POST-SECONDARY COMPLETION RATES AMONG ON-RESERVE STUDENTS: RESULTS OF A FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

A survey of former applicants for post-secondary funding from a First Nation community, was conducted with results analyzed in terms of post-secondary completion rates among these students. It was found that the completion rates were related to a number of student characteristics, as well as characteristics of their schooling and post-secondary experiences. This study found that university completion rates were much lower than college completion rates; that the completion rates of women were higher than those of men; that those who attended the reserve high school had much lower completion rates than others; that those who transferred from one school to another frequently in elementary-secondary school had lower completion rates; and that the students had more success in friendly and cooperative post-secondary environments.

Les résultats d'une enquête sur des étudiants de communautés des Premières nations qui avaient déjà fait une demande de financement d'études postsecondaires sont analysés relativement aux taux d'achèvement des études postsecondaires de ces étudiants. On constate que les taux d'achèvement sont liés à certaines caractéristiques de ces étudiants ainsi qu'à des caractéristiques de l'expérience de leurs années d'école et des études postsecondaires. L'étude conclut que les taux d'achèvement d'études universitaires sont moindres que les taux d'achèvement d'études collégiales, que les taux d'achèvement des femmes sont plus élevés que ceux des hommes, que ceux qui ont fréquenté l'école secondaire de leur réserve ont des taux d'achèvement très inférieurs à ceux des autres, que ceux qui sont passés fréquemment d'une école à une autre aux niveaux primaire et secondaire ont des taux d'achèvement moindres et que les étudiants réussissent mieux dans des milieux où l'enseignement est combiné avec l'emploi.

Previous research concerning Aboriginal post-secondary education has pointed to both progress and continuing difficulties. While Aboriginal educational attainment has increased greatly over the years, the gap in attainment between the Aboriginal and general Canadian population has grown. In comparison to the non-Aboriginal population, Canada's Aboriginal population is far less likely to have graduated from high school and post-secondary institutions. Aboriginal rates of completion of university education are especially low (Hull 2005; Mendelson 2006).

Clearly there is a need to improve the success of Aboriginal students, particularly at the university level.

However, past research has not progressed very far in identifying factors that have a significant impact on Aboriginal student success at university. In order to help address this problem, a follow-up survey of former post-secondary students was designed and carried out in cooperation with a Manitoba First Nation and with funding support from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The purpose of the survey was to better understand the strengths and weaknesses in Aboriginal post-secondary education and to identify ways of improving university completion rates among First Nations students. The survey design was based on previous research concerning factors affecting post-secondary success and on issues raised by the Education Authority board and staff. It took place in the spring and summer of 2007 and focused on students who applied for post-secondary sponsorship in 2000-2001 or 2001-2002.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

A total of 221 former applicants for post-secondary assistance were identified from Education Authority files, of whom 159 (72%) received funding. Most were funded for both of the two target years, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. About 12% of the applicants did not receive funding in the target period but had previously received funding and another 7% did not receive funding at all. About 58% lived on-reserve when they applied and 38% lived off-reserve. (Addresses were unknown for the remainder.) The majority (59%) of those applying for funding were women; this held true both among those living on-reserve (57%) and off-reserve (66%).

Most interviews were carried out in person by a male research assistant, who was a well known resident of the community fluent in both English and the local Aboriginal language. A few interviews were self-administered at the request of the person being interviewed or because the individual lived off-reserve. In appreciation for their participation in the survey, an honorarium of $25 was paid to each person who completed an interview.

The initial sample was made up of every fifth name from the list of 221 applicants; however, it proved very difficult to contact those living off-reserve, even with the assistance of Education Authority, First Nation and local contacts. Within the initial sample a completion rate of 50% was achieved among those living on-reserve but only 6% among those living off-reserve. Additional names were drawn from the list of students and others were contacted opportunistically in the community by the research assistant in an effort to reach a target of 50 interviews. The resulting sample of 46 completed interviews was clearly biased towards on-reserve residents who made up 85% of those interviewed. In addition women were under-represented in the sample, making up 41% of those who completed interviews. Because of problems contacting and interviewing the off-reserve and female populations, the results of this survey should not be viewed as a representative sample. It reflects the population of First Nations post-secondary students, who were resident on-reserve when they applied for funding and who were still living on-reserve five or six years later. Those persons who may have been attending school off-reserve at the time of the survey, or who may have chosen to move off-reserve after attending post-secondary programs, are not part of the sample. At the same time these results may prove useful in exploring some of the issues that affect the on-reserve resident population.

