

Market Research Final Report

**Feasibility Study of Lincoln College ABE Program
at the Mount Senario Campus Location**

For

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Executive Summary

This study conducted market research in a six county area (e.g., Rusk, Price, Sawyer, Barron, northern Chippewa, and Taylor) to determine the feasibility of Lincoln College offering the Accelerated Bridge to Education (ABE) Program at the former Mount Senario College (MSC) campus location in Ladysmith. Goals of the study were:

- 1) to create an awareness among area residents of a potential Lincoln College ABE program; and
- 2) to determine interest in the Lincoln College ABE program by potential users.

Multiple strategies were used for both goals.

- Development of a website with two online surveys, for potential users of the ABE program and for regional employers to assess their training and educational needs.
- Nearly 1000 flyers were distributed with information about the website along with other electronic media such as listservs and Internet websites with hot links to the Lincoln College MSC website.
- Articles were published in nine local, county, and regional newspapers.
- Interviews of numerous business and community leaders.
- A potential user survey mailed to 4800 property owners in Rusk County with a return rate of nearly 10%.
- Employer surveys were also sent to 114 businesses with a return rate of nearly 20%.
- Focus groups in Ladysmith and Cornell.

A summary of the findings includes:

- Supporting two prior feasibility studies focusing on higher education and interest in the region, this study confirms that there is a high interest in seeking a Bachelor's Degree in the northwestern part of the state (66%).
- 71% of 25-30 year olds reported an interest in working toward a bachelor's degree.
- In ranking the three program offerings (Business, Health, and Liberal Studies), 53% of survey respondents indicated their preference for a Bachelor's Degree in Business.
- Survey results indicate two other academic areas of interest that Lincoln College is not planning to offer – nursing and education.
- The top three goals of persons responding to the survey are increasing general knowledge and skills (60%), enhancing current job skills (47%), and preparation for a new job or career (40%).
- Preference for classes is consistent with hybrid instruction, e.g., combination of face-to-face and online coursework (66.4%); twice a week (76%); and a non-traditional schedule of coursework, e.g., evening classes, M-F, 5–9 p.m.(74%).
- The largest barrier to enrolling in the ABE program is cost of classes (67%).
- To be successful financial aid would be a necessity for at least 44% of the respondents.
- Employers, responding to the survey, provide some type of a tuition reimbursement program (78%).
- Employers' training needs are computer/software skills (72%) and leadership skills (64%), new technology training (56%) and business skills and specialties (56%).

I. Overview and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to conduct market research in a six county area (e.g., Rusk, Price, Sawyer, Barron, northern Chippewa, and Taylor) in northwestern Wisconsin to determine the feasibility of Lincoln College offering the Accelerated Bridge to Education (ABE) Program at the former Mount Senario College campus location in Ladysmith. There were two major goals:

1. To create an awareness among area residents of a potential Lincoln College ABE program.
2. To determine interest in the Lincoln College ABE program by potential users.

To address goal one multiple strategies were used that included:

- development of a website with two online surveys – one survey for potential users of the college to determine their level of interest and another for business and industry to ascertain their educational and training needs;
- articles in local, county and regional newspapers promoting the website;
- distribution of nearly 1000 flyers promoting the website to area retail establishments, government offices, dental and health care clinics, nursing homes and hospitals, and public libraries;
- letters to area school districts informing them of the potential school, website, and online surveys; and
- sharing information via formal presentations with business and community groups; and
- promoting the ABE program via other organization's websites, newsletters, HR listservs and news releases.

Goal two strategies included:

- development of two separate surveys – one for potential users of the college and one for regional employers;
- creation of a mailing list of employers in the six county region and sending them surveys;
- scheduling and conducting two focus groups in Ladysmith and Cornell with potential users;
- surveying 4800 residents in Rusk county; and
- meeting with business leaders and organizations throughout the region to gauge their interest and needs.

This report includes the findings and recommendations from these data.

II. Background to the Study

Two prior feasibility studies have been completed in the past couple of years concerning future plans for the former Mount Senario College (MSC). These have included a study by James Magee of Strategic Innovations in Education, completed in May 2007, to assist the principal owners of the MSC in identifying a unique and distinctive mission, vision and action plan for the MSC. An outcome of this study was a recommendation that the MSC become a Center for

Higher Education in the northwestern part of the state. To move toward that goal, a comprehensive partner search was conducted to find existing colleges that might be interested in partnering with MSC to offer college-level course programs. Lincoln College in Normal, Illinois expressed an interest in the possibility of offering their highly successful Accelerated Bridge to Education (ABE) program at the MSC site.

A more recent study, the Northern Wisconsin Higher Education Initiative (NOW) completed in December, 2007 examined the potential need and interest for post-secondary educational opportunities in the northern tier of Wisconsin. As part of that research, three studies were completed: 1) a demographic profile of 17 counties north of, or adjacent to Highway 8; 2) a telephone survey of 600 residents regarding interest in higher education opportunities; and 3) eight community discussions across the northern counties that utilized purposive sampling techniques to evaluate current higher education opportunities and to gauge business, government and community leaders' interest in additional opportunities. Based on the information gleaned from these studies which showed that "there is an immense but dispersed need for higher education in northern Wisconsin," a recommendation emerging from the study was the need for a higher education center in Ladysmith that could feasibly serve Rusk, Sawyer, and Price Counties. Other recommendations included:

- educational programs focusing on future job market projections;
- hybrid instruction be utilized in the delivery of educational programs;
- priority should be placed on efforts to respond to the educational interests of those who already have some post-secondary education credits, which were identified as individuals in the 32-44 year old age group; and
- priority should be placed on building interest among high school students regarding higher education

Given the location of the Mount Senario campus, in northwestern Wisconsin, a decision was made early on to narrow the geographic field to Rusk County and the surrounding counties of Price, Taylor, Barron, Sawyer, and northern Chippewa.

