

ACCESS

The Problem

Over the next decade, it is estimated that over 70% of Canadian jobs will require some form of post-secondary education (PSE).¹ Unfortunately for many in Ontario, education beyond high-school is not an option they consider, as various barriers stand in the way of advancing into higher education. Traditionally, six target groups have been under-represented within Ontario's PSE system: low-income students, Aboriginal students, first generation students, rural and northern students, students with dependants, and students with disabilities.

Recently, community-based early outreach initiatives have shown much success in increasing participation rates in PSE amongst many of these groups. Early outreach is the engagement of youth in a dialogue about education, its purpose, benefits, outcomes, and the opportunities it provides. Early outreach seeks to extend the continuum of education to post-secondary studies from an early age, as it has been shown that three-fourths of students make the decision to attend university before the age of 15 and one-third before the age of nine.²

Students from these underrepresented groups each face specific barriers to accessing and persisting through PSE, ranging from financial, socioeconomic, attitudinal, behavioural, and familial considerations.³ Because of this, tailored early outreach programs have been shown to be the most effective, as they address the specific needs of the community. Specific programs, such as the Pathways to Education, have led to decreased high school drop-out rates and an increase in the number of students attending PSE.⁴ As a result of their successes, the Canadian and Ontario governments have provided resources for some early outreach programs, but inequities still exist that must be addressed.

Low-income Students

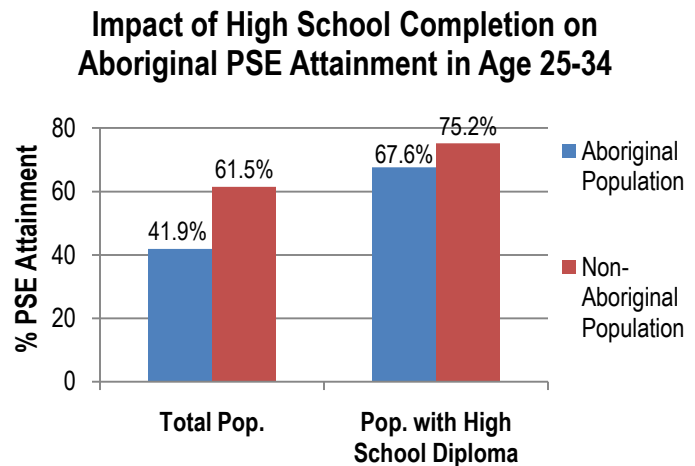
Participation rates for low-income individuals are consistently lower than higher income groups. In 2006-07, data revealed that over 80% of 18-24 year olds from families earning over \$100,000 participated in PSE, while the participation rate dropped to less than 60% for youth from families earning less than \$25,000. Most importantly, this gap does not appear to be changing appreciably. Through the last decade from 1995 and 2006, the gap between these two earning groups oscillated between 16 and 31 percentage points, and has been growing since 2003.⁵ Low-income students face additional barriers to accessing post-secondary education relative to their peers. Low-income families tend to overestimate the cost of attending PSE and are less aware of financial aid available to students. Studies have also shown that, generally, more affluent students fair better academically than their low-income counterparts. Interestingly, the gap between income quartiles largely disappears when looking at registration rates after application, indicating that the priority for increasing participation rates among low-income youth should be reducing real and perceived barriers prior to application.⁶

Aboriginal Students

Although participation in and success throughout PSE has been improving for Aboriginal students, they are still less likely to attend PSE than their peers. The 2006 National Census showed that amongst Aboriginals aged 25-

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1. Bob Rae. 2005. *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
 2. Council of Ontario Universities. 2003. *Applicant Survey Highlights*. Toronto.
 3. Ross Finnie, Richard E. Mueller, Arthur Sweetman, and Alex Usher. 2010. *New Perspectives on Access to Postsecondary Education*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
 4. Boston Consulting Group. 2007. *BCG Assessment of Pathways to Education*. Toronto.
 5. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. 2010. *Third Annual Review and Research Plan*. Toronto.
 6. M. D. Dooley, A. A. Payne, and A. L. Robb. 2009. *University Participation and Income Differences: An Analysis of Applications by Ontario Secondary School Students*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

34, 42% held a PSE credential, while 68% of non-Aboriginal young adults held a similar credential. According to the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, Aboriginal students face a number of barriers, including financial, academic, and cultural.⁷ One of the clearest barriers to access arises during high school, where nationally, a startling 40.3% of Aboriginal youth 20-24 years of age did not complete high school, compared to 12.5% amongst the remainder of the population.⁸ The graph below demonstrates how completion of high school narrows the national gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in ages 25-34 and their access to post-secondary education.⁷



Familial responsibilities have been cited as a rationale for the gap in participation, as Aboriginal students are far more likely to be married, have children, and live farther from educational institutions.⁹ Financial barriers exist as well; in 2000, the total cost of education was roughly one-third of median family income for Aboriginal households in Ontario.¹⁰ Cultural barriers such as a lower appreciation for PSE, concerns over cultural preservation, and a lack of engagement with PSE objectives may also play a role.⁹ This may partly help explain Saskatchewan's relative success in closing the proportional gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal university graduates, due to the presence of Aboriginal-targeted university-level education through the First Nations University in Canada and the Gabriel Dumont Institute.¹¹ Aboriginal populations also tend to contend with overlap in other factors of low representation, including rural residence and first generation standing.

