

BOOK REVIEW/CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

ROSS FINNIE, RICHARD E. MUELLER, ARTHUR SWEETMAN, & ALEX USHER (EDS.). *Who goes? Who stays? What matters: Accessing and persisting in post-secondary education in Canada*. Montreal, QC & Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press. (2008). 374 pp. \$39.95 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-55339-221-7).

This edited book is a compilation of research papers about access, persistence, and financial issues in post-secondary education (PSE) in Canada. All of the contributions to this volume emerge from the research results of the *Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Aid Project*, created by the Educational Policy Institute and the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University and funded by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Given that conventional studies draw heavily on the identification of barriers to access and persistence in PSE, the book's introduction explains that there is lack of a clear understanding of what these barriers really are. Authors in this volume opine that emphasis on the predominant ones, i.e., financial barriers, overshadows the study of other factors. In particular, authors such as Mueller point out that although less visible, barriers such as family background, parental education, aspirations for PSE, and the preparation for higher education should also be taken into account; previous studies have not addressed these factors because of "[a] paucity of appropriate data to study these questions" (p. 55).

Authors of this volume make good use of official datasets available nationally and locally in Canada. Most of them regard datasets of the *Youth in Transition Survey* (YITS) as appropriate and rich sources for exploring issues about access and persistence in PSE, in contrast to other existing datasets such as the *Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics*, which "[allows] researchers to track young people in the years leading up to, and through, PSE," but "is a general survey rather than youth/PSE-focused" (p. 25). As a survey undertaken jointly by Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the YITS features a longitudinal track on the major transitions in the lives of youth in terms of education, training, and work. In the introductory section, Finnie, Sweetman and Usher argue that the YITS offers "a source of policy-

relevant data on education with few equals anywhere in the world” (p. 4), helps researchers reach pertinent data, and makes their exploration of various factors affecting access and persistence in PSE possible. However, in chapter ten, Andres and Adamuti-Trache go beyond that data source to separately utilize their own databases of the 15-year longitudinal *Paths on Life's Way* study, which investigated student loans and adult life course outcomes in the province of British Columbia. Their datasets consisted of “education, careers, and family formation patterns” (p. 249) of class of 1988 high school graduates in British Columbia. The data significantly underscored social inequity in education and the labour market. Altogether, the authors in this volume, by referencing quantitative empirical data from these two well-established datasets, are able to explore factors that affect access and persistence in PSE in a broader context. All of the book’s contributors are advanced educators and researchers in PSE across Canada, although they come from different fields such as education, policy studies, and economics. Their grasp of varied statistical methods, empirical models, and analytical approaches enables them to undertake an in-depth data analysis and share insights into issues of access and persistence in PSE through varied lenses.

The book is organized into four sections. The first three papers in the introductory section offer a review of the research context, framework, literature, and the YITS datasets. The second section of the book explores the influences of the backgrounds of Canadian youth on their access to PSE and asks how the aspirations of high school students, as well as their involvement in school and extracurricular activities, affect their participation in PSE. Gender gaps in university attendance are also investigated. The third section focuses on persistence: authors present different perspectives based on the YITS datasets, address transitions and adjustments in students’ PSE, and study the relationships between university attainment, student loans, and life course outcomes. The last section looks at the relationships between persistence and the constraints of academic ability, parental influences, and finance (including factors such as financial aid, family income, student grants, and variation in tuition across Canadian provinces). Altogether, the papers highlight key research findings and discuss either implications for educational policy making or considerations for further research.

This volume undoubtedly enriches studies on access and persistence in PSE in the Canadian context, and competently addresses factors that influence access and persistence overall. The evidence-based analysis not only fills a gap in the literature, but also contributes to educational policy studies. However, it should be pointed out that although these research papers benefit from the two datasets, data analysis is restricted by available quantitative data. A number of authors address limitations in their essays and indicate directions for future research. Many of the chapter authors call for better data for future research because certain questions could not be answered with such limitations. For

example, Johnson notes that his exploration of the influence of student aid on the access behaviour of different groups of young people across Canada is constrained by the limits of obtainable data in the YITS (though he does not specify further in this regard). Likewise, authors like Finnie and Qiu note that “qualitative analyses...can probe the reasons for students’ behaviours in a way that quantitative data cannot” (p. 203): descriptive statistics from the quantitative datasets are absolutely insufficient in revealing a full picture of access and persistence in PSE or in truly dealing with the question of why inequities exist. In view of the limitations of quantitative approaches, the possibility of applying other methodologies in such educational research should be taken into account in order to address a wider variety of data and carry out further data analysis.

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