RFP-006: Student Services

Discovering the Benefits of a First Year Experience Program for Under-represented Students: A Preliminary Assessment of Lakehead University's Gateway Program

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Report 4

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The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) issued a Request for Proposals in June 2008 that focused on The Role of Student Services in Support of Access, Retention and Quality. The goal was to provide funding to institutions to allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of existing student services projects or programs designed to enhance student access, retention and academic success, and to identify best practices and innovative techniques that might be useful for other postsecondary institutions. Twenty-eight proposals from Ontario colleges and universities were submitted, and 15 projects were subsequently approved for funding by HEQCO.

While there was some overlap, the projects were roughly divided into those that focused on the general student population to deal with overall first-year transition challenges; those that focused on improving the engagement, transition and retention of targeted populations of "at-risk" students; and those that focused on courses and programs that were considered to be "at-risk" (e.g. high rates of Failure and Withdrawal) for students enrolled.

This final report is part of the "Student Services" series, and is one of four being released in June 2010. Together, these and the subsequent reports from this series will help better inform student success strategies with evidence-based assessments.

Abstract

Student demographics are changing at institutions of higher education. Research indicates that non-traditional students now comprise the majority of students on campuses (Wylie, 2004, para. 4). Non-traditional students can include the following: first generation students, students with disabilities, visible minorities and mature students. These students are considered more "at risk" for attrition for a number of reasons, including outside responsibilities, poor understanding of the postsecondary environment and limited social and family supports (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Wylie, 2004).

This study examined the effectiveness of an academic intervention program called Gateway. The results indicated that many of the attributes of, and difficulties experienced by, non-traditional students entering college and university in the United States also apply to non-traditional students entering Lakehead University. The results also indicated that the Gateway program is a successful intervention for first year, non-traditional students. Common concerns identified by Gateway participants reinforce concerns cited in the literature: difficulty with time management; procrastination; and balancing family, social and academic priorities (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Miller & Murray, 2005; Patrick, Furlow & Donovan, 1988; Tinto, 1993).

Almost all students interviewed in this study indicated that they felt at least one intervention of the Gateway program was useful to their overall success as a student. Many signified that "not disappointing their advisor" was a main motivation for attending classes and completing their course work. Other findings revealed that programming should be provided for students who do not recognize the need for assistance and those who are unmotivated to seek help. In addition, it is important to provide this non-traditional student group with programming to help them balance their off-campus responsibilities with their academic priorities.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Gateway Program

As part of a Government of Ontario initiative to encourage the implementation of programming designed for non-traditional students, Lakehead University introduced the Gateway program in the fall of 2007. This program provides intentional and intrusive programming for under-prepared, non-traditional university students entering Lakehead University. The goal of the program is to assist students with their transition to the university environment, with the hope of increasing retention and graduation rates for an "at-risk" population group.

This study uses qualitative data analysis and examines the effectiveness of the Gateway program based on the students' self-perceived needs and their own definitions of success. Students' suggestions for improvements to the program were also solicited.

1.2 About Lakehead University and the Gateway Program

Lakehead University is a comprehensive university, which offers its 8,200 students a range of undergraduate and graduate programming in nine Faculties. The main campus is located in Thunder Bay, Ontario, near Lake Superior, while the Orillia campus brings the Lakehead University experience to Central Ontario. As a comprehensive university, Lakehead is committed to excellence and innovation in undergraduate and graduate teaching, research and other scholarly activity. As part of this commitment, Lakehead University is dedicated to creating and maintaining a student-centred learning environment.

The Gateway program at Lakehead University is designed for students who do not meet the university's traditional entrance requirements but who exhibit academic potential. The program is modelled after First Year Experience programs in the United States and is based on the theory that high school marks are not necessarily indicative of students' ability to be successful in postsecondary studies. Admission to the Gateway program was determined through the assessment of applicants' marks for the 2007 cohort (required minimum average of 65 per cent). Seventy-two students accepted their offer to be part of the Gateway program in 2007. In 2008, the admissions team not only examined applicants' high school transcripts but also required the submission of a supplementary application form. On this form applicants were asked to describe why they wanted to attend Lakehead University and to outline how they planned to be successful. Each applicant was also asked to provide an academic reference who could speak to their ability to perform at the university level. Thirty-two students accepted their Gateway offer in 2008.

The content and structure of the Gateway program is based on best practices from student retention research. As outlined in the Offer of Admission, students are required to take part in mandatory academic advising sessions. Each student is assigned an academic advisor with whom they work throughout the academic year. Students meet with their advisors monthly

(more frequently if required), to work on course selection, transition issues and goal setting. Gateway advisors act as referral sources for students, helping connect them to resources like the Learning Assistance Centre, Health and Counselling and faculty members. The advisor also stays in regular contact via e-mail, informing students of important academic and social events on campus.

