

The Diversity Challenge for Higher Education in Canada: The Prospects and Challenges of Increased Access and Student Success

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With the shifting demographics of societies such as the United States and Canada, access to higher education presents a variety of challenges to ensure that universities are able to meet the challenges associated with increased student diversity on campus. The current paper reviews first the literature on the linkages between social inequality and education, before turning to an examination of Canadian data with respect to access issues and the possible barriers to increasing diversity among postsecondary institutions. The evidence reveals that first-generation students and those whose parents did not attend university, Aboriginal peoples, and students with disabilities (among others) continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary education. At the same time, the paper argues that while institutions of higher learning can facilitate improved access, they must commit to developing support services and a more welcoming and inclusive environment in order to ensure student retention and success among an increasingly diverse student population. The paper concludes with a discussion of "best practices" from the perspective of a predominantly undergraduate, liberal arts institution in southern Ontario.

Keywords: higher education, diversity, access, student services, student success

The university environment has changed dramatically in the last half century, bearing witness to profound shifts that have forever altered student, faculty, and staff profiles. While historically dominated by White males, universities in the twenty-first century are far more diverse in terms of students' gender identities, ethno-cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientations, citizenship and able-bodied status differences. The increased heterogeneity has had impacts in every facet of the university experience, commencing with what universities do to monitor and enhance accessibility (Belyakov et al. 2009; Solovieva and Bock 2014). The impacts, though, have extended much more

broadly to areas such as what institutions can do to accommodate student diversity (Seelman 2014; Spivey-Mooring and Apprey 2014), enhance student achievement (Anderson 2004; Sidanius et al. 2008), broaden hiring and staffing decisions (Beer 2015; Lee and Janda 2006), and diversify curriculum content (Valadez and Moineau 2010; Zinn and Eitzen 1996), pedagogical practices (Boucher 2011; Lyon and Guppy 2016), and program development (Oxenford, Summerfield, and Schuchert 2012; Robinson 2012).

Despite the changes and challenges involved, few argue philosophically *against* an increased openness and diversity within higher education. Most laud the dramatic expansion of university access as commensurate with principles of distributive justice, equal opportunity, and

improved social mobility (Black, Cortes, and Lincove 2015; Liu 2011; Louie 2007; Smith and Gottheil 2011; compare Haveman and Smeeding 2006). Much of the research and commentary have been devoted to expanding access for previously disadvantaged groups (Abrego 2006; Arciniega 2012; Frempong, Ma, and Mensah 2012; Gallego and Busch 2015).

At the level of individual institutions, each university's philosophy serves as an integral guiding factor for establishing fair and equitable admissions. An interrogation of their mission statements offers a lens through which one can view how organizational cultures affect the delivery of student supports on campus, which then influence student success (Meacham 2008). Kuh et al. (2005: 27) assert that the issues of institutional missions and their philosophies provide a "tacit understanding about what is important to the institution (as well as the) deeply held values and beliefs about students and their education." The admissions policies of each institution provide a framework for understanding the university's normative position with respect to serving their students. For example, Kotzee and Martin (2013: 626) identify five possible scenarios as to "who should go to university:"

1. the Tournament conception: as an academic competition, only those with the highest admissions averages or scores on relevant examinations succeed;
2. the Trial conception: similar to the Olympic trials, applicants are viewed as competitors vying to get to the next stage, with only the "winners" advancing;
3. the Leveling conception: the objective involves the effort to "level the playing field" for those applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds to offer an equal chance for admission;
4. the Remedy conception: not only should there be a level playing field, but one should actively attempt to equalize opportunities for those who have been disadvantaged; and

5. the Job-interview conception: a neoliberal perspective of accountability stressing the importance of admitting enough applicants to ensure there will be sufficient graduates to help fulfill economic needs.

Rather than one-size-fits-all frameworks, different types of universities privilege alternate conceptions regarding their admissions. Yet these five scenarios share in common an emphasis on establishing standards upon which a student's application should be judged. The ethical controversy arises in adjudicating among these competing criteria to determine what should count as the key qualifications or merit for university admissions. According to Mason (2006: 25), an open and fair admissions policy requires that "the rules of that competition must be well-designed to select the best-qualified candidate," even though the criteria for what one means by *qualified* may vary from one place to the next. Thus universities must develop clear assessment criteria consistent with their institutional missions and philosophies to facilitate the selection of first-year cohorts who embody the student profile they intend to serve.

While higher education will always have an elitist component with schools that privilege first and foremost the highest achievers, the breadth of collegiate alternatives has expanded substantially to meet a variety of new intellectual, technological, economic, and social demands. No one model alone can possibly achieve the full range of societal objectives currently placed on the higher education agenda. The current paper, therefore, focuses mainly on universities that, in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, have missions that aspire to be more open, inclusive, and committed to diversity and social justice.

To that end, the paper reviews first the literature on the linkages between social inequality and education, before turning to an examination of Canadian evidence with respect to access issues and possible barriers to increasing diversity among postsecondary

institutions. The next section presents some of the research and analytic results to establish which factors are most important in determining access to colleges and universities among disadvantaged groups. The final two sections then focus first on the issues that help determine student success among an increasingly diverse student population, followed by a discussion of “best practices” from the perspective of a predominantly undergraduate, liberal arts institution in southern Ontario.

