

## Student Transfer Mobility within Indigenous Programs: Pathways of Access or Appropriation?

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Article abstract

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# Student Transfer Mobility within Indigenous Programs: Pathways of Access or Appropriation?

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# Student Transfer Mobility within Indigenous Programs: Pathways of Access or Appropriation?

## Abstract

Mobility pathways to and from Indigenous programs is one strategy post-secondary education (PSE) institutions employ to support reconciliation, yet data is limited on the status or impact of these pathways. The current study examined program pathways of Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners within Indigenous programming. Fifty-three students were recruited from across PSE institutions in Ontario. Chi squared tests indicated that the majority of students transferring to an Indigenous program were Indigenous; however, the study also found that non-Indigenous learners were frequent users of pathways. Results of this study provide cause for consideration about how settler normativity may permeate in pathway development and delivery. Recommendations are provided on how PSE can centre Indigenous students in mobility program development.

## Keywords

Indigenous studies, Indigenous students, student mobility, reconciliation, decolonizing education

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## **Student Transfer Mobility within Indigenous Programs: Pathways of Access or Appropriation?**

Indigenous Studies programs were introduced into post-secondary institutions in the late 1960s to improve post-secondary access and attainment levels for Indigenous students (Pidgeon, 2016). The impetus behind these programs was surmounting pressure from Indigenous, civil rights, and anti-war political movements for post-secondary institutions to serve mandates of Indigenous nation-building, cultural resurgence, and social justice (Andersen, 2009; Champagne, 1994; Murry et al., 2022; Taner, 1999). While Indigenous programs have expanded and evolved within the discipline (Murry et al., 2022) and there now exists Indigenous-based programs across disciplines such as Indigenous Social Work (Lee, 2017; Pidgeon, 2016; Universities Canada, 2019), Indigenous programs remain committed to the initial goals of Indigenous student access, nation-building, and the resurgence of Indigenous worldviews, culture and language (e.g., Fixico, 2001; Lee, 2017). For today's Indigenous learners, Indigenous programs can provide a safe haven from the colonial politics of recognition, representation, knowledge production and erasure in the broader institution (Smith et al., 2018). Indigenous spaces on campus, including programming, can foster resilience and provide an Indigenous-centered space for learning (e.g., Cote Meek, 2014; Jacob et al., 2019).

Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) (2015), the discourse and practice surrounding Indigenous education has been dramatically altered. While the calls to action coming out of the TRC have been valuable to the advancement of Indigenous education, including the call to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms (TRC, 2015), the way the report recommendations have been interpreted and implemented by Canadian governments, institutions, and society, has been widely criticized and largely performative (e.g., Daigle, 2019; Green, 2015). A consequence of the TRC has been a heightened involvement (or perhaps, more accurately, control and surveillance) of Indigenous programs and space on campus by the broader university (Ray et al., 2019). As noted by Denetdale (2020), “instead of a focus on Indigenous nation-building and supporting Indigenous sovereignty, an influx of non-Indian scholars and administrators attempt shifts to “diversity” and “multiculturalism” (p. 624).

While Indigenous programs remain ghettoized through under resourcing (Champagne, 1994; Denetdale, 2020) and the undervaluing of scholarship (Povey et al., 2021; Waterfall & Maiter, 2003) the scramble of universities to perform reconciliation has placed greater burdens upon Indigenous programming (Cook-Lynn, 1997; Daigle, 2019), including facilitating settler education. Additionally, while Indigenous programming initially focused on access as part of a broader strategy to support nation-building and Indigenous knowledge systems, it is now commonplace for Indigenous access and educational attainment to be approached through a framework of reconciliation (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Pidgeon, 2014). This framework endorses a neo-liberal model of inclusion that focuses on the presence and adaptation of Indigenous bodies in place of radical models which would challenge current structures and promote system transformation (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Pathways to and from Indigenous programs have been identified as a strategy that can enhance access to post-secondary education for Indigenous learners (e.g., Camman et al., 2014; Barnett et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2010; Rosenbluth, 2011; Smith et al., 2015; Taner, 1999), and in recent years, Indigenous program pathway development in Canada has increased (Ray, 2017; Rhodes, 2019). However, Bunda et al. (2012) caution that affirmative action projects are insufficient on their own and that entry programs and pathways need to exist alongside broader strategies that address the structural differences that produce inequity. Recent scholarship also supports the claim that pathways in and of themselves are not an effective strategy to support access for Indigenous learners who are among the most underrepresented in post-secondary education (PSE) (Ray, Landry, et al., 2019). As Henry et al. (2017) note, “Notwithstanding the promise of equity, the university is a racialized site that still excludes and marginalizes non-White people, in subtle, complex, sophisticated, and ironic ways, from everyday interactions with colleagues to institutional practices that at best are ineffective and at worst perpetuate structural racism” (p. 3). Thus, it cannot be assumed that solely developing pathways will be sufficient to attract students from underrepresented groups to PSE (Camman et al., 2014, p. 4).

