

## **ARTICLES**

### **A STUDY OF THE STUDENT RETENTION EFFORT IN THE NEW BRUNSWICK COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM**

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#### **Abstract**

In recent years the student population of all post secondary institutions has been changing. The numbers of traditional high school graduates are declining while the number of nontraditional students are increasing. This new wave of students is more susceptible to dropping out and requires more assistance if they are to succeed in college. This study examines what the New Brunswick community colleges are doing to retain students. The New Brunswick Community College system is unique in comparison with similar American institutions and differs somewhat from other community college systems in Canada. It is administered centrally by a government ministry, the Department of Advanced Education and Training. The system comprises nine separate colleges, each with its own local administration and principal. Each of the nine college principals was contacted to identify a person knowledgeable on student retention activities who could act as a respondent for the survey. All respondents' names were staff members in a Student Services section of a community college. Each respondent completed a written questionnaire and was interviewed to ascertain what the colleges consider to be effective strategies to accomplish retention goals.

Responses provided information about the individual college and the general problem of student retention; about student retention and attribution in the past five years; and about how the college is organized to promote retention.

Reported activities were organized to show how they related to three educational phases: Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving On. A current statistical profile of student attrition and retention is not kept by the New Brunswick Community Colleges. A description of the past and present programs and services and how they are perceived by those responsible for them is provided. The data indicate that the colleges provide a higher and more consistent level of service during the Moving In phase than during the other two phases. It also shows a disproportion of student services based on college size; the larger colleges offer more activities and programs than the smaller colleges. However, all colleges attempt several student retention programs and are actively supporting the students they enrol. The study led to the conclusions that clearly defined goals should be established for the student retention programs and a method established to monitor and assess the results of such services.

## **Résumé**

La clientèle des institutions d'enseignement post-secondaire a changé au cours des dernières années. Alors que la clientèle traditionnelle qui provient du secondaire diminue, celle qui provient d'autres secteurs augmente. Cette nouvelle clientèle semble plus susceptible d'abandonner les études et exige un meilleur encadrement afin de l'aider à réussir.

Cet article présente d'abord une recension d'écrits sur la fréquentation scolaire et la persévérance dans les études. Les résultats varient chez les auteurs selon qu'on se situe en début, en cours ou en fin de programme. Des responsables de services aux étudiants de chacun des collèges communautaires du Nouveau-Brunswick ont rempli un questionnaire et participé à une entrevue afin d'identifier les stratégies utilisées pour conserver la clientèle. Il ressort qu'il existe de meilleurs services de support et d'encadrement en début de programme. La recherche conclut à la nécessité d'établir des objectifs clairs et précis en vue de conserver les nouvelles clientèles et à la nécessité de mettre en place des méthodes d'évaluation et de suivi des services offerts.

Les phénomènes d'abandon et de fréquentation scolaire des nouvelles clientèles des institutions d'enseignement ont déjà intéressé plusieurs chercheurs américains. Ces phénomènes n'ont cependant pas été étudiés de manière approfondie dans les collèges et universités

canadiennes. Plusieurs institutions scolaires ont échoué dans leurs efforts de conserver la clientèle une fois qu'elles l'ont inscrite. Il y a donc nécessité de créer des services d'encadrement et de support qui soient efficaces. De tels services s'avèrent essentiels pour les années 90.

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## **Introduction**

The community colleges of New Brunswick, as in many higher educational institutions, have failed to appreciate the importance of keeping students once they have enrolled. The cost of education relates to the number of students and the time it takes them to complete their program. When students drop out or take three years to complete a two year program, the cost per student escalates. Many educators consider that students are entirely responsible for their own departure from the educational setting. Inquiries into student departure frequently ask "Why did the student drop out?" An equally likely question is "What did the college do to keep the student in the system?" This article reviews the literature on student retention within a practical conceptual framework and reports on information about student retention activities gathered by interviewing student counsellors in community colleges in New Brunswick.<sup>1</sup>

During the decades before the 1980's, the number of students exceeded the facilities available to house them. However, as the 1990's approach, the condition is changing. The growth in traditional enrolment will decline as the number of youth decrease.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the policies of the federal government have changed during the 1980's. Groups that traditionally did not receive higher education are targeted for special assistance. The number of nontraditional students within the community colleges of Canada is increasing in proportion to the traditional students.<sup>3</sup> There is a need to have active and supportive programs in place to help retain these students. Such programs will be new and essential services for the 1990's.

This article will focus on activities related to student retention and on what the new Brunswick Community Colleges do to help students stay to the completion of their program. Much of the research on student attrition has been of a theoretical, scholarly nature offering little to the institution trying to establish a retention plan. Tinto, one of the

influential writers in this area, maintained that his theoretical framework on student attrition was not easily adapted to the practical needs of organizational planners.<sup>4</sup> He placed all past attrition theories in one of five categories, each with its own particular focus and level of analysis. These categories are: psychological, societal, economic, organizational and interactional theories. Pappas and Loring, after reviewing and analyzing 40 years of literature on student persistence, admitted it would be difficult to isolate single variables, and categorized the variables under much the same headings as Tinto.<sup>5</sup> Noel et al. viewed student retention as a "practitioner's art" and noted that student retention activities had the potential for changing an institution's policies.<sup>6</sup>

Student attrition and retention are not the opposite sides of the same coin. Studies in student retention focus on the action-oriented programs designed and implemented as interventions by an institution to keep students in a program. Studies in student attrition are frequently viewed as a postmortem examination of student characteristics which lead to withdrawal rather than as an evaluation of the actions taken by the institution.

