

Csiernik, R., Hannah, D. & Pender, J. (2007). Change, evolution and adaptation of an university EAP: Process and outcome at the University of Saskatchewan. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 22(2/3), 43-56.

## **Introduction**

The University of Saskatchewan was founded in 1907 in Saskatoon, just two years after the creation of the province, to provide traditional and innovative post-secondary education. Its mission statement proclaims that:

*“The University of Saskatchewan belongs to the people of Saskatchewan. As an academic community, our mission is to achieve excellence in the scholarly activities of teaching, discovering, preserving, and applying knowledge.”* University of Saskatchewan, 1993

The University’s goal is to provide liberal arts, professional, and applied education in preparing students to help the people of Saskatchewan build an agriculturally-based province with the economic and cultural benefits of modern urban society. As the University prepared for its second century of providing post-secondary education it undertook a significant organizational restructuring resulting in substantive actual and perceived changes throughout the entire university system including a new philosophy for the human resources division (University of Saskatchewan, 2003). Among the issues raised within this document was if the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) was meeting the needs of the evolving university structure. This question led to a formal review by a panel

of two external evaluators in association with a senior member of the university administration not involved in the day-to-day operation of the EAP to:

1. review and assess services provided by the EAP according to objective evaluation standards within the EAP field;
2. assess effectiveness of the EAP against its mandate in terms of meeting current and future needs of the University and to identify an appropriate level of financial support for the program;
3. identify options and services that would provide an EAP based on best practices in the context of the University of Saskatchewan Strategic Directions; and,
4. identify an appropriate level of resources, financial, human and facilities, required to deliver and support an EAP program based on best practice for 2005 and forward.

### **The University of Saskatchewan Employee Assistance Program**

The University of Saskatchewan EAP was instituted in 1989 with the stated purpose of providing assessment referral and short-term counselling for any employee requesting assistance for personal issues or work related concerns that may impair the ability of that employee to function effectively in the performance of duties. EAP services were made available to all University employees, unionized and non-unionized as well as their family members. It was constituted as a voluntary, confidential service with no mandated component though both management and union members were able to recommend to an employee or peer to use the service, though that component was never formalized in a written policy.

Since its implementation the EAP was staffed by two employees, Program Director and an administrative support. The Director was responsible for assessment of client issues, short-term counselling, referral to the community for more extended counselling, program promotion and program administration along with involvement with the critical incident response team. Six multi-disciplinary private counselling agencies in the Saskatoon area were contracted to provide longer term counselling for employees and their families. External counsellors received a maximum fee per client served which fell below the average private practice rate in return for being part of the roster of recommended University EAP counsellors. This however, led to a cap of typically six sessions for most clients.

Administration of the EAP was through an Employee Assistance Board which reported to the Vice-President of Finance and Administration. No one comprehensive EAP policy was ever created rather, the policies governing the program were situated within the various collective agreements with the last substantive revision being the addition of a critical incident protocol in 1992. The University of Saskatchewan provided all financial support for operation of the EAP though the day-to-day administration of the program was the responsibility of a 12 member voluntary Administrative Board comprised of two representatives from each of the Administrative and Supervisory Personnel Association, the Canadian Union of Public Employees Locals 1975 and 3287, the University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association, the University administration along with two members external to the university, including at least one service provider. Thus, since its beginnings there had been a labor imbalance in board composition, something rarely seen on any joint EAP committee. The Board's

responsibilities included determining program policy, financial accountability, assessment of the overall effectiveness of the program, and appraisal of EAP staff. However, the Board was never given a formal budget for external counselling resulting in a perpetual under-funding of the EAP which became a critical issue during the University's organizational restructuring. The annual deficit had historically been dealt with by drawing upon a surplus that arose from the Program's initial start up being delayed by one year however, this fund had been exhausted and there was no longer any money available to provide for a service that continued to be offered.

Staff and faculty of the University and their family members also had varying levels of private extended health care benefits that were used to obtain additional counselling hours beyond what the EAP offered or instead of using the EAP. However, under the benefits plan counselling could only be obtained through the auspices of provincially registered psychologists, excluding other qualified and professionally registered professions. It also occasionally necessitated having an employee switch from a social worker or family counsellor, after the EAP-funded portion of their counselling allowance was exhausted, to a psychologist in order to allow for coverage through the extended benefits plan.