Literature Review

Students of social inequality have long been interested in debates in regard to “equality of opportunity” versus “equality of outcomes” (Arneson 1994; Brickman 1977; Persad 2015; Saito 2013; see Rawls 1971).¹ Although the evidence has shown that increased access to education does not ensure equal outcomes (Fleming 1981), widespread agreement nevertheless persists across the political spectrum that barriers to higher education should be kept to a minimum (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Hasan and Nussbaum 2012; compare Travis 2012). As such, scholars have assessed the different mechanisms and policy initiatives that might help alleviate the inequalities associated with “widening participation” in university education (Grodsky 2007; Jackson 2012; Owen et al. 2013; Van Zanten 2009).

The issue of higher education access resonates in part because the evidence indicates that graduates from universities (with degrees specializing in academic and professional programs) earn significantly more over their working lifetimes compared to both college graduates and those holding high school diplomas. In Canada, the term “college” refers to postsecondary institutions that specialize in the development of practical trade and technical

skills, while offering certificates and diplomas (often requiring one- or two-year commitments). Frenette (2014) draws on longitudinal tax data to demonstrate that at age 35, males with bachelor’s degrees from universities earn \$64,000 in constant (2010) dollars, whereas the comparable figures for college and high school graduates are \$53,000 and \$44,000. The gap accelerates such that 20 years later, university degree holders earn twice as much as the high school graduates (\$95,000 versus \$47,000). Women with university degrees fare about twice as well as their counterparts with high school diplomas, although their incomes continue to lag well behind men’s earnings for a variety of reasons (see Lambert and McInturff 2016).

The annual earning differences, therefore, translate into significant lifetime earning differentials across university, college, and high school graduates. Frenette (2014: 7) notes that “the earnings premium associated with a bachelor’s degree over the 20-year period ranges, on average, from \$728,000 for men to \$442,000 for women. For a college certificate, the premium is \$248,000 for men and \$180,000 for women, on average.” As one might expect, the potential earnings vary further by field of study, as those graduates with business- and engineering-related degrees earn more compared to those with fine arts, social work, and theological degrees (Frenette and Frank 2016).

Yet despite concerns about underemployment among university graduates (Canadian Labour Congress 2014), the income data confirm both an earnings premium for those who are able to participate in higher education *and* a reduced likelihood of experiencing unemployment (Berger and Parkin 2009). Hence the questions of access and affordability are central in terms of equity issues across diverse groups in society, especially as these relate to income inequality and quality of life issues. The

¹Most casual observers might acknowledge that even the notion of “equal opportunity” bespeaks a fallacy insofar as individuals within contemporary societies are born into radically different familial and community circumstances.

Even open access to free public education hardly implies equal opportunity, at least in terms of the variable quality of schooling available across jurisdictions.

longstanding importance of education as a key determinant of status attainment cannot be questioned, with robust evidence dating back at least a half century (Blau and Duncan 1967; Haller and Portes 1973; Kerckhoff 1974).

The more recent research has reaffirmed the importance of maternal education and family income in shaping the processes of intergenerational mobility, regardless of family structure (Seabrook and Avison 2015; Lui et al. 2014; Wolbers, Luijkx, and Ultee 2011). The Canadian data further reveal that, despite the dramatic expansion of postsecondary education, children from highly educated families still have a better chance of qualifying for university and, moreover, are more likely to opt for university rather than college (Canisius Kamanzi and Doray 2015). Finally, there has been a concomitant rise in terms of gender expectations with respect to educational aspirations and achievements (Park, Nawyn, and Benetsky 2015; Portes et al. 2010; Schoon 2008).

A number of social psychological and environmental factors further influence positive education experiences and contribute to the pursuit of higher education. For example, parenting can have an important effect on children's enjoyment of schooling and their likelihood of applying to university (Henderson 2013). Indeed, family success expectations serve as an important predictor of educational outcomes (Faas, Benson, and Kaestle 2013). Moreover, the interactions between family background factors and student ambitions are powerful correlates of status attainment and adult earnings (Ashby and Schoon 2010; Berzin 2010).

Canadian Access Evidence

One cannot gainsay the evidence that various groups have enjoyed preferential access to higher education. The patterns in Canada are clear with

respect to most major socio-demographic categories, although some regional variation persists. Interestingly, while higher education has been dominated by males historically, the data for the past generation indicate that women have surpassed men in terms of completing bachelor's degrees (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera 2014; Zeman 2007). Canadian women accounted for 56.3 percent of the more than 2 million post-secondary enrollments in 2013-14 (Statistics Canada 2015), even as gender segregation across fields of study remained problematic (Andres and Adamuti-Trache 2007).² Some have raised questions as to whether gender imbalances favoring women should be a concern and whether programs should be implemented to attract more men (e.g., Evers, Livernois, and Mancuso 2006).

Apart from gender issues, several groups have been singled out in prior research for comparisons. Finnie, Childs, and Wismer (2011) have identified the disadvantaged groups with respect to accessing postsecondary education (PSE) as including the following:

1. those from low-income families;
2. those from families with no prior history of attending PSE (i.e., first-generation students);
3. those with immigrant status or with minority race/ethnic status;
4. those from single-parent (or other "non-traditional") families;
5. those living in rural areas and others who live far from college or university campuses;
6. those whose mother tongue is French (outside of Quebec);
7. those of Aboriginal or First Nations ancestry; and
8. those with disabilities.

