Retention of Aboriginal Students in Post-Secondary Education

Judy Hardes

This chapter was originally published in *The Alberta Counsellor* (Summer 2006), 29(1), pp. 28–33. Reproduced with permission.

Statistics Canada (1998) defines *Aboriginal* as “those people who are North American Indian (First Nations), Metis, or Inuit.” Current demographics on Aboriginal culture in Canada suggest that the number of Aboriginal post-secondary education students could largely increase in the future. This could have many positive effects if the retention rates are high, but there are socio-economic, educational, and cultural needs unique to the retention of Aboriginal students in mainstream colleges and universities. *Retention* is defined by the number of students remaining in their chosen program until graduation. This chapter focuses on the retention of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education, specifically where the Aboriginal student population is a minority group. It outlines some issues and then discusses some strategies that have been developed to retain Aboriginal students in post-secondary education.
Socio-Economic, Educational, and Cultural Retention Issues

Socio-Economic Issues
The Aboriginal culture in Canada has been affected by a long history of substance abuse, disease, violence, low employment rates, poverty, high mortality, and depression. In the past few decades, an increasing number of Aboriginal people have been migrating from reserves to urban settings. Aboriginal people enrolling in post-secondary education bring with them a host of social issues that may interfere with their academic success. Many students are among the first in their families to leave their home communities in pursuit of higher education. These first-generation attendees do not have role models or mentors to help personally or academically with the transition to post-secondary education.

The Saskatchewan Women's Secretariat (1999) identifies several facts about Aboriginal women that affect enrolment in post-secondary education. More women than men live in urban areas and are enrolled in post-secondary education. More single-parent families are headed by women and living in poverty than single-parent families headed by men. Aboriginal women have more children than white women, increasing the need for child care, family supports, and educational facilities.

Based on traditional Native cultural values, Aboriginal people are not future-focused; hence, they are less willing to go into debt to finance their education. Budgeting is difficult because they tend to share rather than save for the future. Many students rely on funding from sponsors, such as bands, Métis Nations, and bursaries when educational costs are rising and resources are dwindling. The costs of food, housing, daycare, health care, and transportation add to the financial strain. Many Aboriginal students must move away from their communities to attend college. Transportation to and from the reserve can be expensive, and funding agencies usually do not fund regular trips. If the success of Aboriginal students revolves around parental encouragement and support (McInerney, 1990), then when regular contact with family is in jeopardy so is the retention of the student.

Educational Issues
Education has been "the traditional enemy of Indian people" (Rodriguez, 1997, p. 40). Historically, Aboriginal students are half as likely to finish high school or complete a post-secondary diploma and one-fifth as likely to complete a university degree as the general population (Statistics Canada, and integration have all difficulties facing the Aboriginal students enter skills, program requirements in mathematics and English language. Few colleges provide Aboriginal culture in teaching styles are different. of purpose, which is important in the environment of colleges. The notion and, ultimately, academic success. Traditional Aboriginal beliefs are based on the ethics of and emotional restraint (Go not mesh with the mainstream culture. The education and, ultimately, academic success. The mainstream education is based on individualism, futurism, and non-traditional beliefs. Students have to be treated like outsiders” (Stenberg, 1999, p. 50). Leaving their home communities leads to ostracism and exclusion from society.

Cultural Issues
The transition from living on the land to urban living includes chaos, cultural disconnect, and fragmentation. Students often have to compromise their own cultural identities. To “Dance in Two Worlds” means to maintain an allegiance to their own cultural heritage while actively participating in the mainstream culture. Leaving their home communities leads to ostracism and exclusion from society.

The mainstream education, individualism, futurism, and non-traditional beliefs.
affected by a long history of employment rates, poverty, and in post-secondary education that may interfere with the first in their pursuit of higher education. Single-parent families are more than white family supports, and educational issues. Aboriginal people are ill to go into debt to fulfill because they tend to rely on functions, and bursaries when are dwindling. The costs of transportation add to the move away from their on to and from the reserve usually do not fund regular services around parental en-

To “Dance in Two Worlds” (Betz, 1991) refers to Native people trying to maintain an allegiance to their traditional Native culture while actively participating in the mainstream society to get an education. Leaving their home communities in pursuit of higher education sometimes leads to ostracism by friends, family, and community. Students fear that once they become educated, they will “return home only to be treated like outsiders” (Steinhauer, 1998, p. 115). Racism and discrimination, whether actual or perceived, can be detrimental to the success of Aboriginal students in a predominately white environment.

The mainstream educational system is one of competition, saving, individualism, futurism, and verbosity, all of which conflict with population (Statistics Canada, 1998). Residential schooling, assimilation, and integration have all been blamed for the many educational difficulties facing the Aboriginal race.