This paper presents the sub-set of results on program pathways to and/or from Indigenous programs from an Ontario-wide study to better understand program pathways in Indigenous contexts. While the paper provides an overview of the results, it focuses on the potential implications of the findings that Indigenous students were more likely to transfer into an Indigenous program and non-Indigenous learners were the most frequent users of Indigenous program pathways. From these findings a discussion is launched on the potential impacts of Indigenous program pathways on Indigenous student access and experience within Indigenous programs. By doing this, we interrogate the role of pathways in supporting the intent of Indigenous programs as well as popular institutional defined notions of reconciliation.

### **Literature Review**

Since their introduction into public universities, Indigenous programs continue to grow and evolve in Canadian and international contexts (Lee, 2017; Murry et al., 2022). Many programs exist across the globe, and in Canada alone, universities experienced a 33% increase in Indigenous programs over a two-year span (2013-2015) (Universities Canada, 2015). Today, Ontario is home to many innovative Indigenous programs, which in some cases are among the first of their kind in Canada and North America (Ray, 2017).

### **Indigenous Program Goals**

Jacob et al. (2019) posit that “Indigenous Studies programs can perhaps be viewed as sacred spaces for the indigenous self-determination and decolonization taking root in an otherwise assimilative educational system for indigenous students” (p. 286). While Indigenous programs are reflective of regional contexts, generally, they have been built for Indigenous students and seek to revitalize and reflect Indigenous worldviews and languages, and restore and defend communities and nations (Denetdale, 2020; Lee, 2017). In her pivotal article on the intent of Indigenous Studies, Cook Lynn

(1997) argues that Indigenous programs should focus on indigenesness (culture, place, and philosophy) and sovereignty (history and law). In an Australian context, similar goals exist, requiring students to engage the politics of knowledge production, education, and self-determination (Nakata et al., 2012). A recent content analysis of Indigenous Studies programs across Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand, while noting a wide variance among programs also reaffirmed many of these goals, arguing that the current underlying factors of Indigenous Studies programs are Indigenous methodologies, Indigenous community involvement, Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, Indigenous languages, and Indigenous student presence (Murry et al., 2022).

There is an ongoing recognition of the interrelationship of the two main goals of Indigenous programs: revitalizing Indigenous culture, language, and worldviews and Indigenous community building and sovereignty (e.g., Cook-Lynn, 1997; Corntassel & Gaudry, 2014). A main theme at the “First Convocation of American Indian Scholars” in 1970 was that “we cannot defend our languages and cultures if we cannot defend our homelands” (Cook Lynn, 1997, p. 9). Indigenous governance systems emerge from relationship with place (Ray & Cormier, 2012) and yet cultural sovereignty is a predicate of political sovereignty (Gross, 2003), making the two inextricably linked.

### ***Indigenous Knowledge Systems***

One objective of Indigenous programs has been to maintain and disseminate Indigenous culture and worldviews (Huaman et al., 2019; Taner, 1999). Centered in this privileging of Indigenous knowledges is an understanding that Indigenous students have a right to learn and enact their own knowledges:

IS should not only be a discipline where students can learn about Indigenous Peoples, similar to the way one would learn about ancient Rome. Indigenous Studies should also be a way that Indigenous students can obtain a college education that is in alignment with and inclusive of their Indigenous orientations and perspectives (Murry et al., 2022, p. 54)

The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars proposed a model of education by Indigenous peoples for Indigenous peoples, wherein content permeates from the languages, experiences, and geographies of Indigenous peoples, allowing for Indigenous Peoples to see themselves, their community, and their nation reflected in their education system (Cook Lynn, 1997, p. 9-11). Today, Indigenous programs often reflect Indigenous ways of knowing in their curriculum (Bunda et al., 2012). Many of these programs seek to draw from Indigenous knowledge systems to identify and advance solutions to issues gravely impacting Indigenous communities, including colonialism, dispossession, and racism (Corntassel & Gaudry, 2014; Huaman et al., 2019). Corntassel refers to this process of addressing issues through Indigenous worldviews as insurgent education (Corntassel, 2011 as cited in Corntassel and Gaudry, 2014, p. 168).

### ***Nationhood and Community***

Since the inception of Indigenous programs, issues of sovereignty and community need have been at the forefront (e.g., Nakata et al., 2012). Taner (1999) explains that in Canada there was an expectation for Indigenous programs to make education more practical and prepare Indigenous learners for responsibilities associated with self-governance. In the United States, tribal colleges opened under a mandate of reflecting and serving local Indigenous community needs (Huaman et al., 2019). Albeit, there are debates within the discipline of the best way to achieve this objective (e.g. see Andersen, 2009). While Turner (2006) argued for “word warriors” within Indigenous nations that could use their academic training and Indigenous ways of thinking to liaise and advocate within the current government structures, Corntassel and Gaudry (2014) insist that individuals be responsible to community, support community work, and work to dismantle current government structures (Corntassel & Gaudry, 2014). Along a similar vein, Lee (2017) argues for Indigenous graduates to provide service to their community and explains that this is motivated through a “critical Indigenous consciousness” in which one critically situates themselves within social and political conditions.

