Road Map to Retention

Strategies and Suggestions

MTC Institute

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MANAGEMENT & TRAINING CORPORATION INSTITUTE

The MTC Institute, a division of Management & Training Corporation (MTC), addresses topics relevant to job training and corrections programs. The Institute is dedicated to objectively examining data, projecting trends, researching program models, tracking public policy developments, and shedding light on promising practices.

We strive to support the overall success of the Job Corps program and its students in gaining career skills, high school diplomas, GEDs and career placement. Our intention is to provide useful information to those interested in and committed to the Job Corps community. With a research-oriented and innovative approach to tackling our projects, the Institute hopes to engage the community in a discussion of the most pressing issues facing individuals involved in education and training programs such as Job Corps.

This publication, "Road Map to Retention: Strategies and Suggestions," focuses on the ongoing struggle faced by academic and vocational institutions around the country to retain students. We examine retention in Job Corps training programs and offer strategies to improve student commitment.

MANAGEMENT & TRAINING CORPORATION

Management & Training Corporation is an international private contractor that manages and operates 23 Job Corps centers in 19 different states. It has operated centers since 1966 for Job Corps – a U.S. Department of Labor job-training program that prepares disadvantaged youth for meaningful careers.

MTC entered the corrections industry in 1987 when it opened one of the first privately operated corrections facilities in the United States. Today, MTC is the third largest operator of privatized correctional facilities in the world with approximately 13,000 beds. Committed to inmate rehabilitation through education, MTC seeks to provide an educational and social base for these individuals to reenter society and live productively after serving their sentences.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educational institutions from secondary schools to post secondary programs are struggling with retention of students in order to provide the training demanded by employers. Today's job market requires more technical skills and higher levels of education in order to earn gainful employment. The correlation between attaining education beyond high school and earning better wages is stronger than ever. This report includes demographic information and statistics on Job Corps retention that provide the reader with valuable insight into the scope of the issue.

WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US

Research on the topic of dropping out of school examines the issue from multiple perspectives, utilizing various constructive frameworks. This report identifies principle reasons why students withdraw or terminate from Job Corps, based on research of comparable settings.

Several models categorize risk factors for dropout behavior that apply to Job Corps. The first posits an interaction between individual and institutional characteristics prompting student departure. The second delineates "alterable risk" and "unalterable risk" factors related to students and institutions. A third model distinguishes psychological, academic, behavioral, and family factors that impact a student's desire to complete an educational program. Earlier reports submitted to the Department of Labor identify factors affecting retention among specific demographic groups, such as Hispanics or females in Job Corps. Overall research in this field has determined that student attrition occurs because of the interaction between multiple spheres of influence that affect an individual's ability to or interest in committing to school or work.
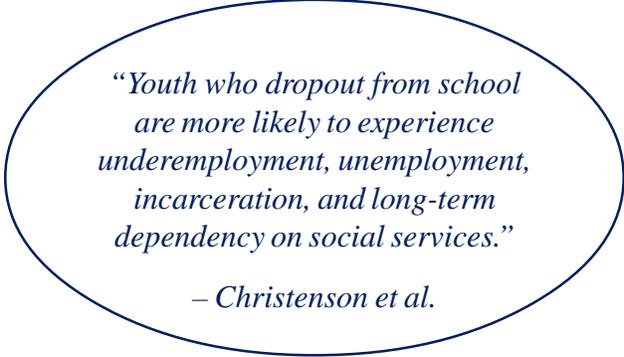
"Youth who dropout from school are more likely to experience underemployment, unemployment, incarceration, and long-term dependency on social services."

– Christenson et al.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

From this list of motives of student departure, we present a model entitled ROAD MAP to Retention that details the key student and center characteristics, which research suggests promote higher retention levels.

ROAD stands for the following traits students must bring to Job Corps or be open to develop:

- **R**esolve – a will to complete

- **O**utlook – a clear vision

- **A**ssociation – connecting to the center

- **D**isposition – personality to make it happen

MAP stands for the roles and functions that enable a center to meet the individualized needs of the students:

- **M**onitor/manage – checking and teamwork
- **A**ssess – evaluate progress
- **P**rime/promote – students and staff

We highlight four general objectives for management to consider as essential to establishing a system that responds to student needs for engagement while supporting Job Corps procedure and practice. Finally, from the objectives, we expound specific strategies for use across Job Corps centers to improve retention.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

In reality, Job Corps deals with a set of students who, because of their diverse backgrounds and the open-ended nature of the program, will not all fit in and be able to reap the benefits of the Job Corps program. However, continued exploration of methods that effectively meet the challenge of improving retention can be beneficial for many students. This report is an initial attempt to define the scope of retention, present a model for engaging students, and suggest specific strategies proven to work in Job Corps centers. Using structured consistent tactics as generally described in this report, it is possible to engage students and retain them longer in the Job Corps program.