In addition to receiving mandatory academic advising, students are required to successfully complete a student success course in order to continue into Year 2 of their program. For the 2007 cohort, this course was a half-credit University Seminar course. It was offered through the Faculty of Science and Environmental Studies and was taught by an instructor who is an academic advisor as well as a sessional lecturer in the department of English. The course focused on critical thinking and on providing students with the opportunity to enhance their writing, research and comprehension skills. Students were required to complete assignments, tests and a research project.

For the 2008 cohort, the student success course was modified to provide continual and practical support to students. The course was changed from a half-credit course to a full-year, non-credit course and was taught by an associate professor from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. The course had a pass-fail structure, and attendance was mandatory, forming a major part of the evaluation. The restructured course included information on study skills, time management, test preparation and personal health and wellness at university. Students were also required to meet individually with the professor to help encourage faculty connections. Peer leaders were also incorporated into the class, and they helped to deliver lectures, run small group meetings and provide support to students taking the course.

2. Literature Review

In the 1960s, postsecondary institutions began to recognize the need to provide programming to assist incoming first year students (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 38). This shift occurred for a number of reasons. First, universities and colleges began to see more non-traditional students, who were often unsure of the student "role", enrol in postsecondary education. Second, curricula on campuses were changing and students were presented with more complex options. Finally, students began to express the need for "help" (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 39). This programming has expanded over the years at postsecondary institutions throughout the world. The United States' National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses seven characteristics to define non-traditional students. These characteristics include the following: "delaying enrolment in post-secondary education, attending part time, being financially independent, working full time while enrolled, having dependents, being single parents and/or lacking a standard high school diploma" (Upcraft, Gardner, & O'Barefoot, 2005, p.18). Non-traditional students may also include students with disabilities, adult learners, students from different cultures (e.g., visible minorities or Aboriginals), first generation[1] students and low income students (Bigger, 2005, para.19). Increasing numbers of "non-traditional" first year students are enrolling in postsecondary education, and many institutions are working diligently on developing programs to meet the needs of this student population. Although all first year college and university students are likely to experience transitional issues, students from "non-traditional" backgrounds may experience difficulties on a larger scale (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Patrick, Furlow & Donovan, 1998).

Students' success in university and college depends not only upon their understanding of course content, but also on their ability to demonstrate this knowledge in ways that will satisfy the professor's expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 428; Grayson, 1997, p. 659). Non-traditional students may lack cultural resources and background information about higher education, and this may limit their awareness of how to "perform the role of (university) student" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 425; Terenzini, Springer, et al., 1996, p. 2; Vargas, 2004, p.3). First generation students, in particular, cannot rely on parental advice to help them identify and resolve role-based problems or to help them understand the university's expectations. They come to university with less understanding of student roles and less support to help them build their knowledge base (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p.442). This may mean that success is more difficult to achieve than it is for traditional students, who have greater familiarity with higher education because of their family's past experiences within the university or college environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p.442). As a result, there is a greater need to provide non-traditional students with information concerning what they can expect of their educational experience. Non-traditional students also have a greater need for intensive advising, so they can talk through any fears or concerns about their academic performance, establish their

[1] For the purposes of this study, first generation students were defined as those for whom neither parent had attended a postsecondary institution.

educational and career goals, and be empowered in their decision-making processes as a whole (Vargas, 2004, p. 5).

The creation of first year experience programming or first year seminar courses has been one of the most popular initiatives that colleges and universities have utilized to help first year students. According to Upcraft, Gardner and Associates (1989), “first year experience courses provide students with an opportunity to interact with their peers academically and socially, while gaining basic academic and time management skills” (as cited in Lang, 2007, p. 11). Although first year experience programs are ingrained in higher education institutions across the United States, there is little research on such programming in Canada or on applying the success of this programming to the Canadian system of higher education and to a Canadian demographic. According to a study by the National Resource Center on the First Year Experience® and Students in Transition (2006), 84.8 per cent of the responding institutions in the United States indicated that they offered a first year transition course, but there is no comparable data for Canadian institutions.

To help first year students succeed, it is important for institutions to help them fulfill their educational and personal goals (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989, p.2). According to Tinto (1993) students are more likely to persist in college or university when they are able to successfully separate from their home life and become academically and socially integrated into the college or university setting (as cited in Inkelas, Daver, et al., 2007, p.406). The more successful students are at reaching true integration and engagement, the more likely they are to successfully complete their degree (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 426; Tinto, 1993, p. 50). Research indicates that student success at university is based largely on the experiences a student has in their first year and their ability to transition into the university environment (Lang, 2007, p. 11; Tinto, 1993, p. 14). Tinto indicated that there are four forms of individual experiences that may affect student departure: “adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation” (1993, p. 37). It therefore stands to reason that it is essential to develop first year experience programs that help address students’ needs and assist them in successfully integrating into the university community.

