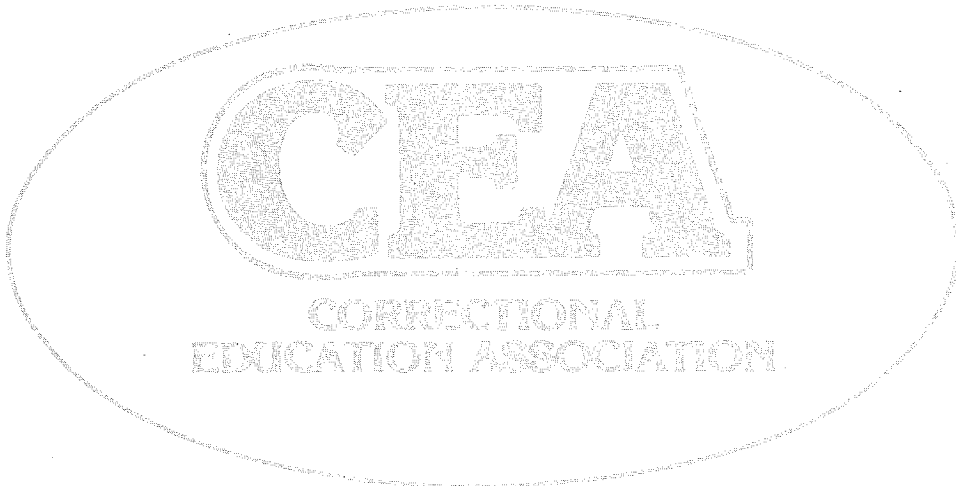


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Adult Basic Education: Programs That Work

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The External Diploma Program

Judith A. Alamprese

Abstract

The provision of alternative high school assessment programs in correctional settings is a critical part of the correctional education system. The experiences of the External Diploma Program, a competency-based alternative credentialing program for adults, are described in this article. Factors to consider when implementing a program in a maximum security facility are explored.

Introduction

During the past decade the number and variety of educational programs provided for adults who are incarcerated have greatly increased. The options available now range from adult basic education through college. The adults who participate in these programs are motivated by the desire to improve their work skills, to upgrade their basic skills, and for self-improvement. While a number of the programs offered are at the college level, the majority focus on remediation of basic skills and the acquisition of a high school diploma.

The programs that provide the opportunity for incarcerated adults to earn a high school diploma are becoming increasingly important. A recent study of the corrections system in Texas indicates that approximately 82 percent of felons in the Texas prison systems are school dropouts, Texas Department of Corrections (1983). This finding is reinforced by data provided by other departments of correction. What is of interest are the reasons why these adults left school. In order to investigate this issue, Porter and Gilberg-Porter conducted a study of the attitudes of inmates in the Texas prison system. They found that the two most frequently cited reasons for dropping out of school were because of lack of interest in school and classwork and wanting to go to work. The study concluded that public education should consider methods to improve student interest and the quality or relevance of classwork to enhance the probability of retaining potential dropouts, Porter and Gilberg-Porter (1984).

This finding has implications for the design of educational programs in correctional settings. If the prior educational experiences of incarcerated adults have not been positive or reinforcing, then the programs that are to be offered in correctional institutions should be created so that they retain the student and provide motivation for future learning.

One example of the creation of an educational program to respond to the needs of incarcerated adult learners has been the experience of the New York State External High School Diploma Program (External Diploma Program). The External Diploma Program, designed as an alternative secondary credentialing program for adults, has been implemented in a variety of correctional settings.

The External Diploma Program

Program Description. The External Diploma Program is an innovative high school credentialing program for adults who have acquired skills through their life experience and can demonstrate these skills through an applied performance assessment system. **The objective is to provide adults with an assessment and credentialing process that is an alternative to traditional diploma programs and that enables adults to earn a regular high school diploma.**

Designed in 1973, by a group of administrators, teachers, counselors, students, businessmen, and labor leaders from the Central New York area under the aegis of the Syracuse Research Corporation (SRC), the program was developed, field tested, and refined with funding from the New York State Education Department's Division of Continuing Education.

The assumption behind this program is that adults, through their life experiences, learn skills in a variety of traditional and non-traditional ways. To validate these skills it was necessary to create a reliable and valid assessment process. In keeping with the program philosophy, which maintains that assessment of competencies is most valid when the test environment is as close to reality as possible, the program was developed to enable adults to demonstrate their competencies through simulated life experiences.

Program Process. To earn a high school diploma in the External Diploma Program, an adult must demonstrate, with one hundred percent accuracy, 64 generalized life skill competencies and one individualized competency in a particular occupational, special skill, or academic area.

The generalized life skill competencies are included in the following seven generic areas of competence: communication, computation, self awareness, social awareness, consumer awareness, scientific awareness, and occupational preparedness. Some examples of competencies are: write a resume, state the contributions made by different cultures to American life, compare sources of consumer credit in making a purchasing decision, and locate and classify information about job choices in the local community. The individualized competency may be in one of three skill areas: occupational, advanced academic, or special skill. Some examples of occupational skills are auto mechanic and clerk typist; an example of a special skill is photography.

