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STUDENT VOICES

Student Voices: What Students Say They Do to Be Successful

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Abstract

Since a post-secondary education tends to lead to improved life chances and opportunities, understanding the ways in which students at all levels of university are able to succeed is important not only for individuals, but also for the nation. In spite of the success of targeted first-year retention programs, most universities in Ontario have much lower degree completion rates. Few existing studies of university persistence and success focus on what students themselves say about how and why they are successful at persisting to graduation. This pilot study compared the strategies for success at university used by self-identified visible minority students and those who did not self-identify as a visible minority. The findings demonstrate that further research is needed to better understand how students who face significant barriers are able to successfully persist to fourth year and graduation. Initial findings illustrate the importance of a strong foundation of having good time management, being well-organized, and being motivated to engage in course work. When students embrace these foundational strategies, then more nuanced strategies can be implemented.

Keywords: student success, persistence, minority, comparison, barriers, time-management, organization, strategies

Student Voices: What Students Say They Do to Be Successful

Given that research has identified the importance of higher education for future earnings (Ostrovsky & Frenette, 2014), as well as quality of life and life chances (Banerjee & Verma 2012), understanding how to enable “at-risk” students to succeed in higher education (instead of studying only barriers) is important. This research examines the academic and non-academic strategies for success from the perspective of underrepresented university students who have overcome barriers to educational access as identified in existing research (Gunderson, D’Silva & Odo, 2012). This paper draws on a pilot project, conducted at a medium-sized Canadian university located on the rural-urban fringe in a medium-sized city in the Greater Toronto Area, to compare the success strategies and university experiences of students who identify as visible minority to those of students who do not identify as visible minority. The findings from the pilot study formed the foundation for a subsequent project, which is currently underway and is funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grant, to further explore how underrepresented university students in Canada are successful at persisting to graduation. This research will allow for a better understanding, from a student perspective, of the tools and strategies used by students who are successful; this can then inform institutional and instructional strategies for assisting students.

Literature Review

Much research on underrepresented university students has focussed on barriers to access, retention of first generation students, retention from year 1 to year 2, and analyses of institutional retention programs and strategies at specific universities. Most of these focus on one province or individual universities, are small case studies, or examine specific retention programs; only a few analyse the strategies used by students or capture student voices. Research

on the barriers to and the levels of participation in higher education for students of different ethnic, racial and class backgrounds is extensive (Ashton & Esses, 1999). In Canada, much of the research has relied on the rich longitudinal data collected in the Youth in Transition survey (Finnie, Wismer & Mueller, 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 (Childs, Finnie & Mueller, 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 (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Much of that research refers to quantitative data collected in the 1980s and 1990s (Glick & White, 2004; Tseng, 2004). Some researchers utilizing 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 (Baum & Flores, 2011) and point to generational differences between categories of children from immigrant families (Glick & White, 2004), even when researchers controlled for socio-economic background. 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, Rhodes & Milburn, 2009). There is also considerable research about retention and student participation in higher education in Ontario (Finnie et al., 2011; Norrie & Zhao, 2010; Sweet, et al., 2010).

Recent programs 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 (Torenbeek, Jansen & Hofman, 2010). These include mentoring and early integration experience programs (Collier & Fellows, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2012), first-year seminar courses (Miller et al., 2007), participation in learning communities to improve engagement and persistence (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), institutional policies and practices (Calcagno et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2009), institutional structures (Scott et al., 2008; Parkin & Baldwin, 2009), and the influence of faculty interactions with students (Sax, Bryant & Harper, 2005). Other researchers have focused on students who are English language learners to determine how they acculturate to the academic environment (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), and how resilience and self-esteem impacts student experiences and success (Jaret & Reitzes, 2009; Seror, Chen & Gunderson, 2005). In spite of the success of targeted first-year retention programs, most universities in Ontario have much lower degree completion rates. Few studies examine what happens between years 2 and 4 to cause this attrition or which students are most affected. By undertaking a holistic and comparative analysis of the success strategies used by different demographic segments of student groups it is possible to reduce the “othering” that often emerges when examining only “at risk” populations (Seigel, 2005).

