



Retention Specialist Connie Pierett (left) and GED Chief Examiner Sharon Harvey (right) have been key players in New River Community College's efforts to increase retention.

Pay Off New River Finds Success with Retention

by JENNY BOLTE

For the past six summers, key staff members in our program have participated in a continuous quality improvement retreat to analyze our strengths and areas of improvement. It's a hard week because we take an honest and objective look at our program, and we must check our egos at the door. Summer 2005's retreat was much like past retreats. There we were, sitting around the board room table, weary from staring at Post-it[®] flip chart pages that were themselves beginning to droop and lose their sticky from being moved around the walls. As I dropped the handout packets of NRS Tables 4 and 5 onto the stack in front of me, I stated, "I can't believe that with all of the changes and all of the new initiatives, our data is pretty much the same as it's always been." I was frustrated. I knew that we had come a long way, but at the end of the day, it's truly the data that matters most.

One of the teachers responded, "But you don't know what our data would be like had we not implemented these changes this year."

"Yeah," I answered, "that's true, but it's just not enough." We called it a day; we would wait until the next morning to begin setting goals and strategizing for the upcoming year.

As I went back into the office, our GED[®] Chief Examiner Sharon Harvey was working at her desk trying to complete the paperwork from her recent testing. "How did everyone do?" I asked.

"Well, we had some not make it. I'm going to call them as soon as I can because some of them really need to go back into classes."

This was a usual exchange between us. I went into my office and sat down. Our program outcomes had angered me. As far as the DOE could see, we were status quo. They would never know some of the exciting changes we had implemented. They would never know how far we had come. I was frustrated by the money

Retention

- 1 Pay Off: New River Finds Success with Retention
- 3 New Start Just-in-Time Tutor Training
- 4 VA Programs Transition
- 6 Role of GED Counselors
- 7 Comprehensive Counseling Services
- 8 An Interview with Sharon Lankford-Rice
- 9 VA Retention Strategies
- 12 Retention in the Digital Age: Online Learning
- 13 The TEAM Approach
- Back VALRC Update

spent on marketing. All those newspaper ads and billboards. All those blasted flyers. No return.

Then it hit me, and I walked back to Sharon's office. "How many people do you think have not passed the GED over the past 18 or so months?" I asked her.

"Well, at least two hundred," she answered.

"Oh my," I responded, "let me ask you this. Suppose we were to hire someone to manage those folks. To create a file for each of them and not release them until they have passed the GED." Sharon looked at me, and I could tell the wheels were turning in her head. She's the reality-checker to my pie-in-the-sky dreams. The money. How could we pay for such a person? Who would do such a job? What exactly would we be asking this person to do? "Let's think about this," I told her, "and we can get back to it tomorrow."

The next day, Sharon and I talked some more about the idea. "I think you're

Continued on page 14 ...

PROGRESS

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A Few Words on *Progress*

In her interview, Sharon Lankford-Rice, Education Specialist for the southern region in the U.S. Department of Education, makes a distinction between **retention** and **persistence**. “With the term **persistence**, it sounds as though it is the student’s choice to persist and continue to improve, while **retention** tends to reflect the old paradigm of the teacher’s doing something to the student.” After reading the many interesting and informative articles appearing in this issue of *Progress*, I have come to understand that retention and persistence, while closely related, have distinct differences that must be recognized and addressed. In fact, it seems to me that it is the intersection between retention and persistence that determines the effectiveness of a program.

Retention is about the programmatic elements, organizational structures, and services that combine to create an educational environment supportive of student success. In recent years, adult educators across Virginia have begun to take a long, hard look at NRS results and other data and have made changes in class schedules, instructional approaches, testing schedules, and enrollment policies to help meet students’ needs and support successful learning. In addition to these kinds of changes, the adult education program at New River Community College established a Retention Specialist position who contacts GED non-completers to offer encouragement for their continued pursuit of the GED.

While retention deals with program content and structure, persistence focuses on the student’s attitudes, commitment level, readiness to return to school, and other personal attributes. It also must include clearly articulated, achievable goals that guide the student’s educational attainment. Adult students, most of who have had poor school experiences, often need guidance in identifying and understanding the set of attitudes and attributes necessary for academic success. Programs have addressed these needs through expanded intake procedures, student orientations, transition programs, and student counseling.

When adult education programs have the right programmatic elements in place to support successful learning, and the students have opportunities to identify and develop the personal attributes critical to academic progress, the probability of reaching the desired outcomes is considerably increased. It is this balance of retention and persistence that leads to the level of performance that adult educators aspire to achieve.

Sincerely,



Calendar

**March
7 & 10**
**VALRC Library
Open House**
Richmond, VA
www.valrc.org

**March
13-19**
National Library Week
www.ala.org

**March
30-April 1**
**National Conference
on Family Literacy**
Louisville, KY
www.familit.org

**April
21-May 2**
**Registration for
VALRC Online Courses**
www.valrc.org

**April
28-May 1**
COABE Conference
St. Louis, MO
www.coabe.org

**May
5-June 29**
**VALRC Online Courses
Spring Session**
www.valrc.org

**May
22**
Literacy Fair
Keysville, VA

New Start Just-in-Time Tutor Training

by CAROL HOLMQUIST

Volunteer-based one-to-one instruction has been a mainstay of adult literacy education for more than 25 years. Yet little research has been done involving this instructional approach. Tutor training has been considered one of the most important ways to orient volunteers to the task of improving adults' reading skills, but it falls far short of its intended goals.¹ It may be useful to completely rethink the training model by investing less up front and shifting these resources to more intensive on-the-job support and development. We owe both our adult learners and the dedicated volunteers a new effort to support their work in the best way possible. At The READ Center, we believe less initial orientation training and more just-in-time training will help us do so.