Schools that Aboriginal students attend vary widely, as do curricula and academic standards, which affect entrance to post-secondary education. Some students entering post-secondary education lack study skills, program requirements, and academic preparedness, especially in mathematics and English. For many students, English is a second language. Few colleges provide instruction in Native languages or integrate Aboriginal culture into their curricula. Learning styles and teaching styles are different. Often students do not have a clear sense of purpose, which is important for success in the future-oriented environment of colleges. The lack of a clear career goal affects motivation and, ultimately, academic achievement.

Traditional Aboriginal teachings involved the promotion of peace and harmony arrived at through the “suppression of conflict practiced through the ethics of non-interference, non-competitiveness and emotional restraint” (Gorman, 1999, p. 114). These values do not mesh with the mainstream emphasis on competitiveness, especially for marks in post-secondary education.

Cultural Issues
The transition from living on a reserve to living in a college environment creates a culture shock for Aboriginal students. The adjustment to urban living includes changes in lifestyle, spirituality, and even simple things, such as eating different foods. Adjusting to the multicultural nature of Canadian society can lead to a conflict in values and beliefs. Students have to adjust not only to a non-Native culture but also to various Aboriginal backgrounds, including Status Indian, Métis, Inuit, and other Aboriginal students from various bands, all with their own cultural identities.

Leaving their home communities in pursuit of higher education sometimes leads to ostracism by friends, family, and community. Students fear that once they become educated, they will “return home only to be treated like outsiders” (Steinhauer, 1998, p. 115). Racism and discrimination, whether actual or perceived, can be detrimental to the success of Aboriginal students in a predominately white environment.

The mainstream educational system is one of competition, saving, individualism, futurism, and verbosity, all of which conflict with
the traditional Native values of co-operation, sharing, group identity, emphasis on present and past, and listening rather than talking (Friesen, 1991, p. 186). Native culture does not see education as a necessity that must be completed within a specific amount of time, but rather as Gorman (1999) points out, “the talents, skills, and interests of the Native child are nurtured to fulfillment and are part of a lifelong learning process.” Many Aboriginal students leave and return to college several times; this is referred to as “stepping out” (Rodriguez, 1997, p. 38). Although this may be quite acceptable for Aboriginal people, it is a source of frustration for staff and faculty in mainstream post-secondary institutions.

**Socio-Economic, Educational, and Cultural Retention Strategies**

**Socio-Economic Strategies**

The social issues that Aboriginal people bring with them to college have a major effect on their retention. Based on enrolment numbers, many social issues affecting retention revolve around serving the needs of Aboriginal women. Housing, child care, and transportation are three key areas that women need assistance with. Providing family housing and daycare on campus can help to alleviate these pressures, as does providing transportation for children to attend school. To balance home and school, women need support in the form of parent support groups, parenting classes, and time management.

Traditionally, the Aboriginal woman’s role was to care for her home, husband, and children. As Aboriginal women assert themselves, men feel threatened in their roles, which can create relationship problems. Individual and group counselling, peer-support groups, and family housing associations can provide support for students to deal with many social issues.

Post-secondary students who move from their home communities to attend college leave behind a support network that they have relied on throughout their lives. Colleges can fill that gap with “family-like support systems that one can find on campus, or through national organizations in urban areas” (Steinhauer, 1998, p. 115). Aboriginal student associations, Aboriginal liaison offices, and Native friendship centres are examples of these support services. Post-secondary institutions must provide continual understanding and support for students when these social issues put them at risk of dropping out.

Financial aid offices on campus can provide a liaison between students and funding agencies. Information on financial aid programs specific for Aboriginal students, loans, should be available prior to year. In case of emergencies, services can be available either through the university or the Aboriginal students' associations, and students needing a ride or transportation costs. Affordable accommodations, work placement offices, and extra time to cope with academic pressures can help students gain the necessary recognition of academic achievements.

**Educational Strategies**

Nora and Cabrera (1996), Commission on Higher Education preparedness profoundly affecting post-secondary education, can help students with writing for classes and meetings, helping appointments are basic but these are often barrier conscious. Workshops on organizational skills can help students gain the necessary recognition of academic achievements. Typically, such programs can be held during the academic year. Mentoring programs can help students gain the necessary recognition of academic achievements. Typically, such programs can be held during the academic year. Having students identify strategies focusing on their strengths, abilities, and interests can help Aboriginal students who transmitted to long-term goals.
specific for Aboriginal students, including scholarships, bursaries, and loans, should be available prior to admission and throughout the college year. In case of emergencies, small loans, grocery coupons, or taxi vouchers can be available either through the Aboriginal liaison office, student services, or the Aboriginal students' council. Workshops on budgeting and economical shopping, as well as establishing collective kitchen programs, can help prevent financial difficulties. To alleviate the transportation issue, some institutions have developed "ride boards," where students with vehicles post when they are driving to a certain location, and students needing a ride can post their requests. Students then share the transportation costs. Aboriginal student housing programs provide affordable accommodations that are culturally responsive. An Aboriginal work placement office can assist Native students in finding practicum placements during the school term and employment after college.

