
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE REPORT 2019

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1. Context and Overview

The International Student Survey and Focus Group was a collaborative initiative of the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP), Community Settlement Initiative (CSI), and Algonquin College Pembroke Community and Student Affairs (CASA). The purpose of this report is to gather information about the experiences of international students at Algonquin College in Pembroke, Ontario. We are interested in the attraction and retention of newcomers in Renfrew and Lanark counties.

The team members representing LIP, CSI and CASA put forward questions to ask international students. These questions were edited down to 14 questions to send out as an electronic survey using Survey Monkey (See **Appendix A: International Student Survey**). We sent the survey to 25 international students. In total five students responded to this survey.

LIP and CSI, with the support of CASA, organized a one-hour focus group for international students (See **Appendix B: Focus Group Outline**). The event was promoted with free “Canadian” food - beaver tails and poutine - to entice students to join. The event had 11 attendees, seven of whom provided verbal feedback.

The results of and observations from the survey and focus group have been combined in this report and organized under the following headings:

Recruitment & Orientation

What made students choose Algonquin College Pembroke, and what would they have wanted to know to help prepare them?

Networking & Communication

What connections in the community did students make and how do they prefer to communicate?

Retention

What factors would make students want to stay in or leave Renfrew County and Algonquin College Pembroke?

2. Recruitment & Orientation

Recruitment & Orientation Summary

What made students choose Algonquin College Pembroke, and what would they have wanted to know to help prepare them?

Overall, the students were attracted by the reputation of Canada's education system and standard of living. The Pembroke campus of Algonquin College was not the first choice educational institution of about half of the students we spoke with. The other half of students were drawn to Pembroke by factors that included shorter programs and unique offerings such as the Outdoor Adventure Naturalist Program. Regardless of whether Pembroke Campus was their first choice, most students said they were made to feel welcome by college staff. Nearly all students identified a desire to have more information prior to arriving about the realities and challenges of living in a small, rural community like Pembroke.

What factors made you decide to attend Algonquin College Pembroke campus?

- *“It’s not just a course for me, it’s finding myself and getting closer to my own true nature.”* (Outdoor Adventure Naturalist Program)
- Multiple students said that the quality of education and standard of living in Canada attracted them to explore colleges here.
- Three students thought Pembroke was part of, or a neighbourhood of, Ottawa, and did not know where they were going.
- One student said that the Ottawa cohort of their program was full, so they were told to go to Pembroke Campus.
- One student’s family applied for them and they agreed.
- Students identified the hands-on and practical nature of their programs as a draw for allowing them to easily enter the workforce.
- A compressed program length meant students could enter the workforce sooner.
- Algonquin College Pembroke offered unique programs that catered the the students’ interests.

What information would you have liked be a part of your orientation at Algonquin College Pembroke Campus before you began?

- Some students identified that they did not attend the orientation offered by Algonquin College.
- Many students noted that they arrived too late before classes began to be able to take advantage of orientation. These students wished they could have had more time before their programs began.
- One student said they did not attend orientation because they did not check their email and did not know about orientation.
- Students emphasized that even if they did not attend orientation, Algonquin College staff made them feel welcome in other ways.
- Students would like orientation to include more information about the City of Pembroke and broader Renfrew County community, including both positive and negative aspects.
- Several students said they would have liked to know how important a car was in getting around.

What information about living in Renfrew County would you have liked to know before coming here?

- Transportation was identified as a big barrier. Several students noted that a car is necessary to get around town and visit other communities. Others note they wish they knew there was no bus service within town.
- Students wish they had more warning about how cold winter would be. In addition, they wished there were more indoor and outdoor winter activities to keep them occupied during snowy periods.
- One student said there is no information he felt he was missing and that everything he needed to know was revealed when he needed it.

3. Networking & Communication

Networking Summary

What connections in the community did students make and how do they prefer to communicate?

Several students noted that they felt isolated from the surrounding community on campus and were unaware of social events until after they happened. Students felt that there were no arts and culture activities at all, and a lack of public indoor and outdoor sports. Students found word-of-mouth, posters, Instagram, and texting to be the most effective forms of communication. Facebook and email were not as effective.

