

FACTORS INFLUENCING RETENTION AND ATTRITION
RATES OF BASIC SKILLS LEVEL I STUDENTS AT
MILWAUKEE AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE

by Dorothea A. Macon

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Master of Science Degree
with a Major in

Vocational and Technical Education

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

Investigation Adviser

The Graduate College
University of Wisconsin-Stout
August, 2000

The Graduate College
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, Wisconsin 54751

ABSTRACT

	Macon,	Dorothea	A.
(Writer)	(Last Name)	(First)	(Initial)

FACTORS INFLUENCING RETENTION AND ATTRITION RATES OF BASIC SKILLS LEVEL I STUDENTS AT MILWAUKEE AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE
(Title)

VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION DR. HOWARD LEE AUG/2000 (66)
(Graduate Major) (Research Advisor) (Mon./Year) (No.Of Pgs.)

(Name of Style Manual Used in this Study): APA Style Manual

The purpose of this investigative study was to identify factors hindering level I Basic Skills students from achieving their short- and/or long-range goals. Retention rates in the division were extremely low and attrition rates were unbelievably high. Students were coming into Basic Skills programming, however, many were leaving prior to attaining set goals. This study surveyed level 1 students that had been enrolled in Basic Skills programming during the 1997-98 school year, but who had not returned after 1998-99. These students were mailed questionnaires which captured their perceived perceptions of Basic Skills programming, including its strengths and areas needing improvement. The hope was, that in doing so, a comprehensive plan could be developed to combat the high attrition that was being experienced by the division. Because programming is based on need, and is dependent upon funding, this discussion has become of paramount concern to administration. As a result of the new interest, a plan of action has been developed, which includes social service agencies, and MATC staff, faculty, and administration to combat the retention and attrition issues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To my first teacher, my mom, Deborah A. Stewart,
who gave me universal knowledge,
and to my dad, John D. Stewart,
who was there because he wanted to be.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) is largest theof 16 two-year technical colleges, with an enrollment of 63,270 students. The total population of students in the Wisconsin Technical College System's (WTCS) district is 431,405. All policies and standards for educational programs and services provided at MATC are set by the Wisconsin Technical College System Board. The WTCS Board, "Is responsible for the direct operation of their respective schools and programs...are empowered to...provide for facilities and equipment...set academic and grading standards...and manage the district budget" (www.tec.wi.us.about.htm). As a result of this relationship, MATC has been commissioned to operate under the scope of the WTCS district's guidelines. The scope, as described in the Wisconsin Blue Book for 1997-1998, is indicative of a district that empowers its citizens, and fosters personal and academic growth. "In the past two years the system has focused on lifelong learning; education for economic development; and services for groups that formerly had less access to education, including...women and minorities. Special assistance has been given to assisting the unemployed, displaced homemakers and those with literacy problems."

Within MATC's technical programming framework are developmental programs that can aid students in upgrading skills needed to succeed in their degree or technical programs of choice. The College Transition Division (CTD) has been designated as a developmental education program established to improve the college's minority access and retention. MATC's "Mission Statement Initiative's position is that developmental education (Basic Skills) be provided to aid students participating in occupational training,

employment development, and in academic programming” NCA Criterion Report (1990). One developmental opportunity provided through the College Transition Division is Basic Skills. The Basic Skills area enables students to improve upon reading, writing, and mathematics up to the 12th grade level. Often times, students are in need of additional support that could best be serviced at sites within the community. Classes are, therefore, offered at various community based organizations as a way in which to abet students with those additional needs. Even with the additional support services, class sizes are often small and attendance is poor.

Federal and state funding for the college and the division is driven by the success it has in the recruitment and retention of students. In return for student bodies and actual attendance hours, point equivalents are designated securing future funding. (Approximately 23% of the district’s student head count is generated by the CTD’s Basic Skills department). As a result, one of the five agreed-upon goals for MATC beginning 1998/99 is to improve recruitment and retention:

MATC will focus on refining and implementing targeted recruitment and retention efforts that promote enrollment and retention of a diverse student population. These efforts will be responsive and flexible in effectively meeting the lifelong learning needs of our students and the community. (NCA Retreat Strategic Planning, 1998, p. 23, & 33-35)

The focused goal furnishes ideology that says that MATC cannot afford to function as a higher-education provider and not render the support students need in order to succeed. The College Transition Division operates under the same scope and directives as those of MATC and the WTCS.

Although there are several reasons why the College Transition Division should implement a plan for retaining students, the main focus for concern culminates around funding for those classes outstationed in Community Based Organizations (CBO's). Poor attendance rates suggest to funding sources that there is no need for remedial education and training. Funding then becomes a problem for program continuance. According to the College Transition Division's '97-'98 annual report, one of the objectives is to "follow the state and federal guidelines." Those guidelines provide specific details of who is to be served and the manner in which they are to be served. The College Transition Division caters to those populations. Documentation in the annual report reveals that, "The number of students participating in Basic Skills are largely women and minorities." Of the 3,073 students that participated in Basic Skills education, 62.8% are female, 90% are minorities, and nearly 75% are either unemployed or under-employed. The Client Reporting System developed for capturing demographic data also supports information which says that the average basic education student is African-American, female and between the ages of 18-27. Hispanic females are the second largest group. Needless to say, the division is operating under a reasonable and feasible scope, catering to the needs of the special population, and is very much in need of federal funding in order to support said programming.

A task force representing members from colleges within the Wisconsin Technical College Systems defined an effective college as "...one that provides efficient educational programs and services that anticipate and respond to external and internal customer needs and result in outcomes that meet or exceed customer goals and expectations" (Roberts & Rieley, 1995). Is it realistic to assume that the public school system will raise its standard

in order to academically prepare its high school students for college and work?

According to statistics captured in the Wisconsin Blue Book for 1997-98, public schools in Wisconsin experienced an annual student dropout rate of between 6.42% and 10.66% for the years 1992-1996. It is apparent that a better job could be done by the public school system to deter the phenomenon of students dropping out of school. The result is an alarming number of students needing remediation in their adult lives.

The effort to reduce remediation is, all too often, motivated by racism, classism, and hostility to immigrants. “Cultural deprivation is an unfortunate concept that has been used--deliberately or not--as an excuse by the educational establishment for not doing its best on the problems of education of minorities and disadvantaged youngsters” (Clark, 1992). Is MATC really looking at the implications of how they would affect students if they did not look into the factors surrounding attrition rates? Surveillance of the phenomenon that hinder good attendance assures us that they are not limiting the number of students that can attend technical colleges. When disadvantaged students are isolated and they are denied the quality education and support they would get in remedial courses, it results in a disproportionate share of African-Americans and Hispanic students being denied access---largely because of the lack of strong preparation and economic class. It is hard to remediate years of poor schooling and years of poor living, but, hopefully, Milwaukee Area Technical College’s desire will be driven by its sense of integrity professionally and institutionally to meet vision objectives to “provide the quality occupational, academic, and life long education for improving personal and employment potential” (NCA Retreat, Strategic Planning, 1998).

Whatever process is utilized for increasing retention rates, one must consider the implications of what happens if Milwaukee Area Technical College denies the obvious. Noting the factors that hinder student success is very important to the survival of the institution. MATC's goal is multi-purposeful for the enrichment of students' lives; yet, if it does not serve its clients in the appropriate manner, and does not integrate the convictions and values of the student community at the college, then it is not the magnanimous body it intends to be. The best way in which to mirror the values of the college's mission and vision statements of, "Being a world-class educational institution that empowers students..." and "provide quality occupational, academic, and lifelong education for improving personal and employment potential," would be to incorporate the type of culture that promotes positive attitudes and behaviors where everyone feels valued and respected (www.milwaukee.tec.wi.us/mission.htm). It is all too easy to become bombarded by influences that do not serve the human populous. Finances and policies do have a role in decision making, yet it should not allow one to lose sight of the mission and vision of the college and the students' basic needs. The inclusiveness of those values should be reflective institutionally. That's what it takes to be a world-class institution.

The source for determining what it is that the instructors are commissioned to do is set by North Central Association's (NCA) accreditation standards, Wisconsin's Technical College System, and by Milwaukee Area Technical College and College Transition Division's vision and mission statements. "More and more we are accepting the realization that learning is a continuous, lifelong process and that there must be established a comprehensive system that provides for the education of adults" (Evanson,

1973). If Milwaukee Area Technical College is committed to “providing quality occupational, academic, and lifelong education for improving personal and employment potential,” as outlined in the college’s 1998 course catalog, and retention rates continue to spiral downward, then it will need to look to its program implementation to determine why students are not accomplishing their goals as identified in the academic advising stage of their instruction. It is also apparent through the initial assessment phase that students possess great interest in their performance and in achieving higher academic success. Why, then, is it that students are not attending classes?

