

Native Students in a Community College: Perceptions of Upgrading and Career Students

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A 59-item questionnaire dealing with aspects of self-preparation, campus life, relationships with families, and satisfaction with programs was administered to students in three kinds of programs at a community college—upgrading programs, a career program that included an upgrading component, and a career program requiring upgrading before entry. The questionnaire was administered in fall and spring of one academic year and the responses of Native students were compared between programs. The results of grouped and paired t-tests appropriate to the specific comparison, as well as responses to open-ended questionnaire items, indicate somewhat different patterns of changing perception between groups over the course of the program. The study produced a working hypothesis for further study, that programs that combine career programs with upgrading, rather than requiring upgrading before entry, enhance students' self-esteem.

Some students complete upgrading courses to gain admission to college career programs. Other students may take upgrading courses while registered in a career program. Is there a difference in how these two types of students view their college experience?

In the fall of 1990, a southern Alberta community college offered a new educational route for Native students in the criminal justice field. Although an existing two-year diploma program in criminal justice was popular and widely recognized, few Native applicants possessed the academic background for admission. So a new certificate program was designed to incorporate academic upgrading and career training into a two-year certificate program. Certificate recipients would also be eligible to opt for a diploma by studying for an additional year. This educational route marked a departure from other college career programs that required students to complete upgrading courses before applying for admission to a career program. The criminal justice certificate became the first on-campus program to establish an alternative route for Native participation within the ongoing program.

Accompanying the implementation of this certificate program was an ongoing study to measure and report how selected factors were related to Native student success and satisfaction in the program. The study sought to compare factors related to satisfaction and success of Native certificate students with first-year diploma students and with Native upgrading students.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, although a substantial number of Native students register in programs at the community college, previous systematic inquiry for examining their perceptions of college experience or academic performance is not extensive (McFarlane, 1982; Goodrider-McFarlane, 1989). Second, the study provided criminal justice faculty members with a forma-

tive evaluation of aspects of a new program. Third, as expanded educational opportunities for Native students and increased retention rates for Native students were among the community college's objectives, the study provided important insights for academic administrators and faculty members in other program areas about how Native students perceive their college experiences.

Review of Literature

Two bodies of research literature are particularly related to this study. One area involves minority student experience in higher education, including studies of Native students, whereas the other area is student persistence/withdrawal research.

Although information about factors associated with needs of minority students is common in higher education literature (e.g., D. Wright, 1987), study of Native student performance in higher education is generally limited. There is some evidence (B. Wright, 1987, p. 2) that participation rates of North American Indians in higher education are among the lowest for visible minorities in the United States. (In Canada, the situation is probably similar, although racial background is not reported with enrollment data.) Several recent studies, however, have looked at promising approaches for studying Native participation in colleges and universities (e.g., Lin, 1990; Rindone, 1988; Benjamin & Chambers, 1989). These researchers have identified achievement motivation and perception of family background as important elements in understanding Native performance in higher education. Further, Rindone (1988) cites the continued need "to identify and explore those factors that contribute to the successful completion of a college" program (p. 2). In addition to the study of student performance and persistence, some institutions have focused efforts toward developing specific programs to meet the needs of Native students or enhancing faculty cultural awareness. In Canada for example, the Nova Scotia Micmac and Dalhousie University have collaboratively developed a decentralized approach to social work education (Smith, 1987). In the United States another approach identified by Hornett (1989) involves improving retention of Native students through increasing faculty cultural awareness.

A student persistence model developed by Tinto (1975, 1987) and tested by many others (e.g., Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977) centers on student social and academic integration at college. The model recognizes that the individual is influenced by a wide range of experience before and during college. Adjustment or adaptation to the college environment is central to student decisions to stay or leave college. Generally, it appears that students who are more academically integrated are more likely to persist than students who are less academically integrated. There is also some evidence that social integration, although not as strong a factor as academic integration, is also instrumental in decisions to persist or withdraw from college. In this vein, some researchers have found that minority students at predominantly white campuses often face overwhelming adjustment challenges (Allen, 1987; Beckham, 1988; Nora, 1987).

