

# Successes and Challenges of the University of Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC)

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## Abstract

The Winnipeg Education Centre began in the 1970s, first at Brandon University (1972-1978), then University of Manitoba (1978-1997), and now University of Winnipeg (1998-present). This study examines the University of Winnipeg Education Centre's (WEC) successes and challenges. WEC has made deep and lasting contributions to teacher education in Manitoba and to the inner-city and other communities that it serves. Since 1998, over 400 students, about 50% of them Indigenous, have graduated from the program. The success of WEC has also helped to lay the foundation for later ACCESS programs - the Community Based Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (CATEP), the Post Baccalaureate in Indigenous Knowledge Program (PBIK), and the most recent Immigrant Teacher Education Program (ITEP). Educated through WEC, many graduates are now practicing teachers and administrators across various school divisions throughout Manitoba. WEC students, all of whom require academic, personal, and/or financial support in order to be admitted into the program, have access to considerable resources to ensure their academic success. Despite strong supports, and excellent and caring faculty and staff, a few challenges keep the program from making its fullest contribution to the education and well-being of its student teachers.

## Methods & Data

- Online survey questionnaire distributed to about 400 past and present WEC students in the fall of 2016 (n=63)
- Anonymized demographic data from in-take forms, 1998–2015 (n= 419)
- Interviews with past and present administrators, staff, and faculty
- Student focus group
- Review of the relevant secondary sources

# About WEC

WEC is a 5-year integrated education program with a History major and an English minor. Graduates are certified teachers in the Province of Manitoba with a specialization in Early and Middle Years (K-8).

WEC has been running since the early 1970s, first at Brandon University (1972-1978), then at the University of Manitoba (1978-1997), and now at the University of Winnipeg (1998-present) housed in the Helen Betty Osborne Building (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). As a teacher education ACCESS program, it accords with recommendations in the provincial government's Hikel Report, which identified the major design elements that have an impact on program costs and outcomes (Hikel 1994; Baker et al. 2003). WEC's purpose is to address inequality by educating socially and economically disadvantaged individuals representing the inner city or neighborhoods with inner-city characteristics. As stated on WEC's website, the program is designed for "adult learners who would normally not be successful in a university program due to financial, academic, and/or social barriers. Examples of such barriers include low family income, single parent responsibilities, ethnicity, and lack of prerequisite academic qualifications" (<https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/access-education/wec/student-supports.html>).

The program accepts only those students who require academic, personal, and/or financial supports. An application and vetting process ensures that these students are representatives of their communities in the sense of having experience with the inner city or communities with inner city characteristics. WEC is a highly successful program that has graduated over 400 students since 1998. Many of its graduates have gone on to teach in school divisions across urban and rural Manitoba. The success of WEC has also helped to lay the foundation for later ACCESS programs - the Community Based Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (CATEP), the Post Baccalaureate in Indigenous Knowledge Program (PBIK), and the most recent Immigrant Teacher Education Program (ITEP).



*Figure 1:* First location of WEC in decommissioned elementary school, Sir Sam Steele School. Photo Credit: Gordon Goldsborough, MHS.



*Figure 2: Second location of WEC in U of M facility on Selkirk Avenue, William Norrie Centre.*  
Photo Credit: Prairie Architects.



*Figure 3: Current location of WEC at UW on Ellice Avenue, Helen Betty Osborne Building.*  
Photo Credit: University of Winnipeg.

# History

WEC has its origins in humanistic initiatives across North America during the early 1970s to improve the personal, social, and economic position of members of minority populations (Baker et al. 2003). The Winnipeg Centre Project (WCP) was created in 1972 under the authority of Brandon University. WCP arose at a time when other "alternative" teacher training programs were springing up all over the United States and Canada, seeking to recruit and train more minority professional educators (Baker et al. 2003). The WCP's original mandate was "to train inner city residents as teachers with its campus located in the inner city of Winnipeg" (Loughton, 1978). In 1978, WEC was relocated to the University of Manitoba, William Norrie Centre campus, where it remained until 1997. At the William Norrie Centre, the University of Manitoba offered the Inner City Social Work Program through the Faculty of Social Work and the Winnipeg Education Centre program through the Faculty of Education and Extended Learning. The University of Winnipeg began to teach courses in the program around 1986, sharing administrative duties and financial resources with the University of Manitoba. From the University of Winnipeg side, there was a sense of cost and resource imbalances. There was also a sense that the William Norrie campus was cut off from the main UW campus and that this isolation had a negative impact on students, faculty, as well as on perceptions of the program by others.

