The Excellence-Commitment-and-Effective-Learning (ExCEL) Program: A Group Intervention for Academically High-Risk Students

Siu-Man Raymond Ting, North Carolina State University

This article reports an evaluation of a group intervention for academically high-risk students. The Excellence-Commitment-and-Effective-Learning (ExCEL) program was developed using Sedlacek's noncognitive model for employing cognitive and noncognitive strategies in a group. Eleven academically high-risk freshmen in a public Midwestern university participated. The results show that participation in the group appears to have enhanced the students' academic performances and study skills.

Academically high-risk students are generally defined by standardized aptitude tests and high school grades/class ranks (Moore, 1970; Nisbet, Ruble, & Schurr, 1982). Academically high-risk students often experience additional challenges to poor academic performance (MacDermott, Conn, & Owen, 1987; Riehl, 1994), including financial need (Riehl, 1994) and involvement in extracurricular and community activities (White & Sedlacek, 1986).

There are many intervention programs for academically high-risk students across the country; however, few of them are theoretically based (Burns, 1994; Noel, Levitz, and Saluri, 1985). The noncognitive model proposed by Tracey and Sedlacek (1984, 1985; Sedlacek, 1991) appears to be promising for designing intervention programs for academically high-risk students.

Sedlacek and his colleagues used a Non-Cognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) to explore psychological, cultural, and social factors related to academic success and retention of high-risk college students (Sedlacek, 1991; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). NCQ variables were validated in a factor-analytic study. Eight factors enhanced student success (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1989): a) positive self-concept; b) realistic self-appraisal system; c) ability to cope with racism; d) preference of long-range goals over short-term or immediate needs; e) a strong support person, for example, a mentor, a student affairs professional, or a faculty member; f) successful leadership experiences; g) demonstrated community service; and h) acquired knowledge in a field.

Predictions, based on NCQ, about college performances of different student groups were reported (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Hood, 1992; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1988). Sedlacek used an advising strategy emphasizing these psychosocial variables to advise nontraditional students on an individual basis (Sedlacek, 1991) and found that the students' academic and campus social lives were enhanced. Adopting Sedlacek's strategy and the same psychosocial variables, I designed and implemented a group intervention entitled the Excellence-Commitment-and-Effective-Learning (ExCEL) program.

During the fall of 1994, the ExCEL program was implemented at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls in which approximately two thirds of the undergraduates were first-generation students. The university had been experiencing an attrition rate of over 30% during their students' first year. In 1993, the Academic Support Office (ASO) was set up to provide academic services—including academic advising, tutorial services, study skills workshops, career counseling, and financial aid information—to first-generation students, those with low incomes, and students with disabilities.

In the Fall of 1994, letters were sent to all students who registered for Academic Support Office (ASO) (N=184) services, inviting them to join the ExCEL group. Eleven freshmen enrolled, 9 women and 2 men. Nine completed the group sessions. Five of the participants were Asian Americans, which reflects the largest minority group on campus, and the remainder were White. In this report, noncognitive variables (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984) are referred to as psychosocial variables.

The ExCEL Program

Adopting Sedlacek's model and a small group approach, the goals of the ExCEL program were to improve students' study skills and academic performances. The topics covered included learning and study skills and related psychosocial topics such as self-concept, self-appraisal, and involvement in student activities. Cognitive topics were based on personal advising experience and ideas taken from Brown and Holtzman (1987) and Ellis (1991). The selected topics were a) learning general study skills, reading skills, and skills in the classroom; b) learning to manage

time; c) summarizing skills; and d) memorizing. The psychosocial topics adopted from the NCQ were a) developing a self-appraisal system; b) enhancing one's self-concept; c) improving knowledge in one's field; d) living in a diverse community; and e) becoming involved in cocurricular/community activities.

Program Description

Eight, 1 1/2 hour, weekly group sessions were held. I served as leader. The group was interactive, included discussions, worksheet exercises, and simulations on each assigned topic. Because the program depended upon considerable out-of-class work, I checked, recorded, and reviewed students' homework assignments at the beginning of each session.

A typical session began with a follow-up discussion about the previous meeting. Focusing on the last topic discussed, group members reflected on their responses and assignments, asked questions, and discussed suggestions for further actions and improvements. A new topic, designed to generate discourse about its meaning and implications for students' academic success, was introduced. Next, the students were encouraged to examine themselves on this topic through worksheets and role-plays.

The group process is very important in the design of the ExCEL group and deserves some illustration. In the second group meeting, in which the objective was to help students with time management, students completed semester schedules that included holidays; due dates for assignments; estimated time needed for project completion; and starting dates to begin work on papers, projects, and examinations. Initially, the students thought they had nearly unlimited time to finish academic assignments and tests, but after they had completed the schedules, they were amazed about how much time academic responsibilities demanded.