III. Marketing Research Methodology

In a discussion of methods used in this research each goal will be addressed separately.

Goal 1: To create an awareness among area residents of a potential Lincoln College ABE program.

Prior to surveying area residents about their interest in attending a proposed Lincoln College ABE program, it was necessary to first create an awareness of the ABE program and potential delivery options. To accomplish that numerous strategies were used that are detailed below:

- 1. Website.** Through ResourceAbility, consultants working with the developer on a business plan, Applied Interfaces, an Internet design and consulting company was contacted to develop a user-friendly website – www.mountsenario.com (see Appendices) where

information about the Lincoln College ABE program could be posted. The site also had links for two online surveys; one to be filled out by potential students enrolling in the ABE program and the other for employers to learn more about their employee educational and training needs. In addition to these an email address was posted and a telephone number that could be called for additional information. The website was up and running by May 12th. Through interactions and conversations with other business persons in the area about the website, the MSC website was then linked to other websites, such as ReMax Reality website (www.homesinLadysmith.com) which receives thousands of hits each month.

2. Flyer Distribution Promoting the Website. A flyer (see Appendices) was created that promoted the website and/or the two focus groups. Nearly 1000 flyers were either hand-delivered or sent to area and regional businesses and organizations, county government offices, dental and health care clinics, and nursing homes and hospitals.

In the Ladysmith area these included: the Marshfield Dental Clinic, Dr. Reisner's Dental Office, Wal-Mart, the CEP (Job Service) Office, Rusk County Library, Ladysmith City Hall, Rusk County Extension offices, Kaiser Realty, ReMax Realty, Rusk County Hospital and Nursing Home, IndianHead Action Agency, and Fashion Cents. In the Holcombe/Cornell area these included: Steel Horse, Holcombe Bank, Holcombe Laundrette, Holcombe Café, 2nd Chance Consignment, Cornell City Hall, Touch of Class, Public Library, Cornell Nursing Home, Suds Hub Laundry, and Magic Salons.

In addition to these, bundles of 15 flyers each were sent with a letter to public libraries throughout the region: Gilman, Hawkins, Cameron, Hayward, Phillips, Bruce, Cornell, and Phillips. Letters and flyers were also mailed to several regional CEP (Concentrated Education Program) offices in northwestern Wisconsin including Medford, Park Falls and Hayward.

3. Mailings. Sixty letters and flyers were sent to 21 area school district and building level administrators and high school counselors: Birchwood, Bruce, Bloomer, Cadott, Chetek, Cornell, Gilman, Flambeau, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Schools, Holcombe, Ladysmith-Hawkins, New Auburn, Park Falls, Phillips, Prairie Farm, Prentice, Rib Lake, Stanley-Boyd, Turtle Lake, Weyerhaeuser and Winter. In addition to making area school districts aware of this potential program, the letter also solicited any future special needs that districts might have concerning continuing education for faculty and staff and to provide programming for students, such as Youth Options, a program where students take college level classes, not offered by the district but paid for with district funds.

4. Media Outlets. To promote the website and online surveys, newspaper articles (see Appendices for samples) about the Lincoln College ABE program were submitted as news worthy articles to 12 local, county, and regional newspapers. Of these, seven newspapers published stories about the College and the website between the weeks of May 12th and June 2nd. The *Eau Claire Leader Telegram* picked up the story as well and published an article on Saturday, May 24th. Additionally, an ad (see Appendices) was purchased to be placed in *TidBits*, a weekly regional paper that is distributed to businesses and other

organizations in Rusk, Barron, Sawyer, Price and northern Chippewa counties. The ad ran during the week of May 26th. The table below lists each newspaper with circulation/readership numbers:

Publication	Circulation Numbers
<i>Eau Claire Leader Telegram</i>	30,000
<i>Ladysmith News</i>	5,700
<i>Cornell Courier Sentinel</i>	3,400
<i>Barron News Shield</i>	3,000
<i>Cumberland Advocate</i>	2,450
<i>Chetek Alert</i>	3,500
<i>Bloomer Advance</i>	3,300
<i>The Phillips Bee</i>	4,000
<i>TidBits</i>	3,000
TOTAL	58,350

In addition to the newspaper articles, the local radio station, WLDY, was contacted and ran a Public Service Announcement with their Community News broadcast, three times/day one week prior to the focus group held at the Rusk County Library in Ladysmith.

5. Presentations For Established Organizations and One-on-One Interviews. A qualitative data collection technique referred to as “snowball or chain sampling”¹ was used to identify relevant stakeholder groups and individuals, with whom to pursue conversations about Lincoln College potentially making their ABE program available at the former Mount Senario College site. Conversations and interviews with selected individuals included:

Dan Gudis, Ladysmith Mayor
 Al Christiansen, Ladysmith City Planner
 Winnie Lee, City Council President
 Andy Albarado, Rusk County Economic Development Director
 John Terrel, Ladysmith News Owner
 Carolyn Ford, Library Director
 Steve Terry, Ex Dir, NWCEP
 Tom Schwab, Marshfield Clinic Admin

Phil Kaiser, Kaiser Realty
 Ori-Anne Pagel, Rusk County Chamber of Commerce Director
 Kerm Morgan, Former Mount Senario Administrator
 Joe Lorence, ReMax Realty
 Other local business and organizational leaders (e.g., job service center employees, extension offices, etc.)

