

# Disadvantaged Students Overcome Barriers in Weatherford College GED Program



Weatherford College, located in Weatherford Texas, is the oldest community college in the Southwest. The two-year public community college offers over 40 academic and technical degrees and certificate programs.

## Youth opportunity program begins

Weatherford College started the Youth Opportunity Program (YOP) in 2000 with the help of the Workforce Investment Act Out of School Youth Program. YOP was designed to give disadvantaged young people who are not enrolled in an educational program the opportunity to improve basic academic skills, attain a GED certificate, and receive occupational and life skills training. According to Program Director Kathy Cook Spears, these students have not been successful in regular school, and the YOP small class setting with its individualized self-paced learning plans and one-on-one tutoring helps them achieve success.

Individuals must apply through the local Texas Workforce Center and must have one or more of the following barriers: low-income, learning disability, basic skills deficient, psychological or emotional difficulties, single parent household, incarceration, ward of the state, on probation, or homeless. The program runs 24 hours per week, Monday through Thursday, from 8:30 am to 3:30 pm. Students must attend a minimum of 75% of the scheduled class time.

## Self-paced program established

Based on the success of the YOP, Program Director Spears and Weatherford College started a second, self-paced program in January 2002 with no specific enrollment requirements. This program offers written

and computerized assessments and study material, and students must attend a minimum of fifteen hours per month.

## Basic skills and test preparation improve

Both programs use PLATO Learning assessments and courseware to prepare students for the GED, with teachers available during class time for tutoring and support. Weatherford has set up a dedicated GED classroom with fifteen computers hosting ten PLATO Learning LAN licenses and eleven Web licenses. The YOP averages ten students per day and the self-paced tutorial class averages five to ten. Program Director Spears offers additional access and self-study options through PLATO Learning Web Network, with many self-motivated students using the courseware on their home computers.

In both programs students take an initial skills assessment test. Depending on the results, they either enroll in the PLATO Learning curriculum or proceed with GED practice testing. Before starting the curriculum, they complete the PLATO Fastrack Curriculum Placement Test assessments in reading, language arts, and math. They then work through the curriculum up to grade level 10 and proceed to GED practice testing.

### Students realize success

In 2002, Weatherford College enrolled 150 GED students and 40 passed the test. Spears noted that many students attended GED class only a few times, did not take the GED test, or were just not motivated to accomplish their goals. However, she is eager to point out that most students who stuck with the program achieved success on the GED, and many went on to college or vocational programs.

Spears shares the joy of success with the students and is encouraged by the results. She enjoys telling the story of a 60-year-old grandmother who started the class with her 18-year-old grandson. Within a few months both passed the GED test and graduated together. Both now plan to start taking some college classes. Weatherford has also seen several students with severe psychological or learning disabilities, including dysgraphia, dyslexia, ADHD, depression, bipolar or reading difficulties, complete the curriculum and pass the GED test. Students come from all walks of life, ages, genders, races and skill levels. Some have only an elementary education; others have junior high or high school experience. The passion and experience of Spears and the GED program teachers, coupled with the strength of the PLATO Instructional Solutions courseware, have helped many disadvantaged Weatherford students realize success.

### Teachers express their support

The Weatherford teachers have become strong supporters of the GED program and the role PLATO Learning courseware and assessments can play in improving their students' chances of success. They shared some of their observations about both classes: "PLATO Instructional Solutions courseware is a very good teaching tool because it is so comprehensive and covers

an enormous amount of subject material at all grade levels. In our GED programs, everyone is at different academic levels. These students all want a fast, effective way to study for the GED test. We use PLATO Learning courseware because it sets up an individualized learning plan for each student to help build their basic academic skills and improve those deficiencies. It also allows students to move through the curriculum at their own pace with a means of accessing student progress as they study. Once a student has built up their basic academic skills, they are more capable of using other GED specific materials to enhance their learning experience."

According to Program Director Spears, "Both students and teachers agree on what they like best about PLATO Learning courseware, which is the ease of use, the broad range of comprehensive subject material, the reporting access, and the ability to establish individualized learning plans at different academic levels. A whole class can be using the courseware at the same time and not one moving at the same pace or at the same academic level. It's a GREAT tool for GED preparation classes, or any class with varied learners, because no two students learn at the same pace or are at the same place in their learning or education experience. It also cuts down on teacher prep time and allows more time for the teachers to help students individually, which significantly increases the success rate. PLATO Instructional Solutions courseware has proven to be an exceptional fit for all our students, at all levels."