LISTENING TO STUDENTS: PERSPECTIVES, EXPERIENCES, AND NEXT STEPS

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Introduction

We write our introduction to this Special Issue from the Dish with One Spoon and Williams Treaty Territories, as well as the ancestral Lands of the Seneca, Huron-Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit and of Scugog Island. As guests and settlers, we are grateful to live and work on these Lands that are home to many Indigenous peoples and recognize our responsibility to care for the Land as treaty people.

The idea for this special issue on the perspectives of traditionally underrepresented students was first proposed as an organized panel for the 2020 Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) Annual Conference, which, of course, was cancelled and rescheduled to 2021 as a result of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The intention for that proposed panel was to create a space for exploring what traditionally underrepresented students said about being successful during their post-secondary education experiences and how those narratives can inform pedagogical and structural changes within post-secondary institutions. Authors were asked to take a strengths-based perspective (rather than solely a focus on barriers) about the experiences of students from demographic groups that have been historically under-represented in post-secondary education (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, lower class or socio-economic backgrounds, immigrants, Indigenous students, among others). By trying to move away from the barriers such students face, the intention was to highlight the experiences of those who have succeeded in continuing their education in spite of the barriers they have faced or

who can point to specific changes that would better support students. We also want to note that since the call, we moved to adopt a critical approach and bring awareness to the social, structural, and systemic conditions that hinder student success (Abes et al., 2019).

At that point in time, pre-pandemic, the need for deeper understandings of how students believe that they succeed, and the evolving barriers that they face, was great; arguably, it is even greater today in light of the increased number of illnesses, the challenges of emergency online teaching and learning, and the trauma that has occurred for some people as a result of the pandemic. Research emerging on the pandemic has shown a disproportionate impact on historically marginalized communities, further widening the educational gap (see Allen et al., 2021; Napierala et al., 2022; Pichette et al., 2020). For historically underrepresented post-secondary students, the challenges created by the pandemic and its aftermath will likely exacerbate the pre-existing systemic barriers. For instance, students who completed high school, started post-secondary or convocated during the early years of the pandemic have all experienced disruption and increased levels of stress regarding their education and future plans. The after-effects of the pandemic combined with the inflationary pressures that are being felt globally are apparent in all universities, with students struggling with mental health challenges, food insecurity, financial precarity, strained resources, and a lack of housing (Abbas et al., 2020; Banerjee et al., 2022; Bottorff et al., 2020; Hanbazaza et al., 2021; MacDonald et al., 2022). While the articles in this special issue do not

focus on the pandemic and its economic and social aftermath, the fact that they will be ongoing for the foreseeable future means that any of the challenges highlighted here will persist and may worsen students' educational experiences. Future research certainly will take the compounding effects of the pandemic into consideration.

Understanding how students are successful in pursuing their post-secondary education, whether they overcome systemic barriers, such as racism, or personal challenges, such as disability, or combinations of these, is important in ensuring that higher education is not only accessible, but also that degrees and diplomas are attainable. Once students have accessed or entered the doors of the academy, they still must survive several years to achieve a diploma or degree. Yet, survival is not just about meeting academic or cognitive requirements; it is also about being able to navigate campus culture and climate (Castellanos, et al., 2016). Researchers have demonstrated that positive and supportive university and college environments empower students and promote well-being (Mitchell et al., 2016; Valenzuela-García et al., 2022). Publicly supported education and literacy has had a long history in Canada because of the view that a well-educated populace would create a productive workforce and a strong nation, a stance that has continued into the 21st century with government policies promoting a knowledge-based economy (Fernando & King, 2013). It has become generally accepted that a post-secondary education leads to long-term benefits for both the students (in terms of finances and mental and physical well-being) and the Canadian economy generally (Robinson, 2008; Usher, 2006). Although the statistical analyses support this understanding, many in the general population, especially those from underrepresented groups, underestimate the benefits of higher education and are unwilling to take a chance on it (Palameta & Voyer, 2010).

