4. PARTICIPATION AND PERSISTENCE

An Analysis of Underserved Students at UOIT

INTRODUCTION

In Canada's multicultural society, identifying and understanding how students from diverse backgrounds are able to persist at university until graduation is important, especially given the impact of postsecondary degrees on employment opportunities, individual income and long term earnings, as well as the education requirements for newly created jobs (e.g., Zeman, McMullen, & de Broucker, 2010). Since research has identified the importance of higher education for future earnings (Ostrovsky & Frenette, 2014), quality of life and life chances (Banerjee & Verma, 2012), we must understand how to enable "at-risk" students to succeed in higher education (instead of studying only barriers).

According to Statistics Canada (2010), about fifty percent of the population over the age of 15 will be foreign-born or have one foreign-born parent by 2030. The University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), where this study took place, is located on the rural-urban fringe at the edge of the Greater Toronto Area and provides a good snapshot of this demographic trend, with 44% of the students self-identifying as visible minorities and a large number receiving loans or working more than 15 hours per week to pay their university tuition fees (NSSE, 2012). Broad trends show that there are differences between ethnic groups and the educational success of young adult immigrants (Reitz, Zhang, & Hawkins, 2011; Vaccaro, 2012), but most of that research is American and focuses on the barriers that create such differentials in educational success among ethnic or national groups (Armstrong & McMahon, 2013; Boyd, 2009; Davies & Maldonado, 2008), explores the stage of transition from high school to the university (Roxas & Roy, 2012; Sweetman & Dicks, 1999), examines labour market success after degree completion (Anisef, Sweet, & Frempong, 2003; Ferrer & Riddell, 2008; Mata & Krauth, 2008) and uses quantitative methodologies that provide little detail about the nuances of students' experiences (Ferede, 2010). This pilot study complements these by beginning to develop a more nuanced examination of the reasons why some students successfully persist to graduation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the barriers to and the levels of participation in higher education for students of different ethnic, racial and class backgrounds is extensive (e.g., Kilpi-Jakonen,

2011; Ashton & Esses, 1999). In Canada, much of the research has relied on the rich longitudinal data collected in the Youth in Transition survey (e.g., Finnie et al., 2015) and provides information on financial barriers, family income, parental education background, and the like. Others have delved into these quantitative data to analyse their impact on student aspirations for, barriers to, and influence on attending and persisting in post-secondary education (e.g., Childs et al., 2012).

In addition, researchers in Canada and the United States have examined the role that family background plays in the participation of immigrant youth in post-secondary education and the transition process and integration of immigrant youth into schools and communities (e.g., Teranishi et al., 2011; Matthews & Mahoney, 2005; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Much of that research refers to quantitative data collected in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Glick & White, 2004; Keller & Tillman, 2008; Tseng, 2004). Some researchers utilising traditional assimilation theory have found that immigrant youth and children of recent immigrants face barriers to accessing post-secondary education (Keller & Tillman, 2008), but others have found that some groups of immigrants have higher levels of aspiration for and participation in higher education (e.g., Baum & Flores, 2011) and point to generational differences between categories of children from immigrant families (Glick & White, 2004; Keller & Tillman, 2008; Baum & Flores, 2011), even when researchers controlled for socio-economic background (SES). Related research has identified an “immigrant paradox” where 2nd and 3rd generation immigrant students experience lower academic achievement than their 1st generation counterparts (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009). There is also considerable research about retention and student participation in higher education in Ontario (e.g., Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011; Norrie & Zhao, 2010; Sweet et al., 2010). These reports are valuable in providing information related to individual institutions, specific programmes targeted at the retention of 1st generation university students, overviews of factors impacting access and persistence, and the like. Few studies focus on what students themselves say about how and why they are successful at persisting to graduation.

Recent programmes that targeted First Generation students (i.e., those whose parents have never attended university) and overall first-year retention have been important in improving first-year persistence rates (e.g., Torenbeek et al., 2010; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). These include mentoring and early integration experience programmes (e.g., Collier & Fellows, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2012), first-year seminar courses (Miller et al., 2007), participation in learning communities to improve engagement and persistence (e.g., Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), institutional policies and practices (e.g., Calcagno et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2009), institutional structures (e.g., Scott et al., 2008; Parkin & Baldwin, 2009), and the influence of faculty interactions with students (Sax et al., 2005). Other researchers have focussed on students who are English language learners to determine how they acculturate to the academic environment (e.g., Cheng & Fox, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2013), the ways in which immigrant students socialize on university campuses and maintain their cultural values and identities in a diverse environment (Grasmuck & Kim, 2010;