Methodology

Volunteers for the project were solicited and were chosen through purposeful selection to seek a balance between first and fourth year students, between visible minority immigrant students and those who did not identify as visible minority immigrant, and in gender; however, more first year students and fewer male students volunteered. In addition, volunteers were sought from all Faculties and disciplines. The research used a concurrent mixed methods approach of questionnaires and interviews, and theoretical frames of analysis, such as critical race theory, resilience theory, post-colonialism and Indigenous paradigms, that challenge the notion that “the social system is open and individual mobility can be attained through hard work” (Sleeter, 1993, p. 160). For instance, 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). In this respect, while some questions asked students to define themselves using set terminology, there were several opportunities for students to explain their answers or provide more detail in their own words.

Demographics

A total of 24 students took a survey delivered using PsychSurvey: 13 first year students and 11 fourth year students, of whom 7 were male students and 17 were female. Participants ranged in age from 17 (n=1) to 25 (n=1), with most aged 18 (n=10) and 21 (n=8). Fifteen of the students were Canadian citizens by birth, four were Canadian citizens by naturalization, 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 addition to the surveys, eight female students were interviewed: four

were in first year and four were in fourth year.¹ Three of the students did both the interview and the survey for a total of 29 individual participants. The focus for this paper will be on the comments provided by the self-identified visible minority students who were interviewed and will be supplemented by relevant findings from the survey.

In the surveys, the students were asked about the importance of their ethnic identity: eleven stated that their ethnic identity was “very important” to them (Table A), while the rest included seven who did not feel it was important to them and six were in between. Even though 17 students placed some importance on their ethnic identity, this sense of belongingness did not seem to be correlated to levels of motivation or satisfaction with their school life. Most of the students (n=18) had always planned to attend university; four decided to attend while in high school or during the summer before enrolling. Two students, however, indicated that they still did not know why were in university. Students were also asked about their experiences of feeling out of place or discriminated against in different locations, including the university campus and classrooms (Table B). While some students indicated that they had experienced feeling out of place, being treated unfairly or discrimination, these experiences did not seem to be correlated to their ability to succeed or their feelings of motivation.

Interviews: Personal Stories

The interviews with eight female students demonstrated that the immigration experience was an important factor in the university experience. The experiences of the four immigrant students are described in detail to capture their rich stories. The non-immigrant students had less diversity in their backgrounds and experiences. Yet, the strategies used by both groups are remarkably similar.

¹ Even though several male students were invited to take part in an interview, none showed up for their allotted time.

Student A is a 19-year old woman who was three months into her first semester at university at the time of the interview. Her family moved back and forth between Canada and Trinidad before settling in Canada for the last 15 years. She has two older siblings who went to college in Canada. Both her parents finished high school; her father attended university in Canada for a while, but did not finish his degree. She has found university challenging after taking a year away from school before enrolling at UOIT. During her year off, she worked while she upgraded her high school English and mathematics grades. She has found the university workload to be heavy. Although she met people at Orientation, she has not socialized with any of them and only comes to campus to attend classes. She commutes 20 to 25 minutes to Oshawa from her family home in Scarborough four days a week and works about three days per week. During the Christmas and New Year's holiday season, she was working about 18 to 27 hours per week. She says that she has good time management skills and knows that "one lazy day would cause everything to come crashing down." She also plans her work schedule so that she does not have to work the evening before an 8 a.m. class. In terms of how her family supports her, she says that her sister provides the most support. Her parents are divorced and she lives with her father (who pays for her tuition), grandmother and sister. At home, she cooks dinner and cleans the house. Her mother provides encouragement and is very supportive emotionally. She is more ambivalent when speaking about her father: "with my dad, it is kind of just like he wants to see me do well but he does not necessarily show that he is proud. I know that he supports me, it is just he does not support me as well as others." Her boss, however, was not supportive when she had to reduce her availability in order to attend school. There were few other barriers mentioned by this student, beyond the idea that her friends did not really understand her workload. While her family is Hindu, she feels she is not as well connected or as religious as her family. The only