The results reported here contain findings and conclusions based on the first year of the study, which may be of interest to a larger audience.

Design

This research project was undertaken with the direction of a steering committee of faculty members and administrators having direct responsibilities for the criminal justice and upgrading programs. In addition to providing overall direction to the project, committee members held specific responsibilities for gathering data.

The study focused on students who were new to their program at the main campus in the fall of 1990. All new students in the criminal justice diploma and certificate programs ($n = 80$), and all students in the upgrading program (approximately 420) were surveyed. This article reports primarily on the experiences of the Native students in the upgrading program and Native students in the certificate program, while making some comparisons with students in the diploma program.

The research design lent itself to comparing perceptions of Native and non-Native students in one career program, and between the Native students in that career program and Native students in an upgrading program. Because part of the requirement for criminal justice certificate students was participation in academic skill building courses, it was possible to investigate similarities and differences between students pursuing a career program with students pursuing upgrading exclusively.

Data were collected using a 59-item questionnaire near the beginning of the first and near the end of the second semesters. The questionnaires included sections about demographics and personal traits, education and career expectations, and experiences at the college. An identical questionnaire was used in both semesters. The questionnaires were distributed, completed, and returned during a regular class period. The purpose of the questionnaire was twofold: gather data for a descriptive profile of the students and gather information about changes in perceptions about selected aspects of academic life.

Responses to open-ended items were coded and entered, along with the responses to scaled items, into a Paradox3 database. Statistical analyses used both Paradox3 and SPSS/PC+. In the fall, 68 diploma students completed the questionnaire, whereas 56 completed one in the spring (the other 12 students either were not registered in the courses where questionnaires were distributed or were unavailable when the forms were distributed). Grouped t-tests were used to compare these sets of responses. Six of the seven students in the certificate program completed both questionnaires; paired t-test were used to compare their responses. Although 62 Native students in the upgrading program completed a questionnaire, only 18 of these students completed one in both fall and spring (the other 44 students either were not registered in the courses where questionnaires were distributed or unavailable when the forms were distributed). The demographic data were used to develop initial profiles of the three groups of students.

Diploma students. Based on the fall 1990 data, nearly 80% of the 68 students were male. The majority (85.3%) were single. Their average age was 20.3 years. Most resided (83.4%) in the city where the college was located. About one quarter reported that their fathers obtained education beyond high school and about half indicated that their mothers attended beyond high school. Of the students with spouses, fewer than one third of the spouses obtained education beyond high school. About 30% indicated that they were employed during the academic year. All but three in this group were Caucasian.

Certificate students. Four of the students were male and three were female. Two were single. Their average age was 24.4 years. Five commuted from outside the city to attend classes. Although fewer than half of these students' parents had education beyond high school, all of the students' spouses had obtained education beyond high school. None of these students reported employment during the academic year. All students in this group were Native.

Upgrading students. Five of these students were male and 13 were female. The majority resided in the same city as the college and 44% were single. Their average age was 27.5 years. About one quarter indicated that their parents obtained education beyond high school; similarly, about one quarter of these students' spouses had education beyond high school. About 17% reported employment during the academic year. All students in this group were Native.

Findings

Responses to scaled and open-ended items from the survey illustrated similarities and differences in perceptions among the three groups of students as well as changes in perceptions over the academic year.

Family-related. Although all three groups perceived that their family provided support and encouragement for their education, the diploma students were more likely to believe this to be the case (Table 1). The level reported by the diploma group was unchanged in spring. By the end of the academic year, however, the certificate students reported a higher level of support than they did in fall, whereas the upgrading students reported a lower level in spring. The diploma group agreed that they believed "in much the same things" as their parents; their agreement was even stronger by the end of the academic year. By spring, the certificate group had reversed its view and reported that they now believed "in much the same things" as their parents; the upgrading students were more likely to hold this view at the beginning of the year than at the end. Perceptions also changed so that by the end of the year all groups were more likely to report that their college

