

***The Buffalo Drug Treatment Court
&
Erie Community College
V.L.E.A.P***

E2R “Opening Doors”

Education to Recovery Component



Keys to Self Sufficiency

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Innovative and Effective Strategies and Practices

The Vocational Life Enhancement Accomplishment Program (VLEAP) is an academic/vocational learning community for addicted offender clients. VLEAP assists non-violent drug offenders in their transition to vocational engagement and employment in the Buffalo, New York community. The target population is non-violent offenders participating in the Buffalo Drug Treatment Court and the COURTS program, whose crimes were the result of addicted behavior. These individuals historically experienced low educational levels, learning disabilities, chronic unemployment, remedial learning deficits, and cognitive retention problems, along with their alcohol, drug and mental health problems. The limits in basic reading, writing, and language skills leave them vulnerable to entry-level employment, or any employment because of the lack of basic skills. Recognizing these issues, the Buffalo City Drug Court in partnership with Erie Community College, the New York State Department of Labor and the State University of New York (SUNY) created a learning community to address the functional improvements of this offender population. Operationally, VLEAP provides hope and encouragement to individuals often lost to the world of employment. The pre-VLEAP outcomes for this client population had been dismal; with few becoming and retaining competitive employment, many dropping out of remedial education, and many stuck in a chronic system of poverty/subsidy/homeless, when support systems are becoming less available. The results are increases in crime, over crowded jails, treatment admissions that could have been prevented, and a failed system.

Nationally, Community Colleges are recognized as the backbone of providing academic credit and non- – credit training for the local workforce. Locally, Erie Community College is recognized as the Workforce Development Leader in Western New York.

The Buffalo Drug Court (BDTC) and Erie Community College's (E.C.C.) *Education "2" Recovery (E2R)* program stands in the forefront of Innovative Justice and Educational Partnerships geared towards the attainment of high levels of service access, retention, and advancement. While *E2R* is not a college wide program in the sense that it is inclusive of all students served at ECC, it is elaborately woven into the overall fabric of institution-wide student services. Most importantly, *E2R* has established a coordinated, comprehensive approach that involves the entire college community. Indeed, *E2R* offers a model from which other community colleges across the nation may benefit from emulating.

Initiated in 2000 under the auspices of the BDTC and the college's Mental Health Assistant: Alcoholism and Substance Abuse program, *E2R* has broken significant new ground in recruiting and providing necessary services to a much neglected and maligned student population: individuals disabled by substance abuse and/or mental health problems that are participants in the Buffalo Drug Treatment Court. Having been awarded funding from a variety of funding sources, *E2R* stands ready to serve as a national model in the design and implementation of a comprehensive, coordinated compendium of academic and support services needed by this growing target group.

ECC's Mental Health Assistant: Alcohol and Substance program includes an Associate's Degree, 350 hour CASAC Certificate Training, and regular professional development workshops. Grant programs include:

- **VLEAP:** \$473,330 grant from the New York State Department of Labor to train and place seventy-five nonviolent, recovering drug offenders in productive employment. This

first of its kind partnership program between education and criminal justice has become a model for the State. \$572,000 continued funding from July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2005.

- **FAWLS:** \$281,325 grant to assist 200 needy families receiving welfare benefits with academic, vocational and life skills training services.
- **Drug Court Training Seminar Series:** Erie Community College is approved by the New York State Office of Alcoholism & Substance Abuse Services as Training Institute for addictions counselors. In addition the Buffalo Drug Treatment Court was designated a Mentor Court by the U.S. Department of Justice and the National Drug Court Institute and is a National Training Site. Through the collaborative effort of the Buffalo Drug Treatment Court and ECC's Mental Health Department, fifteen professional multi disciplinary cross trainings and workshops have been sponsored. Over two thousand training attendees have been awarded continued education hours that are requirements for licensure and credentialing. The department also provided CASAC clock hours for the first six years of the New York State Drug Court Professionals Conference in New York State.

This innovative education and Justice partnership ***E2R*** at E.C.C has effectively and stunningly countered the prevailing, counterproductive belief that recovering addicts and mental health patients are too incapacitated to benefit from placement in an institution of higher education. By following **this innovative** path breaking, revolutionary model which establishes education as the cornerstone for recovery, community colleges across the nation may be able to successfully assist this growing high-risk group of students become productive citizens, thereby achieving previously undreamt levels of achievement.

