

BREAKING BARRIERS

A STRATEGY FOR EQUAL ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION



BREAKING BARRIERS: A Strategy for Equal Access to Higher Education

February 2011

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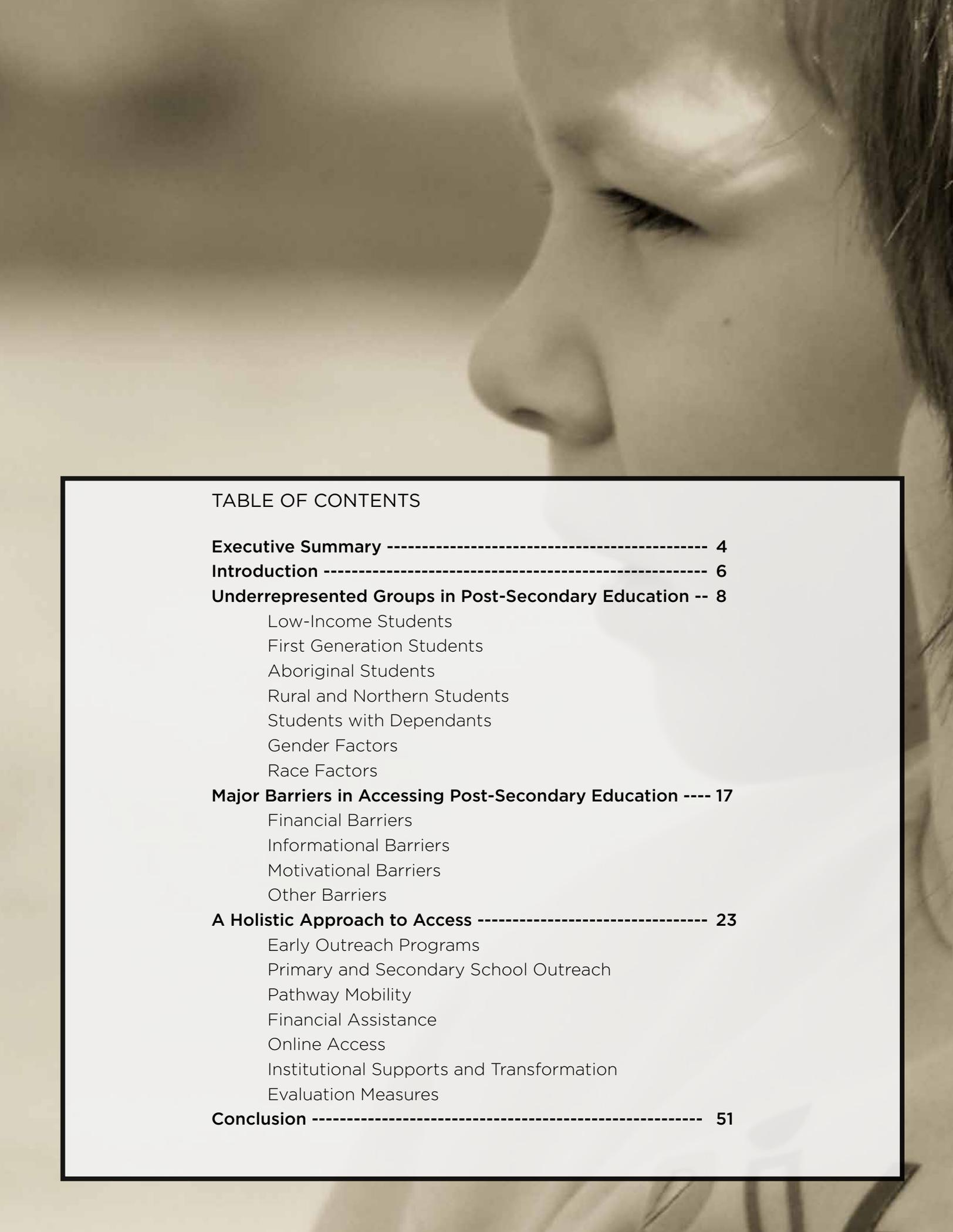


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students from a number of groups remain underrepresented in Ontario's universities and colleges, including low-income students, Aboriginal students, first generation students whose parents did not attend a post-secondary institution, rural and northern students, and students with dependants. Improving access to higher education for these and other underrepresented groups is widely acknowledged as essential to building a more equitable society and to competing in the increasingly knowledge-based economy. Indeed, Premier McGuinty has stated his desire to see 70 per cent of Ontarians complete post-secondary education, and achieving this target will require a concerted effort to reduce participation gaps.

The last decade has seen a substantial increase in research on who is not attending higher education, why they are not attending, and how to encourage their participation. Based on this research, secondary school, college and university students have joined together in the common belief that now is the time for the Ontario government to re-evaluate how it conceptualizes the challenge of improving the accessibility of post-secondary education and to implement a truly holistic access strategy. If we are proactive, determined and strategic in how we address the needs of individuals facing barriers to access, all of Ontario's youth will have an opportunity to access and succeed in their pursuit of higher education.

Students from underrepresented groups face a variety of barriers to accessing a higher education. The interplay between these barriers is complex, as different groups and individuals face different combinations of barriers of varying degrees. It can be useful to broadly categorize these barriers as financial, informational and motivational. Financial barriers include a lack of funds to attend a post-secondary institution, debt aversion in a primarily loan-based student aid system, and high sensitivity to increases in the cost of attending post-secondary education. Informational barriers refer to a lack of information about financial aid and various post-secondary pathways, particularly misconceptions about their costs and benefits. Finally, motivational barriers include a lack of confidence, the absence of parental engagement, and an unsupportive primary or secondary school environment. There are many other barriers, such as institutional, geographic and academic barriers, but each is closely related to at least one of the three broad barriers identified.

The Ontario government has demonstrated considerable commitment to improving access to post-secondary education through initiatives such as the Ontario Access Grant and the Access to Opportunities Strategy. The latter includes a variety of individual initiatives, such as bursaries, e-learning opportunities, and institutionally-administered access and retention programs. Despite these and other efforts, underrepresented groups have largely seen static or widening participation gaps. Without an integrated plan that tackles multiple access barriers from an early age, this situation is unlikely to change.

As a preliminary step in implementing a comprehensive access strategy, students have devised specific, pragmatic recommendations for a holistic plan. These fall into six broad areas of focus, that will enable the government, institutions and stakeholders to build on past initiatives and raise post-secondary participation rates for underrepresented groups:

EARLY OUTREACH PROGRAMS should be expanded to provide a greater number of students from underrepresented groups with support for reaching post-secondary education early in their lives. Future funding decisions should prioritize the expansion of the successful framework developed by Pathways to Education, which includes financial, mentorship, tutoring, and personal supports. Colleges and universities should also implement a broad range of community-based early outreach programs that provide exposure to post-secondary options.

OUTREACH IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS should be strengthened through improved guidance, curriculum, parental engagement, and enrichment programs. All students should have access to a guidance counsellor who is trained and knowledgeable about post-secondary pathways, including their relative costs and benefits, and the financial assistance system. Curriculum should be improved through a greater emphasis on post-secondary options and financing. Parental engagement strategies should be undertaken by school boards, while enrichment programs, including dual credit and high skills major programs, should be expanded to reach more underrepresented students.

PATHWAY MOBILITY should be enhanced to enable students to transition between various streams of study, as well as the workplace.

Post-secondary institutions should reduce administrative barriers to credit transfer and establish consistent, transparent and fair transfer mechanisms through multi-lateral agreements and purpose-built pathways for credit transfer between colleges and universities. Additionally, bridging programs that assist Ontarians without adequate entrance prerequisites should be expanded across Ontario institutions.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE should be improved through tuition regulation, a greater emphasis on targeted non-repayable assistance and broad reforms to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). The current provincially-funded tax credit system should be eliminated, and money from this program redirected to reduce students' up-front costs. Student loan eligibility criteria should be expanded to include part-time students, and the OSAP need assessment formula should be re-evaluated to more accurately reflect living costs and provide adequate childcare funding for students with dependants.

ONLINE ACCESS opportunities should continue to be developed through the government's plans for the Ontario Online Institute. Funding incentives should be created to increase online course and program offerings through a consortium model of Ontario post-secondary institutions. The Ontario Online Institute should include student and teacher support services, advanced online learning pedagogies, a quality assurance framework, and integrated credit transfer between institutions. Broadband access should also be improved for rural and northern Ontarians.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS AND TRANSFORMATION is required if institutions are to foster a welcoming culture for students from underrepresented groups. Student support services should be funded and expanded by both post-secondary institutions and the government and should include comprehensive counselling, tutoring, academic support, career planning services, childcare facilities, and services for students with disabilities and Aboriginal students.

Students urge the government and post-secondary institutions to display the leadership necessary to execute these successful strategies. Students believe that there are few, if any, more important pursuits than ensuring the equal accessibility of higher education for all of Ontario.



INTRODUCTION

Ontario has one of the most highly educated populations in the world. Over 60 per cent of Ontarians aged 25 to 64 have a post-secondary education (PSE) credential, and this rate increases in Ontario's younger demographics.¹ These rates place Ontario first among Canadian provinces and compares favourably to peer jurisdictions internationally. The non-university attainment rate in Ontario exceeds all other countries in the OECD, and Ontario's university attainment rate ranks fourth behind only Norway, the United States, and the Netherlands.² This is a remarkable and important achievement that should not be understated. As the Honourable Bob Rae stated in his review of Ontario's higher education system, "today, our standard of living, and consequently our quality of life, depend on people having access to education."³

There are a number of indicators that suggest participating in higher education pays huge dividends for individuals, their communities, and for society at large. At the individual level, attending PSE increases lifetime earnings and allows for more stable employment.⁴ At the community level, post-secondary institutions contribute billions to their local economies, and post-secondary graduates are more likely to volunteer and have higher levels of civic engagement.⁵ At the societal level, post-secondary graduates pay considerably more taxes, are less likely to receive government transfers, are healthier, and commit fewer crimes.^{6,7} It is therefore encouraging that successive Ontario governments have prioritized increasing the availability of spaces at post-secondary institutions, laying the groundwork for the educational advantage Ontario enjoys today.

However, these impressive attainment rates mask the sobering reality that students from a number of groups are significantly underrepresented in Ontario's university, college and trades programs. This underrepresentation is due to a variety of barriers that include, but are not limited to, financial, informational, motivational, academic, physical and geographic factors. These groups historically have included low-income students, Aboriginal students, first generation students, rural and northern students, students with dependants, and students with disabilities. More concerning is that many of these participation gaps have remained stagnant or widened in recent years.⁸

It is estimated that over 70 per cent of all new jobs will require PSE, and the Ontario government has rightly set this as its target for the province's PSE attainment rate.⁹ In order to meet this goal and maintain it in the future, much of the growth in participation will have to come from groups that are currently underrepresented.¹⁰ Improving access to higher education, then, is a necessary step in ensuring that Ontario has a skilled workforce that can meet the future demands of the knowledge-based economy.¹¹ Moreover, equitable access to PSE is critical to reducing poverty and creating a more just society where all have the opportunity to benefit from higher education. As Yves Pelletier from the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation asserted, in the contemporary economy, "everyone has to be able to go on to post-secondary education. There has to be social equity, and there are long-term economic gains for the country."¹²

This submission will begin with a discussion of who is underrepresented in Ontario's post-secondary system and the specific barriers faced by these individuals and groups. The deeper purpose of the submission, however, is to offer a holistic action plan for improving access to post-secondary in Ontario. A holistic plan is longitudinal in design, comprehensive in scope and coordinated in approach. The strategy will articulate a set of broad areas that should be addressed to create a truly accessible system in Ontario, and also specific steps that can be taken in the short-term to improve access and persistence of underrepresented groups. Interspersed throughout our strategy are quotes and insights gleaned from focus groups

conducted with low-income, rural and northern, first generation, and Aboriginal students in the fall of 2010. Additionally, research and consultation with experts in this important area have strongly driven the recommendations.

Students propose that only a comprehensive, holistic strategy with financial, academic and personal supports can address the multi-faceted, overlapping and interacting barriers that students from underrepresented groups face in accessing and succeeding in the post-secondary system. The Ontario government has invested millions in access programs, including over \$100 million through the Access to Opportunities Strategy (AOS), which focuses on increasing access for Aboriginal students, Francophone students, first generation students, Crown wards, and students with disabilities. All of these investments should be commended as a sincere effort to address access gaps in the post-secondary system. Nevertheless, the lack of a comprehensive approach to tackle the full range of barriers has led to stagnant or widening participation gaps, and students from underrepresented groups still face difficulties accessing and persisting through their studies.

