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Abstract

A team of conference participant observers studied the "curriculum" of the 2001 NASPA National Conference. The team assessed the extent to which different subgroups of conference attendees sensed the presence of a conference "curriculum." The team also studied subgroups' perceptions of whether the learning outcomes of the perceived curriculum for the conference were addressed during the conference, and the reasons why participants chose to attend the conference.

Only a relatively small percentage of conference participants surveyed perceived that the conference had a discrete "curriculum." Various subgroups perceived the presence of the learning outcomes for the conference differently. "Professional development" was the most common reason for conference attendance. Three of five subgroups rated the outcome, "development and enhancement of collegial relationships," as the outcome which was emphasized most strongly. This suggests the presence of a "hidden" curriculum that places a high value on the personal relationships fostered through conference attendance.

The annual National Conference sponsored by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) is one of the major professional development opportunities available to student affairs professionals. It brings together professionals from many different backgrounds and levels of responsibility for over three days of educational programs and social activities. NASPA contracted with a team of graduate students and faculty to assess the "curriculum" of the 2001 conference in Seattle and its delivery. In an attempt to describe and synthesize the formal and informal curriculum of the 2001 NASPA conference ("Perspectives from the Leading Edge"), it is necessary to first understand and define the differences between formal and informal curricula and discuss curriculum characteristics within a conference setting.

The writing on curriculum focuses mainly on the connection of the work of classroom teachers in their schools (English, 2000). For our purposes, many existing definitions of curriculum

have been refined to fit a national conference for professionals in higher education, a situation quite unlike a traditional classroom. The nature of curriculum is the design of a course of study to be implemented in any situation in which learning is predominant (Beane, 1997). "Curriculum refers to what is taught or what is learned, not what is to be done or what is to happen" (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2001). Curriculum should link subject areas with practical experience as well as (or instead of) organized learning methods such as lecture, discussion, workshops and small group situations (Beane, 1997).

A curriculum that focuses on significant learning outcomes should include clearly articulated outcomes that are interdisciplinary, multi-dimensional and applicable to real life situations (Beane, 1997; Ozar, 1994). The curriculum will indicate what is to be learned, the goals will indicate why it is to be learned, and the instructional plan will indicate how to facilitate that learning (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2001). A formal curriculum is that which is stated and written for others to see (English, 2000). The informal and hidden curricula include learning components that are unrecognized, unofficial, and often unintended (English, 2000). Our study examines both the formal and the informal curriculum of the NASPA 2001 National Conference.

A formal curriculum should include integration of activities, experiences of all the participants (both facilitators and learners), as well as provide common or shared educational experiences for people with diverse backgrounds (Beane, 1997 & Ozar, 1994). "It should provide experience-rich environments that promote opportunities for students to learn with understanding as active participants" (Solomon, 1998). Curriculum integration can be further broken down into four separate areas: integration of experiences, social integration, integration of knowledge and overall integration as part of the curriculum design (Beane, 1997).

The integration of experience includes ideas people have about themselves and the world around them, as well as perceptions, beliefs, and values gained from individual and group experiences. Participants involved in creating and learning from a formal curriculum gain knowledge by reflecting on their experiences and becoming resources for dealing with challenges presented in personal and professional situations. It is generally thought that experience allows people to deal with situations that arise and deepens their understanding of the world around them. It also prepares them for any future situations that may occur (Beane, 1997). According to Beane (1997), this type of integration occurs in two ways: new experiences are integrated into learning schemes and meanings and the organization or integration of past experiences facilitates the processing of future situations. In short, the meaning behind formal curriculum is to search for meaningful integration of prior experience with new knowledge (Solomon, 1998).

Social integration of curriculum provides a common or shared educational experience for those with diverse backgrounds. The hope is to promote a sense of shared values (Beane, 1997). In this sense, curriculum should be organized around personal and social issues, should be collaboratively planned and facilitated by group leaders and participants alike, and should hold a commitment to integration of prior knowledge with new perceptions and goals (English, 2000; Posner & Rudnitsky, 2001; and Solomon, 1998). Ozar (1994) emphatically believes that in order to create a curriculum that focuses on significant learning, it needs to be the work of a community composed of administrators, professionals, and society.