Rationale for *E2R*

The old model of addictions and mental health treatment primarily focused on treatment, support systems and recovery activities. This model also encourages individuals to have skills to function in society. These individuals, however, often lack the ability to develop relationships, especially with the non-recovering world around them. They fear this world as unsafe; yet yearn to be normal like others. Treatment professionals expected wellness from them -- which they would just integrate with others in school, work and life.



It was simple to tell these individuals to “Go get a job!” (although they lacked skills), and “Go to school!” (but many suffered from learning deficiencies, or even brain illness which made

hearing, storing and retrieving information almost impossible). The outcomes of such scenarios were almost always relapses and treatment recycling. The individual who failed to navigate these expectations was wrongly judged not ready for change.

The processes of recovery and getting into, staying in, graduating from college and finding employment are filled with demanding processes and activities. Indeed, the two systems are not always flexible and accommodating. ***E2R*** works with the assigned counselors in both systems to negotiate priorities and advocate for project clientele where necessary. Efforts are made to realize that the goal is improved functionality of the individual, not just compliance to procedures.

How *E2R* Works

“Recruitment”: The majority of referrals during ***E2R***’s first year of operation in 2000 were Buffalo Drug Court Participants that were in residential settings such as halfway houses and recovery care homes. The breakthrough in treatment came as a result of Drug Court completion criteria coupled with NYS addictions licensure requirements that each client needed to have an established individualized plan for employment/education. Treatment professionals and staff met this proposed change with mixed reactions. Traditional beliefs that clients needed months, if not years, of clean time before starting school and/or getting a job were challenged. The “old model” was based on expected recidivism and the myth that clients could not learn-unless they had sufficient, but undefined periods of clean time. In addition to Drug Court requirements there were also changes in welfare occurring, where single adult males had a two year window to get off welfare and become employed and TANF mothers were given five years. The State welfare mandates were now realizing that significant cost savings could occur through assisting individuals to become functional. The BDTC and ECC recognized it could become the center for training and education for those in recovery and assist the participant fulfill the State’s mandates for change.

Initially, the ***E2R*** Project Director and the Court contacted colleges throughout NYS looking for any with programs of similar concentration.. Some would say this program was built without walls and guidelines. The reality it accepts, however, is “build it and they will come”. In 2000, there were 59 referrals. In 2001, there were 208; in 2002, 154 came; and so far, through June 2003, 129 have come. Overall, there have been 550 participants who have entered the college and become students.

What are the realities of this group of students?

- 45% of addicts and mental health clients do not have GEDs/Remedial education.
- 5-10% have learning disabilities that often are undiagnosed.
- 70-80% came out of families where addiction was evident and family literacy was not stressed.
- 50-60% of these individuals had polysubstance dependency diagnoses, along with mental health disorders for depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, attention-deficit problems and personality disturbances.
- Long histories of multiple treatment attempts without long term success.
- Failure rates consistent for 1 out of 4 dropping out of treatment.
- Skills deficits in the ability to retain information, store it and retrieve upon request.
- Poor problem solving skills, processing of information limitations, especial conceptualization and abstraction.
- Most significantly, live challenged by the daily struggle just not to use today.

Admissions: College systems for application and enrollment are surmountable by most students, yet these typically act as formidable barriers to those in recovery.

Traditionally those in recovery were told but not assisted to “Contact the Admissions Office, fill out the application, decide on a degree program, take the placement test, file your financial aide forms, see an advisor, sign up for classes, get your books, and go to classes.” Concurrently, “stay sober today, go to a meeting, get back to the halfway house by 4:00PM, get to the house meeting, and then get to another self help meeting in the evening.”

Today, with the guidance and support of Judicial Monitoring, participants entering the program are closely case-managed by program staff, both at the college and the court from entry through graduation and beyond. Work-study students, often those in recovery and enrolled, act as role models and “mentors” to and assist entering students. Mandatory and informal drop-in encounters at the college as well as in court are transformed by staff into support sessions to compensate for the anxieties of change.

