

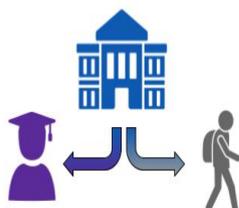
# Leaks in the Pipeline:

## Barriers to Student Success in the Post-Secondary System



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### The Problem



Not all students succeed in university—some drop out<sup>i</sup> while others attain their credentials but without meeting all the learning objectives of their program<sup>ii</sup>. While working with the Athabasca University Students' Union over the last several years I have had the immense privilege of hearing many students' stories and seeing the interconnectedness of the problems they experience. Once problems occur students can get trapped in a cycle of crises which makes it difficult to complete and fully benefit from their education. This analysis and the accompanying systems map centre the students' lived experience as they study to examine the relationships between the barriers to student success, which originate both inside and outside of the academy. My work advocating to the university and to the provincial and federal governments has regularly cycled back to recommendations on how to change the systems that hurt students. This report will highlight the parts of those systems that students routinely get trapped in, as well as identify some key next steps in fixing those systems.

### The Stories

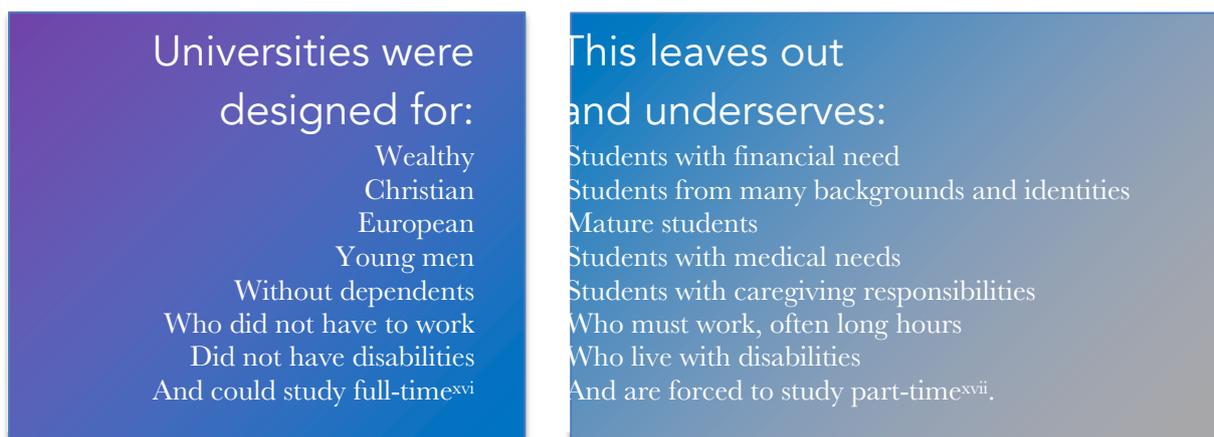


This is both no one's story and many students' story—typical but without any one person's details. Our student is named Alex. Alex is a mature student<sup>iii</sup> that did poorly in school<sup>iv</sup>. They work full time but are unable to make enough to cover rising costs of living in their current position but cannot advance in their career without post-secondary education<sup>v</sup>. Alex and their partner keep their finances separate, but provincial and federal financial aid do not acknowledge this, so refuse Alex student loans due to their partner's income<sup>vi</sup>. As a result, Alex can only afford to study part time, which means their degree will take much longer than if they qualified for a student loan and could study full time;<sup>vii</sup> this decreases their lifetime earnings and the likelihood of Alex graduating<sup>viii</sup>. Alex has struggled with school all their life; it is likely that their difficulties are the result of undiagnosed learning disabilities<sup>ix</sup>, they were never referred for assessment<sup>x</sup>. White boys are disproportionately flagged for diagnosis as children, whereas other demographics are more likely to be punished for comparable behaviour<sup>xi</sup>. Alex contacts Accessibility Services but is told that a formal diagnosis is required to receive accommodations<sup>1</sup> <sup>xiii</sup>. Alex begins the process of getting diagnosed but is stopped by both how expensive and complicated it is<sup>xiii</sup>. They continue to pursue their education, but between working and studying without accommodations their grades and mental health

<sup>1</sup> Canadian term: “accommodations.” British equivalent: “adjustments.” Accessibility measures, not housing.

suffer<sup>xiv</sup>, their anxiety increases, and they have a harder time learning, further increasing their anxiety. Alex already does not qualify for many bursaries due to their partner's income<sup>xv</sup>, and their low grades prevent them from applying to academic-based scholarships, making it difficult to afford tuition.

