

# forum

## Research in Brief

### Increasing Accessibility: Lessons Learned in Retaining Special Population Students in Canada

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In Canada, changing demographics and increased competition—as well as social values based on equity—have inspired efforts to increase the postsecondary education participation rates of youths from under-represented/under-served groups.

Despite its population having the highest level of educational attainment among those of OECD countries, Canada appears to have made little progress in terms of narrowing “access gaps” and improving student retention rates. Provincial governments increasingly are funding a variety of targeted initiatives intended to encourage colleges and universities to enroll more special population students. This has proven challenging, however, as many institutions have neither holistic retention programs nor well-developed planning for such students. Consequently, access and success have become important public issues in Canada.

A recent survey (Smith and Gottheil 2008) found that the under-served student groups served by Canadian colleges and universities are diverse. The groups of greatest interest include Aboriginal/First Nations/Inuit, recent

immigrant, Asian, northern Canadian, rural, first-generation, low-income, francophone, and black students as well as students with disabilities. Using the strategic enrollment management conceptual framework, we focus on four of these groups: low-income, first-generation, Aboriginal, and francophone students. We describe each group and review specific barriers to postsecondary education (PSE) access as well as factors contributing to attrition. Finally, we offer six “lessons learned” to guide education leaders as they explore ways to better meet the needs of special population students.

#### UNDER-SERVED POPULATIONS

Aboriginal Canadians represent 3.8 percent of the total Canadian population; approximately 62 percent of these are North American Indian, 30 percent are Métis, and 5 percent are Inuit. The population is heterogeneous and diverse: Spread among more than 1,000 communities, they speak 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: Almost half are younger than 25 years of age (Statistics Canada 2008). Among youths between the ages of 20 and 24 years, 40.3 percent have not completed high

school—compared to 12.5 percent of their non-Aboriginal peers (Statistics Canada 2008). By age 20, non-Aboriginal youths are three times more likely than Aboriginal youths to be enrolled in PSE. Attrition among those Aboriginal youths who do enroll in PSE is 33 to 56 percent greater 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, compared to 23.4 percent of the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada 2008). Aboriginal Canadians have a higher rate of participation in the community college system than they do in universities.

First-generation students are those 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 only 53 percent of young people whose parents did not continue their education beyond high school (Parkin and Baldwin 2009). Even when differences in high school preparation are taken into account, first-generation students are less likely than their peers to earn PSE degrees (Lee and Wiley 2007). Parental education—not parental income—is a key driver of PSE participation in general and of university enrollment in particular (Finnie and Mueller 2008). Canadian immigration policy's favoring of immigrant applicants with higher education credentials over those without such credentials helps to explain why the children of some Canadian immigrant populations are more likely than Canadian-born youths to attend university.<sup>1</sup>

Low-income students are defined generally as those whose families earn less than \$25,000 (Canadian) annually. According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), 58.5 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds from families earning less than \$25,000 per year participated in PSE in 2006. This compares to 80.9 percent of youths of the same age from families earning more than \$100,000 per year.

Canadian students whose first language is French are less likely than their English-speaking counterparts to complete high school and earn a university degree. A recent Quebec study (D'Amours 2010) found that anglophones are twice as likely as francophones to perceive a university degree as a key to success. The roughly 10 per-

cent gap in university attainment between francophone and anglophone Quebecers persists because francophones have not increased their education levels at a higher rate than their anglophone counterparts; thus, the relative gap remains unchanged.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In an effort to better understand how these special populations' participate in PSE, a strategic enrollment management (SEM) framework can be used. Hossler and Bean (1990) define SEM as follows:

*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 perspective focuses on the beginning stages of the student enrollment cycle. In contrast, the SEM framework takes a more comprehensive view. It stresses the full student success continuum and emphasizes the importance of the interrelationships among recruitment/marketing activities, curriculum and pedagogy, academic support programs, and the on-campus student experience. (See Figure 1, on page 49.)

## BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Barriers to PSE access for special population students can be categorized as academic, aspirational, financial, geographic, and institutional and as relating to family and community, language and literacy, self-esteem, and confidence (Wright *et al.* 2008).

A core factor of success in PSE relates to academic preparation. The College Board (Burton and Ramist 2001) found that students who participate in a rigorous academic curriculum are most likely to attend and succeed in PSE. As in the United States, many special population students in Canada have poor high school grades, have not completed admission prerequisites, and lack "hard" and "soft" skills. Some have attended high schools with less academic rigor. An increasing number do not attend PSE immediately af-

<sup>1</sup> Participation patterns vary by source country: Youths from Asian and African immigrant groups enroll at higher rates than youths from Caribbean and South American immigrant groups.

ter high school and so have gaps in their education and training.