¹ An approach for locating information-rich key informants by asking a number of people who else to talk with. Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, London: Sage Publications.

Formal presentations about the potential program were done for: Barron County HR (Human Resource) Directors (May 16), Rusk County HR Directors (May 22), Ladysmith Chamber of Commerce (May 27), the Mount Senario College All-School Reunion (June 21), Ladysmith Kiwanis (June 24), and Servants of Mary Convent (June 24) .

6. Listservs and Other Electronic Media. Through meetings and telephone contact with organizational leaders, press releases and news articles about the potential Lincoln College ABE program were distributed on established listservs. Examples include an article promoting the website sent out via the Internet to 1000 business/industry individuals through the Barron County Economic Development Department in Barron County, 116 HR directors in Barron County sent out by Jean Frenzel (Barron County HR Coordinator), promotion of the website and online business survey to 30 HR persons in Rusk County sent out by Rosemary Johnson (Rusk County HR Coordinator).

Goal 2: To determine interest in the Lincoln College ABE program by potential users.

To gauge the interest of potential enrollees participating in the Lincoln College ABE program several distinct strategies were used as well.

1. Surveys. Potential User's Survey. Using a survey as a model from another institution of higher education in Illinois, a survey (see Appendices) was developed to assess potential interest in the ABE program. The survey consisted of 15 questions broken into five major categories: 1) Education, Career, and Professional Goals, 2) Degrees, 3) Class Enrollment, 4) Community Education, and 5) Demographics. The survey was designed in such a manner that respondents could select multiple responses for most questions. In several cases respondents were able to write in their choices as well. The survey gave a brief description of the ABE program and listed potential program areas: Liberal Arts, Business Administration, and Health Administration, from which participants were asked to prioritize their interest.

The survey sample was a population of 4800 households that lived in Rusk County and owned property. These individuals were identified as being on the current property tax roles. A CD of labels of households was purchased from the Rusk County Treasurer's office. To minimize mailing costs a local printer's bulk rate permit was used and a local agency providing employment to disabled adults was selected to prepare the surveys for mailing. To ensure higher return rates, a self-addressed stamped envelope was included in the mailing. The same survey was also available on the website for completion online. The return rate was a little less than 10% with 455 surveys received in the mail. Of these, 64 were considered not useable as they contained incomplete information. An additional 85 surveys had been submitted online through the website. There were 476 valid surveys with useful information.

There was a disproportionate number of older adults responding to the survey, with 167 adults older than 55 years, 191 adults between the ages of 40 and 55, 63 adults between the ages of 31 and 39, and 27 adults between 25 and 30 years old. Fifty-one percent of the

respondents (242) were from the Ladysmith area, 44 or 9% from Bruce, and then Tony with 34. Hawkins, Glen Flora, and Weyerhaeuser had 22, 21, and 20 respectively, Sheldon and Conrath had 17 each and there were 11 from the Holcombe area. All the rest came from numerous other areas that closely surrounded the county, e.g., Rice Lake, New Auburn, Chetek, Exeland, Ingram, Cornell, Birchwood, Prairie Farm, Medford, Stanley, Spooner, and Fountain City. Female respondents were nearly double the number of males, 65% to 35% and 59% were employed full time, with retirees comprising the next largest category (20%).

Business/Employer Survey. Another survey (see Appendices) was developed to assess employer's interests and training needs in the region. A mailing list of 114 businesses was created using employers that employed at least 50 employees in the six county region. They were each sent a survey that consisted of nine questions asking for corporate education and training needs, preference for delivery of training, expected level of education for future employees, and whether or not employers provided tuition reimbursement and/or support. This survey was also posted online. A total of 25 surveys were completed, 11 online and an additional 14 surveys received in the mail. The majority of the business surveys that were filled out online or sent in the mail, were from employers that had more than 150 employees (42% or 10) and 21% of the surveys employed 50 to 100 persons. Business surveys came from employers scattered throughout the region – five from Ladysmith, two from Spooner, and then employers from each of the following cities/towns – Glen Flora, Rice Lake, Bloomer, Shell Lake, Webster, Hayward and Park Falls.

2. Focus Groups. Two focus group sessions were scheduled – one on May 27th at the Rusk County Library and the following evening at the Cornell City Hall. These locations were chosen because of the centrality of Ladysmith to the targeted region and given the fact that the College is located in Ladysmith. Cornell is about 25 south of Ladysmith.

Ladysmith Focus Group – Description of Participants. The focus groups were generally not well-attended nor exclusively consisted of potential enrollees in the ABE program. This was due to an inability to do purposive sampling and to identify and invite participants ahead of time. (See Limitations of the study). Eight persons attended the focus group session on May 27th at the Rusk County Library, consisting of six women and two men. Age ranges varied from persons in their 20's to retired persons in their early 60's.

