FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT SUCCESS AT

COWICHAN ADULT LEARNING CENTRE

by

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ABSTRACT

This action research study was designed to discover what students at an adult learning centre believed were the factors that both promoted and prevented their educational success. The centre was located in a medium sized town in British Columbia, Canada. Using a two stage selection process, five participants were randomly chosen from the student population to be part of a one time, focus-group interview. The participants were asked five questions and their answers were tape recorded and transcribed into text which formed the data for the study. Qualitative analysis of the text identified some common themes under the three headings of situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational refers to factors outside of the control of the centre such as family and work-related issues. Institutional refers to those factors within the control of the centre such as staff attitudes and timetabling. Dispositional factors focus on students' attitudes to education in general. The most prominent factors that students believed contributed to their success were staff support, system flexibility, and a positive environment. The most prominent barriers mentioned were the hours of operation and poor communication. Almost all of the factors mentioned by the participants were institutional in nature which led the researcher to make some concrete recommendations to the centre. Implementing these recommendations could lead to a more successful learning environment for the students at this adult learning centre. This study and these recommendations may be of interest to other adult learning centres.

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Chapter 1: Problem to be Investigated

Purpose of the Study

Through the 1990s, as many as 10,000 students per year did not graduate from high

school in British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2008). Even though by 2005 this figure had fallen

to 7,000 per year, the on-going number of dropouts, combined with the accumulated number

through previous years, has sustained the need for adult education centres where students can

receive a second chance at achieving high school equivalency.

The Cowichan Adult Learning Centre (CALC) is run by School District No.79. It is an

adult centre which is located in Duncan, BC, a town with a population of 40,000. Out of the

approximately 800-1000 yearly registrants, the majority will complete at least one or more

courses, and 8 % will graduate with their Adult Dogwood Diploma. However, over 30 % of the

registrants will not complete a single course. While many students achieve their academic goals

at the centre, it is evident that a significant number of others do not. This present study sought to

determine what the students at CALC believed were the main reasons that contributed to success

for most students at the centre, and what areas could be improved at this adult learning centre to

make it possible for an even greater number of students to achieve their educational goals.

Asking a sample of the students in the centre for their thoughts provided some data from which

one could form some conclusions.

Justification of the Study

The justification for investigating the reasons for the lack of success of a significant

number of adult students at CALC is that other adult education researchers have concluded that

changes to the program at adult learning centres can lead to increased student success. One such

researcher, Kerka (1995) concluded the following about adult education:

> In fact, personal reasons such as family problems, lack of child care, and job demands are
>
> often cited as the cause of withdrawal. At the same time, adults usually have pragmatic,
>
> focused reasons for participating and will leave whenever they feel their goals have been
>
> met or if they feel the program will not satisfy their goals. Personal/job factors may seem
>
> to be beyond institutional control, whereas program satisfaction is something educators
>
> can improve. (p. 1-2)

One of the difficulties in accurately determining the reasons why adults withdraw from formal

education is the lack of information. McGivney (2004) pointed out, "Given the paucity of

detailed national age-aggregated data, one is forced to rely on qualitative studies and individual

institutional surveys to gain a picture of adult withdrawal patterns and the reasons for non-

completion" (p. 36). This present study will add one more piece to the overall picture of factors

affecting student success at adult education centres in British Columbia.

　One of the problems at CALC is the lack of attendance of many of the students who

register. To retain students and to see them successfully acquire the skills and pass the courses

that they need to proceed with the next phase of their lives is the main goal at CALC. However,

the centre's goal of retention is made even more difficult when one begins to understand the

complexity involved in the reasons adult learners withdraw from adult learning centres

(MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994). There does not appear to be one isolated reason for the failure of

many adult students to attend, but rather multiple factors that influence the inability of adult

education centres to retain a significant number of their registrants (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994).

Perhaps the students themselves could provide information that would be helpful in identifying

the reasons for students at CALC failing to continue to attend this centre. By gathering

information from students at CALC, the author of this present study was able to identify those

factors that are contributing to student success at this centre and those areas that are in need of

improvement.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Kerka (1995) affirmed that there will likely be several reasons given by students for not

completing courses that are beyond the control of the centre. This present study sought to

discover what the students at CALC believed were the factors that are within the control of this

centre that affect student success. The research question that guides this study is: What factors do

the adult students at CALC believe influence their academic success at that centre? By asking the

students, one could determine which factors are important, and whether there are things the

school could be doing to increase student retention and success.

Definition of Terms

The following are the key terms in this present study that are not clear and thus need to be

defined:

'Cowichan Adult Learning Centre' (CALC) is an adult learning centre that has been in

operation for 14 years and is currently in its third location in the city. The present location is a

former elementary school in a residential area. The hours of operation are Monday to Thursday

from 8:30 to 3:00, and Friday from 8:30 to 12:00. The centre was open on Tuesday and Thursday

evenings from 6:00 to 8:30 during the 2009-2010 school year, but due to district budget

constraints, the evening program was eliminated from September 2010 to January 2011. It has

recently been reinstated and will be available from February 2011 to June 2011. A fairly wide

variety of academic courses are offered, as well as literacy and numeracy upgrading classes. All

courses are offered as self-paced, with the more popular ones also being offered as teacher-led.

Intake is continuous, and by the end of the academic year approximately 800 to 1000 students

register.

The present staff includes a full-time female secretary, one part-time female student

support worker, one full-time female teacher, and three full-time male teachers, one of whom

serves as a half-time vice-principal. The principal is also responsible for the operation of an

alternate school, so he rarely attends the adult centre but relies on the vice-principal for day-to-

day operations. Three of the seven staff members have been with the centre for 10+ years, and

the other four for less than five years. The principal is in his fourth year and the vice-principal is

in his third. The longest serving male teacher (13 years) was responsible for the operation of a

satellite centre in a nearby community on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but this centre was closed in

June 2010.

An 'adult student' is anyone 19 years of age or older and can include the following: non-

graduates who have gone through the regular or the alternate system, high school graduates who

are upgrading one or two courses in order to meet university program requirements, people of

varying ages who are looking for literacy and numeracy upgrading, young single mothers who

had to leave the regular system due to pregnancy, middle aged workers who are seeking a career

change, people who have spent some time in prison or in substance abuse rehabilitation

programs, immigrants from a wide variety of countries who have English as a second language,

and people who are only interested in increasing their computer skills.

'Student success' is increased or regular attendance, increased feelings of self-esteem,

more positive social interactions, more course completions, and more students who have

completed at least a single unit in a course. In regards to increased feelings of self-esteem,

Kennedy and Roeder (1976) have pointed out the connection between this and academic success. As students feel better about themselves, their motivation to ahieve their educational goals improves, and they are ultimately more successful. In her comprehensive study of 5 adult learning centres in British Columbia, Upex (1999) found that a positive shift in student self-perception was a very important factor contributing to increased student participation in programmes of study.