Student retention and attrition have been, and continue to be, subjects that receive much attention from American researchers. Beal and Noel, in a watershed research project entitled *What Works in Student Retention* (WWISR), surveyed the higher education institutions of the United States.<sup>7</sup> Their purpose was to identify the activities that different colleges and universities were using to increase retention and to assess the results. They conceived of retention as being a function of organizational characteristics. For example, organizational characteristics which affect student retention are such things as a simple and supportive admission procedure in which students do not have to spend days lining up to enrol, and the provision of programs which provide ongoing academic and personal support.

Anderson argues through the use of a force field analysis that student characteristics can be divided into internal and external forces, both of which have a positive and negative component.<sup>8</sup> He described positive internal forces as including career aspirations, achievement motives and personal interests, while negative forces include self-doubt, career indecision and loneliness. Positive external forces include support from parents, peers and teachers, cultural values, and opportunities for financial aid, while negative forces include lack of

money or housing, transportation problems, work and family demands and conflicts, and social demands. Positive forces act to increase retention while negative forces act to increase attrition.

Although the work of Beal and Noel is still valid, current writers follow Tinto in conceptualizing student leaving as having both individual and organizational attributes and have validated Tinto's theoretical model of student persistence/withdrawal.<sup>9</sup> Tinto argues that the interaction among the interlinking parts of the college system provide the impact and feedback on the decision to withdraw.<sup>10</sup> He considers all formal and informal, academic and social activities to have an interactive role in the longitudinal decision of a student to depart. Tinto further argues that the student's decision to persist is continually being reassessed in the context of the student's social and academic integration into the college environment. The relationship of the student's educational goals and commitments to the program provided by the institution also enter into the decision to persist. For example, students often leave to take a job without completing their program, even though they are successfully integrated into the institution. This usually occurs if they are successful in obtaining employment in the same career area as that in which they are studying.<sup>11</sup>

Pascal and Kanowitch reviewed studies from 49 Canadian universities and found that most dealt with student attrition in terms of the relationships which could be established between various student characteristics and withdrawal from studies.<sup>12</sup> There were no studies which examined issues related to retention and attrition activities and Canadian students. There is a need in the Canadian context for research on organizational and interactive characteristics affecting student retention and attrition. The research was undertaken using a questionnaire which replicated the Beal and Noel study; the literature review found no report of a similar study in Canada.<sup>13</sup> The headings used in organizing the findings are based on the report; however, there was a lack of statistical information available from the colleges on student retention.

### **New Brunswick Community College System**

In 1985, a complete reorganization of the New Brunswick Community College system changed the rationale behind program placement within the colleges and the accompanying management structure.

Programs were assigned to a college on the basis of the specialization assigned to that college. Each college was then responsible for all of the programs offered in the province in their specialty field. This system was duplicated for both the francophone and anglophone colleges.

The New Brunswick Community College system is unique in comparison with similar American institutions and differs somewhat from other community colleges systems in Canada. The colleges do not have autonomy; rather, they are administered centrally by a government ministry, the Department of Advanced Education and Training (DAET). The college system consists of nine community colleges located throughout the province of New Brunswick. In four of these colleges the language of instruction is French; in the other five, the language of instruction is English. Because New Brunswick is the only officially bilingual province in Canada, the college system offers duplicate services in both official languages. In 1985-86, it offered over 86 full-time programs in both official languages, to nearly 12,000 full-time students. However, in that year, only 77.2 percent of the students successfully completed the program in which they were enrolled.<sup>14</sup> The research on retention and attrition in the province has been limited to follow-up surveys of graduates and to reviews of the student dropout rate in selected colleges.<sup>15</sup>

Pascal and Kanowitch suggested that there are three basic reasons attrition should be an administrative concern.<sup>16</sup> First, the "dropout" is perceived by both future students and the public to be a reflection of the colleges' inability to meet the student needs, particularly career needs. This in turn has a negative effect on those considering attending the college and also can have an effect on financing of the program.<sup>17</sup>

Second, the administration structure of each college is established on the basis of the number of students who are scheduled to attend. This scheduled or design number determines how many students will be admitted and the resources assigned to each program with the expectation that an acceptable percentage of the students will complete the program. If students drop out, too many resources may be consumed by an inefficient program and too few students graduate to justify associated expenditures. Excessive student dropout rates lead to an inefficient balance between planning and program operation and between student admission and completion.<sup>18</sup>

Third, the colleges are financially affected by student dropouts through the loss of income from tuition, federal sponsorship and provincial support.<sup>19</sup> The potential dropout may be given more attention in the future because federal funding, with the advent of the Canadian Job Strategies, is now directly related to the number of students who enrol and continue to attend a program.

