

**AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS
IMPLEMENTED IN A RURAL ALBERTA HIGH SCHOOL**

by

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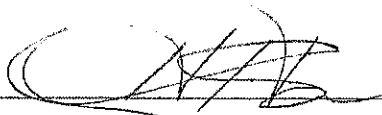
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Abstract

For over 50 years, schools across North America have implemented a variety of alternative education programs to help address the needs of students who have struggled in traditional school settings. Students who do not complete high school often experience a variety of psychological and social challenges, and there may be a negative impact on the economy. This study examines an alternative education program that was designed to help at-risk students successfully complete high school. The staff used a flexible approach that focused on individualized programming, modified classroom rules, relationship building, and student-paced learning. Seven students in a rural Alberta high school participated in this study. Each student had attended traditional schools in the past, but attended the alternative education program during the 2014-15 school year. The study compares the number of credits completed by each student over the course of two school years. The two years compared were the 2013-14 school year and the 2014-15 school year, while attending the alternative program. The results of the study show that, on average, the students completed more credits while attending the alternative program. The majority of the students completed more than enough credits in the alternative program to be on pace to complete a high school diploma in three years. From the results of this study, it can be concluded that the flexible approach used in the alternative program was able to successfully meet the unique needs of the at-risk students who attended the program. Future research in the field of alternative education may want to focus on the transition of at-risk students back to traditional schools.

Keywords: alternative education, at-risk students, flexible programming, relationship building, individualized programming, student-paced learning, and student-directed learning

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**An Alternative Education Program For At-Risk Students
Implemented In A Rural Alberta High School**

Chapter 1

Introduction

Beken, Williams, Combs, and Slate (2009) described at-risk students as those who experience failure or are projected to fail in school. Students who do not feel successful in school often stop attending (Smith & Thomson, 2014). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) estimated that students who do not complete high school have an impact of billions of dollars on the American economy. If these students do not eventually complete high school, they are more likely to experience a number of psychological and social challenges during their lives; these challenges include depression, isolation, addiction, poverty, unemployment, and unhealthy lifestyles (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009). The most effective strategy to meet the needs of students who are at risk of not completing high school, according to Wehlage (1991), is the development of alternative education programs.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) is a program that Alberta Education implemented in 1999. AISI provides funding to provincial school authorities; this funding is for educational projects that are intended to improve the performance and learning of students in Alberta. Gunn, Chorney, and Poulsen (2009) reported on 18 of these projects that focused on high school completion. Among other themes and findings in this report, alternative programming proved to contribute to students' completion of high school. Gunn et al. (2009) found that the successful alternative education programs had a flexible program structure and instructional approaches.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the problems related to at-risk students, the purpose of this study, an explanation of the research and why it is important, and definitions of the terms used in the research.

Background to the Problem

Traditional schools implement classroom programming where one teacher teaches a group of approximately 20-40 students in a classroom. The group of students study and learn specific curricular outcomes at a teacher directed pace. Teachers in a traditional classroom often have specific rules that apply to each student. According to Smith and Thomson (2014), traditional school settings are currently not effective for educating at-risk students, which has resulted in approximately one in three students' failure to complete high school in the United States. Chalker and Stelsel (2009) identified a variety of obstacles that have prevented at-risk students from completing high school, such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse, the difficulty of high student-teacher ratios, abusive or challenging home lives, and social-interaction problems. According to Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin's study (as cited in Knesting, 2008), many at-risk students have had negative experiences in school; they believe that their teachers do not care about them and are not invested in their learning. These students feel that they lack the personal attention and support that they need from school counselors. The results of this study indicated that students also feel that the counselors are too busy or overloaded with work (Altenbaugh et al. as cited in Knesting, 2008).

In a study of an urban high school, Fine (as cited in Knesting, 2008) stated that district policies, disciplinary procedures, and student-teacher interactions contribute to students' failure to complete high school. According to Beken et al. (2009), students do not complete high school because of the cumulative effects of negative experiences in schools that have failed to meet the

needs of at-risk students. Students who are at risk of not graduating need an alternative to traditional schools to meet their needs in a setting that supports their desire to graduate (Smith and Thomson, 2014). Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison (2006) interviewed people between the ages of 16 and 25 who had not completed high school. Most of them believed that they could have succeeded if they had been provided the right opportunity. For example, over 75% of students stated that smaller classes, more individualized instruction, and more time with teachers would have improved their chances of graduating.

Statement of the Problem

According to the Centre for the Study of Living Standards report released in 2007 (as cited in Gunn et al., 2009), the number of students who do not complete high school impacts the labor force participation rate, employment rate, crime, poverty, and health. Satchwell (as cited in Gunn et al., 2009) identified the main factors in the noncompletion of high school in Alberta, Canada; these reasons include gender, First Nations/Métis/Inuit (FNMI) populations, socioeconomic status, and student and school-related issues. Gunn et al. (2009) found that approximately 25% of the students in Alberta, who enter Grade 10, do not complete or graduate from high school within five years; this occurs in a school system that is designed for students to graduate in three years. In response to this problem, the Alberta Commission on Learning ([ACOL] 2003) set a goal of a 90% high school completion rate for Alberta students within four years of their beginning Grade 10. ACOL recommended the use of creative strategies to keep students in school and encouraged the implementation of alternative education programs to accomplish this goal (Gunn et al., 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether an alternative education program that incorporates methods such as student-paced learning, individualized programming, modified classroom rules and expectations, and flexible attendance policies would improve academic achievement. To determine the effectiveness of the alternative program, I compared the credit completion of at-risk students who enrolled in the program between one school year and the next.

Research Question

As Smith and Thomson (2014) outlined, traditional schools have had difficulty meeting the needs of at-risk students. The alternative education program studied in this research study examined the academic achievement of local at-risk students. Prior to this study, no alternative programs were available on the site. I addressed the research question “Can an alternative education program implemented in rural Alberta improve student achievement by increasing the credit completion of high school students who are at risk of not completing high school in three years?”

The alternative education program in this research study differed from traditional programs in many aspects. For example, the program allowed for flexible rules such as allowing students to take breaks when necessary, using a sign-in and sign-out book for students to come into and leave the classroom, using social media websites periodically throughout the day, listening to music with earphones while they were doing schoolwork, wearing a hat in the classroom, adjusting daily schedules to meet students’ needs, and eating in the classroom. All school courses were available online. This allowed students to choose the course they wanted to study at any given time, as well as the amount of time spent on a particular subject area. To

ensure a low teacher-to-student ratio, the capacity of the classroom was limited to 10 students. This condition allowed students the freedom to direct their learning and receive more individualized attention.

Importance of the Study

Smith and Thomson (2014) ascertained that society is negatively affected by the inability of school systems to provide meaningful education to a high number of students. According to Hankivsky (as cited in Smith & Thomson, 2014), nearly half of the population on welfare, as well as almost half of the prison population in many Western countries, are comprised of people who have not completed high school. By creating intentional and successful models of alternative education programs, school systems can minimize the negative societal effects of the noncompletion of high school (Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Beken et al. (2009) stated that policy makers concerned with high school graduation need research data on successful alternative education programs. Similarly, ACOL (2003) recommended that the results of innovative strategies to keep students in school should be shared with other high schools in Alberta (Gunn et al., 2009). Successful aspects of the alternative education program, that I studied, can be shared and implemented in various rural Alberta high schools. The staff in traditional schools and programs might also be interested in learning the effective strategies that the program uses. They might incorporate similar ideas and strategies to help retain at-risk students enrolled in their programs.

