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Article abstract

This article explores the strategies used by Indigenous students attending three Canadian universities (in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Manitoba) to find success in their studies. As part of a larger study on the success strategies of students who have been traditionally underrepresented in Canadian universities, this article draws on the responses of students who self-identify as Indigenous and insights from a key informant. We argue that the voices of Indigenous students are essential in the processes of institutional decolonizing and reconciliation and of reimagining universities as inclusive, equitable spaces for Indigenous students and their academic success

"I WAS LIKE AN ALIEN": EXPLORING HOW INDIGENOUS STUDENTS SUCCEED IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES

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Abstract

This article explores the strategies used by Indigenous students attending three Canadian universities (in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Manitoba) to find success in their studies. As part of a larger study on the success strategies of students who have been traditionally underrepresented in Canadian universities, this article draws on the responses of students who self-identify as Indigenous and insights from a key informant. We argue that the voices of Indigenous students are essential in the processes of institutional decolonizing and reconciliation and of reimagining universities as inclusive, equitable spaces for Indigenous students and their academic success.

Keywords: Indigenous students, university, success, challenges

Résumé

Cet article examine les stratégies utilisées par les étudiants Autochtones qui fréquentent trois universités canadiennes (en Nouvelle-Écosse, en Ontario et au Manitoba) pour réussir leurs études. Dans le cadre d'une étude plus vaste sur les stratégies de réussite des étudiants traditionnellement sous-représentés dans les universités canadiennes, cet article s'appuie sur les réponses d'étudiants qui s'identifient comme Autochtones et sur les idées d'un informateur clé. Nous soutenons que les voix d'étudiants Autochtones sont essentielles dans les processus de décolonisation et de réconciliation institutionnelles et de réinvention des universités en tant qu'espaces équitables inclusifs pour les étudiants Autochtones et leur réussite scolaire.

Mots-clés : étudiants autochtones, université, réussite, défis

Introduction

Attending university or college is often viewed as a good path to improving one's life chances, yet Indigenous peoples in Canada have long faced a range of overt and covert barriers to accessing post-secondary education. For those who have successfully broken through those barriers, many struggle to navigate the colonial and Eurocentric system of post-secondary education. Until recently, research has tended to focus on the "deficit view" of Indigenous youth (Battiste et al., 2018, p. 4). The details of the barriers faced by Indigenous peoples in accessing formal education are critical for understanding how they shape the experiences of students, including those students who successfully enroll and persist in post-secondary education. Yet, a focus only on barriers is a partial story.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the challenges, strengths, and strategies of Indigenous university students in the context of some significant barriers they face. Using quantitative and qualitative research data of participants who self-identify as Indigenous and have recently completed or nearly completed their undergraduate degrees at one of three Canadian universities (located in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Manitoba), this research adds to the body of knowledge about the experiences of Indigenous youth attending Canadian universities. Alfred (2015) notes the

importance of paying attention to the experiences of Indigenous youth because their realities are "very different from those the decision makers usually confront" (p. 3) and argues that a vision of interdependence, independence, and mutual respect, following the idea of Guswhenta (or "Two Row Wampum"), is essential to any relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples and nations. We believe that this vision is key to moving forward with, and beyond, reconciliation in Canadian universities.

Setting the Context

Authors' Positionality

Self-locating or positionality statements are rooted in Indigenous methodologies and the protocol of introducing oneself, which includes acknowledging one's relationships to place and people (Kovach et al., 2013). Such statements prompt us as researchers to reflect on such questions as "Who am I as researcher?" and "How do I do this research in a nonexploitive way?" (Kovach et al., 2013, p. 491). Recognizing the importance of positioning or self-locating ourselves as researchers in relationship to the research, we offer our positioning statements.

Alyson King

As a White settler whose family members arrived on Turtle Island as early as the mid-1700s and as late as 1958, King's knowledge of Indigenous histories was first shaped by the typical colonial history taught in Ontario schools. At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, King began learning about (what was then called) Native–White relations, Residential Schools, and other forms of education for Indigenous peoples. While not a primary focus of research, the history of education for Indigenous peoples formed an important part of her teaching about the history of education and education policy. Recently, King chaired a committee to build a cross-disciplinary minor program in Indigenous Studies and continues to advocate for Indigenous knowledge and history to be holistically embedded into curriculum across Ontario Tech University. The current study arises from King's concern with the experiences of undergraduate students attending university. Her early historical research in this area focused on women students attending Ontario universities from 1900–1930. Since then, her research interests have evolved to focus more generally on students who have been traditionally underrepresented in Canada's current university system. For this article, we pulled data from a larger project on historically underrepresented students to shine a spotlight on the experiences of students who self-identify as Indigenous. King engages in this research with the understanding that she is continually learning about Indigenous knowledge systems, worldviews, and methodologies.

