Indspire

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Story as Knowledge: Experiences of Early Leaving & Persistence from Indigenous Post-Secondary Students

By Jaiden Herkimer
Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation

and Karsyn Summers
Chippewas of the Thames First Nation

Cover Design
Stand Strong by Alanah Jewell

About Indspire

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programs, and shares resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Through Indspire's education offerings, we provide resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success for Indigenous youth. In 2021-2022, Indspire awarded over $23 million through 6,612 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside the federal government.

About Research Knowledge Nest

The *Indspire Research Knowledge Nest* is the first Indigenous research program of its kind in Canada. With data analysis skills rapidly becoming critical to economic success, the *Research Nest* is poised to seize this exciting opportunity to foster Indigenous engagement and leadership in quantitative research and data science roles. The program will be guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who will provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

Cover Design – Stand Strong by Alanah Jewell

Alanah Astehtsi Otsistohkwa (Morningstar) Jewell (she/her) is a mixed French-First Nations artist. She is Bear Clan from Oneida Nation of the Thames, grew up off-reserve and currently lives in Kitchener, Ontario. Alanah is an illustrator, painter and muralist, and organizes local Indigenous Art Markets through @IAmKitchener on Instagram. She received an Honours BA in Sociology from Wilfrid Laurier University, and had dreams of attending law school or pursuing a Masters degree in the years following graduation. However, life took a turn when she decided to pursue art as a hobby in 2019; she quickly developed a love for creating and felt that she could pursue art part-time. Illustrating and painting soon became her life work, and through this she has been able to connect with other Indigenous creators, participate in community, and express culture, love and connection through her art.

Founding Supporters

Thanks to the Hodgson Family Foundation for supporting the Story as Knowledge: *Experiences of Early Leaving & Persistence from Indigenous Post-Secondary Students* report.

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Preface

A Note to Participants

First and foremost, we would like to give a huge thank-you to all the participants for their contribution to this research project. Your stories hold value, and we want to honour your knowledge and wisdom. We hope that by sharing your experience with us, you felt heard and validated. We heard your words.

Your participation has started an important dialogue about early leaving and persistence in post-secondary education, which will contribute to creating a better educational landscape for Indigenous students.

Thank you/Chi-miigwetch!

Self-Location Statements

Using an Indigenous methodology in research requires a reciprocal and mutual relationship between participant and researcher. This means that in asking our participants to share their stories in this report, we at Indspire would like to offer our own experiences in return. Below, you can find self-location statements from each of the researchers who worked on this project, as a way of situating our own knowledge within the context of this report.

Jaiden Herkimer

I am Anishinaabe and a member of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. I live within the bounds of the Between the Lakes Treaty (No. 3). In my education and career, my goal has always been to help people. My knowledge comes not only from my education, but also from my family and experiences. As someone who recently graduated from post-secondary, I find I can relate to many of the topics brought up by participants in this project. Research, to me, is about creating awareness and understanding of current issues in order to improve lives and make change. This means giving back the power to those who have lived experience and first-hand knowledge. I am grateful to be a part of a project which centres these values and hope this report contributes to a positive shift in post-secondary education for Indigenous students.

Karsyn Summers

Boozhoo! My name is Karsyn Summers, and I am Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee from Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, located along Deshkan Ziibiing (Antler River). As a recent post-secondary graduate, I fuel my work with the need to amplify Indigenous student and community voices. Research, through an Indigenous lens, has created many opportunities to uphold traditional knowledge and individuals' lived experiences. To me, research is a powerful tool to create space for those who are underrepresented, and ultimately take those next steps toward community-led change. Taking part in the early leavers project has given myself and others the ability to lead important conversations, changing the landscape on Indigenous education.

Introduction

Early leaving is a phenomenon that is not discussed often, despite it being a common reality that post-secondary students face. The first-year early leaving rate in Canada is 6.6% for university students and 15.4% for college students (Childs et al., 2017). However, for Indigenous students, these rates increase by 5 to 7% and result in lower graduation rates than non-Indigenous students (Childs et al., 2017). As a follow-up to the report *"Holding Our Ground: Indigenous Student Post-Secondary Persistence & Early Leaving*" (Herkimer, 2021), this study aims to tell the stories of Indigenous post-secondary students who have experiences with early leaving and persistence.

In the original literature review, Indspire investigated why Indigenous students are more likely to leave post-secondary education (PSE) early and face additional barriers to graduation, in comparison to non-Indigenous students. The report identifies three complex categories of factors which tend to most affect Indigenous early leavers in PSE: systemic, socio-cultural, and individual. Ultimately, it was concluded that early leaving should be viewed with a holistic perspective, as it is often the result of a student facing multiple barriers and challenges at once. In other words, persistence is not determined by one isolated experience, but rather is caused by a combination and accumulation of many factors.