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Recognizing the importance of this issue, secondary school, college, and university students have come together to urge the government to prioritize implementing this plan, as we believe that there are few, if any, investments a government can make with more lasting impact than ensuring that all Ontarians can access and succeed in the pursuit of higher learning.



UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Several specific groups have participation rates in PSE that lag behind those of Ontario society as a whole. We will begin with a discussion of the circumstances of low-income students, rural and northern students, first generation students, Aboriginal students, students with dependants, as well as race and gender concerns.

This paper focuses on these groups because they face many overlapping barriers that a comprehensive umbrella of solutions can address. Additionally, it should be noted that the groups outlined above do not form discrete categories, and interrelation between these groups is evidenced by the fact that individuals who identify with one underrepresented group often identify with others as well.

While students recognize that there are other underrepresented groups in post-secondary education, many of the remaining groups have specific and unique barriers with similarly specific and unique solutions. For instance, improving access for students with disabilities requires strategies including enhancements to physical infrastructure and more flexible assessment methods. Similarly, the challenge of access for Francophone students is in part that there are not enough opportunities in Ontario to study in French. In both these cases, solutions are specific to the needs of these groups, and the government has adopted proactive, targeted strategies that should continue to be supported to address participation gaps.

Low-Income Students

Studies have repeatedly shown that youth from low-income families have a much lower PSE participation rate. Eighty per cent of students aged 20 to 24 from families earning over \$100,000 enrol in PSE, whereas only 60 per cent of students from families earning less than \$25,000 pursue a higher education.¹³ Much of the gap stems from differences in university participation rates. By age 19, nearly half of youth from families in the top income quartile attend university, compared to only one-quarter of youth from families in the bottom income quartile.¹⁴ Youth in the lower-middle quartile are only slightly more likely to attend university than those from the bottom quartile, indicating that household income has a significant bearing on PSE participation for half of Ontario families.¹⁵

As displayed in Figures 1¹⁶ and 2¹⁷, the participation gap between students from low- and high-income families has been increasing steadily since 2003.¹⁸ Additionally, income-related gaps in participation largely disappear when examining registration rates. That is, the same proportion of university applicants from low- and high-income groups are accepted to university, and ultimately register for courses. In large part then, the participation gap stems from low-income students applying to university more infrequently than their high-income counterparts, rather than differences in acceptance rates.¹⁹

Low-income students have comparable college participation rates to their high-income peers, as illustrated in Figure 3.²⁰ However, these overall participation rates mask the reality that college enrolment is still higher amongst high-income students once university participation is taken into account. Once the numbers are adjusted to eliminate the effect of university participation, there is a statistically significant 11 per cent gap in participation of the lowest and highest quartile in college, as seen in Figure 4.²¹ In other words, 49 per cent of low-income students who do not attend university enrol in college, as compared to 60 per cent of high-income students who do not attend university.²²

Both financial and non-financial factors have been shown to play a role in the lower PSE

Figure 1: Full-time University Participation by Income Quartile for Ontario Youth aged 18 to 24

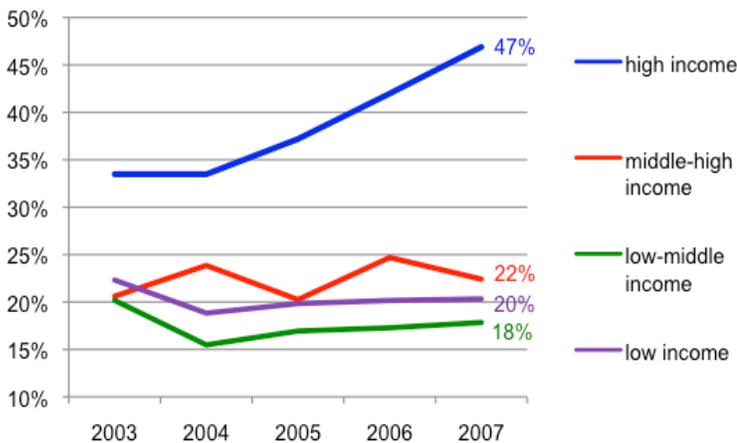


Figure 2: University Participation Gap between Low and High Income Quartiles for Ontario Youth aged 18 to 24

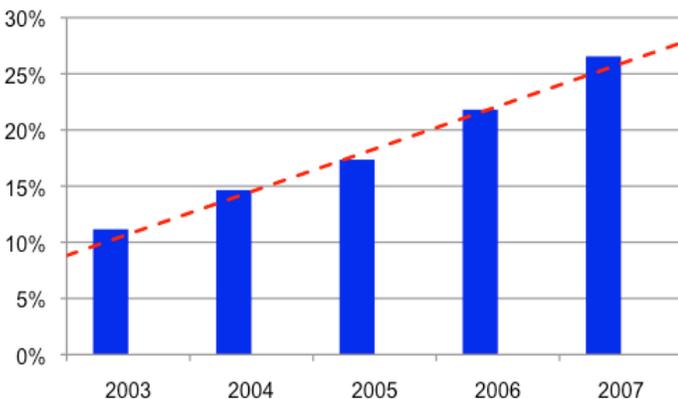


Figure 3: Full-time College Participation by Income Quartile for Ontario Youth aged 18 to 24

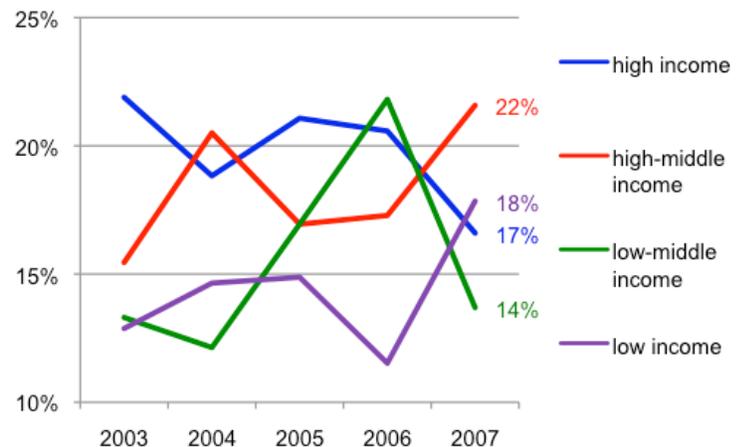
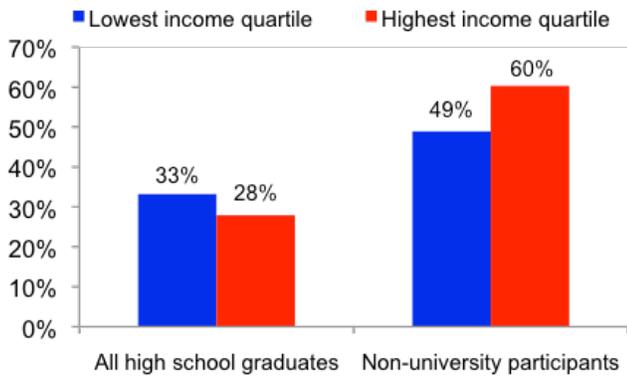


Figure 4: College Participation by Income Quartile for Ontario Youth aged 19



participation rates of low-income students. One study found that 12 per cent of Canadian low-income students were financially constrained in applying to university, that is, they were unable to fund their education sufficiently through savings, loans, and bursaries.²³ It should be noted that this 12 per cent does not include students that were discouraged by financial factors from applying to university in the first place. In addition, low-income students tend to over-estimate the costs of PSE, be more sensitive to price increases in PSE, and have greater anxiety about their ability to pay back their loans once they graduate.²⁴

In addition, parental and environmental influences are hypothesized to be equally, if not more important, than financial factors in explaining the lower PSE participation rate of low-income students. On average, youth from low-income families tend to perform worse on standardized tests and have lower secondary school grades, not due to any intrinsic difference in ability, but rather because low-income students are more likely to attend poorer quality schools and less likely to have parental expectations to

complete a degree.²⁵ Living in areas where a high proportion of residents fall below the low-income cut-off is correlated with a higher proportion of students dropping out before completing secondary school and lower overall academic achievement.²⁶ Furthermore, paid employment during secondary school negatively effects university participation, which may impact the ability of low-income students to achieve the grades necessary to enter the post-secondary system.^{27,28} In addition to lessening the pressure on secondary school students to find work, families with more financial resources can pay for activities that can influence the educational success of children, such as purchasing books and computers for children, enrolling youth in extracurricular activities, paying for higher quality daycare, and living in neighbourhoods with better schools. These actions may result in higher performance on standardized tests, and thus, in a higher probability of attending PSE in the future.²⁹

It is clear that the challenge of increasing post-secondary participation rates among low-income students will require more than one solution. Only a comprehensive strategy that recognizes and addresses the full range challenges will be successful.

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First Generation Students

First generation students are generally defined as students whose parents did not attend college or university. Research shows that parental education is one of the most important factors in determining whether youth will attend PSE, and what type of PSE they will enrol in. Of Canadian students whose parents have less than a secondary school diploma, 29 per cent enrol in PSE, a level that more than doubles to 72 per cent for those whose parents hold an undergraduate degree.³⁰ Once again, a large portion of the disparity in Ontario is manifested at the university level, where 54 per cent of non-first generation youth enter university, compared to only 26 per cent of first generation youth.³¹

Family background and educational attainment of parents appear to affect decisions to attend post-secondary education even among students who appear to be equally qualified and motivated.³² Moreover, parental education is correlated with income and aspirations for their children, two factors which have been shown to impact PSE participation.³³ Some studies suggest that first generation students need extra guidance to successfully apply to and enrol in PSE institutions because they have less support and guidance from their families.³⁴

First generation students are also much more likely to use student loans, and less likely to have family support to finance their education.^{35,36} Among university students, 52 per cent of non-first generation students have family members who saved for their education, while only 42 per cent of first generation students had financial support from their families. Despite an increased reliance on government financial aid, first generation students demonstrate less knowledge about the financial assistance system.³⁷ On average, they also spend somewhat fewer hours studying than non-first generation students and have moderately lower grade averages, which may influence their ability to qualify for merit-based scholarships.³⁸ Finally, first generation students are more likely to delay enrolment after secondary school, more likely to attend part-time, and more likely to work while attending PSE.³⁹ All of these factors can have a bearing on first generation students' ability to successfully pursue post-secondary studies.

Again, a combination of financial, motivational, and informational barriers are at play for first generation students, necessitating an access strategy that can address these challenges simultaneously.

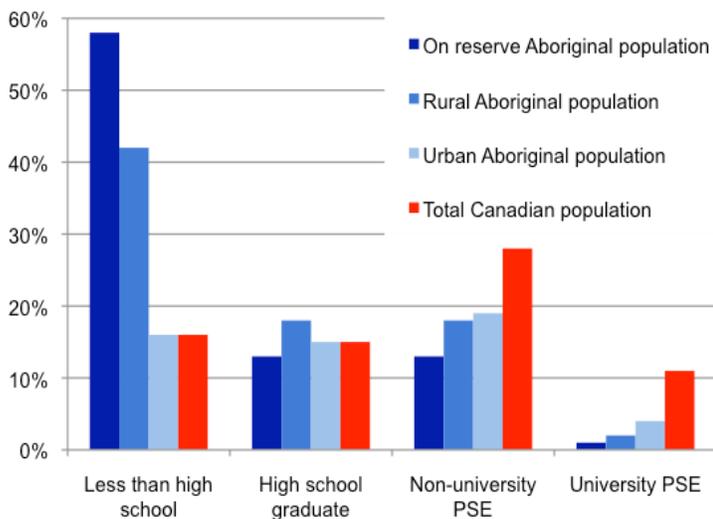


Aboriginal Students

Aboriginal students, including those that self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, have particularly low PSE participation rates compared to non-Aboriginal students. In Ontario, Aboriginal people have comparable participation in trade certificates, apprenticeships, and college programs as non-Aboriginals. However, only 9 per cent of the Ontario Aboriginal population aged 25 to 64 has a university certificate or degree, compared with 26 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population.⁴⁰

As PSE participation rates of non-Aboriginal Canadians have increased, the gap in PSE participation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals has widened from 12 per cent in university participation among the 55-64 year old age cohort to 19 per cent among the 25-44 year old age cohort.⁴¹ There is also a significant difference in Aboriginal participation in PSE based upon area of residence, as depicted in Figure 5.⁴²

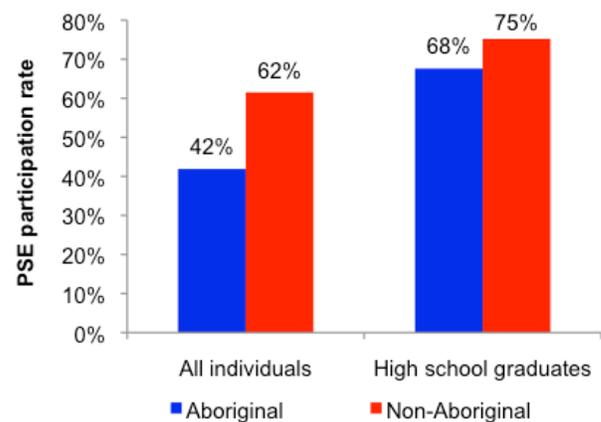
Figure 5: Highest level of attained education, Aboriginal and Canadian population aged 20-24



A significant part of this participation gap is due to the fact that Aboriginal youth have much higher secondary school dropout rates than non-Aboriginal youth.⁴³ Aboriginal youth are more than twice as likely to have dropped out of secondary school as non-Aboriginal youth, with a third of all Aboriginals aged 25 to 68 not having completed a secondary school diploma. This number rises as high as half of all youth for on-reserve and Inuit communities.⁴⁴ One study found that only 42 per

cent of First Nations youth between the ages of 20 and 24 who lived on reserve had completed a secondary school education, as compared with 85 per cent of non-Aboriginal youth in the same age cohort.⁴⁵ It is worth noting, as Figure 6⁴⁶ demonstrates, that Aboriginal students who have graduated from secondary school have similar, though slightly lower, overall PSE participation rates as the non-Aboriginal population, indicating that increasing the secondary school completion rate is an important step in raising post-secondary participation of Aboriginal youth as a whole.