The results from this study may offer schools an alternative education model for supporting credit completion. In response to ineffective traditional educational programming for at-risk students, many school systems have developed alternative high school programs (Smith & Thomson, 2014); however, not all alternative programs have successfully met the needs of at-

risk students. It is therefore essential to develop effective models of alternative education programs and “for research in this area to identify sociological, psychological, and pedagogical elements that contribute to the success of an alternative education program” (p. 111). Early identification and intervention can help to counteract the prevalence of at-risk students who do not complete high school (Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Definition of Terms

Assent: Agreement from students to participate in the research study after being properly advised of the format of the study and its potential impact on them. Students who agreed to participate in the study were required to sign their names on an assent form.

At-risk student: A student who is not on pace to complete an Alberta high school diploma in the designed three-year time span.

Informed consent: Agreement from parents to allow their children to participate in the study after being properly advised of the study and its potential impact on the students. Parents who agreed to give consent were required to sign their names on an informed consent form.

Student-paced learning: The students complete their courses online and therefore can work at their own pace. They have access to courses 24 hours per day via the Internet. Although the assignments have recommended due dates, the students are not penalized for handing in their work after the due dates have passed.

Individualized programming: An instructional method whereby the students can choose the course material that they will study during the school day as well as the amount of time spent on any given course. For example, the students could choose to work on a mathematics course for an entire week before they study a different course.

Credit enrolment unit: A method of distributing funds to school divisions for senior high school courses in Alberta. The requirement for receiving an Alberta high school diploma is 100 credits.

Retroactive credit: If students fail a course, they are permitted to take the next sequential course in that subject area. They receive credits for both courses if they pass the higher level of the two courses.

Credit recovery: Students who failed a course in the past and who were allowed to challenge and subsequently pass the final exam to receive course credits.

Carnegie unit: A time-based measure of educational attainment. In traditional Alberta school programs, a minimum of 25 hours of instruction is required for the completion of one high school credit.

Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL): An Alberta committee comprised of a group of educational experts tasked with providing recommendations for the future of Alberta's education system.

Dropout rate: The percentage of students who do not complete or graduate from high school.

Traditional school: One that implements classroom programming in such a way that one teacher teaches a group of approximately 25-40 students in a classroom. The group studies and learns specific curricular outcomes at a set pace that the teacher directs. Typically, students receive some type of penalty, such as a loss of marks, for assignments that they complete after the given due date. The format in the classroom is often stand and deliver. Attendance is recorded daily in traditional classrooms.

Certificate of high school achievement: Awarded to students who complete a minimum of 80 credits. These students enroll in Knowledge and Employability courses (Alberta Education, 2016).

Knowledge and Employability (K&E) courses: Designed for students in Grades 8 to 12 who demonstrate levels of achievement that are two to three grade levels below their age-appropriate level (Alberta Education, 2016).

Alberta high school diploma: Awarded to students who complete a minimum of 100 credits with specific criteria that they must meet in certain subject areas (Alberta Education, 2016).

Scope of the Study

This research study included an examination of an alternative education approach implemented in a rural Alberta high school. The program design was meant to meet the needs of at-risk students, improve student achievement, and increase high school students' credit completion. The study was an analysis of the impact of the alternative education program on at-risk students. To determine the effectiveness of the alternative program, I compared data between two school years. The number of credits that the subjects in the study completed in the 2013-2014 school year was compared to those in the 2014-2015 school year. The students did not complete qualitative information or surveys regarding the aspects of the program that they felt contributed or did not contribute to their success.

Summary

Students who do not complete high school are more likely than their peers to experience negative conditions in life such as poverty, unemployment, public assistance, and imprisonment (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009). Gunn et al. (2009) postulated that the Province of Alberta will suffer

serious economic, social, and political consequences as a result of the high dropout rate in Alberta. To intercept the trend of the failure of at-risk students to complete high school, alternative education programs are needed to help them to overcome their challenges and successfully graduate from high school (Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

I have organized this research study into five chapters. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature that covers important research in the fields of at-risk students, the impacts of the failure to complete high school, and alternative programs that various school divisions across North America have developed and implemented. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology that I used in the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the research study, including a discussion of the statistics and the practical significance of the study. Finally, chapter 5 includes a discussion of the implications of the study and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Chapter 2 is a review of the research studies that have been completed in the area of alternative education programs for at-risk students. In chapter 2, I explore different models of alternative education programs that schools across North America have implemented. Some alternative education programs have been more successful than other programs in helping at-risk students (Smith & Thomson, 2014). The successful programs have commonalities such as flexible classroom rules, online course delivery, low student-to-teacher ratios, student-directed and student-paced learning, small class sizes, individualized programming, and a focus on relationship building (Gunn et al., 2009; Chalker & Stelsel, 2009). This chapter highlights the aspects of alternative education programs that successfully support at-risk students. Further research in the field of alternative education programs for at-risk students will provide insights for educators.

Historical Background

According to Lange and Sletten (2002), the fundamental goal of education is to increase student achievement; however, not all students find success in traditional schools. Currently, one of the biggest issues in education is to find ways to educate all children in America (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Kauffman (as cited in Tissington, 2006) explained that students who struggle academically often resort to misbehavior and do not graduate from high school. Similarly, Smith and Thomson (2014) noted that students who do not feel successful are more likely to stop attending school. Reaching the goal of improving student achievement and addressing the problems of struggling students requires educational choice; furthermore, students do not all learn best in the same educational format (Lange & Sletten, 2002). As society evolves, so too

must the educational system. Students today confront more serious issues and circumstances than they have in the past; issues such as parenting and assisting with family income make it difficult for them to attend and succeed in school (Smith & Thomson, 2014). To deal with the high rate of noncompletion of high school, there is a significant need to serve at-risk students (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

To properly address the wide variety of students' needs, alternative schools or alternative education programs have been established (Tissington, 2006). These programs have continued to evolve since they were implemented in the 1960s, when the focus of the programs was to offer equal and meaningful education to minority and disadvantaged students in response to the problem of racism in public schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002). By the 1980s there was a growing need to address the needs of students who were disruptive or failing in their traditional schools (Young, 1990). By the early 1990's, Raywid (1994) categorized alternative schools and programs into three main types: (a) Type I alternatives were schools of choice, similar to magnet schools, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs and strategies designed to attract students; (b) type II alternatives were "last-chance" schools designed for students who were near expulsion; the emphasis was typically on behavior modification; and (c) type III alternatives used a nonpunitive, therapeutic approach with a remedial focus on academic and/or social emotional issues. Alternative education programs now serve a variety of students, including those who are at-risk of not completing high school (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Rather than continue to use methods such as detention halls, mandatory summer school, or other punishment and disciplinary measures that do not help at-risk students to succeed in school, Raywid (2001) emphasized the need for different or alternative styles of schools to help these students to thrive; one size does not fit all when it comes to schools. There is a growing

need for alternative education programs to fulfill the commitment to educate all students, regardless of their circumstances (Tissington, 2006). Cable, Plucker, and Spradlin, (as cited in Edgar-Smith & Baugher Palmer, 2015) stated that, ideally, alternative education programs are custom designed to support the specific population of students they serve. Although different strategies work better with different at-risk students, according to Smith and Thomson (2014), successful alternative education programs cater to students' different goals and learning styles; alternative programs should simply provide a different path for students to reach the same destination. This means that many different paths or programs might be required to address the diverse needs of individual students. Raywid (2001) reported that it is not possible for one specific type of school program to meet these needs; rather, several schools that are genuinely different from each other are needed.