The *New Start* approach to tutor training at The READ Center is a cognitive apprenticeship in which an expert program staff person scaffolds and coaches the novice tutor into productive learning. It helps the volunteer tutors learn how to tailor general information about teaching reading to adult learners to the specific needs of their individual students. In workplace learning models, this sort of in-service training is known as just-in-time training, because it focuses on specific skill needs, does not depend on inferences or generalizations, and encourages learning through practical application.²

What is involved? There is less orientation training up front and less staff follow-up at the end of a month. The field standard for orientation training typically consists of four two-hour sessions covering The Adult Learner and The Four Components of Reading. The just-in-time approach offers, instead, a

very hands-on method of having new tutors and new students meet in a setting where highly experienced staff can both monitor the pair and advise on the best approach to learning the specific skills needed at that particular time. Additionally, the tutor is thoroughly indoctrinated into the new online curriculum in reading and phonics. These online programs allow students access to curriculum at any of our tutoring locations in Chesterfield, Henrico, and Richmond. Students are also assigned homework in the online programs and can utilize either our labs, any library in the area, or any computer with Internet access.³

The *New Start*, a just-in-time training and tutoring model, brings both tutoring and online curriculum together in an intensive, twice weekly experience for students, once with the tutor and once in a computer lab. All of the students are evaluated using the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Student progress in

the *New Start* program will be compared to the progress of students

who are using the standard program model. The standard model consists of once-weekly meetings with tutors, who have been trained in the four-week orientation program and who receive monthly educational resource coordination by one of the professional staff. Both sets of students will receive pre- and post-testing at 20 and 40 weeks to measure their progress.

The standard method of tutor training prior to the beginning of *New Start* tutor training included more orientation training, after which the new tutor joined a Start class where new students and new tutors both participated in up to 8 weeks of lessons prepared by a master teacher. Gradually, student/tutor pairs were matched, and the new tutors also gradually assumed the leadership of teaching their matched student in the Start class setting. Once the new tutors took over completely, tutor and student moved into one-to-one tutoring.

This method has its merits, the primary one being the open enrollment for students and tutors, and the opportunity to match a working pair comfortably. Its limitations include the problem that tutors will not know with whom they are going to work until very near the end of a six to eight week period. This does not provide the new tutors much time to inquire about techniques for their particular students. Also, the early lessons presented first by the teaching staff and then gradually by the new tutors tend to be at the global level, since they are leading an exercise for the composite class or sit-

Continued on page 15 ...



1 Lysaker, J. (2003, December) The relational qualities of more and less successful tutoring pairs. Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, Scottsdale, AZ.

2 Beckett, D., Agashae, Z. & Oliver, V. (2002) Just-in-time training: Techne meets phronesis. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 14,332-339.

3 Letters of agreement are in place with all the libraries and public school adult education programs in the city of Richmond and in Chesterfield and Henrico Counties.

From GED to the Community College, Virginia Adult Education Programs Ease the Transition

by SUSAN ERNO

GED students from throughout central Virginia recently gathered for a presentation on promising career opportunities. The group included teens, middle-aged adults, and seniors. In short, a typical GED class composite. Students, teachers, and Piedmont Virginia Community College staff talked informally while dinner was served. Every student had a career in mind, from architect to computer programmer.

Unfortunately, their odds of reaching these dreams are not in their favor. Here are the grim statistics:

- Most GED testers say post-secondary education and training is a goal. Yet, only 12% who earn a GED complete 1 year of college within 10 years.¹
- 85% of GED recipients who transition into post-secondary must take remedial courses.²

In a recent *Progress*³ article, Hal Beder characterized most GED classes as “warm fuzzies.” When he makes the point that students aren’t prepared for the rigors of

college level work, he is echoing the findings of several recent studies.⁴ Successful transition will require adult literacy professionals to work closely with post-secondary educators, particularly those in community colleges.⁵

Many Virginia Adult Education programs have responded to this challenge. They have forged productive partnerships with community colleges and have implemented promising initiatives such as bridge and transition classes. What follows is a sample of what is happening in the field.

Taking the first step

Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education and Lord Fairfax Community College (LFCC)

Recent GED recipients are eligible for one of 20 scholarships for the one-credit College Success Skills class. According to the LFCC catalog, “The course is designed to assist students with the transition to college; introduce college resources and services; and enhance the intellectual, cultural, personal and social development of students. Effective

study skills, career and academic planning, college transfer processes, wellness components and issues related to student life are among the topics offered to help students succeed in their course work and accomplish their goals.”

As Susan Utt, Regional Planner, states, “This is a wonderful opportunity and transition into college life. Some GED recipients may be intimidated at the thought of college. This scholarship will encourage them to take the first step. It is to be hoped that they will experience success and continue their pursuit of an associate’s degree.”

The GED is not a means to an end. It is a means to a beginning.

Mount Rogers Regional Adult Education Program and Wytheville Community College and Virginia Highlands Community College

The Mount Rogers Regional Adult Education Program (MRRAEP) implemented transition classes in Fall 2007 at Wytheville Community College and Virginia Highlands Community College

Southside Virginia Community College Students Achieve Success



Irene Fowlkes (left) is 61, a mother, grandmother, and GED graduate. She worked in a factory for 22 years until it closed and currently resides in Nottoway County. She is enrolled full-time at Southside Virginia Community College in the Human Services program and hopes to one day teach and show the importance of education. Roy Wine (right) is 21 and lives in Mecklenburg County. He passed the GED on his first attempt and is now a fulltime SVCC student in the college transfer program. Wine would like to transfer to a four-year college and become a teacher.



Many Virginia Adult Education programs ... have forged productive partnerships with community colleges

using funding from the Tobacco Commission and the Workforce Investment Board. The funding provides teachers' salaries, supplies and materials, mentors, child care, and assistance with transportation. One goal is to increase postsecondary enrollment by removing as many obstacles as possible. A second goal is to prepare the students to pass the COMPASS with a score high enough to enroll in credit-bearing classes as opposed to remedial classes. The classes provide accelerated instruction in reading, math, and writing; counseling; study skills; and time management strategies.

"The GED is not a means to an end. It is a means to a beginning. Exciting opportunities await those who successfully transition from ABE into postsecondary. The key to a successful program is an effective partnership between the ABE program and the community college," states Susan Seymore, Regional Planner for MRRAEP.

Paving a path to success Southside Virginia Community College Adult Education Programs

Southside Community College, with Shelia Harper's leadership, became a GED Testing Center in July 2007. "Having the testing here on campus has been a great benefit," Harper explains. "Our staff leads the student through the admissions process for SVCC. And, it also helps the student to have a contact, a familiar face and name. This presents the student fewer hoops up front that he or she needs to jump through in dealing with the admissions process."

Other initiatives include: a letter signed by the SVCC President inviting GED recipients to enroll in community college classes, GED Graduate Scholarships for tuition and textbooks for any GED graduate, and an Honors Gradu-

ate Scholarship for any GED graduate scoring 2,700 or above. Finally, Harper's office works closely with the Counseling Center and with the Admissions process for GED recipients. She meets with faculty and adjunct faculty to discuss advising and class load, recognizing that some faculty can offer that extra nurturing touch.

