

# **GTA POST-SECONDARY ACCESS INITIATIVES: Pointing the Way to Success**



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It is intended to provide independent advice that will help in the definition of the work that lies ahead for this dedicated group of advocates as they continue the important work of improving access to post-secondary programmes, and meaningful engagement in the workforce for those young people who are traditionally under-represented in our colleges and universities.

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## Executive Summary

Post-secondary education (PSE) confers measurable social and economic benefits upon individuals and upon society as a whole. In the knowledge society of which we are now a part, access to education beyond secondary school has moved from a privilege to a necessity for the vast majority of citizens. The success of the province and the country are increasingly dependent upon a highly educated and skilled labour force. We have now reached the peak year of the baby boom bulge and its echo and in the coming years will witness a steady decline in the proportion of the population in the prime working ages of 15 to 64. At the same time we know that, at current rates of graduation, we are not preparing sufficient numbers of Ontarians to meet the combined challenge of an aging population and the growing demands of the knowledge economy. This reality and need for a more educated workforce was recognized in the Ontario Speech from the Throne (McGuinty, 2010). Part of the solution must be to increase access to post-secondary education, especially among groups that have traditionally been under-represented in our universities, colleges, and apprenticeship programs.

Despite the urgency of increasing accessibility to post-secondary education, the fact of the matter is that we do not know very much about the real causes of the under-representation of groups such as Aboriginal, first generation, low income, immigrant and minority students or students with disabilities, or what measures are most likely to be successful in meeting this challenge. A comprehensive review of the literature reveals that while there have been quite a number of studies related to accessibility for traditionally under-represented groups, they tend to be longer on description than on analysis. One seldom finds hard, or quantitative, data to support the conclusions and recommendations.

There are currently a considerable variety of programs and initiatives within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) that seek to improve accessibility for under-represented groups. A review of programs offered by the public and separate school boards, the four colleges (Centennial, George Brown, Seneca and Humber) and the three universities (Ryerson, Toronto, and York) is provided. The existence of some notable “best practice” programs and the diversity that characterizes these efforts are identified. However, the importance of provincial leadership in encouraging and financially supporting them is underscored.

There are some serious concerns regarding how access programs are funded, structured and evaluated. Principal among these are the short duration and shifting priorities of most initiatives, the reliance on “soft money” in funding programs, the lack of rigorous built-in evaluations, and changes in personnel, all of which make the establishment of long term commitments and planning cycles very difficult. What is also apparent is that what funding is available is directed almost exclusively to supporting the delivery of programs and does not allow for rigorous program evaluations or research into the causes of under-representation of specific groups or best practices in addressing this problem.

Building on existing institutional strengths, several steps are reviewed that might assist in moving accessibility to the next level of effectiveness. Above all, what is needed is a mechanism that will facilitate the coordination of the institutional capacity that is already in place, that will support enhanced networking among these participants, and that will engage in and support research, evaluation and a sharing of knowledge. This can best be ensured by strengthening the Council of Educators and putting it on a firmer and longer term foundation.

# Introduction

Post-secondary education – university, college, or apprenticeship training – has become the essential path to reasonably stable and satisfying employment for most Canadians. It follows, therefore, that the question of who gets into a post-secondary program, and who graduates, is now a critical issue not only for the individuals directly concerned and their families, but also for public policy and for the general Canadian public, more broadly. This is the issue we have come to define as access to post-secondary education, or simply as accessibility. It is the issue that is destined to become a critically important consideration as we wrestle with the challenges posed by the demographic changes that are upon us. We have long recognized that advanced education provides benefits on the educated individual, both in terms of future earnings and personal satisfaction. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that until the twentieth century in Canada we expected the cost of a higher education to be borne primarily or entirely by the student or his or her parents. That began to change, especially after the Second World War, as we came increasingly to realize that in a world that was rapidly industrializing post-secondary education confers substantial social benefits, such that we are all better off, both socially and economically, when we live in a highly educated society. We are, of course, still debating what the respective individual and social shares of the cost should be, but the principle that the benefits of post-secondary education accrue, at least in part, to society as well as to the individual is no longer questioned.

Precisely because we recognize that post-secondary education provides benefits to society as well as to the individual, we are obliged to acknowledge the importance of who has access to degree, diploma, apprenticeship and certificate programs. This is partly a matter of fairness or equity. To not provide an individual with a reasonable opportunity to obtain a post-secondary qualification is to prevent that person from reaping the benefits that would result from their further education. But it is also a matter of importance for public policy because a highly educated population contributes directly to our collective social and economic well-being – our happiness and our national income. A report by the TD Bank Group (Drummond, D., Alexander, C. and Fard, S. M., 2010) clearly showed the link between our nation's standard of living and educational attainment. In other words, it is in our collective self-interest to ensure that as many Ontarians and Canadians as possible have access to post-secondary education. And so we have come to accept, as both a personal and a social responsibility, that effective steps must be taken to lower, if not remove entirely, any barriers that exist in the way of enabling individuals to pursue their education beyond secondary school.

# The Benefits of Post-secondary Education

We know, of course, that post-secondary education contributes to higher incomes. It also leads to higher rates of employment and contributes to higher tax revenues. But it may not be so generally well known that post-secondary education is, to put it bluntly, a matter of life and death. The fact is that, statistically, those with more education live longer. There is a linear relationship between the years of education and life expectancy such that mortality rates are highest for those with the least education, and decline as education increases, up to the age of 85 (Wilkins, R. et al., 2008). Life expectancy for those with some post-secondary education currently stands at 82 years; while for those with only high school education or less it is only 75 years (Meara, E. R., Richards S., and Cutler D. M., March/April 2008).

Not only do those with higher educational achievement live longer and earn more, they also live healthier lives. A recent American study found that college graduates were twice as likely to report their health as good compared with high school graduates (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America, 2009). Moreover, higher crime rates in the GTA can be associated, among other factors, with lower educational levels (Toronto Star, July 2008). Post-secondary education also contributes to positive civic behaviour. For example, post-secondary graduates are more likely to vote and are more likely to serve as volunteers (Baum, S. and Ma, J., 2007). To all of these considerations we must add a looming crisis that is about to raise the ante in terms of the importance we attach to addressing the barriers to accessibility in Ontario and Canada - a looming labour shortage.

Before leaving this section one must be aware of two facts. First, the research results reporting the benefits of education are almost entirely corollary. Hence, one needs to be cautious about inadvertently attributing direct causality to any one factor (say education) because there is a great deal of co-variance involved (other inter-related factors). Yet, the results are so consistent among a variety of researchers that one can feel reasonably comfortable assuming that education is a significant factor even though it is certainly not the only factor. Second, one needs to exercise some caution about assuming that increased education will immediately lead to increased benefits. As with the issue of co-variance, it is likely that some lag time will exist between educational attainment and some form of social and/or economic benefit.

# The Looming Labour Shortage and the Growing Importance of Accessibility

Canada has, this year, begun to witness a demographic shift of profound significance. The baby boom bulge and its echo (the children of the boomers) are now beginning to exit the prime working age cohort of 15 to 64 and enter the period when many will seek or expect retirement. That means that Canada's labour force will begin to shrink as a proportion of the total population, while at the same time the increasing proportion of older citizens will make increasingly expensive demands on our public and private resources (health care and pensions, for example). The magnitude of this shift is not always fully appreciated. Between the mid-sixties and the early eighties, the peak of the boomer generation entered the labour market and, consequently, the proportion of the working-age population rose from below 60% of our total population to nearly 70%. It reached its peak of 70% in 2010. It will now begin a precipitous decline, falling back to about 61% by 2030. The people who breathe life into this statistic are real people, moving through their life cycle year by year and about to reach 65 in ever increasing numbers, with fewer and fewer young workers to take their places. This does not mean that the total population of Ontario and Canada will decline; it does mean that a larger and larger proportion of our growing population will be senior citizens.

As recently documented in *People Without Jobs, Jobs Without People* for both Ontario and Canada (Miner R., 2010a and 2010b), and recently "confirmed" by the World Economic Forum (Cumberlege, P., et. Al., 2011), the situation is a good deal more challenging than suggested by this demographic shift alone. The fact of the matter is that this demographic shift is occurring at the

same time as equally dramatic changes are taking place in the kind of jobs that will be in demand. We have entered what has come to be called the knowledge economy. The jobs that will be created will increasingly require a level of education and training beyond that obtained in secondary school. Post-secondary education will increasingly be the minimum expected of employees, be it a degree, diploma or certificate, apprenticeship, industry credential or professional qualification. A reasonable if somewhat conservative projection puts the proportion of the labour force that will need a post-secondary qualification at 71.8 % by 2021 and 76.5 % by 2031 (Miner, R., 2011). According to McGuinty (2010) it now stands at 62 %.

These estimates correspond to objectives established in both Ontario and British Columbia. In the 2010 Speech from the Throne (McGuinty, D., 2010) the Ontario Government established the objective of raising Ontario's workforce post-secondary attainment level from 62% to 70%. While no target date was specified, informal discussions lead one to believe that a 2020/2021 time frame is what the government has in mind. This seems reasonable as British Columbia (2010) has announced an 80% target for 2020. While clearly more aggressive than the Ontario target, British Columbia contends they are starting from a slightly higher attainment level (67%). As will be discussed later, the Ontario target is probably a lot more ambitious than most people realize. Specifically, Ontario currently graduates about 200,000 students per year from a post-secondary program. Miner (2011) shows that when one even takes in to account the natural growth in attainment levels from 62% to 64%, Ontario will need a minimum of 465,000 additional post-secondary graduates by 2021, which is about 46,000 additional graduates per year.

What *People Without Jobs, Jobs Without People* showed is that Ontario and Canada face the very real prospect of a situation in which a growing number of citizens will be unqualified for the



jobs that will be available, while at the same time many of those jobs will go unfilled because of a shortage of qualified applicants. As the studies argued, the solution to this problem is two-fold. First, it will require increasing the proportion of the population entering or remaining in the labour force. This will help, but, on its own, it will not be enough to eliminate the problem. Given the increasing sophistication of the labour market, what is also required is an increase in the proportion of workers who obtain at least some post-secondary education or training. Among other actions that will be necessary, all provinces in Canada will need to increase access to post-secondary education, and to do this it will need to reduce or eliminate barriers that now inhibit or prevent too many under-represented students from continuing their education. This will be critically important as most of the additional 46,000 graduates per year will need to emerge from what is now considered to be under-represented communities.

So, we know that Ontario needs to improve accessibility to post-secondary education (Canadian Student Alliance, et al., 2011). Yet, before we can suggest effective solutions to meet this challenge, we need to know more precisely what the problems are. What do we know about accessibility, and what do we know about the barriers that are preventing certain potential students from pursuing a post-secondary education or training?

## What Do We Know About Accessibility?

The short but accurate answer is that our knowledge is insufficient to provide the basis for data-driven prescriptions for enhancing accessibility. The fact is that interest in access to post-secondary education for traditionally under-represented groups is a relatively recent phenomenon. As a result, funding for systematic research and the development of accountability measures has been relatively modest. Moreover, the study of accessibility and barriers to access is, like all experimental research on human subjects, inherently complex and fraught with ethical questions. It is neither easy nor inexpensive to recruit a representative sample of under-represented students, provide them with the additional supports necessary to test the effectiveness of specific interventions, and then track the results over time. Moreover, serious ethical questions would arise in a study that denied comparable services to another group of students in order to create a control group for comparative research purposes. But to rely on self-selection in constituting the experimental group creates its own problems of experimental validity. The upshot is that research involving longitudinal data is lacking with regard to these programs and in both Canada and the United States responsible authorities have explicitly shied away from endorsing different practices for different target groups (Berger, J., et al., 2009; US Dept. of Education, 2010).

