

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

ABSEL: THE WAY WE WERE AND NEED TO BE

Alan L. Patz, University of Southern California
Sandra W. Morgan, University of Hartford

ABSTRACT

The Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning (ABSEL) is at a transition point. Its reasons for being are blurring, for it faces a technological tomorrow that reaches beyond its traditional scopes of expertise. Nevertheless, ABSEL is singular in its combined emphases on classroom innovation, collegial atmosphere, informal style, acceptance of individual differences, and outreach to practitioners. Even more important, if its members are so inclined, ABSEL is in the unique position of being able to lead change in education in the 21st century. Other organizations may make similar claims, but only ABSEL has an inclusive view of the relevant issues rather than a specific focus in a limited area such as organizational behavior, finance, decision making, or sociology. ABSEL is indeed at a crossroad where significant decisions need to be made. Will this organization continue in its same format, or will it reach for and grasp the educational opportunities of the next century?

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this report is to present and support the assertion that ABSEL is unique and more than capable of becoming a leader in education in the 21st century both in the college classroom and in the workplace. A second, equally important, purpose is to outline some of the organizational changes that will be necessary to meet this 21st century challenge. In fact, a key impetus for this report is the perceived need for change among ABSEL board members, consistent research contributors, and regular attendees at annual meetings.

The suggestions for change presented here are the result of discussions, conference evaluations, a strategic management exercise, and a targeted survey of ABSEL presidents, fellows, and board members and involved members. The response percentage to the targeted survey was 40%. (See Table 1.1 Other data are the results of an evaluation form distributed at the 1993 ABSEL Savannah meeting. The 58 responses represent approximately 50% of those attending the meeting. Strategic management and discussion information is mainly from the individuals who attended an ABSEL strategy session on the Saturday following the Savannah conference. This session was announced as open to all interested members, but was attended primarily by board members.

Table 1 provides a summary of the information sources for this report, but the numbers do not capture the feelings, attitudes, and general dispositions of the respondents regarding ABSEL. Overall, in a most general fashion, the results of this report can be summarized in a few short statements. They are that ABSEL: 1. is populated by professionals who care deeply about education.

2. encourages research that makes a difference in the classroom and the workplace,
3. aims to provide support among colleagues rather than playing the one-upmanship games common to other national, academic organizations, and
4. is constrained by quality and recognition problems.

Each one of these four statements is elaborated in the paragraphs that follow. However, they all lead to the same, to be expected, conclusion that there is an unmistakable tension between status quo and change prescriptions for ABSEL's future. This tension will not recede, and ABSEL's future will be determined by its release

Table 1

Respondent Summary

I. At the 1993 ABSEL Savannah Conference	<u>N</u>
Evaluation Forms	58
[47 academic: 11 practitioner	
Personal interviews	9
Strategy Session Participants	14
II. To the 1993 ABSEL Strategy survey	
Current Board members	7
Fellows	10
Past Presidents	1
Members	2
Total	101

*Note: Due to the overlapping membership of current board members, fellows, and past presidents, a categorization method was used as follows:

1. Fellow
2. Past President
3. Current Board Member
4. Member

A respondent was classified into the first of these four categories that matched their ABSEL status. There is substantial overlap among the two categories as most of the fellows and board members attended the Savannah meeting, submitted evaluations, and attended the strategy session. See Figure 1 for the survey instrument and Figure 2 for the evaluation forms.

The ABSEL Appeal

In all of these proings for information--discussions, questionnaires, strategic exercises, and surveys--there is one universal constant. People like ABSEL.

They like its emphases on informal style, research goals concerned with making the classroom more effective and enjoyable, constructive rather than self-serving research criticisms, and the

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Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

acceptance of individual differences rather than adherence to politically correct behaviors and lines of thought.

One questionnaire respondent captured these sentiments that ABSEL, "Is one meeting where I at least feel that the purpose of the meeting is to learn from each other and not an atmosphere of challenge for one-upmanship within a madhouse of humanity climbing over each other during the breaks." Another notes that we avoid both the cultist and tight but irrelevant" research and theory paradigms so common to other organizations.

People like ABSEL for other reasons too. They look forward to the wine and cheese party as well as the business meeting rituals of awards, recognition of long-standing membership, and the granting of fellow statue. They appreciate the way ABSEL reaches out to the membership for new ideas and board participation.