DAET has a mandate to provide all post-secondary non-university education and training in the province of New Brunswick.<sup>20</sup> The provincial government has linked the socio-economic success of the province to the education of its citizens and considers this investment the cornerstone of the province's economic strategy.<sup>21</sup>

Although student attrition is important to the community colleges and the Department of Advanced Education and Training, it undoubtedly is a more important individual concern to the student who is withdrawing. Withdrawal can represent failure in a career choice, loss of money and self-esteem. Seidman maintains the dropout rate can have a demoralizing effect on those remaining and on the instructional staff.<sup>22</sup> He also contends it has a negative effect on students deciding to attend an institution. Bean and Metzner found that nontraditional students have a higher attrition rate than traditional students.<sup>23</sup> If this is also true in New Brunswick, then as the number of nontraditional students in the colleges increases, the need for support programs will also increase. Some support and action-oriented retention programs have been initiated in some of the New Brunswick Community Colleges, but no departmental policy was reported to exist in this area.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study investigated the activities and strategies being used in the new Brunswick Community Colleges to increase student retention and reduce student attrition and to identify activities which, in the opinion of those involved, are the most effective in accomplishing such goals. A survey of the nine New Brunswick Community Colleges was carried out. This survey used a questionnaire similar to the one developed by Beal and Noel.<sup>24</sup> In each college a staff member of the Student Services section, who was considered to be knowledgeable regarding the retention programs and services offered in that college, was interviewed to gather information about retention strategies.

## **Findings**

The findings are discussed in relation to the following issues: college organization for retention; retention and attrition rates; college studies and analyses of student retention and attrition; characteristics of colleges and students which contribute to student retention; problems encountered in retention efforts; and action-oriented student retention programs. The findings have also been reviewed under the typology suggested by Schlossberg et al.<sup>25</sup> She and her colleagues divided the educational experience into three phases—Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving On. The Moving In phase described the period of time in the student's life starting with the decision to apply until after becoming oriented to the institution. The Moving Through phase encompasses the entire period while the student is enrolled in the institution. The Moving On phase describes the period during the final days at the institution and includes the time after graduation and orientation to the work world. In the opinion of the researcher, this typology had greater potential for leading to the development of practical programs and policies and as such was better suited to the needs of organization planners than the theories proposed by other writers.

## **College Organization for Retention**

Student Services sections were added to each of the New Brunswick community colleges in the early 1980's. The original purpose was to provide the college students with career guidance and counselling service. Student Services have grown in some of the colleges both in staffing and in the variety of services provided to students. These services vary from college to college, but the Student Services section has become responsible in each college for all activities pertaining to student life not of an academic nature. Since 1986, DAET has upgraded and increased the amount of space allotted in the colleges to the Student Services section. The sections have been placed in a more visible location within the college buildings. However, policy direction, goals or objectives regarding attrition or retention activities were not provided to the colleges by DAET. Many respondents felt that the activities their sections provided could not be considered as special retention activities, but rather reflected standard services to students. The validity of the responses can be questioned on the basis of this view of the activities.



Since 1987, all the colleges have acquired a library and librarian at the campus, a much needed addition at the smaller colleges. A calendar and information booklet outline all courses at all colleges were introduced in 1988-89 by DAET. These provide applicants with an overview of the New Brunswick Community College programs. Providing the student with factual information prior to enrolment is a very positive step in assisting the student to persist.<sup>26</sup> In the past the colleges each had produced their own calendar and DAET had produced an individual program information pamphlet for each program. The college calendars were not standard amongst the colleges and frequently new programs were introduced without the information pamphlet being available.

In the 1985 reorganization of the New Brunswick Community College system, a formula was devised to equalize the supervisory responsibilities of management personnel. In large colleges (Moncton, Dieppe, Saint John and Bathurst), the reorganization resulted in the development of a Student Services section which has a coordinator and several staff positions. The coordinators report to the Deans of Administration. In the smaller colleges (St. Andrews, Woodstock, Edmundston, Campbellton and Miramichi), the Student Services section have only one student counsellor who reports directly to the college principal.

The distinction between the smaller colleges and the larger colleges, aside from their physical size, is their more complex management structure. The reorganization also affected the type and extent of services offered in the large and small colleges as will become apparent in the later sections of this article.

The Student Services section in each college, according to those surveyed, is responsible for all student activities not considered to be academic. These responsibilities include: recruitment, high school visitations, admissions, student health, graduation ceremonies, student life, applicant testing, facilitating support groups, group counselling, advising and teaching study skills. The obligation to provide equal services in all colleges exists even though the staffing level is inconsistent. A discrepancy was reported to exist in the services provided to off-campus students and to those attending programs at the college. Off-campus students are those students attending classes somewhere other than the college location. They are more likely to be non-traditional students than on-campus students

and to require more help in order to succeed.<sup>27</sup> However, none of the action-oriented student retention programs discussed later in this study are available to the off-campus students.

Mature adults make up the largest portion of off-campus enrolments and need to feel part of the mainstream of college life, not part of the margin.<sup>28</sup> Moore and Carpenter contend that colleges must change how they view students, maintaining that, since colleges are no longer faced with a homogeneous student population of new high school graduates, they will have to be innovative and more inward looking to retain the non-traditional student.<sup>29</sup>

In summary, the installation of a Student Services section by DAET in each of the colleges is a very positive move in student retention effort. However, the activities and mandate of some sections are narrowly focused, while others are more broadly defined. Beal and Noel<sup>30</sup> argued that the degree to which the campus is organized to deal with student retention helps to determine the success of the retention effort. None of the respondents reported having either a retention committee or a retention coordinator at their college. During the interviews, several respondents reported there was a need for an expanded role for student retention in the college to raise the awareness of the instructors and staff to retention issues. Noel argues that an organized retention strategy is the best alternative to the pressures facing educational institutions.<sup>31</sup> Colleges are trying to maintain enrolments and to encourage re-enrolments. He insists that colleges should focus on reducing dropouts as the key to stabilizing enrolments rather than focusing on recruitment difficulties.