There is relatively little primary research on the effectiveness of post-secondary access programs in Canada, although this began to change under the aegis of the now defunct Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. For the most part, we must rely on reports from individual institutions on their own specific access programs, even though they are mostly descriptive in nature rather than analytical or comparative. Most of the academic literature dealing with access to post-secondary education originates in the United States. Even



there, almost every article or review comments on the lack of rigorous research on accessibility, the paucity of studies incorporating experimental designs, or the absence of attention to outcomes (Valentine, J., et al., 2009). So, while acknowledging these limitations, what can we learn from the literature that is available? Here, the literature most often addresses issues of specific groups of students for whom access programs are provided. We will follow this pattern and summarize findings in relation to the following groups: Aboriginal students, first-generation students, low-income students, students with disabilities, immigrants and visible minority students. Of course, these categories are not always discrete, and a given study may touch upon students in more than one category, or even blur the distinctions altogether. Nevertheless, we begin with Aboriginal students.

## Aboriginal Students

Research related to access for Aboriginal students reveals a profound paradox. On the one hand, Aboriginal students who manage to successfully complete their education to the end of high school are just as likely as non-Aboriginal students to be successful in pursuing a post-secondary education. PSE completion rates for Aboriginal students who have graduated from high school are very similar to those of non-Aboriginal students (Mendelson, M., 2006). The problem arises earlier, with far lower completion rates at the secondary or high school level (Mendelson, M., 2006; Berger J., et al., 2009). This means, of course, that without high school completion, direct access to a post-secondary program is blocked. In recognition of this, many provincial initiatives and recommendations for improving Aboriginal educational attainment focus on the elementary and secondary or the K-12 years (Richards J. and Scott M., 2009).

Despite this, in Ontario the proportion of Aboriginal persons with a college or trade credential is very similar to that of the general population. It is at the university level where the discrepancy persists;

with proportionately far fewer Aboriginal students attaining university credentials than the general population (Statistics Canada, 2006; Colleges Ontario, 2009). Even in the case of college and trade programs, however, Aboriginal students tend to be older than their non-Aboriginal colleagues (ACCC, 2005; Junor, S. and Usher, A., 2004; Colleges Ontario, 2008), suggesting that direct access from secondary to post-secondary education is not the norm. Yet, colleges may well prove to be an avenue by which Aboriginal student might successfully enter universities. When we consider these data in conjunction with the fact that the Aboriginal population is both growing faster and is younger than the general population (Statistics Canada, 2006), we confront the urgent need to improve access and retention for Aboriginal students.

Recent comprehensive reviews, although largely descriptive, have shed considerable light on the many and varied barriers that face Aboriginal students in pursuing a post-secondary education (Junor, S. and Usher, A., 2004; ACCC, 2005; ACCC, 2010). Some are historical in nature, reflecting the negative legacy of previous policies of forced assimilation. Others reflect the social situation of many Aboriginal communities, including poverty, discrimination, competing family responsibilities, and the lack of role models who could demonstrate the benefits of continuing in school. Among other barriers cited in these studies, finance, geographical isolation, and a feeling of isolation within post-secondary institutions loom largest. Although empirical data on the efficacy of such approaches are lacking, many Ontario post-secondary institutions have adopted programs designed to ameliorate at least the symptoms associated with these barriers. These include Aboriginal student centres, employment of Aboriginal elders to provide support, and programs tailored specifically to the learning needs of Aboriginal students. In 2010 the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario published a review of programs and services available to Aboriginal learners. Again, however, quantitative data on the effectiveness of any of these programs

are absent. An exception is found in a study at the University of Victoria, which employed both qualitative and quantitative analyses in evaluating its access programs and consider variables such as mentoring, financial assistance, internships, etc. The final report was just released in December (Hunt, S., et al., 2010) confirming that withdrawal rates were lower and retention rates higher for participants in the program receiving support services.

Given the significant growth in the Aboriginal population (higher fertility rates) and the historically lower levels of educational attainment, our ability to enhance educational opportunities for this group will take on particular significance as the shortage of skilled workers increases. The GTA will experience particular difficulties in this regard. However, if the trend of increasingly higher numbers of urban Aboriginals continues, this population, with higher levels of educational achievement, could become an extremely valuable asset.

It is worth noting that the definition of Aboriginal students is at times as contentious as that of first-generation students, the second group for whom access to post-secondary education is often seen to be problematic.

## **First-generation students**

Here we encounter considerable definitional confusion. What, exactly, is a first-generation student? Answers vary considerably and, of course, with varying definitions the scope of the analyses or prescriptions also differs. One common definition of a first-generation student is one whose parents did not attend a post-secondary institution. But another definition narrows the scope to include only those whose parents did not obtain a post-secondary credential (degree, diploma, or certificate). Moreover, some studies consider all forms of post-secondary education, while others focus only on universities (Auclair, R., et al., 2008). Still other Canadian studies limit their focus to whether parents obtained their credential from

a Canadian institution. And in addition to all of this, there is the problem common to virtually all attempts to categorize the characteristics of those who are deemed to face barriers to accessibility: the categories often overlap so that a given first-generation student may well occupy several other access categories simultaneously. In the US, it is common to use a catch-all definition such as under-represented students, thereby blurring more descriptive categories. Separating first-generation status from low-income has, for example, proven to be particularly difficult.

Ontario's Rae Report (2005) placed considerable emphasis on the need to improve the registration and graduation of first-generation students. The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities provide targeted funding for first-generation students and define an eligible recipient as "a student whose parents have not participated in post-secondary studies." Ontario research indicates that the principal accessibility barrier exists prior to registration in a post-secondary program, since once registered, first-generation students are as likely as other students to continue (Finnie, R., et al., 2010).

One recent review of programs targeted at first-generation students identified five general categories of interventions (Engle, J., 2007). The categories included improving pre-college preparation (college-prep courses), enhancing early aspirations for college attendance (directed to both students and their parents), providing financial aid for first-generation students, easing the transition to college (bridging or orientation programs), and providing opportunities for enhanced exposure to the college environment (work-study programs and access to on-campus services).

An important study in the US identified the common characteristics of first-generation students (Engle, J. and Tinto, V., 2008). The authors found that first-generation students tend to be older than other students, with heavier family and financial obligations. They were also more likely

to come from ethnic or minority backgrounds, with less academic preparation and lower incomes. Even when the study controlled for demographic factors, first-generation students were still less likely to complete post-secondary education than other students. Based on these findings, the authors proposed a rather long list of strategies to improve access for these students. The proposed strategies included improved academic preparation (counselling in high school), additional financial aid, including financial literacy instruction and funding of unmet financial needs, easing the transition to college and from two- to four-year colleges through orientation and mentoring programs, and a variety of initiatives designed to familiarize students with the college experience. A particularly successful example is the Student First Mentoring Project funded by the US Department of Education (Collier, P. and Fellows, C., 2008). Similar results were obtained using focus group interviews in a Texas study (Engle J., et al., 2006).

As noted above, first-generation students are often lumped together with other groups of under-represented students. And while students from low-income backgrounds sometimes fall into the same catch-all category, a number of studies do focus specifically on low-income students.

## Low-income students

As with many of the categories discussed in this section, low-income status is neither easy to define nor simple to distinguish. Definitions vary with the jurisdiction involved. In Canada, studies variously define low-income students as those whose income, or their parents' incomes, fall below a specific level. But this may be expressed as the bottom quartile, or the bottom quintile, or as below a specific dollar amount. Alternatively, low-income may be taken as including students who qualify for financial aid, whatever the threshold for that is (e.g. Berger, J., et al., 2009). This raises a common concern as to whether the measure should be based on income or financial need (Junor, S. and Usher A., 2004;

Mueller, R., 2008). In the US, eligibility for Pell grants, which are designed specifically to assist low-income Americans and are administered federally, is often taken as a proxy for low-income status. In the UK, parental occupation and average income in the student's resident neighbourhood are frequently used. To repeat, studies of accessibility frequently use the definition of low-income in combination with other factors in identifying students who are under-represented in post-secondary institutions.

A major focus in studies of access to post-secondary education for low-income students is, not surprisingly, placed on financial aid policies and eligibility for grants or loans. For this group, students' knowledge of the system has often been found to be a key factor in determining the effectiveness of student aid policies. For example, both young people and their parents often do not appreciate the objective benefits of a post-secondary education (Junor, S. and Usher A., 2004). Low-income Canadians especially tend to overestimate the costs and underestimate the benefits.

Interestingly, US studies tend to focus on income, or finance, as the principal barrier to post-secondary study, while in Canada the tendency is to consider financial factors in conjunction with other barriers, such as motivation, information and academic preparedness. Nonetheless, household income is still found to be a significant predictor of university attendance, but much less so in the case of college attendance (Berger, J., et al., 2009). Indeed, household income is essentially irrelevant in the case of colleges, with virtually equal proportionate participation across all income quartiles (Colleges Ontario, 2010).

A study comparing intervention programs in 12 US states encountered considerable difficulty in defining best practices because of differences in program design, target population, and the evaluation of outcomes. The best that could be attempted was a summary of the most common features of the programs studied (Junor, S. and Usher, A., 2004). The US Department of Education

has for years sponsored a collection of programs known as TRIO, designed to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. There is no coordinated evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs, although there appears to be growing interest in doing so, particularly since many access programs offered by individual institutions derive their funding from this source. Other studies in the US have also found it impossible to define best practices in this area because of the underdeveloped nature of the research (e.g. Tierney, W., et al., 2009). This may be about to change with the involvement of such funding agencies as the Lumina Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC).

Another group that has had PSE access difficulties (Alcorn MacKay, S., 2010) is students with disabilities, which we turn to next.

## **Students with Disabilities**

Students with disabilities have only recently received significant attention in the literature on post-secondary access, and what attention they have received has been focused more on colleges than universities (Holmes, D., 2005; Neubert, D. and Moon, M., 2006). Disabilities could be considered in two categories: students with sensory or motor disabilities, and students with learning disabilities. Despite the lack of attention to issues of access for students with disabilities, it is generally recognized that this is destined to become an issue of growing importance in coming years. This was the case with a recent study in Ontario which argued that increasing numbers of students with autism spectrum disorder can be expected to access the post-secondary system (Alcorn MacKay, S., 2010).

There have been a few exceptions to the general paucity of attention to this group of students and

potential students. For example, the University of Washington offers a transition program with an emphasis on careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics which has won several awards (Ramsay, J. and Gorgol, L., 2010). While evaluations have not employed a control group for comparative purposes, they have been tracking results on the basis of interviews. Results appear to be positive. Other institutions have introduced programs offering supports to students with disabilities, but generally these have not been subjected to systematic analysis to determine their effectiveness. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario recently released report (Chambers, T., Sukai, M. and Bolton, M., 2011) shows the students with disabilities have significant financial challenges and their total income is not sufficient to cover the educational related services they need.

## **Immigrants and Minority Students**

The most recent Toronto District School Board (TDSB) data, with immigrant related analysis, indicate that approximately 75% of TDSB high school students graduate after five successive years but, of the 25% who do not, the largest numbers are students of Aboriginal, Black (Caribbean males), Hispanic, Portuguese, and Middle Eastern backgrounds. With the growing demographic diversity of the GTA, attention to the academic and socio-economic success of these and other immigrant and minority students has, appropriately, grown in recent years. Nevertheless, research on this demographic cohort presents analytical challenges.

Firstly, the issues these students face seldom exist in isolation. Immigrants and children of immigrants are often also defined by low-income status or as first-generation students. These students tend to have the lowest family income levels and are more likely to live in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of the city. Immigrant and minority status often go hand in hand and trying to separate them can be problematic. There are also



significant differences between immigrant and minority groups themselves with some achieving educational attainment levels significantly above the Canadian average while others are significantly below (Bonikowska, A. and Hou, F., 2011). There can be as much difference between immigrants from different cultural backgrounds as between immigrants and Canadian-born citizens (King, A., et al., 2009; Brown, R., 2009; Junor, S. and Usher A., 2004).

