

# **Why Do Aboriginal Students Stay or Leave Thompson Rivers University?**

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## Acknowledgements

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The cover art was created by Jacinta Sampson, an Aboriginal student attending TRU. You can see the mother and child image on a full moon.

## Executive Summary

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“We have lived together in the same area for over 500 years, and we still don’t know each other. If we are going down the same path, we can walk together” (Mike Arnouse, Elder, 2009).

We analyzed information on 430 Aboriginal TRU undergraduate students to identify factors that best predict if the students stayed or left the university. **Overall, 54% of Aboriginal students leave TRU before completing their programs and do not return**, compared to 33% for non-Aboriginal students (IPA, 2009). The retained rate (students who stayed) was 37% for Aboriginals and 66% for non-Aboriginal students. Despite these facts, about 80% of Aboriginal students rated their overall TRU educational experience as “Good” or “Excellent” (IPA, 2009).

The factors of university GPA, age, gender, home location (rural, urban), parental education level, and student university engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement questionnaire) were included in analyses to predict retention. **Supportive Campus Environment (NSSE subscale) and university GPA were the only two factors that predicted if an Aboriginal student stayed or left TRU.** Within the Supportive Campus Environment scale, the best predictors were the Aboriginal student ratings on institutional support for non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.), and support for a thriving social environment. The Aboriginal students who left TRU reported less institutional support for non-academic responsibilities and creating thriving social environments, and they had lower university GPAs compared to students who stayed. **The combination of Supportive Campus Environment and university GPA predicted if an Aboriginal student stayed or left the university with 73% accuracy.** Aboriginal students gave high ratings to their relationships with faculty, students, and administrative support personnel.

Surprisingly, the factors of **age, gender and home location (rural, urban), and parental education level did not predict Aboriginal student retention at TRU.**

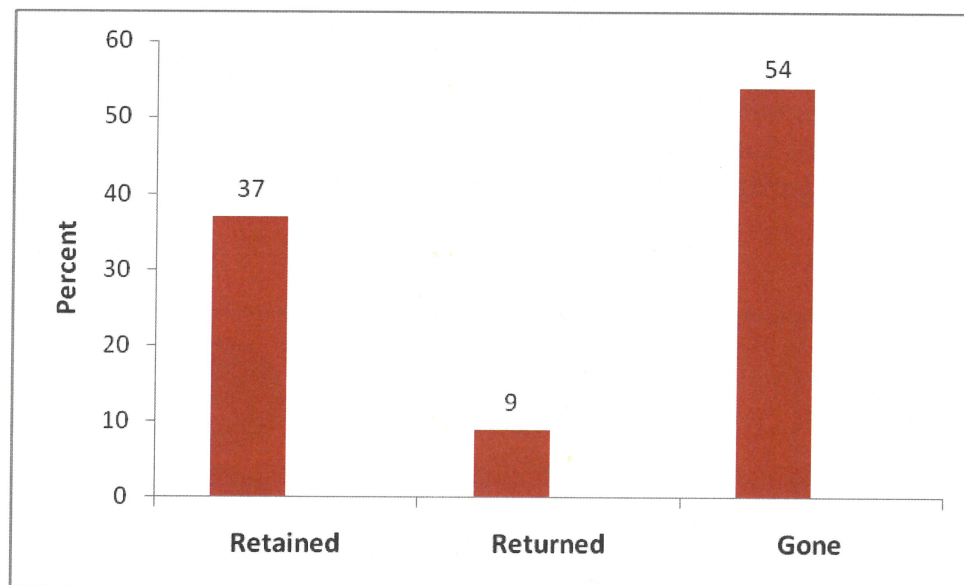
To increase Aboriginal student retention at TRU, we recommend:

- Increased support to help Aboriginal students cope with non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.), and to enhance the social environment at the university. We see roles for the university and the Aboriginal community;
- Increased academic support to help raise the university GPA for the Aboriginal students who need that assistance;
- More “easy exit and return” policies at TRU to facilitate the return of the many Aboriginal students who leave the university and do not return. The Open Learning course completion is higher for Aboriginal students than for non-Aboriginal students, and so Open Learning could potentially play a role.
- Interviewing Aboriginal students to identify the specific non-academic supports needed, and how to enhance the social environment at TRU. Then, the university and Aboriginal community will be in a strong position to focus our efforts.

## Introduction

"There are more Aboriginal students going to university now and we fought for a long time to get that. We fought to get grade 3, then grade 7, and we got high school in 1951" (Mike Arnouse, Elder, 2009).

