

INVISIBLE BARRIERS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: ABORIGINALS AND COLLEGE ADMISSION POLICIES Margaret Brigham, Ph.D (2008)

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on access and the open door and raises the public policy question of "What happens when the players are not equal"? It examines systemic barriers, obstacles to progress, and student demographics associated with a gap in educational outcomes reported by Canada's Auditor General. Data sources include national surveys and statistics, anecdotal information, and public policy documents. The image of students being "stuck at the door" without a clear pathway to graduation is used to underscore the significant role of Aboriginal transition strategies in making access and equal opportunity a reality in Canadian colleges and universities.

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges for public policy makers in Canada involves closing the *education gap* in the postsecondary completion rate of Aboriginal people. The *gap* compares the *highest level of schooling* reported for Aboriginal people in Canada with the non-Aboriginal rate. The report of the Auditor General (2004) evaluated the postsecondary attainment of First Nation people against that of the Canadian population as a whole.

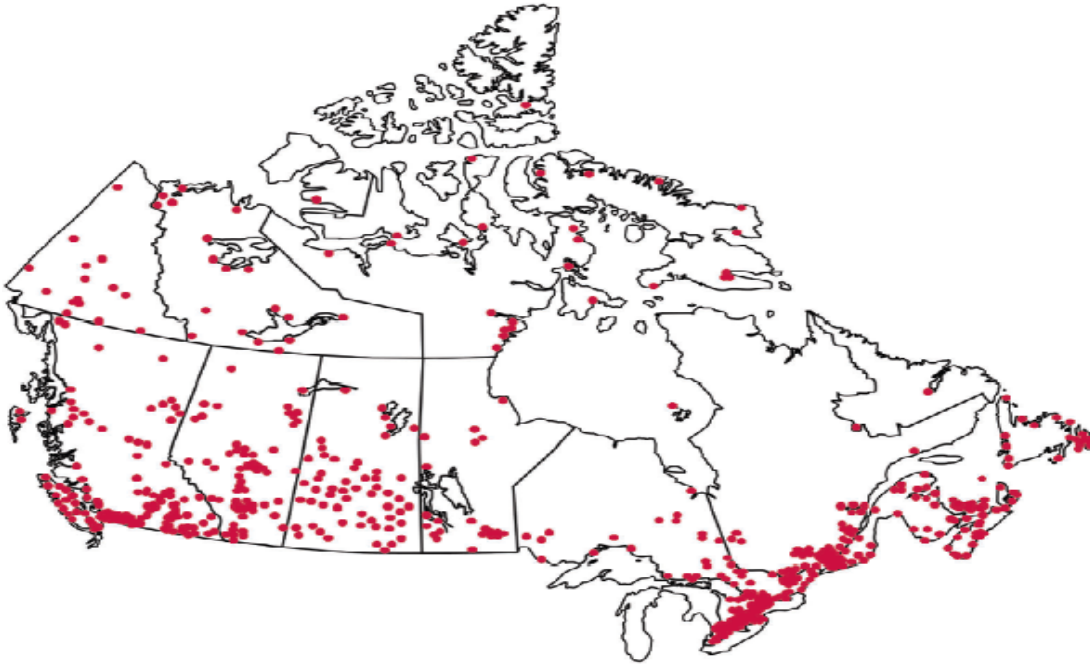
About 27 percent of the First Nation population between 15 and 44 years of age hold a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree, compared with 46 percent of the Canadian population within the same age group (OAG, 2004).

The public policy question that arises is "What happens when the players are not equal?" This article investigates factors contributing to the gap such as barriers, student demographics, and obstacles with a view toward closing it.

The framework guiding the investigation derives from higher education policies that are designed to ensure equal opportunity through access and the open door. *Access*, refers to the extent that special populations including Aboriginal students can successfully enter and participate in Canada's postsecondary education system (CMEC, 2003). A related concept, the *Open Door* involves an open door to admission and implies that institutions of higher learning will meet the wide ranging needs of students, thus providing equality in educational opportunity (Drea, 2003).

