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# Supporting Successful Transitions to Post-Secondary Education for Indigenous Students: Lessons from an Institutional Ethnography in Ontario, Canada

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# Supporting Successful Transitions to Post-Secondary Education for Indigenous Students: Lessons from an Institutional Ethnography in Ontario, Canada

## **Abstract**

This study examines some of the ways institutional policies and practices can support or hinder the successful transition to post-secondary education for Indigenous people. Tracing the path from Indigenous high school student to post-secondary education applicant and utilizing knowledge gained from interviews, focus groups, and online surveys as part of an institutional ethnography approach, we offer recommendations for institutions and applicants to help increase enrollment and enhance the success of Indigenous post-secondary students. We share implications for institutions and post-secondary education applicants utilizing self-identification or cultural identity tracking.

## **Keywords**

access, post-secondary education, Indigenous, Aboriginal, transition

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## **Supporting Successful Transitions to Post-Secondary Education for Indigenous Students: Lessons from an Institutional Ethnography in Ontario, Canada**

Although there has been an increase in the number of Aboriginal students enrolled in and completing post-secondary programs in the last two decades, Aboriginal people are still significantly under-represented at colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions in Canada. Only 39% of those between the ages of 25 and 64 have graduated from some form of post-secondary education. This is far below the aspirations that Aboriginal youth and their families have for higher education, and also well below the overall Canadian post-secondary attainment level of 54% (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005).

A survey of First Nations people living on-reserve showed that 70% of those between the ages of 16 and 24 hoped to complete some form of post-secondary education, and almost 80% of parents hoped their children would do so (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005). Formal education is critically important for its ability to provide the kinds of experiences, knowledge, skills, and credentials required for success in contemporary Aboriginal communities and Canadian society in general (Holmes, 2006; Malatest, 2004). Indeed, the more education individuals have, the more likely they are to be happily employed and experience better health (Edgerton, Roberts, & von Below, 2012; Mashford-Pringle, 2008).

Aboriginal students face numerous barriers in accessing post-secondary education, including inadequate financial resources, poor academic preparation, lack of self-confidence and motivation, absence of role models who have post-secondary education experience, lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture on campus, and racism on campus (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Hudson, 2009; Malatest, 2004; Rae, 2005; Restoule & Smillie, 2008; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002). These factors, coupled with a history of forced assimilation through non-Aboriginal educational institutions (Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999), ensure a challenging path for Aboriginal people wanting to pursue post-secondary education (Malatest, 2004). Aboriginal students considering post-secondary studies also face the legacy of distrust towards the Canadian educational system due to historically ethnocentric practices and residential schools (Dickason, 2004; Malatest, 2004; Office of the Auditor-General, 2005).

In an attempt to better understand the barriers and supports for Aboriginal peoples transitioning to post-secondary education, our Indigenous-led research team worked with Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities funding to ascertain how Aboriginal people engage with post-secondary institutions (PSI's). The ultimate goals of this research were to increase enrolment of Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions (PSIs), increase completion of their chosen programs, and identify strategies to achieve these goals.

### **Research Design**

We grounded our work in Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) methodology, and complemented this approach with institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005, 2006; Wilson & Pence, 2006). Our method of inquiry was motivated by Elders' teachings: We must honour our ways of knowing and doing, while also creating bridges and connections with "Western" practices (Armstrong, 1997; Cajete, 1994; Simpson, 2000). A first principle of working from an Anishinaabe methodology is that the work must represent and serve

the people. We took as a starting principle that this project must change conditions for Aboriginal people seeking post-secondary education. Early on in the conception of this study, we wanted to turn our attention to how the institutions can change to make the transition to post-secondary education more successful for Indigenous students. As such, we sought a method of inquiry where the focus would be on understanding where in the institution revised policy and practice could result in a change for the experiences of Aboriginal students and potential applicants.