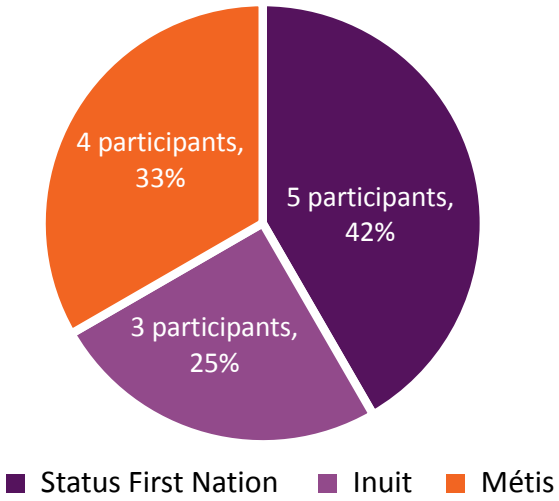
In this study, we asked, "What are the stories and experiences of Indigenous students who go through some type of post-secondary early leaving or struggle with persistence?" The goal was to provide a platform for students whose voices are not always heard so that they could speak their truth. Additionally, this report aims to paint a more complete and positive picture of early leaving and destigmatize alternate educational paths which differ from traditional routes to graduation.

The Research Process

Participants

Students from Indspire's *Building Brighter Futures (BBF)* program were recruited to participate in this research project.[1] In total, 12 participants were chosen to participate in the study. Of those, five identified as status First Nation, four identified as Métis, and three identified as Inuit (refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1. Indigenous Identity



There are many types of experiences that a student may encounter in regard to early leaving and persistence. As such, participants were organized into four different persistence categories related to experiences and retention:

1) **Early leavers** –students who left school before the completion of their programs

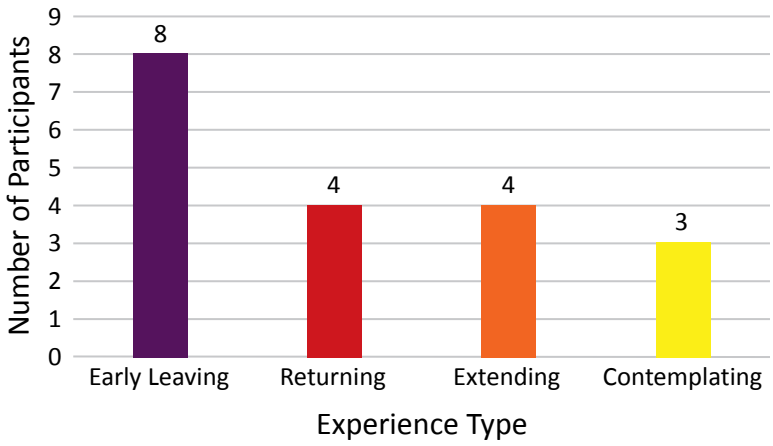
2) **Returners** – students who left school early, but later returned to school (regardless of whether it was the same or a different program)

3) **Extenders** – students who prolonged the length of their program (e.g., did part-time instead of full-time studies)

4) **Contemplators** – students who thought about leaving early or were very close to leaving early, but stayed in school

However, it should be noted that four participants had knowledge of more than one of these experiences. In total, eight participants had experiences of early leaving, three of returning, four of extending, and three of contemplating (refer to Figure 2).

Figure 2. Participant Experiences with Early Leaving and Persistence



[1] Participants were given the option to be anonymous, use an alias, or use their real names