Participants included three persons who were interested in attending the college themselves, one being a former student who when Mount Senario closed wasn't able to complete her undergraduate degree. Since then she had completed a vocational/technical program, but was interested in completing a bachelor's degree. Another was an employee of a local organization who wished to pursue a bachelor's degree. And the third person was interested in beginning a program of study with Lincoln in the Liberal Arts area and then transferring to another college to complete her studies in her chosen field. One individual, a male, attended the focus group because he had four children and was hoping to put them through a college where his children could continue to live at home, which he believed was a more economical option for higher education.

Four others were there for varied interests; one was employed with the local branch of the vocational/technical school and interested in Lincoln College's intentions; one was a former employee of Mount Senario who was interested in learning more about Lincoln's plans, one was a former graduate of Mount Senario who had gone on to earn a master's degree in the UW system and was now employed full-time in the Ladysmith area; and the other was a retired person who was also interested in learning about Lincoln's plans.

Cornell Focus Group – Description of Participants. Only two persons, both males, attended the focus group session on May 28th at the City Hall in Cornell. One of these individuals was a “typical” person that Lincoln College is targeting through the ABE program – a young adult who had begun higher education and then after three years had to quit for personal reasons. He was anxious to complete his degree and found the potential ABE program a convenient alternative to meet his needs. The other person was a faculty member in the Cornell School District who was interested in potentially teaching at the College.

3. Meeting with business leaders. Meetings were scheduled either individually or through group meetings/presentations such as with Human Resource groups and organization managers/owners. The purpose of these meetings was to make these individuals aware of plans for a potential college, the website, and the on-line survey and to determine their perceived future training needs (See Goal 1, numbers 5 and 6 above).

IV. Findings

The major question being addressed in this study is “*what is the feasibility of Lincoln College offering its Accelerated Bridge to Education program at the Mount Senario College site?*”

Perceptions of Interviewees

According to the Executive Director of the Northwest Wisconsin Concentrated Employment Program, Inc. (NWCEP), the state will face a labor shortage that has already begun in northern Wisconsin and will continue over the next decade. In an interview he commented that the state of Wisconsin labor market data indicated that in ten years, 75,000 career opportunities will exist in northern Wisconsin due to the retirement of baby boomers and therefore the NWCEP has developed a special website, www.workwhereuplay.com, with the intent of actively recruiting workers from metropolitan areas to fill job vacancies in highly skilled occupations in northern Wisconsin. He confirmed a need for higher education opportunities in the region.

In sharing this information with local community and business leaders, they felt that having a college here would be a good opportunity to train some of the workers locally for these positions. When asked their opinions about Lincoln College offering ABE at MSC the responses were overwhelmingly in the affirmative. The current president of the Ladysmith City Council, herself a 1968 graduate of Mount Senario commented, “If the college wasn't here a lot of people wouldn't have had an education.” She shared that there is a real need for a higher education institution in the area and felt that “the time is ripe to move forward.” While she believed that in the past local people didn't support the college as they could have, she said that since MSC has been gone, the locals have now had time to realize the impact of the college and she believed

would be supportive in making every effort to ensure its success.

Other community leaders, such as the Mayor, City Planner, and the County Economic Development Director echoed her sentiments and shared what they perceived to be educational areas of need including business management, education, criminal justice, social work, and nursing. Several business leaders commented that having Lincoln College in the community would make recruitment of health care professionals (e.g., doctors) and business executives easier in that a college would certainly make the community a more attractive place to settle down, raise a family, and provide an outlet for greater educational and cultural experiences.

Educational, Career and Professional Goals Survey Results

While these comments are not new and were voiced in previous studies done on the feasibility of higher education at the MSC, findings from this study are unique in that the target population was not the “movers and shakers” in the community but rather potential users, those persons interested in pursuing higher education if such an opportunity existed. Of the 476 survey respondents, when responding to questions concerning **Educational, Career, and Professional Goals**, of the nine choices listed, the aggregated responses that were most highly rated were:

Response	Percent (%)	Count (#)
Increase general knowledge and skills	60	259
Enhance my job skills	47	201
Prepare for a new job or career	40	173
Meet new people and become involved in something new	32	139
Obtain a promotion in my current job	20	85
Start a business	17	74

When these responses are broken down by age group, the responses differ as shown in the following table:

Response	25-30 Yrs		31-39 Yrs		40-55 Yrs		> 55 Yrs	
	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
Increase general knowledge and skills	70	19	57	35	61	111	61	82
Enhance my job skills	82	22	45	28	56	101	29	39
Prepare for a new job or career	56	15	63	39	44	80	22	29
Meet new people and become involved in something new	44	12	19	12	28	51	44	59
Start a business	33	9	26	16	16	29	8	11
Obtain a promotion in my current job	33	9	31	19	22	40	8	10

While the number of adults in each age group varies considerably, with 25 through 39 year old respondents comprising only 45% of 40-55 years old, goal priorities differed as one's age increased. For example 82 % of 25-30 year olds rated enhancing job skills as their primary goal as compared to 56% of 40-55 year olds, which was their second priority. Naturally, those who are older (> 55) are more likely looking forward to retirement or are retired, so this goal is a low priority for them. The same is true with other goals that ranked higher for younger workers (ages 25-30) as compared to those that were 40 and older. Starting a business and obtaining a job promotion were both rated more highly. Again these were rated considerably lower by those who are nearing the end of their careers. Interestingly though, meeting new people and becoming involved in something new rated nearly the same for the youngest respondents as it did for those 55 and older, indicating this is a goal at both ends of the career continuum; when one starts out in life hoping that one's career will fulfill this need, as at the other end of the continuum when one is looking forward to retirement and new experiences and possibilities.