Historical and Current Research in Higher Education

Although considerable Canadian research about retention and student participation in higher education exists (see, Cox & Strange, 2010; Strange & Cox, 2016; Robson et al., 2018; Sweet et al., 2017), comparatively little examines what students themselves say about how and why they are successful at persisting to graduation. The barriers that students must overcome in order to access higher education do not disappear once they are enrolled. Indeed, it is almost impossible to exclude the barriers when discussing success strategies. For instance, while some research has demonstrated that race does not impact academic momentum (i.e., the impact of how well a student does in first year on their trajectory in subsequent years) (Attewell et al., 2012), other research illustrates that academic momentum may worsen any previous social and education inequalities in that those who do not progress smoothly and quickly early in their studies are less likely to persist to graduation (Kondratjeva et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2022). The articles in this special edition intentionally examine the systemic nature of the barriers students face, as well as evaluating how students manage to succeed in spite of them.

The ways in which post-secondary students manage and shape their educational experiences are rooted in their identities and histories. Students' personal lives clearly impact their experiences on campus and vice versa; although professors and staff members may be aware of this dynamic at the theoretical level, that awareness is not always translated into concrete structural changes that support, for example, Indigenous students (Pidgeon et al., 2014), adult students (Merrill, 2015), students with dependent children (Andrade & Matias, 2017; Squires & Disano, 2017), and those with family and work responsibilities (Andrade et al., 2017). Additionally, working-class and first-generation students (i.e., those without a family history of post-secondary educational achievement) face barriers in accessing extra-credential experiences such as internships or exchanges because of financial barriers and a lack of social networks (Lehmann, 2012).

Research on the retention of students, especially regarding the transition from first to second year, is vast and international in scope. Research in this area has been completed by universities themselves and the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), as well as university- and college-based researchers. From HEQCO, topics have ranged from examinations of emotional intelligence interventions (Bond & Manser, 2009), pedagogical and curricular techniques in different disciplines (Bloemhof & Hughes, 2013), statistical analyses such as performance indicators, student access, retention, and attainment rates (Chatoor et al., 2019; Dooley et al., 2011; Doran et al., 2015; Weingarten et al., 2015), and evaluations of targeted programs and student services at individual universities (Brock University Student Development Centre, 2011; Massey et al., 2012; Pugliese et al., 2015). An extensive number of articles have been published in scholarly journals, such as the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* (CJHE), and cover similar

areas of higher education research. Much of the research about retention has focused on the first-year experience, especially regarding large lecture courses (Ahadi et al., 2019; Ambler et al., 2021; Browne & Perrier, 2015; Hauck et al., 2020; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; van der Zanden et al., 2018). This research has demonstrated the importance of strong supports for incoming students transitioning from the relatively small classes of secondary school to the large, introductory classes in lecture halls that might hold as many people as entire secondary schools. In much of this research, the findings tend to demonstrate that students will be successful when universities intentionally program supports for students.

While issues related to retention have been studied since at least the 1970s, recent research in higher education explores perspectives about integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and being into the academy as part of a commitment to reconciliation, such as Styres and Kempf's (2022) collection *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Critical Perspectives*, which offers chapters on both the theoretical and practical approaches to reconciliation in education. This issue's articles by Brant and by King and Brigham highlight the importance of Indigenous programming and spaces in supporting Indigenous students in higher education. Another body of research focuses on race and colonialism, such as Thobani's (2022) edited book *Coloniality and Racial (In)Justice in the University: Counting for Nothing?* which brings together critical analyses of "how the university is productive of - as well as produced by - the racial-colonial and gender-sexual hierarchies that structure nation, state, and capital within local and global contexts" (p. 5). Extensive research on higher education related to racialized students, as well as the discriminatory and colonial structures and practices within universities, has been increasing since the end of the 20th century (e.g., Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; Bunjun, 2021; Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Duran, 2021; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Henry et al., 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2022; James, 2021; Joshee & Johnson, 2007; Pidgeon, 2008, 2016; Razack, 1998; Walton et al., 2020). hampton and Conway's contribution to this issue demonstrates the important role community can play for Black women in the academy, as well as the need for further research because Conway's "professional work veered toward understanding how the literature she was reading on student success failed to capture what she was observing as a staff person and had experienced as a student" (p. 97).

