
CHANGING COURSE:
Improving Aboriginal Access to
Post-Secondary Education in Canada



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Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation is a private, independent organization created by an act of Parliament in 1998. The Foundation works to improve access to post-secondary education for Canadians from all backgrounds; it encourages a high level of achievement and engagement in Canadian society; and it brings people and organizations together to understand barriers and improve access to post-secondary education in Canada. Each year, the Foundation distributes \$340 million in bursaries and scholarships to students across Canada.

The Research Program

The Millennium Research Program furthers the work of the Foundation by undertaking research and pilot projects aimed at understanding and reducing barriers to post-secondary education. It ensures that policymaking and public discussion about opportunities in higher education in Canada can be informed by the best available evidence.

Research Note Series

Part of the mission of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation is to improve access to post-secondary education so that Canadians can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to participate in a changing economy and society. Higher education provides the prospects for personal fulfillment and economic advancement to which Canadians from all backgrounds are entitled.

The Foundation carries out extensive research, collecting and analyzing data from surveys and pilot projects, so that we can better understand the barriers that prevent some students from making it to the post-secondary level, and so that we can identify means to alleviate those barriers.

Within the broad scope of our research, we uncover certain trends, questions and issues that call for wider public dialogue. This research note, the second in an ongoing series examining issues of access and funding for post-secondary education, seeks to inform this dialogue and the development of new programs and policies.

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Jacob Beaton,
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Introduction: Improving the prospects for Aboriginal youth

All Canadians concerned with either the social cohesion or the economic prosperity of their country have an interest in the prospects for young Aboriginal peoples¹. The Aboriginal youth population is growing at a much faster rate than the youth component of the general population.² Already, in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, one quarter of the population under 14 years of age is Aboriginal. Looking ahead ten years, Statistics Canada reports that the number of Aboriginal people in their twenties entering the Canadian labour market will grow by 40%, a rate four times greater than that of the general population. As the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada has argued, the continued economic and social development of not only Aboriginal communities but of entire regions and provinces of Canada will depend in large part on increased Aboriginal access to and success in higher education.³

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation seeks to improve access to post-secondary education so that Canadians from all backgrounds can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to participate in a changing economy and society. As such, it has a keen interest in the educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples. Its research program has addressed this issue through several studies,

and the Foundation has initiated a series of more in-depth projects to test the effectiveness of different strategies for encouraging access to and success in post-secondary education among Aboriginal students. This research note highlights some of the more important research findings and the rationale behind these projects.

Aboriginal Canadians optimistic about post-secondary education

Most young Aboriginal people in Canada want to go on to post-secondary education after completing high school. Like other Canadians, they recognize the value of a college or university education.

In fact, the educational aspirations of Aboriginal people are not very different from those of other Canadians. A recent survey of First Nations people living on-reserve⁴ shows that 70% of those between the ages of 16 and 24 hope to complete some form of post-secondary education, and almost 80% of parents hope their children will do so.

Even more encouraging is that ambition is matched with optimism. For Aboriginal people between the ages of 16 and 24, 72% say it is likely or very likely that they will obtain the level of education they desire. Parents are just as likely (70%) to believe that their children will get the post-secondary education they want.

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**Uphill climb:
aspirations versus reality**

Despite the optimism of Aboriginal people, only 39% of those between the ages of 25 and 64 have graduated from some form of post-secondary education. This reality is far below the aspirations that Aboriginal youth and their families have for higher education, and also well below the overall Canadian post-secondary attainment level of 54%. In the case of status Indians, only 20% of those under the age of 24 have pursued some form of post-secondary education, compared with 42% of their non-Aboriginal counterparts.⁵

This difference between aspirations and achievement is illustrated in *Chart 1*. For Aboriginal communities, achieving educational goals is a steeper climb. Many young people want to go on to some form of post-secondary education, but far fewer are making it in the current context.⁶

An earlier report commissioned by the Foundation confirmed that the steeper climb for Aboriginal students is the product of a number of barriers, making it more difficult for Aboriginal people to attain their educational aspirations.⁸ These barriers include:

- inadequate financial resources
- poor academic preparation
- lack of self-confidence and motivation
- absence of role models who have post-secondary education experience
- lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture on campus
- experience of racism on campus.

