

Culture

Native Students and the Special Mature Students Program at the University of Manitoba: An Historical Examination

John S. Matthiasson et Ronald W. Kristjanson



Volume 1, numéro 1, 1981

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077279ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077279ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Matthiasson, J. & Kristjanson, R. (1981). Native Students and the Special Mature Students Program at the University of Manitoba: An Historical Examination. *Culture*, 1(1), 91-95. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077279ar>

Résumé de l'article

A cause d'une inquiétude croissante pendant la dernière décennie concernant la situation socio-économique des Amérindiens du Canada, une inquiétude due largement à la politisation des Amérindiens eux-mêmes, plusieurs universités canadiennes mirent en action des programmes spéciaux d'éducation. La majorité des étudiants dans le Programme des Étudiants Adultes Spéciaux de l'Université du Manitoba est du milieu amérindien. Cet article étudie quelques-unes des difficultés qu'on affronta pendant les premières années de ce programme, les moyens employés pour les résoudre, et les facteurs qui se rapportent au succès des étudiants amérindiens qui obtinrent le premier diplôme universitaire et/ou furent admis aux facultés professionnelles.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1981

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Native Students and the Special Mature Students Program at the University of Manitoba : An Historical Examination

John S. Matthiasson
Ronald W. Kristjanson
University of Manitoba

During the 1960's and 1970's the Canadian of native ancestry, whether Indian or Metis, suddenly was projected into national visibility as a representative of a social category which until then had been relegated to a position of social, economic and educational invisibility to his or her fellow Canadians. Reasons for this change in national interest in, and concern for, the place of peoples of native ancestry in contemporary affairs are several and varied. One must have been the emergence of a national consciousness of ethnicity as an under-lying and pervasive feature of the Canadian social fabric. Another can be found in developments in the United States such as the Pan-Indian movement, stimulated in no small way by the civil rights movements of the 1950's and early '60s. Still another, and in many respects a response to the first two, was an increasing awareness on the part of native peoples themselves, of their need to assert themselves in a political way if they were to achieve a viable place within that national society which had suddenly become aware of them. Education was seen by many as an avenue to the settling of longstanding patterns of inequality of access to the economic benefits of Canadian life on the part of native as opposed to non-native Canadians. Whatever the reasons for this change in national outlook, educators and legislators sought ways to make existing educational programmes more accessible to native peoples, and several experiments were carried out.

Many of these experiments have taken the form

of new departments in Arts faculties of "Native Studies Programmes." These have given a status to native histories in existing curricula, and have usually attracted students of native ancestry to them. Other programmes have attempted to discover ways to bring native persons into the existing frameworks of universities while also making the transition from a social background which is often that of the reserve to that of an urban educational complex less traumatic for the participant. In this paper we will examine one such experiment of the latter type, carried out at the University of Manitoba. While some evaluation of this programme will be attempted, much of the paper will be descriptive. It is a relatively new venture, and it is too early to make firm statements on its success. Possibly a review at this time is useful, though, however indefinite, as other universities in this country consider establishing similar experiments.

In the late 1960's there had been considerable discussion among faculty and administrators at Manitoba about the formation of a special programme for native students. One of the central figures in these discussions was the then Dean of Arts. Nothing jelled at that time, but when the Dean moved to take up the Presidency of Brandon University he took the idea with him, and in 1970 he was instrumental in establishing a programme at that institution. It was primarily designed to train native teachers, who, it was hoped, would eventually teach in northern, isolated settings.

Interest continued at the University of Manitoba, in spite of a resistance movement on the part of some faculty and administrators, who feared that bringing mature students with less than adequate academic background into the university system, even with special support mechanisms, would help neither the students nor the university in achieving goals. It was thought that academic standards would have to be sacrificed if a programme were to be installed, and, according to some, a form of inverse prejudice would lead to individuals being given credit for things they hadn't really mastered.

The advocates of a Special Mature Students Program for Manitoba from the Special Projects Branch of the Manitoba Department of Education and from within the university had done their homework, however. Funding sources had been identified as well as existing institutional support structures. Competition for the limited resource of students in a time of dwindling enrollments no doubt provided an unstated argument in their favor. The consequence was that in July of 1974, a Senate committee report stated forcefully that there was strong sentiment within the university community for the idea of supporting disadvantaged and mature students. While not aimed directly at the concept of a programme for disadvantaged and mature students of native ancestry, that was implicit in the committee's recommendation.

Shortly after, although Brandon continued programmes of its own, the Special Mature Students Program was implemented at the University of Manitoba campus. This would provide access to the range of professional faculties and schools located there. One of the aims of the program was to produce not only native teachers, but native medical doctors, dentists, architects, and so on. Funding was provided jointly by the federal Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE) and the provincial Department of Colleges and Universities Affairs with overhead support from the University of Manitoba.