²At the same time, however, the data further confirm that women continue to be under-represented in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, women

aged 25 to 34 accounted for only 39 percent of STEM university degrees, as compared with 66 percent of the non-STEM degrees (Hango 2013).

The evidence corroborates significant differences and unequal impacts linked to these factors. Although financial issues do not always rank highest for those interested in accessing PSE, that area can be dealt with more readily through enlightened public policies and across specific educational institutions. Students from high-income families, without question, are more privileged in terms of attending universities, as well as accessing more elite institutions (Corak, Lipps, and Zhao 2004; Davies, Maldonado, and Zarifa 2014). While financial challenges continue to act as an access barrier among underserved populations (Gupton et al. 2009), affordability issues are somewhat less of an impediment in the Canadian context (Finnie, Wismer, and Mueller 2015). The research indicates further that young students from low-income families may already display certain deficits and disadvantages that present obstacles to PSE, such as increased participation in special education and remedial programs that constrain higher-education options (Parekh, Killoran, and Crawford 2011; Rounce 2006). Yet more than anything else, parental education may be an even more powerful barrier.

In particular, the challenges of access among “first-generation students” can be quite profound (Gupton et al. 2009). In the United States, the evidence reveals that first-generation students are more often female, older, African-American or Hispanic, have dependent children, and hail from lower-income families (Engle, Bermeo, and O’Brien 2006). Despite recent gains, inter-generational educational mobility continues to be an issue among minority groups in particular (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). The Canadian research emphasizes the importance of parental education upon first-generation students, with maternal education an especially potent predictor (Murdoch, Kamanzi, and Doray 2011; Frenette and Zeman 2007). Cultural and social capital factors clearly have an impact (Finnie 2012). Consider, for example, Strayhorn’s (2015) description of “Alejandra’s” frustrating experience with her father’s repeated pleas that

she should simply return home rather than struggle in college as a first-generation Hispanic:

I learned from the interview that Alejandra’s parents also depended on her greatly in the home: to answer the phone as the only fluent English speaker in their immediate family, to translate conversations with neighbors, to pick up and sort mail and call attention to any communication related to bills or family emergencies. All of this shapes how her dad responded and why he tried to keep her from applying to college in the first place. (P.60).

Herein some differences emerge between U.S. and Canadian experiences with respect to race, ethnicity, and immigration as these relate to PSE. The evidence reveals that, with the strong exception of Aboriginal status, these factors are somewhat less of an impediment to accessing universities and colleges in Canada (Junor and Usher 2004; Sinacore and Lerner 2013). Yet African/Latin American Canadians are still less likely to pursue university as compared with their European and especially Asian counterparts (Thiessen 2009). As with Alejandra’s case, not only does student preparation matter, but “family support(s) are crucial to students’ decisions to pursue postsecondary education” (Smith and Gottheil 2011: 49).

On the other hand, Abada and Hou (2009) have shown that most children of immigrants have experienced upward educational mobility, with some stagnation only among Black and Filipino groups. Picot and Hou’s (2013) study reveals that Canadian students with immigrant backgrounds actually have an advantage in terms of familial aspirations, even among those who may not have performed as well in high school. In addition, research has shown that first-generation students in Canada employ their ethnic identities to develop support networks, form clubs, and enhance their chances of success as a means of overcoming any general lack of knowledge about university life (Birani and Lehmann 2013).

Another issue hypothesized to have an effect on attending college or university involves one's family situation (Martin 2012). The conventional wisdom suggests that living in an intact, two-parent family should provide not only financial benefits relative to alternative family types, but also perhaps stability and cultural resources that could facilitate entry into PSE (Thomson and McLanahan 2012; Wu, Schimmele, and Hou 2015). Yet Seabrook and Avison (2015) studied longitudinal data in Ontario and determined that family structure had no independent effect on postsecondary attendance, while maternal education had the expected positive impact of graduating from college or university.

An even more trenchant divide exists between rural and urban populations in that degree holders are more prevalent among the latter group (Brown, Newbold, and Beckstead 2010). Newbold and Brown (2015) established an inverse relationship between urban area size and college entry, with highest youth attendance among students from large urban areas and the lowest rates among those living in rural Canada. The fact that larger urban locales attract more immigrants helps account for the gap, although parental education, income, and student reading scores exert independent influences as well (see Finnie 2012).

The impact of language has been less of a focus in terms of educational attainment, as the issues are often intertwined with ethnic background and immigration factors (Kaushal and Lu 2015). One study in Quebec determined that Anglophones are twice as likely as Francophones to view a university degree as crucial to success (D'Amours 2010). Looker and Thiessen's (2004) research has shown that Anglophone youth are more intent upon

completing higher education than Francophone youth, regardless of where they live in Canada. Yet, although Francophones living outside of Quebec report higher educational aspirations than those living within that province, their aspirations are still lower than those of their Anglophone counterparts.