They look forward to the evening spent on some sort of entertainment, the opportunity to see old friends, and the good times had by all on the various planned and unplanned groups choosing restaurants or other forms of diversion for an evening. Once again, the urgency of one-upmanship is absent from these sessions.

Problems. All of this, however, is not without some perceived and real costs for ABSEL. There are concerns that the "laid-back" style produces too many less than first-class articles for the Proceedings. Associated with this are concerns that the Proceedings has not been promoted sufficiently for the refereed journal that it is. Then there are those who contend that these two issues are related.

that is, some people argue that the quality of research in the proceedings will not improve until (a) it is no longer called proceedings," and (b) its general format or style of presentation is greatly enhanced. In other words, outstanding format generates outstanding research, and outstanding research demands outstanding format. This problem, along with the need to differentiate between simulation and experiential learning publication standards, is a just that: a problem.

Second, ABSEL has yet to develop reasons for its population to be associated with it beyond the annual meeting. Some proposed reasons for year-round association includes jobs, publications, support networks such as a bulletin board, and associations with other organizations--both academic and non-academic.

This last reference to non-academic organizations raises a third problem for the ABSEL population. That is, new technologies are thundering upon us, and business organizations are implementing them more rapidly than ABSEL and the business schools in which most of us work. This is an ABSEL survival issue that will not disappear.

Fourth, related to the new technologies concern, is the fact that ABSEL needs to expand its population base. The attempt has already been made with so-called "practitioners," and the practitioners are of many kinds--not just business. Practitioners come from organizations that are non-business academic departments, government agencies, military as distinct from government units, and non-profit organizations. Extended business simulation and experiential learning techniques are not the province of business schools alone.

A key problem. All of this, however, raises a fifth problem of collegiality. The four key problems just noted, if "solved," will affect what people like about ABSEL. A lot of them like the size of ABSEL, the fact that we can fit the whole conference into one small dining room for the wine and cheese party and another slightly larger one for the business meeting. They like the familiarity of their past research and design efforts on simulations and experiential learning.

They are not so much threatened by the new information technologies, as they are less than interested in them or unable to access them.

In short, the key problem is: Can ABSEL continue to make a difference and still be ABSEL? Can the style, goals, constructive support, and tolerance of individual differences be continued if the quality, reasons for being, new technologies, and reach-out concerns become major change dimensions? And, as many have asked, should the ABSEL name be retained?

Making a Difference

These are crucial questions in an era when the relevancy of past academic, business associations is being called into serious question; when business school education programs are under fire; and when American universities are beginning to parallel the restructuring and downsizing of American industry. Making a difference is no longer a glib phrase, one of the platitudes so readily offered by university officials at fund raising dinners. It has become a matter of survival.

But do ABSEL members want to make a difference and survive? On this issue, the responses to this report appear to be like Caesar's Gaul. They are divided into three parts. One group maintains that survival, even small growth, is dependent upon the continuation of current organization patterns. A second one pleads for change, change that will take us beyond our current patterns. A third group, smaller than either of the first two, has a different notion. They contend that ABSEL is doomed given either continuation or change.¹

This last group is interesting in that they appear to have the evidence on their side. They note the following:

1. The quality of the research reported in the Proceedings has not improved despite all sorts of pleas for more rigor, better reviews, and more incisive though still supportive comments at the annual meeting sessions.
2. The format of the Proceedings has not improved nor have there been enough significant efforts to promote it worldwide.
3. There are no programs in place between annual meetings to promote ABSEL benefits.
4. Building on the last comment, ABSEL is still controlled by the few people who manage the annual meeting. That is, there is little operating and strategic communication among other board members and publication track people between meetings other than that necessary to launch the meeting.
5. ABSEL is simply not enough of a "mainline" academic organization for anyone to make the effort to change the preceding four conditions.

This last comment, however, has a serious rebuttal from several members. That is, do we really want ABSEL to be mainline, say, in the Academy of Management pattern, or do we want to do something useful?

The mainline controversy. Interestingly, this mainline problem irks both the status quo and change advocates. Both groups have only minimal interest in what is published in the currently popular academic journals. They take them seriously and publish in them, nevertheless, in order to protect their career paths while trying to do something useful in the classroom.