Aboriginal people total almost a million in Canada and data from the Census reports population increases for both the reserves and urban areas (Mendelson, 2006). Importantly, this dispels the myth that there is growing migration off reserves and into the cities. In Canada, as indicated by the map, institutions are spread across the southern part of the country and Aboriginal people from remote areas must travel great distances to attend postsecondary institutions.

Canada's Colleges



Aboriginal people are not a homogenous population and represent a diversity of languages, histories, cultures, life-ways, and traditions (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001). Those who aspire to postsecondary education must leave home communities, which offer networks of kinship and support. Yet, amid these challenges, Aboriginal students do seek educational opportunity and college entry.

This article looks at the high school to college transition of Aboriginal students in relation to the following public policy framework. *Lifelong Learning* is both a federal and provincial policy focus, and a concept that describes community development and nation building among Aboriginal peoples (Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable, 2004). The *Lifelong Learning Continuum* depicts learning as occurring in stages throughout a person's life and posits that various transition points on the continuum require special attention (Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable, Government of Canada Background Paper, 2004). Like other Canadians, Aboriginal youth recently surveyed have high educational aspirations with seven in 10 hoping to complete a postsecondary education (EKOS, 2006).

Yet, anecdotal accounts give cause for concern and indicate the complexity and urgency of issues associated with the high school to college transition. Scenario one: An advisor surveyed in a recent study characterized the nature of the problem as follows. Typically, First Nation students seeking college entry are "out of school anywhere from one to four years, under-prepared, and missing grade 12 English and Math". Most lack "the skills to survive in a postsecondary program" and need "a minimum of a year before starting on a degree" (Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen, 2000).

Scenario two: A participant in the 2004 Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable talks on post-secondary education stated the following facts. Many Aboriginal students drop out before grade 12, which means that upgrading programs are also required. "Currently, only 32% of First Nation children are graduating from Grade 12-13 in on-reserve schools. Provincial outcomes are no better. That is, 70% of our population has less than a high school education" (Assembly of First Nations Background Paper, 2004).

Scenario three: An Inuit spokesperson observed, "Weak foundational skills and limited English proficiency mean that extra time and effort are required" before students can enter the door to college or university. "It is not surprising that there are a low number of Inuit who go on to complete trade certificates, college certificates/diplomas or University degrees" given the low number of Inuit high school graduates. Due to early dropout, low English literacy, and the unavailability of certain courses at the high school level "skills are not always at a level acceptable to many post secondary institutions" (Inuit Backgrounder on Education, 2004).

METHODS

Research Design. The study reported in this article used a "mixed methods design" which incorporates qualitative and quantitative techniques to answer research questions. The mixed methods approach has the advantage of fulfilling many of the requirements of public policy research on Aboriginal issues because it allows the research to be put "in context" through narratives about peoples' lives (Status of Women Canada, 2005). Additionally, it recognizes cross-referencing and triangulating sources as important in getting as accurate a picture as possible of specific policy issues (Pasteur, 2001).

Data Collection. Mixed methods research includes data collection efforts that are relatively complete projects on their own, and are also used conjunctively as one research program. Hence, data collection can be conducted to answer a particular question with the total research results triangulated to form a comprehensive whole (Morse, 2003). Multiple sources used include national research surveys, demographic statistics, a sampling of over forty transition programs, anecdotal information, and public policy documents.

Research Questions. These address four broad areas of inquiry. (1) What are the systemic barriers that impede access and college entry? (2) What are the major obstacles that hinder equal opportunity? (3) What is known about the characteristics of Aboriginal postsecondary students? (4) What types of transition strategies promote Aboriginal achievement and success?

Analysis. The analysis consists of a four-step process. The first step examines factors in the high school to college transition that may indicate systemic barriers for Aboriginal learners such as high school graduation requirements, higher education admissions requirements, enrollment and funding patterns, as well as

anecdotes and policy documents. Step two involves identifying demographic trends and patterns to serve as benchmark descriptors of the target group. Prevalent patterns will be used to create a statistical profile of Aboriginal postsecondary students. Step three surveys the literature on Aboriginal postsecondary education for references to life conditions that impede education and make life difficult. Major findings will be clustered into themes and depicted as an obstacle course. The fourth step analyzes a sampling of over forty transition programs available to Aboriginal learners. Programs will be evaluated and classified into a typology based on their value in promoting Aboriginal achievement and success.