The third characteristic of curriculum should include the integration of knowledge gained from prior learning. It is generally believed people will seek knowledge they do not have in order to solve problems presented (Beane, 1997). Knowledge is a powerful tool that brings a measure of control over one's life as each person learns to define a challenge, meet the challenge, and solve it using the wide range of new knowledge gained from learning experiences. According to Beane (1997), the ability to draw on prior knowledge to meet challenges that arise brings new meaning to curriculum as well as a fresh perspective. Posner and Rudnitsky (2001) outline course planning to be

based on recognized motivations, recognized capacities, needs, and interests of learners, and a familiarity with current approaches to the subject matter.

The final and most important aspect of creating a curriculum is integrating the curriculum. As a group plans a curriculum, consideration needs to be given to the inclusion of problems and issues that are of social and personal significance. Learning experiences should be planned to integrate pertinent knowledge of the organizers; learning experiences should be planned to address the issues currently under study. Emphasis should be placed on substantive learning projects and activities that involve real application of knowledge. It is important to know how people may frame issues, as well as what learning situations help them acquire knowledge (Beane, 1997; Solomon, 1998).

In order to create a curriculum that works, learning outcomes must be developed to include interdisciplinary experiences. A traditional model of curriculum development would typically begin with a needs assessment to develop goals and design measurable objectives (English, 2000). Once significant learning outcomes are created that drive curriculum, participants should be able to demonstrate learning specified by the outcomes. It is necessary to develop learning activities and strategies geared to promote the learning stated in the outcomes (Ozar, 1994). While goals and values do traditionally provide a base for designing curricular content, it is not always necessary to specify those goals and values first (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2001).

During the process of creating a curriculum, it is necessary to understand the essential pieces needed to make it work: outcomes, assessment, and strategies (Ozar, 1994). The community creating the curriculum needs to agree on how these pieces will work together to increase learning. We suggest a sequential process of creating learning outcomes, designing an assessment tool to determine whether or not the outcomes have been met, and determining a strategy to meet the outcomes. Creating significant learning outcomes at the beginning of conference planning allows for the foundation of a curriculum that is useful. Outcomes should be selected that integrate both the values and the discipline to be taught. Next, should be the creation of the curriculum as a concise statement of the matches desired among the outcomes, assessment and strategies (Ozar, 1994; Erickson, 1998). The curriculum should provide an opportunity for the learners to accept new things, participate in real-life situations and problem solving, be stimulated and connected with prior knowledge, respect differences in learning styles, meet the learning outcomes for self and those proscribed by the conference facilitators, and achieve high satisfaction in skill building areas (Erickson, 1998; Solomon, 1998). One model recommends that an evaluation plan be used at all steps in curricular creation to assess the value of goals, content, learning outcomes and results (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2001). Together, the outcomes and assessment form the basis of a workable curriculum (Ozar, 1994).

Methodology

Research Design

The basic format for the study was participant observation. The researchers engaged in an overt study, in which the researchers were identified and the NASPA office was aware that the conference was being studied. Overt participant observation is a basic form of ethnographic research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). The observations of the research team were supplemented by a survey instrument described below.

The research team began with the seven learning outcomes for the conference, provided by NASPA's executive director. The seven outcomes were: know where and how change is occurring and its impact on higher education and student affairs; learn with intentional commitment to integrate leading edge theories and practices into the delivery of campus programs and services; comprehend how changing issues of diversity affect the entire campus community; recognize how to

incorporate the standards for new and innovative methods in higher education as they apply to student affairs; become aware of new possibilities for educational partnerships to enhance student learning; increase commitment to intentional learning through continual professional and personal development; and develop and enhance supportive collegial relationships. An initial assumption of the research team was that the planning for the conference was designed to address the learning outcomes.

Prior to the conference the research team reviewed past conference programs and evaluations and interviewed several key informants involved with planning the conference. The interviews were informal and conducted in person, over the telephone and via email. Based on the interviews with the key informants, the four main components of the conference were considered to be the pre-conference workshops; interest sessions; keynote speakers; and social activities. Each component was considered part of the curriculum for purposes of this study.