Figure 6: Impact of Secondary School Completion on Aboriginal PSE Attainment in Canada, ages 25-34



There are a number of other factors that contribute to lower participation rates for Aboriginal students. In 2000, the total annual cost of a university education was roughly a third of median family income for Aboriginal households in Ontario.⁴⁷ Since then, tuition and general educational costs have increased at a rate greater than inflation. Consequently, the proportion of median family income consumed by PSE expenses has risen, despite a modest increase in median income for Aboriginal families when compared to the rest of Ontario. At the same time, the availability of band-administered funding under the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs' Post-Secondary Education Funding Program for First Nations has declined in real terms, and these funds are unavailable to Métis and non-status Aboriginal students.⁴⁸

Given the low average income and restricted availability of band funding, it is not surprising that inadequate financial resources and the need

to work to pay for higher education have been cited by Aboriginal students as the primary reasons for the inability to complete post-secondary studies. In one survey, one in three Aboriginal students in Canada cited financial difficulties as a reason for not completing their post-secondary schooling.⁴⁹ Other studies have shown that Aboriginal students have greater price sensitivity to increases in the costs of PSE and are more averse to entering debt to finance their education.⁵⁰

Aboriginal students also face a number of non-financial barriers in accessing and persisting through PSE. Approximately 30 per cent of Aboriginal students leave PSE without graduating in their first or second year of study, compared with only 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal students.⁵¹ Family responsibilities were cited as another major obstacle to completing a post-secondary accreditation.⁵² Additionally, Aboriginal youth from remote and rural areas must travel considerable distances to pursue post-secondary studies. Some studies have found that Aboriginal post-secondary students experience strong anxiety related to feeling out of place in the institutional culture of university, and also being torn between the university environment and their commitment to their families and home communities.⁵³ A lack of employment opportunities in home communities may also serve as a motivational disincentive for Aboriginal youth to pursue PSE. Aboriginal students who complete higher education may feel pressured to remain in urban areas where their earning power is significantly enhanced, particularly if they have high levels of debt. This migration presents a serious problem for Aboriginal communities that are struggling to stimulate economic development and speaks to the broader structural challenges that many of these communities face.

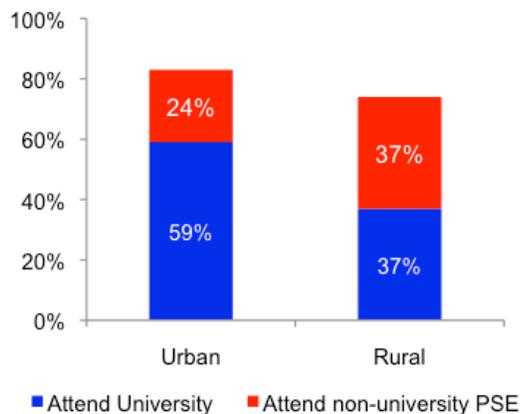
Though Aboriginal students, in particular, face a number of unique barriers, such as low secondary school completion rates, the familiar financial, geographic, informational and motivational barriers compound the problem. While solutions are often more difficult to implement due to the level of cooperation that is required between different levels of government, increasing accessibility to PSE for Aboriginals will similarly require addressing many overlapping barriers.



Rural and Northern Students

Rural and northern students are generally defined as students who live further than 80 kilometres from the nearest post-secondary institution of the type they attend. These students have been shown to have lower participation rates in PSE than their non-rural counterparts. One study found that students living in excess of 80 kilometres from a university were 58 per cent less likely to enrol than students who live within 40 kilometres of an institution.⁵⁴ A more recent study found that the gap in Ontario is driven primarily by differences in university participation. Only 37 per cent of rural youth have enrolled in university, compared with 59 per cent of non-rural youth, as shown in Figure 7.⁵⁵ The regional gap in university participation between urban and rural youth is greater in Ontario than in any other province, and over three times greater in magnitude than that of Quebec.⁵⁶

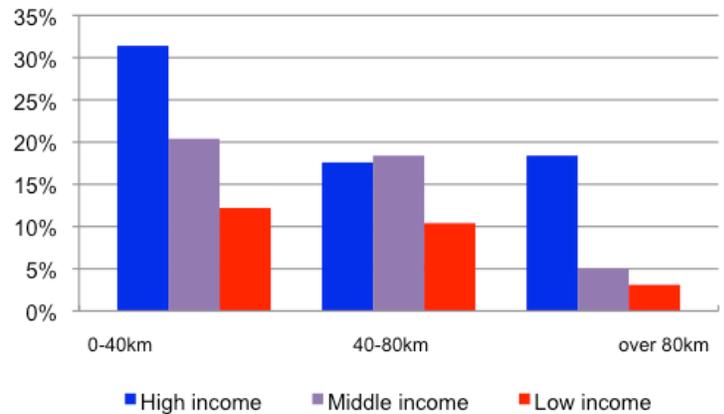
Figure 7: Urban-Rural Differences in PSE Participation in Ontario



Fifteen per cent of Ontario's population lives beyond the 80 kilometres threshold for commuting to a university, but only three per cent of students live beyond 80 kilometres from a college. Consequently, those living far from a university may choose to study at a college instead, indicating institution choice is constrained by location.⁵⁷ Rural and northern students face the additional cost of attending college or university away from the parental home, which adds over \$7,000 to the annual cost of attending a post-secondary institution.⁵⁸ A focus group participant from a rural community explained, "why would you want to go to university when there is a college half an hour away for cheaper?"

As Figure 8 shows, low-income rural youth have particularly low university participation rates.^{59,60} The burden of living expenses is compounded by the fact that rural areas tend to have slightly lower incomes than urban areas.

Figure 8: Canadian University Participation by Distance to School and Income



A focus group participant from a rural community explained, "why would you want to go to university when there is a college half an hour away for cheaper?"

In addition to the increased costs of attending a PSE institution away from home, students from rural and northern communities often face informational and motivational barriers. As noted in the focus groups, students from rural and northern areas may have fewer informational resources on PSE available to them, and rely more heavily on informal sources for information. Students from rural areas are more likely to have parents who did not complete secondary school, and less likely to have parents that attended university than their urban counterparts.⁶¹ Many rural and northern students can experience familial isolation when attending institutions in large urban areas.⁶² Difficulties adjusting are manifested in the fact that rural students are somewhat more likely to drop-out of all forms of postsecondary education than their non-rural counterpart.⁶³

Students with Dependants

Another group that is underrepresented in higher education is students with dependants. A student with a dependant is an individual who acts as a primary care-giver to an individual unable to meet their own needs. While this relationship is usually interpreted as a parent caring for a child, dependency can also include elderly parents and relatives, or an individual suffering from a chronic illness, disability, or other condition requiring substantial care from a second party. However, since the term dependant most often refers to children when talking about post-secondary access, this section focuses primarily on students with dependent children.

Individuals who reported having a child by 26 were less than half as likely to have attended university as those with no children, and were twice as likely to have never attended any form of PSE.⁶⁴ Students with dependants tend to be older, are more likely to enroll part-time, are more likely to have interrupted their studies, and also tend to be female.⁶⁵ The presence of a dependant is a greater barrier to participation in PSE for women.⁶⁶ Approximately 19 per cent of women between the ages of 20 to 24 had dependent children. However, only four per cent of 20 year-old women attending university reported having a child.⁶⁷

Moreover, only 12.5 per cent of women who were lone parents in Ontario had a university qualification, compared to the Ontario average of 19.6 per cent.⁶⁸ Younger children are typically a greater barrier to full-time university participation, as students with children under the age of five are much more likely to be studying part-time than those with older children.⁶⁹

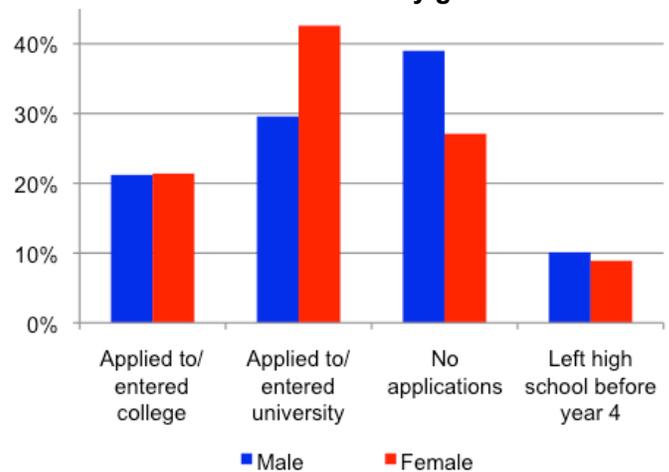
Students with dependants also face significant financial barriers to PSE, as they juggle the cost of caring for a dependant with the substantial expense of a post-secondary credential. Caring for a dependant also requires a significant investment of time. This, along with time devoted to employment to overcome the financial obstacles imposed by a dependant, may make it difficult to participate in a standard academic program. When an individual with dependants is prevented from accessing or completing higher education, everyone involved in the dependency relationship feels the economic and social damage. In the short term, both the potential student and his or her dependants are denied access to a higher income and the corresponding quality of life benefits. In the long term, the children of a parent who has not attended or completed PSE are less likely to attend themselves.

Gender Factors

There are a number of participation gaps in the observed data on post-secondary education that relate to gender. At a macro-level, women's enrolment in university has jumped ahead of men's in recent years. Women received 58 per cent of university diplomas and degrees in 2006, and there is a significant gap between male and female enrolment at the undergraduate level.⁷⁰ According to the 2007 data in Figure 9,⁷¹ male youth in Ontario were also more likely to leave secondary school before having completed four years, and more likely to have completed no applications for post-secondary study. Some have hypothesized that the university participation gap for males is due to poorer performance in secondary school. In Ontario, male students are 32 per cent more likely than female students to leave secondary school before completing their diploma.⁷² A somewhat higher percentage

of females perform at or above the provincial level on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, indicating there is a gender-related gap in

Figure 9: Post-secondary destinations of Ontario students by gender



literacy that persists into secondary school and could affect students' ability to gain admission to post-secondary institutions.⁷³ Others argue that the employment opportunities available to males in the absence of post-secondary education are more prevalent and higher paying than those available to females with only a secondary school diploma. Fewer male students plan to attend PSE from a young age than female students, indicating that these students may lack the motivation from an early age to plan for attending post-secondary education.⁷⁴ Males may also face disproportionate disengagement in secondary school which may contribute to a lack of motivation to attend PSE, as research shows that male students are more likely to report being dissatisfied with their secondary school experience.⁷⁵

At a micro-level analysis of post-secondary education, both genders are underrepresented

in certain fields. Women are more likely to receive credentials in the services and nurturing fields, including health and education, as well as the social sciences and humanities. In contrast, males are more prevalent in trades, industry, engineering, management, and occupations requiring physical strength.^{76,77} A recent study hypothesized that "traditional societal and cultural beliefs about gender differences in abilities and interests may be factors that continue to constrain the early choices of career direction made by youths, both male and female."⁷⁸ In addition, certain subgroups of women are less likely to enrol in post-secondary studies, namely those with dependants and other family obligations. Studies have shown that family responsibilities, marriage and parenting tend to affect women's enrolment and success in post-secondary studies more than men's.⁷⁹ This could be part of the reason why women are more likely than men to choose part-time and online options.

