

BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AND RETENTION FOR MADISON AREA
TECHNICAL COLLEGE MEDICAL ASSISTANT STUDENTS AND INTERVENTIONS
FOR ADDRESSING THOSE BARRIERS

Approved by Patricia Bromley: Date: __12-21-2011__

BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AND RETENTION FOR MADISON AREA
TECHNICAL COLLEGE MEDICAL ASSISTANT STUDENTS AND INTERVENTIONS
FOR ADDRESSING THOSE BARRIERS

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Masters of Science

in

Education

Adult Education

by

John J. Otterson

2011

Abstract

BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AND RETENTION FOR MADISON AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE MEDICAL ASSISTANT STUDENTS AND INTERVENTIONS FOR ADDRESSING THOSE BARRIERS

John J. Otterson

Under the Supervision of Dr. Patricia L. Bromley

This paper examines the barriers to success and declining retention rates faced by the Medical Assistant students at Madison Area Technical College. The literature contains multiple strategies for college administrators and faculty to use when working with this population of students.

In collaboration with the Student Development Center Learner Success Advising staff, a work group was convened to study the cause for low retention rates in the Medical Assistant program. Learner Success administered a survey to assess student perceptions resulting in two key findings. Using the review of literature as a guide, recommendations were developed to be implemented in the Madison Area Technical College Medical Assistant program. The program orientation will be redesigned with a focus on assessing barriers and increasing awareness of resources available for dealing with those barriers. A second strategy will create faculty/student mentoring relationships to create an educational environment that is responsive, nurturing, and results in improved percentile rankings in the Student Readiness Inventory rating the students' perceptions of their potential for success.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
APPROVAL PAGE.....	i
TITLE PAGE.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction	
Statement of the Problem	
Definitions of Terms	
Delimitations	
Method of Approach	
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	4
Overview of non-traditional student characteristics	
Review of barriers to student success	
Strategies for addressing barriers to success	
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	10
VI. REFERENCES.....	14

Chapter One: Introduction

Learner Success Advising is part of the infrastructure at Madison Area Technical College (MATC) and is a component of the Student Development Center. Learner Success Advising assists student in developing their personal educational plan, advises students on resources available including scholarships and financial aid, and monitors and evaluates student retention. As part of their retention efforts Learner Success administers an early alert function that allows faculty to inform the advisers of at risk students. Advisers will follow up with referred students in an effort to provide them with available resources and assist them in successfully completing their course work.

Learner Success convened a workgroup in 2010 to study the causes for high failure rates in core courses and decreased student retention in the Medical Assistant program. The composition of the work group included medical assistant faculty, Learner Success advising staff, and the dean for the Center of Health and Safety Education (CHASE). The Medical Assistant curriculum is designed to be delivered over two semesters. Upon completion, students are awarded a certificate in Medical Assisting. Graduates are eligible to take the national certification exam administered by the American Association of Medical Assistants (American Association of Medical Assistants, 2011). Data gathered over the 2010-2011 academic year indicated 20-30% of students failed a core course and in accordance with program policy, those students are given one additional opportunity to successfully pass that course. Program policies also prohibit any student who has failed a core course from registering for any second semester program courses. A failure in a core course requires students to attend classes for three semesters rather than two. The additional semester of classes as a result of a course failure causes socioeconomic challenges for students, delayed entry into the work force, loss of financial

aid, and decreased self-esteem. These negative educational experiences may result in low self-esteem and a diminished motivation to learn (James, 2003).

The purpose of this project is to combine the findings and recommendations of the Learner Success work group related to Medical Assistant student retention with the review of literature to create interventions designed to aid in higher student success rates. Interventions for addressing barriers to success will be recommended for inclusion in a redesigned program admission/orientation process and the initiation of a one-on-one faculty/student mentoring and advising relationship.

Statement of the Problem

To what extent will programmatic changes and faculty interventions effectively address MATC Medical Assistant student retention and perceived barriers to success identified by students?