## The Foundation



Although changes have been added to the systems to try to be more inclusive, accommodations are often clumsy and awkward because they were added after the fact<sup>xviii</sup>. Many of the problems Alex faces are tied to the fact that their experience is described in the right side of the diagram above, rather than the left.

## The Context



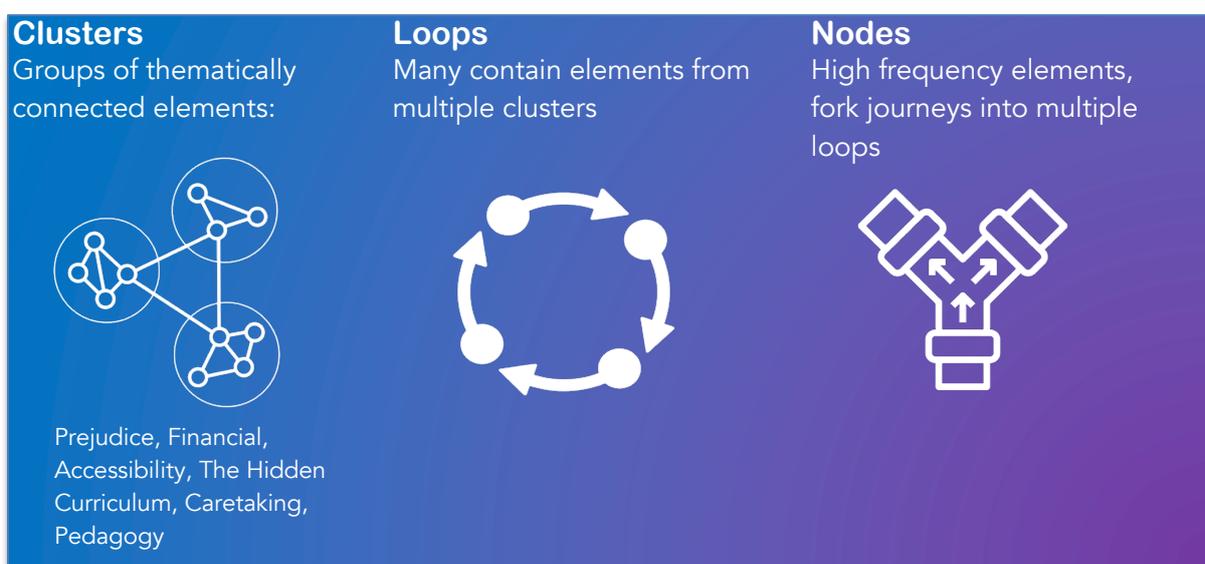
The post-secondary system does not operate in a vacuum, it was created by and to serve colonial and patriarchal society, and these larger paradigms have pervasive impacts throughout post-secondary institutions<sup>xix</sup>. These impacts show up in the assumptions about who can and will provide a student with financial support and who the government counts as a dependent<sup>xx</sup>. Colonial values are demonstrated in the requirement for disabled and ill students to provide proof of their needs through an expensive medical model of disability rather than centring supporting and believing students<sup>xxi</sup>. Colonial and Western norms flavour what we consider professional, creating a hidden curriculum many structurally disadvantaged students must learn in order to fit the mould of who gets letters of recommendation or learns about opportunities<sup>xxii</sup>. Implicit assumptions that students are young men without dependents makes it nearly impossible for a student who gives birth partway through a semester to complete

Colonialism and patriarchy should not be understood simply as a root cause but as something that continually opens and closes doors to different groups of people based on their identity.

their courses because our educational system was not designed to work around pregnancy, childbirth, or miscarriage<sup>xxiii</sup>. Colonialism, racism, and misogyny, among other paradigms, throw weights at students to carry through their education in the forms of barriers, microaggressions, harassment, and violence<sup>xxiv</sup>. Solutions that address the problems discussed in this paper will only work to the extent that we proactively address the larger systems that drop poison into the post-secondary system we want to fix.