All of these factors, combined with a history of forced assimilation through non-Aboriginal educational institutions, create a challenging path for Aboriginal youth wanting to pursue post-secondary education.

If we want Aboriginal people to share in the

wealth of Canada and contribute fully to their families, communities and society, then we need to better understand these barriers and reduce them where possible.

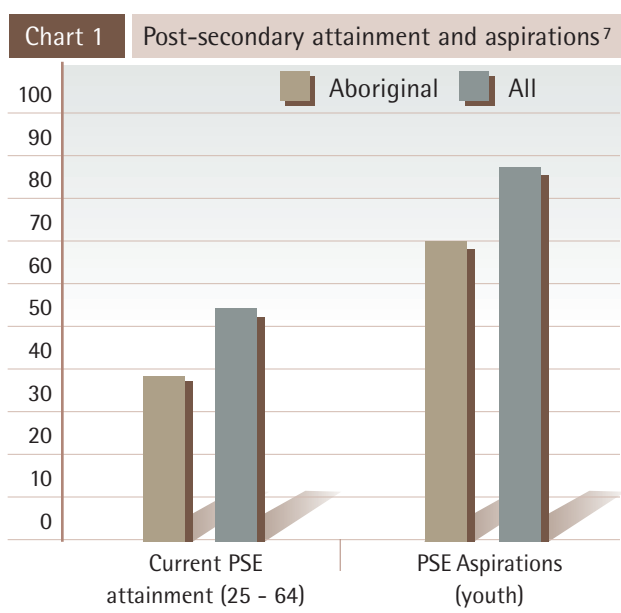
**Understanding the barriers
to post-secondary education
for Aboriginal people**

A recent survey of First Nations people on-reserve helps create a clearer picture of the barriers to post-secondary education faced by Aboriginal people.⁹

Of all the factors holding back First Nations students, our research shows that the lack of financial resources is perceived as the most significant, although a lack of academic preparation is also important.

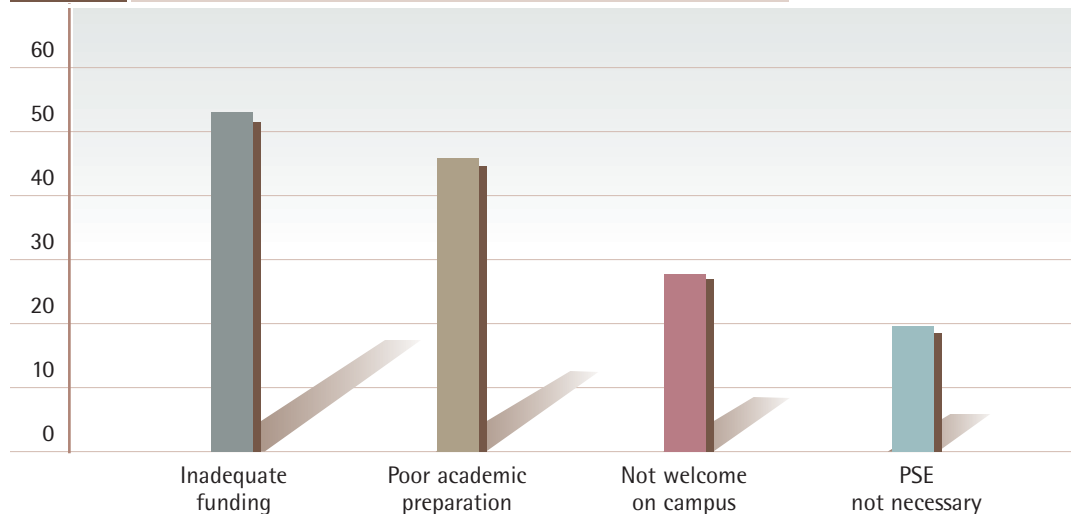
Those surveyed were asked to agree or disagree with four statements: 53% agreed that the level of government funding is inadequate; 46% agreed that First Nations youth are not academically prepared through their high school education; and 28% agreed that

“For Aboriginal communities, achieving educational goals is a steeper climb.”