Results of the investigation are discussed as a response to a particular research question in the sections that follow. The term "Aboriginal" is used throughout the article, except in instances where the data source noted reference to "First Nation and Inuit" exclusively.

THE BARRIERS TO COLLEGE ENTRY

What are the systemic barriers that impede access and college entry? The examination of factors involved in the high school to college transition begins with the secondary completion side of the equation. Evidence shows that Aboriginal young people are most likely to withdraw from high school between grades 9 and 10 (Government of Canada Background Paper, 2004). Although the provinces differ on high school graduation requirements, most include Math, Science, and English credits earned in grades 11 and 12; a majority have provincial exams in literacy and core subject areas; and most have academic streaming that designates a curriculum pathway leading to university, college, or the workplace (Brigham, 2006).

Most educators agree on the importance of the high school to college transition for all students, but for Aboriginal students it marks a crucial point of intersection. Namely, this is where the past (high school performance and completion) meets the present (college and university entrance requirements). For someone who dropped out in grade 9 or 10, the reality is that the student would not have fulfilled any senior level work toward a high school diploma. For someone graduating with a high school diploma, the reality is that the level of college readiness would be determined by the academic stream placement of the individual (Knowledge Matters, 2002). Interestingly, one study shows that Aboriginal students who do finish high school, go on and complete some form of postsecondary education in the same proportion as high school graduates in the Canadian population as a whole (Mendelson, 2006). Thus, the difficulties lie, not among the Aboriginal high school graduates, but with those lacking high school diplomas.

Our attention now turns to the postsecondary side of the high school to college transition equation. *Systemic barriers* involve policies and procedures that prevent accessibility, of which there are two types: structural and procedural. The

federal reserve policy that isolated First Nation and Inuit people from interacting with the rest of Canadian society is an example of the first type. The commonly used terms "on-reserve and off-reserve" signify one of the last vestiges of this policy. College and university admission policies adhering to the assumption that Aboriginal students are equally prepared to participate in mainstream institutions exemplify the second type. Application of the concept *gatekeeper* to the role of institutions is accurate in the sense that each postsecondary institution sets its own admission policy and entry criteria, as do each of its departmental faculties.

Many Aboriginal students begin their postsecondary experience "outside" of an actual program of study. Although granted general admission to register for classes, the student must still make further application to be admitted to a program. Terminology related to the admission process is important to an understanding of what happens to Aboriginal applicants. For example, a distinction is made between **general admission** (open access to register for general education, academic upgrading, adult education, or college preparatory courses) and **program admission** (to enter a certificate, diploma, or degree program). Another distinction refers to the use of **selective admission** involving programs where applicants are picked based on possession of a required grade point average (GPA) or standing in their graduating class. Yet another distinction concerns the availability of **program seats** when size of the program is limited by policy, cost or high demand and admission becomes competitive for the applicants. Beyond achievement levels, a **letter of interest** is often the means whereby selective and competitive programs reject or accept applicants.

Evidence shows that the Aboriginal postsecondary enrollment pattern tends to be highest in the community college system (DIAND, 2001; Mendelson, 2006). Community colleges have open door admissions policies and often a high school diploma is all that is needed for general admission. Some community colleges recognize secondary level equivalences such as the general equivalency diploma (GED) and upgrading, while others do not. Barriers encountered by Aboriginal students occur, however, when they seek program admission. Community colleges tend to be more selective at the program level. They admit students to specific programs based on an applicant's ability to meet additional criteria. In most cases, this will involve completion of specific high school subjects with grades of 60-65%, as well as departmental prerequisite courses related to the field of study. (Brigham, 2006).