impact her religion has is related to what she can and cannot eat. At school, she has made friends in her classes and has become part of a study group with three other young women. She does not socialize much with any of her friends or take part in any campus activities because her schedule is so busy. She indicates that she would like to get more involved by volunteering with Orientation because it would allow her to help other new students. Despite being unable to participate in events on campus, she has embraced the experience of being a university student. For example, she said that at first “it was scary. I [would] always want to sit at the back and not be the one that walks up and sits right in front of the teacher; however, it has definitely changed and I love it. I am excited for my next four years here. ... I sit right at the front row.” After three months, she feels that her courses are going well, with grades to this point ranging from the low 90s to the low 70s. The courses with the better grades are the ones that she finds most interesting and engaging. She considered using the learning centre for tutoring, but she could not figure out how it worked and if it would cost anything. When faced with a poor grade after one mid-term, she had to work hard to stay positive and motivated, reminding herself that one poor grade is not the end of the world, and she knew that she had to continue to stay on top of the course readings and assignments. She feels that her high school did not prepare her well for university because, at high school, there was much more hand-holding. High school teachers warned students that this would not happen at university, but not much else was done to prepare the students for the independence needed for life at university.

Student B is an 18-year old young woman in her first semester of university. She is a first generation university student born in Canada from a Filipino background. Her mother is Filipino but was born in Canada, while her father immigrated to Canada from the Philippines at age 11 years. When she first arrived at university she felt confident that she would do well, but was

apprehensive of what might happen when she was under pressure since she knew that some people dropped out during their first year. On the outside, she felt she looked “confident and bubbly,” while on the inside she was anxious about making friends. Before coming to university, she prepared herself by visiting the UOIT campus with friends and familiarizing herself with “everything.” At the start of term, she also attended Orientation, where she met most of her friends, and joined the Facebook group. With these friends, she formed a study group. In addition, she works about 15 hours a week. She manages her time by scheduling work so that it does not conflict with school and so that she has one day a week with no class or work commitments. She also makes sure to do her readings prior to going to class, although she commented that she does not always understand everything she reads. At the time of the interview, she continued to like university and felt confident that she is doing well, although she was struggling with one class. Because she had friends in university before she started, they provided her with advice and she felt that there were no surprises. She tries to follow her friends’ advice to do the readings and homework, and to hand in all assignments on time, no matter how little they are worth, to avoid unnecessarily losing marks; she believes this advice has helped her to be successful. In terms of workload, she felt that the amount of homework and assignments was less than she expected compared to her friends at other universities.

While Student B felt that she was well-prepared for university by her high school because she took a number of social science courses in grade 11 and grade 12, most teachers prepared the students by simply warning: “you’re on your own next year.” Taking the social science courses in high school was helpful because she became familiar with the terminology and concepts discussed in her current courses which helps in her note-taking; these high school classes also helped because she wrote essays that developed her writing skills. She feels that her diligence in

taking notes during class has been important. In addition, she starts studying for mid-terms and tests early and works with her study group in quizzing each other. When she did poorly on one mid-term, she began to make even more detailed notes and began reviewing the material more often. The work paid off since her grade increased from 50% to 65% on the next test. While she was careful about taking notes during class, she did not do the same when reading the course text; however, she did try to link the ideas in the textbook with those mentioned in class. Her other course grades ranged from the low 80s to the low 70s, which she felt was in the normal range since she had been warned not to expect everything to be in the 80s in university. The main academic help she receives is from her friends. While her parents did finish high school, neither completed a post-secondary education. Her mother attended college for a year and a half, but did not complete her program. Her dad started his own business, which failed, then took an online course, and is now starting a new business. Her parents are supportive and allow her to prioritize her school obligations; however, she is the oldest of four children with siblings quite a bit younger than her, including one with Down syndrome and autism, so she is required to help look after them at times. She has not used any of the university's support services, but she expressed interest in seeking help through peer tutoring and volunteering at the Outreach Centre. Her friends are supportive, but she does not often get to see those who did not go to university. Like herself, most of her friends who went to college or university live at home because school is "so expensive." She has four friends living in residence who she visits after her night class before driving home. She only drives to school on the days she has her night class; otherwise, she takes the bus because she can use her bus pass (which was part of the ancillary fees). She considers herself agnostic, although her family does not know (because "I just don't want to give my grandparents a heart attack"), so religion does not impact how she deals with challenges at