Susan Brigham

Susan Brigham identifies as a cis woman settler of African descent from an immigrant family. Her family immigrated in the 1960s from the United Kingdom to New Brunswick, the unceded territory of the Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) and Mi'kmaq Peoples. Although raised in a community situated along the Saint John River close to Kingsclear First Nation, Brigham had had little to no opportunity to interact with and learn from or about the First Nation community throughout her childhood, and received very little education at school and university about Indigenous peoples in Canada in general. Unfortunately, therefore, the stereotypes and predominantly negative grand narrative of Indigenous peoples writ large were Brigham's main way of learning about Indigenous peoples locally, nationally, and internationally. It was not until returning to Canada in 1993 after teaching abroad and taking the position of kindergarten teacher in the Anaham community in British Columbia that Brigham began to develop an understanding of colonialism, cultural genocide, and the repercussions of the Indian Act. As a professor at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), Brigham is involved in the ongoing collaborative work to decolonize the curriculum in the Faculty of Education by deepening her awareness of Indigenous worldviews, knowledges, and perspectives, and by integrating Indigenous-informed practices into education programs. As president of the Mount Saint Vincent University Faculty Association, she is committed to working with her colleagues and the institution to decolonize the Collective Agreement, continue to work to increase and retain Indigenous faculty, and intensify Indigenous perspectives, insights, and critical analysis to challenge the colonial university system.

Literature Review

The history of education for Indigenous children and youth in Canada has been marked by racism, genocide, and abuse (Barman et al., 1986; Razack, 1998). Over the past centuries, churches and colonial governments designed formal education systems, including Residential Schools, intended to "take the Indian out of the Indian" (Benjamin,

2014, p. viii). Using terrorism, epistemic violence, and dehumanization tactics, colonialists systematically disrespected and discounted Indigenous knowledge, cultures, languages, traditions, and spiritualities (Brigham, 2013). Today, the devastating intergenerational trauma "continues to affect success rates in secondary and postsecondary education" (Hanson, 2021, p. 29) in spite of the awareness of, and efforts to redress, the educational inequities over the years (e.g., Assembly of First Nations and National Indian Brotherhood, 1988; Barman et al., 1986; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Many Indigenous youth experience a sense of "personal amputation" by attending formal mainstream schools and, since they are often excluded from the rewards of schooling, many question the relevance of such education (Brade et al., 2003, p. 236). This extends into the post-secondary experience, where the colonizing project continues through Eurocentric knowledge systems underlying curricular and academic structures (Levin & Alcorn, 1999; Antone, 2000; Battiste et al., 2002; Bunjun & Brown, 2021; Pidgeon et al., 2014; Starblanket & Stark, 2018). The temporal nature of post-secondary education has changed as it has become increasingly commodified (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017): if time is money, then the longer a course or program takes to complete, the more the student's earnings are deferred. Yet, for many non-traditional students, the standard pace of multiple courses with many requirements over three or four years may not fit their life responsibilities. Indeed, the social construction of the meaning of time (e.g., being early or late, fast or slow) imposes stress around the dynamics of power relations within the university (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). Furthermore, a feeling of alienation may be created by way of the compression or acceleration of time that threatens the stability necessary for self-determination and autonomy (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). While this generalized feeling of urgency affects all students (as well as faculty and staff), we believe it has a greater impact on those from cultures where the temporal nature of everyday life is less structured around the norms of industrialized work. "Settler time" (Rifkin, 2017, as cited in Stirling, 2022, p. 35) is different from "Indigenous temporalities [which] are grounded in relations with land, human and nonhuman animals, ancestors and descendants, and other beings past and present, [and is] frequently in tension with linear settler temporalities" (Stirling, 2022, p. 35).

In addition to "cognitive assimilation" (Battiste et al., 2002, p. 83), Indigenous students often face overt everyday racism, as well as the embedded racism of the invisible curriculum and the inherent racism of colonial histories. Canel-Çınarbaş and Yohani (2019) found that Indigenous students attending a Canadian university faced overt and subtle microaggressions from both staff and fellow students, which undermined their sense of belonging and confidence. These experiences placed students in situations of uncertainty regarding identifying whether a microaggression had occurred, how to respond, and the fear of negative consequences if they were to react (Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Clark et al., 2014). Bailey (2016) also reports on the "interpersonal discrimination, frustration with the university system and feelings of isolation" (p. 1262) that negatively affect the academic experience of Indigenous university students.