SCOPE OF THE RETENTION ISSUE

Educational institutions from secondary schools to post secondary programs are struggling with retention of students in order to provide the training demanded by employers. Today's job market requires more technical skills and higher levels of education in order to earn gainful employment. The correlation between attaining higher degrees and earning better wages is stronger than ever. The issue of retention is important to consider because high school graduates are more likely than students who do not complete a high school diploma or GED to work full-time and year round, and earn 1.4 times as much as dropouts (Cheeseman Day 2002). Indeed, society considers "dropping out" an extreme form of disenfranchisement. However, retention is not only about dropping out; persistence refers also to completion of certificates, diplomas or other demonstrable outcomes that the job market values. Thus, retention in the long term is crucial as a means to ensure that students complete the requisite classes in their program, acquiring the appropriate skills, trade, and degrees that will yield higher wages.

From 1975 to 2000, the dropout rate of 16 to 24 year-olds from U.S. high schools improved from 14% to 11%, where the level is likely to remain. This stable and relatively low dropout rate may not reflect the magnitude of the dropout problem within large inner city schools. Given the increase of the 18-year-old population, projections claim that through 2011, 390,000 youth will leave high school before completion. Likewise, maintaining high student commitment rates in Job Corps has been a perpetual challenge for the Department of Labor since the inception of the program. This dropout behavior is disturbing because too many of these at-risk youth appear to rebuff society's offer for education and career opportunities provided at no cost to them, abandoning a valuable prospect for changing their lives.

Costs associated with dropping out not only impact the student, but society as well. "Youth who dropout from school are more likely to experience underemployment, unemployment, incarceration, and long-term dependency on social services. Non-graduates are two to four times more likely to be arrested within a few years of leaving school. The estimated annual cost of failing to prevent youth from dropping out of school is $76 billion a year" (Christenson et al. 1995, p.2). The scope of dropping out extends far beyond the individual.

Students who attend Job Corps come from highly variable backgrounds: distinct ethnic and racial heritages, various countries, diverse mental health and substance abuse histories and disparate academic backgrounds. Language competency and learning differences are additional complications to the Job Corps challenge of educating, training, and providing for this diverse group of individuals. As these students come together in an open-entry, open-exit melting pot, some traveling out-of-state to live in a new environment distanced from familial and other known support systems, the challenges are often quite daunting and, in some cases, overwhelming. Charged to give vision and tangible means for these individuals to achieve in areas where they previously failed, Job Corp's central concern is retention. Its mandate assumes that although disadvantaged, these youth can greatly benefit from the program offerings, if they stay long enough to take full advantage of the medical, dental, room and board, as well as vocational and educational training scholarship provided.

Data shows that students who remained at Job Corps 61 days or more had an 80.48% chance of completing vocational training, a high school diploma, or a GED at Job Corps[1]. Unfortunately 22.4% of students left prior to the 60-day mark. Of those, the majority of students departed under Absent Without Leave (AWL) status, generally without sufficient warning for the center to prevent their impulsive departure. One-third of the 22.4% terminating pre-60 days left for disciplinary reasons (DID), related to zero-tolerance rules or violations of the disciplinary code. The remaining departures comprised resignations (RES 4.5%), medical leave (MED 4.5%), or administrative discharges (ADD 4%).

The Career Preparation Period[2] (CPP) constitutes the initial 60 days at Job Corps. The center assesses student needs and interests in order to place them in a vocational and academic track matching their individual profiles. The emphasis in CPP is on career planning, employability skills, and assessment for the subsequent phase of the Career Development Period. Students who terminate in this period appear to have serious difficulty acculturating to the Job Corps system, are not prepared emotionally or academically to make the commitment to the process of career preparation, and/or reject some aspect of this initial introduction to Job Corps.

After Career Prep, students enter the Career Development Period (CDP)[3]. In contrast to Career Prep, the demographics of departure during Career Development reflect marked differences. Whereas AWL behavior forms the bulk of departure in the CPP, during Career Development when the focus is on training and academic instruction, and presumably, acculturation to the Job Corps system has taken root, most students graduate. Of graduates, 2% completed in 60-112 days, 16% completed in 112-180 days and 80% require 180 or more days to complete. Even so, retention at this stage is of concern, with disciplinary and AWL separations still occurring, though at reduced levels.