Grant funding sources have published chronicles outlining criterion relative to budgeting and program implementation. According to the mid-year and year-end reporting statistics, the College Transition Division is operating within the scope of its design; yet, students are not succeeding. So, if the parameters for what is standard has not given way to providing the provisions students need in order to succeed, then the College Transition Division’s entire process of how it relates to students may need to change. The most plausible to reconstruct weaknesses in programming and to strengthen parameters is to consult with the populous that has lead to this inquisition.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the empirical data regarding specific demographics relative to the type of student enrolled in Basic Skills courses can be obtained from usage of the State’s Client Reporting System forms. Additionally, it is possible to locate students through records filed in the division’s student data files. When students are not present, then assumptions are made regarding the need for remediation, and future funding becomes a problem.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this investigative study will be to identify factors that hinder the progression and success of adult students formally enrolled in Basic Skills levels I classes (outreach sites). The research data, gathered through the investigative study, could provide a format for the design and implementation of a model that instructors in the community based organizations could utilize for improving student retention rates.

Research Questions

The following questions were ascertained to determine how best to accomplish the purpose of identifying factors that cause poor attendance and alarming retention rates within the College Transition Division:

1. What is presently being done to identify students who have either dropped Basic Skills courses or progressed into other areas of the college? How are Student's tracked?
2. What factors appear to affect students' attendance and retention rates?
3. What program changes might be useful for improving retention rates in the CTD's Basic Skills department, particularly the Community Based Organizations?
4. What strategies can be utilized to increase student retention?

Rationale for the Study

1. Identify factors that promote attrition. Retention rates are low, affecting programming and funding. The results of this study may be used to reverse poor retention rates.
2. Assist with curricula design. With the research data, staff may be better able to design curricula which will meet the demands of the students, facilitate course

meeting times, and format instructional delivery modifiable and alienable with students' life and work schedules.

3. Retention strategies found in this study may be useful in other departmental programs experiencing the same type of retention problems.

Limitations of the Study

1. Student registration forms provide addresses and phone numbers, that can be used for the purpose of this study; however, correspondences sent to former students were often returned to the college undeliverable. Milwaukee area residents tend to be transitory and people changed addresses and phone numbers without giving notice to the college. This provided a need for surveying a greater number of people.

2. The college changed to a more complicated computer system, COSMO. Accessibility to students' personal data and addresses is not accessible to operators. This altered the timetable and hindered the time frame, as outlined, for completion of the study during semester one. However, in efforts to retrieve information as quickly as possible, telephone interviews were done. Some students may have felt more comfortable with this process than others.

3. Data analyzed for the College Transition Division may be used by other technical colleges within Wisconsin.

Definition of Terms

Attrition Rates/ Retention Rates: "...index for gauging the effectiveness of educational programs...the ability to attract and retain students" (Evanson, 1977, p. 10).

Community Based Organizations: Non-profit and for profit organizations in the Milwaukee area that provides additional support services to the community.

Basic Skills/ABE: “...education for adults....which is designed to...raise the level of education...and making it better for them to reach their adult responsibilities.

The three levels of ABE are:

Level I = grades 0-5.9 (beginning)

Level II = grades 6.0-8.9 (intermediate)

Level III = grades 9.0-12.9 (advanced)”

Grant: “An award made for an activity in which specific ideas are initiated and defined by the applicant” (Mohrman, Ficklen, and Latimer, 1990, p. 29).

North Central Association (NCA): Accrediting agency.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to establish a background for this study, a review of literature detailing the history of Adult Basic Education (ABE) will be presented. Part one presents a historical perspective, detailing the history of ABE within the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS), Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), and the College Transition Division (CTD). This section offers purpose to remedial instruction. Part two focuses on the college's goals and objectives for developmental programming; and on the CTD's Basic Skills area for how it links those objectives to guidelines as set by grant funding guidelines. The third section gives statistical data detailing the demographic make-up of students enrolled in Basic Skills classes within the WTCS districts and MATC. Retention rates are captured, and a rationale is given as to why the present instruments used for capturing data has not been successful in explaining poor attrition rates. The final section of the related literature, focuses on identifying factors that affect retention rates within the department of Basic Skills. One investigation culminates around the cultural deprivation theory as a reason for poor retention rates. Other factors hindering students' attendance and attrition rates are also identified. This analysis will be useful in the planning, design, and implementation of an instrument that can help to improve retention rates within the department.

History of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and
Wisconsin Technical College System's Role in Basic Skills

Historically, the Wisconsin Technical College System has recognized the importance of Basic Skills education. According to “A New Paradigm for Basic Skills Education in Wisconsin’s 1996 Strategic Policy Recommendations Report,” one out of every five Wisconsin adults between the ages of 18 and 64 years of age has not completed 12 years of schooling. These statistics play into an increasing high number of adults who are incapable of accessing or retaining meaningful and sustainable employment. Furthermore, advances in technology further aids in reducing opportunities for the “at-risk populations” found in Basic Skills programming. Because of the long-term ramifications of this occurrence, WTCS has worked to support Basic Skills programming in the state. Additionally, a mandated statute further places obligation on the WTCS to advocate for adult learners and deliver educational services. The WTCS is meeting those demands through a number of channels in collaboration with volunteer agencies and community-based providers, and institutions, such as Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). Collective strategic planning between technical colleges ensure that Basic Skills programming is significantly improved in its system of delivery; thus, better meeting the needs of the population it serves. Continuous quality improvement for Basic Skills programs within the district helped to strengthen and improve programming, and institution’s efforts were championed as they work to further support grant activities for government funding. It was necessary to establish outcome-based performance standards and instructional delivery methodologies that provide all-

inclusive curricula, and assessment that measures what it was intended to measure. After strategic planning, as described, it is now the responsibility of the individual institution to carry out the charge that will support the mission and vision of the district and promote an atmosphere that places the Basic Skills programming on a continuum for constant quality improvement. According to WTCS's Strategic Policy Recommendations Report, June 1994, "It is the mission of the Basic Education Programs of the Wisconsin Technical College System to offer an adult school-to-work education continuum...facilitate the acquisition by adult learners of basic academic, research, critical thinking and technology skills and culturally and socially relevant social science, mathematical and scientific knowledge...college survival skills, a global understanding of careers, an understanding of the employment and work" (p.4-5).

Milwaukee Area Technical College's Role in Basic Skills

Milwaukee Area Technical College was established in 1911, for the purpose of educating young adults, focusing on academic and occupational training. As a college it purposes to cater to the needs of the population of students that it serves. Note that MATC is the largest of the 16 technical colleges within the Wisconsin Technical College System consisting of much diversity and a disproportionately poor and academically under-privileged population. According to the 1995 MATC Alternative Education Delivery Network report, "The multicultural, urban epicenter of Wisconsin is simultaneously vibrant with a hopeful economy and devastating with the highest poverty rate in the state." The minority population numbers are significant and the student body population at MATC is reflective of such. These facts place a great burden on the institution to fulfill the purposes as defined by the WTCS and by each agency's mission

and vision statements. However, in the institution's efforts to effectively organize the human, financial, and physical resources for accomplishing the purposes as outlined in the vision and mission statements, every program area of the college must be embraced. As a result, the College Transition Division remains an integral part of the strategic plan, inclusive of the programming within.

The Formation of the College Transition Division Including

Internal and External Basic Skills Classes

The College Transition Division is identified in MATC's Strategic Plan in the section, Focus on Learning. The objectives, as identified, are to increase the number of students transitioning from Basic Skills programs into both the occupational and academic areas of the college, and prepare adults for work. Courses/curricula are tailored to individual occupational areas, strategies are employed for constant improvement, and pre- and post-testing is done to record improvement. In addition, student participation in classes has become paramount in Basic Skills; therefore, recruitment and retention efforts seem to need attention. The division has incorporated the Strategic Planning goals into their divisional plan for improving programming quality, while striving to comply with state mandates, and focusing on expanding services.

The College Transition Division began in 1993, although much of the programming preceded the name. Seeking to develop pre-academic skills, the division, purposes to prepare students for higher levels of learning, employment, and better citizenry. In order to meet the demands of the population it serves, various teaching methodologies are employed. Classes are held during the mornings, afternoons, evenings, and weekends in both traditional and non-traditional settings. Collaboration

with other agencies aid in promoting/supporting the division's efforts to serve other needs of the adult population through a variety of social services. An increasingly large number of instructors are outstationed at the various community based organizations in hopes that students' needs will be better addressed and that services will not be duplicated.

The most recent initiative, however, presented by the state for the purpose of continuous quality improvement is the Family Literacy component. Family Literacy has been added to the list of activities necessary for receiving federal funding. The hope is that infusing interactive literacy activities (between parents and their children) and curricula for Basic Skills levels I, II, and III will aid students in their efforts to create better living conditions for themselves. Because funding is built around a program's success in being able to provide outlined activities, it might appear that Basic Skills programming is driven by grant funding dollars and not student-centered outcomes. Clarification of the goals and purpose of grant funding is needed to show the correlation between the two.

