

Mental Health Factors Impacting Indigenous Students' Academic Performance: Empirical Evidence from Canadian Universities

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Abstract

Indigenous students in Canada experience both higher rates of mental health challenges and persistent educational disparities, yet whether mental health conditions differentially impact their academic performance remains empirically unexamined. Using survey data from 8,652 students across 16 Canadian universities in Spring 2022, we test whether the relationship between psychological distress and academic performance differs by Indigenous status. Our results show that mental health challenges are differentially associated with academic performance for Indigenous students. Specifically, the negative association between stress and GPA is 1.4 times stronger for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous peers; for anxiety, 1.6 times stronger; and for depression, 1.8 times stronger. These differential effects remain robust across alternative mental health measures including diagnostic indicators and 30-day stress severity. These findings reveal differential vulnerability beyond prevalence differences alone, suggesting that identical mental health symptoms are associated with substantially larger academic performance decrements for Indigenous students. This hidden multiplier of educational inequality has direct implications for university support systems, indicating that achieving equity requires differentiated interventions calibrated to both amplified academic consequences and Indigenous students' cultural strengths, rather than universal approaches developed for general populations.

Keywords

Mental Health; Stress; Anxiety; Depression; Indigenous Students; Academic Performance; Canadian Universities.

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