

CONVERTING INCOMPLETE APPLICANTS INTO ENROLLED STUDENTS:  
A KEY TO SUSTAINABILITY FOR THE COLLEGE OF NEW CALEDONIA

By

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We accept this Report as conforming  
to the required standard

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### **ABSTRACT**

Every year, hundreds of potential students slip through the cracks at the College of New Caledonia (CNC) because there is no system to help them follow through with their applications and become qualified. This project used a mixed-method research approach of online surveys and a focus group to ask employees and those whose applications were deemed incomplete, for suggestions on generating more qualified applicants. Research participants called for more personalized service, additional online services, clear and consistent information, and supplementary funding. The key findings and conclusions led to seven recommendations for CNC: (1) Create a system to deal with incomplete applicants; (2) Form a working group to investigate issues raised by participants; (3) Update the College's strategic enrolment and marketing plan; (4) Employ prospect tracking software; (5) Improve the online application process; (6) Provide more entrance awards to applicants; and (7) Create a student mentorship program.

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## CHAPTER ONE: FOCUS AND FRAMING

In this chapter, I describe the Organizational Leadership Project (OLP), the reasons for my interest in the project, the research questions, the opportunity and its significance, a systems analysis of the opportunity, the organizational context surrounding the opportunity, and a conclusion.

I am Director of Communications and Development at the College of New Caledonia (CNC). I am responsible for several areas, including student recruitment. CNC's Application Status Report (ASR) of August 3, 2010 (Appendix A) indicated student recruitment was successful, with almost every program filled to capacity and many programs with qualified applicants on a waitlist. However, the ASR also showed there were 999 incomplete applications to CNC in August 2010. Applications can be deemed incomplete for relatively easy-to-fix reasons, such as submitting a portfolio of past work, writing an entrance exam, or submitting a transcript. However, some applications are deemed incomplete because the applicant is missing one or more prerequisite courses, which can take months to complete. While many of the 999 incomplete applications were for programs with no available seats, a total of 221 seats were available in various programs as of August 3, 2010, including 189 seats in open enrolment programs (Appendix A). Unfortunately, seats in some areas remained empty when classes commenced for the 2010 fall semester, despite the long list of incomplete applicants. While seats in some programs have been filled in past years by vigilant CNC employees who contacted incomplete applicants via ad hoc "phone gangs", CNC currently has no specific system or process to engage, track, and help those who submit incomplete applications. At present, people who submit incomplete applications are sent a form letter detailing which requirements they are lacking. They are then left to their own initiative to become qualified applicants and

subsequently students in classrooms. Little is known about how many incomplete applicants become enrolled students.

I first became interested in incomplete applications in December 2009, when the Associate Dean of Trades expressed concern to me that no one at CNC was engaging this valuable group of people, who he believed would eagerly fill empty seats if someone helped them become qualified applicants. As the recently hired manager responsible for student recruitment, I was frustrated that programs were commencing with empty seats, despite the recruitment department having generated more than enough applications. I discussed the issue with CNC’s executive, who recognized the importance of converting incomplete applications into enrolled students. This led me to my research question: How can the College of New Caledonia convert a higher percentage of incomplete applications into enrolled students? The sub-questions for my research were:

1. What barriers did incomplete applicants experience when applying to CNC?
2. What barriers did CNC employees identify when dealing with applicants?
3. How can CNC stakeholders work together to convert incomplete applications into enrolled students?

### **The Opportunity and Its Significance**

The need for this Organizational Leadership Project (OLP) might not have been obvious to some. Last year, CNC experienced its highest enrolment in the college’s 41-year history (College of New Caledonia [CNC], 2010b). However, a perfect storm was looming on the horizon in the form of “a continued decline in K-12 enrolments in the CNC Region into 2016” (Boese, 2010, p. 19) and an inevitable economic rebound, both of which might mean reduced applications to CNC. Part of the reason for the historic enrolment in 2009/10 was the decline in



the U.S. housing market in recent years. “The U.S. housing collapse has had a significant impact on lumber operations in northern B.C., where thousands of forestry workers have lost their jobs” (Hoekstra, 2010, p. 1).

There were also issues with the unemployment rate in the Cariboo region, which “rose by 5.5 percentage points to reach 12% in 2009 – the highest rate and [highest] annual increase in the province” (Institute of Chartered Accountants of British Columbia, 2010, p. 3). Many of the unemployed workers enrolled at CNC to upgrade their skills, thanks to special funding provided by the federal government and increased trades seats funded by the provincial government. “High unemployment rates appear to correspond to increased community college enrolment and general post-secondary enrolment of males and higher-income students” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006, p. 3). However as noted by CNC’s President John Bowman, provincial trades funding to CNC was cut by almost 100 spaces in 2010, and the majority of federal funding for the unemployed has expired (J. Bowman, personal communication, April 28, 2010). Furthermore, many of the displaced workers will either be retrained in the next 2 years, or return to work once the economy rebounds.

While some displaced workers went to college, others left the Prince George area in search of employment. As families left the area, it caused declining school enrolments of 1,824 students between 2005 and 2010 in the Prince George school district and the closure of six primary schools (School District 57, 2010). The decline in secondary school enrolments will likely hurt CNC in the coming years, as 26.9%, or 2,462 students, came directly from high school to the college between 2001 and 2008 (CNC, 2009).

The opportunity of converting incomplete applications into enrolled students has significant potential to increase revenue for CNC, increase the earning potential of the

applicants, and increase the chances of students' children attending post-secondary education, as well as provide an economic impact to the region, while improving job security for CNC employees.

If CNC could have filled the 221 available seats in the fall 2010 semester with incomplete applicants, who had then gone on to take five first-year university transfer courses, it could have collected \$639,353 in tuition and fee revenue. While it is debatable how many incomplete applicants can actually be converted into students in classrooms, each incomplete applicant that is converted represents \$2,893 in tuition and fees, if they register for five first-year university transfer courses (Gray, 2010, p. 4). This added revenue could be very useful to the college, which saw its 2010/11 Annual Capital Allowance funding reduced by more than \$1 million from the level provided in 2008/09 (CNC, 2011c, p. 1).

Helping incomplete applicants obtain access to post-secondary education will also increase their skills and thus their employability. "The acquisition of knowledge and skills is increasingly seen as both the main challenge and the central opportunity for achieving a return to full employment" (Crouch, 2006, p. 242). CNC research (2007) has also shown that individuals' earning potential increases with the amount of education they obtain from the college:

Students will see their annual income increase, on average, by about \$122 per year for every credit completed at CNC during the analysis year. . . . Throughout his or her working career, the average CNC student's discounted lifetime earnings (i.e., future values expressed in present value terms) will increase \$4.80 for every education dollar invested (in the form of tuition, fees, books, and foregone earnings from employment). . . . Students enjoy an attractive 16% annual rate of return on their CNC educational investment, and recover all costs (including wages foregone while attending) in 9 years. (p. 1)

According to Choy (2001), attending post-secondary education will not only help the students, but could also create positive change for their family members, as research shows people are more likely to attend college or university if their parents did:

As parents' education increases, so does students' likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education. Among 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not go to college, 59 percent had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education by 1994. The enrollment rate increased to 75 percent among those whose parents had some college experience, and to 93 percent among those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. (p. 7)

Converting incomplete applicants into students could also create positive change in the local economy in Prince George:

About 17% of CNC's students come from outside the region, bringing with them monies that would not have otherwise entered the local economy. The expenditures of CNC's out-of-region students for books and supplies, room and board, transportation, or other personal expenses generate roughly \$6.3 million in regional income in the CNC Service Area. . . . College skills embodied in the workforce of the CNC Service Area where past and present students are employed yield a cumulative of \$350.4 million in added regional income. (CNC, 2007, p. 1)

Converting incomplete applicants into enrolled students may also increase job security for CNC faculty, as fully subscribed programs are rarely terminated at the college. An improved application to student conversion rate would also prove the value of student recruitment stakeholders and thus increase their job security and productivity. According to Ventrice (2009), "it is a simple fact: people who feel valued perform at a much higher level" (para. 2).

If CNC continues to do nothing to convert incomplete applicants into enrolled students, some programs may be cancelled owing to low enrolment. Cancellation of programs may lead to layoffs for faculty, which would likely lead to layoffs in support staff and possibly

administration. Cascio (2002) stated layoffs can lead to low morale, loss of trust in management, heightened insecurity, and reduced productivity for those who remain with the organization.

### **Systems Analysis of the Opportunity**

Many interdependent factors, dynamics, and forces are at play around the issue of incomplete applicants at CNC. As pointed out by Wheatley (2006), “from a systems consciousness, we understand that no problem or behavior can be understood in isolation. We must account for dynamics operating in the whole system that are displaying themselves in these individual moments” (para. 9). In this section, I look at the system that surrounds and influences this OLP, including government funding and regulations, CNC’s location, increased competition globally, nationally, and locally for students, as well as human resources issues regarding student recruitment.

Like other post-secondary institutions in British Columbia (BC), CNC is regulated by the provincial government. The college is also heavily dependent on government funding, with approximately 74% of its revenue coming from the Ministry of Advanced Education operating grant and the Industry Training Authority’s Training Plan (CNC, 2011c). CNC’s student tuition fees are the second lowest in the province and account for approximately 15% of the college’s revenue. “This proportion is far lower than the proportion generated by the special purpose teaching universities (32%), and large urban colleges (26%)” (CNC, 2011d, p. 5). The province’s “policy of limiting tuition fee increases to the rate of inflation (approximately 2%) will continue for 2011/12 and 2012/13” (CNC, 2011d, p. 7).

That means the only area where CNC has control over its funding is the approximately 11% it receives from other sources such as interest on investments, endowment funds, and donations, which depend on market fluctuations and the generosity of donors. In other words,

CNC has very little control over its funding, and because it is legislated to provide a balanced budget to the province every year, it must make cuts in order to balance the budget. This is the case with the 2011/12 budget, where the government has indicated CNC will receive “status quo” funding, which has caused the college to predict a \$1.8 million shortfall because of rising costs and expenditures.

The college’s funding is not likely to increase in early 2011, as most government decisions have been put on hold following the resignation of Premier Gordon Campbell and NDP leader Carole James and the subsequent leadership races that have followed. The college will present a plan to its Board of Governors at the end of April with ways to reduce the shortfall. Given the projected shortfall, it will be difficult for CNC to find the human resources necessary to convert incomplete applications into enrolled students. This is all occurring at a time when CNC is also dealing with increased competition for potential applicants globally, nationally, and locally.

The increasing popularity of online universities means CNC’s competition for local students is no longer limited to the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), the only other post-secondary institution in Prince George. In fact, I am aware of dozens of local people, including myself, who have pursued post-secondary education online, through universities such as Royal Roads University, Athabasca University, and even Central Queensland University in Australia. The students I have talked with said they chose online universities because of the anywhere, anytime learning and flexibility they provide. This fact is not lost on the college, which mentioned the issue in its current 5-year strategic plan: “We foresee a post-secondary and college system under pressure . . . [with] increasing competition amongst provincial institutions

(colleges, regional universities and others) and across jurisdictions (including private trainers)” (CNC, 2011c, p. 4).

CNC’s main local competition for students comes from UNBC, which has a competitive advantage for applicants because of its “early admission awards” of up to \$5,300 per annum for up to 3 years (University of Northern British Columbia, 2009). UNBC’s early admission incentive program could mean more than \$15,000 to an applicant, which is considerably more than CNC’s top entrance bursary of \$2,000 for 1 year (CNC, 2010c, p. 47). Besides its limited entrance enticements, CNC may also be at a disadvantage when it comes to its location.

Several respondents indicated in their online surveys that Prince George’s northern location and winter weather were deciding factors in not attending CNC. Prince George is located in the central interior of BC, more than 780 kilometres north of Vancouver. Prince George’s rural location and area population base of 83,225 means it has a much smaller local applicant pool than an urban college, such as Douglas College, which has campuses in the Vancouver area and enjoys a population base of more than 2.39 million in the Metro Vancouver area alone (Statistics Canada, 2010). In other words, each applicant to CNC is potentially more valuable than to an urban college, which has a larger pool from which to draw applicants. CNC has also undergone changes to its internal system, which may have an effect on this opportunity.

There are three main departments involved in recruitment and enrolment of students: Communication Services, Counselling and Advising, and Admissions. All three departments have gone through changes recently. The Communication Services department has seen a reduction in staff in the past 2 years, leaving it with one student recruitment advisor, who sees “extreme value” in converting incomplete applications into enrolled students, but has no time to take on the task (G. Gray, personal communication, June 1, 2010). In fact, the loss of the part-

time recruiter position has forced Communication Services to cut back on the number of recruitment fairs it attends, which may cause a further reduction in the number of applications to the college. The Counselling and Advising department has also restructured how it operates, while the Admissions department has made some changes under a new leader.

Fortunately, CNC's executive has said it supports the opportunity of converting incomplete applicants into students and recognizes the value it can provide to the college's long-term sustainability. Therefore, I believe now is an excellent time for CNC to look at how it deals with incomplete applications.

### **Organizational Context**

In this section, I look at the organizational context within which this OLP is situated. It also outlines the institution, its students, its employees, its mission statement, and its vision statement. CNC has grown from one to six campuses in the past 41 years:

The College of New Caledonia was established in Prince George, B.C., in 1969. CNC has since expanded across central British Columbia, with a total of six campuses in: Quesnel, Mackenzie, Burns Lake, Fort St. James and Vanderhoof and other smaller learning centres (located in Fraser Lake, Granisle, and Valemount). (CNC, 2010a, para. 1)

Unlike urban colleges, CNC must serve a very large geographic area. In fact, the area is so large, it contains three school districts:

The college region spans a vast geographic area of 148,000 square kilometers and encompasses three school districts (Prince George #57, Quesnel #28 and Nechako-Lakes #91), 11 local government municipalities and 21 First Nations communities. In 2010, the total regional population was approximately 144,000 people. (CNC, 2011c, p. 1)

This OLP focused on the Prince George campus, which is the largest and accounts for 2,954, or 73%, of CNC's total of 4,042 full-time equivalent students (CNC, 2011e, p. 2). I also chose the Prince George campus, as it is where the majority of my responsibilities lie. While no specific numbers are available for the Prince George campus, the student gender distribution for

all campuses is 51.6% female students and 48.4% male students. The majority of students at CNC are 24 years and younger, with 30.3% aged 20 to 24 and 25% aged 15 to 19. The median age for students is 24, while the average age is 28 (CNC, 2011e, p. 2).