Review of Literature

Importance of relationship building. Several studies have indicated that relationship building and the development of a caring atmosphere in alternative education programs have proven to have a positive impact on student success. Nakkula (2013) found that caring teachers supported learners to see themselves as capable, rather than unintelligent. Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, and Tonelson (2006) stated that at-risk students flourish in alternative environments that focus on caring for and respecting students, listening to their opinions, and following fair rules and flexibility. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) reported that the students in their study identified their lack of success in traditional schools as a result of poor teacher-student relationships. According to Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, and Christenson (2003), attending to students' psychological and social needs, such as the development of strong interpersonal connections among students, teachers, and parents, before focusing on academic needs such as tutoring

services, flexible programming, and differentiated instruction can prevent at-risk students from leaving school early.

Barstow (2008) identified the student-teacher relationship as one of many examples of power-differential roles inherent to the relationship. Within this relationship students are vulnerable to harm and confusion if teachers misuse their power. Teachers have many responsibilities in their roles of power, including setting appropriate boundaries, being trustworthy, and creating safe spaces (Barstow, 2008). At-risk students require even more attention to these prerequisites. Teachers are in an up-power role, whereas students are in a down-power role. Teachers who understand and are sensitive to the dynamics of power differences use their role to empower at-risk students in ways that support dignity and result in collaboration (Barstow & Feldman, 2013). The setting of an alternative education program should therefore focus on the creation of this egalitarian environment for at-risk students. Students do better behaviorally and academically if they are in an environment in which they feel that staff treat them fairly and support them (Edgar-Smith & Baugher Palmer, 2015). Adults must believe that at-risk students have the ability to change (Powell, 2003). Teachers can realize this belief if they are cognizant of and attentive to the power differential between teachers and students.

Edgar-Smith and Baugher Palmer (2015) researched an alternative education program that focused on many aspects such as relationship building with students, positive behavior interventions, a less formal classroom atmosphere from their previous schools, less punitive measures for poor behavior than in their previous schools, and low staff-to-student ratios. The results of the study show not only that students' experiences in an alternative education program positively impact their perceptions of school, but also that students improve academically.

“When students make a lasting connection with at least one caring adult, it appears they invest in school such that academic and personal outcomes improve” (Edgar-Smith & Baugher Palmer, 2015,p. 139).

Frediana (2002) indicated that when students are in a nurturing and supportive environment, they are more likely to thrive academically. Gunn et al. (2009) stated that a safe and caring environment is important in helping at-risk students to graduate; this environment can be created by developing strong interpersonal connections between peers, teachers, and parents as well as by providing counseling supports for students. According to Cuban (1989), a sense of community, small class sizes, committed staff, and flexibility are key to successful programs for at-risk students. Similarly, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found that supportive and nonjudgmental teacher-student relationships play a large role in students’ success and that class size and composition play a lesser role. Teachers must demonstrate respect for students in their language and actions; it is therefore important that teachers be mindful of these things when they work with at-risk students.

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) researched and compared the perspectives of at-risk students on their former traditional schools and their current alternative school. They identified the alternative program as a solutions-focused alternative high school that concentrated on relationship building, students’ strengths, and students’ potential success, rather than past difficulties, among other aspects. Unique features of the program included multigrade classrooms, highly individualized instruction from teachers, and self-paced learning. The results of the study, by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), show that many factors such as teacher-student relationships, home-school connection, school climate, and flexible rules and consequences contribute to success in an alternative program.

Flexible programming. Gunn et al. (2009) examined 18 different projects that focused on the high school completion rates of students who had been identified as at risk. Each project utilized several strategies and approaches with the aim of improving completion rates. The projects that focused on school retention improved the climate of the school and offered alternative and flexible programming. The aspects of alternative programming, that led to this finding, included additional instructional support, individualized academic assistance, online course delivery, and a caring environment for students. Online programming and course completion choices offered more flexibility and were most suitable for students who needed to complete missing courses or who struggled with attendance because of external work commitments (Gunn et al., 2009). The flexibility of the program structure and instructional approaches were commonly reported reasons for the success of alternative programs.

Chalker and Stelsel (2009) explored unique alternative education programs called Education Resource Centers (ERCs). The programs were situated in shopping malls, where the students felt comfortable. The mall also had internship, mentoring, and employment opportunities for students. The large and open learning centers accommodated different learning styles and study preferences. The goal of the ERCs was not to create an environment that was easier or more difficult than that of traditional schools; rather, they simply took a different approach. Plucker et al. (as cited in Chalker & Stelsel, 2009) found that the ERC programs helped at-risk students earn their high school diplomas. The cumulative graduation rate at ERCs, at the time of the study was 90%, compared to the national American average of 70%. The ERCs included many aspects of flexible programming such as smaller class sizes (15:1 student-to-teacher ratios), online course delivery that allowed student-paced learning, and individualized

instruction. Half-day sessions accommodated family responsibilities for students with children or employment responsibilities.

Differing results. Raywid (1998) restructured the classification of alternative education programs into three different levels: (a) change the student: these are highly structured and usually have therapeutic aspects; (b) change the school: these programs are highly innovative and focus on changing instructional approaches in a highly positive school climate; and (c) change the educational system: this approach makes broad changes to the education system. The results of the study show that the effectiveness of these alternative program levels varied. Those programs that focused on punishing students rarely worked. Programs that focused on changing the school had mixed results in that they seemed to help at-risk students to thrive academically and behaviorally in the alternative education program, but the students did not continue to succeed when they returned to the traditional school system. The third level has shown positive results in helping at-risk students to complete high school (Raywid, 1998).

Lehr (as cited in Edgar-Smith & Baugher Palmer, 2015) found that students who attend alternative schools improve their school performance and have positive peer relationships. Similarly, Quinn et al. (2006) suggested that at-risk students are more inclined to flourish in an alternative education program with caring staff, who respect them, are flexible in their approach, and take a nonauthoritarian approach to teaching. Conversely, other studies have shown little or no improvements for at-risk students who attended alternative education programs. For example, Tissington (2006) stated that little empirical evidence has been found to suggest specific conditions that will work in all alternative education programs. Beken et al. (2009) found that students in traditional high schools, with large populations of at-risk students, scored significantly higher than did students who attended academic alternative educational campuses.

Lehr et al. (2003) stated that while schools have used a wide range of interventions to improve outcomes for at-risk students, the degree to which the practices enhance school completion is not known.

Summary

Alternative education programs have been designed to meet the academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of at-risk students who do poorly in traditional school environments (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Many different models of alternative education programs have been implemented, but most of these programs have common characteristics, including a supportive environment, flexibility, small class size, and one-on-one interaction (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Although alternative education programs have differing models, the tremendous growth in the presence of these programs in the United States has revealed a continuing demand for them (Quinn et al., 2006).

There is a continual need for studies in the field of alternative education programs for at-risk students. Research that can be used to advise practice regarding at-risk students who do not graduate from high school is incomplete (Lehr et al., 2003). Tissington (2006) agreed that more research needs to be done to find ways to accommodate the fast-growing population of at-risk students who do not complete high school. To better understand the effect of alternative education schools on student achievement and the retention of students, more assessments and studies may be necessary (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Fitzsimmons Hughes and Adera (2006) stated that to grow and improve alternative education programs, it is vital to develop effective practices that incorporate research-based educational activities, evidence-based instructional strategies, and that use data-driven decision-making. As more public alternative schools and programs are created, calls for accountability and more specific data have increased (Lehr &

Lange, 2003). In an attempt to add quality data to the field of alternative education programs for at-risk student, this research study addressed the question “Can an alternative education program implemented in rural Alberta improve student achievement by increasing the credit completion of high school students who are at risk of not completing high school in three years?”