Recognizing the limitations of universities as spaces for Indigenous youth to learn, thrive, and persist through to graduation, research has demonstrated the value of universities providing supports and services tailored to their needs as one way of addressing some of the limitations. Examples include Indigenous-centred university preparation and transition programs, mentorship and supports from faculty role models and ally networks (Archibald et al., 2010; Pidgeon et al., 2014), access to critical scholars and designated safe spaces (Bunjun & Brown, 2021), educational programs providing emotional and psychological supports that ensure cultural integrity (Pidgeon, 2008), and "policies, pedagogies, curricula, and services that promote the mental, physical, and intellectual wellness of students" (Bunjun & Brown, 2021, p. 186). According to Carter et al. (2018), universities that work at fostering a strong sense of belonging for Indigenous and other marginalized students can improve retention and academic success. For instance, universities can work to include spaces that are as equitable, inclusive, diverse, and respectful as possible, while encouraging pedagogies using active collaborative and participatory learning opportunities combined with culturally responsive teaching practices and caring approaches. Such pedagogy may help motivate students to be more engaged in their learning and offer critical opportunities for classmates of all races and backgrounds to work collectively. Positive interactions between diverse students can promote "academic self-confidence, social agency and likelihood to think critically" (Laird, 2005, as cited in Carter et al., 2018, p. 245). Carter et al. (2018) add that demystifying university culture and discourses for students unfamiliar with dominant university cultures, along with supporting students' academic identities, is critical to their success. While these efforts will never fully redress the generational harms that are inherent

in existing colonial institutions of higher education, they may help in moving toward reconciliation within universities and decolonization of universities. It has taken several generations to reach the point where significant efforts are finally being made to make the existing institutions more welcoming to Indigenous and other traditionally excluded students; it will likely take several generations more for any significant reimagining and reconfiguration of universities to occur. Furthermore, most of these efforts may be categorized as *Indigenous inclusion,* which "is a policy that aims to increase the number of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff in the Canadian academy" (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p. 218). In this conceptualization of Indigenization, structures of the university do not change, and Indigenous students and faculty are supported in order to adapt to the existing academic culture. Our research illustrates the ways in which respondents navigated these structures with the supports in place for students in general and Indigenous students in particular. Recently, many Indigenous peoples have been advocating for what Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) call decolonial Indigenization, which "envisions the wholesale overhaul of the academy to fundamentally reorient knowledge production based on balancing power relations between Indigenous peoples and Canadians, transforming the academy into something dynamic and new" (p. 219).

Although some early steps toward reconciliation within the academy are being taken, most universities have a long way to go to integrate aspirations for an improved relationship with Indigenous communities and knowledge systems within the existing university culture (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). The hard work of reconciliation needs to be undertaken by those with the most power in universities with input from Indigenous community members. In other words, universities cannot presume to burden the few Indigenous faculty members and employees in a university with the organization and implementation of all Indigenous activities on campus. This of course also begs the questions: Why aren't more Indigenous peoples holding the most powerful positions in universities, and what kind of efforts are being taken to recruit and retain Indigenous faculty and staff? Given the fact that many "Canadians do not fully understand and embody the idea of reconciliation" (Simpson, 2011, p. 21), universities and other educational institutions must work harder to better understand the needs of all their students, especially those who are Indigenous. Indigenous researchers, such as Starblanket and Stark (2018), emphasize the importance of a relational approach to transformation within universities and the integration of Indigenous

ways of knowing throughout the academy. The research reported in this article represents the strategies used by Indigenous students within typical colonial institutions. Given that these students have spent their lives navigating colonial education systems, it is not surprising that most of their experiences and strategies are different compared with non-Indigenous students.

The number of Indigenous peoples who successfully graduate from post-secondary education has increased since the early 2000s. Indigenous women are more likely than men to attend and complete a post-secondary program. For example, 52% of Indigenous women (aged 25–64) in 2016 had graduated from a post-secondary institution, with 14% having attained a bachelor's degree or higher (Arriagada, 2021). By comparison, 46% of Indigenous men obtained a post-secondary qualification, and 8% had received a bachelor's degree or higher. These rates continue to be lower than among non-Indigenous women (67% had a post-secondary qualification and 32% a bachelor's degree or higher) and among non-Indigenous men (64% and 27%, respectively) (Arriagada, 2021). Research about students coming from backgrounds in which trauma, racism, and other challenges have been pervasive illustrates that additional support systems are needed for educational persistence and success. Whether or not formal supports such as targeted special programs (Chodkiewicz et al., 2008; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Stewart, 2012) are in place, personal networks, a sense of community, and relationships with professors and instructors also play critical roles. The importance of maintaining community connections and "cultural integrity" (Pidgeon, 2008, p. 144) underlies all other factors of success in the university system. As explained by Pidgeon (2008), the idea of success for Indigenous students involves students' ability to retain cultural integrity as they navigate the colonial educational institutions that award degrees and diplomas. We argue that this is an important factor in understanding the strategies that Indigenous students use to complete their education and attain their credentials. As illustrated by Pidgeon's (2008) "wholistic representation of Indigenous participation in post-secondary education" (p. 352), Indigenous students' experiences are shaped by their family, community, and sense of place (e.g., their culture, lands, and past institutional experiences).

Research Methodology and Demographics

The data for this article come from a project that examined the success strategies used by traditionally underrepresented university students. We received ethics approval from all three of the universities. In Nova Scotia, we also received ethics approval from the Mi'kmaw ethics watch. The principles and protocols of the ethics watch guide our research in a manner that guarantees that the right of ownership of our findings related to Mi'kmaw participants rests with the various Mi'kmaw communities.