Race Factors

While much research remains to be done, evidence suggests that race factors can act as a barrier to accessing post-secondary education for some students. After controlling for education and income of parents, some immigrant groups have higher PSE participation rates than students born in Ontario, but some groups have lower participation rates. In particular, first and second generation immigrants of Caribbean, Latin American and East African origin have disproportionately low participation rates at both university and college.⁸⁰ While 42 per cent of Canadian-born students in the Toronto District School Board had gained admission to university following their final year of secondary school, only 12 per cent of Caribbean-born students did the same. Caribbean-born students also had the highest secondary school dropout rate at 45 per cent, followed by those of African origin at approximately 30 per cent.⁸¹ Region-of-origin differences are most apparent within the university pathway, although youth from these groups were also less likely to participate in college.⁸²

Regardless of status as a recent immigrant or not, some students experience discrimination that has an influence on success at the secondary and post-secondary level. The lower achievement of many black students in the Greater Toronto Area has been a cause of concern for educators. Black students tend to have disproportionately lower achievement and higher drop-out rates. It has been

suggested that this is partially due to socioeconomic marginalization. Visible minorities also tend to have median family incomes below the Canadian average, indicating that tuition and other costs of attending PSE may be a significant barrier to participation. In addition to socioeconomic considerations, curriculum-based factors may also play a role in discouraging participation. Students from visible minorities may be alienated by a Eurocentric curriculum that ignores diverse experience, culture and history.⁸³ In response to these higher drop-out rates, the Toronto District School Board established an Africentric Alternative school in 2009-2010,⁸⁴ and it remains to be seen whether this strategy is effective.

At the institutional level, some students from visible minorities may feel alienated. This can be a consequence of divergent life experiences, and also the assumptions that others may make about how some students qualified for admission. For example, while access programs that take into consideration racial, disability and gender barriers may raise university participation rates for these students, they can also lead to the characterization of students from these groups as lacking the academic skills necessary to qualify for university based on merit. In other cases, some students may feel that they do not fit with the dominant image of a university student, and that there is an implicit questioning of their presence on campus.⁸⁵



MAJOR BARRIERS IN ACCESSING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Underrepresented students face many barriers to accessing PSE, several of which have already been mentioned. The interplay between these barriers is complex, as various groups face different combinations of barriers of varying importance. To provide some organization, it can be useful to broadly categorize these barriers as financial, informational and motivational. There are many other barriers, such as institutional, geographic and academic barriers, that overlap with these, but each is closely related to at least one of the three broad barriers identified.

Some researchers have attempted to quantify the relative importance of each type of barrier. For instance, Junor and Usher estimate that 20 to 30 per cent of the barriers for underrepresented groups are financial, and approximately 50 per cent are motivational and informational.⁸⁶ Attempts to ascribe a lack of participation to one specific barrier

are complicated by the fact that barriers to PSE overlap in many ways and are the result of complex, nuanced factors that interact throughout childhood and adolescence, including environmental circumstances and individual choices.^{87,88} For example, sensitivity to the price of post-secondary education is generally considered a financial barrier, but also overlaps with informational gaps about the long-term benefits of higher education. Similarly, while academic barriers are typically understood as deriving from student ability, often a lack of student motivation and engagement can lead to poorer academic performance.

In this section, the various barriers are briefly defined and the literature about each of them is summarized. To assist the reader, Table 1⁸⁹ provides an overview of the relationships between these barriers and the underrepresented groups discussed previously.

Table 1: Known relationships between barriers and various socio-demographic characteristics

GROUP	BARRIERS					
	Financial	Informational	Motivational	Academic	Geographic	Institutional
Low-Income	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
First Generation	✓	✓	✓	?	✗	✓
Aboriginal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rural/Northern	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
With Dependants	✓	?	?	✓	✗	✓
Gender	✗	?	✓	✓	✗	?
Race	✓	?	✓	✓	✗	✓

Financial Barriers

Students most frequently cite financial barriers as a reason for not pursuing PSE, and as one of the top reasons for leaving their studies prematurely.⁹⁰ In one study, almost 40 per cent of individuals who never attended a post-secondary program reported finances as a barrier to attending a post-secondary institution.⁹¹ Another study found that financial considerations, such as high costs and insufficient financial aid, were the most common reasons that underrepresented students who applied to PSE declined admission offers.⁹² Unsurprisingly, youth from lower-income families are three times more likely to report being financially constrained, and after controlling for other factors, youth that report being financially constrained are 30 per cent less likely to participate in university.⁹³ Financial barriers to PSE can include a lack of sufficient funds, debt aversion, and price sensitivity.

As one low-income student explained in a focus group, “if you come from a family that is in debt, you don’t want to get into that cycle.”

A lack of sufficient funds occurs when, even given current grant and loan programs, potential students find themselves with insufficient funds to pay their immediate educational costs. In Ontario, 42 per cent of students have financial need not met by student assistance programs. The average unmet need of these students is \$1,191, though it should be noted that some of this need is met

by institutional financial assistance through the province’s Student Access Guarantee.⁹⁴ Even more concerning is that some existing government financial assistance disproportionately benefit high-income households. For example, the Ontario government spends a substantial portion of its financial aid budget on tax credits for PSE, yet low-income households are often unable to take advantage of tax credit programs because they do not earn sufficient income to pay high levels of taxes.⁹⁵ On average, high income earners claim more through the tax credits than do people from low or middle income families.⁹⁶ It is not surprising, then, that there has been no research that shows that PSE tax credit programs improve the accessibility of PSE.⁹⁷ Similarly, although the intent behind Registered Education Savings Plans, the Canada Education Savings Grants and the Canada Learning Bond was to enable low-income and first generation families to participate more fully in PSE, studies have found that these savings programs are used predominantly by high-income families, and families with parents who are highly educated.⁹⁸ Moreover, despite having the highest tuition in Canada, over the past decade, Ontario has ranked ninth out of ten provincesⁱ in the per-student amount of need-based aid available to post-secondary students.⁹⁹

Debt aversion, or a reluctance to borrow to finance PSE, is also a barrier to accessing a post-secondary system that requires increasing numbers of students to go into debt to finance their education.¹⁰⁰ Studies suggest that between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of

i. Quebec currently ranks tenth of ten provinces, but it is worth noting that the average university and college tuition in Quebec is less than half that of Ontario.

students are unwilling to go into debt to pay for a post-secondary certification.^{101,102} Some underrepresented groups, including Aboriginal students and low-income students, have higher than average levels of debt aversion.¹⁰³ In particular, low-income students display high anxiety about their ability to pay back student loans post-graduation, possibly as a result of witnessing parents in debt.¹⁰⁴ As one low-income student explained in a focus group, “if you come from a family that is in debt, you don’t want to get into that cycle.”¹⁰⁵ Students with the highest levels of debt are also more likely to leave a PSE program without graduating.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, there have been suggestions that religious and cultural factors also have a bearing on students’ willingness to finance their educations through loans, but further research needs to be done on this topic in the Canadian context.

Price sensitivity, or a perception of the benefits of PSE as less worthwhile than the cost, has also been shown to affect the participation of underrepresented groups. This is an especially salient concern given that underrepresented groups have been shown to underestimate the future benefits of PSE.^{107,108} One low-income student expressed concern that after graduating from university with debt, “you’re making the same wage as you would at a minimum wage job.”¹⁰⁹ Moreover, while students from low-income backgrounds assess the benefits of higher education similarly to their counterparts

from other income brackets, they are more likely to perceive the opportunity cost of an education as being higher, both through the perception that the costs are more severe and the belief that they have more alternatives to PSE.¹¹⁰ In a study of the perceived cost-benefit analysis of a university education, low-income Canadians estimated tuition costs for a four year degree were double the actual cost.¹¹¹ Consequently, while moderate increases in tuition fees do not necessarily directly correlate with decreased participation by underrepresented groups, high tuition costs indirectly affect the participation of underrepresented groups by influencing how students perceive the benefits of higher education. In other words, in the context of high tuition, research indicates that individuals from low-income, first generation, and Aboriginal backgrounds in particular, may be more likely to assess the future benefits of PSE as being not worth the immediate financial costs of pursuing further studies.¹¹²

The research is clear: financial barriers are complicated, and solutions will require innovative thinking. Increasing student loan limits may assist students with a lack of funds, but it does nothing to overcome price sensitivity or debt aversion issues. A broader discussion in Ontario on the full range of financial barriers and their interaction with informational barriers and motivational barriers is long overdue.



Informational Barriers

Closely related to certain financial barriers, like price sensitivity, are informational barriers to access. Informational barriers refer to a lack of necessary information about educational options, career paths and educational financing to pursue post-secondary studies. Underrepresented groups are more likely to be unaware of key information regarding the post-secondary options available, application processes, and financial aid programs. In turn, financial assistance programs or mentorship and academic support initiatives designed to facilitate the participation of students from underrepresented groups in PSE can be ineffectual, given that target populations are often unaware of their existence. For instance, provincial bursaries for Aboriginal students may provide much-needed financial assistance to students who have already decided to enrol in PSE, but if Aboriginal students are unaware of the bursaries when planning for their future, this program is unlikely to improve access among students reluctant to apply in the first place.

“When you talk to your guidance counsellor, you talk about what you are going to do with your life, not how you will pay for it.”

Informational barriers are particularly important for first generation students and rural and northern students. First generation students often lack the familial guidance and information available to youth whose parents participated in the post-secondary system. Students from rural and northern areas may have fewer informational resources on PSE available to them, and rely more heavily on informal sources for information. Interviews with students who chose not to pursue PSE suggest that greater information about program and funding options, earlier in secondary school, would improve participation.¹¹³

Further evidence suggests that guidance counsellors in secondary schools are having little influence on students’ decisions to pursue PSE. While most students cited family and friends as their primary sources of financial aid information, the Canadian Student Survey found that even students who said guidance counsellors were

their primary information source performed no better on a financial aid literacy test.¹¹⁴ Ineffective counselling on PSE may be a result of guidance counsellors spending the majority of their time helping students with more immediate personal issues regarding drugs, health, and safety. This contention is supported by a survey that found that only a minority of students interacted with their guidance counsellor and, of those that did interact, PSE was rarely a topic of discussion.¹¹⁵ As one rural student, who did not attend university until several years after secondary school, described in a focus group, “I loved math, but the only job that my guidance counsellor suggested was becoming a math teacher. Knowing I didn’t want to do that, I decided not to apply to university.”

Obtaining information about financing PSE was also a source of concern. As one focus group participant explained, “I spent a lot of time working with my guidance counsellor, but I still did not feel like I had enough information ... when you talk to your guidance counsellor, you talk about what you are going to do with your life, not how you will pay for it.”¹¹⁶ Others suggested that their guidance counsellors gave factually incorrect information about availability of financial assistance. In a recent survey of PSE non-attendees, 40 per cent did not know how to apply for a student loan, and in the Canada Student Survey, over three quarters of students failed a basic financial aid literacy test.^{117,118} It is important that, without reducing the availability of personal counselling for students, counsellors reach out to more students to provide correct information about post-secondary options and financial aid.

Many studies support the contention that a lack of information about vocational pathways, including college, as well as a curriculum bias towards university-oriented material, has served to deter students from pursuing skilled labour careers. The lack of information can contribute to indecision among students and delayed entry into college programs.¹¹⁹ While the Ontario secondary school curriculum now includes a mandatory Career Studies course, many educators argue that it is important to provide information about PSE to students earlier to influence course selection, that

careers courses should be given greater emphasis in secondary school, and that careers information would be more effective if it were integrated into regular coursework.¹²⁰

Clearly, informational barriers play a significant role in the decisions made by Ontario youth. Although this has been known for some time, not enough has been done to address these

challenges. Part of the challenge is that since almost half of Canadian youth decide whether or not to enrol in PSE before they reach grade nine, information about post-secondary pathways must be made available early.¹²¹ Solutions to informational barriers could be implemented with minimal cost to the government, and, in concert with other initiatives, could have a greater impact on access than any other program created to date.

