

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

A STUDY OF ABORIGINAL POST-SECONDARY COMPLETION RATES

By

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# **MAIS 701 RESEARCH PROJECT**

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## **Abstract**

Aboriginal students' participation in post-secondary education programs is studied to determine what kind of challenges, obstacles and issues exist that hamper their ability to be successful in completing their post-secondary studies. The subjects studied include a brief history of post-secondary education for Aboriginal students; demographic overview of Aboriginal post-secondary students; Barriers to higher retention rates including economic, skill and preparedness, social and individual and geographic barriers; Current strategies and initiatives that have been successful; as well as recommendations for enhancing Aboriginal student post-secondary success.

## **Introduction**

"There is a longing in the heart of my people to reach out and grasp that which is needed for our survival. There is a longing among the young of my nation to secure for themselves and their people the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors. Their training will be much longer and more demanding than it was in the olden days. The long years of study will demand more determination; separation from home and family will demand endurance. But they will emerge with their hand held forward to grasp the place in society that is rightfully theirs."

**The Late Chief Dan George (1989)**

Statistics Canada defines the Aboriginal identity population as "those persons who reported identifying with at least one Aboriginal group, i.e. First Nations Indian, Métis or Inuit (Eskimo), and/or those who reported being a Treaty Indian or a Registered Indian as defined by the Indian Act of Canada and/or who were members of an Indian Band or First Nation" (Statistics Canada, 2003, census dictionary). There have been more Aboriginal individuals in post secondary programs in the past two decades than there

have been in all earlier generations. *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) defines post-secondary education as “the formal academic, vocational, career and technical education, as well as adult basic education, upgrading, life skills, and pre-college courses taken to meet postsecondary requirements”.

Many more Aboriginal youth go on to college and university programs after high school, or return as adults, yet “Aboriginal peoples are still significantly underrepresented in completion rates at Canadian colleges, universities and other postsecondary institutions” (Statistics Canada, 2003). The increasing number of Aboriginal graduates gives the impression that education outcomes are fast improving but there are severe limitations on this growth. This paper will briefly explain the history of post-secondary education for Aboriginal students, then will focus on the problems hindering retention and success for Aboriginal students, the current strategies and initiatives, and will highlight the recommendations arising from successful initiatives. There will be a strong focus on Alberta’s Aboriginal populations and strategies occurring within the province, but recommendations and initiatives can be useful for Canadian Aboriginal populations as a whole.

## **History of Post-Secondary Education for Aboriginal Students**

If you like the flame on the white man's wick, learn of his ways, so you can bear his company, yet when you enter his world, you will walk like a stranger.

(George, 1989)

The unfortunate reality of the history of post-secondary education for Aboriginal students is that First Nations students did not have the freedom to attend post-secondary institutions (in Western Canada) until after 1950 when high school was made available to them (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Historically, Aboriginal children

in Canada were educated by their parents, extended family and elders. “They were caught in an oral tradition and encouraged to learn by trying, and the central belief was the principal of guidance without interference” (Charlie, 2001). An important aspect of life in traditional Aboriginal societies was education and empowerment of children. The education that the Aboriginal children received provided them with skills and awareness needed to survive and succeed as independent individuals, while still contributing as members of the Aboriginal community. In order to achieve this, “all aspects of the child (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual) were addressed”. (Western Canada Protocol, 2000, p.13)

As Europeans settled in Canada, Aboriginal education turned into a variety of paternalistic, discriminatory and racist events. The federal government, under the *Indian Act* (1876) assumed complete responsibility for education of status Indian children on reserves. Through government policies and plans, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development forced Aboriginal children into:

...A combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the worldviews, languages, and cultures of Aboriginal parents and the education of their children. (Battiste, 1995a)

Control of education was robbed from Aboriginal communities and placed in the hands of Euro-Canadian, male, Christian educators. Formal education was assimilationist, and as the Royal Commission Report (1996) states “the primary purpose of formal education was to indoctrinate Aboriginal peoples into a Christian, European worldview, thereby civilizing them” (p. 434). Residential schools existed from the 1890’s until the 1980’s and the intent of these schools was to remove all spiritual and cultural

affiliations of Aboriginal children, thereby eliminating Aboriginal traditions and values for all of the future generations.

Gallagher-Hayashi (2004) describe how residential schools were horrible environments for Aboriginal students to be raised and educated in, creating some of the negative views towards education that many Aboriginal communities still hold onto today. Children were punished, and often tortured, for practicing or speaking their own language and culture. “Many children went months and sometimes years without seeing their families and when finally reunited, they felt alienated and were often unable to make connections with the peoples they had left behind” (Gallagher-Hayashi, 2004). And yet, these children that were reunited with their families were still some of the luckier- some Aboriginal children were “adopted out to non-Aboriginal families in Canada and around the world without recourse for the family of origin” (Fournier & Crey, 1997). It is no wonder then, as of result of this, Aboriginal people have become skeptical and pessimistic about the types of education that are available to them.

Gallagher-Hayashi (2004) describes how in the 1960’s, when the residential school system began to decline, social services in Canada began what would be later called the "60s scoop." Children were torn from families, often for no other reason than poverty, and placed in the homes of non-Aboriginal families. The numbers of children removed escalated to a point that social workers could not keep up, and foster families were not carefully scrutinized, thus resulting in extremely negative environments for the Aboriginal children to be raised in.

The assimilationist education practices produced generations of individuals who lost their sense of belonging- peoples who belonged neither in their Aboriginal cultures

nor in Western culture. “The negative results of residential schools are felt to this day as Aboriginal peoples struggle to regain their stolen history, language, culture, and relationships” (Western Canada Protocol, 2000, p.5). It is not surprising that the current education system is viewed with suspicion and fear by many Aboriginal parents when we consider the experiences that were common in the era of the residential schools. In addition, it is well researched and commonly understood that “parental involvement and influence is a key factor in success for all students, including Aboriginal students” (Macias, 1989). Many Aboriginal peoples feel that when Aboriginal students lacked this parental support, due to being ripped away from their families and communities, they were not as successful as they could have been if they had been raised by the traditional Aboriginal method of education (Western Canada Protocol, 2000). The Western Canada Protocol (2000) asserts that many Aboriginal peoples believe that the educational systems imposed on them by the federal and provincial government has had the greatest negative effect on the nature of their lives. This is in large part due to the fact that the children were separated from their families, with very little regard of how it affected children, families and communities.

Aboriginal children from families who did not end up going to residential schools were still affected as they saw other children being ripped away from their families, friends lost, or later heard horror stories of what other Aboriginals went through in residential schools.

Thus, Aboriginal students in Canada have been at a disadvantage when it comes to post-secondary education as a long term result of the educational experiences that they have had to endure. Residential schools and assimilation practices created fear, disgust,

and skepticism of the European/Canadian educational system. If Aboriginal students somehow survived the residential school and wanted a higher education, it was just about impossible or would require great sacrifices. Aboriginals who wanted a post-secondary education would lose their Indian status, which gave Aboriginal peoples the idea that “education results in assimilation and loss of not only rights and privileges, but also loss of basic identity” (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000).