### ***Student Access***

Indigenous programs in the areas of Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education began to serve as access points in the 1960s for Indigenous students, and this practice continues on with a more diverse range of program offerings (Pidgeon, 2016). A similar impetus exists in the United States. Enshrined into law in the 1970s, the Tribally Controlled Community College Act supported the construction of Indigenous community colleges to address the disparity of post-secondary educational attainment rates, in which Indigenous peoples were severely underrepresented (Huaman et al., 2019). Furthermore, the relationship between access and nationhood and Indigenous knowledge systems are intertwined. Indigenous peoples are the targeted recipients of program mandates of restoring Indigenous nationhood and Indigenous knowledge systems. In turn, programs that reflect Indigenous peoples’ knowledges and experiences, are relevant to Indigenous needs, and they provide a friendly environment to enhance Indigenous participation in post-secondary education (Taner, 1999). For example, the Native American Studies program at the University of New Mexico (UNM) seeks to facilitate students’ roles and connections to community, creating a learning community rooted in Indigenous values for community (Cajete, 2015; Lee, 2017). The program includes a high number of the institution’s total number of Indigenous learners as it enrolls approximately 400 students annually, many of which are Indigenous (Lee, 2017).

### ***Indigenous Programs and Student Post-Secondary Experience***

Many Indigenous learners congregate in Indigenous programs and support services as a way to survive post-secondary institutions (Cote Meek, 2014; Fredericks et al., 2022). Indigenous students generally describe these “counter spaces” as places for positive social experiences and connection with other students, facilitating learning, supportive environments, and self and cultural validation (Bailey, 2016, p.

1271). An Indigenous community is built within these spaces, which can be reminiscent of home for some students and work to mitigate against the impacts of epistemic violence housed within the broader institution (Tuck & Yang, 2012 as cited in Jacob et al., 2019).

While Indigenous programs have been a place where Indigenous ways of knowing are reflected in the curriculum, the wider academic community has not made significant changes and continues to maintain/sustain the status quo (Bunda et al., 2012). Indigenous students are faced with a multitude of barriers when studying at post-secondary institutions. They experience racism (Bailey, 2016; Fredericks et al., 2022; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2019; MacDonald et al., 2023), interpersonal discrimination, frustration with the university system, and feelings of isolation and alienation from the non-Indigenous student body (Bailey, 2016). They contend with cultural misunderstandings and ignorance, and in the classroom they are often forced to bear the burden of educating non-Indigenous students and professors about Indigenous worldviews, decolonization, and responsible allyship (Dubois Brooks et al., 2021; Jacob et al., 2019). So that they are not judged or feel that they are on display, Indigenous students sometimes choose to not disclose their Indigeneity (Bailey, 2016). This unfortunate reality was affirmed by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance's report on the status of Indigenous students which listed "leaving parts of yourself behind for the sake of safety" as a high-level concern (Dubois Brooks et al., 2021, p. 11).

Indigenous students' voices and experiences can be erased in the classroom when they raise issues that are uncomfortable and serve as counter narratives to non-Indigenous students' and faculty's understandings of the world (McGloin, 2015). Non-Indigenous students may also reject their need for unlearning, pushing back against the material presented and the instructor presenting it (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2019). In some instances, Indigenous students can be subject to derogatory comments by non-Indigenous students (Bailey, 2016; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2019). These words and actions by non-Indigenous students can be triggering for Indigenous students as well as Indigenous educators (Ward, 2018).

Overall, an individual's race and ethnicity can influence their experiences as a student within post-secondary institutions (Hern et al., 2019). For Indigenous students, this experience is distinct as they must navigate the overt and subtle racial tensions couched within nation-to-nation struggles of decolonization, sovereignty, and settler colonialism (Bailey, 2016, p. 1263; Cote-Meek, 2014). Navigating racism in the academy, particularly in the classroom, can be traumatic for Indigenous learners (Cote-Meek, 2014). Indigenous students may be more at risk for mental health stress considering the wide range of stressors they are exposed to, including post-secondary environments (Hop Wo et al., 2019). The impacts can be accumulative, contributing to feelings of self-doubt and creating mental exhaustion (Bailey, 2016, p. 1264). It is imperative that post-secondary institutions create [and maintain] welcoming environments for Indigenous learners, which provide them with culturally safe interactions (Hop Wo et al., 2019).



## Study Purpose and Hypotheses

This paper presents a subset of data from an Ontario-wide study with the primary purpose of describing post-secondary program pathways among Indigenous learners in all post-secondary programming and pathways to and/or from Indigenous programs among Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. A program pathway was defined as a route from one program to another within or between postsecondary institutions that contains benefits such as transfer credits or guaranteed acceptance. These pathways can provide seamless transitions between programs through prearranged articulation agreements or can include additional components to facilitate the transition such as bridging programs. In the context of this paper an Indigenous program pathway refers to a pathway between Indigenous programs whether the learners are Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

The purpose of the current study was to identify who is accessing Indigenous program pathways, understand the transfer experience (including examining transitions to types of programming, attendance of bridging programs, and potential considerations of pathways in the context of Indigenous programming), as well as to describe some inferential relationships between perceived support and satisfaction of transfer among program pathway students transferring to or from Indigenous programs. It was hypothesized that pathways primarily support access to Indigenous programs for Indigenous students, and thus, the majority of pathway users will be Indigenous. It was anticipated that students who report more transfers, with less credits transferred to their new program of study, would report significantly less perceived support and transfer satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

To be eligible for this study, participants had to be enrolled in a participating post-secondary institution in Ontario and have transitioned to and/or from an Indigenous post-secondary program. Students who self-identify as Indigenous but transferred to and from a non-Indigenous program could also participate but are not part of the data subset described in this paper. Of 1089 potential participants who were interested in the study, 1061 (97.3%) stated they read the initial study information and 963 consented to participation. Of these potential participants, 194 met criteria for the broader study, and of these, 55 indicated that they transferred to and/or from an Indigenous program. This paper presents the results from these Indigenous program pathways respondents.

