

# Aboriginal Post-Secondary Student Retention

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## Abstract

*Aboriginal people face the lowest standard of living of any group in Canada due to the lasting and far-reaching effects of colonization and failed education. Without improved educational outcomes, in the form of increased Aboriginal retention rates, this situation will not improve. In order to accomplish this goal, post-secondary institutions need to offer academic, economic, and personal supports that will holistically address the issues facing Aboriginal students.*

The retention of Aboriginal learners in post-secondary education within Canada is bleak. The unrelenting legacy of colonization,<sup>1</sup> including failed education for Aboriginal people, continues to affect all defining aspects of society. Due, in part, to the dismal levels of completed post-secondary education, Aboriginal people face the lowest levels of health, socioeconomic status and employment, and they are most likely to be victims of violent crimes (Keatings, Innes, Laliberte, & Howe, 2012). Improved levels of education have the potential to increase participation in society, affecting the socioeconomic status of the community (Sharpe & Arsenault, 2010). The educational plight of Aboriginal people is complex, and the retention of Aboriginal students who do enter post-secondary education is an important area of study. The reasons that Aboriginal students are not successful at the post-secondary level include academic preparedness, numerous social issues and personal barriers, and no sense of belonging in educational institutions. To assist Aboriginal students to complete their studies, these issues have to be addressed more effectively.

## Challenges and Issues

Due to the legacy of colonization and residential schools, the Aboriginal community faces unprecedented levels of disparity in all areas of life. All aspects of family and community were negatively affected as a direct result of residential schools. Loss of parenting skills, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and poverty are overwhelming issues (Anderson & Lawrence, 2006). Aboriginal people have the lowest academic achievement levels of any other group in Canada. As of 2006, 43.7% of Canadian Aboriginal people over the age of 15 had not completed any post-secondary education, compared to only 23.1% of non-Aboriginal people of the same age group (Sharpe & Arsenault, 2010, p. 9). Colonization and residential schools continue to have a negative effect on educational attainment in the Aboriginal community.

As a result of these dismal educational outcomes, Aboriginal people face the lowest levels of economic status, political participation, health status, and social engagement of any other group in Canada. The stark reality is that Aboriginal people face poverty rates that are more than double the rate of non-Aboriginal people. Suicide rates are five times higher, and children are two times as likely to have a disability and are more likely to be part of child welfare systems (Abele, 2004, p. 8). Addressing educational disparities will help to tackle the numerous social issues facing the Aboriginal community, all of which are affected by low economic levels. Increased educational levels are followed by increased employment and economic well-being

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<sup>1</sup> Kortright (2003) defined colonization as follows:

(1) Colonization begins with a forced, involuntary entry; (2) the colonizing power alters basically or destroys the indigenous culture; (3) members of the colonized group tends to be governed by representatives of the dominate group; and (4) the system of dominant-subordinate relationship is buttressed by a racist ideology. (p.3)

(Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2001). Increased economic well-being reduces poverty and therefore has a positive impact on social development because "education is by far the most important determinant of labour market outcomes and also plays a pre-eminent role in improving social outcomes" (Sharpe & Arsenault, 2010). Increased educational attainment is essential for the continuing growth and prosperity of the Aboriginal community.

## **Recommendations for Action**

In order to improve the retention of Aboriginal learners in post-secondary education, the discrepancy of educational attainment must be addressed for the students who are entering those programs. Many Aboriginal students are not academically prepared for post-secondary education (Preston, 2008). They need services such as mentoring, tutoring, study groups, and workshops. Not having the required skills at the outset does not mean that these students are not capable of attaining the required skills. With the appropriate supports, many academic issues can be alleviated and students can be successful (Malatest & Associates, 2010). These supports are critical to students who face academic challenges so that they do not fall behind in their studies, leading to additional stress. Aboriginal students require a variety of academic, economic, and personal supports that are specifically directed to their needs.

### **Academic Support**

It is crucial to identify post-secondary students who are struggling academically and to provide the appropriate supports, ideally before the students become overwhelmed. Engaging students right away ensures active participation and shows the students that the instructor, or institution, is aware of their struggles and is willing to help. By creating a retention strategy that includes early intervention for academic struggles and other areas of need, institutions can help to implement the required supports at the outset (Timmons et al., 2009). This approach highlights the importance of institutions taking an active role, because they "cannot assume that students will take the first step and seek help. The university must be proactive" (Seidman, 2005, as cited in Timmons et al., 2009, p. 11). Identifying issues and implementing action plans for struggling students is critical to their success.

### **Economic Support**

Tangible economic supports will address many students' the immediate needs allowing them to remain in school during crisis. Such supports should include accessible housing, affordable childcare, assistance with transportation, resource centres, and financial support. These resources can make the difference in retaining students who have been rendered fragile by obstacles beyond their control. Institutions that provide this type of ongoing support highlight the importance of offering financial supports, housing, resource centres, and mentors (Timmons et al., 2009) on an individual and continued basis. Concrete, accessible, and meaningful economic supports are important to improving Aboriginal student retention.

### **Personal Support**

Aboriginal students have numerous personal issues to deal with in addition to the day-to-day struggles of completing a post-secondary education. Negative historical factors often affect the personal well-being of Aboriginal students. The harsh reality of the problems faced by these students includes "single parenthood, spousal violence, homelessness, poverty, trying to stay clean from an addiction" (Shankar et al., 2013, p. 3915). These can impact the ability of learners to complete their studies, as they are often deep rooted and encompassing issues which, when "combined with academic demands may increase stress levels, with many negative implications

for the personal and academic experiences" (Parrack & Preyde, 2009, p. 226). Providing supports to help students navigate through these difficult issues is another meaningful solution to low post-secondary retention rates.

Offering personal supports is a successful strategy in the quest for improved Aboriginal student retention (Malatest & Associates, 2010). These types of supports are frequently incorporated into the day-to-day operations of Aboriginal- controlled institutions, as part of their school culture. By providing access to Elders, support services, role models, and mentors, these institutions have raised their Aboriginal students' retention rates to 75% or higher (Hampton, 2008). Implementing these supports in the culture and fabric of educational institutions is yet another means of improving retention rates of Aboriginal students.

Another important factor in the retention of Aboriginal students is cultivating a sense of belonging. When students feel supported and welcomed, they are more likely to be engaged, which increases the likelihood of retention. Instructors can be supportive, friendly, and concerned, which can help to create a sense of family and belonging (Schmidtke, 2009). Community and cultural events offer students the opportunity to participate in safe, social events with their peers, creating a strong community. Native American students indicate that social supports and Native American Student Centers increase a sense of community and reduce feelings of alienation (Guillory, 2009). These types of social interactions nurture a sense of belonging.

### Conclusion

Retention of Aboriginal students at the post-secondary level is critical to improving the life circumstances of the Aboriginal community, and thus economic status. Education is the answer to improving the current situation for Aboriginal people (*Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, 2010). Whether by addressing academic concerns and implementing supports to assist in bridging the academic gap, developing holistic support systems, or building a sense of community, educational institutions need to identify and implement strategies that will improve Aboriginal student retention rates.

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### **About the Author**

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