Methods & Methodology

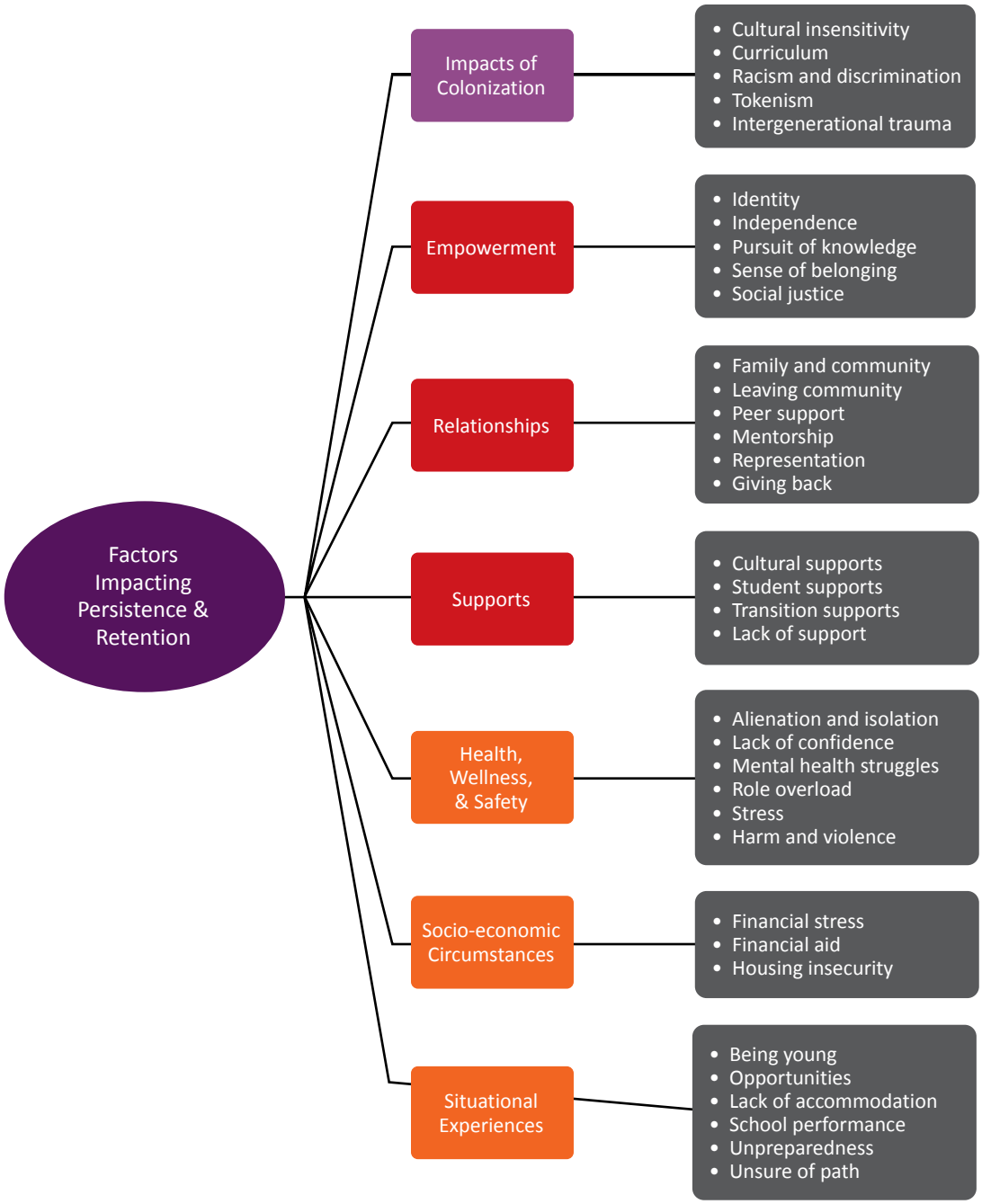
This study took a qualitative and an Indigenous methodological approach. In accordance with Kovach (2010), story was used as the method to gather knowledge. As such, the research question was kept open and broad, so as not to structure the process too rigidly. Those who wished to receive tobacco were sent some before data collection in order to start the research process in a good way. Participants were also able to review this report before publication and make any changes they wished.

Participants were given the option to take part in either a semi-structured interview, a focus group, or both. In the end, eight interviews and three focus groups were conducted. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed using an online transcription software. The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were analyzed using NVivo. Themes and sub-themes were coded based on what participants experienced and discussed most frequently.

Results

Seven main themes, with sub-themes, emerged from the analysis: (1) Impacts of Colonization; (2) Empowerment; (3) Relationships; (4) Supports; (5) Health, Wellness, & Safety; (6) Socio-economic Circumstances; and (7) Situational Experiences (refer to Figure 3).

Figure 3. Themes and Sub-Themes



[2] See appendix for direct quotes from participants

Impacts of Colonization

Cultural insensitivity was experienced by six of the participants at PSE, and in all four persistence categories. From the discussions, it appears that a lot of ignorance and misinformation about Indigenous people still persists on campuses. One contemplator[2] stated that they wished more people were up-front about the often-limited reality of their knowledge, so that they can then learn, rather than pretending to know things of which they are unaware.

Four participants voiced concerns and thoughts regarding curriculum. Of those four, there was experience with all persistence categories. Jesse explained that at PSE, there was an attempt to Indigenize curriculum without input from Indigenous peoples. Other participants talked about having no Indigenous course options – and if options were available, the curriculum often portrayed Indigenous peoples in an inaccurate or negative way. Colin, who attended a First Nations post-secondary institution, found the curriculum to be very informative, as it was grounded in Indigenous teachings.

Seven of the twelve participants reported experiences with racism and discrimination at post-secondary institutions (PSIs). This also included all four persistence categories. Participants spoke of being shut down in the classroom and enduring stereotypes and microaggressions. One early leaver experienced misogynistic comments from post-secondary staff. The most pervasive stereotypes participants discussed were that Indigenous students get their schooling for free and do not pay taxes.

Tokenism was an issue four participants experienced during PSE. This was true for early leavers, returners, and contemplators, but not extenders. Participants felt more like they were being used in promotional materials for the diversity of their institution rather than a valued part of the community. They were often looked at to be the experts on Indigenous topics, leaving them singled out and vulnerable.

Five participants spoke of intergenerational trauma across all four persistence categories. This was a result of colonization, residential schools, Inuit identification tags, and family relocations. Amie spoke of a separation from their family because of these historical and present-day issues. One early leaver explained that the impacts of colonization trickle down through generations and thus impact student success.

[2] See appendix for direct quotes from participants

Empowerment

Six participants, representing all four persistence categories, most of whom were early leavers, spoke of their Indigenous identity while pursuing PSE. An extender discussed how they felt more open about their Indigenous identity while at school. On the other hand, one early leaver stated that they had to examine and reflect on how they fit into the post-secondary system as a Cree scholar. They questioned if they should even be in academia. Hilary, who experienced contemplating early leaving and returning, noted that when you initially apply for school, most institutions will ask if you are Indigenous. Although identity can be empowering, students should not be required to express their Indigeneity on an application in order to access resources, if they do not feel comfortable doing so. A reason for not wanting to identify may be because of racism. Hilary suggested that institutions should circulate Indigenous resources to all students in case there are Indigenous students who do not want to openly identify. Hilary also noted that not only is Indigeneity important to identity, but so is the intersectionality of gender and sexuality.

