

Title: Improving attendance after the Easter Break through Student Interviews and Student Focus on Absenteeism

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Location(s) of project: Melfort

Time Frame of Project: April-May, 2013

Name of Delivery Organization: Cumberland Regional College Melfort

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Abstract:

Regular attendance is the most important factor if ABE students are to achieve success in their programs. However, attendance in our program tends to drop off towards the end of the term, just when the opposite should be happening.

This project was designed to provide extra support and encouragement for students at the end of the term to see if added help would improve attendance levels and, hence be reflected in higher marks. Also, the reasons for students being absent were explored as a second part of this study. The project started in the beginning of April, 2013 and went to the end of the term which was May 31, 2013.

The students had 3 sessions of intensive individual interviews over the final weeks focusing on reasons for why they thought absenteeism occurred for students whose attendance was less than 70%, why their own attendance might be below 70%; and what they themselves were doing that helped them be there regularly if their attendance was greater than 70%. We met with each of the Gr 10 and Gr12 students individually on a formal basis on three occasions as well as informally as the opportunity presented itself.

These interviews were held on a bi-weekly basis to improve class attendance, find reasons for absenteeism, and provide an avenue of counselling and encouragement to

the students. We might refer them to the counsellor at our college or we might speak with them as instructors. The intention was to see if the additional focus on attendance and trying to deal with stated issues as best we could would result in an increase in attendance during the period from April to May 31.

The Research Question:

Would bi-weekly student interviews giving a focus on attendance and providing additional counselling and supportive help to those with low attendance to increase their class attendance by 10%?

The Intervention (including Baseline and Timeline

At the time of the project, we had (35 students in our various classes in Melfort. They were taking grade 10 and Gr 12 BE classes. These programs are block intake, meaning students entered the program in the fall and at the beginning of the second semester. The three instructors met with each student individually on a bi-weekly basis to discuss their absences during the previous two weeks, reasons for absences, assignments and their class progress. The interviews were held one-on-one after class or during noon hour or break. The intervention being tried was to put a new focus on their reasons for absenteeism, explore those reasons one-on-one and try individual initiatives with those students who were becoming absent. Would a new focus and more support make a difference when compared with the previous years' benchmark?

The project started on April 8 and continued to May 31—which meant the last 6 weeks of the program, the period when attendance is typically at its worst. The interview schedule for the Melfort classes was:

The first interviews in both classes were held by April 11,

- the second interviews were held by April 25,
- the third interviews were held by May 9 and
- the final interviews were held by May 23.

The baseline for comparison was the average April/May attendance of the previous 5 years.

Specifically:

- For the Grade 12 class, the five year-averaged baseline was an average of 72% attendance;
- For Grade 10, the baseline was an average of 74% attendance.

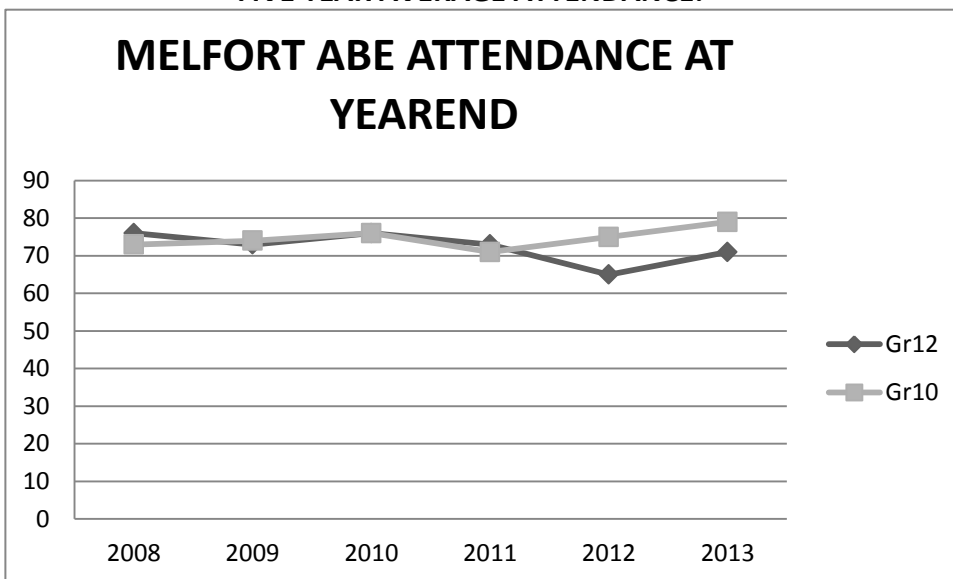
The criterion for success was to make a project-end comparison of attendance for the April/May period of 2013 following the interview intervention to see if there has been a 10% increase in attendance.

Benchmark Overview:

The following is a graph showing the April / May average attendance each year for the Melfort Gr 10 and Gr 12 classes from 2008 to 2013.