Developmental Programming Goals and Objectives

According to the 1999-2000 Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFL) guidelines, there are several components which are key for funding. Guideline 11A.1 indicates a commitment of the eligible provider to serve individuals in the community most in need of literacy skills. This provides the basis for implementing Family Literacy programming into Basic Skills curriculum. Curricula and instructional strategies have been identified by the grant, and plausible activities will be developed to integrate Family Literacy Education into Basic Skills programming. The appropriate training will have to

be provided to teachers first, then to parents, in order to maintain grant funding. The following have been outlined as possible AEFL grant activities:

- Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children,
- Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children.
- Parent Literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.
- Resources and guidelines for integrating Family Literacy Activities (p. 9).

While the AEFL is not the only funding agency with which the division is aquatinted, it is the primary funding agency.

College Transition Division's (CTD) Basic Skills Grant Funding

Guidelines and Objectives for Meeting Those Goals

Just three years ago, the push in the CTD was to incorporate activities that would increase employment opportunities. Two years ago the theme was technology. As economic trends change, undoubtedly, so will the thrust of Basic Skills programming. This remains the least of the division's problems. An identified area for improvement may lie in the division's ability to document what it is that they are doing to improve services.

Improved data collection, longitudinal tracking, and better client reporting might enable the division to strengthen its position. A new computer system has been designed and implemented which should alleviate some of the previous tracking problems. Students transitioning into programs, and those returning to Basic Skills programming after a hiatus, can now be identified through their student identification numbers. Better record keeping would demonstrate the program's ability to achieve outcomes as

identified. As noted, accuracy in reporting demographics and other vital statistical information is crucial to the division and to its success.

Statistical Data Relative to Basic Skills Retention Rates and
Student Demographics in the Wisconsin Technical College System

According to the 1990 census report, in studies relative to Basic Skills retention rates, at-risk literate level students' figures are extremely high. In Wisconsin, 422,329 adults who have completed 9-12 years of schooling. The number listed as functionally literate, 264,624, is reflective of adults completing 5-8 years of schooling and, lastly, nearly 37,760 adults are considered totally illiterate; while 14,741 of these adults are of limited English proficiency. The demographic figures showing participation in Basic Skills courses aid in planning and in funding. Statistics capturing age groupings and race/ethnicity during spring 1994, depict greatest numbers served for individuals ages 16-44. This phenomenon might well be due to the fact that these adults are not of retirement age and are in need of work or better work. The employment climate might figure into this occurrence, as well. Nevertheless, the most alarming statistics show that 71% of all adults entering Basic Skills programming within the state read at or below the 8th grade level, irrespective of schooling completed.

It's no wonder that the WTCS's mission statement promotes that upon completion of Basic Skills programming, adult learners should be encouraged and supported in their efforts to...“gain entrance and success in occupational programs and post secondary education; attain and retain meaningful and sustainable employment; and...become self-directed and life-long learners” (p.4-5).

Note, that demographically, the student body plays into curriculum design.

Student Demographics in the CTD's Basic Skills Department

In Milwaukee, demographic figures represent a disproportionately high number of minority and at-risk populations. The College Transition Division's Fact Book indicates that although 33% of the students registered are not in the labor market, only 22% are employed full-time and over 70% of these adults live at or below the poverty level. Women and minorities make up a large portion of these adults living in poverty, who are unable to sustain their families. Moreover, unemployment rates are higher in Milwaukee than other parts of the state. Commonly, these adults are unable to find suitable employment due to their academic skill levels. As such, MATC's 1995 Alternative Education Delivery Network documents, "A majority of Milwaukee's unemployment and working poor are also academically disadvantaged, which makes it even more difficult to receive and/or maintain employment." For African-Americans the unemployment rate is four times higher than that of whites. Consequently, MATC's College Transition Division is targeting minorities and women to provide instructional programs that would promote life-long learning and life skill application. The Family Literacy component in Basic Skills education might aid in delivering and promoting life-long learning and life skill application as identified. The CBO partnership with MATC assists in achieving these goals. The plan is to serve as many as 1,200 students in core areas of math, reading, English, etc., for at least 200 contact hours, so as to aid adult learners in achieving their short term goals, as identified through their PEPs (Personal Education Plans). There are other expected outcomes; however, these are the ones most closely related to academe and retention. For the purpose of the study, statistics in the CBO will

be viewed. Note that rates throughout the district are affected in the same manner; however, those in the Community Based Organizations will be used because greater numbers of students have chosen to participate in the outstation sites. This may be due to the various other support systems in place, or in the family/community view/aspect which surround agencies.

The College Transition Division produces an annual report of Grant Demographics on Community Based Organizations. The most current issue for 1997-98 indicates that, during the 96-97 school year, 2704 students were served. Of those recorded, all but 279 of those students were identified as minorities, 1499 were female; and 680 of those were heads of single parent households. Only 494 of students in Basic Skills programming were employed full-time. So, if adult students in the Community Based Organizations are educationally disadvantaged and are either unemployed or underemployed, then there seems to be a serious need for Basic Skills programming. How the Division achieves the goal of maintaining students for the purpose of retaining students, however, becomes of paramount concern.

Until recently, there had not been much emphasis surrounding attendance or retention rates. What had never been necessary before, has now become a top priority because of funding issues. During the 1970's, remedial classes were often overcrowded and funding was plentiful. However, there has been a recent decline in student attendance and participation which seems to suggest to funding sources/agencies that there is a scant need for Basic Skills or remediation. While in actuality, the need for Basic Skills is more discernible than ever.

Instruments Noting Flaws in the Data Retrieval System's Design

Factors associated with low attendance and non-completion rates have increased concern for institutions, as demonstrated by the responses below:

It's become a political issue. It can put the institution in a bad light.

There's great official resistance to evaluating rates: there's a defensiveness about rank discussion. There's terrific resistance to divulging this kind of information. People feel threatened. There's a---it's a very sensitive issue in our college. (McGivney, 1996, p. 133)

The need to investigate non-completion rates becomes apparent in these responses, not because of its lasting effects on society, but because of its ramifications on institutions receiving financial assistance.

The study suggested that it is funding concerns that have concentrated minds on retention rather than the quality of student experience. Evaluative tracking systems consequently tend to be internally- or institutionally-focused rather than student-focused. (McGivney, 1996, p. 133)

Students leaving Basic Skills are hard to track. It doesn't help that metro Milwaukee is quite transitory for lower socioeconomic groups. Furthermore, students have been known to leave one center and attend classes at another center closer to home. At which time, hours of attendance begin again. The need for more rigid data collection has grown out of consequences institutions face by not developing instruments that capture reliable data. As a result, institutions are now required to collect and record data to meet grant objectives. "Institutions incur financial penalties for student non-

completion, they lose a proportion of their central funding when students leave courses prematurely...” (McGivney, 1996, p. 133).

Factors Which Cause Poor Attendance/Retention Rates

Retention rates are low within the College Transition Division’s Basic Skills department and the present data retrieval mechanism fails to capture reliable data indicative of why students do not complete their studies. One of the possible outcomes, as captured on the Client Reporting System’s termination form, points to partial completion of Basic Skills programming. This infers that although students did not stay in class until the end of the semester, that class objectives have been met through partial completion. Note that completion rates do not drive funding, hours of attendance do. “It is extremely difficult to obtain a clear and reliable national picture of student completion and non-completion; the national database is inadequate and there are wide variations in the ways in which institutions define and measure non-completion and record student data” (McGivney, 1996, p. 133).

Furthermore, it is difficult to track Basic Skills students. Many students enroll in Basic Skills classes in hopes of increasing skills levels for completion of their General Equivalency Diplomas (GED), for entrance into other programs within the college, or to increase employment opportunities. Once students have fulfilled their short-range goals of completing GED testing, obtaining employment, or gaining entrance into academic/technical programming, they cease attending classes all together.

Other factors relative to tracking involve lifestyles. Because Basic Skills classes are designed to be open-entry, open-exit they provide flexibility in scheduling for non-traditional students. Basic skills students are not traditional to institutions of higher

education. They are often beholden to work, personal, and family commitments. Even with the flexibility in schedules many of these students drop from classes subsequent to completion although they intend to return to classes.

Successful completion of Basic Skills levels and transference into other programs do say a lot for instruction, yet good instruction alone does not guide student participation and retention rates. What is apparent is that student withdrawal should not be viewed as failure. A more flexible method for calculating hours would enable institutions to do a better job at retaining and tracking students, less the burden of financial penalties. Research studies in Great Britain conclude that, “making funding partly dependent on completion rates has not entirely beneficial results; not only does it create difficulties for institutions with mature and flexible learners, but there are fears that it may lead to greater screening of applicants, with those with low, or non-standard, qualifications being seen at greatest risk of non-completion” (McGivney, 1996, p. 133).