Definition of Terms

Barrier: “something immaterial that impedes or separates” (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Multiple barriers ranging from socioeconomic to student self-esteem will be investigated in this paper.

Intervention: “to interfere with the outcome or course especially of a condition or process” (Merriam-Webster, 2011).

Medical Assistant: Medical assistants are the only allied health professionals specifically trained to work in the ambulatory setting, such as physician offices, clinics, and group practices. “These multi-skilled personnel can perform administrative and clinical procedures.” (American Association of Medical Assistants, 2011)

Retention: “the act of keeping someone or something” (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Retention as it applies to this paper will refer to retaining Medical Assistant students in the one year certificate program.

Delimitations of Research

The references used for the review of literature were collected over a period of 60 days using the resources of the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Several search engines provided by EBSCOHOST were used. Key search terms included “student retention, barriers, interventions, learner success, and attrition”.

Method of Approach

A review of the literature describing the barriers to success faced by adult learners in the community college setting was conducted. Data collected by Learner Success through the use of a survey instrument titled “Student Readiness Inventory” administered to Madison Area Technical College Medical Assistant students currently enrolled in the program was used in designing recommendations and strategies for this project. The findings and survey results were used in the development of the project.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Overview of Non-traditional Student Characteristics

The 2011 graduating class from the MATC Medical Assistant program included 17 students, 16 female and 1 male, with an age range of 18-56 years, and an average of seven years since their last educational experience. Other characteristics of this graduating class included four students with bachelor degrees, six students attending classes with assistance from Work Force Development grants due to the fact that their employers had downsized or closed, and one student who had retired from elementary school education and was re-entering the workforce in hopes of securing employment with an organization that would provide health care benefits. This demographic is consistent with reports from the literature, however there are additional student characteristics reported that need to be considered. Community colleges have seen a growing number of new students from three distinct groups: workers displaced as a result of the economic downturn, veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, and adults moving into higher education after completion of a GED (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011).

The literature defines the non-traditional student as one who possesses one of the following characteristics; delayed enrollment into college, registered for less than 12 credits in a given semester, work full time, have dependants other than a spouse, single parents, or students who did not earn a standard high school diploma (Spellman, 2007). According to Spellman (2007), one-third of community college students are married, 25% are single parents, 57% work more than 20 hours per week and 21% report a minimum of six hours per week commuting to and from classes. Nearly 20% of non-traditional students complete less than ten credits of post-

secondary education (Spellman, 2007). Socioeconomic factors directly effect self-esteem and are cited as a key contributor to low retention in community college programs (James, 2003).

Review of Barriers to Student Success

Non-traditional students in the community college system face a plethora of barriers posing challenges to their success. These barriers include a lack of academic preparedness, financial pressures, complex family situations and cultural issues (Spellman, 2007). In a study of 858 students at Indiana University, students cited their barriers included trying to balance work, family, and school as well as managing the inherent fear of starting college, particularly after a significant lapse in time since their last academic experience (Brown, 2004). The role of self-esteem as a barrier to learner success (James, 2003) needs to be considered, and participation in education may lead to higher self-esteem. Students entering college who may have had negative educational experiences in the past are at high risk for low self-esteem. These experiences can also be a key influence on the student's level of success (James, 2003). Low self-esteem is often the result of forces outside the educational realm and those forces include poor health, abusive relationships, poverty, and unemployment (James, 2003).