Immigrants who come to Canada as very small children tend to behave much like Canadian-born children when it comes to post-secondary attendance (Erisman, W. and Looney, S., 2007). Similarly, in the specific case of children of immigrants, much depends on whether both or only one parent was born outside Canada. Children with one Canadian-born parent are very similar in their post-secondary experience to children with both parents born in Canada.

As mentioned earlier, post-secondary access and attainment levels differ by an individual's region-of-origin. Using TDSB data, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario recently released a report (Sweet, R., et al., 2010) showing pathway differences among immigrant groups. Compared to students who were born in Canada and spoke English at home (Canadian-English) some first-generation students had educational pathways with both significantly higher and significantly lower post-secondary enrolments. In this regard, Caribbean and African students were far less likely to pursue a post-secondary education. In fact, the results for the Caribbean population are particularly discouraging. On average, 56% of the Canadian-English students went to university or college but only 29% of the Caribbean students followed the same route. The results also showed a significantly higher high school dropout rate. For this population the dropout rate was 45% compared to the norm of 24%. On the other side of the comparison, East Asian, European and South Asian students were far more likely to

attend a post-secondary institution. Of particular note is the East Asian population where 80% enrol in a post-secondary institution compared to the norm of 56%.

It is interesting to note that when the Caribbean and African students do enrol in post-secondary they are proportionately more likely to enrol in a college. For example, in the Caribbean population 17% go to college while only 12% enrol in a university. The results of a similar study done by the TDSB (Brown, R., 2009) also found South and East Asian students excelling while Latin and Black students (Caribbean and African) whether born in Canada or not are struggling. So with regard to post-secondary attainment, it is clear that not all immigrant groups are alike and programs that do not distinguish one group from another may be missing their target.

As we have seen, the study of under-represented groups in post-secondary education tends to be longer on description than on analysis. While some studies claim positive results, they are seldom able to provide hard data to support their conclusions. As we move from a general survey of the literature to concrete experience "on the ground", we may be able to shed further light on what works and what does not in efforts to improve access. Our focus now turns to high schools and post-secondary institutions in the GTA. We will briefly examine the two K-12 school systems (Catholic and public), four colleges (Centennial, George Brown, Seneca and Humber) and three universities (Ryerson, Toronto and York). We will also turn our attention to two projects which, while not engaged in educating students directly, are nevertheless playing an important role in supporting both students and educational institutions in that process. These are Pathways to Education (PTE) and the Community of Practice (CoP). Finally, there is an "overarching" entity, the Council of Educators (CoE), which includes both community, labour, civic and educational representation whose future role will be examined in detail.

## Efforts to Improve Accessibility: Institutional Approaches

Institutional efforts to improve accessibility in the GTA are many and varied. There are, however, some general patterns that distinguish some from the others. The distinct mandates of high schools and post-secondary institutions offer one obvious example. Even so, these mandates do overlap, especially for young adults who have not completed their high school diploma yet wish to pursue further education or training. Colleges and universities also differ. Universities, by their historical foundations and established traditions, are more decentralized in their governance structures and decision-making procedures. They also have, and perceive themselves to have, different missions both one from the other and as compared with the colleges (and vice versa). The colleges, for their part, while generally subject to greater direction and coordination by the provincial government, are nonetheless quite distinct in how they interpret their mandates and how they respond to the needs and demands of the constituent communities which they serve. And despite the intended differences between colleges and universities, and provincial efforts to maintain them, there is a growing convergence in certain aspects of their operations. One need only think of the increasingly common practice of students moving from one to the other, often in sequence and in both directions. The sum of these institutions provides us with a rich field on which to examine efforts to improve access to post-secondary education in greater Toronto. We begin with the two high school boards.

## The High Schools

In 2003 the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced an ambitious strategy to guide the reform of high school education in the province, known as the ‘Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L 18) Strategy’. Among its five goals, two stand out for our purposes: to increase the high school graduation rate from 68% to 85%, and to support effective transitions from secondary to post-secondary education and training. ([www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentsuccess/CCL\\_SSE\\_Report.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentsuccess/CCL_SSE_Report.pdf),9).

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB), following on this provincial initiative, adopted an urban diversity strategy designed to identify the 20 (originally 25 and ultimately 19) most under-performing schools and set a target of increasing their performance by five percent per year to reach 85 percent by 2013, thus matching the provincial goal for all students. ([www.tdsb.on.ca/boardroom/bd\\_agenda/uploads/generalinfo/081010%20UEBAN%20DIVERSITY%20STRATEGY.PDF](http://www.tdsb.on.ca/boardroom/bd_agenda/uploads/generalinfo/081010%20UEBAN%20DIVERSITY%20STRATEGY.PDF)). In general, the TDSB places its emphasis on students who are at risk of not completing high school rather than on admission to post-secondary education per se. Of course, finishing high school is generally a prerequisite for entering college, university or an apprenticeship program, so the two goals are ultimately compatible, if not identical. This is, of course, a two-way path, and as we will explore shortly, the post-secondary institutions are actively engaged in working with high school students to encourage them to think about and plan for futures that include post-secondary education. Moreover, as we learned earlier, failure to complete high school is a primary barrier for Aboriginal youth in terms of obtaining a post-secondary qualification. According to information from the Learning to 18 Department of the TDSB, two features are vital to the success of students at risk of not completing high school: strong mentorship (particularly with a job component experience) and financial awareness/support. On the other side of the equation, major obstacles to

success cluster around issues of information and perceptions about the actual costs and advantages of post-secondary education, as well as real financial barriers for some students. All of this raises significant questions regarding the coordination of programs at the high school and post-secondary levels.

Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) takes its cues regarding “at-risk” students from the provincial government’s SS/L 18 Strategy and, like the TDSB, focuses on getting students through Grade 12 while encouraging them to think about post-secondary planning and education. It has adopted what it calls a “graduation tracker”, which is an (individual) plan for students in all schools who are deemed to be in need of individual assistance and which follows a student’s credit accumulation and other factors relevant to post-secondary admission. This tool is available for all students, but schools are particularly encouraged to use it for students who present as “at-risk”. A senior official with the TCDSB indicated that the board pursues a somewhat narrower focus than the TDSB. Like TDSB, TCDSB involved all of its schools in the Top 20 initiative, but in terms of post-secondary outreach to this population of at risk students, TCDSB targeted only the neediest schools. They also provided schools with a formalized plan to increase access to PSE, which included formally identifying contacts in post-secondary institutions as liaisons.

One provincial program that is aimed directly at the closer integration of secondary and post-secondary offerings, at least for a segment of the youth population, allows high school students to earn dual credit (high school and college or apprenticeship) for courses, including work experience, taken as part of a high school program. The dual credit program is aimed at students in Grades 11 and 12 “...who may have challenges in graduating, may be disengaged and underachieving or may become

early school leavers.” All high schools and colleges are eligible to participate. ([www.edu.gov.on.ca/morestudentsuccess/dualCredit.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/morestudentsuccess/dualCredit.html)). While the program is still being evaluated, it appears that many students enrolled in dual credit programs do not turn out to be those for whom the program was originally designed (“at risk” students) since some dual credits are also part of the Specialist High Skills Major pathways charts for students who are seeking a “red seal” diploma. For the more “at risk” student, TCDSB is also involved in a SWAC (School Within a College) program with Humber College. Students in this program “test drive” a college experience by being on the college campus full time—taking dual credits as well as other credits which count towards their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The Board has also made significant investment in school-to-work (Pathways) programming. The TCDSB’s ‘Fast Forward’ program has been very successful in re-engaging “at-risk” youth and program locations have grown steadily over the past several years. Expansion of co-operative education, school to work, Dual Credit and Special High Skills Major programming has all been integral to TCDSB’s response to better serving “at-risk” students.

Before turning to the post-secondary level itself, it is important to take note of the provincial Ministry of Training, College and Universities funding of college and university programs designed to encourage first-generation students (FGS) to enrol in post-secondary education. All of the colleges and universities in the GTA have participated in this initiative, which provides needs-based student bursaries as well as institutional support for approved projects. A first-generation student is defined as a student whose parents have not participated in post-secondary studies. The program was originally designed to run for three years, from 2007 to 2010, with a budget allocation of \$32 million. It has now been extended for an additional two years. The focus in the extended program, however, shifted from access as its primary objective to encouraging student retention.



As will be discussed later, this represents a significantly different direction and focus which has not generally been accepted by the colleges and universities. Research seems to show that a strategy that encourages enrolment “pays off” more than a retention strategy.

## The Colleges

Toronto is fortunate to have four large urban colleges in its jurisdiction. All of these have been particularly involved in access initiatives.

Humber College primarily serves the western GTA through its three campuses and eight schools. It established its Community Outreach and Workforce Development Office in June of 2008, with a broad mandate that targets marginalized youth, immigrants, first-generation students, the underemployed and unemployed as well as Aboriginal students. Humber serves what it considers to be the high need community of Rexdale, an area where there is a higher proportion of socio-economic issues such as high dropout rates in high school, crime, unemployment, gangs, racism and violence when compared to Toronto overall. Helping youth succeed and progress to post-secondary education is a key priority of the college. The Community Outreach Office has assigned a Partnership Development Manager to work in the community on youth outreach initiatives and connect the community to Humber’s resources.

With its commitment to the need to address post-secondary access long before Grade 12, the College has taken advantage of the first-generation student (FGS) funding initiative by working with six high schools, providing, among other things, information to Grade 10 and 11 students, and to their parents, on the value of post-secondary education. The parental outreach component of this strategy grew quickly and by the end of 2009 had exceeded expectations by a considerable margin. The outreach component fell slightly below expectations in attracting first-generation students in the brief period of its operation.

The Community Outreach office also established a ‘Parents as Partners in Education’ program in partnership with the TDSB, the Rexdale Women’s Centre and the Community MicroSkills Development Centre, which provided workshops to some 30 parents to help them understand the education system and how to engage in their children’s education. Humber only received FGS funding in mid-2009. By the time the new program was in place, only nine months of funding remained. The college, however, plans to continue providing information to high school students and parents after 2010. With the change in emphasis in 2010 to student retention, responsibility for implementing the FGS program was shifted to the Student Success and Engagement Office.

Other Humber schools and departments are also engaged in access related programming, some of them in cooperation with the Community Outreach and Workforce Development Office. For example, Campus Services offers a three day residential camp operated for students in Grade 7 and 8 from all over Ontario that is designed to give the students a taste of the residential college experience and programs. Some 650 students were enrolled in 2009-10, many of them participating on a fee-for-service basis, with over 300 from disadvantaged schools admitted without charge, funded through the School-College Work Initiative, to promote accessibility. FGS funding also enabled the addition of an Aboriginal Camp in 2009, with 85 students enrolled. The camp continued with support from other government departments in 2010.

A number of other initiatives occur across the college to introduce young people to post-secondary education. Dual credit programs, as well as a ‘School Within a College’ are delivered to more than 2,000 students participating in dual credit, college experience days, mentoring and other activities. The School of Applied Technology offers a summer nature camp as well as MicroSkills Campers and Leaders in Training. The School of

Creative and Performing Arts, in conjunction with the School of Social and Community Services offers a 'Jump Theatre Project'. The School of Hospitality, Recreation and Tourism, in partnership with a community agency and the Outreach office, offers a cook pre-apprenticeship program. The School of Media Studies and Information Technology provides an after-school radio program, as well as a couple of programs designed to foster anti-violence awareness. The Student Success and Engagement Office offers a homework club, works with the Pathways to Education initiative in Rexdale and Lawrence Park, and provides outreach and support service to Aboriginal students. Academic upgrading is available through the Liberal Arts and Science department.

Centennial College, Ontario's first community college, has four campuses in the eastern GTA and operates through eight schools. Its commitment to engagement of groups typically under-represented in post-secondary education is the primary responsibility of the Community Outreach Office. Five of the 13 'priority investment neighbourhoods' designated by the City of Toronto and the Toronto United Way, are located in the immediate vicinity of Centennial campuses and are recognized by Centennial as containing a high proportion of first-generation students. Recognizing the obstacles and challenges for successful educational attainment experienced by many of these youth, Centennial works closely with the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board to promote engagement in learning and access to post-secondary education.

