



Thriving in
Change and
Complexity

Rising to the challenge in
Continuing Education

CAUCE CONFERENCE 2026
HALIFAX | MAY 13-15

Culturally Responsive Interventions

Increasing the Completion Rate of
Indigenous Students in Academic
Preparation Programs

Presented by

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University of Calgary Continuing Education

Land Acknowledgment

Dalhousie University operates in the unceded territories of the Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqey, and Peskotomuhkati Peoples. These sovereign nations hold inherent rights as the original peoples of these lands, and we each carry collective obligations under the Peace and Friendship Treaties. Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 recognizes and affirms Aboriginal and Treaty rights in Canada.

The University of Calgary, located in the heart of Southern Alberta, both acknowledges and pays tribute to the traditional territories of the peoples of Treaty 7, which include the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprised of the Siksika, the Piikani, and the Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations). The city of Calgary is also home to the Métis Nation within Alberta (including Nose Hill Métis District 5 and Elbow Métis District 6).

The PEISSA Program

[Pre-pathways to Education for Indigenous Students \(PEISSA\)](#)

Program:

- Fully funded academic upgrading for Indigenous students across Canada
- Supported by the Student Union Quality Money Grant
- Delivered through Continuing Education's Academic Preparation Program with integrated supports



Why This Work Matters

- **Indigenous learners are underrepresented in degree pathways**
 - In 2021, **32.9% population of Canada** (aged 25-64) held a bachelor's degree or higher (Statistics Canada, 2021 Census)
 - **Less than 1.65%** of this group identified as Indigenous
- **Barriers exist across the student learning journey**
 - **Access barriers:** financial constraints, limited access to prerequisite courses, geographic isolation
 - **Systemic barriers:** lack of representation, racism, institutional inequities; curriculum that doesn't reflect Indigenous perspectives
 - **Persistence challenges:** intergenerational trauma, relocation and culture shock, lack of culturally appropriate and relational supports
- **Why this matters for student success**
 - Getting students into programs is only the first step
 - Persistence and retention are critical to long-term outcomes
 - Students are more likely to continue when they feel supported, connected, and reflected in their learning environment

The Beginning of PEISSA

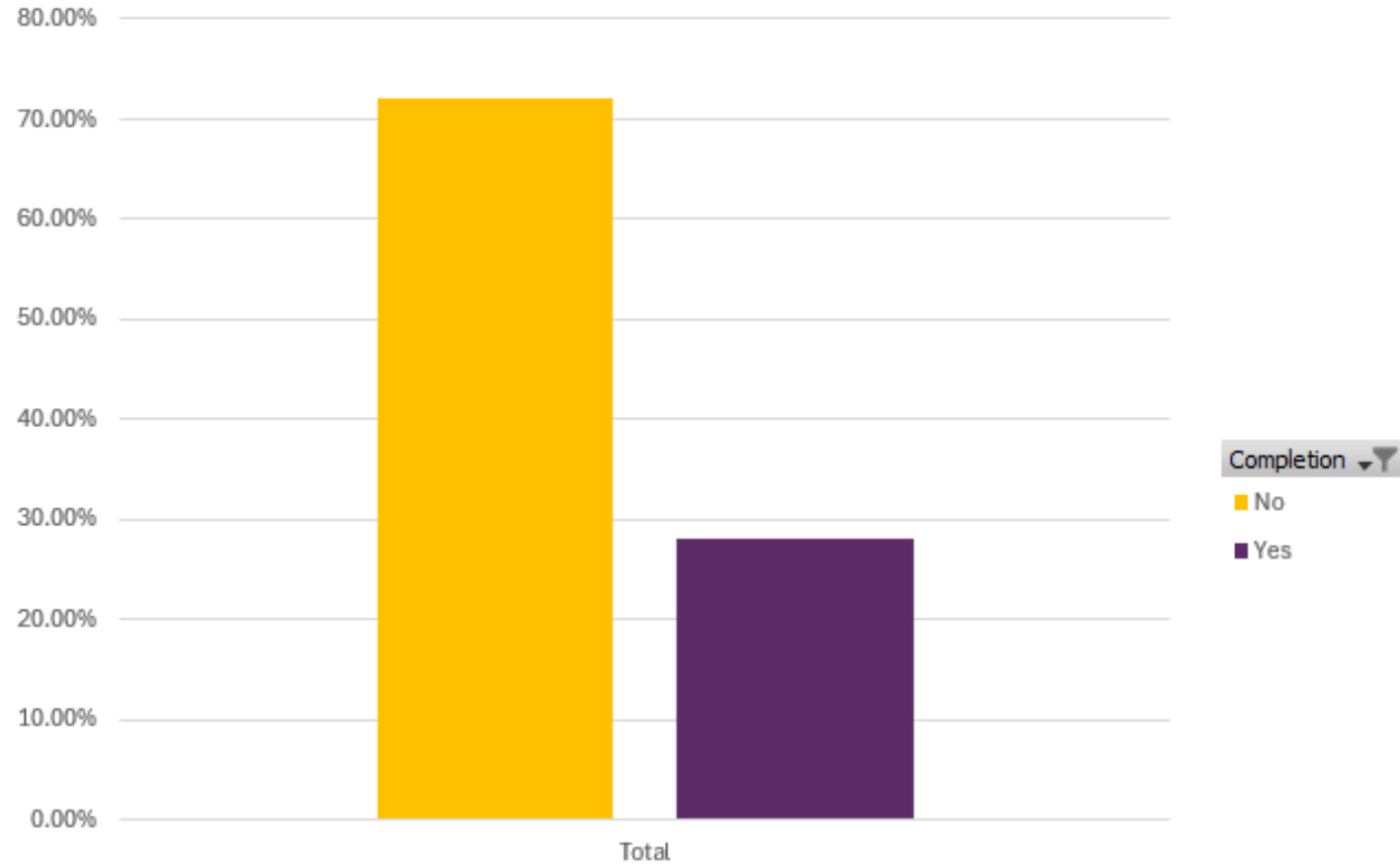
- Slow enrollment
- Relationship-building challenges
- Standard student journey:



Intervention ▼

Count of Xnumber

Completion Rates Before Intervention Fall 2022 - Spring 2024

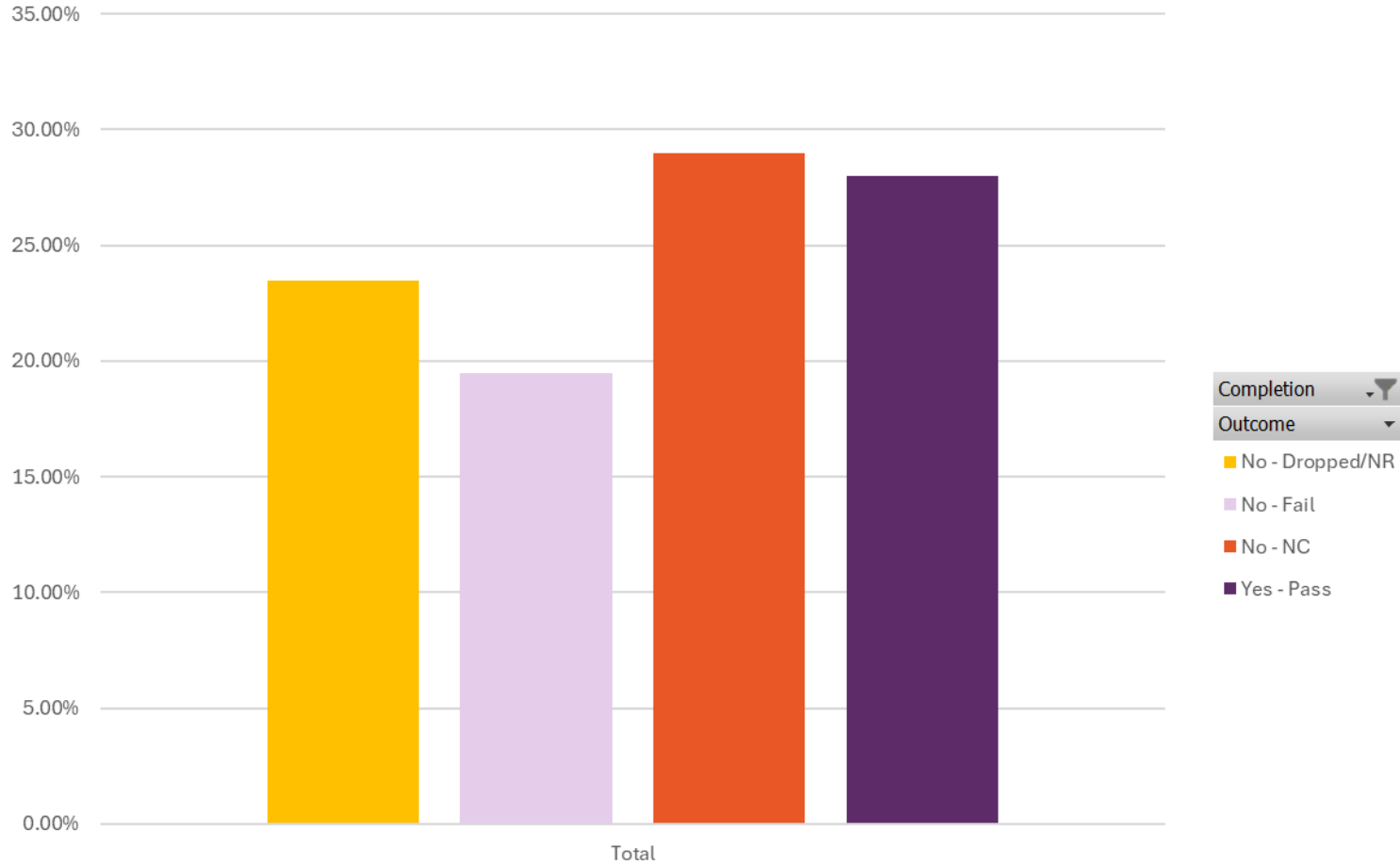


72% Non-complete
28% Complete

200 Enrollments
74 Unique students

Count of Xnumber

Completion Rates Before Intervention Fall 2022 - Spring 2024



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What went wrong?

One-size-fits-all approach to academic upgrading

Limited recognition of Indigenous students' lived experiences

Underestimated that post-secondary institutions are not neutral environments

Financial access addressed, but cultural and relational needs overlooked

Why a New Approach Was Needed: What the Research Tells Us

- Access ≠ Experience ≠ Completion
- Equity requires more than equal treatment
- Persistence is relational, not just individual

Students are more likely to persist when they feel **supported, connected, and reflected in their learning environment.**

The **Three**-Pronged Holistic Support Model

Supporting the student, the learning experience, and the teaching environment

1

**Student
Supports**

2

Curriculum

3

Instruction



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The **Three**-Pronged Holistic Support Model

1

Student Supports

Personal Advising

Direct Student Supports

- **Purpose**
 - Meet the student where they're at with personalized, relationship-centered advising
- **Recommended Tools**
 - A curated set of guiding questions that support meaningful connection while gathering information relevant to the students upgrading journey
- **Goal**
 - Empower the student by equipping them with knowledge and confidence to take the next step forward

Standardized Touchpoints

Direct Student Supports

- **Tools**
 - Centralized inbox for PEISSA students
 - Microsoft bookings page
 - Planned engagement throughout the term
- **Touchpoints**
 - Start of semester welcome and resources
 - Mid semester check-in and coaching
 - Cultural activities and main campus connections

Setting Students Up for Success

Direct Student Supports

- **Proactive Supports**
 - Intentional course-loads
 - Early progress and attendance reviews
 - Outreach before disengagement occurs
- **Support in Action**
 - Coaching and success strategies
 - Access to tutoring
 - Supported course transfers or withdrawals

The **Three**-Pronged Holistic Support Model

2

Curriculum
(Course Development)

Development of Indigenous Studies 30

Course Development

- Led by an Indigenous instructor
- Elder involvement (blessings, project feedback, relationship-building)
- Centers Indigenous ways of knowing and learning
- Designed to support PEISSA students returning to learning environments
- Emphasis on Truth and Reconciliation through action

Expanding Curriculum to Support Student Success

Course Development

Responsive Course Design

- Continuous feedback and iterative course improvement
- Indigenous perspectives embedded across programs

Building Foundational Pathways

- Development of foundational and bridging courses.
Example: Math 10/20 Condensed course
- Aligns course pathways with student starting points, not just end goals

Flexible Course Delivery

- Increased online and hybrid course options
- Expands access for students balancing work, family, and location

Universal Design for Learning

- Multiple ways to engage and demonstrate learning
- Flexible assessments and varied course materials
- Supports confidence-building and re-entry into learning

The **Three**-Pronged Holistic Support Model

3

Instruction
(Instructor Practices)

Instructor Support & Development

Instructor Practices

- **Training Approach**
 - Needs-based training and individualized coaching
 - Focus on culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices
 - Integrating Indigenous perspectives into curriculum and course design
- **Partnerships**
 - Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning
 - Writing Symbols Lodge (Indigenous Relations Training)
- **Focus Areas**
 - Relational teaching practices
 - Inclusive course design and delivery
 - Creating culturally supportive learning environments

Hiring and Instruction

Instructor Practices

Hiring for Inclusive and Relational Teaching

- Prioritizing instructors with:
 - Trauma-informed teaching experience
 - Inclusive education practices
 - Knowledge of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives

Aligned with Alberta Teaching Quality Standards

- Standard 1: Fostering effective relationships
- Standard 4: Establishing inclusive learning environments
- Standard 5: Applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures

The **Three**-Pronged Holistic Support Model

Supporting the student, the learning experience, and the teaching environment

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**Student
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Curriculum

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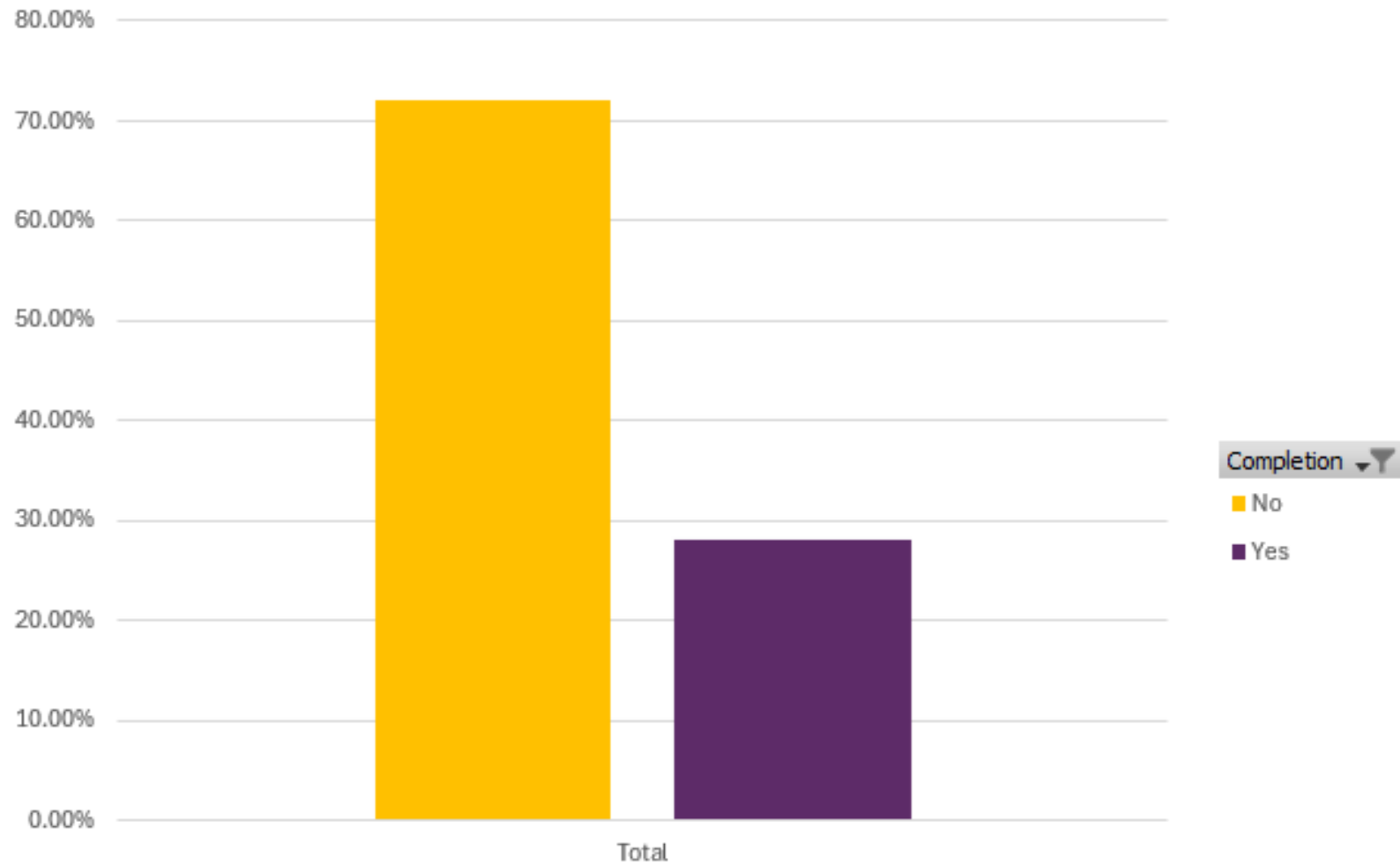
Instruction