By comparison, the Aboriginal postsecondary enrollment pattern in the university system is considerably lower (DIAND, 2001; Mendelson, 2006). Barriers encountered by Aboriginal students occur throughout the entire process from general admission to program admission. Universities are highly selective and typically admit students who achieve in the top third of their graduating class. Few recognize high school level equivalences. Most require a high school diploma, university preparatory curriculum, and a grade point average of 65-70% or higher for general admission. To gain entry into a program, students must fulfill specific departmental criteria and compete with all the other applicants for

available seats. Each field of study stipulates its own prerequisites and achievement levels for program admission. (Brigham, 2006).

There is a growing recognition of the need for alternative admission policies and guidelines to minimize the impact of entrance requirements on Aboriginal students. For example, some institutions offer a provision for *special Aboriginal student admission* that targets Aboriginal applicants unable to qualify under the regular university entrance criteria (University of Alberta, Queen's University in Ontario, and the University of Victoria in B.C.). Applicants are encouraged to request special consideration on an individual basis. Under this category an Aboriginal student is able to walk through the open door, but entry to any specific degree program is not guaranteed. Usually a student must take prerequisites and perform satisfactorily in transition year courses. Additionally, other schools have instituted policies and initiatives granting *designated seats* to Aboriginal applicants who meet program requirements (University of Toronto, Law School, Queen's University, and New Brunswick Community College).

Equally important, but not Aboriginal-specific, *admission as a mature student* is another option for students not qualifying for admission under regular entrance criteria. A majority of colleges and universities admit mature applicants on an individual basis using the following list of conditions as alternative criteria. For example, if an applicant is unable to meet minimum requirements but has been out of school for 1-2 years, has previous school performance and/or a recent work record that suggests a strong possibility of academic success, and has reached the age of 19-21 (varies by province). Admission as a mature student does not guarantee program admission and typically, foundational courses are mandated for the first year of study.

THE OBSTACLE COURSE

What are the major obstacles that hinder equal opportunity? The term *obstacle* references a variety of conditions present in the lives of students that make progress difficult. The literature review of Aboriginal postsecondary education identified several major studies reporting findings on obstacles.

For example, in 2000, a survey by the UNESCO Institute for Education assessed the postsecondary education status of Aboriginal peoples in Canada as part of a larger international study (Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). Among the findings, the survey lists the following obstacles to access:

- the nature of the K-12 schooling system
- low expectations of Aboriginal students
- inadequate financial support
- racism and experiences with the educational system that have resulted in low self-esteem, low skills development, and emotional barriers
- stress related to relocating (e.g. finding housing, moving away from family, feeling unsupported)

- curriculum and programs (ignore Aboriginal perspectives, values and issues) and do not prepare students for the environments in which they will work
- lack of support services
- not feeling any ownership or control with regard to the education process

Another study sponsored by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) in 2002 outlined the financial and non-financial obstacles to enrollment and completion for Aboriginal peoples (Malatest, 2002). Reported as follows, the obstacles encompass historical, social, cultural, family-related, and individual/personal factors:

- historically determined distrust of education institutions (legacy of residential schools and assimilative practices of education)
- lack of preparation at the secondary level (due to weak performance, high drop-out rates, and limited funding of reserve and remote schools)
- poverty of Aboriginal communities
- feelings of social discrimination at mainstream institutions, in mainstream society
- family and community ties and obligations make the relocation (that is often necessary) difficult and expensive for Aboriginal people

In an update of the CMEC study, it was reported that reserve and remote schools do not typically offer the academic preparation needed to succeed in post-secondary studies and that "most reserve students were at least one year behind their expected grade level by the age of 13" (Malatest, 2004). Moreover, many students do not complete high school and those who do are lacking in necessary mathematics and science courses, plus other essential areas such as study skills, time management, and computer literacy. One of the respondents in the study said his/her institution had raised its entrance requirements and expected Aboriginal enrollment to decrease as a result.

A Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation report in 2006 summarized findings from a telephone survey of 2,206 on-reserve First Nation respondents. Participants were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements on postsecondary barriers. First, 53% of those surveyed agreed that the level of government funding is inadequate; 46% agreed that First Nations youth are not academically prepared through their high school education; and 28% agreed that First Nations people do not feel welcome on university and college campuses. Interesting to note, only 20% perceived that a college education was not needed because jobs in First Nations communities do not require a credential. Second, when only those planning to go to postsecondary were asked if anything might change their plans, 48% said it would be a lack of money, 43% said they may need to work to support their family and 42% said it would be because their grades are not good enough (Research Note Series, 2006; EKOS, 2006).

Finally, a Statistics Canada report (2001) of the non-reserve Aboriginal population surveyed 117,000 individuals and listed the top reasons hindering completion of postsecondary education. Aboriginal people aged 25 to 44 (both sexes) identified family responsibilities (24%), finances (22%), lost interest or motivation (13%), and got a job or had to work (11%) as major obstacles. The reasons differed among men and women, however. Men were most likely to report financial reasons (25%) while the reason most frequently cited by women was family responsibilities (34%) (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001).

Seven common themes emerged from the survey literature and were used to cluster the data on obstacles. Results of this synthesis highlight the following key factors as hindering access and constituting an obstacle course.

The Obstacle Course

1. Inadequate Financial Resources
 - the cost of tuition, books and living expenses
 - inadequate financial aid and level of government funding
 - a lack of money
 - poverty of Aboriginal communities
 - a need to work at a paying job
2. Poor Academic Preparation
 - non-college vs. college track curricula streams
 - the nature of the K-12 schooling system
 - low expectations of Aboriginal students
 - lack of college preparation at the high school level
 - limited available resources at reserve and remote schools
 - grades are not good enough
3. Family Responsibilities
 - children, child care and family responsibilities
 - a need to work to support a family
 - expense of relocating a family
 - difficulty in managing community ties and obligations
4. Student Development and Services
 - lack of information on career choices, programs of study, and financial aid
 - lack of counseling and advising support services on campus and in community
 - lack of self-confidence and motivation, absence of role models who have postsecondary education experience
5. Isolation
 - attitude that college is not part of the culture
 - stress of relocating (finding housing, moving away from family, feeling unsupported)
 - not feeling any ownership or control of the education process
 - loss of interest or motivation
 - distrust of education institutions (residential schools, assimilation)
 - feelings of social discrimination (mainstream institutions, in mainstream society)
 - concern over value of credential for jobs in First Nations
6. Exclusion

- experience of racism on campus
 - discrimination experiences with the educational process
 - low self-esteem, low skills development, and emotional barriers
7. Campus Climate
- lack understanding of aboriginal culture on campus
 - curriculum and programs ignore Aboriginal perspectives, values and issues
 - courses fail to prepare students for the environments that they will be working in
 - feeling that not welcome on university and college campuses

ABORIGINAL STUDENT PROFILE

What is known about the characteristics of Aboriginal postsecondary students? An analysis of demographic data identified nine prevalent patterns, from which a statistical profile of Aboriginal postsecondary students was created. Some Aboriginal postsecondary students will match the profile, while others will fit it in a few areas only. This is because the basis for the profile are Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) reports which tend to average out regional or subgroup differences. One limitation of this data is that it does not include all Aboriginal postsecondary students, only those eligible to receive federal funding as status Indians. Another limitation is that it is collected to track trends in enrollment and expenditures but not people. Therefore, other sources are included to compensate for limitations and permit comparisons. Regarding sample size, the percentages are based on enrollment data for 24,030 First Nation and Inuit students (DIAND, 2001; INAC, 1998-2004).

Profile of Aboriginal Postsecondary Students

1.	Female	67%
2.	Over age 30	44%
3.	From Ontario	34%
	B.C	18%
4.	Completed high school	34%
5.	Enroll in college, not university	49%
6.	Attend full-time	87%
7.	Graduate from colleges and universities	21%
	Avg. number of graduates per year is 3,838	
8.	Receive college degree	53%
9.	Over 1/3 enroll in access or upgrading, prior to program admission	34%

Sources: DIAND, 2001; Basic Departmental Data, 2003; For the Love of Learning, 1994; Embracing Differences, 2005; Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001.