The 2006 census in Canada revealed that 8% of Aboriginal people had completed a university degree compared to 19% for the general population, a rate over two times greater. If we can understand why Aboriginal students stay or leave Thompson Rivers University (TRU), we will be in a strong position to focus our efforts where they may have the most positive effect. At TRU, 37% of Aboriginal students stayed to complete their programs, 9% left and then later returned to university, and 232 of 430 (54%) **left TRU before completing their programs and did not return (see Figure 1, Gone category). Most students left during their first year.** The data was not available to make a direct comparison with non-Aboriginal TRU students across the years of data available for the project. However, in the nearest year where a comparison can be made (2004), the non-Aboriginal Retained rate was 66%, and the Gone rate was 33% (IPA, 2009a).



**Figure 1 - Aboriginal Retained, Returned, and Gone from TRU.**

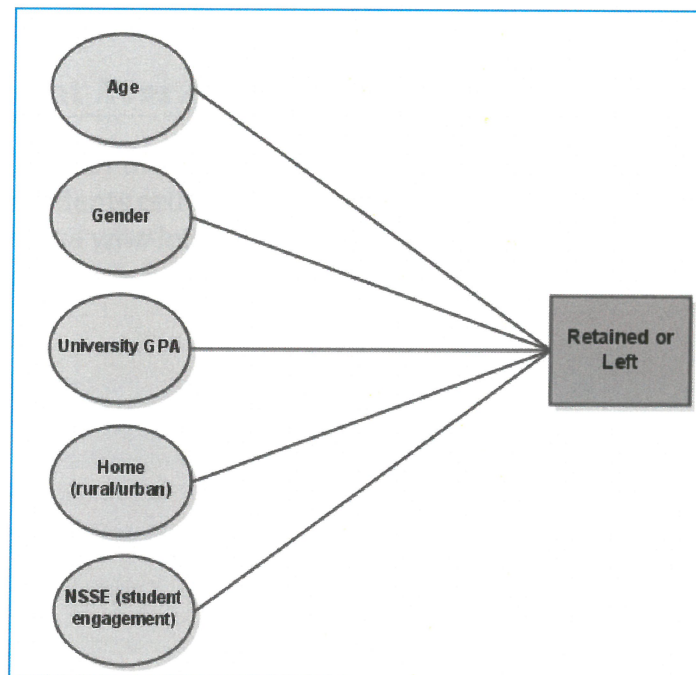
What can we learn from the experience at other universities? There is little existing research on Aboriginal university retention in Canada. In a study at the University of British Columbia, Archibald, Selkirk, Bowman, Pepper, Urion, Mirehouse, and Shortt (1995) listened to the stories of Aboriginal graduates and found that finances, family responsibilities, and racism were significant obstacles to staying in university, and that cultural connections with the Aboriginal community were key supports. Pidgeon (2009), and Shwartz and Ball (2001), also interviewed Aboriginal graduates and found that Aboriginal social interactions and ceremonies were strong supports. Other researchers questioned off-reserve Aboriginal students and found that most who left



reported a lack of satisfaction with their program (52 %) as the reason for leaving the university, financial reasons were cited by 22%, and academic difficulties were cited by 12% (Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2007). **The review of research found that the main obstacles for Aboriginal students staying in university were finances, family responsibilities, racism, lack of program satisfaction, and academic difficulties. The most common supports were cultural connections with the Aboriginal community, Aboriginal social interactions, and ceremonies.** We see roles for the university and the Aboriginal community.

What can we do to increase Aboriginal student retention at TRU, and how do we proceed in a way that respects Aboriginal protocol and appropriate ethical practices? Recently, TRU created the First Nations and Aboriginal Affairs Committee (FNAAC) made up of Aboriginal students, Aboriginal community organizations, Elders, TRU Aboriginal counselors, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal faculty and administrators. The committee decided that the most pressing research need was to find out why Aboriginal university students left university, and what factors supported the students who stayed and graduated. This report represents a step towards understanding the key factors related to the retention of Aboriginal students at TRU.

TRU has database information on all students, including those who self-identify to the institution as being Aboriginal. This report is based on information for the 430 Aboriginal baccalaureate students who began their programs at TRU in Kamloops from 2004 to 2009. Consistent with the ethical use of secondary data, identity information was removed prior to analyses and individuals cannot be identified in the report. TRU databases contain information on five key factors that are potentially related to staying or leaving university; age, gender, university grade point average (GPA), home location (rural or urban), and student engagement (results of the National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008 and 2009). We examined each factor in turn and then together (see *Figure 2*).