Typically, students who pursue higher education have a career or life aspiration that requires a PSE degree or diploma. In contrast, many special population students lack such goals. These students often lack information about the benefits of PSE as well as support from teachers and guidance counselors.

The expense of PSE, including tuition, fees, and the cost of living, tends to be of great concern for under-served populations. These students often unwittingly inflate the cost of PSE even as they under-value the outcomes associated with attending college or university (Gupta *et al.* 2009).

Many special population students are particularly concerned about distance and related travel costs between home and the nearest PSE institution. Geographic barriers, combined with often being the first in their family to participate in PSE, are especially problematic for Northern Canadians, rural students, and Aboriginal Canadians.

Some of the reasons these students do not pursue post-secondary education have to do with how colleges and universities operate. Institutional programs do not always correspond with students' educational needs or interests. Many first-generation students find admissions and financial aid criteria and procedures overly complex and are unsure how to access academic counseling and other support services. Too many institutions assume that prospective students have a clear understanding of the value of higher education and lifelong learning—yet, as previously mentioned, many special population students question whether such education is necessary.

Community and family support are crucial to students' decisions to pursue PSE. Students whose parents did not attend or succeed in PSE lack appropriate role models. The enforced cultural assimilation and overall legacy of

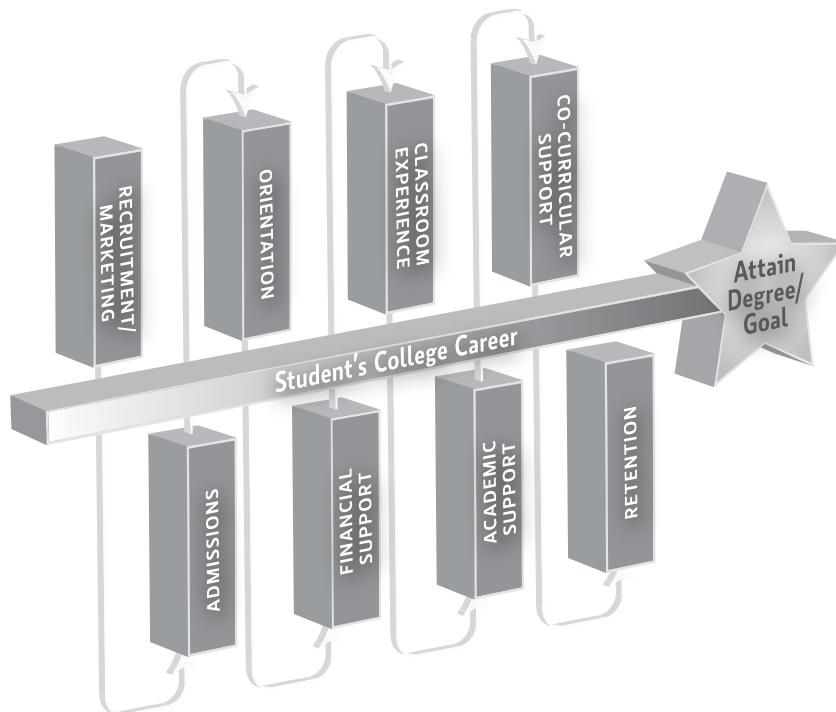


FIGURE 1. *The Student Success Continuum* (Bontrager and Smith 2009)

the residential school system are of special concern to Aboriginal Canadians, who are only one generation removed from having been forcibly separated from their families.<sup>2</sup>

Many Aboriginal students from rural and northern communities grew up speaking English or French as their second language. In this respect, they are similar to some of the new immigrant populations. Often, the need for members of these groups to learn one of Canada's two official languages—through ESL courses—constitutes a barrier to accessing PSE.

Much has been written recently with regard to the relationship of social and emotional intelligence to PSE attendance and success (Parker *et al.* 2006). It is not surprising that students with higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence are more likely to believe they can be successful in PSE.

All of these factors contribute to special population students' belief that PSE is not an option for them.

<sup>2</sup> As 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", December 2009).

## ATTRITION FACTORS

Factors that contribute to attrition are similar—and sometimes identical—to those that hinder prospective students' access to PSE. They include academic preparation and performance, financial support, family and work responsibilities, family and community support, language proficiency, educational aspirations and motivation, sense of well-being, and student engagement (Wright *et al.* 2008).

Students who begin their PSE studies without sufficient academic preparation tend to question their abilities. As their self-confidence is undermined, many choose not to seek needed academic support services and instead adopt a passive approach to their studies. The result is poor academic performance and eventual withdrawal from higher education.

In addition, many special population students either are uncertain of their goals or have misdirected expectations. As a result, the programs of study they choose may not reflect their true interests, and/or may be inconsistent with their career plans. When their educational programs prove to not match their expectations, some students question their PSE plans altogether and drop out.