A key outreach program at Centennial, known as HYPE (Helping Youth Pursue Education), provides a six-week, on-campus, summer program, as well as fall and winter outreach programs designed to help youth from under-served neighbourhoods make the transition to post-secondary education. The program provides a college-like experience for 13 to 29 year olds. It started with

funding provided by the provincial government's Youth Challenge Fund and has "graduated" some 300 participants, half of whom have gone on to post-secondary education.

The award winning START Smart program, for learners with a documented learning disability, combines outreach, a residential experience, and mentoring to engage students, assist with their transition to college, and support their learning through to graduation. The residential experience focuses on 'Understanding and Accommodating your LD', and explores four major areas: Self-Awareness and Self-Advocacy, Developing Learning Strategies, Assistive Technology Training, Orientation to College Life.

Other college initiatives designed for first-generation students include high school outreach, through the Community Outreach Office, and on-campus "in-reach" programs, mentorship, and leadership experiences provided by the College's Transitions Office, including a variety of learner needs-focused workshops and engagement and retention activities. The College has introduced the Aboriginal Strategy for Access and Participation and is currently developing unique program offerings for Aboriginal learners, based on the belief that there is an inextricable link between Aboriginal students and their culture and community.

From their experience, Centennial College officials have concluded that outreach and engagement programs work best when they involve building and maintaining relationships with students over time, and being responsive to where students and their communities are, rather than trying to impose a preconceived approach. The focus at Centennial is directed at developing students' capacities and competencies. The College believes that an institutional commitment to the long-term development of each student's capacity is crucial and that this can be best achieved through stable funding.

Among the challenges in working with first-generation students is collecting and maintaining accurate and useful data through elementary, secondary and post-secondary education, partly because they self-identify. Of broader concern, youth who have experienced challenges in their education or are marginalized often do not see post-secondary education as possible for them. Time, relationships, and new experiences are key elements in assisting these youth to change these beliefs. Centennial believes this work is best accomplished in partnerships with neighbourhood organizations. To this end, Centennial has developed a broad range of partnerships and collaborations and is an active participant in local Neighbourhood Action Partnerships, Pro Tech Media Centres (in partnership with the City of Toronto, Microsoft, Toronto Public Library, and Renew Computer Technology), and Youth Challenge Fund Legacy Initiatives.

Centennial has developed a Student Retention Plan to support the learning of all students, with particular attention to the needs of students from under-represented groups (first generation, Aboriginal, women in non-traditional careers, persons with disabilities). In terms of first-generation students, efforts to enhance access and to improve retention are recognized as distinct objectives.

Outreach and engagement activities for under-represented groups are one dimension of the wider range of Centennial programs and activities to promote access to post-secondary education. Among the broader range, Centennial offers a comprehensive Centre for Students with Disabilities, including the 'Introduction to College Life Workshop' for students with all disabilities; Career Conferences for Grade 7 and 8 students; employment preparation; Dual Credit and Specialist High Skills Major programs; Career and College Transition programming for academic upgrading, with a specific program, Pimootewin, for Aboriginal learners; bursaries and scholarships; academic Foundation

programs; prospect advising with a specialty in Internationally Trained Individuals (ITIs); Second Careers. This representative sample is testimony to Centennial's commitment to "transforming lives and communities through learning".

Seneca College, serving North Toronto and York Region, has four primary and six specialty campuses. It has been actively involved in providing programs for persons with disabilities, immigrant, first generation, Aboriginal and low-income students.

In 2006, Seneca was one of the first colleges to be provided FGS funding in support of its SCORE (Seneca's Centre for Outreach Education) initiative. This program focuses on first-generation students who are 19-24, out of school and out of work. The objective is for students to receive an Ontario College Certificate in General Arts and Education. Beginning modestly with 17 students, the program grew year by year with annual enrolments well over 50. While some short term student tracking is done, it is not possible to conduct the long term tracking that is needed and desired.

Even with this limitation, there was the view that this program was successful which resulted in the College creating an Aboriginal SCORE program called 'Finding the Path'. This initiative was launched in 2007 and targeted Aboriginal youth age 19-29 who were interested in pursuing a post-secondary education. As with SCORE, program emphasis was placed on activities such as academic upgrading, mentoring, institutional adjustment and educational obtainment. In support of this and other Aboriginal activities, Seneca established an Aboriginal Centre and appointed an Aboriginal advisor.

Located near Jane and Finch (NW Toronto), Seneca's Yorkgate Campus provides academic upgrading to community members who are typically low income, immigrant and/or first-generation students. This campus has been in place for decades and represents one of the early

community educational interventions addressing the problems of under-represented groups. As will be discussed in the university section, Yorkgate has a partnership with York University with both working together to try to provide increased educational opportunities for members of the Jane-Finch community.

Perhaps Seneca's most distinguishing feature is its programs for students with disabilities. It has four programs, three of which have been offered for decades, which have served thousands of students with disabilities. The 'College Vocational Program' helps students with learning difficulties prepare for the workforce and develop independent living skill through classroom learning and work placements. The college reports a 60 to 70% post-graduation employment rate which is viewed as being extremely high for this group of students. Their 'Redirection Through Education' program assists adults with mental health and psychiatric histories to strengthen their vocation direction and/or academic development. 'Work on Track' is a 24 week program directed toward students with mental health issues by providing career planning, job coaching and employability skills. The final 12 weeks of this program is spent in an unpaid work placement. The success of these and other disability related programs has caused Seneca to launch a free four day, in-residency program (Seneca's Summer Transition Program), offered to students over the summer to assist those with identified learning disabilities to make the transition to post-secondary education.

As with the other colleges, Seneca works closely with the TDSB and TCDSB providing dual credit offerings, student and parent outreach programs beginning as early as Grade 7, and a variety of other programs targeting disadvantaged youth. Organizationally, the programs discussed tend to be managed in a more decentralized fashion with partnerships between academic schools and various elements of Student Services or delivered within one of the offices of Student Services.

George Brown College (GBC), with two campuses and a soon to be opened waterfront campus, serves populations in the downtown core and surrounding areas of Toronto. Responsive to community needs, it began early to develop outreach programs intended to facilitate community economic development and capacity building through education. One of its first efforts in this regard was a pre-apprentice training program to assist residents of Regent Park participate in the community's redevelopment project. Community partnerships have blossomed in subsequent years to the point where they have served 2,883 students engaged in 43 programs and events with 49 partners, all coordinated by the Community Partnerships Office

The Community Partnerships Office is the central platform or "front door" through which students and community groups can access other programs and divisions within the college, and through which those programs and divisions are invited to contribute to community outreach activities. It is intended to serve as a magnet especially for under-represented students from marginalized communities including first-generation students. Among the many outreach activities at George Brown are the aforementioned pre-apprenticeship programs designed to equip students from under-represented groups with the job skills and trade readiness that will prepare them for further training and employment as apprentices. The School Within a College program, in conjunction with the TDSB, enables underachieving 17 to 19 year old high school students who are in danger of dropping out of school to enrol in college credit courses that allow the students to experience post-secondary education first hand. The first group of 21 students, from 14 different high schools in the GTA, is currently completing the program. The Building Opportunities for Life Today (BOLT) program, through its Day of Discovery and in conjunction with Tridel Construction Company, offered some 80 student Crown Ward students and their case workers an introduction to careers



in construction, with the promise of ongoing support for participants interested in pursuing further training.

The college has a particularly strong connection with the Regent Park housing development and has formed both public-sector and private partnerships to advance projects in that community. It works closely with Pathways to Education which originated in that development and has provided ongoing credit courses, educational advising and transition planning to 75 students since 2005. The Education Hub – Regent Park provides a range of learning opportunities for residents designed to cultivate a learning culture in the community, promote community engagement and ultimately serve as a gateway to post-secondary education. George Brown delivers academic upgrading and preparation for post-secondary courses at this site as well as at eight others throughout the GTA. The Community Health Education through Food program (Chef) has trained 144 community based facilitators to deliver culinary skills, food awareness in seven schools within the City of Toronto's 'Thirteen Priority Neighbourhoods' and 10 shelters within the GTA. Exposure to education and post-secondary environments are integral parts of this program.

A Culinary Arts Café at Regent Park operates a restaurant in cooperation with other college departments, private corporations and social agencies that provides food services training and serves as a route into post-secondary education.

George Brown also works closely with the two school boards. One illustration of this cooperative relationship is the 'School-to-College-to-Work' program, a series of collaborative activities between school board and college educators designed to create a seamless transition for students as they move from high school to college to work. Another example involves dual credit arrangements which currently allow 400 high school students to complete college credits in a

college setting. The program allows them to get credit on both their high school diploma and college transcript while encouraging them to continue on with their post-secondary education.

Attracting and retaining first-generation students has been a major priority for George Brown. Indeed, it has developed a model of student service known as 'Outreach, Transition and Retention' or OTR, which it uses to guide program development, including one-on-one advising and career exploration and assistance in navigating the post-secondary system. The college has achieved considerable success in these efforts, with a 32% increase in applications from partner schools, a 45% increase in requests for advice on post-secondary options, and a 25% increase in career planning sessions. Partnerships with community agencies have increased from three in 2007 to over 25 in 2009. Requests for advice and service from these agencies, has increased by 130% since 2007. Year to year retention rates for first-generation students in pilot programs have steadily increased from 70% in 2007 to 75% in 2008 and to 80% in 2009. These efforts have advanced retention for first-generation students close to the college graduation average of 73%.

The major challenge for George Brown, as for other colleges in the GTA, is to secure sustained funding for first-generation programs. From the college's perspective, the current project-specific funding model inhibits institutional learning through analysis of what works and appropriate modification of programs over time. Currently, by the time lessons can be gleaned from experience, the funding model is changed and new priorities must be pursued. The current shift in provincial emphasis in favour of retention to the exclusion of outreach and transition is a case in point. Not unrelated to the issue of changing priorities is the problem associated with changing personnel at the provincial level. As raised by other post-secondary institutions, the upshot is a breakdown in what should be a collaborative relationship

between province and college/university, in which both work from a common understanding of problems, objectives and methodologies.

The problem of shifting priorities and funding has led George Brown to develop an evidence-based case for sustained funding derived from their own research data. The Community Partnerships Office (CPO) has responded to the identified need for rigorous evaluation and research to demonstrate the effectiveness of and gaps in access programming. Having secured research ethics approval, the CPO is moving forward on this area of research. They are aware that only a few government-funded programs are supported by rigorous research into the structures and supports necessary to ensure the access and success for traditionally under-represented students. In response, they are now moving beyond the required reporting mandated by funders and are introducing an evidence-based research platform for all programs. Their expectation is that this research will identify the unique supports that marginalized learners require, and will document how GBC meets those needs.

In the absence of a provincial educational identification number, they have developed their own tracking system which might be of use to other institutions. The hope is that by this means the college's success in meeting the challenges of first-generation students can be demonstrated.

## **The Universities**

The University of Toronto (U of T) has a deep and rich history dating back to 1827. Today, U of T has three geographically distinct campuses, the St. George campus in downtown Toronto, plus locations in Scarborough and Mississauga. There is a broad array of access programs at the University of Toronto across many colleges and faculties. Below is a sample of some of the programs available.

The university's access-related programs include the

Millie Rotman Shime Academic Bridging Program (AB), the Transitional Year Program (TYP) and many others provided through professional faculties such as Law, Medicine, Engineering, Physical Education and Health. AB is a part-time program designed for students who are at least 20 years of age, have been away from formal education for some time and require upgrading and orientation to meet admission requirements to the Faculty of Arts and Science. The AB Program supports students with services including academic and financial advising and academic skills development. The Program is offered through Woodsworth College, one of the Faculty of Arts and Science colleges on the St. George campus. Each course is intended to bridge the gap between a student's prior education and the requirements of first year university courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Students who successfully complete the Academic Bridging Program are admitted to the Faculty of Arts and Science with one full credit towards their degree. AB students have full access to all programs and services available to any student at the University of Toronto.