CNC takes pride in the fact that it

Has assisted more than 110,000 individual students to achieve their personal, educational and career goals. High rates of student satisfaction, successful employment outcomes and transitions to further education have been a hallmark of the CNC experience. . . . CNC offers more than 60 educational programs, from developmental and adult basic education, to university transfer courses, as well as business, health, social services, trades, career and technical programs. (CNC, 2011c, p. 1)

In 2009/10, CNC employed roughly 1,067 people across all of its six campuses. Of the 1,067 employees, 583, or 54.6%, were faculty; 431, or 40.4%, were operational staff; and 53, or 4.9%, were administration (CNC, 2011a, p. 1). CNC is second lowest in BC among rural colleges for its ratio of administration to full-time equivalent students at 9%, which is more than 6% below top-ranked Okanagan College, which had a 15.2% ratio of administration to total FTE employees in 2008/09 (CNC, 2011a, p. 1). CNC has a standard, hierarchical executive power structure seen in many community colleges, with a president and three vice-presidents. As Director of Communications and Development, I report directly to the president. The staff in Admissions as well as Counselling and Advising report to the vice-president of Community and Student Services, who then reports to the president.

CNC's annual budget for 2010/11 was \$45.9 million, and it is expected to be the same in 2011/12 (CNC, 2011b, p. 1). Human resources represent the majority of CNC's costs.

“Approximately, 78% of the Colleges [*sic*] expenditures are allocated to employee salary and benefit costs. ‘Other’ expenses represent about 20% of total expenditures annually” (CNC, 2011d, p. 5).



This OLP dovetailed with the fourth priority in the College’s strategic development plan for 2011-2015 (CNC, 2011c). The fourth priority outlined strategies for increasing students’ access to the college so they can reach their learning goals. The plan calls for CNC to develop and implement a Strategic Enrolment Management Plan (SEMP) “and related strategies to increase and improve overall student access, recruitment, engagement, retention, persistence and program completion” (CNC, 2011c, p. 1). The strategic plan also stated that CNC “is a public community college dedicated to helping meet the adult and post-secondary educational needs of all people who wish to access its programs and services” (p. 1). This is congruent with the main goal of this OLP, which was to help incomplete applicants access CNC’s programs and services. Converting incomplete applications should also help CNC fulfill its mission statement, which mentioned providing access to lifelong learning:

The College of New Caledonia, as a comprehensive college, provides access to lifelong learning and facilitates the achievement of personal and educational goals. We are responsive to the diverse needs of our students, our employees, and the communities in our region. In the dynamic, consultative environment, we deliver quality programs and promote the success of every student. (CNC, 2011c, p. 11)<sup>1</sup>

Helping incomplete applicants’ access education was also in alignment with CNC’s vision statement, which stated: “The College of New Caledonia’s education and training are accessible and of high quality. We work with our communities to build success. We provide opportunities for outstanding learning and service” (CNC, 2011c, p. 11).<sup>2</sup>

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### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I showed how converting a higher percentage of incomplete applications into enrolled students is likely to improve CNC's long-term sustainability. I also showed how converting incomplete applicants can improve morale, job stability, and productivity for CNC employees. I then discussed how this OLP can improve the lives of prospective students by increasing their earning potential and their contribution to society, as well as the likelihood of their children taking post-secondary education. This chapter illustrated how converting a higher percentage of incomplete applicants into students can have a positive impact on the economy in the Prince George area. Evidence was also given that incomplete applications will become increasingly important to CNC as it deals with a shrinking application pool from secondary schools in the area, reduced applications because of a predicted economic rebound, and increased competition from UNBC and online post-secondary institutions. In this chapter, I also explained how this OLP was congruent with CNC's vision and mission statements.

In the next chapter, I compare and contrast the key concepts and trends found in scholarly and popular literature regarding student recruitment, as well as the importance of communication, listening, trust and collaboration when leading change in organizations.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Chapter 2 contains a literature review related to my research question: How can the College of New Caledonia convert a higher percentage of incomplete applications into enrolled students? The sub-questions to my research were:

1. What barriers did incomplete applicants experience when applying to CNC?
2. What barriers did CNC employees identify when dealing with applicants?
3. How can CNC stakeholders work together to convert incomplete applications into enrolled students?

This chapter is divided into three sections: current methods of student recruitment, the building blocks of change, and leading change in organizations.

### **Current Methods of Student Recruitment**

When I reviewed the current literature, I found nothing regarding my specific research question, which dealt with incomplete applicants. However, I did find literature regarding student recruitment in general in post-secondary education, or higher education as it is called in American literature. In this section of the literature review, I explore the three most popular methods of recruiting students in post-secondary education today: electronic communication, personal contact, and a hybrid method that combines technology with personalized service.

#### **Electronic Communication**

Electronic communication plays an increasingly predominant role in recruiting students, according to the latest journal articles and white papers. The majority of colleges and universities in Canada and the United States are increasingly using websites, email, videos, texting, and other electronic methods of communication to recruit students, rather than the traditional printed course calendars and brochures that are predominant at CNC. Noel-Levitz, Inc. (2009) found that

“communicating with prospective students has undergone a profound transformation in the past ten years” (p. 1). In the company’s survey of 1,000 college-bound senior high school students, the Noel-Levitz, Inc. study reported, 880 of them “would drop a school from their search or be disappointed with a school if that institution’s Web site did not have the content they needed” (p. 3). A total of 80% of survey respondents also pointed out that “the content presented on a college or university Web site is more important than how it looks” (p. 3).

Katz and Oblinger (2000) stated that when it comes to the Net Generation, which is those who have grown up with the Internet, using technology as a recruitment tool is essential. “Many students are selecting universities based on how wired they are. In part, this is because students are performing more functions on-line, from registering for classes and communicating with professors to ordering take-out food” (p. 8). However, Katz and Oblinger pointed out, most post-secondary institutions are behind the times when it comes to utilizing technology:

Compared to other sectors of the economy, colleges and universities, serving a highly wired population of students and faculty, have been slow to embrace and to build for electronic commerce. Institutions and campus officials will have to do more, do better, and do it soon. (p. 20)

In addition, Coleman, Little, and Lester (2006) stated that the Net Generation expects instant communication. Unfortunately, this is in conflict with the 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. hours that most post-secondary employees work. “Students are able to send email messages to faculty and staff whenever they wish, and they are not limited to traditional office hours for communication” (Oblinger, 2003, p. 1). Coleman et al. (2006) stressed that institutions should not be concerned about using too much technology because the Net Generation will likely be using the technology long before the institutions. Coleman et al. continued: “Students use computers, cell phones, personal desk assistants, and other technological tools to make their lives easier. Introducing new

systems or services that utilize these tools can be both familiar to, and appreciated by, students” (p. 1). Similarly, Malroutu and Tripp (2008) indicated that websites have become the first point of contact for the majority of prospective students: “Websites have become a major source of academic information; most potential students will view a website before they visit a campus. A dynamic website is a cost-effective way to increase visibility and to attract new students” (p. 1). However, according to Keller (2011), websites are already becoming old news, as many applicants and students are using hand-held devices like smart phones to sign up for classes. “Hand-held devices like smart phones and tablets are fast becoming the primary way many people use the Internet” (Keller, 2011, p. 1). But some experts (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007; Hossler, 2003; Ivy, 2008; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Woodhouse, 2006) cautioned that not every prospective post-secondary student enjoys technology and thus electronic communication should not be the sole recruitment method employed by a post-secondary institution.

Educator Naomi Baron (as cited in Barnes et al., 2007) warned that catering too much to the Net Generation, who entered the college system circa 2000, is problematic. Baron cautioned that while the technology is available to drastically change the way higher education is delivered, it should not be done to the extent that it alienates less tech-savvy applicants and students. Baron’s comments are congruent with the views of several experts (Hossler, 2003; Ivy, 2008; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Woodhouse, 2006), who cautioned against excessive use of technology over people when recruiting students.

### **Personal Contact**

Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) warned that while the Net Generation enjoys and expects technology in higher education, “they also want face-to-face interaction” (p. 2.11). “Year after year, face-to-face interactions are ranked by all students in either first or second place. . . . The

implication is that colleges and universities should not assume that more technology is necessarily better” (p. 2.11). Woodhouse (2006) argued that aside from the customary staff who are traditionally involved in recruiting, personal contact with faculty plays an increasingly important role when attracting students. According to Woodhouse, faculty members can no longer play a peripheral role in the recruitment of students, since many post-secondary institutions have been forced to make cutbacks in the recruiting department because of financial issues. Woodhouse explained that the cuts often come at a time when the pipeline of applicants has diminished due to a reduction in school enrolments. According to Ivy (2008), the contact that prospective students have with an institution’s employees can be more important than its public reputation, marketing efforts, and instructors’ qualifications:

The simple process of how a telephone enquiry is handled may have a greater impact on whether or not a prospective student is going to keep that university in their range of options, than an eminent professor’s publications or research record. (p. 290)

Lin (1999) agreed and stated that when it comes to student recruitment, the people skills of frontline workers are crucial to success.

### **Hybrid Method of Personal Contact and Electronic Communication**

According to Malroux and Tripp (2008), the key to student recruitment success for California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) was a combination of personal contact and electronic communication. CSUS doubled the number of majors in its Family and Consumer Sciences department to 375 students when it switched to a hybrid method of personal contact and electronic communication to recruit students. CSUS used its website to provide applicants with immediate answers to frequently asked questions, while also having its staff and faculty readily available to provide a personal touch to applicants. Noel-Levitz, Inc. (2010) suggested post-secondary institutions can use technology to provide a personal touch:

Personalization is now a key strategy for any e-recruitment communication program. But more than personalization, students are looking for socialization. Campuses should definitely explore options such as blogs and instant messaging, and even campus-specific social networking pages. Why? Because the “authentic voices” of your students, faculty, staff, and alumni are important and compelling. (p. 5)

Malroutu and Tripp (2008) contended the process of creating the hybrid recruiting method brought CSUS departments closer together, leading to improved “relations and communication” (p. 1) between stakeholders.

### **The Building Blocks of Change: Communication, Listening, Trust, and Collaboration**

In this section of the literature review, I look at what many consider to be the four most important building blocks of change in organizations: communication, listening, trust, and collaboration. Experts (Astin & Astin, 2000; S. M. R. Covey, 2006; S. R. Covey, 1989; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Lewis, 1999, 2006; Rowley & Sherman, 2001; Senge, 2006; Sims, 2002) argued that communication, listening, trust, and collaboration provide the foundation for change and allow it to be implemented smoothly.

#### **Communication**

CNC experiences communication challenges among its employees, partially as a result of its six campuses being situated in communities across northern B.C. The college’s education council also approves adjustments up to 10 months per year to courses, programs, admission requirements, and other issues submitted by CNC stakeholders. Those changes, which could involve a number of the college’s more than 50 programs, then must be communicated to thousands of applicants, more than 4,000 full-time equivalent students, and more than 600 employees. Communicating these changes, which can be very detailed in nature, to a plethora of stakeholders is challenging, but necessary.

Sims (2002) confirmed that “the importance of effective communication for today’s organizations can’t be overemphasized for one specific reason: Everything the organization does involves communicating. Not some things, but everything” (p. 135). S. R. Covey (1989) agreed and concluded, “Communication is the most important skill in life” (p. 237). Sims (2002) also stated that communication is essential in organizations, where employees at all levels need to be good communicators in order for organizations to be effective in the 21st century. Lewis (2006) concurred and asserted, “Communication is critical in creating and articulating vision; channeling feedback between implementers, key decision-makers, and key users; providing social support; forestalling or making constructive use of resistance; and assessing and promoting results” (p. 1).

Kouzes and Posner (2007) declared that leaders must keep their lines of communication open, both internally and externally, to avoid being swept away by the swirling waters of change. Moreover, Lewis (1999) contended that change cannot take place without communication: “The empirical picture that is slowly emerging indicates that communication process and change implementation are inextricably linked processes” (p. 44). Coombs (2001) also emphasized that clear, concise, and timely communication is imperative for leaders when initiating change; otherwise, rumours and innuendo are often used to fill the gaps in people’s minds, derailing the change process:

In the absence of information, people devise their own explanations. However fanciful these explanations might be, they become accepted as absolute fact. . . . Only if management lays cards on the table and comes clean quickly can there be any hope of quashing rumour and uncertainty. (p. 83)

By increasing communication among employees, CNC can ensure stakeholders and applicants consistently receive current and correct information.



**Listening**

According to S. R. Covey (1989), there are four forms of communication: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. While speaking and writing are often what many people think of when they hear the word communication, S. R. Covey asserted that listening is the cornerstone of effective communication. S.R Covey's comments on listening are similar to those of Bolman and Deal (2008), who argued change agents need to listen to those involved in the change if they want things to run smoothly. Changes regarding incomplete applicants at CNC could affect dozens of stakeholders. Therefore, as the change agent, I must ensure I hear from those who will be affected by the change.

