

## ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

### BACKGROUND

Aboriginal peoples in Canada face multiple and systemic barriers to attaining and succeeding in post-secondary education. A long history of discrimination, including the legacy of residential schools, and chronic government underfunding of Aboriginal education has contributed to low high school completion rates, a widening gap in post-secondary attainment, and the lowest labour market outcomes of any group in Canada.

OUSA has identified a range of barriers that impact on the ability of Aboriginal peoples to access and succeed in post-secondary education including: informational, motivational, financial, and social/cultural barriers. In order to address the barriers faced by Aboriginal young people government of all levels and institutions must work to support all willing and qualified Aboriginal students who hope to attend a post-secondary institution.

### AREAS OF CONCERN

OUSA uses the term “Aboriginal” to refer to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada. OUSA recognizes that Aboriginal peoples are diverse groups with widely differing experiences and cultures, speaking a wide array of languages, living in both remote reserves and metropolitan areas. It is important to acknowledge that the experiences of various Aboriginal peoples in the post-secondary system varies widely.

Students believe that governments, both federal and provincial, and institutions must be held jointly accountable for their shared responsibility to address the barriers that currently impede Aboriginal peoples from accessing and succeeding within post-secondary education.

#### 1: BARRIERS TO ACCESS

##### *Early Outreach, and K-12 Education*

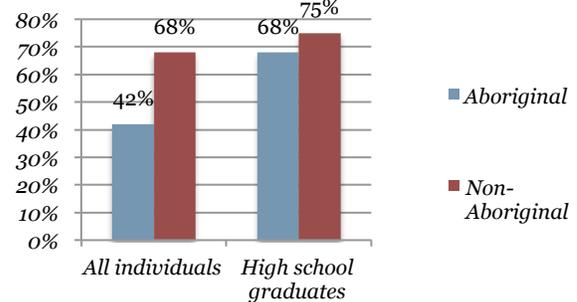
Lack of awareness about post-secondary options, availability of funding and support, and the long-time benefits of obtaining a post-secondary credential may impact the decisions Aboriginal youth make when they are considering their post-secondary pathways.

The impact of Aboriginal student success in K-12 has a huge impact on these students’ likelihood to pursue post-secondary education. As Figure 1<sup>1</sup> illustrates, the impact

<sup>1</sup> Finnie, R, Childs, S, and Wismer, A. (2011) *Underrepresented Groups in Postsecondary Education: Evidence from the Youth in*

that high school completion has on closing the PSE attainment gap is vast: the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples narrows from 26 points in the general population, to just 7 points amongst high school graduates. Across Canada, high school non-completion amongst Aboriginal peoples is more than double that of non-Aboriginal peoples.<sup>2</sup> It is evident then, that K-12 experiences are crucial in addressing Aboriginal students’ attainment of post-secondary education.

**Figure 1. Impact of Secondary School Completion on Aboriginal PSE attainment in Canada, Ages 25-64**



Unfortunately, ongoing chronic underfunding of Aboriginal primary and secondary education has created significant barriers for Aboriginal youth. At both on and off reserve schools underfunding has led to inadequate support and resources for Aboriginal students. For federally funded band schools, funding has been capped at 2 per cent since the mid-nineties, leading to band schools receiving roughly 60 per cent of what provincially funded schools receive.<sup>3</sup> This means that many of the basic infrastructure and additional amenities (such as libraries, computers, special education supports) that we expect in our schools simply do not exist in many band-operated schools.

Within the provincially funded school system, students are concerned that Aboriginal histories, knowledge and pedagogies are inadequately incorporated into the curriculum. Students are concerned that a lack of Aboriginal teachers, inadequate guidance, and minimal understanding of Aboriginal education may be limiting the success of Aboriginal learners in K-12. Of further concern are recent studies finding that 59 per cent of Aboriginal

*Transition Survey*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon and White (2013) *Supply side of Aboriginal Education in Post-Secondary Education*

<sup>3</sup> Claudine VanEvery-Albert, *A review of the Band Operating Funding Formula*.

learners were enrolled in applied courses in high school, compared to a provincial average of 30 per cent.