Brief Overview of Study

The purpose of this action research project was to identify those factors that students believed contributed the most significantly to student success at CALC. A focus group of five participants was chosen randomly from the student population in order to gather the data. Unfortunately, one of the participants had a family emergency just before the interview was to begin and could not attend. The other four participants met together for a focus group interview where they responded to five questions. Their answers were examined for common themes from which conclusions were made. Qualitative analysis of the data was used in identifying both the factors that contribute to success and the barriers that hinder it.

Chapter 2: Background and Review of Related Literature

Theory

A number of researchers have found that there are several things that can be done to increase program satisfaction and the success of an adult learning centre: the initial registration process must be friendly and well organized, teachers must be relationship-focused rather than task driven, activities must be provided that increase a sense of community, and instruction must be as flexible as possible to accommodate learners' needs (McGivney, 2004; Giles & Alderson, 2008; Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991; Milheim, 2005; Terry, 2006).

It is quite often an anxious experience for someone to return to school when they have either not experienced much success there in the past, or there has been a lengthy interval between educational settings (McGivney, 2004). It is crucial that returning students are made to feel welcome, and that their fears are somewhat allayed at the initial contact (Milheim, 2005). The registration process must be well organized so that students do not experience any frustration or confusion about what they are doing. It must also be thorough in its assessment of a student's needs and abilities so that the student is placed in the appropriate courses. If a student is mistakenly placed in a class that is too difficult, he will often not return to the centre (McGivney, 2004).

The relationship between teachers and their students is an important factor in determining whether students will achieve success. If the students really feel that the teacher cares about them as people, then the chances of them returning to class and achieving a measure of success are significantly greater (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009; te Riele, 2006). The challenge for the teacher then is to use the curriculum as a tool to build up self-esteem, increase feelings of confidence and

worth, and establish an atmosphere of trust and friendliness in the classroom (Helm, 2007).

According to Giles and Alderson (2008),

> The role taken by the adult educator is critical for the students. While the educator is
> required to wear many hats in the course of their work, it is important that he/she
> develops warm, reciprocal relationships with the students such as friend, confidant,
> companion and teacher. (p. 472)

Effective instructors develop significant connections with students which must be of the highest priority and which deeply affect a student's success (Battell, Gesser, Rose, Sawyer, & Twiss, 2004). An effective instructor will be genuinely interested in the lives of his students, and this genuineness will go a long way in encouraging students to keep coming to class and ultimately achieving success (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004).

Kennedy and Roeder (1976) suggested one method of making connections with students in Literacy or lower level English classes was to allow them to use their own experiences as part of the curriculum. This Language Experience method encouraged students to build relationships by sharing personal stories both orally and in writing (Kennedy & Roeder, 1976).

Freire (1993) used the idea of 'the banking concept of education' to depict the model of teaching where the teacher is all-knowing and the students are quiet, passive receptacles that receive the deposits of knowledge from this authoritarian figure. He stated that such a paternalistic, one-way system of delivery is not at all conducive to true learning, and that it did not encourage a thoughtful, critical analysis of reality (Freire, 1993). Instead, Freire (1993) proposed 'problem-posing education' as a vastly superior method of instruction which has as its central tenet meaningful dialogue between students and the teacher. In another one of his books Freire (1998) said, "It is through hearing the learners, a task unacceptable to authoritarian

educators, that democratic teachers increasingly prepare themselves to be heard by learners. But by listening to and so learning to talk with learners, democratic teachers teach the learners to listen to them as well" (p. 65).

Soroke (2004) affirmed that many of the important elements that constitute sound educational practice such as respect, reciprocity, responsibility, facilitative power, and dialogic instruction are all contingent upon the community relationship. According to Waldron and Moore (1991),

> In terms of continuing education, the expression of the security motive is often represented by individuals learning in the close company of friends, learning in an environment where they feel very much at home, and wanting to know the other participants in the learning situation. (p. 49)

School barbecues, luncheons, and banquets are valuable in helping to create a social climate that is welcoming and accepting (te Riele, 2006). Staff and students can further develop friendly relationships in such settings, which increases the trust that is so necessary for the success of many students (te Riele, 2006).

The social interactions of students with other students help to initiate and develop friendships, which further develops an atmosphere that is conducive to positive learning experiences (Prins et al., 2009). Regularly scheduled award days where students are recognized for achievement in front of their peers helps to create confidence in those receiving the awards (Stevic & Ward, 2008). It is an exercise in appreciative inquiry that seeks to draw attention to the strengths of students and what they are doing well. Gaberkatz and Watson (1991) have mentioned many of the situational barriers that adult students face such as inadequate housing, demanding work schedules, poor health, lack of food, lack of leisure time, physical disabilities,

and inadequate transportation and how important a strong sense of school community is in

helping to overcome these barriers.

Flexibility, both in hours of operation and instructional delivery, is another factor that has

been shown to affect the success of an adult learning centre. It is certainly advantageous if a

centre can be open during both daytime and evening hours (Milheim, 2005). It is also important

to offer both self-paced as well as classroom-directed curriculum as many students cannot attend

the centre on a regular basis but can only come in to drop off completed work and pick up more

units to complete at home (Terry, 2006). Some students require a teacher-led, lock-step class

where they can interact with the instructor and with other students (Sadler-Smith & Smith,

2004). They can achieve a much greater level of success through the communication that takes

place in a classroom setting rather than trying to manage their way through a directed self-paced

program (Terry, 2006).

Studies Directly Related

The Lutheran Settlement House Women's Program (LSHWP) is a social services agency

that provides a wide variety of services for women, men, and children in Philadelphia. Part of

LSHWP's services includes an adult education program consisting of classes for beginning

literacy, adult basic education, a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), and English as a Second

Language classes. Goertzel and Gordon (1992) addressed the problem of why students drop out

of the LSHW Program and stated that the purpose of their study was to identify the factors that

affect student retention.

Goertzel and Gordon (1992) conducted their research by choosing four classes which had

a total of 78 students out of the approximately 1,100 students who enroll annually. The

researchers acquired quantitative data by keeping records of the number of students who dropped

out of the four classes (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992). They also collected qualitative data by

conducting four different interview sessions which involved the following subjects: a) students

who dropped out of the four classes between September and December; b) 23 of the initial 78

students who had been chosen were selected for initial in-depth interviews; c) 14 of those 23

students were given a follow-up interview; and d) the four class teachers were interviewed

(Goertzel & Gordon, 1992).

Goertzel and Gordon (1992) found evidence to suggest that there were three main factors

that contributed to student retention: 'support from others', 'a sense of self-esteem and personal

empowerment', and 'the quality of teacher interaction'. 'Support from others' included spouses,

family members, friends, classmates, and additional services available at the centre such as

childcare and counseling (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992). An increased 'sense of self-esteem and

personal empowerment' motivated students to continue to attend (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992).

'The quality of teacher interaction' involved a student's positive relationship with the teacher

and was characterized by words such as 'fun', 'friendly', and 'patient' (Goertzel & Gordon,

1992). In order to increase student retention at the LSHWP, the authors of the study

recommended increased follow-up with students either from staff or fellow students, a more

extensive orientation and registration procedure, improved student support services, and staff

development for improving student-teacher interaction (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992).