Educational Strategies

Nora and Cabrera (1996), Wells (1997), and the New Mexico Commission on Higher Education (1996) all agree that a lack of academic preparedness profoundly affects retention of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education. Organized tutoring and remedial courses can help students with writing and mathematical skills. Being on time for classes and meetings, handing assignments in on time, and keeping appointments are basic expectations of the white population, but these are often barriers to success for a culture that is not time-conscious. Workshops on time-management skills, study skills, and organizational skills can help prepare students for academic success. Spreading a two-year program over three years can allow students the extra time to cope with academic pressures.

Mentoring programs can help facilitate transition into a college environment. Typically, such programs match first-year students with second-year students who act as role models, are familiar with the support services available, and can share experiences with new students so that they do not have to struggle through the system on their own. Summer bridge programs and career preparation programs can help students gain the necessary prerequisites for college entrance. These programs could be offered prior to admission and throughout the academic year.

Having students identify their learning style and develop strategies focusing on their strengths would help to retain students. Ongoing recognition of academic achievements is important to retaining Aboriginal students who traditionally are not future-focused or committed to long-term goals. Recognizing short-term accomplishments
could be done monthly in the form of Round Dances. Historically, Aboriginal people learned best by doing; hence, many students today benefit from hands-on learning. Programs with practicums, co-operative education, and work experience programs are examples of educational programs that lend themselves to kinesthetic learning styles.

Students who have specific career aspirations are more motivated to succeed; thus, linking academic programming to a realistic and achievable career goal is useful. Academic advising and career counselling go hand in hand to provide meaningful educational choices. Especially for Aboriginal students, emphasizing the practicality of the program and making explicit the relation of the courses to the career goal are important to retention. Academic advising and career counselling programs must be cognizant of the cultural needs of Aboriginal students in selecting an appropriate career goal if they are to facilitate retention.

Cultural Strategies

Betz (1991) explains that “retention and graduation will continue to fall far below those of majority students until everyone involved becomes aware of, and sensitive to, cultural and racial differences and acts to eliminate the external as well as the internal barriers to education.” Hiring a liaison worker of Aboriginal descent is important in establishing a post-secondary institution that will respond to the unique needs of Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal liaison worker will usually establish an Aboriginal liaison office to complement the existing student services that are available for all students. The worker will assist students with recruitment, admission, advising, financial aid, counselling, job placement, college adjustment, and referrals. Developing and co-ordinating new initiatives in response to the needs of Aboriginal students is an important part of this role. The Aboriginal liaison worker will liaise between the college, Native communities, and the urban community where the college is located.

Having access to a specific contact person through the Aboriginal liaison office simplifies communication. Above all, the Aboriginal liaison worker is a role model for Aboriginal students. The worker will assist students with recruitment, admission, advising, financial aid, counselling, job placement, college adjustment, and referrals. Developing and co-ordinating new initiatives in response to the needs of Aboriginal students is an important part of this role. The Aboriginal liaison worker will liaise between the college, Native communities, and the urban community where the college is located. Having access to a specific contact person through the Aboriginal liaison office simplifies communication. Above all, the Aboriginal liaison worker is a role model for Aboriginal students.

Prior to registration day, the transition to college is made easier by conducting student orientation programs, such as campus tours, open houses, information evenings, and meet-the-faculty sessions.

The hope is that prospective students are more familiar with the physical setting and the support system offered by the institution. A summer camp with the essential academic work and some cultural activities can help students prepare for the academic year.

An Aboriginal students' council is an important part of the retention strategy for students by addressing the unique needs of Aboriginal students. Examples of activities include organizing cultural events such as Round Dances and traditional ceremonies, producing a newsletter, and providing a specific contact person through the Aboriginal liaison office. The Aboriginal liaison worker is a role model for Aboriginal students, and the application package for students to identify themselves as Aboriginal students and benefit from services provided by the Aboriginal liaison office shows prospective students that the institution recognizes and is sensitive to the unique needs of Aboriginal students.

Awareness, understanding, and respect between cultures and how they are important to the retention of Aboriginal students are important to the retention of Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal liaison worker is a role model for Aboriginal students and the institution recognizes the unique needs of Aboriginal students.

The hope is that prospective students are more familiar with the physical setting and the support system offered by the institution. A summer camp with the essential academic work and some cultural activities can help students prepare for the academic year.

