

## **Incorporating Ropes Courses to Build Self-Esteem, Leadership Skills, and Enhance Student Performance**

– *Judy B. Fane (LSC-Cyfair)*

Cognitive and analytical skills are highly sought after resources in today's competitive job market. Ropes programs are designed to encourage and build these very skills. Students, such as those in nursing, fire fighting, and EMT training would benefit from Ropes. However, these courses might also be a benefit to students who are high risk; in that studies show people who are integrated into the community are more likely to succeed and less likely to commit suicide. Thus, offering students an enrichment tool that teaches them how to become involved would appear to have benefits of community building and problem solving, as well as a positive impact on self-esteem.

Ropes courses are designed to encourage leaders to emerge naturally through a series of problem solving and physical activities. Competition between campuses could be arranged to encourage further networking through the system, as well as individual spirit throughout each school (Cy-Fair, Kingwood, Montgomery, etc...)

To measure the results of participation in Ropes, would require tracking certain groups of students to determine whether their overall grade average and school activism increased, individually and/or collectively, after participation in the Ropes program.

The price quote from Craig Morantz of Mobile Ropes, located in Houston, Texas, is approximately \$2,000 dollars for a half-day program that can accommodate 100 students. Prices vary according to the number of students, as this affects the number of facilitators needed to conduct the groups. Holly Williams, Program Manager, Student Activities gave indication that incorporating Ropes might be beneficial to students.

An alternative to bringing mobile Ropes to the campuses would be to have a number of instructors enroll in Ropes certification courses, thus the system would then have instructors that can facilitate the program on a regular basis. This alternative would of course mean that the department, under which supervision of the program falls, would be responsible for building and maintaining an onsite facility to conduct the activities. It appears that the equipment can be dismantled and stored when not in use. Thus, the decision of designating a permanent site might not be necessary at the moment, but could become a long-term consideration. Further budgetary study is necessary to determine the alternative that is most cost effective.

### **Spring Update**

It was put for as a proposal to have a group of students take a Ropes course to determine if such curriculum, if incorporated into a college or university system, would increase student engagement to the extent that students become more responsible for their own academic success. The researcher also sought to determine if courses, such as Ropes, would increase the participant's self-esteem, leadership skills and enhance their overall academic performance. The following is the report of those findings.

Students were recruited with flyers, through other faculty, and via word of mouth. Volunteers were sought between mid February 2010 and the 7th of April 2010, with a cut off at 3:00 p.m. on April 8, 2010, as head count had to be given ahead of time for invoicing purposes. The researcher sought, with assistance from a team of faculty and staff, 30 students to participate on April 9, 2010 and 60 students for April 10, 2010. 30 students volunteered to participate for Friday, the 9th and 35 students volunteered for Saturday, the 10th. Thus we fell short of our goal to recruit 90 students for the 2 days.

On Friday April 9th, 22 of the 30 volunteer participants showed up for the event. This number needs to be compared to a statistic against the number of students who don't show up for the first day of class and /or against the statistics for students who register for classes but never attend and don't drop. Two students cancelled one hour prior to the event via email. There was no further communication with the students who did not show up. The weather was fair and mild. It was partly cloudy but no precipitation. All in all excellent conditions for this type of course.

On Saturday, April 10th, 16 of the 35 volunteers showed up. There was no contact from those who choose not to show up. The weather conditions were dark and cloudy with drizzle at about 7:45 a.m. The event was scheduled to start at 9 a.m. By 9 a.m. the sky near the course appeared dark and foreboding, as if a strong storm were approaching. The Ropes facilitators used a lightening monitor to help determine if conditions were safe to continue. The device was monitoring continuously and no lighting was detected within the 12 to 20 mile range; meaning that the nearest lighting was occurring over 12 to 20 miles away from the facilities.

There was soft rain on and off for a couple of hours, during which time the activities were moved to a covered pavilion. The participants stayed and carried on with the course. Although the weather was dreary, the participants displayed jovial moods and good spirits. The group appeared eager to continue.

Without following up with the students who choose, for whatever reason, not to attend, it cannot be determined if the weather conditions played a factor in their choice not to come to the event. An information packet was sent via email or through participating faculty, containing the address to the event, links to Google maps with the course from Cy-Fair campus to the Ropes facility plotted out for them, links to videos demonstrating some of the activities they would be participating in and other pertinent information such as waivers. Students were informed during the recruitment process and at the event that they were participating in a study whose findings would be reported to the Student Engagement Research Fellows committee at Lone Star College and the mini grant funding committee. This event was held off campus. Any of these factors may have contributed to the decision to not participate.