### **Retention and Attrition Rates**

The survey questionnaire asked for statistical information on the nature and extent of student attrition (withdrawals). The researcher attempted to obtain information about the percentage of full-time students still attending the college four months after enrolling. In addition, this part of the survey asked for enrolment and retention data covering the period 1985 to 1989. The respondents were asked if the information was obtained from recorded (actual) data or whether it was an estimate.

No respondent was able to complete the questions on statistical data although four, all from smaller colleges, were able to partially

complete this section with the help of other people in the college. None of the college respondents had accurate up-to-date statistical information on student retention and attrition. This fact tends to have a negative effect on those attempting to prevent attrition and increase retention. The incompleteness of the responses to these questions made it impossible to develop a summary for inclusion in this study.

## **College Studies and Analyses**

The survey asked for information on studies, analyses and surveys that the colleges may have undertaken to ascertain characteristics of the college in relation to retention activities. Only two studies were found which examined community colleges in New Brunswick. The causes for attrition in the community college technology programs in Moncton, Saint John and Bathurst were examined during the early 1980's.<sup>32</sup> In each study a series of instructor interviews were conducted and responses to a questionnaire on probable causes of student attrition were catalogued.

None of the reported studies surveyed students who had dropped out, although Beal and Noel found this to be the most common group surveyed in American colleges and universities.<sup>33</sup> The reported studies and the comments made by various respondents suggest that the community college staff members view student departures as the result of student characteristics and college leavers as distinguishable from stayers on the basis of personality and ability.<sup>34</sup>

Although not conducted by the colleges, DAET annually conducts a follow-up survey of graduates which seeks information on their jobs and asks for opinions on the training they received while attending a New Brunswick Community College.<sup>35</sup> Cousineau argues follow-up surveys came into existence due to government pressure for accountability and not as a measure of student retention. He goes on to argue that such studies reveal nothing new about the instructors and only help to confirm suspicions about the strengths and weaknesses of the program.<sup>36</sup>

## **College Characteristics which Contribute to Student Retention**

Respondents were first asked to rate college characteristics in terms of their negative contribution to student retention at their college on

a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The importance ratings were averaged for all respondents and the results were rank ordered as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Negative College Characteristics (In Average Ratings)**

<u>College Characteristic</u>	<u>Average</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=8
Inadequate financial aid	3.50
Inadequate academic support service	3.13
Inadequate counselling support	2.75
Unsatisfactory living accommodation	2.75
Inadequate academic advising	2.63
Inadequate personal contact between students and faculty	2.63
Inadequate part-time employment opportunities	2.38
Inadequate extracurricular programs	2.38
Lack of staff care and concern for students	2.38
Inadequate opportunity for cultural and social growth	2.25
Inadequate career planning service	2.25
Quality of teaching not consistently high	2.13
Restrictive rules and regulations governing student behaviour	2.00
Lack of instructor care and concern for students	2.00
Inadequate curricular offerings	2.00
Conflict between class time and job	1.88
Insufficient intellectual stimulation	1.63
Heavy course load	1.13
Lack of academic preparedness	0.88

Note: Ratings are based on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high)

The college respondents rated inadequate financial aid as the most important negative characteristic. Tinto, however, when describing economic theories of student attrition, maintains there is little evidence to support the idea that financial forces are paramount to the individual retention decision.<sup>37</sup> Employment and Immigration Canada (EIC) reported that as many as 56 percent of the Youth Program students drop out, even when their tuition is paid and they receive a stipend to attend an educational program.<sup>38</sup> Lenning et al. argue that students' concerns about adequate financial support is the most important variable in student retention.<sup>39</sup> They also argue that students with adequate aid often drop out for hidden or other reasons and cite finances as the reason when surveyed.

Inadequate academic support service was rated as the second most important negative college characteristic and inadequate academic advising as the fifth. Holdaway and Kelloway found, in their survey of students, that the amount of work and the difficulty of the work were significant factors relating to attrition.<sup>40</sup> Fullerton and Vail found, in their survey of instructors, that providing a support service for students who wish to stay, but are not academically prepared, was a desirable goal for action-oriented retention programs.<sup>41</sup>

Inadequate living accommodations was rated as the fourth most important negative college characteristic by the respondents. The colleges do not, however, provide accommodation for the students.

Respondents were then asked to rate a list of college characteristics in terms of their positive contribution to student retention at their college on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The importance ratings were averaged for all respondents and the results were rank ordered as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Positive College Characteristics (In Average Ratings)**

<u>College Characteristic</u>	<u>Average</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=8
Excellent counselling services	4.25
Caring attitude of instructors and staff	4.25
Excellent career planning services	4.00
Consistently high quality teaching	3.88
Consistently high quality of academic advising	3.63
Adequate financial aid programs	3.63
Encouragement of student involvement in college life	3.50
Admissions practices geared to recruiting students likely to persist to graduation	3.50
System for identifying potential dropouts (Early warning system)	3.38
Overall concern for student institution congruence or "fit"	3.13

Note: Ratings are based on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high)

Respondents from large colleges rated excellent counselling services as the most important positive college characteristic giving it a maximum rating of 5.00. The smaller colleges with their more limited

resources rated it in fourth place at 3.80. Since all respondents were employed in the colleges' Student Services sections, a bias in favour of the services they provided may have been present in these responses. Inadequate counselling support was rated as the third most important negative characteristic (Table 1). Tinto argues that institutions should consider a part of their educational mission as assisting students to find their proper niche.<sup>42</sup> He further defines this task as including the provision of supportive social and intellectual communities.