A pilot project undertaken at one of the universities served as the foundation for developing the larger tri-university project. Starting with the questions used in the pilot project, survey and interview questions were revised and developed through a collaborative process among the researchers, graduate research assistant, and community partners, with the advice of the Director of the Social Research Centre that administered the electronic survey. The survey was composed of both closed- and open-ended questions that were intended to solicit the necessary detail to understand respondents' life circumstances, as well as their strategies for success. All survey responses were de-identified and SPSS was used to analyze quantitative data. Survey participants were entered into a draw for one of three gift cards of $50 (one for one randomly selected student from each of the three participating universities) and one grand prize of an iPad. The survey administrator randomly drew names for winners of the draws. An incentive of $20 was provided to those who participated in the interviews. Volunteers were invited for interviews, but not all were selected due to funding limitations. During the interviews, we collected basic demographic information before moving on to open-ended questions that were intended to encourage elaboration about their experiences at university. All interviews were conducted in person by the local researcher or research assistant, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Transcribed interviews were de-identified as much as possible while still retaining the demographic information necessary to understand differences in experiences. Qualitative data were hand-coded and analyzed by each researcher before discussing and identifying the emerging themes.

We employed a mixed methods approach, namely a quantitative method that involved a lengthy electronic survey (consisting of 160 questions) and a qualitative method of one-to-one interviews. We recruited participants at three universities in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Manitoba using mass emails sent out by university administrators and/or students unions, putting up recruitment posters around each university campus (which included QR codes that allowed students to learn more about the project), by having professors share the recruitment posters and brochures directly with students in their classes, and by word of mouth. We also had our community partners actively engaged in recruitment through sharing the electronic and paper copies of the recruitment posters and brochures through their channels. Additionally, the surveys (which were our initial method of data collecting) provided a space for potential interview participants to indicate their interest in being interviewed.

Our survey was administered by the Social Research Centre at King's institution. The survey was created using Qualtrics, which is a secure, password-protected online platform on a Canadian server. All the survey data were stored and processed in the location where they were collected. Recruitment materials specifically mentioned that we were interested in learning about the success strategies used by "students who are Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit), immigrant (recent and established), visible minority, and Canadian-born." The one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face (as this was before the pandemic) in a meeting room on campus at each of the three universities. Interviewees were selected from volunteers via a targeted approach based on self-identification of gender and background in order to have representation from the different demographic categories. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Participants consisted of 690 final-year students and recent graduates (aged 21–53 years) who completed the electronic survey and 27 individuals who participated in the in-person interviews. For this article, we focus on the data from students who identified as Indigenous, which consist of eight face-to-face individual interviews and 54 surveys, as well as one interview with a key informant. Our ethics application, approved at all three institutions, permits us, the researchers, to include key informants for the purpose of providing context and additional first-person voice. All key informants have the right to be named if they wish. In this article, we refer to Métis Cree (or Michif) key informant Jesse Thistle (who consented to have his real name used), as many of his educational experiences mirror those of other Indigenous young people in our study.

Of the Indigenous respondents to our survey, 65% are women and slightly more than half of the respondents are between the ages of 23 and 30 years (52%). Another 20% are aged 19–22, and 20% are aged 31 and older. Of these, 35% are caring for at least one child while attending university. Among the eight interview respondents, one male student and five women identify themselves as Indigenous, while one woman self-identifies as Métis and another as both African Canadian and Mi'kmaq. All participants are identified in this article by pseudonyms, with the exception of the key informant.

Theoretical Framework

Because the lives of university students are composed of their roles at home, at school, and in the community, we use intersectionality as an analytical strategy (Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1991) to understand the experiences of the students in our study. Furthermore, intersectionality is a useful approach when considering how students navigate their complex and intricate lives, which are formed by gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, religion, and ability, within the university context (King et al., 2021). We also bear in mind the concept of decolonization and the challenges inherent in efforts to decolonize the academy since decolonization is "hard, unsettling work" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 4). We recognize that we, as researchers, are continually learning about the various methodologies, especially Indigenous methodologies (e.g., McGregor et al., 2018), that will help in the decolonizing of the academy. Humanizing students is part of the decolonial project in the university system; this project works toward a deeper understanding of students from all backgrounds. As a result, our strategy was to incorporate the personal stories that demonstrated the interconnections between all components of students' lives. While the overall nature of the project did not afford us the opportunity to establish personal relationships with the participants in our research, we encouraged students to consider their identity and experiences in relationship with their family, friends, and community. Indigenous methodologies illuminate the concept that relationships are a key part of understanding people's experiences (McGregor et al., 2018).

Listening to Students

In this section, we highlight two themes, with several subthemes: the challenges faced by our respondents and the factors that allowed them to be successful. These themes emerged from the analysis of both the surveys and the interviews. We found that we first had to understand the challenges participants faced in order to avoid making assumptions about their prior educational experiences and to better understand the success strategies used. Thus, we start with the challenges faced by respondents, before examining the factors that allowed them to be successful. In both the surveys and interviews, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences in order to give advice to future students. Interestingly, this advice tended to be similar to that of students from all backgrounds.