university or in life. Similarly, her ethnic background does not impact her schooling or how she deals with challenges. She had minimal involvement in a Filipino-Canadian association while in elementary and high school, but she is no longer involved in any of its activities. She has also not become involved in any on-campus groups or activities because she has been focussed on passing her courses. Her advice to incoming first year students: “It’s not as bad as you think, but just don’t expect everything to be really easy.”

Student C is a 23 year old 4th year student who immigrated by herself to Canada in order to attend university. Her family is from India and she was born in India, but she grew up and attended school in Abu Dhabi. At the time of the interview, she had been in Canada for three years. When she first arrived, she lived with family friends in Whitby for the first two weeks and then moved into the university residence. It was challenging to come by herself to a new country, but she found Canada to be warm and welcoming: even the bus drivers were “all very pleasant.” She felt that everything was explained very well during Orientation so she did not feel lost when classes started. During Orientation, she made several new friends, but some have dropped out or changed programs since then. She was one of only a few enrolled in electrical engineering, but she did not really socialize with any of them because “people in my program, especially electrical, are not exactly sociable.” In first year, she socialized with a lot of international students who were also new to Canada. Most of her friends are from university and she does not have a job. She felt that her first year was “pretty easy because most of it I already learned in my high school.” This meant she was able to help out her friends in first year who were having trouble. However, the courses have gotten more difficult in the upper years. She does not feel completely comfortable at university; she feels that “there’s a lot missing in [my] university life because back in India, my friends ... have a fixed schedule for instance [while] we have such a

scattered schedule. That is one reason I don't even get to see a lot of my friends because when I have class, they don't have class and when they have class, I don't have class." In Canada, the social parts of school are optional and easy to miss, while in India there are no classes when there are cultural festivals so everyone gets to go. Especially for engineering students, the workload is so heavy "that we cannot do anything other than study, study, study. There's no time for any going out to social ... Like I used to go out a lot in my first year, but in 2nd year, 3rd year, I'm barely getting any time to do anything."

Student C faced some health challenges in her first winter in Canada when she always felt cold and only wanted to sleep; she clearly felt depressed in her first year, but she was also diagnosed with diabetes. Because she was ill and all alone, she failed one course and her GPA suffered. As a result, her family followed her to Canada the next year. The family all has permanent resident status. At the time of the interview, she was living with her family and enjoying university much more because she is better able to focus on her studies while her mother looks after her. Her sister helped her to come up with a schedule for managing her time, but she continues to battle a low cumulative GPA. Her family and the friends in her study group help her to persist in school. Her sense of what she should have done in her first year is that she "should have just tried harder." She feels it is easier dealing with problems now that her parents are nearby. For example, her father will pick her up on cold nights so she does not have to rely on the bus. She also tries to get most of her work done while she is at school before going home. She now takes better care of herself by eating well and going to the gym before going home. She used the peer tutoring service for one assignment, which she found helpful. She was a member of Engineers Without Borders and has volunteered for the African Student Society because a friend is the president. Both parents have some post-secondary education and encourage her to get good

grades: “when they get furious, I’ll be like oh I know I have to get much better scores next time.”