The clearest discrepancies, though, pertain to the educational goals and achievements of Aboriginal or First Nations peoples, which lag significantly behind non-Aboriginal groups (White and Peters 2013; Spence, White, and Maxim 2007; Stonechild 2006).³ The problems stem first from lower high school completion rates, as only 60 percent of Aboriginal adults aged 25-64 have their diplomas (Statistics Canada 2013a). While almost two-thirds of non-Aboriginal adults held some type of postsecondary credential in 2011, the figures for Aboriginal peoples stood at 48.4 percent (see Statistics Canada 2013a, b). Among those who *do* attend PSE, the members of various Aboriginal groups are more likely to have delayed their entry, reflected in their greater likelihood of being older, married, and having had children (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation 2005; Holmes 2005). The barriers are both cultural and structural in nature. Some individuals may lack self-confidence and motivation, as well as having earned lower high school grades or having parents who may not share aspirations for higher education (Looker and Thiessen 2004; Stonechild 2006; Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation 2005). Institutional factors include the lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture on campuses and the accompanying experiences of racism (Bailey 2016), which have been compounded through forced assimilation and the devastating

³In Canada, in the context of Statistics Canada's surveys, the term 'Aboriginal identity' refers to whether the person self-identified or reported "being an Aboriginal person, that is, First Nations. (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit) and/or being a Registered or Treaty Indian, (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada) and/or

being a member of a First Nation or Indian band. Aboriginal peoples of Canada are defined in the Constitution Act, 1982, section 35 (2) as including the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada" (Statistics Canada 2013a: 9).

impacts of residential schooling (Pidgeon 2016; Mendelson 2006).

Finally, the issues surrounding access for those experiencing disabilities has long been a focal issue (Hill 1992; Layton and Lock 2003). The evidence confirms that institutions must invest substantially in upgrading access to their facilities, providing closed-captioning, and having additional personal support services in many cases to ensure the viability of expanded access (Hedrick et al. 2012; Dallas, McCarthy, and Long 2016; Gelbar et al. 2015). In view of the fact that some federal legislation mandates equal access to higher education (e.g., Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act), many universities are committed not only to improving access, but to changing their campus *cultures* in an effort to be barrier-free, welcoming, and inclusive (Leake and Stodden 2014; Nichols and Quaye 2009).

To evaluate the impact of different factors affecting student access more formally, published data from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) are presented in Table 1. The YITS is a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of young people in Canada that has tracked two cohorts (aged 15 and aged 18-20) starting in the year 2000. The study approximates a life course approach by documenting the main patterns and influences of major transitions in young people's lives over time, especially with respect to education, training, and work. Since these data have been released, researchers have studied the key determinants of access to post-secondary education and have established rather robust findings (Finnie 2012; Finnie, Wismer, and

Mueller 2015; Kamanzi and Doray 2015; Newbold and Brown 2015).

As indicated in Table 1, the full sample displays some regional variation in comparing the four main jurisdictions, with the Atlantic provinces having the highest proportions of young people attending university and Quebec having the lowest percentage. On the other hand, Quebec had proportionately more students attending college than any other region. In the Atlantic provinces, young people were twice as likely to attend university (51.1 percent) as compared to college (24.6 percent). By comparison, more than 80 percent of youth in



Ontario attended either college or university to rank first in PSE from across regions in Canada.

In addition, the most dramatic differences emerged with respect to key demographic categories. Most notably, parental education yielded statistically significant differences across regions, such that youths who had a parent attend university were far more likely attend as well. That factor proved significant independently of family income in all areas except Atlantic Canada, which displayed a clear pattern favoring an elevated income. Both Aboriginal status and disability status displayed statistically significant differences as well. Those young people with disabilities, for example, were far less likely to

Table 1. Percent Students Attending College or University Across Regions, by Sociodemographic Factors*

	Ontario		Atlantic Canada		Quebec		Western Canada	
	College	Univer- sity	College	Univer- sity	College	Univer- sity	College	Univer- sity
Full Sample	36.4	45.5	24.6	51.1	40.0	30.3	26.1	42.8
Family Income								
Below \$50,000	39.3	35.2	29.2	36.1	41.3	19.7	26.5	36.4
\$50,000 or more	35.2	49.5	20.5	64.4	39.2	37.3	26.0	45.8
Parental Education								
No PSE	43.5	25.7	30.1	30.1	38.5	16.7	27.5	28.6
Some PSE	33.5	53.7	22.4	59.5	40.9	38.5	25.7	47.9
Location								
Rural	44.6	28.6	30.4	42.5	40.0	23.2	28.7	33.1
Urban	34.9	48.8	19.6	58.5	40.0	32.1	25.2	46.3
French Population								
French minority	43.0	39.5	26.3	48.4	n/a	n/a	21.0	50.0
Non-French minority	36.1	45.8	24.4	51.4	n/a	n/a	26.2	42.8
Family Type								
Single-parent family	41.1	36.4	24.4	39.7	41.9	24.9	24.8	34.3
Two-parent family	35.5	47.4	24.6	53.2	39.5	31.6	26.4	44.4
Immigrant Status								
First-generation	30.1	58.4	12.6	82.6	44.5	29.1	24.1	63.4
Second-generation	31.2	54.7	12.7	70.5	38.1	46.5	26.7	51.2
Non-immigrant	39.9	39.2	25.5	49.6	40.0	28.5	26.2	37.9
Aboriginal Status								
Aboriginal	38.7	17.8	19.5	40.7	35.3	25.6	20.9	22.4
Non-Aboriginal	36.4	46.2	24.8	51.4	40.1	30.3	26.4	43.7
Disability Status								
Disability	46.2	22.1	26.4	37.9	41.6	16.5	28.5	27.4
No disability	35.2	48.5	24.2	53.4	39.8	31.7	25.7	45.9