The internal EAP, itself, employed a system-based model, using a person-in-environment brief counselling protocol with referral to external sources for more complicated work. Table 23.1 provides a summary of program use between 1999 and 2004. A gradual decline in overall utilization can be observed that was reversed as the University entered its period of internal restructuring and reorganization. Likewise, clinical use increased during this period of uncertainty which placed further stress upon

an EAP already working at a maximum capacity which in turn was part of the reason for undertaking a broader review of the program, its structure and its future.

Table 23.1: Program Utilization

Year	Employees	Clinical Intake	Consultations	Total	Clinical Utilization	Overall Utilization
1999	3617	188	196	384	5.2	10.6
2000	4465	234	190	424	5.2	9.5
2001	4465	243	124	376	5.4	8.2
2002	4465	281	154	435	6.2	9.7
2003	4465	292	168	460	6.5	10.3
2004	4465	350	207	557	7.8	12.4

## The Process

The review of the University of Saskatchewan EAP occurred between November 2005 and April 2006 and entailed a review of 29 documents including that which had triggered the organizational change process the *University of Saskatchewan Strategic Documents: Renewing the Dream A Framework for Action* (2002). Seven focus group meetings organized by stakeholder group consisting of 48 individuals were conducting along with 19 individual interviews with representatives from throughout the university who were unable to attend the scheduled focus groups. Thirteen individuals unable to attend either a focus group or an individual interview completed formal written responses to the focus group questions (Table 26.2). The seven focus groups held were

for EAP staff, external service providers, the EAP Advisory Board, representatives of the major bargaining units, managers and supervisors, human resources staff, and members of the university administration.

All participants completed a consent form that discussed the scope of the review and how the data would be used. Participants also received a list of questions to be discussed prior to their focus group or key informant interview (Table 23.2). The focus group interview schedule was constructed by the Review Panel with feedback provided by the EAP committee and university administration on the initial draft. The final step in the program evaluation was a review of how other western Canadian universities provided EAPs services and administered their programs.

Table 23.2: Focus Group Questions

1. What do you see as the role of the EAP program at the University of Saskatchewan?
2. Tell us a bit about how you see the EAP. Is it a stand alone service or is it integrated with other services such as occupational health and safety, occupational health, human resources? To what extent should it be?
3. In your opinion how should the EAP be situated within the University environment in terms of reporting relationship to best meet the needs of the three stakeholder groups: university administration, employees and the providers of service?
4. What are the greatest strengths of the current EAP program? What does it do well?
5. What do you see as the major weaknesses or shortfalls of the current program?  
What doesn't it do well?
6. Are there things the EAP should not be doing that it is currently involved in?
7. What innovative programs are in place, or could be developed to increase resilience and prevent the need for employee absence in the first place? Where does the EAP fit into this?

8. Of the services currently being offered what should be done by in-house staff versus outside contractors?
9. Who currently does the EAP serve in your opinion and whom should it serve?
10. How does the EAP determine success in your opinion?
11. How should success be determined?
12. Any final thoughts or comments that you'd like to discuss before we wrap up?

## **Findings**

The review was conducted in the midst of a major change process occurring at the University. Even when adequate preparation and forewarning occurs organizational change processes are inherently stressful as employees adapt to changing and evolving environments and an uncertain employment landscape. The fact that the review of the EAP was occurring within and as a result of this process was one contributing factor to the high level of interest that was generated by this program evaluation and why most of the focus groups went over the allocated time without even addressing all of the pre-planned questions. There was much discussion in the focus groups regarding the potential integration of EAP services with human resources programs as in the minds of the majority of participants these two have inherently distinct functions. For many, integration implied some loss of confidentiality and the autonomy of the EAP. As such, the proposed integration of the two, as it was understood, was not supported by representatives of the various bargaining units. Individuals with administrative responsibilities were, on the contrary, generally supportive of the notion of integration, as they typically believed that the current EAP operated in isolation from other services that were intended to support and enhance

individual and organizational well being such as disability management, health and physical wellness and return-to-work programs.