**Figure 2 - What factors contribute to Aboriginal retention and university leaving?**

## Aboriginal Graduation Rates

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Overall, 54% of Aboriginal students leave TRU before completing their programs and do not return, compared to 33% for non-Aboriginal students (see *Figure 1*). The retained rate (students who stayed) was 37% for Aboriginals and 66% for non-Aboriginal students. At the same time, about 80% of the Aboriginal students rated their entire educational experience at TRU as “Good” or “Excellent”. One explanation of a high rate of leaving university **and** a high overall rating of the institution is that some of the key factors related to Aboriginal students leaving the university originate from outside TRU. We now report the findings of our analyses based on the factors shown in *Figure 2*, beginning with age. More information about the statistical analyses is presented in Appendix 1.

### Age

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The average age was 22 years, 6 months for the Aboriginal students who stayed at university, 22 years, 5 months for those who returned, and 22 years, 9 months for those who left university. **Age was not related** to whether an Aboriginal student stayed or left TRU.

### Gender

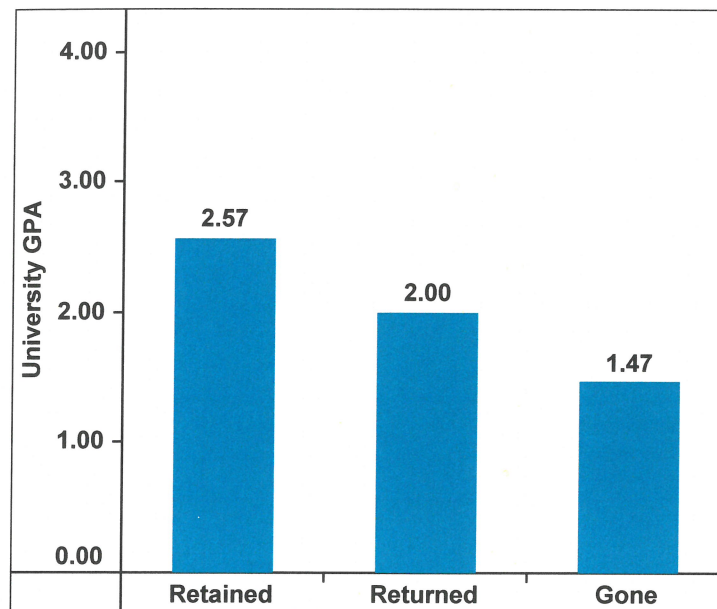
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Of the 430 Aboriginal students in the sample, 305 were female and 125 were male. The gender ratio of students who were Retained, Returned, or Gone was also reflected in the three categories (119 Aboriginal women were retained compared to 40 men). **Gender was not related** to Aboriginal students staying or leaving TRU.

## University Grade Point Average (GPA)

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University GPA is the average of the grades received by the student (see Appendix 2). The GPA differences between the students retained (Average = 2.57, C+), those who left and later returned (Average = 2.00, C), and those who left university for good (Average = 1.47, D) were all significant. So, **university GPA was strongly related to retention** (see *Figure 3*).



**Figure 3 - University GPA of Aboriginal students Retained, Returned or Gone.**

### **Home Location (Urban, Rural)**

Home location was classified as either Rural or Urban, and we had home location information for 412 Aboriginal students. Of the 412 students, 263 were Urban and 149 were Rural. The ratios of students who were Retained, Returned and Gone (never returned to TRU) were very similar to the overall Urban to Rural ratio. **Home location was not related** to staying or leaving the university.