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Chart 2 Barriers to post-secondary education for Aboriginal people



First Nations people do not feel welcome on university and college campuses. Only 20% agreed that jobs in First Nations communities do not require post-secondary education.

Among First Nations youth not planning to go on to college or university, financial barriers are most frequently cited as holding them back: 59% say they have to work to support their family while 40% say they do not have enough money.¹⁰

When asked about why they are not planning on attending post-secondary education, only 27% say it is because they do not want to leave their communities; 25% because their grades are not good enough; 20% because they do not think they need post-secondary education; and 18% because they simply do not like school.

When those youth who are planning to go to post-secondary education are asked if anything might change their plans, 48% say it would be a lack of money, 43% say they may need to work to support their family and 42% say it would be because their grades are not good enough.

The survey data show that while the experience of school and the perception of the importance of post-secondary education are factors for some, concerns about financial resources and academic preparation are most prominent when First Nations people living on-reserve think about what might hold them back from going on to post-secondary education.

Understanding the Aboriginal student population

The importance of financial factors should not be surprising, given what we know about the income levels for Aboriginal people. Based on 2001 census data, the average income for First Nations on-reserve was \$14,616; for Aboriginal people off-reserve average income was \$20,888; and for the non-Aboriginal Canadian population, average income was \$30,062.

Despite these statistics, 39% of First Nations parents living on-reserve say that they, their child or another family member is saving for their child's post-secondary education. This

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figure is lower, however, than that for the general population, again testifying to the disparity that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. Statistics Canada surveys show that half of parents with at least one child expected to finish high-school are saving money for their child's further studies.¹¹

The financial barrier facing Aboriginal students does not stem only from the fact that Aboriginal families are, on average, less well-off than other Canadian families. It is also important to understand that Aboriginal students tend to be at a different stage of life than non-Aboriginal students. They are less likely to be what people may typically think of as a college or university student: 19 years old, single, with no children.

Specifically, the Foundation's research¹² has shown that Aboriginal university and college students are, on average, older than the typical student and more likely to be married or to have children. More than half of Aboriginal university students are 22 years of age or older while almost one-third of Aboriginal university students have children, as do almost half of Aboriginal college students.

Generally, Aboriginal students are further removed from the relatively care-free days of early adulthood and more likely to face pressures of juggling school with family responsibilities. As well as paying for tuition, they are more likely to need housing suitable for a married couple or a family, and have to pay for child care. At the same time, Aboriginal college students are less likely to live at home, rent-free, while those attending university are more likely to interrupt their studies.

Given what we know about the Aboriginal student population, we can understand why the most common reason given for not going on to post-secondary education is the need to work and support a family. In this context, it is not just a question of the amount of finan-