First year experience programs are especially important for students who may be deemed “at risk.” According to King (2004) “at risk” students are those who are considered academically under-prepared as a result of extenuating factors such as their prior educational experiences and specific individual risk factors. Risk factors can range from psychological concerns and health issues to social and family influences (as cited in Miller & Murray, 2005, para. 2). Upcraft and Gardner (1989) state that students who are considered “at risk” may drop out of university for a variety of reasons, including: “academic boredom, a sense of irrelevancy, limited or unrealistic expectations of (university), academic under preparedness, transition difficulties and/or uncertainty about or incompatibility with a major or career” (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, pp. 67-70).

We can differentiate between internal and external factors that can be attributed to students experiencing academic difficulty in university or college. Molina and Abelman (2000) distinguish between “uncontrollable and controllable internal factors” and “stable and unstable external factors”. Internal uncontrollable factors are those that are inherent to the individual and are

therefore difficult to change. These factors include health problems, learning disabilities and a general inability to master the work. Internal controllable factors are behavioural and tend to be easier to change; they include poor time management and class attendance. These factors require the student to make a conscious effort to improve. External stable factors are difficult to change and may include unhealthy family environment/living arrangements. External unstable factors that are easier to change (but that may require some guidance) include frequently changing courses and professors (Molina & Abelman, 2000, p. 6).

According to the United States' National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (as cited in Boylan, 2001, p. 2), between 16 and 40 per cent of each year's incoming students at any given postsecondary institution in the United States are, to some degree, inadequately prepared for college- or university-level academic work. A study by the Pell Institute (2008) indicated that low-income and first generation students (both considered non-traditional) were four times more likely to leave higher education after their first year than were traditional students (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 2). Non-traditional students are less likely to receive support from family members and tend to have obligations outside the postsecondary environment that limit their ability to become fully integrated (Collier & Morgan, 2007, p. 430; Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 3; Grayson, 1997, p. 659). Attrition theory states that persistence in university or college requires individuals to adjust and become integrated, both socially and academically, into the postsecondary environment. For many students, this becomes an overwhelming experience. The easier this experience is for students, and the less time they spend feeling overwhelmed, the more likely they will be to persist (Tinto, 1993, p. 71). Hence, providing developmental and first year experience programs for non-traditional students is especially important to help with their adjustment to university or college (Heisserer & Parette, 2002, para. 6).

As students transition from high school to college or university, it is essential for them to learn how to become intentional learners, including changing any negative aspects of their academic behaviour. The more successful students are in implementing strategies that lead to personal control of their learning, the more likely they are to be successful (Dembo & Seli, 2004, p. 3). King (2004) (as cited in Miller & Murray, 2005) suggests that universities can help under-prepared students become resilient learners through:

> assisting students in planning programs consistent with their abilities and interests, providing choices, working in tandem with developmental educational programs, interpreting and providing rationale for instructional policies, procedures and requirements, monitoring student progress toward goals, teaching problem solving techniques, using intrusive advising methods when appropriate, and referring students to campus and community resources as needed (Miller & Murray, 2005, para. 20).

3. Methods

The researchers conducted a qualitative, exploratory analysis to assess how Lakehead University's Gateway program is helping under-prepared, non-traditional, first year students succeed in their transition to university. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with students who had participated in the Gateway program in the 2007/08 or 2008/09 academic years. Interviews were conducted using a script of predetermined questions/topics, including a list of suggested prompts should students not be forthcoming with answers. Questions were developed based on an extensive literature review and focused on a number of points: fears and expectations (both positive and negative) that students experienced before attending university, whether these fears and/or expectations were realized during their first year and whether the Gateway program provided them with support to help cope with or overcome the stated fears or concerns. Finally, the researchers asked the students to define what success meant to them and whether they believed their first year at Lakehead University had been a success. A list of interview prompts is included in Appendix 1.

Students were invited to participate in the study through an announcement in their Gateway class (2008/09 students only), through poster advertisements in the Office of Academic Advising and through direct e-mail or telephone contact. While students were encouraged to participate in the study and were offered the incentive of a 1 in 40 (or more) chance to win an iPod touch, participation was voluntary. The goal was to conduct 40 interviews, 20 with each cohort. Of the 105 students enrolled in Gateway in 2007/08 and 2008/09, there was valid contact information for 92. Twenty-nine agreed to come in for interviews, but only 26 students showed up for their scheduled interview times. Sixty-three students declined or did not respond. In the end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 students, 13 in the 2007/08 cohort and 13 in the 2008/09 cohort, for a 32 per cent participation rate (based on 92 students). All but one of the students who responded from the 2007/08 cohort returned to Lakehead for their second year. The researchers recognize that the results of the study may have been different if there had been more participation from students who either chose not to return or who were unable to return due to poor academic performance.