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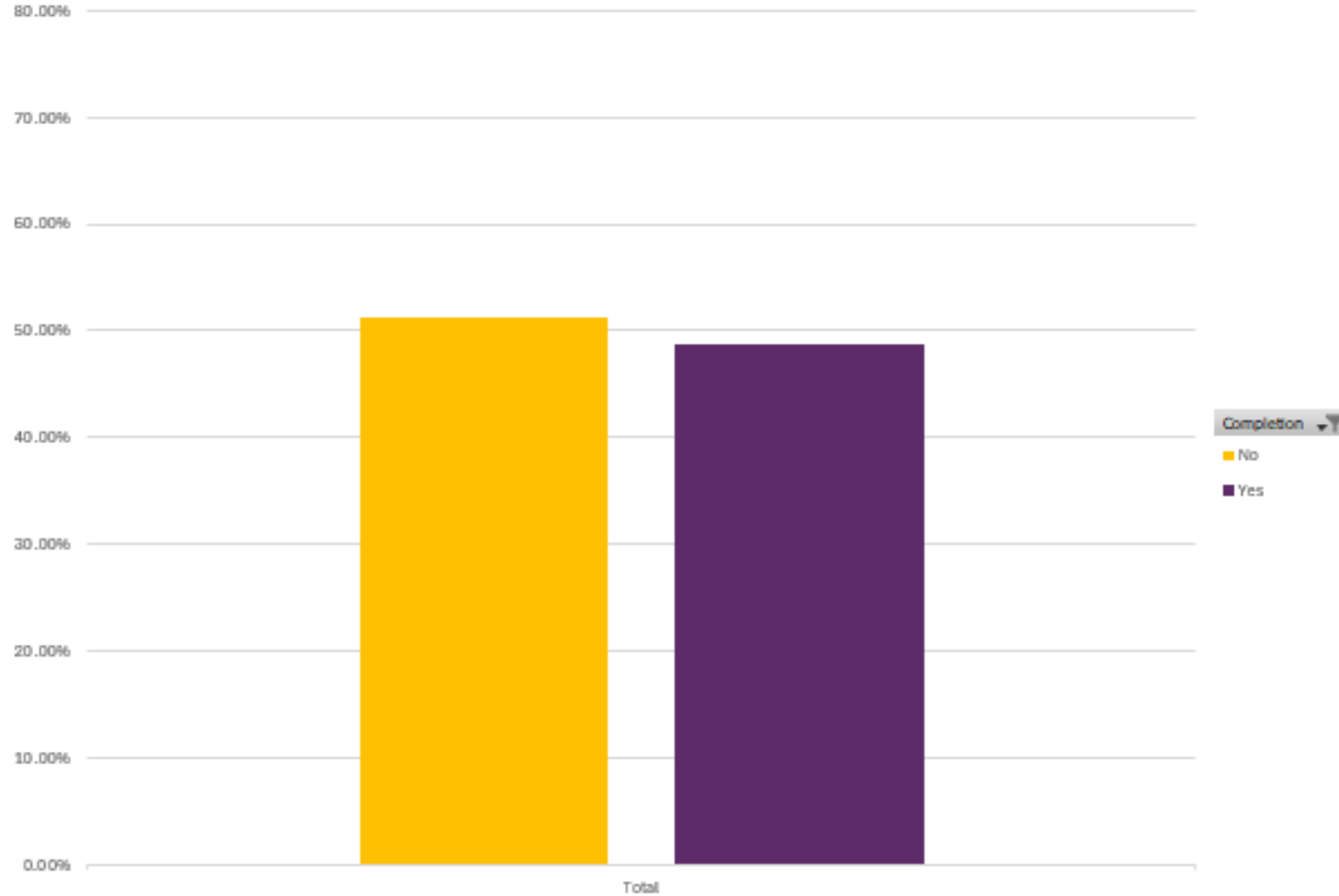
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