

## **Community Partnerships - Tapping the Resources**

**by Barbara Gosnell**

Raising a child is an enterprise fraught with a variety of challenges. Successful parents find ways to develop support systems for their children that incorporate community input to reinforce the values they need to teach. In the same way, a literacy program that develops strong community support discovers a wealth of strengths, ideas and resources they simply could not produce on their own even with the best of intentions and funding.

The strength of community sponsorship of an adult education or literacy program lies in the variety of perspectives brought to the planning that can enable remarkable and innovative solutions to local problems, and in the amount of energy available for execution of the program. I hope, in this article, to provide some small insight into how such programs are being developed in the rural East Texas communities served by Trinity Valley Community College (TVCC). Of course, such endeavors are always a learning experience; each success spawns new and more creative efforts. Not all efforts are as successful as hoped, but always new community bonds are forged and the groundwork is laid for improved effort the next time.

It should be noted that the first place to look for support, ideas and collaboration is in one's own house. Many times, adult education programs which are a part of a community college or ISD feel more than a little marginalized. Before real progress can be made with the outside community, the needs of the internal community must be identified and addressed. Adult education programs need to see that real communication happens in-house so that the rest of the institution is aware of and can value the contributions made by both adult education faculty and students. As with all human relations strategies, it takes time, planning and consistent effort over a period of time to accomplish this goal. Newsletters discussing current activities and posting statistics of past successes may be worth the effort to produce. News articles focusing on successful students or programs which cast the entire institution in a favorable light are always helpful.

Candy Mitchell, an adult education student from TVCC who completed her GED in 1999 and continued through college to complete her associate degree from TVCC in May 2002, did a great deal to promote the value of the adult education department within the TVCC community. Candy was an active college student who became president of the local Phi Theta Kappa honor society, winning several state and national awards and earning transition scholarships to continue toward her bachelor's degree. Her willingness to use her public forum consistently to promote the value of the adult education program in her own life has had a wonderful impact on the reputation of the program within the college community as well as in the larger community. Every program can encourage students to "give back" as they become successful in their careers. If they are made aware of the impact they can have in this way, many students are both willing and able to provide the very best of publicity.

Community collaborations work best when they are just that - a product of real community effort rather than a program offshoot being promoted and pursued by the

Adult Education provider. Every stakeholder in the community has an individual agenda which must be identified and valued. Additionally, every community has its own "culture" which must be understood and incorporated into the program. Just as our students respond positively to our efforts to individualize their curriculum, community members respond favorably when a program recognizes and values their unique culture.

One of the more difficult rural communities in our service delivery area has been in the Canton area. Previous efforts to establish programs had been received well by professionals in the community, but not well by the intended students. Recently, a concerned citizen from the Canton area happened to attend an adult education "new student orientation" with her son. She was impressed with the changes in the adult education program over the past few years and recognized the need for classes to be available in her home area. In rural areas, distances of 20 miles and more to reach a class and lack of public transportation options make transportation an insurmountable obstacle for many persons in need of adult education services. She knew that others in her community recognized the need but were unaware of the resources the college could provide. It also became obvious that the local efforts to meet the need were fragmented because many potential supporters were unaware of others who shared their concerns.

She opened a new discussion with the program directors at TVCC and on her return home, contacted other stakeholders in the Canton area - chamber of commerce, public library, economic development committee, and ISD. TVCC invited several other stakeholders including the local Workforce center, and a new advisory committee was born: The Van Zandt County Adult Education Program. Meeting separately to the general advisory committee for the TVCC Adult Education program, this committee meets solely to provide the guidance and planning for the program to benefit that particular community. Plans were laid, with various committee members assuming administrative and public relations roles. This has had the effect of infusing local energy into recruiting and planning. Committee members have passed out flyers to local businesses and seen that the program was publicized in print and on radio, offered local classroom space and access to technology required for the distance learning program, and recruited students. Not only do these contributions create local ownership for the program, they also relieve TVCC staff of the need to attend directly to the many details inherent in providing service in an area, extending the available resources even further.

Where attempts to establish classes in the area over recent years had met with demoralizing failure (only 2 students attended a past orientation session), the recent orientation following the formation of this local committee met with resounding success. Nineteen students attended and enrolled in appropriate classes. A follow-up committee meeting assisted with resolving program issues that arose in response to the particular needs of the participants. With the seeds of a truly successful literacy effort planted, the potential for growth in this community is firmly established. Other community stakeholders, including industry partners, will be invited to contribute to the process and reap the benefits of an educated local workforce and citizenry.

A similar broad community collaboration was formed recently when the Athens HELP center, a non-profit CBO which serves as a clearinghouse for many local relief efforts, applied as a partner with TVCC for an APEX grant through the East Texas

Workforce Board. Local industries brought to the table a need for job skills training for their employees so that they could move up within the companies, along with a need for capable, trained, entry level employees to fill the gaps created. The ability to provide complete job training (provided by TVCC Continuing Education Department), along with case management and counseling (provided by the HELP center), GED preparation, adult basic education and ESL (provided by TVCC Adult Education Department) and the possibility of actual offers of employment following successful completion of the program (provided by industry partners) makes this collaboration one that brings all the puzzle pieces together in a truly comprehensive plan. As in other situations in which collaboration has been ultimately successful, this one allows each member to play a specific, predefined role and keeps control of the program in the hands of the stakeholders. Again, planning meetings are held regularly with stakeholders to meet the specific needs of the program.

**Give credit where credit is due.** Providing recognition through appropriate publicity of the program is the icing on the cake. Recognition serves to maintain focus and motivation among the group.

Building community partnerships is the best way to provide adult education - especially in rural areas where program funding must be spread over such wide geographical areas. Strengthening communication within the sponsoring institution and well as within the larger community, encouraging and valuing the support of successful students, maintaining local control of individual program components and providing recognition to stakeholders who participate in partnerships will allow adult education and literacy programs make the most of the funding available for this essential service.

### **About the Author**

Barbara Gosnell is program coordinator of the Adult Education Department at Trinity Valley Community College in Athens, TX. Adult education has become a real passion over the past 12 years - especially encouraging the use of technology to extend the opportunities of education to the learning disabled and those who need or desire distance learning options. Outside the school setting, Barbara enjoys spending time with her family and exploring the ocean depths through her coral reef aquariums.

---

LITERACY LINKS is a quarterly newsletter published by  
The Texas Adult Literacy Clearinghouse,  
a project housed in the Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy & Learning  
Texas A & M University, College Station, TX 77843-4477