Sample

Because each NASPA National Conference creates a curriculum to address the needs of multiple constituencies, the research team decided to focus its efforts on five categories of professionals in attendance: senior student affairs officers, community college professionals, faculty, graduate students/new professionals, and mid-level professionals. To address the concern that some conference participants could fit into more than one group, all community college professionals, regardless of position, were placed in the "community college" category; and only full-time faculty were placed into the "faculty" category. Each member of the research team fully participated in the conference with members of one of the five selected subgroups, making it clear that the member was doing research on the conference. In order to triangulate the observations of the participant observers with another data source, a convenience sample of conference participants was asked to fill out a short survey instrument about their perceptions of the curricular elements incorporated into the conference. 108 conference participants provided input, including the following number of respondents from each subgroup: 25 senior student affairs officers, 20 community college participants, 13 faculty, 23 graduate students/ new professionals, and 27 mid-level professionals.

Instrumentation

There were two types of instruments utilized by this study. As indicated by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), the researchers were the key instruments, since the natural setting of the conference was the direct source of data about the conference curriculum. The researchers attended preconference workshops, keynote presentations, interest sessions, meetings, and social activities. The team was concerned with the context of the curriculum as well as the content.

The research team also designed a simple cross-sectional survey to gather feedback from conference participants about their perspectives on the conference, why they chose to attend, and how much emphasis they felt was placed on the seven learning outcomes. The survey asked participants to rank the most important reasons why they chose to attend. The purpose in asking this question was to triangulate the results with the larger conference assessment that would later be conducted online by the NASPA office; this would show how similar or dissimilar the selected respondents were to those who chose to fill out the NASPA office conference evaluation. Utilizing a Likert scale, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt each learning outcome was addressed during the conference. Participants were also asked if they thought the NASPA conference followed a specific "curriculum," and were given space to make additional comments. The research team made no attempt to define what was meant by the learning outcomes or by "curriculum."

Procedures

We utilized a methodology that incorporated the experience of conference participants (their actions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions) as a major focus of the study and interpretation. Therefore, the methods employed were largely those utilized in ethnographic field studies. Observation, interviews (formal and informal), and paper and pencil participant analysis were the methods of data collection employed.

This study was not without limitations. Issues that the research team did not control for may have threatened the internal validity of the study. Interviewees were not selected at random. Each member of the research team was responsible for identifying participants from the five selected subgroups to interview and to fill out the survey. Participant observer bias may have influenced these decisions. Survey participants were solicited to fill out the survey while participating in the conference; locations were not always conducive to focusing on the survey. Because of the procedures utilized for data collection, the findings should be generalized to the larger conference population with caution.

Analysis

As a result of their observations, interviews, and collection of the paper and pencil participant ratings of aspects of the conference connected with its curriculum, the research team formulated a conceptual understanding of the conference's curriculum. Throughout the conference, members of the team met to compare field notes and share observations. Once the paper and pencil analysis by the sample was completed, means were computed and compared for each of the professional categories established. Since the respondents did not comprise a random sample, further statistical treatment of the results was not warranted. However, the means may be compared in order to generate working understandings of how different groups of participants may have experienced the conference. These understandings may be useful, not only in understanding the impact of this conference, but also in planning for future professional undertakings which attempt to meet the needs of varying constituencies within a given professional association.

Findings

The findings of the research team fall into three major categories: the conference as a "curriculum," the extent to which the conference addressed the learning outcomes for the conference, and the main reasons participants seem to have for conference attendance. These three categories are interrelated.

The Conference as a Curriculum

The main purpose of this project was to study the "curriculum" of the 2001 NASPA National Conference. Interviews with members of the planning committee for the conference suggest that developing a "curriculum" for the conference was not a conscious process. However, a curriculum includes what is taught, not necessarily what is intended to be taught (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2001). The concepts of informal and hidden curricula (English, 2000) also include the social activities integral to the planning for the conference. Many definitions of "curriculum" (Beane, 1997; Ozar, 1994) are sufficiently broad to encompass the planning done for the 2001 conference. A strong case can be made that there was a curriculum for the 2001 conference, even it was not articulated as such.

An effort was made to understand whether participants from each of the five subgroups perceived that the conference had a discernable curriculum. Attendees chosen for the sample were asked the following question: "In your opinion, does the 2001 NASPA conference have a specific 'curriculum'?" These responses are summarized in Table I in Appendix 1.