### Partnering Institutions

All partnering post-secondary institutions were those that had consented to student participation in a larger study. Although not all institutions were involved in student data collection, a total of 25 institutions participated in the study in some capacity, including 1 Indigenous institute, 15 colleges, and

9 universities. Data collection was completed with students enrolled in one of 12 institutions (colleges  $n = 8$ ; universities  $n = 4$ ). Research Ethics Board approval was received at all data collection sites.

## Procedure

Electronic surveys were distributed to learners between January to March 2019 primarily via their student email accounts. In some instances, the survey was advertised on institution-wide communication bulletins and/or Indigenous student support listservs. A brief letter at the beginning of the survey described the purpose to potential participants, and interested students were asked to complete consent through the survey platform. All data was anonymous in nature, as no identifying information was collected.

Given that the research process was participatory in nature, learners and members of the broader postsecondary community were engaged in all aspects of survey design, implementation, and analysis. The scope of institutional collaboration included: providing advisement on institutional processes for student engagement and supporting submissions to research ethics boards; participating in group sessions online or via telephone to provide input into survey design; facilitating student survey dissemination; providing advisement on and supporting student lunch and learns; participating in a one-day Indigenous pathway forum to provide input into data analysis direction and interpretation of preliminary results; and, participating in group sessions online to provide further input on the data analysis and report recommendations. A small cohort of Indigenous students provided feedback on the draft survey and three student lunch and learns were held at two colleges and one university. At these events results were presented and Indigenous transition students had an opportunity to provide their interpretation of results and recommendations to enhance Indigenous program pathways.

## Study Limitations

This study has some limitations. Sampling and participation biases within the current study exist, whereas only students currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution could participate in the study. It is likely that when some students are highly dissatisfied with their experience, they terminate their enrollment rather than transferring to a new program. Additionally, due to the small sample size of Indigenous students, it was not possible to separate their experiences from non-Indigenous students for the purpose of inferential statistical analyses.

## Results

Quantitative analyses of the online survey data were completed using SPSS Statistics-26. Descriptive statistics (including means, ranges, and percentages) reported participant demographic data. Inferential statistical analyses were completed using independent t-tests and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) to compare student satisfaction (reported as a dichotomous variable) with the number of courses transferred and number of courses repeated.

## Demographics

Of the 55 students that transferred to and/or from an Indigenous program pathway most were non-Indigenous ( $n = 40$ ; 72.7%). Most participants reported being female ( $n = 38$ ; 73.1%), with only 13 individuals self-reporting as male, and one individual preferring to not report their gender. The majority of survey respondents were between the ages of 19 and 24 ( $n = 29$ ; 54.7%). Nineteen learners were between 25–34 (35.8%), three between 35 to 40 (5.7%), and two over 40 (3.8%). Participants were asked to identify the community types in which they resided in the 5 years prior to attending PSE. More than half of respondents ( $n = 30$ ; 54.5%) resided in an urban community, whereas 20.0% ( $n = 11$ ) of learners reported living in a small town and 10.9% ( $n = 6$ ) lived in a rural community. Individuals living in various types of First Nation communities (rural, remote, or next to an urban centre) were the most underrepresented ( $n = 6$ ; 10.9%) in the entire sample and comprised 38.5% of the Indigenous respondent sample. Most respondents were from the Northern region of the province ( $n = 31$ ; 62%), followed by the Southwestern region ( $n = 15$ ; 30%) and the Central/Metro/Greater Toronto Area [GTA] ( $n = 4$ ; 8%). No respondents reported being from the Eastern region of the province.