Diagnostic Phase. The External Diploma Program has two phases: diagnosis and final assessment. In the first

phase, the adult works with an advisor who administers six diagnostic instruments: Math, Writing, Reading, the Self-Directed Search or Occupational Profile, the Checklist for Self-Assessment of Competencies, and the Individualized Competency Diagnostic Instrument. These instruments identify learning deficiencies that could prevent the adult from demonstrating the 64 life skill competencies and the individualized competency. In addition, the diagnostic phase acquaints the adult with the program requirements and the various testing modes that will be used in assessing competencies.

All the results of the diagnostic instruments are explained to the adult by an advisor, who prescribes further learning if the adult is deficient in math, reading, writing or does not possess an individualized skill. The advisor also identifies resources in the community, such as the adult basic education program, a private tutor, friends and family where the adult can obtain help in overcoming any deficiencies. The adult, however, is responsible for arranging any tutoring or training. When the adult believes the deficiencies have been overcome, he/she takes a retest in the topic that was identified as deficient. If the retest is not satisfactory, another learning prescription is given and the process is repeated.

Final Assessment. During the second phase of the program, final assessment, the adult is assessed in the 64 generalized life skill competencies and in the individualized competency. Specially-trained staff assessment specialists assess adults in the competencies through an open testing technique that consists of applied performance tasks incorporating different situational modes. These tasks are a combination of take-home projects and interviews. All of the tasks require an explicit understanding of the competencies to be demonstrated and continuous feedback is given to the adult as he/she completes the task. During a period of what is called the Post-Task Assessment, the adult is given the opportunity to demonstrate any of the generalized competencies that he/she did not demonstrate during assessment. This period continues until the adult has demonstrated the 64 generalized competencies.

In order to fulfill the remaining program requirements, the adult must demonstrate an individualized competency in one of three areas: occupational, special, or advanced academic. In the occupational area the adult can demonstrate his/her skill by having his/her employer verify that he/she has worked satisfactorily at the same job for at least one year. If the adult has worked less than one year, a performance assessment of his/her skill is made by someone from the community who is experienced in that occupation. If the adult chooses the advanced academic option, he/she can demonstrate this skill by presenting a portfolio containing acceptable evidence of his/her ability to do college-level work. One example is obtaining acceptable scores on two standardized tests and writing an autobiographical essay. If the adult chooses the special skills option, he/she can demonstrate the skill in a performance assessment conducted by a person from the community who is an expert in that skill.

When the adult demonstrates the 64 generalized

competencies and an individualized competency and the work has been verified by another staff assessment specialist, the adult is awarded a regular high school diploma that is granted by a local school board. The process of two staff assessment specialists verifying a participant's work ensures the consistent evaluation of competencies by staff members and the reliability of the assessment process, Alamprese (1979), Feldman and Alamprese (1980). The External Diploma Program process is depicted in Figure 1.

Implementation in a Correctional Setting

The External Diploma Program, originally developed in the Central New York area, has expanded to a number of states across the country. In 1979, the program was validated by the Joint Dissemination Review Process (JDRP) in the U.S. Department of Education. Subsequently the program became part of the National Diffusion Network, also in the U.S. Department of Education. This enabled the program staff to expand its dissemination efforts and to implement the program in a variety of educational settings, such as adult basic education centers, community-based organizations, city jails, community colleges, Job Corps centers, Indian reservations, and correctional institutions.

The primary dissemination of the External Diploma Program in a correctional setting has been in New York State. The program was implemented in two facilities in the state: Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum security institution, and Downstate Correctional Facility, which was a separation facility at the time the program was installed.

The External Diploma Program staff at the Syracuse Research Corporation worked with the New York State Department of Corrections Education staff and with the education staffs at the two institutions in organizing the program installation. The Syracuse staff trained the staff from the institutions and provided technical assistance and evaluation services throughout the implementation period. At the time that the External Diploma Program was being installed in these settings, the State Department of Corrections was interested in testing the application of competency-based adult education programs in correctional settings. The External Diploma Program provided an ideal opportunity for such a test.

Factors to Consider in Replication

The implementation of the External Diploma Program in a maximum security facility was greatly facilitated by the structure of the program. The program's open entry/open exit feature, the life skills competency orientation, the flexibility of the learning environment, and the diversity of assessment techniques all contributed to its successful replication. However, the implementation of the program in a correctional setting did provide some challenges to the assessment staff. In order to meet these challenges, some adaptations in program procedures were made to accommodate the institutional environment and culture. The adaptations were designed so that the reliability and validity of the assessment system, the key element for replication,