Note that the Gr 12 2013 attendance of 70.8% is below the baseline of 72 % and the Gr 10 class at 78.8 % is 4.8% above the baseline of 74%, indicating attendance has tended to be better in the Gr 10 class over the past five years (a revealing statistic unto itself and noted later in this report).

FIVE YEAR AVERAGE ATTENDANCE:



The Findings:

Grade 12:

The baseline established for Gr 12 from the previous five April/ May averages was 72%. The attendance for Gr 12 in April/ May of 2013 was 70.8 %. There was no increase in attendance as a result of the intervention. There was, in fact, a small decrease of 1.2% in average attendance. This is well below the goal of having the hoped for 10% increase at yearend. This could possibly be explained by a variety of personal situations of this particular class.

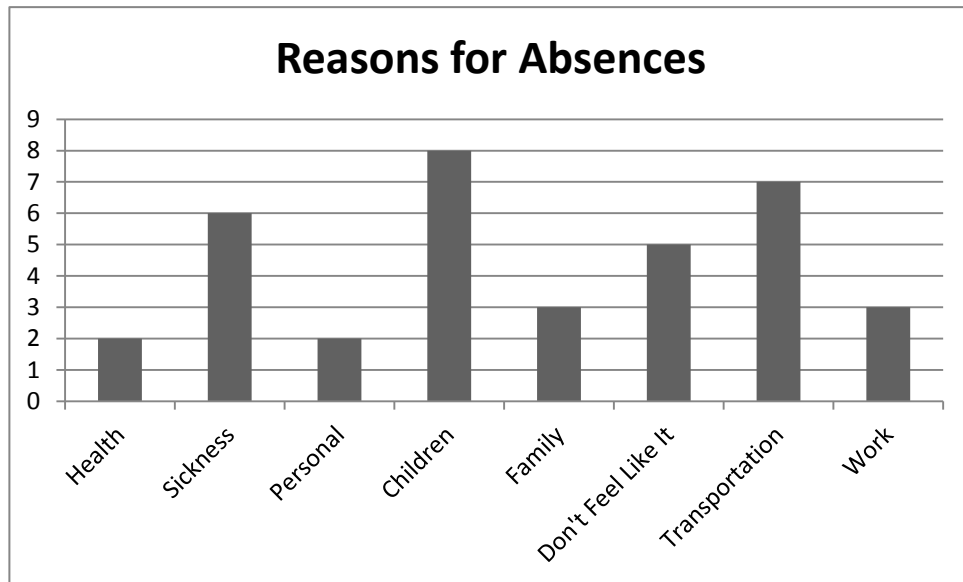
Grade 10

The baseline established for Gr 10 from the previous five April/May averages was 74%. The attendance for the Gr10 class in April/ May of 2013 was 78.8%. This increase of 4.8% is slightly above the five year average but well below the goal of having a 10% increase at yearend.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that increasing student interviews did not increase attendance at yearend by 10% in either grade 12 or grade 10. However, we did conclude there were positive outcomes and the findings point to the need for continued research along these same lines, as seen next. The reasons for absences was a focus during the interviews as well. The reasons for absences mentioned most frequently ranked in order were as follows:

1. Responsibilities with children were mentioned 8 times. Children sicknesses, babysitters not showing up or not on time, appointments missed were common.
2. Transportation problems were mentioned 7 times as a reason for not coming to classes. This included vehicle breakdown or weather driving conditions.
3. Personal sickness was mentioned 6 times as a reason. This would be the flu, cold or other short term ailments.
4. Also mentioned 6 times was the response that "I didn't feel like coming", maybe too tired, not in the mood, hung over, slept in so I stayed home all day
5. Family responsibilities were mentioned 3 times as a reason. This involved looking after other family members, appointments and other family commitments.



Responsibilities with children and transportation are the two largest factors stated as reasons for not attending regularly.

There were 3 students with attendance over 85% and 3 with attendance under 60% at the time of the interviews. There were 2 students that had withdrawn since April 8. There were 15 students that were doing well or very well, 6 that were on the bubble and 2 that were failing

Discussion and Recommendations for other Practitioners:

It would seem that the College personnel are all ready doing all that they can to promote good attendance. Extra efforts by staff don't seem to make a further improvement in attendance rates.

6. Chronic health issues were given 2 times. Not feeling well or medical appointments.
7. Work was given as a reason on 2 occasions. This involved staying away from classes to work for reasons of earning extra money.

