

Research in Practise Report - June, 2012

Researcher: Jan Phillips, Instructor - Great Plains College, Biggar

janp@greatplainscollege.ca

j.phillips@sasktel.net

Title: A Five Year Tracking Analysis: Exploring what makes a difference in student progress and attendance through tracking and analysis of change.

Brief Summary of Outcomes:

- **Course Completions:** In the 2010-2011 year, the course completion rate was 64%, an increase of 15% over 2007-2008. By now, the student body was evidently familiar with the new process and the expectations around course completion. The intervention with the new process is likely a major reason for the change in attendance and progress.
- **Student Attendance:** The 2011-2012 attendance was even higher (6.1%) than the benchmark of 60.9%. Again, the student body was again made up of mostly Adult 12 and upgrading students nearing completion of the program and graduation.

Project Abstract: In the fall of 2009, in an effort to become more accountable to our funding department, our campus implemented a process through which we hoped to monitor **learner progress and attendance** more accurately and to follow through with a consistent approach that would hopefully help improve both learner progress and attendance. (See attached “Process for Reviewing Student Progress and Attendance” document for details) **Progress** in this context refers to the completion and passing of individual courses in Levels 3 and 4 and to the adherence to a timeline agreed upon by the program staff and the student. We wanted to see what the attendance and progress patterns had been through time and attempt to determine what we had done that evidently made a difference to improve attendance and progress.

For analysis, I used statistics for the two years prior to implementation of the “Process for Reviewing Student Progress and Attendance” as the project benchmark to help measure the success of the project since that time. I also compared the pre-post progress and attendance over the five year period beginning in 2007. The expectation was that we would see an increase in both attendance and progress after implementation of the new process back in 2009, but we were open to seeing if other interventions had made a difference along the way. By looking back and comparing statistics, we could perhaps see where change occurred and why it evidently occurred.

The Research Question: If we implement a consistent process for monitoring and carry out a fair and reasonable follow-through process around student attendance and progress, can we affectively increase attendance and progress in ABE programs?

Definitions Used:

- **“Progress”** in this context refers to the completion and students passing individual courses in Levels 3 and 4 and to student adherence to a timeline agreed upon by the program staff and the student.
- **“Course Completions”** refers to the individual courses in Levels 3 and 4 such as Science 10 or Canadian Studies 30. If the course ran its full length, as planned, it was a course completion.
- **“Student leaver forms”** are the documents our college uses to record course completions. These forms are filed in student files and are also submitted to the registrar so that the credit can be recorded in the student records system.

The Timelines Studied:

- a) Longer Time Line: School years September, 2007 through May, 2012. Each school year consisted of 120 days between September and May.
- b) Benchmark for Comparison: September 17, 2007 – May 15, 2009. Attendance for these two years was averaged at 60.9%.*

Method:

- a) **Course Completions** refers to the individual courses in Levels 3 and 4 such as Science 10 or Canadian Studies 30. The number of courses completed was calculated using student files containing course registration forms and leaver forms. A **leaver form** is the document our college uses to record course completions. These forms are filed in student files and are also submitted to the registrar so that the credit can be recorded in the student records system. The percentage of courses completed was determined by dividing the number of completed courses (taken from the leaver forms) by the total number of course registrations (taken from the course registration forms) for in a given school year. For example, in 2007-2008, the total number of courses completed was 35 and the total number course registrations was 71. Therefore, the completion rate that year was 35/71 or 49%.

In our program, students have traditionally worked at their own pace on individualized programs. Students often register in courses at the beginning of a semester and then do not complete the course during that semester or they drop out, so we call those "incompletes." These students might complete the course the following semester and would not be required to start the course over again. So, the remaining 51% were courses that were begun by students who did not attend to the planned end date of the semester or they worked more slowly than expected.

- b) **The Average Attendance** was based on an analysis of actual attendance reports. Unfortunately, the first two years of this study were missing some of the reports. This posed a problem so, given the information I had to work with, my decision was to average the results of these two years to form the benchmark by which we measured the following years. This calculation gave me an average attendance of 60.9%. This means there was approximately a 61% attendance rate for 25 students from September, 2007 to May, 2009.

