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Land Based Colleges
Aspiring To Excellence



An Excellence Gateway case study

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Herefordshire College of Technology (Holme Lacy Campus: Improving Retention and Success

Summary

Maintaining strong levels of retention and success for a predominantly rural population presents the College with many challenges. Whilst the land-based provision has a track record of very good success rates, the challenge has been to raise standards still further in line with national priorities and expectations. As such, the College has adopted a highly focused approach to initial information advice and guidance, learner support, parental involvement and learner-focused programmes designed to further improve learner and employer satisfaction.

About Herefordshire College of Technology

Herefordshire College of Technology is a medium-sized further education college in a predominantly rural county, operating on a campus in Hereford, a land-based campus at Holme Lacy and numerous community venues. It provides vocational education and training to young people and adults, from pre-entry to higher education, in 13 sector subject areas. The College mission is simply "Success for our Students".

The challenge

Many of the learners at Holme Lacy travel great distances to participate in land-based provision and, for some, the limited public transport links present a significant challenge. Whilst land-based provision has a robust quality record, the challenge has been to achieve consistency across all curriculum areas and raise standards beyond expectations.

The activity

In response the College placed a renewed focus on its arrangements for IAG, initial assessment and the matching of learners to the appropriate level and size of programme. The following practical solutions have been implemented:

- Excellent customer service starting from initial point of contact is viewed as essential. The College believes that “first impressions count”. Learners are invited to open days and other events to find out about the College. These include both evenings and weekends; Saturday mornings have proved a popular time for learners and families to visit the College.
- Student interview days are highly structured and designed to provide learners and their parents / guardians with good information sufficient to ensure the learner is placed on the right level and size of programme. Families are first guided around relevant facilities and resources. Learners take a BKSB screening to determine levels of numeracy and literacy, which is used during the interview. Following a presentation about College life, learners have one-to-one interviews with course tutors; they are encouraged to ‘come out of their shells’ and talk about their achievements. They are not told the outcome on the day to allow course tutors to consult with colleagues and allow learners to feel a sense of achievement when they learn of their success by letter. It’s a good feeling and the College wants success to become a habit from the start.
- Once recruited, learners receive further invitations, to the College open day, and a familiarisation event designed for the end of their year 11. Learners meet staff and others with whom they will study and become familiar with the campus and facilities. This helps reduce any anxiety and maintains motivation of learners who may have applied up to nine months before commencing their programme.
- Great care is taken to ensure learners receive timely information on matters such as transport, bursaries, fees and accommodation.
- Once the academic year is underway, the College involves parents / legal guardians in the learning process. Parents’ welcome and information evenings are held in early September followed by two parents’ evenings to discuss progress. At the second meeting progression is also discussed. This partnership is viewed as pivotal in providing broader ownership of learning, and support for the learner. Senior managers understand the complexities of learners’ family circumstances and seek to deal with these in a sensitive and appropriate manner.
- The first six weeks of the programme are used effectively as an extended induction and initial assessment to check learners are on the right level and size of programme. For example, if the college has concerns about a progressing level 1 learner achieving a full level 2 Diploma, they may recommend they undertake a level 2 Certificate instead.
- The College is very careful to apply this approach only where necessary and by exception. In 2011/12, 29 students were placed on “smaller” programmes with nine subsequently progressing in-year to the full qualification.
- Management information is used to very good effect to regularly monitor learner participation. Timekeeping, attendance and underachievement are

monitored closely with follow-up actions implemented where required. The Principal actively monitors performance and meets with curriculum area managers to ensure learners at risk of dropping out are fully supported.

The outcomes

Current "in-year" performance for the 2011/12 year is strong. When measured in April 2012, the retention for learners following land-based subjects was 97%. If those who left during the first six weeks before the census date are included, the retention is still high at 96%.

Average learner attendance is good at around 91% but if attendance falls below 80% actions to remedy the situation are presented to the Principal by senior managers.

Learners are highly complimentary about the support they receive and about their teaching and learning. All criticisms are followed up and resolved promptly and learners informed of improvement actions taken.

The impact

Ofsted inspectors, in May 2010, noted:

“Outcomes for learners are good. In recent years the college has secured a strong increase in long course success rates. The degree of improvement in 2007/08 was particularly substantial. In 2008/09, success rates continued to increase at advanced level

On the range and suitability of provision, Ofsted commented:

“The college meets the needs and interests of learners and employers well. Vocational progression routes are numerous and coherent. The regular review of the curriculum ensures a good match with learners and employers’ requirements. A detailed course approval process scrutinises market demand and the financial viability of new courses. A few newly developed courses have very low numbers. Reduced funding is resulting in a narrowing of courses available to adults and others are moving to a self-financing basis. The college is particularly effective in widening access to training in rural communities. Employers value the college’s speedy response to requests for training and flexibility in how it is provided. They are generally very satisfied with the quality of training”.

Ofsted also reported:

“Care, guidance and support are good. Learners now receive more accurate and timely advice and information from first contact in schools, which helps them to make sound decisions about their choice of college course. Arrangements for transition from school to college are good and induction helps learners settle into college quickly. Most learners receive useful careers advice and helpful support in applying to university”

Ian Peake – Principal of Herefordshire College of Technology, said:

“College staff have worked together very effectively for many years. We are completely committed to providing all our learners with the very best possible education. This commitment has led to excellent outcomes for our learners and real satisfaction for governors and staff.”

Rob Dunn Assistant Principal for Land based Studies and the Holme Lacy Campus said:

“Raising standards is a team effort: relentless attention to detail, complete flexibility in terms of delivery and buying in to the philosophy that learners do not fail. It starts with ensuring learners are on the right course and ends with a bang of a celebration...oh yes, and some inspirational teaching along the way.”

The lessons learned

For Holme Lacy the real challenge has been to maintain high levels of performance and to ensure teams bounce back immediately from dips in performance; this requires energy and focus.

An antidote to the intensity of the work is to enjoy and celebrate learners’ successes, both while at college and in securing sustainable employment.

Useful links

- [The LSIS Excellence Gateway](#)
- [Herefordshire College of Technology](#)