Goertzel and Gordon's (1992) study was valuable for contributing to the replication

evidence that can eventually lead to tentative generalizations for other adult learning centres.

Perhaps students at other adult learning centres may be retained if those students receive 'support

from others', 'a sense of self-esteem and personal empowerment', and a good 'quality of teacher

interaction' (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992). The situation at LSHWP was quite similar to the one at

the Cowichan Adult Learning Centre (CALC), so the study is helpful in providing comparative

information for CALC. Goertzel and Gordon's (1992) interview questions for all four interview

sessions are attached as appendices in their study, and these will be an excellent resource when

designing questions for a future study. There is also an appendix that gives helpful demographic

information about the entire student population such as reading ability, age, gender, race, and

information pertinent to retention.

The small number of dropouts who were successfully contacted (only 8 out of 21) raises

the issue of validity for this part of the authors' study and also suggests how difficult it is to

contact adult students after they have dropped out of the program (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992).

Goertzel & Gordon (1992) did not say whether these eight interviews with students who had

dropped out were done in person or over the phone, which may affect the students' responses.

The researchers of this study did raise the issue of how honest drop-out students would be in

disclosing their real reason(s) for leaving the school (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992). There was no

information provided on the results of the teacher interviews which leads one to question why

they were done.

Quigley and Uhland (2000) addressed the problem of why a significant number of

students drop out of adult basic education (ABE) programs in the United States and Canada in

the first three weeks after registering. The location of the study was simply stated as "a large

literacy/ABE/ESL program in Pittsburgh" (Quigley & Uhland, 2000, p. 2). The authors identified

students who drop out within the first three weeks as being at-risk (AR) (Quigley & Uhland,

2000). Quigley and Uhland (2000) proposed that AR students only gave socially acceptable

responses as to why they left the program until there was a certain level of trust with the

interviewer. However, once this level had been reached, the most common reasons given were

dissatisfaction with the teaching style or program structure (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). The researchers of this study hypothesized that there was an AR group of students that did not want to quit but who needed a higher degree of attention than persisters did (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). The procedure for identifying AR students during the registration process was a complex one requiring three separate interviews and two trained counselors (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). The third interview used the Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory tool to further clarify that a student truly fit into the AR classification (Quigley & Uhland, 2000).

Quigley and Uhland (2000) then selected 20 AR's to be part of the quasi-experimental study, and these AR's were given the Witkins Embedded Figures test to determine if they were more highly field dependent (highly dependent on others for a sense of well-being) than mainstream students. This group was then divided into four groups of five which were placed in the following situations: a control group or mainstream class of 15 students with no special attention given (group 1); a mainstream class of 15 students but with considerable extra attention from the teacher and a counselor (group 2); randomly placing each of the AR's into one of five small groups of four to six mainstream students (group 3); and each of the five AR's not being part of a group at all but receiving one-on-one tutoring (group 4) (Quigley & Uhland, 2000).

All five AR's in group 1 dropped out in the first three months; in group 4 one student remained; group 2 retained two students; and group 3 kept three (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Quigley and Uhland (2000) admitted that the sample numbers were small, but they suggested that the results found evidence that it was better to identify AR's and give them some form of special treatment rather than mainstreaming them. The researchers also suggested that the small group model (four to six students) may be the best for retaining AR's as it may address their high field dependency (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Perhaps stronger connections were made with

fellow students in a small group, and there was more opportunity for being actively involved in the interaction.

In this study Quigley and Uhland (2000) revealed several important implications for adult education: first, the authors exposed the level of trust needed between the interviewer and the subject in order to get truly honest and significant answers; secondly, they established how important and complex the initial registration process can be in identifying AR students; and finally, they discovered that different models of instruction can have an impact on retaining these students.

Quigley and Uhland's (2000) study revealed a direct correlation between AR students and high field dependence levels. This correlation strongly suggests that AR's have great difficulty working independently and will leave the program within the first three weeks unless they feel connected to another individual or a small group. The implications for CALC and other adult learning centres are to identify AR's during the registration process and establish a strong connection for them with a mentor or a small group of students as early as possible after the registration process.

The Student Participation and Retention Keys (SPARK) project was conducted by Marshall (1992) at Blue Ridge Community College in North Carolina to determine why a significant number of adult students dropped out of their adult basic education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) classes. The author's clearly stated objectives for this project were to identify the factors that contributed to student dropout, provide improved services to basic skills students, and increase retention rates by 20% (Marshall, 1992). An initial survey (written at a grade 8 reading level) was mailed to 192 students who were selected randomly from the 348 non-returning students (Marshall, 1992). The survey sought to rank 25 reasons why adult

students may stop attending (Marshall, 1992). Sixty-four were completed and returned for a

33% response rate (Marshall, 1992). Marshall's (1992) findings indicated that the top three

reasons chosen for dropping out were "I had money problems", "I began work", and "I did not

have transportation" (p. 4).

In the next school year, Marshall (1992) conducted structured interviews with new

students and with students referred by instructors. The purpose, and number, of these interviews

was not clearly stated by Marshall (1992), but it appears to be to gather more information about

the students and to make them aware of the services and programs that the college offered.

During that same year, a follow-up survey that was exactly the same as the one from the year

before was sent to 189 students who had stopped attending, and 37 were completed and returned

(Marshall, 1992). The top three reasons given in this second survey by students for not returning

to the school were "I began work", "My work schedule changed", and "I had money problems"

(Marshall, 1992, p. 15). The author of the study then did a comparison between the two years as

to the percentage of drop-outs in each year and found an increase in retention of 9% in the

second year (Marshall, 1992).

This study provides valuable feedback from students who have stopped attending an adult

education centre. Goertzel & Gordon (1992) found how difficult it was to contact students who

had dropped out, but Marshall (1992) was able to get 64 returned surveys the first year and 37

the second year, all from students who had stopped attending. Out of the 25 questions in the

survey, 9 had to do with institutional (school-related) issues, and the other 16 focussed on

situational (personal) issues (Marshall, 1992). It is noteworthy that in both years none of the 9

school-related reasons were in the top 7 reasons given by students for no longer attending

(Marshall, 1992).

The in-depth interview for new students during the second year of Marshall's (1992) study was probably the main reason that the retention rate improved by 9% as more students would be aware of the large variety of services that the college offered. This awareness would lead to an increase in utilizing these services and thus better retention. This 9% improvement in retention suggests the importance of the registration process and the time that must be invested with each new student to ensure that they are aware of all the school has to offer. Marshall (1992) does mention that one significant change to the school's program was that the centre began offering GED testing at night rather than just the day and that the centre experienced a 50% increase in the number of GED completions as a result.

A study was done by Tucho (2000) at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) to determine whether the barriers to adult students in completing their General Education Development (GED) requirements were primarily situational, institutional, or dispositional. Situational factors included things like financial difficulties, transportation problems, lack of child care, pregnancy, and job-related issues (Tucho, 2000). Institutional factors were those things that were under the control of the College and included things like the school schedule, teaching methods, teacher-student relationships, cost of books, and school policies (Tucho, 2000). Dispositional (or psychological) barriers involved students' values and beliefs about the school and education in general (Tucho, 2000).