### **Student Engagement at University**

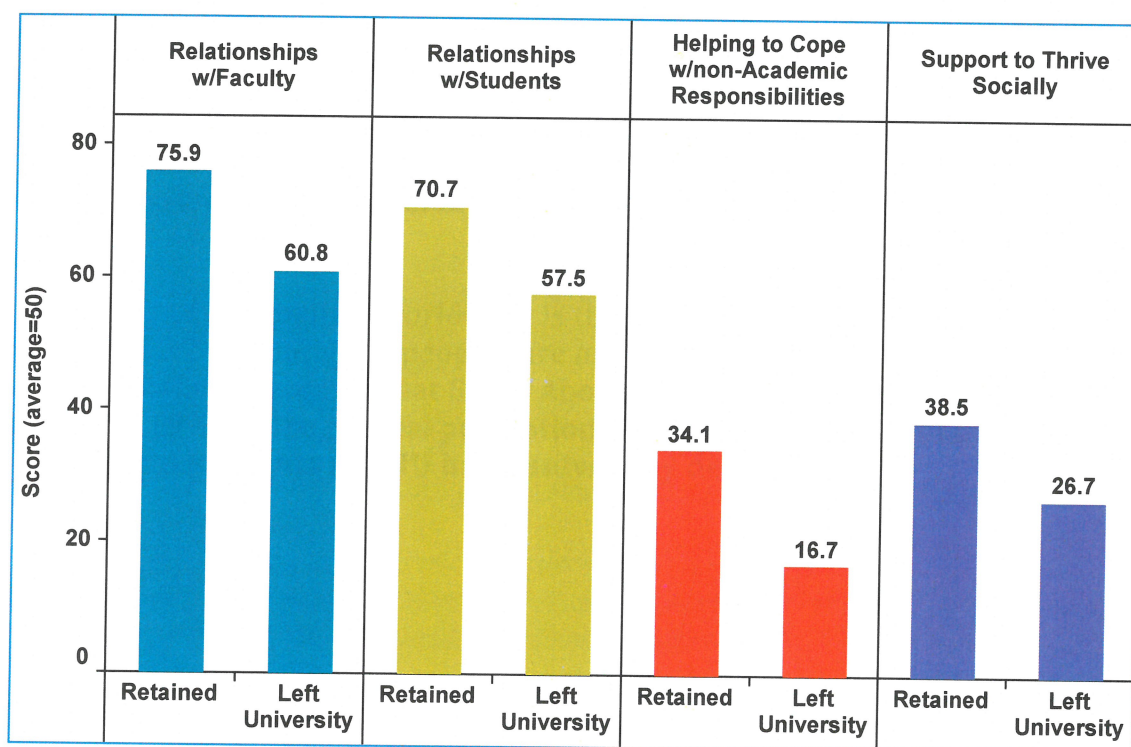
TRU and many other Canadian universities administer the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to all university students in years 1 and 4 to assess student academic and social engagement. Students self-declare if they are Aboriginal and we have NSSE information for 65 of the 430 Aboriginal students in this report. The NSSE has over 80 questions grouped into 5 subscales. Students complete the survey over the internet and the completion rate is typically 40%. A copy of the NSSE is available at the following website:  
[http://nsse.iub.edu/html/survey\\_instruments\\_2010.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/html/survey_instruments_2010.cfm).

The NSSE has five subscales (Supportive Campus Environment, Academic Challenge, Active Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Enriching Educational Experiences). We used predictive analyses to see if the Aboriginal student responses on the subscales could predict if they stayed or left the university. **The Supportive Campus Environment subscale was the only significant NSSE predictor of whether Aboriginal students stayed or left the university.**



We examined the questions within the Supportive Campus Environment subscale and found that **the question which best predicted if the student stayed or left TRU asked if the institution helped you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)**. All Aboriginal students rated TRU below average on institutional support for non-academic needs, but the lowest rating was by the students who left TRU (see *Figure 4*, column 3).

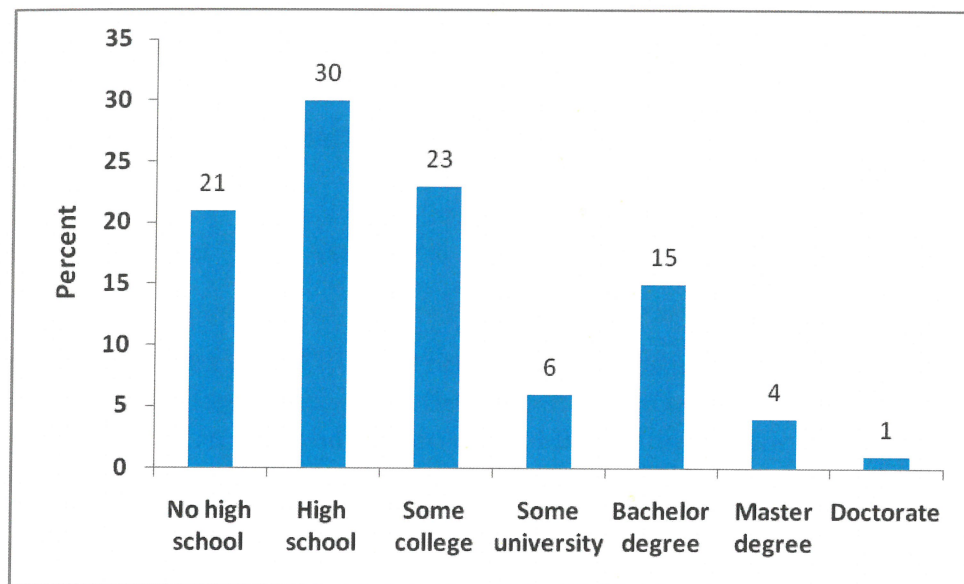
The Aboriginal students reported good relationships with faculty and other students, although the students who left gave significantly lower ratings in both categories. Also, most Aboriginal students gave the institution low ratings on providing support to thrive socially (see *Figure 4*, column 4).