In the remainder of the paper we will discuss only students in the program who are of Indian or Metis background. One characteristic of the program, which had been insisted on by the University Senate, was that although special support systems would be established for students and their families, they would be expected to meet the same academic standards as regular students. At the same time, however, at least in their first years in attendance, students in the program usually take a reduced course load. Instead of the maximum five courses allowed, they normally take three.

The administrative structure includes a full-time Director and a full-time Administrative Assistant, and secretarial support. The first director was a psychologist with extensive experience in counselling as well as administrative work with programs for disad-

vantaged persons in non-university settings. The assistant was one of the first graduates of the Mature Students Program at Brandon University and she continues in her position. The program nerve centre, located in the Student Union Building, has a small lounge area with an ever-full coffee urn. On the typical day several students in the program can be found there studying, involved in discussions with one another or with the Administrative Assistant, or simply withdrawing temporarily from a still unfamiliar urban university setting.

In any given year more women are enrolled than men. Their ages range from twenty to forty-five. A majority have been recruited from northern Manitoba communities or reserves where possibilities for high school completion are not present and educational offerings of any nature are limited. These facts, of course, create serious disadvantages for new students in the program. Several, for example, have come from Tadoule Lake, a new settlement near Churchill. It was established ten or so years ago by a small population of Chippewyan Indians who were disenchanting with life in Churchill, and had decided to "return to the land". Until a year ago, only education to the fourth grade was possible locally at the site. Others have come from larger, but almost equally isolated, settlements such as Wabowden. This year has seen the first class graduate in that community with a complete grade twelve university entrance background.

In the past, students from such communities could often receive only a grade six educational training in their home communities. If they wished more, they were forced to attend residential schools where teachers, often ignorant of traditional native cultures and of the native languages of the children, maintained more of a holding action than making an effort to seriously work at educating their students for higher levels than obtainable locally. One implication of these types of experiences for students in the program has been a consistently evidenced weakness in science and mathematics backgrounds. Special efforts incorporated into the program to reduce these will be discussed later in the paper.

The recruitment and selection of students for the program are elaborate. Requests for names of potential candidates are regularly solicited from native organizations, such as the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood (MIB) and the Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF). Also, the Director of the program makes frequent visits to northern communities. On these trips, he is always accompanied by a native person—either a student already enrolled in the programme or a representative of one of the native organizations. Information on the program in brochure form is mailed to band councils in isolated reserve areas, and, in particular, this is always done before any visit by the Director.

The two basic criteria in the selection of candidates are a basis of need, and judged capability of succeeding. The first has priority, but the second is also a serious consideration. In a somewhat facetious manner, the first Director of the program described the ideal candidate as a native woman, who is single, has nine dependents, and has a previous formal education of grade nine. With the emphasis given to the first criterion, then, a woman with dependents will have a likelier chance of admission to the program than one without, if all other considerations are equal.

Once an individual has been given consideration for admission, the second part of the process begins. Part of this is a rigorous interviewing procedure, which takes place on the University of Manitoba campus. The candidate meets with a series of panels consisting of representatives of several constituencies. To avoid potential competition, candidates are interviewed individually. Members of the specific panels, which usually consist of only two or three persons, are representatives of the university faculty and administration, members of native associations such as the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood and the Manitoba Metis Federation, and students already enrolled in the program. Also included on one of the panels is a representative of the Provincial Department of Education.

To return to the question of criteria applied to who is accepted, several are used, with some latitude for individual differences. The most important is a judged need for the support systems which the program is able to provide. These are academic, personal and most importantly, financial. A judged capability to succeed does play a central role, however. The aim, then, is to provide access to the program to those who most need it, but also to those who are likely to be able to benefit from it. Panellists look for evidence of personal motivation, and are interested in past efforts of applicants to make self-improvement efforts, such as enrolling in and completing training programs on their own initiative. Previous formal educational attainments, however, are not taken into account. Students have been accepted with what only can be called minimal educational background.

Efforts of those involved in all phases of the selection procedure, then, have not sought to find those individuals most likely to succeed, but those who most need the program, and its benefits.

Assistance in the form of support systems for students are various. Since most entering students are parents, and often single, a primary concern is to make it possible for them to continue in their parental roles while also maximizing their academic efforts. For those from remote northern communities and reserves, the staff of the program try initially to make them aware of local social resources other than those provided by the program itself. They are assisted in

locating accommodation, in techniques for placing their children in appropriate schools, and, in general, learning about urban living. These initial efforts are followed up throughout the student's university career. Students receive living allowances, based on the number of dependents they have. When necessary, a housing subsidy is provided as well. All tuition costs are paid for by the program, along with the purchase of books and supplies required for course work.