Chart 3 University student profile

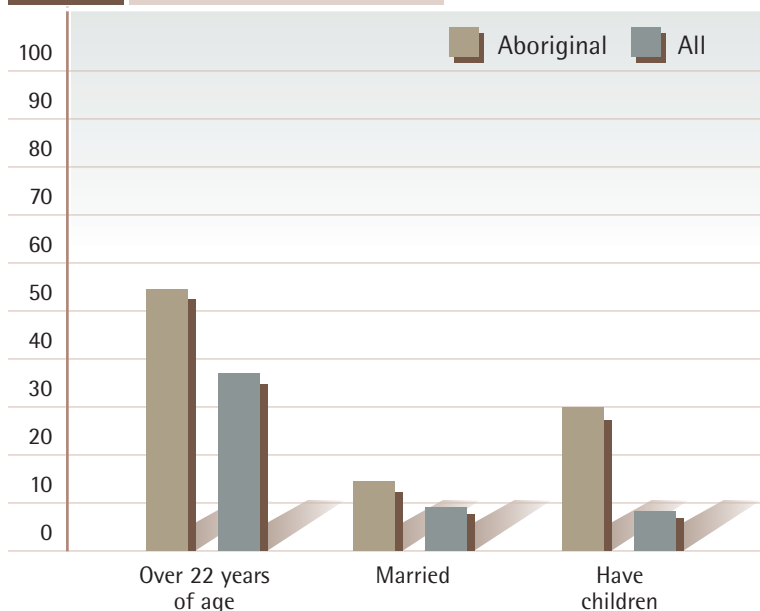
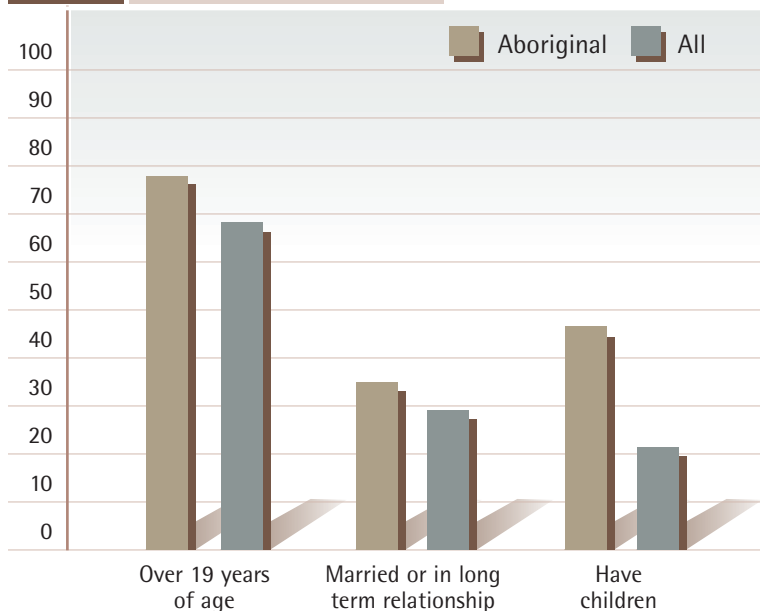


Chart 4 College student profile



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cial support given to Aboriginal students, but the kind of financial and other support. Programs for Aboriginal students need to provide support suitable for older students and single parents.

Factors in addition to financial support will also continue to be important. Racism on campus, for instance, will continue to deter or discourage some Aboriginal students, along with those from other groups that experience discrimination. It is encouraging, however, that of those Aboriginal students who do attend university, 72% feel part of the community and 91% say they are satisfied with the quality of their education — figures comparable to the general population of university students.¹³ While there is still a need to make faculty and fellow students more aware of Aboriginal issues, it appears that some progress may have been made in this direction.

Further research: pilot projects look at easing barriers

The research, described above, has helped the Foundation understand the barriers faced by Aboriginal students and their families considering post-secondary education.

Many believe governments need to do more to address these barriers. In the First Nations on-reserve survey, 58% said that governments have the greatest responsibility for paying for post-secondary education. Interestingly, non-Aboriginal students are just as likely to hold this view.¹⁴

As well as committing resources to the problem, we need to ensure that those resources are spent wisely and are devoted to programs that will make the greatest difference to Aboriginal students.

The Foundation is determined to make a contribution here. It is investing a total of \$13 million over the next four years in experimental projects involving Aboriginal students.

These pilot projects will not only benefit Aboriginal students directly as they prepare for and go on to post-secondary education, but they will also test the effectiveness of different strategies so that, by the time the projects come to an end, we will know whether they delivered results and should be continued and expanded, or whether they need to be set aside in favour of other approaches.

The projects¹⁵ are:

- “Making Education Work,” a comprehensive program of academic preparation and student and family support for students at selected Aboriginal high schools in Manitoba, to help ensure that these students are ready to make the step to post-secondary education should they choose to;
- The Millennium Aboriginal Access Bursary for first-year Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan, to help lower the costs of their first step into post-secondary education; and,
- “Le,nonet,” a program offering financial, academic and cultural support to Aboriginal students at the University of Victoria in British Columbia to ensure that those who do get to university have the best chance of succeeding.

