

*Canadian Post-Secondary Education and Aboriginal Peoples of Canada: Preparation, Access, and Relevance of Post-Secondary Experiences*

*~ Final Report ~*

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## ***Key Messages***

### **Learning experiences of Aboriginal students in PSE are influenced by:**

#### *Family*

- Aboriginal students often have multiple familial responsibilities that can add both challenging and supportive influences to their educational experiences.
- Family influences are one of the main factors in the decision to pursue PSE, an important source of support within PSE, and a motivating factor for persistence and completion of PSE.
- Family connections serve to support Aboriginal students within PSE and these connections should be honoured within PSE environments.

#### *Community*

- Preservation of Indigenous identity appears to be the fundamental reason why connection to family and community was important.
- Many who rely on family, extended family, and communities for affirmation of identity can find large post-secondary institutions difficult to navigate.
- Lack of connection may be exacerbated by the climate and culture of post-secondary education institutions that privilege the non-Indigenous, western mores that provide Aboriginal students no sense of belonging, and no sense of cultural inclusion.

#### *Success & Barriers*

- A significant amount of the previous research simply compares the outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. This is a form of benchmarking that unfairly compares the successes and barriers of marginalized groups to the dominant class.
- Lack of role models, funding, language and cultural differences, intergenerational family/social problems, and inadequate preparation are cited as barriers to experience.
- Aboriginal culture and inclusion of family support systems, are demonstrated markers of success, while informal learning, experiential learning experiences, and strong community involvement and attachment can facilitate post-secondary enrollment and completion.

### **Educational methods best suited to successful PSE experiences for Aboriginal students:**

- There is an essential relationship between students' culture and the way in which they acquire knowledge, manage and articulate information, and synthesize ideas.
- PSE environments should be perceived as those where faculty engage their students and the community in a manner that allows them to explore and affirm aspects of their own identity whilst facilitating academic success. Currently this is often not the case.
- Aboriginal perspectives should be *integrated* in a reasonable manner that makes the PSE experience relevant to Aboriginal students and community.

### **Characteristics of research regarding Aboriginal students in PSE:**

- Much existing research fails to incorporate decolonizing methods as central research strategies.
- Very few of the studies bring the qualitative voices of Aboriginal students to answer this question.

### **Gaps and future research:**

- The third research question, *how are current models of education informing the post-secondary teaching and learning experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada*, remains unanswered as no research engages with this issue.
- Future research, particularly on curriculum and learning experiences must incorporate Indigenous knowledge at its centre.

## ***Executive Summary***

### **Background**

Post-secondary institutions across Canada have promoted academic and professional preparation programs to recruit and retain Indigenous peoples, yet the evaluation of many of these initiatives is limited (Kapsalis, 2006). Although there is some awareness of Indigenous peoples' participation in post-secondary education (PSE), the primary focus has been success as measured by completion rates. Examining the outcomes is only part of the process; the unique learning experiences of Indigenous students and the best-suited delivery methods for successful completion of PSE are equally important. The current lack of appropriate post-secondary education opportunities for many Aboriginal peoples contributes to the deficit of their participation in the current labour market (Kumar, 2009). Culturally relevant and meaningful opportunities in post-secondary education (PSE) could be the catalyst that reverses this employability trend of underrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in many parts of the labour force (Akweks, Bill, Seppanen, & Smith, 2009). Considering the significant growth of the Aboriginal population in Canada (Battiste, Bell, & Findley, 2002), it is important for post-secondary institutions to consider how their programs contribute to the development of an innovative, sustainable and diverse labour market that is inclusive of Aboriginal peoples.

### **Approach**

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of Aboriginal students within PSE by summarizing the literature that addresses factors relating to these experiences. To achieve this goal scoping review methodology was used to isolate key themes embedded within the subject area and summarize a large body of literature under a tight timeline. Levac, Colquhoun and O'Brien's (2010) six-stage framework for scoping reviews, provided a rigorous method through which we conducted the review for this project. This preliminary synthesis included 375 articles relating to the social, cultural, familial, educational, and personal factors influencing Canadian Aboriginal peoples' experiences within PSE.