This data, in conjunction with the argument regarding the importance of completing a trade and degree to guarantee higher earnings, prompted MTC to undertake a retention study to determine why students leave under these patterns as well as possible solutions that might ameliorate the situation and promote longer stays at our centers.

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[1] The data present in this report is based on MTC terminations for Program Year 2001. We derive additional details from a random sample of 448 students who terminated during a one-week period in PY 2001 (2.4% of total MTC terminations that year).

[2] The objectives of the Career Prep period are ìto ready each student for successful participation in the Job Corps experience by providing a Career Preparation Period (CPP) designed to assist each student to acclimate to center life and acquire basic skills that will enhance job readiness and job search competenciesî(PRH 2-19).

[3] The purpose of the CDP is to ìprepare students to enter and remain connected to the labor market, and/or obtain further education and training by assisting them to acquire the foundation skills, specific knowledge, and competencies needed to achieve their career goals; understand how to progress in the work place environment; move successfully from the learning environment to the work environmentî (PRH 3-1).

OBSERVATIONS

The findings presented in this section are based on MTC Institute research conducted at Job Corps centers as corroborated by the prevailing research published on the topic of student departure in secondary schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, and programs for at-risk or disadvantaged youth similar to Job Corps.

Job Corps Center Observation

Our on-center research indicates that students withdraw from Job Corps for personal reasons coupled with institutional shortcomings. Students who depart from this program do so because of low levels of identification with the Job Corps system.

The primary student-centered causes for dropping out of Job Corps are:

- Homesickness,

- Immaturity,

- Incapacity to adapt to the environment,

- Lack of affiliation with the program, and

- Substance abuse.

Key dropout causes related to Job Corps centers include:

- Delayed entrance in preferred vocational trade,

- Inaccurate information regarding expectations and details of daily program functioning, and

- Unsafe or non-secure environment.

We note that the most significant drivers of student dropout behavior correlate strongly with inadequate levels of social skills development. Individuals whose social maturity base is deficient continually contend with forces that work to undermine their commitment to educational and employability opportunities. Frequently these individuals lack exposure to appropriate models of academic and social behavior; consequently, their immaturity stems from ignorance rather than incapacity. Those who are immature and exhibit low self-esteem are prone to homesickness, alienation, detachment, and are more vulnerable to succumbing to negative external forces while in Job Corps. Students with impaired perceptions of self tend to have an external locus of control that limits school membership (Hagborg 1998) and prompts them to seek external validation from sources outside of Job Corps. Being codependent and insecure relegates them to search for acceptance in negative spheres of influence where, prior to enrolling in Job Corps, they felt comfortable.

Literature Review

Research on the topic of dropping out of school examines the issue from multiple perspectives, utilizing various constructive frameworks. The first model suggests that dropout behavior occurs because of the interaction between personal and institutional barriers (Tinto, 1993). Students depart from school because of internal as well as external forces acting upon them. Tinto contends that "individual roots of student departure: intention, commitment, personal disposition – set the boundaries of individual attainment." These traits play a fundamental role in moderating and facilitating achievement in individuals. However, taken in isolation, Tinto suggests that intention, commitment, and personal disposition are not enough and that on the institutional level, there are four forms of individual experience that affect departure – adjustment, incongruence, isolation, and difficulty. Students depart if they 1) do not adjust to the system embodied by the institution; 2) perceive that their needs are incongruent with the institutional offerings; 3) feel radically isolated or alienated from the mainstream students; and/or 4) experience insurmountable difficulty meeting the standard performance level mandated at the institution.

Another model classifies risk factors into two general categories of "Status Risk" (unalterable) and "Alterable Risk" factors (Christenson, Sinclair, Thurlow & Evelo 1995), which are either subject to transformation or irreversible. This model assumes that the school environment, programs, relationship-building, and other concrete strategies employed by institutions to engage and identify students within a system can have an impact on "alterable" factors, such as absenteeism, limited or lack of supervision at home, low expectation to graduate, inaccessible support services, or limited resources.

Utilizing the Christenson et al. model of "alterable risk factors" versus "status risk factors," we consider the student-centered traits we found to be evident in the Job Corps population. Student demographics pertaining to abusive or dysfunctional families, peer influence, substance abuse history, severe academic failure, learning disabilities, and deleterious community ties can, in some cases, interfere entirely with the efforts of staff to assist, accommodate and assimilate students into a positive learning environment. Heavy drug users or codependent individuals who are not mature enough or open to the notion of change at this point of their lives may fall into the category of "status risk." The addictions or emotional problems of these individuals tax the Job Corps program beyond capacity as their needs often exceed available resources.