Volunteer participants were asked to supply their grade point average, here-in-after to be referred to as GPA, from the previous semester and then again to supply the researcher with their GPA at the end of the spring 2010 semester so a comparison can be done to determine if there was any variance in the GPA after participating in Ropes. However, that being said, the researcher would like to note that due to time constraints, that an even further comparison of

perhaps a Summer 2010 GPA or Fall 2010 GPA would be needed in order to fairly determine what results can be concluded.

Students were informally interviewed during the breaks between the scheduled activities throughout the day. They were interviewed in pairs, groups of 3 to 4 and as individuals. Students were asked if there was a Ropes course available through the college, would you take it. The overwhelming response was “yes.” There was no negative response among the group, even from those students who had participated in similar courses at a younger age.

When asked how they felt overall at the end of the day some of the responses were as followed: empowered, strong, dynamic, challenged, ready to communicate more in class and courageous. Again, all of the responses were perceived by this researcher to be positive meaning that the Ropes course had impacted the students in a way that would impact their own engagement in further academic pursuits. Thus, it might be concluded that at that moment, the overall self esteem level of the students could be referred to as elevated or increased, which the searcher would determine to be a positive result.

The activities associated with the various levels of Ropes are goal oriented. The researchers decided the goals for this particular study needed to correspond with the goals of determining increased self-esteem, a change in attitude toward their own success in their education, along with building team and leadership skills as well as working on the listening skill set.

## **Survey Results**

Friday, April 9, 2010

Most of the participants were first year students, with 6 being second year, and 1 student listed as a third year student.

- 24 Participants
- Total of 9 Males – 8 Hispanic, 1 Black Male, 0 Caucasian
- Total of 15 Females – 3 Mixed Race, 1 Caucasian, 3 Black, 4 Hispanic, 1 Native American, 1 Other, 1 Asian, 1 Survey returned Black
- Age: All participants were 18-24, except 1 female who was 24-31 age range.
- Majors: 6 Undecided, 4 Biology, 1 History, 1 Applied Nursing, 1 Computer Science, 1 Business Administration, 1 Dental Hygiene, 1 Architecture, 1 No Response, 1 Education/music, 1 Mass Communication, 1 Accounting, 1 International Studies

Saturday, April 10, 2010

This group varies from the first in that only 3 of these students identified themselves as being first year status, while 9 Students identified themselves as being second year status and 3 students reported their status as third year; there was a no response as well.

- 16 Participants
- Total of 12 Males – 4 Caucasian, 5 Hispanic, 3 Other
- Total of 4 Females – 2 Caucasian, 2 Hispanic

- Age: All participants were 18 to 24, except 1 who identified themselves as being 32-39.
- Majors: 3 Education, 2 Business, 2 International Business, 2 Geography, 1 Chemical Engineering, 1 Psychology, 1 Teaching Certification, 1 Systems Engineer, 1 ESOL, 1 Management, 1 Communication

This group varies from the first in that only three of these students identified themselves as being first year status, while nine Students identified themselves as being second year status and 3 students reported their status as third year; there was a no response as well.

Out of the Saturday group, there were four students with increased GPA, only one of which could be considered a significant increase of one point or more. In the same group, there were three students with a slightly decreased GPA. There were 2 students in this group whose GPA stayed exactly the same as the previous semester. There were four students from this group who did not follow up with their GPA information as requested. Thus, no comparisons could be made for these students.

Out of the Friday group, there were four students with increased GPA, none of which showed a significant increase. Out of the Friday group, there were eight students with a decreased GPA; four of which dropped significantly falling at least a full point or more below the previous semester's GPA. Nine students who did not supply the information as requested, thus a comparison could not be made for those students.

One might immediately draw the overall conclusion, at least quantitatively, that Ropes courses do not promote increased student engagement. However, observing the students on the day of the event, one could conclude qualitatively that Ropes courses do appear to inspire students, at least on the day of the event. This researcher would suggest that further research be done with a one semester trail curriculum course combing Ropes with communications. The research result might be more reliable when the researcher is allowed to take the students through a full semester of activities on a weekly basis to determine if the Ropes course actually makes little or no difference or if there are other factors affecting the student's lives that caused their GPAs to drop rather than rise.