As Anishinaabe scholars (of the research team, three hailed from Anishinaabe communities, one had Mushkegowuk heritage, and one was from a non-Aboriginal Canadian background), we were attracted to the institutional ethnography approach for its emphasis on narrative and for its ability to engage with ruling relationships in ways that have the potential to make concrete differences in how Aboriginal people experience post-secondary education. What institutional ethnography offers Anishinaabe methodologies is a way of inquiring into institutional practices that normalize colonialism into “work” and finding where these practices intersect with Indigenous people. Unlike many other approaches that result in problematizing Aboriginal peoples or that blame abstract structures with little or no hope for change, institutional ethnography gets at the “everyday” experiences of organizational practices. In institutional ethnography, it is the institution that is the focus; it is the institution’s story that is being told through its textual practices and processes. In the same ways that our languages are deeply connected to the land and spirituality, institutional ethnography teaches us that institutional language is inherently tied to texts and textual practices. Thus, it is the life of the text - its multiple readings and appraisals - that becomes the focus through the use of narratives.

Initially, our work on Aboriginal people’s access to post-secondary education centered on the experiences of current students and experiences with the application process. We started with an online survey that reached over 250 Aboriginal students Ontario-wide over several months in 2008. We asked about the level of support they received from their family, schools, and communities. We asked about the importance of emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental supports in their schools from elementary to secondary to post-secondary. We followed up with phone interviews with those students who consented to being called. The purpose of the initial information was to get a sense of where, in the vast sequences of texts and practices in post-secondary institutions, would be a good place to start.

We were aware that many Aboriginal people did not follow the typical application sequence (high school, application-assessment, post-secondary education entry), which many respondents termed the “regular” way. It was important for us to get a general feeling for issues and trends in Aboriginal people’s access to post-secondary education before we focused on specific work-text sequences of action. Immediately, we noticed that the majority of Aboriginal post-secondary education students who responded were over the age of 25 (79%). More than 60% had accessed post-secondary studies through a bridging program or as mature students. When they were younger, these students were not able to access or chose not to access post-secondary education through the so-called “regular” way. Following the path of the mainstream application form helped us to see how systemic barriers to Aboriginal access to education become hidden. However, the relatively lower numbers of Aboriginal respondents seeking higher education through this route suggested a need to look at youth who were not applying in this way. Following the “text” of the application form submitted to the Ontario Universities Application Centre (OUAC) illuminated the barriers to Aboriginal youth applying through this route. The OUAC is a not-for-profit, centralized application service for applicants to Ontario universities. Following the

experiences of youth who do not apply at all or who have not applied demonstrated just how early the barriers to access begin.

### **The “Regular” Way In**

Our survey asked respondents to indicate whether they had entered post-secondary education through a special access program. Some survey respondents said they got in “the regular way.” In Ontario, the “regular” way to university studies is a general application to undergraduate studies that is processed by a central bureau serving the province’s universities. “These services were developed to facilitate the process of applying to the Ontario universities. They reduce duplication in application processing, and save time and resources for applicants and the universities” (Ontario Universities’ Application Centre, n.d., para. 1). There are two forms, 101 and 105. Form 101 is for current secondary school students and Form 105 is for all other applicants. We were advised by the OUAC that most Aboriginal students apply using Form 105 so we focused our attention to the work done in filling out that form.

Form 105 includes a question asking Aboriginal people to self-identify as such. The question was developed with Aboriginal student support services in mind – to reach applicants and provide them with information about programs and services. Significantly, one of the pieces of information Aboriginal services at University of Toronto wants to provide is financial assistance options and scholarships. Given that inadequate funding for Aboriginal students is a key theme in the literature on Aboriginal access to post-secondary education (Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004), having access to information about funding would be an important support for incoming students (Restoule & Smillie, 2008). In our survey, less than half of the First Nations student respondents reported receiving band funding for their post-secondary education. Other avenues of support are clearly needed. However, the question on Form 105 causes confusion and depending on how it is interpreted, can hinder rather than help Aboriginal student access.

More than a dozen Aboriginal people were informally asked to read the form and discuss with our research team how they would respond to the question about self-identification. Several of the consultants said they would identify as Aboriginal while close to half said they would choose not to identify as Aboriginal. When probed, the consultants choosing not to identify talked about their distrust of government, their concerns about being assessed on their individual merit instead of their cultural heritage, and a need for privacy. A couple of the respondents who would declare their Aboriginal identity said that they would do so because it might give them an advantage. There was clearly a sense among our small group of Aboriginal people that the form had some bearing on their academic admissibility. Staff at OUAC, however, say that they do not use this information for that purpose at all. Indeed, they do not even look at it. Staff shared with the research team how the documents are processed. The OUAC acts solely as a coordinating body, collecting the applications and sending them out to the respective institutions. No decisions are made at OUAC about academic matters. The one and only barrier to the forwarding of the applications is non-payment of fees to the OUAC.