Her mother trained as a science teacher and gives her tips on managing her time and how to study. Although her family had some good savings from working in Abu Dhabi, most of that money went to purchasing a house. Her parents have had trouble finding jobs in spite of being well-educated. While she felt that religion was important to her, it had little impact on her success at university. Similarly, she had not joined any Indian cultural groups; the one time she went to a meeting, she did not feel welcome. Instead, she prefers discipline-oriented groups that cut across culture and religion. She commented that some of the barriers she has encountered were related to the way classes are scheduled. In particular, if a course has a cap on enrolment, but it is one that is a prerequisite for future courses, it is frustrating to have to fight to get into it. Similarly, if you fail a course, there are no summer courses offered that allow you to catch up and not fall behind a year. She also commented that classes in the evenings seem to be more difficult because students get tired and fall asleep in class as the term goes on. Even though she is one of two women in electrical engineering, she does not feel disadvantaged; she feels she is treated the same way as all the other students.

Student D’s experiences with education have also been challenging, particularly with regards to the lack of support from her family. Student D is a 21-year old woman in her fourth year of study in health sciences. Her family emigrated from Kenya to the United States and then to Canada. In Canada, they moved from Mississauga to Fort McMurray to Calgary. Her father is from Nigeria and her mother is from Kenya, but they met in India while studying at university – her father studied economics and her mother mathematics. She is the oldest of three children and has two younger brothers. Her parents have struggled with health problems as both have been diagnosed as having AIDS and one brother tried to commit suicide. She chose to come to UOIT

because it was far enough from Mississauga that she could move away from her family to attend school and she chose to stay at UOIT even after her parents and brothers moved to Alberta.

When she started at university, she was on campus during Orientation, but she did not really understand what it was all about. She met people in her first month of school because she was one of “the very, very few black girls” living in residence. For example:

a guy approached me that was also black too and was ‘hey’ ... how are you? And he was like yeah I’m black too and I’m kind of lost and I was like me too! So we became friends and then slowly we started to make friends with more people. Like from our race. That way we didn’t feel so ... alone and weirded out cause ... it’s intimidating trying to go out and try to meet people, but ... when you’re with people that understand your culture then ... it helps make it easier – you’re both going through the same things you can be able to identify with [sic].

When asked if being of the same race or skin colour is the same as having the same culture, she replied:

it’s like some intuition that you can always tell somebody that’s African as compared to let’s say somebody who’s African American. It’s just ... mannerisms, the way they talk, the way ... they approach you and it’s weird cause [when] he approached me, I immediately knew he was African, even before he said a word. And I was African too so we were able to just immediately identify and he had an accent too so it was ... as soon as he started talking to me I was ... okay, phew, I know this person, ... I was able to relate in some way at least.

She went on to explain that most of the black African students at UOIT come from either Nigeria or Ghana. The region of Africa was important: she explained that attitudes changed depending on what region of Africa students came from:

I was born in Kenya ... [people would say] where's Kenya or something like that. But then, ... as soon as you say Nigerian, it's like OHHH KAYYYY, like, hey, how are you, ... and it's even how they treat [you]. It's friendlier than if you're not.

When she was speaking during the interview, her accent sounded Canadian, but she said that when she spoke with others from Africa, she would speak with a different accent. This code switching was perplexing for some people who, based on her physical appearance, expected her to speak with a certain accent. She said that it was annoying that there was this categorization happening and said that it made it difficult to make friends: "if you ... are not from the same place you know immediately there's this barrier." She is a member of the African Student Association, but she says she is there not for support for herself, but to provide support to new students who may not immediately fit into its "cliques." Because she grew up in Kenya, she identifies more with her mother's Kenyan heritage than her father's Nigerian culture. Because there are fewer Kenyans at UOIT, she sometimes does not feel she fits in since she has a Kenyan accent. In spite of these challenges in first year and being shy, she has made a lot of

really, really good friends. I did not speak with anybody [at first] but definitely with time ... when you make one friend then you make another friend and then you can slowly start to mix up with groups and now it's not just Africans I'm friends with. I'm friends with all types of races so that's definitely better than just being by myself from the beginning.

In spite of the divisions between the different groups of black students, she says it is still much better than in high school where you were expected to only hang out with other black kids and you had to see everyone every day, even if you did not like them. Because her parents had met in India and they were open to other cultures, she grew up feeling multicultural which gave her a different point of view.