Interviews took place in a quiet room on the Lakehead University campus, with one or two interviewers present. Interviewers were provided with a script but were encouraged to let the conversation flow. All students were asked to consider and comment on their experience with the Gateway program, which the 2007/08 cohort had participated in during the previous year. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed upon completion of the interview. Electronic files were destroyed to prevent the possible identification of respondents through voice recognition.

Once transcribed, the interviews were read and re-read by the authors. Statements by students were coded and organized into themes. For the most part, themes followed those laid out in the interview script, although several new themes emerged. Both researchers read and coded the

interviews independently, and results were compared. Coding and organizing into themes took place in several iterations.

4. Results

The goals of Lakehead University's Gateway program are to encourage the enrolment of non-traditional[2] students at Lakehead University and to promote their success, retention and graduation so that they may acquire access to the opportunities, resources and supports associated with a university education. In 2007/08, 65 per cent of the students admitted into the Gateway program who completed a self-declaration questionnaire identified themselves as first generation university students, 17 per cent were visible minorities, 38 per cent were mature students and 9 per cent were students with disabilities. These percentages are higher than in the general university population, where in 2007/08 52 per cent of students were first generation, about 15 per cent considered themselves to be part of a visible minority group (which includes Aboriginal students), 29 per cent were mature students and approximately 5 per cent identified themselves to the Lakehead University Learning Assistance Centre as having a disability. A table comparing selected characteristics of Gateway students to all undergraduate students at Lakehead University is presented in Appendix 2.

Of the sample of 26 students interviewed, 42 per cent declared themselves to be first generation and five (19 per cent) considered themselves to be visible minorities/Aboriginals. One additional student revealed during the interview that s/he was Aboriginal (for a total of 23 per cent) but did not declare her/himself a visible minority when asked. Of the students interviewed, 58 per cent were mature students[3] and four of the 26 (15 per cent) declared some kind of disability (physical/mental/learning). Two additional students were worried that they might have a mental/learning disability but had not yet been tested (for a total of 23 per cent). Only four of the 26 students interviewed (15 per cent) had none of these risk factors (See Appendix 2).

In the rest of section 4, the results of the interviews are summarized. A full copy of the results, coded into themes, is included in Appendix 3.

4.1 Concerns Prior to Commencing University

After a brief introduction and a few introductory questions about their background and demographic information, students were asked to think back to the months prior to starting their first year at Lakehead and to recall whether they had had any concerns, at that time, about attending university. Where students indicated concerns, they were asked to elaborate. Many students entering the Gateway program in both 2007/08 and 2008/09 recalled that prior to beginning university, they had experienced anxiety. This anxiety ranged from traditional transitional issues experienced by most university students (i.e., their ability to integrate academically, socially and personally into the university environment) to cultural-type transition

[2] For the purposes of their Multi-Year Accountability Agreements, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has focused on Aboriginals, first generation students and students with disabilities in their definition of non-traditional students.
[3] Mature students are those who have been out of school for at least two years prior to being admitted to Lakehead University.

issues typically faced by non-traditional students, such as their ability to balance family life and academics.

As some students indicated, a general sense of uncertainty and apprehension regarding what to expect in university was common. One student stated that s/he[4] was anxious because s/he pictured university as a "big looming institution that would drown me". Another student indicated that s/he just didn't know what to expect (see Appendix 3.A.1).

In addition to referring to general uncertainty prior to entering university, many non-traditional Gateway students articulated a lack of academic self-esteem or overall academic anxiety. Many students stated that they were concerned about their capability to complete university-level work. Feeling unsure of professors' expectations and concerns about how heavy the course loads would be were other common concerns (see Appendix 3.A.2). In addition, many students felt that their prior academic performance dictated whether they would be successful or not. One student revealed that s/he had been told all through high school that s/he wouldn't be able to handle university-level work (see Appendix 3.A.2).

The social transition to university was another concern of Gateway students. Students had anxieties about moving away from home, making friends and being able to handle the responsibilities of a university student (see Appendix 3.A.3).Personal doubts related to the transition to a university lifestyle were also a concern, especially for mature students and first generation students. Most mature students commented that they were nervous about returning to school after taking time off. One student stated that s/he was "worried about being the only old student" (see Appendix 3.A.3).In terms of personal transitional issues, many students referred to moving away from home and how this was an overwhelming experience. One student also mentioned that s/he was concerned with managing his/her medications (see Appendix 3.A.4).

Only four of the interviewed Gateway students commented that they didn't have any concerns about attending university. All four of these students did not consider themselves to be "non-traditional," and all had come to Lakehead University straight out of high school or college.

