



LESSONS IN LEARNING

**Post-secondary
education in Canada:
Who is missing out?**

April 1, 2009

Canada has high participation rates in post-secondary education and its performance in terms of educational attainment is ahead of most other developed countries in the world. In 2006, 55% of Canadians between the ages of 25 and 34 had completed a post-secondary program of study, compared to an average of 33% among all OECD countries.¹ However, post-secondary participation remains low among some demographic groups in Canada, including students from low-income families, students with no history of higher education in their family, and Aboriginal students.

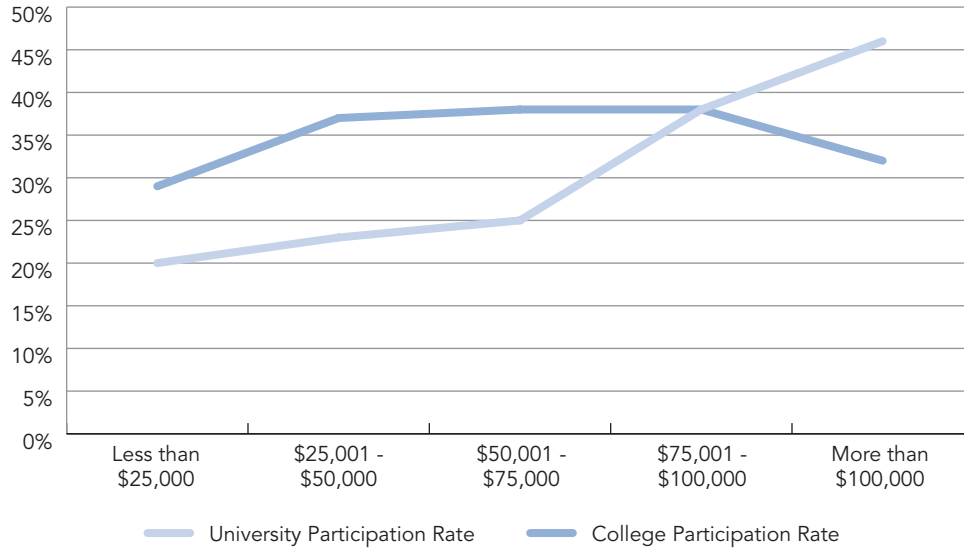
In the decade leading up to 2015, nearly 70% of Canada's projected 1.7 million new jobs are expected to be in management positions or in occupations usually requiring post-secondary qualifications.² Although post-secondary attainment is relatively high in Canada, only 59% of working-age Canadians (20- to 64-year-olds) currently hold a post-secondary credential.³ Improving access to post-secondary is one way to increase the number of graduates able to respond to labour force demands in the face of anticipated skills shortages. Raising the number of graduates may require new programs aimed at increasing the proportion of students from low income families, students with no history of higher education in their family and Aboriginal students in post-secondary education.

Under-represented demographic groups

Low-income and first-generation students

Analyses of post-secondary participation rates and parental income suggest that young adults from less affluent families are under-represented—relative to their more affluent peers—among university students. Parental income is not strongly tied to college participation rates, but it is tightly linked to university participation rates: young adults whose parents earn at least \$75,000 per year are much more likely to pursue university studies than young adults from less affluent families (see Figure 1).⁴

Figure 1:
Proportion of young adults who pursue college and university studies, by parental income

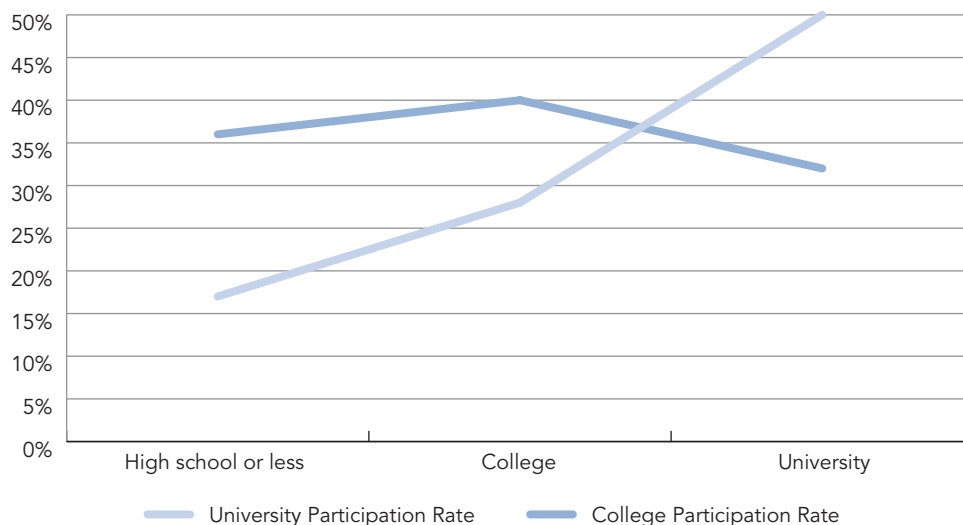


Source: Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, from M. Drolet, "Participation in post-secondary education in Canada: Has the role of parental income and education changed over the 1990s?" *Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005), Catalogue no. 11F0019MIE – No. 243.