A new learning community Charlottesville Adult Learning Center and Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC)

GED recipients scatter after graduation ceremonies and are often hard to reach. To plant the seed early on, a PVCC recruiter meets with every GED class early in the first session to inform students of opportunities and career paths. This is followed up with a formal presentation at the Adult Learning Center. The next month, all GED students and recipients, as well as instructors, are invited to the PVCC campus for dinner and an introduction to the community college. The deans from each field talk

It is hoped that this early exposure to college courses will result in ... a greater commitment to pursuing education and training beyond the GED.

about careers and potential salaries. Finally, at the GED testing site, everyone receives PVCC information.

This year, two college credit classes are available at no charge for GED students and recipients who live in Charlottesville City. They are an orientation course, similar to the LFCC College Success Skills class described earlier, and a 3-credit computer literacy course. These courses may be taken while a student is still in a GED class. There is support for child care and transportation. It is hoped that this early exposure to college courses will result in success and a greater commitment to pursuing education and

training beyond the GED.

While it is too soon to tell the value of these programs, it is safe to say the field of adult education in Virginia is moving in the right direction, based upon current research.

For more information about the programs cited in this article, contact the program managers listed below. ■

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In addition to being Program Manager for the Adult Learning Center in Charlottesville, Susan Erno is the RLCC co-chair for her Region. Learning of the activities around the state at the Lead Agents' meeting in November led her to write this article.

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- 2 US Department of Education. The Condition of Education 2004, Indicator 18. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2004/section3/indicator18.asp>
- 3 Beder, H. Post-secondary Transitioning: The GED Is Only Halfway There. *Progress*, Fall 2007, 20(1), p.1.
- 4 Duke, A. L. & Ganzglass, E. Strengthening State Adult Education Policies for Low-Skilled Workers. Working Poor Families Project Policy Brief. Summer 2007
- 5 Beder, p. 12.

Role of GED Counselors in Student Retention

by ELAINE CALLAHAN

Assessing students to determine their ABE/GED needs is a crucial part of the Adult Education process, but after the assessment what happens? Enter the ABE/GED counselor. The Henrico County Adult Education Center has used this position for quite a few years. Over the years, the duties have evolved to create one of the most important positions we have in our program. Our counselors have four main goals: assessment/class placement, student motivation, student retention, and student success.

The major role of our counselors is to focus on student success and to develop a program that fits each student's individual needs. After the assessment has been completed, our counselor meets one on one with the student and discusses what the results mean, what the specific goals of the student are, and how the student will achieve those goals. A brochure, developed by one of our counselors, entitled "GED TEST – Are You Ready?" is completed and given to each student during the counseling session. This brochure helps the students track their progress and gives them a better understanding of the process and what it takes to earn a GED certificate. After placement in the appropriate class, the counselor then focuses on student orientation and retention.

Since the counselor is the first point of contact for our students, they have formed an initial bond and will often turn to their counselor for guidance and motivation, along with the classroom teacher. Since we follow a managed enrollment model, our students must attend an orientation conducted by the counselor. The session reviews the expectations of the adult education program, explaining attendance policies, our incentive program, our tutoring program, and other policies the students may need to know. This allows for continuity, and it ensures that all information disseminated is the same, whether a student attends during the day or during the evening.

Our counselors also make personal contact with our students. If a student has been missing class, a counselor will

call and/or send a postcard letting them know they need to return, and reminding them of the importance of returning to class. Many adult education students did not have a positive school experience. They enjoy having that counselor, a person who listens, gives a gentle nudge, and offers the encouragement needed to succeed.

Our data indicates ... a 49.3% percent increase in student retention.

Could the classroom teachers perform these duties? Yes, they could— although perhaps not at the same intensity or with the same duration as a person whose position is devoted only to counseling students on an individual basis. In our case, all of our classroom teachers are part time employees, and many are not available, either in person or via telephone. The instructional priorities of the classroom are significant, and the instructor's focus is different from that of the counselor.

Our data indicates that our student retention has improved each year. We have gone from 225 students separating before completion in 2005/06 to 111 students separating before completion in 2006/07. This is a 49.3 percent increase in student retention. When we did an informal survey of our students, we found that the counselor played a major role in their experience with our program. Three

major factors came to our attention:

1 Students cited as a reason for staying in the program that a full time counselor was available to discuss their individual needs outside of the classroom. One student responded with, "That's why I like this place. People care." Another student responded, after receiving a postcard from our counselor asking her to return to the program, that it was the only card she had received over the holidays, and it meant so much to her. Again, it was the personal touch of someone available full time showing that the program cares about each individual.

2 Students stated that they liked being in a class where the other students were at the same level. The counselors are responsible for organizing the different levels of classes offered.

3 Student incentives are available. Counselors are responsible for developing, coordinating, and disseminating teacher and student incentives. The thought and care they have put into choosing the items to be used as incentives focuses on the needs, achievements, and goals of the students, teachers, and entire program.

Overall, the role of the counselor at the Henrico County Adult Education Center has had a positive impact on the entire program, allowing for a positive experience for our students. ■

Elaine Callahan is program manager for Henrico County Public Schools Adult Education.

Comprehensive Counseling Services for Adult Learners

by SUSAN LEONE, ED.D, LPC

Counseling and related services can assist adult learners to clarify their educational goals, to identify obstacles and challenges to successful achievement, and to become familiar with institutional resources available for achieving these goals. The adult learner's decision to seek counseling and related services may make the difference between success and failure in persisting in the learning endeavor and reaching desired goals. Adult students have obligations and commitments outside the classroom. Adding coursework, additional student responsibilities, and time for studying and mastery to an already full life can be especially challenging. Assistance with navigating these obstacles from a counselor who is knowledgeable about adult issues and needs and academic demands can mean the difference between persistence in goal attainment and discouragement and early exit from the educational endeavor.

Developmental counseling consists of exploration of **personal/social**, **academic** and **career** issues experienced by normal individuals in similar situations. It does not involve long-term therapy with deep-seated personality disorders. Adult learners can be greatly assisted in the above-mentioned domains through individual counseling by a professional who understands these issues and concerns as they relate to adult development. Issues that are commonly in need of exploration by the adult learner include:

- career and life planning
- study skills
- student success skills
- performance anxiety
- test anxiety
- time management
- job search skills and strategies

These topics can be addressed with a variety of interventions and programs. However, initially some sort of orientation is helpful to ease the transition to

the classroom.