Chapter 3

Method

In chapter 3 I discuss the research methodology and procedures used in the study. I include a description of how I selected the subjects, the ethical considerations in the study, and the instrumentation and data-collection methods that I used. I also explain the data collection and recording, as well as the limitations of the study.

Method

I used a quantitative, experimental research methodology to compare data from two different school years and measured the effect of an alternative education program for at-risk students in a rural Alberta high school. I also compared the number of credits that the students completed during one school year with the number in the following school year. The 2013-2014 school year was the first year of data collection. At this time the students were enrolled in traditional schools, where they attended classes with 20 to 40 students per class with one teacher. The teacher directed the pace at which he or she taught the students, and the students were required to attend the class for a specified number of hours per semester. In the traditional schools, late assignments had consequences, such as a loss of marks. Attendance was mandatory and the teacher recorded it daily; he or she contacted the parents of the students if they were absent from class. The students were familiar with this program format from their previous years of public education.

The second year of data collection was the 2014-2015 school year. During that year, the students attended an alternative education program that took a more flexible approach than that of traditional school. For example, the students were allowed to take breaks when necessary, use a sign-in and sign-out book to come into and leave the classroom, use social media websites

periodically throughout the day, listen to music with earphones while they worked, wear a hat in the classroom, and eat in the classroom. Full-time students could also choose to attend for partial days if they, their parents, the teacher, and the administration agreed that it would benefit the students. Low student-to-teacher ratios were ensured, as the capacity of the classroom in the alternative program was a maximum of 10 students. Although various teachers taught the different online courses in which the students were enrolled, only one teacher worked face to face with the students in the alternative-program classroom.

The alternative education program also had other unique aspects that made it different from traditional schools. The online delivery of the courses meant that the Carnegie Unit was eliminated. This meant there was no longer a requirement for a student to attend the previously required number of hours to receive credits. If students demonstrated an understanding of curricular outcomes, they could pass the course and receive credits regardless of the number of hours that they expended in completing the course. In the alternative program, students could choose the course on which they wanted to work at any given time, as well as how long they wanted to work on it. The students also had an opportunity to work on their courses from home, on weekends, and during other breaks. The courses and assignments were available online and did not rely on the presence of a teacher.

Additional features of the alternative education program enhanced flexibility and further helped the students to complete courses. Students, who completed only part of a course in the first semester of the school year, and did not have a passing mark, were allowed to complete the unfinished parts of the course and receive credits in the second semester. In rare and specific circumstances, students who had failed a course in the past, enrolled in a credit-recovery program in which they were allowed to challenge the final exam from that course and receive

credits for the course if they passed the final exam. A retroactive credit arrangement also meant that if students failed a course, they were permitted to take the next sequential course in that subject area and then receive credits for both courses if they passed the higher level of the two courses. This was not a common occurrence, but happened only with the approval of the school principal.

Research Design

The purpose of the study was to determine whether an alternative education program in rural Alberta could improve student achievement by increasing the credit completion of high school students. These students were at-risk of not completing high school in three years. The dependent variable in the study was the number of credits that each student completed in each of the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. The independent variable was the type of programming, traditional or alternative. Based on the research noted in chapter 2, a plausible hypothesis for this study is that students will complete more credits in an alternative education program that they did in the previous year, when enrolled in a traditional school.

Selection of Subjects and Ethical Considerations

I followed strict and comprehensive guidelines in selecting my participants. This research study involved human subjects, some of whom were under the age of 18. I took all measures to ensure that I would expose the subjects to minimal risk as a result of their choice to participate or not participate in the research study. I submitted an ethical review protocol (Appendix A) to the Institutional Review Board of the City University of Seattle, and the board approved the study before I asked the students to participate. I also received permission from the school division to conduct the research study.

A teacher, from the same school division in which the alternative program was offered, invited the students to participate in the research study. The students were invited if they were at least half-time students in the alternative program; some students were co-enrolled with another high school. I ensured that the students did not feel pressure from me, as the researcher, or from other students to participate or not participate in the study. The teacher met with each student individually. The same teacher gave each of the students a letter of assent (Appendix B) that described the research study, explained the process of the study, and invited the students to participate; he answered their questions and asked for their assent. The teacher also informed the students that their participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous; if they chose not to participate or wanted to withdraw from the study at any time, there would be no negative consequences. The students were not required to complete surveys, questionnaires, or tests in the research study. Their participation meant that I would access, analyze, and compare data on the number of credits that they had completed during each of the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years.

The teacher, who had met with the students, also sent a letter of consent (Appendix C) and other applicable informed consent forms to the parents. Most of the students in the study were under the age of 18, so, to ensure an ethical approach, I explained the research study to the parents and its implications for the students. At this time, I requested their informed consent. The assent letter (Appendix B) and consent letter (Appendix C) emphasized that I would not breach the participants' confidentiality and that I would take all measures to ensure that the students would face no emotional distress from participating in the study. I also explained the safeguards to protect the students' identity, including that I would not use their names or any other personally identifiable information and that any data would be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

for five years and then shredded. Any information that I would store electronically on a computer I would encrypt and password-protect. Similarly, I would permanently destroy any digital data after five years. The teacher who collected the assent and consent forms would maintain the participants' anonymity and keep the forms secure to avoid researcher bias.

Limitations

Although I assured the subjects that their participation was voluntary, they might have felt that it was their inherent responsibility to participate and that they were obliged to complete as many credits as possible to prove the importance and effectiveness of the program. Although the students were all enrolled in the same alternative education program in 2014-2015, they had not necessarily attended the same school the previous year. It was also possible that the different traditional schools that the students had attended in 2013-2014 had used a range of differing strategies to help at-risk students or that they had used no specific strategies.

I asked seven subjects to participate in the research study; all seven agreed to participate and signed and returned the assent forms. All of the parents also consented to their children's participation in the study and signed the forms. The subjects ranged in age from 15 to 18 years. Four of the subjects were female (57%), and three were male (43%).

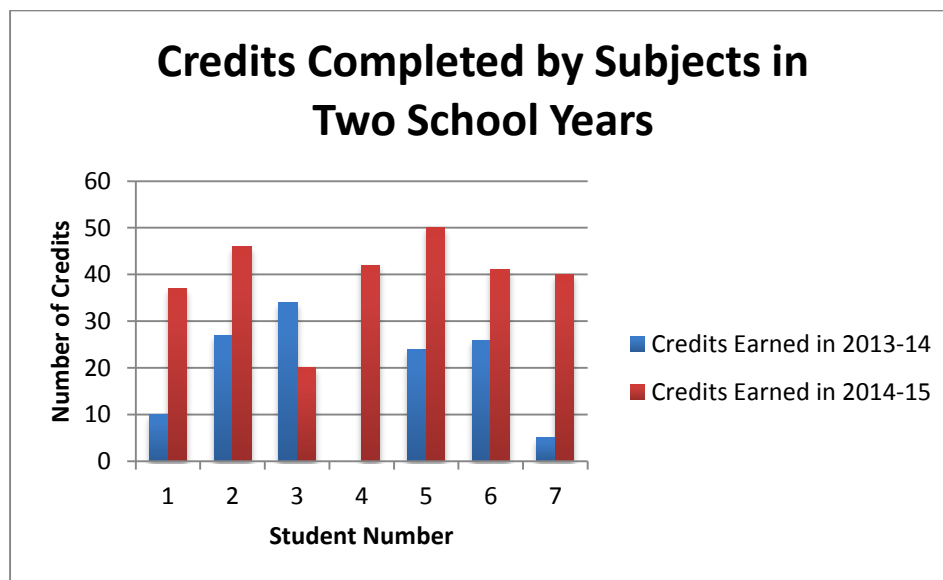
Instrumentation and Data Collection

As noted previously, I did not ask the students to complete surveys, questionnaires, or tests. The data from the study were strictly quantitative and presented as a comparison between the number of credits that the students completed in one school year and the number of credits that they completed in the following year. I retrieved the number of credits that they had completed in each subject from the Alberta Education website by using the students' Alberta student numbers. A limitation of the study was that the students had no opportunity to offer