A *White Paper Policy* was announced in 1969 by the federal government, a proposal which proposed transferred educational responsibilities of Aboriginals on reserves to the provincial authorities. Aboriginal communities rejected this idea, and in return, issued their own *Red Paper Policy*. “This was followed by a policy statement, Indian control of Indian education (1973), articulated by the national Indian brotherhood, the first national organization bringing Canadian Aboriginal peoples together. The national Indian brotherhood reconstituted itself into the Assembly of First Nations in 1984” (Fournier & Crey, 1997). The concept behind this was to create an environment in which Aboriginal students could develop attitudes and beliefs that honor Native traditions and culture. In 1973, the federal government accepted as national policy the idea of Aboriginal control of Indian education. The Indian Control of Indian Education policy makes special reference to the importance of adult education "considering the great need there is for professional peoples in Indian communities, every effort should be made to encourage and assist Indian students to succeed in post secondary studies" (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). The policy addresses the importance of Aboriginal students obtaining a higher education, in order to be contributing members of their communities and to



become more active in participating in formal training, thus leading to enhanced work and career opportunities.

However, administrative management remained in the hands of the federal government. The federal government maintained control over funding and to most Aboriginals that continues to be a major impediment to local control. "First Nations which have accepted local control recognized it as increased administrator responsibility without managerial authority and no recognition of First Nations jurisdiction; the federal government continues to set policies and budgets" (Assembly of First Nations, 1993, p.4). The *Appropriations Act*, also known as the E-12 guidelines, provided funding and assistance to Aboriginal post-secondary learners in the form of tuition, books, supplies, travel and living allowances. In 1989 the postsecondary student assistance programs replaced the E-12 guidelines, which tightened eligibility requirements and further restricted funding for students. As more students were denied funding, the Canadian Human Rights Commission Report (1990) criticized this decision:

The decision to restrain the growth in funding to attend postsecondary institutions seems ill considered. We have underlined on several occasions that, given the importance of education, and particularly technical and postsecondary education, it would be worse than shortsighted not to guarantee every possible opportunity to enable Native persons to pursue their schooling at the postsecondary level. (p. 16)

Many Aboriginal students today are still denied post-secondary education, even though Aboriginal communities argue that post-secondary education is an inherent right as well as a treaty right, and the federal government needs to recognize this. As noted by the Assembly of First Nations, the government constantly refuses to acknowledge that post-secondary education is an inherent right according to the treaty, and rather focuses on the issue at their own discretion. Post-secondary education is necessary for

Aboriginals to participate in a growing economy and emerging Canadian society, and while the history of Aboriginal education is a setback in itself, it is necessary for the government to take an active stance in its role to increase Aboriginal completion rates in post-secondary settings.

## **Current Demographics**

This section provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of post-secondary educational attainment amongst Aboriginal students. When it comes to examining the post-secondary completion and retention rates of Aboriginal students, it is important to note that majority of the numbers and statistics apply to First Nations students, and Metis and Inuit students comprise a small portion of the statistics, if any at all. There are relatively few statistics and numbers that pertain strictly to Aboriginal populations, especially in regards to Metis and Inuit, and this is an area that is currently being worked on so that more numbers and figures can give us an idea of where the demographics of Aboriginal populations stand (Council of Ministers of Education, 2003, and Statistics Canada, 2003).

Statistics Canada (2003) shows that the majority of Aboriginal peoples (approximately 65%) live in the four most western provinces. The wide demographic distribution is associated to the fact that Aboriginal communities are diverse, unique and distinctly located in large part in remote and isolated areas.

Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen (2000) describe a 1999 British Columbia study of former students of colleges and institutes, which showed First Nations students were more likely to have a spouse or partner, to be older than the general population, and to have children. Many of the First Nations students that complete post-secondary education

are students who come back as mature students, after prolonged periods of absence and time away from their studies.

The links among better education, better jobs and better income have been substantially documented. Hull (2005) concludes that “there is ample evidence that educational attainment leads to greater opportunities in the areas of employment and income.” Most studies have concluded that Aboriginal peoples are more successful in postsecondary education today than in the past (e.g. Council of Ministers of Education, 2003, and Statistics Canada, 2003). Statistics Canada (2003) indicated that while 38.4% of the Canadian population aged 25 to 64 reporting Aboriginal identity had attained trade, college and university education according to the 2001 census, 48.3% of the overall Canadian population aged 25 and over had attained trade, college and university education. In the 1996 Census by Statistics Canada, it showed that rates of post-secondary completion have improved for First Nations peoples; however, this is part of an overall trend of improvement for all populations. (Statistics Canada, 1996)

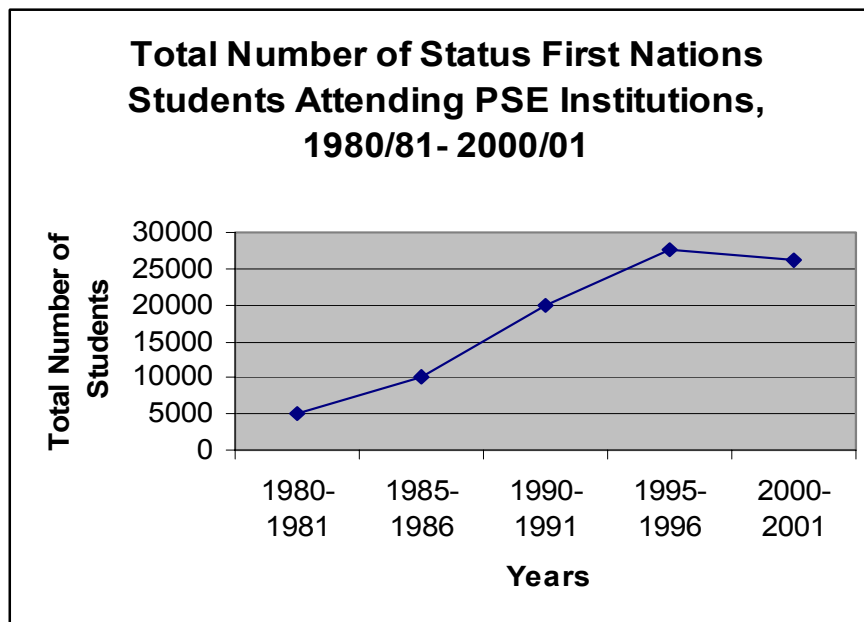


Figure 1.1. Source: INAC, Indian and Northern Affairs

In general, female Aboriginal students tend to do better in educational attainment. McFadden (1996) explains how one exception is in the trades and college postsecondary education sector; here male and female Aboriginal persons do equally well; while females show a “smaller percentage than males for ‘secondary school certificates’, this stems from the fact that they have a higher proportion completing PSE as well as a higher proportion among the Aboriginal population in the ambiguous ‘some PSE – no certificate’ schooling level”.

The difference between the rate of completion for the Aboriginal population and the Canadian population is most evident at the university level. Of those Aboriginal students who commence university studies about “a quarter of them earn a degree, compared to about half of the non-Aboriginal students” (Armstrong et. al. 1990). Many students drop out of programs entirely, some return after a semester or two and some change programs. The reasons are various, including lack of funding, mis-management of time, falling in love, as well as death or birth of a close one. It is clear that skills to survive in a program are not only academic, but rather, they include knowing how to manage one’s daily life, cope with various circumstances, and deal with life changes.