¹ This categorization into three groups was made by examining answers to a variety of questions from the evaluation survey, questionnaire, and strategy session. Precise quantification of the data is difficult because of the complex, multi-part answers

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

Nearly every tape and interview strongly emphasized the value of teaching methodology and sharing new and innovative ideas as the primary value ABSEL offers. The ABSEL membership believes teaching is important and attend the meetings in a collegial, informal, supportive environment in order to discover new ways to teach. This base in teaching improvements provides the impetus for ABSEL to take the leadership in education patterns for the 21st century, both in the universities and in the workplace. However, in order to lead the education effort, several strategies are warranted.

1. This organization needs to expand its membership with younger people, new faculty and graduate students. But these same people need research publication outlets to secure their promotion and tenure, outlets that ABSEL does not have beyond our Proceedings and *Simulation and Gaming*.²
2. In order to assume educational leadership in the workplace as well as in universities, ABSEL needs a solid base of practitioner members. Support for this contention comes from the 25 positive responses from academics to the evaluation question, "Please comment on the value of having private sector participation." Some typical responses included, "This is key," "...valuable input," "excellent," and "useful." Nine academics were less positive or ambivalent, providing answers such as "Good as long as academics stay in the majority," "Not sure," and "I don't see the value in this." But our only means of securing and maintaining this base between annual meetings are the informal actions of board members in encouraging the practitioners to present and in facilitating interaction between them and academics.
3. Business simulation and experiential learning emphases need to have equal footing within ABSEL. But we continue to struggle with this balance, including only one form for the review of both types of papers submitted for the annual conference. Tailoring is needed, not only for the review forms, but also for the length and format of sessions as well, as the expectations for chairs and discussants.
4. Back to research on education, experiential learning, and simulations, almost all ABSEL members consider this activity to be at least as, if not more, important than the research that is published in popular academic journals. The key basis for this notion is that research on practical issues is far more productive than research on armchair logic. But, once again, very little is done to promote this point of view.

Redefining mainline. In other words, people appreciate very much some of ABSEL's definitions regarding collegiality, informal style, concern with the classroom, and constructive criticism. What they don't like are the problems posed by the need to do "academic" research for career purposes rather than useful research. ABSEL has done little to ameliorate this dilemma and may, in fact, decide to avoid the problem.

To summarize the main points in all the preceding paragraphs, ABSEL has not provided:

1. Justifications for the credibility of research on education, experiential learning, and simulations.
2. Respectable outlets for the publication needs of graduate students and new faculty.
3. Easy paths for practitioner participation.
4. Reasons to be concerned with our organization between annual meetings.
5. Methods for maintaining the highly cherished collegial values within a larger, more visible organization.
6. Useful guidelines for what represents a good simulation paper and a good experiential learning paper.
7. Procedures for dealing with the emerging educational technologies.
8. Explicit goals for the future of the organization that are known by all members.

9. Organization structures within ABSEL to handle all of these key problems.

In fact, by directing attention to these nine key problem areas, ABSEL is in the position to redefine mainline. It certainly is not obvious that other organizations are rushing to provide new definitions.

But, in order to do so, ABSEL must deal with the ninth problem first. That is, ABSEL must reorganize itself for strategic decision making.

This issue, organization, was another part of this report conducted after the Savannah meeting. It resulted in recommendations for ABSEL strategy formulation and strategy implementation. A brief summary follows.

STRATEGY FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

The organization recommendations for strategy formulation and implementation are a summary of the collective wisdom of ABSEL's current directors, fellows, past presidents, and the members attending the strategy session on the Saturday following the Savannah conference. What is reported below is a second round of that effort. The first round summary of what these members recommended was circulated to a subset of six respondents. Their comments were incorporated into the first strategy organization statement, which was then recirculated to the entire sample for final comments.

Formulation

Strategy formulation and implementation are to be the continuing concern of a permanent ABSEL Board of Directors committee. Strategy formulation, the concern of this section has three basic parts: organization, duties, and reporting.