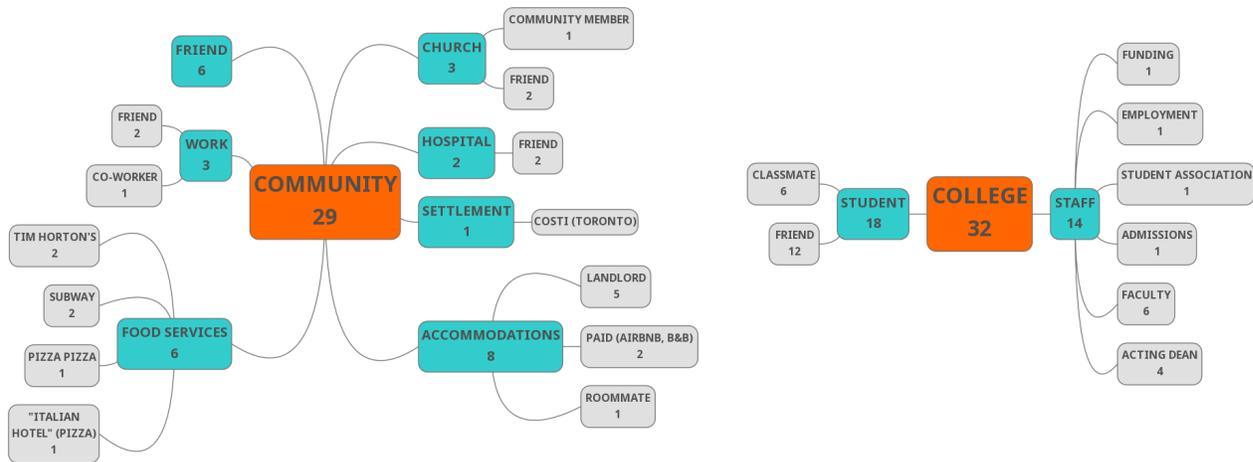
What methods of communication and engagement are most effective for international students?

- Older students shared tips about interesting places to visit in Pembroke and the region.
- Students say posters are a very visible means of communication about events. Of the students who attended the focus group, only one read the email that was sent out, while the rest came because of the poster.
- Digital communication was mentioned, noting that Facebook and email are OK. Others asked if the college could use Instagram or texting, as they use these services more often.
- Some students said they don't check email, or that they get too many from the college.
- Students say they are most driven to attend events that are free or cheap. One student suggested making use of promoter discounts where students would get free entrance or a free drink at events if they brought a poster/flyer to the event.
- Students felt local events were not well promoted, and they would like to know more about what is going on.

Networking

In our focus group we asked participants to write down the names of 10 “Helpers”: People who were helpful or welcoming who they met during their time studying at Algonquin College Pembroke. Along with the Helpers’ names, we asked participants to write out their relationship and how they met. The results were combined with responses from our online survey to a

question about what connections students made in the community and are presented in the graph below. The numbers under the text indicate number of connections.



Networking Observations

The activity is designed to show participants the extent of their local networks, and emphasize local people who were helpful and welcoming. We caution readers against drawing conclusions about the types of connections not present: this is from a sample size of 11 students and portrays a limited set of connections. With more time we anticipate a broader range of connections would manifest. Our observations below are drawn from the connections that are present.

- International students appear to make a majority of their friends through their classes.
- Faculty Members and the Acting Dean (Jamie Bramburger) count among the most visible connections for college staff. However, multiple other departments were mentioned as being particularly helpful and welcoming.
- Landlords emerge as one of the most significant community connections made by International Students. This presents an opportunity to further support international students through housing.
- Food Services (restaurants) are another major point of contact in the community. One student identified two Tim Horton’s staff members who were “helpful during Xmas.” This identifies another potential venue to support international students.
- Several students did not visit downtown Pembroke at all - instead they went straight to Walmart by cab because they were not aware of the downtown.
- Several students noted challenges moving from a large urban centre to a small town.

4. Retention

Retention Summary

What factors would make students want to stay in or leave Renfrew County and Algonquin College Pembroke?

A majority of students appreciated the close-knit community at Pembroke Campus and the opportunities that presented for learning. Students would have liked to see more dedicated support for international students and more activities to participate in outside of classes. One student mentioned being afraid of getting sick because of the logistical difficulties of going to the hospital in Canada and several agreed that this was a concern. As with most students, the ones we interviewed were in a transitional place in their lives where they were not making decisions about where to settle down. Most mentioned work opportunities as a deciding factor in where to move next, while others wanted to go to other parts of Canada to explore or be near family. Students who wanted to stay in Renfrew County appreciated the access to nature and small, welcoming communities. Those who wanted to leave identified the lack of services, activities and diversity compared to a larger city.

What did international students like best about studying at Algonquin College Pembroke?

- Multiple students identified the unique learning environment at Algonquin College Pembroke as a major positive. In particular the small student community and close access the professors were appreciated.
- The small college and community size also meant fewer distractions from learning.
- Professors are willing to help each student individually.
- The program of study, with diversity of offerings and plenty of information to offer.
- ODAN's Fall Camp was a great opportunity to make friends and learn about the community.

What would international students like to see done differently at Algonquin College Pembroke?

- The lack of dedicated support for international students at the Pembroke Campus was challenging.
- Some students were afraid to go to the hospital because of negative experiences with hospital staff being unable to process their health insurance and not having OHIP.
- Students felt there were not many activities at the Pembroke Campus.
- One student found the program challenging because of tight schedules and an excess of assignments.

What factors influence international students to want to stay in the Ottawa Valley after graduation?

- *“Pembroke has everything a city needs to live in.”*
- *“Renfrew County is beautiful. I could stay here for a long time.”*
- Nature was identified as a big reason to stay, with students noting they found a love for nature and ecology, especially if they had outdoor experiences through the ODAN program. Others identified nature as a positive reason to stay, but more in the summertime.
- Student would like to see more competitive athletics, or have activities such as swimming be more accessible to those without a vehicle.
- One student would stay if they had more social connections keeping them here such as friends or a partner.
- One student said they love Pembroke and it is a nice, quiet, small city with fresh air.
- Students hoped to do hiking and to visit historical places.
- Job opportunities, especially a good job with benefits.