1. Sixty-seven percent of these students are female. Interestingly, even though there is an equal gender distribution in the Aboriginal population (Basic Departmental Data, 2003) elementary schools show more males than females enrolled, and secondary schools show higher female enrollment. At the college

level, females account for approximately 2/3 of post-secondary enrollment (DIAND, 2001). This begs the question of what happened to the males? Compared to the general student population, Aboriginal students are more likely to be married or in a long-term relationship, more likely to have children and more likely to come from small communities, often far from the college or university (Embracing Differences, 2005).

2. Forty-four percent of these students are over age 30. The over 30-age group accounts for the largest proportion of all post-secondary enrollment. The only exceptions to this trend occur in the Atlantic region, where students *24 and under* account for 48 percent of post-secondary enrollment; and in Quebec where students *24 and under* age account for 46 percent of post-secondary enrollment (DIAND, 2001). In the Northwest Territories, the majority of students were *24 and under* until 1997/98, then the trend shifted and by 1999/00 a majority there were also over 30 (DIAND, 2001). It is noted that Aboriginal people are more likely than other Canadians to complete their schooling later in life (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001).

3. Thirty percent of these students are from Ontario. Another 18 percent are from British Columbia, 14 percent from Manitoba, 13 percent from Saskatchewan, 10 percent from Alberta, 8 percent from Quebec, 5 percent from the Atlantic region, and less than 1 percent is from the Northwest Territories and the Yukon (Basic Departmental Data, 2003). As might be expected, enrollment replicates the population distribution across the regions. What is surprising is that while Ontario has the largest Aboriginal population in terms of absolute numbers, the Aboriginal population accounts for a larger share of the population within the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. And the larger share translates into more political influence (Mendelson, 2006)

4. Thirty-four percent of these students completed high school and at an older age. The high school graduation rate for First Nation and Inuit students was 34 percent in 2001/02 (Basic Departmental Data, 2003). Stated another way, close to two-thirds lack high school. Based on *highest level of schooling* reports, 70 percent of Aboriginals on Manitoba reserves between the ages of 20-24 failed to complete high school, as compared to about 16 percent of the same age group in the general population (Mendelson, 2006). In terms of age, thirty percent of Aboriginal high school graduates are 16-18 years old; fifty-four percent (the majority) are 19-21 years old; and, sixteen percent are 22 or older (DIAND, 2001).

5. Forty-nine percent of these students are enrolled in college rather than university. College enrollment nation-wide among First Nation and Inuit students is forty-nine percent compared with forty-five percent in universities (DIAND, 2001). Slight variations exist to this pattern, however. University enrollment is higher in the Atlantic region (73%), Manitoba (48%), and Saskatchewan (63%) (DIAND, 2001).

6. Eighty-seven percent of these students attend classes full-time. On the national scale, First Nation and Inuit students are enrolled full-time (DIAND, 2001). British Columbia is an exception since full-time enrollment declined from 88 percent to 79 percent between 1993/94 and 1999/00. Another exception reflects gender differences. Most of the female students go part-time. It is important to note that when analyzed as a subgroup, females make up 66 percent of full-time enrollment and 73 percent of part-time enrollment. (DIAND, 2001).

7. The postsecondary graduation rate for these students is estimated to be around 21 percent. On average (DIAND, 2001) there are 3,838 First Nation and Inuit graduates each year. A graduate rate can be projected by comparing the difference between enrollment and graduates over a six-year period. For example, in 1993 First Nation and Inuit student enrollment was 17,699 and six years later 3,681 (21%) graduated (DIAND, 2001). For comparative purposes, a similar statistic calculated in a Canada/U.S. study (Grayson and Grayson, 2003) noted American Indians as having the lowest graduation rate at thirty-six percent.