On the other hand, many of the characteristics we identify as institutional are likely "alterable risk factors" if proper systems are in place and adequate resources allocated. For example, surveys measure safety continuously on sites because safety is an intrinsic part of student trust, affiliation, and retention. If students feel a center is unsafe, center management can promote a safer environment by condemning all forms of harassment, containing incidents of physical abuse, and establishing precedents that demonstrate a firm commitment to a safe and friendly, zero-tolerance environment.

Bhaerman and Kopp (1988) categorize predictors of risk behavior into academic, behavioral, family, and psychological subgroups that paint a comprehensive portrait of the demeanor of a dropout. Analyzing the risk factors under these subheadings, one can develop an intervention strategy to remedy or address disengagement behavior. Consistent with the findings generated during our staff focus group discussions, Bhaerman and Kopp enumerate behavioral and psychological "Factors Involved in Dropping Out" that support the essential role of social development in retention.

Among the more important factors noted on their behavioral dropout list are:

- Lack of bonding and affiliation with friends at school,

- Drug/substance abuse, and

- Non-participation in extra-curricular activities.

As tangential psychological factors that further corroborate our findings, Bhaerman and Kopp specify:

- Feeling rejected by school,

- Feeling that courses are not relevant to individual needs,

- Social isolation or social and emotional disturbance,

- Being a loner who is unaccepted by peers, and

- Having a poor self-concept and lacking a clear sense of identity.

Several studies submitted to the Department of Labor on the subject of retention in Job Corps focus on a general analysis of attrition (Ginsburg et al. 2000), female recruitment, and retention (Wild et al. 2001) or Hispanic retention issues at the Gary Job Corps center (ATSI 2001). These reports examine specific demographic groups (female or Hispanic) or the entire student population in order to shed light on the complex problem of retaining such a varied group. A key finding from the Ginsburg et al. report acknowledges the diverse "at-risk" student body that Job Corps serves, which by definition eliminates selectivity for low-risk, high retention students, and complicates the possibility of coming up with a "predictive model based on easily measurable characteristics" for retention. Consequently, the report claims, "unmeasured factors such as attitude, motivation, personal program experience, or events that occur outside of the programs, are the key, but incalculable, factors that affect length of stay" (Ginsburg, p.2). Our study concurs with the assertion that a myriad of forces, both within the system as well as external to Job Corps, make the goal of retaining 95% of students challenging and that in measuring commitment, one must take into account intangible, immeasurable factors associated with the emotive realm.

Concerning school affiliation, the participation-identification model of student behavior (Finn 1989) correlates any measure of student success experienced in school with a higher degree of identification and affiliation with the school environment. Self-valuing attitudes within the school milieu help to build maturity and a base of self-confidence. Thus, aligning self-esteem with positive vocational, academic, and/or social outcomes at Job Corps rather than external sources strengthens retention and engagement on center.

Regardless of the model, successful programs take into account appropriate intervention strategies based on the categories previously enumerated. In essence, research in this field has determined that student attrition occurs as a consequence of the interaction between multiple spheres of influence that affect an individual's ability to or interest in committing to school or work.

With a sense of the motives driving student behavior to stay or leave, the next step in this discussion is to postulate a means to identify students at risk for departure and to ensure that a system that best meets their needs is in place.

Strategies

Research suggests the need to develop a variety of targeted strategies if we are to effectively address these issues. Several strategies exist for remedying "alterable risk factors" at Job Corps centers. Effective interventions assume two levels of delivery – simple or rigorous, depending on the degree of disengagement. The first step for center staff is to identify the degree to which the individual is disengaged in order to best target the intervention. Once staff identifies at-risk students and the degree of intervention called for, the literature on retention repeats these common, general strategies for working with students to engage and retain them in the system:

- Persistence by staff in working with a student,

- Continued and honed contact with the identified disengaged student,

- Flexibility to meet individual needs without resorting exclusively to punitive solutions (punitive measures tend to further disenfranchise students), and

- Facilitation of access to, as well as empowerment of, the student to take advantage of system resources.

Road Map

Our model entitled ROAD MAP to Retention highlights characteristics that are fundamental to a student's ability to satisfactorily participate in, persist in, and complete the Job Corps program. The ROAD component is one traversed by the trainees at Job Corps. However, equally important is the crucial supporting role played by the Job Corps center, embodied in the staff and programs, offered through the MAP. ROAD MAP involves the joint efforts of trainees working with staff to smoothly and consistently meet needs, promote well-being, and create a high performance organization.