In addition, S. R. Covey (1989) argued that in order to influence people, a leader has to be able to understand them, which comes from listening to them. Blicq (1991) stated that communicating at work is absolutely essential if leaders want to achieve results, and like S. R. Covey (1989), he stated that effective communication involves listening. "The trouble is we take listening for granted. Nobody taught us to listen" (Blicq, 1991, p. 269). Kouzes and Posner (2007) concurred and stated that effective leaders must be able to listen to their people and recognize that "leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue" (p. 17) S. R. Covey complained the problem is that everyone spends years in school learning how to read, write, and speak, but rarely does anyone have formal training in how to listen effectively to others.

**Trust**

Christenson (2007) insisted trust is the bottom line in leadership, especially in times of uncertainty, such as when leading change in organizations. I agree with Christenson, and believe I will need stakeholders' trust if I am to successfully lead change at CNC. S. M. R. Covey (2006) explained trust is the one thing that changes everything in an organization, because it allows

almost everything else to fall into place. “When trust goes up, speed will also go up and costs will go down. It’s that simple, that real, that predictable” (p. 13).

Christenson (2007) insisted, “To be worthy of trust, a leader must, at a minimum, have integrity and competence. Integrity in its highest form follows this simple, but difficult-to-execute formula: What I think = what I say = what I do” (p. 1). This formula is similar to Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) second law of leadership, which declared, “DWYSYWD: Do What You Said You Will Do” (p. 41). Fairholm and Fairholm (2000) emphasized a leader’s words and actions must be congruent, or the contradiction will impede the leader’s ability to garner trust and thus lead change. “For leaders to lead they need a united and harmonious environment characterized by mutual trust” (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2000, p. 1). Christenson (2007) claimed that once leaders have the trust of their people, they can lead them through almost any change:

If people truly trust a leader, they are willing to put their jobs and sometimes their lives at risk to support that leader, confident that she or he is leading them in the right direction and is supporting their efforts. (p. 1)

It became obvious to me the value that CNC President John Bowman places on trust when he gave all of the college’s management team S. M. R. Covey’s (2006) *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* for Christmas 2010. The gesture caused one of CNC’s deans to comment, “Trust is like a sandcastle; you have to keep building it up because there is always someone kicking it down. The important thing is you don’t give up and continue to build it up” (D. Precosky, personal communication, December 7, 2010). If CNC stakeholders can communicate effectively, they can increase collaboration and enhance trust, which S. M. R. Covey (2006) asserted will increase the speed at which changes can take place.

## **Collaboration**

Kouzes and Posner (2007) argued that effective leaders must be able to collaborate with others to facilitate change in organizations. In order to create a system to help incomplete applicants, I will need to collaborate with as many CNC stakeholders as possible. “‘You can’t do it alone’ is the mantra of exemplary leaders – and for reason. You simply can’t get extraordinary things done by yourself. Collaboration is the master skill that enables teams, partnerships, and other alliances to function effectively” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 242).

Freed, Klugman, and Fife (1997) cautioned that people in higher education often purport to be collaborative because they erroneously assume time spent on a committee with others means that actual collaboration is taking place. “Committees in academe are common, but actually collaborating and working as teams is not” (Freed et al., 1997, p. 4). In order for the culture to change in post-secondary education and more collaboration to be realized, Freed et al. (1997) stated that “members need to shift their thinking about how work is done. When the paradigm shifts, members begin to ask different questions in search of new answers to the same old problems” (p. 4).

It is suggested by Kezar and Lester (2009) that collaboration is lacking in some organizations because leaders spend time battling or suppressing the differences between constituency groups, instead of embracing and utilizing the energy and distinctions. “One of the reasons leaders often fail to move forward is that they do not capitalize on the natural synergies that occur when multiple, similar initiatives come together” (Kezar & Lester, 2009, p. 2). Rabe (2006) explained that while collaboration can be effective when leading change in organizations, it is important that group participants are free to express their own ideas and opinions, even if they differ from popular opinion. Rabe also remarked that too many groups try to come to a

consensus when making decisions regarding change, which often silences dissenting voices and thus reduces the chance of innovation. “Groupthink is one of the greatest threats to innovation that any organization faces. . . . The issue is that Groupthink turns otherwise brilliant, independent-minded people into herd animals” (Rabe, Chap. 2, para. 8). Hallgren (2010) stated that while groupthink is a well-developed theoretical idea, “not all temporary organizations suffer from groupthink, but there is reason to be cautious” (p. 14).

Kezar and Lester (2009) suggested that post-secondary leaders must not only understand the importance of collaboration, but also be aware of barriers to collaboration if they are to be successful: “Leaders will not be able to successfully enact the strategies for reorganizing campuses unless they understand the advantages of collaboration and the systemic barriers to creating collaboration” (p. 1). Kezar and Lester (2009) argued that external factors that romanticize and reward the lone wolf or individual leader, instead of recognizing and compensating the collaborative team, are a barrier to teamwork. “American values celebrating the rugged individualist further compound and solidify this perspective in organizations. Typically, individuals are rewarded, individuals are held accountable, individuals hold a spot within institutional hierarchies, and the like” (Kezar & Lester, 2009, p. x).

### **Leading Change in Organizations**

In this section, I explore three theories on leading change in organizations as well as barriers to change in post-secondary education.

#### **Three Theories on Leading Change in Organizations**

Change does not happen easily or overnight in organizations for a long list of reasons, according to John P. Kotter, a respected author on the subject. However, Kotter (1996) described an eight-step change process that organizations can use to increase the chances of changes taking

hold. Kotter stated that change leaders must implement these eight steps: (1) Establish a sense of urgency; (2) Create a guiding coalition; (3) Develop a vision and strategy; (4) Communicate the change vision; (5) Empower others to act on the vision; (6) Generate short-term wins; (7) Consolidate gains and produce more change; and (8) Anchor the new approaches in the organization's culture (p. 21). Kotter acknowledged that his list of steps is oversimplified and does not take into account all of the intricacies of change, but he argued that it is useful as a template for change. Kotter also stated that the first four steps in the transformation process can "help defrost a hardened status quo" (p. 22).

Kotter's use of the defrosting metaphor is similar to the change model described by social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who pioneered the idea that change efforts should emphasize the group rather than the individual. Lewin (1951) described change as a three-stage process of unfreezing, change or transition, and freezing. Like Kotter's first stage of creating a sense of urgency, Lewin's unfreezing stage is where the need for change is established. Kotter and Lewin insisted that leaders must establish reasons for change in order for others to understand why the change is necessary; otherwise, they will not be motivated and not support the change initiative, causing it to fail.

The importance of establishing and communicating a need for change and thus creating a desire for it is echoed in Richard Beckhard's change model. Like Kotter and Lewin, Beckhard (1969) stated three factors must be present for meaningful organizational change to take place: (1) dissatisfaction with how things are now; (2) a vision of what is possible; and (3) concrete first steps that can be taken toward the vision. Beckhard presented his model as the mathematical formula  $D \times V \times F > R$ , with R representing resistance. Beckhard stated that if the product of the first three factors is greater than the resistance, then change is possible. However, if one of the

elements is missing, such as dissatisfaction with the status quo, Beckhard argued, the change initiative will be unable to overcome the resistance and will fail.

### **Barriers to Change in Post-secondary Education**

I expect there to be barriers or resistance to change regarding incomplete applicants at CNC, which is congruent with the experts (Hardy, 1991; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005; Van Schoor, 2003). Leading change in post-secondary education is even more difficult than in other organizations (Hardy, 1991; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005; Van Schoor, 2003), because employees are typically more educated and skeptical than average workers. McRoy and Gibbs (2009) agreed, stating,

Academics are conservatives in the main, they don't like change. They are also usually very intelligent [and] questioning and if they do not perceive a good reason for change then they will find a way of obstructing it or at least delaying it. (p. 699)

Hardy (1991) indicated one of the biggest barriers to change in post-secondary education is the three distinct employee groups. Hardy (1991) explained faculty, administration, and staff have very different perspectives, duties, responsibilities, pay scales, and often education. Hardy argued that the plurality of groups in post-secondary education makes leading change more complicated than in other organizations. "These groups are, potentially at least, in conflict with each other since they perceive problems, solutions and goals differently" (Hardy, 1991, p. 131). Hardy also stated that the situation in post-secondary education is further complicated by the possibility of faculty from two different areas, such as business and fine arts, viewing the same problem completely differently. "Consequently, if the university is to be effective, these inevitable tensions must be managed" (Hardy, 1991, p. 131). Hardy added that change agents must recognize who the different groups are, "the interests that they represent, the objective they are pursuing, and the sources of power they can command in their pursuit of them" (p. 131).

Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005) reported that change is also difficult to lead in post-secondary education, because institutions are knowing organizations, which makes it hard to transform them into learning organizations. Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt detailed various barriers to change in post-secondary education:

Managing change in universities is an odious task: it tends to be carried out in periods of decreasing budgets and must deal with unclear goals of the organisation. The motivations behind the actions taken by the individuals involved are for the most part not obvious to others. In addition, hierarchies are ambiguous and unreliable, and governance structures are weak. The members of the organisation are idiosyncratic and often obstinate; on the other hand, they are experts when it comes to arguing. (p. 76)

While not nearly as frank, Van Schoor (2003) agreed that resistance to change is greater in higher education, which is why traditional top-down change management techniques are not effective. Instead, Van Schoor (2003) argued that in order to overcome resistance in post-secondary education,

A systemic approach, which includes a bottom-up, social and political influence stream, should be used. This influence stream focuses on involving employees in the change event and in creating a change-facilitative environment. The process of dealing with resistance can be expedited by engaging employees, departments and organisations in the development of Transformational Intelligence. It comprises the attitudes, knowledge and skills to drive change from the bottom-up and to participate in change-facilitative rather than change-inhibiting conversations. (p. 1)

Yukl (2010) argued that resistance to change cannot be avoided, as it is a natural occurrence:

Resistance to change is not merely the result of ignorance or inflexibility; it is a natural reaction by people who want to protect their self-interests and sense of self-determination. Rather than seeing resistance as just another obstacle to batter down or circumvent, it is helpful to view it as energy that can be redirected to improve change. (p. 168)

Yukl listed nine reasons for people resisting change: (1) lack of trust in the people proposing the change; (2) belief that change is not necessary because of a lack of evidence against the current system; (3) belief that the change is not feasible or unlikely to succeed; (4)

economic threats leading to personal loss of income; (5) relative high cost, which may be seen as higher than the benefits; (6) fear of personal failure resulting from expertise becoming obsolete; (7) loss of status and power; (8) threat to values and ideals if the change appears to be inconsistent with organizational culture; and (9) resentment of interference by those who do not like to be controlled by others (pp. 167-168). Senge (2006) confirmed, “Resistance to change is neither capricious nor mysterious. It almost always arises from threats to traditional norms and ways of doing things” (p. 88).

Senge (2006) asserted that “rather than trying to push harder to overcome resistance to change, artful leaders discern the source of the resistance. They focus directly on the implicit norms and power relationships within which the norms are embedded” (p. 88). According to Van Schoor (2003), resistance to change can be overcome in post-secondary education by involving stakeholders in the change and working from the bottom up, rather than the top down. I believe this approach is important at CNC, which is why I invited frontline workers, faculty, and administration to take part in the online survey and focus group.

In the next chapter, I outline the inquiry approach and methodology used in this project.



### **CHAPTER THREE: INQUIRY APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I describe the research process I used to capture the opinions and experiences of CNC employees and incomplete applicants to the College of New Caledonia for the fall semester 2010. The chapter is divided into seven sections: the inquiry approach, project participants, inquiry methods, study conduct, data analysis, ethical issues, and a summary.

#### **Inquiry Approach**

I used action research as described by Stringer (2007) as the foundation for this Organizational Leadership Project. In this section, I provide a description of the mixed-methods concurrent transformative approach I employed as described by Creswell (2009), along with aspects of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) as well as appreciative intelligence (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006). The research question explored was: How can the College of New Caledonia convert a higher percentage of incomplete applications into enrolled students?

I chose action research because it calls for constant improvement and focus of the project while involving the stakeholders. “Action research is a participatory process that involves all those who have a stake in the issue engaging in systemic inquiry into the issues to be investigated” (Stringer, 2007, p. 6). I believed that in order to effect change, I needed to hear from not only incomplete applicants, but also CNC employees who have a stake in student recruitment. Action research allowed me to engage the CNC stakeholders and have them contribute to the systemic inquiry, shared solutions, and recommendations. “[Action research] is a collaborative democratic partnership. Members of the system which is being studied participate actively” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007, p. 4).

I also chose action research because it is not a static process of analyzing data, but is instead a more organic approach that allowed my project to evolve as my knowledge increased. According to Coghlan and Brannick (2007), action research is valuable because it “focuses on research *in* action, rather than research *about* action” (p. 4). I also chose action research because I wanted CNC solutions to a CNC opportunity. Action research “is based on the proposition that generalized solutions may not fit particular contexts or groups of people and that the purpose of inquiry is to find an appropriate solution for the particular dynamics at work in a local situation” (Stringer, 2007, p. 5).

I used a concurrent transformative approach as described by Creswell (2009) for the data collection of the research, because I wanted to collect quantitative and qualitative data at the same time. I believed collecting both kinds of data concurrently was particularly important with incomplete applicants, as they had recently received a letter from CNC explaining why they were not accepted and thus might not have been particularly receptive to multiple inquiries.

I also used aspects of appreciative inquiry as described by Cooperrider et al. (2008). I chose appreciative inquiry so that I could take a positive approach to questions and problem solving where possible. In appreciative inquiry, “intervention gives way to inquiry, imagination, and innovation. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design” (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 8). However, seeing as the focus of this OLP was on identifying and solving barriers to incomplete applicants, it could not be entirely appreciative in its inquiry. This is in line with the position of Cooperrider et al. (2008), who pointed out that appreciative inquiry “is more about learning and understanding something . . . and thereby *valuing* it – than it is about expressions of appreciation” (p. 8).