The TYP program admits students to a full-time, eight-month access-to-university program intended for adults who do not have the formal qualifications for university admission. The program provides each student with an academic advisor, access to counselling and funding options, and a space to work and socialize with other students in the program. TYP students have full access to the programs and services available to other registered students. Successful graduates are automatically admitted to an undergraduate program at U of T.

There are many other examples of access initiatives at U of T. The Faculty of Arts and Science partnership with Seneca College offers a unique degree completion pathway that allows for significant course-for-course transfer credit. Seneca provides students with the academic foundations through their Liberal Arts Diploma Program. Qualified

students are then recommended by Seneca for admission to U of T.

The Faculty of Law, with support from the Law Society of Upper Canada, offers a program to introduce downtown Toronto high school students to the study of law. The Faculty of Medicine provides a Summer Mentorship Program, an intensive four-week program for students from traditionally under-represented communities aimed at acquainting them with various health-care professions. The Saturday Program is a tutoring/mentorship program spearheaded by the Faculty of Medicine and involves staff from related health-care professions, providing one-on-one tutoring, lunch, workshops, seminars and team-building activities on Saturday mornings for students in grades eight to 10 with identified needs and potential. The objective is to cultivate student interest in pursuing a career in one of the health professions.

The University has also established programs that support students once admitted. The University of Toronto Advance Planning for Students (UTAPS), in place since 1998, provides aid to students who have reached the maximum for government aid from OSAP and who have an OSAP-assessed need beyond that maximum. In 2009-10, the University provided over \$58 million in needs-based student aid.

The U of T has also developed a tri-campus First Generation Project partially funded through a grant from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. At the Mississauga campus, genONE provides first-generation students with the opportunity to be part of a learning community that focuses on their personal and academic success, led by a Peer Academic Leader – an upper year first generation student who is from the same academic program.

At the Scarborough campus, the First Generation Project provides high school students, youth (out of school) and their parents who live in high needs neighbourhoods with resources and information

about higher education, access information, as well as support to build the confidence and formal skills needed to achieve their academic and life goals. Working collaboratively with student mentors/ambassadors, faculty and staff, and community partners, first-generation students provide guidance and support to youth through events and mentoring activities on and off campus and gain valuable community engagement experience complementing their in-class learning.

At the St. George campus, the First in the Family Peer Mentor program was designed to support retention by connecting first-year first-generation students to a small learning community led by a first generation upper year mentor who helps them navigate the university experience.

A similar approach characterizes the University's efforts to encourage access and retention of Aboriginal students. First Nations House, a Student Life department of the university, provides culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal students. The university established a university-wide Council on Aboriginal Initiatives and developed a range of successful initiatives through faculties, colleges and departments that encourage and support recruitment, retention and graduation for Aboriginal youth and families in the community and at the university. An MTCU grant has allowed for expansion of these initiatives. During the past year, the faculties of Law, Physical Education and Health, Aboriginal Studies, Applied Science and Engineering, Social Work, Medicine, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, Centre for Aboriginal Initiatives, Centre for Community Partnerships, First Nations House, Transitional Year Program, Academic Bridging Program, UTM Student Housing and Residence Life, UTSC Student Life, and the Native Student Association have developed programs specifically targeted to support Aboriginal students' success, all from their unique access points.

These and other initiatives support secondary students and their families in successfully graduating from high school and accessing postsecondary



education. As there are many access points at U of T, there are also unique support systems in place, to foster students' success, creating small communities within the larger U of T environment.

York University was founded in 1959 in response to the growing demand for post-secondary education in and around the Toronto area. York's Mission Statement and history exemplify a strong commitment to accessible education and the university offers a wide range of innovative programs and initiatives aimed at increasing access to post-secondary education among under-represented groups. For over 25 years, the Women's Bridging Program has provided women who lack traditional academic credentials and skills, a supportive environment to explore university studies. Upon successful completion, these women have the opportunity for direct entry into an undergraduate program in their area of interest. More recently, York mounted a Transitional Year Program that provides intensive academic skill building and supports to students who face systemic and cultural barriers to university (many from the city's priority neighbourhoods) helping them successfully transition into other degree programs.

In addition to the development of new programs and streams, York has addressed the issue of access from an institutional and systemic perspective. In its early years, through the establishment of Atkinson College (1963), York became one of the first Canadian universities to offer classes in the evening, thereby opening the doors of higher education to new cohorts of mature and part-time students. Some years later, recognizing the impact that elementary and secondary teachers have on youth educational attainment, York's Faculty of Education partnered with the Toronto District School Board in 1992 to create the Westview Partnership. The Westview Partnership expanded to include the Toronto Catholic District School Board, Seneca College and 23 local schools, offering programs and activities to promote equity and increased access to post-secondary opportunities

for up to 1500 youth annually from the Jane-Finch community. The majority of youth who participate in the Westview Partnership programs tend to be first-generation students, and many of them, despite living in relatively close proximity to York's Keele campus, have never visited the campus. The Partnership allows high school youth to complete co-op placements on campus for high school credit and have an Advanced Credit Experience (ACE) which enables them to earn their first university course through enrollment in a first year university course.

In 2008, York opened its doors to the York University-TD Community Engagement Centre (YU-TD CEC). Located at Yorkgate Mall at the intersection of Jane and Finch, the YU-TD CEC is a teaching, research and resource centre that builds stronger, mutually-beneficial relationships between the community and the university and supports community engagement and access. The Centre serves as an institutional hub running or supporting various initiatives that promote access to post-secondary education, enrich the learning experience of students, strengthen community-university research partnerships and/or contribute to civic engagement. Several of the University's access programs are located or co-located at the YU-TD CEC (e.g. Women's Bridging Program, Urban Diversity Teacher Education Program, Masters in the Mall). The Centre also holds regular information sessions and/or provides information and referrals that promote York's access initiatives including the Transitional Year Program, York Youth Connection, and scholarships/bursaries to local students. Finally, the YU-TD CEC's mandate to promote social justice and community building has enabled the Centre to become a key collaborator on local networks and projects (e.g. Black Creek Community Collaborative, Success Beyond Limits) and city-wide initiatives related to post-secondary access (e.g. United Way Toronto Community of Practice on Youth Educational Attainment, Toronto Crown Wards Championship Team).

Over the past year, the university has been immersed in several significant institutional planning processes that will guide its future strategic priorities. In February 2010, the university released *Towards an Engaged University: Final Report and Recommendations of the President's Task Force on Community Engagement* ([www.yorku.ca/com-meng/documents/finalreport](http://www.yorku.ca/com-meng/documents/finalreport)). The Report presents a vision of an engaged university and establishes a strong alignment between community-university partnership, outreach and access, and the civic role of post-secondary institutions. Shortly afterwards, in April 2010, York's White Paper, *Building a More Engaged University: Strategic Directions for York University 2010-2020* ([http://vpacademic.yorku.ca/whitepaper/docs/White\\_Paper\\_Companion\\_April\\_15.pdf](http://vpacademic.yorku.ca/whitepaper/docs/White_Paper_Companion_April_15.pdf)) was released establishing a vision and planning framework for the university and reconfirming York's ongoing commitment to access. In April 2011, after considerable pan-university consultation, York approved the new University Academic Plan 2010-2015 confirming its commitment to post-secondary education access.

Ryerson University's outreach and access activities reside primarily in two programs: the Tri-Mentoring Program (TMP) and Spanning the Gaps to Postsecondary Education.

The TMP offers marginalized students support throughout their undergraduate years through mentoring relationships with fellow students, industry professionals, and the community. Students benefit from workshops, and engaging events (over 100 each year) that build a supportive community and contribute to Ryerson's retention strategies. The program is open to all students but over half of the more than 2,000 TMP students are first-generation students.

First year students are paired with a senior student mentor to help facilitate their transition into university life. Subsequently, students are enrolled in a student leadership and education program to develop skills/training in peer support, team work,

communication and problem solving and, then become student mentors to first year students, while exploring their own career development. In the final year, students are paired with industry/career mentors who help them develop networks, job opportunities, and career/employability skills before graduation.

The TMP First Generation (FG) Ambassador Project, funded by MTCU, motivates FG community youth to complete their high school credits in order to pursue post-secondary education and to assist FG students who require additional support in adjusting to campus life and the university's expectations. An existing partner, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, provided additional funding through their Social Investment Fund to establish a FG Ambassador/TMP Model in their social housing communities.

Spanning the Gaps is a program of several projects, all with the goal of increasing access to PSE for marginalized youth and adults, with a single shared infrastructure. *Spanning the Gaps: Information* is for people who are interested in and would benefit from post-secondary education, but have little idea how to access the post-secondary system and need specific information, advice and educational counselling. Ryerson provides individualized "maps" to post-secondary education for these individuals, many of whom are from low income marginalized communities and need a one-on-one approach. *Spanning the Gaps* is also engaged in outreach activities with marginalized high school youth designed to help make their "first chance" successful.

*Spanning the Gaps: Second Chances* provides a "second chance" to access PSE for capable people whose "first chance" did not work. Many adults lack the credentials to enter Ryerson programs because they have not completed high school, have been out of school for a prolonged period of time, and may have had negative experiences with past education. Ryerson has created a series of access points or "spans" to enable some of these individuals to

acquire the skills they need and then to demonstrate that they can be successful students.

Bridges to Ryerson provides educational, life skills and career planning supports and guaranteed admission to students achieving the necessary grades in designated courses. All Bridges courses are done part-time, in the evenings through the Chang School of Continuing Education. In 2009-10 there were 35 students and 38 students in 2010-11. Of these students, 25 from the 2008-09 and 2009-10 cohorts are currently in Ryerson degree programs; 11 are taking additional Ryerson Continuing Education courses; 17 are in other PSE programs – and one returned to high school.

The Aboriginal Summer Experience Program is a two-week, on-campus, non-residential summer program set up to increase the number of Aboriginal youth and young adults participating in post-secondary education by familiarizing them with the university environment and inspiring them to seek further education. This Program can lead participants to Bridges to Ryerson where students are supported by that team as well as by an Aboriginal Academic Support Adviser.

Road to Ryerson is an access program for high school students who are close to gaining admission to a desired program, but who, for a variety of reasons, may be missing prerequisite courses and/or whose grades may not be quite high enough for admission. The program gives these students a supported “second chance” at making their “first chance” of getting into university work. Road to Ryerson works in partnership with the TDSB and Pathways to Education to identify students who have “fallen short.” The program identifies courses they lack in order to improve their grades to meet Ryerson’s admissions standards. The students are guaranteed admission if these standards are met. Ryerson student mentors and tutors help the students with their high school work and re-application process, including applying for financial aid. The courses and upgrading are done in a TDSB

high school with no cost to the students. Students visit Ryerson for campus tours and workshops to become familiar with the environment and with university expectations. Road to Ryerson began in 2007-08 with 13 students; there were 23 students in 2008-09 and 18 students in 2009-10. Fifty students are now in programs at Ryerson and other PSE institutions; one went back to high school and one is in a PSE transitional program.

Ryerson University Now (RUN) offers marginalized high school students at risk of not completing high school or of not going to PSE, the opportunity to earn a Ryerson University credit. The goal is to motivate these students to consider PSE as a viable option by making it familiar, accessible, non-threatening and successful. Students register through Continuing Education, receive a Ryerson student card and have access to all of the supports and services available to regular degree students. They are provided with orientation sessions, information on PSE options and help with applications and admission. Many RUN students use the Information part of Spanning the Gaps. A large number of former RUN students are currently enrolled in some form of PSE.

The TMP and Spanning the Gaps are close partners and work extensively with other organizations including the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, the Black Creek Community, the TDSB, Pathways to Education, and a wide variety of community agencies.

