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ABSTRACT

An innovative program known as "ASTW", a system that works, was designed to assist the non-traditional student in a university setting. The program goal is retention of the non-traditional student through counseling and learning assistance. Peer Counselors play a key role in the total program operation. They are the paraprofessionals who participate directly with the professional staff in determining program needs, the deliverers of services to students, the evaluators of the program, and often times, the creators of innovative techniques and projects to better serve the non-traditional student. These two papers describe the program and present the model used in its implementation. (Author/CKJ)

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Retention and The Non-Traditional Student Through Peer Modeling

Retention is becoming increasingly important to colleges and universities. It has become evident that institutions must not only concentrate on massive recruitment efforts but must begin to focus on retaining the students already enrolled.

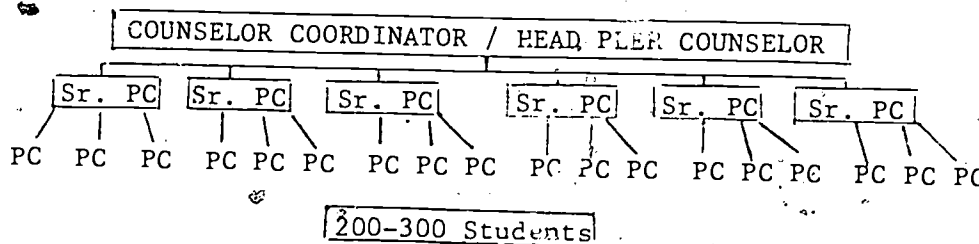
Enrollment and drop-out rates are not the only factors facing today's institutions. The increasing availability of financial aid (such as the Basic Opportunity Grant) is now enabling a whole new population of students to attend college. This new population is usually composed of low income, minorities, and the older generation or a combination of these. Many of these non-traditional students are not prepared to survive in college.

The proposal to be examined concerns itself with an innovative program in a university setting designed to assist the non-traditional student. The program goal is retention through counseling and learning assistance.

The Counseling Component will be the main focus in this proposal.

A system was introduced to the program known as "ASTW" -- (a system that works!) This was initiated not only for on-going staff development but for effective delivery of services.

Illustrated below is the organizational structure for the Counseling Component which is composed of one Counselor Coordinator, one Head Peer Counselor, five Senior Peer Counselors, and 15 regular Peer Counselors. 200 to 300 students can be served adequately (with close follow-up) utilizing the ASTW.



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Peer Counselors play a key role in the total program operation. Peer Counselors are the paraprofessionals who participate directly with the professionals in determining program needs, the deliverers of services to students, the evaluators of the program, and often times the creators of innovative techniques and projects to better serve the non-traditional student.

Non-traditional students are usually unfamiliar with supportive services and seldom seek them on their own initiative. The outreach approach through peers has been the "key" to reaching the non-traditional student.

The student is initially identified by the Counselor Coordinator who then assigns 10 to 12 students to each regular Peer Counselor and 6 to 7 students to each Senior Peer Counselor. Peer Counselors are responsible for "seeking out" the students through sources such as dorms, registrars, admissions office, etc. At the initial contact, the students are informed about the program's services and emphasis is placed on establishing a good relationship with the students. An internal assessment of student needs and interests is made by the Peer Counselor, and future meetings are then scheduled if the student wants to participate. Such rapport is established that a student feels comfortable coming to his Peer Counselor for assistance -- whether it be of a personal, social, or academic concern.

Peer Counselors maintain contact with their assigned students throughout the academic year. Students are assessed intermittently via bi-monthly written progress reports.

The Counselor Coordinator is responsible for the supervision of all Peer Counselors. The Senior Peer Counselors, in turn, are responsible for direct supervision of three other Peer Counselors each. Senior Peer Counselors work directly with the Counselor Coordinator and Head Peer Counselor. They report

one hour per week for an individual or group session for the purpose of:

- 1) in-service training, 2) receiving guidance on how to assist students,
- 3) evaluating every program students, and 4) disseminating information relevant to student needs. Senior Peer Counselors also hold both individual and group sessions with their three assigned Peer Counselors.