In 1996, there was a review of Faculties of Education in the province, including the WEC program at the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba. There was considerable worry that UW would lose the program under rationalization, as had recently happened in other parts of the country. Dr. Annabelle Mays, Director of Education in the Faculty of Arts and Science at the time, prepared an Education Review for Dr. Bernard Shapiro, produced in 1996. Following this report, the Manitoba government decided to reassign WEC to the University of Winnipeg and to keep the social work program at the University of Manitoba. In a move that seems to have pleasantly surprised UW administration and faculty, UW was given the authority to administer its own full program, including a certification year. Under the old joint system, students needed to attend the University of Manitoba campus to complete certification, a requirement that was understandably a source of dissatisfaction for a lot of UW students.

The decision to move WEC to the University of Winnipeg resulted in the new responsibility to offer a full degree program. Fortunately, UW had experience in offering a full degree program due to a recent contract with the Malaysian government to offer Bachelor of Education degrees to two cohorts of about twenty-five students each. Because of this contract, there were already courses on the books that could be readily adapted to fulfill the requirements of the WEC program. The English Department also provided a number of courses for the Malaysian students in this ESL-based program.

# Who Are WEC Students?

WEC's annual intake is 20-25 students and there are currently about 100 students enrolled in the program. The average age is 31. According to the online survey, most students (70%) hear about the program through word-of-mouth. The intake data indicates that about 57% of WEC students are Indigenous, with 15% immigrant/visible minority, and about 28% other including Caucasian (see Figure 4). In our online survey, a higher number self-identified as Caucasian (37%) and a lower number (13%) as visible minority. Historically, about 82% of the students are female (see Figure 5), although this number was higher in our online survey (86%).

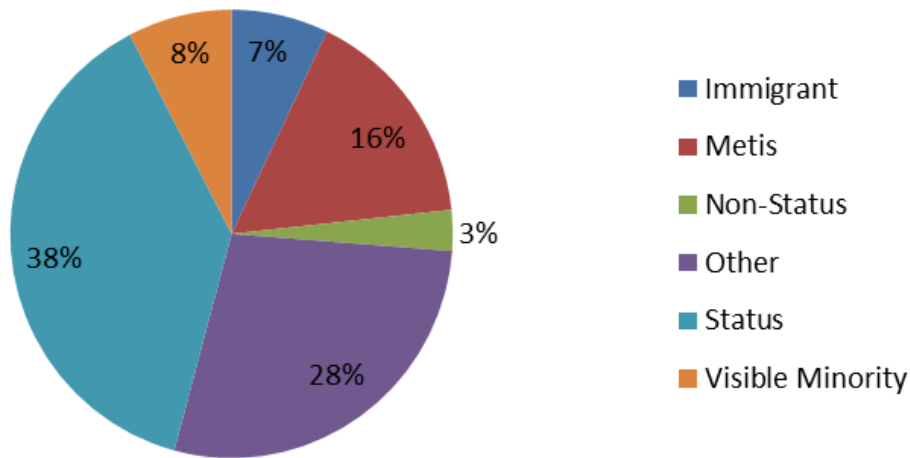


Figure 4: Cultural Breakdown of WEC students (n=419). Source: Chart provided by Dan Bailey.

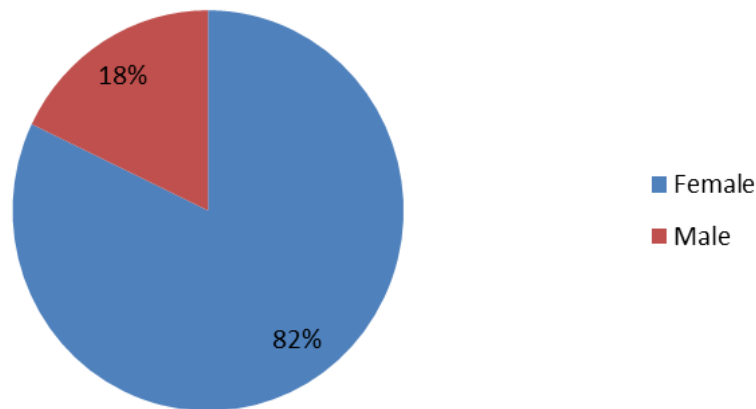


Figure 5: Gender Breakdown for WEC (n=419). Source: Chart provided by Dan Bailey.