When admissions bodies were asked how they read these forms, particularly the question on Aboriginal identity, the answer was universally that they forwarded copies of the files to Aboriginal Student Services when students self-declared. The answers had no bearing on decisions of admissibility. Aboriginal students hoping to get in on a quota system could not do so via Form 105. Aboriginal students who did

not tick the box out of fear of being reviewed unfavourably due to prejudice were in fact doing themselves a disservice. Their files would not be forwarded to Aboriginal Student Services, meaning that they would not receive information about the supports available to them as Aboriginal students in the way that students who did self-declare would. Furthermore, by not ticking the box, they essentially provide the university with an inaccurate, namely undercounted, number of Aboriginal students in attendance. This could have implications for the amount of program funding provided to student services to assist Aboriginal students on campus. Not only is the validity of the count possibly inaccurate because a segment of the population of Aboriginal students holds suspicions regarding identity reporting, but the perceived benefit is likely affecting the way international students complete similar forms. At least one Aboriginal student support officer reported that the list they received from their institution of students reporting Aboriginal heritage included numerous names of individuals who misinterpreted the question and whose Aboriginality is traced to regions outside of Canada. They may indeed identify as an Indigenous person in the lands they call home but the institution is seeking to identify those who are Indigenous to lands settled by Canada. To avoid this misinterpretation and increase the validity of the information gathered, institutions are advised to clarify whom they mean by “Aboriginal people” and why they are collecting this information in the first place: How is the information to be used and who will use it. While this information may already be communicated in fine print, it could be made clearer to applicants so that the information gathered is better serving its purpose.

Clarity about the uses of the information provided on this part of the form could go a long way to reducing inaccurate declarations of Aboriginal identity. It could also allay misperceptions and fears among the intended Aboriginal applicant groups that the question is somehow related to malicious research practices or prejudicial academic assessments. The form itself could include a statement about how the information will be used, including clarity that academic admissions decisions do not take into account whether individuals declare they are Aboriginal on this form. It is important to note that there are programs seeking Aboriginal applicants, but they obtain this information by other means, such as in a statement of intent or as part of the application process specific to the program. These programs usually clearly specify that they are seeking Aboriginal applicants to fill spots exclusively reserved for them and often have dedicated recruitment strategies indicating that this is the case. This may be why some students believe that self-declaring on OUAC’s Form 105 will be used to make decisions on admissions.

There are several implications for the policy around self-declaration. One of these is aimed at the institutions gathering data on the number of Aboriginal people they serve or requesting declarations on the part of the applicant. If they want reliable and valid data, it is imperative that the motivation for requesting this information is transparent and explicit on the form itself and clearly communicated to potential applicants. There may be some lingering distrust among applicants. Another implication is for the applicant. Applicants need to be better informed about how self-reporting is used. How can they be reached? For applicants who may be seeking post-secondary education assistance from their Band Education Counselor, the counselors might be the most appropriate part of the chain for raising awareness. When they provide or collect the applications, they can offer advice to their band members about the uses of self-declaration in the application process. In urban settings with status-blind education counsellors or in Friendship Centres or similar bodies, this information could be provided by the relevant staff to the clients they serve. This step is important because even if the institutions improve the way they communicate their intentions in collecting such data, the Aboriginal applicants may continue to carry skepticism and mistrust of academic institutions, even of ones to which they are

applying. In our surveys, about 57% reported that they “do not trust the education system,” and these were current or graduated post-secondary education students! Imagine the lack of faith held by those without any experience in post-secondary education.

From all accounts, it seemed that there were a series of interactions that occurred between post-secondary institutions and Aboriginal youth that had an impact on access to post-secondary education long before the applications process. The applications collected by institutions for admissions generally centred around the transcript, which is a record that tells of a student’s achievement in the past, but is often uncontextualised. Transcripts serve as a form of currency, where identities are circulated in the form of grades that presumably communicate a student’s worth in academia. When the transcript is taken as reality, the result is fewer Aboriginal students are admitted. As one university assistant registrar said in an interview:

We are being fair because we don’t look at whether someone is Aboriginal or not, we look only at the transcript. If you meet the target and have the prerequisites, you are admitted.