Rosenblum et al., 2009), and how resilience and self-esteem impacts student experiences and success (Jaret & Reitzes, 2009; Seror et al., 2005). In spite of the success of targeted first-year retention programmes, most universities in Ontario have much lower degree completion rates. According to CUDO (Common University Data Ontario, 2014), for instance, Laurentian University's year 1 to 2 retention rate in 2012 was 83.1% and its graduation rate was 70.9%. Few studies examine what happens between years two and four to cause this attrition or which students are most affected. Our research takes up these questions to make a holistic and comparative analysis of the success strategies used by different demographic segments of student groups at varying levels of risk. This comparative approach reduces the "othering" that often emerges when examining only "at risk" populations (Seigel, 2005; Viveiros de Castro, 2004). This case study is the result of a pilot project to begin considering the potential for such a comparative analysis.

METHODOLOGY

We used a concurrent mixed methods approach and drew on a variety of theoretical frameworks: critical race theory, resilience theory, post-colonialism and Indigenous paradigms. Understanding how underrepresented students successfully persist in university in spite of barriers to access requires methodologies that challenge the notion that "the social system is open and individual mobility can be attained through hard work" (Sleeter, 1993, p. 160). Resilience theory, like Indigenous research paradigms, holds that oppressive methods dislocate trust and unfairly position the researcher as the one with the 'power to define' (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Volunteers for the project were solicited and were chosen through purposeful selection to ensure an even split between first and fourth year students, between visible minority immigrant students and those who did not identify as visible minority immigrant, and for a balance in gender.

This pilot study of a total of 29 individuals including surveys of 24 students (13 first-year students and 11 fourth-year students) and interviews with eight students (4 first-year and 4 fourth-year), three of whom did both the interview and the survey. Seven participants were male students and 17 were female, ranging in age from 17 (1) to 25 (1), with most aged 18 (10) and 21 (8). Only one student surveyed was living common law; the remaining 23 were single and never married. Fifteen of the students were Canadian citizens by birth, four were Canadian citizens by naturalisation, and five were permanent residents. Of the 15 Canadian citizens by birth, all were born in Ontario. Students identified with a wide range of ethnicities, including Canadian, and several identified with multiple ethnicities, such as Italian, German and Scottish or South Asian and West Indian or Jamaican and Indian. In terms of the importance of their ethnic identity, four stated that their identity was not at all important, while eleven felt their identity was very important; the remaining nine students fell in between, with five rating their identity as neither important nor very important. For most students, English was the main language they spoke

regularly and used for reading and writing, but there was a wide range of languages spoken at home and with friends.

Volunteers were sought from all Faculties within the university. Fourteen of the students were enrolled in a programme in the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, three were in a Science programme, four were from the Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science and three (one in each Faculty) were in the Faculty of Business & Information Technology, Faculty of Energy Systems & Nuclear Engineering, and the Faculty of Health Science. Participants were enrolled in a total of twelve different programmes (4 in Criminology, 8 in Forensic Psychology, 2 in Legal Studies, 2 in Electrical Engineering, and one in each of the following programmes: Automotive Engineering, Commerce, Biology, Communication, Community Development & Policy Studies, Health Science, Mechanical Engineering, and Nuclear Engineering).

FINDINGS

The survey and interview questions were designed to solicit information about the influence of family and personal lives, as well as available academic resources and activities. In both the survey and interviews, open-ended questions were used to capture the voices of the students as they reflected on their experiences at university. Most respondents' parents (21 mothers and 19 fathers) had at least a high school education or higher (see Table 1). In addition, fifteen students had an older sibling who had pursued a higher education. Having family members who value education has been shown to be important for the successful completion of both high school and post-secondary education for young people (Glick & White, 2004; Picot & Hou, 2013).