*Figure 4* - Key questions within the Supportive Campus Environment subscale.

## Parental Education Level

The NSSE also asks questions to determine the educational level of both parents. Predictive analyses found that **the education level of the parents did not predict if an Aboriginal student stayed or left the university**. We were surprised at this finding and it suggests that other factors affecting Aboriginal retention are more important than parental education level. The education level of the parents of the 65 students who completed the NSSE survey are shown in *Figure 5*.



*Figure 5 - Parent education level of TRU Aboriginal students.*

One important legacy of colonialism worldwide is the under-representation of Indigenous peoples at universities but Aboriginal peoples are making huge gains in university education. The 2006 census in Canada revealed that 8% of Aboriginal people had completed a university degree compared to 19% for the general population. *Figure 5* shows that **about 20% of the parents of Aboriginal students at TRU have university degrees.**



## Recommendations

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To increase Aboriginal student retention at TRU, we recommend:

➤ **Increased support to help students with non-academic responsibilities (e.g., work, family)**

Most Aboriginal students gave TRU **low** ratings on institutional support with non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.), and the students who left gave the lowest ratings overall. We need to address this matter but we do not yet know the specific non-academic responsibilities that are affecting Aboriginal students at TRU. We need to interview the students and others to identify the specific obstacles and supports, and then the university and Aboriginal community will know where to focus our efforts.

➤ **Enhanced social environment for Aboriginal students**

Most Aboriginal students rated TRU poorly on providing support for a thriving social environment. The research review found that most common supports identified by Aboriginal students were cultural connections with the Aboriginal community, Aboriginal social interactions, and ceremonies. We recommend having a talking circle with Aboriginal students to identify improvements to the social environment at TRU.

➤ **Increased academic support for Aboriginal students to improve university GPA**

The 54% of Aboriginal students who left the university and did not return had a lower university GPA (1.47, minimal pass) than students who stayed or returned. Clearly, more academic support needs to be provided to these students.

➤ **Easy Exit and Return policies**

Recent research in New Zealand recommends turning to retention strategies that ease the exit and return of Maori students back to post-secondary institutions (Te Tari Matauranga, 2007). For example, many Aboriginal university students have families of their own and stretching programs out over time might allow more students to graduate. Easy return to TRU might involve Open Learning, as the completion rate for Open Learning courses is higher for Aboriginal students than for non-Aboriginal students. We recommend interviewing Aboriginal students who left TRU to identify supports that can facilitate their return to university.

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## Appendix 1 - Statistical Analyses

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### Age

Analysis – ANOVA with Age as the outcome variable and Retention (Retained, Returned, Gone) as the grouping variable.  $F(2, 427) = .08, p > .05$ .

### Gender

Analysis – Chi-square with Gender (female, male) and Retention (Retained, Returned, Gone) as categorical variables.  $\text{Chi-square}(2, N = 430) = 3.39, p > .05$ .

### University GPA

Analysis – ANOVA with university GPA as the outcome variable and Retention (Retained, Returned, Gone) as the grouping variable.  $F(2, 427) = 76.26, p < .001$ .

### Home (Urban, Rural)

Analysis – Chi-square with Home (Urban, Rural) and Retention (Retained, Returned, Gone) as categorical variables.  $\text{Chi-square}(2, N = 412) = .13, p > .05$ .

### Student Engagement (NSSE)

Analysis 1 – Logistic regression analysis with the five subscales as predictors and Retention (Retained or Left) as the outcome grouping variable.

Analysis 2 - Logistic regression analysis with the six Supportive Campus Environment questions as predictors and Retention (Retained or Left) as the outcome grouping variable.

Analysis 3 - Logistic regression analysis with the Supportive Campus Environment subscale, university GPA, father educational level, and mother educational level as predictors, and Retention (Retained or Left) as the outcome variable.

## Appendix 2 – Letter Grade and Grade Point Equivalents at TRU

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Letter Grade	Numerical Grade	Grade Points	Description
A+	90-100	4.33	Excellent.
A	85-89	4.00	
A-	80-84	3.67	
B+	77-79	3.33	Very y good.
B	73-76	3.00	
B-	70-72	2.67	
C+	65-69	2.33	Satisfactory.
C	60-64	2.00	
C-	55-59	1.67	Pass.
D	50-54	1.00	Minimal pass.
F	0-49	0.00	Unsatisfactory.
DNC		0.00	Did not complete.