This model came about as a result of in-depth interviews and center staff focus group discussions that probed retention at Job Corps. The model finds strong support in existing research on retention, including publications by leading academic institutions for the US Department of Education.

ROAD MAP to Retention identifies the basic, essential characteristics that students must possess or be open to develop as they pursue Job Corps opportunities. Herein follows a description of the elements of the ROAD that leads students down the path to success. (see Chart 1)

ROAD stands for Resolve, Outlook, Association, and Disposition.

- <u>RESOLVE</u> includes dedication to self-improvement and a strong sense of self determination that drives the individual to not only take the initial steps of contacting Job Corps, but more importantly allows one to stick with the process through its challenging hurdles and overcome the temptation to take the easy road out of Job Corps.

- <u>OUTLOOK</u> pertains to the student's perspective and attitudes toward life, family, academics, authority, rules, and society. Not only must the student recognize and accept the inherent principles that shape society and its corresponding organizational structure, they must believe that they are in a position to truly take full advantage of and assimilate productively into the system. Related to outlook is the ability to develop a perspective about and manage personal issues – family, partners, and/or self-esteem – so that these do not impede the process of moving forward in a productive manner.

  Outlook also assumes objectives and goals. In order to persist in a formal educational environment or mainstream society, individuals must have some tangible, realistic objectives, a sense of direction, and a plan to realize those goals.

- <u>ASSOCIATION</u> indicates the requisite affiliation, connection, and linkage with a system or program that provides the key to unlock doors to one's potential and success. Moreover, association refers to the degree of engagement and commitment demonstrated. Persistence is unlikely without a minimal level of attachment, either to an individual adult mentor or to a specific outcome or activity offered through a program in the Job Corps system.

- <u>DISPOSITION</u> implies resiliency, temperament, character, and an attitude that encourage a sense of self-worth. With these qualities, individuals in Job Corps can withstand the constant barrage of negative forces acting to sidetrack and derail him or her from complying with the mandatory steps on the road to retention.

MAP stands for Monitor/Manage, Assess and Prime/Promote. Job Corps centers provide a MAP that serves as the foundation for students to proceed down the road successfully.

- <u>MONITOR/MANAGE</u> are key functions for the Job Corps center. Staff fulfill this charge through constant and consistent tracking of student progress, problems, and achievements. Staying in personal contact and keeping the student fully involved and abreast of his or her progress has the dual function of connecting the student by demonstrating a high level of interest, as well as helping centers to project enrollment and monitor student activities. By vigilantly monitoring risk behavior, staff can reign in disengagement before it takes complete effect.

  Managing refers to establishing strong formal and informal networks of communication that relay important and timely information to the appropriate stakeholders about the students and daily center issues. Another aspect of managing is the organization of the workforce into "true teaming" (Christenson et al. 1995, p.5) that can effectively tackle and solve problems from cross-departmental perspectives. Thus, retention becomes a center-wide goal with accountability and responsibility spread across center staff.

- <u>ASSESS</u> and determine the individual needs of the student. Assessment should focus on cognitive elements as well as the psychosocial side of the trainee. Job Corps is a program with a mandate to work with the whole individual. Academic, vocational, and social assessments can help place students in the right programs at the right time, positioning them to succeed.

- <u>PRIME/PROMOTE</u> student and staff well-being. In addition, staff is responsible for priming students to achieve their potential. They must promote trust and caring as main tenets of the organization. Furthermore, they should establish support mechanisms that reach out to students and train staff with the competencies needed to fulfill their charge.

In the next section, we suggest strategies for intervention that specifically address alterable factors affecting student retention. Four objectives serve to organize the strategies into more specific examples of activities or methods of intervention. (see Chart 2)

OBJECTIVES

1. Create a sense of community, whereby, students acculturate early on and affiliate to the Job Corps system.

2. Integrate programmatic flexibility and versatility to meet individualized student needs.

3. Monitor and track student academic, vocational, and social/recreational engagement in a timely, consistent manner.

4. Establish and promote open communication at all levels.

METHODS/ ACTIVITIES

To satisfy each of these goals, we provide a list of specific interventions that promote retention.

I. Create a sense of community, whereby, students acculturate early on and affiliate with the Job Corps system.

STUDENT INPUT IN CENTER OPERATIONS WITH STAFF FACILITATION AND OVERSIGHT

Recreation

> Integrate student input for field trips, extra-curricular activities, special events, and daily program offerings.