POST-SECONDARY COMPLETION RATES

Post-secondary completion rates were defined as the number of certificates of any type received by students, divided by the number of programs they enrolled in. The survey allowed former students to describe their experiences in up to three separate programs and the 46 individuals in the sample reported their experiences in 138 different programs. In calculating completion rates and other statistics, each program attended was counted separately.

FINDINGS CONCERNING STUDENTS' PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

Some of the findings confirm the findings of other research concerning the general population:

- Women had a substantially higher post-secondary completion rate (69%) than men (47%).
- Those who transferred from one school to another three or more times during their elementary-secondary years had a much lower completion rate (18%) than those who transferred less often (62%).
- Those whose parents expected them to complete high school or post-secondary education had higher completion rates (53% to 75%) than those whose parents did not expect them to complete high school (20% completion rate).
- Post-secondary completion rates increased with grade levels completed in high school completed, ranging from 33% among those with grade 9 education to 58% among those with high school graduation.
- Married students and students with dependents had higher completion rates (62% and 59%, respectively) than single students and those without dependents (35% and 50%, respectively).

Other findings were unexpected, including:

- Students who spoke both an Aboriginal language and English at home had much lower completion rates (33%) than those who spoke only one language, either Aboriginal (53%) or English (62%).
- Those who described their high school friends' attitudes towards education positively had a lower completion rate (52%) than those who described their friends' attitudes negatively (62%).
- Students who described their parents as highly active in the life of the community had had a *lower* completion rate (37%) than those whose parents were described as moderately active (64% completion rate).
- Those who reported the *lowest* level of participation in after school activities had the *highest* post-secondary completion rate (82%), while those with the *highest* level of participation had a much *lower* post-secondary completion rate (46%).
- One of the most dramatic findings was that students who had attended high school on-reserve had a much lower post-secondary completion rate (7%) than those who either attended the nearby town high school (63%) or other high schools (71%).
- Those who attended high school prior to 1990 had a higher completion rate (78%) than those who attended after 1990 (39%).

FINDINGS CONCERNING POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS AND ENVIRONMENTS

The survey asked about the post-secondary programs that students attended including the location, the services provided and the general school environment. Some students had attended community college programs only (53%), some had attended university programs only (13%) and others had attended both college and university programs (33%). One college, with a campus located close to the reserve, accounted for the 57% of all the student-programs attended.

Several aspects of the post-secondary programs and environments were related to completion rates, including the following:

- Those who attended programs located on or near the reserve had a higher completion rate (64%) than those who attended locations away from the reserve (46%).
- The completion rate of those attending college programs was much higher (63%) than among those attending university programs (38%).
- Those enrolled in skilled trades programs had the highest completion rate (86%) followed by those involved in business administration and management programs (70%) and technical or para-professional programs (62%). Those enrolled in general studies or upgrading had the lowest completion rate (23%).
- Those who attended for a longer time period had higher completion rates. 80% of those who had attended for 3 or 4 years and 100% of those who had attended for 5 years had completed their programs.

Students were asked to rate their learning environment in several ways. Higher completion rates were generally associated with a more positive view of the environment but some aspects of the environment seem to have a much larger effect than others. As shown in the figure below, the biggest differences in completion rates were found in relation to how easy it was to socialize with other students and how well students worked together. Where it was felt that it was easy to socialize, the completion rate was 61%, compared to 41% when students felt it was not easy to socialize. Similarly, where it was felt that students worked well together the completion rate was 62%, compared to 42% when it was not felt that students worked well together. In contrast, the provision of counselling and tutoring services do not seem to be as strongly related to student success.