*Source: *Youth in Transition Survey* (Finnie, Childs, and Wismer 2011)

attend university as compared with their counterparts in the general population. Aboriginal status had a substantial impact, but especially in Ontario and Western Canada. These two regions had far fewer Aboriginal students attending universities, while Quebec fared far better in terms of First Nations students attending university and even college for the most part. The rural-urban divide also stood out with higher percentages of urban dwellers attending university across Canada.

With respect to attending colleges in Canada, the patterns tended to be the reverse. For many of the sociodemographic categories, a higher percentage of youths attended college than what one might expect from the general population. Proportionately more young people from families with lower incomes, with less parental PSE, those from rural areas, those from single-parent families, and students with disabilities more often attended college than their demographic counterparts. Within Ontario, the three highest correlates for enrolling in college included living in rural areas, having parents with no PSE, and having a disability.

The full data from the Youth in Transition Survey indicate that by age of 24 in 2008, more than three in four (77 percent) young Canadians had pursued studies in a college or university. The crucial analytic question, however, moves beyond simple bivariate relationships to evaluate whether certain factors might prove more powerful predictors of PSE, net of other independent effects. To determine the relative effects, Kamanzi and Doray (2015) conducted a logistic regression analysis to determine the relative likelihood of youths entering college compared to high school, as well as the likelihood of attending university compared to high school. As indicated in Table 2, the results have been broken down to assess the models for two cohorts: youths at age 20, who are then compared with young adults at age 24.

First, as one should expect, the outstanding students in high school exhibited a greater likelihood of attending PSE and especially

university. Those students in the cohort of 20-year-olds with high school marks of 90 percent or higher were 23.6 times more likely than their counterparts with marks in the 70s to have attended university. The members of the 24-year-old cohort with exceptional high school grades were 16.3 times more likely to have enrolled in university by that age as compared with classmates who had marks in the 70s. Conversely, students with below average grades were substantially *less* likely to attend PSE. The analysis also reaffirms the gender discrepancy, with females having a higher probability of attending *any* PSE compared to males. In fact, net of other factors, young women were more than three times as likely as men to attend university in particular.

The results reveal that in addition to the expected positive effects of family income, having parents with university educations dramatically increased the odds of their children attending as well. Immigrants were more likely to attend university, especially by their mid-20s. For those residing in rural areas, their chances of attending either college or university had *decreased* compared to those living in urban locales by age 24. Furthermore, students with disabilities had much lower odds of attending university as well, controlling for other factors. At the regional level, young Quebecois were more likely to attend college compared to Ontarians (all else constant), while the 20-year-olds from all other regions were *less* likely to attend college in comparison with Ontarians. Although the younger students had a lower chance of attending university when matched up against their Ontario counterparts, by age 24 the youth from the Maritime and Prairie provinces had a *higher* probability of heading off to university. As Finnie, Childs, and Wismer (2011) have shown through a comparable analysis of PSE across regions, family structure (single-parent vs. two-parent families) exerted no statistically significant effects across any region, net of the other factors considered. More importantly, parents who attended university

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regression: Odds Ratios for Attending College or University, by Age

	20 Years Old		24 Years Old	
	College vs. High School Exp (β)	University vs. High School Exp (β)	College vs. High School Exp (β)	University vs. High School Exp (β)
Parental Annual Income (Log)	1.24*	1.07	1.47**	2.04***
Parents' Education (High School)	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
College	3.72***	7.78***	1.66***	2.66***
University	3.51***	17.60***	1.49	7.54***
Gender (Male)	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Female	1.94***	3.60***	1.36**	3.01***
Immigrant (No)	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Immigrant: Yes	0.72**	1.38**	2.26***	3.12***
Urban locale	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Rural locale	1.07	1.06	0.38***	0.21***
High School Grades (70-79.9%)	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
90 – 100%	2.31**	23.59**	1.67	16.31**
80 – 89.9%	1.09	3.34***	1.45*	4.30***
Under 70%	1.18	0.57***	0.71**	0.15***
# Hours for Duties per Week	0.84**	0.98	1.42**	2.25***
Disability (No)	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Disability: Yes	0.65**	0.36***	1.09	0.28***
Province (Ontario)	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Quebec	2.43***	0.30***	0.66*	0.85
Maritimes	0.38***	1.11	0.65*	1.82**
Prairies	0.39***	0.51***	1.23	3.51***
British Columbia	0.38***	0.42***	0.26***	0.43***
Pseudo R ²	0.267		0.319	
χ^2 Wald	2,410.96***		1,589.25***	
N (DF)	10,336 (30)		10,336 (30)	

*Significant at .05 level **Significant at .01 level ***Significant at .001 level

Source: Kamanzi and Doray (2015)

conferred even greater advantages to their children in Ontario, while affordability issues played less of a role in the other regions. The two groups most adversely affected consisted of Aboriginal students and those with disabilities, but especially among those living in Ontario.