Each of these projects is designed to focus on one or more of the principle barriers facing Aboriginal students wishing to go on to post-secondary education. The Millennium Aboriginal Access Bursary in Saskatchewan will provide approximately \$2,000 in non-repayable financial assistance to over 600 Aboriginal students each year. The Le,nonet program at the University of Victoria will also make additional financial assistance available to Aboriginal students who might otherwise discontinue their studies due to lack of funds. Both the Making Education Work and the Le,nonet projects focus on academic preparation, providing Aboriginal students with tutoring and courses designed to improve learning skills. Finally, these same two projects

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address social and cultural barriers by providing students with encouragement and support through peer mentoring, improved student services and the maintenance of ties between students and their communities.

Taken together, these pilot projects will provide a range of support for Aboriginal students as they prepare for, enter into, and complete post-secondary education. As research projects, the impact of the support given to

Aboriginal students over the next four years will be carefully measured. These projects are limited in duration and available on a test basis in specific areas only, but they will expand our knowledge of what works and what does not. In this way, the Foundation anticipates that by the end of its ten-year mandate it will have moved from documenting the extent of barriers faced by Aboriginal students to documenting solutions.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, the term "Aboriginal" refers to all those who identify themselves as "First Nations," Status or non-Status Indians, Metis or Inuit. The research data cited sometimes pertains to specific groups of Aboriginal peoples, such as First Nations people or Status Indians. When this is the case, the distinction is noted.

2. See Statistics Canada's *The Daily*, June 28, 2005; available online at <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/050628/d050628d.htm>.

3. Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, *Aboriginal Access to Higher Education*, available online at http://www.aucc.ca/_pdf/english/reports/2002/innovation/aboriginal_e.PDF.

4. The telephone survey of 2,206 First Nations residents living on-reserve was conducted in the spring of 2005 by EKOS Research Associates. The questions reported on in this research note were commissioned from EKOS by the Foundation.

5. Figures cited in this paragraph are from the 2001 census and are reported in Sean Junor and Alex Usher, *The Price of Knowledge 2004: Access and Student Finance in Canada*. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004.

6. This does not mean that the situation has not been improving in recent years. See Junor and Usher, *The Price of Knowledge*, Chapter 2.VII.

7. Data for Aboriginal aspirations pertain to First Nations youth between the ages of 16 and 24, and come from the EKOS survey of First Nations residents on-reserve. Data for general aspirations pertain to Canadian youth in Grades 6 to 12, and come from a survey conducted in 2003-04 on behalf of the Foundation by R.A. Malatest & Associates.

8. R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., *Aboriginal Peoples and Post-Secondary Education: What Educators Have Learned*, Millennium Research Series Number 8. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004.

9. The survey was conducted by EKOS Research Associates. See note 4, above.

10. The answers are not mutually exclusive; respondents could choose more than one reason. Note that the survey sample size in the case of youth not planning to pursue post-secondary studies was relatively small (n=124). As a result, the figures cited in this case should be treated as more indicative than definitive.

11. The data for First Nations parents is from the EKOS survey of First Nations residents living on-reserve. The Statistics Canada data is cited in Junor and Usher, *The Price of Knowledge*, Chapter 1.IV. A more recent survey of parents of teenagers, conducted on behalf of the Foundation by COMPAS, found that 69% of parents in the general population who have at least one teenaged child they hope will go on to post-secondary education are currently putting some money aside for that purpose.

12. This research is summarized in: David Holmes, *Embracing Differences: Post-Secondary Education among Aboriginal Students, Students with Children and Students with Disabilities*, Millennium Research Series Number 18. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005. See also Junor and Usher, *The Price of Knowledge*, Chapter 2.VII.

13. These findings are reported in Holmes, *Embracing Differences*.

14. A recent survey conducted for the Foundation by Léger Marketing found that 60% of university and college students in both Ontario and Québec say that governments, as opposed to students and their families, should be mainly responsible for paying the costs of a post-secondary education.

15. Further details about these projects are available on the "What's New?" and research newsletter sections of the Foundation's website. See <http://www.millennium-scholarships.ca>.