Independence was a theme that four participants spoke of. However, this was true only for early leavers, returners, and contemplators, not extenders. Crysta, who returned to school, explained that being in PSE gave them independence. Once they were not a student anymore, they no longer had their scholarship. This meant they had to rely on their family for finances.

Three participants discussed a pursuit of knowledge in their education journey. This was true for all persistence categories except extenders. Colin described their initial motivation for attending PSE as wanting to better understand other people and themself. Despite early leaving, they felt they had achieved that goal. Similarly, Crysta wanted to pursue PSE to learn, experience more, and be surrounded by different perspectives. Hilary stated that they were happy to finally be learning about Indigenous peoples in their classes while in PSE, as their previous education did not address this subject.

Having a sense of belonging and fitting in can be empowering. Two participants spoke on this topic. Together, they had experienced early leaving, contemplating, and extending. Colin felt like they were a part of something bigger when going to post-secondary institutions, especially because of the supporting staff and their cohort of peers. One extender mentioned that struggling with imposter syndrome made them feel like they did not belong, but that self-confidence helped combat those feelings.

Finally, four participants brought up the topic of social justice, in all four persistence categories. One participant, who had extended their program, said that by sharing their story through this project, they wanted to empower Indigenous women and give them strength. Alternatively, Kerrie said that what pushed them to keep going and get their PhD was social justice. Specifically, writing their dissertation and telling the story of their grandmother was a way to get justice for the racism their family endured and the pains of colonialism. Kerrie reminded us that there is still a lot of work to be done, but steps can be taken to right the wrongs of the past. Hilary entered the field of social work in order to promote advocacy for Indigenization and decolonization. Another participant wanted to become a community-based researcher so that Indigenous people no longer had to be the subject of white researchers.

Relationships

Most participants indicated that relationships were very important to them and that they had different kinds of relationships at post-secondary institutions. While participants met many supportive people, they also had interactions with unsupportive and ignorant people. Participants referenced their relationships with peers, faculty, family, and community members.

Nine participants, of all persistence categories, spoke of family and community. Often, family was the reason participants chose to start and stay in PSE. For example, one extender decided to go to school so they could better provide for their son. Family responsibilities could be another reason that a student might decide to leave school early. Specifically, Colin stated that one benefit of leaving early was that they were able to spend more time with family. Additionally, some participants wanted to pursue PSE so they could better serve community needs.

Seven participants, of all persistence categories, talked about the difficulty of leaving home and community. For many students, leaving home means leaving their family or children, and experiencing the culture shock of a new environment. This can make the transition into PSE even more difficult. One extender noted that leaving home often means leaving behind your support system. Some participants agreed it would be beneficial for students to have the option of studying and attending PSE in their own community.

Two types of relationships that six participants, of all persistence categories, discussed was peer support and mentorship. Kerrie, for example, explained how mentorship gets students through the difficult times in their education journey. Students also found support in their cohorts of peers, especially with other Indigenous students.

Eight participants, of all persistence categories, discussed Indigenous representation at PSIs. Unfortunately, many participants felt there was not enough representation in both the students and faculty. However, when there was representation, it had a positive impact on students.

Finally, seven participants, of all persistence categories, expressed the importance of giving back and helping people. For some, this was the reason they pursued PSE in the first place. Giving back informed their academic, career, and personal decisions.

Supports

Participants talked about different types of support that helped them while they attended PSE. Seven participants, of all persistence categories, discussed cultural supports as being beneficial. Colin explained how their institution engaged in ceremony and stated that it was very healing. Cultural supports can also include having Elders on campus and Indigenous resource centres. Eleven participants, of all persistence categories, spoke of general student supports that everyone can access. This included resources such as tutoring, counselling, peer academic support, and academic advisors. Finally, two students discussed transition supports for students. These students had experiences of early leaving, returning, and contemplating. Transition supports can be for students coming out of high school and into PSE, or for students entering graduate studies.

Seven participants, of all persistence categories, stated that there were not enough supports available to students. Specifically, cultural and emotional supports seemed to be lacking. This included opportunities for healing and counselling. There was also an issue with the accessibility of supports and students feeling hesitant to utilize resources. Amie recalled feeling intimated when accessing supports. Additionally, one contemplator noted that some supports for Indigenous students felt performative in nature, and thus there was a false notion of supports being available. Similarly, participants spoke of a lack of communication from the institution to students about supports that were available. This resulted in students not knowing what supports they could access or where to access them.

Health, Wellness, & Safety

Words such as alienation, isolation, and invisibility were quite common in the interviews and focus groups, with almost half of the participants, from all four persistence categories, speaking on the topic. Kerrie said they experienced isolation early in their education and it is part of the reason why they initially left school early. Participants stated that being the only First Nations, Métis, or Inuit student in their cohort, being the only queer student, being the only student with children, being the only student entering directly into year two of a program, or just being different from those around them, made them feel isolated. The size of the institution can also impact feelings of isolation. Jesse, who left school early, explained that because the institution they attended was quite large and prestigious, it was difficult to relate to other students – especially those who were non-Indigenous. Another early leaver stated that because they attended a small satellite campus, it could be very isolating.