Quality of Life

> Establish "Quality of Life" boards whose mission is to make the center a livable, productive, and pleasant community to inhabit. The board is composed of student representatives and staff from each department who examine issues pertinent to the center workings and make suggestions to remedy, change, or continue policies or practices.

Student Government Associations (SGA)

> Initiate and support SGAs that give a voice to students. SGAs allow a direct, formal channel for incorporating student ideas into academic, trade, recreational, and residential management, policies and programs. SGA can be a meaningful instrument for students to collaborate and shape center activities. Participation as an officer merits leadership recognition and incentives.

Residential Life

> Adopt and support dorm beautification projects initiated and performed by students with staff facilitation. As a result, students are more likely to take pride in and maintain living areas.

> Encourage student involvement in room and dorm décor within the limits of fiscal and social decency constraints. Make every effort to let students personalize as much of the dorm room space as possible.

PUBLIC RECOGNITION

Publications and Bulletin Boards

> Erect public displays of recognition. Disseminate information through newsletters, bulletin boards, or other media that praise student performance on center and efforts in the community. Regularly update the information and display contributions and achievements in central areas where students congregate, such as the cafeteria or recreation center. Create a student "Public Relations" person who is responsible for these displays.

Plaques and Signs

> Prominently display signs highlighting student involvement in center projects, from beautification efforts to hands-on vocational jobs. Plaques should list the students involved and project date. If students see their name on a wall or building, they are far less likely to desecrate that building or area and experience a strong sense of pride and accomplishment tied to the center and something well done. Organize a student group responsible for making the signs or plaques.

STAFF TRAINING

Topics and Strategies for Staff Training

> Training on student-centered topics should focus on techniques for effective communication, teamwork, retention, and customer-service. Additional training topics include multiple learning styles and multicultural differences. Provide staff with specific strategies and techniques for working with emotionally troubled or academically challenged youth, the primary participants of Job Corps.

> Relay in a methodical fashion management and center goals as well as strategies for meeting those goals.

ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS

Student

> Utilize student role models as mentors as much as possible to provide peer support and affiliation. Through a leadership program, find and exploit strong student role models who help engage other students. Peer affiliation is strong, and can be extremely influential in the adolescent stage of development. Enhance positive peer connections from the beginning that can have long duration throughout the student's stay on center. Student mentors should receive appropriate and attractive incentives for leadership parrticipation.

Staff

> Introduce as soon as possible adult/staff mentors who will act as constant, concerned, and reliable points of contact for the student throughout the course of his/her time at Job Corps. Model language, manners, goal setting, and expectations from the top down.

Management

> Management and directors should support staff. Recruit and hire leaders into upper management who can demonstrate and clarify goals and techniques for staff, who in turn model for students. Staff need role models, leadership, and support just as much as the students.

PRE-ARRIVAL CONNECTIONS AND CONTACT

Materials

> Prepare students with advanced information and knowledge about practices, policies, and program dynamics prior to arrival at the center. Portray life on center through printed, oral, and multimedia platforms that are accurate, realistic, and presented in a medium that "speaks" to these youth on their own terms.

People

> Contact the student in some manner prior to arrival. Make pre-arrival calls that directly, truthfully, and in detailed fashion give students a personal overview of the program and introduces them to a staff member they will then recognize on the first day of the program. If staff is contacting less than 95% of students, set up a center contact number where the recruits call in to speak with someone from the center who provides the aforementioned pre-arrival information.

Relationship with Outreach and Admissions (OA)

> Build up two-way communication between OA counselors and the center, familiarizing OA with trades offered, enrollment levels, physical layout of the center, and other relevant information. When possible, have the OA counselor spend a night on center and send relevant projections of enrollment statistics on a weekly basis.

INVOLVEMENT IN EXTRACURRICULAR AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Facilitation

> Mandate participation in student-generated, staff facilitated social activities. Student generated extra-curricular activities must be meaningful, varied, and can be both individual (art projects) or group-oriented (team membership). Extra-curricular offerings should respond to student interests as well as staff competencies and interests.

INCENTIVES

Individual

> Reward students for affiliation through extrinsic rewards of money, t-shirts, balloons, mugs, and privileges that bestow more liberty.

> Publicize and provide incentives for students who return after breaks or weekends.

Group

> Reward and foment ties with the room, dorm, center, and entire Job Corps program on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. Acknowledge room, dorm, and center-wide accomplishments (i.e. dorm of the month) regularly in all-center meetings. Create competitive challenges to inspire affiliation to some aspect of the program – be it vocational, academic, dorm life, recreational, etc.

