

Increasing Accessibility

Lessons Learned in Retaining Special Population Students in Canada

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Introduction

In Canada, changing demographics and increased competition, as well as social values based on equity, have sharpened efforts to increase post-secondary educational participation rates of youth from under-represented/under-served groups.

Despite having the highest level of educational attainment among OECD countries, Canada appears to have made little progress on narrowing “access gaps” and improving student retention rates. Provincial governments are now increasingly funding a variety of targeted initiatives with an aim to encourage colleges and universities to enroll more special population students. This is, however, challenging since holistic retention programs and planning for such students are not well-developed at many institutions. This has led to access and success becoming important public issues in Canada.

A recent survey (Smith and Gottheil, 2008) found that the student groups under-served by Canadian colleges and universities are diverse. Those groups of greatest interest include:

- Aboriginal/First Nations/Inuit,
- recent immigrants,
- Asian students,
- northern Canadians,
- rural students,
- students with disabilities,
- First Generation students, low-income students,
- francophone students, and
- black students.

Using the strategic enrolment management conceptual framework, we will focus on four of the groups of interest (low-income students, First Generation students Aboriginal, and francophone students) by providing a description of each group, and reviewing the barriers to post-secondary education (PSE) access and factors leading to attrition. We will also offer six “lessons learned” that offer guidance to educational leaders as they explore ways to better meet the needs of special population students.

Aboriginal Canadians

Aboriginal Canadians represent 3.8 percent of the Canadian population, with 62 percent being North American Indian, 30 percent Métis and 5 percent Inuit. The population is heterogeneous and diverse with over 1,000 communities speaking a dozen languages. More than 70 percent of the Aboriginal population live off reserve; 54 percent reside in urban areas. The Canadian Aboriginal population is much younger than the Canadian population as a whole, with almost half under the age of 25 (Statistics Canada, 2008). Among youth aged 20-24 years old, 40.3 percent have not completed high school. This compares to 12.5 percent in the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008). By age 20, non-Aboriginal youth are three times more likely than Aboriginal youth to be in PSE and attrition is 33-56 percent higher than among the general student population (Baldwin and Parkin, 2007; Parkin and Baldwin, 2009). Overall, 7.7 percent of Aboriginal Canadians have a university credential vs. 23.4 percent of the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008). There is a higher participation rate in the community college system.

First Generation Students

First Generation students are those students whose parents have not attended a PSE institution. Some 81 percent of 18 to 24 year olds whose parents have a university education participate in PSE. This compares to 53 percent for young people whose parents did not go past high school (Parkin and Baldwin, 2009). These students are less likely than their peers to earn degrees, even when differences in high school preparation are taken into account (Lee and Wiley, 2007). Parental education--and not parental income--is seen as a key driver of PSE participation in general and university in particular (Finnie and Mueller, 2008). This helps to explain why some Canadian immigrant populations are more likely to attend university than Canadian-born youth—Canadian immigration policy favors immigrant applicants with higher education credentials.¹

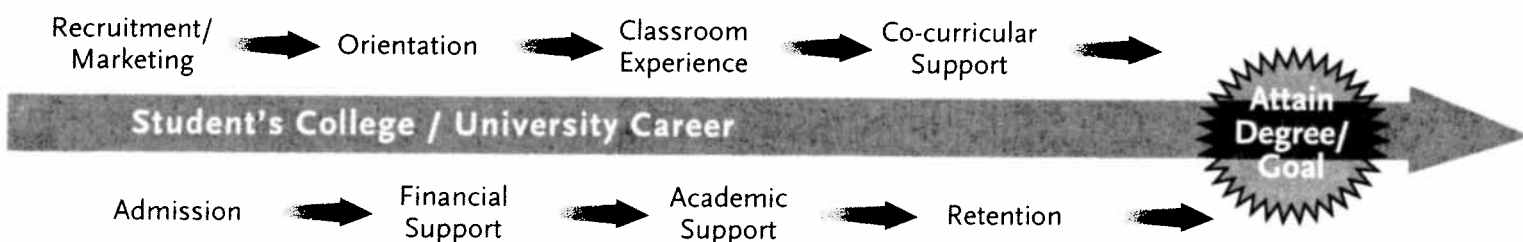
Low-Income Students

Low-income students are generally identified as students coming from families earning less than \$25,000 annually. According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), 58.5 percent of 18-24 year olds from families earning less than \$25,000 per year participated in PSE in 2006. This compares to 80.9 percent of youth of the same age from families with an income over \$100,000.

Francophone Students

Canadian students whose first language is French are less likely to complete high school and less likely to have university degrees than their English-speaking counterparts. A recent Quebec study (D'Amours, 2010) found that anglophones are twice as likely as francophones to see a university degree as a key to success. The roughly 10 percent gap in university attainment between francophone and anglophone Quebecers persists because francophones have not increased their education levels more than their anglophone counterparts, making the relative gap between the two unchanged.

Figure 1: The Student Success Continuum (Bontrager and Smith, 2009)



¹ The participation patterns vary by source country—Asian and African immigrant groups are doing most favorably; immigrants from the Caribbean and South American countries less so.