On-going evaluation of the Counseling Component is made primarily through progress reports, weekly meetings and Peer staff conferences. Documentation is maintained on the above and entered into the students' personal folder or program file.

This ASTW system continues to provide very favorable results in retention. Specifically, the following was of significance in meeting the needs of the non-traditional student, thereby, increasing their retention in the educational setting.

1. Peer modeling provides the close one-to-one relationship so important with any student.
2. Identification with peers provides students with realistic models.
3. The personal interest and support from the Peer Counselors reinforces the student's acceptance of himself as an individual and others.
4. Student motivation is maintained through constant reinforcement from peers.
5. By participating in the peer program a student feels he "belongs" and sees himself as part of the institution.
6. A network of intimate and lasting friendships are the results of participation in a peer program.
7. The physical facility provides students with a "hang out" which encourages peer interaction.
8. The student is given immediate academic tutorial assistance in

coursework to help reduce the level of anxiety. Programs for the development of long range study skills are available in the Learning Assistance Center to help strengthen the fundamentals necessary for academic survival. (This refers to the Learning Assistance Component of the program not dealt with in this proposal, but also utilizing peers).

Retention of the Non-Traditional Student Through Peer Modeling

Retention is becoming increasingly important to colleges and universities. Since enrollments are steadily on the decrease, it has become evident to most post-secondary institutions that they must not only concentrate on increasing their enrollments by massive recruitment efforts but must also begin to concentrate on the students already enrolled at the institution. Enrollment increases at some universities are being recognized as being mainly due to retention of students already enrolled rather than in new enrollees (New Mexico State University Registrars Report 1974-75).

Enrollment and drop-out rates are not the only factors facing today's institutions. The increasing financial aid (such as Basic Educational Opportunity Grant) is now enabling a whole new population of students to college.

The new population is mostly composed of the low income, minorities, and the older generation or any combination of the preceding. Many of these non-traditional students are not prepared to survive in college. Colleges and universities themselves are not prepared to receive this new population into their traditional setting.

Many universities still believe they are dealing only with the "traditional" student. The traditional student is seen as:

- a. White
- b. Middle class
- c. Good command of the English language
- d. College-bound in high school
- e. From an environment not foreign to college (post secondary)
- f. Good positive self-concept

Traditional efforts of most universities are aimed at serving this type of student. The university assumes that:

- a. The student is essentially of the same background as the majority of university personnel, therefore, no cultural barriers are anticipated
- b. The student is economically secure
- c. The prevalent language is English with both oral and written proficiency
- d. Parents, relatives or friends of this student attended college
- e. The student was guided in high school for college entrance and participation
- f. The individual is emotionally well adjusted.

In contrast, what is a non traditional student? What qualities does he or she possess?

- a. The student is non-white (therefore, language and cultural difference exist)
- b. The student seldom falls in the middle income bracket
- c. The student lacks the traditional fluency in oral and written English (if at all)
- d. The student's environment is foreign to college
- e. The student was not considered college material in high school either by himself or the school, therefore guidance and direction towards college was non-existent
- f. Due to cultural differences a non-traditional student may be perceived by the typical university community as emotionally unstable

The proposal to be presented concerns itself with an innovative program in a university. The program is federally funded and designed to help low

income students at the post secondary level.

The program goal is retention of the low income student through counseling and learning assistance.

A two-year survey of this program provided the following student profile representative of the target population being served.

1. 60% of the students have an ACT score of 15 or less
2. 87% are of an ethnic minority group
3. The average family size has 6.1 members
4. 70% of the students' family income is less than \$6,000
5. 84% of the students received some type of financial aid.

The staff of this program is composed of 91% (29) regular student employees and 9% (3) professional staff members. Additional temporary student employees are hired on a need basis.