In summation, the evidence confirms a rather dramatic demographic shift with respect to student applications to and attendance at universities across Canada. The student population has diversified immensely in the last twenty years based on changes to government policy regarding access, immigration patterns, and more complicated family structures. Students vary greatly in terms of their demographic and socioeconomic profiles, which then have an impact on their application to or attendance at postsecondary institutions. Factors such as parental education, family finances, first-generation attendance, Aboriginal status, northern Canadians, being new immigrants, disability status, and having racial minority status have impacted access to PSE (The Educational Policy Institute 2008; Smith and Gottheil 2008).

Provincial governments thus increasingly have chosen to fund targeted initiatives aimed at encouraging colleges and universities to enroll more special population students to narrow the “access gaps” and improve student retention rates. Yet many institutions have not developed holistic retention programs or planned properly to ensure that these diverse student populations will be served adequately (Smith and Gottheil 2011). The remainder of the paper addresses key policy and program considerations for institutions to enhance student success, concluding with a case study of an undergraduate institution in southern Ontario.

Strategies for Enhancing Student Success

The efforts to increase diversity have paid off at some institutions, despite the obstacles that continue to negatively impact certain groups. Yet simply ensuring access by no means guarantees success. Some students from minority

backgrounds lack confidence or may experience stigmatization, which hinders their likelihood of continuing in their programs (Anderson 2004; Looker and Thiessen 2004). The professors either may not be fully prepared to shift their pedagogical strategies to accommodate an increasingly heterogeneous study body (Quaye, Tambascia, and Taleh 2009), or the technologies may not be sufficient. For example, the use of videos or other forms of media may not have closed captioning or otherwise be accessible to deaf and/or blind students (Dallas, McCarthy, and Long 2016). Admitting more students with learning disabilities typically requires more effort and flexibility on the part of professors, teaching assistants, and support staff in terms of notetaking and testing options (Dietsche 2012; Johnson and Fann 2016).

In addition to recognizing the specific needs or risk factors a student might have that should be considered within the admissions profile, officials must evaluate whether or not the student has the academic preparation and wherewithal to be successful. Does s/he have the potential for scholarly success based on existing academic preparation and ability? Despite the commitment to the principles of access, equity, and social justice in higher education, one must contemplate such a difficult question if one hopes to enhance PSE success among underserved populations. As Swail (2014: 23) has argued, “perhaps one of the most immoral things we can do is to admit a student who seriously does not have the skills to stay in the game.” Swail criticizes the practices of institutions that accept students who may not be adequately prepared to complete a postsecondary credential, or who “do not have the requisite skills to take on higher learning” (2014).

In Canada, as demographic factors have reduced the potential pool of students and government funding for PSE has been curtailed, the operational budgets of universities have been affected adversely (Herbert 2016; Brownlee 2016). Postsecondary institutions rely increasingly on student tuition to help cover their

operating costs, such that these fees accounted for just over 50 percent of their budgets in 2014 (Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario 2015). Hence the pressure to meet enrollment targets has increased, possibly affecting the admissions standards and practices of institutions. In a rather prescient commentary about the path postsecondary admissions potentially could travel, McDonough and Robertson (1995) warned of the trend to reposition admissions officers as marketing officers who need to be more concerned with achieving enrollment numbers rather than a qualified first-year cohort. If students are viewed as part of the funding model of an institution, then the integrity of student success can be impacted when admissions officers relax their standards to admit students who lack the academic preparation or ability to persist and to graduate.

In their efforts to recruit and admit an increasingly diverse demographic of students, institutions of higher learning must consider a range of factors relevant to their success beyond those solely linked to academic performance (Swail 2014). The applicant profiles of those applying to postsecondary schools have significant characteristics that must be supported within the student success planning model of an institution. That might include: creating community spaces for Indigenous populations which respects their cultures and methods of learning, providing appropriate accommodations and aids for students with disabilities, creating additional on-campus work opportunities tailored to a student's academic schedule, or awarding bursaries to help support students in financial need (see Harper and Quaye 2009; Hughes and Mighty 2010). In effect, postsecondary institutions need to have a deeper familiarity with the students they are attracting and registering in order to provide the best possible environment to support student retention and success. Herein institutional culture can play a vital role. As Habley, Bloom and Robbins (2012: 101) have noted, “entering student

demographics certainly have an impact on student graduation and persistence rates, but institutions themselves also have the power to have a positive impact on student success rates.”

In short, enhancing access to higher education merely constitutes a *first step* toward achieving more equitable outcomes and social justice objectives. Without implementing further systematic and even cultural changes to respond to the challenges that students from diverse backgrounds present, the university may actually end up doing more harm to at least some of their students. Hence to help ensure student success, there are several distinct challenges that must be confronted. Smith and Gottheil (2011: 50) have summarized the key elements from several innovative programs designed to enhance success among under-served populations:

- Early, proactive, and “intrusive” intervention;
- Bridge and transition programs;
- Financial aid and support;
- Peer support developed intentionally within a cohort;
- Connections to community role models and mentors;
- Faculty and/or staff coaches to provide guidance, help set clear goals, and direct students toward appropriate resources for support (as needed);
- Attention to the particular needs of students from special populations and support to help them integrate into the campus community; and
- A holistic approach to student support that addresses academic, social, emotional, and financial needs.