## The System

This system contains three major structural elements:



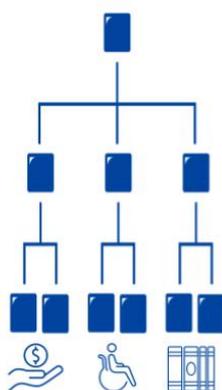
I expected each cluster would have its own set of loops that stayed within that cluster, this turned out to be false. Instead, there were many loops, often spanning multiple clusters. For example, colonial and patriarchal norms cause students to face bigotry, which in turn hurts their mental health, reducing capacity for studying. This, in turn, decreases their grades which makes it less likely that students facing bigotry become professors, their exclusion from the professoriate then perpetuates colonial and patriarchal norms.

I considered whether the fact that so many loops include multiple clusters was an indication that the map was too complicated. This is a system of systems; does this mean I should narrow the focus to one of the clusters? Such an approach would simplify the work but it would also fail to take into account Crenshaw's work on intersectionality<sup>xxv</sup>. I have observed throughout my work with the student union that many of our students experience problems because of silos that exist within the post-secondary institution. For example, students who need to be diagnosed with learning disabilities to get accommodations (a problem with inaccessibility) will have financial barriers (a problem with student aid) preventing them from accessing help—the root of the problem is that solutions are often designed looking at one cluster and fail to consider how one cluster of elements relates to the others.

The great truth of the system: students are failed at the borders between clusters.

The nodes are elements that can split a student's journey into multiple loops. For example, a student may experience inaccessibility and then their grades decrease (a node), which causes that student have problems meeting financial aid requirements and be less likely to get letters of recommendation—they went from being in one loop to being in two. Being in multiple loops increases the number of barriers a student face while introducing new ones, since silos within the post-secondary system mean that finding solutions that work across clusters requires more work from the student.

## The Complications



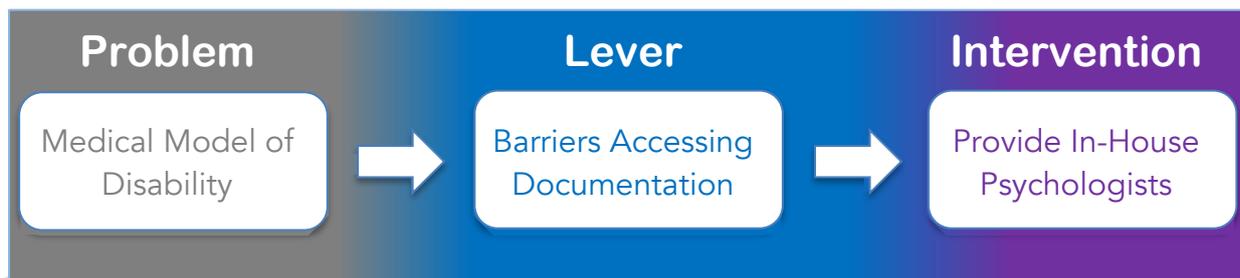
The post-secondary system includes a wide variety of professionals; faculty, learning technologists, financial aid advisors, administrators, among many more. In my experience, almost all want it to function well and care about making positive change. However, universities and the system they are a part of are made up of many parts that need to work together. Change often requires approval and cooperation between different committees or between institutions and government; this is very difficult even when everyone has compatible goals. The embedded structures mean that change requires different decision-making bodies each with their own policies, procedures, and timelines for to work together. Positions with power to change the system (university leadership, government) generally require post-graduate degrees, excluding those whose lived experience forces them out education, creating a feedback loop. Additionally, problems persist due to the highly segmented structure of universities where staff have limited opportunities to interact with people from other departments, preventing collaborations, resulting in one need (i.e. support for learning disabilities), requiring multiple, possibly complicated solutions.

Trying to make change in the post-secondary system is like trying to get marching bands playing different songs to walk in lock-step.