Respondents from the smaller colleges rated the caring attitude of instructors and staff as the most important positive college characteristic while the large college respondents placed it in second position. Beal and Noel maintain that a caring attitude of the faculty and staff is the most potent retention force on campus.<sup>43</sup> The people who come face to face with the student can provide a positive growth experience, allowing students to confirm their goals and identify their talents. The lack of staff and instructor concern was rated as the ninth most important negative characteristic by both large and small college respondents.

Consistently high quality teaching was rated as the fourth most important positive characteristic and consistently high quality academic advising as the fifth. Researchers have found a strong correlation between academic success and persistence, and have reported that helping students to achieve personal academic success is the core of action-oriented retention programs.<sup>44</sup>

Table 2 indicates that the respondents rated excellent career planning services as the third most important positive college characteristic. Sprandel found in her study that career planning is the key to forming a career goal.<sup>45</sup> She found that the two most frequent causes for a student to drop out were a change in career goals and poor grades. Excellent career planning is an important factor in student retention.<sup>46</sup>

Adequate financial aid was rated as the sixth most important positive characteristic while inadequate financial aid was rated as the most important negative characteristic (Table 1). All federally-sponsored students, of which there is a large percentage in the college programs, receive financial aid. If the aid is stopped or the student finds work, then they are at risk of leaving the college. Financial aid is not a

single service; rather there are many unconnected programs at both federal and provincial levels. This survey did not request sufficient information to assess the respondents' references to financial aid. Since the financial programs offered varied so greatly an in-depth study would be required to assess why financial aid was found to be the most important negative characteristic leading to attrition while at the same time an important positive characteristic assisting in student retention. It seems likely that if a student does not have money, he or she leaves; and if the student does have money, he or she may stay or leave depending on other characteristics.

Positive college characteristics (Table 2) received a higher overall rating than did the negative college characteristics (Table 1). While more negative characteristics were mentioned than positive ones, respondents appear to have indicated that positive college characteristics are more effective in student retention. Further, the respondents appeared to have rated student services (excluding financial aid), in comparison with academic services, as somewhat more positive in improving student retention and as slightly less negative in affecting student attrition. Research studies which include respondents from both academic and Student Services staff should be done before any conclusions can be drawn about the differential effects of academic and student services on student retention. Another way to make sense of these findings is to assume that improvements in student services (e.g., counselling services, career planning services, financial aid) would have a greater positive effect on student retention than improvements in academic services (e.g., academic advising, quality of contact between faculty and students). This assumption should be carefully examined in future studies.

### **Student Characteristics which Contribute to Student Attrition**

The survey asked respondents to rate a list of commonly mentioned student characteristics in terms of their relationship to students dropping out of college on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The importance ratings were averaged for all respondents and the results were rank ordered as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Student Dropout-Prone Characteristics  
(In Average Ratings)**

<u>Student Characteristic</u>	<u>Average</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=8
Low academic achievement	4.50
Inadequate financial resources	3.88
Limited educational aspirations	3.63
Indecision about major or career goal	3.50
Economically disadvantaged	3.25
Boarding student	2.50
First generation college students	2.00
Local student living in town	1.63
Personal problem	1.13

Note: Ratings are based on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high)

All respondents indicated that the most important dropout-prone characteristic was low academic achievement and the third most important was limited educational aspirations. These results are consistent with the findings reported by Sprandel and by Beal and Noel.<sup>47</sup> The second most important student characteristic was inadequate financial resources and the fifth was economical disadvantage. These ratings are consistent with the ratings assigned to the issue of financial resources as a college characteristic.

The fourth most important student characteristic was indecision about major or career goal. Sprandel studied student exits through a follow-up survey given to more than 100,000 students.<sup>48</sup> She described the two most frequent reasons for dropping out as changes in career goals and poor grades. Of the two, she considered career planning to be a key factor in creating the commitment necessary to keep students in an academic program. Beal and Noel also found that students without clear career goals were more apt to drop out.<sup>49</sup> Seidman argues that community colleges are continually under pressure to teach as many students from varied backgrounds as inexpensively as possible.<sup>50</sup> This fact is often reflected in the academically mixed group in the same class in which different students have very different academic goals.



Comments from the respondents suggest that many of the college staff may explain student attrition through a psychological theory of student departure. Tinto argues that such theories assume that the student alone shoulders the responsibility for his or her education and that persistence is directly related to personality and ability.<sup>51</sup> Such assumptions relieve the institution of responsibility for creating an environment which facilitates the retention of students. Low academic achievement, limited educational aspirations, and indecision about major or career goal would all relate to psychological theories.

A comparison of college characteristics (Tables 1 and 2) with student characteristics (Table 3) suggests the following interpretations:

(a) If a student is accepted with a low level of academic achievement and the college has a consistently high level of academic advising, then the student likely will be retained. However if the level of academic support is inadequate the same student is prone to drop out.

(b) A student with inadequate financial resources is prone to drop out if the college does not provide the student with the ability to get support through some method such as Student Aid, Co-op Programming or employment opportunities.