When asked what they consider their home community to be, online survey respondents offered the following: Winnipeg (32 respondents or 48%), various Manitoba first nations (7 or 10%), other rural Manitoba areas (5 or 7%), Caribbean (1 or 1.5%), and Ontario (1 or 1.5%). 65% percent of respondents completed high school on time. Of those who did not complete high school on time, 55% earned a Mature Diploma and 19% a General Education Diploma (GED). A high number of respondents (48%) speak another language in addition to English: French (8 speakers or 12%), Ojibwe (8 or 12%), Cree (2 or 3%), Yoruba (2 or 3%), Hausa (2 or 3%), Portuguese (2 or 3%), and Italian, Amharic, Polish, German, Salteaux, Tagalog, Spanish, Hebrew, and Kiswahili each with 1 person or 1.5%. The figures indicate that, of those who speak a second language fluently, the majority speak a local Indigenous language (11 respondents or 16%).

78% of WEC students have children, according to the survey, 42% of whom are single parents. Not surprisingly, WEC students give generously of their time and energy as volunteers. They volunteer most with educational (20%), community (17%), children's school (14%), cultural (12%), religious (12%), and sports (10%) organizations and activities.

The majority of survey respondents (30%) are the first in their families to attend university. About 5% said that both parents attended university, 18% said their mother only, and 11% their father only. 80% of respondents had some level of post-secondary education prior to their enrollment in WEC. 75% were employed prior to enrolling in WEC, with 45% of the total employed in a teaching-related field. 6% of respondents indicated they were a stay-at-home parent while the other parent worked, 5% were on maternity leave, 8% on social assistance, and 6% indicated they were a student.

## Success of the WEC Program

Intake data (see Figure 6) indicates that, since 1998, 42% of students have graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree, 5% with a Bachelor of Arts, and 4% have transferred to other programs. 28% of students have withdrawn (automatic or voluntary) and 21% of students are still in the program (SIP). The actual graduation rate is 70%.

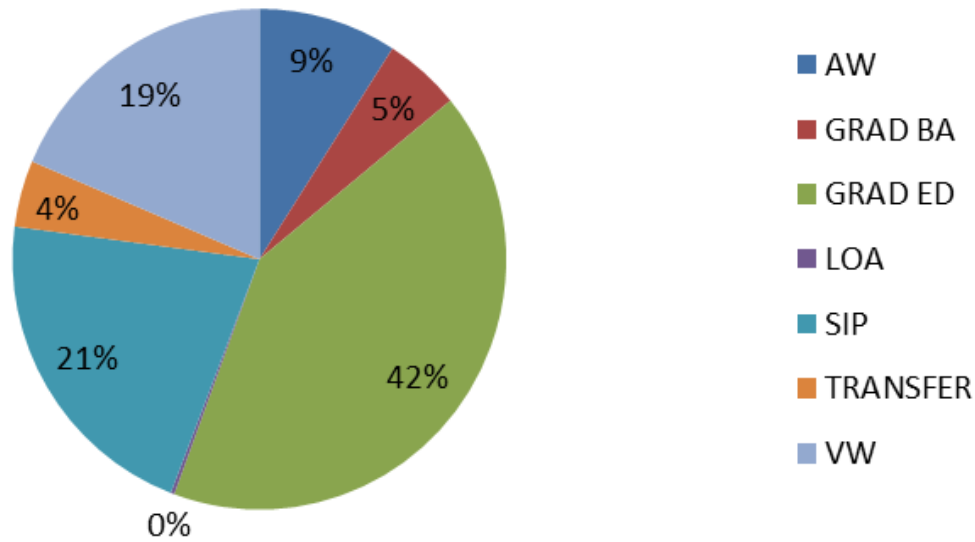


Figure 6: WEC Student Graduation Statistics (n=419). Source: Chart provided by Dan Bailey.

## Employment Rates

Accurate employment rates since WEC came to the University of Winnipeg in 1998 are not known due to the difficulty of tracking students after graduation. The high level of satisfaction expressed in the online survey (see Figure 7), along with the feedback and comments received in both the online survey and focus group, would seem to suggest that placement and employment is not a major concern. Anecdotal reports suggest that the success rate is even higher than that for main campus although we are not able to confirm this. In terms of the survey, 44% are currently employed in a teaching related field, 6% in a teaching related field outside the classroom, 6% in a support position, and 6% are unemployed. Of the over 55% who are employed, 48% of respondents state they are employed full time and 15% part time.

Graduates of the program are employed across most of Manitoba's school divisions. According to the small sample of our online survey, the majority are employed in Winnipeg School Division (22%), followed by Seven Oaks (11%), Pembina Trails (4%), Lord Selkirk (4%), and others.