No matter the time period, an attention to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) is important in research on and with students since the demographic trends of post-secondary students continue to evolve; recognizing students such as those who identify with more than one racial/ethnic heritage, who are older, who have family responsibilities, or who do not have family support is (and has always been) essential. The lived realities of students clearly extend beyond the classroom (Merrill & Fejes, 2018), yet post-secondary institutions have been slow to accommodate them.

The contributions included in this special issue highlight the diversity of students and their experiences, such as how students who are blind/partially blind experience belonging, as articulated in Bulk et al.'s article about how Teng et al.'s (2020) belonging in academia model (BAM) can help to support blind/partially blind students. Similarly highlighting diverse experiences is Elliott and Fitzgerald's examination of foster care alumni (FCA) and their finding that having the support of caring adults who can coach FCA was key to their ability to succeed in higher education. The experiences of blind/partially blind and FCA students necessarily intersect with those of students who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or women.

Positionality

As co-editors, we each come to this research from different perspectives and lived experiences. In this section, we introduce our positionalities in the context of research on traditionally underrepresented post-secondary students because our identities and locations within academia shape our individual approaches to research on higher education and our roles as editors of this special issue.

Alyson King (she/her)—I am a settler and a white, cisgender, established professor and researcher with tenure. As a student, I was the first in my family to successfully attend and graduate from university and I often felt lost and as if I did not fit in, even in graduate school. My current research focuses on students and their experiences of university.

Estefania Toledo (she/her/ella)—I am an immigrant settler, and identify as Latina and Ecuatoriana. I have focused my 15++-year career in higher education to advance educational opportunities for historically marginalized students and their communities. My gender, class, and racial identities shape my research and inform my current dissertation work on Latinx/a/o students in Ontario.

Nadia Qureshi (she/her)—I am a diasporic South Asian, born in Canada to immigrant parents of working-class

background, Muslim, hetero-cis-woman, mother, teacher, and graduate student. My 14-year teaching career, coupled with my identity and life experiences witnessing and being subject to racism and white supremacy in Canada, have shaped my scholarly identity and research on access to sci-ence/STEM in post-secondary education. My identity and privilege shifted when I became a teacher, a PhD student, and a mother. These contexts all continue to inform my an-ti-racist approaches to pedagogy and research.

Colleen Stevenson (she/her)—I am a white, cisgen-der woman and settler and recognize that my identities influence my research and work in higher education. As a current PhD student, my research focus is on systemic in-equities and white normativity in higher education, particu-larly on the impact of policies that are ostensibly created to improve equity at universities.

Weaving a Special Issue: Challenges and Learning

As editors, we are aware that, by working within the confines of an institution and academic journal, we are inherently part of the very systems that have produced the oppressions which result in underrepresented students in post-sec-ondary education. For instance, academic in-group bias has been documented in academic journals and knowl-edge production (Demeter, 2020; Lutmar & Reingewertz, 2021; Reingewertz & Lutmar, 2018). Similarly, the ways in which rigour may be interpreted may exclude innovative or non-Eurocentric research methods (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Halme et al., 2022). We experienced this especially as a tension in selecting manuscripts for inclusion in this special issue. Who are underrepresented students? Who gets to decide? We grappled with these questions, while also working to understand the acceptable scope and parameters of the journal.

Our research and our awareness of the colonial nature of academia overall led to interesting discussions regarding which articles fit the established parameters of the journal that gave preference to research that is quantitative rather than reflective or autoethnographic. This preference tends to give more weight to research conducted by well-estab-lished researchers and those whose research fits the norms of a higher education system that is struggling to integrate alternative ways of knowing, such as Indigenous worldviews and research by Indigenous knowledge keepers and schol-ars. For example, when exploring the intersectional nature

of historically underrepresented students' experiences in Canada, a continuing emphasis on primarily quantitative research may contribute to the cycle of lack of research, further undermining welcome and support, and thereby continuing the perpetuation of underrepresentation in the university system.

