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Aspiring To Excellence



An Excellence Gateway case study

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Reaseheath College: Preparing students effectively for full time equine courses

Summary

It is important to ensure students enrol on courses which meet their needs. This is especially so in equine subjects where employers demand high levels of experience in routine tasks irrespective of the level of course undertaken. Therefore Reaseheath College has introduced a 'summer school' week for all prospective equine level 2 and level 3 full time students. This has resulted in increased retention, particularly on level 2, and increased learner and parental satisfaction with the course.

About Reaseheath College

Reaseheath College in Cheshire provides further and higher education courses in agriculture, countryside, horticulture, equine and animal management. It also has substantial provision in construction, engineering, and food processing. It recruits learners from across the North West and has residential accommodation for over 600 students.

The challenge

The management of tensions between the wishes of employers, students, and what can realistically be provided on equine courses, has long been an issue. Employers don't want students that have not done yard experience irrespective of the level of post which may be sought. Students often want to move quickly onto more advanced work. Colleges are restricted in how much time they can devote to each. Student ability to succeed depends on developing practical skills as well as academic progress. The commitment required of equine courses which include significant practical (including routine) work, can be a culture shock for some students. In these circumstances, getting each student to start on their 'right' course is difficult.

The activity

Following interviews for prospective students during the year, Reaseheath College have introduced a one week 'summer school' prior to them starting college.

Prospective students are required to contact the equine administrator and book their place on one of approximately 10 weeks during the summer. This ensures sufficient choice for students and families to work around other commitments.

While students are asked to bring suitable clothing: riding hat, gloves, sensible footwear, and if they want to ride, riding boots, the college will make alternative arrangements if required since all students must undertake a summer school before starting their course.

Most students stay in college and are charged a reduced rate of £65 bed and breakfast for the week.

During the week, students have practical lessons and complete routine practical yard tasks. They have a lecture (usually on nutrition), and undertake a written assignment including reflecting on their lecture and yard work. Time is allocated for completion and its purpose is partly to assess ability to hand work in on time. While not formally marked, it forms the basis for discussion during an individual tutorial during the week. Prospective level 3 students will also be asked to construct a CV and letter of application for an equine post, giving the college further valuable information on background skills and experience.

The week provides a much greater insight into each student's practical and personal qualities. Students familiarise themselves with college and course requirements, and tutor and student together, consider course options much more effectively.

The addition of a parents evening on the Thursday has made it much easier to agree options and manage expectations, for example, whether the prospective student should undertake riding units.

If a student has displayed inappropriate behaviour during the week then the college can advise that the September course will begin with a probationary period during which behaviour will be reviewed.

The outcomes

Students are now more likely to be placed on a course meeting their needs. Students arriving at the college in September have more realistic expectations of college, course, and possible future employment.

Because almost all who attend summer school also start the course, this provides an early indication of recruitment.

Summer school introduction has been followed by increases in retention and success, especially now a parents evening is also improving parental communications.

This year, to cope with increased applications for equine courses, the college is increasing places on each summer school from 10 to 14.

The impact

Staff are already in college so additional staffing cost is avoided.

Students already know some staff when they start in September and give positive feedback on this experience:

“Attendance at the summer school made the first day of term far less scary”

“Learning about how such a big yard runs is very different to what I was used to. I was scared at first but by the end of the week I felt much better and really enjoyed myself”

The summer school helps level 3 learners onto either the subsidiary, or the extended diploma and has helped the college maintain retention and success.

Retention has increased to 91% on level 2 courses following introduction of an evening to enhance information, advice and guidance to parents.

The lessons learned

- The importance of open communication with both parents and prospective students, and of managing expectations with both.
- The importance of developing both parental and student understanding of the purpose of routine duties, so they support yard duties rather than feeling it is an unfair imposition.
- The student benefits of settling in and getting to know their peers and staff quickly, to their future retention.
- The benefits of the summer schools in helping with conversion of individuals to actual starts in September.
- The benefits in predicting how many students are likely to start full time courses, at an early stage.