

Successful
Transitions
to Higher
Education:
A look at
Maine's
College
Transitions
Initiative

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MAINE
Adult Education
College Transitions

The state of Maine is big on spectacular coastline and natural beauty. It is small, however, on employment opportunities for people without much education. As is true in other parts of the country, steady work in the manufacturing sector is no longer plentiful. The Maine Center for Workforce Research and Information's website (<http://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/qcew.html#EmpWagesInd>) reports a 36% loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector from 2000 to 2010 (over 28,500 jobs). Increasingly, employers are requiring a more educated workforce. With only 25% of Maine's population holding a bachelor's degree, Maine lags behind the rest of New England (at 35%), according to the Maine Compact for Higher Education (n.d). Maine wants to change this statistic, and central to that change is a program focused on adult learners called Maine College Transitions (MCT).

My interest in this topic started when I began teaching math at a small adult education program in Western Maine. I saw many former mill workers turn to education to help them obtain a stable career. Many

had a goal of "going to college," but knew little about what that meant in terms of planning and preparation. This led me to look into how other programs were helping students transition to college. My research included visits to three MCT sites and a small qualitative study in which I held focus group interviews with current and former students to learn what they thought about the program. Thirteen students participated in the study. Eleven of these students had completed the program. Of these, 8 were in college and 2 were starting soon. None had completed college at the time of the study. In this article, I hope to share some of what I learned from them about MCT programs.

Maine College Transitions

Although Maine Adult Education programs have offered college preparation classes for years, the state wanted a more comprehensive approach to college readiness, and MCT has grown from that. In 2006, the legislature made MCT a line item in its biennial budget. This allowed the program to evolve from a small, grant-

funded ABE-to-college initiative operating at six pilot sites into a statewide program reaching into every county and region of Maine (Levinson, 2009). The Maine Department of Education oversees the program, currently funded at approximately \$800,000 per year. The program is now in its fifth year of statewide operation.

The Program

MCT programs are offered through local adult education (AE) programs across the state, something that sets MCT apart from other transition programs. Local programs apply to the Department of Education for these funds. MCT is a competitive grant program, and sites need to meet certain requirements in order to receive funding. Required program components include assessment, career and education planning, data collection, academic and technology training, assistance with college and financial aid applications, and college success skills. "The goal is to provide high quality, cost-effective and accessible pathways to postsecondary education for adults," according to Larinda Meade, the MCT Coordinator (Meade, 2010).

To accommodate adult students, two scheduling options exist. In the first option, students spend about 84 hours together in a class setting, working on both academic and college readiness skills. The second option consists of approximately 12 hours in class working on college readiness skills. Students then choose academic courses based on their individual needs. Costs vary among programs, but most are free or of little net cost to the students. Some charge only for text books. Others charge up to \$200, but they often return the fee

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by way of a college scholarship upon completion.

Another program feature is professional development to assist AE sites in building their programs. Best practices in administration, data collection, instructional methods, and curriculum are shared among the programs at regional and statewide meetings and through the MCT website. Programs partner with local universities, community colleges, and other agencies that have similar goals such as regional CareerCenters, Maine Educational Opportunity Centers, and Maine Centers for Women, Work, and Community.

The Students

Approximately 1,300 students enroll in MCT each year. Many are recruited from the hosting AE programs as they complete their high school or GED® diplomas. Others are referred by college administration personnel after they first attempt the entrance exam. CareerCenters and other state agencies often refer their clients to MCT programs. Some students self-refer after seeing a program advertisement or hearing about the program from a friend or coworker. Lisa Levinson, a third-party evaluator

of the MCT program, described the population that MCT programs target in her 2009 report:

"Strangers to the educational system, out of school for a long time, and fearful of going on to college, they are not going directly into postsecondary education, but are coming to adult education transition programs to gain skills, confidence, and college information (Levinson, 2010)."

All the student participants in my study indicated that they wanted to go to college to improve their employment options. Many needed to brush up on academics. They needed help and guidance navigating college admission and financial aid processes. Two of the participants indicated that they had tried college years ago but had dropped out during the first semester. One of the students described his situation like this: "I was laid off since 2008, unemployed. Someone from the CareerCenter suggested I should look into going back to school. I needed something to get me back to speed." Another put it this way: "I knew nothing about college. I would have been lost."

Program Components

The required program components include career and education planning, academic and technology instruction, assessment and data collection, and the college experience.

Career and Education Planning

Whether it is done as a group activity or through individual counseling, career planning is one of the first steps in any MCT program. All of the students I interviewed came to MCT because they wanted a career

and better employment opportunities. At MCT, they are introduced to online career search programs such as ONET. That, along with visits to and from industry representatives, job shadowing, and individual counseling, helps them choose a career direction. Career exploration is followed by educational planning, assistance with college and financial aid applications, and steering students to resources that can help them both while applying to college and after they enroll. One student described the program he attended as one that "gets you ready for this thing you want to do in your life."