A 28 question Likert-type survey was sent to 400 randomly selected students out of the 1200 who had attended CCP the previous year but were no longer attending (Tucho, 2000). Tucho (2000) designed the questions to determine which of the three types of barriers was the most prominent. A quantitative approach was then used by the author to analyze the data from 124 of the returned surveys (Tucho, 2000). The survey had 12 questions pertaining to

institutional barriers, 11 for situational, and 5 for dispostional (Tucho, 2000). The evidence

suggested that the situational barriers, especially job-related issues, ranked highest followed by

institutional (Tucho, 2000).

Tucho (2000) recommended that CCP put their courses on-line so that working students

could access the courses outside of working hours. The hours of operation for CPP were not

given, but it would seem to be a logical recommendation to be open more hours if the main

institutional problem was school hours conflicting with job hours; however, this recommendation

was not made. Tucho (2000) did recommend that CPP provide tutoring for students who were

struggling with understanding the course work, and that teachers receive training to understand

the barriers that students face. No rationale was provided for these last two recommendations.

Thomas (1990) did a four month study on Adult Basic Education literacy programs in

British Columbia which had two goals: to identify the reasons for nonparticipation and dropout

rates in literacy programs and to suggest ways of improving these rates. To increase the diversity

of her sample, Thomas (1990) chose the participants from four different geographical areas:

Southern Vancouver Island, Vancouver's downtown eastside, Northwest Community College in

Prince Rupert, and Selkirk College in Castlegar. Her extensive procedures included sending a

questionnaire to the provincial college ABE Administrators and Instructors, speaking with seven

literacy classes, individually interviewing 66 literacy candidates or withdrawals, and overseeing

two telephone surveys of non-attenders and withdrawals from two different ABE/literacy

programs.

Nine of the Administrators and nine of the Instructors responded to the questionnaire.

Thomas (1990) compiled their responses into Tables and ranked the answers based on the

number of times an answer was given. Of the fifteen reasons given for what was perceived to be

Barriers to Participation the top three were financial, lack of support systems, and lack of information (awareness about the program). From the interview sample, Thomas (1990) also formulated a table for the reasons given for participants dropping out of a program; the top two reasons were Work related and Personal/family problems/health. The telephone surveys revealed how transient the clientele of ABE programs can be as 21% of the people could not be reached due to numbers out of service or having moved and another 11% were given up on after three calls failed to reach them. Those who were contacted gave the following as the top three reasons for withdrawing: Work related, Entry to another program, and Family related.

While there was an attempt by Thomas (1990) to quantify some of the data into tables, the majority of her analysis was qualitative in nature. She referred extensively to individual anecdotes and situations from the considerable amount of information gained from the interviews and concluded, "The heterogeneity of the population together with varied socio-demographic and geographic factors make generalizations difficult." (VI. PROJECT IMPLICATIONS – DISCUSSION). However, in order to retain students in ABE literacy programs, Thomas (1990) did make several recommendations: caring instructors, a variety of instructional strategies, individual learning plans, consistent tracking procedures, frequent encouragement, and adequate counseling. Thomas (1990) did ask the participants how to recruit students and keep them from dropping out, and their answers included better advertising, better orientation, more variety and flexibility in programs, more tutors provided, and Life Skills and Job Training.

Upex (1999) conducted an extensive study in an attempt to answer these two questions: "What are the factors which promote adult student success in goal achievement within adult learning centres? and, within various adult education settings, what commonalities of experience exist, if any, among students who enjoy success there?" (p. 5) Over the course of several months,

Upex (1999) visited five adult learning centres in two different school districts in British

Columbia. One centre was located in an urban setting with a large multicultural student

population; three centres were located in rural settings with smaller student populations

comprised primarily of Canadians born of Anglo-European descent and First Nations people; one

centre was located in a First Nations community and had a smaller student population.

Upex (1999) conducted 122 interviews (10 turned out to be non-usable), each of which

ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. Her sample included 85 adult students, 27 staff members, 7

community members, and 3 whole-class groups. In the interviews the students were asked 17

questions, the staff members 16, and the community members 8. This vast amount of data was

initially organised into emergent categories using the computer programme NUD.IST (Richards

& Richards, 1994). Initially 46 categories emerged from the student interviews, 47 categories in

the staff interviews, and 9 in the community members interviews. These were then further

reduced into Primary Categories: 12 for the students and 11 for the staff, which now included the

community members as well. Examples of student categories included Goal Support,

Descriptions of Staff, Important Skills and Knowledge Gained, and Student Change. Examples

of staff categories included Description of Students, School Community, Goals of Centre, and

Empowerment.

After exhaustive qualitative and quantitative analysis, Upex (1999) concluded that

students had identified that the most important factor in their success was their relationships with

the staff and other students. Positive relationships led to increased self-esteem which was

essential for student success. Two elements within the learning centres that encouraged these

positive relationships were a sense of collaborative community, rather than competition, and

equality or friendship with staff. Upex (1999) also found that this was true in all five centres.

Chapter 3: Procedures & Methods

Description of the Research Design

The students who attend Cowichan Adult Learning Centre come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Their ideas concerning the factors that make the centre successful for them can be a valuable resource in designing improvements to the centre. The present exploratory study used a one-time focus group of four students chosen randomly from the student population. They were asked to respond to five questions which were intended to capture students' beliefs about factors that influence their academic success and retention at CALC. Their responses were used to form the qualitative data for this study, and content analysis was the method used to formulate conclusions.

Description of the Sample

The student population at CALC is comprised of a wide variety of people from many different demographic groups and backgrounds. The ages of students can range from 18 to 75, but the majority of students are in the 19 to 29 age bracket. Approximately 75% are non-high school graduates, and the other 25% are high school graduates who are upgrading their marks and courses for personal reasons, the most common reason being for post secondary requirements. Seventy-five percent of the students are females, and 20% of the students have a First Nations background. A significant number of students have a need to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, and a small number of students are immigrants who need ESL classes.

Two-stage random sampling was employed in the selection process. The first stage was an open invitation to the entire school population to be involved in the study. Names submitted from this first stage were then placed into a container. The second stage involved randomly selecting five names from this container. The focus group was intially intended to be made up of

five students randomly selected from those who offered their names to be potential participants

in the present study. All five participants that were selected were females; two of them were

single Caucasian mothers in their twenties who had not graduated from high school and were

trying to get their Adult Dogwood Diploma, and the other three were graduates who, now in their

thirties, were seeking to upgrade some courses in order to facilitate a career change. Two of these

were Caucasian and one was First Nations. Unfortunately, the First Nations participant had a

family emergency just before the scheduled interview was to begin and therefore was unable to

participate.