These best practices ideally should inform university strategies and policies designed to enhance students' academic success. The aim of increasing diversity in higher education must be accompanied by parallel commitments to student retention and providing the necessary supports to integrate all learners into the academic and *social*

environments of respective institutions (Dietsche 2005). The above practices aim to enhance the student experience and probability of success by increasing access to key resources and providing the necessary cultural supports that will engage a broad range of learners (O’Keefe 2013). From a more theoretical standpoint the practices hang together effectively precisely because, if delivered in a truly comprehensive and integrated fashion, the various elements should strengthen the development of supportive social networks (social capital) *and* provide validation of their worth and respect for their emerging identities (cultural capital). Yet those who work in higher education generally, and student services in particular, readily acknowledge the challenges of providing increased services that accompany increased access. As Seifert and Burrow (2013:141) report:

Increased access also means greater variation in the backgrounds, preparation levels, and previous life experiences of today’s post-secondary student. One participant noted, ‘If you look at the [student diversity] on this campus, it has profoundly changed in the last five years. People are identifying the type of services necessary for first-generation students, for international students, students with disabilities, etc.’ Supporting a diverse student body often requires programs and services to be delivered on a one-to-one basis. These include counselling, accessibility, and learning strategies services (and) staff in these areas reported higher caseloads, packed appointment schedules, and greater demands on their time.

What might be done? Although each institution must work within the context of their local environments and respond to the specifics of their student populations, the final section considers an exemplar of how an undergraduate institution in southern Ontario has attempted to



be more responsive to the growing diversity among their learners. While not fully addressing each of Smith and Gottheil’s (2011) recommendations above, several steps have been taken to develop a more proactive delivery model that some have endorsed as critical to ensuring long-term students success among under-served populations (e.g., Dietsche 2012).

A Southern Ontario University Case Study

As a publicly funded Catholic university in southern Ontario, King’s University College (KUC) has evolved considerably over the past decade. The total enrollment has stabilized at about 3,500 students, which includes increases in the relative proportions of students with special needs, those with Aboriginal backgrounds, and first-generation and low-income students (among others). Several program and policy responses have been designed and implemented to help everyone—students, faculty, and staff—cope more effectively. The model to assist

underrepresented groups on campus stems from an institutional mission to support individuals holistically, taking into account their unique circumstances, backgrounds, and characteristics. Yet the entire framework flows from KUC's mission statement as a university committed to "the open pursuit of truth and the discovery and sharing of knowledge in service to humanity." The second sentence, though, captures the essence of the institutional culture: "By integrating academic programs rooted in the liberal arts with comprehensive student support, the college creates a diverse and inclusive space to empower students by nourishing their capacity for critical thought, articulate expression, creativity, and ethical discernment."

As such, KUC utilizes a student-centered, ethic of care model (Manning, Kinzie, and Schuh 2014). As an approach built on the premise of being responsive to student needs, KUC services are designed specifically to facilitate student success. Policies and programs revolve around the ethic to provide comprehensive care and supports for each student. The model acknowledges that not all students are adequately or equally prepared to be as successful academically or socially in comparison with others. Hence, the KUC approach focuses attention on students most in need through compassionate and sensitive support services.

KUC services that assist underrepresented groups are integrated through Counselling and Student Development. The four main areas include: 1) Services for Students with Disabilities; 2) Counselling; 3) Learning Skills; and 4) Career Services. Recently, KUC has incorporated additional programming into these areas to support individuals who identify as first-generation or Aboriginal students. KUC operates with the philosophy that if a university chooses to admit individuals from underrepresented groups, then the institution has an ethical and moral obligation to support these students with the appropriately resourced services on campus.

To help create a more culturally-sensitive campus environment, KUC has an Indigenous

member on their Board of Directors, as well as a Visiting Elder who has served as a keynote speaker welcoming first-year students during Orientation week and who works at the university part-time as a member of the main campus's Indigenous Services. As an affiliate of a larger institution, KUC enjoys the advantage of working within a broader institutional construct to access additional support services. These include health services and psychiatric services, which can be used on limited basis to augment the services provided directly at KUC.

To access services, students will self-identify mainly through an extensive welcoming and bridging process that begins in early June as KUC's Enrollment Services organizes the "Summer Academic Orientation." Once students identify their issues, staff members schedule appointments to assist with their ongoing transition and adjustment into the university. The primary support requires specific types of accommodation, such as additional or alternative assessments. Yet the various services have been enhanced further to support individual student's skills development through accessing a learning skills counsellor. KUC provides further support for students to master new assistive technology that helps students use software or hardware to access the curriculum and teaching materials seamlessly.

The KUC results have been significant in terms of students accessing support services. In 2015-16, for example, services for students saw a 10 percent increase in students accessing services over the previous year, with over 450 students getting support (about 13 percent of the entire study body). In fact, the number of students using support services has increased by more than 100 percent over the past decade. The more impressive outcome has been that in a recent review of students using services for students with disabilities, the data revealed that they were no more likely to be required to withdraw or be put on academic probation than the student population as a whole. In addition, retention rates at KUC between first- and second-year have

increased over the last few years. Hence, the limited evidence confirms the efficacy of investments in services designed to support underserved groups.⁴

The university, however, has not been complacent in terms of the further development of services. Within the last year, an independent consultant completed a full review of student support services with the aim of determining how best to align services with students' needs, especially in view of changing governmental priorities and expectations surrounding future enrollment patterns. The result has been a firm recommitment to the ethic of care model, with a further integration of student support services with other student services on campus including Enrollment Services, Academic Advising, and Campus Ministry.