More than two-thirds of the total respondents thought either that the conference had no curriculum, or were unsure if it did. Some surveyed seemed confused between a theme and the word, "curriculum." Several mid-level professionals said there was a theme, but they just couldn't identify it. One senior student affairs officer said: "It is not something I can readily identify. I do not see [the conference] characterized to the extent it can be called a 'curriculum.'" A graduate student described the curriculum as "self-defining" and questioned whether there could be a successful curriculum for over 3,000 conference attendees. Part of this may be due to the fact that, although there were learning outcomes established for the conference, the program committee did not always utilize them in planning the conference program. Therefore, it should not be surprising if conference participants had difficulty making a connection between the learning outcomes and the conference they were experiencing.

The subgroup with the most uniform voice that the conference had no curriculum was faculty, of whom 69.23% of those responding reported that they saw no curriculum. Although faculty might be the NASPA members most likely to take exception to the use of the word "curriculum" to describe the conference program, that does not mean they do not see an informal or even unintentional curriculum in the conference. One faculty member said, "NASPA has a 'curriculum' related to the conference theme. How conscious it is, I can't determine."

Learning Outcomes Addressed by the Conference

From our interviews it was clear that most conference participants assumed the learning outcomes were factored into conference planning. The five constituency groups were all asked how well the learning outcomes were met by the 2001 conference. The results are displayed in Table II in Appendix 2, which shows the overall mean as well as the mean for each subgroup.

Senior student affairs officers and mid-level professionals who responded to our survey were more inclined than respondents from the other three groups to state that the conference demonstrated "an intentional commitment to integrate leading edge theories and practices into the delivery of campus programs and services." Some participants particularly those from the faculty, community colleges, and graduate student/ new professional subgroups, questioned the connection between leading edge theories and what they found in the conference's program content. As one conference participant said, "some of the specific topical sessions were informative, whereas others were too general and disguised topics that have been around for years. I had high expectations of learning about the leading edge development that I could take back home and implement. This conference falls short of that!"

Three of the five sub-groups gave the learning outcome stressing collegial relationships ("development and enhancement of collegial relationships") its highest mean rating. This data, as well as participant comments made to the researchers throughout the entire conference, suggest the importance of the "hidden" or "informal" curriculum of social reasons for attending the conference. Therefore, even though the formal "curriculum" may not have intentionally or systematically addressed the learning outcomes, there was strong agreement among participants about the presence and the importance of the less formal curriculum (i.e. fostering the collegial growth of conference participants).

Throughout the conference, participants told the researchers that issues of diversity were important to them. One of the learning outcomes addressed this topic ("understanding how changing issues of diversity affect the campus climate"). The senior student affairs officers and mid-level

professionals perceived that the conference emphasized this outcome more strongly than the other constituent groups. Among the other subgroups, the community college participants, in particular, felt that this outcome was emphasized more weakly. One conference attendee said: "Leading edge issues are diversity. Need more of this." Another conference participant took note of the Seattle conference's effort to highlight the Pacific Northwest's Native American population, and commented that despite this effort it lacked an acknowledgment of the heritage and presence of Native Americans in student affairs, as well as suggestions about how to incorporate topics about Native Americans into conversations at their home institutions.

Members of the research team worked to glean the perspectives of the community college participants about the learning outcomes and about the conference, in general. With over 30 community and technical colleges in the State of Washington, many community college participants were attending a NASPA National Conference for the first time. These attendees anticipated programs relevant to their campus cultures and student populations. Many community colleges participants expressed their dissatisfaction about the conference to the research team, specifically with what they perceived to be a lack of programming geared toward the community college. Some of the community college participants stated they did not see programs very connected to the designed outcomes and pointed out that a majority of the sessions were geared toward people on university campuses.

The observations of the research team, and the spread among the various constituency groups revealed in Table II, suggest that programming to meet the needs of one group may either overlook or inadequately address the needs of other groups. The curricular piece emphasizing the development of collegial relationships seems to be adequately stressed for all subgroups. The more formal curriculum, represented by the other learning outcomes for the conference (those which focus on specific content areas), must be more effectively targeted to some of the constituency groups within NASPA, unless they are intended to be emphasized for specific subgroups, and not the association's members as a whole.