Challenges

High School and University Experiences

Within the broad category of challenges, first were the barriers many respondents faced in completing high school. Some explained that their educational experiences left them feeling self-doubtful, anxious, vulnerable to discrimination, intimidated by the university environment, and ill-prepared for academia. These experiences reflect a common theme in the literature about Indigenous students' negative educational experiences in the mainstream public school system.

Some of our participants noted that they felt excluded and unmotivated by the curriculum, or experienced racist, sexist, and bullying behaviours from classmates and discrimination, stereotyping, and low expectations from teachers. This led to their irregular high school attendance, which contributed to their lack of preparation for university studies. Ellie, for instance, states that as a youth she rarely went to class and did not complete high school until she was 20 years of age. The term "push out" rather than "drop out" reflects why they left school. In other words, factors located within the school discouraged students from continuing (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). This is an important distinction, as it recognizes that these participants may not have made connections with the school for various complex social, cultural, and economic reasons. These participants completed their high school credits outside of the school system (i.e., in an adult education centre or college transition program) before going to university as mature students. Being older than their classmates had some advantages (e.g., feeling more worldly, having more life experience than younger classmates, and so on) that shaped their success strategies, but also disadvantages (e.g., they talked about having to juggle their studies with childcare, household, and com-

munity responsibilities, supporting adult children, and having mortgage payments and other bills to pay).

Inadequate Preparation for University

Approximately two-thirds of the survey respondents felt that their high school had not provided them with the skills required for success in university. Compared with other groups in our survey, Indigenous students were the most likely to say that their high school did not adequately prepare them for university: 67% of Indigenous students did not feel adequately prepared by their high school, compared to 48% of all respondents. Indigenous students were equally as likely as other respondents to say that they had wanted to attend university as far back as they could remember (54% and 52% respectively), but they were less likely to be attending because of family expectations (17% vs. 28% overall).

Those who were mature students drew on their life experiences and personal motivations to succeed in university. For example, 40-year-old Carol stated that her success was as a result of her own efforts to acquire writing and study skills. Similarly, 22-year-old Hannah said she was ill-prepared for university, particularly when it came to writing assignments and thinking critically, which made her feel "very intimidated and very lost." Frida also used the word "lost" because of some basic assumptions that her professors had made. She gave this example: "I didn't even know what a journal was...I think a journal should have been in the classroom that very first day and [the professor should say], 'this is a journal, pass it around.'" Similarly, Bella said: "I didn't know how to be a student...I didn't know how to read a textbook. I didn't know how to write the way academics write." She elaborated by explaining that being a student means understanding the university system, how to work independently, how to engage with others in discussions, how to ask the professor for help, how to use the university resources, and how to schedule time to complete assignments. Like Hannah, Bella, and Frida, Georgia was missing basic information, did not know where to find it, and did not feel comfortable enough to ask for help. She stated:

> I ended up with a very low GPA from the [previous university] because I just dropped all my courses. And I didn't know the process, like there's a deadline that you can't, like you can't just drop a course when you're at the end of your course. But I did that, and I ended up getting a bunch of F's, and they stayed on my transcript.

Racist and Eurocentric University Systems, Curricula, and Pedagogy

The Eurocentric and racist nature of most university systems caused significant distress among respondents. Alice, a 58-year-old mature student, commented that she was "met with some racist attitudes" during the introductions in her first university class, commenting that racism is "a systemic thing" at university. In Frida's experience, most instructors "do not understand the Indigenous perspective." She said that the grading system made her feel she was constantly being evaluated. After "five years of being evaluated all the time," she wondered if there was a way to make university studies less about constantly ranking students. Like Alice and Frida, Hannah felt that:

> some professors are a little bit difficult to deal with. Either they're not clear on what they want and it's confusing to do things for them, or they're just kind of biased in the way that they do things or how they mark things.

These experiences can add to the trauma many Indigenous students deal with. Jesse underscores the triggering that may occur when researching and studying at university, stating: "I do get vicarious trauma from some of the stuff that I read and write about...I had no idea it even existed until it started happening to me."

Moving Away and Long Commutes

Many of the Indigenous participants travelled long distances from their home communities to attend university. Moving away from friends and family placed added stress on their capacity to succeed in their studies. Many referred to culture shock and loneliness. For instance, 23-year-old Georgia felt "the first month was cool, but after a while I started to feel really lonely because I moved from the rez [to the city]." Georgia's experience illustrates the tension between wanting to succeed while missing community:

> People [had] said, "Oh, you're going to experience culture shock when you live in the city"...nobody talks to you [in the city]. It started to go downhill from there, and I actually dropped out for about a year. Then I moved back to [home community] and I worked there for a while, and then I realized, I have to go back to school. So, I applied here at [university]. Now, I really enjoy school here because I like the environment where it's very small, and you get to know the people in your classes because you're in a lot of classes with them, because it's so small, right? So,

it feels more personal and like a community, rather than [previous university] where you're just a number.

