# Universities make way for the “non-traditional” student

**Campus support programs are helping a diverse set of students to succeed in a system that wasn't designed for them.**

By WENDY GLAUSER | AUG 01 2018

Dominique Oliver-Dares remembers being a first-year undergraduate student at Dalhousie University, looking around at the other students in her “humongous” introductory classes and seeing only a handful of Black students like her spread out around the room. “It was very isolating,” she recalls. “Sometimes your fellow students either know each other from somewhere else, or they might just feel more comfortable to make friends with the other students that look like them. I couldn’t engage in conversations as easily.”

In her second year at Dalhousie, personal issues left Ms. Oliver-Dares struggling with her courses, so one day she showed up at the university’s Black Student Advising Centre. “I started going informally and socially. I didn’t really have the confidence to say I need help, but as I was there, I saw other people getting help in their subjects. I was able to tell the coordinator what I needed.” She was matched with a peer adviser and was referred right away to campus resources she didn’t know existed. “There are a lot of resources that you might only find out about after a couple of years, like the writing centre,” she says. “[My peer adviser] told me about simple things like where to get affordable food on campus, and where you can sell your textbooks to get money.” With the added support, confidence boosts and frequent check-ins with the centre and her peer adviser, Ms. Oliver-Dares went from being on academic probation to the dean’s list. Now she’s a second-year law student at Dalhousie and a peer adviser herself.

Ms. Oliver-Dares’s academic success story is one that universities across Canada are striving to recreate as students are bringing to campus a wider range of life experiences, expectations and challenges than in previous generations. In 2016, the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium (CUSC) surveyed first-year students at 34 universities and found that 40 percent of respondents reported belonging to a visible minority; three percent self-identified as Indigenous; 11 percent were first-generation students with neither parent having obtained postsecondary education; 22 percent self-identified as having a disability; one percent were 25 years or older; and 34 percent were employed. These numbers represent an increase in nearly every category from the previous CUSC survey of first-year students in 2013.

As the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario has put it, “Whether they are older, work full-time, have a disability, are a single parent, first-generation or Indigenous … the non-traditional student is becoming the new normal.” But even that definition of “non-traditional student” doesn’t quite capture the diversity and vastness of this particular population, which can include virtually any student demographic that has previously been underserved by, or under-represented, in the university sector. Many universities are responding to this new norm with programs to help them through a system that wasn’t historically built to accommodate such complexity.

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Up until recently, the Black Student Advising Centre at Dalhousie occupied the same building as the university’s Indigenous Student Centre. Though construction forced the centres to relocate to separate office spaces, they continue to work from a shared purpose: to foster community and provide support to two of the most under-represented communities on campus.

“It’s about creating a space, a cultural hub, to be able to come together and engage in cultural activities,” says Quenta Adams, who oversees the centres as director of student access and academic support at Dalhousie. Cultural context and experience factor into all programming, from spoken word poetry performances at the Black Student Advising Centre and a monthly Friday feast of traditional foods at the Indigenous Student Centre, to panel talks on topics like “Black Excellence in the Work Force.”

And like Ms. Oliver-Dares, students can also participate in peer mentorship where a struggling student might find help structuring their essays, reflect on skills they may want to improve, or get a referral to services like mindfulness workshops or counselling, depending on their needs. The referral is often welcome when it comes from a peer rather than a staff member or instructor, Ms. Adams says, noting that “the soft handoff works better.” The student peer mentors are especially effective because the challenges the students are facing – like imposter syndrome or roommate concerns – are “a recent history” for the peer mentors, she adds.

In addition to helping students who come to the centres, the staff also provide workshops and advice to instructors on how to be more cognizant of the struggles of non-traditional students. Ms. Adams recommends that instructors provide opportunities to “allow students to tell their stories” and to critically evaluate if the teaching style and content is resonating with them. “You want to ask, ‘What difference do they bring to the classroom and how might the classroom benefit from that?’” she says.

Another program that harnesses peer mentors to support non-traditional students is the Q Success program at Queen’s University. According to Woo Kim, manager of student experience at Queen’s, every year the program pairs more than 200 students with a student peer mentor. Matches are made based on what students indicate is important to them in a mentor – whether that’s a mentor who shares their racial identity or one who shares the experience of being a parent, for instance. The program is pitched to students during orientation events and advertised with posters and brochures across the campus.

Although peer mentors are recruited from across the university, program administrators also purposefully recruit from a variety of campus groups and among former mentees to encourage a diversity of participants. The mentors undergo training at the beginning of the academic year and participate in professional development workshops throughout the year.

Mentors and mentees meet once a week for the first six weeks of the program. After that, the students decide how often they should interact – and not all support happens in person. “They’re using social media, and they’re emailing each other,” Ms. Kim says. This flexibility ensures that mentorship can mesh with the students’ jobs, or responsibilities at home, she adds.

In their training, mentors are taught what to ask their mentees about and are offered helpful tips to share. Mentees might have questions that run the gamut from, “What does a final exam look like?” and “How do you approach your professor?” to “Where can I make a friend?” They are also taught to refer to other supports on campus when necessary. They might introduce first-year students to a peer health educator, walk them to the Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre or point them to the student awards office where they can apply for bursaries.

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Many programs for non-traditional students reinforce the fact that the strongest network these students may have to help them through school is often found in their cultural communities. That’s the belief behind the University of Calgary’s Aboriginal Student Access Program (ASAP). The program is

designed to specifically help Indigenous students who may not meet the full requirements to register in a faculty to access faculty-based classes and transition to campus life.