McGivney’s study resolves that there are many influences hindering students’ attendance rates, “...the keys to better retention rates are good staff---student relations and interaction and the provision of personal and academic support for learners, especially those who differ from the majority of the student body by virtue of age, race, qualification, disability or learning mode” (McGivney, 1996, p. 133).

It is apparent that McGivney’s investigation was confined to those factors that hindered the non-traditional students’ retention rates. She indicated that in order for retention rates to improve, special steps needed to occur for the older student.

Older students with gaps in education needed to be provided with forms of practical support...including designated staff members, separate study

and social facilities, additional help and advice with areas such as finance, childcare, and transport...continuous feedback and guidance, and...additional learning support for...help with basic skills and study skills and preparation for examinations. (McGivney, 1996, p.133)

Overall, the fact remains that ninety (90%) percent of students entering Basic Skills classes are women and minority, and three-fourths of those indicated are African American. The study's focus now shifts specifically to those factors hindering the progression and attendance rates of African Americans (specifically, to the urban area of Milwaukee).

Theorists' Perspectives of Cultural Deprivation to Explain Students' Poor Performance in School and the Psychological/Social Implications

There have been many theories to explain why it is that African-Americans perform poorly in American schools. Many theorists have sought to believe that African-American children lacked the intelligence needed to excel in public schools. Later theorists, however, have sought to explain the reason for low achievement by looking to factors that hindered their (Negro children's) progression. "The most recent specific explanation of the academic retardation and apparent intellectual inferiority of Negro children is the widely accepted 'cultural deprivation' explanation" (Clark, 1972, p. 4). This theory rejects earlier beliefs that educators and social scientists had regarding the intellectual capabilities of African-Americans. The cultural deprivation theory, asserts that Negro children do not perform as well in school--- do not learn to read or to do arithmetic as readily as other children--- because they are handicapped by a complex of social and cultural deficits,

burdens and problems in the general environment outside of the control of the school. (Clark, 1972, p. 4)

There are many factors operating beyond the scope of the school. A closer look at the cultural deprivation theory surrounding minority participation in schools might better explain their state of affairs relative to retention rates. However, it is highly probable that many of those same social and psychological factors that hindered academic achievement early on in a person's life are still present and resulting in poor attrition rates for adult students. Perhaps looking into other Basic Skills programming can provide us with ways in which to address poor retention.

Similar Programs' Research and Findings

Charles Brown, Basic Skills instructor from Madison Area Technical College was approached regarding the format/design that was being used on their campus to aid them in retaining students. Although there was no empirical data to suggest that measures used actually improved retention, the department had instituted several programs/initiatives with the hope that change would occur.

- Structured modular (4-8) week courses that seem to be more attractive to students because they are short term, and in some cases objectives/goals could be accomplished sooner than otherwise.
- Classes are offered days, evenings, and weekends making courses accessible to adults.
- There is on going registration (almost weekly, days and evenings) to meet the needs of the students, both working and unemployed.

- The structured ABE Transition Program helps students smoothly transition from Basic Skills into occupational programs or other continuing education.
- The open lab (unstructured) runs days, evenings, and weekends whereby students can start and finish at various times during the semester. It also enables students to choose for themselves the activities/subjects that they would like to work on.

Many of these options, as listed above, have been implemented throughout the district; however, retention problems still persist. It might prove crucial to programming that a collective effort is made within the district to address the retention problem as a whole. The empirical data collected from this study along with other findings within the report, may serve as a platform for getting an initiative begun to identify strengths in programming, note areas for improvement, and list insights for improving poor attrition rates.

CHAPTER III
METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to identify factors and elements that contribute to high drop-out rates within MATC's College Transition Division's Basic Skills levels I, II, and III classes.

Sources of Data

Survey data included information about how satisfied students were with their social and academic experiences at the various Community Based Organizations. The perceived quality of programming, resources, and the facilities were also captured. Of equal interest, was students' perceived comfort or discomfort level with Basic Skills staff/faculty, and curriculum content and delivery. Information relative to the specific demographics of students enrolled in Basic Skills courses was captured through the Client Reporting System's records. Files located at the various Community Based Organizations confirmed the Reporting Systems' figures of the actual numbers of students registered for semester I of 1997-1998. This information was also used to provide specific characteristics of the type of students enrolled in level I.

The following information was obtained regarding the sample population: Ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, number of dependents, employment status, and hours of attendance for the 1997-1998 school year. Of the total figure of 4,735 students enrolled in Basic Skills levels I, II, and III, 2,030 of those students attended classes in one or more of the Community Based Organization sites. Additionally, all but 190 were

identified as minorities, 1371 were female, and most were either under-employed or unemployed.

When the Cosmo (client demographic reporting system) was run, there were 1440 hits (identifying the total number of students that had been enrolled in Basic Skills level I courses in either reading, math, or reading during the '97-'98 school year). Of that figure, less than 392 of those students were found, through social security numbers, on MATC's computer system at all. Thus, indicating a serious need to identify controlling factors for this special population.

The total population of Basic Skills students registered internally and at other sites was 4,736. Appendix C includes a comprehensive list of all the centers operating under the umbrella of the CTD's Basic Skills department. The enrollment figures for students' at the CBO's represent 43% of the total population. All of the students, who had not returned after the '97-'98 school year, were surveyed as to the reason(s) they withdrew from Basic Skills programming. This research, however, will only focus on level I courses. Lots of transitioning occurs throughout the division, and within MATC many of the students registered students in levels II and III are often registered in other areas of the college. This factor would make it difficult for programmers to identify true non-returning Basic Skills students. The study, therefore, looked at enrollment figures for the adult student population registered in Basic Skills classes during the 1997 fall semester, and those who had not returned to Basic Skills programming after June of 1998. This population of students became the focus of the investigation and the source from which research data was derived.

Research data, gathered through the investigative study, should provide useful information in the design and implementation of a model that Community Based instructors could use--- as a tool for improving student retention rates at their sites.

The research design is descriptive in format. It appeared to be the most plausible and comprehensive way in which to compile a profile outlining elements surrounding poor retention and high attrition rates within the division and the college. It is believed that the empirical data gathered might be useful in identifying, monitoring, and changing factors that encumber students from remaining in programs. The empirical data supplied through surveying provided the most cost affective and reliable means for addressing the problems that the CTD faces in maintaining student enrollments.

Research Design

The descriptive study, as proposed, involved a two-step process. Both telephone interviews and mailed surveys were used to capture information regarding students' perceived opinions about what is needed in order to make retention rates better. Telephone interviews, although not very discreet, saved response time. It also enabled the interviewers to obtain more detailed information about causes. The mailed surveys were sent out to create a data file of students who were less sedentary. Many students in Basic Skills programming appear to be quite transient. This affected the researcher's ability to gather more than the expected 10% of responses. Most importantly, surveys provided a format for investigating drop-out rates of those adult students formally enrolled in Basic Skills (BS) levels I classes. Those levels compute to grade equivalents as follows: level I = grade levels 0-5.9 (beginning). Rosters from 1997-98, were used because they provided the most recent occurrences and trends (at the time the survey was

designed) that would be useful in the monitoring of enrollment and termination patterns. Variables for this study were captured by survey, which led to an understanding of where classes were held, and gave introduction to programming (how the student became aware of the program). Variables also included the courses in which the students were enrolled, including class meeting times. The gender/sex, age, nationality, employment status and hours worked, long- and short-range goals, completion rate pertaining to goals, barriers preventing completion of goals, and any accomplishments that were made was also asked in order to gain a better understanding of the students' willingness to share information. This information was useful in the computation and accuracy of the data received.

Instrument Development

This section on instrument development attempts to outline how the survey questions relate to the study's purpose and intended outcomes. Research questions were developed, in hopes, of identifying factors that cause poor attendance and retention rates within the College Transition Division. The College Transition Division produces annual reports which outline the demographics of the student body it serves; however, there was a need to see how well the sampled survey responders reflected the group (Basic Skills students) as a whole.

Question 1 reflected agency names of Community Based Organizations catering to the needs of the Basic Skills level I student (lowest levels). Question two answered the question as to how recruitment in the agency is done, while questions three and four identified the course(s) taken and class meeting times. Gender/sex, age, and nationality were covered in questions five and six to further identify the sample group of surveyors. Questions eight and nine identified the work schedules of those interviewed, as an

attempt to determine if work schedules and hours worked might account as one possible reason for the alarming numbers of leavers from programs. Questions 10, 11, and 12 identified short and long range goals of program attendees and identified barriers to achieving those goals. These first 12 questions were clearly marked toward identifying factors that appear to affect students' attendance and retention rates (listed as item two under Research Questions). Items three and four of the Research Questions looked for programmatic changes that could be useful for improving student participation and retention rates. That is where survey questions 13 and 14 best recognized the surveyor free expression. Answers were "written in" and concerned the student's personal educational experiences in Basic Skills courses. The hope was that these responses would assist the division in curricula design, thus better meeting the demands of students in formatting instructional delivery systems that would be modifiable and alienable with the working student's life and work schedule.

