

## SERVICE LEARNING & LITERACY: JACKSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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### BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The Reading Coaching Project was implemented at Jackson Community College in Jackson, Michigan in order to address the low reading abilities of struggling students. Students who were identified by their reading instructors as needing additional one-on-one support to manage the reading demands of the higher learning environment were referred to the literacy coordinator to be matched with a trained reading coach.

In a previous reading coaching pilot program, students made significant progress after only six weeks of instruction and coaching. This pilot laid the ground work for implementing a college-wide reading coaching program that utilized Jackson Community College staff, alumni, and retired faculty as well as community volunteers to coach struggling students and increase student success and retention. Jackson Community College is committed to the belief that low levels of literacy can severely hinder academic, economic, and social progress, which in turn can adversely affect the community as a whole.

The main campus of Jackson Community College (JCC) is located on more than 500 acres in a rural setting, six miles south of the city of Jackson and includes ten buildings. Each year, more than 9,000 students enroll at JCC with 59% attending part-time. There are 93 full-time faculty and 242 adjunct faculty.

#### Student Population

Total student enrollment for 2006-07 on the main campus was 10,297. Eighty percent of the student population was non-minority (white), fourteen percent was minority, and six percent was unknown. The average age of a student enrolled in a developmental reading course was twenty-one years.

#### Community

Jackson County encompasses 707 square miles and has a population of 152,954, with about 59% of the population living in urban areas, and about 41% in rural areas. The characteristics of the population and economic conditions have created a number of significant complex issues. The automotive and aerospace industries that once were the main sources of employment in South Central Michigan have relocated, leaving scant job opportunities resulting in an 8% unemployment rate. Declines in the automotive industry have resulted in economic hardship, including the loss of a significant number of major employers, which resulted in an unemployment rate of 8% throughout the region.

The unemployment rate has steadily increased, more than doubling during the last five years, averaging 3.6% in 2000 to 6.7% in 2005 and reaching as high as 8.5 in 2005. Southern Michigan Prison is housed in Jackson, and is among the four largest employers in Jackson County employing approximately 2,400 workers in 2005. The community's roots were founded in blue collar, uneducated workers, which consequently devalued formal education and increased significant illiteracy problems. Literacy levels are commonly scaled from Level 1 to Level 5, with Level 1 being the lowest. Seventeen percent of the residents in the JCC service area function at Level 1 and an additional 43% function at Level 2.

Jackson Public Schools, the county's largest educational system, has an alarming 11.3% dropout rate. Additionally, only 51% of Jackson residents have received any type of postsecondary training and a meager 16.3% have completed undergraduate degrees. Of the 51% of the population who have received some type of postsecondary training, only 5.3% were minorities.

## **SUMMARY OF ASSETS PROJECT FOR YEAR ONE**



The Reading Coaching project was developed and implemented to assist Jackson Community College students who struggle with basic reading skills and have demonstrated a need for one-on-one instruction and support. The college currently offers two developmental reading courses, English 080, Reading Essentials, and English 085, College Reading, both of which focus on

comprehension, writing summaries, combining information, and other course skills and objectives. Students enrolled in English 080 have a reading grade level equivalency of seventh grade, ninth month, or below, as determined by the Accuplacer®, a computerized assessment and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, a standardized, norm-referenced assessment. Students enrolled in English 085 have a reading grade level equivalency range between eighth grade and eleventh grade, ninth month, assessed by the tests previously mentioned. It was observed and determined that students at the lowest reading levels were continuing to struggle, during and after the developmental reading courses, as a result of deficits in basic reading skills which hindered progress with comprehension and other skills.

In collaboration with other colleagues, a literacy coordinator researched and developed similar community college reading programs. In addition, a voluntary reading coaching pilot was offered to students who had the desire to improve their reading abilities. Twice a week, for six weeks, students met with an instructor for whole group instruction, worked 30 minutes on computers, and read aloud for 30 minutes to trained reading coaches. At the conclusion of the six week project, students were post-tested using the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. In comparison to the pre-test results, all students

improved their reading grade equivalencies (GE), while two students improved their GE level by more than two grade levels.

Several Reading Coaching training sessions were offered and attended by Jackson Community College staff, alumni, retired faculty, students, and community members. Coaches were trained in literacy methodology and techniques.