An Aboriginal students' council is an important part of the retention strategy for students by addressing the unique needs of Aboriginal students. Examples of activities include organizing cultural events such as Round Dances and traditional ceremonies, producing a newsletter, and providing a specific contact person through the Aboriginal liaison office. The Aboriginal liaison worker is a role model for Aboriginal students, and the application package for students to identify themselves as Aboriginal students and benefit from services provided by the Aboriginal liaison office shows prospective students that the institution recognizes and is sensitive to the unique needs of Aboriginal students.

Prior to registration day, the transition to college is made easier by conducting student orientation programs, such as campus tours, open houses, information evenings, and meet-the-faculty sessions.

Retention of Aboriginal Students
Round Dances. Historically, many students today are more motivated to a realistic and meaningful educational choices. Practicums, co-operative admissions and career counseling are examples of educative learning styles.

Graduation will continue until everyone involved is more familiar with the physical setting and the support services available at the college prior to attending. A summer bridge program not only assists students with the essential academic skills but also helps them to create “their own community within a White structure” and an “inter-tribal system among themselves” (Rodriguez, 1997, p. 39).

An Aboriginal students’ council can provide support and advocacy for students by addressing issues and concerns, promoting understanding and awareness, and ensuring them a comfortable transition to college life. Examples of the functions and services that an Aboriginal students’ council can provide include organizing peer support through sharing circles, coordinating cultural events such as Round Dances and traditional graduation ceremonies, distributing a newsletter, producing a student handbook, and providing access to elders on campus. Establishing a meeting place, such as an Aboriginal students’ centre, provides a hub for cultural activity, and as Rodriguez (1997) suggests, “Schools which provide cultural centers do best at retention (p. 39). To foster communication among all students, a representative of the Aboriginal student population should be included in the general students’ association.

Awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the differences between cultures and how this affects the success of Aboriginal students are important to their retention. Betz (1991) writes that faculty members directly and profoundly affect the motivation and desire of Indian students to remain in school. Instructors must seek to ‘understand the minority students’ communication skills, modalities, and behaviors (body language, facial expressions, eye contact, silence, touch and public space); teachers must understand and decrease their stereotypes about, and fears of, minority students” (Ford, 1998). Training administrators, faculty, staff, and students about Aboriginal culture and its history is important and perhaps best provided by elders from Aboriginal communities. “Hearing elders compare and contrast the educational and political structures of the dominant society with native approaches to life produces more genuine and substantial cross-cultural understanding” (Marker, 1998).

Perhaps Lenning, Beal, and Sauer (1980) sum it up best when they say: “a genuine concern about student retention and a commitment to develop and implement retention strategies must be visible at all levels of the institution.” The role of board members, administrators, faculty, and support staff, as well as their presence on campus, has a bearing on the retention of Aboriginal students. The establishment of Native advisory boards, the appointment of Aboriginal people to board
positions, and the active recruitment of Aboriginal staff and faculty shows a commitment to the Aboriginal student and fosters awareness and communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Conclusion
The debate is ongoing as to whether minority groups should have special programs within the post-secondary system. Giroux (1997) examines the defensive posture taken up by many white college students, who view the emergence of multiculturalism as an attack on whiteness and concludes that some white students resent the benefits that Indian people receive as a result of treaties with the federal government. Rodriguez (1997) notes that the University of New Mexico established three minority student service centres for Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans. Rodriguez claims that not only were the centres seen as racist but the "existence of these patronizing services unavoidably and intolerably stamp these race/ethnic identities as academically inferior" (p. 30). His belief is that the existence of the centres is counterproductive and promotes tribalism and groupthink, not individuality (p. 30). In contrast, Richardson (1989) states that retention strategies are rungs on the ladder to success that must be in place for minority students to succeed. These rungs or retention strategies are necessary and must therefore be provided by the institutions that seek to retain and graduate minority students.

According to Wells (1997), the vast majority of institutions recognize the unique needs of Aboriginal students and offer special programs to address those needs. Even the New Mexico Commission on Higher Education (1996) provided numerous examples of colleges that recognize, support, and serve the educational and cultural needs of the Native Indian student populations through special programs.

Post-secondary institutions in Alberta are at various stages of development and implementation in regards to programs and services for the Aboriginal population. Some institutions have fully established services for recruitment and retention. Others are currently developing initiatives to implement in the near future. Evidence shows that colleges and universities in Alberta recognize the unique needs of a growing population of Aboriginal students and are striving to meet those needs.

REFERENCES
minority groups should have a tertiary system. Giroux (1997) up by many white college students resent the benefits of treaties with the federal government. The University of New Mexico centre for Hispanics, Afrodiaz claims that not the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existence of these patronage stamp these race/ethnic. His belief is that the existen