Student employees are referred to as peer staff with specific responsibilities as counselors and tutors. Peer staff play a key role in the total program operation. Peer staff are the paraprofessionals who participate directly with professional staff in determining program needs, the deliverers of services to students, the evaluators of the program, and often times the creators of innovative techniques and projects to better serve low income students.

Selection of peer staff is of utmost importance to the overall implementation of the program objectives. The delivery system of the program is mainly based on the concept of peer support and peer modeling.

Sensitivity and awareness of student needs has given the staff the ability to readily recognized and pinpoint specific characteristics desirable of a potential peer staff members. Peer staff are a special cadre of students possessing the following characteristics: 1) outgoing, 2) confident, 3) a willingness to want to help others, 4) good academic performance, 5) verbal, 6) involvement in extra curricular activities, 7) positive attitude towards self and others, 8) awareness of differences in culture and language.

In addition the careful selection of peer staff, intensive training is necessary. Staff development is vital especially where peers are the main deliverers of services to students.

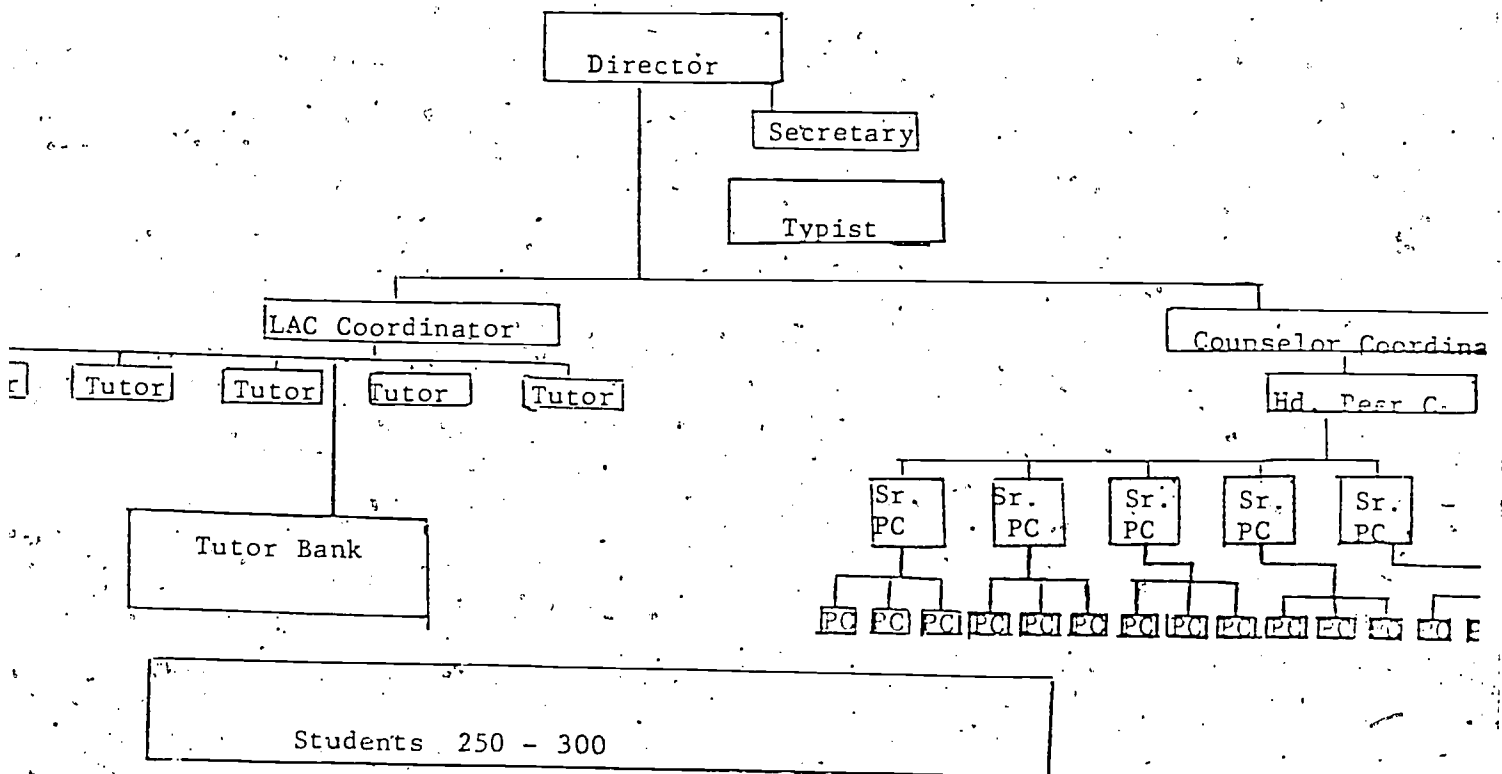
Training of staff emphasizes the concept of "team efforts". The training sessions are highly structured to generate continuous group activities.