Lastly, the Likert scale was used to identify 11 factors that relate commonly to the Basic Skills students' educational experiences. The five point scale was used to provide a fair range of preferences (likes and dislikes) of programming. These included a Poor rating (marking much improvement being needed), Adequate (some improvement needed), Good (acceptable/meeting expectations), Excellent (strong and exceeding expectations), and a Do Not Know rating (to capture those not applicable).

Content, instruction, classroom environment, supplies and materials were the first three items rated in an attempt to identify problems in this area. These related most to curricula issues. Feedback regarding progress/grades, availability of the instructor, advising and career counseling, quality of support services, and security issues were also

rated in an attempt to gain specifics on other program issues. Each of these issues are important enough to programming that either might be seen as a potential hazard or peril to programming. It was, therefore, necessary to use these factors to gain a better handle on the poor attrition being experienced by the department/division.

Pilot Study

As a pilot study, three Basic Skills level 1 students were given the questionnaire to determine readability and the time that would be needed to complete the survey. It was determined that the questionnaire could be completed with relative ease. Furthermore, the cover letter would provide necessary information, enabling the struggling student to contact me for clarification. From the information gathered, it appeared that there were no problems that would cause question to the feasibility, accuracy, or integrity of the study.

Methods for Selection of Subjects

Subjects chosen for this study were randomly selected from a list of over 1440 former Basic Skills level I students that were formerly enrolled, but presently not listed in the COSMO computer data based records as being enrolled. This information, along with addresses and phone numbers were provided by Client Services. Eight hundred of these students were chosen randomly by an associate not connected with the College Transition Division.

Questionnaire Sample

A sample of the questionnaire will be provided in the appendix, along with the actual surveys completed and returned for the purpose of the investigation.

Field Procedures

Questionnaires were initially mailed to 500 students, however, many were returned undeliverable. Each survey returned undeliverable prompted another mailing. Self-addressed, stamped envelopes were sent along with the questionnaires, in hopes, that students would respond. The cover page gave simple instructions to clarify purpose and intent of the questionnaire. The cover letter is also included in the Appendix A.

Data Collecting and Recording

The questionnaire was developed to obtain data for the research. The hope was that it would capture information about attrition rates for level I Basic Skills students. The questionnaire, sent out to 800 students, was also helpful in aiding the registration department to update files, and will, hopefully, assist in recruitment and retention efforts. The first part of the questionnaire, as previously indicated, was designed to gain demographic information of the responding population of students surveyed. The students were asked to provide personal information regarding their age, gender, employment status, the courses that they chose to enroll in, the center/site where classes were held, and other information which could provided an overview of the population of “leavers” from the program. In the second part of the questionnaire survey, students were asked to respond to questions that related to the quality of instruction and programming provided to them during the time that they were registered and attending classes. The survey also asked for strengths, areas needing improvement, and suggestions for aiding in restructuring of the academic and support services involved in Basic Skills programming. The scale rated student expectation as they related to the student’s educational experience in Basic Skills programming. The Likert scale provided the best means for gauging

program strengths and weaknesses, the number 1 indicated great need for improvement. The score proceeded upward in strengths, with 4 indicating the highest praise, and 5 impartial rating.

Again, there were sections of the questionnaire which enabled students to provide more detailed feedback regarding their own personal experiences, needs, and desires of Basic Skills programming.

Lastly, there was information provided to the surveyors indicating how to best retrieve information about the survey's authenticity and usefulness, and in test results. In those scenarios, the student could request the information from either the surveyor, the College Transition Division, or the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Methodology Assumptions

Assumptions made in respect to the survey included the following:

1. Questionnaires were answered truthfully, and regarded to assisting in the improvement of Basic Skills programming.
2. There would be no harm to students responding to the survey.
3. That Basic Skills programming could greatly benefit from survey results, aiding in better recruitment and retention efforts, improved educational programming, and follow-up (exit interviewing and tracking).

Accuracy Precautions

The survey questionnaire was reviewed by MATC Attorney, William Roden, College Transition Division's Dean, Dr. Cheryl Mayes, and Vice President of Academic Affairs and Director of Research, Planning, and Development, Dr. Tony Baez to make

sure that questions did not infringe upon students' rights. Furthermore, students' personal information is not voluntarily given for research purposes, approval had to be given by the each of the above mentioned parties before information pertaining to students' personal information could be provided. Afterwards, data was reviewed, processed, and analyzed by Ms. Christine Ness of UW-Stout's Computer Information Center.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations, as noted, include:

1. Not all of the objectives, as noted in earlier chapters, could be answered based on the questions and answers provided on the questionnaire.
2. There was a lag in the study's timeframe for obtaining and sending out the survey. This may have affected the researcher's ability to obtain more surveys.
3. The study was very broad, trying to capture information as to why students leave programming prior to completion of their goals, and also focusing on how to better retain students. And, there may be other factors, which might have proven more plausible to either or both of the areas, yet were not captured in the survey. This perhaps was the greatest limitation.
4. A committee composing of instructors outstationed at the Community Based Organizations had not been formed to examine findings.
5. Correspondence sent to students were often returned to the college undeliverable. Milwaukee area residents tend to be transitory and people change addresses and phone numbers without giving notice to the college. This provided the need for surveying a greater number of people.

Research Questions, Data Processing, and Analysis

Sample groups used represented nearly 40% of the Department's entire Basic Skills population. Internal Basic Skills classes and levels II and III have also realized a dramatic loss of students, however, the survey focused on the largest group, experiencing poor retention. It might shed some light as to why students leave.

Several new options in scheduling have been implemented in hopes of capturing lost pupils, however, information revealed through personal accounts may be most useful in helping internal programmers and external instructors to tackle the college's retention problem. Statistical results will be discussed in Chapters IV and V.

Summary

The data used is reflective of that retrieved from student satisfaction surveys regarding potential factors students believed affected their ability to remain in classes. Data reflecting the overall climate of this survey might be published in the College Transition Division's Fact Book, and researchers in Research and Development might find the information insightful and useful in some of their publications. Furthermore, the retention and attrition problems are not foreign to other divisions/departments within the college. Students who drop from other departments also experience many of the same social and economic pressures as do students within the College Transition Division, but, possibly on a lower scale. However, seeing that one of the school's goals is to improve retention rates within departments and the college overall, the survey's findings might be discerning.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chapter IV includes information relative to the data collected, and its relationship with the study's objectives. The description of the statistical data/information is presented in narrative form, and this chapter includes tables to illustrate an analysis of the questions and the results as listed on the questionnaire. Again, the population in this study included those College Transition Division Basic Skills level I students that had been enrolled in Basic Skills programming during the 1997-1998 school year, but had not returned to Basic Skills programming. The grade level equivalent of the level I student is grade 0 through grade 5, after 9 months (Department of Public Instruction designation). This is our beginning, or lowest, levels of Basic Skills programming. Results used in this chapter were calculated from the 22 responses (less than a three percent response rate) received. Again, there were 800 surveys mailed. Many of the attempted deliveries to former students were unsuccessful. Over 60 percent of the mailers were returned undeliverable because students had moved and had not left forwarding addresses or phone numbers. Other students had chosen not to return surveys because of the time involved. Time was of the essence, and survey forms were forwarded to Ms. Christine Ness. Using the 22 survey forms received, Ms. Ness was able to calculate the results. The tables and statistical results reported in this chapter were derived from UW-Stout's computer system, located in Menomonie, Wisconsin.

The first question on the survey provided information regarding the location of the education programs. There are 30 out-stationed centers, the downtown campus, West, North, and South campuses that hold classes for level 1 courses. Responses

received were predominately MATC downtown campus students, however, also represented the YWCA, Lao Family, MATC West Allis, Benedict Center, Esperanza Unida, Spanish Center, Hope House, Job Center South, Saint Gall Adult Learning Center, South Campus, and SER Jobs. Table 1 identifies how each student came to learn of Basic Skills programming at these particular sites.

Table 1

Question Relating to How the Student Learned of the Basic Skills Program

<u>Channel</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Friend	3	13.6	13.6
Relative	2	9.1	22.7
Counselor	2	9.1	31.8
Flier	1	4.5	36.4
Teacher	3	13.6	50.0
On Own	10	45.5	95.5
Agency Referral	1	4.5	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Table 2 represents courses taken by Basic Skills students. This information is useful in helping to identify where the greatest need is. More than 50 percent of students responding to the survey were enrolled in two or more disciple areas. This information may provide clues for how programming should be structured, and eliminate the need to provide teachers in specified disciplines. Teachers able to teach more than one subject area might become greater assets to the division.