Having to commute also impacted the participants' ability to make friends, be involved in extracurricular activities, build social networks, and complete group work outside of class time.

Being Successful

The success strategies of respondents included learning to manage their time, being willing to ask for help, and finding what worked for them personally. While we note some very personal strategies may not be applicable to all students, they can be categorized into subthemes: (a) family and friends; (b) community; (c) professors, advisors, and student services; (d) personal ethics and strategies; and (e) study and time management strategies. Many of these strategies are common to all students, no matter their background.

Family and Friends

Respondents commented on the importance of support from family and friends. Alice reflected on being in a dual role of both needing family support and being a role model for others in their family: "Now one of my brothers has entered university, and one of my sisters is on her way to do so." Frida and her spouse "made a decision right from the beginning that [she] was going to be taking on more of a course load than normal students would." The support of parents was important to both mature and younger students. A single parent, 38-year-old Ellie reported that her parents would often look after her young daughter "on the weekends when I had to get papers done." Her aunt and uncle also stepped in to "pick [daughter] up from the Boys and Girls Club...or the school." Other respondents, like David, had parents who were supportive, "[even though] they have no idea what I do," while Bella and Georgia had parents who assisted financially with emergency money. Younger students tended to find new friends at university and create study groups. Both Georgia and Hannah (aged 23 and 22 respectively) commented about the importance of having supportive friends, while Hannah did not make friends at the Aboriginal student centre until her second year.

Community, Culture, and Ceremony

For students feeling lost, even if they were excited to start their university journey, a sense of belonging was important.

Most students found an on-campus home in their university's Indigenous student centre. Key informant in this study, Jesse, reflected on his sense of alienation:

> I was from a different world. I was from the streets, from jail, from addictions, no education. All these kids...were younger than me by a decade. A lot of them had been in school straight through.... So, when I got there, I was like an alien, but I found out pretty quickly that I was one of other aliens. There were other Indigenous students in their 30s who had stories like me, and they were part of a generation of Indigenous people who are dealing with trauma, and they're going back and they're getting their education. So those people sought me out and I sought them out, and we formed a...community within the university, the Centre for Aboriginal Student Services.... And I realized I'm not special. I'm just one of thousands of us like this who are really trying our hardest to get the education that was denied our ancestors.

Alice and Ellie similarly became involved in clubs and student groups, which helped them to feel like part of the university community even as they maintained connections with their home community and came to understand the big picture of social and world events for Indigenous people. After becoming a volunteer in the Aboriginal student centre, Bella began to feel less "invisible," and could let go of her fear that people would be as racist as they were in her high school. This shift, she says, was important, because "you know, if you're lost in the background, you're not really engaged in what you're doing."

Connections to home communities were important. David, Frida, and Hannah were all well-supported financially through their bands or other Indigenous organizations, which Hannah specifically said helped to reduce her stress. Yet, in our survey, 63% of Indigenous women required a loan to attend university, while only 42% of the men did. Although 43% of all Indigenous students in the study did not receive any loans, 17% received loans totalling over $20,000. Nonetheless, cultural ties created a desire to give back to their communities. Ellie's Aboriginal culture gave her a sense of purpose and joy:

> When I look at myself, I don't just see me, I see my people as well. So, I'm just like representing my people as well and I think as good as I do or if I fail, it's a mark on my people as well.

Similarly, once David became part of the Indigenous stu-

dent centre, he "[paid] it forward" by engaging Indigenous high school students in science experiments at a family networking night.

There were interesting gender differences about the importance of cultural identity: 52% of women and 29% of men indicated that their cultural identity was "very important." For Hannah, the opportunity to engage in cultural activities that are a normal part of their lives, such as sweats and ceremonies, helped them to deal with stress. Hannah said

> when I get to those points where I'm just so stressed, and just having a really hard time mentally doing things, I find that going to a ceremony helps me release those negative feelings, and helps me do better in school because I'm releasing all of that tension and everything.

For Jesse, Indigenous ceremony was helpful in dealing with triggering events as a result of his university research: "I have my bison skull with me all the time whenever I'm reading and writing because I do get vicarious trauma from some of the stuff that I read and write about." The importance of ceremony has been noted by researchers, who argue that holding Indigenous cultural and ceremonial events, using Indigenous languages, and the like on campus is part of Indigenous resurgence (Corntassel, 2012, as cited in Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Professors, Advisors, and Student Services

Students who turned to their professors or instructors often found support, especially when their commitment to their studies was demonstrated. While not many of the participants talked about having strong connections with faculty members, a few noted they felt well-supported by faculty. Alice commented that if she met with instructors in "a very upfront kind of way" and if her "points were valid," she was taken seriously. As Bella built her self-confidence, she began approaching instructors for help, especially when her child's health issues took her attention. Ellie learned that her professors wanted her to be successful, but also that she had to earn their grades. Carol told us, "One of the best things I've ever done here is to meet with my academic advisor." While Georgia and Hannah gradually learned to feel comfortable talking to their professors, Bella failed some courses because, as she said, she was too nervous to approach them for help.