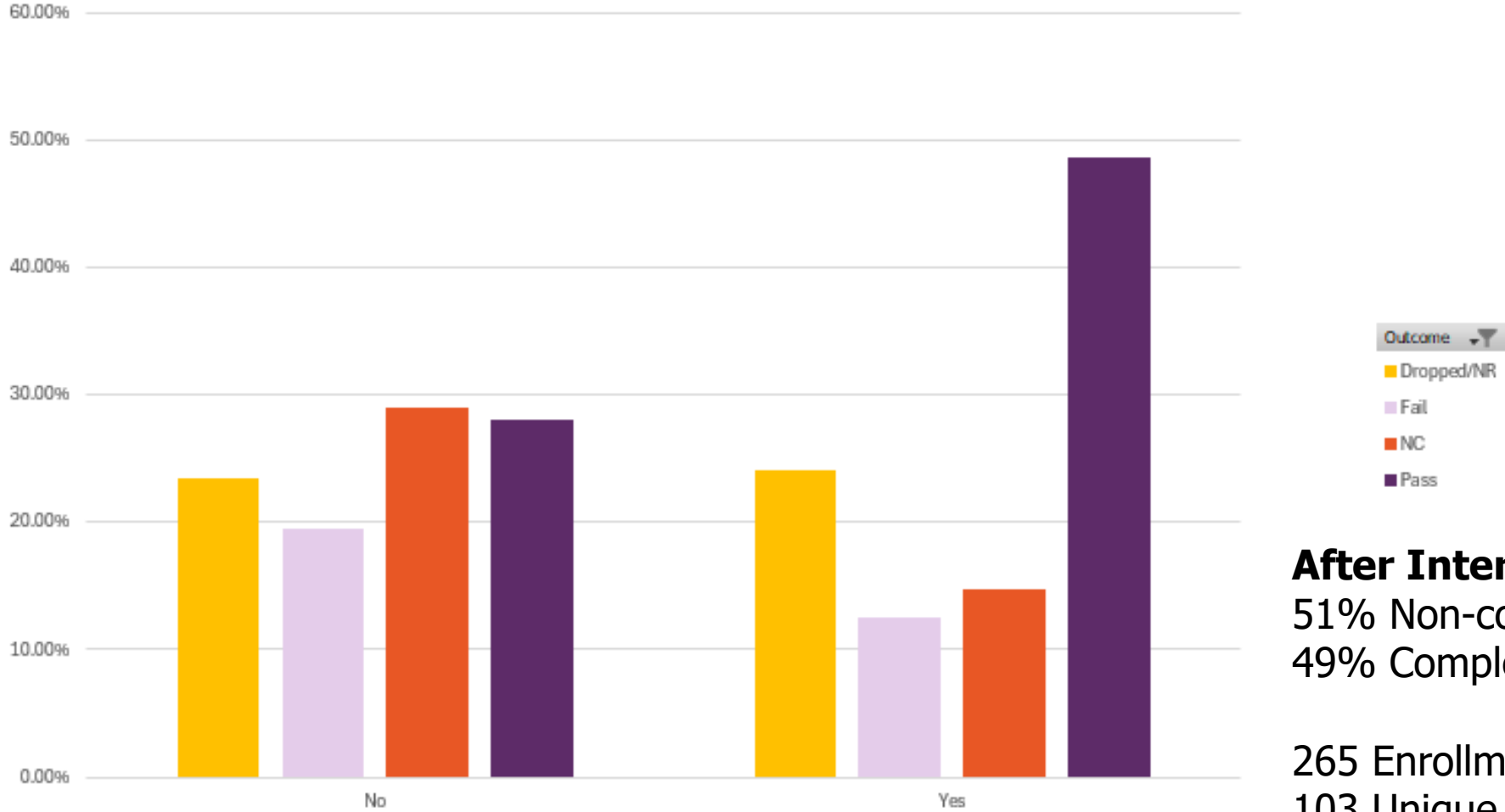
Completion Rates After Intervention Fall 2024 - Winter 2026