While conducting the focus group interviews and in sorting through the data afterward, I was struck by the clear sense of direction in all of the students. I was therefore not surprised that their top response to the question "What specifically helped you the most at MCT?" was the career and educational guidance they received. They learned how to set goals and develop a plan to achieve them. One young student remarked, "I could lay out the steps of a big job now." Along with increased knowledge about and awareness of the opportunities available to them, students reported that their self-confidence had increased.

Academic and Technology Instruction

Math, algebra, writing, reading, and computer technology courses are an important part of all MCT programs. The classes run by MCT programs are usually free or inexpensive; this makes them more affordable than developmental classes offered by colleges. Classes are generally small, and instruction is tailored to meet both the students' needs and their

learning styles. Courses are structured like college classes with challenging assignments, a homework schedule that mirrors college requirements, a syllabus, and clearly defined expectations. From the comments made during the interviews, I gathered that the instructors have struck a good balance between high academic expectations and accessible, nonthreatening teaching.

One site requires students to write a research paper using APA format. In hindsight, everyone I spoke to from that site viewed that assignment as challenging but crucial to their success in college. One student stated, "I probably would have tried college but would have got to the first paper and dropped out if not for this program." All of the sites I observed required students to write reflective essays, both to help them process their new knowledge and to prepare them for this kind of assignment in college. Teachers offered criticism of their work in an anonymous and helpful way, and through this students improved both their writing skills and their self-confidence.

Most college classes require students to be familiar with word processing, spreadsheets, presentation software, and online course platforms. Although all the MCT programs offer or refer students to technology classes, several of the older students I interviewed indicated that they would have liked more instruction in this subject. Their technology class experience also generated positive comments about the benefits of being part of a cohort of students. They said the younger students helped them learn how to use computers to complete assignments.

Assessment and Data Collection

All MCT programs are responsible for assessment and data collection. Programs use the Accuplacer test to assess students when they begin and when they finish a course because this is the entrance test used most frequently in Maine's university and community college system. Some of the students I interviewed reported large increases in their math and algebra Accuplacer scores as a result of their time in MCT. In her 2009 program evaluation, Levinson reported that over 70% of MCT students showed an improvement between pre- and postprogram assessments (2010).

MCT sites collect both quantitative and qualitative data about their programs. They use the Maine Department of Education's reporting system, and program evaluation reports can be found on the Department of Education's website (Levinson, 2010). The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) database will eventually provide a picture of how many MCT students persist in their postsecondary education and obtain a degree (Levinson, 2010). This data should begin to be available in 2012.

The College Experience/ College Survival Skills

The college survival skills taught at MCT programs include skills that are not considered academic but are equally important for college success. Students learn about the structures of colleges and college classes, application processes for college and for financial aid, goal setting, budgeting time and money, stress management, and study skills. Tours of college campuses, libraries, and college classes are often included. Students also learn where

to find help and support services after they begin college.

Challenges

Both MCT students and programs face challenges. Much has been written about the challenges faced by adult students in college. In an article on GED graduates in college, Kist mentions navigating “university bureaucracy and logistics” and increased “economic and family pressure” as things that a new college student might find daunting (2003). Brookfield (1999) describes feelings of “impostership” that adult students often harbor as they worry that they do not belong in college. These, along with academic challenges, could derail a student’s dream of achieving a college degree; yet all the students in my study seemed confident in their ability to succeed. Each challenge they mentioned was associated with a strategy for overcoming it that they learned at MCT. In their words:

“It (college) has been a tremendous amount of work, but the fear factor has totally been eliminated. My self-confidence was boosted along with my understanding of how going to college works.”

“It is intimidating—going to college. But when you have someone breaking down the steps, you feel like you can do it.”

In my study, I was most surprised by the students’ comments that they need and want challenging assignments. Their ability to understand and complete hard tasks builds their faith in their own abilities.

Programs face challenges also. Funding will always be a challenge since MCT is dependent on public monies, but by making MCT a line item, the state has committed to the program. Tracking students after they complete a MCT program is often hard to do, but will get easier after the NSC database is available. Staff will need professional development to maintain program rigor and to share best program practices. Programs will need solid partnerships with colleges and universities to ensure that they are preparing their students appropriately. Programs must also keep up with the technology students need to know when they get to college.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

My exploration into MCT now influences how I teach my math classes. In my study, I was most surprised by the students’ comments that they need and want challenging

assignments. Their ability to understand and complete hard tasks builds their faith in their own abilities. I try to incorporate both technology and reflective writing assignments whenever possible. The MCT website, particularly the Promising Practices section, is one of my resources for curriculum (<http://www.maine.gov/education/aded/dev/transitions.htm>). I also do not underestimate the challenges faced by adult students and recognize the need for survival skills such as money, time, and stress management along with practice in problem solving and overcoming challenges. I now strive to achieve the desirable balance between a nurturing environment and one that is rigorous enough to prepare students for college work.

MCT is fairly new; none of the students in my study has yet completed a college degree. However, my impression is that they are well positioned to succeed in college, and that they view their experience with MCT as the reason for that happy state of affairs. The statewide support for this program is key to Maine’s effort to reach its goal of having a more educated workforce. These words shared by two of the students in the study say it all:

“I am constantly finding things [at college] that were covered in my program.”

“They have changed my future.”

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