At the same time, however, Aboriginal people are becoming more likely to complete training in trades programs than are Canadians overall. If Aboriginal students enter into post-secondary studies, it is often into trades and apprenticeships. Hull (2005) reports that the Aboriginal population is close to reaching parity in post-secondary tech colleges and in the trades. “In 1996, 25% of the total population and 21% of the

Aboriginal population 15 years of age and over completed non-university PSE. By 2001, this had improved to 28% among the total population and to 25% among the Aboriginal population, getting very close to parity” (Council of Ministers of Education, 2003).

Numbers within individual provinces seem to parallel the findings on the national level. For example, upon examination of educational attainment at the Alberta provincial level (see Figure 1.2), Alberta Learning (2003) found that the educational attainment of Alberta’s Aboriginal population, aged 15 and over, is lower than for the non-Aboriginal population. Among the 15+ Aboriginal population, 25% obtained a trades certificate or college diploma, and 4% obtained a university degree. In total, 29% of the 15+ Aboriginal population had attained a post-secondary education versus 47% for 15+ non-Aboriginals. The most noticeable difference is found again at the university level, where Aboriginal peoples are four times less likely than non-Aboriginal people to have completed a university degree.

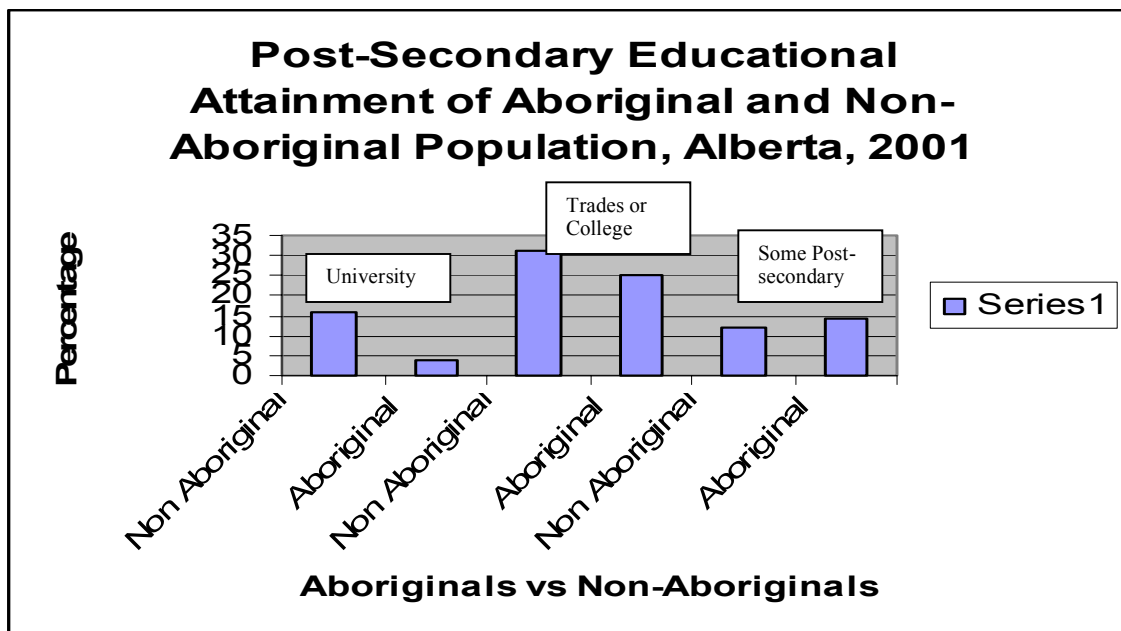


Figure 1.2. Source: Alberta Learning, 2003

Both provincially and nationally, Aboriginal students are less likely to complete post-secondary studies. The numbers are on the rise, but the biggest problem remains in completion at the university level by Aboriginal students. Despite increases in numbers, there are still large gaps between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students completion rates, and these gaps are due to the barriers that Aboriginal students face when embarking into post-secondary education programs.

## **Barriers**

It is clear that the decision about whether or not to attend a post-secondary educational institution after high school is a complex process. Different factors have an influence on different people once they are at the post-secondary level, and can cause completion problems. Furthermore, it is rare for there to be one single reason that can account for the patterns of non-attendance or for the decision of a given individual. Rather, we need to consider the joint influence of several factors acting at different times on different students.

(Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, 2007)

There are a large number of obstacles that Aboriginal students face that can prevent them from reaching their utmost potential when it comes to post-secondary studies, such as economic barriers, social/personal barriers, geographic barriers, and skill and preparation barriers. On their own, the barriers may be seen as ones that everyone may face in regards to post-secondary completion, however, together, they combine to be too much for some Aboriginal students.

### **Economic Barriers**

Post-secondary education is costly and burdensome for most Canadian post-secondary students, but for some Aboriginal students it creates an additional economic barrier due to already poor socioeconomic status and additionally incurred costs.

Malatest & Associates (2004) report that there is currently not enough funding in the system to support all the potential Aboriginal students who wish to attend a post-secondary educational institution. For Aboriginal students, finding financial assistance for postsecondary education takes a comprehensive search of many venues. Aboriginal post-secondary education budgets are often capped, placing restrictions on eligibility and removing daycare and rent subsidies. Funding is not adequate for Aboriginal students for post-secondary education, and often there are problems accessing consistent funding.

**FUNDING IS PROBLEMATIC FOR:**

- Aboriginal students who are not status Indians.
- Metis.
- Aboriginals who have to interrupt studies or do not meet criteria for continued support from bands.

(Malatest & Associates, 2004)

Funding sometimes get scaled back and cut, stipulations and criteria are hard to meet, and relocation costs become too hefty for a student to manage, and they are often forced to withdraw or drop out as a result. “In the more than a decade since the federal government transferred responsibility for the Post-Secondary Student Support Program to First Nations, funding has remained static, placing a burden on individual First Nation communities to make difficult decisions about which students can be funded”. (McCall, 2007) When a student is receiving government support from his or her band they may be ineligible for other federal and provincial student loans, or the amount of such loans may be adjusted to take into account Native student program funding. “Non-status Indians and Métis are not covered by these federal programs and must rely upon regular federal and provincial student loan programs” (Holmes, 2006).

Statistics Canada (2003) states that approximately 44% of Aboriginal students live in rural areas and on reserves before attending post-secondary educational institutions. Thus, they are not only faced with tuition, books and relocation costs but they are also usually confronted with rent, daycare and other costs of living that they are not prepared for. Moving away from their communities, they do not have the support that they need in metropolitan areas. Escalating housing costs in large urban areas where majority of the post-secondary institutions are located have created additional financial burdens. Worst of all, the unfortunate reality for Aboriginal students is that “they do not have adequate employment income to pay for postsecondary education. The majority of Aboriginal students must rely on assistance from other sources to attend college or university” (Malatest & Associates, 2004). Funding for Aboriginal students is largely misunderstood, and many myths about funding for Aboriginals blur the vision of how more post-secondary funding for Aboriginal students is desperately needed.

<b><u>COMMON MYTHS ABOUT FIRST NATIONS PSE FUNDING:</u></b>	
<b><u>MYTH</u></b>	<b><u>TRUTH</u></b>
First Nations students get a free post-secondary education.	For every 100 students that want to go, approximately only 50 students get funding.
Once a First Nations student gets funding, they get it for their entire educational career.	Funding can get pulled based on GPA, course selection, funding cutbacks, etc. and is never guaranteed.
Aboriginal students can use the money they get on whatever they want.	Funding obtained is used for tuition and books. After that, it may be applied against rent and daycare subsidies, relocation costs, and as a basic living allowance.