What factors influence international students to want to leave the Ottawa Valley after graduation?

- *“You have to be involved in the community, or you get left out.”*
- *“I would stay if there was a lot more entertainment.”*
- *“The waterfront campus does not have many activities and the town it is situated in doesn’t offer much entertainment.”*
- *“No way in hell I will at all consider staying in Renfrew county once my program is over.”*

- *“A large city like Ottawa would have a lot more to offer the students, especially international students as restaurant and lifestyle there is a lot more diverse whereas, Pembroke is not a very diverse town.”*
- There is no access to a mosque without a car.
- Winter is challenging and intense. Students said it was too cold and snowy, and they would rather live in a warmer part of Canada. Several mentioned that they did not know what to spend their time doing in the winter.
- Lack of transportation options was mentioned by nearly all students, wishing there was public transportation, with some highlighting Uber as the service they would like to access. Others said they would not stay here if they did not have a car.
- If there was more diversity, students might be more interested in staying. Students specifically identified communities from their home countries and other diverse cultures that existed in Toronto, Ottawa and other cities, but were not present here.
- Students expressed a desire to travel elsewhere in Canada and the world as a reason for not wanting to stay here. This included a desire to live in a landscape that includes mountains and the sea, or at least take a road trip to see Western Canada.
- Lack of family or close friends was identified as a factor that would lead students to move away after graduation.
- There was a perceived lack in accessible healthcare and services for non-Canadians.
- Students did not feel there were many activities to do or much entertainment in Renfrew County.

Where would you take a friend who came to visit you in the Ottawa Valley?”

- *“I would take them somewhere else.”*
- *“Outdoorsy people would really like it here.”*
- *“We could go to Ottawa because I like the city, but I need a car.”*
- Students identified that nature would be a big attraction for visiting friends. The Ski Hill at Calabogie, the Du Moine River, and camping in Quebec were to specific examples mentioned.
- Restaurants were cited as another potential place to bring visiting friends. This included going to McDonald’s, which is a new experience for a Kenyan, and going for pizza, which is good at Domino’s and Pizza Pizza. Whitewater Brewery and Dubeau’s were also mentioned.
- One student said they enjoy walking in the mall and would take friends to visit there.

Appendix A: International Student Survey

International Students: We Want to Hear From You!

International Student Experience Survey

1. Why did you choose to study in Canada? Why Algonquin College Pembroke Campus?
2. What do you like most and least about studying at the Pembroke Waterfront Campus?
Most:
Least:
3. Outside of the college, who did you meet?
Friends
Neighbours
Clubs
Church
4. How do you think living and studying in a small college community like Pembroke would have compared to an experience in a large city?
5. Why would you want to stay in Renfrew County after you graduate?
6. Why would you want to leave Renfrew County after you graduate to live somewhere else?
7. Please rate (1 worst - 5 best) the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Healthcare						
Employment						



Immigration & Settlement services						
Transportation services						
Welcoming community						
Shopping & Food						
Entertainment & Recreation						

8. What experiences did you want to have as an International Student studying abroad? Were there any disappointments?

9. What information may have helped you in your college experience in Renfrew County?

10. Thank you for your input!

We would love to sit down with you and chat about these questions in more detail. We invite you to a beavertails, poutine and giveaways conversation session! Please indicate which of the following dates and times you are available.

Wednesday April 17, 11-12 pm

Wednesday April 17, 4-5 pm

Thursday April 18, 12-1 pm

Saturday April 27, 11-12 pm

Monday April 29, 4-5 pm



Appendix B: Focus Group Outline

Thursday, April 18, 2019, 12-1pm

Eating + Casual Chat (20 mins)

Tools: Beaver Tails, Poutine, GF Alternatives, Drinks

1. Intro to CSI/LIP, what are we doing with their information
2. Round table where everyone tells their story. How did they come to study here in Canada and in this community college particularly?
3. Plan to stay? Why leave/stay?

Networking Activity (20 mins)

Tools: Flip Chart, Paper, Pens/Pencils, Markers

1. Give participants a piece of paper. Ask them to divide the paper into three columns.
First: Who was a helper for you? Name/Organization. *Second:* How did you meet? *Third:* Relationship/interaction?
2. Ask people to share highlights
3. Ask everyone to add their helpers to a big flip chart. If someone has the same person as you, draw a star beside their name instead of copying it twice.
4. Ask people to draw lines connecting helpers who know each other
5. This is your local network! What do you see? What is missing?

Flip Chart Brainstorm (20 mins)

Tools: Flip Chart, Markers, Post-it Notes

1. What do you wish you knew then?
2. Wish-list/to-dos
3. What were some of the opportunities you were glad to have? What challenges did you face as an international student?
4. You are orienting a new international student. What would you do? What do you want them to know?