4.2 Difficulties Experienced

Gateway students were asked to comment on and discuss the difficulties they had experienced during their first year of university. Prompts included asking students whether they had experienced academic, social, personal or financial difficulties. While some students interviewed identified uncertainty about what to expect in university as a concern prior to coming to Lakehead, others arrived at university with a preconceived, but unrealistic, view of what university would entail. One first generation student mentioned that s/he had been led to believe that first year would be easy, and as a result, s/he may not have taken his/her academics seriously enough. Many other students also found the workload much heavier than they had anticipated (see Appendix 3.C.1.e&h).

[4] Gender has been kept confidential.

Comments concerning the aspects of university that excited students also revealed some preconceptions. In addition to an overall level of excitement about attending university and learning new things, students mentioned the importance of the social aspect of university; including meeting new people and living in a new city (see Appendix 3.B.1&2).

Comments such as this may indicate that students were focused on the social aspect of the university experience and did not fully understand what to expect in terms of academic responsibilities.

Difficulties related to academics that Gateway students identified as experiencing in their first year of university included poor study habits and writing skills, poor time management, uncertainty about course/faculty expectations and low levels of competency in the student role. Specific academic skills including writing, test – taking and study habits were problematic for some students. Many students indicated that their marks tended to go down on exams and that before university, they had never needed to "study" and were therefore lacking the skills they needed to be successful on exams (see Appendix 3.C.1.a&c).The main academic difficulty identified by students was time management and procrastination. This was mentioned by over half the students interviewed. Students also mentioned difficulties prioritizing work and putting off writing essays or completing assignments (see Appendix 3.C.1.b).

While specific academic difficulties, such as difficulty with managing time and poor study habits, were common among Gateway students, research indicates that success consists not only of doing well academically, but also of being able to successfully master the student role. In alluding to such difficulties, one mature student stated that s/he had to learn "how to be a student" (see Appendix 3.C.1.g). Another theme that arose was students being unsure of course and faculty expectations. This seemed to be true for all groups, not just first generation students. One student mentioned having a difficult time comprehending what was expected of him/her, while others indicated that because they were so unsure of what to expect, they ended up doing poorly on assignments, failing the course or dropping the course entirely (see Appendix 3.C.1.e).

Several interviewees commented on social and personal difficulties experienced during their first year at university. Students mentioned difficulties in separating from their previous life/peer group and in integrating into a new peer group and a new life/routine. Comments included feelings of homesickness (Appendix 3.C.2.a), feeling socially awkward (Appendix 3.C.2.e) and juggling their social and academic roles (Appendix 3.C.2.b).Students who lived in residence reported difficulties balancing social and academic priorities. Many students indicated that they got caught up with the social aspect of residence and ended up "partying too much" and not attending class (including missing a quiz) (see Appendix 3.C.2.b). Commuter students, some of whom were mature, mentioned family demands and how their "outside" lives affected their university experience (indicating that they did not successfully integrate their academic lives with their non-academic lives). Another common concern involved trying to balance family life and academics (see Appendix 3.C.2.c).

A few of the students commented that they had found it difficult to develop a support group in university and had experienced a difficult time making friends (see Appendix 3.C.2.e&f).Many commuter students stated that although they had a few “friends” in their classes, they either didn’t have time to meet people or they left campus immediately after their classes were over (see Appendix 3.C.2.f).

4.3 The Gateway Program as an Intervention

Most students interviewed felt that the Gateway program – consisting of the student success course and mandatory academic advising – helped them to be successful during their first year of university. Respondents stated that the program helped them develop academic skills and to integrate into campus life.

The Gateway program also assisted students in developing time management skills. A few students mentioned specifically that their advisor helped them to develop a schedule and utilize an agenda. Many students commented that their meetings with their academic advisor provided them with motivation and helped keep them on track academically. Students stated that they didn’t want to “disappoint” their advisors and that their advisors helped them stay on top of things (see Appendix 3.D.3.a,e&h).One student said that s/he would have felt completely overwhelmed without the assistance of her/his advisor (see Appendix 3.D.1.d).

The Gateway program helped many students integrate into/acclimatize themselves to campus life. Academic advisors provided support and advice to students. Students felt that advisors gave them someone to talk to and helped make them feel comfortable (see Appendix 3.D.1.d, 3.D.3.b&i).

Students also mentioned how the Gateway program helped to encourage student-faculty contact (Appendix 3.D.1.f), as well as to develop critical thinking skills (Appendix 3.D.1.a). Students identified developing study and writing skills as benefits of the program (see Appendix 3.D.1.b & e).

