

# Persistence in Post-Secondary Education

## The Argument:

Between one in five and one in ten students in Canada who access post-secondary education leave without completing their program of study. Many more take longer than expected to graduate. Of course, for certain groups of students—that is to say, more marginal students whose success must be ensured if we are to improve educational outcomes in Canada—persistence rates are lower. This is the challenge to which educators must respond: to act to ensure that all those who enter post-secondary education have the opportunity to succeed. As we demonstrate, the efforts of post-secondary institutions to respond to this challenge—by putting in place support services for students at-risk of discontinuing their studies—can be bolstered by the lessons learned through demonstration projects already underway.

## Key Facts:

- While only 54 percent of university students and 58 percent of college students graduate from their original program within five years, many of the remaining students either continue in that program or, if they discontinue it, switch programs within the same institution or switch institutions. Some of these continuers and switchers stop out for a period of time before returning.
- Once all these “switchers” and “stop-outs” are taken into account and reclassified as either graduates or continuers, the five-year drop-out rate falls to 10 percent for university students and 18 percent for college students. This represents by far the best estimate of overall persistence rates currently available in Canada, at least for young adults.

**Table 1 — Overall Persistence Rates of Young Adults in Post-Secondary Education in Canada\***

	Graduated	Still in Post-Secondary Education	Discontinued Post-Secondary Education
<b>College</b>			
Year 1	12.0%	75.2%	12.9%
Year 2	36.9%	45.8%	17.3%
Year 3	57.0%	25.1%	17.9%
Year 4	66.2%	14.8%	19.0%
Year 5	73.1%	8.8%	18.0%
<b>University</b>			
Year 1	1.1%	91.0%	7.9%
Year 2	3.6%	86.7%	9.6%
Year 3	11.2%	78.8%	9.9%
Year 4	45.0%	45.2%	9.8%
Year 5	69.4%	20.4%	10.2%

\*Note: Columns may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: Finnie & Qiu, 2008, p. 197, Table 6.

## What's New:

This chapter provides analysis of a longitudinal survey of young Canadians that offers a more accurate portrait of persistence than existing institutional data.

### Myth: PSE Continuers “Get it Right” on Their First Try

In assessing why some students drop out and others persist, it is important to avoid drawing an oversimplistic contrast between those who enrol in a program of studies and stick with it and those who leave. As we have seen above, many of those who discontinue their studies subsequently re-enrol. In other words, many students make a “second attempt” at post-secondary education, and this is an important element in contributing to overall persistence rates. This point is emphasized by Shaienks and Gluszynski, who show that less than 40 percent of those who persist only attempt one program, compared to 64 percent of dropouts (2007, p. 21). As one journalist reviewing the latest data on persistence put it, “today’s students are a mobile bunch, just about as likely to take a zigzag course through college and university as they are to follow a straight line” (Church, 2008; see also Finnie & Qiu, 2008, p. 202). The difference between many of those who persist and those who drop out, therefore, is not that those who persist achieved optimal “program fit” on their first try but that they were able to make an adjustment that led them to stay enrolled.

In light of this, one difference between those who persist and those who drop out can best be viewed in

terms of resilience, a concept that features in health and social work literature but which has lately been the focus of career development theory and curriculum development (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2007). In general, resilience in this context refers to “the capacity to overcome obstacles, adapt to change, recover from trauma or to survive and thrive despite adversity.” Notably, factors contributing to resilience in youth include supportive relationships with adults and parental expectations (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2007, pp. 3–4). Thus, family background is correlated with resilience, which in turn is an essential tool that students need to persist in their studies, especially when setbacks are encountered and changes of plan required.

The following factors are correlated with low persistence:

- Poor academic performance (both secondary and PSE levels)
- Low engagement
- Inadequate financial aid package or high levels of debt
- Uncertainty about career goals
- Lower levels of parental education (in some studies)
- Aboriginal ancestry
- Gender (men are more likely to drop out than women)
- Age & family status (older students and students with dependent children are more likely to drop out)

**Table 2 — Cumulative Transition Rates After Two Years for Students Entering Atlantic PSE Institutions (17- to 20-Year-Olds)**

	Continuers	Graduates	Switchers	Leavers
<b>University</b>				
Year 1	79.8%	0.1%	5.1%	15.1%
Year 2	66.4%	0.7%	8.4%	24.5%
<b>College</b>				
Year 1	52.6%	23.5%	1.3%	22.6%
Year 2	13.1%	52.2%	1.7%	33.0%

Note: Unlike the figures in Table 1, these figures do not account for students who return to studies after leaving.

Source: Finnie & Qiu, 2009, Table 5.