I also chose appreciative inquiry because it allowed CNC stakeholders to “actually be in the moment we are in, working toward the change we want to realize, and that this being with each other is the change happening, as we engage” (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 9). According to Cooperrider et al. (2008), appreciative inquiry would also be effective in engaging CNC’s vast workforce, as well as its customers and incomplete applicants, and allow them to be part of the change process:

[Appreciative inquiry] is a process for large-scale change management that can enable you to engage and inspire your highly diverse and dispersed workforce; to involve customers and other stakeholders in the future of your business; to discover and extend your business strengths and strategic advantages; and to balance outstanding financial returns with heightened societal contributions. (p. vii)

I also employed aspects of appreciative intelligence as described by Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006), because I wanted to find innovative solutions to barriers in CNC’s application process, rather than spend time “blaming and finger pointing” (p. xvii). I used appreciative intelligence so I could “reframe the challenges as opportunities, look for possibilities that are inherent in the system but not yet recognized or tapped, and build on the collective good of the citizenry” (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006, p. xvii).

By using action research with aspects of appreciative inquiry and appreciative intelligence, I was able to obtain rich, triangulated, quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Project Participants**

In this section, I describe the two main project participant groups for this OLP: incomplete applicants and CNC employees. I also describe the process used to select and invite project participants to participate, the rationale behind these decisions, and the composition of the action inquiry team.

**Action Inquiry Team**

The OLP action inquiry team consisted of Randall Heidt, researcher; John Bowman, project sponsor and president of the College of New Caledonia; Sandra Heidt, research assistant; three RRU leadership cohort classmates, who helped with survey questions, test surveys, and logistics; three volunteer note takers at the focus group meeting where I presented my findings; and a professional APA editor. John Bowman also acted as facilitator during the focus group, partially because of my positional power over two of the participants. See Appendix B for the consent form the action inquiry team members signed.

**Incomplete Applicants**

I was originally going to concentrate on people who had submitted applications to open enrolment programs (Appendix A) since the number of seats is unlimited. In other words, I was reluctant to find ways to help people become qualified applicants only to find there were no seats for them in their desired programs. However, after I received zero online survey responses from my test group of 42 incomplete applicants to the Applied Business Technology program, I decided I should invite everyone who had submitted an incomplete application to CNC for the 2010 fall semester. By the time I sent the email invitations in October 2010 (Appendix C), the list of incomplete applications had grown from 999 on August 3, 2010 (Appendix A) to a total of 1,092 when the semester started in September. The 1,092 incomplete applications were submitted by 1,030 individuals. The difference is because 52 people submitted two incomplete applications to different programs, while five people submitted three incomplete applications to different programs.

I chose incomplete applicants for the fall 2010 semester, as I wanted my survey participants to be the most recent group of applicants to the college. The largest group of survey

invitations went to Health Sciences programs, which received the most incomplete applications, at 483 (Appendix A). The Health Sciences sampling is valuable, as it represents the most popular programs and typically matriculated high school students, given the prerequisites for programs. This is in contrast to incomplete applicants to career and college preparation courses, who are typically students seeking high school upgrading in order to become qualified for programs. Health Sciences applicants also differ from the majority of open enrolment applicants in that they are applying for specific programs.

In other words, I am delighted that I decided to increase the participant group to include all incomplete applicants for the fall 2010 semester, since it ensured that my data were not program specific and provided a maximum variation sampling as described by Glesne (2006). “As experience will show, action research is not a neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step-by-step to the end of the process” (Stringer, 2007, p. 9). All incomplete applicants had to indicate that they had read and accepted the letter of consent (Appendix C) before proceeding with the online survey (Appendix D).

### **CNC Employees**

I believed it was vital to include CNC employees as project participants because of their experience with CNC’s application process. Employees also had a great deal of contact with students who have been through the application process. They also have a stake in incomplete applications. “Researchers, therefore, need to ensure that all stakeholders – people whose lives are affected – participate in defining and exploring the problem or service under investigation” (Stringer, 2007, p. 44).

The project participant group of CNC employees included two main groups: frontline employees and decision makers. Frontline CNC employees were those who dealt with students

on a regular basis, such as counsellors, admissions staff, advisors, recruiters, faculty, and support staff. Decision makers were “those with the positional power and ability to facilitate change” as recommended by A. Schultz, (personal communication, July 15, 2010). This group was much smaller at 12, and much easier to identify. I sent 142 email invitations (Appendix E) to CNC employees, who were chosen by searching through the college’s employee contact list on its website, with particular attention paid to choosing representatives from every area at the Prince George campus. All CNC employees had to indicate that they had read and accepted the letter of consent (Appendix E) before proceeding with the online survey (Appendix F).

I compiled, analyzed, and themed the online survey data from the 78 employees and 62 incomplete applicants who responded and created draft recommendations. I then took the draft recommendations to a focus group of 10 CNC stakeholders, where they vetted and add to the recommendations. The focus group invitation is shown in Appendix G and the focus group questions are listed in Appendix H. The focus group members had earlier been invited to participate in the online survey. However, it is unknown if they actually participated, as I wanted the survey responses to remain anonymous. Focus group participants signed a consent form (Appendix I) before participating.

### **Inquiry Methods**

In this section, I explain the research methods and tools that I used as part of a mixed-method research approach. I specifically describe the data collection tools, study conduct, and data analysis.

#### **Data Collection Tools**

I used two main data collection tools in this OLP: online surveys and a focus group. The questions for each can be seen in Appendix D, F, and H, respectively. By using a combination of

online surveys and a focus group I ensured my data were triangulated and accurate. “The credibility of a study is enhanced when multiple sources of information are incorporated” (Stringer, 2007, p. 58).

**Online surveys.** I conducted the online surveys using SurveyGizmo (Widgix, 2010). SurveyGizmo stores information in the United States and is thus subject to the U.S. Patriot Act (2001). I made survey participants aware of this fact as part of my letter of consent preamble (see Appendix C and Appendix E), which they had to agree to before being able to enter their respective survey (see Appendix D and Appendix F). Interestingly, a total of 50 people, 20 CNC employees and 30 incomplete applicants, abandoned the online survey after reading the letter of consent. It is impossible to determine whether the U.S. Patriot Act, which was briefly mentioned in the informed consent documents, or other factors in the preamble caused people to abandon the survey before seeing any actual questions. However if I could go back, I would try harder to find a similar-quality online survey tool housed in Canada, to ensure the U.S. Patriot Act had no bearing on my research.

I originally pilot-tested the online surveys by sending invitations to 42 incomplete applicants to CNC’s Applied Business Technology program. However, since no one responded from the test group, I decided to use some members of my action inquiry team to test the surveys for both participant groups. I believe this group was ideal for pilot-testing the surveys, as my RRU cohort members provided expertise on survey questions, while the CNC members of my action inquiry team provided institutional knowledge and background. I concur with Glesne (2006) that “a pilot study is useful for testing many aspects of your proposed research” (p. 43).

I chose online surveys as a research tool because they allowed me to quickly and efficiently collect both qualitative and quantitative data from a large group of people, which was

vital to understanding the depth and breadth of the issue. I also believe the online surveys were a cost-efficient, time-saving way to collect a heterogeneous sampling, while providing anonymity as described by Stringer (2007).

**Focus group.** I had intended to host two focus groups for my OLP: one with incomplete applicants and one with CNC employees. “Focus groups provide another means of acquiring information and might be characterized as a group interview. Participants in a focus group should each have opportunities to describe their experience and present their perspective on the issues discussed” (Stringer, 2007, p. 73). However, when only six local incomplete applicants even expressed interest in attending a focus group, I decided to forgo the incomplete applicant focus group.

I chose a focus group format to present my findings and draft recommendations to CNC stakeholders. The focus group helped me, as well as other participants, obtain a deeper understanding of the issues regarding incomplete applicants. “The main advantage of focus groups . . . is the opportunity to observe large amounts of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time” (Morgan, 1988, p. 8). However, I also acknowledge that the control and brevity of the focus group format limited its value, as pointed out by Morgan (1988).

The focus group was hosted by my project sponsor, CNC president John Bowman, who also sent out the email invitations (Appendix G). Invitations to participate were sent out to six frontline employees, six faculty members, and six decision makers, as I wanted to have all stakeholders involved so the vision would be shared and thus the level of buy-in would be increased. “Leaders have to make sure that what they see is also something that others can see. When visions are shared they attract more people, sustain higher levels of motivation, and withstand more challenges than those that are singular” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 105).



A total of 10 CNC stakeholders attended the meeting: five decision makers, four frontline employees, and one faculty member. I was pleased that all areas were represented and that the group size coincided with the advice from Glesne (2006), who stated, “Small groups of six to ten participants generally work best. If the groups are larger, they tend to break into sub-group discussions that are difficult to facilitate and record” (p. 103).

I presented my main research findings and draft recommendations to the group and then used Dr. Edward de Bono’s (de Bono Group, 2010) six thinking hats technique as my inquiry method for the focus group. I chose de Bono’s technique because the majority of CNC meetings that I have attended have focused on the blue process hat, the black critical hat, and the white facts hat, often at the expense of the yellow positive hat, the green creative hat, and the red gut reaction hat. My sponsor, my supervisor, and I believed draft recommendations were warranted given the busy work schedule of focus group participants and the unlikelihood of them being able to come up with substantive and comprehensive recommendations in one meeting. My basic questions for the focus group can be seen in Appendix H.

### **Study Conduct**

In this section, I briefly describe the 12 steps I took during action research. I employed a basic action research framework as described by Stringer (2007): “The basic action research routine provides a simple yet powerful framework – look, think, act” (p. 8).

Step 1, I researched and vetted internal documents regarding incomplete applicants.

Step 2, I developed test questions based on the internal documents and inputted them into SurveyGizmo (Widgix, 2010) for both research groups.

Step 3, I emailed my online survey invitation to my test group, who were incomplete applicants to the Applied Business Technology program and received zero responses.

Step 4, I decided to use members of my action advisory team as my pilot test group for both online surveys.

Step 5, I made changes to the online surveys based on the comments I received from my pilot test group.

Step 6, I acted by sending out email invitations to incomplete applicants and CNC stakeholders.

Step 7, I analyzed and themed online survey data, which were then verified by my research assistant.

Step 8, I used themed data to write major findings and conclusions.

Step 9, I created a PowerPoint presentation for the focus group, which included draft recommendations based on major findings and conclusions.

Step 10, I presented draft recommendations to CNC stakeholders and received their input, suggestions, and additional recommendations.

Step 11, I reflected on what I learned from the focus group and incorporated the information into relevant chapters.

Step 12, I wrote up final results, recommendations, and conclusions.

While these steps appear rather linear, my actual journey was more convoluted and difficult. I found myself constantly re-planning, refocusing, and redefining my questions, literature, themes, and project in general. Fortunately, I drew comfort from Stringer (2007), who indicated change of course was a natural occurrence in action research: “People will find themselves working backward through the routines, repeating processes, revising procedures, rethinking interpretations, leapfrogging steps or stages, and sometimes making radical changes in direction” (p. 9).

## Data Analysis

The data I collected during the action research phase were analyzed in several stages. First, I analyzed the quantitative data from incomplete applicants and CNC employees, which were neatly and graphically presented by the SurveyGizmo (Widgix, 2010) software. I then imported the qualitative online survey data from both participant groups into an Excel document. I then used aspects of the bibbit technique as described by Kirby and McKenna (1989) to sort, colour-code, group, and theme the data. A bibbit is defined as “a passage from a transcript, a piece of conversation recorded on a scrap of paper that can stand on its own but, when necessary, can be relocated in its original context” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 135). I colour-coded the responses from incomplete applicants to the questions and printed them out. I then took the qualitative data from CNC stakeholders and colour-coded them as well, so I could differentiate which group of answers belonged to which participant group.

As themes emerged from the answers, I wrote them on the top of coloured poster paper and began taping the coloured data below the themes. I then taped the poster paper onto the walls of my home office. Three major themes and six secondary themes emerged. I then asked my research assistant to go over the themes and make sure they accurately represented the data. As described by Glesne (2006), my refined data analysis allowed me to further focus my topic and reshape my research as I proceeded, which led to the creation of the focus group questions (Appendix H). I then took the themes and created key findings and conclusions, which are presented in Chapter 4. I used the findings and conclusions to generate draft recommendations, which I presented to a focus group of CNC stakeholders.

In accordance with Glesne’s (2006) approach, I engaged in member checking when I enlisted the feedback from CNC stakeholders and shared my interpretive process with them, thus

ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of my data. I then took the corroborated data and used them to compile final recommendations for this OLP, which can be found in Chapter 5.

### **Ethical Issues**

In my research, I had to address three main ethical issues. The ethical issues were: the power relationship between incomplete applicants and CNC, the power relationship between frontline CNC employees and CNC decision makers, and the power relationship between me and two of the participants in the focus group. In order to mitigate the ethical issues between CNC and incomplete applicants, I made it clear in the email invitation (Appendix C) that participation in the survey had absolutely no bearing on participants' ability to attend CNC. While I understand some incomplete applicants may still have perceived a considerable power differential between me and them, the reality is I am in the Communication Services department and not Admissions and therefore have no direct influence over whether applicants are accepted at the college.

In order to ensure the anonymity of research participants, I also asked the registrar to leave out the last names of incomplete applicants when generating the report. By protecting the identity of incomplete applicants, I treated them with dignity and safeguarded their interests, as described by Palys and Atchison (2008). As I considered opinions from the perspectives of incomplete applicants, I understood that I might have been seen as simply a representative of the college to some, regardless of my position, and thus intimidating. "Being 'ethical' as a researcher means that you have an essentially fiduciary obligation to consider things from research participants' perspectives and to ensure participants' rights are safeguarded" (Palys & Atchison, 2008, p. 71). However, I believe the interests of the researcher and the participant, as described

by Palys and Atchison, coincided in this OLP in that both parties wanted the applicant to succeed. In other words, my intent was to help, not harm incomplete applicants.