(Malatest & Associates, 2004)



First Nations students may receive money from the bands for tuition, books, living allowances, and sometimes relocation expenses. Sometimes they may receive Christmas bonuses if the Band has funds to allow for it. However, sometimes the bands will provide only money for tuition and books. More often than not, it is not the actual cost of education itself that forms the economic barrier (tuition, books). It is the other expenses associated with daycare, transportation, housing, food, etc. that often makes Aboriginal students unable to survive and complete post-secondary education. Survival alone takes everything that the student has, which does not allow for additional time and energy for studying (Barnhardt, 2001).

### **Social/Personal/Individual Barriers**

A social barrier may be defined as an external factor to the individual that influences the accessibility to post-secondary education by exerting certain pressures over which the individual does not have control. Social barriers encompass several factors that are frequently cited throughout studies on accessibility to post-secondary education. (Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, 2007)

Social barriers have an enormous effect on Aboriginal student's completion rates in post-secondary education. The Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat (2007) describes how social barriers that affect Aboriginal students more frequently than their non-Aboriginal counterparts include lack of awareness of post-secondary options, not enough role models and mentors, and lack of familiarity with traditional post-secondary institutions practices.

To some Aboriginal peoples, the post-secondary institution often represents an impersonal and hostile environment in which their cultures, traditions, and values are not recognized and appreciated. Post-secondary institutions (especially universities) typically have long-established practices seen as serving the values and cultural norms of the dominant, non-Aboriginal society. Too often, little of what Aboriginal students bring in

the way of cultural knowledge, tradition and values is recognized or respected in the postsecondary system. The university world in particular, is substantially different from Aboriginal reality.

Aboriginal students must acquire and accept the new form of consciousness, and orientation which often devalues the worldviews they bring with them. For many, this is a greater sacrifice and they are willing to make, so they withdraw and go home, branded a failure. Those who do survive in the academic environment for four or more years often find themselves caught between two worlds, neither of which can fully satisfy their acquired taste and aspirations, and therefore they enter into a struggle to reconcile their conflicting forms of consciousness. (Barnhardt, 2001)

Aboriginal role models help to highlight the accomplishments of other First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth. Many Aboriginal students do not have role models or mentors in their lives that support and encourage them to complete post-secondary studies. Lack of Aboriginal role models who succeeded at the university setting often give students the idea that university is not a viable option for Aboriginal peoples or that it is too difficult to complete. Some Aboriginal students may not know of anybody that has ever completed post-secondary studies, so they may not feel that they can do it either.

Individual and personal barriers can be enormous problems for Aboriginals, as poor self-concept and motivation can become burdensome for Aboriginal students in regards to postsecondary education. They can suffer from stress, panic attacks, headaches, anxiety, depression, and other physical and mental illnesses, as a result of their individual and personal barriers; they might experience feelings such as "a sense of powerlessness, apathy, poor mental and physical health, anger and frustration." (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004, p.16) Frequently the home communities and metropolitan support services do not have sufficient support, either familial or institutional, to assist in

the healthy development and preparation for Aboriginal students. "More students drop out of programs for personal reasons than all other reasons combined. Family stress, discrimination, loneliness and an alien environment combine to overwhelm students" (Unruh, 1989). Unruh (1989) continues to explain that once in the competitive environment of a postsecondary setting, these problems and concerns become more pronounced, and some Aboriginal students are not prepared to deal with the emotions, feelings and sentiments that follow. Aboriginal students often will report negative feelings about postsecondary education, either due to feelings of isolation, inadequacy, or discrimination. As Barnhardt (2001) asserts, those who do survive in the academic environment for four or more years often find themselves caught between two worlds, neither of which can fully satisfy their acquired taste and aspirations, and therefore they enter into a struggle to reconcile their conflicting forms of consciousness. This can become a large burden, and for some Aboriginal students, a complete barrier to completing post-secondary education.

Support and encouragement is extremely important to Aboriginal students, and if they lack that support, they often lack confidence in themselves and their abilities. Alone, any of these social factors may be conquerable, but in combination, they often create barriers and obstacles that are hard to overcome for Aboriginal students. These issues need to be addressed so that Aboriginal students feel the desire to complete higher levels of education.

### **Geographic/Demographic Barriers**

One of the most insurmountable barriers for many Aboriginal students is complete relocation from their local communities and families to large metropolis and

urban settings. Statistics Canada (2003) states that approximately 44% of Aboriginal students live in rural areas and on reserves before attending post-secondary educational institutions. Some of the major issues that Aboriginal students face when leaving reserves and remote/isolated areas include leaving their families, no familiar surroundings, cost of daycare and transportation, increased housing costs, and lack of community support. Geographic barriers might not only refer to physical distance from their home communities, but also consider “commuting time, convenience and efficiency” (Hull, 2000).

Johnson and Buchan (1998) assert that many Aboriginal communities in the North suffer from isolated, remote conditions that do not allow for the same educational opportunities that many others are afforded. They depict how these conditions often segregate Aboriginal peoples, and put them at a disadvantage when it comes to achieving a higher quality of life. These challenges include lack of training opportunities, employment and economic success within their home communities. Students do not have access to local post-secondary opportunities, so when they come to the larger metropolis areas to access education, they often find themselves out of their element.

Often a geographic challenge is complicated by other related factors, as indicated in the statement indicating that:

Many students live in remote or isolated areas that require them to relocate to attend post-secondary programs. This may not be possible for a person with family responsibilities or financial obligations. The history of the residential school system may also discourage young Aboriginal students from seeking an education away from home (Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, 2007).

Family responsibilities often keep Aboriginal students from staying in school and completing their education. These factors indicate that there are complex issues for

Aboriginal students, and while some solutions may be in place to counteract these demographic barriers (such as travel allowances granted through band funding), there are still many complications that need to be addressed and dealt with.

### **Skill and Preparedness Barriers**

Aboriginal students sometimes can lack confidence in their academic capabilities due to inadequate preparation for post-secondary studies, and this poses as a huge barrier to their success. Charlie (2001) claims that Aboriginal peoples who do complete high school often have weak skills, and lack the academic preparation required to succeed in post secondary studies. Hull (2000) describes how a recent report commissioned by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada reflected upon the quality of knowledge transfer at the early and secondary levels of education on reserves, stating that “the quality of education on the reservation for secondary school does not prepare them for postsecondary life. They have to take make up courses when they get here, some get frustrated and dropout”. Hull, Phillips & Polyzoi (1995) found in the 1980’s that most reserve students were at least one year behind their expected grade level by the age of 13. The high number of Aboriginal drop outs from post-secondary studies can be attributed to this type of poor academic preparation. “Many Aboriginal students do not complete high school (in Alberta, only 38% graduate from high school, compared to 77% of non-Aboriginal Canadians)”. (Alberta Learning, 2005) If they do graduate from high school, they may do so without necessary courses such as mathematics and science, or they might lack studying skills, time management abilities and computer literacy- all problems that surface in post-secondary studies. If Aboriginal peoples attend postsecondary education it is quite often as mature students, where skill and lack of academic

preparation becomes even more pronounced as the mature students have been removed from formal education for a number of years. They may have forgotten essential skills, are not used to studying for long period of time, and may have other focal points in their lives that take center stage (children, families, etc.) Whether they are high school graduates, or mature students, Aboriginal students may find their lack of skill and preparedness as barriers to completing their quest for higher education.