Future Research

Curating this special issue also made evident persistent gaps in research that could make a significant impact on Canadian higher education research. These include an ex-pansion of the definition of traditionally underrepresented students and methodological commitments to what is con-sidered non-traditional research that highlight the narra-tives and stories of students. The majority of articles in this issue are from scholars/researchers affiliated with Ontario institutions and, thus, we see space for a greater represen-tation of students and researchers across Canada. In addi-tion to these considerations, future research can expand current theories or co-create new theories with participants that reflect the lived experiences of students in the Canadi-an context.

Summary of Articles

This special issue seeks to highlight the stories and expe-riences of students who have traditionally not been able to attend institutions of higher education in Canada. These 10 articles are focused on student experiences that are not commonly reflected in the academic literature. Although we are often presented with data showing that these students have consistently been underrepresented or highlighting shifts in post-secondary access and success, we do not of-ten see students represented as whole beings with unique and diverse identities; it is even more rare to discard the deficit lens and see the institutional barriers for what they are: systemic exclusionary practices. By focusing on the students' experiences, readers can better understand the ways in which Canadian post-secondary institutions are missing the mark when it comes to serving their diverse stu-dent populations.

As co-editors of this issue, we selected the term "un-derrepresented," but we would like to acknowledge that this passive descriptor fails to address the origins of this under-representation. While the student populations described in this issue are, indeed, underrepresented, it is important for

researchers to expand this conversation and vocabulary to address the fact that this underrepresentation is actually a historical exclusion. The authors included here have used different terms, including "underrepresented," "minoritized," and "lacking opportunities." Terminology is important.

We would also like to acknowledge the focus on the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in many of these articles. This was not an intentional choice by the editors; most of the submissions we received were focused on this one region. While we can acknowledge that the GTA is the most densely populated region in the country and includes many of Ontario and Canada's post-secondary institutions, we do believe that there is much research that should be done in other parts of the country.

First in the special issue, De Oliveira Soares and Magnan focus on Latin American origin students in Quebec universities and highlight their experiences using Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) idea that the "embracing [of] a meritocratic vision" (p. 2) perpetuates inequalities and reproduces social class. For recent immigrant students, it is particularly challenging to adapt to academic culture, learn the rules and norms, and decode the hidden curriculum. While the students aim to get good grades in their studies, when they were not able to, success became defined as simply finishing their studies. This article shines a light on the self-blame that students feel when they are unable to overcome systemic disadvantages, and the authors connect this to the barriers perpetuated by the university system. De Oliveira Soares and Magnan identify a sense that the university does not seem to really care about their students, who often feel like "a number not a person" (p. 9). These feelings of disconnectedness and lack of care lead to "a low sense of affiliation with the university" (p. 9). They further argue that even when services are accessed, it tends to be a last resort when students are already experiencing difficulties, rather than as a preventive action.

Kim's study uses Reason's persistence framework (2009) to analyze the challenges faced by Korean immigrant university students in Toronto and understand their experiences transitioning from high school to university as well as once at university. As with the Latin American origin students in Quebec, Korean immigrant students found it difficult to adapt to university and had trouble finding the information they needed to be successful. Once in university, the students struggled with course content, particularly with learning in an additional language, and had to do extra work to develop strategies to overcome this. Reason (2009) indicates that student persistence is highly related to how students relate to their peer environments and academic activities, and this was confirmed by participants in this study who found support in Korean student groups. These student groups provided support and informal or formal mentorship opportunities, making connections with students who had already developed strategies to navigate the university.

King and Brigham continue the thread of analyzing students' strategies to succeed in university, highlighting the need for universities to do more to support Indigenous students who face extra work in order to overcome the barriers they encounter in post-secondary education and indicating that "a focus only on barriers is a partial story" (p. 41). Their research showcases the experiences of Indigenous students, which are rarely shared in the literature, and adds an intersectional lens to better communicate the stories of these students and recognize them as whole beings, and not just students. Like Kim's work, King and Brigham demonstrate the importance of students cultivating a sense of belonging on campus to overcome the systemic obstacles they face.