The evaluators noted that since the EAP had been implemented in 1989 little had changed in the operation of the program and in the supports the university provided to it and as a result several shortcomings had arisen. However, despite the limitations the reviewers were overwhelmed by the open and publicly stated support for and interest in the program as demonstrated during the site visits and through requests for individual meetings by those unable to attend along with unsolicited requests to forward written submissions. There was a genuine passion demonstrated for the EAP, what it had done, what it was doing and its potential for the future as the University of Saskatchewan entered its second one hundred years of service as an educational institution. While in many organizations little is known about EAP, at the University of Saskatchewan it was acknowledged as an integral program for employees and family members alike.

*“I cannot say enough about how much I owe (the EAP Director) and the EAP Program. I have managed to keep my family and my job, brought in large research grants over a very long period of time, have been nominated for teaching awards and contributed to my Department and to the University in numerous ways. I have no doubt that much of this would not have happened had I not gone to the U of S EAP.”*

*“I would give EAP an A+++ based on the skill, kindness of the overworked but totally dedicated staff. (The director’s) counselling skills are top notch.”*

*“They provide options to the individual to make some choices that gives them hope to continue while they strive to achieve a different direction in life.”*

The program evaluation indicated that the EAP had been providing the type of services it was created to do and that the majority of individuals who used the service saw it as a positive resource (Table 23.3). The EAP and its supporting external counselling services were most likely reducing institutional costs and the savings accrued likely exceed the cost of the program though no definitive return on investment value could be obtained through the parameters of the review. However, it is the unanimous opinion of the Review Panel that the EAP was significantly under-funded and under-resourced in its current configuration and was not in a position to meet the long term needs of the University. What was ground breaking in 1989 was no longer sufficient in 2006.

One result of program under funding over the years was that the director had had to take on a “gatekeeper” function. While this had helped to control costs, it was perceived by some university staff and external providers as a barrier to services, as a portion of employees would prefer to access alternative support services without going directly through the EAP. There were also a minority of University staff members, particularly faculty and administrators, who, for various reasons such as past history, dual relationships and concerns regarding anonymity were not comfortable with having to go through EAP to access counselling or support services. As well, despite

qualifications, experience, training and education not all clients will connect with any one counsellor and research has demonstrated that gender does make a difference in counselling (Dawson, 1996; Didham & Csiernik, 2006; Hodgins, el Guebaly, & Addington, 1997; Jarvis, 1992).

Table 23.3: Client Satisfaction Results					2003	2004
					n=75	n=89
Item					% satisfied/ very satisfied	% satisfied/ very satisfied
EAP responded promptly to my request for service					98.7	100
I was understood by the EAP counsellor					94.5	96.6
EAP staff demonstrated professional skill and demeanour					100	97.8
My EAP experience was treated confidentially					96.0	95.5
Follow-up by the EAP staff was useful					68.0	66.3
I would recommend the EAP to others					98.7	97.8
EAP was helpful in addressing my concerns					92.0	97.8
My coping ability improved through contact with the EAP					78.7	87.6
The issue was resolved to my satisfaction					60.0	57.3
If needed I would contact EAP again					92.0	97.7
Overall, I was satisfied with the EAP's services					94.7	97.7

The original program mandate had also indicated that education and training were to be core functions of the EAP. However, this initiative had been lost as demand

for direct practice had increased over time. As well, the more complex, multi-dimensional, and/or workplace-related a problem scenario is, the more important it is for a variety of university services to be involved and coordinated in order to best assist the employee. The same applies to matters that are related to or affect employee performance especially in the areas of disability management, health and physical wellness and return-to-work issues, domains of human resources. Each of these programs emerged after the EAP was well established but little was done to connect or integrate the programs. As many clients involved with those programs often also became involved with the EAP ongoing communication and coordination between human resources and the Employee Assistance Program needed to be formalized addressed.