This question also gave respondents an opportunity to write in their own choice concerning education, career and professional goals. Of the 60 that chose to write a response, 28% indicated their goal was to work toward a bachelor's degree or to finish their undergraduate degree. Another 23% responded that their goal was to work on a graduate degree or to be involved with continuing education, with 15% of these indicating a goal to renew their teacher's license. Several of the focus group respondents shared similar answers with five of the ten participants from both groups indicating an interest in either starting or completing a bachelor's degree.

Comments included: "need to go back to work on a different degree" (as this particular person was working in a different field but due to a medical issue now had to pursue other work), "it would be great to get a start (at MSC) and not having to leave home – would be less expensive than having to live onsite at a campus," "I would like to get my general studies and transfer those credits out," and a father who shared a similar response concerning his children, "my kids would be interested in attending locally, given the price of gas. They would be interested in taking liberal studies here then transferring those credits elsewhere to finish their coursework." One person who had begun a degree and only had 18 credits left to complete his education commented that enrolling in the ABE program would be an excellent, and affordable way to go back to school to finish his degree, while he could continue working to support himself.

When asked what you need to be successful in achieving your educational goals, 309 of the 416 (74%) responding to this question indicated "evening classes (M-F, 5-9 pm)." The next highest responses were "evening degree/certificate program courses" (49%), "convenient course delivery options (online)" (48%), and "financial aid" (44%). Among the youngest respondents (25-30 year olds), financial aid was a need expressed by nearly 75% as compared to 44% overall. Also, access to scholarships was listed by more than 50% of the youngest respondents compared to 29% overall. Access to computers was also a need expressed by 37% of younger respondents compared to 19% overall. Over 1/3 of the 25-30 year olds and nearly 1/3 of 31-39 year olds indicated career counseling as a necessity while this was rated at only 21% overall. This question on the survey also allowed an open-ended response to the question of what was needed to be successful in achieving your educational goals. Twenty-two chose to write answers that included credit for life/work experience, flexible scheduling, graduate courses for license renewal (teacher

education), classes that meet on week-ends, access to the Internet, job openings, and enrichment course.

Education Degree Survey Results

Concerning the **Degrees** category of questions on the survey, participants were asked to rank order their interest in the three choices of bachelor degrees that would be available through the ABE program. Of the 58% of the participants who responded to this question (276/476), more than half (53%) ranked a bachelor's degree in business administration as their first choice. This was true for all ages of respondents. Of the 200 that left this question blank, 99 either listed another degree choice or specified "not listed." Of those that listed another degree choice, the results were 17% indicating a preference for a degree in nursing, 17% in teacher education, with 11% of those responding they were interested in a bachelor's degree and 6% indicating an interest in securing a master's degree. An additional eight percent said they would hope to be involved in continuing education or work toward a master's degree, but did not specify a field of study. Miscellaneous degree choices included: Counseling, Journalism, Social Work, Sociology, Human Resources, Science, Religious Studies, Computer Science, Criminal Justice, Accounting, and Veterinary Science. Vocational-oriented programs were also listed such as: Court Reporting, Graphic Design, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, and various Dental and Health-related fields of study.

When focus group participants were asked a similar question their responses included: Business (2), Teacher Education (2) and Continuing Education in Teacher Education (1), anything in the Medical/ Health related fields of study (3), Information Technology (2), Liberal Arts (1), and the field of Industrial Technology (2),(e.g., supervision, inventory control, inventory management, etc.). Several of the older participants commented that "elderhostel" types of programs and various community education offerings should be a consideration. Degree areas listed above were similar to those shared through interviews with business and community leaders, especially those in education and health-related fields. A community leader, who is the director of the Rusk County library, and is a proctor for five to ten non-traditional adult returning students a year who are attending various universities in Wisconsin and out of state, shared that the students she supervises are primarily working on early childhood education certification (as this is a requirement now for HeadStart programs and the childcare industry). She also commented that with the prevalence of the wood products industry in this area, that degreed programs and/or short courses could be offered in a variety of areas including agriculture, sustainability practices, and "going green."

Survey results show that participants, for the most part, are interested in obtaining a four-year degree. When asked their preference for a two year associate degree, 347 of those who answered this question responded "no," 66% overall as compared to 34% who indicated "yes." Seventy percent of the 25-30 years olds, the highest percentage of all age groups, selected the "no" response. This is consistent with an earlier reported finding that many persons filling out this survey were interested in obtaining a four year degree.

Employers responded to a question asking what level of education was required for new employees within the next two to five years. Most employers gave multiple responses to this

question stating that it primarily depended on the type of position the employee would be taking within their business organization as different positions required varying levels of education. While 15 responses indicated that a high school diploma was all that was required for some of the positions, another 14 responses indicated that a one- or two-year degree from vocational/technical training institution would be necessary for office and administrative staff as well as technical jobs on the floor. Eleven responses indicated their organization had a need for highly skilled personnel with four year, professional, and medical degrees.

Class Enrollment Survey Results

Concerning the category of **Class Enrollment** questions from the survey, there was little variance on the response to “what days of the week could you attend face-to-face classes.” There was no outward preference between Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday which 60 to 70% of all respondents indicated would be good days. As respondents got older there was less preference for Friday and Saturday classes, with 43% of 55 and older respondents rating Saturday as a choice compared to 76% of 25-30 year olds. Because there were so many more older adults responding to the survey, the overall ratings may be skewed toward their preferences, when the reality of younger adults, and those more interested in pursuing a degree, prefer Saturday classes. During the focus groups several persons commented that they had been involved in a one-weekend a month continuing education degree program that they believed was very compatible with all their other life obligations.