The examples are too many to list, but three help illustrate the commitment. First, the campus provides regular supports and closed-captioning for the hearing impaired, including sign language specialists within classrooms and for any public events sponsored by the university. Second, the campus accommodates religious diversity and mutual respect by doing everything from showcasing works of art honoring major religious faiths across the campus to having a Muslim Prayer Room for the growing population of Muslims in recent years (see Mahaffey and Smith 2009). Third, the university actively supports (materially, spiritually, and educationally) and provides housing for some Syrian and other refugees. Indeed, the faculty, staff, and students alike all contribute to these inclusive and welcoming initiatives, along with sponsoring and organizing a number of local community events for those in need (e.g., preparing food for a local hospitality center in partnership with another charitable organization).

The administration has assumed a leadership role by *supporting student-led initiatives*, including a highly proactive Student Council and intense summer training for student resident leaders. One particularly successful initiative launched three years ago with the full support of the administration and faculty alike has been the development of the King's Academic Mentoring Program (KAMP). As a student-led peer mentoring program, KAMP functions as a "University 101" for incoming students. Mentors are trained to provide support in most aspects of the transition process to university, including academic and study habits, course information, health and wellness initiatives, student support services, campus and extracurricular involvement, and basic life skills. The program offers senior students the opportunity to "give back" to the university and foster the sense of community vital to success by guiding incoming students in their journey through academia. Indeed, KAMP offers one of the strongest examples of programming designed to foster a sense of belonging in a caring, supportive, and welcoming environment that research has confirmed to be vital to student retention and success (O'Keefe 2013; see Harper and Quayle 2009).

Another of KUC's flagship programs consists of the "Learning Hub," located in the heart of the latest campus building initiative, the Student Life Center. The Learning Hub offers an even more "professional" array of academic advisers, writing instructors, tutors, library services, and learning skills experts that students can access free of charge. Students typically sign up for individual appointments or access the "learning and technology" drop-in services that are offered during the week. The more ambitious may choose to attend any of the many weekly workshops offered, such as time management, reading and researching, note-taking strategies,

⁴To assess the experiences and impacts of support services further for first-year students, the authors have implemented a comprehensive survey for the 2016-17 academic year that has been completed by more than one-

third of incoming students. These data will help identify further "what works" and possible gaps in existing supports that can be enhanced in the future.

presentation strategies, effective study groups, exam preparation strategies, and virtually every other issue that may confront students and their learning needs.

Faculty and staff have contributed mightily to the development and appreciation of diversity on campus, such as through their completion of mandatory online training to receive certificates touting their successful completion of the “accessibility in teaching” program. The faculty members receive further, detailed instruction on how to accommodate special needs coordinated by the Services for Students with Disabilities office. The use of a secure, electronic system reduces the pressures and anxieties for both faculty *and* students to have professional, third-party expertise to deal with special needs and, in many cases, medical issues. Regular workshops on creating healthy workplaces and classrooms are provided free of charge, as well as professional development initiatives aimed at fostering the development of cross-cultural competencies. For example, many faculty and staff signed up for an innovative short course known simply as the 2016 Winter School in Cultural Competency.

Lastly, KUC offers proportionately more entry scholarships and bursaries than just about any other institution of higher learning in Ontario. Many strong students receive continuing scholarships throughout their tenure at KUC, provided they maintain a certain minimum standard of academic excellence. Yet, the full range of scholarships and bursaries extend much further to address the needs of mature and part-time students, student athletes, and those with financial challenges. Combined with provincial funding, the financial barriers to attending higher education at KUC in particular have been reduced significantly.

Conclusion

The current paper has discussed the previous research and offered evidence to suggest that the main narrative of higher education in Canada

largely parallels the one currently being written in the United States (and elsewhere): that the students populating institutions of higher learning are more diverse than ever, even though some groups continue to be disadvantaged, struggle with equal access, and must confront a host of challenges to have success. The key argument suggests that while institutions of higher learning can facilitate improved *access* to PSE, they must commit to developing support services and a more welcoming and inclusive environment in order to ensure student retention and success among an increasingly diverse student population. Such a commitment aligns well with Swail’s (2014: 23) contention that “when an institution accepts the registration of a student, they are, in effect, entering a moral, ethical, and legal contract with the student to do whatever they can to help that student succeed.”

With respect to ensuring student retention and success with an ever more diverse student population, these aims can be achieved through the development of well-resourced counselling and student support services, creating a campus culture that encourages diversity and difference, and through positive student-faculty relationships (O’Keefe 2013). KUC has been used as an exemplar to demonstrate the types of initiatives that should be developed to facilitate sustained success for underrepresented groups accessing university in increasing numbers. The primary driver behind the aforementioned and countless other KUC initiatives stems from the recognition that students from every background—and especially those from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented—deserve appreciation, respect, and whatever supports we can offer to facilitate both *access* and *success*.

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