Table 2

Question Relating to the Course(s) Respondents Were Registered

<u>Course</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
1 English	3	13.6	13.6
2 Math	5	22.7	36.4
English/Math Combo	12	54.5	90.9
Eng/Math/Comm	2	9.1	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Table 3 reflects the total number of hours that students responding to the survey attended classes. Fifty percent of the respondents participated in Basic Skills programming during the morning hours. Afternoon classes proved to be less popular than evening classes; and, notably, less than nine percent of respondents were interested in attending classes all day.

Table 3

Question Relating to the Times That Courses Ran

<u>Meeting Times</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
1 Mornings	11	50	22.7
2 Afternoons	4	18.2	68.2
3 Evenings	5	22.7	90.9
1 & 2 Combo	1	4.5	95.5
1 & 3 Combo	1	4.5	100
Total responses	22	100	100

The greatest number of respondents, to the survey, were unmistakably female (See Table 9). This data is consistent with the numbers of female participants actually enrolled in Basic Skills programming. Although responders were few, statistical data captured in Table 4 tended to be consistent with other demographic data retrieved from the group as a whole.

Table 4

Gender of the Respondents

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Male	5	22.7	22.7
Female	17	77.3	100.0
Total responses	22	100	100.0

Table 5 illustrates a breakdown of the age category of respondents. Five category intervals were chosen. The number of responders as identified, and percentages have been totaled. Invariably, the trend is finding that Basic Skills programming is most sought after by the older, mature adult. Sixty percent of the responders were reflected in this age group.

Table 5

Age Span of the Respondents

<u>Age</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
18-20 years old	1	4.5	4.8
21-24 years old	3	13.6	19.0
25-29 years old	3	13.6	33.3
30-39 years old	6	27.3	61.9
40 or older	8	36.4	100
Total responses	21	95.4	95.4

Table 6 comprises the ethnicity makeup of the responders to this survey. Twenty-one of the twenty-two surveyors responded to this question. Again these numbers fall close to the population numbers served. The Basic Skills programs provide equal accessibility and practices for students regardless of creed, nationality, race, or disability. As reflected in survey results, the largest ethnic group to respond comes from the African-American population. Although the Hispanic population is the second largest

group represented in the division, they responded less frequently in this survey than did the Asian student. The Asian population is expected to surpass the Hispanic population in frequency numbers (for enrollment purposes) due to larger numbers of people relocating to the Milwaukee Area.

Table 6

Ethnicity of Responders

<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Black	14	63.6	66.7
Asian	4	18.2	85.7
Hispanic	2	9.1	95.2
White	1	4.5	100.
<u>Total responses</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>95.4</u>	<u>95.4</u>

Tables 7 and 8 sought to identify working schedules or patterns of work for responders. Over forty percent of the responders worked full-time and less than 20 percent are unemployed. This pattern shows an attraction to courses among the working class population. This might indicate a need for programmers to design class schedules/courses around working people's schedules or those who might possibly be seeking to improve upon their work/life conditions.

Table 7

Work Habits of Surveyors

<u>Employment</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Employed Full-time	9	40.9	47.4
Unemployed Seeking	3	13.6	63.2
Employed Part-time	3	13.6	78.9
Unemployed Not Seeking	4	18.2	100.0
Total responses	19	86.3	86.3

Forty percent of responders work full-time. Plausibly, a less flexible work schedule may lend to the need for a more flexible class schedule offering.

Table 8

Total Hours Worked Per Week

<u>Hours worked</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
16-20	1	4.5	8.3
21-34	2	9.1	25.0
35 or more	9	40.9	100.0
Total responses	12	54.5	54.5

Forty-one percent of responders identified in Table 9s question, regarding intended goals, were seeking to participate in either GED or HSED programming. Basic Skills programming seeks to increase skill levels to a point where this goal might become achievable, however, it is not a primary goal for programming. This might indicate a need to incorporate a “wrap-around” program in conjunction with the Adult High School Division, and/or to have better coordination with that division in course design.

Table 9

Goals Identified as GED/HSED Classes/Courses

<u>(GED/HSED Courses)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
GED/HSED Courses	9	40.9	42.9
No/Not Checked	12	54.5	100.0
Total responses	21	95.4	95.4

Table 10 reflects the number of students indicating a need to “pone-up” in particular skill areas in order to take tests for the particular GED/HSED testing. This number is relatively low. Most students enrolled appear to have wanted to begin programming for the GED/HSED courses prior to test taking.

Table 10

Goals Identified as GED/HSED Testing

<u>(GED/HSED testing)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
GED/HSED Testing	8	36.4	38.1
No/Not Checked	12	59.1	100.0
Total responses	20	90.9	90.9

Eighty-six percent of responders were enrolled in Basic Skills programming in hope of increasing their skill levels (See Table 11). This might explain why retention is poor and attrition is great.

Table 11

Goals/Purpose: Increasing Skill Levels

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	2	9.1	9.5
No/Not Checked	19	86.4	100
Total responses	21	95.4	95.4

Less than ten percent of the level I responders as shown in Table 12, appeared to have been placed in Basic Skills programming after seeking to gain entrance into the collegiate/academic programming at Milwaukee Area Technical College. Generally, students performing at these lower level, recognize that they have a need for remediation/Basic Skills programming, therefore, programming goals at this juncture appear to align with program goals and outcomes. Students generally know that assistance is needed, however, they may not be aware of the process for achieving higher goals. Students are required to take a placement test (Accuplacer) before being admitted into the college. Remediation is suggested for students who do not score at the suggested levels for entrance.

Table 12

Goals/Purpose: Passing the Accuplacer

<u>(Pass Accuplacer)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	2	9.1	9.5
No/Not Checked	19	86.4	100
Total responses	21	95.4	95.4

According to the data reflected in Table 13, it is not likely that participants enrolled in courses had chosen Basic Skills programming as a venue for achieving employment.

Table 13

Goals/Purpose: Obtaining Employment

<u>(Obtain Employment)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	2	9.1	9.5
No/Not Checked	19	86.4	100
Total responses	21	95.4	95.4

Other identified goals were not ascertained in the study. With less than ten percent responding that other goals were present, there may not be a great need for concern here (see Table 14). Other goals may be of a personal nature and of little consequence to programming.

Table 14

Other Goals Identified

<u>(Other Goals)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	2	9.1	9.5
No/Not Checked	19	86.4	100
Total responses	21	95.4	95.4

Responders were asked if intended goals had been met (see Table 15). More often than reasonable, the answer was no. One could assume that goals were not met because programming had not been completed, however, that information is not detailed here. Nearly, 82 percent of responders did not meet their identified goals. Perhaps programmers might address the question of how best to assist students in achieving their personal goals through the curriculum design.

Table 15

Goals Achieved?

<u>(Goals Completed?)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes	4	18.2	18.2
No	18	81.8	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Barriers were identified as a means for targeting the real problems in retaining students, as shown in Table 16. Family illnesses accounted for a fraction of a cause, yet

it proves to be less of a concern for people who are more likely than not to complete programming.

Table 16

Family Illness Identified as Barrier

<u>(Family Illness)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	3	13.6	13.6
No/Not Checked	19	86.4	100.0
Total responses	22	100	100.0

Personal illness, as identified in Table 17, appeared to have little consequence on programming completion. Less than 14 percent of responders were affected by failing health issues.

Table 17

Personal Illness Identified as a Barrier

<u>(Personal Illness)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	3	13.6	13.6
No/Not Checked	19	86.4	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Money appeared to have some affect on students' abilities to attend courses and complete programming (See results in Table 18). More than 31 percent of responders believed that their financial state of affairs hindered their progression.

Table 18

Money Problems Identified as a Barrier to Success

<u>(Money Problem)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	7	31.8	31.8
No/Not Checked	15	68.2	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Participants were asked to indicate whether or not content and/or instruction had played a part in obstructing their progression. Table 19 shows that less than five percent of responders found content and instruction problematic.

Table 19

Content and/or Instruction Identified as a Barrier to Achieving Goals

<u>(Content/Instruction)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	1	4.5	4.5
No/Not Checked	21	95.5	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Job scheduling conflicts, as identified on Table 21, shows that almost 20 percent of responders believe that their work schedules interfered with their ability to attend classes. This might account for the high numbers of students who fail to complete programming. Flexibility in course design may prove paramount.

Table 20

Conflicts in Work Schedules Identified as a Barrier to Success

<u>(Job Conflict)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	4	18.2	18.2
No/Not Checked	18	81.8	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Table 20 possibly captures the single working mother that has not been able to successfully juggle work and class schedules, and childcare needs. Nearly 32 percent identified childcare as an obstacle.

Table 21

Childcare Problems Identified as a Hindrance to Achieving Goals

<u>(Childcare Problems)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	7	31.8	31.8
No/Not Checked	15	68.2	100
<u>Total responses</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

Less than 20 percent of responders identified transportation as a reason for not continuing programming. Milwaukee is a large metropolitan area with great mass transit. Furthermore, MATC has done well in placing classes in centers where programming might meet their students.