In an effort to build a framework for understanding the barriers to enrollment, Spellman (2007) suggests considering three categories of barriers: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers include life challenges, family, childcare, and personal finances, for example. A research study by Riggert, Boyle, Petrosko, Ash, and Rude-Perkins (2006) as cited by Gilardi (2011) concluded there is a negative relationship between the number of hours a student works in a week and student retention. Institutional barriers are those barriers that prevent students from participating in coursework. These include complex admission

policies and limited scheduling flexibility to accommodate working adults. Dispositional barriers relate to the student's level of confidence and attitude that they will be successful (Spellman, 2007). Andres and Carpenter (1997) as cited by Kenner and Weinerman (2011) theorized that high attrition rates among non-traditional students could be related to the institution's inattention to successfully integrating the student into the college environment. Students entering the classroom also face challenges with changing technologies, including online or hybrid course offerings; the college environment; and pressures of individual responsibility for their coursework.

Compared to the traditional college student, the non-traditional student may have difficulties adjusting to the college environment and meeting the requirements of their coursework due to a higher load of external demands (Gilardi, 2011). Clark, Clow, and McLaren as cited by Lewis (2010) concluded that despite an emphasis on increased distance learning options, 49% of students chose to take an online economics course. The reasons stated for preferring a traditional classroom experience included individual comfort, and a perception they may not "learn as much" in an online course (Lewis, 2010). Students who experience difficulties in achieving these transitions are a high risk for withdrawing from college (Zepke, Isaacs, and Leach, 2009).

Strategies for Addressing Barriers to Success

Community colleges must adapt to the changing needs of the non-traditional student in order to create an environment that is supportive and provides the greatest chance for student success. The literature contains multiple strategies that when deployed can lead to higher success and retention rates. These strategies include but are not limited to comprehensive

orientation programs, clearly defined mentoring and advising relationships between students and faculty, an institutional philosophy that promotes a nurturing environment, and assessment processes that may assist in identifying students who may be in danger of not meeting expectations.

The pre-enrollment period can be one of frustration and anxiety for the non-traditional student. Community colleges should implement programs that provide guidance and counseling for new students to create an environment that is supportive and welcoming (Spellman, 2007). “Pre-enrollment counseling that involves taking the time to talk with students about their hopes, and dreams, and reasons for considering enrollment gives students realistic expectations about the journey they are about to undertake” (Spellman, 2007).

Many students express apprehension about being “immersed in a sea” of younger students and question their ability to balance their studies with already busy personal lives. This apprehension may be lessened by communicating to students specific strategies for school/work/life balance and by enrollment processes that are user friendly (Brown, 2004). For instance, a significant enrollment barrier for the non-traditional adult learner is based on program costs and securing financial aid. According to Reed and Bailey (2005) financial aid rules and student loan regulations were written decades ago and were intended for the traditional full time college student and are not applicable to the non-traditional returning adult learner (Spellman, 2007).

Faculty mentors can aid in building self-confidence, autonomy, and satisfaction (Thornton, Mattocks, and Thornton, 2001). Mentors are able to assist a student in the development of a “can do” attitude and can serve as a guide as the student embarks on their journey (Thornton, Mattocks, and Thornton, 2001). Mentoring relationships between faculty and

students create a connection for the student and these connections may prevent students from dropping out college (Spellman, 2007). An environment in which a student feels nurtured can result in emotional and intellectual growth and can lead to learning that is transformational versus simply informational (Ghaffari, 2008). Zepke, Issacs, and Leach (2009) studied the effect positive teacher/student relationships have on retention. Interviews with students revealed that teachers who were perceived as enthusiastic, approachable, and caring had an effect on a student's decision to leave a course or program (Zepke, Isaacs, and Leach, 2009). Gifford and Varathataj (2010) described a correlation between faculty encouragement and optimism and higher self-esteem amongst medical students.

Once students have begun their educational journey the use of formative assessments have been shown to be a tool faculty mentors can use to aid a student's success. Formative assessments provide students with early feedback and are vitally important for students who question their ability for success (Nicol, 2009). Formative assessments in general occur during instruction and allow faculty to make immediate alterations to subject matter based on student understanding whereas summative assessments occur after instruction. In a case study, Kannan and Miller (2009) found formative assessments provided immediate feedback about student's thoughts and behaviors that is not gathered in a summative assessment. The subjects in their case study were minority, working adults returning to college with deficiencies in basic math, writing, and study habits. A key factor to retention for these students was their ability to be successful early in their first semester of classes. This case study used journaling as an assessment tool that provided faculty mentors with powerful feedback on student perceptions about their opportunity for success (Kannan and Miller, 2009).