Description of the Instrument Used

Since the purpose of the study was to find out what the students at CALC believed

concerning the factors that affected their academic success, an interview was considered the best

instrument to use. A one-time focus-group interview instrument was chosen over multiple

individual interviews due to time constraints. Also, a focus-group interview allowed students to

be part of a dialogue with other students, which hopefully would encourage an expansion of

thought. As Upex (1999) stated about her extensive adult education study, "As the aim of this

study was to gain deeper understanding of student perceptions, logically the best way to do so

appeared to be through dialogue with students. The interview was deemed the best method to

employ." (p. 55)

Questions 1 and 3 were designed to elicit responses from the participants that revealed

their beliefs concerning the numerous factors that encouraged and discouraged student academic

success at the centre. Questions 2 and 4 focused on what the participants believed was the most

important reason for their academic success or the most important barrier to achieving that

success. Question 5 attempted to discover the participants' views about the one factor at the

centre that they would change in order to improve student success at CALC (See Appendix A).

Since the sample was quite small and dialogue was the method used to acquire the data,

qualitative analysis was the best method for discussing the reasons students gave for their beliefs.

Explanation of the Procedures Followed

In September 2010, posters were put up at CALC advertising that a student focus group

would be held in late October for students to provide input on their thoughts concerning the adult

education centre. The posters only gave general information concerning the focus group, but they

did direct students to contact the researcher for further information. During September,

permission was requested from the other teaching staff to speak to their classes about the

upcoming focus group. A brief explanation was given to the classes concerning the purpose of

the study, how the focus group would work, and who to contact if they were interested in having

their name put into the anonymous draw for participants.

Those students who were interested contacted the researcher who then gave them a more

detailed explanation of how the study would work, and, if they were still interested, their names

were placed into a container. They were informed that the names for the focus group would be

drawn during October, and only those whose names were selected for the study would be

notified.

In October the names were selected randomly from the container. The participants were

informed of their selection either by telephone or in person. All five of those initially drawn

accepted the invitation, and they were requested to meet with the researcher for a further

explanation of the study. These participants were invited to attend a meeting at which they were

each given a research consent form (see Appendix B). After the form was explained to the

participants, they were requested to sign it and hand it in to the researcher of this study. The

returned consent forms were kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's room. The participants discussed and agreed upon the date of the focus-group interview and were given a copy of the interview questions so that they could organize their thoughts concerning their responses.

The day before the interview, the participants were reminded by the researcher, either by phone or in person, of the focus-group interview, and they all confirmed they would be there. They were also reminded to be prepared to answer the interview questions that they had been given.

During the last week of October 2010, the five student participants were to meet in a classroom at CALC. Unfortunately, the participant of First Nations background did not show up. When she was contacted by phone, she said that a family emergency had come up, and she would not be able to make it. Rather than try and come up with another date and time that everyone could be there (a somewhat difficult achievement), the other participants and the researcher decided to carry on with the interview as planned. They sat around a table so they could all talk to one another face-to-face. A Dell laptop computer with the recording program Audacity was used to record the interview as well as a taperecorder for backup. These were used rather than a video recorder as there was no reason to identify the individual participants during the transcription process. The researcher of this present study was interested in the responses of the focus group as a whole. The recording devices were placed in a strategic location, and once everyone was seated and the interview was about to begin, they were turned on.

Each of the five questions was asked in order (see Appendix A), and opportunity was given for each of the four participants to respond, not only to the question, but to answers given by other participants. The facilitator entered into the discussion to establish who had the floor, to request clarification or expansion of answers, and to determine the appropriate time to move on

to the next question. Once the last response had been given to the final question, the recording

devices were turned off and the interview was concluded. At the conclusion of the interview, the

participants were informed of the date for a complimentary pizza lunch for them as a way of

saying thank you for being involved.

Discussion of Validity

The study's purpose was to identify those factors that the students at CALC believed

impacted their success. For this reason, random two-stage sampling was utilized in an attempt to

get an unbiased sample of the general student population to be involved in the group interview.

Even though the sample number was small, it was randomly selected from the entire student

body, so it hopefully was somewhat representative of the student body as a whole. It is

unfortunate that the First Nations participant was unable to attend, as 20% of the student

population is of First Nations background. Her absence was also somewhat ironic as it is the lack

of attendance of the First Nations students that is one of CALC's concerns. Her reason for

absence (her grandmother needed a ride to the hospital) is also revealing in that quite often it is

family and cultural issues that are given as the reasons for the absences of First Nations students

at CALC.

Since this study relied solely on participants' answers to interview questions, the validity

is obviously affected by the honesty of their responses. The participants did volunteer to be

involved in the study after it had been explained to them that the study was for the betterment of

the student body as a whole. Thus, their motivation for being involved was perceived as being

altruistic which lends credence to their honesty in answering the questions. The format of using a

focus-group interview also encouraged more depth to the responses as each participant was able

to expand on the thoughts of the other participants. In order to further enhance the depth of their

responses, the participants were given the interview questions in written form prior to the interview. Thus, they could have time to reflect on their experiences at the centre and be more prepared to provide thoughtful answers.

There was also the possibility that since the researcher was an instructor at the centre, the interviewees may have been reluctant to give negative feedback out of deference for his position. This aspect of the study was discussed with the participants at the preliminary meeting, and they were strongly encouraged to be open and honest with their responses. They all agreed to answer the questions as fully and honestly as possible.The transcribed text was made available to the participants who were interviewed in order to check for accuracy of their responses. The initial draft of the complete study was also made available to them for their comments and suggestions.

Description and justification of the methods of analysis used

During November 2010 the researcher of this present study transcribed the audiorecording into text. The laptop recording was unusable as the microphone did not pick up much of what was said by those who were further away from it. Fortunately the taperecorder worked fine.

The audiotape was transcribed by the researcher using a laptop and Microsoft Word 2007, and the word-processed text formed the content of the data. The answers from the focus-group interview questions were analyzed using qualitative analysis. Commonalities were looked for from the responses of each interviewee, and common themes were established. All of the factors that these four participants believed affected student success at CALC were noted, but more importance was given to those responses that occurred the most. Qualitative analysis was used to discuss the participants' responses to all five questions.

One of the main reasons for choosing an interview as the research instrument was to get more depth in the data. Rather than focusing on just the factors themselves that students believed were important, it was in the reasons they gave for their beliefs that valuable information was also obtained. By looking at both the manifest and latent content of the answers provided during the interview, conclusions were made concerning students' beliefs about what factors affected their success at the centre. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) stated, "Coding the latent content of a document has the advantage of getting at the underlying meaning of what is written or shown, but it comes at some cost in reliability" (p. 478). It is this underlying meaning from an interview that can provide much more content than a survey or questionnaire. Since there were some assumptions made when analyzing the latent content, the conclusions were shown to the research participants for verification in order to increase the validity of the study. After receiving feedback from the interviewees in regards to the latent content analysis, minor changes were made to the conclusions.

The research question that this present study sought to answer was what factors the students at CALC believed influenced their academic success. The answers that the participants gave to the five interview questions supplied sufficient data to answer this question.

Chapter 4: Findings/Results

In his study conducted at the Community College of Philadelphia, Tucho (2000) defined three terms to refer to the various barriers that have an effect on adult students and their success in achieving their GED: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational factors are those that are outside of the influence of the adult centre—things such as family issues, lack of transportation, or work-related concerns. Institutional factors are those that are within the scope of the centre such as teacher support, hours of operation, and the school environment. Dispositional factors refer to students' attitudes and motivations in regards to education and achievement. These three terms were used to analyze and categorize the data from the focus-group interview conducted in this study. Interview data was transcribed and the responses to each of the five questions were listed in data tables. Each table categorizes the responses of the participants (i.e. the issues they raised) as situational, institutional, or dispositional. Each table also includes a final column that lists common themes in their responses as interpreted by the researcher.

