

"Distance Counseling": Making Technology Work for Satellite Campuses & Centers

by Rob Everett

Those of us who work in Continuing Education at satellite campuses and centers are unlikely to have the luxury of being simply "Continuing Education specialists." After all, a prospective curriculum student who shows up on our door to see a counselor about a curriculum program at the main campus twenty or more miles away expects up-to-date, reliable information. Counselors at our sites are rare, are more likely to be part-time, and typically have very limited contact with the counseling staff at the main campus. Thus, one of the truly major problems facing our system's satellite campuses and centers is being able to maintain current information regarding curriculum changes, admissions procedures, and financial aid information. While a telephone call to the main campus is fine for some information, for more complex situations most customers prefer to sit down face-to-face with a counselor to discuss options.

The High Point Campus of Guilford Technical Community College faces a similar problem. To expand on this further, we made the following observations:

- While open some sixty-three hours per week, we provide a counselor four hours per week during the day and eight hours per week at night. How can we expand the number of hours counseling services are available to meet our customers' needs?
- The day counselor, a full-time employee, is often called to meetings at the main campus which conflict with the scheduled time in High Point. How can we make the service more dependable?
- The evening counselor is part-time and has infrequent training from the main campus. How can we be sure that a part-time counselor not connected with the main campus is sharing up-to-date, accurate information on admissions practices and curriculum programs? How can we reassure our main campus colleagues that our quality of counseling service is on par with that of the main campus?
- We expect no changes in staffing patterns due to a limited budget. What will it cost us to continue the current practice as opposed to pursuing another option?

Most of us are familiar with the concept of "distance learning," wherein an instructor in one location is connected via interactive audiovisual technology to a classroom of students in another location. Using the same (or similar) technology as that used for "distance learning," we reasoned, we can provide consistent, high quality, up-to-date counseling services for High Point customers. The idea is to set aside a small office at both campuses, equip both with interactive audio-video, and use the technology to allow a High Point customer to interact face-to-face with a main campus admissions or program counselor. To this idea we have given the name "distance counseling," which will have the following outcomes:

- Distance counseling will allow prospective students to discuss options with counselors face-to-face.
- Distance counseling will ensure that the admissions or program information will be up-to-date and of the same quality as that given on the main campus since it will be given by main campus counselors.
- Counseling services will expand from twelve to about fifty-two hours per week in High Point because it will be available whenever counselors are working at the main campus.
- While there will be an up-front cost for purchase and installation of the technology, the service will eliminate the need for both part-time counseling positions and will likely pay for itself within six to eighteen months. (This estimate is based on the cost of continuing the evening counselor at \$350-\$400 per month and the cost of bringing the full-time counselor to High Point versus an estimated cost of \$2000-\$8000 for the technology.)

Distance counseling has been enthusiastically endorsed by our Vice-president. The High Point Campus is currently investigating specific technology for the project (two options have been identified) as well as seeking funds through the college foundation. Additional information may be obtained through Rob Everett at (919) 889-4545.