Personal Ethics and Strategies

Students drew on their past personal experiences to develop the necessary strategies to persist throughout their post-secondary education. Alice commented on the importance of self-discipline and the feeling that she had "a point to prove." She said, "in high school, I was not encouraged to attend university, and I always wanted to. So, when my kids got a little older, I decided that I would try to take that leap, so I did." Her lived experiences led to her success, because she felt she could not "afford to waste time [or] money." Ellie commented that there was no option to fail: "I think the only time you fail is when you give up and I'm not giving up." Frida made a point of attending "every single class" to ensure she heard all the instructions directly from the professor. Frida also commented on the necessity of maintaining her own integrity: "University was not going to turn me into somebody that I wasn't.... And [if] the professor didn't like my topic...I just thought, well you're not me and I will be doing this because this is important to me." When Georgia resumed her university studies, she chose to stop "partying" and "to treat [university] almost like a job." She stated: "You've got to be committed to it. You can't just be like, oh, I'm just not going to do my assignment. You have to take it seriously." Hannah noted the importance of having "a really good communication with the professor and...a good understanding of what they want." However, she struggled because she was working and did not have adequate time to focus on her classes.

Study and Time Management Strategies

Personal strategies were supplemented by learning strong time management and study skills. Bella was forced to learn academic skills after she "bombed" her first year; attending a student success course was one of the most important supports she received. Ellie "strategically aligned [herself] with other students that were hard workers... [who] wanted the A's and weren't playing around." As Ellie learned "the system," the work became easier. The university's writing workshops helped her learn to write essays and use an agenda to plan her time: "Every hour of my life was scheduled." David noted that he "never left things to the last minute" and recognized the importance of striking a balance—studying hard, taking time for breaks, and working ahead on assignments whenever he had extra time.

Recommendations: Shifting the Academy

Borrowing from the Australian context, a "whole-of-university approach" (Universities Australia, Victoria State Government, & Our Watch, 2021, p. 22) is an effective strategy for considering how Canadian universities can support Indigenous students beyond requiring them to adapt to the existing norms. This approach requires a university-wide strategy such that all parts of the university are engaged in reimagining a learning and working space that supports students and employees in holistic and culturally appropriate ways. As Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991/2001) suggested in 1991, universities need to "convert [the] rhetoric" of "equal educational opportunity for all" (p. 2) into a real paradigm shift using the Four Rs: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. Added to Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991/2001) Four Rs is the importance of relationships (McGregor et al., 2018) in making this change. As Pidgeon (2022) states, "learning, however, cannot be relevant if the learning environment is intolerant of Indigenous peoples" (p. 27).

Discussion/Conclusions: Listening to and Supporting Indigenous Students

Despite equity, diversity, and inclusion policies at most Canadian universities and the public image of universities as being open to and inclusive of students from all backgrounds, the reality is that racism and discrimination are pervasive (Bailey, 2016). Indigenous students often feel they must either accept the norms of post-secondary education in Canada or resist those teachings and risk experiencing increased levels of overt and covert micro- and macro-aggressions from their peers, instructors, and others within the academy. Given that some research has shown that "higher levels of ethnic identity were associated with above average GPAs and self-esteem" (Costigan et al., 2009, p. 268), attention must be paid to the cultural nuances of students' experiences within all levels of the university. Our research suggests that a strong sense of ethnic, cultural, and national identity is important in facilitating success in post-secondary contexts. This finding is particularly important in the context of the inherent systemic racism of colonial structures of post-secondary education (Starblanket & Stark, 2018; Razack, 1998). Universities require Indigenous-informed educational practices that reflect an ethics of care, understanding and compassion, and decol-

Table 1

Experiences and Recommendations

STUDENT EXPERIENCE/COMMENT	RECOMMENDATION
• Previous negative educational experiences: feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, vulnerability, intimidation, and being ill-prepared • Inadequate high school preparation for university	• Culturally appropriate transition programs intentionally designed for Indigenous students, including mature students • Early access to on-campus Indigenous advisors, Elders, and faculty members
• Curriculum and andragogy that is embedded in colonial perspectives and knowledge systems • Retraumatization due to racist curriculum and attitudes and/or courses requiring reading of history of Indigenous genocide • Retraumatization due to policies and structures based in colonial world views	• Education and support for curriculum designers and faculty members to revise and reimagine courses and teaching strategies that are Indigenous-informed • New courses that are created using Indigenous knowledge systems and/or worldviews • Evaluation systems that are based on cooperation rather than competition and memorization • Access to mental health supports • Reimagine and redesign university policies and structures to include Indigenous ways of knowing and being