### **Findings**

#### ***Learning Experiences of Aboriginal Students in PSE***

The type of research regarding Aboriginal PSE experiences tends to be descriptive, focusing largely on identifying the factors that influence the success or those that hinder the progress of Aboriginal students throughout the education system. We believe the popularity of this type of research has to do with several factors. First, it is important in any field of research to lay the groundwork for understanding 'the problem'. Without some knowledge of the types of individuals experiencing difficulties, it would be difficult for us to identify solutions. Secondly, this kind of research is relatively simple. Most of it is based on reviews of existing studies, which themselves are based on large quantitative surveys or administrative databases. Very few of the studies bring the qualitative voices of Aboriginal students to answer this question. Like many student experiences, the experiences of Aboriginal students is multi-faceted and the areas of influence are not mutually exclusive, but are overlapping and intertwined. To make sense of this varied body of literature we have organized our summary according to four predominate areas found to influence Aboriginal students' educational experiences: Family influences, cultural/community influences, factors influencing success and challenges.

#### ***Family Factors***

Results from this literature review indicate that family influences of Aboriginal students are unique from their non-Aboriginal peers in a couple of important ways. First, As Cheah & Nelson (2004) point out, the developmental period of emerging adulthood is often perceived as being shorter for Aboriginal students. When participants between the ages of 18 and 25 were asked about adulthood, were more likely than

their non-Aboriginal counterparts to perceive themselves as already having reached adulthood. Cheah & Nelson suggest this difference arises as a result of promoting independence and a focus on starting one's own family occurs earlier for Aboriginal students. Paired with the strong sense of familial connection present in Aboriginal culture the promotion of early independence and childrearing has important implications for the ways in which family factors influence PSE experiences for aboriginal students, This leads us to the second difference, the significantly higher proportions of adult and mature learners among Aboriginal students than any other student group in higher education. These students often have multiple familial responsibilities that can add both challenging and supportive influences to their educational experiences (Millennium Research Program, 2005). When asked about how family influences their education many students report family is: one of the main factors in the decision to pursue PSE, an important source of support within PSE, and a motivating factor for persistence and completion of PSE (Cheah & Nelson, 2006; Guillory & Wolverson, 2008; Millennium Research Program, 2005; Rosemary White Shield, 2009; Simpkins & Bonnycastle, 2015).

### *Community Factors*

An important perennial concern is the connection that students have with their respective families and communities. In most cases, preservation of one's indigenous identity appeared to be the fundamental reason why connection to family and community is important. Many Aboriginal students attending post-secondary institutions are required to move from their respective community. As a number of sources reviewed in this project have stated, the departure from communities where such things as cultural mores, language and social nuances may be remarkably different from that of large urban centres (Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005). Many who rely on family, extended family and communities for affirmation of identity can find large post-secondary institutions difficult to navigate (Carr-Stewart, Balzer, & Cottrell, 2013). The effects of such lack of connection may be exacerbated by the climate and culture of post-secondary education institutions that privilege the non-indigenous, western mores that provide Aboriginal students no sense of belonging and no sense of cultural inclusion (Chacaby, Brunette, Mashford-Pringle, Smillie, & Russel, 2008). In some cases, while residential schools, industrial day schools and other forms of primary and secondary education may have ended, the memories live on in Aboriginal peoples and lead to a subsequent reticence regarding educational endeavours. As Little Bear (2000) once intimated, it may be understandable for contemporary indigenous peoples to be reserved about attending any sort of western educational institution in the face of ancestors' histories where family and community connection is intentionally severed for long periods of time.

