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Adapting to Change: Utilizing Assessment and Evaluation for Planning in Adult Education GED Programs

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Abstract: When educational service programs are forced to adapt to mandates or other situational changes, assessment-based research can be a useful tool for identifying both challenges and opportunities relating to continued program success. This research demonstrates how programmatic needs assessments have been used in the context of the current General Education Development GED[®] exam and its upcoming changes.

Adapting to Change and Meeting New Demands

For a variety of reasons, non-profits and other service-oriented organizations may be faced with mandated or unanticipated situational changes that drastically alter their operation and service provision. Such changes have the potential not only to impact internal issues such as planning, budgets, staffing, and the acquisition and use of resources, but can also have tremendous external impacts on service recipients and society in general. As a result of the American Council on Education and Pearson VUE's announcement that the General Education Development (GED[®]) test will be undergoing several major changes in 2014, states and service providers alike have found themselves unprepared and uncertain of how to proceed. The new test and its changes will force states (and ultimately providers) to either comply with the new test or adopt an alternative. In either case, service providers will be forced to undergo rapid program change while adapting as quickly and effectively as they can. However, without a state and program-specific action plan, funding, and necessary support, these organizations will be taking it upon themselves to adequately plan for inevitable changes.

A Multi-Site Analysis of GED Providers in East Tennessee

The purpose of this research was to assist a group of local GED[®] programs in East Tennessee as they plan for changes to their programs that, over the seven months-long course of the study, had yet to be clearly identified. The first phase of this research focused on one program that serves students under the age of 25; the second phase, currently in progress, focuses on a collection of programs that serve students of all ages. Four areas of concern guided this research, which sought to identify: (1) what information participants had about the new GED[®] test, (2) ways in which changes to the current test may impact the program and its provision of services, (3) participants' thoughts, concerns, and perceptions about the situation, and (4) how students may be directly affected by these changes. The findings from this study reveal a major theme of uncertainty, a lack of concrete knowledge and, to some extent, incorrect or misguided information about changes to the test. The findings also suggest concern for the ways in which services may be impacted as a result of changes to program funding, resources, and staffing issues such as training needs for current employees or having to acquire additional personnel to meet new demands.

Overall, participants had a negative perception of the new test. Nearly all participants believed it would have negative implications on students, and believed the transition for older students would be much more difficult than for those who are younger. There are at least three ways in which the findings from this study provide added value. First, from a scholarly perspective, the findings contribute to the

existing knowledge about young adult learners preparing for the GED[®] test in terms of their behaviors, learning preferences, and use of technology in educational settings. Second, the applied research component of this study addresses the challenges that many program providers face as states consider the impending transition away from the 2002 version of the GED[®] test. Finally, as a programmatic needs assessment, the findings of this study may be applicable to a variety of organizations as they move forward to implement rapid changes to their service programs.

Application of Evaluative Research

Based on the findings from the first phase of completed research, four recommendations can be extended to organizations in similar situations. First, it is crucial to promote complete and accurate information among program staff and clients. The current study has revealed that incorrect information, misperceptions, and differing expectations can present challenges to effective communication among staff and their ability to adapt to both situational and mandated changes. Program service providers may utilize practices such as question and answer sessions, informational meetings with clients, and addressing issues on a regular basis in order to keep lines of communication open, promote trust, and alleviate concerns. Second, the importance of understanding current clients and their needs cannot be overstated. For some organizations, it is easier to focus on demographics, client assessment scores, or generalized assumptions. However, this study revealed that, despite the level of staff expertise, these assumptions may be misguided and fail to meet the unique needs of the clients. By collecting client feedback, encouraging external evaluation and assessment, and promoting open dialogue about program successes and challenges, providers can identify and utilize important information that may otherwise not be collected and will aid changing programs. Third, particularly in times of drastic situational or mandated changes, it is important to recognize and respond to organizational crisis when it occurs. By recognizing the early symptoms of crisis, such as denial, repetition of mistakes, and lost perspective on the program's mission and urgency, steps can be taken to regain focus, foster unity, and promote program buy-in from both staff and clients. Finally, it is critical that during times of change, organizations remain both positive and flexible. When changes are mandated, there is greater potential for the symptoms of organizational crisis to take over. However, if programs make a conscious effort to be flexible, committed, and focus on the positive aspects, the likelihood of continued success remains within reach.