Staff

> Provide meaningful incentives for staff to reward loyalty, center affiliation, upgrading a dorm, and overall performance as well as specific efforts exerted in student retention.

STAFF INTERACTION

Extracurricular

> Encourage staff to head up extracurricular activities based on their hobbies and special interests. Staff is engaged in a positive meaningful way, students see another side of a staff member and bonding occurs in a non-threatening, pleasant situation.

II. Create programmatic flexibility and versatility to meet individualized student needs.

VARIABLE TIME OPTIONS/SCHEDULING

Trades

> Allow students to begin training in their chosen trade as early as possible, even if only for a few hours a day in the initial weeks. Immediate exposure to and commencement of preferred vocation is essential.

> Prioritize hands-on, early entry in vocational training.

Daily Scheduling

> Consider alternating scheduling blocks to meet individual learning needs.

NON RESIDENTIAL ISSUES

Special Needs

> Strengthen outreach to social service agencies that support student's off-center life with childcare, welfare, medical, housing and transportation needs. Partner with these agencies whenever possible.

> Provide a variable time option for commuter students to accommodate their daily schedule needs.

Learning Styles

> Use multi-modality materials and equipment. Provide learning options that meet different needs and learning styles. Train staff in recognizing learning differences and addressing individual student needs in a large group. Use a checklist for identifying problem areas and strategies to assist students.

Automate information through technology

> Automate as many processes as possible to reduce paperwork. Centralize student information on line where all relevant parties have the ability to enter data and access information.

Off-Center Interactions

Supports and Contacts with Parents or Significant Parties

> Promote student contact with parents and vice-a-versa. Enhance and encourage connections between the family/off-center support system and student so that the family commits to the student's persistence. Sign an informal contract between center, student, and family to commit to participation in the program and realize the benefits of this scholarship, which provides room and board, health and dental services, academic preparation, and vocational training.

III. **Monitor and track student academic, vocational, and social recreational engagement in a timely manner.**

Student Disengagement or Commitment Behavior

> Monitoring behavior impedes students from falling away from the system. Be vigilant for the commencement and gradual realization of disengagement behavior.

> Make retention a center-wide goal supported and backed by management. Track demographics of dropouts who have left the center. Reinforce and train staff for retention improvements, including identification of possible dropouts. Provide resources, collateral support, incentives, and time for staff who invest in efforts to retain at-risk students.

> Anticipate and check for disidentification patterns of behavior. Give timely feedback to students on disengaging behavior and hold weekly staff problem solving meetings to develop strategies for success. Gather in-depth information and distribute to appropriate stakeholders.

> Use exit surveys to gather information from departing students about their experience and reasons for separation.

> Continually validate and reinforce the intrinsic and extrinsic value of attending Job Corps and completing.

> Hold weekly meetings between student and staff to update progress and goals.

> Hold problem-solving meetings to anticipate and analyze potential pitfalls, academic performance, vocational progress, and community/recreational participation.

> Monitor trade performance by task.

STAFF

Quality of Work Survey

> Conduct staff surveys on quality of work and organizational culture.

> Encourage immediate e-mail or phone contact between staff members regarding changes in student status, disciplinary actions, academic milestones, medical or family emergencies, and personal crises.

> Track engagement or participation in recreational or voluntary activities.

IV. Establish open communications

STUDENT – STAFF

> Make referrals to appropriate internal and external sources that can help the student. Provide a central point of contact for students to access the answers to their questions in a timely and friendly manner.

> Maintain an open door policy to address all concerns and issues.

STUDENT – FAMILY

> Open all possible channels of communication between students and family members – phone calls, e-mails, letters, and photos – to support retaining the student on-center.

STUDENT – FAMILY – STAFF

> Activate immediate interventions between parents and student.

STAFF – STAFF

> Utilize cross-departmental teams on center. Design teams around cross-functional lines with input and accountability spread across everyone's shoulders. Hold meetings several times a week – brief and pointed, with a specific agenda. Ensure each department member brings relevant data. Communicate consistent information to staff and then reinforce the same consistent information with the students.

STAFF – STAKEHOLDERS

> Open up channels between students, community volunteer coordinators, social services, OA, CTS, staff, and employers.