## **Pathways to Education**

This program has been mentioned above in reference to several college and university efforts to improve accessibility. A word on the Pathways initiative itself is therefore appropriate at this point. The program began in Toronto’s Regent Park in 2001 as a not-for-profit agency with private-sector funding. Its aim is to assist youth in Grades 9 and 10 who are in danger of dropping out of school to finish high school and go on to college, university,

or an apprenticeship program. It provides four kinds of support: tutoring in five core subjects four nights per week, group mentoring, bursaries at the rate of \$1,000 per year up to \$4,000 if the student proceeds to a post-secondary program, and advocacy through student-parent support workers.

The results of the program, as verified by an analysis done by the Boston Consulting Group, showed a dramatic reduction in drop-out rates, from 56% to 10% and a corresponding increase in the proportion of participants proceeding to college or university from 20% to 80%. The consultants also calculated the return on investment at \$25 for every \$1 invested.

The program has received strong support from the corporate community and increasingly from the Government of Ontario. Beginning with \$2.3 million, Ontario's support has grown to nearly \$30 million. A portion of Ontario's support has been channelled through the United Way, which has entered into a strategic alliance with Pathways to Education to build on the initial success in Regent Park. This support has assisted Pathways in establishing two other programs in Toronto, in Lawrence Heights and Rexdale. Support from the Government of Ontario has also helped establish five other centres in Ontario – in Ottawa, Kitchener, Scarborough, Hamilton and Kingston. As noted above, support in kind, primarily through the provision of tutors, has also come from Ryerson University, the University of Toronto (OISE), and both the public and Catholic school boards.

In 2006 the non-profit organization established a national focus through the founding of Pathways to Education Canada. With that, the group expanded first to Montréal, and subsequently to Winnipeg and Halifax. Other locations are being considered. In 2010 the federal Minister of Finance announced funding of \$20 million from the Government of Canada to support the national expansion of the program.

## **The Community of Practice (CoP)**

The Community of Practice on Youth Educational Attainment Partnerships was formed in July 2008 by the Toronto United Way to bring together the wide range of people, groups and agencies involved in supporting young people who, for a variety of reasons, are at risk of dropping out of school or who have already done so. The Community of Practice is an informal grouping of professionals and volunteers who share this involvement in improving youth educational attainment. It sponsors workshops and research, but perhaps its major contribution lies in the area of networking and information sharing. The United Way, with three-year funding, serves as facilitator and convenes opportunities to share information and best practices, primarily through newsletters and forums. It has approximately 300 people on its distribution list representing some 92 organizations and institutions. This includes the colleges and universities, as well as both the public and Catholic school boards. As is typical with United Way initiatives, efforts are made to find a new “home” for programs such as CoP after the initial period of funding. Discussions between CoP and Council of Educators (CoE) have already taken place for each to better understand the other's objectives. A further commitment to additional discussions has been made. This now takes us to a consideration of the Council of Educators. CoE is the entity most directly associated with post-secondary program delivery and is a significant focus of the rest of this report.

## **The Council of Educators (CoE)**

The Council of Educators was formed in 2008, the same year as the Community of Practice. It is, as its name suggests, a gathering of representatives of the secondary and post-secondary public institutions along with other members of the



GTA community. It includes representatives of the two school boards, public and Catholic, four colleges (Centennial, George Brown, Humber, and Seneca), three universities (Ryerson, York, and Toronto) and representatives from labour, the City of Toronto and other community groups. Organizational leadership has come from John Davies, President of Humber College, who currently chairs the council. College Boreal and the Ontario College of Art and Design University were recently added to the group which now includes all publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Toronto.

The CoE grew out of the 2008 report entitled *The Roots of Youth Violence* which was co-chaired by Justice Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling. That report had argued that the roots of youth violence are complex and deep, but that education can provide an effective antidote. The idea of the CoE, then, is to bring together leaders of the several educational institutions whose mandates include the education of “at risk” youth to investigate the prospects of developing a more coherent and coordinated approach to ameliorate the problem of youth disengagement and violence. The council currently has limited organizational infrastructure, but under Davies’ leadership has emerged as a promising mechanism in terms of coordinating the many agencies and institutions involved in addressing the educational deficits that underlie the problem of youth violence.

It is clear that the CoE is emerging as an entity with particular expertise and interest in the delivery of post-secondary access programs in the GTA. This opinion has recently been confirmed by the decisions of MTCU and MED to provide \$150,000, each, for the next two years to support the Council in its access-related efforts. The important role of the Council has been further validated by the TD Bank Group’s decision to provide an additional \$100,000 to support the growth of the CoE.

## The Government

Given the Government’s commitment to significantly increase workforce educational attainment levels, the challenge facing it and its Ministry of Education and Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities is significantly larger than many realize. A 70% target by 2021 may seem rather modest given the time frame involved and the starting point (62%), but as has been shown earlier the achievement of this object will necessitate the graduation of an additional 46,000 students annually. In the 2010 Speech from the Throne (McGuinty, D., 2010) the government also announced the creation of 20,000 additional post-secondary spaces. While this appears to be a large number of new seats, it is not even large enough to cover the average annual increase in graduates required. It is also only an entry opportunity with actual graduation typically following one to four years later. So the 70% attainment target has a lot of challenges.

Beyond the numbers needed, the next logical issue that needs to be confronted by the Government is where will these additional students “come from”? The answer is reasonably apparent as they will need to be from groups that have historically not pursued a post-secondary pathway. In other words, the same groups of under-represented students (Aboriginal, some immigrants, low-income, persons with disabilities, etc.) we have been discussing in this access report.

On the positive side, both MTCU and MED have been involved in programs and initiatives that are relevant and can contribute to the 70% objective. In recent years, MED made progress by increasing the high school graduation rate to 81%. While their target is even higher (85%), it is impressive to see the progress that is being made. As discussed earlier, the TDSB and TCDSB have initiated programs targeting “at risk” students with the objective of helping them graduate. One expects there will be a need not only for more high school specific

programs but increased cooperation between both Ministries and the post-secondary institutions in order to advance the graduation rates further.

MTCU has likewise had recent successes and relevant program experience. The Second Career initiative helped transition over 40,000 workers, many of whom did not have a post-secondary credential, through colleges to obtain an academic credential. Also, as discussed earlier, the funding for first-generation students to help in their academic attainment is clearly relevant to the needs that will emerge. Yet, these are relatively small programs compared to the annual increase in graduations that will be needed. Clearly the solution will require a “team effort” involving not only the Ministries but the educational providers and community leadership.

So many questions remain unanswered. Who will be the primary players? Will specific programs be identified? How will knowledge about best practices be developed and disseminated? How much will this cost? How will funding be targeted? Will there be annual graduation objectives? How much of the growth will be based on “new seats” versus making the current system more efficient (credit transfer, articulated programs, etc.)? When will the plan be released? The Ministries will need to find ways of developing good public policies to achieve the government’s objective. Given the number of players involved there will also increasingly be the need for more and better knowledge about the success of access programs, which we know is lacking. Who will take on this role? Clearly a lot needs to be done, but it all begins with a clear understanding of the challenges that exist.

## Best Practices and System Gaps

Reflecting on the various programs and approaches described above, it is clear that secondary and post-secondary institutions throughout the GTA have had considerable experience and apparent success in addressing issues of access for under-represented groups. While the institutions have their own particular strengths, capacities and limitations, what emerges is a portrait of a system as a whole that provides opportunities for young people from highly diverse demographic groups to benefit from access and bridging opportunities, mentoring programs, skill development and upgrading supports through the institutions and their community partners. This section highlights the programmatic and institutional strengths within the GTA and summarizes some of the gaps and deficits within the system.

A thorough understanding of what works and which GTA programs constitute best practices would certainly be of value to all who are committed to increasing access to post-secondary education for under-represented groups. As each institution in the GTA operates within its own particular geographic, community and academic context, however, it is a challenge to identify best practices in an absolute sense and to draw definitive conclusions with regard to specific approaches. Nevertheless, the review of institutional approaches has revealed practices and trends within the broader systemic context that speak to the richness and scope of programs delivered by educational institutions in the GTA. Reflecting on feedback from the institutions themselves and our perspective on what they appear to do best, this section identifies and summarizes the strengths and exemplary approaches and programs in the GTA.

## Best Practices

The breadth of initiatives across the GTA is significant and impressive. Institutions in the GTA provide targeted services and activities to increase access for a myriad of under-represented groups including students who are mentally and physically disabled, low-income students from immigrant, visible minority, Aboriginal communities and first-generation students. Different institutions focus on different demographic groups, based on the nature and needs of their particular communities, their institutional mandates and their organizational cultures. While every institution does not provide services or programs for every under-represented group, (and while not everyone from these groups is able to access these services) programs exist within the GTA that target the needs of the various under-represented groups in the city. At the same time, it has to be recognized that many of these programs have limited capacity. Given the provincial objectives and the need to further target under-represented groups, it must be acknowledged that few programs, at this time, have the capacity to deliver what is needed for the future. While program details have been discussed above, the following identifies elements of best practice within the system in general.

**Institutional infrastructure.** The presence of an institutional mandate to address issues concerning access is an important aspect of best practice. A number of institutions within the GTA also have staff people dedicated specifically to access-related initiatives within the institutions which creates a framework for the development of access programs that are responsive to the needs of the institution, the students and the community (e.g. Centennial, George Brown, Humber, Ryerson). Holistic institutional approaches that provide a continuum of service including outreach, transition and retention programs and supports are important best practice models. In some cases (particularly York and George Brown) the institutional mandate to

address issues of access also includes a mandate to change the broader systems through which access programs are delivered.

**Community partnerships.** Community partnership development with relevant stakeholders is an important best practice of programs servicing under-represented youth. Partnerships involve community organizations, industry, business, Aboriginal community elders working together with colleges and universities to collectively support young people facing PSE access challenges, and build responsive and sustainable relationships between PSE institutions and communities. Successful partnerships may operate on campus or off campus, in the community, between institutions or through businesses to provide academic upgrading, literacy and life skills development, pre-apprenticeship training and specific skill development.

**Outreach.** Outreach programs introduce high school students, many of whom are first-generation students, to a college or university experience through formal and informal learning opportunities. Successful programs are offered to students at their high school (Ryerson, York) or on the college or university campus (Humber, George Brown, Centennial, Seneca, U of T). Dual credit programs, summer programs and co-op education programs are prime examples.

The most successful programs and initiatives for students at the high school level and beyond are based on building direct links and individual relationships with the young people and their families. Mentorship models include working with schools, guidance departments and PSE institutions to provide tutorial and life skills support to students and the necessary information and support to complete high school and to consider going further. Programs at Centennial, Humber, Ryerson, U of T, York as well as Pathways to Education provide valuable examples of programs based on the mentorship model.



While there are a number of exemplary institutional-wide programs there are also numerous successful faculty-specific initiatives within the GTA. For large and/or complex academic institutions, such as Humber, George Brown and U of T, individual faculty/departmental programs provide a variety of access points and create small communities for students within the larger institutional environment. These programs enable faculties/departments to target students with specific interests or abilities and to provide specific supports for them.

**Transition.** Transitional Programs typically involve academic bridging, skills development and efforts to demystify PSE for adults who lack the formal qualifications for admission to PSE. Effective programs, such as those at Centennial, George Brown, U of T and Ryerson provide academic courses, financial advising and skill development as well as access to the institution's support services. These programs provide students with individualized academic advising and support, mentoring, access to counselling and funding opportunities, a place to socialize with other students and guaranteed admission to the institution.

**Retention.** Best practice examples of retention programming at post-secondary institutions include financial aid as well as individualized academic bridging and support, mentoring, language programs, support services and a supportive learning community throughout the student's undergraduate years. Some of the most established retention programs can be found at Centennial, George Brown, Ryerson and U of T.