## Transfer Program Pathways by Program Type and Level of Education

### *Transfers To and From Indigenous Programming*

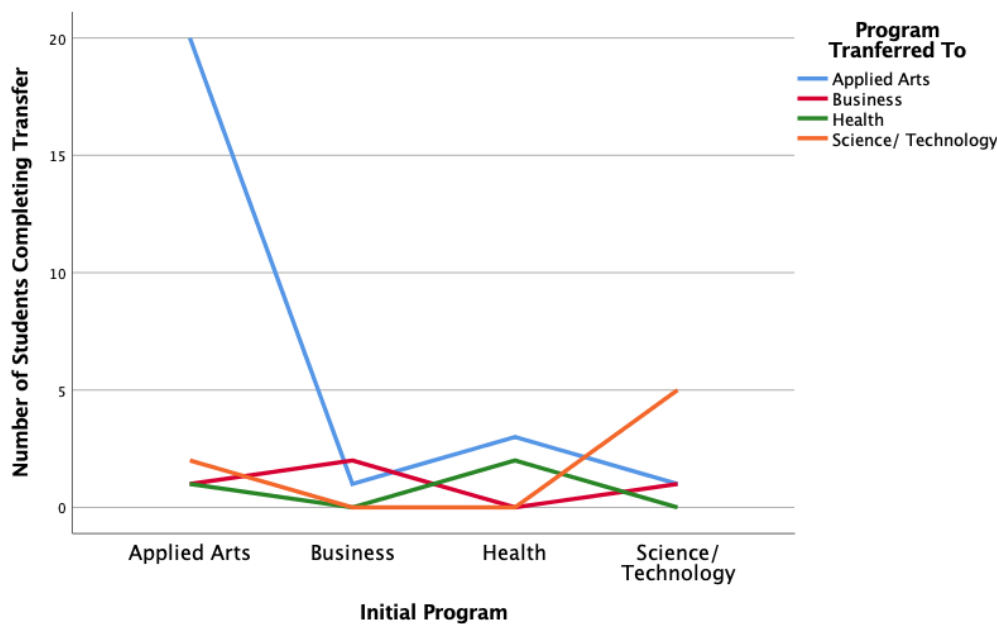
Chi squared tests compared program pathways to and from Indigenous programs by examining Indigenous and non-Indigenous student transfers. When students ( $n = 27$ ) reported their most recent type of program transfers,<sup>1</sup> including to and from Indigenous program transfers, there was a significant association between student identity and transferring to an Indigenous program [ $\chi^2(1) = 5.17, p = .023$ ], where more Indigenous students reported transferring to an Indigenous program (9 of 15, 60.0%) than non-Indigenous students (2 of 12 students, 16.7%). A higher percentage of non-Indigenous students transferred from an Indigenous program to another program type, including to another Indigenous program ( $n = 12$ , 100% of reported transfers), compared to 11 Indigenous students (73.3% of reported transfers). Chi squared tests did not indicate significant differences of these groups ( $p = .05$ ). Seven students (5 of which were Indigenous) transferred to and from an Indigenous program, 16 students (six Indigenous) transferred from an Indigenous program, and four (all Indigenous) transferred to an Indigenous-specific program. Independent t-tests did not find significant differences among students who transferred to and from an Indigenous program compared to students who transferred to or from an Indigenous program in relation to reported program satisfaction, preparedness, or perceived applicability of student learning.

### *Transfers by General Program Type and Level of Education*

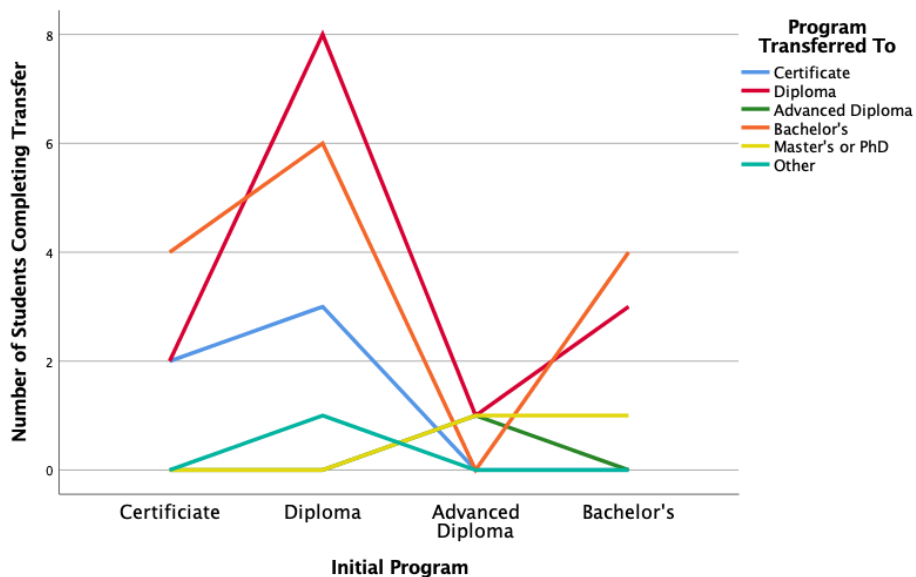
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<sup>1</sup> Calculated from qualitative participant self-report of most recent type of program transfers.

Participants were asked to identify their educational history following completion of secondary school. Of these programs, most were classified (according to College Ontario 2018) to be related to Applied Arts, followed by Science/Technology and Health program specific domains. Participants typically remained in the same field of study in their transfer ( $n = 30$ ; 73.2%), and most students in this sample transferred from and to an Applied Arts program ( $n = 24$ ; 61.5%). Health was the only program domain that had more transfers to a program domain other than Health (Health  $n = 2$ ; Applied Arts  $n = 3$ ). See Figure 1 for a description of program transfers based on program type. While vertical transfers were popular ( $n = 13$ ; 35.1%), more students ( $n = 15$ ; 40.5%) stayed in a program at the same education level. Of the learners who participated in a vertical transfer, the vast majority ( $n = 11$ ; 84.6%) transferred from college to university. The most popular lateral transfer was to and from a college diploma program ( $n=8$ ; 53.3%).