Motivational Barriers

Another set of barriers faced by students from underrepresented groups in accessing PSE are motivational barriers. For students that entered and dropped out of PSE, a lack of direction, interest or motivation was the most frequent reason mentioned. It was also the second most commonly cited reason by students who decided not to apply to PSE.¹²² Researchers believe that understanding the motivations of youth who do not apply to PSE institutions immediately after secondary school, as well as those who abandon their studies, is an important part of raising PSE participation rates.¹²³

Some motivational factors may be attributed to secondary school and neighbourhood characteristics. For example, a focus group participant from a rural community declared, “during my Grade 9, my principal actually got up there and said we don’t expect many of you to go to university,”¹²⁴ while an Aboriginal student from a low-income urban area explained, “it was pretty much understood the whole school wasn’t going to university.”¹²⁵ Schools and communities that hold the attitude that post-secondary studies are out of reach for most students may de-motivate many from pursuing higher education.¹²⁶

Several studies have found that parents and guardians have the greatest impact on whether or not their children pursue higher education. The influence of parents and guardians has been ranked greater than that of friends, guidance counsellors, teachers, and other family members.¹²⁷ Parents who attended PSE themselves are more likely to have a positive view of higher education. When parents consider PSE an important priority for their children, the participation rate quadruples for university and

doubles for college.¹²⁸ Students who say their parents are indifferent as to whether or not they attend PSE are twice as likely to abandon their studies as students who say their parents would be very disappointed if they left.¹²⁹ In addition, parents who expect their children to attend PSE are more likely to have saved for post-secondary education, providing students with a higher level of financial support.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the percentage of students who cited interest or motivation as a reason for not attending PSE jumps to 59 per cent in first generation students, compared to 38 per cent and 44 per cent of non-attendees with college- and university-educated parents.¹³¹ The motivation of students appears to be closely related to parental expectations, and both factors have a bearing on attendance and persistence in PSE for students from underrepresented groups.

“During my Grade 9 year, my principal actually got up there and said we don’t expect many of you to go to university.”

Motivation is a complex issue and difficult to understand on a macro scale. Clearly, though, students’ perceptions of PSE are greatly affected by the role models in their lives. Educating parents, community leaders, teachers, and school principals on the role they play in exacerbating these barriers could be a first step to addressing this challenge.

Other Barriers

Generally, financial, informational and motivational barriers have been considered the root causes of other types of barriers. Several other categories of barriers, including academic barriers, geographic barriers, and institutional or structural barriers, have been cited as having a bearing on the ability of individuals to access the post-secondary system in Ontario. While these barriers are important, at least the first two closely relate to the financial, informational and motivational barriers discussed earlier.

Academic barriers refer to a student with inadequate secondary school preparation to enter their post-secondary pathway of choice. It has been noted that this is generally more prevalent at the university level rather than for college programs.¹³² Poor academic performance in secondary school is often attributable to motivational barriers. Students may self-select out of post-secondary pathways after experiencing preliminary academic difficulties or due to a lack of confidence in their academic ability.¹³³ Additionally, low-income students on average tend to have lower grades in secondary school than their higher-income peers, due to a number of factors unrelated to intrinsic ability, including quality of school attended, ability to access extra-curricular activities and tutoring, and the need to work part-time outside of school. As a result, to a certain degree, academic barriers can also be explained by financial and motivational circumstances.

“I barely get OSAP and my \$300 distance grant doesn’t even cover a trip home for me.”

Geographic barriers refer to barriers to post-secondary education that students face by virtue of being from a community located beyond commuting distance to the college or university program of his or her choice.¹³⁴ Geographic barriers are primarily faced by rural and northern individuals, and also Aboriginal students from remote communities. Potential students who live beyond commuting distance to an institution face financial barriers, in terms of significantly higher

costs to attend an institution, and motivational barriers, because of the stress of leaving their home community. As one rural student in a focus group put it, “I barely get OSAP and my \$300 distance grant doesn’t even cover a trip home for me.” In addition, geographic barriers may also be correlated with informational barriers, in terms of rural and northern students being less able to access information about post-secondary education or take advantage of institution-run early outreach and mentorship programs.

Finally, institutional barriers refer to the cultural or structural aspects of post-secondary institutions that may make it difficult for under-represented groups to gain entrance to the post-secondary system and succeed once attending a post-secondary institution. For example, some Aboriginal students may feel unwelcome in an environment that has historically privileged Western thought over traditional knowledge, and may have to deal with unwelcome comments from culturally uninformed professors and peers. Students from low-income households may have financial concerns that make it difficult for them to participate fully in university or college life. These students may have to work many hours in paid employment during the academic term, and be unable to participate in academic experiences like unpaid internships and field courses. While many post-secondary institutions have taken commendable steps to make their institutional environment more supportive for all students, individuals from underrepresented groups in particular may require further changes to support services and institutional culture to succeed. Taking steps to address concerns such as fair credit transfer between institutions, the availability of online learning, and the provision of available child care facilities, could help create a supportive institutional environment for all students.



A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ACCESS

In recognition of the importance of increasing the participation of underrepresented groups in PSE, and as part of its *Reaching Higher Plan*, the Ontario government initiated the Access to Opportunities Strategy (AOS) in 2007. The objective of this strategy was to improve the post-secondary enrolment, retention and success of Aboriginal students, Francophone students, first generation students, Crown Wards, and students with disabilities.¹³⁵ From the 2007-2008 to 2009-2010 academic years, \$106 million dollars were allocated through the AOS to a number of access initiatives intended to improve outreach, recruitment, retention and support of these groups.¹³⁶ Some of the AOS initiatives include enhanced support for students with disabilities in the form of transition funding, and funding for special services and technology;¹³⁷ the Aboriginal

Post-Secondary Education and Training Bursary and support services for Aboriginal students; and first generation projects and support services.¹³⁸

Students appreciate the considerable effort the government has made to address access barriers through initiatives such as the AOS. Nevertheless, more needs to be done to facilitate access for underrepresented groups. Recent studies indicate that participation gaps for several groups, including low-income and Aboriginal students, are rising. Part of the lack of success in addressing the barriers these students face is that overcoming them requires an integrated, multifaceted approach, due to their connected and overlapping nature.¹³⁹ For instance, taking steps to resolve informational barriers among first generation students will be ineffective if financial barriers are

not also addressed. Similarly, financial assistance will not address accessibility concerns if students are not aware of post-secondary options and the assistance available. Until now, the AOS has been mostly a collection of individual one-off programs rather than an integrated strategy that recognizes and tackles the full range of barriers.

Evidence suggests that packaging interventions is the most effective way to raise PSE participation rates. When considering post-secondary access, barriers and groups often overlap. For example, an Aboriginal student is more likely to be low-income and also from a rural or northern community. Similarly, students with dependants are more likely to be low income, and first generation students are more likely to be from rural or northern communities. Because of the complex interaction and overlap between barriers to PSE, a successful access strategy must simultaneously address different needs.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, different students may require different strategies to overcome similar challenges.¹⁴¹ In support of this point, the results of focus groups demonstrated that individual students prioritized different strategies to improve access, even when they were discussing the same barrier or from the same underrepresented group. For example, some first generation participants felt that early exposure to post-secondary campuses would be valuable in reducing information barriers, while others felt that providing better information to their parents through secondary schools would be necessary.¹⁴²

A holistic strategy that addresses students' financial, informational and motivational needs through a variety of interconnected interventions is the most effective strategy for improving student success rates.¹⁴³ While there are broad cultural barriers within post-secondary

institutions, the majority of current government interventions are aimed at overcoming barriers at the level of the individual.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, the majority, though not all, of the solutions proffered in this paper consider post-secondary access from the perspective of the individual student.

Students have identified the following necessary elements of a comprehensive access strategy:

- i: early outreach programs
- ii: primary and secondary school outreach
- iii: pathway mobility
- iv: financial assistance
- v: online access
- vi: institutional supports and transformation

Each of these elements is an essential component of a holistic and comprehensive approach to access, and it is only through such a multi-pronged approach that we will effectively address participation gaps. Some of these components have fortunately already been identified as government priorities, and students wish simply to broaden the discussion and to encourage sustained action. Others, however, have been largely ignored in the discussion around access and will require greater attention from decision-makers.

After describing each element of the holistic access strategy in detail, a set of recommendations are presented. The recommendations have been constructed in a way that aims to balance the need for long-term change with simple ideas that can be implemented immediately. Finally, to demonstrate how our comprehensive access strategy will tackle the full range of access barriers, Table 2 provides an overview of the relationships between each of the six components and the barriers discussed previously.

Table 2: Barriers addressed by various components of a holistic access strategy

COMPONENT	BARRIERS ADDRESSED					
	Financial	Informational	Motivational	Academic	Geographic	Institutional
Early Outreach	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
School Outreach	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Pathway Mobility	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Financial Assistance	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗
Online Access	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Institutional Support	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓

Early Outreach Programs

Early outreach programs are one of the most valuable strategies for improving participation rates in post-secondary studies. Early outreach is the engagement of youth in a dialogue about the benefits and opportunities of higher education, and the provision of support for students to succeed in reaching and persisting through their program of study. Early outreach is vital given that nearly half of youth decide to attend PSE before Grade 9.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, factors that develop throughout childhood and adolescence, including grades, home environment, and career aspirations, influence the decision to pursue higher education.¹⁴⁶ Early deciders are more likely to have savings for PSE and are less likely to drop out of post-secondary programs.¹⁴⁷ Early outreach can facilitate participation in PSE by encouraging good study habits, a positive attitude towards education, appropriate course selection, and providing essential information about programs and financial assistance.¹⁴⁸ Community- and school-based early outreach initiatives have both demonstrated recent success in increasing participation rates among underrepresented groups.¹⁴⁹

There are many types of early outreach programs. Some consist of one-time events, often designed to bring secondary school aged or younger students to university and college campuses and provide early familiarity with the institutional environment. This can take the form of single day events, or longer visits to campus. These programs are valuable in that they increase awareness of post-secondary options, and help to disseminate information about student financial assistance, application processes, academic programs, and the benefits of post-secondary education. Evidence suggests bringing students to campuses at a young age helps them feel that PSE is a realistic goal and encourages them to plan for their post-secondary aspirations.¹⁵⁰ Many focus group participants, particularly those from rural and northern locations, cited an early campus visit as a key reason why they later chose to attend a particular post-secondary institution. A low-income student described her first time on a university campus as “the opening up of my whole world – it demystified the image I had in my head of university and made it seem possible.”¹⁵¹

While one-time initiatives seem to have some positive impacts on post-secondary participation, there are some concerns regarding their implementation. Often, participation in science fairs or competitions on university and college campuses is based on merit, and may attract students who already are planning to attend university. As a rural student explained, “In Grade 7 I got to go to McMaster’s campus, and that’s why I came to McMaster, but only two people in my elementary school got to go.”¹⁵² Opportunities to attend these events are limited, and may be reserved for one or two students in a class that are judged to already have the greatest likelihood of attending a post-secondary institution.

Early outreach is vital given that nearly half of youth decide to attend PSE before Grade 9.

Students believe that provisions should be made for every secondary school student to visit a college and a university campus in Grade 9 or 10. While some students already visit post-secondary campuses, the opportunity to familiarize oneself with a post-secondary environment and receive information directly from post-secondary students and faculty should be made more broadly available. Ontario’s colleges and universities could create a day in which all local Grade 9 or 10 students are provided with campus tours, classroom experiences, and information on application processes and financial assistance.

Other early outreach initiatives consist of longer-term mentorship programs. In contrast to one-time events, these programs generally aim to remediate a perceived educational deficit, and thus specifically target educationally disadvantaged groups.¹⁵³ Mentorship programs tend to include many different elements intended to address multiple barriers that youth from underrepresented groups often face in accessing post-secondary education. Components may include financial incentives for participation, mentoring, tutoring, parental involvement and application support.¹⁵⁴ A key recommendation of the 2005 report on PSE by the Honourable Bob Rae was to increase

the presence of early outreach in elementary schools in order to facilitate an early discussion of and interest in higher education.¹⁵⁵ As one rural student who did not benefit from early outreach stated, “I feel like the early outreach programs would be extremely beneficial for a lot of people ... they were pushing career planning courses, but it was like we were supposed to jump straight from secondary school to a career, and they didn’t give us a bridge.”¹⁵⁶ Because these programs specifically target students who are considered at-risk of dropping out of school early or not continuing their education, and also because they involve a long-term, sustained support mechanism, they are considered one of the most effective ways to improve post-secondary participation rates.^{157,158} In *Paving the Way to Understanding Education*, Patricia Gandara overviews early outreach initiatives in the United States, describing the most successful programs as including:¹⁵⁹

- A primary person who monitors and guides the student over time;
- Good instruction coupled with challenging curriculum that is carefully tailored to the students’ learning needs;
- Longer term interventions, as the longer students participate in a program, the more benefits they report;
- Cultural awareness of students’ backgrounds;
- Positive peer support, as students are more likely to succeed when a peer group provides academic, social and emotional support; and
- Financial assistance and incentives, since for many low-income students who identify postsecondary education as a goal, scholarships and grants may be essential to realizing that goal.

