



ADULT PATHWAYS TO INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Susan M Brigham, Mount Saint
Vincent University, Canada
Alyson King, University of
Ontario Institute of Technology,
Canada

THE PROJECT

- Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded study: “Diversities of Resilience: Understanding the Strategies for Success used by Underrepresented Students in Canadian Universities”
- Electronic survey of 1 555 students (690 of whom completed the survey)
- one-to-one interviews with 30 students who are either currently studying and nearly ready to graduate or have recently graduated from undergraduate degree programs.
- Three universities in three Canadian regions:
 - Mount Saint Vincent University [MSVU] in Nova Scotia in the Atlantic region,
 - University of Ontario Institute of Technology [UOIT] in Ontario in the central region, and
 - University of Winnipeg [UWin] in Manitoba in the Prairie region).

RESILIENCE THEORY

Resilience:

- ability to adapt to difficult circumstances despite adversity (Bandura, 1997),
- embracing challenges,
- maintaining optimism (Rashid & Gregory, 2014) and
- harnessing resources to sustain well-being (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013).

Limitations to trying to apply standard measures in the resiliency framework to various “other racial or ethnic groups” (McCubbin, et al., 1998, p. 322)

“NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT”

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines a non-traditional student as having any of the following characteristics:

- Delays enrolment: (does not enter college or postsecondary immediately after high school)
- Attends part-time rather than full-time
- Works 35 hours a week or more while enrolled
- Is financially independent as defined by financial aid criteria
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children but sometimes others)
- Is a single parent
- Lacks a high school diploma, though may have a GED or other high school equivalency. (NCES, 2002, p. 3)

SURVEY FINDINGS

Non-traditional students were:

- somewhat more likely to delay their university education to earn money to attend;
- less likely to receive scholarships or bursaries and more likely to get student loans compared with younger students; and,
- those who speak more than one language, identify with a higher importance of cultural identity, and were Islamic or Indigenous, were all more likely to have financial concerns that kept them out of university for at least one semester.

INTERVIEWS

Four significant factors that impacted on the ability of these students to be successful in reaching their final year of university:

- family support,
- a sense of belonging or community when attending school,
- developing a relationship with one or more professors, and
- the ability to manage or cope with stress.

FAMILY SUPPORT

Meg – (all names are pseudonyms) asserts that distancing herself from specific family members helped her to stay focused on her goal of completing her degree

Karim – a divorced father of three, had to go against some of his family members' expectations of him: "Yeah, they don't have a clue how dedicated I think an older person has to be to go to school without money."

Tammy – Indigenous African Nova Scotian and First Nations heritage and a mother of three, notes that as a first-generation student, her family could not understand her challenges of going to university

Priya – her father chose to move the family to Canada (despite having a good career in Pakistan) so all five of his daughters could have their own opinions and a better future. Her father encouraged his daughters in education.

Fatima – single mother of a toddler who came to Canada as a WUSC student, says her family gave her encouragement to do her best in high school. "Without my family and my mom, I don't think I would be studying at [name of University]... because my mom gave up a lot because of sending us to school."

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Rose – an Aboriginal single mother of three, who had tried to do a degree before, said that she has gone from “feeling invisible” to knowing a lot of people and not being afraid ...

Bella – an Aboriginal student who is a single mother. She had completed high school and first enrolled at university when she was in her early twenties, but said: “I didn’t feel it. It wasn’t me.” When she was in her thirties, with limited job prospects and a young daughter to support and be a role model for, she enrolled in and has now graduated from a program that interested her more. Bella stated that her Aboriginal culture helped give her a sense of purpose at university because she feels that she is representing her people and becoming a successful role model. Although this provides more a sense of joy than added pressure, she feels that failure is not an option

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROFESSORS

Mark – 26-year old Canadian-born non-visible minority student who acknowledges his privilege as “a white cis male,” first went to university at 17 years old, but believes he was not mature enough and lacked the focus to succeed at that time: “I’m way more engaged in [university]. My grades are like exponentially better, and yeah, I really feel like—like I came back with sort of like an idea in mind and a career in mind, and I want to learn skills and get good grades, and I feel like I’m meeting people in class. It just feels entirely different.”

Anne – a 53-year old Métis student with adult children, also commented on the importance of speaking with her professors right away, even “just to get an idea of what they’re looking for in this assignment because each professor is different, and it can be very disappointing when you’ve put your heart and soul into something, and realize you were way off or they wanted it done a certain way.”

DESTRESSING, FINDING WAYS TO COPE WITH OR MANAGE STRESS

Bella – engages in self-talk: “I guess I rationalize things first and say ‘Is this a big issue? What needs to be done here?’ I guess I have a philosophy, ‘Time cures everything,’ so just let things pass I guess.”

Karim – : “There are many things I think I did to succeed... some alternative things, like I got into meditation and correct breathing exercises to deal with anxiety, because I couldn’t deal with all the people in these exam rooms sometimes. I just couldn’t deal with the stress and the pressure, so I learned how to breathe and calm down.”

Priya – attended Orientation where she made friends, learned about campus groups, and built the confidence to take on leadership roles later on

Fatima – worked with WUSC to assist refugee students

Tammy – tutored with the Africentric support group which has contributed to a sense of belonging and contributed to a way of coping with their academic and personal stresses

Frank – Indigenous student who deals with stress by being organized and not procrastinating

LAST THOUGHTS

Keys to success at university:

- being older,
- being driven because “there’s no time to waste”,
- having a clear purpose,
- taking classes seriously/never missing classes, and
- being self-motivated.

Resilience & inclusion are connected → true inclusion in the university culture & life