In examining the structure and accountability of other western Canadian university EAPs (Table 23.4) it was found that the vast majority had opted for an externally contracted model administered through the human resources division of the university. While six had either an exclusive joint labour-management EAP advisory committee or broader wellness board, four had no representative administrative structure to report through while one used an ad hoc system and one did not reply to the panel's inquiries.

Table 23.4: Western Canadian University EAP Structures

University	In-House/ Contracted	Accountable to Advisory or Management Board	Committee	Integration
University of Winnipeg	Contracted	Human Resources	Advisory	Prefer More
Brandon University	Contracted	Human Resources	None	None
University of Manitoba	Contracted Capped @ 6	Human Resources/ Benefits	Advisory	With Consent
University of Regina		no information received		
Athabasca Universtiy	Contracted	Human Resources	Wellness Advisory Committee	Rehab & HR Work- Life Consultants
University of Calgary	Contracted	AVP-HR	Wellness advisory Committee	Fully Integrated With Consent
University of Lethbridge	In-House	AVP-HR	None	case-by-case
Simon Fraser University	Contracted 12 hours max	HR Manager	Advisory	None
University of British Columbia	Contracted	AVP-HR	Advisory	case-by-case with consent
University of Northern British Colombia (UNBC)	Contracted	Human Resources	None	None
University of Victoria	Contracted 10 hours max	Human Resources – Benefits Manager	None	Links with Health & Safety
Royal Roads University	Contracted	Human Resources	ad hoc advisory when contract is tendered	integrated on a case-by-case basis

## Results

The review provided an opportunity for the University of Saskatchewan to reconfigure an EAP that was conceptualized nearly two decades previously in a much different educational, organizational, societal and EAP context and to support the EAP in becoming an even better resource to meet the evolving needs of the University. Based upon the findings, current and common practices in the EAP field and the needs of the University a series of recommendations were made to the University administration and Associations through the EAP Advisory Committee to allow it to build upon its long history of assisting employees with personal issues through adopting an interdisciplinary multiple pathways approach. It was recommended that the EAP remain a neutral, independent, confidential program, working in a professional, cooperative, collaborative and appropriate manner with other campus-based professionals including human resources consultants, occupational health and safety personnel and the University's sexual harassment officer. The recommended components of the occupational assistance program were:

- an expanded on-site externally contracted program including voluntary referrals and recommended referrals from manager, supervisors and union personnel;
- an expanded direct access route to professional counselling utilizing the extended health benefits program that any employee can access independently from the EAP; and,
- the current services offered by the human resources department relating to disability management, health and physical wellness and return-to-work issues to remain under the management of human resources.

The Review Panel believed that the EAP should retain its on-site presence. This then led to the inevitable question: is it better to have the EAP staffed by employees of the organization to deliver the service, or is it more advantageous to out-source the program to a local provider? Out-sourcing the EAP has the potential to enhance the perception of neutrality and confidentiality and distance the EAP staff in appropriate manner from the internal dynamics of the University that continued to exist during the broader change process. However, internal staff have the opportunity to develop more casual relationships with various units and staff, thus allowing for greater informal contact and use of the Program. These types of contacts can lend themselves to a “value added” dynamic without additional costs (Csiernik, 1999) and also to address issues within the organizational quadrants of the Integrated Model of Occupational Assistance. Ultimately the common practice of other universities in the geographic vicinity acted as the tipping variable and it was recommended that the University switch to an out-sourced model. However, it was also recommended that two additional dedicated counselling staff at the Masters level or above be added to the EAP staffing compliment, with at least one female and one male , and that the counselling team be physically housed on-site.

The program evaluators stated that three on-site counsellors would be better able to serve staff and families while still using a brief, systems-orientated, solution focused approach. However, time also needed to be devoted to developmental, educational, and administrative functions that were part of the initial program but that had been subsumed by counselling demands. As well, it was recommended that for

clients with more complex problems and for those who preferred an external-based counsellor to staff located on the University campus that the external service provider component of the program should also be maintained. Research has found that capping services at low levels serves limited clinical purpose and has limited financial benefit as long as external counsellors are clearly aware of the focus of the EAP and they are monitored appropriately (Csiernik & Csiernik, 2012). Thus, along with and in support of counselling provided by the three on-site EAP staff, a maximum of \$1000.00 per employee or dependent per year from \$350.00 (with the amount to be monitored regularly and adjusted upward as required) was recommended to be allocated for those referred externally by EAP staff. The \$1000.00 annual limit was also recommended for those who preferred to use the extended benefits program and find their own counsellor without contacting the EAP. As well, it was further recommended that the extended benefits plan should be amended to allow for counselling by any counsellor at the Masters Level or higher of any professionally recognized and regulated profession.