For married students, counselling services are made available, again to aid in adjustment to new living arrangements. This is done by use of the Student Counselling Services at the university, the staff of the Mature Students Program, or through referral to outside agencies. A critical source of morale is the encouragement provided to each other by the students themselves.

When a student first enters the program, he or she is put through an orientation program, lasting approximately two weeks. During this period, an attempt is made to improve existing study and reading skills, and to illustrate the use of campus learning resources such as the library system. Instruction is given in term paper writing, the taking of examinations, and other necessary skills. Once the regular academic courses begin, and the student is attending classes, special tutorial services are made available. These are provided on an individual or group basis, depending on individual preferences and identified needs.

Since its inception, the program has been regarded by all concerned as experimental. Flexibility and responsiveness to perceived problems have been central characteristics of everything which has been carried out. Several changes in the internal academic structuring have been consequences of this approach. A few examples of these should be mentioned.

As noted earlier, possibly the greatest academic deficiency faced by incoming students has been an inadequate background in basic mathematical skills. This became an obvious barrier to successful academic work by those students enrolled in Science programs, but it was also one which impeded work by those in all faculties. In response to this, a special non-credit course in mathematics up-grading was established—a joint venture of the Mature Students Program and the Department of Mathematics. It turned out to be less than successful. While the students needed this training, it was discovered that the course, as structured, took up too much time, and students often neglected it in favour of their formal credit courses. Also, it was found that the class size was too large. Enrolments were as high as twenty-four, thereby limiting the needed individual remediation.

A somewhat similar project was carried out in an effort to up-grade skills in chemistry. While students

in the program took a regular course in chemistry, the instructor offered them a special series of tutorial sessions on the side to cover prerequisite knowledge as it became needed in relationship to concepts and content being dealt with. Again, no credit was given for the tutorials, and the class size was found to be too large to serve the intended purpose. The tutorials in this format were not repeated the second year.

Several students in the program have aspired to admission to the Faculty of Medicine. However, because of their weakness in mathematics and basic sciences, none were successful during the first years of the program. Special efforts such as those mentioned above had, again, failed as mechanisms to overcome these deficiencies in previous training. In the 1979-80 academic year, another effort was made to get around this problem with the establishment of a Special Pre-Medical Studies Program. It was designed specifically for students of Native ancestry. The students take the same courses as other pre-medicine students, but their initial courses are stretched to double the normal time periods. The courses incorporate special efforts to enable students to catch up on the high school training they have missed. Called "stretch science courses", these, along with "regular" stream Arts required, and optional courses, give the students 60 credit hours. On completion, they will have met both the second year science and the pre-medicine requirements. Enrolment in these special science classes is limited to twelve students. Although it is too early yet to evaluate the success of this approach, the retention rate to this point is very high.

Other, less major, changes have been introduced into the program as problems in the existing structure were identified, but space does not allow the documentation of them here.

Another innovation in the program was initiated in 1977, in conjunction with Red River Community College. It is still too early to decide whether it should be continued, but evidence available indicates that unless substantial changes are made, it may not prove to be successful. A joint effort of the two institutions, the aim was to provide a special program for students in the Special Mature Students Program who were interested in pursuing teaching careers in business education or the industrial arts. The program was structured so that students would take their first and third years of training at Red River Community College, but move to the campus of the University of Manitoba for their second and final years. Red River Community College had better resources for specialized education in both areas, but the ultimate goal was for students to receive a university degree. While students tend to perform well during their initial tenure at Red River Community College, they seem to have difficulty in making the transition to university life. The first three transferees dropped out of the

program shortly after making the transfer. One reason for this may be the fact that the program at Red River Community College is highly structured, and students, having been socialized to that system, which is similar in many respects to that of a high school, find the autonomy permitted at the university to be too free. They seem to face the same problems that many other university students encounter in the abrupt change from high school to first year university.

However, this particular program is still quite new, and it is possible that with closer monitoring of students in its third year, it will achieve a higher success rate in the future.

As well as the Red River Community College—University of Manitoba Cooperative Business and Industrial Arts Teacher Education Program, a second relationship was established in 1978 with an off-campus program which is an outgrowth of an earlier program conducted by Brandon University. This is the Winnipeg Education Centre program for training elementary school teachers. At the present time, this program looks to be more likely of long-range success than the one discussed earlier. The main purpose of the program is to train residents of the economically depressed core area of Winnipeg to teach in that same core area. The majority of the students enrolled in it are of Native background as the students reflect the ethnic composition of this area. For the first three years, classes are held in a working school in the core area. There is a full-time staff of instructors, supplemented by faculty members from the main campus. For the fourth year, students move to the main campus, where they take their classes along with regular students taking the final year of the Bachelor of Education program. (Initially, the Brandon program consisted of two years in the school program which was then expanded to a three year Bachelor of Teaching program.)