Table 1. Comparison of Responses about Family Relationships

Questionnaire item	Diploma Fall Spr	Certif. Fall Spr	Upgrading Fall Spr	p<.05
My family has always provided me with support and encouragement for my education.	4.71 4.70	4.00 5.00	4.44 4.17	D-C, D-U Fall D-U, C-U Spr
I believe in much the same things as my parents do.	3.98 4.13	3.00 3.67	3.67 3.33	D-C, D-U Fall D-U Spr
I am worried that with a college education my family and friends will see me as "having changed" and/or "becoming different."	2.18 2.31	2.43 3.00	2.06 2.22	

Note. Five-point scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 5 = Strongly Agree. Statistical Significance ($p < .05$) shows D = Diploma students, C = Certificate students, and U = upgrading students. For example, "D-C, Fall" indicates a statistically significant difference in variance between the Diploma and Certificate students' responses in fall.

education would cause family and friends to see them as having changed or becoming different.

Perceptions of abilities. In the fall all groups held a similar perception of themselves as self-starters (Table 2). By spring, this perception had strengthened in the diploma and certificate groups, whereas it became slightly weaker in the upgrading group. All groups held the perception that they had the ability to do well in their courses; this perception was generally unchanged by year's end. Although all groups agreed that they could handle the required workload, the diploma and certificate students gave a much stronger agreement in spring to this view, whereas the views of the upgrading group remained unchanged. The certificate students reported a greater resolve to accomplish goals that they set or were assigned than did the other two groups (the other two groups also reported a weakened commitment to complete goals or assigned tasks by year's end).

Fitting in. Overall, all groups maintained the view that they made a good decision in coming to college and reported a strong commitment to completing their course of study. These views tended to change little from fall to spring. In part, these feelings may be related to feeling comfortable on campus. All groups reported that they were familiar with the campus and that they became more familiar by the year's end (Table 3). However, only the diploma students reported an increased feeling of being at ease on the campus by spring. The upgrading and certificate groups reported no change. The diploma and certificate groups reported a slight increase in satisfaction with student friendships by year's end, whereas the upgrading group reported a slight decrease in satisfaction.

Perceptions of instructors. Some differences were noted in how these groups perceived their instructors (Table 4). Generally, the diploma and certificate groups saw their instructors as more organized, better communicators, more available,

Table 2. Comparison of Responses about Own Abilities

Questionnaire item	Diploma Fall Spr	Certif. Fall Spr	Upgrading Fall Spr	p<.05
I consider myself a self-starter.	3.98 4.30	4.14 4.50	4.00 3.94	D-U, C-U Spr
I have the ability to do well in my courses.	4.60 4.66	4.57 4.50	4.44 4.50	
I can handle the workload required in all my courses.	3.91 4.29	4.17 4.50	3.72 3.78	
After I set a goal, no matter how difficult it is, I am willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to achieve that goal.	3.93 3.88	4.42 4.68	4.28 4.17	
If I am assigned a task, I will do the task without letting any friends pull me away.	3.85 3.75	4.00 4.17	4.22 3.78	

Note. Five-point scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 5 = Strongly Agree. Statistical Significance (p<.05) shows D = Diploma students, C = Certificate students, and U = upgrading students. For example, "D-C, Fall" indicates a statistically significant difference in variance between the Diploma and Certificate students' responses in fall.

Table 3. *Comparison of Responses about Adjustment to Campus*

Questionnaire item	Diploma Fall Spr	Certif. Fall Spr	Upgrading Fall Spr	p<.05
The student friendships I have developed at the college are personally satisfying.	4.26 4.30	4.28 4.33	4.00 3.94	
I feel "at ease" about being a student on this campus.	4.12 4.30	4.29 4.33	3.94 3.94	D-U Spr
I can find my way around on this campus.	4.47 4.68	4.14 4.67	4.00 4.22	

Note. Five-point scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 5 = Strongly Agree. Statistical Significance ($p < .05$) shows D = Diploma students, C = Certificate students, and U = upgrading students. For example, "D-C, Fall" indicates a statistically significant difference in variance between the Diploma and Certificate students' responses in fall.

and more interested in students than did the upgrading group. Overall, these views tended to change little from beginning to end of the year. However, there was a substantial difference between the two criminal justice student groups and the upgrading group in viewing the influence of instructors on the student's career aspirations; the criminal justice students held this view more strongly. Still, by year's end the diploma students' view of instructor influence had increased, whereas the certificate group's view of instructor influence had decreased. In this vein, the diploma and certificate groups reported a greater likelihood that instructors' attitudes contributed to positive and helpful relationships, compared with the upgrading group.