Note: This chart shows figures for young adults aged 18 to 24 who were living with at least one parent.

University participation rates are also linked to parental education. Students from families with no history of post-secondary education—or first-generation students—are less likely than their peers to pursue post-secondary studies. In particular, young adults whose parents attended university are much more likely to go on to university compared to those whose parents did not attend university (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:
Proportion of young adults who pursue college and university studies, by parental educational attainment



Source: Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, from M. Drolet, "Participation in post-secondary education in Canada: Has the role of parental income and education changed over the 1990s?" *Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005), Catalogue no. 11F0019MIE – No. 243.
Note: This chart shows figures for young adults aged 18 to 24 who were living with at least one parent.

Aboriginal students

Over the past two decades, the educational gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada has been shrinking. Nonetheless, educational attainment among young Aboriginal adults remains well below the levels achieved by their non-Aboriginal peers. In 2006, 68% of non-Aboriginal young adults (aged 25 to 34) held a post-secondary credential, compared to 42% of Aboriginal young adults.⁵

Reasons for under-representation

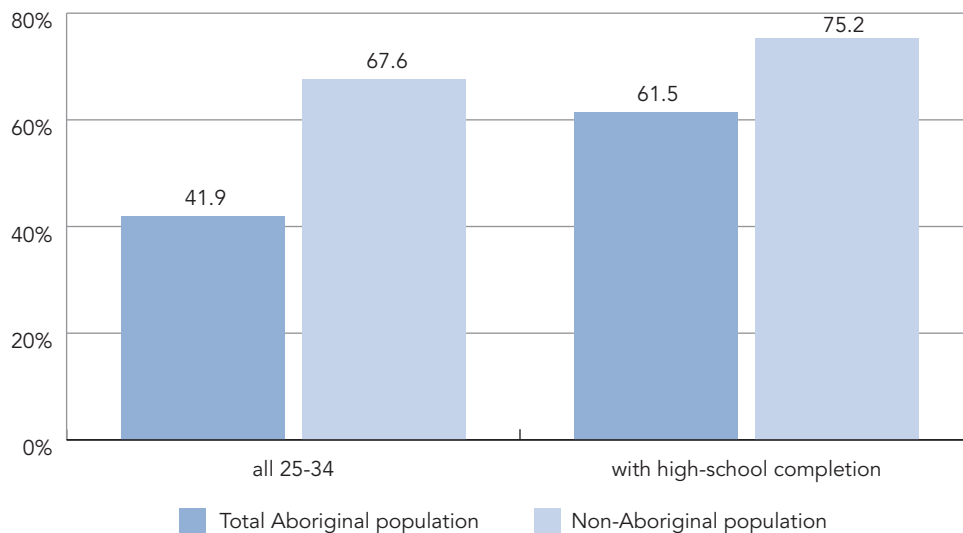
Students in under-represented demographic groups often face multiple and overlapping barriers to participation in post-secondary education.

As a group, low-income students often face financial and academic barriers. The financial barriers are both direct and indirect: clearly, low-income students have fewer financial resources, but low-income families are also more likely to overestimate the costs of post-secondary education⁶ and are less aware of the resources that are available through student aid programs.⁷ In addition, academic achievement is lower among low-income students than among their more affluent peers.⁸ Thus, low-income students can be less prepared, both financially and academically, for post-secondary education.

First-generation students—or students from families with no history of post-secondary education—also face academic barriers: they report lower high-school grades than students whose parents attended college or university.⁹ In addition, these students often face motivational barriers. That is, first-generation students are more likely to be sceptical of the benefits potentially conferred by a post-secondary education and are, therefore, less motivated to pursue post-secondary studies.¹⁰ First-generation students also face financial barriers and are typically more dependent on student loans and less able to rely on family support to fund their studies.¹¹

Academic barriers are particularly problematic for Aboriginal students: Aboriginal students are much less likely to complete high school than their non-Aboriginal counterparts and this presents a clear barrier to pursuing further education.¹² Among young adults (aged 25 to 34), there is a 25-percentage-point gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal post-secondary attainment (see Figure 3). However, for those who completed high school, that gap is considerably narrower. Thus high-school completion is a key barrier to post-secondary access among Aboriginal students. In addition, Aboriginal students face many of the barriers associated with low-income and first-generation students and many also experience or perceive racism within their educational experiences.¹³

Figure 3:
Proportion of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young adults (aged 25 to 34) who have completed a post-secondary credential, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population

Lessons in Learning

Promising practices

Low-income, first-generation and Aboriginal students face multiple and overlapping barriers to post-secondary access. No single solution can alleviate the entire constellation of barriers; rather, efforts on several fronts are required. A few programs that have embraced such a multi-faceted approach show significant promise of success.