Protecting the identity of CNC employees was also a paramount concern for me. Therefore, I did not name any employees in this OLP without first receiving their permission (Appendix J). I believed it was important to protect the identity of CNC employees so they could speak freely, without being worried their responses would negatively affect their careers at the college. Another way I protected frontline employees was assuring them in the invitation that their participation in the study was completely voluntary (Appendix E). Ethics problems “are exacerbated when the prospective risk to participants or the possible cost to them if they refuse to participate is high” (Palys & Atchison, 2008, p. 72).

The same offer of voluntary participation was extended to the two employees invited to the focus group who report to me. “Ethics problems arise when the power differential between researcher and participant is considerable” (Palys & Atchison, 2008, p. 72). Fortunately, the two employees were as passionate about the issue of incomplete applicants as I was and actually asked to be involved in the project before they were officially invited. In adherence to the ethical guidelines in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1998), I protected these two employees’ anonymity by not naming them or identifying their statements.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined my inquiry approach and methodology, the project participants, my inquiry methods, and the ethical issues. In the next chapter, I look at the action inquiry project results and conclusions.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ACTION INQUIRY PROJECT RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Chapter 4 outlines the key findings and conclusions of my action research project, which utilized online surveys and a focus group. The action research was conducted in an effort to answer my research question: How can the College of New Caledonia convert a higher percentage of incomplete applications into enrolled students? The sub-questions to my research were: (1) what challenges did incomplete applicants experience when applying to CNC; (2) What barriers did CNC frontline employees and decision makers identify when dealing with applicants? and (3) How can CNC stakeholders work together to convert incomplete applications into enrolled students?

Participants in this research project were incomplete applicants to the College of New Caledonia for the 2010 fall semester and CNC employees. The study findings are based on 141 online survey responses from both groups of research participants and a focus group of 10 CNC employees.

I sent 1,030 email invitations (Appendix C) to incomplete applicants and received 63 completed surveys for a completion rate of 6.1%. I received 65 invalid email addresses and 30 people refused to agree to the mandatory letter of consent (Appendix C), which was required in order to enter the survey (Appendix D). Of the 63 respondents, 38, or 60%, were female, which is slightly higher than the 51.6% of female students who attended CNC in 2009/10 (CNC, 2011e). The largest response came from incomplete applicants to CNC's two nursing programs, which accounted for 28 of 63 respondents, or 44% of respondents. The majority of respondents, 52.3%, were over 25 years of age, which is similar to the actual percentage of students, 44.7%, who were over 25 in 2009/10 (CNC, 2011e). A total of 46, or 73%, of respondents indicated

CNC was their first choice for post-secondary education. A total of 46 respondents, or 73%, indicated they would have attended CNC if they had been accepted as a qualified applicant.

I emailed 142 invitations (Appendix E) to CNC employees in various departments, with 78 completing the survey, for a response rate of 54.9%. A total of 20 people read the letter of consent (Appendix E), but refused to agree to it, which was necessary to enter the survey (Appendix F). The largest response came from faculty, with 41 responses, or 52.56% of total respondents. The vast majority of respondents had considerable experience, with 74.36%, or 58 people, indicating they had worked at CNC for more than 21 years. The majority of respondents 44, or 56.41%, stated that most of their time was spent interacting with students. A total of 33 respondents, or 42.31%, believed 25% to 49% of incomplete applications could be converted into enrolled students.

For the focus group, I sent out 18 invitations (Appendix G) to CNC employees: six to decision makers, six to frontline employees, and six to faculty. A total of 10 CNC people attended the focus group meeting: five decision makers, four frontline workers, and one faculty member.

This chapter is divided into three main sections: the study findings, the study conclusions, and the scope and limitations of the inquiry.

### **Study Findings**

The key research findings are based on the analyzed and themed data from the online surveys and focus group. I first analyzed and themed the data from each group of research participants independently and then compared and contrasted the results. I found that there were so many similarities in themes and key findings from incomplete applicants and CNC employees that I combined the results. Four major themes and five secondary themes emerged and are listed

in order of importance: (1) Applicants want more personalized service; (2) Applicants want to do more online; (3) Conflicting information is causing confusion; (4) One third experienced no barriers while applying; (5) More financial support is needed for applicants; (6) More seats and scheduling options are desired; (7) Applicants want more recognition for experience; (8) There is confusion over who can access support services; and (9) Prince George and CNC have reputation issues.

In this section, I examine each of these key research findings in depth using the qualitative and quantitative data gathered via the online surveys that were later vetted by CNC employees in a focus group meeting. In order to protect the anonymity of research participants, incomplete applicants' survey responses are indicated by (IAS), CNC employees' survey responses are indicated by (ES), and focus group participants' responses are indicated by (FG).

### **Research Finding 1: Applicants Want More Personalized Service**

The most common barrier identified by all research participants was the lack of support for incomplete applicants, because it is no one's specific responsibility to help them. Dozens of incomplete applicants told stories of unreturned phone calls, emails, and faxes, as well as of being bounced around to various people and departments as they searched for answers to their questions. Incomplete applicants overwhelmingly indicated that they desired one person who would help them navigate the institution and find the answers they needed.

I found it hard to get a hold of someone that could actually help. I got sent back and forth to more than one representative, and neither of them helped by the time the deadline came around. It was hard just trying to get a test to get in. When I asked questions, I was sent to 20 different people who didn't know the answer. (IAS)

Incomplete applicants also stated that they wanted clearer communication and someone to help them navigate the application process. "When I was told I wasn't qualified, I wasn't given



any suggestions on how to get qualified” (IAS). Incomplete applicants expressed frustration that the onus was on them to make sure they met all of the requirements, as no one from CNC contacted them after the initial letter telling them what they needed to do to become qualified.

At one point, I was trying to figure out what was taking so long to figure out if I got accepted or not. So I went to CNC, and she told me that they still needed another transcript to be sent to them, but I didn’t know that I still needed this. I wouldn’t have found out either if I didn’t go in to ask myself. (IAS)

Several members of the focus group pointed out CNC will communicate with incomplete applicants after the initial letter, but only if incomplete applicants initiate contact. Focus group members said that is because employees already have their hands full with applicants who meet requirements and thus do not have time to track down those who do not initiate contact. The need to offer personalized support to incomplete applicants was also the predominant theme in the CNC employees’ online survey. “I think that if someone made personal contact with the students to explain what is lacking in their application, and what still needs to be done to successfully complete it, that more students would follow through” (ES). Another employee suggested CNC should “make personal contact with all applicants sooner in the process” (ES). Dozens of others agreed – for example, one employee recommended “intensive communication with individual applicants from their first contact with us. Make the students feel like they are wanted and needed here” (ES).

Survey participants agreed that once an applicant shows an interest in CNC, the college must reciprocate that interest. “They need to leave our building or get off the phone with us and say, ‘Boy, they want me’” (ES). College employees pointed out the competition for prospective students is ever increasing, and if CNC does not make applicants feel more wanted, they will go elsewhere. “For many students, CNC is not the only place they have applied, and if they develop

relationships and trust with other institutions first, they may make up their mind to attend there” (ES).

### **Research Finding 2: Applicants Want to Do More Online**

Improving CNC’s online application process was one of the most important issues identified by research participants. “CNC is not online friendly, which I think makes us miss an opportunity to serve the needs of students who choose to primarily interact this way” (ES). CNC only has a small number of programs that students can apply for online. What is also problematic is that CNC does not have its own online application on its website, but instead redirects applicants to the BC Campus Services Portal. “I have had students get nowhere trying to apply online through BC Campus and I have had other students try to apply through other CNC campuses for access to our PG [Prince George] programs and get lost” (ES). Several employees and incomplete applicants suggested CNC should employ online registration, online payment, and other electronic services that are available at many other post-secondary institutions.

I heard from many students that online registration for courses was very difficult this past year. What they told me was that in approx May, the timetables for September had still not been posted, so they couldn’t find out what courses would be available and when. (ES)

Several employees suggested CNC create a system that sends automated electronic reminders to incomplete applicants, with details on how to become qualified applicants. “It would be great if it was all done online and a computer program could quickly determine if the application was complete or incomplete, why and immediately contact the person – while also copying admissions – which could then follow up” (ES). One member of the focus group indicated CNC has had the technology to send out automated reminders to incomplete applicants for several years, but the software has never been activated. It was unclear as to why the software

was not utilized. Incomplete applicants also indicated they wanted an easier online application process that was more streamlined, with “less hoop jumping” and “less running around to get everything together” (IAS). Employees and incomplete applicants indicated the ideal application process would include an easy-to-use online application, with step-by-step instructions of what to do and what to submit, with one knowledgeable person standing by to answer their questions.

### **Research Finding 3: Conflicting Information Is Causing Confusion**

Frustration caused by conflicting information from CNC’s staff was the fourth largest barrier identified by incomplete applicants and CNC employees. There was “miscommunication between counsellors and registration [staff]. I was told I had the right high school courses, but I didn’t” (IAS). In addition, “Admissions was really hard to go through. They did not have info correct, and even when I was accepted, they gave me incorrect info on how to go about getting more info on the program” (IAS). While several other students also expressed dissatisfaction with misinformation, it was CNC employees who had much more to say on the issue. Dozens of CNC employees suggested that a lack of communication and collaboration between CNC stakeholders has resulted in applicants receiving conflicting and incorrect information. One employee summed it up best and stated:

There are many points at CNC to access information: Admissions, Counselling, deans, instructors, calendar, brochures, and other media. All of these sources must convey the same message. The communication gaps seem to have narrowed; however, we need to be vigilant, especially when program details have been changed. (ES)

Several employees stated departments at the college often operate more like “silos” that guard information rather than share it. “We don’t talk about what hits our areas, so we have no idea if we are causing each other problems, which in turn is causing our potential students problems” (ES). Employees suggested communication and collaboration should be improved at

CNC so everyone could work together to help applicants and students. “A climate of collaboration would help with all aspects of recruitment and retention of students. If we can’t keep our own house in order, why would students want to join it?” (ES). Employees suggested that a system needs to be established so all employees have consistent, current, and accurate information that they can deliver to applicants. “To do this, we must improve the communication at CNC. I see this as a very big problem in our work environment” (ES).

**Research Finding 4: One Third Experienced No Barriers While Applying**

While the majority of Chapter 4 has detailed items CNC needs to improve, it is important to note that 33% of incomplete applicants indicated they did not experience any barriers while applying to the college. A total of 21 of the 63 incomplete applicants spoke favourably regarding CNC’s application process. They used terms like “very easy,” “pretty good,” “user friendly,” and “just fine” to describe applying to the college. There were “no barriers. As a past student, I always found applying at CNC the easiest and that it was easy to contact someone if you had questions” (IAS). While some described CNC’s paper application as straightforward, no one specifically complimented the online application, which received only criticism, as mentioned in research finding 2.

Many of the survey respondents claimed *mea culpa* when asked what kept them from becoming a student enrolled at the college. “In my case, the only barrier was myself. I did not have enough time and CNC counsellors tried to help me in every way” (IAS).

Several CNC employees pointed out in the online survey and focus group that there must be some rigour in the application process in order to weed out those who are not ready to dedicate themselves to post-secondary education. One employee cautioned that CNC should “quit accepting people who are not qualified. Maintain high standards and concentrate on

academic credibility” (ES). Another employee pointed out it is impossible for CNC to convert all incomplete applications into enrolled students, as people often apply to various institutions and programs: “I know many trades students apply to several programs at CNC, then pick their best choice if accepted. They also apply to several institutions (same program), then pick the best choice from the ones that accepted them” (ES).

With nearly one third of incomplete applicants lauding CNC’s application process, while taking personal responsibility for not completing it, it is clear that CNC would be unable to convert 100% of incomplete applications into enrolled students, no matter what changes it made to its application process.

**Research Finding 5: More Financial Support Is Needed for Applicants**

Even if CNC offered more personalized support and an improved online application process, 15.8% of incomplete applicants stated they would also need financial support in order to attend the college. A total of 10 of 63 incomplete applicants indicated financial issues prevented them from following through with the application process. “I didn’t wind up making the kind of money I planned to, and then it was too late to apply for a loan” (IAS). Several incomplete applicants indicated they wanted more entrance awards, as well as reduced course and application fees. There should be a “few more options for funding. I asked around and the students were all running into the same thing, finding funding. We are going to school to further ourselves – a little help would be nice” (IAS). Almost one quarter of CNC employees agreed and said more financial assistance needs to be made available to applicants.

One of the biggest barriers is CNC’s outdated policy of not offering scholarships until students have completed a year here. Other colleges and universities offer them to high school students as an incentive to come to their institution. We do not. (ES)

One focus group participant corrected this comment and stated CNC does have one \$2,000 entrance scholarship, which it offers to the top student in the Prince George school district. However, focus group participants indicated the entrance award is underutilized or used by students who enrol in one of CNC's partnership programs with UNBC, such as nursing or social work. A total of 17 of 78 CNC employees, or 21.7%, believed financial issues were one of the largest barriers to applicants and students.

Financial barriers are probably one of the main issues. I notice more and more of my students every year are trying to work half to full time while taking 4/5 courses. Reduced tuition or removal of tuition would be most advantageous . . . or the reinstatement of generous government grants. (ES)

#### **Research Finding 6: More Seats and Scheduling Options Are Desired**

Some incomplete applicants indicated they did not follow through with their applications because they learned their desired programs were full. They suggested more applicants would work to become qualified if the number of seats in popular programs was expanded or additional seats were offered on nights and weekends.

The main issue is with the limited number of seats available in the welding program, creating a totally unrealistic waitlist. I was told if I came in on Sept. 15/10, [the] first day of registration for 2010 fall programs, I'd have a good chance of getting in the welding program in Sept. 2011. Get real! (IAS)

The idea of increasing seat availability was only brought up by two employees, likely because many of them are aware that the provincial government, and not the college, determines the number of seats available in the majority of programs through funding allocations.