Challenges with self-esteem and confidence were discussed by five participants in two of the focus group sessions and were relevant to all four persistence categories. Feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, shame, having a lack of self-respect, second-guessing oneself, and not feeling good enough or smart enough were discussed. Hilary was told that they would never amount to anything because they were Indigenous, which impacted how confident they felt in their abilities to succeed in school. Amie, who extended their program, said they try to remind themselves of all the accomplishments and hurdles they have overcome in order to combat a lack of confidence.

There were multiple instance of students leaving early, extending, or taking a leave of absence due to mental health reasons. This was true for all four persistence categories. Five participants noted that they struggled with anxiety, depression, grief, burnout, and addiction. Being overwhelmed and feeling pressure were common, as students were often overworked while at post-secondary institutions. Colin, for example, left school early, partly to do some healing work and take care of their mental health. This included Indigenous ways of healing. While one extender noted that having challenges can be good, they stated that school can also take a mental toll on a person. In terms of supports, discussions indicated that counselling services on campuses are often severely understaffed, and thus it was hard for students to access resources. Ultimately, many participants took time away from school to step back and figure out things. An extender explained that there should be no shame in doing what is best for your mental health.

Eight participants of all four persistence categories spoke of a role overload while pursuing PSE. This means that a person's responsibilities, commitments, and demands overlap and create pressure or the feeling of being "spread too thin" (Bonnycastle & Prentice, 2011). Participants were overwhelmed by their roles of being students while simultaneously living as parents, single parents, spouses, employees, and caretakers. Oftentimes, what leads to feeling overwhelmed is the lack of accommodations, supports, and understanding for students who juggle multiple roles at once.

Stress was a very common topic, as six participants stated they experienced stress while at PSIs. This was true for all persistence categories. One early leaver said that stress affected not only themselves, but other people in their lives.

Two participants experienced harm and violence during PSE. Together, the students had knowledge of all four persistence categories. One participant was raped by their professor, who then tried to have the participant kicked out of school. The professor also exhibited this pattern of sexual abuse with other Indigenous students. The participant did not speak out about what had occurred and stayed silent out of fear that no one would believe them. Eventually the professor was told they could either resign or be fired from the institution. However, stories like this are not uncommon for Indigenous women, which was validated by the participant. This participant was extremely brave and courageous in telling their story. The issues of gender-based violence and Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S) is an ongoing issue in Canada. Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people are much more likely to be the subjects of violence than non-Indigenous women (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019). School is a place where students should feel safe and secure. Students should not be afraid that faculty and staff will take advantage of the power differential. Ultimately, this participant felt they needed to speak up so that they could help Indigenous women and create awareness about violence in academic spaces.

Socio-Economic Circumstances

Financial stress was the only theme that all twelve participants, of all persistence categories, touched upon. This included tuition, costs for school supplies and housing, and travel costs back home if the student studied far from their community. While some participants were able to secure post-secondary funding from their bands or nations, the majority did not have support from them. Ten students, of all early leaving types, spoke of other forms of financial aid. Many participants were living off student loans, grants, and working in order to pay for school. All participants had also received scholarships and bursaries from Indspire. As a result of financial stress, five participants, of all early leaving types, also experienced housing insecurity.

Situational Experiences

There were specific situational experiences which impacted persistence for students. For instance, four participants, who were early leavers, returners, and contemplators, spoke of being too young when they first entered PSE. They felt they were too immature and naïve and should have waited longer before attending PSIs. In fact, Marty mentioned that they study better as a mature student.

Additionally, three participants, of all persistence categories, explained that they had better opportunities outside of school. This mostly meant work and job opportunities. Thus, the incentive to go to school was smaller, as they had found a career path outside of PSE. There is a need to destigmatize this type of journey, as PSE is not always needed to achieve success and it still requires effort, commitment, and dedication.

Next, participants explained that there was a lack of accommodation and flexibility from their institutions. In total, three participants, of all persistence categories, said there was a lack of accommodation for students who were parents, for students who took longer to complete their programs, and for students who had family emergencies or commitments. Ultimately, this is what makes already difficult situations even harder for students to handle.

Eight participants, of all persistence categories, were worried about their school performance while at PSE. Concerns around grades, GPA, and failing classes are what led to early leaving in many cases. Participants explained that the expectations, pressure, and demands of PSE were often what negatively affected their marks. For example, students were frequently required to take many courses during a single semester which resulted in course overload. Meeting these expectations became overwhelming for many participants.

Seven participants of all four persistence categories spoke of unpreparedness. Amie noted that her expectations of PSE were different from reality. It also meant some participants were not feeling prepared for the transition from high school to PSE or did not have the proper course requirements for PSE.