Satisfactions and Dissatisfactions

In describing their college experience all groups of students stated more examples of satisfactions than dissatisfactions. All the certificate group named at least one satisfaction in fall and spring; over 90% of the diploma group reported satisfactions both fall and spring, and many of the upgrading group identified satisfactions (fall 62.8%, spring 83.3%). As a group the diploma students were more likely to identify dissatisfactions (fall 73.6%, spring 82.9%). Most certificate students identified some dissatisfactions (fall 85.7%, spring 66.7%). Although few upgrading students identified dissatisfactions in the fall, more of this group did so in spring (fall 33.3%, spring 61.1%).

Satisfactions. From the students' comments, four broad categories of satisfactions emerged: *friendships*, *self-esteem*, *instructors*, and *courses*. Comments placed in the category of *friendships* included the notions of meeting people, making friends, and stating that there was a friendly atmosphere. In the category of *self-esteem* comments related to achieving personal goals, gaining confidence, and high levels of personal interest. A category labeled *instructors* described instructor characteristics using words such as helpful, interesting, enthusiastic, and professional. The category called *courses* was focused differently than the *instructors* category as course comments were related to course content, grades, and learning new skills

Table 4. Comparison of Responses about Instructors

Questionnaire item	Diploma Fall Spr		Certif. Fall Spr		Upgrading Fall Spr		p<.05
My instructors seem to be well organized.	4.71	4.52	4.71	4.33	4.17	4.28	D-U Fall C-U Spr
My instructors communicate course requirements clearly.	4.54	4.46	4.71	4.17	4.28	4.11	
My instructors seem to be genuinely interested in students	4.44	4.46	4.28	4.00	4.12	4.06	D-U Spr
My instructors seem to be available to talk with students outside of class time.	4.48	4.39	4.14	4.17	4.22	4.06	
My interactions with my instructors have a positive influence on my career aspirations.	4.34	4.44	4.42	4.33	3.78	3.61	D-U, C-U Fall D-U, C-U Spr
My instructors' attitudes contribute to a positive and helpful relationship with me.	4.32	4.28	4.42	4.33	4.06	3.89	D-U, C-U Sp

Note. Five-point scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 5 = Strongly Agree. Statistical Significance (p<.05) shows D = Diploma students, C = Certificate students, and U = upgrading students. For example, "D-C, Fall" indicates a statistically significant difference in variance between the Diploma and Certificate students' responses in fall.

and information. A small number of miscellaneous comments were reported but are not described here.

Overall, the greatest number of comments about satisfactions in both the fall and spring were about friendships; however, on a group-by-group basis, some real differences were noted about other types of comments. Table 5 shows a ranking of comment frequency by student group in fall and spring. The greatest form of satisfactions reported by diploma and certificate students in fall and spring were friendships. Satisfactions related to instructors were least frequent in fall and spring for criminal justice students, though more common for upgrading students. Generally, the type and volume of comments by diploma and certificate students about satisfactions were quite similar in fall and spring.

Although the upgrading group reported similar examples of satisfactions, the proportions of these examples differed somewhat from those reported by certificate and diploma students. In fall, the most common comments by upgrading students were about friendships followed by comments about instructors, whereas satisfactions about courses were fourth. In spring, however, the number of comments about satisfactions with courses were substantially greater and surpassed the comments about friendships.

Dissatisfactions. From the students' comments four broad categories of dissatisfactions also emerged: *academics, facilities, finances, and social support.* Comments about *academics* ranged from class schedules to grades to specific course complaints. *Facility* comments included both instructional and noninstructional campus areas. Concerns about costs such as books and tuition were grouped as

financial dissatisfactions. *Social support* comments included both concerns about social relations on campus and reduced time available to spend with families. A small number of miscellaneous comments were reported but are not described here.