8. Over half of the degrees are earned at a college (53%). Degrees earned by First Nation and Inuit students at community colleges show the highest enrollment in Business and Commerce; followed by the Humanities and Social Sciences (DIAND, 2001). On the other hand, thirty-nine percent of First Nation and Inuit students earn their degree at a university. The fields of study at universities show the highest enrollment in General Arts and Science; followed by Education, and Social Sciences (DIAND, 2001). For both college and university fields of study, First Nation and Inuit students appear to select those with high employment possibilities in First Nation communities.

9. From twenty-one percent to thirty-four percent of Aboriginal students enroll in access or upgrading. Indian Affairs data show that those in college (21%) and university (5%) take part in access or upgrading programs prior to program admission (DIAND, 2001). Similarly, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (2005) survey of 18,536 Aboriginal students reported that twenty-one percent were in access, upgrading programs, and adult education. However, in a Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation report based on Canada's Undergraduate Student Survey and the Canadian College Student Survey, the Aboriginal students were asked to describe their program of study. Thirty-four percent said they were enrolled in access, upgrading, and university preparation classes (Embracing Differences, 2005).

How does the Aboriginal student profile compare to Canadians in general? In 2004, the typical Canadian college student was 24 years old, female (61%), single (76%) with no children, and spoke English (82%) as her primary language (Canadian College Student Survey Consortium, 2005; Youth in Transition Survey, 2004). In contrast, the typical Aboriginal student was 30 years old or

more (44%), female (67%), married or in a long-term relationship with children, and English may not be her primary language. The main similarity is gender, however, major differences exist for age, family responsibilities, and language.

ABORIGINAL TRANSITION STRATEGIES

What types of transition strategies promote Aboriginal achievement and success? Analysis based on a sampling of over forty transition programs drawn from ten provinces yielded information on current efforts to promote Aboriginal achievement and success. Program descriptions from the data sampling were evaluated and classified into four major strategies as represented in the following typology (Brigham, 2006). An explanation follows the chart.

Typology of Aboriginal Transition Strategies

<p>Type 1: Assists with General admission <i>Access</i> programs provide additional academic preparation and skills to students who do not meet the regular admission criteria.</p>
<p>Type 2: Assists with Program admission <i>Preparatory</i> programs help Aboriginal students qualify for entry to certificate, diploma, or degree programs. Each field of study or department sets the achievement levels and prerequisites required for admission.</p>
<p>Type 3: Designated seats <i>Designated seats</i> sets aside a specific number for Aboriginal students who meet minimal program requirements, thus they do not have to compete with other applicants for program entry.</p>
<p>Type 4: Alternative admission <i>Alternative admissions</i> offer Aboriginal students an opportunity to request special consideration for provisional admission on an individual basis.</p>

The first strategy (Type 1) is designed to assist Aboriginal students *seeking general admission*. The likely participants are Aboriginal high school graduates, adults, and out-of-school youth (with or without a diploma). Programs in this approach are flexible, aligned with the curriculum of the institutions offering them, and provide Aboriginal students with the support services needed for success. There is no one model acclaimed as the most effective, and the length of time varies from one semester to two years. Most do not include upgrading as part of the program, although it may be available on campus. Some examples follow.

- Classes that build academic skills in research and study techniques, communications, math, computer applications, and career exploration.
- One-year of study that provides up to three first year classes and academic support in small, weekly workshops. Successful completion helps the student qualify for application to a degree program.

- One-year transition classes offered in the community and a coordinator to support students completing assignments. Helps student qualify for program admission and alternative program admissions policy.
- Two-year transition course in science and technology with academic support, small classes, and Aboriginal community involvement.

The second strategy (Type 2) is designed to provide academic enrichment for Aboriginal students *seeking program admission*. The likely participants are Aboriginal students unprepared for their chosen field of study. In this approach the programs are highly structured, based on competencies and prerequisites for specific fields of study, and enable Aboriginal students to qualify for admission. The length of time needed to complete a program varies from one to two years. Some illustrations follow.