formal feedback on the program, to identify which aspects of the program contributed to or limited their success, or to make suggestions for improvements to the program.

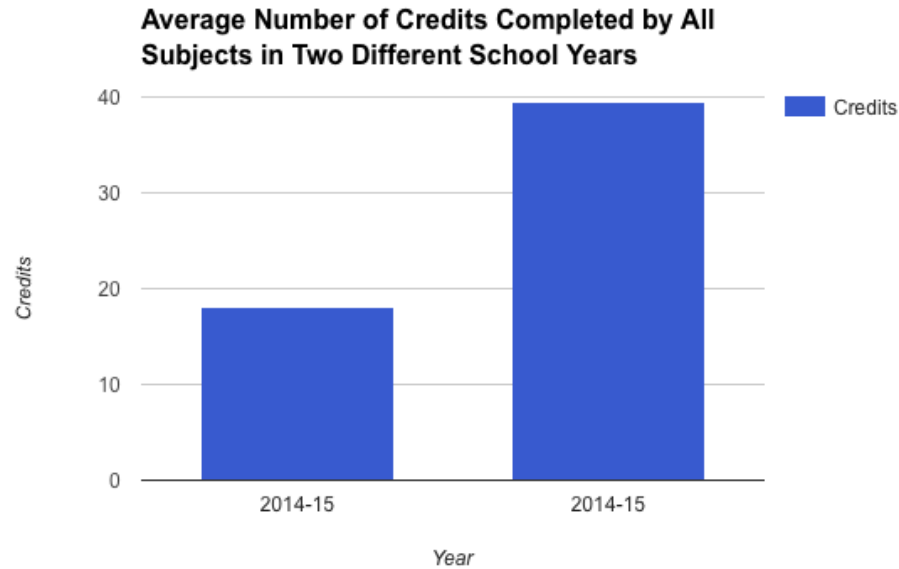
Data Analysis

Figure 1 compares the number of credits that the students completed in the two school years. I calculated the average number of credits that all of the students completed in each school year by adding the number of credits that each completed and then dividing this total by the number of subject. This total number was seven. Figure 2 shows these data. These figures offer a visual comparison to better analyze the data.



Note. The blue bars show the number of credits that each subject earned in the 2013-2014 school year, and the red bars show the number of credits that each subject completed in the 2014-2015 school year.

Figure 1. Credits that subjects completed in two school years.



Note. The bar on the left shows the average number of credits that the seven subjects completed in the 2013-2014 school year (18.0 credits per student) at a traditional school. The bar on the right shows the average number of credits that the subjects completed in the 2013-2015 school year (39.4 credits per student) in an alternative education program.

Figure 2. Average number of credits that all subjects completed in two different school years.

Summary

The research methodology that I used in this study was a quantitative, experimental design in which I compared data on the human subjects from two different school years. I required signed assent forms from the students and signed consent forms from the parents for the students to participate in the study. I took all precautions possible to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and minimal risk to participants in the research study, in which they voluntarily participated. I also informed the subjects and their parents that they could withdraw from the study at any time, with no negative consequences for the students.

In chapter 4, I describe the results of the study by comparing the number of credits that the at-risk students completed during two school years: one in a traditional school and one in an alternative education program.

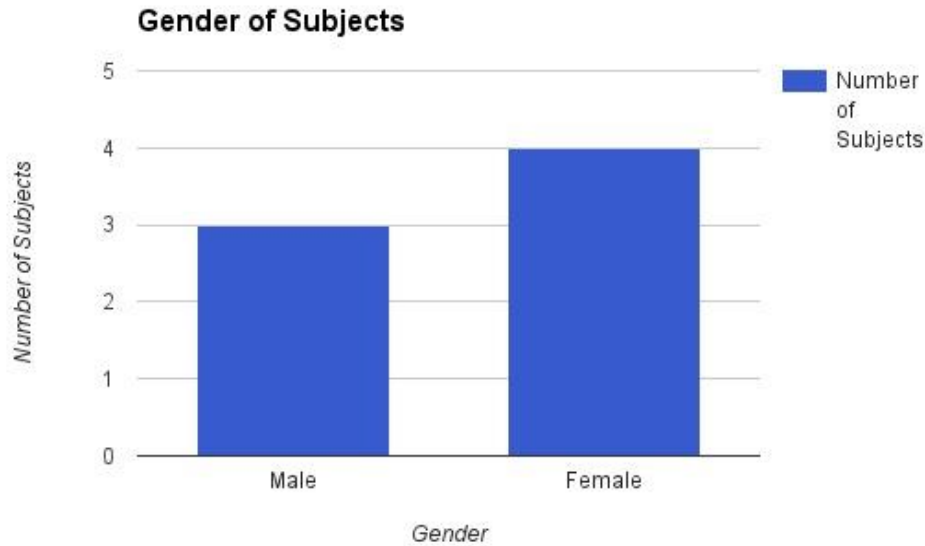
Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

I collected data in this research study to determine whether an alternative education program in a rural Alberta high school would improve the students' academic achievement. More specifically, I measured the students' achievement by quantifying the credit completion of high school students who were at risk of not completing a high school diploma within three years. In Alberta, students can earn credits beginning in Grade 10. In this chapter I discuss the number of credits that each student completed in the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. For comparison purposes, I displayed the data on the number of credits that the students completed during these two years in Figures 1 and 2 in chapter 3.

Presentation of Descriptive and Comparative Statistics

Of the seven students who participated in the study, four were female (57%), and three (43%) were male (Figure 3). All subjects were enrolled as at least half-time students in the alternative education program during the 2014-2015 school year. Some of these students were co-enrolled with a separate high school, whereas others were full-time students in the alternative program. For students to graduate with a high school diploma in Alberta, they must complete a minimum of 100 credits, with a required number of those credits in specific curriculum areas at a specific level. In this study all of the students were enrolled in Grades 10, 11, or 12 during the 2014-2015 school year. During the 2013-2014 school year, however, two of the students were in Grade 9. Alberta Education awards no credits for passing courses in Grade 9. I converted the courses that these two students passed in Grade 9 into a comparable number of credits



Note. 57% of the subjects in the study were female, and 43% were male.

Figure 3. Gender of subjects.

based on the number of hours that Alberta Education requires to complete a course. I made this conversion to fairly compare the two school years for these two students and to maintain consistency.