Through grants and other monies, hundreds of high-interest, low-level texts were selected and acquired. Students were identified and recommended by their college reading instructors as students who would benefit from reading coaching and then were referred to the Literacy Coordinator to be matched with a reading coach.

## **LITERACY COACHING**

Reviewing enrollments of reading courses, of the recent academic years, the trend indicates that the number of students requiring instruction and support in the area of reading is increasing. In the 2001-02 academic years, 257 students were enrolled in English 085, College Reading, in contrast to the 2005-06 academic years where 499 students were enrolled.

The total fall 2006 enrollment, including main campus and two extension centers, was 6,173. The total winter 2007 enrollment was 4124. Participating community partners for the project included: Vandercook Lake Community Schools, Community Action Agency-Work First Clients, South Central Michigan Works!-Employment Services, Jackson Area Manufacturer's Association, Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and Jackson Community College Student Parliament.

## **OUTCOMES AND RESULTS**

During the first year of the reading coaching project, ten students and thirteen faculty members participated. Five, two-hour Reading Coach training sessions facilitated by Amelia Gamel, the literacy coordinator, were presented to prospective coaches, demonstrating teaching and learning strategies for decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Of the ten students who were coached, all improved their reading grade level equivalencies.

## **CHALLENGES**

The largest and seemingly only deficit of the Reading Project was the lack of student motivation and participation. Despite efforts, students were extremely resistant to meet with reading coaches. Some of the reasons may have been embarrassment or discomfort with their low reading levels or, perhaps, an inability to see coaching as a worthwhile or meaningful effort.

## **SUCCESES**

A notable success of the Reading Project has been the strong response from the community and JCC staff and alumni to participate in the project as reading coaches. Currently, there are more than 42 trained coaches. Second, according to the surveys, coaches responded well to training sessions and found them informative and useful. Third, we have a working library of high-interest, low-level texts appropriate for our population of struggling readers, and students' reactions to the leveled texts have been positive.

In addition, a manual was developed for coaches that contains information regarding college reading courses, coaching techniques, and logistics about coaching. Finally, a literacy coordinator was hired to develop the project, train coaches, organize information, order and develop materials, research other programs, provide support, and act as a reading consultant for coaches.

## **WHAT WE LEARNED**

We have determined there is on-going need for continuous search and study of successful adult reading programs, materials, and best practice that produce successful student participation and outcomes. In addition, further study and discussion are needed to generate innovative ideas to increase student participation.

Generally speaking, we determined that students need to have a reason for attending coaching sessions and often self-improvement doesn't appear to motivate students to participate, nor does the future prospect of academic or employment success. Often, developmental education students don't respond well to delayed reinforcement and results. They respond best to immediate results, and need to have a reason for giving effort. Perhaps, students need a visible, tangible incentive, such as tying coaching sessions to course points, grades, extra credit, passing the course, etc.

Another possibility may be to have students who are enrolled in the lowest level developmental reading courses and have demonstrated a reading grade level equivalency of sixth grade or below, as indicated on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test or the Accuplacer® computerized assessment, attend coaching as a required lab or workshop.

## **CONCLUSION**

On many level,s the Reading Coaching Project has been a success. The overwhelming response from volunteer community members and JCC faculty and staff demonstrate sincere concern for student success and the value of reading. However, ideas need to be generated to motivate students to participate and access available reading coaching. Some ideas may include:

- Semester visits, by the literacy coordinator or a reading coach, to each of the developmental reading classes, to familiarize students with reading coaching and welcome students to participate.
- Provide reminder cards for the students who are scheduled to meet with a coach in addition to verbal telephone reminder.
- Students need to have a reason for attending a coaching session. It's been my experience that developmental education students don't respond well to delayed reinforcements. They need and respond best to immediate results and need to have a reason for persevering. Perhaps college reading students need a visible incentive
- Require coaching for any, and all, students registered in a developmental reading course who score sixth grade or below on the Nelson-Denny pre-test.

#### **REFERENCES:**

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Amelia Gamel** is the Literacy Coordinator for Jackson Community College, an adjunct instructor of developmental reading, and teaches students at the elementary level. Amelia has a B.A. in English and will complete a M.A. in Education in July, 2007 from Spring Arbor University. She has also received nearly three hundred hours of training and development in literacy and often shares her expertise while conducting educational presentations for educators at conferences, colleges, and school districts. As her passion for education continues, she is currently searching for additional methods to help struggling students succeed.