Organization. The basic responsibility for strategy formulation will be that of a continuing committee of the board composed of the following individuals;

1. Membership Director (Chair)
2. Development Director
3. Executive Director
4. Newsletter Editor
5. Program Chair
6. Two Members (Not Directors) At Large

Their decisions will be made in liaison with the following ABSEL individuals or groups:

1. President
2. President-Elect
3. Fellows
4. Past Presidents
5. Volunteers

Duties. The key duties of this strategy committee will be to:

1. Articulate ABSEL's reasons for being
2. Differentiate ABSEL from competing organizations

² We could learn from other professional organizations. For example, the Eastern Academy of Management differentiates successfully the review process into four types of presentations--empirical papers, conceptual papers, workshops, and symposia--and designs its program carefully around the needs of each session type.

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

In addition, the strategy committee will:

1. Develop programs that
 - Support these reasons for being
 - Service members' needs between annual meetings
2. Establish external organization relationships
3. Monitor ABSEL success criteria

Reporting. The committee will prepare a report for discussion and approval by the entire Board of Directors at their annual meeting. This report will include a summary of the past year's strategic results, the discussion part, and an outline of strategic plans for the next year, the approval part. Furthermore, a condensed version of the report will be published in the newsletter and made available to all participants at the annual meeting.

Furthermore, the strategy committee's chair will deliver a report to the membership at the national meeting regarding ABSEL's organizational strategy and results. During this same meeting:

1. The Association Development Director will report on external relationships with practitioners, publishers, and other organizations.
2. The ABSEL Fellows/Past Presidents committee chair will report their findings and recommendations at an annual meeting session.
3. The co-chairs of the Member Services committee, the Directors at Large, will report their actions and results at an annual meeting session.

These last two committees, the ABSEL Fellows/Past Presidents and Member Services, are discussed in subsequent paragraphs. For now it is sufficient to note that these recommendations clearly place the organizational strategy responsibilities on specific board members. In addition they must report on their actions and results

Implementation

Three other committees will form the support structure for strategy implementation. They are the Fellows/Past Presidents, Practitioner Relationships, and Member Services committees. Board members will chair each committee and act within the following guidelines:

Fellows/Past Presidents. The Membership Director will be responsible for establishing this organization and forming a steering committee among its members. The key roles of this committee will be to:

1. Make strategic recommendations to the Board and membership
2. Support ABSEL strategy implementation
3. Report their findings and recommendations at an annual meeting session.

Practitioner Relationships. The Association Development Director will chair this committee and execute the charge developed at the annual board meeting. In addition the chair will:

1. Include practitioners on the committee
2. Develop specific programs to enhance practitioner, publisher, and other organizations' participation.
3. Report the committee's findings and recommendations at an annual meeting session.

Member Services. The Directors at Large will be co-chairs of this committee and execute the charge developed for them at the annual board meeting. In addition they will:

1. Assess member needs
2. Design a bulletin board that deals with member needs

3. Assist beyond the classroom with guidance on
 - Proposal writing
 - Fund raising
4. Devise other, necessary, strategies and plans to meet member needs.

Other Major Implementation Concerns

In addition to the support structure of these three committees, the President will:

1. Ask the Directors at Large to implement specific strategic recommendations
2. Use all current Directors to maintain partnerships with other organizations such as:
 - Academy of Management
 - American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business
 - American Finance Association
 - American Marketing Association
 - Organizational Behavior Teaching Society
 - The Institute of Management Sciences
3. Set specific goals and assign them to specific directors regarding:
 - Attendance at national meetings (Membership Director)
 - Number and types of papers (Program Chair)
 - Outreach to graduate students, new faculty, and practitioners (Association Development Director)
4. Develop success criteria regarding
 - Membership
 - Use of member publications rather than publications per se
 - Academic/practitioner interactions

Reasons for Being/Differentiation

Overall, the goals of these committees are to establish and continually update ABSEL's reasons for being and differentiate it from competing organizations. This includes determinations of how to:

1. Do better what we do now in simulation and experiential learning.
2. Establish ourselves as a national teaching organization.
3. Emphasize specific areas of pedagogy and pedagogic research such as:
 - Education and teaching Competencies
 - Effectiveness/Efficiency
 - Outcome assessment
 - Quality faculty
 - Computer based education
 - Practitioner involvement
 - Specific audiences
 - Modelers
 - Pedagogues
 - Learning by doing
 - Program and project management
 - International
 - New products
 - Beyond simulation and experiential learning
 - Future universities

A FEW SCENARIOS

An outline of these strategy formulation and implementation recommendations will be made available to all members at the 1994 San Diego meeting. However, in order to stimulate thought for discussion at that meeting, three of many possible scenarios for ABSEL's next ten years are presented as starting points for the

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

Elaboration of the preceding organization outline for strategy formulation and implementation

Scenario #1

ABSEL becomes an organization that leads in the exploration of innovative ideas around teaching business disciplines. The meetings then would center around preliminary proposals and ideas, not necessarily finished work. They would provide feedback and support for idea clarification and development.