By fourth year, Student D is finding university easier because she is able to manage her time better and she understands the system. She currently works 25 hours per week, which she juggles by trying to put all her courses on a couple of days. In spite of this, she often feels lonely on weekends and holidays because her immediate family lives in Calgary, and she is not close with her uncle's family who is more "culture focused" and think that she is too "Americanized." Her parents emotionally support her attendance at university, but with her dad, "it's more of an intimidation type of thing." Her relationship with her mother has improved considerably since coming to university because they listen to each other better now that they do not see each other every day. In addition, one of her high school teachers in Texas still checks up on her to see how things are going. This teacher's efforts means a lot to her: "It's like she didn't have to do any of it and she always went above and beyond just because I think she knew that ... coming into high school when you're an immigrant child it's very scary just because ... my parents were working like crazy [and] I never had that much support ... so she kind of just took me under her wing." Otherwise, her friends provide support and she knows she can count on them for notes if she cannot make it to class and to help if she has a problem. Her advice for new students is to stay focused because it is easy to get sidetracked, especially when your family is not around. Her family's struggles helps her to stay focussed because she remembers everything they have been through which motivates her "to go the extra mile." The support of her best friend from high

school also helps her to keep going through the tough times. Her main academic support is a study group with her friends. The thought of going to a professor scares her, but she will speak with a TA. She has tried the peer tutoring service, but she worried that “if you don’t know what’s going on, I feel like someone else is going to judge you.”

She commented that it is important to give equal attention to all her courses, and not let any of them slide. She failed one course because she did not give enough attention to it. Similarly, she feels it is important to have a balance between fun and studying in her life. In her first semester, she spent all her time studying in the library; then, in second semester, she had too much fun with parties. In the one class she failed, she felt it was partly due to a lack of connection with the professor who she felt was not approachable. She realised that when she has to take another course with that same professor, she will need to remember not to take things personally, to just do the work and get it done. If she does not feel comfortable speaking with him, she will meet with a TA instead or get help from a friend. Finances are a challenge; she relies on Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and does not get monetary support from her family. She also had to figure out for herself where to live, how to get groceries, and so on. She never asks her parents for anything. One barrier was that OSAP takes into consideration parental income so she does not get as much money as she needs. She has held a job every year, but has changed jobs. She started as a lab assistant through the University Works program in first year, but now works in retail at a large shopping mall. She feels that her younger brothers count on her; indeed, she notes that she had to grow up fast as she was the one who had to try to keep the family together when her parents became ill. She does not feel that her Catholic high school prepared her for university. She says she was at her “rebel stage” and that she “hated high school.” She was also discouraged from even thinking she could become a doctor and was

encouraged instead to become a social worker or to enter some other female-dominated caregiving profession, even though “they just assumed that ... you’re going to be those girls that are going to drop out of high school and have kids.” When asked if she made the right choice coming to UOIT over another university, she said she was 100% sure that she would make the same choice again. She feels that UOIT makes it easy to find what she needs and that everyone has been “very, very helpful.” Her final words of advice are to stay focussed and be self-reliant: “you have to be the one to wake yourself up at 6 in the morning to make it to an 8 a.m. class. ... It teaches you responsibility. Prioritizing is very important...”

The four students who did not identify as an immigrant visible minority had some similar feelings and experiences when they started university, particularly regarding being nervous about being away from home, attending large classes and making new friends. Most of these students came from hometowns near Oshawa and, if they lived on campus, tended to go home for the weekends; only one came from a city about four hours away. Only one student had full financial support from her parents; the rest, like the visible minority students, worked to pay or help pay for tuition and living expenses. Among all the students, attending Orientation was identified as important in making friends in first year, many of whom remained friends until fourth year, as was joining clubs or sororities. The one student who did not do these things did not have any friends at the university. One of the main differences between the two groups of students was in the experience of immigration. In particular, the students who were not visible minorities had never lived far from home or been uprooted during their childhoods.

