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A Special Secretarial Training Program

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The topic of discussion at a staff meeting of the Eastern Utah District of Rehabilitation Services was the discontinuance, due to a declining coal market, of the district's highly successful coal mine training program. Discontinuance had been predicated upon political realities, certainly not upon the program's excellent placement rate. (Obtaining funds, even for a successful program, is difficult when the industry is being decimated by layoffs!).

Eventually, discussion turned from discontinuance to reasons of success for this program over conventional rehabilitation retraining efforts. The mine training program, it turned out, had contained a concept that was not found in traditional retraining efforts conducted by this district. "If it worked for coal miners, why can't it work for secretaries? They're still considered a high demand item," queried one of the district's more aggressive counselors.

The "it" which had proven so successful with hard core rehab clients in coal mines training was the use of the training environment and peer pressure as therapeutic modalities. These precepts provided emotional support to a relatively homogeneous group of clients throughout their training. This mode was chosen over enrolling the client in individual training. Translated into "people" terms, this total training environment provided not only the skills obtainable with traditional educational methods, but

shaped behavior, modified attitudes, and mobilized group support for those trainees who had special problems.

Program Development

Perpetuating a good idea, we decided, was a good idea! Consequently, we negotiated with the College of Eastern Utah to develop a special secretarial program. Additionally the area manpower agency was contacted to obtain partial program funding.

A 34-week curriculum was developed that blended training and therapeutic elements into an outstanding training program. The traditional college schedule was punctuated with three weekly campus group sessions. Specific classes, such as professional modeling, were open only to program participants. The program included instruction in all of the traditional business areas, including typing, word processing, math, English, shorthand, economics, computer operation, and vocabulary building.

The key to the program's success, the factor that made it different than placing a bunch of rehabilitation clients on campus in business classes, was the nontraditional classes the program contained. These included job seeking and survival skills; quality circles training; practical, problem resolution; and professional modeling.

(While not a class activity, the intense rehabilitation interaction with program staff, as well as with clien-

tele, is considered to be a significant component of the nontraditional activities with these clients.)

Participant Selection, Demographics

With a program in place, a broad definition of "homogeneous group" was developed to accommodate client needs: Enrollees would be interested in a business education, be economically disadvantaged, suffer from intense self-image problem, be rehabilitation eligible, have "average" or better IQ's, and have an intense desire to change their lives. This broad definition brought together a congregation of people quite similar yet simultaneously quite different.

While we anticipated 15 students, 13 completed registration. The mean age of the class, which was comprised totally of females, was 27. Age on the date of rehab application ranged from 18 to 54. Five were single, one was divorced with no children at home, four were divorced with children living at home, one was separated with children living at home, and one was married with children at home. The mean average Full Scale WAIS IQ of the group was 98 (ranging from 80 to 111); the mean average Verbal IQ was 93 (ranging from 78 to 109); the mean average performance on Performance WAIS was 107 (ranging from 89 to 123).

Thirty-eight percent of the population was classified as severely disabled, as defined by the policies and

procedures manual of the Division of Rehabilitation Services of the Utah State Office of Education. The most obviously disabled person was Rachel, who is a 23-year-old Hispanic woman with cerebral palsy which results in spastic paraplegia. The client, who was born 4 months prematurely also suffers from birth defects that affect her right hand and left foot. She is unable to negotiate stairs, walk for long distances; and, because of her upper extremity weakness, had to use a cart to transport her books. Several emotionally disabled clients had a history of multiple institutionalizations or required medications in order to remain in the community.

Disability codes reflect part of the group's diversity. Primary disabilities included depressive neurosis (N=4), personality disorders (N=1), learning disability (N=2), substance abuse (N=2), and orthopedic impairment (N=4). Secondary disabilities were equally diverse: depressive neurotic (N=4), personality disorder (N=1), pulmonary dysfunction (N=1). Five clients reported no secondary disability. It is significant to note that seven clients could have been classified as having a second or third disabling condition of learning disability had psychological data been more completely interpreted by the evaluating psychologist. More than once, psychologists were used in doing the initial evaluations. Some obviously were not cognizant of the rehabilitation definition of learning disability and consequently did not include it in their diagnosis.

Program Discussion

From the start, the program created a feeling of "group spirit." The instructor (armed with data relating to specific client problems provided by college faculty), rehabilitation staff, and the clients themselves used tradi-

tional group techniques to develop solutions to specific problems. Initially the district supervisor visited the group twice weekly, assuming the role of "drill sergeant" relevant to participant progress. This created an "us" against "him" atmosphere which contributed to a sense of cohesiveness.