By far the preference for time of day for course offerings was evening classes, with 75% of the respondents rating the “6-10 p.m.” option the highest. The next highest time category, 3-6 p.m., was rated by 42% of the respondents. This finding was consistent across all ages of respondents. Another consistent rating was with the question “how many times would you be able to meet in a face to face class” with three quarters (76%) of the responses indicating “twice a week (two 2-hour sessions) compared to 54% overall for “once a week (one 4-hour session). Again, this arrangement was rated the highest among the youngest adults responding to the survey (85% preferring twice a week to 52% preferring classes once a week) while with the oldest adults, there was only a ten point spread between these choices. When queried about their preference for class length, one focus group participant said that four hours a night might be a little long and deadly, if the class was lecture style.

As hybrid instruction becomes more popular, this research revealed several factors that need to be considered. While focus group participants concurred that online classes would save a lot of money in having to drive back and forth, they cautioned that adults would need be comfortable with this type of learning and would have to be computer savvy to be successful. A concern was expressed regarding high-speed Internet access. Evidently this is still problematic in rural areas where many are still using dial-up service. Cable, evidently is also not a viable option. Many of the focus group participants responded that not having a computer could be a “major sticking point for some people” and that there would have to be computer support and/or a computer lab at the school and classes on real basics of computer use, such as sending an attachment via email or how to use blackboard and other forms of computer technology communication. Several of the focus group participants also commented that they preferred instruction where they can see and interact with the instructor and one affirmed this is saying “students learn from each other in a

setting where they are face-to-face.” Another added that “having a social setting with face-to-face (instruction) you have the advantage of preparing people to interact in a work setting.” Another commented that with pure online courses “you are sacrificing quality for technology.”

Survey respondents overall prefer hybrid courses, with 66% responding that they would prefer “part online and part face to face” coursework. But generally as the adults increased in age, their preference for on-line courses decreased with 11% of 25-30 year olds indicating they did not want on-line coursework to 30% of 55 and older adults. The preference for a combination of on-line and face to face was highest with the youngest adults, 78% compared to 57% for those who were 31-39 years old and 58% for those over 55.

A comparison of the top rated responses to the 12 choices concerning barriers to enrolling in the Lincoln College ABE program are listed in the table below and are disaggregated by age group. Clearly, the cost of classes is the largest factor weighing in on the decision whether or not to participate and lack of free time is the second major concern for all ages of respondents. Home responsibility weighs in for all ages except the over 55 year olds. Also, the older the respondent, the more resigned they are to feeling that their current education is adequate for their present job. At this stage in life most of these individuals seem to be primarily looking forward to finishing their careers at their present job location, so are pretty resigned to where they are at concerning education needs as related to their jobs.

Response	25-30 Yrs		31-39 Yrs		40-55 Yrs		>55 Yrs	
	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
The cost of classes	74	20	76	44	70	119	55	65
Lack of free time	37	10	47	27	46	78	23	27
Home responsibilities too great	30	8	33	19	24	40	14	17
Lack of child care	30	8	12	7	5	9	2	2
Not sure of future job plans	26	7	21	12	23	30	14	17
Undecided about my educational goals	22	6	22	13	15	25	20	23
Current education is adequate for my job	19	5	3	2	17	29	21	25

Fifty-six persons chose to write in a response to the question that asked “what would prevent you from taking classes at the Lincoln College in Ladysmith. Twenty percent of these responses related to scheduling issues and time conflicts. Another 18% said they would not participate if the “courses offered are not applicable to my needs.” Other responses included, the lack of offering graduate level work or continuing education, the cost of gasoline and travel back and forth to campus, and two indicated a personal disability. Two individuals were concerned about the transferability of credits they would earn from Lincoln and also mentioned accreditation concerns.

In a similar line of questioning, focus group participants were asked to identify barriers that they would need to overcome if there were to attend the Lincoln College ABE program. A question that one participant asked was if there would be financial aid available. When queried if any of their employers offered tuition assistance, the response from the group was that few of their employers offered any kind of financial assistance for school, but most were unaware of programs that other employers might offer and felt that in the current economic downturn, employers were equally hard-strapped. Time was a factor also mentioned by several which is consistent with the survey responses. Even after examining the perceived barriers to attending the ABE program, two participants made separate, but similar comments. One said you just “have to keep in mind what your goal is” and the other concurred, “it is a matter of convincing the person of the benefit of getting an education that would pay much more,” in the long run.