Workshops would be added to the program to aid in model development. We would truly become a growth oriented, learning organization.

Members would polish their papers, exercises, simulations, and models after the conference for publication in JME Simulation and Gaming, and possibly a new ABSEL journal. Members would have a reason to stay in touch between annual meetings because we would provide a feedback network for each other. In addition, we would be modeling the behavior that we encourage in our students--creativity, exploration, support, feedback, and production of a better quality product because of additional input.

Scenario #2

ABSEL becomes more "respectable" in terms of academic reward systems. That is, we increase the quality of papers at the meeting, focus more on research based submissions, and start a journal with high standards.

Some of the positive characteristics of our culture at the meetings can be maintained by encouraging supportive feedback on presentations and collaborative planning of meetings. The Eastern Academy of Management may be a good model in this instance. Its members attest to a respectable organization with high submission standards along with a small, friendly, and supportive annual meeting.

Scenario #3

ABSEL becomes the activist and pragmatic organization with respect to the workplace. We become the leaders in linking academia and the business world through our forefront ideas on how to teach, train, and facilitate learning. In other words, we promote learning as a competitive strategy.

More practitioners would co-present at the annual meeting; we would initiate contact with universities and offer to send members to consult on teaching; and we would publish in action oriented journals such as the Harvard Business Review, the Academy of Management Executive, and the California Management Review.

Scenarios #1 and #3 propose that ABSEL takes a leadership role in creating something that does not exist, something new and different. Scenario #2 allows for incremental change, not transformation. Obviously, many other scenarios exist. These three are offered to help begin discussion.

But, with the "permanent-white-water" environment of the business world, we have the opportunity, some might say the obligation or responsibility, to respond in an innovative way to the needs of both business, which hires our products, and academia, which is not producing exactly the product the customer wants. In order to do so, ABSEL must decide on a direction, resolve the nine issues summarized in the section on redefining mainline, and get on with it.

We can hesitate no longer. Equally important, as noted before, ABSEL is in the unique position of having the talent to do the job.

CONCLUSION

In short, the results of this yearlong effort at discussion, survey, questionnaires, interviews, and basically qualitative data analysis are clear. First, almost everyone who knows about ABSEL likes it. But, second, we have not done a very good job with practitioners, and we have a long list of

problems that need to be corrected. Among them are the needs to justify our existence, provide respectable publication outlets, make it important and useful for members to interact between annual meetings, and design an organization that takes strategy seriously.

A strategy organization has been recommended in this paper, based upon membership surveys, and it will be presented at the 1994 San Diego meeting. It includes specific action and reporting responsibilities for directors as well as the inclusion of non-board members and practitioners. In short, it asks simply that people within ABSEL take charge of ABSEL's future.

This organization has to provide an environment in which all members, including new faculty and graduate students, can prosper through their research and publication. Said in another way, ABSEL has to convince the research world that what we do in education, simulation, and experiential learning is not only worthwhile but it is also the cutting edge of relevant academic research.