Students from both the 2007/08 and the 2008/09 cohorts stated that the Gateway course was useful. One mature student commented that the course helped him/her stay at the university, and without it, s/he wouldn’t have been successful (see Appendix 3.D.4.l). A student from the 2008/09 cohort said that even if the course had not been mandatory, s/he would still have taken it (see Appendix 3.D.4.l).

Other students stated that they didn’t find the course useful at all (see Appendix 3.D.4.f & m). One felt that it was an inconvenience (2007/08) and another student commented that s/he didn’t feel the course was necessary (2008/09). One student commented that although s/he didn’t think that the Gateway class helped him/her, s/he did think that it was beneficial for others (2007/08) (see Appendix 3.D.4.e).

Some students felt embarrassed/stigmatized by having to take the class, and some felt that the class was a burden. One student in the 2007/08 cohort stated that s/he didn’t want to tell anyone s/he was in the class because s/he was too embarrassed (see Appendix 3.D.4.a)

Students in the 2008/09 cohort were more likely to indicate that they felt the class was a burden (see Appendix 3.D.4.c&j). These students were required to complete a full-year, non-credit Gateway course. Many stated that they would have preferred to receive credit for the course and indicated that they would have been more motivated to attend and to “try harder” if they knew they were receiving a mark (see Appendix 3.D.4.n).

4.4 Success

When asked whether they thought their year in Gateway had been a success, all but one of the interviewees stated that it had been. However, when students were asked to rate their success on a scale of 1 to 10, ratings varied from 4 to 10 out of 10. The term success was self-defined, and students were asked to elaborate on why, or why not, their first year had been successful. Most interviewees claimed that success had been based on their ability to pass their courses. Several students indicated that the Gateway program had helped them gain insight into themselves and their future goals.

Toward the end of the interview, students were asked what they would have done differently in their first year at Lakehead. Several themes relating to balancing social and academic priorities surfaced. Eight students indicated that they wished they had put more effort into their studies (see Appendix 3.F.1). Other common themes were more focus (see Appendix 3.F.4), better time management (see Appendix 3.F.2) and less partying (see Appendix 3.F.3).

Many of the students in the Gateway program appeared not to be engaged in the university experience, having part-time jobs and families to take care of. In our sample, all those with jobs and families were commuter students (i.e., they lived off campus) (see Appendix 3.C.2.d). Family was a theme that was often identified, especially by Aboriginal students, as a barrier to academic endeavours. Of the five students who self-declared as being part of a visible minority, four indicated that family played a large role in their ability to perform academically.

5. Discussion

5.1 Concerns and Difficulties Experienced

This study sought to examine the needs of non-traditional students attending an Ontario university and to explore the effectiveness of an academic intervention program on their overall success. Prior to entering university, many Gateway students had uncertain or unrealistic expectations and were unsure of what to expect from the university experience. Others had more individual uncertainties such as questioning their ability to complete university-level work or their ability to make the lifestyle changes necessary to attend university. Some had unrealistic expectations about their ability to balance the social aspect of university with their academics, and they did not take the academic component as seriously as they should have. Most students enrolled in the Gateway program at Lakehead University experienced similar fears and uncertainties prior to attending university, and they needed help in understanding what university life is about and how to balance their different roles.

Students enrolled in the Gateway program entered the University with lower academic credentials than did many of their peers. Many of them had poor academic skills and had problems with time management. These concerns were consistent with findings from prior research, which state that under-prepared students are more likely to have deficiencies in academic skills. In addition, according to Bandura (1977) and the Higher Education Extension Service (2000) (as cited in Heisserer and Parette, 2002), if students experience low academic self-esteem throughout their formalized schooling, they are likely to bring these past, negative experiences to university, and this could impact their academic potential and performance there as well (Heisserer & Parette, 2002, para. 6).

The most commonly mentioned problem related to academics was time management/procrastination. Self-declared first generation students reported more problems related to time management and placing priority on the time they devoted to their classes. Mature and commuter students more often needed help in balancing their employment and academic priorities. According to Metzner and Bean (1987), although non-traditional students may become socially and academically integrated into the campus environment, they tend to spend considerable time external to the university while enrolled (Metzner and Bean, 1987, p. 18), and this has a negative impact on their degree of integration into the university environment.

Family and outside responsibilities are very important for Aboriginal and mature students. In addition mature students often have a large number of outside responsibilities and past experiences that result in their being more concerned about the practical application of their degree. Their role as a student therefore becomes secondary to their other roles—as parent or employee, etc. (Wylie, 2004, para. 4). This suggests that, to ensure success, it is important to work with these students (especially Aboriginal students and students with families), to help balance family needs/responsibilities and academics. One mature Aboriginal student suggested

that there should be a Gateway section for parents with kids in order to help them “get ready for the radical change in their life” (see Appendix 3.D.4.e).