### ***Financial barriers***

Aboriginal students can face disproportionate challenges in financing their post-secondary education, which can include low family incomes, additional travel costs, debt aversion and price sensitivity. For First Nations and Inuit students who qualify for federal funding, inadequate funding fails to reach the financial needs of many students. Due to the 2 per cent annual cap on Post-Secondary Student Support Fund, many bands lack funding for all eligible students, and difficult choices must be made between qualified applicants.

OUSA also acknowledges that there is a lack of specific funding for non-status and Métis students. Where provincial funding does exist, it sometimes fails to adequately meet the needs of Aboriginal students. For Aboriginal students are more likely to be mature students: they are thus excluded from the 30-Off Ontario Tuition Grant, which provides 30 per cent off tuition for eligible students. Further the provincial Aboriginal Bursary reaches relatively few students, and the amount of funding availability does not fully meet Aboriginal students' needs.

## **2: SUPPORTING SUCCESS**

### ***Student Support Services***

Students believe that Aboriginal students should be able to access culturally sensitive academic, social and cultural supports that adequately address their needs. This may include: housing; Aboriginal student centres and cultural supports; and childcare. These services are often subject to precarious funding, leaving students feeling that the services they rely on are at risk.

### ***Employment***

Despite the increased focus on increasing the employability outcomes of gaining a degree, little progress has been made to ensure that universities take a leading role in ensuring Aboriginal students access work-integrated learning or developing Aboriginal-focused careers services. Given that Aboriginal peoples continue to focus higher levels of unemployment, wage gaps, and overrepresentation in certain fields, it is important for universities to focus on targeted initiatives to support Aboriginal students' transition to the labour market.

### ***Institutional Transformation***

Post-secondary institutions have made limited progress towards meaningfully incorporating Aboriginal knowledge, values, pedagogy and languages into both their curricula and campus culture more broadly. Students believe that in order to support Aboriginal student success, it is vital that Ontario's campuses strive to be safer, more welcoming spaces for Aboriginal students.

### ***Evaluation***

OUSA is concerned that a lack of available data on Aboriginal peoples attainment and completion of post-

secondary education prevents meaningful evaluation of initiatives.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

OUSA believes that the provincial and federal governments, and post-secondary institutions must all take action in order to raise Aboriginal post-secondary access, participation and attainment rates. We recommend the following strategies in order to achieve these aims:

### ***Address barriers that Aboriginal students face in attending post-secondary:***

- The provincial and federal governments must improve the public education system available to Aboriginal students; including culturally relevant material at all levels of education and robust student support services, additionally aboriginal content, including treaty rights and Métis perspectives, should be better integrated into the curriculum taught to all Ontario students and the primary and secondary school levels;
- The provincial and federal governments must provide resources to support early outreach programming for Aboriginal students in reserve and non-reserve settings. Further, early outreach programs should be within the control of Aboriginal communities, and tailored to each community's specific needs;
- Partnerships between post-secondary institutions and Aboriginal communities should be encouraged and incentivized by government to enhance access;
- The government should work to ensure that adequate funding is available to hire qualified Aboriginal teachers, including investigating alternative methods of accreditation;
- Ontario's teachers should be required to complete a module on Aboriginal education as part of their training, and school boards should ensure that professional development opportunities on Aboriginal issues are made available;
- Guidance counsellors should receive regular skills updating on concerns pertaining to Aboriginal students.