Issues discussed (and often resolved) in class included how to find an apartment, how to maintain a positive relationship with one's boyfriend while in training, and how to obtain a tutor for math class. As the group progressed into more complex areas of training, efforts were mounted to counter the stress created by long hours of intensive study. Four Corners Mental Health Specialists presented workshops on stress management. As particular problems developed, such as the majority of students having difficulty relating to a particular instructor, mental health specialists were called in to conduct

workshops in relevant topics, such as interpersonal relations.

During the second quarter, a formal Job Seeking/Job Survival Skills class was held weekly. Program content was based on commercially available "packages" and experience gained while operating the class during the Special Coal Mine Training Program. Local businessmen served as guest lecturers defining what the business world really expected from them. Mock interviews were held and video taped for group critiques. Students were taught to develop resumes. A film series was used to show special problems on the job and how to deal with them.

There were two special "group activities" during the third quarter. Students were formally involved in "quality circles" training, a popular mode of resolving problems with an industry. Briefly defined, it is a small

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Modeled on a previously successful program to rehabilitate coal miners, the principles also work in rehabilitating secretaries in this Eastern Utah project of the state's Rehabilitation Services.

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group of people who share common tasks within an industry. They are brought together to identify problems, discuss alternatives, seek solutions, present data to management or supervision, work through the solutions, and define and evaluate the results. This training was a practical, industrially oriented application of the problem solving skills learned earlier.

By spring quarter, the ladies were tired. Going to school for 5 and sometimes 6 days a week, 8 hours a day, and trying to maintain family, friends, and family relationships was beginning to take its toll. In anticipation of this, a "fun class" with a purpose was programed into the third quarter. It was professional modeling, with a very professional instructor who was totally committed to working with people and strived for the success of the program. While the intent of the professional modeling class was to give the clients a break from the humdrum of their daily activities, it also served to teach poise, self-reliance, and confidence, characteristics which are mandatory in the business world. Participants were

taught to walk, talk, dress, and apply make-up properly, attributes which are becoming to any secretary. They learned to present themselves in front of a crowd without becoming anxious. In addition, the instructor promoted the program's group theme by taking them nightclubbing in a major metropolitan area, holding fashion shows, taking them shopping, and, as a special treat, taken to a professional beauty salon which catered to celebrities where they were provided with permanents, facials, etc.

Throughout the program, even "regular business classes" were not treated conventionally. College instructors traditionally pay little attention to calling roll and rarely become intensively involved with individual students. In the past, many clients who were dropped into the traditional systems, had to withdraw because of minor problems that went unnoticed until they became insurmountable. The program coordinator, Chuck Acklin, who doubled as life skills teacher, monitored the daily progress of each class, dogged absent students, arranged tutors for those who were failing, advised rehabilitation personnel of pending or existing problems, and often provided midnight counseling over the telephone to clients who had personal problems.

Program Outcome

Eighty-four percentage of the participants are either employed or continuing their education. Three students, who dropped out in midprogram because of employment opportunities, are currently employed in business professions. Five program graduates are employed, three are continuing their education, leaving only two unemployed, one due to pregnancy and one due to lack of desire.

The program has not only changed the employment status of those involved, it has significantly changed their lives. Essentially dependent, withdrawn people have evolved into individuals who have taken control of their lives and their futures. They are working as corporate secretaries or striving to obtain bachelor degrees. Rather than reacting to their environment, they are controlling it.

The spirit of interpersonal involvement (camaraderie) prevented a mass defection from class when all program participants flunked their first mathematics examination, and proved equally effective as other problems arose. Attitudes were significantly modified. Hostile and combative clients learned to reason their way through problems rather than arguing their way through them. Shy and reclusive clients developed skills in interpersonal relationships and learned self-confidence.

Staff attitudes played an important role in effectively implementing the premise upon which the program was based. Without this infectious enthusiasm, the program effectiveness would have been significantly watered down.

A second session of the Special Secretarial Program is in progress at the College of Eastern Utah. Rehabilitation staff are attempting to develop programs in other fields, such as robotics, which would employ the same program premise as the mining program and its successor the Special Secretarial Program. In addition, other schools, cognizant of the success of the programs run by Vocational Rehabilitation at the College of Eastern Utah, are evaluating the model for implementation.

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