Introduction to the Issue of Persistence

- Persistence: the ability of students to continue their post-secondary studies from one year to the next and ultimately complete their programs.
- Meaningful access requires that students brought into PSE must be successful in their studies.
- Low levels of persistence pose a problem...
  - For students: left without the credential they need
  - For institutions: poor use of resources and poor performance
  - For societies:
    - lower educational attainment
    - exacerbates social inequities
Introduction to the Issue of Persistence

• To achieve best results, policy makers must not simply react by initiating programs. They must ensure that the effectiveness of these programs is evaluated through research.

“It is ironic that institutions that spend so much time and money insisting on evidence-based decisions, spend so little time on research that evaluates higher education itself. Research on the postsecondary sector is inadequate and poorly publicized. This should change.”


Previous Research

• Little research on the issue of persistence in PSE in Canada until recently
• Data limited to institution-specific studies
• “We know very little about how many students drop out of programs, or why” (Rae, 2005)
• New research now becoming available:
  – “Youth in Transition” survey (Statistics Canada)
  – Canada Millennium Foundation pilot projects and program evaluations

Persistence Rates in Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in Post-Secondary Education Status Over Time</th>
<th>Graduated from or Continuing Post-Secondary Studies</th>
<th>Never Enrolled in Post-Secondary Studies</th>
<th>Discontinued Post-Secondary Studies (As a % of all Youth)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of Youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-22</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-26</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: YITS (Cohort B).
Persistence Rates in Canada

- Many students who leave one PSE institution continue their studies at another.
- Many students who discontinue their post-secondary studies do so only temporarily:
  - Only 22% of university students and 35% of college students who did not complete their first program ended their post-secondary education.
- Once all these “switchers” and “stop-outs” are taken into account, the five-year drop-out rate falls to 10% for university students and 18% for college students.

Persistence Rates in Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Persistence Rates in Post-Secondary Education in Canada</th>
<th>Graduated (%)</th>
<th>Still in post-secondary education (%)</th>
<th>Discontinued post-secondary education (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Finnie and Qiu, Table 6b.

Who Leaves PSE and Why?

Factors correlated with low persistence:
- Poor academic performance and low engagement
- Inadequate financial aid package or high levels of debt
- Uncertainty about career goals
- Lower levels of parental education (in some studies)
- Aboriginal ancestry
Percent of Post-Secondary Students who Have Discontinued Their Studies (By Age Group)

Source: YITS ( Cohort B) – special calculation.

Who Leaves PSE and Why?

Self-Reported Reasons for Discontinuing Post-Secondary Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Class of 2003 Study</th>
<th>YITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest/lack of program fit/lack of career direction</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial reasons (other than desire to work)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic reasons</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to work</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who Leaves PSE and Why?

- Those who persist are more likely to attempt more than one program than are those who drop out
- Parents’ education correlates with students’ ability to adjust to adversity in their first program by finding and undertaking alternative programs
- Importance of “resilience” (the capacity of overcome obstacles, adapt to change, or to survive and thrive despite adversity)
  - Those who persist are able to make adjustments that help them to stay enrolled
  - Factors contributing to resilience in youth include supportive relationships with adults and parental expectations
Research on Policy Responses

- Persistence should be addressed through a comprehensive approach
  - Need to address interconnected barriers to success
  - Need to work at institutional level rather than isolated policies
  - Implemented by various departments
- There are many programs designed to improve persistence, but few of these are evaluated for impact
- The role of research should not end once the problem of persistence has been diagnosed
- Student support programs can be implemented in the context of a research endeavour that allows the impact of the program to be assessed effectively
  - Confirms that programs deliver the intended benefits to students
  - Confirms that resources are well-spent

Foundations for Success

- Pilot project involving 2,040 students at three Ontario colleges
- Directs students at risk of dropping out to case managers who in turn direct them to the specific support services they need (tutoring / academic support / peer mentoring / career clarification workshops)
- Random assignment into three groups: services; service plus (financial incentive); and control
- Data collected and students tracked to determine whether students in the services or services plus group are more likely to continue and complete their studies than those in the control group, and whether any differences in persistence rates can be linked to participation in the program

Foundations for Success

Research questions:
1. Does a case-manager system in which students are matched with college advisors who guide and facilitate their access to the academic support services, career education programs, and peer mentoring that are appropriate to the needs of the student increase the likelihood that students at risk of dropping out will persist in their studies and graduate?
2. Does the payment of a bursary as an incentive for participation improve persistence either by successfully inciting students to participate in other support programming or by providing students with additional funds to pay for their studies?
Foundations for Success

