Title of Project: "Planning for Failure": Managing Basic Education Intake at the Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Prince Albert Campus

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THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY:

There are 4 quadrants in the Basic Education (BE) Program at our Prince Albert Polytechnic campus and, in each "quad," our Counseling Division offers a one-day orientation session with subsequent PTA (provincial training allowance) application sessions so new learners can apply for their training allowances. Our BE orientation consists of:

- information on the BE program (i.e., education and career planning),
- program supports (i.e., childcare, and housing),
- program policy, PTA eligibility and the application process.

These sessions are designed for students who have been on the waiting list and have accepted the offer of a seat in the program.

The first step in this process is to contact students from the wait list by mail and ask them to report by phone to Student Services regarding their availability to start in the upcoming intake, or quad.

Letters to the perspective students have typically been mailed about 5 weeks prior to the orientation session. The number of students who are invited will depend on: the current number of vacant seats, the projected number of vacant seats due to anticipated completions from one level to the next, and the projected number of students that will be lost through attrition or completion. This projected intake number is highly arbitrary and is subject to change on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Meanwhile, students on the waiting list are required to report to Student Services every two months to update their address, contact telephone numbers, and to confirm that they are still available to start the program.

THE ISSUE:

The problem is, due to “no shows” and the difficulty in projecting accurate seat vacancies, just making contact with perspective students in a timely way—even up to the end of the orientation day—has seen us fall short of meeting our projected numbers more often than we like. Then, students need to be “called in” from our offices from the wait list for the remaining seats. In these “called in” cases, prospective students are contacted by telephone, not by letter, and if they are available to take the next start date they are added to the list of students who require yet another “make-up” orientation. They are advised to contact the appropriate counselor(s) who are expected to give them the information they need to prepare themselves to start the program.

However, this added “called in” step occurs at the same time that counselors are very engaged with the group of students who have just completed the one-day orientation session. Inevitably, the “called in” students will receive a very limited version of the orientation package. They may not actually get the “package” until the first day of school itself and may have to complete a paper application for PTA as they have often have no access to a computer terminal at home. Moreover, they will have missed the pre-scheduled computer tutorial sessions on campus.

All this “catch up” makes it difficult for staff and has a negative impact on the learners. The negative impact has been reflected in higher rates of attrition in the early weeks of the program among this subgroup than among the regular intake groups.

What Should we do? Three Questions Posed:

Based on the action research methodology we learned about at a SARN workshop, we looked for "doable" ways to address the and began with three concrete questions:

1. If we improved our communications with waitlisted students, would our attendance at orientation increase?
2. If attendance at orientation increases, will it affect the attrition rates in the early weeks of the program?
3. If we "planned to fail" by getting the right numbers of students at our first orientation and then scheduled a second "call-in" orientation, would it be easier to communicate among ourselves and with the "call-in" students, so that optimal information is shared?

<u>What Should we Try? The Intervention</u>:

What we decided was to see if it would make a positive difference if:

1. we changed the application form to expand the communication options to include alternate mailing addresses, added land and cell phone numbers, texting and email communications,
2. counselors made telephone contact with waitlisted students *prior to* invitation letters being mailed so we could better determine how many students were actually ready to start,
3. Quad-by-quad, we decided we would always schedule *a second orientation* one week from the original orientation date to deal with the absentee and second "called-in" group. *This is how we would "plan for the failure" of the first intake orientation*
4. Beyond reaching waitlisted students, we had hoped we could consistently check in with new students who had been identified by counselors as "high risk" within the first two weeks of classes. However, upon consultation with the other counselors, we did not do this in any formalized way. We will continue to work on this (as noted below).

The Timeline: When Should we Begin and How Long to run the Project?

We began this research project on March 10, 2015, 5 weeks prior to orientation.

The schedule for this action research project was:

- Orientation: Tuesday, April 14, 2015
- 2nd Orientation: Tuesday, April 21, 2015 (one week later)
- Check- in by May 8, 2015
- Repeat each quad, through to September 2015.*

This new intervention might appear to be consistent but it would be somewhat varied because we have implemented a system of providing orientation for Quad 1 (the former September start date) in June. The called-in session for Quad 1 would nevertheless be done on the first day of classes, rather than one week after the regular orientation.

Benchmarks? Results Compared to What?

How could we measure success for this new intervention? How would we know if what we tried was better than the old system? It was decided we would ask the following questions and, as seen under "Criteria for Success," below. Then we would compare the results of the intervention with the former system.

We therefore asked the following:

- PTA stats**:** Are students receiving their funding in a timely way?
- Feedback questionnaires: We will implement a "qualitative" questionnaire for students to complete after orientation so we can "grade" ourselves on how well our information was received.
- Retention Rates in First Month**:** We had hoped to compare the intervention to the last 2 years of stats to determine whether our retention rates have improved.

Criteria for Success: What will Success Look Like?