Most of the respondents grew up knowing they would go to university (n=18), while four decided to go to university while in high school and two said they were still not sure why they were attending university. Twenty students came directly from secondary school, while four arrived at UOIT after attending another university

Table 1. Parents' education

Highest level of schooling	Mother	Father
Earned doctorate (Ph.D., D.Sc., Ed.D.)	0	1
Master's degree (M.A., M.Sc., M.Ed.)	2	0
Bachelor's or undergraduate university degree (including B.A., B.Sc.N., LL.B., B.Ed.)	4	6
Diploma or certificate (community college, CEGEP or apprenticeship)	9	4
Some trade, technical or vocational school, or business college	0	5
High school diploma	6	3
Some high school	2	4
Don't know	1	1

($n=3$) or college ($n=2$). Three of the students who came from another university or college felt more successful in their new program. Twelve students had completed their secondary school diploma requirements in June 2014 and six in June 2011; the remaining six students had completed secondary school in 2008 ($n=1$), 2009 ($n=2$), and 2010 ($n=2$). Most participants identified their overall grade average in their final year of secondary school as 80% to 89%; however, eight said their secondary school grades were between 70%–79% and three said their grades were 90% or higher. When asked whether their secondary school adequately prepared them for university, opinions were split evenly: twelve felt their secondary school did prepare them well for university and twelve did not (see Table 2).

Students were also asked about their motivation levels. Thirteen stated that they were very motivated (“I attend all classes and regularly do homework, readings and study”), ten stated that they were somewhat motivated (“I attend most classes and do

Table 2. Secondary school preparation for university

<i>Felt adequately or well-prepared for university</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Did not feel adequately prepared for university</i>	<i>Number</i>
Course workload expectations	3	Lack of efficient grading system	1
Difficulty of courses, level of expectations	3	Lack of consequences for missing assignments	1
Time management	3	Lack of detailed explanations of concepts needed for university courses	1
Organization	2	Below standard high school courses	1
Learned to work hard	1	“babied” in high school & victory lap	1
Learned to study	1	Lack of note taking, managing exam schedules, life skills (for living on own)	3
Well-prepared for assignments;	1	Lack of practical assignments	1
Examinations	1	Pressure to study more	1
Course content	1	Grammar, writing skills	3
Writing & citing	1	Citation methods	1
Everything overall	2	Professionalism	1
		Technology	1
		Amount of work	1
		Irrelevant subject matter not related to field of interest	1
TOTAL [Some respondents provided multiple answers]	19		18

most of my homework or readings, and study only when necessary”), and one said s/he was unmotivated (“I often miss class, rarely do homework or readings, and minimally study”). The fact that we solicited volunteers for this project has the potential to skew the results regarding motivation level since unmotivated students are less likely to voluntarily do anything extra. We tried to mitigate this problem by offering a \$10 incentive for completing the survey and a \$20 incentive for taking part in the interview.

In terms of the importance of religion to individual students, seven stated that religion was not important at all and six stated religion was very important; the remaining eleven students ranked religion in between with six stating that religion was neither important nor unimportant (see Table 3). Interestingly, in the interviews, those who said they were religious also said that their religion really did not have an impact on their schooling or ability to be successful beyond providing a stable base for their life in general.

However, when students were asked about how they overcame any challenges in their education and what helped them to succeed at university, religion played a role for some students. Seven students stated that their religion or spirituality regularly helped them with challenges and stresses, five said religion or spirituality sometimes helped them, and twelve stated that religion or spirituality never plays that kind of role in their lives.

Other factors tended to play a more important role in overcoming challenges (see Table 4). Eighteen respondents stated that one or more professors had encouraged and helped them when they had questions, while six said that professors had not helped them. Only six students said that the Student Learning Centre had helped them. Eleven students said that they used online tools (such as NOOL.uoit.ca, OWL@Purdue), but thirteen had not used online tools. Overall, surprisingly few students made use of the free resources available on and off campus. This may be the result of who volunteered for the study. Most of the students felt that they were able to cope well with a difficult course, assignments or other challenges: Sixteen said that they cope well (“Yes, I can usually cope with any problems”), six said that they sometimes cope well (“Sometimes I cope well, but there are times when I give up or do not complete a difficult task”), and one said that s/he does not cope well with problems. Students were also asked about what factors would help them to cope with challenges (see Table 5).

Financial problems cause stress for many students. Using a feeling thermometer scale out of 100, students were asked to identify how much the cost of university worries them (the lower the number, the less worried; the higher the number, the more worried) (see Table 6). Most of the students pay for university tuition through

Table 3. Importance of religion in student lives

Very Important	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Not at all Important
6	17	7

Table 4. Factors to help succeed in university

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Yes, I use</i>	<i>No, I did not use</i>
Professors	18	6
Student Learning Centre (i.e., peer tutoring, subject area support)	6	18
Online tools (i.e., NOOL.uoit.ca, OWL@Purdue)	11	13
Academic Advisors	9	15
Services for Students with Disabilities	2	22
Student Association	1	23
University association or centre (i.e., Aboriginal Resource Centre)	1	23
Study groups with peers	9	15
Other	3	21

