

Challenges and Lessons Learned: Miami Dade College

During intake interviews, we ask participants about the issues they believe are impeding their opportunity to have a better quality of life. The answers have provided us with a list of items we should help them to address.

Training. Ninety-five percent of participants identify training as the most pressing reason for attending our program. A large number of participants (65 percent) complained that a lack of transportation was hindering their training and job search. Some participants cannot afford to pay to maintain a vehicle, nor can they afford public transportation, which costs at least \$5.65 daily (\$112 for a one-month bus pass). The Miami-Dade Transit, Transportation Disadvantage Program, helped us to address this barrier by furnishing us with bus passes for students who are actively going to training/class and/or searching for jobs. The challenge was to deter individuals who were only interested in getting a bus passes, not with complying with the conditions of actively training and job searching. We had to devise controls, including tracking computer lab visits, ensuring passing grades on tests, and obtaining report cards from partners such as Florida International University-Hospitality, MDC-Hospitality Institute, and MDC-North Campus Training, which are outside our immediate control. The bus pass is a much sought after item, especially among homeless and jobless individuals with no intention to undertake any training responsibility imposed by the program. The bus pass control was a challenge from the beginning, but we learned fast. For instance, we learned that some participants were selling their bus pass at a discount. Therefore, they were unable to come to class or search for a job. As soon as we figured that out, we requested that participants bring original bus passes—which we registered by serial number—to class, and posted those numbers in the database each month. Soon, participants learned to adhere to the rules and regulations.

No Resume. Sixty-four percent of participants reported having no resume. We adopted a resume builder program that produced the quality resumes, with perfect spelling, grammar, and formatting in a few minutes, for which participants did not have to know word processing software. Every issue in the list was addressed as the program deems important to alleviate the burden of our participants, most of them were addressed in our computer lab and other social programs dedicated to solve issues such as legal record, health, and housing.

Job Placement and Retention. In order for us to gain access to employment information for those participants who have obtained jobs, the program offers free bus passes in exchange for keeping us informed of their job status. When they come to pick up their bus pass each month, they must bring a pay stub and provide information including work hours, salary, title, start date, and time on the job. The distribution of bus passes has served as an incentive and helped us to obtain information about the employment status of some participants. However, it has been difficult to follow up with those who quit the program and neglect to stay in touch.

The ultimate goal of any program is for participants to get a job that fulfills their needs, or that at least pulls them out of the low-income loop. The most challenging issue that any program can face is the inability to report outcomes accurately because participants are no longer accessible. We use the bus pass as a carrot and feel this effort has worked well.