New York State External High School Diploma Program

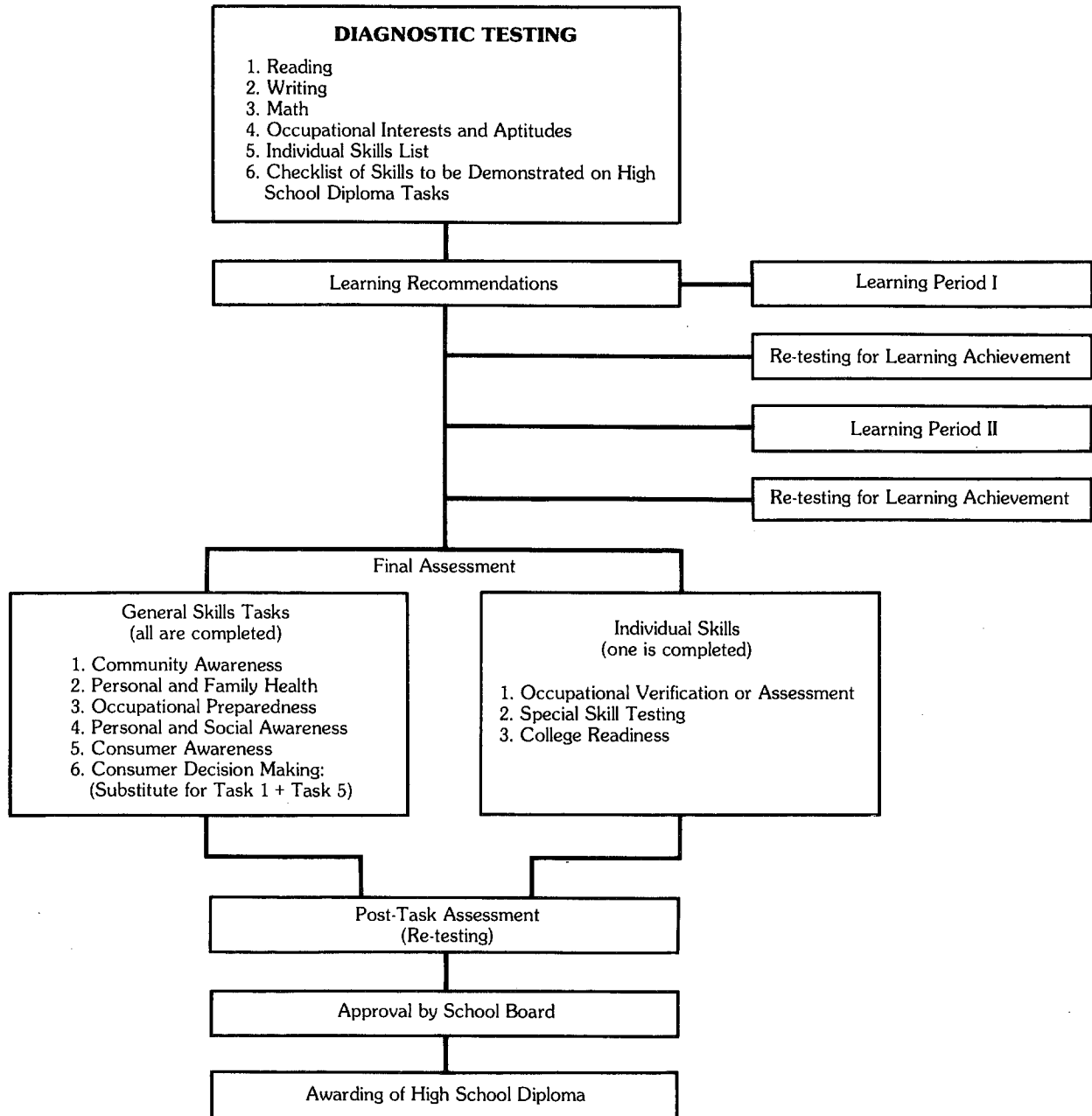


Figure 1

would not be jeopardized. The major adaptations that were made are:

- **Demonstration of Competencies.** The range of acceptable evidence for the demonstration of some of the competencies was broadened. Alternative ways of completing the program tasks were devised to accommodate the closed setting of the institution. External Diploma Program staff worked with the other educational program staff in the institution to utilize existing resources in the environment to facilitate the demonstration of competence by program participants.
- **Certification.** The normal certificate received by an adult who completes the External Diploma Program is the regular high school diploma. An exception was made for the adults who completed the program in the maximum security institution. The New York State Education Department agreed to award a certificate for the completion of the program, which did not require the approval of the local school board for the implementation of the program in the correctional system.

The other key components of the External Diploma Program — quality control of the assessment process, access to instructional materials for remediation, and the provision of multiple opportunities for demonstration of competencies, were implemented within the structure of the institution. The experience of the External Diploma Program within the institutional setting proved to be rewarding and reinforcing.

Conclusion

The implementation of the External Diploma Program in a maximum security facility was an example of how an alternative educational program can be slightly modified to

run successfully in such a setting. The philosophical orientation of the program provided a basis for such an implementation. The design of the program, which encourages independent learning, reinforces success, and provides a structure with motivational elements, proved to be responsive to the needs of adults who are incarcerated and who desire to pursue their education.

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Judith A. Alamprese is currently the Director of Planning at the COSMOS Corporation, Washington, D.C. She was formerly the director of the External Diploma Program and serves on the External Diploma Program National Advisory Council.