(c) A student with limited educational aspirations or indecision about a course major or career goal is prone to drop out unless the college provides excellent career and personal counselling services.

(d) If students do not feel fully integrated into college life for various reasons and the college does not encourage students to become involved, they are prone to drop out. Encouragement can happen through such things as caring instructors and staff, extracurricular programs and opportunities for cultural and social growth.

### **Problems Encountered in Retention Efforts**

The survey sought to obtain information on the problems the respondents encountered in their colleges' student retention effort. The respondents were asked first to select from a prepared list of commonly mentioned items for each question, and second, to explain

the items selected. Table 4 summarizes the responses to problems encountered in the student retention efforts.

**Table 4: Problems Encountered in Retention Efforts**

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Average</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=9
Insufficient data	8
Lack of staff	6
Lack of time	6
Lack of funds	5
Lack of support from faculty	5
Actual resistance to policy changes	5
Lack of support from administration	4
Actual resistance to acceptance of new roles or responsibilities	4
Inadequate data-processing capabilities	4
Inadequate measurement instruments	3
Inadequate measurement-evaluation expertise	2
Confusion of role of staff and Student Services	2
No policy on dropping out or student retention	2

Eight of the nine respondents chose insufficient data as a problem in combating student attrition. This was consistent with the information provided in the survey, which indicated that none of the respondents could provide statistical information on student attrition. Dennison and Gallagher argue that statistics and research on college performance and student success is needed in all of Canada's community colleges.<sup>52</sup> The fact that insufficient data were available was one reason the study took on a subjective form.

Small colleges rated lack of staff, time and funds as interrelated problems in dealing with student attrition. This is consistent with the high priority they assigned to counselling and advising in rating the college characteristics. Lack of support from faculty was selected by five of the nine respondents as a problem encountered in the student retention effort, while it was rated as the second highest positive college characteristic by the same respondents.

Most respondents reported that no goals or statements of purpose existed for student retention activities. Lenning et al. in their study concluded that colleges with a well defined mission and role have a

much lower attrition rate than colleges with a less well defined mission and role.<sup>53</sup> The effort of the Student Services section could be enhanced through the provision of college-wide goals and objectives for the student retention effort.

Beal and Noel reported, in their study of American universities and colleges, that retention coordinators answered to a variety of college officials.<sup>54</sup> They also found that the reporting structure within the management of the college has an important effect on student retention activities. The Student Services section of the New Brunswick community colleges and the central Student Services Branch of DAET reported to administrative divisions. Beal and Noel reported that retention coordinators most frequently reported to academic divisions.<sup>55</sup> By answering to the academic side of the college's management, issues relating to student retention tend to focus on both academic and support services. By answering to the administrative side of the college's management, issues related to student retention tend to focus on recruitment and enrolment where statistics are more easily kept, rather than on academic and support services.

### **Action-Oriented Student Retention Programs**

The respondents were given a list of possible institutional student retention services and asked to check those that applied to their college. Then they were asked to provide detailed information on each of the identified activities. Many of the respondents did not consider certain activities as student retention programs, but rather saw such activities as a normal function of the Student Services section. The activities which were eventually defined as action-oriented student retention activities have been organized under the educational phases suggested by Schlossberg et al.<sup>56</sup> Information on the Moving In phase is provided in Table 5, on the Moving Through phase in Table 7, and on the Moving On phase in Table 8. Programs common to two or more of these phases are described in Table 6. All respondents reported their college had some action-oriented student retention programs.

The Moving In phase is a key time in the student's life. Schlossberg et al. chronicled the Moving In phase in three steps.<sup>57</sup> Schlossberg and her colleagues considered recruitment as a time to provide information to future students and seek college-student congruence.

The second step, enrolment, as Holdaway and Kelloway argue, is the period of time when the student is most likely to become lost, retreat into the past and leave college.<sup>58</sup> The colleges at this time should be striving to have the student become committed to their institutional and career goals. The third step, orientation, according to Noel and Chapman, should start with the first class and continue for the whole year.<sup>59</sup> Beatty-Guenter reported, in her findings of a study at Camosun College, that a strong relationship exists between formal orientation activities and the retention rate.<sup>60</sup> Those without an orientation program had an attrition rate almost double those that had a formal program.

Table 5 provides a summary of the action-oriented student retention programs reported by the respondents which relate to the Moving In phase. The activities have been further divided into recruitment and orientation activities. Recruitment activities involve recruiting of potential students; orientation activities involve welcoming new students at the time of their enrolment and orienting them to the social and academic activities of the college. Beal and Noel reported that orientation activities were the most common of all action-oriented student retention activities.<sup>61</sup> This same result was found in this study.

The respondents reported that much time and energy were spent on two recruitment activities: high school visits to recruit traditional students, and academic advising, testing and evaluation for applicants, particularly for nontraditional students. One respondent told the researcher:

Fifty percent of my time is spent counselling clients who are from outside of the college. The rest are college students. Their (outside clients) numbers are increasing. This group includes adults, juveniles, hard-to-serve clients, handicapped, chronic unemployed, and others. This counselling depends on the individual.... When a client comes in, you start with career or educational counselling, but often it ends up being personal counselling.

If the client has identified his or her goals, and students go into the program knowing what they want to do, and they have all the prerequisites, financial and personal problems taken care of then retention would be very high. The student can say: "I know where I'm going."