#### **Research Finding 7: Applicants Want More Recognition for Experience**

Several survey participants also expressed concerns that too much emphasis is put on prerequisites at CNC and not enough credit is given for life and work experience. A total of eight

incomplete applicants expressed frustration with the prerequisite system at CNC, which they argued should focus more on career and life experience and less on high school marks.

The challenge for me, as an adult learner, full-time worker, and owner of a business, are some of the requirements in order to be accepted into some of the programs. While I can appreciate the minimum level that all students need to be at in order to move forward, I find it a bit restrictive that I cannot get into a program simply because my Math 11 grade was not strong enough. I can do a financial year-end for my corporation, but because I did not have a C+ or higher in Math 11, I was unacceptable as a student for the nursing program. (IAS)

Several incomplete applicants argued that they had changed and grown as adults and should be judged on where they are now as learners, not where they were as youth in high school. “The background education criteria required to apply to the social service program as a mature student with university-level reading/writing/comprehension skills should take precedence over actual schooled history. There is too much rhetorical education requirement” (IAS). At least two CNC employees agreed and one employee stated: “Students increasingly enter with bits and pieces of prior learning and work experience. We don’t have a clear way of helping students get credit for prior learning” (E`S). However, at least one employee cautioned that while prerequisites can sometimes be difficult and laborious to obtain, they are necessary to ensure students have the skills to succeed:

Some people will advocate for minimal admission requirements. The problem, though, with getting rid of prerequisite admission requirements is that students are often not prepared and then drop out or fail once in the program. This is not a good outcome, and so student conversions should be tracked against outcome data. (ES)

Several focus group participants argued CNC’s goal should be to help incomplete applicants become qualified applicants. Focus group participants cautioned against lowering the qualifications for entrance to programs, because it would only cause people to fail later on in the program. However, several focus group participants suggested several hurdles to applicants, such

as submitting resumes and letters, could be revisited to ensure they are still relevant to the programs.

Another prerequisite that was panned by employees and applicants was the English and Math Admissions Test (EMAT), which was described as an outdated way to determine if applicants have the necessary skills to be successful. “The EMAT testing should be reviewed, replaced, or taken out of the admission process for the Trades Foundation programs” (ES).

Another CNC employee argued that “something needs to happen about the EMAT test. It might have worked years ago, but not now, and not for trades students” (ES). Focus group participants widely agreed that the EMAT’s relevance should be reviewed college-wide, considering some programs no longer employ it as a mandatory entrance requirement. “We can do much better diagnostic testing than EMAT” (FG).

### **Research Finding 8: There Is Confusion Over Who Can Access Support Services**

Another barrier identified in the online survey is the lack of support services available to applicants. Several employees expressed disappointment in the survey that the majority of support services are available only to enrolled students, not applicants. “People are not able to talk with a career counsellor or advisor unless they are a current student. So if they are looking to be a student, then they have to fend for themselves” (ES). However, focus group participants said applicants are able to access all of CNC’s support services, except for counselling, which is only for students. The problem is several employees perceive that support services are only available to students. One employee indicated:

Disability Support Services does not help or support the potential students with paperwork and extra supports that the student may need. This is in their mandate not to help prior to becoming a student. Some of these students need to put in for funding grants and adaptive equipment months in advance in order to have them when school starts. This currently is not happening. (ES)



Focus group participants stated this was also untrue, as applicants with a documented disability are allowed to access CNC's Disability Support Services months in advance. Focus group participants then questioned whether survey findings regarding access to support services for applicants should even be included in this OLP, considering they are only misconceived perceptions. However, Palys and Atchison (2008) argued that people's perceptions cannot be ignored if they are "real in their consequences, and if they are a major determinant of what we do. . . . Qualitative researchers therefore argue that any science of human behavior is destined to be trivial and/or incomplete unless it takes people's perceptions into account" (p. 8). The fact that employees' perceptions regarding support services for applicants are far different than the reality is further proof that communication needs to be improved among CNC employees.

**Research Finding 9: Prince George and CNC Have Reputation Issues**

While the reputation of Prince George and CNC were not predominant themes, they were mentioned as barriers by eight survey participants, who suggested some people likely did not follow through with their applications because of negative things they had heard about the city or the college. Several employees said CNC needs to improve its "campus culture" by creating comfortable places for students to "hang out" and have fun, while also increasing the number of clubs, teams, and events.

CNC seems to want to kill student life. Although the resurgence of the gym is a positive sign, there is very little daily campus life. Every semester, I see students being pushed away from the Atrium. There used to be tables, then there were chairs, now there are fewer chairs. CNC needs to give students areas to hang out. Campus culture is based on students being on campus. This begins with having central hangout areas. Eventually, a campus pub needs to be built. (ES)

It is important to note that the college, in conjunction with the Students' Union, has had plans for a student cultural centre since 2002, although nothing has been physically realized.

A total of four survey respondents also listed Prince George's northern location, small population, and cold winter weather as barriers to attending CNC.

### **Study Conclusions**

The key research findings have led me to five conclusions: (1) Incomplete applicants do not receive the attention they deserve; (2) There is no systematic approach for converting incomplete applicants; (3) Online application processes are inconsistent; (4) Enhanced communication and collaboration among CNC stakeholders would assist in the conversion of incomplete applicants; and (5) A lack of entrance awards is increasing the number of incomplete applicants.

#### **Conclusion 1: Incomplete Applicants Do Not Receive the Attention They Deserve**

CNC will have to fundamentally alter how it views incomplete applications, so they are seen as an opportunity for growth, revenue generation, and stability, and thus become a priority.

[The college] needs a change of thinking: From: Students have to work for it and do it on their own if they want it bad enough. To: How can we help you be successful in your application process. By doing this it would assist those who have different learning and coping strategies. Remember that going to college or going back to college may be a very scary, intimidating, and overwhelming step for most people. (ES)

The fact that there is no one responsible for converting incomplete applicants is indicative of their perceived significance to the organization. Several employees pointed out that CNC's attitude toward incomplete applicants is antiquated, because it is based on the premise that the applicants need the college, rather than the college needs the applicants. "All employees must remember that all students are our bread and butter, and if it wasn't for them, we would not be here" (ES). Several focus group members pointed out that the importance of incomplete applications will likely increase in 2011, as the college has already seen a reduction in the number of applications in several areas. "Applications for University Transfer, Business, Applied

Business Technology (ABT), Natural Resources and Environmental Technology, B.Sc. Nursing, and Practical Nursing are currently lower than at this time last year” (Bowman, 2011, p. 2).

Employees stressed that if CNC fails to show reciprocating interest to those in a shrinking applicant pool, it will create its own drought of students at a time when there is an increasingly competitive post-secondary environment. For example, a focus group member pointed out that UNBC, CNC’s only local post-secondary competition, has waived its application fee and is offering on-the-spot acceptance at recruitment fairs in order to better serve its applicants.

**Conclusion 2: There Is No Systematic Approach for Converting Incomplete Applicants**

More than anything else, incomplete applicants and CNC employees agreed that someone needs to be responsible for tracking, engaging, and helping incomplete applicants become qualified applicants and then enrolled students. Research participants pointed out there is currently no clear system or person at CNC that incomplete applicants can utilize. “All too often, prospective students with questions and concerns are passed from department to department, which causes frustration and leaves the impression that service to students is not a high priority” (ES). Several employees indicated that personal attention for each incomplete applicant would be integral to converting them into enrolled students.

Have CNC staff follow up with students who have submitted an incomplete application to a program that still has empty seats/open enrolment and offer to help them through the process. Provide a “Need help with your application?” service, in person and/or electronically. (ES)

Several employees stated the ideal application process would combine the personalized support of a dedicated person with the convenience of an online application, which is congruent with the literature in Chapter 2.

**Conclusion 3: Online Application Processes Are Inconsistent**

CNC needs to improve its online application process, which only allows applicants to apply to some of the college’s programs. The vast majority of applicants must go to Admissions at the college and stand in “long lines” (ES) to accomplish simple tasks that could be accomplished automatically online. Long lines should be a thing of the past, according to a Noel-Levitz, Inc. (2009) survey of 1,000 college-bound seniors. In the survey, “70% of respondents said they preferred to be able to complete an application online” (p. 7). In another Noel-Levitz, Inc. (2010) survey of more than 1,000 college-bound high school students, “81% of students saw value in online applications, with 50% seeing ‘extreme value’ and 31% seeing ‘a lot of value’” (p. 5). One CNC employee summed up the ideal application process and the link between the top two research findings succinctly by stating it should be “simple, online, and intensely personalized” (ES).

**Conclusion 4: Enhanced Communication and Collaboration Among CNC Stakeholders Would Assist in the Conversion of Incomplete Applicants**

Several employees stated that they would like to see improved communication and collaboration between CNC employees, because they believed it would help incomplete applicants consistently receive accurate information, thereby reducing confusion and frustration. “Communication is always needed so that we are on the same page, and therefore make the application process smoother, with [fewer] hoops for the student to get through” (ES). While employees did express frustration with “silos” and a lack of communication, it is important to note that several respondents expressed a desire to improve the work environment and strive for “consistent communication between all departments” (ES). “There really should be an atmosphere of trust and collaboration amongst all levels at CNC. A climate of collaboration

would help with all aspects of recruitment and retention of students” (ES). If CNC employees can improve their ability to communicate and collaborate, they should be able to continuously improve the application process at the college and take it beyond the scope of this project.

**Conclusion 5: A Lack of Entrance Awards Is Increasing the Number of Incomplete Applicants**

Incomplete applicants and CNC employees pointed out that funding is a major barrier that likely prevents many people from completing the application process. According to employees, the funding barrier could be reduced for many applicants if the college could make more entrance awards available. For example, one employee said:

Students apply here, then are offered scholarships elsewhere, so they go there. Our daughter wanted to come here, applied, but couldn’t get any money. UNBC offered her \$5,500 without her even applying for the money. (ES)

**Summary of Study Conclusions**

The first thing CNC must do is alter its perspective when it comes to incomplete applications. If incomplete applications are seen as an opportunity for increased growth, revenue, and stability, perhaps the college will dedicate resources to helping them.

It is also important to note there are three threads – communication, collaboration, and customer service or personalized attention – that are woven throughout the key findings and conclusions, binding them together. For example, if CNC employees learn to communicate more effectively, they can increase their collaboration, allowing them to better identify and remove barriers for applicants. Improved communication and collaboration among employees will also reduce the amount of conflicting and confusing information provided to applicants, thereby improving the college’s customer service to its clients. Research participants, as well as the

literature in Chapter 2, argued that improved personalized attention will help CNC convert a higher percentage of incomplete applications into enrolled students.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Inquiry**

There were several limitations to the scope of my research, including the focus on the Prince George campus, the demographics of the incomplete applicant pool that was surveyed, and the limitations associated with online surveys.

It is important to note that my research focused on incomplete applicants and employees from CNC's Prince George campus. Caution should be used when applying findings from this research to CNC's five regional campuses, as their unique location, programming, applicant pool, services, and dynamics are not considered in this project. For example, while an effective online application process is vital to the future of the Prince George campus, it is likely less important to CNC's regional campuses, where many applicants have reduced, limited, or no access to online technology. In fact, one focus group participant indicated only about 60% of the potential student base in the Burns Lake campus area has access to email.

Another limitation to my research involves the pool of incomplete applicants that responded to my survey. My original plan was only to survey incomplete applicants from programs that actually had seats available. However after receiving zero responses from my test group, I decided to send an email invitation to all 1,030 incomplete applicants for the September 2010 semester. Unfortunately, the largest two groups of survey respondents came from the Practical Nursing and Bachelor of Nursing programs, which accounted for 28 of 63, or 44%, of responses. As these are two of CNC's most popular programs, which often receive three to four times more applications than seats, some respondents may have seen my survey as an opportunity to "do a favour" for the college and perhaps increase their chances of acceptance.

Some incomplete applicants may have also participated in the survey in hopes of winning an iPod, which I decided to use as an enticement to participate after the poor response from my test group.

As this research project only used an online survey to obtain the thoughts of incomplete applicants, it is limited in its depth of inquiry; according to Stringer (2007), “surveys are of limited utility in the first phases of an action research process, because they provide very limited information and are likely to reflect the perspective, interests, and agenda of the researcher(s)” (p. 78). My original plan was to conduct an online survey and then a focus group with incomplete applicants. However, I adjusted my plan after I did not receive enough interest to warrant a focus group.

The next chapter includes the recommendations for CNC.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: INQUIRY IMPLICATIONS**

This chapter describes a number of recommendations based on key research findings and conclusions from Chapter 4. The recommendations include short-, medium-, and long-term goals, as requested by focus group participants, in an effort to make the targets realistic and achievable. In this chapter, I also look at the organizational implications of this project, as well as some implications for future inquiry. This project was conducted in an effort to answer the research question: How can the College of New Caledonia convert a higher percentage of incomplete applications into enrolled students?

### **Study Recommendations**

Based on relevant literature and the key findings and conclusions in Chapter 4, CNC stakeholders and I developed the following seven recommendations for this project.

#### **Recommendation 1: Create a System to Deal with Incomplete Applicants**

The growing importance of incomplete applicants warrants more attention than impromptu phone calls can provide. CNC needs a system dedicated to helping convert incomplete applicants into qualified applicants and then enrolled students. As the director responsible for student recruitment, I will spearhead a committee dedicated to creating a system to helping incomplete applicants become qualified applicants. The vice-president of Community and Student Services has agreed to co-chair the committee, which is vital, as she is the person in charge of the majority of stakeholders.

It is also recommended that CNC create a conversion officer position, which will be at the core of the system dedicated to helping incomplete applicants. This recommendation was summed up best by one employee who suggested that “CNC should develop a full-time position designated solely to incomplete applicants” (ES). This recommendation is congruent with the



findings of Oblinger and Oblinger (2005), who stated that face-to-face interactions between employees and applicants were ranked by students as the first or second deciding factor to attend a school.