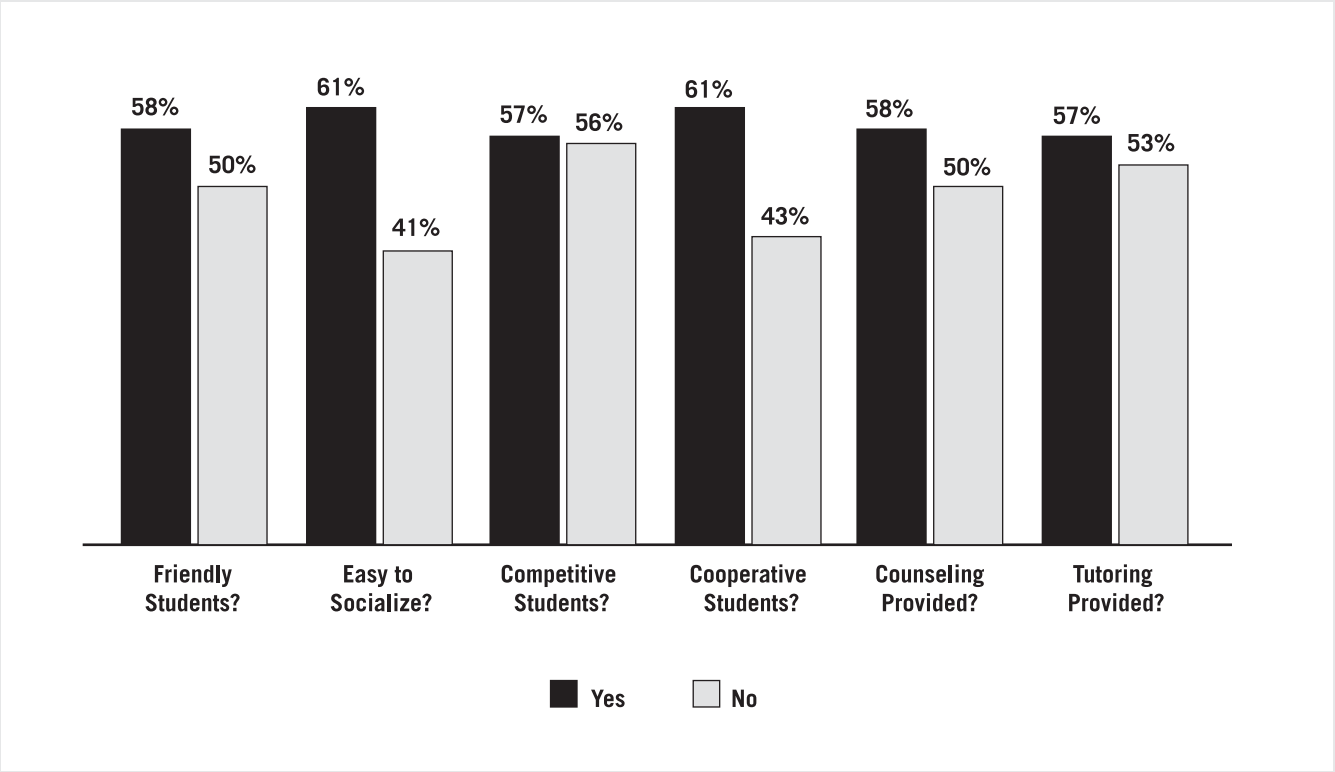
Students reported many more benefits than problems when living on-reserve and they reported slightly more problems than benefits identified when living off-reserve. Among those living on-reserve while attending school, the most frequently mentioned benefits did not have to pay for room and board and the support available from family and friends. Other benefits, such as being with the student's family and children, availability of transportation and babysitting were also mentioned. The most frequently mentioned issue for students living at the reserve was the problem of being distracted from their studies. Some people also mentioned that they experienced financial difficulties while studying and living at the reserve.

Those studying and living away from the reserve identified the benefits as learning to be more independent, having fewer distractions from studying and having a better quality of education or access to better facilities and equipment. On the negative side, financial problems were often identified among those living away from the reserve. A number of these students also mentioned the related issues of loneliness and having to adapt to the culture of the city. While a number of people identified the lack of distractions as a benefit of living away from the reserve, some said that they experienced more distractions when living away.

GENDER, MARITAL STATUS AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

The issue of marital status and presence of dependents was examined more closely in relation to gender. It was found that the completion rates of women and men follow

FIGURE 1: Post-Secondary Completion Rates and Aspects of the Post-Secondary Environment



different patterns in relation to marital status and dependents (see Figure 2). While women with dependents had higher completion rates than women without dependents, the opposite was true for men. This suggests that men have greater difficulty balancing the demands of school and children than women do. It is noteworthy that, in our survey we did not find any single men with dependents who had applied for post-secondary assistance.