In response to the recommendations of the work group described previously, Learner Success administered a survey to first semester Medical Assistant students. The survey instrument is titled the Student Readiness Inventory (SRI). The survey contains 108 questions and is designed to identify potential barriers to student success and provide students with recommended strategies for overcoming those barriers. Learner Success administers and manages the results of these surveys for a number of programs throughout the college. A cumulative report of the surveys administered to the Medical Assistant students was made available for this project. The data collected as part of the Student Readiness Inventory administered by Learner Success indicated Medical Assistant students cumulatively rated their “commitment to college” and “academic self-confidence” in the 54th and 57th percentile respectively. The percentile scores rank the Medical Assistant student results to students attending two year technical colleges throughout the United States. Each survey participant is provided with a recommended plan of action based on their responses. For example, students scoring their “academic self-confidence” as low are encouraged to access advising resources available in the college.

The review of literature clearly describes the barriers faced by the non-traditional student and these descriptions correlate with the student characteristics in the MATC Medical Assistant program. The literature supports barriers to student retention may be overcome with the implementation of programs designed to streamline enrollment processes and mentoring relationships to guide the educational journey for the non-traditional adult learner.

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

The review of the literature and the data collected by the Learner Success team were the key indicators for the strategies selected for this project. Using the categorical approach as described by Spellman (2007) to view barriers as institutional, dispositional, and situational, the focus of this project primarily addressed the institutional changes that could lead to higher retention in the Medical Assistant program.

Madison Area Technical College has dedicated resources to an initiative to streamline the enrollment process, a documented source of frustration for students. An analogy that has been used to describe this initiative is a student is invited to a backyard barbeque (their chosen field study). When they arrive they are ringing the doorbell (enrollment process) to get in but no one answers. The frustrated student leaves without ever getting past the front door. The college has made a redesigned enrollment process part of the overall strategic plan. Currently, prospective Medical Assistant students are screened for admission to the program by an adviser in the enrollment office. Screening involves completion of the application, transfer credit evaluations, and pre-requisite course completion. The Medical Assistant program enrolls 24 students each semester and has 70-90 students on the waiting list for admission. This institutional barrier, while outside the scope for this project, has led to stronger collaboration between the program faculty and Learner Success advisers. Once students have completed the enrollment process and are accepted into the Medical Assistant program they are invited to a new student orientation

held approximately 90 days before classes begin. The MATC new student orientation contains three components: an overall orientation to the college, a specific program orientation, and registration for courses.

The initial change to be implemented for the spring 2012 Medical Assistant class is a redesigned program orientation. The current Medical Assistant program orientation primarily focuses on a review of the program handbook describing policies and procedures ranging from academic requirements to the dress code for clinical coursework. As previously described, students surveyed by Learner Success indicated an average of seven years since their last classroom experience. Coupling the characteristics of the typical Medical Assistant student and the literature review it is recommended that the program orientation be redesigned with the objective to include topics and instruction on easing the transition back to the classroom. Faculty conducting the program orientation will conduct an assessment related to computer skills and will provide an introduction to software including Blackboard and required online course resources. The redesigned orientation also will include greater emphasis on the program requirements related to the clinical experience. Students are required to complete 160 hours of clinical experience over the last 4 weeks of their second semester in a schedule that is 8am-5pm Monday through Friday. Situational barriers related to finances, child care, and current employment schedules have caused a conflict for students in completing the clinical requirements. By assisting students to proactively plan for the clinical hours, the program will increase awareness of resources available to assist in overcoming some situational barriers. Another changed component is that the orientation program will include a detailed presentation on resources available through the Student Development Center. For instance, the Disability Resource Service is also part of Student Development. It provides assessments and plans

accommodations for students with documented disabilities. On average, 8-10% of Medical Assistant students utilize this service but it is theorized that this number may increase with increased awareness of this service. Learner Success has agreed to administer the Student Readiness Inventory survey during the program orientation. Students will be provided their individual results and recommended plans of action on the first day of classes in their first semester in the program.