However, focus group participants pointed out it is difficult to create a new position at this time because of the \$1.8-million budget shortfall the college is dealing with for 2011/12. Therefore, it is recommended that in the short term, the college hire a full-time person during designated months, to help convert incomplete applicants into qualified applicants. Seeing as a new hire would not have the in-depth knowledge required to assist incomplete applicants, it is recommended that the student recruitment advisor act as the conversion officer during the designated period, while the new hire covers for the student recruitment advisor. It is recommended that the conversion officer contact incomplete applicants from December to March, thus giving the applicants enough time to complete tasks and become qualified for the January and September semesters.

As the value of the conversion officer position becomes more apparent, hopefully it will become a full-time, permanent position. I have submitted a budget request for a full-time conversion officer to the college's executive committee. If the request for funding is denied, I will communicate and collaborate with the working committee recommended below and the vice-president of Community and Student Services, to see if anyone else can execute the conversion officer's duties or to create another plan if that is problematic.

**Recommendation 2: Create a Working Committee Dedicated to Issues Raised by Participants**

Several college employees suggested improved communication between CNC stakeholders would reduce the amount of conflicting information between departments. They

argued that more concise information would reduce frustration experienced by incomplete applicants, thereby ensuring a higher percentage follow through with their applications.

Therefore, I will create a working committee dedicated to dealing with the issues raised by research participants. The vice-president of Community and Student Services has also agreed to co-chair this committee with me, which will work on barriers identified by research participants, thereby allowing the incomplete applicant committee mentioned in recommendation 1 to concentrate on a system for the future. The goal would be to create a high-performance team as described by Bolman and Deal (2008) that would include the right mix of expertise from all stakeholder areas, so that the committee can hear from everyone involved. “Leaders who are dedicated to getting extraordinary things done are open to receiving ideas from anyone and anywhere” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 181). I, along with my sponsor and the vice-president of Community and Student Services, will create a list of committee participants.

It is recommended that the group meet monthly beginning in June, to deal with a number of issues mentioned in the key findings and conclusions: (1) Determine the validity and necessity of the English and Math admissions test for trades and other programs; (2) Review prerequisites with stakeholders from each area to determine their relevance; (3) Engage program stakeholders to see if career and life experience can be recognized as bona fide qualifications where applicable; (4) Look at ways to better communicate which support services are available to incomplete applicants; (5) Determine if CNC should offer acceptance at recruitment fairs, similar to its competition; (6) Look at what other institutions are doing with their online applications; (7) Review letters sent to incomplete applicants to ensure they employ appreciative intelligence, as described by Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006); (8) Determine if funding options can be enhanced for incomplete applicants; and (9) Foster new ideas beyond the scope of this project.

**Recommendation 3: Review CNC's Strategic Enrolment and Marketing Plan**

As Director of Communications and Development, it is my job to update the strategic enrolment and marketing plan (SEMP), which has not been updated since my predecessor developed it several years ago. A SEMP is the guiding document, or blueprint, for a post-secondary institution's recruitment strategy and should be updated every 1 to 3 years. I will begin updating the plan in June. Once complete, I will take it to the incomplete applicant committee, the working committee, and CNC's executive for input and vetting. I will attend at least one SEMP conference per year in the future so I can incorporate the latest knowledge and techniques into CNC's plan.

**Recommendation 4: Form a Taskforce to Improve CNC's Online Application Process**

Survey participants called for an improved online application process that is more user-friendly, streamlined, efficient, and versatile than the current system. Therefore, I will form a taskforce as soon as possible, which will include CNC's website designer, web developer, and the business support coordinator who runs the college's colleague software program. The college's chief information officer and the vice-president of Community and Student Services have agreed to allow their staff to participate in the taskforce and will consider its recommendations. According to Keller (2011), the taskforce should not only focus on improving the college's website and online application process, but also look at other opportunities to communicate with applicants, such as smart phones. "But many colleges still treat their mobile web sites as low-stakes experiments. That attitude risks losing prospective applicants and donors through admissions and alumni portals that don't work" (Keller, 2011, p. 1).

I will leave the recommendation of a specific online application software system up to the experts on the online application team. However, it is recommended that the team investigate the

online application process used by Mount Allison University, which was recommended by one research participant. It is also recommended that the team explore the online application process used by Royal Roads University, as I found it excellent from a user's perspective.

Recommending a specific mobile software system for smart phones is also out of the realm of this project and would have to be further investigated by the online application team. However, as Keller (2011) pointed out, many colleges are using one of three main strategies when considering mobile software: (1) buying mobile application software from Blackboard, (2) using an open-source platform created by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or (3) designing their own software. I will also provide this taskforce with Keller's report and other relevant literature on this topic that they can use as a starting point for improving CNC's online application process.

**Recommendation 5: Employ Prospect Tracking Software to Engage and Help Applicants**

It is recommended that CNC begin using student prospect tracking software, which could send incomplete applicants automated emails. The emails could remind applicants about deadlines, transcripts, testing, and other vital issues that would allow them to become qualified. CNC is among a small group of institutions that currently does not employ any form of prospect tracking software, according to a focus group participant who recently returned from an enrolment management conference. According to a Noel-Levitz, Inc. (2006) study, 92% of 4-year institutions and 69% of 2-year institutions track prospective applicants from the first point of contact.

CNC has owned prospect tracking software called Communications Management for several years, but has never activated it. Unfortunately, the Communications Management software that CNC currently owns is now outdated and has been replaced by a superior product

called Datatel Recruiter, which would be much easier for the college to implement, use, and maintain. Therefore, I, along with two focus group participants, have submitted a request to the college's Project Planning Committee recommending the purchase of the \$50,000 Datatel Recruiter software. This OLP will provide the rationale and evidence to the committee regarding the benefits of implementing prospect tracking software at CNC.

If the college decides to invest in prospect tracking software, it should be used at recruitment fairs and other events to enter prospective students' email addresses as well as their areas of interest. If a conversion officer is hired, it will be his or her responsibility to work with the student recruitment advisor as well as members of the community of practice team and online team to determine which automated messages will need to be sent to incomplete applicants at what times. Staff from Admissions, Counselling and Advising, and other areas will also have to be trained on prospect tracking software in the mid-term, with a long-term goal of it being used at all six of CNC's campuses.

**Recommendation 6: Increase the Number of Entrance Awards**

Research participants argued that increasing the number of entrance awards will encourage a higher percentage of incomplete applicants to follow through with the application process and become qualified. A survey participant revealed that a number of financial awards are not given out every year because no one applies for them. Therefore, it is recommended that the financial awards be audited as soon as possible to determine which awards have not been granted and why. If possible, underutilized awards should be converted into entrance awards, allowing CNC to better compete with UNBC, which offers superior entrance awards as pointed out in Chapter 1.

It is also recommended that the college focus on cultivating more entrance awards in the future. The vast majority of CNC's financial awards are handed out to students based on their marks and financial need after they have completed 1 year at the college, which does not help applicants. The fundraising coordinator will explore ways of increasing the number of entrance awards. As the director responsible for the fundraising coordinator, I will develop a strategy with her and members of the Financial Aid department to cultivate more entrance awards.

The fundraising coordinator, along with members of the Financial Aid department, have already begun auditing the financial awards in an effort to determine which underutilized awards may be able to be converted into entrance awards. The fundraising coordinator will then contact the donors of the identified awards and ask them if they are willing to convert their awards into entrance awards. The fundraising coordinator would then rewrite the terms and conditions of any converted awards and make changes to the financial aid calendar.

**Recommendation 7: Create a Student Mentorship Program**

It is recommended that CNC create a student mentorship program, similar to the buddy program at Royal Roads University. However, the mentorship program should be dedicated to helping applicants, rather than new students. The mentorship program would match applicants with current students, who could answer basic questions via email about what it is like to be a student at the college. One employee suggested that a student mentorship program would be valuable because “an applicant may feel more comfortable asking questions of a current student [than a staff member] and feel less intimidated” (ES). Three natural areas to look for student mentors are CNC's leadership classes, the social work program, and the Students' Union. The college's web designer has volunteered to create an ‘ask a student buddy your question’ link on the front page of CNC's website.

Once this OLP is approved, I will speak to the Students' Union executive about volunteering to take part in the mentorship program. I will then ask faculty from the leadership and social work classes to allow me to speak to their students about volunteering to take part in the mentorship program. I will also encourage leadership students, who are required to create a project that gives back to the college or the community, to look at expanding the mentorship program to possibly include tours and offer other assistance to potential applicants.

### **Organizational Implications**

One of the most positive outcomes of this action research project was the voice, as described by Stringer (2007), that it gave to the issue of incomplete applications. This OLP provided "a place for the perspectives of people who have previously been marginalized from opportunities to develop and operate policies, programs and services" (Stringer, 2007, p. 207). However, the voices of incomplete applicants and CNC stakeholders will not be fully heard unless they effect change in the organization. In this section, I outline the additional resources, both human and financial, that will be required to implement the recommendations outlined in this OLP. I also explore the policies that will need to be changed at CNC in order to implement the recommendations, and I consider the implications if the recommendations are not implemented.

CNC stakeholders will also need to revisit written and unwritten policies regarding email address collection, if the recommendations in this OLP are to be implemented. In particular, two major issues regarding the college's email policies will have to be altered: (1) CNC stakeholders will have to collect email addresses whenever possible in order to utilize prospect tracking software; and (2) CNC stakeholders will have to see the value in asking applicants to provide their current email addresses.

People are currently not required to provide an email address to the college when applying. This practice must change if CNC decides to employ student prospect tracking software, which relies on email addresses to automatically communicate with prospective students. However, focus group participants pointed out that making email a mandatory field during the application process is problematic at this point in time, as it will alienate some of CNC's rural applicants, who may not have access to email. Therefore, it is suggested that CNC stakeholders make email address collection a highly recommended but not mandatory part of the application process at this time. However, the long-term goal should be to make email addresses a mandatory field.

CNC stakeholders will also have to change the way external email addresses are viewed. For example, one focus group participant stated the college should only rely on the email addresses it gives to students and not the email addresses from Yahoo, Hotmail, Gmail, and other sources, which the majority of prospective students utilize. However, the focus group participant's claims contradict several studies by Noel-Levitz, Inc., a leader in post-secondary enrolment research since 1973. According to two studies by Noel-Levitz, Inc. (2009, 2010), colleges should not only be collecting whichever email addresses applicants check most often, but also begin collecting applicants' cell phone numbers, as texting has become the new email for today's post-secondary applicants.

E-mail and Web pages are still very important and probably the anchor of any e-recruitment program. But tools such as instant messaging, online chats, podcasts, or virtual tours can greatly enhance the overall effectiveness of e-recruitment. Cell phones are also another avenue campuses need to use. More and more students have their own cell phones, and many are open to receiving calls and text messages. (Noel-Levitz, Inc., 2010, pp. 5-6)



If none of the recommendations in this OLP are implemented, incomplete applicants will continue to slip through the cracks and the college will continue to lose the potential revenue at a time when it is dealing with budget shortfalls. If incomplete applicants are not cultivated as the applicant pool continues to dry up, the college may be forced to terminate undersubscribed programs and the staff associated with those programs. According to Cascio (2002), layoffs can reduce morale, increase insecurity, reduce trust in management and reduce productivity for those who remain with the organization.

### **Implications for Future Inquiry**

While this research project raised the profile of incomplete applicants at CNC, it also unveiled several other related areas that are worthy of future inquiry. For example, CNC not only has an issue with incomplete applicants, but also has an issue of retaining students after they complete their first year. This is particularly evident in university transfer courses, where fewer than 25% of students continue on into their second year at the college, according to one research participant. Finding ways to increase the percentage of students who remain for a full 2 years at the college may have many similar positive outcomes to this OLP and therefore be worth researching.

Other areas for future inquiry include the following: (1) What other 2-year colleges do to create and maintain student life; (2) How other institutions help students with funding issues; (3) How other institutions recognize career and life experience of applicants; (4) What the most effective online applications are in post-secondary education; and (5) What the most effective strategic enrolment management plans are at other colleges. Many other issues would also be worthy of future and expanded inquiry, including how and why applicants choose institutions.

### **Conclusion**

I am hopeful that the majority of recommendations in this project will come to fruition. While I am cognizant that CNC's current financial situation makes some recommendations challenging, the return on investment would be substantial. This project has shown that converting incomplete applicants into enrolled students at the College of New Caledonia will help ensure its long-term sustainability. Therefore, I will continue to work with CNC stakeholders on creating a system to help incomplete applicants realize their educational goals.

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**APPENDIX A: APPLICATION STATUS REPORT**

**For Fall 2010 Intakes (As at August 3, 2010)**

Program	Capacity	Available Seats	Qualified/Waitlist	Incomplete Apps
Applied Business Tech	25	9	0	36
Computer Network Tech	16	0	2	12
Natural Resources Tech	22	0	4	11
Bsc Nursing – PG	104	0	46	171
Bsc Nursing – Quesnel	24	0	2	8
Health Care Assistant	30 F/T 7 P/T	0	17	39
Practical Nursing	32	0	9	146
Dental Assisting	24	3	0	28
Dental Hygiene	20	2	0	48
Med Lab Tech	24	0	11	40
Professional Cook (starts Aug 3)	48	4	0	21
Early Childhood Educ.	24 F/T 6 P/T	0	0	30
Social Work	34 F/T 5 P/T	4	0	2
Fine Arts	17 F/T 3 P/T	0	6	38
New Media	22	0	1	3
Power Engineering	16	1	0	5
Power Eng 3rd Class	16	5	0	2
Welding 'C'	32	0	5	12
Foundations Level Trades				
Automotive	16	1	0	27
Carpentry	16	0	1	16
Electrical	16	0	4	27
HDM	16	0	4	22
Industrial Mechanic	16	2	0	8
Auto Body Repair	16	0	0	5
Total of incomplete applications				810
Total seats available		32		

F/T stands for full-time  
P/T stands for part-time

**Application Status Report (continued)**  
**For Open Enrolment Programs (As at August 3, 2010)**

	Capacity	New Students Accepted*	Incomplete Apps**
Business Administration	open	122	20
Community and School Support (CASS)	open	41	20
University Credit – PG	open	520	38
University Credit – Q	open	49	1
CCP	open	262	110
Total incomplete applications in open programs			189

\***New Students Accepted** indicates the number of students who have been accepted into the program.