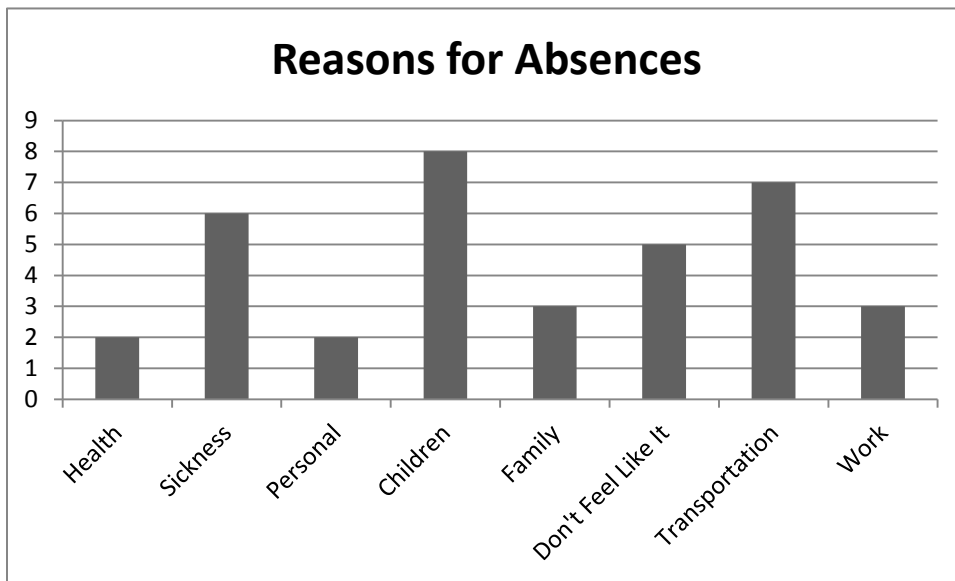
Discussion of Findings

The reasons for absences was a second focus during the interviews as well. The reasons for absences mentioned most frequently ranked in order were as follows:

1. Responsibilities with children were mentioned 8 times. Children sicknesses, babysitters not showing up or not on time and appointments for children were common.
2. Transportation problems were mentioned 7 times as a reason for not coming to classes. This included vehicle breakdown or weather conditions.
3. Personal sickness was mentioned 6 times as a reason. This would be the flu, cold or other short term ailments.
4. Also mentioned 6 times was the response that "I didn't feel like coming", maybe too tired, not in the mood, hung over, slept in so I stayed home all day
5. Family responsibilities were mentioned 3 times as a reason. This involved looking after other family members, appointments and other family commitments.
6. Chronic health issues were given as a reason 2 times. This involved not feeling well or attending medical appointments.
7. Work was given as a reason on 2 occasions. This involved staying away from classes to work for reasons of earning extra money.

The following is a graph summarizing the reasons for absences that were given during the interviews.

INTERVIEW INTERVENTIONS WITH GR. 10: Since interviews were evidently an effective



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Our initial reaction when the project was completed was that the College personnel were already doing all that they can to promote good attendance. And, extra efforts by us and college staff, such as seen here, didn’t seem to be making a significant improvement in attendance rates, at least during this time period of the program with these study groups. However, upon reflection, the Gr. 10 group did respond to the intervention—even if it was not to the degree we hoped for and, if we see this study as a “fact finding” study that helps build information trying to turn raise attendance by a full 10%, then we would recommend the following:

intervention with Gr. 10 students to at least some extent (i.e., a 6% increase), our “interview intervention” at the Gr. 10 level needs to be re-tested in the field to see if it proves consistent for Gr. 10 in other programs. And, possibly in our own program again.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GR. 10 AND 12: Programs should continue to “fact find” within these two course levels during this time period using this “interview intervention” model to try to understand if there is a consistent difference between the attendance rates of Gr. 10 and Gr. 12 students on a province-wide scale. Perhaps grade-level different interventions make sense for these two groups at these two levels. Perhaps different approaches are needed for the two levels.

TRYING COMBINATION INTERVENTIONS WITH GR. 10: Our “interview intervention” should be re-tested in combination with other promising interventions, such as seen in the 2013 study conducted by the Terry Thompson Group at Melfort (posted on the SARN Website) and/or the (2009-2010) study conducted at Onion Lake Reserve by Jacqueline Bruce (on the SARN Website). Since both of those used increased social activities to improve retention, this added approach might change the behaviour of those in the cluster who are not attending because “They didn’t feel like it” during the last weeks of courses. Trying a combination of Interviews and other promising interventions would refine the research knowledge at the Gr. 10 level and could help many grade 10 students; it might even prove effective at the Gr. 12 level if interviews were tried in combination with other interventions.

THE TOP PRIORITY ISSUES: As seen, child care and transportation are the two “situational barriers” that are very hard to address by instructors alone. While Cumberland College is doing its best to help with these two challenging issues, if these are in fact the two consistent main reasons for low attendance across Basic Education during program end, perhaps colleges and funders need to develop a larger provincial strategy that would perhaps fund seats in local daycares as needed; and/or explore avenues to have students develop cooperative transportation (with college reimbursed funding for gas), etc.

IN CLOSING: Child care and transportation in this critical time period require more investigation but are now named as the top two issues for attendance during this timeframe and should now be focused upon directly on a wider scale. Adding further facts to Grade 10 and grade 12 attendances using this model shows promise and should be extended.