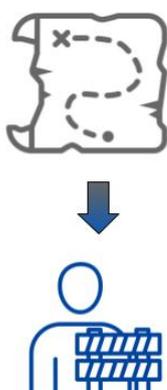
## The Possibilities



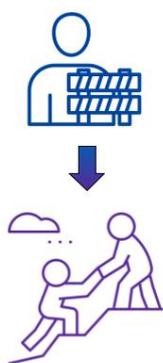
When identifying leverage points I focused on areas that could benefit from specific changes which could be feasibly made in the next three years and would have significant impact. The two key themes in the solutions that follow are (1) building relationships and solutions across different parts of the system and (2) policy changes to simplify students' access to existing solutions. These interventions will decrease the number of students the post-secondary system fails but fixing the system itself will require ongoing work to change the structures of colonialism and patriarchy that underpin the ways of doing things that define the academy and its associated support systems. Despite the challenges in changing a complicated system with entrenched norms there are effective initiatives that are workings to change and improve the post-secondary landscape, and several of the leverage points identified build on existing work.



Currently, students need extensive medical documentation in order to get accommodations, which delays or prevents them from having equitable access to education. Pursuing diagnosis and documentation is expensive and creates considerable additional work for students to do on top of their studies to simply gain accessibility<sup>xxvi</sup>. Making it easier for disabled students to be able to access education would improve their learning outcomes and decrease stress and anxiety. Provinces should provide funding for post-secondary institutions to hire psychologists that can provide diagnoses in-house upon referral from Accessibility Services—eliminating the need for students to navigate finding and paying for providers. At the same time, universities and provinces should allow as many accommodations as possible to be authorised by Accessibility Services<sup>xxvii</sup>. This would require hiring psychologists who want to work within this model (as opposed to teaching or clinical practice). The increased access to the academic supports they need to succeed would help students achieve learning outcomes and maintain grades they need to stay in the program and access financial aid.

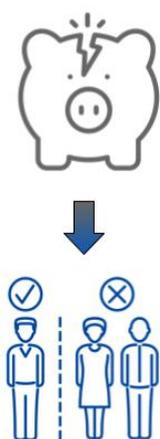


Addressing the unspoken knowledge base that is acquired through proximity to privilege, the hidden curriculum, is a second key leverage point. Students who have less privilege and fewer built-in mentors within the post-secondary system are less likely to know about academic norms and opportunities<sup>xxviii</sup>. For example, students may not know what office hours are and that they can connect with professors during that time, or they may not be aware of resources available through the university such as student success centres<sup>xxix</sup>, how to prepare for grad school, how to get internships and summer jobs in industry, and how and why to attend conferences and other networking events<sup>xxx</sup>.



Creating mentorship opportunities is an intervention that can help all students to learn to navigate the post-secondary system<sup>xxxix</sup>. It is important that faculty and graduate students who participate in these programs as mentors are well-compensated for their labour, both financially but also by valuing this type of service in hiring, promotion, and tenure requirements so that faculty from systematically excluded groups are not inadvertently punished for investing this type of non-research work<sup>xxxix</sup>.

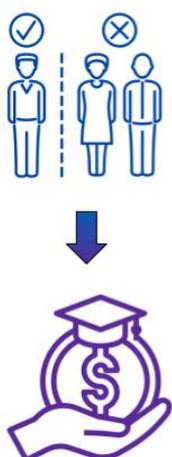
Identifying the knowledge and skills we assume students have and then explicitly teaching those skills as part of the post-secondary experience is a second intervention to address the hidden curriculum. My Academic Family, a non-profit based out of Scotland which supports first generation students has “How to University” talks where students are told about the unwritten rules that help one navigate university, the organization pairs these talks with mentoring opportunities to help students navigate the resources, supports, and opportunities that already exist within the university<sup>xxxix</sup>. Similar interventions would be helpful in Canada.



One of the most common areas that cause students difficulty is financial hardship. This is particularly important due to the number of nodes financial problems feed into; decreasing the number of students who experience poverty will result in fewer students experiencing other negative loops such as mental health difficulties and low grades. There are a number of changes to Canada’s federal and provincial aid eligibility requirements that could address the financial obstacles today’s students face, the recommendations would be a one-time change per jurisdiction that changes an already widely-known program.