After Tables 4.1 and 4.2 is a discussion of the data for those two questions and a consideration of the common themes. These are grouped together because both questions discuss reasons students achieve success at the CALC. This same process is repeated after Tables 4.3 and 4.4 where barriers to success are discussed and once again after Table 4.5, which summarizes suggestions for changes to CALC. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants to protect their anonymity.

Factors Contributing to Student Success

Table 4.1: Reasons for student success at CALC

1. Please tell me what you believe are the reasons why some students achieve success here at the Cowichan Adult Learning Centre?				
Participant	Situational	Institutional	Dispositional	Common Themes
#1	Lifestyle	Staff support Student support Flexible system	Personal motivation	Staff support Flexible system Student support Positive environment Personal motivation
#2		Staff support Adult environment Flexible system Affordable		
#3		Staff support Student support Flexible system Positive environment		
#4	Family support	Staff support Flexible system	Personal motivation	

Table 4.2: Most important reason for student success at CALC

2.Which one of the reasons mentioned in Question 1 do you think is the most important and why?				
Participant	Situational	Institutional	Dispositional	Common Themes
#1		Staff support Positive environment		Staff support Flexible system Positive environment
#2		Flexible system		
#3		Staff support Positive environment		
#4		Flexible system		

The participants felt that the most important institutional factors contributing to student success at CALC were staff support, a program with flexible curriculum delivery and hours, and a positive, comfortable, and friendly environment. Each of these factors will be illustrated with comments from participants.

All four participants stated that staff support was critical for students to be successful. Comments by Sienna and Naomi illustrate the importance of the staff being friendly, caring, and respectful of all students:

Sienna: "I think the most important thing mentioned for the success of the students here would be definitely the support from the staff. I never once have walked into the school and felt any sort of negative response from any of my teachers. I'm always greeted with a smile. The teachers actually take the time to ask how you're doing. If they notice that you have missed a class, they usually ask if everything's okay. You know, there's like that extra care and attention taken and it's not only to a specific few. I find that all the students are treated with that level of respect and dignity and are given the ability to be their own individual, and they're not penalized for being their own person or having other responsibilities and things going on in their life. And just the support that you get here is definitely a lot different than a typical high school or even other alternate schools."

Naomi: "I think the understanding of the staff is really good. I mean, if I can't make it to all my classes, it's not like a regular high school where they get mad…it's more understanding, so like if you can't make it to everything you can't."

Beth felt that it was the individual instructional time that students received from staff that was very important, "…there's lots of support from staff, private tutorials almost. That would lead to success." The participants in this study affirmed that the friendliness, caring, respect, and one-on-one support of the teachers was an important factor in the success of students at CALC.

All four participants also mentioned that flexibility was very important for student success. The flexibility of the system at CALC includes continuous intake, two methods of

curriculum delivery, adjustable deadlines for course completion, and accommodation for attendance and course changes. Sienna pointed out the importance of offering both regularly scheduled classes and a self-paced system of curriculum delivery, "…the fact that you have the ability to either join a class, if that's how you learn and do well, or you can take everything self-paced, if that's how you choose to do your work." Beth added, "The flexibility of the hours helps with this system for success for someone who is working or in another school at the same time." Naomi replied, "You talk to your teacher if she gave work, and it's more working around your schedule—what you can do, your needs—than just the curriculum, this is what you have to do and this is when you have to do it by…" The participants felt that the ability to provide a flexible, personalized system of instruction was a very important factor that contributed to student success.

Two of the participants felt that the environment in the centre was an important institutional factor. Becky said, "It's a really nice environment; it's a nice place to come to and when you're in a positive environment, you're going to achieve. That makes a big difference for me." Beth added, "I think it also helps in the school that there are other people in your age group or close to it. I mean I wouldn't want to be going back to do high school upgrading if I was in a class of 16 or 17 year olds. The fact that you're with other parents is important." Two of the participants felt that support from other students contributed to the positive environment. The friendliness and encouragement of fellow students increased their motivation to attend and succeed.

The issue of affordability was mentioned by one of the participants who said, "the fact that it doesn't cost anything, the affordability, a lot of the other programs you have to pay money for." To this participant, affordability was an important factor.

Two of the participants in this study affirmed that situational and dispositional factors affect student success at CALC. They mentioned that it is the personal motivation of the students that is an important consideration. Sienna stated, "Well, I believe that some of the reasons why students are successful here has to do with outside reasons concerning their lifestyle, what their motivation is to come to school." Naomi added, "I mean everybody has some motivation to be here, whether or not they're tired of having a minimum wage job or because you need that high school thing to get a good job. Or you want to further your education for personal reasons or whatever. I think it all depends on the person, what their motivations are to finish."

Barriers to Student Success

Table 4.3: Barriers to student success at CALC

3. Please tell me what are the barriers that could prevent you, or other students, from reaching your educational goals here at the Cowichan Adult Learning Centre?				
Participant	Situational	Institutional	Dispositional	Common Themes
#1		Hours of operation Poor communication		Hours of operation Poor communication Study interruptions
#2		Hours of operation Study interruptions		
#3		Hours of operation Study interruptions Poor communication		
#4	Lack of transportation	Poor communication	Lack of motivation	

Table 4.4: Most important barrier to student success at CALC

4. Which one of the barriers mentioned in Question 3 do you think is the most important and why?				
Participant	Situational	Institutional	Dispositional	Common Themes
#1		Hours of operation		Hours of operation Poor communication
#2		Hours of operation		
#3		Poor communication		
#4		Poor communication		

The main barriers to student success at CALC mentioned by the participants were institutional factors: insufficient hours of operation (especially not being open in the evenings), study interruptions, and inadequate communication with students. Some situational and dispositional factors were also mentioned: a lack of personal motivation, and a lack of transportation and online resources.

Three of the participants felt that the limited hours of operation was a barrier to success as illustrated in Sienna and Beth's comments:

Sienna: "Barriers that I see would definitely be Fridays. It doesn't impress me that it's only open 9 to 12, whatsoever. I think that it should be open all day. I think that there should be evening classes, so I think that that would definitely be a barrier for somebody who is working. Many students need a Friday 9 to 5 kind of job but that would only leave them their lunch break to come in and grab some work and drop some stuff off. That wouldn't leave them any time to discuss anything with any of the teachers, if they had any questions or anything like that."

Beth:　"I also find that the fact that there's no funding for the night classes, which is listed that you have, so it makes it difficult for people that work. That there's no summer school; that's another time that would be great to continue on because we don't generally get summer break."