Around 35 students join the one-year program annually, says Jennifer Quin, senior director of student services at U of C. Participating students all take two courses together – a first-year English course and an Indigenous studies course – and get together for events and workshops. In becoming a cohort, the students, many of whom come from rural environments, build a sense of community at a university where Indigenous students make up two percent of the student body. "This is a really large campus," says Ms. Quin. "They're a small community within a large community. They support each other."

ASAP students take part in several workshops and events led by an Indigenous elder, including sage picking and monthly women's tea ceremonies. Students who want to meet with an elder to discuss a specific issue can request one-on-one "cultural advising" through the program. In addition, ASAP program director Cate Hannington meets with each student at least once a semester to address any barriers to academic success the student might be facing, and more. "Anytime an adviser knows exactly who a student is, what their background is, and can create specialized supports … that's one of the most important relationships a student can have," says Ms. Quin.

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Wilfrid Laurier University's Access 2 University (A2U) builds on the work and expertise of a local community organization to help non-traditional students apply to, and succeed at, university. For the past two years, professors at Laurier have partnered with The Working Centre, a non-profit organization in downtown Kitchener, Ontario, that works with people who face unemployment and poverty. Young people who use the centre's services are encouraged to apply to A2U, which prepares participants for university-level learning through five free, half-credit introductory courses. Laurier staff and two representatives from The Working Centre select 15 applicants for the program each year.

The applicants "tend to be newcomers to Canada, sometimes refugees, and they're almost all the first generation in their families to attend university," explains Bob Sharpe, a professor in Laurier's geography and environmental studies department and a faculty liaison with the program. "They face a whole range of obstacles including income problems and mental health issues."

The program starts with an orientation session at The Working Centre, where students learn "the expectations that universities have, basic time-management skills, and how to improve their written and oral communication skills," Dr. Sharpe explains. Next, they take two courses that have been designed specifically for them, are taught by instructors who employ diverse teaching methods and offer targeted learning supports. The students then take three first-year arts courses of their choice, which can count toward a future degree. Once they complete the five courses, they can apply to an undergraduate program at Laurier or elsewhere.

Students in geography and environmental studies at Laurier who are registered in that department's community engagement option help out as teaching assistants for A2U – they break down course readings and assignments, provide a sympathetic ear and refer A2U students to on-campus supports. Meanwhile, The Working Centre staff are available as an off-campus resource for an A2U student's needs that fall beyond the university's scope. When one A2U student got evicted, for example, centre staff helped that person find another apartment and move. Having that extra support helps A2U students focus more of their attention on school and a little less on the significant challenges that may have kept them from furthering their education in the first place.

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Now in its 11th year, Spanning the Gaps at Ryerson University in Toronto is another transitional program that supports students whose dreams of higher education may have been affected by trauma, undiagnosed learning disabilities, income barriers or family responsibilities. Each year, 70 students enrol in the part-time program through Ryerson's Chang School of Continuing Education, where they complete three courses – one in writing, one in math and one in critical thinking. Those who pass the non-credit courses are admitted the following year to an undergraduate program of their choice. Almost everyone succeeds, thanks in large part to the program's encouraging instructors and the supports provided by Spanning the Gaps staff.

Janice Pinto, case coordinator of the program, calls students in the program on a weekly basis and encourages them to drop by her office. If a student has a learning disability, a staff member will help them develop study techniques and advocate for them if teaching or exam-writing accommodations are required. Those who need to support children or siblings are connected to work-study programs and helped with bursary application letters. Spanning the Gaps staff members also refer students for counselling, help students find housing and generally act as a cheerleader. "We spend a lot of time talking about the students' strengths," says Ms. Pinto. "We have students commuting from really far and they're caregivers… they're needing that motivation in whatever format we can give it."

O'neil Edwards, an educational consultant and former program director for Spanning the Gaps, says that kind of encouraging approach makes all the difference for participating students. "Knowing that there are people who truly believe in you and think you are going to be successful, that is transformational," he says. In that spirit, Ms. Pinto says, they celebrate every victory; for a student with a mental health issue a victory might even be "sitting in a classroom for three hours, without having a panic attack," she says. Ms. Pinto adds that the program taps into the "resilience that's already inbuilt" in the students, honed by the many obstacles they've already had to overcome.

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The insight that staff and instructors have developed in these programs that support non-traditional students in fact benefits the entire campus community. Students are increasingly seen by university staff, faculty and administrators as the "real, complex human beings" they are, who bring with them rich experiences and connections to a range of communities, explains Ms. Kim at Queen's. Rather than trying to fit these diverse student populations into a one-size-fits-all approach to postsecondary education, these university instructors and staff are looking for different avenues and opportunities to engage in teaching and learning, and new pathways into the postsecondary system.

What's more, these programs often provide students with leadership and mentorship opportunities that strengthen learning, build confidence and allow for a greater range of perspectives in the classroom. And the long-term effects are invaluable. As Mr. Edwards, the educational consultant previously at Ryerson points out, these opportunities beget more opportunities – students will go on to careers and pursuits they may not have otherwise had access to. They may start services and groups that help their communities; they may even support their own kids through postsecondary someday.

Dr. Sharpe at Laurier agrees. "Once you give these students the tools – the writing tools, how to critically analyze, how to make videos – they just flourish," he says. "There's clearly untapped talent."