**Table 5: Retention Activities Reported Relating to the Moving In Educational Phase**

<u>Retention Activity</u>	<u>Average</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=9
<u>Recruitment</u>	
Applicant academic advising	9
Computerized admission information	9
High school recruiting visits	7
Applicant testing and evaluation	5
Open house	4
Evening counselling program	1
<u>Orientation</u>	
September student orientation	9
Staff orientation in retention	6
Special admissions material sent	6
Pre-enrolment information seminar	2
Weekly orientation activities	2

The goal of recruitment activities historically has been to increase college enrolments the following September; however, it also is viewed as an activity to help ensure student-program fit. This emphasis creates a conflict, however. Staff members in the Student Services section are responsible for recruitment activities which occur in the Fall, at a time when newly-enrolled students are most in need of supportive counselling and advising from the same staff members.

Table 6 summarizes the student retention activities that relate to more than one educational phase. For example, counselling in the Moving In phase relates to the students' career and program choices. For traditional students, counselling frequently relates to the problems students encounter their first time away from home. Counselling in the Moving Through phase often relates to personal problems. Many of the colleges have established strong relationships with outside agencies and refer students when dealing with problems beyond their capabilities. Counselling in the Moving On phase involves helping students find jobs when they complete the course or helping dropouts understand why they are leaving.

**Table 6: Retention Activities Reported to Relate to More than One Educational Phase**

<u>Retention Activity</u>	<u>Average</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=9
Individual counselling	9
Committee for women in non-traditional occupations	6
Group counselling	5
Research/surveys on retention activities in the college	4
Single parents support group	3
Credit courses available	3
Mature students support group	2
Athletic/social coordinator	2
Human services counsellor	2
Off-campus student drop-in centre	1
Support group to discuss financial problems	1

Noel argues that socialization of the student into the college is a key student retention activity.<sup>62</sup> Many of the programs described by respondents in this study are support groups that help to make students feel part of the mainstream of college life during the time they spend at college. Tinto and Schlossberg et al. argue students are more apt to persist if they do not feel they are on the margins of college life.<sup>63</sup> Anderson rated counselling, friends, and information as important positive retention influences.<sup>64</sup>

The retention activities related to the Moving Through educational phase are summarized in Table 7. The only universally reported program, job-related training, was described by respondents as being part of the community college philosophy of education. These work placements are organized by the college and the student must receive a passing grade on the work placement in order to complete the program. Tinto argued that commitment and intention are the primary attributes that form the student's decision to persist at college.<sup>65</sup> Career commitment is strongly reinforced by having the students spend time actually working in their chosen occupation. Dunphy et al. argue that career choice is a process not an event.<sup>66</sup> Job-related training provides the student with an opportunity to experience his or her future career while still in college.

**Table 7: Retention Activities Reported to Relate to Moving Through Educational Phase**

<u>Retention Activity</u>	<u>Total</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=9
Job related training (practicum)	9
Study skills lectures	6
Peer tutoring	4
Assessment committee	4
Health information sessions	3
Outside agencies referral	3
Student assistance program	2
Stress management seminars	2
Student needs committee	2
Form modification for retention	2
Emergency loan fund	1
Time management seminars	1
Administration policy change	1
Student involvement college policy	1

Two action-oriented student retention activities were reported that offer assistance to students in academic difficulty: study skills seminars and peer tutoring. Both programs were reported as very successful activities that offer failing students a good alternative to dropping out. Study skills seminars are mandatory in some colleges; in other colleges, they are available as an optional program. The study skills seminar is presented as a lecture by the Student Services section, and provides information on such things as how to take notes, what is important to study, when to ask questions in class, how to study for examinations, and how to write examinations.

Several programs were established to provide equitable treatment to college students. These programs include: assessment committee, student assistance program, student advocacy, student needs committee, administration policy change, and student involvement in college policy. Assessment committees and the student assistance program refer to a process used when a student is at risk of being terminated. The colleges that do not have such programs in place simply terminate students who do not meet established academic or social standards. Respondents from those colleges that have an overall termination plan offer assistance to both the instructor and the

student. The program was described as not only fair, but also as a very effective retention tool. In explaining the assessment committee's role in the college, one respondent stated:

Regular assessment meetings are held to discuss all classes. Someone from Student Services attends.... Individual assessment meetings are held during the year, if there are particular social problems, behavioral problems, academic problems with one or two students in a class. Students are informed that a meeting is taking place and they can ask to speak to the group on their own behalf. For example, if a student has failed a practicum and there is going to be a decision made as to whether the student will be able to continue or not, the student could come and explain to the group any special circumstances.

The Moving Through stage is the longest period of time that the college is in contact with the student. Aitken and Bean found, in separate studies, that in this phase institutions should strive to increase student participation in college activities.<sup>67</sup> Socialization of the student into the college will significantly reduce dropouts.

The student retention activities undertaken by the New Brunswick Community Colleges during the Moving On educational phase are summarized in Table 8. Not much emphasis is placed on this last phase of the student's college career nor is there much consistency among the nine colleges. Three of the colleges reported that they have a college-based Canada Employment Centre (CEC) which allows the students access to job placement services without leaving the building.

