

## Environmental Scan Series.5

### Career-Related Education for Student Engagement & Success

Student engagement is tied to each of the five common drivers presented in this Environmental Scan Series: equity, access, Indigenization, sustainability, and outcomes. Student engagement represents two critical features of academic quality. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to encourage students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning.<sup>1</sup> High levels of student engagement are positively associated with satisfaction, persistence, achievement, and intrinsic motivation towards learning.<sup>2</sup> Student engagement also helps develop relationships with others and promotes connectedness, which helps to improve student retention rates.<sup>3</sup>

At Thompson Rivers University (TRU), student engagement results have been used to

- inform strategic planning,
- improve the student experience through the Service Excellence Initiative,
- recommend activities that foster and promote student success,
- benchmark and track Indigenous student satisfaction around the refurbishment of the Cplul'kw'ten Gathering Place, and
- assess sustainability literacy and culture.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup>

In its infancy, the TRU Focus on First Year steering committee will be using student engagement data to build the metrics to determine the success of a two year faculty-led initiative to focus on first-year student success and supporting faculty teaching first-year students.

[Chapter 1 Trends in Higher Education](#) (of the EnvisionTRU scan) observed that student needs have changed: enabling access and preparing for the labour market of tomorrow are highly considered along with academic rigour and reputation.<sup>8</sup> The social and economic trends driving employment - and outcome - related concerns for students and their families means that career preparation is a key factor in student engagement.<sup>9</sup> Recent studies have demonstrated the connection between career relevance

#### “Big Six” Undergraduate Experiences

1. I had at least one professor who made me excited about learning.
2. My professor cared about me as a person.
3. I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.
4. I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.
5. I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I learned in the classroom.
6. I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while I attended university.

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and overall well-being; the 2018 Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey found that students thrive when they can connect their post-secondary experience to their future work, and they have identified six key undergraduate experiences called the “Big Six” which prime graduates to succeed in their work and lives after university.<sup>10</sup> The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) selected work and career preparation as the principle theme of their 2018 annual results report, stating, “higher education does much more for its students than qualify them for a job. Yet getting a job and other anticipated labor market returns figure prominently in the benefits sought by students, families, and policy makers.”<sup>11</sup> Federally-funding research projects (\$11.58M, announced in April 2019) will continue to investigate what skills are needed to participate and thrive in today’s economy.<sup>12</sup>

Due to their positive associations with student learning and retention, certain undergraduate opportunities are designated “high-impact.” High-Impact Practices (HIPs) share several traits: They demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback. As a result, participation in these practices can be life-changing.<sup>13</sup> At TRU, 54% of first-year student survey respondents reported that they “planned to participate” and 46% of fourth-year student survey respondents reported that they “participated” in an internship, co-op, field experience, student teaching, or clinical placement over the course of their undergraduate experience.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of career preparation has been recognized at TRU for several years. A recent assessment of TRU’s Career Mentoring program

showed that TRU students require creative, inclusive, and intentional support to develop career knowledge and employability skills.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, 64% of TRU first-year student survey respondents indicated that “to prepare for a specific job or career” was the most important reason for them to go to university; career preparation surpassed the other fourteen possible reasons provided on the survey.<sup>16</sup> Engagement with faculty members through career planning is one of the drivers in TRU’s higher-than-average ratings in the quality of relationships between students and faculty.<sup>17</sup> Nearly 40% of TRU fourth-year student survey respondents reported that they “very often” or “often” “talked about career plans with a faculty member” and 10% of TRU fourth-year student survey respondents used career counselling during their senior year.<sup>17,18</sup> Students who said they often speak with faculty and staff members about potential career options are more confident their studies and will lead to positive workforce outcomes. Promoting conversations among students and faculty about potential career options may expose students to careers they had not previously considered.<sup>10</sup>

Engagement through career preparation is also an area of success for supporting Indigenous students. Over half of fourth-year Indigenous student survey respondents (53%) talked more about career plans with a faculty member than non-Indigenous student survey respondents (38%).<sup>19</sup> More fourth-year Indigenous student survey respondents reported that TRU contributed “quite a bit” or “very much” to their ability to speak clearly and effectively, work effectively with others, and solve complex real-world problems, when compared to non-Indigenous students. They also reported that TRU contributed less to their ability to think

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critically and analytically and acquire job or work related knowledge and skills when compared to non-Indigenous students.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Next in the Series*

The next report in the Envision TRU Environmental Scan series will focus on enrolment trends.

#### Sources

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