Two of the participants felt that study interruptions were an important barrier to student success. This may also be a communication issue as Becky felt that students were not properly informed about procedures within the school and that this hindered the learning experience:

Becky: "I really hate classroom interruptions. Like, it's not self-paced time, it's class time. We'll be in here in a class and there's students coming in here right when

we're just asking something and they're walking in. Okay, if some dude's

standing there, talking, laughing cheek for awhile and we've totally forgotten

where we were at. If they need to know, to come at self-paced time, look at the

calendar."

Beth also felt that there needed to be better communication with the students so that

academic progress would not be impeded:

Beth: "Sometimes there's a difficulty finding quiet areas in the school. It feels like you

have to work in a classroom where there's a teacher. If you're in a classroom

where there is no teacher, then there's people—too much talking. I mean I don't

know why they're there. So it makes it very difficult to be working when there's

that kind of distraction going on."

Communication between the school and students was pointed out as a barrier by Sienna

who felt there was inadequate follow-up with students who stopped coming, "Another barrier

that I see that would prevent students reaching their educational goals is maybe when a student is

starting to withdraw, starting to not attend classes, starting to not all of a sudden hand in work,

like just noticing that they're kind of slipping a bit." She said that several times she had to stop

attending for different reasons and not once did she receive any kind of communication from the

school, "I've had quite a lot of tragedies over the last few years happen, and then I'd also

withdraw and that's just the way that I deal with my stresses, I withdraw and kind of close

myself in, so if I would have had that little bit of a push, like that phone call or even an email or

something that probably would have engaged me back in, but I just never got that so I kind of

just cut the ties…"

Two barriers were mentioned that were situational and dispositional rather than institutional: a lack of transportation and a lack of personal motivation. Naomi, one of the young single mothers, talked about both of these:

> Naomi: "For me, personally, I don't drive ….so, transportation issue is a big one for me, and daycare…. For other students it could be the motivation—they just don't have it; they want to do it, but they just don't have that support system. They want to do it but not enough to keep up with it and they just miss so much and they just don't always grasp it. If they do finish, what do they do later? They're still maybe not knowing what to do. Do they want to get a job or do they want to go on?"

She felt that having the courses online might help alleviate the transportation issue for some students, "Not much you can do about the location, but if there was a daycare or something like that, that might help some people cause I know I'm not the only one that has a young kid. Or having online resources too. If you miss a class, the teacher could put up notes about what they did in class that day…"

Suggested Changes

Table 4.5: Changes participants would make to CALC

5. If you could change anything about the school that would help students be more successful, what would you change and why?				
Participant	Situational	Institutional	Dispositional	Common Themes
#1		Hours of operation Better communication		Hours of operation Better communication
#2		Hours of operation		
#3		Better communication		
#4		Hours of operation		

The two primary changes that the participants said they would make would be to increase the hours of operation at the centre and improve the communication between the centre and the students.

Three of the participants felt that they would increase the hours of operation, especially having the centre open during the evenings. This would help to accommodate the many adult students who were working full-time day jobs to be able to access instruction and curriculum. Beth stated, "…maybe longer hours would be helpful for people that work so that if you are working 9 to 5, if it was open even just till 7, that would make a difference…. I know that's a funding issue, so I guess the school would benefit more and the students would be more successful if the school got more funding."

Two of the participants said they would try to improve the communication processes between the centre and students. Sienna felt that the retention of students would be improved if there was more of an effort to contact students who had been absent, "Maybe making a little bit more of an attempt to call, you know, a reminder call, just to see how you're doing, if there's anything we can help you with, just have noticed that you haven't been back." Naomi felt that students needed to receive a better explanation of school procedures during the registration process. She stated, "I never had much of a tour when I started. I didn't know about the sign-in computer until just like a few minutes ago." Beth confirmed that she also did not know about the sign-in computer.

Chapter 5: Summary and conclusions

Summary

This study sought to discover what factors the students at CALC believed contributed to success at this centre and the barriers that might limit that success. The method chosen to gather the necessary data was a focus group interview made up of four participants from the student population. The participants were randomly chosen using a two-stage method of selection. The participants were each asked to respond to five questions, and they could also respond to the answers given by the other participants. The interview was recorded using a taperecorder, and the recording was then transcribed into text. Participants' responses were categorized as institutional, situational and motivational. The text was then analyzed qualitatively by looking for common themes in participants' responses.

Most of the factors that students talked about were institutional. The two major factors contributing to student success that all participants mentioned were teacher support and program flexibility. Other factors mentioned were a positive environment, support from other students, and affordability. The two main barriers to success mentioned were insufficient hours of operation and inadequate communication with students. Other barriers mentioned were a lack of personal motivation on the part of students, transportation problems, and a lack of online resources.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest how important it is for all staff at CALC to be reminded often of the important role that they play in the success of each student. The importance of the relationship between teachers and students has been well documented (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009; te Riele, 2006; Helm, 2007; Giles and Alderson, 2008; Battell, Gesser,

Rose, Sawyer, & Twiss, 2004; and Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004). The ability of teachers to

patiently instruct, encourage, and listen to students is critical in students achieving educational

success at the centre. Staff need to always be cognizant that understanding the individual needs

of students is just as important as the teaching of curriculum content. Staff need to be

comfortable and competent in the varied roles of instructor, mentor, counsellor, listener, and

encourager.

   Milheim (2005) and Terry (2006) noted the importance of a flexible program for adult

learners. This was reinforced in this present study as the participants viewed CALC's flexible

programs as one of the primary factors contributing to student success. The flexiblility of the

program needs to be maintained and perhaps enhanced if possible. The recent addition of

evening hours (6:00 to 8:30) three days a week from February 2011 to June 2011 should

certainly help students to be successful, but this evening program may not be available in

September 2011 due to funding constraints. Perhaps staff should review their hours of operation

and consider some possible changes that would be of benefit to students. The concept of making

more curriculum resources available online should also be explored. This may be of significant

benefit to those students who have difficulty getting to the centre.

   Quigley and Uhland's (2000) study revealed how important it was for student retention

that At-Risk students made a connection with an individual or a small group within the first three

weeks of attending. Waldron and Moore (1991) have also emphasized the importance of

friendship in students achieving success. The participants in this present study affirmed this by

stating the importance of one-on-one help from instructors and friendly support from other

students. Students who feel connected to others in a small group are much more likely to

continue to attend. The staff at CALC need to collaboratively discuss and implement methods of

creating these small group connections so that students have a sense of friendship and belonging.

Other writers have pointed out the importance of a positive environment for adults to

achieve educational success (Prins et al., 2009; Stevic & Ward, 2008; Gaberkatz and Watson,

1991). The participants in this present study also identified a positive environment as an

important factor at CALC. The staff at CALC should be encouraged to use appreciative inquiry

to find even more ways of making the centre a place that is friendly, caring, and fun.

One of the participants mentioned that a lack of motivation was a barrier to student

success. Many students may lack the motivation necessary to succeed simply because no one has

ever had faith in them. Kennedy and Roeder (1976) and Upex (1999) pointed out the importance

of positive relationships with instructors that led to increased self-esteem in students, which was

critical to their success. If an instructor sincerely tells a student that they believe they can achieve

success, it may provide the impetus for that student to succeed. Staff should collaboratively

discuss what methods and strategies could be utilized to build up self-esteem in students. Time

and effort spent in this endeavour may prove to be more valuable than content-driven instruction.