To close a session, the students were challenged to apply what they had learned from the activities. Students received homework assignments, including designing new plans on their study timetable, testing new behaviors about note-taking, and observing and self-monitoring their attitudes and behaviors through journal writings. For example, they were given an assignment to design their own study schedule and implement it after they had completed the session on learning to manage time.

Program Evaluation

The program evaluation examined how students improved their academic performances and study skills after the group intervention. To assess the impact of ExCEL, data were drawn from the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) (Weinstein & Palmer, 1987) scores, participants' grade-point averages (GPAs), and enrollment standings at the end of the freshman year.

Learning and Study Strategies Inventory Scores

To determine whether the ExCEL students improved on their cognitive skills, the LASSI was administered as a pre- to posttest. Ten scales are designed to measure students' use of learning strategies and study methods: a) attitude, b) motivation, c) time management, d) coping with anxiety, e) concentration, f) information processing, g) selecting main ideas, h) study aids, i) self-testing, and j) test skills. Each scale contains eight items except "selecting main ideas" which has five items. The total points possible on each scale is 40—except for "selecting main ideas" which

Table 1 A *t*-test comparing students' mean scores of the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory

	Before		After	
Variable	M	*SD*	M	*SD*
Attention	32.44	4.69	33.89	6.21
Motivation	31.78	5.89	32.89	5.47
Time Management	26.67	6.84	27.44	8.13
Anxiety	20.22	5.19	23.00	7.63
*Concentration	23.89	6.25	27.87	5.86
*Information Processing	27.33	5.59	31.78	5.17
*Selecting Main Ideas	15.78	4.44	18.89	3.89
Study Aids	24.88	6.03	26.67	6.60
Self Testing	25.00	5.17	27.67	6.12
*Testing Skills	25.89	6.21	29.88	5.86

Note. $p < 0.05$. * Significant values.

has a 25 point total. Coefficient alpha reliability estimates for the scales ranged from 0.74 to 0.86, except for "study aids" which was 0.68. Test-retest correlation coefficients for the scales ranged from 0.72 to 0.85, demonstrating a high degree of reliability for the scale scores.

Table 1 shows the mean scores of students' LASSI scores. Ten paired *t*-tests were computed with a confidence level of 0.05. Participants' mean scores on the subscales of Concentration ($t_{(8)}$ = -3.62, p<0.005), Information Processing ($t_{(8)}$= -3.89, p<0.005), Selecting Main Ideas ($t_{(8)}$= -4.23, p<0.003), and Testing Skills ($t_{(8)}$ = -2.59; p<0.03) improved significantly after the program.

GPA and Retention

To examine the students' academic performances and retention standings, GPAs and retention rates of the ExCEL students at the end of the first year were compared with a control group of students (N = 18) who had similar American College Testing Program (ACT) composite scores and high school class rank. The comparison group consisted of students who registered for ASO assistance but did not use any of the services. The mean ACT composite scores of the ExCEL group and the control group were 18.44 and 18.39, respectively, and their mean high school percentile ranks in class were 36.89 and 33.56, respectively. In the fall semester, the mean college GPA for the ExCEL students (M = 2.65, SD = 0.23) was significantly higher than that of the control group (M = 2.05, SD = 0.66; $t_{(25)}$ = 2.62, p <0.05). The ExCEL group members' overall retention rate after one year was 89%, higher than that of the control group which was 83%. No significant differences were found between the retention rates of the two groups. Among the Asian American students, the mean GPA in the fall semester was 2.57 for those in the ExCEL group (n = 5) and 2.41 for those in the control group (n = 3).

Discussion

The small group approach utilized in the ExCEL program provides students with an informal, interactive, and supportive environment and appears to work well with academically high-risk students.

The program evaluation showed that future efforts should devote more time to discussing time and study skills and building a working group earlier in the sessions. Participants also recommended increasing the total number of meetings. An evaluation of the ExCEL program indicated that it may be an effective approach for helping students. Group intervention may improve study skills and academic adjustments during the first year, preventing early drop-outs or academic difficulties.

The findings, although promising, are preliminary because of the small group size. Faculty, student affairs professionals, and researchers should examine the ExCEL model with more participants to validate the current findings.

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Author's Note

Siu-Man "Raymond" Ting is an assistant professor at North Carolina State University at Raleigh. He is also the Coordinator of Student Development in Higher Education program in the Department of Counselor Education. He had been a university counselor before he graduated from the University of Iowa in August 1995. His current research interests are academic performance and retention, and professional development issues.