Students' motivation appears to be high. They form a closely knit group within themselves, and are highly supportive of one another. This may lead to difficulties as they move as individuals from the more protected school environment to that of the university, but the program had been operating for several years before the university's Special Mature Students Program affiliated with it, and the large number of graduates is strong evidence that students are successful in making that transition.

One of the main reasons at the time for establishing the Special Mature Students Program at the University of Manitoba was because of the presence of professional schools and faculties on its campus. As mentioned earlier, a special pre-medical program has been established to compensate for the science and mathematics deficiencies in entering students' backgrounds. How have the students fared in other professional schools where backgrounds in these areas

are not as important? Hard statistics on their over-all success in gaining admission to and holding their own in them are not available. However, some trends can be identified at this time.

Students in the program have entered almost every professional school and faculty in the university system. These include Agriculture, Education, Engineering, Fine Arts, Nursing, Physical Education, Social Work and Law. Their success rates vary from individual to individual and faculty to faculty. (It should be mentioned that the majority of those enrolled in the Faculty of Arts aspire to eventually enter professions.) In Agriculture, one student, who initially enrolled for a diploma course of study, later changed to a degree program. He will likely graduate this year. Four have graduated with degrees in Education, and another is expected to this year. One student who began Engineering was forced to drop out because of a combination of family and academic pressures. Of two who enrolled in Fine Arts, one remains, and he is developing a major local reputation as an artist while also doing successful academic work. Two students are presently enrolled in Nursing.

Of four who gained admission to Physical Education, one has graduated and another dropped out. The graduate is now enrolled in the Faculty of Education while, it should be noted, the "drop-out" now teaches in northern Manitoba, and continues to take university courses during summers.

The Faculty of Law might be treated as a special case, insofar as it, along with Medicine, might be considered the hardest nut to break in terms of gaining admission for students in the Special Mature Students Program. However, the first three students to be enrolled in the Special Mature Students Program were all successful in being accepted. (All three had been enrolled as university students before the program was begun.) Two of these have graduated and are now practising Law. The third did not make it. Two others have been admitted since, one of whom is still taking courses, and is expected to graduate this year.

Not all of those admitted to the Special Mature Students Program complete the requirements for a university degree. As would be expected, a variety of reasons are responsible for some discontinuing their studies. Some leave simply because they find the work too demanding. There have been several voluntary withdrawals, and in most instances, individuals who do so are ineligible for re-admission to the university for academic reasons. A problem yet to be overcome here is that some students, on receiving a set of poor grades, simply disappear, returning to the north or whatever without first seeking remedial counselling which might improve their performances. Others leave because severe family pressures conflict with their university work. Even with the support systems,

their conflicts seem, or, indeed, are, so great that they cannot see their way clear to continue. A few students have withdrawn voluntarily, for personal reasons, even though they were in good academic standing. A closer examination of their motivations for following this course has to be made in the future. A small number have transferred from the university to one of the community colleges in the province, which they find to be better suited to their personal interests and capabilities. One student withdrew to run as a candidate for the provincial legislature.

Although students in the program are under no obligation, if they are originally from northern communities or reserves, to return to the northern regions of the province after receiving degrees, many do. Of the graduates of the Faculty of Education, all now teach in northern communities. One of these completed a Bachelor of Arts degree with the Special Mature Students Program, then worked for two years with the Manitoba Metis Federation before returning to university on his own to enroll in a teacher certification year in the Faculty of Education. His wife had been a student under the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development auspices, but later changed to the Special Mature Students Program. She now teaches with her husband in the north. One of the Arts graduates who had been with the program now has employment in a position dealing with Native land claims while another is enrolled in a pre-Master's year in the resource management field. Of the two graduates in Law, one is practising in The Pas, Manitoba, with a largely Native clientele, and the second is employed by a Winnipeg law firm which handles Native land claim cases. Other examples could be cited as well.

However, it should be noted that Native students on campus do not constitute a distinct social category, interacting only with one another. Some students from both programs, the Special Mature Students Program and the D.I.A.N.D., appear to work consciously at avoiding a special Native identity. They adjust socially to the larger student body, or concentrate on studies and personal family life. Some maintain their ethnic identity while also extending their social contacts outside either of the programs. There are probably as many social postures as there are students with their individual backgrounds, personalities and present circumstances.

In summary, the Special Mature Students Program of the University of Manitoba, although still in its infancy, seems to be achieving many of the objectives for which it was established. The key features which explain the success that it has had are probably flexibility and strong support systems.