Related to cost of classes for potential enrollees, employers throughout the region that had a minimum of 50 employees were surveyed and asked if they provided assistance to employees in the form of tuition reimbursement and support. Of the 25 employers that responded to the business survey, 78% (18) indicated that their business organization did offer some type of tuition reimbursement or support, while five responded “no.” Policies varied among employers with many saying that the tuition reimbursed was dependent on the particular course and the grade that the employee received. The table below lists examples of tuition/support policies that were shared by employer respondents:

- Employee offered only a percentage of the class cost, on a case-by-case basis.
- Typical tuition reimbursement required to be skill sets we would use in the future or currently.
- If employed for two or more years, a portion of tuition can be reimbursed for returning students in the areas of nursing, radiology, etc. Employees must work a semester for a semester of assistance.
- Courses will be reimbursed if job related and approved by management.
- Employee must make a request prior to enrollment and the courses taken must relate to our business.
- Program is grade based. Employees are reimbursed (for all fees). 90% for an A; 80% for a B, and 50% for a C. There is no limit as to the dollar amount allotted to each employee.
- Employee must make request prior to enrollment and must relate to business. If approved, employee can request and receive 50% of the total cost of the course in advance, to cover tuition, books, filing fees, etc. Employee must complete and pass the course with a “C” or better grade to receive reimbursement of additional costs.
- Must retain 70% or better and agree to stay at current employer for at least two years.
- Part-time and full-time employees with six months employment reimbursement of classes with grade of “C” or better. Full-time eligible for \$1,230 and part-time eligible for \$660.
- When an approved course is completed with a passing grade, 100% of tuition will be refunded.
- \$750.00 then remaining ½ for each semester.
- Career based courses are reimbursed to the employee up to 75% of the tuition costs.

Community Education Survey Results

When survey respondents were asked to indicate which type of community education activities they might be interested in participating the top choice overall, with a rating of 55% was computer skills. The 25-30 year olds, however rated this at 41%, and rated continuing professional education at 59% as their top choice. The reason for the lower rating with computer

skills is that younger adults may be much more computer savvy than older adults who rated this as high as 58% (in the 40-55 age group). The 2nd, 3rd and 4th highest ratings and comparisons between age groupings are depicted below in percentages:

Responses	25-30	31-39	40-55	> 55
Continuing Professional Education	59	46	51	17
Personal Finance	49	43	39	21
Personal Enrichment	44	31	38	49
Home & Garden	30	34	47	54
Active Retirement	7	7	19	52

The responses seem pretty logical; as one grows older, retirement becomes a greater concern and priority with 52% of those 55 and older rating this as a high interest compared to only 7% of 25-30 year olds. The same is true with personal finance. While 49% of 25-30 year olds rate this as a high interest, only 21% of persons more than 55 rate this as a high interest. Perhaps the feeling is that by the time one gets to be 55 years old, their finances should be in order.

Five of the respondents who wrote in additional areas of interest and other comments in this section indicated that many of the listed community education courses were already offered in the community either through the local vocational technical college or through the Flambeau Community Education Association, so didn't feel a need for Lincoln to be offering these as well. A sundry of other course suggestions were made, however, that included: continuing education for educators and other professionals such as in nursing, for EMT's, CPR, etc., art, nutrition related topics such as health fitness, forestry, digital photography, automotive, stock market classes, political science, starting a business, sustainability issues and several others.

Employer Needs Survey Results

In their survey employers were asked to indicate which work related skill areas were needs. Of the 25 employer responses, 72% indicated that computer/software skills training was the priority, with leadership skills a close second with 64%. The other two areas rounding out the top choices were new technology training and business skills and specialities, each receiving a 56% rating. Additional responses that employers wrote in included: "if you have any connection with APICS type education, we definitely utilize Supply Chain Management type skills sets," "health care-related skills/certifications and/or licensing," and "what it takes to be a good employee (at work on time, quality minded, etc.)"

When asked what type of training method was preferable, 64% responded that a blend of classroom based and online coursework would be best and then 40% commented that delivery at off-site locations, such as place of employment, and the third choice at 32% was delivery at the Lincoln College Mount Senario Center. In an open-ended question asking what kind of employees will be in greatest demand for your organization over the next few years, the responses included: most anything in the health-care industry from licensed nurses, to therapists,

assistants, pharmacists, lab technicians, surgical technicians, laboratory technicians, administrative support, people with medical terminology skills, and radiologists; people with good communication (written and oral), strong interpersonal, and leadership skills; people well-versed in IT communications; people who are comfortable using computers and have knowledge of computer applications; production assistants, and supervisors; automation technicians, robotic technicians, electrical and electronics knowledge; and entry level persons who can be laborers.

V. Limitations

Focus group participation was low. While there was a telephone number to call for further information about the Lincoln College ABE program that was listed on the website, less than five calls were received. The rationale for installing this telephone number was to do purposive sampling in the selection of respondents to participate in the focus groups. But with limited telephone calls this was not possible. Unlike the UW Extension feasibility study, where purposive sampling of business and community leaders was used to identify focus group participants, it was difficult to locate a sample of actual potential users/students. Even with sufficient promotion for both focus groups as shown earlier, attendance was very low. While it would have been more advantageous to directly solicit focus group participants through their responses to the survey, the short timeline for this study and the fact that changes were made last minute in the decision to use “bulk” rather than first class mail, and the concomitant issues connected with securing a “bulk mailing permit,” the surveys did not get mailed as soon as had been anticipated.

Another limitation was the inability to identify a stratified sample of the population, those in the age range of 25 to 44, who received the mailed survey. Consequently 36% of the persons responding to the survey were 55 or older, and for the most part were not interested in pursuing higher education degrees, although many of these were interested in participating in Community Education types of activities and classes.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine the feasibility of the Lincoln College ABE Program being offered at the Mount Senario Campus location. Based on data collected through a variety of means, it does seem feasible that Lincoln College seriously considers offering their ABE program at the MSC site. This conclusion is based on a documented need to have highly trained workers in the northern part of the state as revealed in labor market data shared by the Director of the NWCEP. It is also based on findings of two previous feasibility studies conducted by James Magee of Strategic Innovations in Education that recommended that the MSC become a Center of Higher Education in the northwestern part of the state and the NOW study by UW Extension that documented a need for post-secondary education, especially for the cohort of 32-44 year olds in the region. This study confirms the findings and conclusions from these prior studies.