Table 5. Factors that help (or would help) in coping with problems

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Yes, it helps</i>	<i>No, it doesn't help</i>
A quiet place to think or study	20	4
An opportunity to talk with my peers in the course	21	3
Encouragement from my family or friends	17	7
Fewer hours of paid employment	2	22
Being enrolled in fewer courses	7	17
Fewer personal problems	18	6
Fewer financial problems	11	13
Other	1	23

government loans (n=17), only three students have parents who pay for all of their tuition, one student received scholarships and bursaries for tuition, two students share the cost with their parents, and one did not respond to this question. Living expenses were similarly a cause for concern with seven paying for living expenses mainly through government loans, three mainly by working part-time, seven whose parents paid for all living expenses, one who lived at home, and five who shared the cost with their parents. In terms of how finances impacted their studies, just over half of the students (n=13) either found that finances were not a problem or that they had found a way to balance work and school, but just less than half either worried about finances (n=8) or had been negatively impacted by financial concerns (see Table 7). Given that we know from other internally collected data that most UOIT students are from lower income families and work while attending university, these findings

Table 6. Worry about finances

Range	46/100 Not worried	60–69/100 Worried	70–79/100 Moderately worried	80–89/100 Very worried	90–99/100 Extremely worried	100 Extremely worried
Number	1	4	5	6	3	3

Table 7. Impact of finances

How have finances impacted ability to pursue your studies?	Number
Finances are not a problem	8
I work hard, but work and school are manageable	5
I constantly worry about paying tuition and other bills	8
My long working hours have a negative impact on my ability to do well in school	1
I delayed my university education to earn money for school	1

suggest that there is some skewing happening – those with the most challenges have the least amount of time to participate in voluntary research. A larger sample size in the future may mitigate this problem.

Because involvement with family, friends and non-academic activities can impact student success, we asked about social supports. Nineteen students said that their family encouraged them to go to university and to attend classes regularly and four students said that some of their family encouraged them. Most of the students had friends either at UOIT or at another university or college; only two said all their friends only worked at jobs and did not attend university or college. Eleven students said they had friends at UOIT with whom they studied, while thirteen stated that they preferred to study alone. Seventeen students participated in the activities of a group or organisation (such as, a sports team, a hobby club, community organisation, or an ethnic organisation) in the past 12 months, but six had not. They were also asked about the type of organisation (see Table 8).

Most of the students who took part in an organisation of some sort, did so at least once a week (n=11) or once a month (n=4); two said they did so once or twice a year, two not at all, one did not know, and four did not answer. Fifteen students had volunteered their time with their organisation. Eight students voted in the last federal, provincial, and/or municipal election, ten did not vote, and five were not yet eligible to do so. Students were also asked if they ever felt uncomfortable or out of place due to their ethnicity, culture, race, skin colour, language, accent, and/or religion (see Table 9). One student reported feeling uncomfortable or out of place all of the time, one did so most of the time, twelve felt uncomfortable some of the time, five did so rarely, three never felt uncomfortable, one did not know and one did not answer. In order to try to get a more complete picture of student experiences of discrimination, we asked them where they had felt discriminated against or treated unfairly in the

Table 8. Participation in non-academic activities

<i>Type of organisation</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Sports club/team	5	18
Religious-affiliated group	3	20
Community organisation (i.e., YMCA/YWCA, community centre)	4	19
Service club (i.e., Kiwanis, Rotary, hospital auxiliary)	3	20
Charitable organisation (i.e., Cancer Society)	3	20
Hobby club (i.e., garden club, book club)	3	20
Political or citizen's group	0	23
Youth organisation (i.e., Scouts, Guides, Boys & Girls Club)	1	22
Children's school group (i.e., Parent/Teacher Assn, school volunteer)	4	19
Job related association (i.e., union, professional association)	6	17
Ethnic or immigrant association	0	23
Other	2	21

Table 9. Feelings of belongingness

<i>Reason for feeling uncomfortable or out of place</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Ethnicity/culture	12	11
Race or skin colour	13	10
Language or accent	6	17
Religion	5	18
Don't know	5	18
Never felt uncomfortable	3	20

past five years (see Table 10). Students were also asked if they felt uncomfortable or out of place at UOIT in particular (see Table 11). Three felt they did so most of the time, one did so some of the time, ten rarely felt out of place or uncomfortable, eight never felt out of place or uncomfortable, one did not know and one did not answer. We explored this question further by asking for the reasons for feeling out of place while on the UOIT campus. These questions about volunteerism and feelings of comfort in different locations speaks to the sense of community and inclusion students feel. We suggest that without a sense of community and belongingness, students are less likely to be successful.