### **Current Successful Strategies & Initiatives**

A variety of successful strategies and initiatives have been proposed and introduced in order to combat the low completion rates of post-secondary by Aboriginal students. These include federal, provincial, post secondary institution and tribal college support programs, funding programs, teaching methodologies/curriculum development and community support programs.

#### **Government Support Programs**

The relatively low completion rates of Aboriginal students have led to a number of government strategies to improve postsecondary retention rates. Education in Aboriginal communities is severely lacking, and this puts many students at a severe disadvantage when it comes to successful higher education learning. The Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat (2007) states that increased First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner access to postsecondary and other adult education and training opportunities and support services is high on the agenda of both provincial and federal governments. The federal government controls much of the funding for First Nations learners (which will be discussed later), while provincial governments work with the federal government, post-secondary institutions and private industry to manage a variety of programs to encourage

increased Aboriginal completion rates in the post-secondary setting. A number of communication activities have been developed and are underway to develop informational and promotional materials for Aboriginal audiences to increase their awareness and assist them to make choices about career opportunities in post-secondary institutions and the trades.

Alberta Education (2003) explains some of the provincial government initiatives in Alberta designed to assist Aboriginal people with post-secondary learning options. . Insight on how these programs can be implemented in remote, isolated communities as well as working within cultural traditions is a major focus of the Alberta government, which is helpful due to the large number of remote and Northern reserves. Some of the provincial initiatives include the Aboriginal Learning Clicks Program, Alberta Apprenticeship Project, and the Aboriginal Role Model Poster Program amongst others. Many of these programs focus on enhancing and developing career, education, and training courses available to Aboriginal peoples to help them advance themselves.

Aboriginal Learning Clicks is designed to motivate and inform Aboriginal students on post-secondary opportunities, and to help them overcome the barriers they might face that might restrain them from completing their post-secondary studies. “With the recruitment of 4 Aboriginal youth ambassadors, over 40 presentations to Aboriginal students were made, reaching more than 875 Aboriginal students” (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2007) reported that 95% of these Aboriginal students found the presentations useful, and 92% of them said they would use the information in future career planning. Development of

career information resources targeted towards Aboriginal parents, along with information sessions and workshops, such as Alberta Advanced Education's *Aboriginal Parent Clicks*, which provides parents with the tools necessary to help their Aboriginal children plan their education and careers. Ambassadors provide parents with post-secondary information and resources, giving them the knowledge to help their child plan for post-secondary. All participants receive a parent package which includes goodies and resources to assist parents in helping their children plan for post-secondary education. In just four months since the commencement of the project, over "450 Aboriginal parents had participated in the workshop" (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007) to gain knowledge about their children's post-secondary education, and the satisfaction rate amongst the parents was 99.89%.

The Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project (AAAP) is a joint venture initiative between industry and Aboriginal organizations, and the federal government designed to increase Aboriginal participation in Alberta apprenticeship programs. Dean Bourque, the project coordinator for AAAP, describes how in response to the need for skilled workforce, a number of pre-apprenticeship programs are being delivered to Aboriginal peoples. Bourque (2005) explains, for example, how a joint training program is being offered in Fort McMurray for the Métis Nation of Alberta and the Athabasca Tribal Council. The First Nations Training to Employment Program assists First Nations people in finding and keeping meaningful employment in the trades. Since its inception in 2001, the AAAP has "registered over 100 apprentices. Due to its success and the continuing shortage of trades people in Alberta, in 2005, the AAAP expanded to include Calgary and Lethbridge. The goal is to register a minimum of 255 Aboriginal apprentices by 2008" (Bourque, 2005). Since the trades comprise a large area of post-secondary



study for Aboriginal students, programs and initiatives such as this can find themselves to be very successful.

It is important that successful Aboriginal students serve as models for Aboriginal academic success and be given the opportunity to share their own strategies for academic survival with other Aboriginal students. It is important to not only look at inhibiting factors to identify key issues, but also to look at what factors have made Aboriginal post-secondary students successful. In response to these ideas, Alberta Human Resources and Employment (2003) released *Seekers and Storytellers: Aboriginal Role Models Share Their Career Journeys*, a resource for Aboriginal youth, and the Aboriginal Role Models poster that links Aboriginal youth to the Career Information Hotline. These consist of personal stories of Aboriginal peoples in Alberta, which are meant to encourage Aboriginal youth in their own career planning and refer them to other career information.

Alberta Human Resources and Employment (2003) research shows incorporating cultural components into information resources and programs are important to Aboriginal youth and their parents and is the focus of these programs. Both the federal and provincial governments are committed to providing Aboriginal learners with access to culturally relevant learning opportunities and quality support services.

### **Post-Secondary Institution Partnerships and Programs**

Institutions must develop a greater understanding of Aboriginal peoples, and the historical and social barriers they face, before “a real difference will be seen in the number of Aboriginal peoples who succeed in pursuing and completing higher education” (Homes, 2006). Holmes (2006) describes how there is currently a strong

focus on post-secondary institutions and communities to come together as partners and actively engage in re-facing Aboriginal post-secondary education.

While studying the barriers that Aboriginal students faced, Macias (1989) performed a study that provided results and proof that cultural discontinuity and inadequate secondary school preparation prevent many Native college students from completing their degrees. He sampled and surveyed Native college students who were successful and explains how these students had to develop strategies for coping with the demands of college- looking to peer and support services, preparation courses, etc.

Post-secondary institutions are taking the initiative to develop programs that adhere to the Aboriginal learning style and culture. Recognizing that some Aboriginal students who may have the potential to succeed at university do not have adequate academic preparation to cope with a full first-year academic load, some universities have established transition, or enhanced support programs. For example, Concordia University College of Alberta has developed a preparation course for Aboriginal adults, which is designed to help students “develop the skills and complete the courses needed for entry into most university, technical and college studies” (Holmes, 2006). The English classes makes use of literature written by Native authors and/or containing Native content.

Post-secondary institutions are also increasing the student services that they offer and provide to Aboriginal students. The University Calgary has developed The Native Centre, which provides an Aboriginal environment that is cultural, spiritual and encouraging, assisting Aboriginal students in becoming more successful in their studies. The Centre focuses on “supportive services for Aboriginal students including an elders program, cultural ceremonies, spiritual gatherings, tutorial services, and social activities”

(Holmes, 2006).

Post-secondary institutions have also joined together to partner as one group to help encourage and motivate Aboriginal students. Holmes (2006) describes the Native Ambassador Post-Secondary Initiative (NAPI), which is a group of Aboriginal ambassadors from Mount Royal College, SAIT and the University of Calgary who serve as positive role models to Aboriginal youth in Alberta. Collectively, their goal is to motivate Aboriginal youth to pursue a post-secondary education by visiting Alberta secondary students and encourage youth to follow in their own footsteps. The ambassadors vary in age and life experience so Aboriginal youth can learn that achieving a post-secondary education is never an impossible goal. The NAPI Ambassadors provide personalized stories on their own life experience and are also equipped to present concrete information on post- secondary entrance requirements, application processes, programs, scholarships, support services, Aboriginal/ First Nation student associations and campus life.