In examining the administrative aspects of the program, it was recommended that the function of the EAP Committee should shift from being a management board to that of an advisory committee. Supervision of staff should become the responsibility of the out-sourced provider rather than of university volunteers while the budget should become the responsibility of the human resources department to allow for adequate financing of the expanded program. It was also recommended that the EAP Advisory Committee should consist of an equal number of labor and management representatives, which would necessitate a change to the various collective agreements, which in itself is a detailed and intricate process. The Review Panel also

stated that the committee should be led by two co-chairs, one representing management, the other labor. The EAP Advisory Committee should also become accountable to the Associate Vice President of Human Resources for administrative and financial purposes rather than the Vice President of Finance and Administration as has become common practice among university EAPs throughout western Canada.

Once the renewed EAP was in place a more systematic formalized orientation program and ongoing promotion and awareness campaign was recommended to be developed for all staff and family members including developing an easily recognizable and distinct EAP “brand” and design to develop a unique identity for this highly valued University resource. This process should be led by the campus-based EAP staff providing the opportunity to create a profile within the University community. To further enhance the well being of the workplace it was also recommended that EAP staff undertake or sponsor a regular series of proactive and preventative workshops/ seminars /brown bag lunches on issues pertinent to the well being of the workplace and the organization, again using the to be designed EAP “brand”. Finally, as part of the restructuring all existing policies and procedures needed to be collected into one comprehensive policy document and updated based upon the renewed University of Saskatchewan Employee Assistance Program.

## **Conclusion**

Few EAPs totally disappear once they have been initiated. However, they can go on their helpful though merry ways with evaluation limited to an annual report that typically indicates how many people were seen and how satisfied they were. This in

and of itself is not a bad thing however it does not address the fact that like organizations, EAPs are not static entities and that they too need to change, evolve and adapt. Most organizations look vastly different in 2013 than they did in 1989 – can the same be said of EAPs established to support both employees and organizations? Have the changes that have occurred in typical EAPs over the course of the past quarter century been reflexive, a response to marketing, or part of a more detailed, systematic process, not necessarily as extensive as that conducted in this case study by the University of Saskatchewan, but still more than a two hour brain storming session attended by a half dozen vested stakeholders? As well, without joint committees to guide and direct EAPs who is left to read and respond to even the humble annual report, the most basic element in EAP evaluation? For as is seen in this article, in western Canada, not even all institutions founded upon creating and sharing knowledge in an environment of academic freedom had an internal place to share this knowledge about the wellness of their own organizations.

The process of EAP renewal that occurred and that is occurring at the University of Saskatchewan was hardly painless. While conversations and debates remained professional there were many disagreements, needed cooling off periods, multiple and repeated discussions of the same theme and yet it was always with the goal of enhancing what was a sound idea and what was a fundamentally good program. The EAP had champions in all sectors of the University and existing staff were supported by many quarters but this does not take away the reality that transition and change have become the norm of the working world and are the very context for much of the

counselling done by EAPs. However, in this case study it was the EAP itself that was the focus of this transitional process and change rather than the resource to facilitate it.

What is not yet known, as the new program is only now being implemented, is the impact that these changes will have upon the University as a whole. Will these changes in fact improve the provision of assistance or perhaps detract from what had been a well established program or even have no discernable impact at all, and what would that say about the process? As the University of Saskatchewan enters its second century of providing post-secondary education and the EAP moves into its second decade of providing support it can only be hoped that the need for change, evolution and adaptation will become integrated into both and become the norm for both and that it will be a functional change and not one that occurs simply because.

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