Once again using the data and the results of the literature review, the second recommendation for working with non-traditional students involves the program faculty serving as coaches and mentors. Once a student is admitted to the Medical Assistant program they will be assigned a faculty mentor. Three faculty members have volunteered to mentor eight, first semester students in a pilot project beginning in the spring 2012 semester. A process will be designed that requires each faculty member to meet with their assigned mentees at least once during the first 4 weeks of classes to assess progress and identify potential barriers to student success. Faculty will document each mentoring session using a strength, improvement, and insights framework for discussion. Students will provide feedback on their perceived strengths, areas for improvement, and insights related to their experience in the program. The use of this framework for mentoring sessions will ensure consistency and allow for the pilot to be analyzed through the use of standardized methods for student assessments. The mentor will document the session on a student progress report and these reports will be discussed in a faculty meeting during week five of the semester. In the event a barrier is identified as part of these meetings, the mentor will suggest interventions and resources for the student in hopes of retaining that student.

The review of literature, Learner Success work group recommendations, and Medical Assistant faculty cooperation has resulted in the design of focused interventions to overcome barriers for student success. The student orientation redesign will include the Student Readiness Inventory and a computer skills assessment that will create a proactive process to address potential barriers. The second intervention, student/faculty mentoring relationships will result in active engagement and assessment of student progress and referrals to college resources in the event a potential barrier is identified. The overall objective is to provide an educational environment that is welcoming, nurturing and attentive to the needs of the non-traditional student.

References

- American Association of Medical Assistants*. (2011, June 20). Retrieved June 20, 2011, from <http://www.aama-ntl.org>
- Merriam-Webster*. (2011, June 20). Retrieved June 20, 2011, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>
- Brown, J. (2004, Fall). Marketing and retention strategies for adult degree programs. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 103, 51-60.
- Ghaffari, M. (2008). Learning pathophysiology by journal writing: The synergy of art and science. *The International Journal of Learning*, 15(9), 11-24.
- Gifford, H., & Varatharaj, A. (2010). The elephant criteria in medical education: Can medical education be fun? *Medical Teacher*, 32(3) 195-197. doi: 103109/01421591003614866
- Gilardi, S. G. (2011). University life of non-traditional students: Engagement styles and impact on attrition. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 82(1), 33-53.
- James, K. (2003). How low self-esteem affects adult learners. *Adults Learning*, 14(5) 24-32.
- Kannan, J., & Miller, J. L. (2009). The positive role of negative emotions: Fear, anxiety, conflict and resistance as productive experiences in academic study and in the emergence of learner autonomy. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(2), 144-154.
- Kenner, C., & Weinerman, J. (2011). Adult learning theory: Applications to non-traditional college students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 41(2,) 87-96.
- Lewis, S. G. (2010). I would have had more success if...Student reflections on their performance in online and blended courses. *American Journal of Business Education*, 3(11), 13-21.
- Nicol, D. (2009). Assessment for learner self-regulation: Enhancing achievement in first year using learner technologies. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(3), 335-352.
- Spellman, N. (2007). Enrollment and retention barriers adult students encounter. *The Community College Enterprise*, 13(1), 63-79.
- Thornton, B., Mattocks, C., & Thornton, L. (2001). Empowerment: A method of motivating adult learners. *Journal of Adult Education*, 29(1), 1-10.
- Zepke, N., Isaacs, P., & Leach, L. (2009). Learner success, retention and power in vocational education: A snapshot from research. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 61(4) 447-458.