This approach also serves as the basis for best practice with regard to programs that encourage access for and retention of Aboriginal students. Based on an understanding of the need to provide culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal students, programs at U of T, Ryerson, George Brown, and Seneca include a range of initiatives that support retention for Aboriginal youth and their families. Programs provide a gathering place

for Aboriginal students, academic bridging and support services, skill development, the involvement of elders and other Aboriginal role models, and financial support.

**Research and evaluation.** There is an emerging awareness of the importance of demographic and academic data on students, especially those in need of support in order to adequately address their needs and for program evaluation and analysis. The Toronto school boards (TDSB and TCDSB) collect data that provides information on students based on the most relevant demographic markers (SES, race and ethnicity, language, family information, academic information). These data enable the boards to identify the students that need support and to determine how to help them succeed. Although there is no comparable data collection system at the post-secondary level, George Brown College has developed a research platform, an important best practice, to enable them to track students, assess programs and understand significant socio-economic themes related to under-represented students.

## System Gaps

Despite the programming strengths in the GTA, our review of access initiatives and our discussions with representatives of the institutions revealed a number of significant gaps within the system as a whole.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the common gap across all institutions is that demand far outstrips supply in terms of amount, duration and level of support. Almost to an institution, they could easily expand their access programs based on the demand that exists. There is a lack of sufficient resources, especially to reach the most challenged youth in the city, a group that requires significant support and attention in areas ranging from life skills to academic support. The system does not currently have the capacity to meet the need for such services throughout the GTA.

A related problem is the lack of long term funding commitments. Programs are often funded for short durations (three years or less) and institutions are continuously uncertain about the future of their access programming. As mentioned previously, the demand for students with post-secondary credentials will increase dramatically in the years to come and the types of students we are now considering will become the basis for achieving the established growth objectives. To address this problem, and to ensure more of our young people are able to reap the benefits of a post-secondary education we will need to increase capacity and make our current system more effective.

This leads to the next glaring gap which is the lack of reliable empirical evidence to help us understand what is working and what is not working. A recently released report sponsored by three student groups (Canadian Student Alliance, et al., 2011) reached the same conclusion about the critical need for better research evidence. There is much anecdotal evidence but insufficient objective measurement and research to quantify results and conduct evaluation research which would enable institutions to modify and improve programs. Presently, school boards are also unable to track students once they leave secondary school and post-secondary institutions are unable to track students who move between institutions and once they leave the college or university. Admittedly, getting this data is easier said than done but improvement could be made even with something as simple as a vastly improved student tracking system (through an Ontario Student Number, for example) that would extend beyond the secondary school level.

When reviewing the best practices that seem to exist one cannot help but be impressed with the variety of programs and the dedication of the people providing them. Yet, the reality is that there is insufficient sharing of knowledge within and between institutions about the existence of various programs and with regard to their strengths and

weaknesses. Knowledge is not easily disseminated within the system itself. In fact, it is likely that this report will provide one of the more comprehensive lists of best practice programs and activities available. In that sense, it should be utilized as a resource for increased knowledge sharing.

Similarly, there is a lack of formalized coordination within and among institutions. Programs are established based on the perceived notions of particular institutions (and in some cases departments or faculties) rather than from an understanding of the needs of the system as a whole. Moreover, there appears to be a lack of knowledge sharing, and coordination between the post-secondary institutions and the ministries and funders. For the system to respond effectively a well-coordinated approach, involving knowledge sharing and cooperation, among the institutions themselves and between the institutions and government is essential. The problems identified will not easily be solved at an institutional or government level. Rather, there needs to be a coordinated system strategy in order to better provide the variety of services needed.

## Lessons Learned

We now have a reasonably clear idea of what the challenges are. We know that Ontario's continued social health and economic prosperity will depend increasingly on a highly educated and skilled population and labour force. And we know that with the demographic changes that are already upon us our success will progressively hinge upon our ability to increase the proportion of the population that has effective access to the benefits of a post-secondary education or training. And that, in turn, requires that we find ways to lower the barriers to accessibility which currently exist for too many individuals and groups in our society, especially Aboriginal students, those whose parents who did not attend college or university, those living on low incomes, those with disabilities, some visible minorities and

those recently arrived in Canada. We also know the government's post-secondary attainment target (McGuinty, D., 2010).

While we know these things, we do not know as much as we should about the barriers or the actions needed to lower or get over those barriers. Despite the efforts of so many individuals and institutions to address these challenges, we do not have the means to assess, with any certainty, what works and why. We do not have the empirical evidence that would demonstrate why one approach or combination of approaches is more effective than another.

Part of the problem is that despite efforts by individuals, corporations and governments to support programs and projects that appear to show promise of improving access, there is an observable deficit in the availability of funding for the design and delivery of good research and evaluation of these programs and projects. Putting money directly into access programs is good. But if at the same time we do not invest in building our understanding of what the underlying problems are, what the real barriers to access are for those who are not succeeding, what others are doing and what combination of incentives and interventions really make a difference, then we are destined to continue to work with good intentions but without the knowledge that could make our efforts more successful, and demonstrably so.

Despite the many programs and the dedicated commitment of the individuals delivering them, what is too often missing is the methodological knowledge and experience that would facilitate the systematic monitoring and evaluation of outcomes such that learning grows incrementally and is based on solid empirical evidence.

A variety of factors contribute to this deficit. One certainly is the unrealistic time limits often placed on projects by the provincial government

and other funding agencies. We know that longitudinal data are required for good evaluations, especially of projects that seek to affect human behaviour and attitudes. Seldom is rigorous evaluation built into a project and too often the time allowed would not permit it even if it were. We can understand the government's desire to fit projects to the cycles of electoral necessity, but the price paid by insisting on virtually instant results that may well reflect an inadequate if not flawed understanding of the situation means that programs will be less effective and money wasted.

A closely related problem is the turnover of junior and senior staff in both provincial departments and delivery agencies. The continuity that could underpin a longer term perspective on the issue of accessibility is lost. The lack of longer term commitments, of both personnel and funding, is often cited by those close to the delivery end of programs as an unfortunate characteristic of many provincial initiatives and a major factor contributing to the lack of observable and measurable progress. Indeed, college and university representatives frequently observed that the provincial officials with whom they deal lack an understanding of the issues and an appreciation of the needs of "at risk" students that are apparent to those who deal with these students "at ground level". This view, however, must be tempered with understanding that there is a dearth of research evidence available to form a basis for agreed upon "realities".

The result is a sense that provincial officials do not share with their college and university counterparts a common understanding of the central focus of their efforts. The recent shift in focus from recruitment to retention is a clear case in point. Research suggests that improving access requires early and sustained interventions designed to persuade those who have traditionally not considered post-secondary education as a viable option for them to broaden their

educational horizons. Thus, a shift in emphasis from recruitment to retention is not typically supported by the research. While accountability may be easier to “confirm” by measuring retention figures, it may well compromise access objectives.

Indeed, underlying many of these issues is a lack of agreement about what constitutes an access program. Is an access program one that targets achievement levels; individuals who do not hold a post-secondary qualification or are not currently enrolled in a post-secondary program? Or is the preferable definition a program that targets identifiable groups, such as first-generation students, visible minorities, etc.? Or should one be concentrating on those who would not normally be expected to pursue PSE? All approaches can be defended but the real challenge is to develop the empirical knowledge that would lead to an informed consensus.

We might start by moving forward to establish an effective student tracking system that would facilitate the generation of empirical data regarding the impact of various programs and interventions on the success of individual students. Without that kind of empirical data we are destined to remain prisoners of guesswork and good intentions. We need to move to a higher level where policy is driven by data and underpinned by analytical rigour. A common student numbering system, ideally national in scope, would greatly facilitate the long term research that is required. Such direction has been suggested by virtually every provincial post-secondary review in Canada over the past decade. Someday it will come to pass because the need is so great.

At the risk of being repetitious, let’s again review the problem. In order for the Government to meet its 70% target by 2021, the post-secondary system in Ontario will need to graduate an additional 46,000 students annually compared to the current graduation rate of about 200,000

(100,000 from universities, 60,000 from public colleges, 35,000 from career colleges, and 7,500 apprentices ). Most of these “new students” will need to come from under-represented groups.

One critical element will be the ability to “convince” students that education will be increasingly important, and they should avail themselves of a post-secondary pathway. To do this, we will need to target under-represented groups in such a way that they are prepared for an interest in increasing their education. A well-coordinated communications plan will be essential. Next, we will desperately need to better understand what works and what doesn’t work in order to be more efficient and effective.

One thing we are seeing, however, is that colleges are probably a more logical route for most of these students to take. Such a conclusion is based on both academic and financial factors. With regard to the academic element, we find, for example, that Aboriginal students seem to be more successful in a college environment (ACCC, 2010), and students from under-represented immigrant communities are more likely to pursue a college pathway (Sweet, R., et al., 2010). As well, many of the programs focusing on persons with disabilities are found in colleges. It is also reasonable to conclude that because of the smaller class sizes, more applied and less theoretical focus, a strong teaching tradition and a history of dealing with under-represented students to a far greater degree than universities, the colleges are in a far better position to take up the challenge. This certainly does not imply that there will be no university role because access opportunities will need to be provided by all institutions. In fact colleges and universities will need to find new and better ways of working together for the benefit of these students.

A second logic for recommending a heavier college involvement is an economic one. From the student’s point of view, tuition is lower and

program durations tend to be shorter. Thus, students can obtain a post-secondary credential quicker and less expensively which will appeal to low-income students in particular. This results in a similar economic logic for the Government since they would not have to provide as much financial support for colleges as they would have to do for significant increase in university enrolment.

As mentioned earlier the stakes are high and there is an increased need for better knowledge and coordination. It is not likely that the Ministries and post-secondary institutions can do it on their own. Access programs in and of themselves will not automatically rise to the top of institutional agendas. Thus, the need for an entity with a specific educational mandate and where access is its main focus emerges. When one looks at the GTA alternatives, it becomes increasingly clear the CoE is closer to that orientation than any other existing organization. As has been discussed, there are gaps that need to be addressed and there are best practices that should be far more effectively disseminated. It would appear that with the right focus the CoE could well become the integrating element that would help the players (ministries, high schools, colleges, universities, community groups, etc.) more effectively deliver on the Government's commitment. So let's now consider what would be needed in order for the CoE to provide a valuable content and integration role.

## Moving to the Next Level

There are many players involved in the development, funding and delivery of services and programs to improve access to post-secondary education for people in the GTA including governments, school boards and individual schools, colleges, universities, community organizations, businesses and funders. Despite the myriad players and initiatives, the system suffers from a lack of coordination and knowledge sharing, as discussed above. Yet in considering the various educational institutions involved, it does not appear that any of them would have the interest, resources and capacity to provide the coordination and framework for knowledge development and exchange that are necessary to move the system to the next level. While we do not need root and branch changes to the institutions and structures that currently exist, a coordinating body, such as the CoE would help assure that the system is best able to yield positive outcomes.

The Council of Educators, currently in its formative stage, is an informal group of people involved in providing access programs from school boards, colleges, universities, community groups, labour and the municipality. It has the great advantage of being led by a president of a college, John Davies of Humber College. He has been described as the "glue" that holds the CoE together in light of his commitment to community engagement, looking to do the maximum for priority neighbourhoods in the GTA and for community outreach in general. This leadership not only gives it prestige, but simultaneously opens doors to other institutional players who can contribute to the shared mission of improving accessibility.



We now consider how this organization might help to move us forward. We begin by reviewing our findings and then considering the role CoE might play to meet the specific needs of our education system. Finally, we will consider some practical limitations that should be taken into account and some organizational factors that could move us in the right direction.

Again in review, we have a system with an array of programs and a strong cohort of dedicated individuals in all institutions offering a variety of programs to address issues of access and student success. Yet, as has been mentioned previously, but is worth repeating, their efforts, and aspects of the systems itself, are constrained by the following:

Funding for university and college access programs is seldom an institutional “line item” but is typically “soft money” derived from short term government grants or philanthropic contributions. As a result there is seldom long term institutional or program commitment which limits the ability to develop the professional supports and expertise necessary for access programing and the ability to conduct effective program evaluation.