FIGURE 1 AN ABSEL STRATEGY STUDY: THE WAY WE WERE AND NEED TO BE

- A. Comment generally about ABSEL
 1. Why has ABSEL been important to you? Include the academic performance appraisal process, if it applies, but go beyond this factor, if possible.
 2. What ABSEL characteristics are important to you? Why?
 3. How would you differentiate ABSEL from other academic and professional organizations?
 4. What would you say about ABSEL when encouraging a non-member to join? Why?
- B. Comment specifically about ABSEL
 1. What is valued and rewarded in ABSEL? Has this changed over time? If so, how?
 2. What are our interaction guidelines among past members? For bringing new members on board? For co-authoring and discussing papers at the conference? For partying?
 3. Who makes decisions about ABSEL? Are different people involved in different types of decisions? What decision-making processes are used?
 4. What is cause for celebration in ABSEL?
- C. Comment on the ABSEL culture
 1. If you were explaining to someone what makes ABSEL special, what would you tell them? Would your description include examples from our conferences, publications, people, and activities? If so, what examples from conferences, publications, and so forth would your descriptions include?
 2. Describe a ceremony or ritual that you feel is critical to ABSEL.
 3. What are the most important behavioral norms of the organization? The conference? Are there any other norms that matter but are not quite so pivotal?
 4. How do we communicate in ABSEL? About what?
 5. What would you say our reasons for being have been over the past ten years? Are these reasons changing?

Development In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

Look back over the past ten to twenty years

1. Who have been the driving forces in ABSEL's history? Who are those forces now? What characteristics would you describe among those who have been important ABSEL leaders?
2. What have been the most important events in ABSEL's history? Why?
3. Are there any good stories that are part of the mythology/ history that get passed down from conference to conference? Please relate one.

E. Look forward to the next ten years

1. What do you most want to preserve in ABSEL? Why?
2. What do you most want to develop in ABSEL? Why?
3. What don't you like and want to change in ABSEL? Why?

F. What did we forget to ask that you feel is important to know for anyone trying to understand ABSEL, its history, and its culture?

FIGURE 2

SCHOLAR AND PRACTITIONER EVALUATION FORMS

1993 SCHOLAR EVALUATION FORM (Please return in the enclosed envelope)

What DREW you to this conference (not what did you like about it)? (Please check no more than two.)

☐ Bill Wiggernhorn
☐ Private Sector Presenters
☐ Interact with Experts in the Field
☐ Learn More about Simulations
☐ Interact about Pedagogy
☐ I'm a Long Standing Member
☐ ABSEL Style
☐ Interactive Sessions
☐ Other (please specify)

Please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5 by circling the number that applies:

	poor	fair	excellent
Quality of Academic Sessions	1	2	3 4 5
Relevance of Sessions	1	2	3 4 5
Interaction between Academics and Practitioners	1	2	3 4 5
Focus and Depth of Topics	1	2	3 4 5
Learning from Practitioners	1	2	3 4 5
Organization and Presentation of Sessions	1	2	3 4 5
ABSEL Informality/Friendliness	1	2	3 4 5
Practitioner Presentations	1	2	3 4 5
Organization and Presentation of Sessions	1	2	3 4 5

If yes, on what topic?

Please identify the best sessions, papers or aspects of the conference you liked the best and why?

Name and phone (optional):

What things did you like the worst and why?

Please comment on the value of having private sector participation.

Other comments or suggestions for improvement.

Name and phone (optional):

FIGURE 2 CONTINUED

1993 PRACTITIONER EVALUATION FORM (Please return in the enclosed envelope)

How did you find out about this conference? (check one)

Call for Papers

☐ ASTD Newsletter
☐ ASTD Meeting Announcement
☐ Chamber of Commerce Flier
☐ SHRM Newsletter
☐ SHRM Meeting Announcement
☐ Other (please be as specific as possible)

What DREW you to this conference (not what did you like about it)? (Please check no more than two.)

☐ Bill Wiggernhorn
☐ Private Sector Presenters
☐ Interact with Experts in the Field
☐ Learn More about Simulations
☐ Interact about Pedagogy
☐ I'm a Long Standing Member
☐ ABSEL Style
☐ Interactive Sessions
☐ Other (please specify)

Please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5 by circling the number that applies:

	poor	fair	excellent
Organization and Presentation of Sessions	1	2	3 4 5
Relevance of Sessions	1	2	3 4 5
Learning from Academics	1	2	3 4 5
ABSEL Informality/Friendliness	1	2	3 4 5
Focus and Depth of Topics	1	2	3 4 5
Interaction between Academics and Practitioners	1	2	3 4 5

Please identify the sessions, papers or aspects of the conference you liked the best and why?

What things did you like the least and why?

Please suggest ways in which ABSEL can improve its conferences to make them more appropriate for practitioners.

Would you be interested in making a presentation at the 1994 ABSEL conference in San Diego? _____ yes _____ no