51% Non-complete
49% Complete

265 Enrollments
103 Unique students

Outcomes Before and After Intervention
Fall 2022 - Winter 2026



Before Intervention

72% Non-complete
28% Complete

200 Enrollments
74 Unique students

After Intervention

51% Non-complete
49% Complete

265 Enrollments
103 Unique students

Impact on Students

“PEISSA gave me second chance to continue my education and work toward my future career. Through their support, I have been able to overcome setbacks and take the next steps toward entering a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN) program.”

“I had seven instructors, each with different educational backgrounds. They helped me realize that age is not a barrier to education and that I still have the opportunity to succeed and build a better future.”

“During a check-in, Brooklyn took the time to walk me through my options and helped me build a clear plan. That conversation gave me confidence and direction, and it played a big role in helping me move forward toward my goal.”

“Instructors were great and really encouraging, they made sure it felt comfortable to ask questions and ask for help”

“I was really struggling with math and wanted to drop out. I was encouraged to keep going and even offered tutoring to help me finish and now they offer a tutoring program”

The future is bright as UCalgary offers free upgrading for Indigenous students

PEISSA empowers Indigenous students like Dylan Giroux by offering free upgrading courses for post-secondary admissions.

Dylan Giroux is a proud member of the Driftpile Cree Nation in Treaty 8 territory near Slave Lake, Alberta. He experienced firsthand the challenge many Indigenous students face when it comes to pursuing higher education: “Back home, there weren’t many opportunities. I remember feeling stuck, like my dream of higher education was out of reach.”