Issues relating to the social transition to university were common as well. Specifically, students in residence experienced problems in balancing social and academic priorities. Prior research (e.g., Tinto, 1993) shows that students are more likely to persist in university when they are able to successfully separate from their home environment and become academically and socially integrated into the university setting. Successful transitions that bridge the students’ home environment with the university environment are critical, primarily in the students’ first year of study (as cited in Inkelas, Daver, et al, 2007, p. 406).

Overall, the concerns and difficulties experienced by first year, non-traditional students at Lakehead University were similar to those experienced by first year, non-traditional students across North America. This has important implications, as it means that techniques and interventions developed by researchers who have studied the first year experience in the United States may be applicable to the Canadian higher education system and to a Canadian student demographic.

5.2 The Gateway Program as an Intervention

The Gateway program at Lakehead University helped most interviewees with at least some of their most significant concerns and difficulties, and almost every student interviewed indicated that at least parts of the Gateway program were useful. Having the connection with an academic advisor appears to have been beneficial for all students. For some students, the relationship was simply one where they could ask for help, while for others, it was a more encompassing relationship. One emergent theme was the number of students who commented that their academic advisor helped keep them on track academically. Many students indicated that because they did not want to disappoint their advisor, they were motivated to complete their course work. It appears that these students were more likely to be motivated by external sources (e.g., trying to please those who were supporting their education) than by internal motivation.

Many students in the Gateway program had difficulties relating their everyday actions (e.g., studying) to their long-term goals. This displays the need for intrusive advising, especially for non-traditional students who may quickly fall through the cracks. Intrusive advising, particularly in the first year, helps in the early identification of students who may be struggling. In addition, helping students create long-term educational and career goals may also aid students in making the connection between their daily actions and their long-term plans. Research suggests that commitment to educational and career goals are among the strongest factors associated with persistence in college or university (Feldman, 2005, p. 28). Another factor related to persistence is students’ feelings of connectedness to the university, both academically and socially. These feelings of integration are increased when the student is able to make connections with university staff and/or faculty, such as an academic advisor. According to Holmes, intrusive advising helps students stay on top of their workload, knowing that someone will be checking in on them. In addition, they are more likely to receive connections to relevant

university services and to feel that someone at the institution cares about their success (as cited in Heisserer & Parette, 2002, para. 27).

The Gateway program made students aware of the supports that were available to them throughout the university (e.g., free tutoring at the Learning Assistance Centre). Despite best intentions, it appears that many students either did not make use of these supports or did so only if it was convenient. Prior research shows that there are many reasons why large numbers of students fail to utilize academic support services and courses. According to Dembo & Seli (2004, p. 2), if students believe they are unable to change, don't understand what needs to be changed or don't understand how to go about implementing change, they are less likely to seek help. Many students fail to seek help and do not readily participate in academic supports unless those supports are mandatory. In addition, students often fail to attend sessions or classes on a regular basis (ibid.). Even when forced to see an advisor, some students were not completely open with their advisor regarding any academic or transitioning concerns. This supports the idea of having mandatory first year programming, such as a student success course, and working diligently on developing relationships with students so they are able to be open about any concerns they may be experiencing.

Students may not be aware of their educational limitations – or they may define them differently than their educators or their institution. For example, when asked if s/he had a disability, one student responded in the negative. However, later in the conversation, this student described how his/her disabilities (learning and mental health) affected his/her ability to perform academically. Providing programming for special groups (e.g., students with disabilities) is effective only if these students identify themselves as members of this group. In addition, other students who indicated that they did not feel they had any difficulties integrating into the university community later referred to a potential problem with gambling, while another student described themselves as feeling socially isolated. It appears that students are often unaware of how their personal circumstances can affect their ability to perform well academically. They may be unable to draw comparisons to how their social/family/personal life may have a bearing on their ability to master the student role unless the correlation is quite clear (e.g., "I work too much and don't have enough time for school"). It may be essential to make programming available to all students, because non-traditional students may be less likely to accept support through programs like Gateway when they are obliged to do so under labels they've received throughout their formalized schooling.

Another theme that emerged through the interview process was students' inability to effectively measure their academic capabilities and expectations. Many of the interviewees felt that they did not need the Gateway program or believed that although the Gateway class may have been helpful for others, it did not help them specifically. These were students who had previously struggled in high school and/or college. Even knowing this, many of these students felt that it was their choice to not perform well previously and that if they chose to do better academically, they would be successful. According to their perception, it was not external resources that made them successful, but their own internal desire. Despite feeling that they did not need the class, most admitted during some part of the interview that some part of the course had helped. Conversely, some students felt that their success was based solely on the Gateway program and that they wouldn't have been successful without it. These results suggest that it is important

for advisors to talk with students about the role they play in their own academic success, in addition to pointing out how resources can help support them, rather than leading them. In hindsight, interviewees realized that their successes were based on their own motivation or willpower throughout the year (e.g., studying more and not procrastinating) and that their success (or lack of success) was determined by their own actions. This relates to the theory of self-efficacy; people who believe that they lack the skills to perform certain behaviours are not likely to attempt that behaviour. Students will often attribute successes and failures to such factors as “ability, effort, task difficulty and luck” (Schunk, 1989, p. 176). Self-efficacy emphasizes students’ beliefs concerning their capabilities to act in given ways, rather than the outcomes of these actions.

