

Helping Students to Succeed

One Adult Educator's Perspective

by Don Sands

"I'm not going to be able to do the college prep class."

"Why not?" I asked him. I wondered what reason the ex-offender had to drop out of the class before it even started.

"Both my girlfriend and her mother say that for me to take the bus to the class is asking for trouble. I've only been out for a couple months and I still know a lot of guys in that area who can only cause trouble for me. So, I don't think it's a good idea for me to come to the college prep class."

My mind started racing: how can I knock down this barrier, so that he can attend the class? In less than a minute I asked him, "What would you think if you met me at my house and I drove you to and from class so you wouldn't have to deal with the guys on the street in that area?"

A smile lit his face. "I think that might work. You would actually do that?" he asked.

After our conversation, the student went home, discussed it with his family, and the following week began riding with me. Was it a sacrifice on my part? Yes. Did I get anything back? Yes. Besides the fact that an ex-offender began attending the college prep class, I was able to have conversations with him twice a week while I drove him to and from class. Through those conversations I gained further insight into what an ex-offender goes through as he or she re-enters society.

Each week I heard about his struggles, his victories, his thinking. All this deepened my understanding of those that I work with daily and the barriers and challenges that prevent them from succeeding. This new understanding helped me to be more effective in how I help them to succeed. None of this would have occurred if I

hadn't offered him the ride to keep him in the class.

This is one example of what it takes to work with adult students, many of whom are ex-offenders, working towards their GED exam, participating in our college transition program, starting their college experience, or looking for employment. For me, it's all about knocking down the barriers. Anyone who has worked in the adult education field knows that motivation on the student's part is key to success.

Of course, I come across many students who aren't motivated to the extent necessary for them to succeed in getting their GED or complete our college transition program. But there are many other

students who face innumerable barriers that prevent them from reaching their goal. My strategy is to do everything in my power to remove those barriers before judging a student's motivation.

Working to remove those barriers means sacrifice on my part. I have to go through a personal balancing act to decide how much sacrifice I'm willing to make and what is good for the student. There are a couple things I consider as I go through this process. First, I watch the student carefully to see if he/she is making a serious effort to succeed. If I sense that the student is not putting in 100%, I quickly challenge him/her, explaining that I can do my part to help, but he/she

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has to do the work. If, over time, the student still isn't putting in the effort needed, I will discontinue whatever sacrifice I'm making. Second, I never make a sacrifice that's going to cause me to act like the student "owes me something." For this process to work for me, I have to understand that I'm taking a gamble. Even after I make the sacrifice, the student may not follow through in the way I would like. I cannot hold that against the student because it was my choice to make the sacrifice and mine alone. I believe that helping our students to remove barriers is *at least* as crucial as the academics we teach them in class, if not more so. The list of barriers that come up is endless and they happen at every stage in the process—from just beginning ABE or GED class through the second or third semester in college. A few examples of these barriers are the inability to:

- pay the \$65 fee for the GED exam;
- navigate the college registration process;
- secure financial aid because of a past drug conviction;
- continue with classes because of lack of employment or income; and
- attend classes because of lack of childcare.

The point is that we can be as effective as we want with the academics in the classroom, but if we don't assist our students in dealing with their personal barriers, they are not going to succeed. These barriers are often the reason why they dropped out of school or engaged in actions that resulted in their incarceration in the first place. It involves flexibility and sacrifice on our part. We will not all agree on what to do, or how much to do. As I continue to work with students making transitions in their lives, I always ask myself two questions: Do I really want this student to succeed? What will it take on my part to help make it happen?

Don Sands is the executive director of X-Cel Adult Education in Jamaica Plain, MA. X-Cel runs a college transition program, GED preparation programs at eight locations, and works extensively with ex-offenders.

Ex-convicts Keep on Paying Long After Release

by Jumoke Osuntokun

Ex-convicts are finding it increasingly difficult to reintegrate into society because of their Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI). . . .

One youthful mistake could forever change a person's life. With the CORI system there is no second chance, no redemption, and there is no opportunity for the person to ever prove to the world that he learned from his mistakes. The stigma of having been in jail makes it difficult for ex-offenders to start their lives over. There are no limitations on how CORI files can be used and few limitations on access. This combination allows every mistake made, no matter how small or how long ago, to follow the person for the rest of his life and forever impair the ability to find employment or a suitable place to live. . . .

Since the inability to get employment impacts every area of one's life, ex-offenders continue to experience economic and psychological difficulties. This has a negative effect on their families, if they have any, the difficulty of earning money to provide for their children's financial needs and theirs, and makes it impossible for ex-offenders to rejoin society. As a result of CORI files, ex-cons are too often denied even the basics: a home and job.

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