## Student Satisfaction

Success is more easily measured in terms of past and present students' satisfaction with the program. Of the 63 participants of the online survey who chose to answer this question, 90% are "satisfied" with the program, with 71% indicating that they are "very satisfied" (see Figure 7).

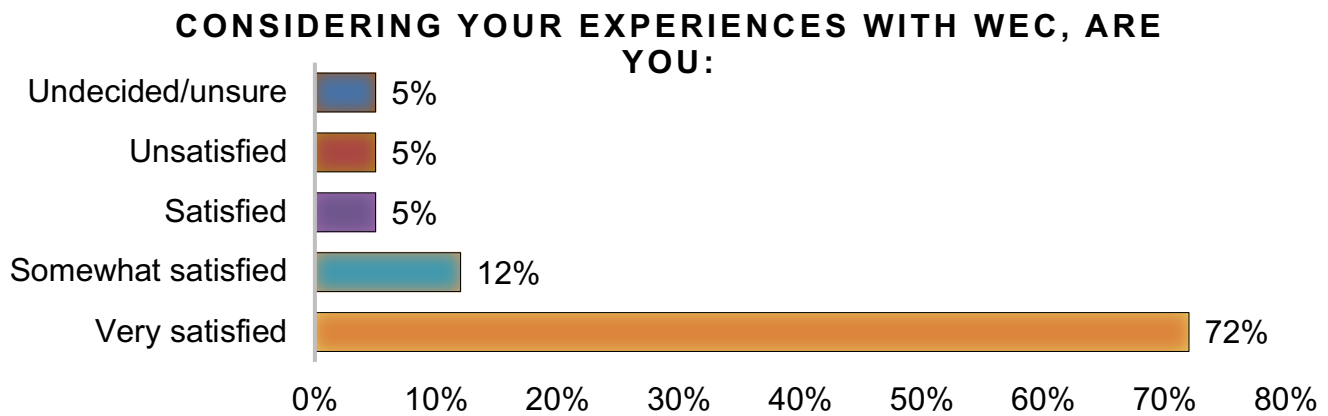


Figure 7: Student Satisfaction with WEC Program. Source: Online survey (n=63, expressed as a percentage).

## Factors that Contribute to WEC's Success

### 1. Kindness & Caring.

Through their online survey and focus group feedback and commentary, many students of the WEC program strongly demonstrate that one of the key attributes of WEC is that it successfully creates a culture that is best described as "kind" and "caring." Students experience these qualities in many facets of the WEC program, from the sense of unity that develops through cohorts, to supportive faculty and staff, to smaller class sizes, to academic and financial supports. For students with young children, this might mean taking courses in a family friendly environment where faculty and staff welcome children and have sometimes even helped to care for them during classes (e.g., during a test). Instructors in the program clearly enjoy working in and contributing to such an environment. Some talk quite specifically about pedagogies that maintain academic rigor within an environment of flexibility needed to accommodate students who have very full and sometimes challenging personal and family lives. Feedback from the online survey points overwhelmingly to a feeling of student appreciation for all the day-to-day and ongoing supports that the academic advisors, staff, and faculty provide. There is a definite sense that the cohort system, smaller class sizes, and less formal environment all help to make WEC less intimidating and overwhelming when compared to the environment on main campus. For those students who have struggled to achieve academic success in the past, the kindness and caring that they experience in WEC appears to be a very big part of their own success as a student.

### 2. Student Supports.

In addition to UW amenities for all students, including the library, fitness centre, etc., WEC students may also take advantage of the following available in the ACCESS building:

- Counselling
- Academic advising
- Free tutoring services



- Free Math and Science preparatory classes
- ACCESS bursaries – initially 21, currently 50 (2018)
- Emergency loan fund (non-repayable)
- Computer lab
- Lounge/lunch room
- Photocopy and printing
- Study room/carrels

**Q. "Is there a specific aspect of the program that has contributed to your success as a student, or that you have found particularly helpful?"**

Select student responses from the online survey:

"The program was focused around relationships. Small class size and more personal connections with staff contributed to my belief that relationships are the key to success at any level in any capacity of education."

"The staff at WEC are always available to meet your needs. They support their students mental, emotional, social, and financial needs. Their compassion and understanding have made my life as a mature university student with no outside support bearable. Their confidence and kind words make you believe that you can keep going on those really stressful days. The staff and students at WEC are a community that works together to create a safe and warm learning environment. Not to say the road has been easy, because it has not been. But the strong foundation of people motivates you."