Financial Aid: Completing financial aid forms is another confusing and overwhelming process for all students. For individuals in recovery, just being able to make sense of the forms and what is being asked for often creates extreme anxiety. Many such students have outstanding loans that have been in default for years. They are ineligible for federal assistance. Many don’t even know when they took out loans, who has the loan, what is owed, and any idea how to address these issues. **E2R** staff makes contact with federal and state student loan organizations to locate the holder of the loan and the amount outstanding. Arrangements are made to work out payments acceptable to both the holder and recovering individual. Realizing that many of these students are on social services, payment expectations are impossible.

Financial Aid offices expect students to have W-2 forms, financial statements, tax returns -- recovering individuals more often than not have none of the above. They are told to come back without knowing where to find information, some without appropriate forms of identification. **E2R** staff personally usher them through all the hurdles they confront.

Placement Testing: Once the Financial Aid gamut is successfully maneuvered, the recovering student’s next hoop to jump through is the placement test to determine English and Math competencies. Testing is another experience that engenders feelings of fear in most people, but these feelings approximate terror in recovering individuals. These students typically express their fears of being judged, embarrassed, and being perceived as stupid to **E2R** staff. The common “I can’t . . . I haven’t been in school for years” self-assessment is converted by **E2R** staff into an opportunity for the students to overcome negative self-statements; those that fuel negative self image and often relapse. The **E2R** staffs explain the testing format, and explain the purpose as knowing where your strengths and limitations exist prior to enrollment in college courses. Many are linked to the Educational Opportunity Center for short courses in arithmetic, study skills, writing, and college success skills. Others are encouraged to go to the library and inquire about basic sample tests in these areas. Others are taken to the tutoring labs on campus to work one-on-one with mentors to familiarize them with writing exercises and simple math calculations.

Acclimation to College Environment: **E2R** students are assisted in becoming integrated into the college environment. They learn how to ask for help, increase social skills and begin to connect to support systems outside just the recovering world. They simultaneously sensitize the college environment and staff with an awareness that they are not dangerous, nor to be feared.

Choosing Career Paths and Courses: To help these students decide on career paths, they are tested for aptitude, interest and personality factors. This is done by both the **E2R** staff and the college's counseling offices. The Meyers Briggs, Strong Campbell, College Success Inventory and others are used to help develop the best academic path for success. Those students with perceived learning disabilities are linked to the college's disabled student services office. Together, **E2R** staff and these counselors refer these students for further testing for intelligence, cognitive limitations and learning style. For some, math course requirements are petitioned for waiver and another course substitution, following this testing. Results are reviewed with the student to work out compensatory learning activities that are necessary for the student's learning. They may be assigned other class members to act as note takers for them. Instructors may be informed that the student may need additional time on assignments. Discussion with faculty may revolve around how testing requiring abstraction in time tested situations will often be difficult for these students - a take home would be a fairer reflection of their learning process.

Sometimes, for those students undecided as to what curriculum to enter, **E2R** negotiates with instructors to let unregistered students to sit in on a class or two, just to experience the class room environment and see if what is being heard fits with their perceptions of that career choice. Many times students have returned asking to change from Technologies to Liberal Arts or out of Psychology because "it is too close to home". The college has been accommodating to these informal advisement experiences. Now, **E2R** staff are often contacted by Professors and others about students that are having struggles in classes, where there is suspected drugs or alcohol involvement.

Retention: **E2R** participants are seen bi-weekly in court for status review and at the college for supportive case management. Work-study students tutor **E2R** students for classes they are taking in the alcoholism and substance abuse curriculum. Tutoring for other classes, outside the department, are coordinated through the respective department chairs. Ongoing mentoring is provided through workshops on "soft skills" on positive relationship skills building, planning study routines, conflict resolution, and many other core functioning skills. Students are linked to the counseling centers on the campuses, when appropriate, to take advantage of other wellness activities.

E2R Counselors also interact directly with the student's court case management team as well as with community treatment facility counselor's to collaborate on recovery strategies, changes in treatment planning, and to facilitate consistent information for the recovery partnership.

E2R students are encouraged to participate in campus student services activities outside the classroom. The participation in clubs, student government, Habitat for Humanity and many other community service activities coordinated by individual degree programs and the career resource centers are vehicles for improving social skills and "fitting in".