The funding that is provided rarely includes a true research component. This significantly limits the amount of empirical evidence that is available to determine a specific programs efficacy. Thus, the creation of “verifiable” knowledge is often limited to anecdotal evidence.

Individuals involved in the design and delivery of access programs seldom have the research experience necessary to design programs and collect data in such a way that verifiable knowledge can be obtained. Thus, the lack of funding, both in terms of amount and duration, limits the ability to obtain such expertise from other sources.

Access target groups (first-generation, Aboriginal, low income, etc.) overlap to such an extent that it might well be the time to develop a new taxonomy (e.g. “at-risk”) in order to better serve under-represented groups.

Access program deliverers are more “isolated” than is desirable. While the CoE and CoP provide some opportunities for professional development there is a great deal more than could be learned and exchanged by more frequent contact.

Even system related knowledge (who is providing what to whom) is surprisingly limited, primarily because of funding uncertainties: funding goes and programs go. There is no central vehicle for exchanging such program-related information. Even during our interviews, individuals candidly admitted that they were not even sure what access programs were available in their own institutions much less what was available elsewhere in the system.

Finally, the economic and social needs for effective access programing, have never been greater and will, by all accounts, continue to expand.

Using this understanding let us now turn our attention to the potential role for CoE, beginning with the need to improve coordination.

## Coordination

The very fact that so many organizations are currently involved in access programs in the GTA pushes the need for coordination at, or very close to, the top of the priority list of what needs to be done to improve the situation. Each institutional player could be more effective if it were better informed of what the others were doing, why, and for whom. We are not starting from scratch. School boards and colleges, with leadership from their respective ministries, have made progress through such initiatives as the dual credit program in breaking down barriers between secondary and post-secondary systems. The CoP, with the sponsorship of the United Way and the provincial government, provides another example of effective coordination of effort, especially in the Top 20 Initiative. There are a variety of voices within the institutional community as to where

coordination efforts should be directed, but the need for enhanced coordination is a view shared with virtual unanimity.

At the high school level teachers, guidance counsellors, principals and others could more easily obtain information for their students as to what is available for them at the post-secondary level. Universities and colleges targeting similar communities would find it easier to collaborate. Amongst all three levels of educational institutions, as well as voluntary organizations, there are many opportunities for cooperation and synergy that could be facilitated by a coordinating agency like the CoE. It could facilitate collaborative projects by serving as a common resource, it could similarly offer advice based on experience, and it could assist in compiling joint applications from complementary groups, institutions, or agencies. And, of course, it could continue to strengthen its collaborative work with the CoP to bring the work of public and voluntary institutions and organizations into closer working relationships. These two organizations, the CoE and the CoP, have already held a working session that proved to have considerable potential for increased collaboration. A second event is planned for the coming months. The potential benefits of enhanced coordination are as wide as the imaginations of the people involved. The potential benefits to students are what should inspire those imaginations.

## **Networking**

Closely related to coordination are the opportunities for networking among individuals engaged in access programs. This has already proven to be an enormous strength of both the CoE and the CoP. The possibility of breaking down silos and getting people talking with each other and sharing ideas, experiences, and possible avenues of cooperation holds enormous potential for improved program effectiveness and individual professional enrichment. The CoE has the opportunity to

serve as facilitator of this kind of networking. What is required is a coordinating agency, one that is not itself pushing a particular approach to meeting the challenge of accessibility, to take the initiative in creating opportunities for people to collaborate on an informal level. Modern means of communication, including especially social media, make this possible in ways only previously dreamed of. What is required is the hub to anchor the network.

## **Research, Evaluation and Sharing of Knowledge**

Improved coordination and networking will facilitate knowledge of what others are doing and how they might cooperate more effectively. If those involved in access programs are to move to a higher level of effectiveness, there must be a shared commitment to advancing the state of knowledge not only of what others are doing, but also of what works and, even more importantly, why some approaches are more effective under certain conditions than others. Research along with collaboration, are the twin keys to learning in this field. The CoE must have a knowledge-creation as well as a dissemination mandate.

There are a number of dimensions to this aspect of the proposed mandate. One, as an integral part of its collaboration and networking responsibilities, is to serve as an information hub with respect to what others are doing in this field. At the same time this needs to be extended to an evaluation of others' experiences. What are best practices with respect to access and retention programs? This might be a good place to start, to establish a level of trust as a reliable source of helpful information and advice. But it would need to go further.

The CoE needs to be “engaged” in research that informs public policy; to answer important questions for those involved and for those interested in investing in access programs. It certainly does not



need to do all of this by itself. Much of the research activity could be undertaken by others: university faculty and graduate students, college and school board officials and their staffs, ministry personnel and others. In this respect, the CoE could act as the coordinating hub into which a network of researchers would contribute. It could also help to advise those who wish to undertake research or evaluate their programs. But there would need to be a research capacity (employed, contracted or borrowed from member institutions) within the central office in order to have the competence to know what good research is. As noted above, we have a real deficit when it comes to evidence-based policy development and advice in this realm and this is a deficit that the CoE is uniquely qualified to address.

Good research, whether quantitative or qualitative, requires good information/data. Good intentions are desirable, but they do not take the place of good data if the goal is evidence-based policy advice or learning from experience. Yet, this is the missing link in seeking to improve accessibility. And if there is one critical item that is lacking in our collective capacity, it is the absence of a means of tracking the experiences, successful or otherwise, of the students who pass through our post-secondary systems. Without this tracking system it is simply not possible to evaluate the impact on an individual who may pass through a series of institutional experiences over the course of his or her encounters with the education and training “system”. How can we improve access and retention if we do not know what the barriers are and how high they present themselves to individuals? An absolutely necessary component of any successful attempt to improve access, therefore, is the development of a system-wide tracking mechanism. And the key to the development of an effective tracking system is the creation of an individual numerical identity that will permit researchers to follow the cumulative experiences of the people we are seeking to serve. Tracking can be accomplished without a provincial educational

numbering system but the costs of doing this are high. CoE could be an effective advocate in this regard. This brings us to the fourth and last of the proposed roles of the CoE, that of advocacy, and it is to that role that we now turn.

## Advocacy

The views about the importance and timing of an advocacy role for the CoE differed among those interviewed. Some were of the opinion that an advocacy role for the CoE would be a very important function. Others felt that this would eventually evolve as a feature of the organization, but that it should not be a primary function from the outset. Even for those who favoured an advocacy role from the start, the view was generally that the real focus should be on research and policy development, with advocacy flowing from that. This seems a sensible approach: concentrate on finding the best way forward in promoting access and then, if it appears likely to be effective, move into an advocacy position. The point is to have something concrete to say, a position supported by research, before pushing a particular policy direction.

Less forceful than outright advocacy is a related role that has considerable merit. The CoE could be very helpful playing an advisory role to the ministries, school boards, colleges and universities and, indeed, other groups and agencies involved in promoting access and retention. The point, to repeat, is first to come to grips with what the real barriers are to access and retention, to understand the problem, and to share this knowledge with those already engaged in attempting to work with disengaged youth and others. The CoE should aim to become a centre of expertise from which informed advice would follow. A more explicit and proactive advocacy role might come later, but it should not be the principal focus of the CoE.

## A One-stop Portal

There is an understandable attraction to the idea of having a single gateway, or portal, to which young people, counsellors, teachers, parents and others could turn for information and advice on a host of matters of concern to those who have been less than successful in navigating the secondary and post-secondary education system. The idea has many advantages. It would provide young people, their parents, and community agencies with information about what programs are available, what the admission requirements are, and what would be the best route for a particular student to get where he or she wishes to go. Its advice would be neutral, for example, as between college and university. Finally, it is an idea that fits logically as a companion to the advocacy role just discussed. But for reasons not altogether dissimilar from those that urge caution in approaching the idea of advocacy, we need to be very careful that we do not leap into a recommendation the implications of which we do not fully understand.

The development of a fully functional portal, with all the “bells and whistles” just described, is an extraordinarily complex undertaking. The information required is enormous. And it has to be kept absolutely current and accurate. Dispensing inaccurate or dated information is worse than no information at all. It follows that such a role for the CoE, which is still in its formative stages, would be very costly. It could very well consume resources and energy that would be more effectively devoted to other activities, such as research, networking, and the coordination of existing programs and initiatives. Perhaps in the future this might be a role that a more mature organization could tackle, but at this stage it appears to be premature and fraught with potential difficulties. Clearly, significantly more funding would need to be made available before this activity is revisited.

## Structure

CoE needs to develop a more formal organizational infrastructure. It has been very successful as an informal means of connecting educational leaders with common interests in promoting accessibility. But if the organization and the mission are to be advanced, a more structured approach is required. Much has been gained by having a president from one of the institutions lead the organization, and this feature should be retained. The CoE will need to develop staff positions and responsibilities, as well as office location and financing arrangements. These are the marks of an organization that is moving from the formative to the formal stages of its evolution. There are, however, some key issues that will need to be addressed along the way, and sooner is better than later.

One question, clearly, is the relationship between the CoE and the CoP. Both have much to offer the communities they serve, and it would be a considerable loss if the two were not able to work out an effective working relationship. There are already promising signs of progress in this regard and it is hoped that further progress will result from the forthcoming meeting this spring. There is no obvious advantage in proposing a merger of the two organizations. Each has its own unique focus and a union might well water down the strengths of each. While they have common interests to be sure, they also represent distinct constituencies, and the most important consideration is to ensure that all are represented in the work of enhancing access to post-secondary education.

Another issue that needs clarification is the relationship between the CoE and the provincial ministries. It is probably not desirable for representatives of the provincial government to become members of the CoE. Much of the strength of the CoE is derived from its ability to coordinate and speak for the educational institutions actually delivering access programs. The inclusion of ministerial representatives could add a new dynamic that would limit this desirable feature. Yet, the

relationship between the CoE and the ministries needs to be close, supportive and positive. The CoE should be a principal source of advice to the ministries, offering coordinated advice and the benefit of its research and information.

A critical requirement is to work out a means of securing longer-term financing for this effort. The private sector could play an important role here, as illustrated in the case of a number of firms, including TD Bank Group, in supporting Pathways to Education. Continued support from the provincial ministries will also be essential. What needs to stop is the short-term approach to funding. Improving accessibility is not a task that will be accomplished either easily or quickly. A long-term perspective and longer-term commitments of resources will be a key ingredient of success.

## Conclusion

Improving accessibility is important not only to the lives of the individuals involved but to the future social and economic success of the province. Improving accessibility is also a complex undertaking. We do not know very much about what works and what does not. We have many committed individuals and groups working to improve the situation, and we spend a considerable amount of money supporting their efforts, but too many of them work in isolation and their efforts are sometimes duplicated and seldom based on solid research. Coordination is critical, and the Council of Educators, together with the Community of Practice, offer a promising path to this goal.

Coordination, however, is only as effective as the ideas that motivate and guide it. We need to know much more about accessibility and the barriers that present themselves to individuals and groups. We need hard evidence, based on rigorous analysis, before we can expect funding agencies, including the private sector and government, to make the sustained commitment of resources that is essential if we are to move forward with reasonable certainty of success. The Council of Educators could play a critical role in sponsoring and evaluating a concerted research effort. In the United States access has been equated largely with a need for money. While certainly a limiting factor, an understanding of what works and what does not work, what supports access and what does not, is probably a better long term investment than providing an individual bursary or grant and sending a student into the unknown.

The task is an important one. Improving access to post-secondary education is one of the few avenues open to us to meet the combined challenge posed by a decline in the proportion of the population in the traditional working-age cohort and an increase in the demand for workers with at least some post-secondary education. And improving access for those traditionally under-represented in post-secondary education represents an opportunity that promises to have both social and economic benefits. The government has recognized this need with its 70% post-secondary attainment target (McGuinty, 2010). We need to get it right, and the Council of Educators, working collaboratively with others, could help point us in the right direction.

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