\*\***Incomplete Applications** indicates the number of applicants who have applied but have yet to qualify for the program.

PG stands for Prince George

Q stands for Quesnel

CCP stands for Career and College Preparation

## **APPENDIX B: TEAM MEMBER LETTER OF AGREEMENT**

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership Degree at Royal Roads University, Randall Heidt will be conducting an action research study at the College of New Caledonia to determine how CNC can convert a higher percentage of incomplete applicants into enrolled students. My research credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Assistant Professor, MA-Leadership, School of Leadership Studies at [telephone number].

### Research Team Member Role Description:

As a volunteer Research Team Member assisting the Researcher with this project, your role may include one or more of the following: providing advice on the relevance and wording of questions and letters of invitation, supporting the logistics of the data-gathering methods, including observing, assisting, or facilitating an interview or focus group, taking notes, transcribing, or analyzing data, to assist the Researcher and the College of New Caledonia's organizational change process. In the course of this activity, you may be privy to confidential research data.

### Confidentiality of Research Data:

In compliance with the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Policy, under which this research project is being conducted, all personal identifiers and any other confidential information generated or accessed by the research team advisor will only be used in the performance of the functions of this project, and must not be disclosed to anyone other than persons authorized to receive it, both during the research period and beyond it. Recorded information in all formats is covered by this agreement. Personal identifiers include participant names, contact information, personally identifying turns of phrase or comments, and any other personally identifying information.

### Bridging Researcher's Potential or Actual Ethical Conflict

In situations where potential participants in a work setting report directly to the Researcher, you, as a neutral third party with no supervisory relationship with either the researcher or potential participants, may be asked to work closely with the Researcher to bridge this potential or actual conflict of interest in this study. Such requests may include asking the Research Team Advisor to: send out the letter of invitation to potential participants, receive letters/emails of interest in participation from potential participants, independently make a selection of received participant requests based on criteria you and the researcher will have worked out previously, formalize the logistics for the data-gather method, including contacting the participants about the time and location of the interview or focus group, conduct the interviews (usually 3-5 maximum) or focus

group (usually no more than one) with the selected participants (without the Researcher’s presence or knowledge of which participants were chosen) using the protocol and questions worked out previously with the Researcher, and producing written transcripts of the interviews or focus groups with all personal identifiers removed before the transcripts are brought back to the researcher for the data analysis phase of the study.

This strategy means that potential participants with a direct reporting relationship will be assured they can confidentially turn down the participation request from their supervisor (the Researcher), as this process conceals from the Researcher which potential participants chose not to participate or simply were not selected by you, the third party, because they were out of the selection criteria range (they might have been a participant request coming after the number of participants sought, for example, interview request number 6 when only 5 participants are sought, or focus group request number 10 when up to 9 participants would be selected for a focus group). Research Team members asked to take on such 3rd party duties in this study will be under the direction of the Researcher and will be fully briefed by the Researcher as to how this process will work, including specific expectations, and the methods to be employed in conducting the elements of the research with the Researcher’s direct reports, and will be given every support possible by the Researcher, except where such support would reveal the identities of the actual participants. Personal information will be collected, recorded, corrected, accessed, altered, used, disclosed, retained, secured and destroyed as directed by the Researcher, under direction of the Royal Roads Academic Supervisor.

Action Research Team Members who are uncertain whether any information they may wish to share about the project they are working on is personal or confidential will verify this with Randall Heidt, the Researcher.

Statement of Informed Consent: I have read and understand this agreement.

Name (Please Print)	Signature	Date
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**APPENDIX C: EMAIL SURVEY INVITATION AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
FOR INCOMPLETE APPLICANTS**

Hello (I inserted each name here from mail merge)

My name is Randall Heidt and I am the Director of Communications and Development at the College of New Caledonia. I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. The objective of the project is to determine how CNC can convert a higher percentage of unqualified or incomplete applicants into enrolled students. Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because CNC's records show you were not accepted into a program of your choice.

My research project will consist of an online survey, which will take about 10 minutes of your time. Please click this link: (This is the first part that appears in the email).

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey. This project is part of the requirement for a Master's Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Assistant Professor, MA-Leadership, School of Leadership Studies at [telephone number]. This survey is set up through Survey Gizmo, which is an American based company. Surveys that are housed on United States servers are subject to the Patriot Act (2001). It is important to note that your participation is strictly voluntary and will have no bearing on your future status with CNC as all information will be kept anonymous. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential.

A copy of the final report will be published. A copy will be housed at Royal Roads University, and in the National Archives of Canada, and available online through UMI/Proquest and the Theses Canada portal, and will be publicly accessible. Access and distribution will be unrestricted. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University, I will also be sharing my research findings with the College of New Caledonia. I may also use the research data for journal articles, presentations and books. The raw data for my project will be destroyed within one month of my convocation. No identifying information will be retained if any individual withdraws from the project at any time.

While I am the Director of Communications and Development at CNC, I will not help or hinder your ability to attend the college. You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence. Your name will not appear on any documentation unless I receive permission from you before it is published.

Sincerely,  
Randall Heidt  
[telephone number]

By clicking I agree below you give your informed consent to participate in this survey after having read the information above.

I agree, enter survey

I disagree, leave survey

**APPENDIX D: ONLINE SURVEY FOR INCOMPLETE APPLICANTS**

1. What course or program were you hoping to take at CNC?  
(Comment box)
2. What age range are you in?  
15-17    18-24    25-29    30-34    35-39    40+
3. Are you?  
Male    female
4. Was CNC your?  
1st choice    2nd choice    3rd choice    fourth choice    last choice
5. If you were accepted at CNC, would you have attended?  
Yes 100%    yes 75%    maybe 50%    likely no 25%    likely not 5%    No
6. Please tell us about what barriers, if any, you experienced while applying to CNC?  
(Comment box)
7. What would you suggest CNC do to remove any barriers that you encountered?  
(Comment box)
8. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic?  
(Comment box)
9. Would you be interested in participating in a focus group on this issue?  
Yes, please give us your contact information including email, first name, phone number. It is important to note here that Survey Gizmo's software will open a new area at this point so that respondents' names are not associated with their survey responses.  
No, thank you for participating.

**APPENDIX E: EMAIL SURVEY INVITATION AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
FOR CNC STAKEHOLDERS**

Hello (insert name here in mail merge)

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting as part of the requirement for my Master's Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University. The objective of the project is to determine how the College of New Caledonia can convert a higher percentage of incomplete applicants into enrolled students. There were 999 incomplete applications to CNC as of August 3, 2010, according to CNC's Application Status Report.

I would like your comments on what barriers, if any, you believe applicants experience while applying to CNC. This anonymous survey will only take about 10 minutes and will also ask you for suggestions of how CNC could remove any barriers. Please click link below to take the survey.

Thanks so much for your help,

Randall Heidt

<http://www.surveygizmo.com>[web address]

(The preamble below was the first question on the survey, which participants had to agree to in order to participate in the survey).

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Assistant Professor, MA-Leadership, School of Leadership Studies at [telephone number]. It is important to note that your participation is strictly voluntary and will have no bearing on your future status with CNC as all information will be kept anonymous. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless your permission is obtained. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential.

A copy of the final report will be published. A copy will be housed at Royal Roads University, and in the National Archives of Canada, and available online through UMI/Proquest and the Theses Canada portal, and will be publicly accessible. Access and distribution will be unrestricted. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University, I will also be sharing my research findings with the College of New Caledonia. I may also use the research data for journal articles, presentations and books. The raw data for my project will be destroyed within one month of my convocation. No identifying information will be retained if any individual withdraws from the project at any time. This survey is set up through Survey Gizmo, which is an American based company. Surveys that are housed on United States servers are subject to the Patriot Act (2001).



You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

By clicking I agree below you give your informed consent to participate in this survey after having read the information above.

I agree, enter survey

I disagree, leave survey

**APPENDIX F: CNC STAKEHOLDERS' ONLINE SURVEY**

1. What department are you in?  
(Comment box)
2. How long have you worked at CNC?  
Less than 2 years    2 to 5 years    6 to 10 years    10 to 20 years    more than 21 years
3. What percentage of your time is spent dealing with students?  
Less than 10%    about 15 to 25%    about half    about 75%    Most of my time
4. Please tell us what barriers, if any, you believe exist for prospective students applying to CNC?  
(Comment box)
5. How would you suggest CNC remove any barriers for applicants?  
(Comment box)
6. What would your ideal application process look like at CNC?  
(Comment box)
7. Is there anything else you would like to add on how CNC can convert a higher percentage of incomplete applicants into enrolled students?  
(Comment box)

**APPENDIX G: EMAIL FOCUS GROUP INVITATION TO CNC STAKEHOLDERS**

From: John Bowman  
Sent: February-10-11 12:31 PM  
To: list blocked for privacy reasons.  
Cc: list blocked for privacy reasons.  
Subject: Incomplete Applicant Research

Hello Everyone,

I am writing to invite you (on behalf of Randall Heidt and myself) to participate in an important Focus Group discussion regarding how the College can increase the numbers of applicants that eventually register and enroll as students at the College.

Randall is conducting a research project as part of the requirement for a Master's Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University. The objective of the project is to determine how the College of New Caledonia can convert a higher percentage of incomplete applicants into enrolled students. Randall would like your input on the draft recommendations derived from online surveys with incomplete applicants and CNC employees.

In accordance with ethics procedures at CNC and RRU, Randall will require you to sign a consent form at the meeting. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to you, unless your permission is obtained. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice.

Three possible dates for this Focus Group are being considered (all at 2:30pm to 4:30pm)

**Thursday, February 24**

**Thursday, March 2**

**Tuesday, March 8**

Please respond to Marlene Beaulieu [email address] if you are willing and able to participate on any of these dates.

Thank you very much for considering this invitation.

John

-----  
John Bowman  
President  
College of New Caledonia  
[telephone number]

## **APPENDIX H: CNC STAKEHOLDERS FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

Below is a list of the questions I asked during the CNC stakeholder focus group using Dr. Edward de Bono's six thinking hats technique.

### **Red Hat**

What is your gut reaction to this information?  
Which ideas are you most excited about?

### **Black Hat**

What are the things that might go wrong now and in the future if these ideas were put into place?  
What cautions and concerns do we have about this situation?

### **Green Hat**

One year from now, how will we want the situation to have changed?  
What one thing, if it were to change, would drastically improve the situation?  
What is your most off the wall idea?  
How might we overcome the cautions we have identified?

### **White Hat**

What has stopped us from solving this problem in the past?  
What disputed information might we need to sort out later?

### **Yellow Hat**

What are the short and long-term benefits of these recommendations?  
Who would benefit and in what ways from these recommendations?

### **Blue Hat**

Have we considered the big picture and all of its parts?  
Let's develop an action plan, who will do what by when?

## **APPENDIX I: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS**

My name is Randall Heidt, and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Assistant Professor, MA-Leadership, School of Leadership Studies at [telephone number].

This document constitutes an agreement to participate in my research project, the objective of which is to determine ways to convert a higher percentage of incomplete applicants into enrolled students at the College of New Caledonia.

The research will consist of a focus group that will last about 120 minutes. You will be asked to share your thoughts on the key finds, conclusions and recommendations of my research regarding how can CNC convert a higher percentage of incomplete applicants into students?

A copy of the final report will be published. A copy will be housed at Royal Roads University, and in the National Archives of Canada, and available online through UMI/Proquest and the Theses Canada portal, and will be publicly accessible. Access and distribution will be unrestricted. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master of Arts in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with the College of New Caledonia. I may also use the research data for journal articles, books, online articles and presentations to interested parties.

Information will be recorded in hand-written format, digital recordings, on computers, and, where appropriate, summarized, in anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential.

The raw data for my project will be protected by password and or kept under lock and key. The raw data will be destroyed within one month of my convocation. No identifying information will be retained if any individual withdraws from the project at any time. I will answer any questions you have before proceeding. I will protect your anonymity by using code numbers to identify your results. Your name will not appear on any documentation unless I receive permission from you before it is published. Loss of anonymity will occur for participants in a focus or discussion group.

A copy of the final report will be published and archived in the RRU Library. Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. My work phone number is [telephone number]. My email is [email address].

It is your option to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX J: INFORMED CONSENT FORM TO ALLOW PUBLICATION OF NAME**

The publication of your name, title or other identifiers has been deemed critical to my Organizational Leadership Project. Your signature of this document indicates that you have read at least the portion of this OLP that identifies you and you have given free and informed consent to allow your name and or other identifiers to remain in this document.

This project is part of the requirement for a Master's Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Assistant Professor, MA-Leadership, School of Leadership Studies at [telephone number].

It is important that you know that a copy of the final report will be published. A copy will be housed at Royal Roads University, and in the National Archives of Canada, and available online through UMI/Proquest and the Theses Canada portal, and will be publicly accessible. Access and distribution will be unrestricted. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master of Arts in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with the College of New Caledonia. I may also use the research data for journal articles, presentations and books.

The raw data for my project will be protected by password and or kept under lock and key. The raw data will be destroyed within one month of my convocation. No identifying information will be retained if any individual withdraws from the project at any time. A copy of the final report will be published and archived in the RRU Library. Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. My work phone number is [telephone number]. My email is [email address].

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Sign and date