#### Key changes:

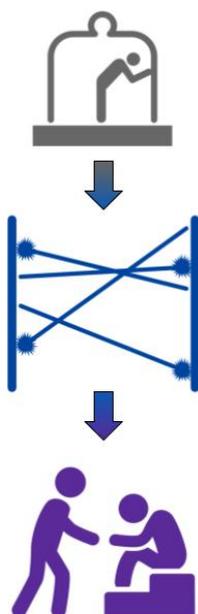
- Expand the definition of dependent beyond the nuclear family, so students who are supporting siblings that are not “wholly dependent on them” and other “non-traditional” dependents access equitable amounts of aid<sup>xxxix</sup>.
- Eliminate defining adults in longstanding relationships (marriage or common-law) as “dependent students.” This results in disproportionate amounts of women being ineligible for financial aid and prevents people in abusive relationships from being able to access education. Although means tested programs are efficient ways to disperse aid the assumption



that married and common-law students have access to their partner's finances in inaccurate and harmful<sup>xxxv</sup>.

- Provide an easy to navigate path in all jurisdictions for young people who would normally be considered dependent students but do not have a relationship with their parents for safety reasons to have access to financial aid, like the “special independent student” category in Alberta which is an effective intervention already in place<sup>xxxvi</sup>.
- Allocate enough funding to fulfil treaty obligations to provide education to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples<sup>xxxvii</sup>.
- Keep the Canada Student Grant at the level instituted in the pandemic which has been effective at helping many of the most economically-vulnerable students<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

All of these changes cost money and would require Members of Parliament from across different parties and jurisdictions to work together on how we define family and obligation, but do not require overhauls of major systems, making them logistically feasible if we are willing to fund them. Ensuring students from all sorts of families have access to financial aid decreases the number of hours marginalized students need to work, giving them more time to study.



In addition to the policy changes noted above two pathways should be created in student financial aid systems for students who are currently under-served by our processes. Canada should support part-time learners (who are often forced to study part-time due to circumstance and not because they are less committed to their studies) with living expenses through financial aid programs<sup>xxxix</sup>. This would prevent students who do not qualify for financial aid because they had to work full-time for a period from being trapped in part time studies due to being ineligible because of having a full-time income in the previous year.

Additionally, a pathway for students who are not making academic progress, where instead of academic probation<sup>xl</sup> students are offered additional academic and mental health support to address the causes of low grades and help students gain their credential would support students though hardship rather than punish them for it. The University of Wollongong has a program that refers students experiencing disruption to a staff member who follows up with support<sup>xli</sup>, similar programs would benefit Canadian students.



At Athabasca University students can study at their own pace, asynchronously. We can take an extension to a course if we are making progress but cannot complete the learning outcomes in a traditional four-month semester. We can study at the time of day that works for us, working with rather than against our caregiving and work responsibilities, even if that means our study time varies week to week. We can study if we are too sick to commute to class or live far away from a brick-and-mortar university. The flexibility that AU offers its students is an incredibly effective large-scale intervention that allows so many students who would not have otherwise had the opportunity to study to gain a degree. If brick-and-mortar institutions created asynchronous online delivery of programs (or partnered with institutions that already have them) they would include students whose lives, either temporarily or permanently, do not fit the stereotype of the traditional students. Flexible options increases retention for students in crises and who face barriers to in person study, this keeps them in the university community and progressing towards graduation.

## Key Insights



Students' lives are complicated, and some barriers to their success are outside the post-secondary system itself. Universities and governments attempt to support students through these problems, however often solutions do not effectively integrate different departments or programs. Current solutions can be made more effectively making them easier to access and ensuring students know about how to benefit from the supports already in the system.

## The Future



The recommendations suggested here will not fix the system, they will improve it and allow more students to complete and benefit from their education. It is tempting to suggest ambitious and fantastic overhauls, however grandiose projects are either too complicated or too slow to make enough difference. Fixing, even reimagining, Canada's post-secondary system will not be like leaping over tall buildings but more like climbing a mountain, approaching the summit one step at a time. There's no way to get to the top of a mountain but to go step by step. The steps before us, providing in-house diagnosis, teaching the unwritten rules of the system, expanding needs-based grants, supportive streams for struggling students, and flexible options, are within reach.

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