**Figure 1.** Transfer Pathway Endorsed by Participants by Program Type



**Figure 2.** Transfer Pathway Endorsed by Participants by Level of Education

### *Transfer Experience, Learner Preparedness, and Access*

The majority of students did not attend a voluntary or mandatory bridging program ( $n = 29$ ; 80.6%) to support their transfer. Chi squared tests indicated that attendance of a bridging program was not associated with Indigenous identity or gender. All survey respondents indicated that they were prepared for their transfer program to some degree, with most responding that they were very or mostly prepared ( $n = 31$ ; 81.6%). Only 37.2% ( $n = 16$ ) indicated that they were very likely or likely to attend their receiving program if a program pathway was not in place. Six (14.0%) students indicated that they were neither likely or unlikely, 16 (37.2%) were unlikely or very unlikely and five (11.6%) were unsure.

### *Transfer Experience and Learner Satisfaction*

Most learners ( $n = 13$ ; 81.3%) were very satisfied or satisfied with their transfer experience and when asked retrospectively how likely they were to make the transfer again, the majority indicated that they were very likely or likely ( $n = 10$ ; 75%). Most respondents were satisfied ( $n = 28$ ; 87.5%) with the number of credits that were transferred to their receiving program. Independent t-tests assessed significant differences between reported student satisfaction ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) and dissatisfaction ( $M = 1.20$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) with courses and number of credits transferred, detecting significant differences between these groups [ $t(32) = 1.67$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ]. A one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant relationship between satisfaction with transfer overall and number of courses transferred [ $F(2, 6) = 5.444$ ,  $p = .045$ ]. An independent t-test found that students who indicated satisfaction with credit

transfer ( $M = 1.20$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) reported significantly less courses repeated [ $t(19) = -2.38$ ,  $p = .029$ ] than students who were not satisfied with their credit transfer ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 7.01$ ).

## Discussion

Learners were satisfied with their overall transfer experience and the number of courses repeated significantly impacted credit transfer satisfaction. These results were anticipated, and the high level of satisfaction may signal that credit transfer processes are successful in identifying program content equivalencies. However, it should be noted that this finding does not provide any information on what content in the receiving program may be missed or under-examined because of the transfer, only what is perceived to be duplicated. Additionally, the result that most survey respondents' program pathways were in the Applied Arts (61.5%) was expected. Most Indigenous programs fall under the Applied Arts umbrella and the vast majority of learners (74.4%) indicated that they remained in their same field of study.

As anticipated, Indigenous program pathways appear to support access to Indigenous programs for some Indigenous students. There was a significant association between student identity and transferring to an Indigenous program [ $\chi^2(1) = 5.17$ ,  $p = .023$ ], where more Indigenous students transferred to an Indigenous program (9 of 15, 60.0%). This finding appears to affirm that Indigenous programs are still a desirable area of study for Indigenous learners. Moreover, in the study, program pathways are identified as a mechanism to support student access to Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in post-secondary education. While it was outside the scope of this study, further research to identify if reasons for transfer to Indigenous programs differ from reasons for transfers to non-Indigenous programs will help better understand if Indigenous students are purposefully utilizing pathways as mechanism to support access to Indigenous perspectives and/or culturally safe environments.

Although pathways have traditionally been understood as a steppingstone to university (e.g., DeCock, 2006; Kerr et al., 2010), more students (40.5%) stayed in a program at the same education level than vertically transferred (35.1%). These findings are consistent with College Ontario (2018; 2022) studies which reported that recent college graduates were most likely to enroll at a university or continue studies at their college of graduation. In fact, the most recent report from Colleges Ontario (2022) shows an increase in the number of students within six months of graduation furthering education by returning to their own college. In 2017/18, 19% of students returned and by 2019-2020 25% of students returned (p. 21).

Yet, despite the high level of lateral transfers, over 37% of survey respondents indicated that they were unlikely or very unlikely to attend their receiving program without the pathway. Among those who indicated they were unlikely to transfer without the pathway, eight students identified as Indigenous (53.3% of respondents) as compared to the eight non-Indigenous students (28.6% of respondents) who did so as well. These findings demonstrate that even among lateral moves, pathways can support access, challenging narrow conceptions of access that solely reference vertical pathways. Moreover, coupled

with the finding that Indigenous students were more likely to transfer into an Indigenous program, it may be that lateral pathway opportunities provide a mechanism for Indigenous students to seek refuge in an Indigenous program if they did not see themselves reflected in their original program. More research must be done to investigate this proposition.

Most unexpected of the findings is that the majority of learners who accessed pathways to and or from Indigenous programs are from groups that are already among the most represented in PSE (e.g., Gordon & White, 2014; Henderson & McCloy, 2019). In particular, three quarters of survey respondents were non-Indigenous. While these findings were not anticipated, the number of non-Indigenous students in Indigenous programming is rising. Phase 1 of this study which focused on understanding Indigenous program pathways from institutional perspectives found that Indigenous students are spread across the institution, and in one instance, non-Indigenous learners comprised 40% of the student population in Indigenous programs (Ray, 2017, p. 20). This trend has also been reported internationally. Nakata et al. (2012) remark that Australian Indigenous students are often the minority within Indigenous programs because of the high number of Australian students and increasing number of international exchange students.