For example, Pathways to Education delivers integrated academic, social and financial support to at-risk students through community-based initiatives. Its holistic approach has helped young people graduate and develop a positive self-image and an attainable future. As a measure of success, the program delivered in the Regent Park area of Toronto, Ontario, appears to have decreased the high-school dropout rate and increased the proportion of high-school graduates who go on to post-secondary studies.¹⁴

The Westview Partnership addresses systemic barriers facing first-generation students through a variety of initiatives designed to serve younger students. It has created partnership programs with Seneca College, York University academic departments, community groups, and the Toronto Catholic District School board. Programs include: enrichment learning activities in math, science and art; summer internships such as the York/Seneca Science and Technology Program; Higher Five, a familiarization program for Grade 5 students to spend a day engaged in learning activities on campus; and the Advance Credit Experience, a program for middle-achieving students to spend a semester on campus.

Policies and programs are also needed to provide students with better information about their choices after high school, as well as the costs and benefits of post-secondary study. Financial-aid programs must be supplemented by measures that encourage students and their families to plan for higher education. The internet provides a wealth of information in this regard, but many students and their parents find it difficult to hone in on relevant and accurate information. A number of organizations have attempted to address this problem by collecting and vetting information and then making it available through a single access point.

For example, the Education Centre on the Aboriginal Youth Network's website provides links to Aboriginal college and university programs and outlines funding options. As part of its 2005 Reaching Higher Plan, Ontario has added a new Access Window to its website for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). Features include financial assistance options and a repayment calculator for estimating monthly loan payments after graduation. Similarly, the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer has created a website called Education Planner. This is a comprehensive resource for finding out about undergraduate program availability, application dates, tuition costs, and admission requirements, at post-secondary institutions throughout B.C. CanLearn.ca is an online resource at the national level that shows parents how to get a head start on saving, guides students in their career and program choices, and provides tips for paying back loans.

Aboriginal students

The multiple and overlapping barriers faced by Aboriginal students require a particularly broad approach. Researchers in Australia have identified the following factors as essential in keeping Aboriginal students engaged in education:

- **Community-based education and training.** Aboriginal students' engagement and outcomes improve when programs are concretely linked to their home communities.
- **Community relevance.** Aboriginal students are often more attracted to practical fields of study that will allow them to return to and work in their communities.
- **A commitment to Aboriginal employment.** Aboriginal students are often more motivated to stay in school when their learning goals are focused on employment.
- **Cultural sensitivity.** Supporting Aboriginal students' cultural heritage and adapting curricula and materials to their preferred learning styles can encourage Aboriginal students to stay in school. It is equally important to have appropriate expectations concerning attendance, participation and achievement.¹⁵

Creating post-secondary programs which aim to improve recruitment and retention is also essential for ensuring that more Aboriginal students pursue and complete post-secondary studies. In 2005–2006, the Ontario government provided \$1 million to support outreach and networking activities on the part of post-secondary institutions to recruit and retain Aboriginal students. Pilot projects provided:

- transition programming to address gaps and prepare Aboriginal students for further post-secondary studies,
- seamless program delivery supporting both institutional and community-based components,
- targeted programming in health, Aboriginal teacher education and other professional disciplines, and
- retention activities to keep Aboriginal students engaged in their post-secondary studies, including counselling, mentoring and support from Aboriginal Elders.

Across Canada, a number of post-secondary institutions whose emphasis is on serving Aboriginal students have been founded. These Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning typically offer programs of study within environments that recognize and support Aboriginal culture, history and perspectives. The lessons learned by these institutions regarding recruitment and retention of Aboriginal students can be useful to other post-secondary institutions across the country.

Further research

Further research is required to determine how best to deliver programs designed to increase and broaden access to post-secondary education. In Manitoba and New Brunswick, the Future to Discover project is currently evaluating the effectiveness of two such programs: Explore your Horizons and Learning Accounts.¹⁶

Explore your Horizons is a multi-faceted program that:

- helps high-school students explore their occupational choices;
- engages parents in the process of career exploration;
- helps high-school students develop the skills and support they need to face the challenges of pursuing post-secondary education; and
- introduces high-school students to post-secondary students who share their experiences.

Learning Accounts is an approach to providing financial support to low-income students by providing them an early guarantee of \$8,000 in financial support if they complete high school and enrol in post-secondary studies. The funds are deposited into an account while students are still in high school (beginning at the end of Grade 10) and made available in disbursements upon enrolment in post-secondary programs and at the beginning of each semester. The timing of the program is designed to encourage high-school students to start thinking about their post-secondary educations early in their high-school careers.

Both programs are currently the subject of rigorous evaluations, with interim results expected in 2009 and final results scheduled for release in 2012.

Addressing the constellation of barriers confronting low-income, first-generation and Aboriginal students requires a coordinated effort by governments, educators, parents, members of the community and students themselves. In the long term, these efforts will be critical to maintaining economic prosperity and an egalitarian society in Canada.

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