"The instructors are very helpful and understanding when I need more time to finish assignments. WEC offers flexibility and a family environment. The smaller classes make a huge difference. I feel very comfortable coming to WEC and very happy to go there every day. The classes starting at 9:30 am is very helpful."

"The fact that people are more supportive. The fact that it is more community based, learning with people with life experience. The fact that professors are helpful and easy to talk to."

"The compassion from the professors and the smaller class sizes and it truly feels like a family and you are not just a number."

"First Nations perspectives."

"The in-house access to financial help and education advice."

"The smaller class sizes, extra support from the teaching staff, and close community with fellow colleagues, felt like a close-knit group of friends."

"The community of learners. Having a cohort that I see almost every day, that I am able to build solid relationships with, has assisted me in being successful. I also have benefitted from the support staff and professors in the program. Everyone is kind, helpful, and supportive."

"The professors and administrative staff are extremely supportive for overall success. I would not be a teacher if it wasn't for this program."

"Support from staff seemed more available and involved than regular university programming."

"Aboriginal component."

"Understanding that many of the students have families and having the classes mostly within school hours has been helpful. Also, getting funding and bursaries has made studying and providing for my family easier."

"I had very little confidence in my abilities as a university student before WEC. I felt confident after my first term. I felt very supported by other students and faculty."

## Observations & Recommendations

### 1. Program Success

WEC is a highly successful educational program that has trained and benefitted many students. Many past and present students clearly feel grateful for the opportunities and supports they have been given, without which there is a sense that many would not have succeeded in university.

### 2. "Two Solitudes"

The sense of isolation and "two solitudes" that existed when WEC was at the William Norrie Centre on Selkirk Avenue has significantly improved with its move to the Helen Betty Osborne building on Ellice Avenue which is immediately across from the Duckworth Centre on the university's main campus. To a lesser extent, WEC students, staff, and faculty still experience a feeling of "two solitudes" in the sense that there is little interaction between main campus and UW ACCESS programs, including WEC. Several WEC students have described main campus as a kind of intimidating and overwhelming place where they do not feel welcome or wish to go. There is also a perception among WEC/ACCESS staff, faculty, and students that ACCESS programs in general, and their contributions to teacher training in the province, are not well understood on main campus.

This sense of "two solitudes" is unfortunate particularly in our era of inclusive and "Indigenized" education, where there is an opportunity for students to learn from the experiences of different people, cultures, ethnicities, and socio-economic positionalities. Some faculty are consciously seeking to enhance the level of interaction between main campus and ACCESS students, through, for example, creating learning opportunities on main campus for WEC/ACCESS students and also integrating main campus students into WEC/ACCESS courses and vice versa.

### **3. Math**

Many students expressed a high level of frustration, sense of failure, and lack of confidence in their Math abilities. Even though free tutoring is available, many expressed the feeling that expectations around Math, imposed by the Math Department, are unjust and even detrimental. Students are required to take two courses, Math 0031 and Math 0041, which are preparatory, non-credit courses, but are subject to fees and require "a lot of tutoring," according to many reports. Students often need to repeat the required Math 2903 two or three times. The skills test, for which they require 80% to pass and for which there are no assigned marks, totally consumes them. For students who have often struggled with Math in the past, their experiences with the subject in the WEC program serve mainly to reinforce their considerable anxiety for the subject. The Math Department and Faculty of Education would do well to work together in order to create highly effective pedagogies and strategies that can enable Math to be part of the solution.

### **4. Daycare**

Childcare is obviously a great concern for WEC students, especially given that 78% have children. Several students and staff commented during our study that the current daycare facility at UW offers little help to WEC and other ACCESS students, due to hours, space availability, and cost. Various ideas have been considered over the years, including a daycare in the Helen Betty Osborne building which is not feasible due to resource and provincial licensing requirements. We suggest that the University of Winnipeg consider opening another daycare in an adjacent building or expanding the hours and service of the existing UW daycare in order to accommodate WEC and other ACCESS students and their children.

### **5. Indigenous Languages**

As stated earlier, about 16% of students according to the online survey speak a local Indigenous language. This is a significant strength of the program and we recommend that a way be found to make it easier for those who are fluent in their Indigenous languages and who wish to teach the language to be able to do so. We therefore suggest that the University investigate ways to fast track Indigenous language experts into the system. One way might be to recognize prior learning, especially in Indigenous languages, to help get more qualified Indigenous language experts into classrooms throughout the province as quickly and efficiently as possible.

# Acknowledgments

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