Table 22

Lack of Transportation as a Barrier to Achieving Set Goals

<u>(Lack of Transportation)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	4	18.2	18.2
No/Not Checked	18	81.8	100
<u>Total responses</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

Table 23 indicated that conflict with other students tended to be of no concern to the responders of this survey. None of the responders identified this as a barrier to their completion goals.

Table 23

Personal Conflicts With Students Identified as a Barrier to Achieving Goals

<u>(Conflicts w/ Students)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
No/Not Checked	22	100	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Less than twenty percent of responders, as identified in table 24, revealed personal problems as a “player” in hindering completion goals.

Table 24

Other Problems Identified as a Barrier to Students Achieving Their Intended Goals

<u>(Other Personal Problem)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	4	18.2	18.2
No/Not Checked	18	81.8	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Table 25 outlines a lack of concern to the possibility that conflicts existing with teachers happen at a rate that would hinder students being able to achieve programming goals. The figure of less than five percent is very low, indicating that conflicts of this nature do not exist to a point where programming and/or goal completion would be affected.

Table 25

Conflict With the Instructor Identified as the Reason For Not Attaining Goals

<u>(Conflict w/Instructor)</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cum. %</u>
Yes/Checked	1	4.5	4.5
No/Not Checked	21	95.5	100
Total responses	22	100	100

Summary of Statistical Data

Several assumptions have been made conclusive to the summary data compiled, assumptions and theories, which will be discussed in detail later in Chapter V. First of all, there exists the assumption that the summary data received is reflective of the total student population presently enrolled in Basic Skills level I classes. Demographically, the numbers mirror the population served, and also reflect the student population of level I students at the time research was compiled, however, there remains the fact that there were fewer than the anticipated ten percent of responders to the questionnaire. The survey's reliability quotient may not be affected as much as its validness. The saving grace is that the survey's validity may only be affected in its inability to be unmistakable in identifying factors affecting students' attendance and retention rates. The summary data was interesting and strong enough to support a theory and a thesis, therefore, the study continued forward. As a result, the summary data, undeniably, had to be examined closely so as to connect and relate issues, explain occurrences, and to account for those things appearing to affect programming and goal completion. After all, Chapter IV, was designed to provide summary data that would be conclusive in providing clues for any potential program changes that might be useful for improving retention rates in the CTD's Basic Skills department, and particularly in the Community Based Organizations. So, what program changes are necessary to bring about change in the division? Well, in order to answer this question another assumption had to be made avowing that strategies could be and should be employed to increase student retention. This is the documentation that consummates Chapter V. Later, Chapter V will look at this documentation and at the assumptions made, as described, and theorize on a quest to

bring about change that purposes to lose less students to attrition, thus, retaining them long enough to complete personal, academic, and programming goals.

Lastly, Chapter V will attempt to summarize, and make reasonable, conclusive recommendations using the statistical data presented in this chapter. The hope is that the data collected will be circumscribed in a manner that would be useful to the department, division, and other areas of the college or district. And, that the suggestions given will provide conclusive results that other divisions might find interesting enough to use in their plans to promote, strategize, and better retain students.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION

Basic Skills programming in the Wisconsin Technical College System has long focused on lifelong learning; education for economic development; and services for groups that formerly had less access to education, including women and minorities. Special assistance has also been given to assisting the unemployed, displaced homemakers, and those with literacy problems. As designated by the Wisconsin Technical College System Board, MATC's technical programming framework provides developmental programs to aid students in upgrading skills needed to succeed in their degree or technical programs of choice. The College Transition Division (CTD) has been identified as one of those areas to provide developmental education programming. In addition to assisting in academics, the CTD is also established to improve the college's minority access and retention. In order to do this, however, the College Transition Division had to first address its problem of poor retention and high attrition. This became the basis for this study.

Level I students were identified in the Basic Skills programming department, then those who had not returned after the 1997-98 school year were surveyed to determine factors which may have inhibited their participation. The hope was that in doing so, problem areas could be isolated and solutions could be derived to combat the issues surrounding high attrition and poor retention within the department, division, and the college. Chapter V summarizes the findings identified in Chapter IV, traces the conclusive results, and provides recommendations for resolution.

Restatement of the Problem

The main purpose of this investigative study was to identify factors hindering the progression and success of formally enrolled Basic Skills levels I students and particularly those enrolled in the outreach sites. The research data, gathered through the investigative study, provided a format for the design and implementation of the model outlined in the recommendations, one that could be utilize for improving student retention rates.

Methods and Procedures

Demographics regarding the physical composition of the students served in Basic Skills programming are captured through client reporting forms. It is expected that programming will fall in line with guidelines set forth by the college's vision and mission statements and with State guidelines, and that it will be legal and ethical. Evaluation, attendance, and student participation is not a major issue when determining factors relating to retention and attrition. However, instructional methods support evaluation methods, which measure performance objectives of students, and those can only be measured of the students who are retained. It is important that students are clear about expectations and about how to transfer learned skills, then they can buy into the process. So, this justified a need for evaluation. There are several ways to understand the need for evaluation. There has to be a measure for identifying if we are doing what we say we are doing. Every prerequisite and every objective should be relative to what we measure. It is also imperative that the institution maintain a plan for consistency throughout the

college as well. The Center for Continuous Quality Improvement maintains a position in assessing institutional effectiveness, responding to the needs of the community, and checking to see if we actually do what we say we do, however, their emphasis is on providing demographics which measure things that can be seen. For instance, they can chart how minorities move through the system, yet, they cannot measure why they fail to continue to that point. The method and procedures chosen to capture those demographics in Basic Skills, which contribute to the high dropout rates, were descriptive in format. The empirical data that was supplied through surveying provided the most cost effective and reliable way of capturing data and addressing problems relative to retention and attrition of students enrolled in the College Transition Division. The majority of the surveys were captured through a questionnaire that was mailed to previous students of Basic Skills programming. The surveys captured data relating to perceived opinions of what hindered students from achieving their short- and long-range goals, identified those things which might aid programming, and researched and investigated ways to inhibit the high drop out rates in the future. Telephone interviews were used to update students' records. Students move often and it is hard to track them. Mailed surveys were introduced by this method. This enabled an opportunity to clarify the goals and objectives of the study. Unfortunately, only 22 of the 800 surveys mailed were returned completed. The perceived quality of programming, availability of resources, and quality of the facilities were captured along with students' perceived comfort or discomfort level with Basic Skills programming overall.

Major Findings

Overall, the demographic information compiled in Chapter IV mirrors the student population enrolled in Basic Skills programming at MATC-Milwaukee. The study attempted to identify strengths of programming and areas needing improvements, as perceived by the student population captured. The hope was that students could shed light on the reasons why they were not completing programming, although the need for remediation was present. There are 30 out-stationed agencies that run Basic Skills classes. The study's results suggest that these classes are widely publicized in the community and that programming is necessary in agencies that provide wrap-around services. The greatest need for programming appears to be for students that are in need of a combination of math and English skills. Morning classes were favored and programming consisted mainly of female students that were 30 years of age or older. The largest ethnic group captured was African-American, followed by the Hispanic, and Asian populations. More than 40% of the responders work full-time. The greatest need for programming appeared among the population of students who were interested in just increasing skill levels. The assumption is generally made that students entering Basic Skills programming are interested in obtaining advanced degrees or GED programming. This theory was not supported by the study's results. Goals that were not generally met were identified through the survey. Barriers hindering student progression were identified and did cover a range of areas. Most commonly, students were plagued by either financial or childcare problems, or they lacked transportation. On a good note for

Basic Skills programming, it appeared that students were most often satisfied with the content of curricula being offered and with instruction.

Conclusions

This part of the research attempts to draw conclusive results based on findings developed from the surveys that were received. The answers are narrated and attempt to answer questions that were identified as problem areas to be probed. The first of the objectives sought to identify, through separate research, what was presently being done in the division and in the college to identify students who had either dropped Basic Skills courses or progressed into other areas of the college. Another part of this was to monitor how students were tracked. At the time that the study was developed, several initiatives had been used to capture students' whereabouts. Generally, surveys developed relied on Basic Skills instructors to provide information about student progression and increased skill levels, but failed to identify why students had not completed programming. New initiatives are being developed by the Research and Development Division, under the direction of Dr. Tony Baez, to do a better job at identifying where students go when they leave Basic Skills. The research, proposed by Dr. Baez, seeks to do a better job at transitioning students into occupational and academic programming in other areas of the college. The findings might prove beneficial to the college for many reasons. First, the Basic Skills area becomes a pool that other departments can pull from, students are effectively tracked and assisted into areas that interest them, and there is more comprehensive programming that better equips students for their intended career choices. This study, however, sought to identify factors that appear to affect students' attendance

and retention rates in the Basic Skills area. It also intended to identify strengths and weaknesses in programming that might have usefulness for improving retention rates in the CTD's Basic Skills department and particularly the Community Based Organizations. Lastly, from the results, a plan could be chartered and executed that would identify strategies to increase student retention and lower the high level of attrition.

