

ABSTRACT

Moving from open enrollment to managed enrollment

By Kate Hyzer

We all want our classrooms to be communities of adults making meaningful strides toward educational goals, but sometimes our openness to new students can sidetrack even the most focused teachers and students. At Lutheran Settlement House, we took a hard look at the impact that an open enrollment model had on our classroom communities. Based on feedback from students, teachers, and our program performance, we shifted from open enrollment to managed schedules. This article describes how we made the change, the questions we asked ourselves, and the data that we used to verify the benefits of the change.

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Moving from open enrollment to managed enrollment

By *Kate Hyzer*

Our adult education program recently shifted from an open enrollment model that welcomes new students anytime to managed enrollment that is closed to new students except during specific registration periods. This shift was spurred by student feedback collected in surveys and focus groups, teachers' frustration at continually "restarting" classes to orient new students, and data that showed too many students were leaving our program before attending 12 hours of instruction. Our program needed some fresh ideas and a method to evaluate them.

Our journey toward managed enrollment began with a simple question: "What changes do you recommend for your class or (our agency)?" Our destination became clearer when an intern ran a focus group and asked, "What are two ways (our agency) could better assist you?"

In August 2004 an intern ran focus groups with about 15 of our adult education learners. Then in September 2004 we gave all of our active students a Satisfaction Survey. We found many expected results: students liked our agency and our teachers (they were attending, weren't they?); they would refer a friend or relative; they knew about some but not all of the noneducation services our agency provides. However, the most interesting information came from those open-ended questions about what else we could do to support them. Learners asked for what seemed like a supportive community. Among other things, they wanted more nights of classes, a student lounge, and fewer distractions for their teachers.

In November 2004 our ABLÉ-funded staff spent a day brainstorming ideas to respond to students' requests and to address the alarming percentage of adults who came to us for fewer than 12 hours. As the day progressed, it became clear these two areas could benefit from the same solutions. Also, we identified the three criteria that had to be satisfied for any new solutions to be implemented: improved student satisfaction demonstrated in formal feedback, improved teacher satisfaction, and improved program performance data.

A pilot takes off

Throwing my fear of missed enrollment goals to the wind, we developed the idea of piloting managed enrollment classes in a limited dimension. In January 2005, we piloted two GED-level managed enrollment classes. GED classes were chosen with the hope that a greater sense of community might lead to group GED test registration, buddy GED test taking, a higher level of seriousness about homework, and, most importantly, more GEDs. Our pilot classes lasted 12 weeks and covered two GED subjects. The expectation was that students would test in those subjects at the end of the cycle. After the first two weeks teachers had the option to drop students who were not attending or were not at the appropriate skill level; then the class would be "closed" for the next ten weeks.

We watched the attendance very closely for the rest of the winter. In March, we started to review the pilot. We had many questions that fell into our three criteria areas. *Did students like the new system? Were students more successful in managed classes than in open enrollment classes? Were teachers more satisfied with the new model? Were we enrolling enough students to make our enrollment goals?*

To answer these questions we looked at a few key pieces of data: percentage of students who attend at least 12 hours, the average hours of attendance, and GED achievement. In our morning GED class we saw an immediate and huge impact on the percentage of students who attended at least 12 hours. The class had averaged about 62% of students staying 12 hours under the open enrollment model. With the introduction of managed schedules, that number leaped to 91% during the first six months of the pilot. (A recent analysis showed that improvement held with the first four months of 2005–06, yielding a 72% enrollment rate.) Within the context of a better enrollment rate, we saw similar average hours of attendance and placed a similar number of students in the class. In the end, we saw more students staying and receiving plenty of hours of instruction.

The numbers were even more telling for our evening GED class, which is populated by adults who work all day then drag themselves to class. Prior to managed enrollment, this class had dismal enrollment rate of 43% of students staying for 12 hours. Those who did stay for 12 hours averaged only 23 hours. With managed enrollment, we saw the enrollment rate jump to 66%, with students averaging 43 hours of instruction over the first six months. (Looking again to the first months of PY 2005–06 we saw the enrollment rate continued to climb to 73%, vs. 43% for same period before managed enrollment, and hours of attendance jump to 31 hours, vs. 23 hours same period before managed enrollment.) As an added bonus, we even placed more students into the class as word of the success spread.

The most exciting data was that in these two classes at least 18 students took one or more sections of the GED test, with only two students needing to retest for those subjects. Of these, 18 more are expecting to complete the GED within a year of starting the managed classes.

Assessing the pilot

From a data perspective, our pilot was a clear success. Next, we wanted to make sure students perceived the same improvement in their satisfaction with the change. We surveyed students who had participated in class under both open and managed enrollment models. After explaining the change, we asked which system they preferred. All respondents preferred the managed schedule model. Students wrote about feeling that under managed enrollment the classes were “more organized” and they valued being able to “concentrate on the subject covered.” They also appreciated that everyone was learning “at the same pace” with “no one ahead or behind.” Finally, they did feel more like a community. They said “classmates were very supportive” and they had “made a nice group of friends and had a lot of support.”

The teachers also gave enthusiastic support to managed enrollment. The two teachers involved in the pilot had been teaching the GED classes for at least six months under the open enrollment model and continued to teach a full-time course load that was open enrollment. The teachers appreciated being able to develop a tighter curriculum to move students forward faster.

In April 2005 we brought our data back to our ABE-funded teachers. The teachers who had not been involved in the pilot did not need our data to be convinced that managed

schedules were what they wanted. As a group, we discussed what our next steps should be. We decided that creating and maintaining a sense of community happened naturally in our ESL and low-literacy classes, so we would leave those open entry. However, about two-thirds of our students fall into ABE-level classes, and that was our next target. In July 2005 we rolled out a managed enrollment schedule for 20 of our 25 classes.

The next leg

Our planning process became more complicated. We still needed to make our enrollment goals, what should we do with students who came to us between registration periods? Students seemed more satisfied when they saw their successes, but what could punctuate ABE classes as testing had punctuated GED classes? Did teachers need different supports in a managed schedule than they did in open enrollment?

As we did with our pilot, we are trying different solutions and holding them up to our three criteria. Right now, we offer a mixed-level class for learners who come to us between registration periods, but we are thinking about trying computer-based distance learning. In addition, we need to ensure we do not confuse or lose these students as they wait to enroll in their permanent class. We end each enrollment period with a post-test, progress report, and satisfaction survey, but perhaps we should add some sort of “move up” celebration for students who advance to the next skill level. Teachers are quickly coming to love the 12 weeks of no new students and now can spend more time sharing ideas and lesson plans. We wonder if we should formalize this process or let it grow on its own.

This has been an exciting journey for us. It was very satisfying to be able to form a solution that pleased everyone involved without compromising our educational mission and philosophy. Because we involved all our staff and students in developing our solutions we have had more creativity and energy than we expected. Though I was nervous about making changes that might hurt our program performance data I have learned to take thoughtful risks, then back them up with data. This slow and thorough process is still ongoing, but I feel confident that managed enrollment is the right solution for our program.