Orientation to the learning institution and the academic experience will assist the adult learner to understand the culture of the institution, learn to navigate the academic environment, and realize the opportunities for academic and social support available. Orientation can occur in sessions prior to the onset of formal learning experiences; it can be an orientation class, or it can be integrated into the regular class offerings. Good teaching for all students includes helping the learner with application of content, understanding how to learn, and instruction about the availability of resources that will enhance learning. It

The adult learner's decision to seek counseling and related services may make the difference between success and failure

is helpful if the orientation includes an introduction of counseling as a resource to aid the student. The orientation can also serve as a vehicle for self-assessment in which the adult learner identifies strengths and deficits for navigating the learning experience and reaching educational goals. Fostering the development of adult learners must extend beyond the orientation or transition phase and may include individual counseling or a variety of group approaches in order to be corrective.

Counseling, following the orientation phase, can build upon the strengths and address the skill deficits that the adult learner has identified in the transition experience. This can be conducted in individual sessions or small groups.

Often individual sessions are used to further assess and to develop goals and identify strategies. If this is followed by group counseling, the adult learner benefits from the opportunity to network and to develop a larger repertoire of strategies for academic success. As helpful as individual counseling is for adult learners, group interventions have the potential to assist this population in ways that counteract the isolation often associated with their experiences. Already overburdened adults who attend classes with minimal interaction with other students outside of the classroom frequently give up due to lack of social support and awareness of the resources available to assist them academically.

Depending upon individual preferences and the degree of severity or scope of issues, individuals may choose group counseling over individual counseling. In group counseling, adult learners are presented with a safe environment with which to explore issues or concerns with a trained professional. This can occur in conjunction with individual counseling and family or couples counseling depending upon the individual's circumstances. The focus for the adult learner would be on issues that have bearing on the academic success of the student and may include:

- reentry or transition problems of the adult learner;
- limited academic preparation and other classroom issues; and
- partner or family matters that preexisted and/or relate to academic demands.

Other issues to be considered in individual or group counseling sessions are likely to be presented in workshops or presentations that are a part of an ongoing effort to support the adult learner, many of which were listed earlier.

Besides group counseling, other group interventions helpful in aiding the adult learner include support groups, led

Continued on page 15 ...

An Interview with Sharon Lankford-Rice

by MARCIA PHILLIPS

Q: What is your role at the DOE and what states make up your region?

I am the Area II coordinator, which means that I am the Education Program Specialist for the southern region, consisting of 14 states, starting with Virginia and West Virginia and going out to Texas and Oklahoma, with all the other states in between.

I help provide assistance to the states, looking at compliance issues. Basically I am available for quality monitoring on the states to see how well they are doing. I hate to describe myself as a policeman, but compliance with the guidelines is one of the main things that I look at.

Q: What are some of the efforts states are using to encourage or strengthen retention?

We can get a general feel for what programs are doing. The biggest thing is they are creating more opportunities for students to participate in their classes. More and more, programs are going away from the traditional class setting, the tra-

Programs ... have to operate at a different level of personal involvement... It's counseling, it's mentoring, all of that.

ditional instruction in the classroom setting. They are changing a great deal.

The increased offerings in distance

learning are a good example. I am a Comcast customer, as a matter of fact, so I was very interested to hear about GED On Demand, which you are doing in Virginia. Technology, particularly, offers so many other ways for students to continue in a program. The biggest retention strategy is to have different class offerings. Because that's when they will go, those are the classes that will work. The biggest thing is to have different opportunities, now, on their schedule, not necessarily yours. It needs to be what works for the students.

When I was a service provider, people had to make the effort, what we called getting their butts into the seat. They had to drive to the building, walk into the room, spend the time. But now, if you have a computer, you have access.

Q: How do you become aware of these efforts?

We hear about what the states are doing through their reports. At the end of the year, state programs write a narrative that describes their initiatives during the past year. When we monitor the states we take a look at their innovative strategies. I am not calling these Best Practices necessarily, but they are certainly noteworthy. Also, we meet several times a year with the state directors, and they provide us with examples of what they are doing. There are a myriad of ways we keep in touch. I will talk with my states on almost a daily basis and often get updates: "Here's something great that we are doing." If I get something from one of my states, then I will pass that along to other states, and that can get a dialogue going.

We also have a Shoptalks Call. Each area has a facilitated discussion with me and the director of the Division of Adult Education and Literacy, so we do get to

know what good things are happening and can spread that information.

Q: How can program management strengthen adult education programs?

A lot of states are going to managed enrollment. This is a good control, a good strategy to improve their program. A constant evaluation of the program is key to improving it. I was a provider for many years. Often, it seemed to me that there was no connection between the state office and what we were doing. You have to figure out in the state office how the policy can help providers to run their program. The state staff has to align their policy with the local offerings. If a particular policy is not working on the ground, then how can it be changed? Or, it could be that the providers do not understand what is coming from the state. Do they need more dialogue? Or do they need training in that? The constant cycle

The biggest retention strategy is to have different class offerings.

of evaluation helps.

This is a good time for local providers to be looking at their programs because of the state reports. They have just submitted their numbers. Now is the time to look at who is not meeting their goals. And why is that happening? Or not happening? You have to go out and look with a certain caveat. Work with the local WIA. Provide support services.

I ran a one-stop center in Alabama for 15 years; I left just as WIA came in. I worked hand in hand with our adult

education provider. It took a long time to build that partnership, and you don't get to inherit partners, either. Having run that local program helps me understand programs and have some insight into their situations. Our policy was to help everybody who came in the door, which is probably not realistic. But even those we couldn't help did not leave without some assistance; that's where your partners come in. I would follow up with students, and Randall White, the adult education provider, would follow up with students, and that coordinated, integrated effort with the students is what works. This is a very personal field. A lot of people don't realize that. But these programs to be successful have to operate at a different level of personal involvement with their students. It's counseling, it's mentoring, all of that.

Q: What are some of the more innovative programs in Region II?