When Dylan learned about the program, it represented more than just an opportunity—it was a lifeline. “When I first heard about the program, I thought, this is my chance. It gave me access to valuable courses and support needed to succeed.”

One of the strengths of the program, Dylan notes, is its flexibility. “The courses are offered online, which worked perfectly for my schedule and allowed me to work independently,” he says. Support from instructors and staff was responsive, helping him

navigate challenges smoothly. “Without their support, I would not have been successful,” he says.

Dylan has completed three courses and is on track for a fourth, working toward prerequisites for his goal of applying to UCalgary’s combined degree programs in finance and engineering. He stresses the importance of self-belief and perseverance: “You just have to be confident enough to try. If it doesn’t work out, try again; fail forward.”

Beyond academics, Dylan’s journey is deeply rooted in community and legacy. He speaks with pride about his grandfather’s work supporting residential school survivors and emphasizes the importance of honouring those who did not have the opportunities available today. “I’m here, and others like me are here, so we should do it for those who couldn’t,” he says.

Dylan’s advice for other Indigenous students is clear: “Believe in yourself just a little bit more every day; a little effort can go a long way.” He believes this program offers invaluable support but recognizes that self-motivation is key. “The support is there, you just have to reach out and be willing to ask for help.”

What is PEISSA?

It’s a program developed to address a fundamental challenge many students like Dylan face. “In my opinion, one of the reasons why more Indigenous students don’t apply [to post-secondary programs]... is because they lack the support from their inner-circles, and ultimately themselves; PEISSA made it easier to believe in myself,” explains Dylan. This program is a bridging initiative aimed at supporting Indigenous learners who want to enter university.

Made possible by the UCalgary Students Union Quality Money Grant, PEISSA has three pillars:

- Allowing students to enrol based on their completed courses
- Providing pathways to upgrade prerequisites
- Offering academic and cultural supports

For Dylan, the program was transformational. “I went from thinking higher-education was impossible for someone in my predicament, to realizing it is possible, and I can succeed. It’s allowed me to be confident and hopeful for the future.” Funding from the PEISSA program has helped over 160 Indigenous students from Alberta and across Canada.

Term: ● Fall ● Winter ● Spring ● Summer



Thinking about post-secondary?

To learn how PEISSA supports Indigenous student success and to apply go online at conted.ucalgary.ca/peissa

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Education

Lesson 1

Formalize advising touchpoints earlier to:

1. Recognize highest risk for disengagement
2. Adapt program to suit student needs
 - Course delivery modality
 - Foundational courses (grade 10/11)

Tip:

Consider the entire student journey throughout the program, from when they go to the website for the first time to completing their final course. What touchpoints will you have with students throughout this period? When is connecting with them most important?

Lesson 2

Evaluate role capacity:

Role: Program lead

What it looks like:

- Student check-ins, admin coordination, documents and approvals, relationship management, crisis calls, follow-ups

Lesson 3

Document the work so the work can continue

Student History:

- Past enrolments
- Supports provided
- Future program goals
- Future course planning
- Past challenges