- One-year of prerequisite courses in communications, math, and computer programming. Offers access to elders. Helps the student qualify for program admission into Computer Systems program.
- Two-year preparatory course in business foundations. Helps the student qualify for program admission to Bachelor of Business Administration, or to Bachelor of Commerce program.
- Two-year course that helps students complete high school equivalency requirements and nursing prerequisites. Some courses are taught in the Inuit language and include Inuit health beliefs and practices. Upon successful completion, students gain entry to Nursing program.

The third and fourth strategies (Type 3, Type 4), as previously described, establish alternative admission policies and guidelines only. All four types of Aboriginal-specific transition strategies offer opportunities for movement on the *lifelong learning continuum* and represent stepping stones to success for a vast majority of Aboriginal students. Some involve a joint venture between student services and academic departments; others are appended to Aboriginal Learning Resource Centres located on campus, while still others operate at least partially in First Nation and Inuit communities.

CONCLUSION

This investigation identified the invisible barriers to postsecondary education for Aboriginal students as culminating in college admissions policies. Particularly problematic are those which make the assumption that Aboriginal students are as equally prepared as other Canadians to participate in mainstream institutions. By answering the four research questions posed earlier, evidence was presented showing how college entrance requirements tend to represent a procedural barrier for Aboriginal students not matching the typical Canadian student profile. However, the larger question framing the study, directs our attention to the public policy question of --What happens when the players are not equal?

Closing the Aboriginal postsecondary attainment gap placed the issue of Aboriginal postsecondary education on the national agenda of federal, provincial,

and Aboriginal policymakers, and it raised the matter of accountability. The responsibility for Aboriginal postsecondary education in Canada has been a contentious source of disagreement. The federal government sees it as a "matter of social policy", while First Nations view it as an inherent Aboriginal and Treaty right recognized in the Canadian Constitution (No Higher Priority, 2007). As a policy relevant statistic, however, the gap clearly demonstrated a need for intervention. Toward this end, Canadian officials entered into discussions with Aboriginal leaders on closing the gap as a quality of life issue.

"The government of Canada is committed to closing the gap by 50 percent in 10 years, meaning an increase of 14,800 post-secondary graduates over the next 5 years and 37,000 more in 10 years." (Kelowna, British Columbia, First Ministers talks, November 25, 2005)

Statistics on First Nation and Inuit students are sparse in terms of graduates, an average of 2,068 high school graduates per year, and an average of 3,838 postsecondary graduates per year (Basic Departmental Data, 2003). While some colleges and universities have initiated outreach and recruitment efforts to increase Aboriginal enrollment, the goal of closing the Aboriginal attainment gap through an increase of 14,800 postsecondary graduates over the next five years will require transition strategies. The image of Aboriginal students being "stuck at the door" without a clear pathway to graduation, underscores the significance of transition programs in making access and equal opportunity a reality for Aboriginal people.

Implications for Practice

New strategies, partnerships, and collaborations are needed that will allow Aboriginal learners to take advantage of the best educational opportunities wherever they exist (AFN Education Plan, 2005). In addition to offering opportunities for movement on the lifelong learning continuum, Aboriginal-specific transition strategies presented in this study help transition high school graduates and non-graduates into successful college and program entry; serve as an effective tool for motivating and attracting mature students back into the educational system; and, offer a mechanism to meet community-based needs in adult education. Provided support measures are in place, most Aboriginal students will progress---- from aspirations, to general access, to qualify for program admission, and finally to move into their chosen fields of study.

Implications for Future Research

Three areas are recommended for future research. Inquiry is encouraged into why the lifelong learning continuum appears to break down for males at the secondary level of education. This is a critical area that definitely needs attention as it affects the health of Aboriginal communities and the stability of future generations. Another focus is for external researchers to conduct controlled studies on how to engage boys and male youth in the learning process. A second area of inquiry is encouraged into disabilities. How do learning disabilities affect Aboriginal postsecondary students? It is known statistically that

special needs and learning disabilities (which don't go away) are disproportionately high among elementary/secondary students. The third area of recommended inquiry is on the obstacles that affect Aboriginal students once they arrive on campus, the research literature identifies these as: isolation, exclusion related to racism, and campus climate.

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