Graduation: All **E2R** students are case managed minimally biweekly to monitor their progress in academic course completions and audits are conducted to insure adherence to graduation completion dates. **E2R** case managers work directly with Chairs of departments where the student is enrolled to provide support and any accommodations required. Most often, students will need psychological testing for a math waiver or granting an incomplete grade because of stress-related

emotional conflicts or relapse, where the goal is stabilization and reinvolvement as quickly as possible. This facilitates the student's sense of esteem and inhibits the tendency to judge themselves as failures.



E2R staff also participates in the Drug Court Graduation ceremonies. To be sure, this is an emotional experience for the student, their family and the college's **E2R** staff. The "graduate" is expected to provide testimonial to the court of how their life has been impacted and changed. The Judge comes down off the bench to acknowledge the graduate with a handshake, a hug and a room filled with applause. ECC has initiated a separate Recovery Graduation Ceremony for drug court graduates. Judge Robert Russell from the Buffalo Drug Court is the keynote speaker and the distributor of the diplomas "of life". Hundreds of drug court graduates, families and friends have participated in this ceremony.

Transferring: **E2R** students are encouraged to explore continued enrollment in a four-year institution. Most select Buffalo State College, University of Buffalo or Empire State College. They are linked to transfer counselors at these institutions, EOP, and other support services. Often, students select to go to work and continue their education on a part time basis. This is encouraged as employment is a self-esteem builder and others are facing limits on their social services benefits. Ongoing tracking of students occurs with ECC's Career Resource Centers.

Employment: Those students in the Mental Health and Human Services Programs are often recruited directly from the **E2R** Program. Directors of facilities who are the internship sites for these students often call asking for references on these students and any others available for employment. Over 1,100 students have completed clinical internships as part of their degree training since the 1980s. The staff of **E2R** and Associate Professors in the Mental Health Assistant: Alcoholism & Substance Abuse Degree Program has decades of experience working in and running facilities throughout Western New York. These contacts are the most valuable resource for screening potential employees.

E2R receives notices on vacancies of job openings, posting and facilitating writing resumes and preparing portfolios for job interviews. Other students are linked to the One Stop Centers, VESID, and other community job placement agencies. Uniquely, each semester 30-40 students are placed in clinical internships which offers the student hands on learning and a potential employer pre screening candidates for employment. Employed students then become a peer group of information and contacts for fellow students through announcing openings, providing personal references and the bottom line: **"Opening Up Doors."**

Outcomes: Hope, Confidence and Achievement in Place of Despair

In measuring outcomes, we must look at both direct and indirect indicators. We need to measure cost containment as a significant outcome of **E2R**. We know that the program keeps individuals from relapsing and needing expensive inpatient detoxification and residential treatments. It keeps others out of jail, saving taxpayers many thousands of dollars per year. And it keeps families together, greatly reducing the costs of taxpayer-supported foster care.

Observational outcomes must also be considered. The Drug Court reports higher rates of compliance with participation and completion. Success rates in drug court average around 80%, meaning these individuals are not continuing to commit crimes to get drugs. Reductions in larceny, possessions, and prostitution have been the result of drug court monitoring. Directors at halfway houses have indicated longer stay rates for their residents participating in **E2R**. These individuals are reported as being more focused on their recovery programs and cooperative with community service activities.

In terms of hard numerical data (See **Appendix A** for outcomes data concerning the **E2R** program presented in a variety of tables), if we look at the 208 students who entered the **E2R** program in 2001, we find that 116 were recommended into a degree program and 81 entered GED programs. Since their entry just two short years ago, six **E2R** students have already graduated with Associate's degrees -- four with Mental Health Assistant: Alcoholism and Substance Abuse degrees and two with Liberal Arts degrees.

Erie Community College's **E2R** program has also produced a wealth of amazing personal transformation stories. The following stories of just two recent graduates (**names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved even where personal photos have been provided**) present an overview of the intensely personal, comprehensive services provided by ECC's **E2R** program to students who have succeeded in recovering from and rising above severe mental health and drug-related disabilities.

Donna Smith (*see above regarding anonymity*) is a forty-two year old female with a history of multiple drug-related arrests, domestic abuse, prostitution, three years of homelessness and many attempted but failed treatments. She enrolled at Erie Community College while living in an addictions supportive living facility, having completed rehabilitation and halfway house treatment mandated by monitored Drug Court participation. Her placement test scores indicated she needed to complete remedial courses in English and Math, prior to taking academic credit courses. She desired to become an addictions counselor, believing this to be one area she knew well. Drug Court monitored her involvement in Erie Community College on a bi-weekly basis for six months and then monthly thereafter up to the eighteen months of judicial case management.



