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through accreditation

Retention: Does It Really Matter?

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CAAHEP accredited Paramedic educational programs are required to meet identified thresholds in the outcome areas of: Written National or State credentialing examinations; Programmatic Retention (exit point completion); Job (Positive) Placement; Graduate Satisfaction; and Employer Satisfaction. These data are part of the information programs submit each year in the Annual Report (AR). In 2013, the CoAEMSP began a phased-in, systematic review of specified outcomes and began a dialogue with the programs that fall below the identified outcome threshold, for three (3) consecutive years.

The first outcome addressed by the CoAEMSP Quality Improvement Committee was the Written National or State credentialing examination pass rates. While certification examinations are viewed as a “gold standard”, it is still only one (1) measure of success, however these rates are an important indicator.

The second outcome, added for review in 2013, was retention. In 2016, 86.7% of reporting programs met the 70% retention threshold. The range for retention for programs not meeting this threshold was 29% to 69% with an approximate 60% average. Reasons for student attrition are multiple and varied. Also, in some programs student enrollment/cohorts are small and the loss of a small number of students can result in a large percent of attrition. Some of the common reasons for attrition given by Program Directors and faculty include: open enrollment with no ability to implement additional screening or testing; student financial considerations; lack of academic preparation to successfully complete the course; lack of field experience; unforeseen medical or family issues; and leaving for another job or professional opportunity.

But the underlying question posed by some program staff is ‘Do attrition numbers really matter if the students we do graduate are competent?’ Well, yes it does, especially in a professional track (EMS) versus general education courses. EMS education is costly and time consuming and most students who enroll at the Paramedic level have enough EMS experience to know this is a career they want to follow. The Paramedic educational program has a responsibility to provide the opportunity and resources for the student to be successful. Retention (or completion rates) is also important to colleges and institutions of higher education. State funding is frequently predicated on student completion of a course of study. While there may be pressure in some programs to enroll ‘numbers’ of students based on financial considerations, this may be off-set by the state funding return. Additionally, resources to assist students less academically prepared for paramedic education can outweigh any income from the students.

Given the challenges of attrition in some organizational structures, what are suggestions and best practices for improving retention? Some suggestions follow.

1. If your program is required to be open enrollment, explore with your administration if it is possible to add pre-requisites or screening and testing for your specialized program. Some colleges are not able to permit additional requirements based on statutes or rules, but screening tools are common in many colleges, especially in allied health career fields.
2. Institute interviews with applicants. Detail the requirements, schedules, rigor, cost, and other specifics to allow the student an informed choice regarding admission. Discuss balancing course work, work schedules, and family obligations.
3. Provide a thorough orientation for a new cohort with all the information identified in the interview. Be sure it is before the add/drop date for your program. Establish appropriate expectations.

4. Provide strategies for success that include information on developing study skills, test taking tips, creating a study environment, time management, and other tips for success.
5. Invite/include student family members to the orientation session and explain the program requirements and how they can support their loved one.
6. Faculty should meet with enrolled students at specified points in the program to review academic status, clinical and field progress toward requirements, areas the student may be struggling and potential remediation/resources.
7. Structure the classroom and lab sessions to engage and challenge students that lead to development of critical thinking skills.
8. Suggest students form study groups that can provide mutual encouragement and enhance learning.
9. Conduct exit interviews with students who drop/withdraw from the program. You may think you know why they are leaving but there may be other reasons.
10. Facilitate outside tutoring/resources through faculty, adjunct instructors, or other sources.
11. For programs offered over multiple semesters, it can be easy for a student to just not return. Keep track of the cohort and make follow-up contact with any non-returning student.
12. If your program administration wants all applicants accepted/enrolled for financial reasons, have a crucial conversation with them about the goals and aims of an EMS career and the Paramedic educational program.
13. Connect with the college Student Services as soon as problems such as learning disabilities are discovered.
14. Provide advising for students regarding personal issues during the program.
15. Recommend that potential applicants complete math, English, and other general education courses to prepare for the rigors of the program, especially if they have been out of the academic environment for some time.
16. Provide frequent evaluation of performance in all domains during the program.

Should every student that enrolls in a Paramedic educational program graduate? No. Are there students who should not have entered this career track? Yes. Does life/money get in the way of education? Yes. And many more factors impact attrition/retention. But in the end: retention does matter, and it is the responsibility of the program to work with each and every student to be successful!

If you have additional strategies please let us know so that we can share other “best practice” approaches to increase student retention.