### ***Providing improved financial assistance for Aboriginal students:***

- The provincial government should push the federal government to uncap and annually increase the Post-Secondary Student Support Program funding to levels that will provide full support to all Aboriginal students in financial need and reflect the rising costs of education;
- The provincial government should expand the Aboriginal Bursary program to meet the unmet financial need of all Aboriginal students. The government should further work with institutions and Aboriginal Education councils to ensure the bursary is being used efficiently;
- The provincial government should expand the Access to Opportunities Strategy by investing in the creation of a new grant program for Aboriginal students;
- The provincial government should increase funding for the Ontario Distance Grant;

- Institutions should partner with the provincial government to create strategies to improve the available information on financial assistance available to Aboriginal students;
- The provincial government should extend OTG eligibility for Aboriginal students to cover their entire time spent attaining an undergraduate education, regardless of date of graduation;
- The provincial government should make a multi-year plan to contribute to the bursary fund of Métis Nation of Ontario Education and Training, to ensure the sustainability of the fund and enable more Métis students to access financial assistance;
- The provincial government should eliminate late fees for all students receiving band funding.

***Investing in comprehensive support services to ensure Aboriginal student success:***

- The provincial government must work with local Aboriginal Education Councils and Aboriginal communities to assess the student support service needs of Aboriginal students;
- All post-secondary institutions should have, at minimum, an Aboriginal student centre, an Aboriginal counsellor, and Aboriginal-specific secondary to post-secondary transitional services;
- All Aboriginal Education Councils should have student representation;
- The provincial and federal governments must provide funding for culturally appropriate, affordable, and accessible day care services for Aboriginal students with dependants;
- Institutions and the provincial funding should dedicate consistent annual funding for Aboriginal student centres.

***Exploring the role post-secondary institutions can play in improving Aboriginal peoples' employment outcomes:***

- Governments should provide funding to increase work-integrated learning opportunities for Aboriginal students, focusing in industries where Aboriginal peoples are underrepresented;
- Government should facilitate the creation of partnerships between NGOs and post-secondary institutions to support Aboriginal student employment;
- Government should introduce employment initiatives targeted towards Aboriginal and university students' needs;
- Investments should be made to increase opportunities for Aboriginal student entrepreneurship;
- Government should incentivize the creation of Aboriginal focused employment services, or expand services where they currently exist.

***Providing more welcoming, safer campuses for Aboriginal students:***

- The federal and provincial governments in partnership with universities and Aboriginal stakeholders should take concrete action towards the elimination of racism, providing access to

Aboriginal course content, Aboriginal faculty, administrative and support staff;

- The provincial government must review the current partnership model of funding for Aboriginal managed-institutions to ensure that students studying at Aboriginal post-secondary institutions are adequately funded. This should include collaboration with the Aboriginal Institutes Consortium.
- Institutions should seek to include Aboriginal perspectives in undergraduate curricula, and ensure that Aboriginal courses or programs have the required number of faculty needed to meet student demand;
- Institutions should commit to recognizing and incorporating Aboriginal culture on their campus in a meaningful way;
- Institutions that are located on traditional territories should commit to recognition of Aboriginal land claims;
- Admissions policies should be more widely available and included in high level strategic planning.

***Recognizing the need for robust data and comprehensive metrics to ensure program evaluation:***

- The provincial government must make resources available to facilitate information gathering on Aboriginal students within post-secondary education;
- The provincial government, in partnership with Aboriginal peoples, must begin to annually audit Aboriginal enrollment, attainment, retention and graduation rates in all post-secondary education institutions in Ontario, and set public goals and objectives for Aboriginal post-secondary attainment;
- The provincial government, in conjunction with Aboriginal communities and students, should explore metrics for measuring Aboriginal student success and support universities in implementing institutional changes based on the findings;
- Institutions should consider implementing the Council of Ontario Universities' self-identification instrument, in consultation with Aboriginal students and AECs. Where self-identification protocols are implemented, institutions should offer training resources to staff, faculty, and student organizations that may find themselves offering support to Aboriginal students;
- The provincial government should develop mechanisms to encourage information sharing and transparency among institutions;
- Oversight over universities should be given to the Ontario Ombudsman.