She soon was confronted by the problem of a long outstanding academic loan that made her ineligible for financial assistance for college. Being on social services and welfare made the

possibility of paying back this loan virtually non-existent. E2R caseworkers contacted the loan holder and negotiated a minimum payment for six months, when her loan would be temporarily deferred. E2R caseworkers helped her enroll at the local Educational Opportunity Center which partners with ECC for college prep classes.

Then it was determined that Donna needed to take and pass five non-credit remedial classes before she could get into her degree-required composition, literature and survey of math classes. Donna's overall academic and personal progress was supported through weekly E2R case management services, with the lone exception of failing her algebra classes. This one failure frustrated Donna and triggered an underlying depression and instability. She contemplated dropping out and considered using again.

Fortunately, Donna was enrolled in her clinical internship class at this time and was able to get support from fellow students, many in recovery themselves, who could identify with her struggles and help her through this crisis. Simultaneously, Donna was referred to a private psychologist by a counselor in the E2R program, whereby she participated in an extensive neurocognitive evaluation which concluded she had a quantitative learning disability from her years of addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder. Given this information, which was difficult for Donna to accept as not being her fault, E2R staff managed to obtain for her a waiver on the math requirement for graduation. In order to continue paying her previous loan, E2R staff assisted Donna in finding part-time work as a receptionist and referral counselor for a faith-based organization while she took a full schedule of classes in the evening. Donna graduated in May, 2003 with her Associate of Science Degree in Mental Health Assistant: Substance Abuse Counseling. She has applied for her New York State CASAC-T credential. She continues into her fourth year of being clean and sober. She was recently hired to a full-time position in an outpatient facility and plans to continue her studies in Social Work at Buffalo State College in September, 2003.



Jody Green (*see above regarding anonymity*) is a 43 year-old mother of 3 teenagers, ages 17, 18 and 19. She separated from her husband 5 years ago. This was an abusive relationship which was the only thing she knew. Judith shared that she was a helpless, hopeless drug addict. She was in and out of jail for 20 years, with no future. She came through Judge Russell's court on 12/19/01 and that's when she found hope and the strength to start getting her life back together. She was linked with the Cazenovia Recovery Systems who gave the support and encouragement she needed for her trip back to functionality. She is 19 months clean.

She was referred to E2R through the Drug Court Program on 4/4/02. She was referred to EOC through E2R where she started her GED Prep classes. She completed the GED classes and obtained her GED Diploma in November 2002.

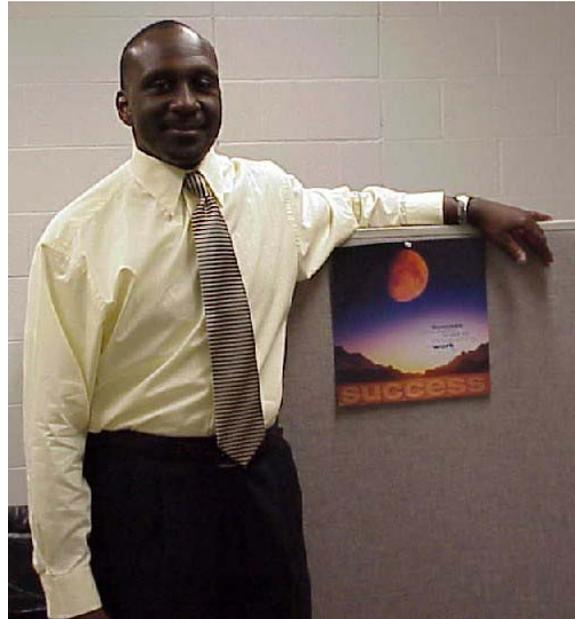
Jody gives all due credit to all credit to **E2R**, Cazenovia Recovery Systems and the COURTS Program who supported and encouraged her every step in her recovery. She gives special recognition the Caz Recovery Systems in that they had enough trust in her to give her the time she needed to accomplish her goals. She noted that her children expressed that they were happy to have their mother back. She is building a new relationship of trust with her children.