Conceptual Framework

The challenge of understanding the way special population students participate in PSE is sizable. To assist us, we adopted the strategic enrolment management (SEM) framework, a tool that Canadian colleges and universities have increasingly adopted over the last decade.

A definition that captures the essence of SEM was suggested by Hossler and Bean (1990):

Enrollment management can be defined as an organizational concept and a set of systematic activities designed to enable educational institutions to exert more influence over their student enrollments. Organized by strategic planning and supported by institutional research, enrollment management activities concern student college choice, transition to college, student attrition and retention, and student outcomes. (p. 5)

The traditional enrolment perspective focuses on the beginning stages of the student lifecycle. The SEM framework puts forward a more comprehensive view. It stresses the full student success continuum and emphasizes the importance of the inter-relationships between recruitment/marketing activities, in-class curriculum and pedagogy, academic support programs, and the total on-campus student experience. Figure 1 displays the student success continuum.

Barriers to Access

The barriers to PSE access for special population students fall into several areas, including academic, aspirational, family and community, financial, geographic, institutional, language and literacy, self-esteem and confidence (Wright et al, 2008).

Academic: A core success factor in PSE is related to academic preparation. The College Board in the United States (Burton and Ramist, 2001) found that students who have taken a rigorous academic curriculum are most likely to attend and succeed in PSE. As in the U.S., many Canadian special population students have low high school grades, have not completed admission prerequisites and have a lack of preparation in both hard and soft skills. Some have attended high schools of lower academic quality. An increasing number of students do not attend PSE immediately after high school and often have gaps in their education and training.

Aspirational: Students who pursue higher education generally have a career or life aspiration that requires a PSE degree or diploma. Many special population students have a lack of interest/motivation in this area and often think their particular career or life path does not require PSE attendance. Further, these students often lack

information about the benefits of PSE and lack support from teachers and guidance counsellors.

Family and Community: Community and family support are crucial to the decision to attend PSE for special population students. With many of these students having parents who did not attend or succeed in PSE, there is a general lack of role models supporting college or university attendance. The enforced cultural assimilation and legacy of the residential school system is a special concern for Aboriginal Canadians who are only one generation removed from being forcibly separated from their families².

Financial: Special population students are very concerned about the costs associated with attending PSE, including tuition, fees and the cost of living. They often inflate the costs of attending PSE while under-valuing the outcomes associated with attending college or university (Gupta et al, 2009). This leads many to being debt adverse.

Geographic: Distance and the costs of travel between home and the nearest PSE institution are a concern to many special population students. This is especially the case with Northern Canadians, rural students and Aboriginal Canadians. Geographic barriers, when combined with being the first in their family to attend PSE, are especially problematic.

Institutional: Some of the reasons special population students do not attend colleges and universities have to do with how we operate as institutions of higher learning. In some cases, the programs offered do not respond to students' educational needs or interests. For many first-generation students admission and financial aid criteria and procedures seem overly complex, and it is often not clear to them how to access educational counseling. Moreover, our institutions are set up assuming students have a clear understanding of the value of higher education and lifelong learning, while many special population students question whether education is actually necessary for their future.

Language and Literacy: Aboriginal students from rural and northern communities have often grown up with English or French as their second language. In this respect they are similar to some of the new immigrant populations. These groups of potential students must often learn one of Canada's two official languages—through ESL courses—before starting their studies.

Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence: Much has been written recently with regard to the impact of social or emotional intelligence on PSE attendance and success (Parker et al, 2006). What we have found is that students with higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence are more likely to believe they can be successful in PSE. Many of

the factors discussed above contribute to special population students believing that PSE is not an option for them.

Attrition Factors

Attrition factors—some similar to the access barriers—include academic preparation and performance, financial support, family and work responsibilities, family and community support, language proficiency, low level of educational aspirations and motivation, sense of well-being, and student engagement (Wright et al, 2008).

Academic Preparation and Performance: Students who begin their PSE studies without solid academic preparation tend to question their abilities and do not proceed with self-confidence. For this reason, many do not seek out the academic support services they need, and many adopt a passive approach to their studies. The result is poor academic performance and eventual withdrawal from higher educational pursuits.

Educational Aspiration/Motivation: Many special population students have uncertain or misdirected goals and expectations, which lead them to select programs of study that may not reflect their true interests and/or be inconsistent with their career plans. When their educational programs do not match what they had expected, some students question their PSE plans and may drop-out.

Financial Support: Some special population students begin their PSE studies without a clear understanding as to how they will manage the costs of a higher education program of study (Gupta et al, 2009). Institutional financial aid is often “front-loaded” in the first year of study (that is, it is used as a recruitment incentive) and students find that they have insufficient funds to support themselves and, often, their families or dependents. Added to this is the debt aversion that many low-income, immigrant, and first-generation students possess which prevents the full exploration of financial aid sources.

Family and Community Support: Some communities that have little experience with PSE are less supportive of members of their community attending college or university. In Aboriginal communities especially, there is concern that PSE attendance will result in a decline in community values and affinity.

