

## **Stakeholder Summary**

### **Online writing assignment may help boost student retention**

Participation in an online, goal-setting writing program could help reduce student attrition rates, particularly among those who are most likely to leave early, finds a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). *Using Future Authoring to Improve Student Outcomes* presents the first set of results for a research project that attempts to gauge the effectiveness of the Future Authoring writing program among entering students at Mohawk College. It found that students who were assigned to participate in the Future Authoring workshop had lower leaving rates than students who didn't participate in the program. The effects were even more pronounced among those students with typically higher leaving rates, such as male students and those with lower high school grades.

#### **Project description**

The Future Authoring program is an online application that is designed to improve student retention and academic performance using a writing-intensive exercise. Participants in the Future Authoring workshop were randomly selected from students who took part in Mohawk College's 2015 summer orientation program and who started their first semester at Mohawk in Fall 2015. The online writing assignment that was delivered to the test group consisted of two stages. In the first stage, students were asked to write briefly about important aspects of their life, such as family and careers, and also what their lives could look like three to five years down the road if they were to take good care of themselves. It also asked students to imagine what their future would look like if their bad habits and undesirable behaviours were allowed to prevail. In the second stage, students were asked to analyze the positive outcomes they had envisioned for themselves and formulate a plan to achieve those goals. They were also asked to rank their goals, consider potential obstacles that could stand in the way and how these might be overcome, and to come up with a process to monitor their progress.

#### **Findings**

The study found that participants in the Future Authoring program had an overall leaving rate that was 3.3 to 4.3 percentage points lower than those in the control group. The effects were more pronounced for students who typically have higher leaving rates, including male students, those enrolled in certificate programs and interdisciplinary studies, and those with lower high school grades. Participants

in the treatment group also tended to have higher first-term grade point averages (GPA), but the differences were very small and statistically insignificant, the authors found.

### **Further research**

The goal of future research will be to track the retention and first-term GPA outcomes of the Fall 2015 student cohort through to March 2019. “This will help us understand whether and to what degree the Future Authoring program has long-term effects on student outcomes,” the authors write. Future research will also try to relate the word count of a student’s Future Authoring submission, which can be thought of as a proxy for effort, to the student’s outcomes.

In terms of practical applications, the authors note that there is a potential for the Future Authoring program to be used as a resource for advisers and counsellors, and to be administered to all students through orientation programs or as an assignment in select first-semester courses across programs. “A good place to start may be by targeting students who seem most likely to benefit from the intervention, such as those in male-dominated programs including business, technology or the trades,” they say.

The authors of *Using Future Authoring to Improve Student Outcomes* are Ross Finnie, Wayne Poirier, Eda Bozkurt, Jordan B. Peterson, Tim Fricker and Megan Pratt.