Reasons for Conference Attendance

The research team asked conference participants to indicate the five factors that were most influential in their decision to attend the 2001 NASPA National Conference. The results are given in Table III in Appendix 3, which also includes a summary of the reasons given in response to the NASPA office's online evaluation.

The most important reason for attending the NASPA 2001 conference, considering all categories of attendees, was "professional development." It was the most important reason affecting conference attendance for faculty, senior student affairs officers, and mid-level professionals. A senior student affairs officer said: "I appreciate how focused the conference program was on topics for 'practicing' professionals. I feel that I gained a number of skills, ideas, tips that I can take back and use on my campus."

As shown in Table III, the top three reasons survey respondents decided to attend the NASPA National Conference were the same top three cited on the NASPA online conference evaluation. In addition to "professional development," the other two main reasons were "chance to connect with colleagues and friends" and "location of the conference." This triangulation demonstrates some similarity between the respondents to the two surveys. One subgroup differed substantially in the reasons cited for attendance at the conference. The graduate student/ new professional group indicated that "placement" and "major speakers" were more important reasons for them to attend than the top three reasons that appear for the other four subgroups. The graduate student/ new professional group was the only subgroup that listed "major speakers" within their top five reasons for attending the conference.

The bottom five reasons for attending the conference revealed through the NASPA office's online conference evaluation were the same bottom five reasons uncovered in the research team's survey. The least important reasons for attending the 2001 conference, according to both surveys, were: present a program;

pre-conference workshops; conference theme; attendance is an expectation of their institution; and exhibits/ vendors. Differences in the results of the two surveys existed in the middle range reasons for attendance. Our survey revealed a higher proportion of attendees who thought the cost was "reasonable" or who were there for placement, and NASPA's evaluation had a higher proportion of regular attendees complete their evaluation.

The community college participants at the conference warrant notation. One hundred percent of community college participants in our sample said their decision to attend the conference was affected by the location of the conference. The State of Washington has a large community college system. Since the conference was in Seattle for the first time, student affairs professionals in these colleges were encouraged to attend. A large percentage of the respondents to our survey (19 percent) were from community colleges. This is a group of colleagues that NASPA wants to include. Based on our interviews, however, it also appears that many community college attendees felt that the NASPA conference did not adequately address community college issues and concerns. A member of the conference committee interviewed by the research team stated that the program committee believed it had accepted a diverse group of programs that would meet the needs of people from most types of institutions, including community colleges. Despite this person's perception, many community college participants made comments like: "there was a lack of programs" [for community colleges], and "the sessions were weak for a national conference."

Discussion

This analysis of why participants chose to attend the 2001 NASPA National Conference and the way in which participants experienced the learning outcomes designed for the conference suggests that the conference is meeting multiple needs. It is encouraging that 80 percent of conference attendees state that "professional development" is one of the major reasons they choose to attend the conference. Close behind, as a reason for attending, is "chance to connect with colleagues and friends." This suggests that conference attendees are drawn to the conference by both the formal and the informal "curricula."

The concept of a "curriculum" was a difficult one for many of the participants we talked with to apply to the conference. This is an idea more typically associated with classroom activities. Although it is clear that this concept can be applied to a multi-dimensional activity such as a national conference, the language of participants indicates that they are more accustomed to the phrase, "professional development." There are myriads of reasons why professionals in the field choose to attend a NASPA National Conference. Many of those with whom we spoke would welcome a stronger emphasis on a formal curriculum. This was particularly true of faculty and those who place their own learning as the major reason for their conference attendance.

Our study shows that there is value in looking at the experiences of different subgroups of conference attendees. The experiences of community college participants were invisible on the NASPA online evaluation because no demographic information was collected by NASPA. The seemingly less positive experiences of community college attendees can be translated into an opportunity to include more input from professionals in this sector when planning the conference. Perhaps a professional development needs assessment of the membership could be commissioned for the purpose of identifying the needs, not only of this group of professionals, but other needs which might be less obvious to conference planners in any given year. Program planning, which includes input from NASPA's diverse constituencies, can only strengthen the conference experience.