Although more Indigenous students transferred to an Indigenous program than non-Indigenous learners, these results invite consideration about the increase of non-Indigenous students in Indigenous programs and pathways. “Being in Indigenous classes but being surrounded with non-Indigenous people” was a major concern raised in the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance’s report on the status of Indigenous students (Dubois Brooks et al., 2021). An increase of non-Indigenous learners in Indigenous programs poses a number of challenges and considerations that are likely to be exacerbated if non-Indigenous learners begin an Indigenous program in an advanced standing. Nakata and colleagues (2012) explain that Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners enter programs with their own vested interests and digest content and pedagogical approaches through their own social locations. A study of almost 3000 students in Ontario revealed that first year university students lack a basic awareness of core concepts related to Indigenous studies which impacted their ability to conceive of futurities of Indigenous sovereignty (Schaepli et al., 2018). Students lacked knowledge of legal structures that impact Indigenous peoples, the history of colonialism, structural racism, and ongoing trauma, and instead were far more conversant in Indigenous deficit narratives (Schaepli et al., 2018). Moreover, non-Indigenous students can have difficulty overcoming the conceptual limitations of Western knowledge systems (Phillips, 2011 as cited in Nakata, 2012), decentering themselves from the conversations within Indigenous studies (Olsen, 2017, p. 209), confronting their own practices, complicity, and privilege (Nakata, 2012), and moving past guilt or hopelessness to ethical and political commitments when confronted with the colonial violence that Indigenous peoples face (McGloin, 2015).

Traditionally, Indigenous programs are places of community on campus for Indigenous students (Tuck & Yang, 2012 as cited in Jacob et al., 2019) and are among the few places in post-secondary institutions where Indigenous students feel supported and safe/validated (Bailey, 2016; Cote Meek, 2014). Yet, as

the student body in Indigenous programs diversifies, Indigenous students can be marginalized within the very spaces built for them. Indigenous learner and community need is placed on the backburner while these spaces became reoriented, focusing on the education of settler students (Gaudry & Lorenz 2019). Moreover, the politics of knowledge production is not the optimal learning space for Indigenous students as they construct arguments to defend Indigenous interests (Nakata, 2012) and undergo their own interrogation on their reception of the seductive aspects of the nation-state (Andersen, 2009, p. 85).

The authors are not suggesting that there is no place for non-Indigenous learners in Indigenous programs. In fact, many scholars have articulated appropriate positions for non-Indigenous learners within Indigenous programs (e.g. Corntassel & Gaudry, 2014; Olsen, 2017). However, active dialogue and strategies are needed when attempting to fulfill the needs of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Taner, 1999); especially considering the context which gave rise to Indigenous Studies programs. DeCock (2006) agrees with this position, arguing that pathways cannot claim that they are mechanisms to support access for racialized students in “the absence of a policy or mechanism to encourage transfer” (p. 14). While the authors believe that pathways are a worthy cause and do have a role to play in Indigenization, a more critical stance and Indigenous centered approach to pathway development is needed. Specifically, bridging programs, institutional policies and procedures, and pathway development methodologies are key avenues to advance this principled approach.

### **Bridging Programs**

Very few students in this study reported attending a bridging program, however bridging programs may offer an opportunity for non-Indigenous students to equip themselves with necessary tools and understandings. Such programs could focus on key concepts and skills to enhance self-awareness and frameworks of knowing (Nakata, 2012). Resources are readily available which identify and discuss keystone concepts and pedagogical approaches in Indigenous programming (e.g., Moodie; 2019; Teves, et al., 2014; Vowel, 2016). For example, Moodie (2019) suggests that those new to the discipline focus on understanding race, country, relationality, policy, and evidence as key concepts that aid in the interrogation of knowledge production in Indigenous context, and Olsen (2017) posits that a methodological and theoretical foundation consisting of (1) the need to privilege the Indigenous; (2) an intersectional approach to the different encounters; (3) the use of critical perspectives; and (4) decentering is needed.

### **Institutional Policies and Procedures**

Pathway development in Indigenous programs need to be part of a coordinated institution wide effort to indigenize postsecondary institutions. This would allow for a relational lens in the building and evaluation of initiatives and support the privileging of Indigenous experience and need. Such a strategy should be Indigenous led (Ray, Wabano, et al., 2019) and address systemic issues from which racism, discrimination, and settler normativity permeate. Targeted strategies include the development of



culturally relevant admission policies and procedures (Pidgeon, 2016), recognition of Indigenous experience by crediting prior learning for Indigenous students (Pidgeon, 2016; Ray, 2017), and target ratios which privilege space for Indigenous learners in Indigenous programs and program pathways. Moreover, those target ratios must account for the “less visible and more abstract aspects of diversity such as different world views which arise from intersectionality of, for example, age, class, and ethnicity” so that the focus is not just on Indigenous learners who most resemble the norms of the institution accessing pathways (Henderson et al., 2021, p. e95).