Aboriginal students can sometimes be attracted to programs that reflect their own life experience and cultural background and give them an opportunity to examine their culture and history in greater depth. “Many universities and colleges have established inter-disciplinary programs in Native or indigenous studies” (the name varies at different institutions) (Holmes, 2006). These programs may have a high number of Aboriginal faculty and incorporate an Aboriginal learning style. For example, Holmes (2006) describes how the University of Lethbridge has developed an excellent Native American Studies program that allows for study from a Native perspective, and relates to various

disciplines such as management, law, politics, history, women's studies, etc. The classes are taught from a Native perspective, including sharing circles, Native philosophies, and incorporation of elder teachings, which make this program very unique and appealing to Aboriginal students. When combining some of the previously mentioned support services for Aboriginal students with Aboriginal-specific academic programs, students might find themselves with higher retention and completion rates.

Many post-secondary institutions are working together to create innovative and supportive programs to encourage Aboriginal students and to increase post-secondary completion rates. For example:

Alberta Advanced Education along with Alberta Solicitor General and the RCMP participated in the development of two Aboriginal policing certificate programs. The first, Aboriginal Policing Security, is a joint initiative between Norquest College and Northern Lakes College. The second, Aboriginal Police Studies, is delivered by Grant McEwan College. Graduates will obtain the skills and prerequisites required to enter cadet training with municipal police services and the RCMP (Alberta Learning, 2005).

Partnerships between post-secondary institutions, the government, private industry and external organizations allow for more Aboriginal control of education, and generate more interest from the Aboriginal community. For example, SAIT (Southern Alberta Institute of Technology) has partnered with Maskwachees Cultural College to deliver a petroleum industry training program. (Alberta Learning, 2005) The program is part of SAIT's regular curriculum, but offering it through the tribal college, allows Aboriginal students who do not want to leave the reserve or whom want to continue studying at Maskwachees Cultural College to obtain credentials in this program. Alberta Learning (2005) has collaborated with stakeholders to develop Aboriginal initiatives leading to increased employment opportunities. Keyano College (2006) recently

received Ministerial approval for delivery of the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program that is designed to allow individuals working in Aboriginal business settings to acquire business skills and knowledge without having to leave their jobs or relocate.

Community delivery programs bridge cultural and financial gaps of attending post-secondary education for Aboriginal students, and can be very successful in recruiting and supporting the remote, northern, and underrepresented Aboriginal populations. Community programs include examples such as Alberta-North, which is a partnership of “six northern postsecondary institutions-Athabasca University, Fairview College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Northern Lakes College and Portage College” (Alberta Learning, 2005) that aims to increase and improve the access to educational opportunities for adult learners in northern Alberta. The network of 49 Community Access Points (CAP site) provides educational opportunities for over 1700 registrants per year in small, remote communities across northern Alberta. “A significant number of students in these programs are Aboriginal, as it is tailored to their needs” (Keyano College, 2006).

In the past, post-secondary institutions have perceived the problems of low achievement, high attrition, and poor retention as student problems, placing the onus of success completely on the Aboriginal student. These same institutions are starting to realize that there needs to be an emphasis on an educational system that respects and honours Aboriginal traditions, cultures and worldviews and are developing and implementing programs accordingly. Programs that may be “praised or singled out include community delivery, transitional support, academic and personal support, and support for Aboriginal programs” (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004, p.41). These should

all be considered successful new initiatives as they are developed in response to the outstanding obstacles that Aboriginal students currently face in completing any type of post-secondary studies.

### **Tribal Colleges**

Tribal Colleges have been successful in increasing Aboriginal retention and completion rates through a greater understanding of Aboriginal needs, support, cultural-appropriateness and through the “provision of a community of Aboriginal learners and faculty” (Malatest & Associates, 2004). Many tribal colleges maintain their original language during instruction (Blackfoot, Cree, etc.), while instilling the values of the tribe’s traditions, rituals, and ceremonies through social activities and gatherings. Tribal college’s goals include a commitment to the community, sustained local leadership, participation of Elders, spiritual harmony, and traditional teaching practices.

Rindone (1988) conducted a survey with 107 Navajo college graduates concerning background factors contributing to their high educational motivation. He concluded that a stable traditional family was the major influence on these high achieving students. The key factors that motivated these Aboriginal students to obtain higher education can help us identify areas that are essential to higher Aboriginal completion in post-secondary studies. One of the most important factors was that they felt that they could take pride in their culture and integrate this cultural knowledge into their daily lives. He found that when cultural content was included in the teaching of language, ceremony, spirituality, cultural events, protocol, cultural values, and history from an Aboriginal perspective, the students became more involved and were more successful. Rindone (1988) also found that the wisdom of the elders should be included, and they

should be invited to share their knowledge and wisdom with the students. Information on career opportunities should be more holistic and should include information such as user specific services and resources, low cost housing, life skills and educational tools.

Rindone (1988) describes how 87% of the students reported higher success and completion rates when the above stated factors were adhered to.

The First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium (FNAHEC) is inclusive of Aboriginal adult learning and post-secondary institutions in Western Canada. The goal of FNAHEC and the tribal colleges is to foster lifelong learning amongst Aboriginal peoples and to promote indigenous based initiatives to maintain and nurture higher education.

**ALBERTA TRIBAL POST-SECONDARY FACILITIES INCLUDE:**

- 1) Bluequills First Nation College (St.Paul, AB)
- 2) Bullhead Adult Education Centre (TsuuTina, AB)
- 3) Maskwachees Cultural College (Hobbema, AB)
- 4) Nakoda Wesley Post-Secondary Education (Morley, AB)
- 5) Nechi Training, Research & Health Promotions Institute (St.Albert, AB)
- 6) Piikani Post-Secondary Education Centre (Brocket, AB)
- 7) Old Sun Community College (Siksika, AB)
- 8) Chiniki Education Program (Morley, AB)
- 9) Red Crow Community College (Cardston, AB)
- 10) Yellowhead Tribal College (Edmonton, AB)
- 11) Kayas Cultural College (Fox Lake, AB)

Webster (2003) describes how many of the tribal colleges were established to allow Aboriginals to adhere to traditional ways, thus ensuring post-secondary educational attainment and success. Usually in the tribal college setting, a special emphasis is placed on topics such as identity, language, traditions, history, family values, assisting each other, and developing independence as learners. Tribal colleges are tailored to the needs of their culture and their students. For example, Maskwachees Cultural College bases its

core values, instruction methodologies, curriculum and philosophy, on the “wisdom, teachings and beliefs of the Cree culture” (Maskwachees Cultural College, 2006).

Programs are holistic in nature, allowing students to relate to their peers and foster knowledge that aide in development of social, emotional, physical and spiritual element, while using the powerful philosophy behind Native traditions. Krumm (1995) explains how Yellowhead Tribal Council has focused on providing financial, social and educational support to band members that provide economic, social and educational support services to First Nations band members that could not find themselves successful at mainstream institutions.

Each individual tribal college specializes and controls their own education programs, however, many partner with accredited mainstream post-secondary institutions to offer their students every opportunity they possibly can. For example, Blue Quills was one of the first Native-controlled education centers in Canada (opening in 1971), and while many of their course are developed and delivered on site, they also partner with Athabasca University, the University of Alberta and the University of Regina so that their courses may be accredited and transferable, if an Aboriginal student wants to obtain a bachelors degree (Alberta Learning, 2005).