STUDENT EXPERIENCE/COMMENT	RECOMMENDATION
• Racist attitudes and behaviours among instructors, staff, and students	• Ongoing anti-racist education of all members of the university community • Clear policies on addressing racism on campus • Education about the collective responsibility of all members of the university to work toward reconciliation (Pidgeon, 2022)
• Loss of community and family support due to relocation or long commutes; loneliness	• Opportunities and programming to help create a sense of community within the university • Alternative education opportunities (including online or hybrid learning) so that relocation or commutes are reduced in number
• Financial challenges	• Bursaries for Indigenous students
• Importance of family and friends	• Opportunities for family members of all ages to visit and be welcomed at the university and learn about what it means to attend university • Opportunities for students to socialize and make friends on campus
• Importance of community, culture, ceremony, and Elders	• Indigenous cultural centres for students on campus • Meaningful connections with local Indigenous Nations within (e.g., Elder-in-residence and Aunty-in-residence campus-wide programs) and beyond the university campus • Opportunities to engage in ceremony while on campus (this may require revision of regulations regarding lighting fires on campus or burning smudge in the classroom; building a sweat lodge)
• Importance of supportive instructors, advisors, and staff	• Instructors, advisors, and staff must work to understand the particular and general needs of Indigenous students (recognizing that Indigenous students are a heterogeneous group) and the resources available to them • Instructors, advisors, and staff must critically reflect on their own positionalities and be willing to share their self-location statements with students
• Importance of personal ethics, study skills, and time management	• Opportunities for mentorship with senior students, faculty members, and/or community members • Targeted programming for Indigenous students

onization. Decolonization "involves moving back into [the] ancient traditions of obligation, responsibility, and mutual reciprocity" (Louis, 2021, p. 13).

The nature of colonial and neo-liberal systems of education tends to reinforce and "normalize social inequality and educational insecurity" under the guise of individualistic ideas about students having the "resilience and grit" to persevere and be successful (Slater, 2022, p. 2). Slater (2022) points out that valorizing these concepts ignores the fact that many students are simply in survival mode while attending university, and interprets social inequality as being the result of failures by the institution or the individual, rather than due to existing market and cultural structures. Indeed, educational success for Indigenous students has long had the implication of completely adapting to the existing norms of the university (Gallop & Bastien, 2016). Ignoring

the structural contexts in which educational success takes place leaves students to fend for themselves against the neo-liberal bureaucratic structures of the modern university. Access to a formal education is a fundamental human right, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and was made an explicit right for Indigenous peoples in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Green, 2014). Furthermore, the UNDRIP identifies the importance of an education "appropriate to [Indigenous peoples'] cultural methods of teaching and learning" (Article 14(1), as cited in Green, 2014, p. 31).

A key challenge for Indigenous students is to find a path to sustain their identity and family/community connections in the face of the "cognitive imperialism" of the "academic industrial complex" (Simpson, 2011, p. 32). Our participants' strategies reflect a recognition of having to understand and comply with individualistic ideas and university norms (e.g., managing time, taking university seriously, treating university like a job), while also claiming their place at the university, using university resources (especially Indigenous student centres and writing centres), and demanding the support of their professors (e.g., "don't be intimidated," "you're paying for it"). The participants also recommended that Indigenous students protect themselves, their spirits, and their identities through Indigenous teachings, spirituality, staying connected with their communities, and making their learning relevant to their own identities and contexts despite professors' discouragement and rigid curriculum (e.g., "I would pick topics that were relevant to me...I was staying true to me"). Indigenous student centres played a key role in respondents' lives. Staff in these centres work hard to ensure Indigenous students have access to Elders, ceremony, and community while they are on campus. By adequately financing and staffing these centres and hiring Indigenous people into stable and well-paying positions, including as professors, staff/service providers, and administrators, as well as student research assistants and teaching assistants, universities can demonstrate in concrete ways that they are committed to reconciliation.

Rather than expecting Indigenous students to adapt to the existing post-secondary educational structures, we argue that it is necessary for institutions to reimagine themselves in ways that move beyond long-established, deep-seated, Eurocentric patriarchal practices and ways of knowing to include "relationship building, story-work, the visual and performing arts, intergenerational learning, and community-based practices'' (Hanson, 2021, p. 30), to allow for new conceptions of time (e.g., course scheduling and course design) and success (e.g. not limited to grades, resilience, and grit), and to embrace the idea of "decolonial Indigenization" (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). To do so, relationships with Indigenous peoples and nations based on mutual respect, sharing, independence, and interdependence in the spirit of Guswhenta (that is, the "Two Row Wampum") must be developed and nurtured alongside opportunities for cultural resurgence and (re)connections to the land (Alfred, 2015). This includes respecting and promoting Indigenous-preferred languages in universities, increasing Indigenous-informed curriculum materials and educational resources, and making Indigenous perspectives and knowledges visible throughout university campuses. According to Hanson (2021), "the ability of post-secondary institutions to Indigenize remains controversial and circumspect but the opening of channels for new ways of learning and teaching holds seeds for transformational learning to take place within institutions and...within communities" (p. 29). This, of course, requires that settlers "come into a learning relationship with Indigenous people and their Teachings" (Louis, 2021, p. 13). Listening to the voices of Indigenous students, including the research participants in this study, is one step toward doing this.

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