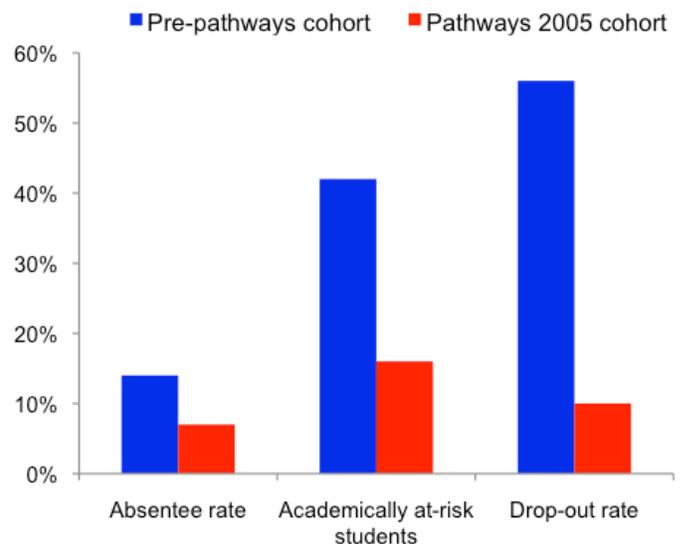
“They were pushing career planning courses, but it was like we were supposed to jump straight from secondary school to a career, and they didn’t give us a bridge.”

Probably the most well-known early outreach program in Ontario is the Pathways to Education program, which started in the Regent Park area of Toronto. Thanks to funding from both the provincial and federal governments, the program has since spread to other neighbourhoods and cities across

Ontario and Canada. The Pathways to Education model is based on four pillars: tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and financing. Participants receive immediate financing in the form of bus tickets and meal vouchers to encourage students to stay in school. In addition, students who advance through the program earn funds that can be put towards their post-secondary schooling. The program also partners with existing community organizations to strengthen and coordinate support for students.

Since the Regent Park program was implemented in 2001, it has reduced local secondary school dropout rates from 56 per cent to 10 per cent, and increased college or university enrolment of graduates fourfold.¹⁶⁰ Pathways has also decreased student absenteeism and the proportion of students deemed “at risk”ⁱⁱ of dropping out, as shown in Figure 10.¹⁶¹

Figure 10: Pathways to Education Results in Regent Park



Students recognize that these types of programs can be relatively expensive on a per-student basis. However, in a third-party evaluation of the program, the Boston Consulting Group estimated that the Regent Park pathways program provided:¹⁶²

- a return on investment of \$25 for every dollar invested;
- a net present value to society of \$50,000 for every student enrolled; and
- a cumulative lifetime benefit to society of \$400,000 for each graduate.

Given the evidence of the tremendous success early outreach programs have on PSE access, students

ii. In this context, the term “at risk” refers to students who, by the end of Grade 10, have obtained less than sixteen secondary school credits.

ask that the provincial government increase funding and support for community-based early outreach initiatives across Ontario, either through community organizations or public institutions. In light of the considerable success of the Pathways to Education program, students recommend that the government prioritize the continued expansion of this program across Ontario and use its framework as a starting point when developing a long-term approach to early outreach.

It is also important that early outreach not stop at further funding for Pathways to Education. The government must continue to work with colleges and universities to implement a range of early outreach programs. A number of successful institutional programs already exist. For example, at York University, the Westview Partnership program partners students at schools in the Jane and Finch community with university mentors. The aim of the partnership is to deliver knowledge about PSE, increase student confidence and motivation, and improve academic preparation for post-secondary studies. The partnership consists of 14 specific programs that are mostly run by student volunteers, in conjunction with funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, the York Faculty of Education, and some community funding. The program has been credited with improving access to post-secondary education in an area of Toronto that has traditionally had lower participation rates.¹⁶³ Two years after the initiation of the University Path Program through the Westview Partnership, the number of graduating students from the Westview neighbourhood gaining admittance to York University more than doubled.¹⁶⁴ One particularly valuable aspect of the partnership is that by channelling former secondary school students from the neighbourhood into mentor positions, it provides current students with a support network that is familiar with the very specific challenges of the community.¹⁶⁵



Another example of a promising institutional-community partnership is the RBC-Lakehead University Joint Aboriginal Outreach Program, an outreach program geared towards increasing enrolment of Aboriginal youth at Lakehead University. Elements of the program include visits to campus for students from remote communities, a long-term mentorship program pairing third-year Aboriginal students at Lakehead with secondary school students, and an Aboriginal speaker series.¹⁶⁶

Successful early outreach programs should be supported by the government and expanded. In light of the success shown by initiatives that offer a combination of academic services, financial incentives, information, parental involvement activities, mentoring, and personal and social enrichment activities, programs should be designed with the purpose of combining many or all of these elements and should be tailored to the specific needs of the target community.¹⁶⁷

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue to support early outreach as a key component of a holistic access strategy for post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should commit to having every secondary school student visit a college campus and a university campus as a part of the Grade 9 or 10 curriculum.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should prioritize the continued funding and expansion of the Pathways to Education program.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should work with colleges and universities to design and implement a broad range of community-based early outreach programs that provide exposure to post-secondary options and offer multifaceted support for youth from underrepresented groups.

Primary and Secondary School Outreach

Primary and secondary school outreach is a promising, but largely untapped, avenue for facilitating access to PSE among under-represented groups. While community-based outreach programs are also important, the formal school system reaches every student in Ontario and can provide students with information about post-secondary pathways through both in-class and out-of-class initiatives.

The Ontario government has demonstrated considerable commitment to enhancing the success of students in primary and secondary school. Since 2006, every secondary school in Ontario has been equipped with a “student success team” that includes a student success teacher, the principal, the heads of the guidance and special education departments, and any other appointed staff.¹⁶⁸ Each team works with staff, students, parents, and the community to ensure at-risk students have the support they need to graduate. Furthermore, students are required to take a Career Studies class in Grade 10 to help them plan their path post-graduation.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should recognize primary and secondary school outreach as a key component of a holistic access strategy for post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should set a goal for the primary and secondary education system to raise post-secondary participation rates.

Nevertheless, students believe that Ontario’s primary and secondary schools can be better used to help underrepresented students access the post-secondary system, especially through improved guidance. In addition, while a single careers course is an important step in providing students with information about possible pathways, students believe that the secondary school curriculum should include a greater focus on overcoming informational barriers to post-secondary education. Specific enrichment programs, which provide students with hands-on experience of a work and/or post-secondary environment, should also be further expanded.

The Ontario primary and secondary system made tremendous progress after setting out to raise graduation rates and student test scores. Considering the long-term importance of PSE attainment rates, a new and equally ambitious goal should be set for the primary and secondary system to increase the number of students who move on to PSE, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

Guidance and Curriculum

One of the most under-utilized opportunities for improving post-secondary access is through reform in the guidance and career studies programs offered in Ontario’s primary and secondary schools. For instance, a study by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation found that “school guidance counsellors and teachers... have very little impact on the decisions made by students” and that students needed more information on post-secondary admissions, programs, career choices, costs, and financing options.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, another study found that Canada lags behind other OECD countries in providing sustained career development services from primary and secondary school to PSE and through transitions to the workplace.¹⁷⁰ Only a

minority of students actually interact with their guidance counsellor, and despite the presence of counsellors, many secondary school students feel anxious and unprepared to make decisions regarding their post-secondary options.¹⁷¹

Aside from the need for more interaction between students and guidance counsellors, another deficiency in the guidance counselling system is the inappropriate streaming of youth due to a lack of sufficient information, encouragement and guidance in the selection of courses. Despite the implementation of student success teams in secondary schools, concerns have been raised that secondary school students are being guided into preconceived paths of best-fit as opposed

to individually appropriate pathways. More specifically, some guidance programs may be streaming otherwise qualified students, particularly those from low-income, Aboriginal, or rural and northern backgrounds, away from the more rigorous secondary school courses necessary to qualify for university and college programs. One Aboriginal focus group participant noted, “my high school counsellor said I’d never go to university,” sentiments that were echoed by many rural focus group participants.^{172,173} This problem may also stem from the well-intentioned desire of educators to not discourage any pathway a student chooses (including transitioning to work or apprenticeship training after secondary school), even if that selection is influenced by financial, informational, parental or motivational barriers.



One Aboriginal focus group participant noted, “my high school counsellor said I’d never go to university,” sentiments that were echoed by many rural focus group participants.

Research also indicates that some racial minorities, including students who identify as black and immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, may be disproportionately steered away from the academic streams in secondary school.¹⁷⁴ Some researchers have theorized that inappropriate streaming stems from a misunderstanding of cultural factors, the dismissal of socioeconomic circumstances, and from educators being more likely to label behaviour from minorities as deviant and problematic.¹⁷⁵ A study of the perceptions of race in secondary school education found that guidance counsellors who did not identify with a visible minority were more dismissive of anti-racist education initiatives, and less willing to recognize race as a salient issue for students.¹⁷⁶ Evidence suggests that students from a visible minority are more able to relate to the lived experience of racial minority teachers and guidance counsellors, and more easily connect with these figures. Consequently the presence of more racial minority teachers in guidance could fill a void and provide students dealing with racial issues with more meaningful counselling.¹⁷⁷

In addition, many students are concerned about the lack of information about financial assistance available through guidance counselling and the

broader curriculum. Students in focus groups particularly highlighted the lack of information on how to finance their education. A first generation student noted that, “if you know about [financial assistance] when you’re in high school, you’re more likely to know that you can afford to go to university.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, many targeted bursaries have not increased access of low-income and underrepresented students, in part because they reach those who have already succeeded in applying and enrolling in PSE. Their impact is limited in secondary school because many students are unaware of their existence and whether or not they qualify for assistance.¹⁷⁹ Improved information about financial assistance in secondary school would enable bursary and loan programs to be more effective in reaching those with the greatest need.

Innovative ways to reduce informational barriers and improve pathway selection should be implemented, including reforms in guidance and the incorporation of financial aid literacy into the secondary school curriculum. Students believe that in order to properly address students’ counselling needs, the provincial government should ensure that the allocation of guidance counsellors is sufficient to fulfill these needs. Schools with a higher incidence of personal health and safety concerns may lack the resources to devote adequate time to discussing PSE options with students. As such, the allocation of guidance counsellors should not be based strictly on student numbers, but be flexible enough to accommodate

local circumstances. High-need communities should be allocated more counsellors per capita within the secondary school funding formula.

To accompany this system, the government should ensure students are receiving appropriate social, personal, and academic support from their guidance counsellors and student success teams. Training should be provided to guidance counsellors in areas that demonstrate need for specialized counselling skills so that the dissemination of accurate PSE information is not left behind or ignored.

Through guidance and curriculum changes, information on the benefits of post-secondary education and repayable and non-repayable financial supports should be presented early in a student's studies, preferably at or before Grade 9 to influence course selection.¹⁸⁰ This is particularly important given that 35 per cent of university applicants decide to attend university before they reach the age of 9, and 73 per cent before the age of 15.¹⁸¹ Initiatives that demonstrate the earning value of a post-secondary credential and enhanced information about student assistance could dispel misconceptions about the value of higher education and help to encourage students that it is within

their reach.¹⁸² Ontario may consider emulating a program in British Columbia entitled "Life after High School," which gives secondary school students an opportunity to plan for their post-secondary options through academic counselling and web-based tools.¹⁸³ Even something as simple as every student completing a mock OSAP application in the Career Studies curriculum could demystify the financial assistance process. Another strategy could be working with each school board's Parent Involvement Committees in undertaking parental engagement strategies, such as sending home a letter in every report card with information on costs and financial assistance to encourage parents to help their children plan for PSE.