Tribal colleges have been successful in ensuring higher Aboriginal retention and completion rates than mainstream post-secondary institutions. While relatively few number exist on retention of students in Alberta, one can see the success of a tribal college by examining “SIPI, a tribal college that has tracked retention rates, which retains 80 percent of its students through each trimester; nearby mainstream colleges report



dropout rates as high as 90 percent for Native students” (Robbins, 2002). Small class size, an extensive and effective support system, and an environment encouraging learning and fostering pride in Native traditions and self-achievement, benefits students at tribal colleges and fosters success.

### **Funding**

Limited support for Aboriginal postsecondary education in Canada is available to status Aboriginal students through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's Postsecondary Education Program, which includes the Postsecondary Student Support Program, the University College Entrance Preparation Program, and the Aboriginal Bursary System as well as provincial government and external organization funding programs.

#### **EXAMPLES OF FEDERAL FUNDING SOURCES:**

- Canada Millennium Scholarship
- Canada Study Grants
- Post-Secondary Student Support Program
- University College Entrance Preparation Program
- Aboriginal Bursary System
- Aboriginal Education Awards Program

(INAC, 1997)

Matthew (2000) describes some of the different types of funding that are made available to Aboriginal students, while noting that there is a lot more funding sources available to First Nations students, than for Metis students. Bands administer federal funding programs and have to follow federal guidelines. Federal support programs that are available include the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), which is

inclusive of financial assistance for Status Indians and Inuit students for any type of post-secondary training and studies.

The Federal Government, through the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Postsecondary Education Program, does provide funding for a large number of Aboriginal students to attend college and university as well as provide some funding for books, travel and living expenses. Almost all the funding is flowed through to and administered by the First Nations communities themselves. To be eligible, students must be registered members of the band to qualify for funding that is subject to band council approval (Holmes, 2006).

The University College Entrance Preparation Program (UCEP) is designed for those Aboriginal students who need to increase their academic credentials before entering into formal post-secondary study. This program also will cover the costs of tuition, books, travel and a basic living allowance if necessary, but only for the period of time of upgrading; once accepted into a diploma or degree program, it is discontinued (Holmes, 2006). The purpose of the Aboriginal Bursary System is to provide Aboriginal students with a valuable tool to facilitate their pursuit of post-secondary studies. These awards are made available by various organizations and institutions (Holmes, 2006). These programs from the federal government have been successful in providing funding to Aboriginal students in order to help them overcome economic barriers- while they may be criticized for not providing enough, they are still helping some students overcome financial obstacles.

Individual provinces have taken it upon themselves to help finance Aboriginal students and assist them in funding their post-secondary education. Each province has varied sources of funding, scholarships and bursaries available to Aboriginal students. These programs cover all levels of postsecondary education, including community

college diploma and certification programs, undergraduate programs and professional degree programs. (Alberta Learning, 2005) Some funding and scholarships are available for First Nations only, while others may be for Metis, or inclusive for all Aboriginal students. For example, the Alberta Aboriginal Health Careers Bursary is available to First Nations, Metis and Inuit students studying in a health related field. Meanwhile, the Theodore R. Campbell scholarship is for First Nations students only studying in Alberta. More examples of provincial Aboriginal funding initiatives include:

**PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA ABORIGINAL FUNDING SOURCES EXAMPLES:**

- Alberta Opportunities Bursary
- Social Services Bursary Program
- Alberta Heritage Scholarship
- Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) Partnership Bursary
- Northern Student Supplement
- Delia Gray Memorial Scholarship
- Joey Gladue Memorial Scholarship
- Career Development Centres of Canada-Alberta Services Centres

(Alberta Learning, 2005)

The objective of Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy (AHRDS) is to expand the employment opportunities of Aboriginal people across Canada. Aboriginal organizations are provided funding under an Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy Agreement. The “focus of AHRDA is on apprenticeship and trades training, with the overall goal to achieve an Aboriginal employment rate that is on par with Canada’s overall employment rate” (Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, 2007). Programs can range from funding an individual to receive training at a Community College, to

delivering contract training on-reserve. Some examples of programs that have been administered through AHRDA include daycare training, gas technician training, and forestry worker training. The goal of the program is to provide useful and effective training that can be utilized by Aboriginals to gain and enhance employment opportunities.

In Alberta, Aboriginal organizations that administer post-secondary education funds may include “Freehorse Family Wellness Society, The Métis Nation of Alberta and the Oteenow Employment and Training, amongst others” (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2007) explains how, for example, Oteenow Employment and Training has provided over 1000 Aboriginal students in the Edmonton area with funding for post-secondary studies and training. External organizations such as these can be a great help to Aboriginal students seeking additional financing for post-secondary education and training opportunities.

Funding for post-secondary studies is not just a problem for the Aboriginal students themselves- both mainstream post-secondary institutions and tribal colleges need much more funding in order to increase Aboriginal completion rates. “Many mainstream institutions say they need further student support- it is the students that are not receiving such support that withdraw from studies” (Hampton, 1993). The Report on Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) indicated that in order to improve access and opportunities for Aboriginal postsecondary students, the government has to continue to dedicate funds to help post-secondary institutions deliver Aboriginal-specific projects to improve outreach, transition and retention. This funding is supporting a range of initiatives at colleges and universities, including retention activities to keep Aboriginal

students engaged in their postsecondary studies, including student support services, mentoring and role models, and support from Aboriginal Elders.

A motivational possibility to increase retention rates would be graduation bonuses (which some bands already provide) for Aboriginal students, to encourage them to continue and complete their program of study. In the cases where bands already provide graduation bonuses, the First Nations students would receive an extra amount of money based on their successful completion of post-secondary studies and it appears that the bands that administer graduation bonuses do see a slightly higher completion rate (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007).

Historically, increased funding for Aboriginal students has helped to increase retention rates from 2% up to 23% in some post-secondary institutions according to Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2007). Continued focus on availability of funding and scholarships through the government, post-secondary institutions, private sources and industry partners is necessary in order to see higher post-secondary retention and completion rates amongst Aboriginal students.

### **Aboriginal Curriculum and Teaching Development**

Traditionally, a large part of education for Aboriginal peoples was about learning values and practicing them- which can also be referred to as traditional knowledge. Hammersmith and Sawatsky (1995) explain how elders played a central role in passing on the teachings, and how oral teachings were historically the way that knowledge and learning occurred for Aboriginal students. Elders are probably the best resource persons for strengthening a person's relationship with self, family, and community- relationships

that can become very strained in the post-secondary setting. Macias (1989) reported that post-secondary institutions found that by integrating elders into post-secondary teaching methodologies, and utilizing their knowledge and expertise, Aboriginal students have been able to better cope in the classroom setting.

Culturally relevant resources and curriculum materials need to be relevant to what students are learning. AHRE (2003) research shows incorporating cultural components into information resources and programs are important to Aboriginal youth and their parents. It is important that they feel that they can take pride in their culture and integrate this cultural knowledge into their daily lives. The study indicates that cultural content should include the teaching of language, ceremony, spirituality, cultural events, protocol, cultural values and history from an Aboriginal perspective. The wisdom of the elders should be included, and they should be invited to share their knowledge and wisdom with the students. Information on career opportunities should be more holistic and should include information such as user specific services and resources, low cost housing, life skills and educational tools.