Inadequate communication with students was perceived to be a barrier to students'

success. Two of the participants mentioned that they were not even aware of the sign-in

procedure, which should have been made known to them during the registration process. Other

researchers (McGivney, 2004; Milheim, 2005; Marshall, 1992) have emphasized the importance

of the registration procedure in the retention of adult students. Perhaps a review of CALC's

registration process may be in order to determine how it might be improved. A substantial

difficulty is that large numbers of students all register in a short period of time at the beginning

of September. Staff members simply cannot take the time needed to fully explain everything to

each student, or there would be too much frustration on the part of students waiting to register. The staff need to collaboratively discover a solution to this problem.

Other studies (Goertzel & Gordon, 1992; Thomas, 1990) have shown the importance of tracking procedures and consistently encouraging students to continue to attend. One of the participants in this present study mentioned that she never once received a phone call or any communication from the centre asking why she was no longer coming. The staff at CALC need to discuss the process of following up on students who have stopped attending and collaboratively agree on a method of consistently contacting them.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

A very significant limitation in this study was the small number of participants. At the time the focus group interview was done, there were over 400 registrations, and by the end of the year there will be close to 1000 registrations. The researcher of this present study was unsure how much data would be gathered from five participants and in hindsight believes that it would have been beneficial to have proposed to have a larger number. Using a small number of participants increased the chance of certain demographic groups not being represented in the interview group. While random sampling was important in increasing the validity of the study, it is unfortunate that several obvious groups were not represented in the sample—for example, younger and older males. A focus group interview involving this segment of the student population would be helpful in gaining their perspective.

The focus group of the present study also lacked participation from First Nations students. (The one First Nations participant who had been selected in the selection process was unable to attend the focus group interview due to an unexpected family emergency). This group makes up approximately 20% of the students who register at CALC. A focus group interview

that exclusively had five to ten First Nations students could reveal some valuable information

regarding the factors that contribute to and are barriers against their educational success. This

process would be helpful in understanding some of the cultural and socioeconomic influences

that affect this group's poor retention and course completion rates.

The purpose of this study was to discover what the students at CALC believed were the

important factors affecting their success at that centre. For this reason, the staff were not

included in the data collection. However, a future study should include input from this group as

they are obviously an important part of the centre and would provide valuable insights into what

is working well and what could be improved.

Another limitation was that the researcher of this study was also an instructor at the

centre. As much as one tries to be completely objective, the possibility of bias exists. The

participants' responses to the interview questions could have also been influenced as they were

providing information to one of their instructors. This possibility was discussed earlier in the

section *Discussion of Validity* in chapter 3.

Conclusions

Four participants randomly selected from the student body were asked what they believed

were the reasons that contributed to the success of the students at CALC. They responded by

voicing the following factors:

- Staff support
- Flexible system
- Student support
- Positive environment

- Personal motivation
- Lifestyle
- Family support
- Affordable

Out of these eight factors, the five that were mentioned by more than one participant were the

following:

- Staff support
- Flexible system
- Student support
- Positive environment
- Personal motivation

It should be noted that four of these factors are institutional in nature.

These participants were also asked which reason for student success they believed was most important. They responded with the following:

- Staff support
- Flexible system
- Positive environment

Again it should be noted that all of these are institutional factors.

The participants were also asked what were the barriers that would prevent students at CALC from achieving success, and they responded with the following reasons:

- Hours of operation
- Poor communication
- Study interruptions
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of motivation

The participants believed that the two most important barriers were hours of operation and poor communication, which are also both institutional factors.

The participants' responses in this present study echoed important themes from the literature. In particular their responses affirmed the importance of the following factors:

- the relationship between staff and students
- the relationship of students to other students
- a positive, friendly environment
- a flexible program
- the hours of operation
- an efficient and comprehensive registration procedure
- clear communication and consistent tracking

Recommendations

Most of the participants' responses focussed on institutional factors, which strongly suggests that some concrete recommendations can be made to CALC:

1. Staff should be reminded of the important role they play in the success of each student. They should also be encouraged to discuss the importance of student self-esteem and ways this may be developed.

2. Staff should discuss means of encouraging students to bond with other students (i.e. mentors, class buddy, working in pairs or small groups, check-ins)

3. Staff should be reminded of the importance of a positive, friendly environment and to collaboratively explore ways of ensuring this continues.

4. The possibility of making curriculum available on-line should be explored as well as an ongoing discussion about the best way of making courses available to students.

5. The hours of operation should be reviewed to explore ways of being of more service to students.

6. The registration procedure should be reviewed carefully with all staff to maintain consistency and for ways to make it more comprehensive.

7. The tracking procedure should be discussed to discover an efficient way of staying in touch with all students on a consistent basis.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Please tell me what you believe are the reasons why some students achieve success here at the Cowichan Adult Learning Centre?

2. Which one of the reasons mentioned in Question 1 do you think is the most important and why?

3. Please tell me what are the barriers that could prevent you, or other students, from reaching your educational goals here at the Cowichan Adult Learning Centre?

4. Which one of the barriers mentioned in Question 3 do you think is the most important and why?

5. If you could change anything about the school that would help students be more successful, what would you change and why?

Appendix B

Research Consent Form

"Factors Contributing to Student Success at Cowichan Adult Learning Centre"

Philip Cowley   Harry Janzen, Ph.D., Supervisor
Masters of Education Student   Dean of Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University   Vancouver Island University
pcowley@sd79.bc.ca   (250) 740-6220

I am a student in the university-level research methods course MEDL 690. This course requires us to gain applied experience in designing and conducting research. As such, I have designed a research project to study the factors contributing to student success at Cowichan Adult Learning Centre. This action research study is part of the requirements for Masters of Education (Leadership) at Vancouver Island University (VIU).

During this study you will be asked to be part of a focus group interview that will last approximately 45 minutes. Along with four other students from the Cowichan Adult Learning Centre, you will be asked to answer and discuss five questions that pertain to your opinion about what factors contribute to student success at this learning centre. I will facilitate the interview at the centre in late November and, if you are willing, I will use an audiorecorder to tape your responses. You will be given the five questions well in advance of the actual interview date in order to think about your responses.

All records of participation will be kept strictly confidential, such that only I will have access to the information. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my classroom. The audiotape will be destroyed at the end of this project, approximately December 2011. Electronic files will also be deleted at that time. The final action research report will be submitted as a requirement of MEDL 690 (Major Project), and will be presented in a culminating public presentation. Upon completion of these requirements, I will share the findings with interested parties, which could include teachers, parents, administrators and Ministry of Education staff, in the province of British Columbia. Information about the project will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time for any reason without explanation and without penalty. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer by telephone at 250-753-3245 (ext. 2665) or by email at reb@viu.ca.

If you have any questions about this research project or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at pcowley@sd79.bc.ca or at 250 746 0277.

I have read the above form, understand the information read, and understand that I can ask questions or withdraw at any time. I consent to participate in this research study.

_____

Participant's Signature   Date: October 2010