Finally, six participants, of all four persistence categories, said they were unsure of their path while in PSE. This could mean they switched programs at some point or were unsure of what they were passionate about. Some participants wondered if PSE was a right fit for them, while others had to find their way before settling on a career path.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that early leaving and persistence are determined by a balance between motivators to leave and motivators to stay. Ultimately, it is a very complex phenomenon. Findings suggest that Indigenous students start PSE at a disadvantage because of a history of colonization (as seen within the *Impacts of Colonization* theme). Students are more likely to persist if they feel empowered (as seen within the *Empowerment* theme), have connections and relationships with others (as seen within the *Relationships* theme), and are offered and access supports and resources (as seen within the *Supports* theme). However, they are less likely to persist if their health and safety are compromised (as seen within the *Health, Wellness and Safety* theme), if they struggle with finances and housing security (as seen within the *Socio-Economic Circumstances* theme), and if specific situations in their life are occurring (as seen within the *Situational Experiences* theme). Additionally, all themes and most sub-themes had been experienced by all four persistence categories, which shows how common these experiences are for Indigenous students, regardless of their individual experience with persistence.

When an Indigenous student first enters PSE, there are factors that are predisposing them to leave early. As stated by Cowan (2020), students who had a parent attend residential school are more likely to have difficulties in school as a result of intergenerational trauma. This is something that was validated in the interviews and focus groups. Participants said that when campuses foster a culturally insensitive environment, it becomes an unsafe space for them. Inaccurate and ignorant curriculum, racism and discrimination, and tokenism contribute to the creation of that type of environment. All these factors, stemming from colonization, push Indigenous students to leave school early. Although there is nothing to be done about the past, it is up to PSIs to correct the ways they are perpetuating colonist attitudes and behaviours.

Once an Indigenous student enters PSE, they may be motivated to stay if they feel empowered. Indigenous students can feel empowered through multiple factors. For instance, it has been suggested that having a strong sense of Indigenous identity can positively impact persistence (Herkimer, 2021). We saw this reflected in the participants of this study. The results also indicate that a strong sense of identity may be difficult to achieve in an institutional environment where there is a history of excluding Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Other ways to empower students to stay in PSE, that this study uncovered, is through the facilitation of independence and a sense of belonging. It was found that they may also stay because of what they are learning in their pursuit of knowledge and social justice, which is why it is so important that curriculum is historically accurate and portrays modern-day Indigenous people correctly. This is consistent with the TRC (2015) recommendation to develop culturally appropriate curricula. Secondly, Indigenous students may feel motivated to stay in PSE if they have community and relationships at school. This is because relationships foster a sense of connectedness (Herkimer, 2021). Participants in the study found comfort in knowing there were people to support them at school, especially when they had to leave their home community to attend PSE. There is a clear need for more Indigenous representation on campuses, as students might find it easier to create relationships with others who have similar

lived experiences. Another part of these relationships, for Indigenous students, is reciprocity; we found many participants wanted to give back to people and community. Finally, they may be more motivated to stay in PSE if there are supports and resources available to them. This is because when things get difficult, they require ways to cope with stress and the demands of academics. The key is to make sure supports are easily accessible to students. Therefore, if Indigenous students are empowered, have relationships, and supports, they will be much more likely to stay in PSE.

On the other hand, once a student enters PSE, there are also motivators to leave. Many participants had struggles with health, wellness, and safety during their post-secondary studies. These struggles included feelings of alienation and isolation, having a lack of confidence, mental health challenges, stress, being overwhelmed, and gender-based violence. From these discussions, it is clear that more effort needs to be put towards Indigenous student wellness in PSIs, as it may help with increasing retention rates and creating better campus environments (Herkimer, 2021). It also highlights how it is critical that students have access to mental health resources on campus, as these findings suggest it is not uncommon for students to experience these feelings and situations. Additionally, not having financial or housing security may motivate a student to leave PSE. This speaks to the need for more financial aid for Indigenous students, as has been stated by previous Indspire reports (D'Antimo, 2021; Indspire, 2020). Finally, a motivator to leave PSE can also be the situational circumstances a student is experiencing. While some of these experiences are out of anyone's control, such as a student being too young and having better opportunities outside of school, others can be effectively remedied. For instance, institutions could provide more accommodations and flexibility for students and offer more tutoring to students who are worried about their grades. Ultimately, there are things that can be done, both within individual institutions and across PSI culture as a whole, to mitigate the influence of these motivators to leave school early.

Recommendations & Advice

During this project, participants had the opportunity to express any recommendations or advice they would give to institutions, other Indigenous students, and the public. We have compiled their suggestions into a list, which we hope will be used to better support Indigenous students in the future:

For Institutions

1) Create study-skill sessions with a culturally grounded framework (e.g., a writing group for Indigenous students).
2) Make legal and cultural agreements with local First Nations and Indigenous groups (e.g., in research and cultural diversity endeavors).
3) Invest more in campus mental health resources.
4) Have an Elder on campus who can support Indigenous students.
5) Provide Indigenous healing and supports from Indigenous professionals.
6) Provide culturally informed mental health supports (e.g., counsellors trained in Indigenous ways of knowing and being).
7) Be open to Indigenization and decolonization (both school-wide and within departments and faculties).
8) Don't expect Indigenous students/professors/faculty to educate everyone on Indigenous topics or privilege (it is not their responsibility).
9) Create support systems for Indigenous students (e.g., talking circles).
10) Create Indigenous peer networks.
11) Create more Indigenous professor positions.
12) Indigenize the curriculum.
13) Implement Indigenous-led cultural safety training for staff/faculty.
14) Create courses that are restricted to Indigenous students only.
15) Create a mandatory Indigenous 101 course that provides the campus population with a base-level knowledge on Indigenous issues and topics.
16) Create a faculty-specific Indigenous body or representative position.