First Generation Students

Students with parents who have attended post-secondary education are more likely to participate in PSE themselves than students whose parents did not attend PSE. Amongst those aged 26-28, 41% of Canadians whose parents completed some PSE had a university degree, while less than 20% of those whose parents completed high school or less had the same.¹² First generation students face a number of barriers to accessing PSE compared to their peers. There are academic barriers as they tend to achieve lower high-school grades compared to their peers.¹³ First generation students are also more skeptical of the benefits of a PSE credential when compared to non-first generation students. Finally, like many other cohorts of under-represented students, first generation students also face financial barriers.

7. Statistics Canada. 2000. "Household Income Groups (24) in Constant (2000) Dollars and Selected Demographic Educational, Cultural and Labour Force Characteristics of Primary Household Maintainer (87) for Private Households, for Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1995 and 2000- 20% Sample Data," 2001 Census. Ottawa.

8. Statistics Canada, 2006.

9. David Holmes. 2005. *Embracing Differences: Post-Secondary Education among Aboriginal Students, Students with Children and Students with Disabilities*. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

10. Richard Van Loon. 2001. *Report from the COU Task Force on Student Assistance*. Toronto: Council of Ontario Universities.

11. Michael Mendelson. 2006. *Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

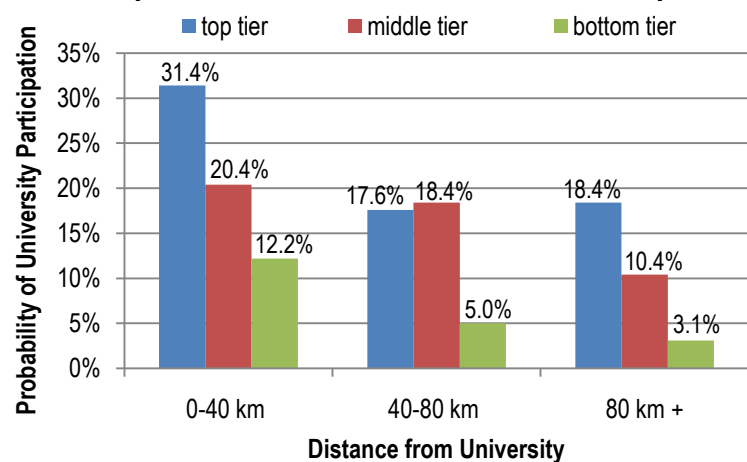
12. Statistics Canada, 2009. *Youth in Transition (YITS) cycle 5, cohort A and B*. Ottawa.

13. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. 2010. *Third Annual Review and Research Plan*. Toronto.

Rural and Northern Students

Overall, rural and northern students in Ontario are less likely to access post-secondary education than their urban peers. Across Canada, students living in excess of 80 kilometres from a PSE institution are only 58% as likely to attend PSE as students who live within 40 kilometres of an institution. The graph to the right demonstrates how this fact is only compounded by income level.¹⁴

Impact of Distance and Income on Participation



Students with Dependants

Across Canada, 19% of women between the ages 20 and 24 had children in 2001.

However, only 4% of women 20 years old attending university reported having a child.¹⁵ Many students with dependants are only able to attend school on a part-time basis, and part-time students are unable to access OSAP. Further, a single-parent cannot concurrently receive Ontario Works and OSAP, leaving them to face additional financial barriers to education. The child care system in Ontario also is not meeting the needs of students with dependants, creating a further barrier in the form of familial obligations.

Students with Disabilities

One in seven Canadians has a disability,¹⁶ and while high school completion for this population is only slightly below the provincial average, the attainment of PSE students with disabilities is only 40% of the Ontario provincial average.¹⁷ Students with disabilities face a broad and multi-faceted range of social, medical, administrative, and financial barriers that may affect their ability to access and succeed in the current PSE system. Additionally, the physical limitations of some campuses and learning facilities pose significant challenges for individuals with physical disabilities.

The Solution

1. OUSA believes that the government must establish and properly fund an arms-length foundation that supports the development of **community-based early outreach initiatives** across the province, which can provide information and resources to students, families, and communities to assist in making better informed decisions about educational pathways.
2. OUSA advocates for adequate funding for universities, so they are able to implement and strengthen **social, financial, and academic support programs** targeted for, but not limited to, under-represented students, ultimately ensuring the future success of Ontario in the knowledge-based economy.
3. OUSA asks for a strong commitment to underrepresented students through **targeted grants** which will ensure that these students do not face additional financial barriers to accessing PSE.

14. Marc Frenette. 2002. *Too Far to Go On? Distance to School and University Participation*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

15. David Holmes. 2005. *Embracing Differences: Post-Secondary Education among Aboriginal Students, Students with Children and Students with Disabilities*. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

16. Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. 2010. *Making Ontario Accessible*. Toronto.

17. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. 2010. *Third Annual Review and Research Plan*. Toronto.