The survey also asked former students whether or not family responsibilities had affected their studies. There was little difference in the completion rates of women who said that family responsibilities interfered with their studying (67%) and those who said it did not interfere (70%). But among men, those who said family responsibilities interfered with studying had much a lower completion rate (38%) than those who said it did not (59%).

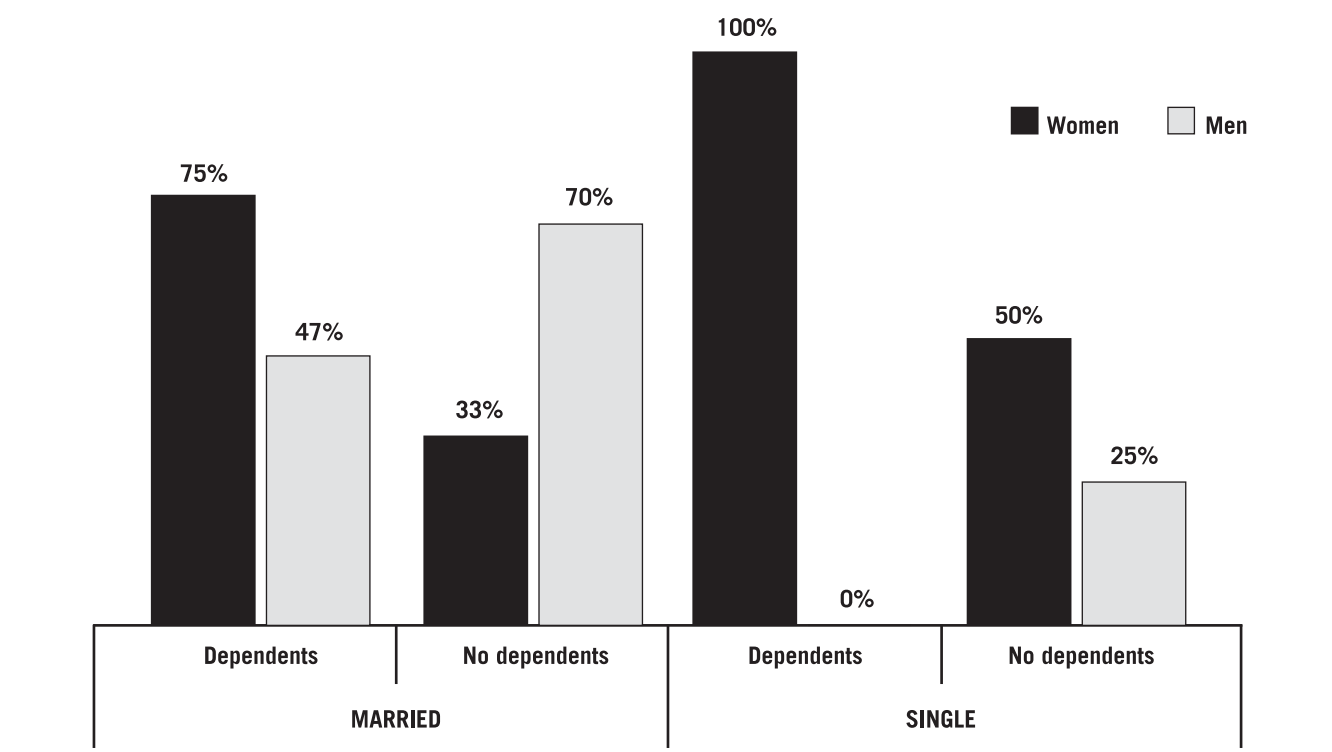
AGE AND COMPLETION RATES

The relationship between age and program completion is not straight forward. As shown in Figure 3, two groups of students appear to have more success than others: older students entering post-secondary programs for the first time and younger students entering their second or third programs before they reach the age of 25. Perhaps the first group represents mature individuals, who have decided on a career later in life and are well motivated to pursue that career. The second group may represent students who have been relatively successful in school and who have gone through a sequence of post-secondary programs relatively quickly, building on the skills gained in their first program to go on to a second or third program.