Beyond providing information about financial assistance, debt management should be included in the curriculum as well. Over half of students indicate they are concerned about paying back their post-secondary education debt, and a significant percentage of students are averse to the idea of taking on debt.¹⁸⁴ It is imperative that the secondary school curriculum include information on how to manage debt, and what assistance is available for those experiencing difficulty with loan repayment, including the province's new OSAP Repayment Assistance Plan.

Recommendation: The Ontario government and school boards should ensure all students have adequate access to trained guidance counsellors to help students plan for post-secondary education.

Recommendation: Information about post-secondary options, costs, financial assistance, and debt management should be integrated into the secondary school curriculum, including a mock application for the Ontario Student Assistance Program.

Recommendation: School boards should undertake parental engagement strategies with Parent Involvement Committees, including sending letters with report cards to provide information to parents about post-secondary options and financing.



Enrichment Programs for At-Risk Students

Targeted enrichment opportunities in secondary schools, including dual credit and Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) programs, have also shown success in reducing barriers to PSE. These programs can increase student engagement with school, and student engagement is associated with higher academic performance, increased likelihood of entering PSE, and increased likelihood of completing a post-secondary program.¹⁸⁵ Students who report low levels of engagement at school are more likely to dropout because they are less likely to see the relevance of their studies to their future career plans.¹⁸⁶ Providing secondary school students with the experience of taking a class at university or college can prove to some students that they have the ability to succeed at the post-secondary level. These experiences are invaluable for at-risk students who might self-select out of PSE.¹⁸⁷

Specialized program options can also help address the gender gap in PSE, as they may improve secondary school engagement for males, who tend to report feeling less engaged in the traditional secondary school environment and consequently are more likely to dropout. Enrichment programs can also address the male-female imbalance in certain professions by dispelling gender-based myths as students have the opportunity to study and work in a variety of fields. Finally, enrichment programs can help address the informational barriers that first generation and rural and northern students face when considering post-secondary studies, by providing these students with first-hand knowledge about pursuing employment in an area of interest.

In this context, dual credit programs refer to programs, targeted at youth at-risk of not completing secondary school or not attending a post-secondary institution, that allow students to take college, university and apprenticeship courses that count towards both an Ontario Secondary School Diploma and also a post-secondary certification. These courses have successfully improved graduation rates for students at-risk of not finishing secondary school.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, an American survey

found that students who participated in dual credit programs had better academic performances than their peers in the first year of college.¹⁸⁹ Dual credit programs introduce students to the more rigorous expectations of higher education while they are still able to take advantage of the more personal and individually-tailored academic supports of secondary school. There are currently dual credit programs in Ontario where students can take up to four credits that count at both the secondary school and college level. However, in contrast to the United States, dual credit programs targeted at youth from underrepresented groups are virtually non-existent for university credit in Ontario.¹⁹⁰

Similarly, Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) programs allow secondary school students to focus their studies on a particular field, and involve taking a cluster of courses related to this area, as well as a cooperative education experience.¹⁹¹ The program is designed to help students investigate and refine their career goals, and make early contacts in the field they are considering entering. SHSM programs address informational barriers as well as motivational barriers to PSE, by providing students with experience in an area of interest.

The Ministry of Education had done much to develop and fund secondary school enrichment programs, and should continue to expand these initiatives. Right now, students can participate in these programs only if their secondary school offers the option. As of the 2009-2010 school year, only half of Ontario's secondary schools offer the SHSM program, and a mere 1.3 per cent of Ontario secondary school students took part in a dual credit program. Furthermore, even in schools that offered these programs, course selection was limited. As one rural student explained, "programs were good if you wanted to do trades, more college-oriented things. But most university-level arts professions, you couldn't get that kind of experience in a rural setting."¹⁹² The Ministry should look to expand dual credit and SHSM programs in secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, with the objective of motivating underrepresented students to pursue higher education.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue to fund and expand dual credit programs and Specialist High Skills Major programs, specifically targeted at secondary school students at-risk of not attending a post-secondary institution.

Pathway Mobility

Pathway mobility refers to the ability of students to switch programs within a stream of study, and also the ability to switch between educational pathways and the workforce. An example of the former would be a college student who switches from a plumbing to an electrical engineering program, and an example of the latter would be a student switching from the workforce to a university or college program.

Unlike many of the other issues raised in this report, when discussing pathway mobility, it is predominantly the design of the system, rather than the characteristics of the student, that acts as a barrier. Thus, the responsibility for change falls directly on the government and institutions that oversee the system. Improved pathway mobility, through improved credit transfer and bridging programs, increases the PSE options available to an individual student and reduces the barriers to access that are currently ingrained in the system.

Roughly 25 per cent of Ontario's college students say they are attending college in order to prepare for university, but only 9 per cent actually enrol in university after completing their college studies.

A significant number of Ontario students switch pathways at some point during their education or careers.¹⁹³ Roughly 25 per cent of Ontario's college students say they are attending college in order to prepare for university, but only 9 per cent actually enrol in university after completing their college studies.¹⁹⁴ Without fully developed transfer mechanisms, many qualified students are unable to access their pathway of choice because they do not have the required prerequisites. Nearly 55 per cent of college-college transfer students and 65 per cent of college-university transfer students cited the existence of specific transfer agreements as a reason behind their decision to continue their education.¹⁹⁵ Consequently, it can be inferred that the absence of these pathways hinders transfer between streams. For individuals transitioning from the workforce to a post-secondary institution, the process can be even

more challenging in terms of having necessary support, information and financial resources. One student in a low-income focus group explained, "I've been out of secondary school for six years ... In terms of coming from the workforce, I had no idea how to find out this information [about transitioning to a post-secondary program]."¹⁹⁶

The absence of pathway mobility between the workplace, college and university is particularly problematic in light of the fact that many underrepresented groups have apprenticeship and college participation rates comparable to the general population, but lag behind in accessing university. If pathway mobility for qualified students were improved, this mechanism could be of critical importance in raising university participation rates in underrepresented groups.¹⁹⁷ For example, many rural and northern youth tend to decide what type of post-secondary institution to attend based on geographic factors. Because colleges tend to be more prevalent in rural and northern communities, many students that would otherwise consider attending university go to college to stay near home.¹⁹⁸ In Alberta and British Columbia, both of which have large rural populations, the provinces have implemented an "articulated system," where university credit courses are also offered in community colleges.¹⁹⁹ In British Columbia, 19 per cent of college students eventually transfer to university programs, double the transfer rate in Ontario.²⁰⁰

In the international sphere, many OECD countries have greatly improved the flow between colleges and universities, in some cases creating regional university/colleges to improve pathway flexibility. For example, in the United States, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Community College Transfer Initiative (CCTI) provides support to eight selective universities to increase their enrolment of high-achieving, low- to moderate-income community college transfer students.²⁰¹ Participants include prestigious institutions like Amherst College, Cornell University, University of California, Berkeley and the University of Michigan. CCTI community-college transfer students have performed as well as their non-transfer peers in a university setting. These students also benefited the institutions by increasing campus diversity and improving collaboration among schools.

An evaluation of the program noted that it was “transformative” for students, and “many had not envisioned themselves even finishing community college, let alone succeeding at an elite four-year institution and (for many) planning to attend graduate school.”²⁰²

Unfortunately, otherwise qualified students in Ontario may not transition directly to college

or university due to a number of personal and financial factors, including inadequate secondary school performance and familial obligations. For an access strategy to truly serve students, it is imperative that there is fluid mobility between work, training, college and university. Two critical steps in improving pathway mobility are addressing issues of credit transfer, and increasing the availability of bridging programs.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue to support improved pathway mobility as a key component of a holistic access strategy for post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should recognize that it must play an active leadership role by insisting that universities and colleges improve pathway mobility for students.



Credit Transfer

Accessibility is compromised by the current lack of credit transfer. Credit transfer refers to the recognition of prior learning from one program to another and remains vital to student access and success in higher education. Even between institutions in the same stream of study, credit transfer is usually on an ad-hoc, inconsistent basis, which makes it difficult for potential transfer students to predict how many of their courses will transfer with them into a new program.²⁰³ Ontario students are not adequately supported by a patchwork system of bilateral agreements for select courses between particular institutions.

Both transparent learning objectives and prior learning assessment are essential for institutions to accurately transfer credits. Requesting any student to duplicate observable prior learning is ineffective, delays students’ entry into the workforce, and deters more students from continuing studies. Duplication of prior learning is also highly costly for students and government alike. For example, a 2010 study found that if 65 per cent of a student’s credits are transferred, a student can save at least \$26,000 in total costs associated with their education.

In recognition of the increasingly nationalized and globalized education system, many other OECD countries have been improving credit transfer between institutions to expand mobility.²⁰⁴ Mobility between and within pathways through an improved credit transfer system with greater consistency, transparency, and fairness must be a top priority for government and post-secondary institutions.

Fortunately, the Ontario government recently announced \$74 million will be available over five years to assist colleges and universities in developing an enhanced credit transfer system. Students welcome this initiative and suggest that concrete steps to implement the new system should include:

- more multi-lateral agreements between universities, between colleges, and between universities and colleges that allow students to transfer credits between institutions
- a public database of detailed class descriptions and learning objectives to assist decision-makers in credit transfer approval

- a public database of past credit-transfer decisions to promote transparency and consistency in the way credit transfers are reviewed at different institutions, similar to the system in place in British Columbia and Alberta
- clear and consistent information available to students in navigating the credit-transfer system, while ensuring students know which credits will transfer prior to accepting admission
- establishment of an appeals mechanism at each institution where students can challenge credit transfer decisions
- reducing residency requirements such that no more than fifty per cent plus one of a student's credits must be taken through the institution where the degree is granted
- adjusting academic transcripts to note the institution where each credit was received and a system-wide agreement to transfer the student's grades with the credit
- providing adequate and timely information and support to transfer students
- development and collection of system-wide indicators for credit transfer, including application, registration and completion rates

These types of purpose-built pathways ... should be expanded to encourage mobility between college and university.

Students also believe that all college-college and university-university credits should at least transfer as electives, and the grade requirement for transfer should not be higher than that of passing the course. A third year English course at one university may not transfer directly to a course at another, but all institutions should at least consider the credit to be a third-year elective. To facilitate university-university transfer,

all institutions should adopt the Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University credits, developed in 1995 by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), and agree to accept all first- and second-year courses from any university.

According to the Centre for Spatial Economics, over the next decade, Ontario universities will see a significant increase in the number of college graduates looking to transfer to university. Therefore, multilateral agreements on college-to-university credit transfer must also be more broadly implemented. The few examples in Ontario that exist include Ryerson University and York University who have been steadfast leaders in the practice of credit transfer. Both universities accept an average of 59 per cent of credits earned in a college diploma program and account for well over one-third of all credit transfer in Ontario. A more standardized credit transfer system can reduce the duplication of student learning, freeing up resources for all students.

There are also a limited number of college programs designed for those who wish to transition from college to university. One example is the two-year Liberal Arts Diploma at Seneca College, which allows students with a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or better at the end of the second semester to take university courses while finishing their diploma. Once completed, students who meet requirements may complete a summer bridging session at Woodsworth College at the University of Toronto and be admitted to third year of a Bachelor's of Arts program at York University or the University of Toronto with a minimum of six transfer credits. These types of purpose-built pathways, which gives students flexibility to finish with a diploma or transition to a degree program, should be expanded to encourage mobility between college and university.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue to invest in reducing administrative barriers to credit transfer and establish consistent, transparent and fair transfer mechanisms.

Recommendation: Ontario post-secondary institutions should provide adequate and timely information and support for students transferring institutions.

Recommendation: Colleges and universities should collaborate to expand the number of purpose-built pathways for transition from college to university.

Bridging Programs

In addition to credit transfer, bridging programs can be an important means of giving students who lack the prerequisites for university or college an opportunity to qualify for entry.ⁱⁱⁱ These programs also provide potential students with a foundational experience involving coursework in a university or college environment, and can be particularly valuable for those who have abandoned or disrupted their secondary studies. They differ in design but typically involve advanced academic support, reduced tuition, and often a chance to automatically enrol in the host institution upon completion of the program. The estimated 5.8 million Canadians who lack credentials beyond the secondary school level could benefit greatly from second chance educational opportunities. This includes many individuals from underrepresented groups with lower than average secondary school completion rates, such as Aboriginal students, certain groups of immigrants, and male students.²⁰⁵

Many academic preparation or bridging programs already exist at Ontario colleges. For example, Mohawk College offers a tuition-free program that gives potential students an opportunity to earn English and Math credits needed to enter college. Both Humber College and Seneca College offer academic upgrading programs to meet entrance requirements. Some bridging programs are also currently available in Ontario universities. The University of Toronto offers the Millie Rotman Shime Academic Bridging Program at its Woodsworth College to students who have been out of formal education for some time and do not meet the entrance requirements for the university. The University of Guelph offers the Open Learning Program that allows students open access to the university and guarantees admission to some degree programs once they have completed a number of prerequisites.²⁰⁶ Finally, the Chang School at Ryerson University

offers Academic Bridging Courses or ABCs in a number of disciplines to help students meet the entrance requirements of university.²⁰⁷

In terms of the overall availability of bridging programs ... Ontario lags behind many jurisdictions.

