

Title: **Social Environment and ABE Retention and Attendance**

Researcher's Name: Teri Thompson, Eric Adair, Dorthy Allen

Name of Delivery Organization: Cumberland College

Location of Project: Cumberland College, Tisdale Campus

Project Timeframe: April 8- June 7, 2013

Contact for Further Information: tthompson@cumberlandcollege.sk.ca

Abstract: This action research project looked at the relationship between an improved social environment, with more opportunities for student-to-student and student-to-staff social interaction, and improved retention and attendance. A weekly social activity was planned for the portion of the year where we typically see one of the largest drops in attendance and retention, namely between Easter break and year end. We looked at attendance statistics from Easter to year end for the last five years for our benchmark and sought an improvement in retention and attendance of 20% compared with the past five year average.

The Question: Would an improved campus social environment between Easter and the academic year end increase student attendance and retention by 20% as compared with attendance and retention over the past 5 academic years?

Time Frame:

The activities for this project began the week of April 8 and continued until the week of June 3, 2013. We did not complete an activity during the week of May 13 as this was grad week and we had several interruptions to the schedule already.

Baseline:

The average attendance data from Easter break to year end for 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 was used as our baseline for the purposes of comparison. However, we found it was much more difficult to obtain data on how many students had been discontinued or withdrew during the same time period, and therefore there is no data on retention.

However, the five year average for attendance was 71.0%, although the data from 2011/12 was abnormally high, and if that year was removed the four year average dropped to 67%.

Therefore, we took 67% to be the attendance baseline for this study.

The Intervention:

During the 9 weeks from the point of student return from Easter holidays until year end at June 7, we planned various lunchtime activities with a goal of one activity per week. Our hypothesis was that a social activity once per week might encourage better attendance. However, we were not completely successful at hosting an event a week. There were 2 weeks in May when we had several other competing events, with staff away on various days and interrupted time tables where unfortunately, we were unable to get an event off the ground.

What activities did we conduct?

- The week of April 8: Game of Guesstures. Event attendance 75 %
- The week of April 15: Wii Wednesday. Event attendance 55%
- The week of April 22: Comedy TV and popcorn. Event attendance 18%
- The week of April 29: Hotdogs and Bingo. Event attendance 68%
- The week of May 6-13 no event. (Classroom attendance for the week was average.)
- The week of May 24: Bingo. Event attendance 50%
- The week of May 27: Wii. Event attendance 50%
- The week of June 3: Bowling. Event attendance 75%

The Findings:

Retention: We had 31 students on our attendance rosters on April 9 when we returned from Easter holidays. During the time period of the intervention, we had 3 students either withdraw or be discontinued. Of the 3 who were discontinued, 2 had begun their period of non-attendance before the Easter holidays and did not return. We were not able to accurately compare retention. This is something we will track going forward; however if we discount the 2 that dropped off before the interventions began, and were therefore not affected by the intervention, the average retention for the test period would be much higher.

Attendance: The five year average of attendance for this time period was 71%, but as explained 67% as our more accurate average as we chose to drop the outlier from 2011-2012. The attendance rate for 2012-2013 for the same time period was 73%. This shows an

improvement of 6% over the five year average over the adjusted five year average.

Discussion and Recommendations:

We did not achieve the hoped for 20% increase in retention or attendance in this cycle. However, the improved attendance of 6% and improved retention (losing only one student who was involved in the intervention), together with the feedback from the students, encourages us to use this intervention again next year as a cycle two study.

We found an activity once a week was too difficult to maintain over the long haul if one was to attempt to do this for the year as a method of improving social climate and positively influencing attendance. However, implementing the intervention for only the last 2 months of the program was attainable. Other programs in similar situations in the province may find this is a reasonable place to start. Certainly the positive direction of the interventions of the project us encourage us to work through the second cycle of the intervention.

We also noted that going forward we would want to track student attendance and see if there was a correlation between students who attended social events and students who were retained for the year or at least for a complete semester. Ideally records would be kept on student demographics, what types of students are more likely to become engaged in the activities, younger, older, aboriginal, non-aboriginal, male, female, etc. This information would be easy to tabulate once attendance tracking was done differently.

We started this activity at a one day workshop in a group who had not previously discussed possible projects and who were very unfamiliar with the process. Had we been better prepared, we would have been looking at the tracking and statistics methods more thoroughly. We also ran out of time with the students and the student assessment tool was not completed. Therefore, we would recommend for the future that programs attending a staff workshop on action research be directed to, or at least encouraged to, come with working ideas.

Anecdotally the students commented that they really enjoyed the activities and asked why we had not done more of this type of activity earlier in the year.

Recommendations:

- We recommend activities twice a month instead of weekly because the pace of planning an activity every week can become overwhelming.
- Seek more student input into activities. Ideally students would have more ownership of the activities.
- Track individual student attendance at activities to watch for correlation between attendance/retention and social activity attendance, as well as gender/personality/age, etc. characteristics of those learners who respond or don't respond to such interventions so the interventions can better match the student groups in the future.
- Track the types of activities that seem to be most successful with certain students and drop those that generate little interest. With the goal of building a base of activities to use with certain types of students over time. For example, perhaps Wii is less successful with older students ; but TV and popcorn would be better if that were the majority of the class.
- We do intend to continue with this approach and hope to refine it through future cycles.