In Jafar's article, we continue to see consideration and inclusion of students' many intersecting identities in this study of mature student experiences as they transition into college. Jafar uses Schlossberg's (2011) transition model to analyze the phases of transition, from transitioning in, to transitioning through, and finally transitioning out of college. Most of the participants struggled with balancing their work and family commitments while studying—commitments that are often overlooked in the student success literature and by post-secondary institutions. In contrast to Kim and King and Brigham's studies, these mature students had trouble finding a sense of belonging because they did not feel the same connection to younger students and the activities offered by the college seemed geared to younger students. They also found the college career services did not meet their needs as mature learners, as the services were not prepared to support later-career transitions, highlighting yet another gap in the institution's understanding of student needs.

The need to recognize students' many intersectional identities and the complexities of their situations is further illustrated in Legusov's study, which focuses on international students in community college and their perception of equity, diversity, and inclusion. These students found the college resources to be insufficient or were not made aware of what they could access and, thus, did not get the support they needed. They also felt that their status as international

students caused them to miss out on opportunities because of their inability to work in certain positions and because they were not treated the same as domestic students by their professors. They felt left out in the classroom, both by professors and fellow students. Although students saw great diversity in the student body, many of them noticed a lack of diversity among the faculty, counsellors, and staff at the college and did not see themselves reflected in those groups. This study once again highlights a need for institutional change to meet the needs of students.

Continuing the thread of intersectionality, Hanson contributes to a broad body of work on women in STEM by investigating the experiences of students who are traditionally underrepresented in engineering, including women, racialized students, LGBTQ2S+ students, and students from lower socio-economic statuses. This work critiques Kanter's (1977) idea of reaching a tipping point of equity when a program reaches 30% women, and expands on the concept of equity by incorporating multiple minoritized identities in this study rather than only focusing on women, and also using an intersectional lens in understanding the student experiences. They point to institutions and engineering schools improving their support and equity programming for these students, highlighting the systemic nature of these issues.

Further demonstrating the need to approach problems as systemic is Elliot et al.'s work on former foster care youth's experiences in post-secondary education. They highlight the deficit perspective of much of the previous work on foster care youth in higher education, which points to a shift in responsibility from the individuals to the institutions. However, this work also highlights the resilience and psychological capital of the students and points to the important role that community and support play in student success.

The remaining articles use a counter-storytelling approach (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), wherein the stories of underrepresented peoples are shared in order to centre their experiences and presence in institutions that are aligned with hegemonic culture. For example, Bulk explores the experiences of blind and partially blind students as they navigate post-secondary education. Using Teng et al.'s (2020) belonging in academia model, they highlight blind and partially sighted students' need to build interdependence and mutually trusting relationships. This article highlights the students' experience of feeling belonging in environments where their contributions were valued and others had trust in their contributions, and where the contributions of all students, including those who were blind or partially sighted, were valued for their uniqueness. By sharing the ex-

periences of the students, Bulk highlights ways in which the institutions can change to improve student supports.

Brant's article takes a reflective approach to thinking about how to support the academic success of Indigenous women in higher education in wholistic ways that do not focus on deficit approaches. Her research is embedded in her personal educational journey as both a Yakonkwehón:we [Mohawk woman] and Ista [mother], contributing to the counter-storytelling theme. Brant's practice of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies involves a strength-based approach to provide culturally specific support and education, and her study highlights the relevance of the lived experience, knowledge, and culture of the participants while acknowledging the complex history and contemporary context of higher education.

Finally, hampton and Conway share their own counter-stories as Black scholars at an elite university through a call-and-response style narrative in which they analyze artifacts of their own experiences. Similar to Brant, Bulk, and other authors in this issue, the focus is on the importance of experiences and rarely told stories and important components of epistemology. However, hampton and Conway expand their argument and build it into a critical examination of the institution of higher education and its whiteness, and its impact on Black graduate students.

Together, the articles in this special issue provide important insights into the experiences of students from a wide range of backgrounds. The variety of methodologies illustrates the myriad ways research with and for post-secondary students can be undertaken. Most importantly, they highlight the diverse voices of students.

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