A system was introduced to the program known as "ASTW" (a system that works) not only for on-going staff development but for effective delivery of services.

The system was designed to insure the following:

1. Maximum use of limited funds
2. Maximum use of professional time
3. Constant feedback
4. Close follow up
5. Accountability

Illustrated below is the organizational structure of the system.



The outreach approach through peers has been the "key" to reaching the non-traditional student. Non-traditional students are unfamiliar with supportive services and seldom seek them on their own initiative.

The student is initially identified by the Counselor Coordinator who then assigns a minimum of 10-12 students to each Peer Counselor. Peer Counselors are responsible for seeking out the students through sources such as dorms, registrars, admissions office, classes, etc. At the initial contact, the students are informed about the program's services which primarily include counseling, tutoring, typing, etc. At this time, emphasis is placed on establishing a relationship with the students. An internal assessment of the student's concerns and interests is made by the Peer Counselor.

The Peer Counselor and student then proceed to schedule future meetings. Such rapport is established so that the student can feel comfortable coming to his/her Peer Counselor for assistance -- whether it be of a personal, social, or academic nature. Peer Counselors maintain contact with their assigned students. Students are evaluated intermittently via bi-monthly written progress reports.

The Counselor Coordinator is responsible for the supervision of all Peer Counselors. The Senior Peer Counselors, in turn, are responsible for direct supervision of three other Peer Counselors each. Senior Peer Counselors work directly with the Counselor Coordinator. They report one hour per week for an individual or group session for the purpose of: 1) in-service training, 2) receiving guidance on how to assist students, 3) evaluating each program student, and 4) disseminating information relevant to student needs. Senior Peer Counselors will hold both individual and group sessions with their three

assigned Peer Counselors and Peer Tutors from the Learning Assistance Center.

The Learning Assistance Center is geared towards the development of long-range reading and study skills. Immediate tutorial assistance is also provided in the academics.

Peer Tutors are selected to work in the major academic problem areas. They handle the bulk of the learning assistance requests.

Individualized programs in basic study skills are developed and monitored by the Learning Assistance Coordinator.

A tutoring bank of 40-60 tutors is used to supplement learning assistance in specific subject matter areas as needed.

On-going evaluation of the program is made primarily through progress reports, weekly meetings, and peer staff conferences.

Documentation is maintained on the above and entered into the personal file of each student.

This ASTW system continues to provide very favorable results in retaining the non-traditional student. Specifically, the following was of significance in meeting the needs of the non-traditional student thereby increasing their retention in the educational setting.

1. Emotionally: a) Peer modeling provides the close one-to-one relationship so important with any student even more so with the non-traditional, b) student motivation is maintained through constant reinforcement from peers, c) a network of intimate and lasting friendships is the result of a peer program.
2. Academically: a) Immediate assistance in coursework is provided to help reduce the student's anxiety level, b) development of long-range study skills is made available to help strengthen the fundamentals necessary for academic survival.

3. Socially: a) Identification with Peer staff provides students with realistic models, b) the personal interest taken by Peer staff reinforces the student's acceptance of himself as an individual, c) a sense of belonging and inclusion as part of the university is provided by participation in the peer program, d) the physical facility provides students with a "hang out" which encourages peer interaction.