The survey concluded with questions to help determine students' overall sense of life satisfaction and their advice for other students. Using a feeling thermometer, students were asked to identify: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your personal life as a whole these days?" (see Table 12). Responses were spread almost evenly from not at all satisfied to extremely satisfied. To help gain a sense

Table 10. Location of discrimination/lack of belongingness

<i>Where did you experience discrimination or been treated unfairly in the past 5 years?</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
On the street	11	12
In a store, bank or restaurant	7	16
At work or applying for a job or promotion	7	16
When dealing with police or courts	1	22
When on the UOIT north campus	2	21
When on the UOIT south campus	2	21
In class at UOIT	2	21
When working with other students for class projects	2	21
When speaking with a lecturer, professor or TA	1	22
Other	6	17
Don't know	1	22
Never experienced discrimination	6	17

Table 11. Reasons for lack of belongingness at UOIT

<i>Reason for feeling uncomfortable or out of place while at UOIT</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Ethnicity/culture	7	16
Race or skin colour	10	13
Language or accent	3	20
Religion	1	22
Don't know	0	0

Table 12. Life satisfaction

<i>Range</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>30–39</i>	<i>40–49</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>60–69</i>	<i>70–79</i>	<i>80–89</i>	<i>90–99</i>
	<i>Not at all</i>								<i>Extremely</i>
	<i>satisfied</i>								<i>satisfied</i>
Number	1	1	2	4	2	3	2	5	3

of what students did to succeed at school, they were asked what advice they would give to incoming students in order to be successful. A common comment by several students who faced academic struggles was that they “should have tried harder”. Another regular comment was that they needed better time management and to make sure to do the readings regularly. One non-immigrant student commented that after doing badly in her first term, she began typing out her notes after class and reviewing them daily. She made sure to review regularly and keep up with assignments. These

comments reflect a sense of personal responsibility for students' success or lack of success, rather than any attribution to external influences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The most interesting findings came from fourth-year students, since first-year students had not yet had enough experience in their university studies to really understand and be able to articulate how they were successful and how they overcame any obstacles. When asked what advice they would give to a new student, the comments were remarkably similar and were connected to their analysis of their own perceived failings. Students indicated that knowing someone who had been to university prior to starting was helpful in understanding what to expect. At the same time, making new friends early in their programme of study was just as helpful. Having at least one person to share experiences, complaints and studying helped with motivation, problem-solving and the like. In many ways, these findings are not surprising. Success in education is regularly attributed to personal factors rather than external ones. Discrimination off-campus was seen as occurring more frequently than on campus and as causing feelings of discomfort. A lack of a sense of community may be one of the key factors inhibiting success. Many students indicate that having like-minded friends who study together and support each other is important to their success. Yet, our findings indicate that students do not access on-campus resources (such as the writing centre or peer tutoring) largely because the hours to access them are limited. Additionally, few students are involved in extra-curricular or volunteer groups in spite of the fact that they know such activities are important for building skills and networking with potential employers. For students at small commuter campuses who have to work to pay for tuition, there is little time or money to become involved or to access resources on or off campus. Indeed, after speaking with a professor when help is needed, the most frequently used resources are online tools.

The number of our participants was quite small, so we do not have a strong sense of differences between different groups of students. However, one of the last questions students were asked on the survey was: "If there is something you wanted to say about how your background impacts you (either at school, University, society in general), but we did not address in the questions above, please tell us in the space below". Only one of the non-visible minority/immigrant students made a comment ("Sometimes I feel I am treated differently in society because of the colour of my skin"), but four of the immigrant/visible minority students did. They commented on feeling uncomfortable in a larger city with more diversity after growing up in a small pre-dominantly white town without experiencing any racism and on being yourself even when you are feeling judged. One student specifically commented on the loneliness of not fitting into any groups on campus, even an 'African' student group, because her accent was wrong: 'It's hard to open up when you feel alone. I've never been able to identify with the African society (sic) because the majority of the group acts as though I don't belong simply because my accent is

different which upsets me'. Not surprisingly, these comments suggest that there are influences beyond personal actions (such as studying more) that impact on students' successfulness. In future research, the goal will be to involve more students who are close to graduation or recently graduated and to include students from across Canada to allow for comparative analysis based on location of study as well as immigrant status, ethnicity, class, and gender.

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