As Figure 1 shows, six of the seven students in the study completed a higher number of credits while enrolled in the alternative education program. On average, the seven subjects completed 18.0 credits in the 2013-2014 school year in a traditional school. During the 2014-2015 school year, the seven subjects in the alternative education program completed an average of 39.4 credits. To graduate with a high school diploma in Alberta within three years, students need to complete an average of 33.4 credits per year. Figure 1 shows that during the first year of the study, because none of the subjects was on pace to complete a high school diploma in three years, I defined them as at-risk students for the purposes of this study.

In the alternative program, six of the subjects completed more credits than the average number needed in one school year to be on pace to graduate with a high school diploma in three

years. During the first year of the study, student 3 was enrolled in K&E courses, which are part of a modified and less academic curriculum than the regular programming required to attain a high school diploma. Students who complete the K&E program receive a certificate of high school achievement rather than a high school diploma. Student 3 switched from the K&E Program in the first year to regular programming in the second year. The second year includes courses from a curriculum that leads towards a high school diploma.

Discussion and Comparison of Statistics

According to Alberta Education (2016), depending on the individual circumstances, some students find that traditional schools do not meet their needs. To address this issue, Alberta Education has allowed alternative programs that take a flexible approach to teaching and learning. As Lange and Sletten (2002) noted, some students require alternative programming because not all students learn best in the same educational format. It is vital that alternative programs be offered in an environment that is different from that of traditional schools (Smith & Thompson, 2014). Successful alternative programs, such as the one in this research study, take a flexible approach to addressing individual student needs. Gunn et al. (2009) found that alternative education programs are more likely to improve the completion rates of high school students if the programs have a flexible structure and an instructional approach. The data in this research study indicate that alternative education programs can have a positive impact on at-risk students' achievement.

Practical Significance of the Study

The results of this study show that the alternative education program improved at-risk students' achievement via course completion. Six of the seven subjects completed more credits in the alternative program than they had in a traditional school the previous school year. The

student who completed fewer credits in the alternative program had switched to a more academic program in the second year of the study; this might explain this fact. The aspects of the program that increased the credit completion might include its flexibility.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

In chapter 1 of this study I identified the problems associated with students' failure to complete high school, including a suggested negative impact on the economy (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Students are also more likely to experience a variety of undesirable disorders such as poverty, addiction, depression, unemployment, and unhealthy lifestyles if they do not complete high school (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009). A range of definitions describe at-risk students and a large variety of alternative education programs use different strategies to address the needs of at-risk students. For the purposes of this research study I defined at-risk students as those who are not on pace to complete a high school diploma in three years. The elements of the various researched alternative programs, which were implemented in this alternative program, included a low student-to-teacher ratio, individualized programming, modified classroom rules, nonmandatory attendance, student-directed and student-paced learning, online course delivery, a focus on relationship building with students, a retroactive credit arrangement, and a credit-recovery program. In this research study I focused on determining whether an alternative education program could have a positive impact on the academics of at-risk students. More specifically, I asked the research question "Can an alternative education program in a rural Alberta high school improve student achievement by increasing the credit completion of high school students who are at risk of not completing a high school diploma in three years?"

The literature review in chapter 2 offers sufficient evidence that alternative education programs can have a positive impact on students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. Smith and Thompson (2014) indicated that alternative education programs can minimize the negative effects of students' failure to complete high school. According to Quinn et al. (2006),

at-risk students flourish in alternative environments that are characterized by flexibility, fair rules, and care and respect for students and their opinions. Lehr et al. (2003) found that developing strong interpersonal connections between students and teachers can prevent at-risk students' dropping out. Further, Knesting (2008) reiterated that at-risk students are more likely to persist and not drop out of high school if they attend a program with a focus on empathy and caring. These examples of alternative education programs have improved various aspects of students' lives. However, rather than basing success on vague descriptors, in this research study I focused more specifically on comparing the credit completion of at-risk students over the course of two school years to determine the effectiveness of the alternative program.

In this study I used a quantitative, experimental research methodology to compare data from two different school years. I compared the number of credits that the seven subjects in the study completed during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. During the first year of the study the subjects were enrolled in a traditional school, and during the second year of the study they were enrolled in the alternative education program. Figures 1 and 2 compare the number of credits that they completed over these two school years. The data that I collected demonstrate that the subjects who enrolled in the alternative education program were more successful academically than those who attended a traditional school.

Conclusions

This research study demonstrated that this alternative education program successfully helped six of seven at-risk students to improve academically by completing more credits than they were capable of completing in a traditional school. All subjects in the study were categorized as at-risk students prior to entering the alternative program because they were not on pace to complete a high school diploma in three years. During the 2013-2014 school year, six of

the subjects completed fewer than 33.4 credits; this is the average number of credits that students require in one year to graduate with a high school diploma in three years in Alberta. One subject completed 34 credits during the 2013-2014 school year, but was enrolled in courses that allowed him to receive a certificate of high school completion rather than a high school diploma. This subject was the same individual who completed fewer credits in the alternative program, in which his courses allowed him to graduate with a diploma rather than a certificate.

The alternative program successfully improved student achievement by increasing the credit completion of the students who were at risk of not completing a high school diploma in three years. The average number of credits increased from 18.0 to 39.4 over the course of the two school years. The data show that, on average, the students completed far more credits than they had in a traditional school and more than the 33.4 credits that they needed in one school year to graduate in three years.

Implications

The data that I compiled in this study have many implications. The success of the students in the alternative education program has proven that they were capable of completing courses at a rate that would allow them to graduate with a high school diploma in three years. This might have empowered them to continue to complete courses and earn high school diplomas. The findings of this study also imply that flexibility in an educational format can benefit at-risk students. This is important for school administrators, who can use the research to determine which aspects of alternative programming might work best in meeting the needs of their at-risk students. Teachers could also benefit from the research if they understand the value of flexibility for students who have struggled in the past. Parents of at-risk students might also benefit from the implementation of alternative programs because their children are more likely to

be successful in an alternative program. All stakeholders, from at-risk students to school administrators, can benefit from the implementation of alternative education programs. This research study has shown that alternative education programs can have a positive impact on academic results.

Recommendations

One of the major challenges of the alternative program was the lack of qualified counseling available to the students in the program. I found that students in the program commonly had a variety of issues, such as mental health, addiction, and problems at home. I am not a trained counselor, but I regularly attempted to help the students to deal with their problems. More resources and outside counseling agencies would benefit the students and make the program sustainable. This would be recommended as the program continues in the future.

This alternative education program was located on the same site as two other schools. However, it might be beneficial to house the program separately from the schools to alleviate problems such as distractions from other students and staff. Housing the program separately from another school may help students focus on their schoolwork. Another suggestion is to make work-experience opportunities available to the students. This recommendation may provide students a setting that limits their distractions and another way to complete credits. It may also create opportunities to try different types of employment that might interest them.

The sample size for this study was small. Only seven subjects participated, so making broad generalizations based on the study is challenging; however, the academic success of the students was undeniable. The focus on ensuring that the environment of the classroom allowed the students to make decisions independently regarding the course work that they chose to do and the pace at which they worked were key factors in their success. The flexible approach and

modified classroom rules were also vital components of the program that empowered the students. I invested a great deal of time building relationships and rapport with the students. I found it much easier to ensure accountability in the classroom because of the strong relationships and trust that I established with the students. I used a non-authoritarian approach to dealing with them and tried to prevent power-differential struggles between the students and me. I regularly reminded them that the alternative program was less restrictive than programs in traditional schools in terms of rules, but they still had to follow the rules. This recommendation may provide educators with the necessary approach and atmosphere required for alternative education programs to succeed.