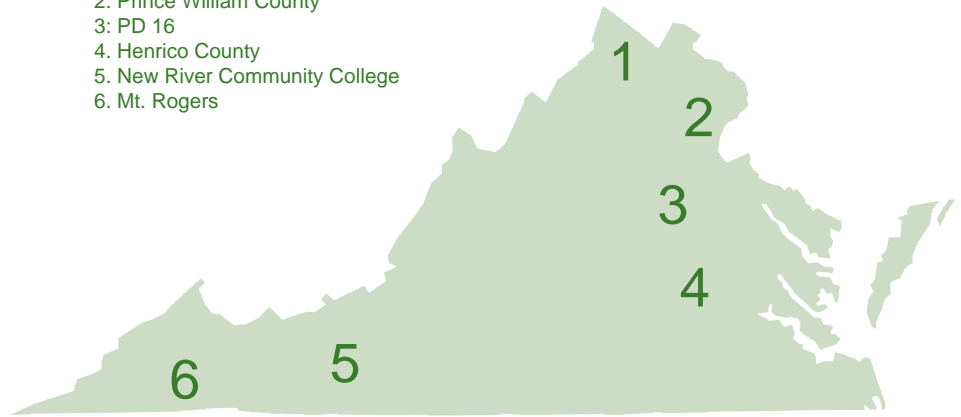
In North Carolina, the state has a partnership with the Holocaust Museum in DC that teaches diversity. It is a very interesting program, and it is open to anyone who wishes to participate. West Virginia has SPOKES where the adult education programs work closely with WIA, both ABE and WIA students. In Arkansas, WAGE is another WIA partnership with ABE programs that provides a work readiness certificate. And I cannot recall which state this particular program is from, but it is a recruitment program called Literacy Ambassador where the speakers go to schools, churches, and community organizations and tell of their experiences with their adult learning. It's a peer-based recruitment effort. People pay more attention to their peers than to the professionals telling them what to do.

Q: Why is accountability such a good driver of a program?

Continued on page 10 ...

PROGRESS: *Volume 20, No. 2*

- 1: Northern Shenandoah Valley
- 2: Prince William County
- 3: PD 16
- 4: Henrico County
- 5: New River Community College
- 6: Mt. Rogers



Virginia Programs Share Retention Strategies

Henrico County Adult Education Center

by ELAINE CALLAHAN

Henrico County Adult Education Center conducts a managed enrollment for the ABE/GED program. By utilizing a managed enrollment process, we are better able to administer pre- and post-testing, track the progress of our students, maintain contact with our students, and help them reach their goals in a reasonable amount of time. With managed enrollment we are able to develop classes based on levels, eliminating multi-level classes. This has helped all of our teachers to work with their classes in a more effective manner. We continue to assess and counsel each week, even if there is not an enrollment date immediately in the future. Students are scheduled to work in our lab with a tutor if they have missed the current enrollment period until they can fully enroll in our program. We have four specific enrollment periods during the school year.

Prince William County

by BETTE SNEED

Retention of students in the Prince William County Public Schools (PWCS) Adult Education ABE/GED program continues to be a challenge. In our efforts to institute best practices, we always seek ideas and methods to encourage our students to remain in their classes. One strategy we have used is to develop different course offerings: Fast Track GED, Math-only GED, Supportive Adult Intensive Learning (SAIL), and Successfully Obtaining Academic Results (SOAR). These classes offer our students the opportunity to transition from the basic adult education classes to specialty programs, which pique our learners' interest and curiosity.

Other methods of retention include writing letters to students, having them complete questionnaires concerning their classes, and making personal phone calls inviting students to return to class after an absence. A simple invitation to return to a class may be all it takes for someone to become engaged in learning once again. Personal contact from a teacher makes the students feel they belong and are important.

One approach we use to retain our ESOL students is to help them focus on the responsibility of attending class and on their goals. One of the reasons we developed our "Learning English: The Journey Begins With You" video and ESOL Student Guide is that it gives both teacher and students the opportunity to learn about each other and recognize how they can approach goal setting, so that the process is clearly defined and becomes a common goal. The video and downloadable copy of the ESOL Student Guide can be viewed at the PWCS Adult ESOL website:

<http://www.pwcs.edu/curriculum/adulted/?eslpwpcs.html> *Continued on page 10 ...*

Virginia Programs Share Retention Strategies (continued from page 9)

PD 16

by BETSY MATHIAS

We have wrestled with the concept of open vs. managed vs. closed enrollment in our classes for several years. Open enrollment only works when you have students close to being ready to pass the GED test. Closed enrollment is too strict: as soon as you close the class, five more people call in wanting a class. Our most recent example of this phenomenon is that two weeks after we finished registration in January, we are looking at a new waiting list of 62 people who want to earn a GED.

Managed enrollment seems to be the best approach for us. As students show they are ready to pass the test by successfully completing practice tests, they move out of the class to get tested, and we replace them with new students. The teachers prefer to receive a new group of students all at once instead of one student at a time. So we continue to register students, administer assessments, and put them in a holding pattern until class space is available. New students may enter a class two to three times within a semester.

Mount Rogers Regional Adult Education Program

by SUSAN SEYMORE

Retention... such a huge challenge in adult education! A recent survey of MR-RAEP teachers revealed several strategies for retaining adult students.

Sue Rector: "I do my best to make students feel welcome and comfortable in my classroom. I make a constant attempt to make students feel their goals are important and that they are experiencing success. More specifically, I try to keep them informed of class and GED test schedules, and changes in rules/requirements and to explain why we do certain things, such as assessment. I always contact them after the first couple of absences."

Sue Dill: "Doing one test at a time has been a big boon in keeping students in class. I give Hardee's coupons or any little gift I have to keep them coming."

Rozaanne Counts: "Showing genuine interest and concern for them as multi-dimensional people, rather than as students only, helps to establish rapport that will make them comfortable enough to stay in class. The best way to retain, though, is to give them a sense of having accomplished something each time they come to class."

Other responses included presenting a certificate to recognize an educational functioning level gain; giving a welcome packet that includes important class information, a pencil, and paper; and sending a note of congratulations to those who pass a section or sections of the GED. Because transportation has become a huge barrier, we provide a \$10 gas card (through grant funding) for every 20 hours of attendance.

We find that early detection of those at risk of withdrawing and follow up with those who have withdrawn is critical. Even with all of these strategies in place, we still seek the magic solution, knowing that the odds fall on the side of those who remain and complete their goals.

Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education

interview with SUSAN UTT

Retention and class management are always on the mind of Susan Utt. NSVAE offers closed enrollment ESL classes and open enrollment GED classes. The finite nature of the GED as a goal and the fact that students may be ready to take the tests after only a few weeks of study leads to greater rollover on the GED side. NSVAE did try a closed, 10-week math class, but found that, after a few weeks, class size dwindled while new students began to express interest

Continued on page 11 ...

An Interview with

Accountability helps you evaluate how you are doing. What gets counted is what gets put on paper and demonstrates to other people what your program is doing. It's easy to get lost in the incidentals, but they don't always count. You need to be able to show what has added value, what is working. People say that the numbers shouldn't run the program, but I think that is maybe not understanding accountability measures.