Some students begin their studies without clearly understanding how they will manage the costs of higher education (Gupta *et al.* 2009). Institutional financial aid often is “front-loaded” in the first year of study (that is, it is used as a recruitment incentive); students find as the years progress that they have insufficient funds to support themselves—let alone their families and dependents. This compounds the debt aversion that is characteristic of many low-income, immigrant, and first-generation students—a characteristic that too often prevents them from exploring the full range of financial aid sources.

Some communities that have little personal experience of PSE are less supportive of members of their community who express interest in attending college or university. Particularly in Canadian Aboriginal communities, there is concern that PSE attendance will result in declines in community values and affinity.

Many students from the groups we are discussing begin their PSE studies one or more years after leaving high school. Time management becomes a significant challenge as many students must balance family and work responsibilities with those relating to their education. Family members who are not supportive of an individual

attending class and completing homework assignments impede the student's continued enrollment in PSE.

Students who lack language proficiency and/or literacy skills must enroll in English as a Second Language coursework either before or in addition to coursework relating to their particular area of study. They often must work harder to be successful in their programs than those who have language proficiency. Students who lack ready access to their home community or family members may begin to feel isolated. Some experience high levels of stress. Racist attitudes and low levels of cultural understanding on campus also can have considerable adverse effects on the willingness of some students to remain in school.

As a result of many of the factors described above, students from special population groups are less inclined to be active participants in in-class learning and in out-of-class activities. Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation students, in particular, have significantly lower levels of student engagement than their peers.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Canadian colleges and universities offer a multitude of programs and services geared toward student retention; a number are targeted specifically to under-served populations. Those programs found to support students' academic success—for example, Pathways to Education, Foundations for Success, Future to Discover, and the University of Victoria's LE, NONET program<sup>3</sup>—have a number of elements in common. Among them are:

- Early, proactive, and “intrusive” intervention;
- Bridge and transition programs;
- Financial aid and support;
- Peer support developed intentionally within a cohort;
- Connections to community role models and mentors;
- Faculty and/or staff coaches to provide guidance, help set clear goals, and direct students toward appropriate resources for support (as needed);
- Attention to the particular needs of students from special populations and support to help them integrate into the campus community; and
- A holistic approach to student support that addresses academic, social, emotional, and financial needs.

<sup>3</sup> More information on these promising initiatives can be found in the reports of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

It is clear that the many barriers to student access and success interact with and compound one another. Researchers working under the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation highlighted three key areas: financial support; inadequate academic preparation and motivation; and insufficient information, guidance, and encouragement (Parkin and Baldwin 2009). Institutions should study the following lessons as they seek to eliminate the barriers to access and to ameliorate the attrition factors faced by special population students:

**Lesson #1:**  
**Access and success should not be targeted in isolation.**

The barriers and obstacles to access and success are the same. Placing too much emphasis on access can be problematic if students ultimately fail to meet their educational goals. It is important to remember the holistic SEM framework and to address *all* elements of the student enrollment 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, including 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:**  
**Students' experiences of the enrollment funnel and of the enrollment cycle differ by group.**

Retention strategies need to be customized to meet the needs of each special population group. The strategies also must take into account the diversity *within* each group—for example, socioeconomic status, age, and individual experience. Always, we must be wary of making assumptions and stereotyping students.

**Lesson #4:**  
**In addition to offering specialized/targeted student support programs and services (as outlined above), we must work to integrate**

**under-represented groups into regular campus programming and activities.**

We need to create connectivity and ensure that we do not create silos for each special population group. Rather, the goal is to create welcoming and supportive campus communities that serve all students. The entire campus community must work together to support special student populations and to make them feel a part of the academic community. This requires outreach, cultural sensitivity, and awareness of the specific historical, economic, and social barriers faced by special populations.

**Lesson #5: We need to make a 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 to provide students with role models and mentorship opportunities. We also need to ensure that families receive clear and accurate information about financial aid, academic programs and opportunities, and the benefits of postsecondary education; doing so is critical to developing trust.

**Lesson #6: Assessment is key to determining the success of initiatives we undertake, but data often prove difficult to collect.**

Targeted communities sometimes are reluctant to self-identify, making it difficult to set goals for enhancing 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 having become the focus of attention in individual regions and jurisdictions. In recent years, we have learned much about the challenges that confront students at various stages of the enrollment funnel. Many of the factors that inhibit enrollment by special population students also inhibit their academic success once they do enroll. Many PSE institutions thus have begun to implement retention initiatives in support of special population students.

What remains missing is any clear assessment of which efforts are most effective. Institutions should consider

publishing their institutional assessment studies. Further, multi-institutional research should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of specific strategies in different regions of the country and at different types of institutions.

Finally, we need to give more consideration to integrated activities that address the numerous access and attrition factors that prevent more special population students from achieving academic success. Only then will we maximize our efforts in support of the academic success of special population students.

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