This process in reality can be unwittingly unfair. As one member of our research team, having spent several weeks in northern Ontario as a former university recruiter, noted there were some districts where the high school could not offer courses that were prerequisites for entry into some university programs. As a result, some students graduating from these regions could not directly enter their chosen university programs because they lacked the prerequisites. In our survey, 72% of the respondents did not feel that their high school had adequate resources to help prepare them for post-secondary school. Digging for this kind of context about educational transitions yielded insight into why so many of our survey respondents accessed their programs as mature students.

Our survey also elicited numerous other potential barriers to successful transitions experienced during the high school years. A little less than a third of respondents reported that their high school staff did not expect them to do well in high school and 29% felt that their high school staff did not expect them to do well in post-secondary education. While 1 in 3 Aboriginal students did not feel supported by their high schools, their families were an important source of support. Only 7% of respondents reported that their families expected them to do poorly in high school, while 53% said their families had expectations of success in high school. This support during high school translated into a majority of respondents (79%) reporting their families encouraged post-secondary attendance and had expectations of success. According to our data, one of the best predictors of success was knowing other Aboriginal people who have gone to post-secondary education or completed degrees. Of the respondents, 60% reported they had a role model with post-secondary experience and 90% knew five or more Aboriginal people who have post-secondary education experience (respondents may have been counting fellow students when answering this question) and 84% knew five or more Aboriginal people who had completed their program. Respondents were most likely to have a cousin who attended (90%) or a sister (50%). Still, the majority (63%) were the first generation in their family to go to university or college.

Moving away from a supportive community was reported as a struggle with just over 50% saying they had difficulty managing community ties and responsibilities. This is significant to post-secondary transitions because most respondents said family and community responsibilities take precedence over schooling (> 70%). In the early period of starting a university program, 80% of respondents experienced

stress starting the new program, often because of the physical relocation; 71% reported difficulty moving away from family or community members. The good news is that most reported that their university provided support in ways that their high schools did not. While 90% of respondents reported experiencing racism in their school experiences, approximately two-thirds of respondents reported feeling welcome at their campus and 63% had guidance and support from their college or university counseling or advice services. Furthermore, the supports available in university were often remarked upon in the narrative open-ended questions on the survey. In response to the question, "Have you been assessed for, or feel you have a learning disability?", respondents shared numerous stories about accessibility accommodations they received in post-secondary education for learning disabilities that were ignored, dismissed, or undiagnosed while in high school. One respondent noted having supports in elementary school that were discontinued while in high school due to cost, but were recommended again in university after an assessment by accessibility services.

### **Post-Secondary Institutions and Aboriginal Youth**

In Phase Two of our study, we shifted our focus to looking at how post-secondary education is experienced prior to entry to gain ideas about the ways in which Aboriginal people were viewed within the applications process and the kinds of organizational practices that alternately supported or posed barriers prior to and during the applications process. Approximately 75 Aboriginal youth from across Ontario were asked to talk about what they thought of post-secondary education. We held focus groups or sharing circles with students from Thunder Bay and Scarborough, Ontario. Most of the youth attended high school programs and ranged from Grades 9 to 12 (although some did not currently attend high school); some were in special programs geared toward at-risk Aboriginal youth. The youth were invited to participate as consultants rather than "subjects of study" and were compensated accordingly. The youth were also given a citation for the study and a description of how they could add this consultation to their résumés or post-secondary education applications. Since this study was focused on textual processes and representations, it was important to highlight the ways that their "work" on this project could be used textually to their advantage. Many of the youth agreed that this incentive was worth more than the monetary compensation.

#### **Youth Recommendations for Post-secondary Education Practices, Processes and Representations**

First, the youths' stories suggested that the information provided by universities is vague and did not represent their needs - they could not see themselves in these representations. The following points were suggested by the youth themselves as ways to address this issue:

- Provide more information about "everyday issues" that relate to Aboriginal youth: funding (band funding, scholarships, Ontario Student Assistant Program), housing (single parent, on and off campus), food banks, childcare, and part-time jobs or job training opportunities.
- Have posters of successful post-secondary education graduates from their communities (e.g., show a doctor from Eabametoong First Nations).