Survey Findings

Although the students who identified as visible minorities, especially those from an immigrant family, overcame challenging barriers to university access and success, the strategies

used by all students were remarkably similar. In addition, in response to a question about their overall satisfaction with their school lives, few from either group indicated that they were very satisfied (Table C). Both first and fourth year students who were not a visible minority indicated, on average, a slightly higher sense of satisfaction than did those who self-identified as a visible minority. However, the person who indicated the lowest level of satisfaction (10/100 on a sliding feeling scale) was a first-year non-minority student, while a fourth-year visible minority student indicated the highest level of satisfaction (92/100). There was no apparent correlation between satisfaction and motivation to succeed at university. Half of the students reported that their high school had adequately prepared them for university, while the other half said that it did not. The higher the (self-reported) high school average, the more likely the students were to say that high school had prepared them well and vice versa (Table D).

Half of the students reported that religion played little to no role in helping them overcome challenges in school or in their lives, while the other half said religion or spirituality had helped them. When the numbers were broken down by age, there were no significant differences. However, more Canadian-born students reported that religion or spirituality did not help them compared to those born outside of Canada (Table E). Religion did not seem to have an impact on satisfaction with school life, ability to cope with problems, or on motivation to succeed at university. Due to the small numbers in this sample, the type of religion identified was not a significant factor.

Place of birth and gender did not have a significant impact on students' ability to cope with challenges at university (Table F). All but one (female) student reported being able to cope well with challenges. This student who reported being unable to cope well was born in Canada, was unmotivated to do well at school, and indicated that her Hindu religion/spirituality helped

her with problems. Interestingly, most students had learned a language in addition to English at home and said that they were very or somewhat motivated to succeed (Table G). All students indicated that their parents emotionally supported them in pursuing their education. Students that participated in extra-curricular or co-curricular activities were more likely to say that they were usually able to cope well with difficult courses, assignments or other challenges (Table H). Concern over finances (such as, paying for tuition, books and living expenses) was significant for eight students, while another eight said that finances were not a problem and five stated that work and school were manageable. Finances seem to have little correlation with level of motivation to succeed at university. Perhaps not surprisingly, the one student who delayed his/her education to earn money was very motivated to succeed.

Most of the students who were interviewed indicated that working with study groups or friends was useful in achieving success in their courses; however, the survey results showed an almost even split between those who preferred to study with friends and those who do not. Students were also asked which university services and supports they found helpful (Table I). By far, most students indicated that one or more professors had been helpful when they had questions, followed by online tools (such as the writing and math resources at NOOL.uoit.ca), the academic advisors in each Faculty, and self-organized peer study groups. Only six students said that they had used the Student Learning Centre programs, such as peer tutoring and writing specialists, and even fewer had used other university centres or associations. When asked what would help them to be successful, students responded (from most to least important): opportunity to speak with peers in classes, a quiet place to think or study, fewer personal problems, encouragement from family and friends, and fewer financial problems. The least important were having fewer hours of paid employment and being enrolled in fewer courses (Table J). A

limitation to the study in the last two factors is that those who are most stressed out working many hours are the least likely to volunteer to take part in a survey or interview.

Discussion and Conclusions

In some ways, there were few surprises in this pilot study. Most strategies for success were similar to those usually promoted by teachers at all levels: study in advance and do not cram, manage your time, organize yourself, ask for help when you need it, talk to your professors and TAs, use the student services that you pay for in your fees, and so on. Whether or not the students were in fact following their own advice is open for debate. Indeed, even some students who stated that high school had prepared them well for university and that it was not as difficult as expected, still struggled with their courses and found that their grades had dropped since high school. The findings do not show family background in terms of religion and ethnicity to have had a significant correlation with students' ability to cope with problems, be motivated and to succeed. All but one student indicated that their families supported them emotionally, if not financially. There seems to be a correlation between students' ability to cope with problems and whether or not they joined a university club or organization. Those who took part in activities beyond school and work seemed to demonstrate better coping strategies.