- Data on persistence available as of autumn 2008
- Preliminary observations
  - while the majority of students participated in at least some hours of support programming, only a minority participated extensively
  - the availability of a financial incentive to encourage participation is effective at increasing participation levels
  - the case manager approach appears to be successful in increasing student use of support services: students in the services and services plus group are more likely to be taking advantage of tutoring, peer mentoring and career guidance than are those in the control group
  - students in the two program groups do better academically and show more academic improvement during their first year than students in the control group

LE.NONET

- Pilot project to test the effectiveness of initiatives to improve the retention of Aboriginal students at the University of Victoria
- Project recognizes that improved outcomes necessitates change not only in Aboriginal students but also in the culture and practices of the university
- Supports students through a suite of services, each designed to address particular obstacles that Aboriginal students are likely to encounter:
  - Bursary program;
  - Peer mentoring program;
  - Research apprenticeship program;
  - Community internship program;
  - Preparation seminar;
  - Staff and faculty cultural training seminar.
Research question:
• will a series of interventions involving financial, academic, peer and cultural support have a demonstrable effect on the performance of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education and specifically on their persistence year-to-year and on their likelihood of completing their program of studies?
• Is any particular type of intervention more effective and do the interventions have greater impact when delivered in combination with one another?

Research evaluation
• The persistence of Aboriginal students during the period in which the program is in place will be compared to the persistence of Aboriginal students registered at the university in the five year period before the program was introduced.
• Cannot use random assignment
• Since one of the objectives of the program is to change the university culture, it is possible for the program to affect non-participants as well as participants.

Data on persistence available after 2009
• Preliminary observations
  – 145 students participated in elements of the program between Sept. 2005 and Jan. 2008
  – Preliminary observations from qualitative research suggest positive impacts on students including:
    • contributing to students’ sense of connection to the on-campus Aboriginal community;
    • contributing to students’ sense of connection to the general university community;
    • contributing to their success as students;
    • strengthening their own Aboriginal identity and understanding of Aboriginal culture
  – Not yet clear whether these effects will ultimately result in improved persistence

“MESA”
Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Aid
• Example of using evaluation research in the context of a national financial aid program rather than a limited institution-specific pilot project
• Evaluation of the millennium access bursaries ($200 million over four years, approx. 28,000 students per year)
• Bursaries paid to students from low-income families (and in some cases, Aboriginal or rural students)
• Program objective: to encourage participation and persistence in post-secondary education by lowering net cost of attendance for those facing financial barriers
Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Aid

Research questions:
1. How do youth from low-income families who attend college or university compare with those who do not?
2. Does providing more funding in a student’s first few years of study attract more low-income students to post-secondary education?
3. Does providing more funding in a student’s first few years of study make it more likely for low-income students to persist and graduate?
4. How do low-income students differ across Canada?

Research evaluation:
1. Longitudinal study of administrative files and survey responses that will allow for a comparison of the progress of bursary recipients with “non-recipients” who narrowly missed qualifying for the award.
   - In the case of Aboriginal students, the comparison will instead be made to those Aboriginal students who were enrolled prior to the introduction of the new program.
2. Collection of quantitative data and qualitative information that will help deepen the understanding of the situation and behaviour of students from low-income families.
3. Systematic analysis of other data on the determinants of post-secondary participation (this latter element is required in order to address the research questions related to access).

Preliminary observations:
• Initial data confirm that important differences exist between recipients and the comparison group of non-recipients.
• Recipients have access to significantly less money to pay for their education through earnings and savings.
• The access bursary therefore serves to lessen additional borrowing requirement for recipients and to equalize the initial financial situation of the two groups.
• Too early to speculate whether this result will produce a positive impact on persistence.
Table 1: Selected Characteristics of Access Bursary Recipients and Non-Recipients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ontario*</th>
<th>Nova Scotia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amount earned from summer jobs</td>
<td>$2,427</td>
<td>$2,753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prior to PSE (average)</td>
<td>$2,309</td>
<td>$4,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of these earnings saved</td>
<td>$1,541</td>
<td>$1,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for school (average)</td>
<td>$1,565</td>
<td>$2,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students who saved</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for their education prior to PSE</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students whose families saved for their education</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of access bursary (median)</td>
<td>$2,159</td>
<td>$1,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$2,550</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In Ontario, recipients are those below an initial income threshold who receive a combination of federal and millennium or Ontario access bursaries equal to 100% of their tuition; non-recipients are those below a higher income threshold who receive a millennium or Ontario access bursary equal to between 25% and 50% of their tuition.

Discussion and Conclusion

1. Role of research is not limited to that of diagnosing the problem. Research can also assess impact of programs. This helps ensure that the programs are in fact benefiting students and that public resources are well-spent.

2. Evaluation research is not always easy to put in place. Obstacles include:
   a) Money
   b) Time
   c) Confusion between testing and ranking
   d) Tensions between educators and researchers
   e) Recruitment of participants

3. All of these obstacles can be overcome, but only when researchers develop effective partnerships with educators and administrators in institutions and governments.

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