- Provide detailed information about what cultural supports, housing, academic help, etc. there are in post-secondary institutions. Are there Elders with whom to talk? Are there cultural events, tutors, and community centres?
- Have information about supports presented in packages with details and pictures (of Aboriginal youth).
- Have more speakers (that are Aboriginal youth) who can talk about more than just how important it is to go into post-secondary education.
- Have post-secondary education information made specifically for Aboriginal youth that includes a “what to expect” section, which takes applicants step-by-step through the first year process. This would include information about preparing to apply to post-secondary education.
- Have all the information circulating earlier in secondary school (i.e., Grade 9).
- Have time, starting in Grade 9, devoted to discussing post-secondary education.

Altogether, Aboriginal youth spoke about having little agency over the ways that the “work” they have done in high school is taken up by post-secondary education textual practices. They have no say about what kind of information post-secondary institutions provide and, with the exception of a few outstanding Aboriginal support staff in the high schools, they have very little support interacting with and navigating through these texts. All of the youth narratives honed in on the desire for more access and control over post-secondary education textual representations and processes and the need for colleges and universities to develop long-term relationships in and with Aboriginal communities. As one youth said,

[T]hey [universities] only speak to us in our last year when they want us to apply and they say you need to go and this is not helpful.

Another youth said,

[I]f they really wanted us, they would come to our powwows, our community events, not just court us a day and leave.

The youths’ perceptions of universities become their reality of university, just as the records read in bureaucracies become the reality they are meant to represent. As Hubner (2000) observed,

Writers such as Foucault have shown that communications do not just passively document an objective world, they construct and shape it and thus they help shape what later archivists and researchers can know about the past- This construction is done in many ways. Among the most important are the choices records creators make when they decide what to record, how to record it, how it is filed, and what to transmit to superiors. As these records are used in daily operations and they accumulate in massive filing (and later archival) systems, these records act as

surrogates for reality, which means they become reality, or what is taken to be real about the world. (p. 30)

This process worked in both directions: in how the university read applicants via their transcripts and in how the youth rejecting university as an option took the institutions' recruitment literature as reality.

As a way of honouring the youth circles, a member of our research team took the above recommendations from youth about their recruitment materials to a university assistant registrar. The registrar worked at a college that had just recently developed multiple recruitment videos that were being posted on YouTube and links were sent to various feeder schools. When we viewed the videos we didn't see any examples of Aboriginal students or elders in the footage. When asked why this population was not visible, the registrar replied that the college had chosen to represent its current student population and there were few Aboriginal students whom they knew about or could invite to participate. One can see how continuing to recruit in the same way is not likely to change the make-up of the attending population. The pamphlets and videos university recruiters used in high schools became the reality of the institutions for the youth, who were often critical of the lack of Indigenous community seen in these texts. Yet, the representation of the reality of university presented in the recruitment materials—one that is absent of Aboriginal participation—may actually be contributing to the ongoing reality of underrepresentation in these college spaces. One of the youth consultants said to us that he knew he would be rejected if he applied so he was going to reject the institution first by not applying. How could he know he would be rejected?

### **Conclusions**

Much work remains to be done to support successful transitions for Aboriginal students accessing post-secondary education in Ontario. Aboriginal students across Canada aspire to more education (Hudson, 2009) but are suspicious of education as an institution. The transition issues begin much earlier than the point of access. Establishing relationships with Aboriginal students in high school or earlier is clearly important as is developing these relationships in the context of community, not just to the individual. Many students did not feel supported in high school or that they belonged in post-secondary institutions. One of the key issues identified by Aboriginal youth is communication on the part of the institution that more readily speaks to their target population.

While these findings are based on research conducted in Ontario, Canada, there certainly are implications for other regions of Canada and internationally. Wherever self-identification data on Indigenous populations is collected, clear and transparent language explaining self-declaration strategies is vital to enable students to access important cultural supports and financial opportunities targeting this population. The flow of counsel on self-identification should come not just from government and education institutions but from Indigenous support organizations and counsellors who are in a role to advise clients, band members, and Indigenous applicants of the meaning and benefits of self-identification questions and data collecting. Finally, Aboriginal students for the most part did find their campuses welcoming of their identities and found supports for disabilities. Building on these successes will undeniably assist in supporting successful transitions for Aboriginal students accessing post-secondary education.

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