An interesting finding of our study, mirrored by the findings from the NASPA office's conference evaluation, was the relative unimportance of the theme to members' decisions to attend the conference. The theme was listed as one of the five top reasons to attend the conference by only 14 percent of our respondents (and 12 percent of NASPA's). However, the theme can create expectations for the membership on what type of conference to expect. The choice of the theme, "Perspectives from the Leading Edge," for the 2001 Conference suggested that the conference program would be innovative, futuristic and exciting. Some conference attendees felt that the conference did not live up to the promise implied by the theme. An intentional curriculum development model might have connected the programs to the theme through means other than their program titles.

The curriculum literature is easily translated to planning a national professional conference such as NASPA's annual meeting. Beginning with the association's core values, goals, and objectives, learning outcomes can be mutually crafted by the association's leadership and conference planners. Then a delivery system can be designed to address the conference curriculum, keeping in mind the need to teach to different learning styles utilizing multiple modalities. It is also important to remember the presence of distinct subgroups of professionals at any national conference and to program accordingly. Next, an assessment tool can be developed to administer at the conference to measure how effectively the learning outcomes have been achieved. Some curriculum experts (Ozar, 1994; Erickson, 1998) would have the assessment tool designed as the second phase of curriculum development. Incorporating the informal curriculum into the conference planning is the final step in programming in order to blend in the relationship needs of conference attendees with needs related to more formal professional development.

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Appendix 1

Table I

Conference Participants' Perceptions of Whether 2001 NASPA Conference had a "Curriculum" (by percentage)

Category	n	Yes	No	Unsure
Senior student affairs officers	24	37.50	27.50	37.50
Community college professionals	20	35.0	50.0	15.0
Faculty	13	15.38	69.23	15.38
Grad students/ new professionals	23	26.0	39.0	34.0
"Mid-level" professionals	27	33.0	26.0	41.0
Totals	107	30.84	42.99	26.17

Appendix 2

Table II

Perceived Conference Emphasis on the Learning Outcomes for the 2001 NASPA National Conference (Means)

Learning Outcomes for Conference	Senior Student Affairs Officers n=24	Community College Professionals 20	Faculty 13	Graduate Students/ New Professionals 23	Mid-Level Professionals 27
Know where and how change is occurring and its impact on higher education and student affairs	3.82	3.60	3.54	3.30	3.85
Learn with intentional commitment to integrate leading edge theories and practices into the delivery of campus programs and services	4.12	3.65	3.38	3.56	4.07
Comprehend how changing issues of diversity affect the entire campus community	3.76	3.25	3.31	3.56	4.04
Recognize how to incorporate the standards for new and innovative methods in higher education as they apply to student affairs	3.50	3.30	2.75	3.13	3.54
Become aware of new possibilities for educational partnerships to enhance student learning	3.68	3.30	3.23	2.83	3.56
Increase commitment to intentional learning through continual professional and personal development	3.61	3.60	3.23	2.83	3.56
Develop and enhance supportive and collegial relationships	4.17	3.60	3.92	4.26	3.92

Note: The means were computed on a 5-point Likert scale where 5="strong emphasis" and 1="weak emphasis"

Appendix 3

Table III

Top Factors in Deciding to Attend 2001 NASPA National Conference

Reasons for Attendance	Survey Findings	SSAO's	CCP's	Faculty	Grad/New Pro.	Mid-Lev. Prof.	NASPA Online Evaluation
Professional Development	80	88	85	77	56	89	82
Chance to connect	69	84	70	62	19	67	77
Location of Conference	66	48	100	69	30	85	68
Regularly attend NASPA	27	56	10	23	00	37	44
Major Speakers	32	24	15	00	86	22	27
Attend a particular Program	37	24	35	30	56	37	24
Involvement in Groups meeting	19	32	10	15	04	26	24
Reasonable cost	32	24	55	07	30	37	22
Placement/ Career Services	31	16	00	15	87	26	22
Present a program	21	16	05	62	17	22	18
Pre-conference Workshops	15	02	15	00	22	11	14
Conference Theme	14	16	20	00	17	11	12
Attendance is an Expectation	11	04	30	00	08	11	07
Exhibits/Vendors	10	12	10	07	13	07	04

Notes:
(1) SSAO's= Senior Student Affairs Professionals
(2) CCP's = Community College Professionals
(3) Participants in survey could choose up to 5 different factors leading to conference attendance