Shared File



Student-Relationship Management

Application Submission Date (D1)	Last Name	First Name	Student #	UCID	SIN # On File?	Phone Num	Address	City	Province	Country	Postal Co	Email	Desired Program	Courses Interested in Taking	Most Recent Enrolled Semester	Notes
2022-11-09	Rand	Brooklyn	X123456	123456789	Y	123-456-7890	2500 University Drive NW	Calgary	AB	Canada	T2N 1N4	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Computer Science	Biology 30 Chemistry 30 Physics 30 Math 30-1 Math 31	Fall 2025	<p>June. 6/25 - Brooklyn reached out to us this week after being inactive in the program since 2023. He was enrolled in finding a balance. since then, he has successfully completing upgrading Math 30-2, Chem 20, and Bio 30 at the Bull</p> <p>excited about evening courses. Planning on taking 3 courses in Fall 2025 and 2 in Winter 2026 to apply for university talked about over the phone. Waiting for signed letter before sending course options. BR</p> <p>June. 10/25 - Reached out to see if he has any questions about courses, decided to enrol in the following: APP 330-C sent textbook letter to bookstore</p> <p>Aug. 25/25 - student reached out to confirm enrollment in courses. Confirmed enrolled in: APP 330-017, APP 310-013, and APP 301-019. EL</p> <p>Aug. 26/25 - updated notes in D1. EL</p>
2022-11-08	Rand	Brooklyn	X123456	123456789	Y	123-456-7890	2500 University Drive NW	Calgary	AB	CAN	T2N 1N4	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Nursing	English 30-1 Bio 30 Chem 30 Math 30-1/2	Fall 2025	<p>AT Nov. 8 - Finacially paying for the courses, flexibility can do courses after work. Being able to provide more incom</p> <p>Friend Michelle - works with Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary</p> <p>Jan 9 - Please enrol in UPG 032-006 AT Jan 11 - SF registration processed</p> <p>Aug 15 - Enrol in APP 341 - 002 AT</p> <p>Nov 15, would like to enrol in APP 201-001 and APP 341-005. Will look into taking Math 30-2 in the fall, and will need</p> <p>Jan 16/24 - NOTES IN D1</p> <p>Aug 15 - Enrol in APP 341 - 002 AT</p> <p>Nov 15, would like to enrol in APP 201-001 and APP 341-005. Will look into taking Math 30-2 in the fall, and will need</p> <p>Sept 19/24 - Emailed to drop math. Currently states she is taking APP 100-001 Math 10. Asked about circumstances of the same one, can I do that?" Following up to understand the situation. File shows multiple withdrawals. EL</p> <p>Sept 19 - Currently taking a course with Brooklyn Finds teaching is not working for her. Brooklyn needs examples, and</p> <p>Math 10, she can successfully do Math 20 without it. EL</p> <p>Oct 1/24 - Student requested withdrawal from APP 100-001.</p> <p>Jun. 12/25 - Brooklyn emailed asking to enrol in Math 10 and English. I notice she has multiple drops without and lit request and remind her she must pay out of pocket going forward. I will let her know that she if she successfully co her future courses. BR</p> <p>Jun. 19/25 - She can take the Math 10/20 split course, if she is successful we will offer her more courses, if she is n</p> <p>Sept 10/25 - Updated fees reporting spreadsheets. BR</p>
2024-07-22	Rand	Brooklyn	X123456	123456789	Y	123-456-7890	2500 University Drive NW	Calgary	AB	CAN	T2N 1N4	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Nursing	English 30-1, Math 10C	Fall 2025	<p>August 27, 2024 - Interested in pursuing a degree in BioChem. Needs to upgrade math, sciences, and English. Wants in spring 2025. Enrolled in APP 002-001 Learning Strategies Course</p> <p>Aug 29/24 - sent sponsorship letter to bookstore. EL</p> <p>Nov. 7/24 - Got a scholarship that requires her to be a full time student so she wants to take three courses in Winte courses so I feel confident that with the right mix, she will be successful. Looking to enrol in Bio 30, Math 20-1 and courses affects her GPA, following up - BR</p> <p>Nov. 20/24 - student registered in Winter 2025 APP 210-005 Bio 20 and APP 201-005 Math 20. Registration sent to stud textbook information. EL</p> <p>Dec. 16/24 - Student reached out inquiring about the nursing program. Looking to book a phonecall to get a rundown reached out to Brooklyn, a nursing faculty advisor to get in touch with her. BR</p> <p>Jan. 22/25 - Teacher reached out because she has not been attending classes or keeping up with her work, reached</p>

Student-Relationship Management

Last Nam	First Nam	Student X	UCID	Phone Numbe	Email	City	Student File	Course Cod	Course Titl	Status
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 301-019 APP 310-013 APP 330-017	Math 30-1 Bio 30 Chem 30	Pass Pass Fail
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 205-001	Math 10/20	Dropped/NR
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 205-001 APP 210-006 APP 230-006	Math 10/20 Bio 20 Chem 20	Pass Pass Pass
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 310-013	Bio 30	Dropped/NR
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 330-016	Chem 30	Dropped/R
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 303-008	Math 31	Pass
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 230-006 APP 201-008	Chem 20 Math 20-1	Pass Pass
Rand	Brooklyn	X212345	12345678	123-456-7890	brooklyn.rand@ucalgary.ca	Calgary	Rand, Brooklyn X212345 Stuc	APP 201-008 APP 350-004	Math 20-1 Indigenous 30	Dropped/NR Dropped/NR

Program Constraints and Considerations

- Relies on **dedicated staff capacity** to maintain relationships and continuity
- Requires **flexibility in pacing and progression** (not a standard model)
- Depends on **external funding** to remove financial barriers

Resources to get started

Modest funding

Dedicated program lead

Strong internal relationships

Existing courses

Proactive advising

Light instructional support

Thank you

References & Resources

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