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION AND TIME PERIOD

Because the completion rate among those who attended the reserve high school was so low, this issue was explored in relation to whether or not the students actually completed high school. It was found that, even among the reserve school students who completed grade 12, the post-secondary completion rate was quite low (8%). Among those who attended the nearby town high school, those who graduated had a higher

FIGURE 2: Post-Secondary Completion Rates by Marital Status, Dependents and Sex

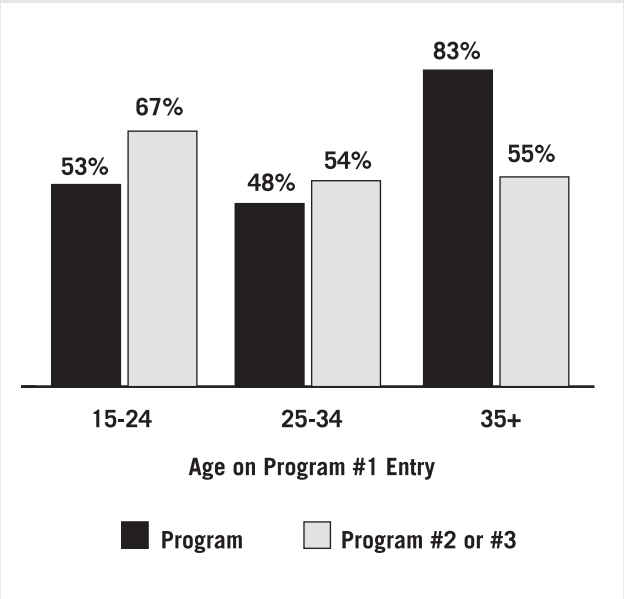


post-secondary completion rate (80%) than those who did not (33%).

As noted above it was found that students who attended prior to 1990 had a higher completion rate than others. This was examined in relation to the school attended. None of the students who attended the reserve school had attended prior to 1990. Among those who attended the nearby town high school, those who attended prior to 1990 had a higher post-secondary completion rate (76%) than those who attended after 1990 (33%). Among the students who attended other high schools, the post-secondary completion rates was slightly higher among thos who graduated (58%) compared to those who did not (52%).

The time period when the former students attended high school was important, at least among those attending the nearby town high school. Those who attended this high school before 1990 had a much higher completion rate (76%) than those who attended after 1990 (33%). Among the students who attended other high schools, the post-secondary completion rates were relatively high, whether they attended before 1990 (86%) or later (89%).

FIGURE 3: Post-Secondary Completion Rates by Age on Entry and Program Sequence



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Following are some of the conclusions that arise from the findings.

CHALLENGES FACING RESERVE HIGH SCHOOLS

The growth of high school programs on reserves has been successful in making education more accessible to First Nations students and increasing high school participation and completion rates. However, the findings of this survey suggest that there may be a problem with the quality of education obtained in reserve schools, at least in terms of preparation for post-secondary studies. These findings may be related to the age of the students, their level of maturity and perhaps to a process of self-selection among students who attend the school. Nevertheless, they suggest that reserve schools are facing a major challenge in attempting to achieve both increased participation and strong preparation for post-secondary education.

SUCCESS OF WOMEN COMPARED TO MEN

Aboriginal women are consistently more successful than Aboriginal men in post-secondary education, as shown in Census-based and other studies. This survey of on-reserve students is consistent with this general trend, showing a large gap in success between women and men. The results also suggest that child care responsibilities do not prevent women from being successful; in fact, those with dependents are more successful than other women. In contrast, child care responsibilities appear to be a greater burden to male students.

PROGRAM LOCATION

In this survey it was found that students studying close to home had higher completion rates than those studying farther away. This finding must be interpreted cautiously, both because of the on-reserve bias in the sample and the differences in the types of programs offered near the community and those offered elsewhere. Still, Education Authority officials feel that local community-based programs have been more successful than other types of programs and the comments from the students indicate they experienced more challenges when living off-reserve, such as financial pressures and adapting to the culture of the city.

TYPE OF PROGRAM

College students, students enrolled in skilled trades, technical, administrative and paraprofessional programs have higher completion rates. The relatively high completion rate among college students is consistent with census findings.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The survey findings suggests that First Nations students do better where there is a friendly and cooperative atmosphere among students and that this may be more important than other factors.

YEARS IN THE PROGRAM

The survey has shown that greater success has been achieved by the students who stayed in their programs for longer periods of time. Those First Nation students who persevere have achieved success.

AGE AND MATURITY

The evidence from the survey concerning the effect of student age is not consistent. On the one hand, older students have higher success rates than younger students, when entering their first post-secondary program. On the other hand, younger students who quickly go on to a second or third post-secondary program do well. It seems likely that other factors besides age are involved.

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