**Table 8: Retention Activities Reported to Relate to Moving On Educational Phase**

<u>Retention Activity</u>	<u>Total</u>
Institutions reporting:	n=9
CEC counsellor at college	3
Report of departure or exit survey	3
Job placement service	2
Job search seminars	1



Only three of the college respondents reported programs that were specifically aimed at the Moving On phase: report of departure or exit surveys. These surveys or reports outlined why the student had left or was leaving. Unlike the exit interview which often helps the students to change their minds and stay at college, the only retention value of the exit survey is the information it provides to the college on why the students left.<sup>68</sup> Such information can be used to introduce changes which may help keep other students in college.

In summary, respondents reported 44 action-oriented retention programs of which 12 related to more than one educational phase, 11 related to the Moving In phase, 15 to the Moving Through phase, and 4 to the Moving On phase. Only five programs were reported by all colleges. Three of these were related to the Moving In phase. If it can be assumed that the reported action-oriented student retention activities were based on central or college objectives, then few policies appear to exist which relate to student retention, and those that do exist focus rather narrowly on the Moving In phase of recruitment and orientation.

The existence of programs in any college is determined to a large extent by its size and the availability of staff, financial resources and time. In this regard, larger colleges offer more programs and a greater variety of programs than smaller colleges. One type of program was cited as an extremely valuable service to students. These programs provided staff with an early warning system about potential dropouts and offered support and assistance to identified students while there was still a possibility of helping them stay in their educational program. The respondents could offer only subjective information on the value of the retention programs. No statistical data or research information had been kept on the satisfaction of the programs to the college or students.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of this study the researcher formulated the following conclusions about the New Brunswick Community Colleges' student retention efforts. These conclusions are based on the activities reported by the college respondents and their relevance to current research on student retention and attrition.

- 1 Clear goals, objectives or policy directions would assist in the development and implementation of student retention activities. DAET has provided each college with capital assets and operational services to aid in the retention of students. All of the colleges have a Student Services section placed in a highly visible location within the college. Libraries have been installed in all of the colleges and many, but not all, of the colleges have sports and social facilities. DAET has provided a course calendar and an information pamphlet on all New Brunswick Community College system's programs. The fact that a Student Services section exists in all colleges implies policy directions, goals or objectives regarding student retention activities, although this study indicates that no explicit goals, objectives or policy directions are provided.

The implications of these initiatives are that both the colleges and DAET perceive a need to increase services to students. The initiatives place an emphasis on student retention, although without a clear mandate, the services provided appear to be aimed at increasing student enrolment rather than on increasing student retention.

Off-campus students do not get the same level of support services as the on-campus students. Students who attend off-campus programs are as prone to dropping out as students who attend on-campus programs. When a college program is established, whether on or off-campus, student retention activities should be discussed as an integral part of the program.

- 2 Program services should be developed to focus on all three phases of student life at the community college. The Moving In phase, in particular recruitment, was considered to be the most important phase of the action-oriented programs. Staff in the Student Services section were reported to spend as much as 50 percent of their time on recruitment. Most respondents reported that the activities of their sections reflected standard services and could not be considered as special retention activities. The implications of having the Student Services staff members spending 50 percent of their time dealing with future applicants appears to be twofold. First, applicants may become dependent on the student counsellor for advice and support,

only to find when they become students that the counsellor is not readily available to them. Second, the rate of dropout is highest in the first few weeks after initial enrolment, at a time when student counsellors are least available because they are busy with recruitment for the next academic year.

- 3 Up-to-date statistical data on student dropouts need to be made available to college staff. The bulk of the statistical information available relates to student enrolment, graduation and employment success. Statistics on the success of the college programs in terms of student attrition and retention were reported to be difficult or impossible to obtain. This fact tends to have a negative effect on those attempting to prevent attrition and increase retention. Eight of the nine respondents rated insufficient data as the most important student retention problem.

If statistical information on dropouts is not provided in a timely fashion, then the staff responsible for developing and operating action-oriented student retention programs can only provide a subjective opinion on whether a program is good and helpful, or a waste of money and time. When concise statistical data are kept, program goals can more easily be confirmed and modified.

- 4 Research needs to be undertaken by the colleges or DAET on student attrition and retention. Little research has been undertaken by the colleges or by DAET on student attrition and retention. Only three of the colleges reported having undertaken a study or survey relating to these topics. Current or former students were surveyed.

Research provides the objective opinion needed to form long term goals, objectives and policy direction. The result of not having a body of information, grounded in research, is that the policies of the various colleges with respect to student retention are based on subjective opinion. Good retention programs may be dropped, ineffective student retention activities may be continued.

- 5 Student retention must become an integral part of the colleges' educational strategy, if education is to become an effective cornerstone in the province's economic strategy. The

respondents did not report a student retention organization in any of the colleges. In order to effectively deal with student retention the colleges could take an organized approach to assisting students to persist. The absence of an organized approach allows students to drop out without counselling or advice from the Student Services section. Students cannot be assisted once they have left the college; it is imperative, therefore, that the students be provided with help before leaving.

- 6 The provision of adequate financial aid should be considered a major student retention strategy. Inadequate financial aid was listed as the most negative characteristic contributing to student attrition and as one of the most positive characteristics for retaining students. DAET and the colleges could examine the financial aid programs offered in relation to their effectiveness in retaining students.
- 7 An administrative procedure should be put in place to identify and assist potential dropouts. Several of the large colleges' respondents reported a student assessment process in which the potential dropout's situation is reviewed. This should be an integral part of all of the colleges' administration and there should be an ongoing review of the student involvement in the process.

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