These findings demonstrate the need for a larger comparative exploration of how students succeed. This pilot study included first-year students who did not yet know if they would be able to persist to graduation nor what they were doing to be successful. Future research will focus on students in fourth year and recent graduates. For university administrators and student services providers, this research is important in better understanding of how students perceive student support programs and which they feel are most useful. For instructors, the importance of students having access to and feeling comfortable with professors, instructors and TAs is clear. Students

must be encouraged to meet with instructors during office hours or after class. For students, knowing what worked for other students like themselves may be helpful in their own efforts to overcome any shyness, insecurities or other challenges. Hearing the personal stories of challenges and strategies may make success at university seem more achievable. The advice from fourth year students echoes what instructors and teachers often tell students – manage your time, be organized, and do the course readings and assignments. These words of advice form the foundations upon which other, more personal, strategies can build.

Tables

Table A. *Sense of ethnic identity*

How important is your ethnic identity (or your sense of belonging) to you?	Number	Percent
Not important at all	4	16.7
2	3	12.5
3	5	20.8
4	1	4.2
Very important	11	45.8
TOTAL	24	100

Table B. *Experiences of discrimination*

In the past 5 years, in which places or situations do you feel that you experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly in Canada?)	Yes	No
On the street	11	12
In a store, bank or restaurant	7	16
At work or when applying for a job or promotion	7	16
When dealing with the police or courts	1	22
When on the UOIT north campus	2	21
When on the UOIT downtown 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
Somewhere else	6	17
Don't know	1	22
Not applicable (I have never experienced discrimination.)	6	17

Table C. *Satisfaction with school life*

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your school life these days?				
	1 st yr visible minority (n=9)	1 st yr Non-visible minority (n=4)	4 th year visible minority (n=5)	4 th year non-visible minority (n=5)
Mean	52.4/100	59.25/100	52/100	66/100
Median	57	68.5	43	76
Min-Max Values	29-86	10-90	30-92	38-82

Table D. *High school preparation*

Did high school prepare you for university?		
Average grade in Gr. 12	Adequately prepared me	Did not prepare me
90% + (A+ average)	3	0
80-89%	7	6
70-79%	2	6
TOTAL	12	12

Table E. *Role of religion and citizenship status*

Status	Yes, religion has helped me	No, religion has not helped me
Canadian by birth	5	10
Canadian by naturalization	2	2
Permanent Resident	5	0
TOTAL	12	12

Table F. *Place of birth and ability to cope*

Where were you born?	When faced with a difficult course, assignment, or other challenge, are you able to cope well?		
	Able to cope well	Sometimes able to cope well	Not able to cope well
Canada	10	4	1
Outside Canada	5	3	0
TOTAL	15	7	1

Table G. *Languages and motivation*

At school, I am:	Yes, I learned a language other than English at home	No, I did not learn a language other than English at home
Very motivated	12	1
Somewhat motivated	6	4
Unmotivated	1	1
TOTAL	19	6

Table H. *Non-academic activities and ability to cope*

When you are faced with a difficult course, assignment, or other challenge, are you able to cope well?	Are you a member of, or have you participated in the activities of, any group or organizations in the past 12 months (e.g., a sports team, a hobby club, a community organization, an ethnic association, etc.)?	
	Yes, participated in group or organizations in the past 12 months	No, did not participate in any group or organizations in the past 12 months
Usually able to cope well	12	3
Sometimes able to cope	4	2
Not able to cope	1	0
TOTAL	17	5

Table I. Success factors at UOIT

At UOIT, what factors have helped you to succeed in your courses or achieve your educational goals?	Yes	No
One or more professors have encouraged and helped me when I had questions	18	6
Student Learning Centre programs (e.g., peer tutoring, subject area support) have helped me	6	18
Online tools (e.g., NOOL, OWL@Purdue) have helped answer some questions	11	13
Academic Advisors in my Faculty have helped me	9	15
The Services for Students with Disabilities have helped me	2	22
The Student Association has provided some support	1	23
A university association or centre (e.g., the Aboriginal Resource Centre)	1	23
Study groups with peers	9	15
I have NOT used any UOIT support services	3	21
Other	3	21

Table J. *Factors to help cope with challenges*

What factors enable (or would enable) you to cope with challenges?	Yes	No
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

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