Regarding non-Indigenous learners, this study found that more non-Indigenous learners are transferring out of Indigenous programs than into Indigenous programs. Understanding students’ motivations for transfer and experience in their current program would be helpful in evaluating the potential impact of such pathways as an Indigenization strategy. Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) contend that settlers must not be the focus of Indigenization. Yet, a vast amount of time and resources have been invested in Indigenous content requirements, resources that could be utilized to serve Indigenous programs (Innes et al., 2022). Strategic and intentional program pathway development could be part of an Indigenization strategy that does not reinscribe colonial norms by centring settlers. Instead, resources that may be diverted from Indigenous programs to support Indigenous content requirements can be redirected back to Indigenous studies, building their capacity to address the educational needs of non-Indigenous students while not jeopardizing their commitment to Indigenous students and nations. Through targeted pathways, a student base that has knowledge and competencies in Indigenous studies in non-Indigenous programs can help to shift the culture and support informed and respectful conversations about settler colonialism and the issues that have arisen from it. Also, in doing so, Indigenous students may be less likely to be expected to bear the brunt for educating their peers on Indigenous issues and addressing incorrect or problematic conversations.

### **Pathway Development Methodology**

Interdisciplinary transfers challenge existing credit transfer methodologies due to differences in program type, structure, and content among institutions and assumptions of content equivalency mapping (Rhodes, 2019). While Indigenous programming arises from distinct genealogies and employs distinct intellectual traditions (Champagne, 1994; Simpson & Smith, 2014, p. 1), Indigenous program pathways have been approached from an interdisciplinary perspective. Where the problem lies is that most non-Indigenous programs lack knowledge of Indigenous epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies, and deep conversations about decolonization and colonialism (Andersen, 2009; Rhodes, 2019, p. 5). This results in transfer students entering an Indigenous program in an advanced stage without the necessary foundational knowledge of the discipline (Ray, 2017). These disparities are further exacerbated by many non-Indigenous students who are confronted by their own implicit or explicit role in settler colonialism for the first time within these environments, raising questions about the appropriateness of the use of transfer and articulation processes which have predominately functioned within discipline specific spaces in interdisciplinary and Indigenous pathways (Rhodes, 2019).

Scholars such as Kennepohl (2016), Roska and colleagues (2016), and Rhodes (2019) have put forth an outcomes-based approach as one that is more appropriate to assess block transfers. This approach should be coupled with faculty participation in the transfer credit evaluation process to ensure that those with discipline-specific knowledge are involved in the process (Ray, 2017). Additionally, interdisciplinary transfers can focus on transferability of elective courses instead of required courses in Indigenous programs.

### Conclusion

In addition to providing a snapshot on Indigenous program pathway student experience, this paper has sought to raise key considerations about how Indigenous program pathways in their current state can buttress colonial norms through the decentering of Indigenous student experiences and Indigenous program goals. While Indigenous program pathways are developed under the umbrella of Indigenous student access and success, this study has found that it is predominately non-Indigenous learners who are accessing Indigenous program pathways. While the study found that many non-Indigenous learners utilized pathways from Indigenous programs to other program types, Indigenous program pathways in their current design can provide a mechanism for the influx of non-Indigenous students in Indigenous programs at an advanced standing. This can have dire consequences for Indigenous programming and Indigenous learners if non-Indigenous students are ill-prepared for Indigenous-centered spaces. The learning environments in Indigenous programs can be coopted and Indigenous students can be marginalized, hampering the educational attainment of Indigenous students and the directives of Indigenous programs.

While this research was conducted in a Canadian context, the findings of this study are salient beyond Canadian borders, as post-secondary institutions around the world remain a site of colonial reproduction in which settler normativity is re-enshrined (e.g., Smith, Tuck & Yang, 2018). Post-secondary institutions around the globe continue to debate targets and caps for non-domestic students to ensure that they are able to fulfill their mandate to domestic students; however, in a time when there is a myriad of pledges related to Indigenous peoples and reconciliation, there have been no alarms raised by post-secondary institutions in Canada and beyond on the increasing number of non-Indigenous students enrolled in Indigenous classes and programs and the impact of this on Indigenous students and faculty (in fact, many institutions tout this as an achievement toward reconciliation through Indigenous content requirements and other initiatives). Moreover, while bridging programs have long been associated with pathways and used as a strategy to address Indigenous students' "shortcomings" so that they can grow their resiliency and adapt to postsecondary education norms and expectations (McMurtry et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2015), this strategy has not been discussed, let alone employed, to support the readiness of non-Indigenous pathway students to engage in Indigenous spaces and to question their privilege and positionality.

Currently, there is a lack of critical conversations about the development of Indigenous program pathways. When a plausible scenario exists whereby a non-Indigenous learner can receive advanced

standing into an Indigenous program from an interdisciplinary transfer and an Indigenous student with a lifetime of experience must attend a bridging program to enter these same programs, the foundation is laid for the appropriation of Indigenous spaces on campus. Operating in this framework of settler normativity is indicative of inclusive modes of reconciliation which have been widely critiqued for their focus on acclimatizing Indigenous students to the current system, instead of implemented targeted and transformative change (e.g., Daigle, 2019; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). In order for Indigenous program pathways to move beyond this model of inclusion, Indigenous program pathway development must begin to work within decolonizing frameworks and situate access within the goals of Indigenous nation building and the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems.

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