17) Allow for more flexibility and accommodation (e.g., for students who have children, etc.).

18) Host Indigenous networking conferences and platforms.

19) Put accountability protocols in place (e.g., who is responsible when a student experiences racism on campus?).

20) Appoint an Indigenous support person who checks in with the Indigenous students on campus.

21) Provide a stipend or allowance to students for joining a student club or initiative.

22) Create an Indigenous mentorship or peer mentorship program.

23) Provide more cultural resources for those who are researching or reconnecting to their Indigeneity.

24) Transition to referring to degrees not by how many years they are "supposed" to take, but instead by the number of courses required to complete the degree.

For Other Indigenous Students

1) Take advantage of the resources that are available to you and don't be afraid to ask for help (e.g., counselling, academic assistance, financial aid, Indigenous student centre on campus).

2) Create a support network for yourself and make time for your family, community, and peers.

3) Know you can always go back to PSE if you choose to leave early.

4) Don't rush into PSE; take your time figuring things out, talk to people if you are unsure, and put thought into choosing the educational path that is right for you.

5) Don't be so hard on yourself; practice kindness to yourself, give yourself some breathing space, take care of your mental health, and remember you don't have to be perfect.

6) Remember that mental and physical health come first.

7) Remember that fear and fear of failure is normal.

8) Don't feel ashamed or guilty for leaving early; do what you need to do.

9) Remember that getting a degree does not guarantee success; you need to pursue what success means to you.

10) Celebrate your resiliency!

For the Public

1) Understand that early leaving is complex and Indigenous students are complex:
    - Early leaving is typically not caused by just a single reason
    - Early leaving is not caused by a lack of intelligence

2) Do your research on Indigenous people, so you don't perpetuate stereotypes.

3) Understand your privilege.

4) Understand that Indigenous students do have to pay tuition and educational fees.
    - Not everyone has support from their band or nation

5) Realize that early leaving is common and shouldn't have a negative connotation.

6) Understand that Indigenous students have extra emotional and psychological burdens (e.g., having to deal with racism and intergenerational trauma).

7) Know that Indigenous students often pursue education not just for themselves, but for their community and for others.

8) Realize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to education.

9) Understand that schooling is different than it was in previous decades and times have changed.
    - Education is more competitive, takes longer, and costs more money today

Limitations & Future Directions

While the results of this study provide an in-depth look at Indigenous persistence and early leaving, there are some limitations that should be noted. First, there was an uneven number of the types of early leaving experiences (early leaving, returning, contemplating, and extending). As such, we cannot definitively say that one theme was more applicable to one type of early leaving experience than another. Additionally, because our interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually, our capacity to truly connect with participants was limited. This may have affected how much they wanted to share with us, considering it is such a sensitive topic.

For future research, exploration should focus on how to dismantle and stop the spread of misinformation and stereotypes about Indigenous students and early leaving. Many of the issues discussed in this paper could be mitigated by offering more supports to Indigenous students. Researchers should investigate the academic, emotional, and cultural supports that are currently available at post-secondary institutions across Canada, in an attempt to find ways to improve on existing resources and create new ones. Finally, the reasons why students are hesitant to access supports should be explored, as many participants indicated they were aware of the resources on campus but were reluctant to utilize them.

Conclusion

Students who struggle with persistence do not often have their voices heard. However, this report is a reflection on their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. The discussions with participants resulted in the creation of seven themes which centre their experiences. It was concluded that there are motivators to leave and motivators to stay in PSE, which make early leaving more or less likely. These results will be beneficial in better understanding the entire Indigenous student experience instead of focusing solely on students who graduate. This report will also be helpful as a guide to increasing Indigenous post-secondary student retention rates. The participants in this study showed great perseverance and strength. Some hoped to go back to school at some point and others were excited to continue their career journey. No matter the path, participants made it their own. They did what was best for them, their families, and communities. That, in and of itself, is something to be proud of and admire.

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Appendix

Quotes

Alienation and Isolation

. . . when you're entering a program in the second year. . . It's a little bit alienating as the new student.

– Crysta; early leaver, returner

Cultural Insensitivity

The, you know, people not really understanding the extent of colonization, the whole point of colonization, oppression, everything that has happened to Indigenous people and still continues to happen to Indigenous people. And they just, you know, think that this is normal.

– Hilary; contemplator, early leaver, returner

I personally believe that it's worse to pretend, then to just be culturally insensitive, at least I found, because then at least with one, you know what you're dealing with, whereas with the other, it's just, "hey, we care about you," and walk the other way.

– Anonymous; contemplator

Curriculum

. . .there was an attempt, I will call it, to indigenize their curriculum, which is how they voiced it. And then I would find out later that, you know, all the staff had met to talk about how they were doing without any Indigenous people in the room and evaluate their own progress. And I had no problem explaining to them that is exactly how residential schools came about. It was a bunch of white people trying to fix the Indian problem. And they did not appreciate that. And that was part of the reason I left.