For example, say that my program is right on the state border, and I'm busy all the time, but most of the people are from the other state, not mine. So those out-of-state people won't show on my numbers. If I only serve 50 of my own state people, then I'm in danger of losing my grant, because there are other people around me doing more. So accountability can keep me focused, because I know what I can count and why.

Once you understand that, then you can begin to improve your program. People will argue that accountability is the driver, but accountability is not just the numbers. It shows when you are providing the service that makes your students happy. Tie what you do to those numbers and they will rise. Your program will improve. You have to pay attention to both: numbers and people. I used to work with someone who said, "Everything is a priority." And I said to him, "How can that be? Something has to take precedence." But it's true: everything is important; it's all your priority. Or everything else will fall.

I hear people say "I can't do all of it." Maybe they can't. But we have more things we can do with our students now than ever before. The advantages of technology...we are limited only by our imagination. When I was in my program, I spent a lot of time following up on students who had stopped coming. I would call, and sometimes they would take my calls, and sometimes they wouldn't. I had a great ally in the Gran-nies. They would rat them out. When I did follow up, I called it having the virtual cup of coffee with them or with

Winter 2008 **..PROGRESS**

Sharon Lankford-Rice (continued from page 8)

Granny. Being friendly, concerned, helping them to find how they can connect with the program. That's what makes the difference.

One program we ran in Northern Alabama, when the textile industry was dying there, worked with women who had spent all their lives in the textile plants, and their mothers before them, and their daughters were there with them, too. They were frightened of the change. We had a program where they got their GEDs and then went through a transition program and then went to two-year college. I see some of them now, from time to time, and they are all doing well, continuing in good jobs. One woman in a transition program had gone through a terrible family tragedy; she was seriously injured and her husband was killed. It took her about twice as long to get through the program, but she did it. She gave me credit for helping her through, but I told her, she was the

one who did it. She has my fingerprints on her back. I wouldn't trade these for anything. You have to give everyone that same level of service.

Q: I am hearing some people use the word *persistence* rather than *retention* to describe keeping students in class. What do you see as the difference between these terms?

My take on the buzz words is that one (*persistence*) is more interactive and positive than the other one (*retention*). I think it is a reflection of how the system is changing to be more student/client centered. With the term of *persistence*, it sounds as though it is the student's choice to persist and continue to improve, while *retention* tends to reflect the old paradigm of the teacher's doing something

to the student. The difference is illustrated by the old cartoon that shows the teacher opening up the student's head and pouring in the knowledge in (*retention*). In the new paradigm, the student is pouring in the knowledge and not the teacher (*persistence*).

We want to thank you for taking time to talk with us, sharing your ideas about retention and program improvement.

It was my pleasure. I guess this is where I ought to say that the opinions stated here are my own and may not reflect those of the Department of Education or the Office of Adult Education and Literacy! ❖

Marcia Phillips is Specialist for Special Projects and Editor of Progress at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

Virginia Programs Share Retention Strategies (continued from page 10)

in the math-only format. Overall, NSVAE has found open enrollment classes best serve the ever-changing pool of GED students.

NSVAE's ESL classes, however, made the move from open to closed enrollment about five years ago. Classes were consolidated and offered only at two central locations; in return, NSVAE is now able to offer level-specific ESL classes. The change is more than just a change in enrollment policy: more leveled classes have led to an increase in the quality of instruction, "which keeps students coming because their needs are better met. It's been very, very helpful," says Utt. With closed enrollment, students are also made aware that their seat is valuable. As an added incentive, students who persist in class attendance through post-testing are guaranteed a seat in next semester's class; students who don't persist go back into the larger pool of waiting students.

Setting the enrollment limit for a

closed class can be a balancing act. "We tend to overload classes at the beginning," Utt admits, "and then wonder—do we lose people because of class size?" After the initial drop-off in numbers, classes keep a fairly consistent attendance for the rest of the semester. Closed enrollment helps to build community within a class, which also aids retention. When students "feel part of something bigger," they feel an "obligation to their classmates to be there." Utt cites the example of one morning ESL class, composed mostly of stay-at-home mothers. Class members have started their own monthly game day (playing word games in English) and have planned special events, such as a Chinese New Year celebration, to share their cultures with classmates. The students form "a support system for each other," says Utt. "So much more than just learning English is going on there."

To further motivate student persistence and strengthen the classroom

community, ESL teachers at NSVAE are reviving a class goal-setting strategy. At the beginning of each unit, students brainstorm what they want to know and write class goals and objectives for the unit. These objectives are displayed in the classroom and, as the class covers each objective, a student checks it off the list, also writing down the date of the class. This process serves as a positive reinforcer for students, who can literally see what they've accomplished and remind students who may have missed class that something happened while they were gone.

Neither program nor classroom management offers a quick fix to retention, which Utt calls "truly one of our greatest challenges." Utt stresses that educators need to recognize that they are "serving adults with extremely complex lives," many of who are working very hard just to sustain themselves. ❖

Retention Goes Digital: Incorporating Online Learning

by JASON GUARD

Retention is a universal problem that requires a diversity of approaches to accommodate hard-to-serve learners. Both adult education programs and K-12 schools have difficulty effectively teaching learners who do not attend class regularly. Of course, both systems have their policies and punitive measures to retain their students and encourage good attendance. However, adult education providers must take extra steps to accommodate the hard-to-serve learners and fill the gaps in their service.

The number of adult learners who leave their classrooms due to schedule conflicts is very high. Likewise, the percentage of learners who will miss class frequently and/or not be able to finish a course once they start is also high. The fact is, most adult learners are also *intermittent learners*: their class attendance will be interrupted by life's many circumstances. One way instructors can approach this situation is to plan for breaks in attendance and give learners supplemental lessons from the onset. By encouraging self-direction in their learners, instructors are preparing them for the reality of professional development: that it is ultimately their own responsibility to continue their education. To that end, supplying learners with opportunities to better themselves on their own schedule needs to be a component of every adult education initiative.

Technology offers adult learners many new ways to pursue their studies on their own time. In Virginia, learners with access to digital cable television (through Cox or Comcast) can view the 39 episodes of *GED Connection* using the OnDemand feature. The same programs have also been uploaded to the internet and can be viewed by any Virginia resident who visits www.elearnva.org/stream and provides an email address.

Also, Virginia's Department of Education Office of Adult Education and Literacy is providing an option for online study called eLearn Virginia (www.elearnva.org), a centralized statewide online learning program for GED students. Many local adult education programs have purchased subscriptions for computer-mediated curricula for students' use. As another option, learners can make up their work by visiting publicly accessible computer labs between classes.

By encouraging self-direction in their learners, instructors are preparing them for the reality ... that it is ultimately their own responsibility to continue their education.

