

**Title:** “Working with Wait Lists”: Improving Retention within Basic Education through Better Detection of and Service Provision for At-Risk Students on the Wait List.”

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**Location of Project:** SIAST Wascana, Regina

**Time Frame (dates):** Sept/10-June/11

**Question Posed:**

**Initial Question:** Will flagging at-risk students improve retention?

**Refined question:** Is it possible to establish a “warning system” within Basic Education that identifies at-risk clients EARLIER than the system that currently exists? If so, how can we go about establishing it?

**I constructed the question and the study but was not able to complete the entire project because:**

- This was my first year as Waitlist Counselor; I thus had no established practice within which to conduct research
- As a new counselor, I had little time to make this project a priority
- Despite my inexperience and lack of time, I was inspired by the *Aboriginal Student Success Strategy: Final Report of the Committee* to explore the challenge of establishing an early warning system in which at-risk students are identified in a timely fashion and connected with the supports necessary to mitigate their risk.
- As I set out to launch my project, I soon discovered that it was far too big for one person to manage. According to theory, an early warning system requires:
  - (1) a common framework to define at-risk behavior; and
  - (2) a coordinated process in which at-risk students are identified early in their programs and fast-tracked into required supports. As this theory suggests, establishing an early warning system requires the input/cooperation/coordination of many people.

**Steps made towards project completion:**

I have focused on how I, as Waitlist Counselor, can become more adept at detecting and tracking students at-risk. To that end, I completed the following steps:

- Waitlist Log established to record daily duties/activities (including client contact) and reflections.
- *Client Profile* (an electronic form) created and continuously refined (see *appendix A*).
  - The *Client Profile* currently includes sections from the Adult 10/12 Waitlist Checklists (blue/purple forms); the ABE Pre-Admissions Questionnaire – Learning Profile (green form); the Individual (Accuplacer) Score Report; the yellow multi-purpose Accuplacer form; and academic transcripts.
  - The *Client Profile* includes **red flag indicators** in the areas of learning and counseling (personal/career).
- Electronic folder/file system established to keep track of *Client Profiles*
- 249 *Client Profiles* established, i.e. one for each applicant/student referred my way
  - Each profile includes pertinent intake data as noted under *Client Profile* above
  - Client notes from the Wait List log are transferred to each client’s profile (see below) on a weekly basis.
  - I have recently begun to incorporate data from Student Info Exchange meetings into each client profile

- With informed consent, I have shared *Client Profiles* for each student going into Intake and Assessment (I/A) with the I/A instructors. I have had much positive feedback from these instructors on how helpful the profiles have been to them.

### Reflection On or Implications for Practice:

- **Obstacles: Establishing an early warning system requires:**
  - A collective will/desire to establish such a system.
  - A forum in which all BE staff work to develop:
    - (1) a common framework for identifying at-risk behavior; and
    - (2) a coordinated process in which at-risk students are identified early in their programs and fast-tracked into required supports.
  - A more proactive/preventive and integrative case management model than what currently exists within BE.

As I have found:

- The attitude that BE students are self-directed adults is a barrier to adopting a more proactive approach to detecting and supporting clients at-risk
- The lack of communication between the Waitlist Counselor (who deals with the new “applicants”) and Program Counselors (who deal with enrolled students) makes the transmission of info (integrated case management) difficult. This lack of communication is perpetuated in part by:
  - (1) an attitude that program “applicants” are distinct from program “students” (which does not seem to fit with student life cycle model);
  - (2) the desire of Program Counselors to collect their own info (which is understandable but which seems redundant to me); and
  - 3) There are many opportunities to practice integrated case management (Student Info Exchange Meetings, Counselor Meetings) but these forums seemed impeded in part by current conceptions of and uncertainties around privacy/confidentiality; and by insufficient follow-up or insufficient communication of follow-up between meetings.
  - (4) the lack of an established integrated case management practice

could be improved: by implementing a consistent chair and by following standard meeting procedures; by implementing a consistent recorder who is separate from the chair; by reviewing previous minutes; and by having policy/procedural documents on hand for reference. Also, when questions/issues arise that require more info, the task of finding answers/solutions to be presented at the next meeting should be clearly assigned to those best positioned to follow up.

- **Positives/gains**
  - Better understanding of what is needed to establish an earlier warning system than the one that currently exists
- **Next steps**
  - I will leave the initiative of establishing an earlier warning system within BE up to the Program Heads and also, perhaps, the Dean
  - I believe a review of the current counseling model within BE at our campus should be undertaken with an eye towards *increasing* integrative case management (to better detect and serve at-risk clients) or *decreasing* the need for integrative case management
  - I will discuss with the I/A instructors whether they think my *Client Profiles* had an impact on retention within their program

### Recommendations for Practice and/or Future Studies in this Area:

- Leadership which is committed to improving retention in BE through the implementation of recommendations set down in the *Aboriginal Student Success Strategy: Final Report of the Committee*.
- Leadership which is able to inspire/mobilize/rally diverse staff around the issue of improving retention.
- Assessment of the current counseling model within BE; of client/student tracking systems; of client/student follow-up methodology; and of systems of communication and accountability.
- Education on issues such as privacy/confidentiality; and the development of documented internal policies/procedures that address such issues.

