# Orientation for New English Language Learners

Adults come to adult ESL and family literacy programs for many different reasons. They may want to learn English to communicate in their daily lives, develop skills to find a new or better job, become a U.S. permanent resident or citizen, get a high school diploma or GED certificate, advance to higher education programs (e.g., vocational training, college, university), help their children succeed in school or they may simply love to learn (Houle, 1963; NCES, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998; TESOL, 2003, p. 6).

When program staff conduct a thorough orientation process, adult learners new to a program feel at ease and welcome in the program. An orientation process also can minimize barriers to effective participation. Administrators and staff may begin by discussing what the new adult learner wants to know about the program. (See a sample interview guide on page II–17.) The interview may have to be conducted in the learner's native language. Staff should consider the questions that new students may have (see Figure II–1) and discuss how to answer them.

*Figure II–1:* **Anticipating Student Questions**

1.   What will I learn in this program?

2.   How will learning in this program differ from my previous experiences?

3.   Will my records be kept confidential? (I don't want my spouse or employer to know.)

4.   How long will it take me to learn English? (how to speak, how to read, etc.)

5.   How much will I need to pay? What supplies and materials must I buy?

6.   When are the classes? What time do they begin and end?

7.   Will there be other students who speak my language?

8.   What are the rules? (turn off cell phone, no smoking, etc.)

9.   If there is an emergency while I am in class, how can my family reach me?

10. Where is the closest bus stop? What is the bus schedule?

11. If I drive my own car, where do I park? Do I need a parking permit?

The first day of class is a critical one for adult learners new to a program. From the moment they enter the classroom, learners begin to decide whether or not they will return (Lieshoff, 1995). Therefore, it is important to anticipate questions or needs they may have. The checklist in Figure II–2 provides matters for program administrators and staff to consider.

*Figure II-2:* **Orientation Checklist**

1. *What do we know about the culture of this new student?  How can we learn more?*

   ___ Check the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) Web site at www.cal.org/caela to learn more about issues in adult ESL education.

   ___ Check the Cultural Orientation Resource Center for profiles of different immigrant and refugee populations. www.cal.org/co

   ___ Think of ways to honor and build on students' cultures in the classroom environment.

2. *How are we promoting a sense of community and friendship among students and staff?*

   ___ Assign a peer mentor to each new student on his/her first day in class.

   ___ Create a welcome committee of experienced students.

   ___ Present the new student with a welcome basket of supplies from local businesses.

   ___ Assign a staff member to call the new student at home the first evening to welcome the student, discuss events of the first day, and clear up any misunderstandings.

   ___ Set up a student contact system so that students may call each other outside of class.

3. *How do we orient the new student to our class, building, and campus?*

   ___ Familiarize new students with the classroom setup such as the coffee area, lounge/reading area, and the computer stations.  Explain classroom rules.

   ___ Take the new student on a tour of the program facilities.

   ___ Teach the new students how to use the library, cafeteria, and bookstore.

4. *How do we make the first day of class a successful one for new students?*

   ___ Assess new students to determine the levels of instruction they require.

   ___ Break tasks into manageable bits to help reduce their frustration (and throughout the year).

   ___ Be sure that students leave the first day of class knowing that they have learned something.

5. *How do we strive to meet new students' needs and goals (the first day and throughout the program)?*

   ___ Conduct a needs assessment. (See *Needs Assessment and Learner Self-Evaluation* beginning on page II–5 for examples.)

   ___ Offer a curriculum that is based on learners' strengths and needs.

   ___ Offer a challenging curriculum.

   ___ Begin with the students' goals in mind and the expectation that they will advance to further education and lifelong learning.

During the initial interview and needs assessment, it may become evident that new students need services outside the ESL or family literacy program. Therefore, it is beneficial to consult a community services guide to determine which agencies might be the most appropriate for student referrals. Various agencies in communities across the country (e.g., Head Start programs, United Way, local libraries) create these guides, which list contact persons, location and phone numbers, program descriptions, services offered, and the target population. These are usually updated annually. The community services guides are available in various formats and contain different information, as dictated by the resources of the community. The following services may be included:

- Free or reduced-cost health services, social services, crisis services, housing assistance, or legal assistance
- Public transportation
- Head Start, Even Start, or other early childhood programs
- Adult education or community education services
- Elementary school services, such as after-school and parent involvement programs
- Women's centers and women's shelters
- Cultural centers
- Library services
- High school and college programs for adults
- Advocacy organizations offering job preparation and training

(King & McMaster, 2000)

The objective of the student orientation is not so much to present program information as to answer questions, allay fears, and make adult learners comfortable so that they will want to return. Through careful planning, administrators and staff can make the first days of a new adult learner's participation a pleasant experience.

## References

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