Increasingly, many adult education administrators and teachers are looking to the Internet as a way to help learners continue their adult education lessons. There is a rich variety of resources on the web that learners can access for free that will help them continue their studies, build their workplace skills, or prepare for the GED. Also, many ABE programs across the state have created their own formal distance learning programs, using a variety of online programs such as *GED Connection* and *ITTS*.

How these supplemental materials are incorporated into classes is a matter of teaching style. A closed enrollment class might start off with an orientation that covers the probability of gaps in attendance, holiday breaks, and other setbacks in an educational program. At this time, students can get information about online and OnDemand material,

and instructors may suggest that learners can move through the program more quickly by pursuing these supplemental opportunities. Another possibility is to contact learners after they've missed class and suggest particular online lessons. Adult education needs to promote a blended approach (combining classes with distance education) for all learners, while expecting many will prefer either traditional classes or a pure distance experience.

Teaching online learning skills opens a door to the world of continuing education. Online learning:

- promotes good writing skills (through regular email correspondence).
- instills good organizational skills with online portfolios.
- develops the technology skills inherent in today's work world.
- rewards motivated students.
- gives learners more control over the focus of their study.

For many adult education teachers, the prospect of persuading their students to embrace technology can be pretty daunting. Adult learners often have a steep learning curve when it comes to computers and the Internet. However, getting a class of adults to perform work on a computer cannot be much more challenging than getting the students to show up in the first place. Once the learners are actually in the classroom, it's up to the educator to model and teach the learning habits that will improve learners' skills and help them engage their continuing education resources while in class, between classes, and outside the classroom experience. ■

Jason Guard is Assistant GED and Distance Learning Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

Trouble Retaining Adults? Consider the TEAM Approach

by DONN FINN, PH.D.

An issue common to adult education programs is retaining learners long enough to help them to reach their goals. Although this can be troublesome, you don't need to go it alone; rather consider the TEAM approach to student retention. Adults are busy and usually operate in multiple roles; among these are employee, spouse, parent, child, and student. Those participating in adult education programs often feel conflicted while balancing these different roles.

Time. This leads to the first component of the TEAM approach: make the learning worth their time. Adults need to weigh the costs of taking time from other roles and using it for their educational pursuits. To borrow a term from the business world, they need to consider the *opportunity cost* of participating in adult education. Frequently they face the possibility of losing pay, spending less time with family, or missing out on a number of other things so they can attend class. It is essential that adult education programs offer relevant curricula with benchmarks to help students gauge their academic progress. If this is not evident, these students may become frustrated and disappear.

Encouragement. For most adults, the largest step they take in their learning journey is the first one. This leads to the second TEAM component for retaining these students: encouragement. Re-entering

school is a huge step, and whether the goal is to learn how to read, work toward a GED, or to pursue a college degree, most adults will face some type of fear. If you want your students to persist, they should know that the classroom is a place where they will be encouraged through all their lessons. It is particularly reassuring to adult students when teachers remind them that many successful learners have come before them and that someday their success story may help another student to persevere. Remember that student retention begins on the first day of class, so be sure your program is welcoming, and never underestimate the power of an encouraging attitude and words.

Atmosphere. The most successful classrooms are those with an atmosphere that is conducive for adults to learn. Programs that retain adult learners are often characterized as respecting adults and their ideas, opinions, and experiences. These classrooms often encourage the exchange of experiences and ideas and the promotion of dialogue as part of the instructional process. Although teachers are responsible for establishing a positive atmosphere, maintaining it is the responsibility of all members, including learners.

Meaningful. The final element of the TEAM approach to retaining adult learners is making instruction meaningful. At any level, learning new concepts, skills, and ideas can be extremely chal-

lenging, particularly if these concepts, skills and ideas are presented from a perspective foreign to the learner or devoid of any meaningful context. Whenever possible, new concepts should be taught and practiced in a manner consistent with the adult experience. For example, students learning mathematical formulas may be better able to understand them if they are presented using real life contexts, like determining the real cost of an automobile with a loan at 9.5% APR or other examples of personal financial management. Another meaningful approach may be to have students write about personal experiences as a means to discuss history or to practice writing skills. These approaches involve creativity and flexibility by the teacher, but the benefits for the students make the extra effort worthwhile.

Retaining students in adult education programs is an issue that impacts students and programs alike. Integrating the TEAM approach can have a dramatically positive impact on both, so give it a try!

Donald Finn, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Adult Education at Regent University in Virginia Beach and President-Elect of VAACE. He has written and presented nationally on the topics of effective instructional strategies for adults and the integration of technology into instruction. He resides in Chesapeake with his wife and three children.

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Pay Off New River Finds Success with Retention

(continued from front page)

on to something,” she said as she handed me a printout of names. “There are 223 people on this list,” Sharon said, shaking her head in disgust.

“I guess it’s like a death, isn’t it?” I asked Sharon. We had noticed when talking with our students who didn’t pass the GED that, at first, they were shocked and sad—then came denial and anger. Then they would give up, and we would never see them again. Sharon and I both agreed that we just didn’t have the time to talk to the students like we should. They needed support when going through the

We had noticed when talking with our students who didn’t pass the GED that, at first, they were shocked and sad—then came denial and anger. Then they would give up, and we would never see them again.

gamut of emotions, and we simply didn’t have enough time to do this for them.

“Connie,” Sharon said. “If anyone can do this, Connie Pierett could.” I agreed with her. Connie was our Distance Education Instructor, and we have joked that she’s a cross between a hummingbird and a junkyard dog. Connie had transformed our dying distance education program into the strongest program in our region. Sharon and I agreed that Connie, with her tireless energy and dogged determination, was the right person for this job. We also agreed that we would greatly limit the money we spent on marketing and put the savings into this new position. After all, we deduced, it made more sense to recruit

from a known audience than to put up billboards and Sunday advertisements in the local papers to market to the unknown.

So, we decided to call this position a Retention Specialist, and we took a leap of faith that it would pay off. That afternoon I approached Connie about taking on this responsibility. I didn’t have all of the details worked out, and I certainly didn’t have a formal job description to give her, but Connie immediately accepted the offer. “What I’m asking you to do is manage the GED non-completers by creating an Excel spreadsheet with their demographic information and test scores. I’d like for you to contact all the students at least once monthly as well as send them something in the mail to help keep them connected to the program. Do whatever you can to get them to pass the GED. Bug them short of harassment. Also, I’d like for each student to have a file where you and the student devise a study plan to work toward passing the GED. You’ll have to keep the file current until each passes. Essentially, your job is to work yourself out of a job,” I told Connie. She enthusiastically accepted this mission. Since office space is at a premium, Sharon and I agreed that a cell phone would allow Connie the flexibility to work whenever and wherever she needed to get the job done. It wasn’t until much later that Connie came to me and excitedly reported the numbers who had passed the GED. But, she added, with each testing she would win some and lose some. Her numbers were staying about the same. “How’s that for job security?” I responded.

