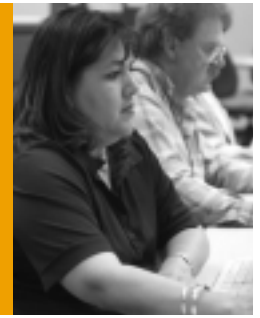


Lambton College of Sarnia, Ontario Serves First Nations Communities Using PLATO Learning



"First Nations", the term that literally describes Canada's aboriginal population, is an integral part of Sarnia and the Lambton College community. For the last eight years, Lambton College has worked closely with First Nations communities throughout Ontario, using PLATO Learning Technologies to deliver GED prep, pre-apprenticeship training and higher education programs to members of these communities.

Students that didn't fit the mold

"Our students come to us eager to learn but apprehensive about returning to school," said Kathy Bouma, PLATO Administrator at Lambton College. "Most of these students have failed in the traditional school system because it simply did not meet their needs. One of the problems is that the First Nations are still deeply entrenched in traditional cultural activities and leave school during hunting and fishing seasons. They end up behind in school and eventually leave without completing their education."

Lambton College uses its connections to the First Nations communities to spread the word about the programs it offers. Students range in age from seventeen to sixty-five years old and represent all aspects of society—men, women, youth, married, single, and single parents. Most of the students, especially older students, have limited high school experience, or at best, sporadic high school attendance. Younger students typically have completed at least a few years of high school before they enter the PLATO Learning programs.

The one thing all of these students have in common is that they want to complete high school. Some have set a goal to go on to a post-secondary program, some want to enter an apprenticeship training program and some simply want to complete high school to build their self-esteem.

When students come into the program they are assessed using PLATO Fastrack Curriculum Placement Test to determine prior learning and place them at the right level in the program. PLATO Fastrack and the Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT) are used throughout the program to monitor student progress and grade level completion. A student's typical day is split between one-on-one instruction in math, writing, science and social studies and the PLATO Learning Lab. In the lab, students work through individualized education plans using PLATO Learning modules to achieve their program goals.

Moving beyond the college walls

The success of the program has enabled Lambton College to expand to satellite campuses and into remote communities. "In Dryden, a remote community in northern Ontario, we had students come to a central location for a week to learn the program. These students then went home to their own communities that were even more remote. One of our students took the program home to her community that is only accessible by plane and only has one phone line. Families have to make appointments to use the line. But despite all that, students used PLATO Learning to prep for a two-year college accounting program."

"One of the keys to the PLATO Learning program is that it sets students up for success, sometimes for the very first time," said Kathy. "The classroom time, coupled with the PLATO Learning individualized tutoring gives students self-confidence. PLATO Learning also builds in awards for learners when they successfully complete modules." The first time Kathy visited a reserve she met an adult student who tested at grade two, having left school in just grade five. He wanted desperately to get into an apprenticeship program to support his family. "PLATO Learning motivates our learners," Kathy said. "After he completed his first module he jumped out of his chair and danced like Rocky from the movies. For this student, it was the first time in his life he had ever succeeded. It was a moment I'll never forget."

Self-paced learning and self-motivation

"The other thing our students like is that PLATO Learning is hands-on, the students control what they learn, where they're going and how fast they get there." PLATO Learning allows students to begin working at any level. If they master the test first then they can move on. "They think they're cheating by taking the test first," Kathy said with a smile. "But more importantly, they feel like they're in control. It doesn't matter what level they're at, there's no risk, no peer pressure, no cultural pressure because they work at their own pace. They become motivated. As educators, we work with them until they are self-motivated, then they take over, and it's inspiring."

"We recently had a twenty-one year old student with a six year old daughter who wanted to go to Lambton College to get her Business diploma. As so often happens, students motivate each other and she and another student constantly competed against each other to see who would do the best. Then because of a family situation, she lost her housing at the reserve and had to drop out of the program. We were able to loan her a laptop for the four and a half weeks she needed to be out to get new housing. She logged more time at home on the laptop than she had in the lab! Then she moved ahead of the other student, passed the GED and is now in her second year of college."

"First Nations reserves are beginning to pass resolutions requiring all adult community members to have a minimum GED education," Kathy said. "They are now using our program to enroll every adult within the community. The changes are positive. I really feel that this program has just begun."