She continuously expresses that it is a miracle that she is alive and functional today. She expresses that after 43 years, she finally came to a point in life that she knew what she wanted and went after it.

Jody scored a perfect 800 on the Language Arts portion of the GED Exam. She successfully completed outpatient treatment at Horizon. She graduated from drug court. She received numerous awards from EOC. Jody is now volunteering at the COURTS Program. She stated that's where she came from and that she wants to give back some of the rewards that the COURTS gave her.

She will be a full-time student in Fall 2003 in the Mental Health Assistant: Substance Abuse curriculum. She would like to counsel adolescent girls and wants to become a foster parent.

Randyl Brown (*see above regarding anonymity*) was in active addiction for twenty-plus years, primarily dependent on heroin, cocaine, and alcohol. Utter desperation, paranoia and cold turkey finally led him to the Salvation Army in the fall of 1994. He remained there for six months, living dormitory-style with approximately eighty-five men. It is mandatory for residents to work, and he was assigned to the donations' warehouse. By January of 1995, he relapsed and did not return until the following day whereupon he was faced with the consequence of a full in-house restriction for two weeks. He remained at "the Sally" for two more weeks before signing-out to enter the Oxford House an independent home for recovering individuals housing up to nine men.



Demonstrating leadership skills, Randyl was elected house comptroller and attended to the group's day-to-day financial affairs, including collection of rents. He was also enrolled in outpatient treatment at an area addictions clinic

Linked with Vocational Employment Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), he entered job training to learn Warehouse Operations and soon landed a Shipping and Receiving Supervisor position where he remained for two years. Then downsizing hit and his position was terminated. After being unemployed for four months, all the while staying clean, he managed to get a job with the New York State Department of Correctional Services as a Counselor-in-Training and for two years case-managed work release inmates in a halfway house.

Then Randyl heard of the Education to Recovery Program (**E2R**) at Erie Community College. With staff assistance, he assessed his career goals. Fascinated with the field of addictions and co-

occurring mental and personality disorders, he decided to pursue education and training to pursue a career in this field. Through the advisement and support provided by E2R staff, Randy enrolled in the Substance Abuse Counseling Curriculum in the Fall of 2001 and graduated in the Spring of 2003 with a grade point average of 3.0.

Randy Brown will be attending SUNY at Buffalo in the Fall of 2003 in a combined B.A. / M.S.W. Degree Program in Health and Human Services. He's currently employed at an intensive Residential Chemical Dependency Treatment facility in Niagara County as a Counselor.

This collaborative effort is a prime example of willingness to fulfill the mission of the Treatment Court "to make a difference in the intellect, character and quality-of-life of every student, employee and in the community we serve." This program has opened the doors to individuals with alcoholism, substance abuse and mental health disorders. These individuals have been stigmatized for years as those who choose to be as they are, considered deviants, belong in institutions, locked psychiatric facilities, and jails. The reality is that many of them have life long histories of these experiences, but E2R does not label this a failure or cast aspersions upon these individuals. We realize the hope for change and opportunity lies within the individual's ability to rise above adversity, if given the chance.

Is this not the "American Dream" to which we all aspire? Why not those with addiction and mental health problems? Education at ECC can and has become the vehicle of the Drug Court as a life line, that beacon, that glimmer of opportunity in a world of fearfulness and loneliness, the consequence of these lives of despair. Drug Court participants have accepted the challenge to be accepted to college is that first step in the long "marathon" of recovery that is completed one mile at a time. The distance is not always started and finished in each trial. Some individual's relapse and others decompensate, but at ECC's E2R we accept relapse not as failure, but another opportunity for learning. We stress life education with the individual's college degree courses symbolizing the foundation to try to finish the race again, again and sometimes again. Thus, our case management services are ongoing. Some students require withdrawal from classes for a semester to get more into inpatient or residential treatment to shore up their stability, others need to be helped to negotiate an incomplete grade, and others still need more time to complete assignments because their brain illness of addiction prevents them from retrieving information and completing tasks.

The Drug Court through E2R uses the philosophy of change in living, learning and working. All these students are empowered to believe they can learn and work in jobs and careers. They can walk across the stage at graduation. They can become employed and get off life dependency on welfare. They can be the role models for other students coming into the program with shattered hopes and no dreams, as the life of "being addicted" has for many become all they know.