The Findings:

I have charted the findings in an attached spreadsheet. The numerical data for attendance and for course completions are graphed separately and show the relationship between the 5 school years. The third graph combines the information to demonstrate the relationship between attendance and progress. (Please see attachment)

Discussion of Findings:

a) Attendance

In the 2007-2008 school-year, I had attendance records for the Adult 12 group only. Because of that, the average attendance appears to be relatively high in relation to the other years in the study. I would suggest that there may be several reasons for this. These reasons may include:

- The Adult 12 learners may be more eager to attend as they see the light at the end of the tunnel and are more focussed on completing their program.
- That year included several learners who had extremely high attendance rates overall.
- Several of the learners in this group lived near to the college and had reliable transportation.

- As the year moved on, several students dropped out of the program so their numbers were taken out of the average and didn't show their affect in the totals. Only students who were attending were included in the attendance average.

The attendance records of the 2008-2009 school-year were for the Adult 10 group only.

- Here the records show a severe drop-off of attendance in December and the rate did not recover. Most of the students in this group were first nations learners from nearby reserve communities who travelled 30 to 45 minutes to school so weather and transportation were likely significant factors here.
- In 2009-2010, we saw a slight decrease ($60.9 - 57.9 = 3\%$) in attendance *during* the implementation year. I suggest that this was as result of 2009-2010 being a transition year for our ABE team as well as for our student body. We had several students registered at the beginning of the year who did not continue for a variety of reasons. Some were not prepared or able to meet the attendance and progress requirements. Progress expectations were set out as a minimum of 2 course completions per semester unless barriers were identified. Progress was our prime concern and attendance was less stringently applied. However, if attendance fell below the expected 90%, it was used to support any decisions being made with regard to Provincial Training Allowance (PTA) discontinuation. Most students chose not to continue in the program if they lost their PTA funding even though they were not discontinued from the Adult Basic Education program for these reasons and had the choice of remaining as part-time students.
- We saw a significant increase (4.8%) in attendance in the 2010-2011 school-year after implementing the "Process for Reviewing Student Progress and Attendance" compared to the combined first two year average. The factors affecting this increase may be due to acknowledgment and acceptance of the new process by the student body and due to the fact that almost all of the students were Adult 12 or upgrading students. This ongoing pattern would indicate to me that this type of student at the more senior level of programming might have a high level of motivation to attend and complete their program.
- The 2011-2012 attendance was even higher (6.1%) than the benchmark of 60.9%. Again, the student body was again made up of mostly Adult 12 and upgrading students nearing completion of the program and graduation.

Course Completion Rates

In 2007-2008, my final benchmark year for this part of the study, we see that the completion rate (49%) was at its lowest for the 5 year study period. When compared to the attendance rate, it at first glance seems to be counterintuitive that the completion rates are low. This may be due to the fact that prior to the implementation of the 2009 process, the expectation of 2 courses per semester was not made explicit to students. Therefore, it could be that students beginning their Level 4 courses were not under any pressure to complete these courses within a semester system. In fact, in those years, the program appeared to operate under the timeframe of an almost infinite continuum of time. Four students withdrew from the program after December so this explains a lower rate of course completion. Another reason for the low completion rate may be, as mentioned earlier, there was a severe drop-off of attendance in the remaining students after December.

The 2008-2009 year saw a 9% increase in course completions over the previous year. This result is surprising given that the attendance for this Adult 10 group was significantly lower than the average attendance of the Adult 12's from the year before. Again, for this group, attendance was very good until December and then remained low until the end of the school-year. This may be due to a low drop-out rate and although attendance averages were low, students remained in the program and were able to complete their courses.

The 2009-2010 completion rate did not increase. It remained the same as 2008-2009 at 58%, still a 9% increase over the baseline year. We had 5 students withdraw or be discontinued during that year which would explain the lower than expected course completions.