– Jesse; early leaver

Family and Community

. . . my children. . . I realized really quick that I needed to have an education to provide for them how I wanted to. . . I want to give them a good life. And in order to do that, I had to get an education. . . I also wanted to show them that with hard work and dedication, your dreams can come true.

– Hilary; contemplator, early leaver, returner

Harm and Violence

I'm not the only unique one whose gone through this.

– Anonymous; extender

. . .we have to take a stance on stopping people from hurting us. Just because we're Native women. . . I've met so many beautiful Indigenous women over the years. Intelligent, outgoing. And nobody has the right to take that from us. . . I want to empower other Indigenous women, not to tolerate that, to give them the strength to get through it.

– Anonymous; extender

Identity

In terms of identifying as indigenous, lots of subtle racism, passive aggressiveness, a lot of people making sort of casual jokes. . . microaggressions.

– Anonymous; contemplator

I'm trying to show the kids that . . . you can still have your Indigeneity and go to post-secondary even though it's in a western lens.

– Hilary; contemplator, early leaver, returner

Independence

Money. . . it empowers you. . . you don't want to have to live under other people's rules. . . my biggest motivator was wanting to be totally independent.

– Marty; early leaver, returner

Intergenerational Trauma

There's an emotional burden that Indigenous students carry and maybe because of that emotional burden, because of our history, communities, institutions, and faculty and everybody that work is involved, we need to work at supporting Indigenous students more.

– Anonymous; early leaver

Lack of Accommodation

If I bring my kids into a university. . . I don't think people should bat an eyelash at it, I think it should be just normal, you know what I mean? Because they're our next generation. We need to educate them and show them the way because if we don't, who is going to?

– Hilary; contemplator, early leaver, returner

Lack of Confidence

I had people tell me that I wasn't ever going to amount anything because I am Indigenous. . .
That kind of sunk in and that kind of stayed with me when I failed those courses.
And I just kind of was like, well, maybe their right, you know what I mean?
Maybe I'm not ready for university.

– Hilary; contemplator, early leaver, returner

One thing that I have noticed, like even in my working professional life, post-university, like a lot of people that have, like a successful career path are not necessarily the most competent people, but they're the most confident people. And one thing that I am trying to do is just like, you know, fake it until you make it.

– Amie; extender

Leaving Community

I think a lot of people had barriers to even get to this program. . .
because they were from out of town.

– Tiffany; early leaver

I'm 12 hours away from my own community. And I feel that I probably would have maybe done better if I studied in my own community.

– Tiffany; early leaver

Mental Health

. . .if you, like, have to work in addition to going to school, that's time that you can't spend studying, and then you're exhausted physically, you're not taking care of yourself, and it just kind of all, like, spirals together. . . the mental health piece of it, like, was just such a wild ride. It was like a really difficult time. . . it's actually so like, nice to hear that there's other people that have had the same experiences and it's not just, like, me.

– Anonymous; extender

…just be kind to yourself…if it takes a bit more time, that's fine…
you have to do what you need to do.

– Anonymous; extender

Mentorship

Mentoring was vigorous and what got me through it all was knowing these wonderful Indigenous scholars on a personal level, that really made it more possible and made me see how possible it is.

– **Kerrie; contemplator, returner, extender, early leaver**

Peer Support

I made a group of friends within the program. So, we kind of use each other for support.

– **Tiffany; early leaver**

Pursuit of Knowledge

. . . that was my initial motivation was, you know, I want just to be able to help and understand not only other people, but myself. . . Which I do feel like I got out of that experience.

– **Colin; early leaver**

Racism and Discrimination

They've never met an Indigenous person. They're just basing their knowledge on stereotypes and they're very convinced of the stereotypes.

– **Kerrie; contemplator, returner, extender, early leaver**

Representation

I feel like there's a real need for more Indigenous faculty.

– **Kerrie; contemplator, returner, extender, early leaver**

Role Overload

I'm a mom. And then I was a girlfriend. And then I was working full time job on top of that.

– **Tiffany; early leaver**

Sense of Belonging

I just felt like I was part of something when I was going to school.

– **Colin; early leaver**

Social Justice

I'm here in this field so that I can change it.

– Hilary; contemplator, early leaver, returner

…a lot of times when Indigenous people are in post-secondary, we're not just doing it for ourselves, we're not doing it for individual greatness or some financial reasons, we're doing it for our communities and our families and social justice and for a better world for everybody.

– Kerrie; contemplator, returner, extender, early leaver

Stress

. . . that kind of stress. . . from the program and from the lack of support and the lack of institutional support or understanding, you know, affects everything in our lives and so it makes it extremely difficult.

– Anonymous; early leaver

Tokenism

I got singled out a lot in terms of answering questions about any kind of Native question in the classroom, whether that was literature or current events or historical kind of perspectives. So that's not unusual, I guess, as an Indigenous person.

– Anonymous; early leaver

Unpreparedness

I definitely found, like, when I went to post-secondary, like, it was so much harder than high school. . . it took a big learning curve. . . it was such a huge jump academically.

– Amie; extender

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