Research on at-risk students and alternative education programs is broad. Many students could be considered at-risk for a variety of reasons. Alternative education programs also have many different models. As Smith and Thompson (2014) noted, some alternative programs have been successful, whereas others have not. The successful programs operate with the common understanding that not all students have the same goals or same learning methods; alternative programs are simply meant to provide a different route to the same goal. Assessing the needs of students and remaining open minded about alternative programming styles can help schools to ensure that at-risk students graduate from high school.

Future research in the field should focus on creating clear descriptions of and distinctions among the various types of at-risk students and alternative education programs. This may help educators to better determine the modifications that they must make to best meet the needs of individual students. As at-risk students experience success in alternative education programs, they could perhaps be re-integrated into traditional schools gradually. Research on the transition of at-risk students back to traditional schools would be beneficial to educators. Professional

development opportunities for teachers in traditional schools might help them in better meeting the needs of some at-risk students. Research in this field would benefit traditional schools and their students.

Education must take into consideration the needs of all students, including those who are at risk of not graduating from high school. At-risk students have unique needs and therefore require unique programming. As this study demonstrated, this can be in the form of alternative education programs in a flexible setting and with committed staff who invest energy in building positive relationships with these children.

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Appendix A: City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board Ethical Review Protocol



Institutional Review Board Ethical Review Protocol

City University of Seattle Ethics Training completed on this date: July 10/ 14



1. Title of Project Alternative Education in Rural Alberta
2. For Faculty Researcher(s)
Name:
Department/Division
Telephone
E-mail
3. For Student Researcher
Name Ryan Sheehan
Faculty Supervisor Heather Henderson
Department/Division Gordon Albright School of Education
Degree sought Master's in Leadership in Education
Telephone 403-429-1988
E-mail ryansheehan@cityuniversity.edu
4. Project Coordinator:
5. Sponsor (if any):

Fill in this protocol completely, including appropriate consent form(s) at the end. Incomplete protocols will be returned for resubmission.

6. Abstract/Lay Summary
 - Research question Can an alternative education program in rural Alberta improve student achievement by increasing credit completion by high school students who are at risk of not completing high school in three years?
 - Basis for the question including supporting quote from research The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) was a program implemented by Alberta Education from 1999-2013. AISI provided funding for projects intending to improve performance and learning of students. Among other themes and findings, alternative programming proved to contribute to student completion of high school. A common reason for success in helping students complete high school included the flexibility of the implemented program (Gunn, Chorney, and Poulsen, 2009). Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tanelson (2006) determined that troubled students tended to flourish in alternative learning environments that focussed on caring for and respecting the students and their opinions, the establishment of fair rules, and flexibility in trying to solve problems.
 - Purpose of the study To determine if an alternative education program that incorporates student-paced learning, individualized programming, and flexibility in attendance and rules, will improve academic achievement in a rural Alberta high school. Results from the research could potentially offer other rural schools with an alternative education model for supporting credit completion.
 - Methodology I will use a quantitative research method for my data. I will collect data from two different school years. The number of credits completed by the subjects will be compared from the 2013-14 school year to the 2014-15 school year, which is the first year that the subjects have enrolled in the alternative education program.
 - The alternative education program being implemented for these students is different from the traditional programs they have attended in the past. For example, the alternative program allows for flexibility in rules such as taking breaks when the student feels it is necessary, using a sign-in and sign out book for students to come and go from the classroom, being able to use social media websites periodically throughout the day, to listen to music with earphones while working, to wear a hat in the classroom, and to eat in the classroom. The program incorporates student-paced learning and individualized programming. All courses are available online so students can choose

which course they would like to work on at any given time, as well as how long they would like to work on it. The capacity of the classroom has been set for 10 students. The program format has flexibility built in that allows students to continue completing courses into the next semester if they are near completion but need more time to finish. In rare and specific cases, a credit-recovery program is used in which students are allowed to challenge a final exam and receive credits for a course if they pass. A retro-credit arrangement is also in place; if a student has failed a course, they may be permitted to take the next sequential course from that subject and receive credits for both courses.

- I will compare data from the previous year to the year of being enrolled in the alternative education program. The research is intended to help determine if the differences in the alternative education program will help students to complete more credits in a school year. I will compile the data to show individual and group comparisons to help determine the effect of the alternative education program on student achievement. I will use graphs to help display the data comparison.

Minimal Risk per governmental regulation is defined as research that "poses no more risk to the human participants than that encountered in ordinary daily life".

Check this box if faculty supervisor or faculty researcher believes this research constitutes minimal risk according to the above definition. The IRB will make final determination regarding the level of risk.

7. Description of participants (include number, ages or age range, location, and special characteristics to include gender and ethnicity).

The proposed seven subjects range in age between 15 and 18 years old. Four of the subjects are female and three are male. All subjects live in or near the rural town in which they attend high school.

8. If research is conducted through an agency or institution, complete the CityU Organizational Consent form to include the names, contact information, and contact persons for any institutions or agencies.

If outside institution's consent form is used and attached, researcher is responsible to assure that all provisions are in concert with CityU approved Research Participant Informed Consent form.

Submit completed organizational consent as " 'Student Name' Attachment A".

Please see attachment A.

9. Describe how participants will be identified or recruited. Include in your answer the exact wording of all notices, advertisement and/or scripts used to recruit participants. If the human participants include minors or vulnerable adults, include the script used to advise them of the study.

Students will be asked to participate in the research study if they are at least half time students in the alternative education program. A teacher from the school will deliver the enclosed letter to the subjects that describes the research study. He will also explain the process, invite them to participate, and ask them for assent. The teacher will also send the parent letter and applicable informed consent forms home to parents. The teacher will collect the assent forms and keep them anonymous from me until the end of the school year. The teacher will inform students to return the informed consent forms from parents to me.

10. Include in your answer the exact wording to be used in information letters, emails, telephone scripts to participants and parents/guardians, oral scripts and/or email scripts.

A teacher from the school will present a letter of assent to each of the subjects as well as a letter of informed consent to their parents stating that it is voluntary for the subjects to participate in the study, they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that there would be no negative consequences for withdrawing.

Dear Student,

As the teacher and facilitator of the education program in which you have enrolled, I would like to tell you about research that I am doing and I would like to invite you to participate. I am currently doing a research study for my Master's thesis through City University of Seattle. My project is based on determining if an alternative education program has a positive impact on student achievement.

Why am I doing research?

I want to know if the changes that we have made in the classroom are helping you and the other students to earn more credits than last year. I will be comparing the number of credits completed from the 2013-14 school year with the 2014-15 school year. The main differences about the alternative education classroom include: sign-in and sign-out attendance during class time, individualized programming, computer-based courses, student-paced learning and self-directed learning (for example you choose which course you would like to work on each day). There are also many rule changes such as being allowed to listen to music with earphones, to wear a hat, to occasionally use social media, having a small number of students in the classroom, and having access to my support daily as you work on assignments.

What do you need to do?

You don't need to do anything. I want to use the information about your credits completed from the 2013-14 school year and the current school year (2014-15) in my research study. I will be comparing the information to see if the alternative education model in the classroom is helping students to successfully earn more credits than in the program they enrolled in last year. The research is not part of your school work. Students will not have any assignments to do for the project and it will have no impact on marks.

Do you have to do it?

No. You can choose to participate or not. If you give assent, you can withdraw from the study at any time and there would be no negative consequence for withdrawing.

