



November 2009 Volume 4, Number 1

“First-generation” university entrants are no more likely to drop out early on than students with university-educated parents. Or are they?

Canada has one of the most highly educated workforces of all OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, and university enrolment continues to increase across gender, race, ethnicity and social class, as young people seek to obtain the high level of formal education they believe is essential to success in the post-industrial knowledge economy.

Even though research consistently shows that university enrolment is lower for young people whose parents were not university-educated, a rising number of “first-generation” students are enrolling in university and heading off into a world unknown to their parents.

Does this lack of familiarity with the university environment affect their integration and ultimate success? Will they be more likely to drop out than those raised by university-educated parents? Research from the USA suggests that the answer to these questions is “yes”. Canadian research is less clear.

UWO sociologists, Wolfgang Lehmann and Eric Tenkorang set out to explore these questions using data from Statistics Canada's *Youth in Transition Survey*. They constructed an analysis to test whether a “deficit in cultural capital”, suggested by Bourdieu's theory of practice, might affect an individual's successful academic integration while their working-class “habitus” might create problems of social integration at university, an essentially middle-class institution.

With information from a sample of young people (aged 18-20 years in 2000) who had attended university, they were able to compare those who dropped out of university early on with those who did not. This study will soon be published in *Leaving University without Graduating* – a chapter in an upcoming book *Challenging Transitions in Learning and Work: Reflections on Policy and Practice* edited by Peter Sawchuk and Alison Taylor.

Dropout rates were indeed higher for students without a university-educated parent. However, attrition was also higher for men than women, and for students who were not socially and academically integrated at university, who had no clear plans for future employment, and who were doing paid work during the academic year.

Did these characteristics explain the higher dropout rates among first-generation students? In fact,

Variables	Parents with University Education	Parents without University Education
	%	%
Clarity of Future Plans		
Low	59.7	56.8
High	40.3	43.2
Social Integration at University		
Low	58.4	65.5
High	41.6	34.5
Academic Integration at University		
Low	48.8	50.4
High	51.2	49.6
Hours Worked during Term		
1- 29 hours	39.2	42.2
>30 hours	2.4	3.5
Not worked at all	58.4	54.3

Note: All results have been weighted

comparing the two groups showed little difference between first-generation students and the others. They were very similar in terms of (i) feeling academically integrated (ii) having clear future plans and (iii) in the number of hours of paid work. A multivariate analysis confirmed that these three factors have a stronger significant effect on university dropout among Canadian youth than does the educational attainment of their parents.

These findings seem to suggest that “the relationship between socio-economic status and educational attainment is formed in primary and secondary education”, and that “the educational attitudes, aspirations, and aptitudes of lower SES students who enter university may be closer to those of their middle-class than their working-class peers”.

A particularly interesting aspect of this *quantitative* analysis, however, is that earlier *qualitative* research carried out by the authors feeds into the interpretation and discussion of the results. Despite the lack of statistical significance for parents' education, for example, the authors do not ignore the importance of coming from a university-educated background. Alerted by their quantitative research to the risk of attrition among first-generation students, they discuss fully the implications of this consistently negative coefficient.

Another refreshing aspect of the discussion is that they call into question the virtually unchallenged Canadian belief in university education as the one and only path to success in the modern world. To quote the final paragraph:

*“Decisions to drop out of university have important social and individual implications if we are to take seriously the debates of the knowledge economy and if we consider the originally high ambitions that led these young people to university. Equally important, the changing career trajectories of those who have dropped out and subsequently entered respected, fulfilling and well-paying careers via community colleges and apprenticeships (Lehmann 2007b) also suggest that **we need to subject knowledge-economy discourses to a more critical debate**, which ultimately may lead young people, regardless of social class, gender, race or ethnicity, to consider a larger range of educational and occupational options”*

To find out more about this study or about the authors' other work in this field, and to discuss the causes and implications of “leaving university without graduating”, please join us at the UWORDC Brown Bag on Wednesday, November 11, 12:30-1:30 PM at SSC 5220.

Note: Summary prepared by Heather Juby, CRDCN Knowledge Transfer Coordinator, based on Lehmann, Wolfgang and Eric Y. Tenkorang. Forthcoming 2009. Leaving University without Graduating: Evidence from Canada's Youth in Transition Survey. In Peter Sawchuk and Alison Taylor (Eds). *Challenging Transitions in Learning and Work: Reflections on Policy and Practice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishing. For more information on this study please contact Wolfgang Lehmann at wlehmann@uwo.ca.

The analysis was carried out at the University of Western Ontario Research Data Centre. The Research Data Centre program is part of an initiative by Statistics Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and university consortia to strengthen Canada's social research capacity.