### *Success and Challenges*

Until the turn of this century, a significant amount of the previous research simply compared the outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. An example of this kind of research could be gleaned from much of the findings of the most recent Census of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. In it, researchers reveal that 8% of Aboriginal students have university degrees, compared with 22% of non-Aboriginal Canadians (Statistics Canada 2009). While this kind of comparison is useful in pointing out systemic and institutional level inequalities experienced by Aboriginal students, there is a rather sinister undercurrent embedded within this kind of research. This is a form of benchmarking that unfairly compares the successes and barriers of marginalized groups to the dominant class. Many of these comparisons do not adequately question the nature of how our society is organized to privilege the dominant class and exploiting the marginalized classes. Despite this major difficulty, we are left with reviewing a substantial number of papers that focus on the successes and the barriers that prevent Aboriginal students from completing post-secondary education. According to Higher Education Strategy Associates (2015), programs that are most successful in attracting and maintaining the participation of Indigenous post-secondary students address "the academic, cultural, and spiritual development of

students, ... included Aboriginal content in the curriculum and possessed a strong cultural component". Aboriginal culture and inclusion of family support systems are shown to be markers of success among students. While, informal learning, experiential learning experiences, and strong community involvement and attachment have been found to facilitate post-secondary enrollment and completion among Indigenous students (Statistics Canada, 2006). Conversely, Anonson, Desjarlais, Nixon, Whiteman, & Bird, (2008, p. 275) found that "inadequate educational preparation, language and cultural differences, lack of role models and funding, and intergenerational family and social problems" as the main reasons preventing students from completing programs. Although the existing research is extremely good at identifying the characteristics that determine success and the barriers that prevent Indigenous students from completing post-secondary education, neither the theoretical framework nor the statistical results tell us 'why' nor does any of the research provide an Indigenous decolonized way of collecting and interpreting this data.

### ***Delivery and teaching methods that facilitate successful completion of PSE for Aboriginal Students***

Ancestral cultures and languages may offer some important insight into worldviews and how meaning is acquired (Ryan, 1994), so it may be important to view the potential of post-secondary education for Aboriginal peoples with considerations of relevant cultures and languages. Many of the items reviewed in this knowledge synthesis suggest that there is an essential relationship between students' culture and the way in which they acquire knowledge, manage and articulate information, and synthesize ideas. An implication of this argument may be the perception that post-secondary institutions, are regarded as oppressive institutions that facilitate social reproduction (Kumar, 2009). Instead they should be perceived as environments where faculty engage their students and the community in a manner that allows them to explore and affirm aspects of their own identity whilst facilitating academic success. Since PSE in Canada operates with curricular imperatives that give privilege to what is regarded by many as essential learning and methods, contemporary scholars posit that Aboriginal perspectives should be *integrated* in a reasonable manner that makes the PSE experience relevant to Aboriginal students and community (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005). In a process popularly referred to as *Indigenizing the academy*, many also refer to the integrating of indigenous perspectives as the preferred terminology for this sort of integration because it emphasizes the importance of exploring the histories, experiences, values, and knowledge associated with an aspect of Aboriginal culture and/or language (Fitznor, 2005). In an effort to avoid treating such subject matter in a tokenistic manner – where aspects of Aboriginal culture are explored in a superficial, trivial way that doesn't explore why such aspects exist and the people they represent – teachers in many jurisdictions are now encouraged to share and explore with their students the respective social contexts associated with a given cultural issue or theme (Riggs, 2005). While we acknowledge the literature in this area is limited it provides insight to ways in which institutes of higher learning have been lacking as well as ways in which they can move forward.

### ***Conclusion and Future Directions***

Our third research question, *how are current models of education informing the post-secondary teaching and learning experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada*, remains unanswered. This is largely due to the focus of much of the current research on descriptive studies that tend to focus on factors that influence the success of Indigenous post-secondary students or its focus on inventories of barriers that prevent them from succeeding in the first place. This single-minded focus on identifying barriers and successes does little to advance our knowledge on how institutions might change to become more Indigenous. Furthermore, the lack of a strong, Indigenous voice in almost all of the publications was disheartening. Future research, particularly on curriculum and learning experiences must incorporate Indigenous knowledge at its centre.