Who will see my data?

Names will never be identified in the research. The information will remain anonymous. Reference to students will not include names or any other personal information.

Sincerely,

Ryan Sheehan

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Ryan Sheehan. I am the teacher and facilitator in the education program in which your child is currently enrolled. I am also a student in a Master's in Leadership in Education program through City University of Seattle. I am doing a research study on alternative education for my Master's thesis. More specifically, my project is based on determining if an alternative education program has a positive impact on student achievement.

For my research project, I want to compare the number of credits that students in the program completed in the 2013-14 school year with that of the current school year (2014-15). The purpose of the research study is to determine if the alternative education model being used is beneficial in

helping students to complete more credits in order to be on pace for completing high school in three years.

The research will not impact your son or daughter in their course work. It does not require them to answer surveys or questionnaires. It is not part of their school work. It will have no impact on their marks and there are no assignments for them to do related to the research project.

I am asking for your informed consent for your child to participate in the study. If you give informed consent and your child gives assent, you both have the option of withdrawing your child from the research any time and there would be no negative consequences for withdrawing. If you and your child choose to not give informed consent and assent, there would be no negative consequences.

I will use all possible measures to keep your child's information as confidential as possible. The information will also be anonymous. If I publish or present results of this study, I will not use names or any other personally identifiable information.

Data will be stored on paper in a locked filing cabinet in my locked house. It will not be kept in the school and will not be shared. The information will be anonymous. Any information about students that is stored electronically, will be on my personal computer which is encrypted and password protected.

Sincerely,
Ryan Sheehan

11. What data collection tools will be used and how will they be administered? Include in this answer exact replica of data collection tools, e.g.: written questionnaires, interview questions, observation schedules and confirm the source and/or copyright permission.

The only data I will collect is the number of credits that subjects have completed during the 2013-14 school (the year prior to entering the alternative education program) year as well as the 2014-15 school year. Subjects will not be requested to respond to any surveys or interview questions. No individual student evaluation information or graded assignments will be collected.

12. Will participants receive inducements or rewards? Give details.

No they will not.

13. How will the confidentiality of each participant be protected?

Subject names and any other possible identifying information will not be used. The location of the program will never be identified more specifically than "rural Alberta".

14. How and where will data be stored and for how long?

- Electronic data storage Data will be stored on my personal computer. The files will be encrypted and password protected. The data will not be stored in the cloud, rather it will be stored in a program on my computer.
- Paper data storage Paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my locked house.
- Other data storage, e.g. audiotapes, videotapes There will be no audiotapes or videotapes. All data will be either on paper or stored electronically.
- 5 years duration or longer per local regulations Data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed.
- Permanent destruction methods for each data item Paper data will be shredded. Computer files will be deleted from the computer.

- 15. Describe the informed consent process, that is, how will researcher fully advise the participants (or parents/guardians) about the study? Fill out the appropriate informed consent form(s) at the end of this protocol as they will be presented to participants. (Stating only that participants or parents will be given a letter is insufficient.)

A teacher from the school will give the letters of assent and informed consent to students and parents and then ask them to return the parent informed consent forms to me and student assent forms to the teacher if they choose to participate in the research. I will only analyze the data at the end of the current school year.

█
█

- 16. Describe any possible risk or distress and safeguards in place to address risk or distress including access to counseling, with attention to vulnerable populations who may be participating in this research.

Agreeing to participate in the study is completely voluntary. Subjects will be informed that their names will not be used. Their names and any identifiable information will never be mentioned. It is minimal risk; students will undergo no emotional distress by participating in the study. There will be no breach of confidentiality.

█

Submission of this form electronically signifies that the researcher takes responsibility for the accuracy of the contents of this submission and that student researcher's Supervisor approves of the submission, in an equivalent manner to an original signature.

Ryan Sheehan

Heather Henderson

01.20.2015

Name of Researcher

Research Supervisor/Advisor

Date

I further understand that my involvement is voluntary and I may refuse to participate or withdraw my participation at any time without negative consequences. I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand I may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

Confidentiality

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means. If the student researcher's cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be checked. All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for years (5 years or more if required by local regulations). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Signatures

I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this research project at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

Participant's Name:
Please Print

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name:
Please Print

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated as a research participant, I may contact the following individual(s):

Heather Henderson, Program Coordinator (and/or Program Director), City University of Seattle,
at

Suite 120 1040-7th Ave. Calgary, AB

T2P 3G8

587-880-2875

hhenderson@cityu.edu (address, direct phone line and CityU email address).

Appendix B: Students' Assent Form

March 2, 2015

Dear Student,

As the teacher and facilitator of the education program in which you have enrolled, I would like to tell you about research that I am doing and I would like to invite you to participate. I am currently doing a research study for my Master's thesis through City University of Seattle. My project is based on determining if an alternative education program has a positive impact on student achievement.

Why am I doing research?

I want to know if the changes that we have made in the classroom are helping you and the other students to earn more credits than last year. I will be comparing the number of credits completed from the 2013-14 school year with the 2014-15 school year. The main differences about the alternative education classroom include: sign-in and sign-out attendance during class time, individualized programming, computer-based courses, student-paced learning and self-directed learning (for example you choose which course you would like to work on each day). There are also many rule changes such as being allowed to listen to music with earphones, to wear a hat, to occasionally use social media, having a small number of students in the classroom, and having access to my support daily as you work on assignments.

What do you need to do?

You don't need to do anything. I want to use the information about your credits completed from the 2013-14 school year and the current school year (2014-15) in my research study. I will be comparing the information to see if the alternative education model in the classroom is helping students to successfully earn more credits than in the program they enrolled in last year. The research is not part of your school work. Students will not have any assignments to do for the project and it will have no impact on marks.

Do you have to do it?

No. You can choose to participate or not. If you give assent, you can withdraw from the study at any time and there would be no negative consequence for withdrawing.

Who will see my information?

Names will never be identified in the research. The information will remain anonymous. Reference to students will not include names or any other personal information.

Sincerely,

Ryan Sheehan

Appendix C: Parents' Consent From

March 2, 2015

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Ryan Sheehan. I am the teacher and facilitator in the education program in which your child is currently enrolled. I am also a student in a Master's in Leadership in Education program through City University of Seattle. I am doing a research study on alternative education for my Master's thesis. More specifically, my project is based on determining if an alternative education program has a positive impact on student achievement.

For my research project, I want to compare the number of credits that students in the program completed in the 2013-14 school year with that of the current school year (2014-15). The purpose of the research study is to determine if the alternative education model being used is beneficial in helping students to complete more credits in order to be on pace for completing high school in three years.

The research will not impact your son or daughter in their course work. It does not require them to answer surveys or questionnaires. It is not part of their school work. It will have no impact on their marks and there are no assignments for them to do related to the research project.

I am asking for your informed consent for your child to participate in the study. If you give informed consent and your child gives assent, you both have the option of withdrawing your child from the research any time and there would be no negative consequences for withdrawing. If you and your child choose to not give informed consent and assent, there would be no negative consequences.

I will use all possible measures to keep your child's information as confidential as possible. The information will also be anonymous. If I publish or present results of this study, I will not use names or any other personally identifiable information.

Data will be stored on paper in a locked filing cabinet in my locked house. It will not be kept in the school and will not be shared. The information will be anonymous. Any information about students that is stored electronically, will be on my personal computer which is encrypted and password protected.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Ryan Sheehan