Traditional Western teaching methodologies and traditional faculty instruction needs to be adaptable and flexible based on classroom needs and individual learning style. While many students might have unique learning styles, Aboriginal students have the additional barriers of different cultures, upbringing, previous education, and learning styles. Aboriginal students often learn and understand concepts in different ways (McFadden, 1996), so flexible teaching styles can really enhance the learning experience for Aboriginal students. Hands-on and application-based learning may be necessary for certain Aboriginal students, while varied examination techniques might aid and abet

students as well. For example, faculty may choose to have a group examination, whereby the students are presented with an essay topic and allowed to discuss the answer as a group- however, they still will need to write individual essays. By doing this, the students are allowed to share their knowledge and perspectives with each other, converse as group, yet still be marked individually on their personal contribution of an essay. Some faculties have taken approaches such as this and have found them to be extremely successful. AHRE (2003) found that cultural knowledge and awareness among faculty, counselors, and employers were essential elements to effective communication with Aboriginal students. Recognizing and acknowledging cultural differences, and responding to appropriately chosen communication messages was necessary to make a significant difference in helping youth make career choices. We need to stress the importance of having Aboriginal teachers and faculty who understand the barriers and issues faced by Aboriginal youth and who can serve as role models and mentors for their students.

When teaching Aboriginal students, faculty need to remember that they should always check if material on spirituality or kinship is acceptable with the students- otherwise they risk alienating or insulting Aboriginal student's background, history and potentially, personal beliefs. Faculty should consult regularly with the local community, parents, and elders to encourage their participation and involvement in learning activities and curriculum development. Seeking advice from peoples with expertise in Aboriginal education and have professional development sessions in this area will stand to benefit all, especially the Aboriginal post-secondary student.

**THINGS FACULTY SHOULD ASK THEMSELVES AND TAKE INTO  
CONSIDERATION WHEN TEACHING ABORIGINAL STUDENTS:**

- Does the culture of the material reflect the language and culture of the community?
- Are you presenting at the appropriate learning levels for the students?
- Are you encouraging a supportive learning environment?
- Do you encourage students to know and listen to each other?
- Do you encourage students to use their backgrounds as learning tools?
- Do the materials portray Aboriginal peoples as diverse peoples with a rich heritage?
- Do the materials portray Aboriginal peoples in an authentic way?
- Do the materials recognize and value the contributions of Aboriginal peoples to the present Canadian society?
- Do the materials present positive images of Aboriginal peoples in contemporary settings?
- Do you use a variety of methods to accommodate the diverse learning styles of the students?
- Do you encourage students to take pride in their culture?
- Do you use community resources (peoples, materials) when appropriate and possible?
- Are the evaluation tools sensitive to cultural bias?
- Have you taken the time to learn more about the community culture?
- Do the parents of the students feel welcome in the classroom?
- Are you aware of the way culture affects styles of communication and ways of interacting with others?

(Alberta Learning, 2005; Malatest & Associates, 2004; Rindone, 1988)

Teaching methodologies and curriculum are aspects that can either serve as a barrier or a huge motivation to Aboriginal students. Teaching style, curriculum, and material relevance can all become a huge barrier and learning obstacle for Aboriginal students if not presented in the right context and manner. Curriculum in the post-secondary setting needs to take into account Aboriginal perspectives and learning styles. Aboriginal students should always be treated with respect, dignity and given due recognition- their contributions should be valued and considered worthwhile



## **Recommendations (based on successful initiatives)**

Through a variety of these successful strategies and initiatives, it is hoped that the following outcomes would occur:

- improvement of the academic performance of Aboriginal students
- elimination of the stereotypes that exist in mainstream and non-mainstream cultures
- improvement of the quality of life of Aboriginal peoples
- increase the representation of Aboriginal peoples in post-secondary schools
- increase the representation of Aboriginal peoples in all sectors of the workforce

(Western Canada Protocol, 2000)

In the last 40 years, Aboriginal postsecondary education has been revolutionized by the recognition of student's different needs. Further research to track the success of initiatives on a wide scale is needed, such as statistical evidence on completion of specific postsecondary programs. However, many programs have emerged to empower the students and see them in context of their culture, such as the preparation course at Concordia University College (Holmes, 2006), or the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program at Keyano College (Keyano College, 2006), amongst many others. These programs have also tried to take into account a fundamental economic disadvantage, and to work in consultation and partnership with Aboriginal peoples, such as in the case of the petroleum industry training program partnership between Maskwachees Cultural College and SAIT (Alberta Learning, 2005). "No single strategy has surmounted all barriers for all students, but part of the gradual increase in Aboriginal completion rates must be attributed to these initiatives" (Malatest & Associates, 2004).

Krumm (1995) found that in order for Aboriginal students to have higher completion rates in regards to post-secondary education, it is important that their traditions and values are honored. Aboriginal students need to be able to recognize the importance of a quality educational journey that will allow them to share visions and

knowledge for many generations to come. While tribal colleges are already promoting this type of education and are quite successful (Krumm, 1995) mainstream post-secondary institutions need to take this approach as well in order to increase retention rates. It is necessary to promote culturally appropriate education which meets the needs of the Aboriginal students, while at the same time enhancing their experience in the post-secondary setting, and providing a positive learning environment in which they can achieve success (Johnson & Buchanan, 1998).

Rindone (1988) recommended that in order for Aboriginal students to have higher completion rates, they need to be able to develop positive self-images, and participate in learning environments that are conducive to their culture. Aboriginal students must be able to see the importance of education and developing skills that they can take back to their communities to help other Aboriginal members better themselves. They need to be able to “learn about their own histories, cultures, traditions, values, and peoples in the post-secondary setting” (Rindone, 1988). Through this unique appreciation of their own culture and lifestyles, as well as through encouragement and role models such as the NAPI program (Holmes, 1996), Aboriginal post-secondary students would stand to have higher completion rates, and be able to achieve higher rates of personal, academic, and workplace success (Alberta Learning, 2005).

Many Aboriginal students struggle with transitions from one educational level to the next; from rural to urban settings; from one community to another. It is essential to provide Aboriginal students with positive relationships, peer groups, and mentors (Holmes, 1996). By actively engaging Aboriginal students in culture, recreation, fine arts, leadership groups, and engaging them in the educational setting, they are more likely

to find a sense of belonging in positive community interactions. It is extremely important that we provide counseling to Aboriginal students within a holistic, proactive, and culturally relevant context, such as the Native Student Centres that many post-secondary institutions have created. Faculty need to provide instruction that is culturally based and reflects the needs of the students. This might include traditional teachings, spirituality, fine arts, and recreational activities.

Through encouragement from the Aboriginal community and role models (AHRE, 2003), students can continue to grow in confidence and take pride in their abilities to make a difference. The students should be provided with opportunities to develop and utilize their leadership skills through participation in groups. (Rindone, 1988) They need to be responsible for volunteering at their schools, teaching culture to others, mentoring young students, planning social activities, advocating and mentoring for their own community, and whatever else is necessary to provide future Aboriginal students with success.

It is important to note, however, that there are a growing number of examples of individual success, and graduation rates have improved significantly over the last decade and that there has been a “steady rise in the number of status First Nations students attending postsecondary institutions over the last 20 years” (Avison, 2004). Increasing this educational skill level is imperative for Aboriginal students to be able to contribute back to the community from which they came from, in the areas of economic and social development. The challenge remains to improve on these initiatives (Western Canada Protocol, 2000), to test the strength of their effectiveness, while also seeking ways to

further address the compiling barriers that often stop Aboriginal peoples from even reaching the point where these initiatives can begin to assist them.

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