At the close of the year during our summer 2006 retreat, we were once again analyzing our data. Because of her new position, Connie had joined the Leadership Team. “Oh my,” we said as the data jumped off the page, “an increase. We

have a 47% increase in GED completions!” We were all pretty ecstatic.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell exactly what causes dips and blips, but I felt pretty certain that the root lay with the work Connie was doing. “It’s bigger than just the Retention Specialist,” we concluded. As we examined our program, we realized that other elements had to work congruently with Connie to bring about the increase; Connie couldn’t do it alone.

As Connie counseled students, she had to offer them some way to work toward completing their GED. GED class

After all, doing the same thing the same way and expecting a different result was ludicrous. If what we were doing was not meeting student needs, then we had to do things differently.

offerings had to change dramatically. After all, doing the same thing the same way and expecting a different result was ludicrous. If what we were doing was not meeting student needs, then we had to do things differently. We had to offer classes with more intensity and duration, as well as give students the option of instruction during alternative times conducive to their work and family lives. We had to make a concerted effort to not only talk to our students about their needs but also truly hear what they were saying to us, and then do something about it. Some students needed individual or small group instruction after classes to be able to progress at a quicker pace. Other students wanted the opportunity

to work in an open computer lab with our GED software. Students wanted to be more in control of their education, so our program created lesson plans using the Virginia GED Content Standards that were geared to the student and written in a way we believed would help students know what they needed to know and be able to do to be confident going into the GED Tests.

We then realized that it was also more than the Retention Specialist and instruction: Sharon was a critical element to the success equation. When students were ready to re-test, Connie and Sharon worked together to offer the GED Tests at a time convenient to the student. Sharon's Test-on-Demand schedule took

off, and her regular schedule doubled as she traveled throughout the region taking the test out to the different localities. Students were also allowed to take one or two tests at a time if that made them more comfortable. Sharon's workload intensified greatly, but she stated, "It's worth it if our students are passing."

Sometimes it's really hard to make changes even though you know they're the right thing to do. Our program believes that change is necessary to our growth and student success. We've tried a lot of things, and often we've had to use that old football cliché, "Let's drop back and punt." As we work and encounter problems, we try to remember to invest our energy in finding the solutions and

not in focusing so much on the problems themselves. I don't have enough data to prove that our 47% increase in GED completions was because of the dramatic changes we enacted, but in my heart I believe that the Retention Specialist, alternative options for instruction, student feedback, and a varied and flexible GED testing schedule contributed to the increase our program finally saw. It was a leap of faith, and I believe it is paying off. ■

Jenny Bolte is adult education program manager at New River Community College.

New Start Just-in-Time Tutor Training (continued from page 3)

ting with a different student for a couple of weeks prior to being matched. The result is that the master teacher spends little time supervising the new tutor once he has begun working with the student with whom he has been matched. This does not give adequate time for the tutor to identify and develop the specific skills and techniques that will work most effectively with the student. With the *New*

Start approach, the student and tutor match takes place almost immediately, the classes are homogeneous by reading level, and the just-in-time learning for new tutors is continuous. Tutors benefit from the longer and more focused counsel from master teachers, and students benefit from more targeted and more expert tutoring.

With *New Start*, we believe we have

developed a better way to support our adult learners and dedicated volunteer tutors. We look forward to comparing the results from the two groups and seeing if our expectations will be met. ■

Carol Holmquist is the Executive Director of The READ Center in Richmond, VA.

Comprehensive Counseling Services for Adult Learners (continued from page 7)

by trained peers or professionals, cooperative study groups, student learning communities, classrooms that promote collaborative and cooperative learning, and workshops and presentations on topics that support better learning. Support groups, although time-consuming for the already overburdened adult learner, can address the aforementioned isolation often associated with the academic experience. The group support can range from clarification of information about academic demands and resources to emotional support for the anxiety associated with the stressful endeavor to social support from study buddies and study groups. Co-leadership by a peer who has successfully negotiated the learning

environment and who has developed skills and mastery of the academic setting can be extremely helpful and provides modeling for adult learners who are struggling with the transition. These peer models and others can also serve as valuable mentors.

Mentorship programs, as an adjunct to counseling and related services, have the potential to extend the benefits of counseling by reinforcing and monitoring the newly learned skills, extending the practice of reflection and self-assessment, and building on strengths. The benefit of all of these processes is the reduction of isolation and the increase of motivation necessary to persevere as an adult learner in the face of often over-

whelming obstacles.

Comprehensive services for adult learners consist of meaningful interaction with teachers, counselors, advisors, and peers who are trained and knowledgeable about the unique needs of adults and the resources and support services available to them. Advising, counseling and mentoring for adult learners by a dedicated team can mean the difference between successful goal attainment and frustration and failed dreams. ■

Dr. Susan D. Leone, LPC, is the Chair and an Associate Professor in the Department of Counselor Education in the School of Education at VCU.

From the Resource Center...



Marianne Baker

It is with deep sadness that the Resource Center bids farewell to Marianne Baker, who died suddenly on February 9, 2008. Marianne worked for the Resource Center for four years as Administrative and Library Assistant. Her duties includ-

ed handling workshop registrations and answering phone calls; she was the voice of VALRC to many in the field. Marianne will be greatly missed by all of us.

On a happier note, VALRC is pleased to announce that Richard Sebastian, Project Manager for eLearn Virginia, has taken on the additional role of Instructional Technology Specialist at VALRC. Richard will now be able to focus full-time on distance and blended learning initiatives and the uses of technology in adult education.

We are also very pleased to welcome Assistant Instructional Technology Specialist Christopher Poole, who joined the Resource Center in November 2007. As webmaster, Christopher plans to update and redesign the www.valrc.org website in 2008. He extends his thanks to those of you who completed our website survey in December and January.

The Resource Center has also recently completed an overhaul and reorgani-

zation of our library, resulting in several boxes of books for which we no longer have room. We would like to pass these resources on to programs that could use them. To this end, VALRC will be holding a Book Giveaway in our office on March 7 and 10. All are invited.



Christopher Poole