CONCLUSION

The scope and consequences of student retention in Job Corps is an issue of great importance for those within the Department of Labor program as well as members of the broader society. This report is an initial attempt to define the scale of retention, present a model for engaging students that includes a road map for both students as well as Job Corps centers to consider, and finally make suggestions regarding a way to enact specific strategies proven to work in settings such as Job Corps centers. Although we would like to see between 95-100% retention levels, the reality is that Job Corps deals with a set of students who, because of the diversity of their backgrounds and the open-ended nature of the program, not all may find the answers to their calling within this structure. Retention is a constant challenge that has no easy fix. However, if the majority of the recommendations proposed in this report are put into practice, Job Corps centers may be one-step closer to improving retention. The challenge of retaining students requires forward thinking and a significant investment of human resources to meet the demographic changes and labor market demands of the future.
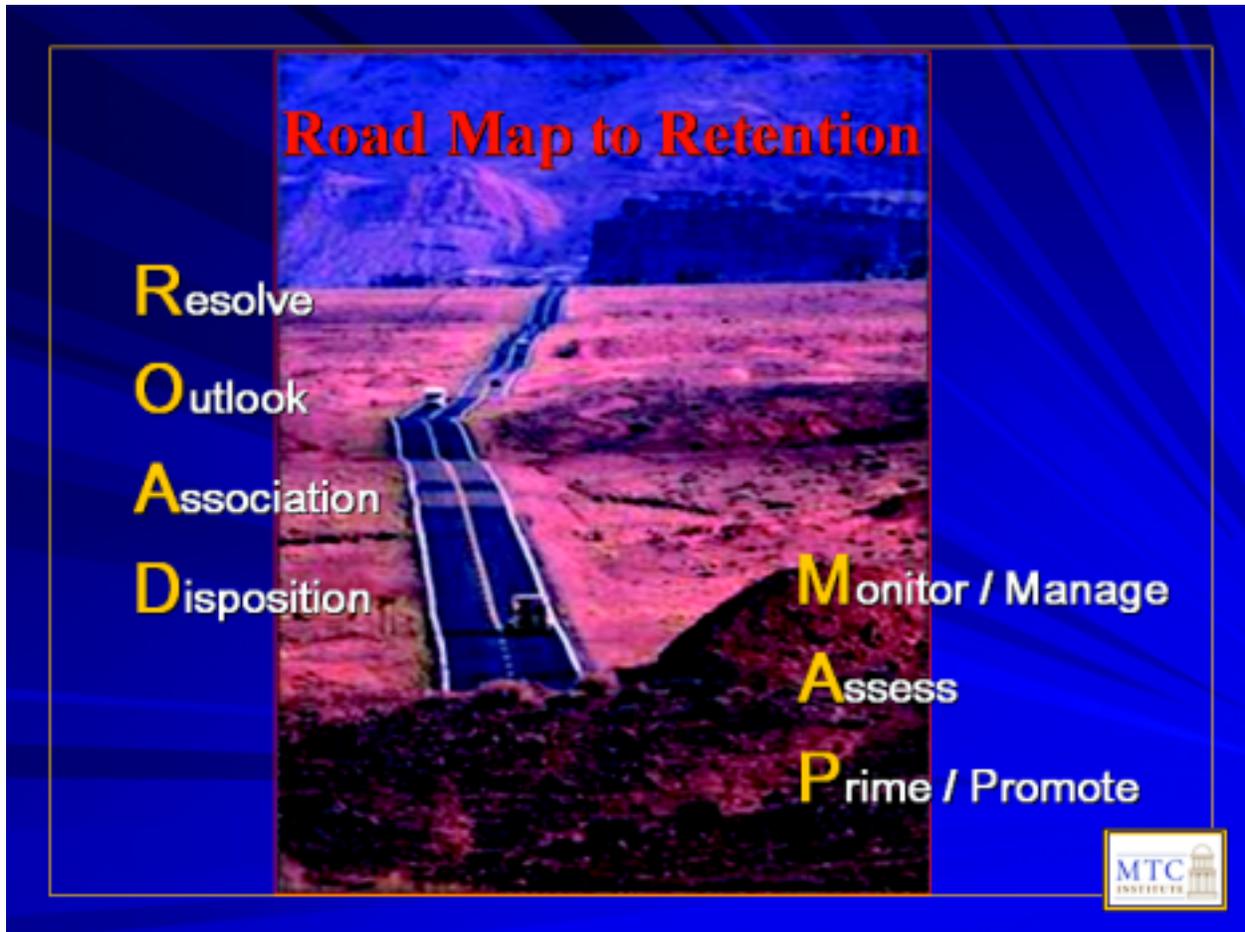
Chart 1:   Road Map to Retention

Chart 2:   Objectives and Activities

NOTES

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