It is apparent, from the survey findings, that there needs to be an on-going process for identifying students and tracking them through the system. First of all, students entering Basic Skills programming must be correctly placed and instruction must relate to intended goals. This will ensure that students are getting what they need to progress. Better records and collaboration with students should increase cooperation and retention. Students placed in the appropriate track know what is expected of them, and are sure to fair better than those that are placed in general programming. Another component to be considered is tracking students once they are on given a track.

Because students generally move often, it is necessary to frequently mail response cards to students to maintain contact. This appears to be a costly venture, however, one that is paramount in tracking students in the future. Students that come into Basic Skills programming generally end up changing addresses prior to completing Basic Skills programming. The mailers, as previously discussed, will enable the college to maintain contact with students and provide better counseling and academic services to students needing assistance. There are a number of social agencies that may be utilized to assist in student retention efforts. These relationships with other communities are sure to be strengthened. Lastly, there needs to be a comprehensive plan and study that will continue

to chart the progress of the proposed plan. This study will need to have several personnel involved, if the efforts are to grow to fruition. The rationale for repeat and continuation of studies to support programming is identified in the next section. The hope is that in doing so a clearly delineated plan for action may be executed.

There are many factors that seem to promote attrition. Retention rates are low, affecting programming and funding, and students operating on the lower levels appear to become discouraged easily. It was suggested in the previous section that studies of this nature continue on a regular basis, as a means of maintaining contact and good customer service with the students of Basic Skills. The results of this study might prove beneficial in its attempt to reverse the poor retention rates experienced in the College Transition Division. This study would need to be supported by planning done at the point of entry through academic advising.

Instructors in the College Transition Division have developed a more comprehensive Academic Advising Form that intends to identify what students' short- and long-range goals are. This will aid the instructors with curricula design. Students will be tracked into the areas that they choose and programming will provide a ladder of distinction for those wishing to go into specific occupational areas. It will be easier to track whether students were able to transition into specific areas. Goals will be clearly drawn and expectations will be stated for students. The counseling department will work with those students who have identified specific occupational, technical, or academic areas. As a result, staff may be better able to design curricula which will meet the demands of the students, facilitate course meeting times for special conferences, and format instructional delivery systems so that they are modifiable and alienable with

students' life and work schedules. The process described may not be limited to the College Transition Division's Basic Skills department. The retention strategies described in this study may be useful in other departments experiencing the same types of problems with student retention and attrition.

Of course, any program changes that are derived as a result of the study might only have a marginal effect on the division's retention and attrition problem after the first year. However, a closely monitor program generally produces results after the second year. This is the hope.

Continuous Quality Improvement is necessary if student retention is to be addressed, changes and new strategies will always be part of the equation to keep up with the times, technology, needs of the students, and the needs of the workplace.

Recommendations

There are many implications for the future that include future research, action to be taken by staff, faculty, and administration. And there are surly new educational practices that will take root as a result of this study. These recommendations attempt to identify strategies that can be chartered and executed and bring about change within the area of Basic Skills, within the college, and throughout the district. Hopefully, this model can be used to attract students and continued interest in the college and in academe.

Recommendations Relative to This Study

Among those reasons that students identified as hindrances or barriers to achieving their short- and/or long-term goals, the following topped the list: Financial difficulties, childcare conflicts, transportation problems, health problems, and personal problems. If these problems are identified earlier in the process, there might be more that

can be done in the form of providing counseling and connecting students to the appropriate social services agencies. MATC has many partnerships with agencies in the community. These partnerships are well established and remain strong. A program that includes and incorporates social services agencies with “wrap-around” programming, will surely strengthen existing relationships and provide additional avenues and resources for our students.

Recommendations for Further Study

On-going research and comprehensive programming, as suggested, must be put in place and supported by faculty, staff, and administrators. Furthermore, studies of this magnitude must be underwritten financially by the college. The research provided in this study, on a very small scale, became quite expensive. Surveys were sent out to capture more conclusive data regarding the possible factors that cause poor attrition rates. However, less than the expected ten percent of surveyors returned the questionnaires. Nearly 60% of the surveys mailed out were returned undeliverable. Milwaukee remains a very transit, urban area. Students move frequently and change addresses and jobs regularly with little notice. It is difficult to obtain conclusive results under strained conditions as these. So, in the future, when one poses the question and attempts to answer what factors appear to hindered students’ future plans for instruction, and what prevents students from continuing in programs, information can be pulled immediately because better tracking and collaboration aids the college in this process.

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APPENDIX A

COVER LETTER

January 12, 2000

Dear former Basic Skills student,

In order to provide continuous quality improvement to Basic Skills classes, I would like your help in gathering data that will help to identify program strengths and areas needing improvement. Any other insights that you may have regarding your educational experience in Basic Skills classes might also be helpful. Please complete the enclosed, confidential survey, and return it to me in the addressed, stamped envelope that has been provided for you, on or before **January 31, 1999**.

If you have questions regarding this survey, please call me Monday through Friday at (414) 297-7326, between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.

Your assistance in helping to create an atmosphere conducive to learning and that meet the needs of students is appreciated.

Thank you,

Dorothea Macon,

Academic Support Specialist
College Transition Division

Enclosures: Student survey
Addressed, stamped envelope

cc: Dr. Cheryl Mayes, Dean Dr. Tony Baez, Vice President
 College Transition Division Research and Development
 Mr. James Campbell, Assistant Dean
 College Transition Division

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

**College Transition Division's
Student Survey #3**

Please provide the following information about yourself and your class by checking the appropriate response.

1. Where were your classes held?

2. How did you hear about the Basic Skills classes?

- a. Friend b. Relative c. Counselor d. Flier e. Teacher
 f. Newspaper g. On my own i. Agency referral

3. In which course(s) were you enrolled?

- a. English b. Math c. Communications

4. What time did your class meet? a. Mornings b. Afternoons c. Evenings

5. What is your Gender/Sex? a. Male b. Female

6. What is your Age? a. 18-20 b. 21-24 c. 25-29 d. 30-39 e. over 40

7. What is your nationality?

- a. Black b. Asian c. Hispanic d. Native American e. White

8. Do you work? If so, what is your employment status?

- a. Employed full-time b. Unemployed, seeking employment
 c. Employed part-time d. Unemployed, not seeking employment

9. If employed, how many hours do you work a week?

- a. 1-10 b. 11-15 c. 16-20 d. 21-34 e. 35 or more

10. What were your short or long range goals?

- a. Begin GED or Adult High School courses
 b. Complete testing for the GED or HSED
 c. Increase skill levels
 d. Pass Accuplacer test and/or gain entrance into MATC
 e. Obtain employment

___f. Other, _____

11. Did you complete your goals while enrolled in Basic Skills? ___a. Yes ___b. No

12. What barriers do you feel may have kept you from achieving your goals?

- ___a. Family illness ___e. Job conflict ___h. Conflicts with students
___b. Personal illness ___f. Childcare problems ___i. Other personal problem
___c. Money problems ___g. No transportation ___j. Conflicts w/instructor
___d. Course content/instruction (What was being taught)

13. What things did you learn in class that were helpful to you?

14. What do you think might help us to improve MATC's Basic Skills classes?

On a scale from 1-5, please rate the following factors as they relate to your educational experience at the center:

1-Poor/Much Improvement Needed

4-Excellent/Strong, exceeds expectations

2-Adequate/Some Improvement Needed

5-Do not know

3-Good/Acceptable, meets expectations

Expectation

Rating

1. Quality of work given (content)	1	2	3	4	5
2. Quality of teaching (instruction)	1	2	3	4	5
3. Classroom environment	1	2	3	4	5
4. Classroom supplies/books	1	2	3	4	5
5. Manner in which objectives were communicated	1	2	3	4	5
6. Feedback given regarding progress/grades	1	2	3	4	5

7. Availability of the instructor during class	1	2	3	4	5
8. Availability of the instructor after class	1	2	3	4	5
9. Advising provided on career choices	1	2	3	4	5
10. Quality of support services from MATC	1	2	3	4	5
11. Security provided against theft and assaults	1	2	3	4	5

Human Research Subjects Sample Consent Form

I understand that by returning this questionnaire that I am giving my permission to participate as a volunteer in this study. I understand the purpose of the study and understand that there are no risks to me. I also understand the potential benefits that that will come from my helping in this study. I am aware that the information is being sought in a specific manner so that I will not have to give my name or address (no identifiers are needed) and so that confidentiality is guaranteed. I realize that I have the right to refuse to participate and that I can withdraw at anytime during the study.

Note: Questions or concerns about participation in the research should be addressed to Dorothea Macon at (414) 297-7326, and then to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI, 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.