Compared with the earlier two years we would hope to see:

- Better turnout at orientation
- Smaller numbers of students needing to be called in (**The most critical question**)
- Positive evaluations by students
- Prompt payment of PTA
- A hoped for retention percentages increase over two earlier years for the second orientation and for the “At-Risk” learners.

Permisssions: Who do we ask?

As we were advised at one of the SARN workshops we attended, research needs permissions—both institution members and study participants need to be aware of, and consent to, a research study. Therefore, we sought permissions from:

- Students (advising them we are studying this issue and we attained their agreement)
- Systemic changes (to forms, processes, advising other staff, including supervisory staff).

Data Collection: Based on What?

Action research requires data—evidence—in order to evaluate change. SARN encourages researchers to use at least three data collection techniques, then to “triangulate” the three data sets at the conclusion of the project and compare the combined results against the earlier benchmarks to help determine if there has been a change.

For this project, we decided to use:

1. Student written survey evaluation forms
2. Student oral interviews

3. Statistics on attendance and retention

What did we Find? The Findings: Quad 4

As we predicted, we fell short of meeting our seat targets for the first orientation held on April 14. Therefore, following this first orientation, fourteen students were contacted by phone and called-in to attend a “mini-orientation” and make their applications to begin the week following the original orientation. Twelve attended and, of these, the PTA Counselor (Lani Scragg) has since tracked 10 of these students who applied for PTA. However, two students who were called in did not apply for PTA because of other income levels.

Of the 10 PTA “called-in students”:

- 5 have discontinued or withdrawn
- 4 are active and returning in the fall
- 1 is completing the program in June

Following this first cycle; on June 16, 2015, we enlarged the project to include approximately 110 students who were contacted to attend an orientation session for the September 1, 2015 intake. Twenty-four did not show or they initially confirmed and then declined the seat.

At the time of writing, our second orientation (“intervention”) is planned for these students on September 1—the first day of school. We are already convinced that, overall, contacting prospective students by phone increases the odds of their attendance at the orientation, as opposed to just sending a letter and are looking forward to a higher attendance at the second orientation. We are also hoping this second cycle proves to increase the overall retention rates of the BE learners this fall.

Evaluations by Students: What did Students Think?

The PTA Counselor and Level 1-2 Counselor offered students an evaluation of the information received at the PTA orientations in April and June. The Level 4 counselor implemented a similar evaluation, but only used it in the April orientation. Positive feedback was received on both orientations.

The students who evaluated the orientations provided positive feedback about what they learned. Additional positive comments were also received on the evaluations. It is impossible to know whether this improved their ability to navigate the application process or not. As the PTA Counselor, I (Lani Scragg) can attest that the actual use of the evaluation made me more conscious to ensure that I covered all relevant areas. In this sense, it improved the process. The feedback surveys help to let the students know that their opinions are important and help us to improve our future orientations.

But besides positive feedback, other changes have followed.

Form Changes

We have implemented application form changes to include other ways to communicate with students while they are on the wait list. Counselors report that this has improved their ability to reach students when calling them in to fill vacant seats after orientation.

PTA Payments

PTA has been paid promptly and there has been no noticeable change due to our new processes. This process has always been assessed on a first come, first serve basis. The fact that new students receive a second chance to attend a mini-orientation session and an online application session definitely improves their ability to apply for PTA at the earliest possible opportunity. However, the issue of following retention rates will have to wait for a future cycle of this project.

Discussion and Recommendations for other practitioners:

While it is too soon to determine whether our improved communication schedule with potential students has improved retention rates and this will need further study, it is clear that developing a second orientation has created a better atmosphere in the counseling division and has made scheduling with call-in students much simpler for the program. The intervention definitely holds promise. Nevertheless, on an informal level, we can say that, at least at the time of this writing, we have improved retention overall as compared to last year at this time. However, it is too soon to determine the reasons for this. We need to improve our record keeping to be sure that we have categorized students as they relate to this project/retention strategy.

Moving forward, we hope to continue to improve our communication methods with our potential students. This will include a proposal to contact students from the Aboriginal English Language Learner and Level 1-2 wait lists for a seat offering in the next quad, as the seat becomes available. This step expands the new processes and will lengthen the amount of time the student has to prepare to start school. It will not change their start date, just the date they can start to plan for relocation (if applicable), find child care, etc.

At the end of this school term, a reorganization of our division is taking place and will be in effect on July 1, 2015. We do not know yet how this will affect our day to day operations, our ability to make decisions as a counseling team, or how we will work with Registration and Student Services to provide optimal management of the wait list and intake list. We hope that the improvements we have seen in our processes will continue to have a positive impact on students and staff.

In closing, we have come up with some other ideas that will be implemented in this new year. We have gained access to the wait list so that we can contact prospective students, therefore, we will register students at orientation, instead of the first day of their class. This will give them quicker access to our computer network and we will advise them about holds on registration, etc.
The ball is rolling now with many promising changes to the whole orientation process—all due to asking some basic questions and using some straight forward

data collection techniques. We hope to conduct future study cycles as we move ahead in improving both the process and our service to learners.