Many of the interviewed students had a strong desire to pursue a university education. Most mentioned that they were excited to come to university for the new experience and for the education/challenge of learning new things. Ten students indicated that if they hadn’t been successful in getting into Lakehead University, they would have tried again in the future. For these students, the Gateway program may have been especially beneficial because it may have eliminated the need to spend a year upgrading their high school or college credits. Although students expressed enthusiasm for attending university, this was not always translated into success once they were actually at Lakehead. Therefore students may need help translating initial enthusiasm into day-to-day actions. Most of the students who expressed excitement about attending university were either first generation or mature students.

6. Limitations and Follow-up Study

This study used qualitative data analysis to examine whether the Gateway program was beneficial for first year students. All but one of the students interviewed for this project were current students at Lakehead University. Initially the researchers hoped to examine the experiences of all students in the Gateway program; those who returned to Lakehead University the following year and those who did not. However the study was not able to explore the experiences of students who did not return to Lakehead University the following year. A lack of reliable contact information for those individuals no longer at Lakehead likely hampered our ability to contact and recruit them to complete an interview.

While this study explored the experiences of students currently enrolled in the Gateway program and students who had completed the program the year before, it will not be until the second part of this report is released (in 2014) that the long-term impacts of the Gateway program on retention and graduation rates of students will be examined. The follow-up report will explore whether the Gateway program helped students in the long term – that is, to continue at Lakehead and successfully complete their program of study. Gateway students will be compared to a group of non-Gateway students selected to mimic characteristics of Gateway students (e.g., first generation, mature). We will compare the "success" of these two groups of students by comparing metrics such as academic averages, courses completed/courses attempted, eligibility to enter Year 2, retention to Year 2 and graduation.

Authors' note: Since the time of writing, preliminary retention statistics for the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 Gateway cohorts have become available and are as follows:

Cohort	Headcount	Retained to 2nd Year	Retained to 3rd Year
2007-2008	72	72%	60%
2008-2009	32	78%	

7. Conclusion

Based on this research with students in Lakehead University's Gateway program, students responded positively, overall, regarding their experience during their first year. The most commonly stated benefits of the Gateway program were the intrusive advising students received and the relationships they developed with their advisors. Students talked extensively about the benefits of intrusive advising and noted that being held accountable was paramount in their success as a student. For non-traditional students, having someone on campus with whom they connected and who cared about their overall academic success enabled them to be more involved with their role as a student. Based on the experiences of these students, it would appear that intrusive advising is the most valuable part of the Gateway program and should be continued. It also stands to reason that providing intrusive advising to "at risk" population groups and first year students may improve retention rates and therefore benefit universities in the long run.

One common theme revealed that non-traditional students struggled with balancing their outside demands and their academics. To address this, it is important for universities to develop programming to help these students become more engaged on campus. Examples of such services may include a commuter services office, a mature and part-time student association, childcare on campus, seminars on being a single parent while attending university, time management seminars and the provision of more employment opportunities on campus (on-campus jobs tend to offer more flexibility as well as helping the student become more engaged with the university as a whole).

The value of the student success course was debatable based on student reactions. Many students felt that the course was not useful to them or that the course in general was a burden (whether it was for credit or not). In addition, some students indicated that they felt "stigmatized" by having to complete the course as part of the Gateway program. Overall, most students found the advising relationship much more useful than the course itself. This could be due to a number of reasons. One possibility is that the advisors were seen as being more of a support than a "requirement." The students also found the relationship to be more on a personal level, while the course was just another academic requirement they needed to fulfill. Although the students may have felt that the study skills course was cumbersome, most were able to apply the skills they learned to their other courses (e.g., better time management, better test preparation and more intentional learning).

Overall, the Gateway program appeared to be a useful intervention for students, and the majority felt that it helped them their transition to university. Because these students entered university with lower academic averages, providing them with intrusive support was essential to ensure that they were not "lost" during their first year. In addition, most research surrounding first year programming in the United States stresses the importance of such initiatives for all students, not just those who are deemed "at risk." Since the Gateway program appeared to be effective for this student group, the researchers believe it would be valuable, at the very least,

for institutions to provide programming to their entire “at risk” student population, not just those entering first year.

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