Family and Work Responsibilities: Many special population students begin their PSE studies one or more years after leaving high school. Time-management becomes a significant factor as many students have family and work responsibilities that need to be balanced with their educational

²As many as 80,000 “alumni” of residential schools are alive today. About one-third of Aboriginal youth have parents who went to the schools (Ottawa Citizen, “Schools of Their Own”, Dec. 2009).

obligations. A lack of family support to attend class and complete homework assignments is often a considerable impediment to continuing in PSE.

Language Proficiency: Students who begin their studies without solid language proficiency in the language of instruction must work harder than those who already possess language proficiency. Some students are still attending English as a Second Language coursework at the time they begin their studies.

Sense of Well-being: Some students who have no community or family members nearby become isolated. Others experience high levels of stress. The impact of low levels of cultural understanding and racist attitudes on campus can also have considerable effects on decisions to stay or leave school.

Student Engagement: For many of the reasons above, special population students are less inclined to actively participate in both in-class learning and out-of-class activities. First Generation students, in particular, have been shown to have significantly lower levels of student engagement than their peers (Pike and Kuh, 2005).

Lessons Learned

There are a multitude of programs and services in many Canadian colleges and universities geared towards student retention—including a number that are targeted specifically to under-served populations. A review of the research literature points to several elements that should be included in developing institutional programs and services that will make a difference to students' success⁵:

- Early, proactive and intrusive intervention
- Bridging and transition programs
- Financial aid and support
- The development of a cohort lending peer support
- Connection to community role models and mentors
- Faculty and/or staff coaches to provide guidance, help set clear goals, and steer students towards appropriate support resources if needed
- Attention to special population needs with help integrating into the wider campus community
- A holistic approach to student support that addresses academic, social, emotional and financial needs.

It is clear that the web of barriers to access and success interact and compound with each other. Researchers (Parker and Baldwin, 2009) working under the now defunct Canada Millennium

Scholarship Foundation have highlighted the importance of three key areas: financial support; inadequate academic preparation and motivation; and insufficient information, guidance and encouragement. Below are key lessons we believe institutions should keep in mind when responding to the barriers and attrition factors faced by special population students and developing programs and services for these under-served groups.

Lesson #1: Access and success should not be targeted in isolation. The barriers and obstacles are the same. Placing too much emphasis on access can be problematic if students do not persevere and fail to meet their educational goals. It is important to remember the holistic SEM framework and address all elements of the student life cycle.

Lesson #2: Providing financial support—even if it is in the form of need-based grants rather than student loans—is not enough. The financial barriers to PSE participation are compounded by other factors—academic performance, individual behavior and environmental circumstances. A holistic and integrated approach to enhancing student access and success should attend to a range of needs—academic, social, emotional and financial.

Lesson #3: The enrolment funnel and student life cycle experience is different for different groups of students. Retention strategies need to be customized to meet the needs of each special population group. The strategies must, however, also take into account the diversity within the groups based on socio-economic status, age and individual experiences and we must be wary of making assumptions and stereotyping students.

Lesson #4: There is a need for both specialized/targeted student support programs and services (as outlined above) as well as the integration of under-represented groups into regular programming and campus activities. We need to create connectivity and ensure that we do not create group silos but welcoming and supportive campus communities that serve all of our students. It is very important that the entire campus community work together to support special student populations and make them feel part of our academic community. This requires outreach, cultural sensitivity and awareness of specific historical, economic and social barriers faced by special populations.

Lesson #5: There is a need for longer term resource commitment to ensure that the strategies we put in place have a lasting impact on student access, retention and academic success. We need to work with external community groups and

provide students with role models and mentorship opportunities. Ensuring families receive clear and accurate information about financial aid, academic programs and opportunities, and the benefits of post-secondary education is critical for developing trust.

Lesson #6: Assessment is key to determining the success of initiatives we may wish to undertake, but data is often difficult to come by. Targeted communities sometimes are reluctant to self-identify, which makes it hard to set goals for enhancing the recruitment and retention of these groups.

Conclusion

Concern for the access and success of special population students has become an important public issue throughout Canada, with differing groups the focus of attention in individual regions and jurisdictions. In recent years, we have learned much about why students are challenged both in terms of seeking enrolment and in achieving academic success at our colleges and universities. Many PSE institutions have been engaged in implementing retention initiatives in support of special population students.

What is missing is any clear assessment as to what efforts are most effective. Institutions should consider publishing institutional assessment studies. Further research should also be done on a multi-institutional basis to determine how specific strategies play out in different regions of the country and at different types of institutions.

Lastly, we need to give more consideration to integrated activities which address the multiple access and attrition factors in order to maximize our efforts related to the success of special population students.

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References are available upon request.

⁵ The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation has highlighted many of these programs in a number of their reports—for example: Pathways to Education, Foundations for Success, Future to Discover, and the University of Victoria's LE, NONET program. The reader is encouraged to refer to these studies for more information on these promising initiatives.