The type and volume of comments about dissatisfactions in the fall were similar for the three student groups (Table 6). Course-related aspects of their experience were most frequently reported as sources of dissatisfaction. This category of comments was followed by comments about facilities and then aspects of social relationships. Only the diploma group reported financial-related dissatisfactions in fall. In spring the comments of the diploma group were relatively unchanged in type and frequency, with the exception that concerns about finances increased substantially. In contrast, by spring the dissatisfactions of the certificate and upgrading group varied considerably from those reported in fall both by category and frequency. The major source of dissatisfactions in spring were concerns related to social supports. Financial concerns, which were not mentioned in fall, now appeared.

Conclusions

It appears that students' perceptions about themselves and their academic environment were influenced and changed by their experiences at college. In some instances, the Native and non-Native groups' perceptions of their experiences changed in a common direction, whereas sometimes changes in their perceptions were divergent. For example, it appears that all the students in this study viewed aspects of their relationships with their families differently after a year at college. The Native certificate students seemed to discover that their beliefs were much closer to those of their families than they had first imagined. In contrast, the Native upgrading group seemed to distance themselves more from their families' beliefs at the end of the year.

Further, it appears that the two groups of Native students held differing perspectives about their experiences in the same college. Both Native and non-Native students in the criminal justice program developed similar perceptions about aspects of their experience that differed from the perceptions of Native students who are not enrolled in that career program. For example, compared with Native students registered only in upgrading courses, the Native students in the career-oriented program held different views about their instructors. Students in the career program appeared to be aware of and to appreciate the career-related

Table 5. Comparison Ranking of Satisfactions

Category Satisfaction	Fall			Spring		
	Diploma	Certif.	Upgrade	Diploma	Certif.	Upgrade
Friendships	1	1	1	1	1*	2
Self-esteem	2	2	3	3	1*	4
Instructors	4	3*	2	4	4	3
Courses	3	3*	4	2	3	1

* denotes a shared ranking as the same number of comments were made.

influence exerted by their instructors. The career program students appeared to perceive a learning environment that gave a strong, balanced support to their education and career goals, whereas the learning environment for upgrading students emphasized academic skill building. By its nature, however, upgrading is not career-directed, which possibly leaves students without strong career-related influences.

However, it also appears that Native students as a group develop similar perceptions about aspects of their college experiences that transcend program boundaries and set these students' perceptions apart from those of non-Native students. As a group, Native students portrayed their ties to family differently than did the other students. Native students more frequently commented that their studies not only separated them from family but also caused feelings of loneliness. Perhaps as a consequence of this separation, on-campus friendships were viewed as particularly important by Native students. Although the career program Native students appeared to find support and camaraderie among their classmates, this was not always the case for the upgrading group. In addition to a sense of increased separation from family, the Native students in upgrading courses expressed concerns over experiences of discrimination.

Caution must be used in making generalizations about these students and their experiences. Still, one dominant factor appears to strongly influence Native student perceptions of their college experience. This factor is the extent to which the college program has a specific career orientation. This study suggests that even though Native students in a career program were involved in academic upgrading, they viewed key aspects of their college experience more positively than Native students taking upgrading courses exclusively. A working hypothesis from this study is this: alternative education routes that blend upgrading with career education enhance students' self-esteem and opportunities for professional socialization, compared with educational routes that require upgrading before granting admission to career programs. Testing this hypotheses in a variety of settings with different student populations is necessary. The outcomes of such inquiries could provide better understandings of how underrepresented student groups can best be served by career training programs. The challenge for innovative educators is to support alternatives for career program entry, yet assure uniform quality at program completion.

Table 6. Comparison Ranking of Satisfactions

Category of Dissatisfaction	Fall			Spring		
	Diploma	Certif.	Upgrade	Diploma	Certif.	Upgrade
Academics	1	1*	1*	1	2*	2
Facilities	2	1*	1*	3	-	-
Social Support	3	3	3	4	1	1
Finances	4	-	-	2	2*	3

* denotes a shared ranking as the same number of comments were made.

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