This study shows that there is a high interest among area residents in seeking a Bachelor’s Degree as indicated by 66% of survey respondents and more than half of focus group participants. Younger survey respondents show an even higher interest with nearly 71%

responding that they prefer a 4-year, rather than a 2-year degree. Overall, survey and focus group respondents see participating in higher education as an opportunity to meet their primary goals which were identified as increasing general knowledge and skills, enhancing current job skills, and preparing for a new job or career. These goals were rated the highest by those falling within the 32 to 44 year old age group, that was identified as the primary cohort for higher education in the NOW study.

Respondents in this study generally see the ABE program as an affordable option to continue or pursue higher education, given the current economic situation and the distance to other IHE's and scheduling concerns of working adults. The majority of the respondents like the idea of the flexibility of the course offerings with evening schedules with 74% responding that this type of program delivery would enable them to meet their educational, career, and professional goals. Two-thirds indicated a preference for hybrid instruction (66%) and more than three quarters of those responding indicated their preference for classes that meet twice a week (76%) as compared to 54% who would prefer classes meeting once a week.

But even with the convenience of the ABE program at the MSC site, 67% of all respondents indicated that a barrier to attending classes is the cost of classes and 43% would require some type of financial aid. This was true for all ages of respondents, except those in the oldest category (> 55). An attractive alternative to the cost concern is the fact that 78% of businesses that responded to the survey indicated that their organization provided some kind of a tuition reimbursement or support. This of course, as explained earlier, would depend on the field of study, the relevance of classes to actual work, and the employer as not all provide this support. Other highly rated barriers included lack of free time and home responsibilities too great. While career counseling and academic advising were lower on the list of needs to be successful, 20% still indicated that these would be valuable services. What makes the Lincoln College ABE program so attractive to area residents can be summed up by two comments made during the focus group, "what interests me most is the convenience. I can still work and don't have to sacrifice work to go to school." and "The location would be great. I wouldn't have to drive too far. There aren't any schools in this area and I would rather drive to Ladysmith than Eau Claire."

Items of concern that were uncovered in this study include the fact that the degree choices that Lincoln College is potentially offering are rather limited. While 53% of the respondents indicated that their first choice would be business administration, only 58% of the survey respondents actually ranked the three choices offered in the survey. Of the 200 persons who did not rank the options, 99 instead either wrote that their first choice was not listed or chose to actually list their preference. Nursing and education, both of which the ABE program will not be offering, each received a 17% response rate as chosen academic fields. Another popular response among these adults was the pursuit of a graduate degree.

Even though the majority indicated a combination of face-to-face and online coursework, there was concern expressed that high speed Internet access is not readily available in the rural areas. Another technology related concern, indicated through the survey and the focus groups, was that older adult returning students might not be as computer savvy as younger adults and this would require that the campus provide technology support in the form of a computer lab and classes on

computer basics, such as sending attachments, using email, communicating via blackboard and other telecommunication strategies. This was confirmed given the fact that computer skills received the highest rating in the Community Education section of the survey (55%).

A concern was expressed by several persons through interviews and the surveys that Lincoln College might not feel a sense of commitment to the community, as one interviewee commented that while she would go back in a heartbeat (because she couldn't afford to go back to the UW Eau Claire given the cost of gasoline and scheduling conflicts), she felt that some may be a little hesitant and concerned about the commitment of the College to the community. This concern has been expressed by others as well. Another concern raised through this study has been questions concerning transferability of credits with participants in the study asking if the Lincoln College ABE credits would transfer to another college in Wisconsin. This is of particular interest to those who are interested in initially pursuing general studies courses in the Liberal Arts degree and then transferring to another university that offers a degree in their chosen field of study.

A finding that emerged throughout this study was that having higher education available again at the MSC location would benefit many and be a "big draw for many people in the area." As one person commented, "This whole part of the state is missing something – the colleges are so far away. We are at the crossroads of the northland."

Overall, there is a perception that the community is ready for a campus at the MSC location, again, and that there will be support for this campus. This perception was voiced again and again through persons who attached notes to the surveys and sent letters sharing their thoughts about a potential future campus. Thirty-eight individuals felt inclined to share their feelings and well wishes with the Lincoln College ABE program. In conclusion, several representative comments are shared below.

My using the proposed college would be very little. Perhaps an occasional conference. I am 83 years old and have a very full life. I sincerely believe it could be of great benefit for the area, touching and changing the lives of hundreds, as did Mount Senario at one time.

I received my degree through Mount Senario and now am employed at Flambeau. The "Mount" was a godsend in my time for many non-traditional students from this area who achieved 4-year degrees. I would see Lincoln College as a much needed asset to our community. Thank you!!

Three of my children attended Mount Senario. WE need a local college...I think more students would go on for a college education if it was close to home.

Because of my age and health condition I will not be able to participate in your program, but I am sending you my very best wishes for your success. Here with our limited cultural resources, Mount Senario, in its day, had a terrific impact. There are professional people who now are working all over the country who otherwise would have been deprived of a college education. I would so like to see something of this nature once again being offered.

Appendices