The 2010-2011 year the course completion rate was 64%, an increase of 15% over 2007-2008. By now, the student body was evidently familiar with the new process and the expectations around course completion. The intervention with the new process is likely a major reason for the change in attendance and progress.

The make-up of the class was largely Level 4 and this is another factor that probably affected the outcomes. In 2010, our program in Biggar was reduced from 25 full time seats to 15. In addition, the improvements I measured are even more interesting because this year saw attendance improvements in spite of the fact that our Educational Assistant was assigned to serve all of the programs in our learning centre rather than just the Basic Education program, as was the case in the previous years.

The 2011-2012 completion rate was 59%, meaning it was down 5% from the previous year. However, it was still higher by 10% than the 2007-2008 year. The 2011-2012 year also saw an increase in the practise of continuous intake and this did affect our results. Compared to the previous years, when fewer students joined the ranks mid-semester, 2011-2012 saw several students enter the program in February and early March which limited their ability to complete their courses during the semester.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

I had entered this study thinking that the process we implemented in 2009 would have a noticeable positive effect. I think that my expectations were well founded; namely, with a clear and transparent process in place, attendance and progress would improve. I believe that the data shown here supports my hypothesis and that a consistent process for monitoring and carrying out a fair and reasonable follow-through procedure around student attendance and progress did in fact increase attendance and progress in our ABE program. However, looking back, it is possible that other programmatic changes also had an impact.

Therefore, in addition to the process described in the attachments, I believe our success was due to some other factors as well.

- An important part of our process was that we met as a team on a monthly basis. We started in September of 2009 and continued to meet at the beginning of each month to re-assess student progress, attendance and issues surrounding their success. Our team members include myself as the instructor, our Program Coordinator, our Educational Assistant, and our Student Support person. This practise ensures that all team members understand the issues facing each of the students and when we agree on a method of addressing each issue as it arises, we are operating in the best interests of the students and of the college and our funding agency. Again, the “case model” approach might have been one of the key factors in improving attendance. This is likely one of the interventions that made a difference. Students recognized that the team took an individualized approach and worked with the instructor and support personnel to identify and reach their goals.
- We were, and still are, also diligent in relating the information about progress and attendance to our students as part of this new consistency process. In private conversations as well as during orientation days and through-out the school year,

we let them know where they stand on progress and attendance. Today, we try our best to give our students a consistent message regarding our expectations but also make allowances for individual needs and situations. This is now always the approach used.

- From this tracking study, it is suggested two interventions have made a difference over time:
 - a) Monthly faculty/staff meetings with group decisions being made on individual student progress and attendance.
 - b) Consistent, regular information given to students about their attendance and progress.

We have seen improvement in both areas of progress and attendance after these practises were implemented.

Next Steps:

We intend to continue using both approaches and we will build on this evident success, but we are looking at the possibility of doing more scheduled lessons. Many of our courses are designed to be completed at the learner's own pace. However, with the implementation of the new math curriculum, we feel that a more structured approach to class scheduling will be required in order to complete the course. This, in turn, may result in even better attendance since missing a class would cause a student to fall behind the group. Of course any student who is unable to attend will still receive assistance from the instructor or the educational assistant, but other experience with small group sessions seems to enhance both student retention in the program and student learning.

This intervention of more scheduled lessons will be interesting and we are considering the possibility of a second action research project to see if attendance and progress changes only in this math area—hopefully even improves—with the introduction of more scheduled group lessons. Such a study could shed some light on the contrast between individualized teaching along with continuous intake vs. the future possibility of “block intakes” and group teaching. Or, the study could be a combination of both.

Questions arise when we consider changing the format of the current method of individualized instruction. We have only one classroom and one instructor. We generally experience a student body with very mixed academic needs, with up to 20 part-time and full-time students studying independently and taking a wide variety of courses at any given time. Consequently, we need to ask ourselves, “Is attempting to schedule more of those courses possible? Should there be block intakes for students taking math

and group teaching for the math and science students only?” The possibilities are under consideration at present.

I look forward to tracking future years and to assessing the effect of any other changes in procedures.