While these bridging programs are important steps in increasing accessibility, certain key factors may make it difficult for potential students to enrol. Little information is provided to students in secondary school about bridging programs as a pathway to PSE. As a result, many individuals looking to enter PSE later in life may be unaware that bridging programs exist. Several of these programs also have high tuition levels: the Millie Rotman program costs \$1,400 in tuition, while Ryerson's ABC courses are \$550 each. The ABC courses also are non-transferable, so credit cannot later count towards a university degree. Students in these programs are also usually considered part-time and not eligible for many of the financial assistance programs available to full-time students.

In terms of the overall availability of bridging programs and the financial assistance available to students completing programs, Ontario lags behind many jurisdictions. The implementation of bridging programs should be encouraged and funded by the government in order to help students with insufficient credits or inadequate entrance averages enter post-secondary education. In addition, students with financial need who are enrolled in bridging programs should be made eligible for OSAP assistance. Bridging programs must be recognized as an important step in closing participation gaps for underrepresented groups in PSE.

Recommendation: The implementation of academic bridging programs at post-secondary institutions across Ontario should be incentivized and funded by the government.

Recommendation: Students enrolling in academic bridging programs with financial need should be eligible for OSAP.

iii. Bridging or academic upgrading programs refer to programs designed to facilitate entry into PSE without the traditional entrance requirements, and do not refer to the many bridging programs for internationally-educated professionals.

Financial Assistance

Financial barriers are a significant obstacle to equal access to higher education. As was noted in the Council of Ontario Universities' report on student financial assistance, while "financial barriers are not the only barriers to higher education, the absence of access to funds will ensure that an individual will not attend."²⁰⁸

Cost aversion is still a major inhibitor for many first generation and low-income students. Increases in tuition can be associated with decreased PSE participation by low-income students.²⁰⁹ A low-income focus group participant explained, "people weren't even considering taking university-level courses in secondary school because they didn't have the money to go to university. ... Info sessions don't mention grants; people think there's no way to afford that, so I won't even try."²¹⁰ In fact for many students, the non-financial barriers of low motivation, lower academic achievement,

absence of parental encouragement, and a lack of information on post-secondary options may be rooted in a much earlier conclusion that the financial costs of attending PSE are either not worth the investment or are simply unaffordable.

Students appreciate the significant steps the government has taken to improve financial assistance programs. At the same time, students believe that to raise the enrolment rates of underrepresented groups in post-secondary education, more must be done to remove financial barriers. Measures such as tuition regulation, increasing the proportion of non-repayable aid targeted at underrepresented students, and reforming the OSAP eligibility and needs assessment criteria will help make post-secondary education more accessible for those with the fewest financial resources.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should recognize continued improvements to financial assistance as a key component of a holistic access strategy for post-secondary education.



Tuition Regulation

Tuition is the largest and fastest growing expense of students.²¹¹ When considering the financial assistance system, it is important to recognize the intrinsic connection between tuition and student assistance. Any changes to the way tuition fees are set will have a major impact on the ability of the student financial assistance system to meet students' needs. One major step to ensure adequate control and predictability of tuition fees is to ensure that these remain regulated by the government.

There is often a temptation, particularly when public funding is not increasing substantially, to grant institutions greater flexibility in raising tuition fees. Often, the argument is made that tuition increases coupled with more robust financial assistance will ensure accessibility is maintained, while providing additional revenue to maintain or increase quality of education. However, experience has shown that deregulation invariably leads to rapid and unpredictable tuition hikes. In the past, the student financial assistance system has failed to provide enough assistance to meet these escalating costs, and as the experience of deregulation in professional programs in 1998 has shown, this had a significant impact on the socioeconomic composition of the student population.²¹²

Tuition is currently regulated by the Ontario government under a framework in which institutions may increase tuition by a maximum overall average of 5.0 per cent annually. This average is a calculation based on a tuition increase of a maximum of 4.5 per cent for first-year general students and 4.0 per cent in senior years, combined with an increase by a maximum of 8.0 per cent in first year and 4.0 per cent in subsequent years for graduate and some professional and 'high-demand' programs. These significant increases are unmanageable for many students and exacerbate financial barriers. As one student from the low-income focus group affirmed, "the fact that tuition is this high makes it out of reach for low-income students."²¹³ Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, many underrepresented groups are less likely to believe the significant up-front costs to PSE are worth the investment.

Some will counter that the government's provision of tax credits, grants and loan remission off-set these up-front costs for many students, and the financial challenges facing underrepresented groups are significantly lower than the sticker price of an education. 'Net tuition', or the cost of PSE minus these government subsidies, is an academically useful concept in a debate about the private versus public expenditure on PSE; however, it is a significantly less useful concept in a discussion of accessibility. The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation put it best; "unfortunately, for students and families thinking about whether they can afford higher education (especially low-income families), it is not clear that the [net tuition] concept is all that useful. Discussions of net tuition do not focus on when and how tuition is paid. ... Policy efforts that, by intention or effect, reduce net price are undermined if they do not also affect the perception of post-secondary costs."²¹⁴

When deciding whether or not to attend PSE, potential students primarily consider the cost of tuition. Many lack a clear understanding of how mechanisms like government-sponsored loans, grants and tax credits will reduce their costs. Moreover, many low-income students and families do not have sufficient taxable income to even make use of tax credits until after graduation.²¹⁵ As a result, despite the existence of some programs to mitigate costs for low-income and other underrepresented students, the up-front financial costs of PSE remain among the largest barriers to improving accessibility.

Clearly, more must also be done to reduce informational barriers relating to perceived costs and financial assistance. However, to prevent any magnification of this problem through unpredictable and large tuition increases, the government must retain their control over setting tuition policy. Moreover, under the current regime of 5.0 per cent tuition increases per year, tuition costs are increasing much faster than inflation, and without reducing these costs, the government risks shutting even more qualified students out of the post-secondary system in Ontario who cannot or will not pay these up-front costs.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should retain control over tuition increases and ensure post-secondary tuition is affordable for all students.

Targeted Non-Repayable Aid

Targeted non-repayable aid is an important mechanism for eliminating the financial barriers many students from underrepresented groups face in entering PSE. The Ontario government currently provides several non-repayable financial assistance programs targeted at students from underrepresented groups, including bursaries for first generation and Aboriginal students, the Ontario Access Grant, the Ontario Distance Grant, the Bursary for Students with Disabilities, and the

Higher levels of targeted grants could encourage both low-income and first generation students to participate in post-secondary education.

Child Care Bursary. However, if these grants are to truly enhance post-secondary accessibility, they must be available to more students, and provide enough funding to meet financial needs.²¹⁶ In a recent report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, it is suggested that higher levels of targeted grants could encourage both low-income and first generation students to participate in post-secondary education.²¹⁷ Studies have shown that low-income and Aboriginal students in particular are more receptive to grants

than repayable loans, but there is inadequate non-repayable assistance available to these groups.^{218,219} Greater availability of up-front non-repayable grants would help to eliminate real and perceived financial barriers to accessing higher education.

Although the government should be applauded for its recent investments in student financial assistance, Ontario ranks near the bottom of provinces on the availability of financial assistance that is targeted and needs-based, as seen in Table 3.²²⁰ Over the past two decades, the number of merit-based scholarships available to students has increased, while need-based aid in Ontario has decreased in real terms.²²¹ Moreover, since 1994, increases in need-based aid have not kept pace with the rising cost of tuition. From 1994 to 2007, tuition increased by 180 per cent in constant dollars in Ontario, while need-based financial aid decreased to 96 per cent of 1994 levels.²²² Meanwhile, the number of students receiving merit based scholarships from institutions has risen dramatically. Most merit-based scholarships are given to first year students on a non-renewable basis and serve as a recruitment tool for universities, rather than being geared towards improving access.^{223,224}

Table 3: Average Student Aid per Recipient in 2007-08 by Type of Aid and Province

	Total Need-Based Aid	Change in Total Aid from 2001-02	Net Loans	Loan Remission	Grants	Total Non-Repayable Aid	% of Aid That Is Non-Repayable
AB	\$11,394	+12%	\$7,976	\$823	\$2,595	\$3,418	30%
PE	\$10,872	+12%	\$8,715	\$918	\$1,239	\$2,157	20%
NB	\$10,528	+10%	\$8,997	\$441	\$1,090	\$1,531	15%
Canada	\$10,495	+14%	\$6,931	\$1,274	\$2,290	\$3,564	34%
SK	\$10,121	+2%	\$5,738	\$3,485	\$898	\$4,383	43%
NS	\$9,857	+11%	\$8,099	\$1,065	\$693	\$1,758	18%
MB	\$9,739	+18%	\$4,759	\$3,312	\$1,668	\$4,980	51%
NL	\$9,718	+14%	\$6,042	\$1,126	\$2,550	\$3,676	38%
BC	\$9,559	+11%	\$7,437	\$1,444	\$678	\$2,122	22%
ON	\$9,044	+4%	\$6,314	\$1,430	\$1,300	\$2,730	30%
QC	\$7,125	+21%	\$3,543	\$12	\$3,570	\$3,582	50%



New investment in targeted financial assistance is necessary, and students recommend two specific improvements as initial steps. Currently, the government provides Ontario Access Grants to assist low-income students. In 2009-10, 58,000 students received an average of \$1,600 through the program. Unfortunately, these grants are only available for the first two years of study, yet low-income students require assistance for all years of their education. Students recommend extending eligibility for these grants to students with financial need in all years of study.

Secondly, the government currently offers a Child Care Bursary to students with dependants, but the program is extremely limited in its use. In 2009-10, it awarded a mere \$13,000 to 24 students. Few can take advantage of the bursary because of the restrictive qualifying criteria. The bursary is only available to full-time students with three or more dependent children under the age of 12 who also qualify for OSAP. Another problem with the Child Care Bursary is that the amount distributed is significantly less than is needed. For a parent with three dependents under the age of 12, a maximum of \$70 per week is provided for a sole support parent. For students who are married or have common-law partners, the amount drops to \$35 per week. In contrast, the actual cost of daycare for a single preschool aged child at an university affiliated daycare is approximately \$250 per week.²²⁵ Students suggest expanding this program significantly to assist a greater number of students in need, such that all OSAP-eligible students with any dependent children under the age of 12 are granted an amount that more accurately reflects the true costs of child care in Ontario.

Besides further monetary investment in targeted financial assistance, there are also three relatively

simple ways this aid could be better delivered by the Ontario government. First, the system of loans and grants through OSAP could be decoupled. Evidence suggests that many students in need of financial assistance are averse to acquiring large debt loads to finance their education. Yet under the current system, any student who qualifies for a grant must first apply for a loan.²²⁶ As a result, students with financial need may not apply to OSAP because they do not wish to take out a loan, but this may also prevent them from accessing grants, as well as institutional assistance and work-study positions that are available exclusively for OSAP-eligible students.²²⁷

Affirming these concerns, a recent study on access to PSE recommended decoupling loans and grants so students who are adverse to financing their education through a loan can still access any grant programs they qualify for.²²⁸ To facilitate this change, a question could be simply added to the beginning of the OSAP application asking if the student wishes to apply for grants and loans or just grants. Additionally, students should not have to fill out an application for OSAP and then fill in the same information to receive the numerous grants and bursaries available through institutions. Some institutionally-administered awards go unfilled through their year due to a lack of awareness about the programs. OSAP and institutions must work together to ensure that the information given to OSAP works as an application for all types of financial assistance and students are made more actively aware of assistance that is potentially available to them.

Secondly, funds directed towards post-secondary education income tax credits, which disproportionately benefit wealthier families, should be redirected, at least in part, to targeted aid. Valued at \$1.38 billion dollars

at the federal level and at \$330 million dollars at the provincial level, tax credits represent the largest government expenditure on financial assistance for students.²²⁹ Tax credits do little to help students from lower income families gain access to post-secondary education. The tax credit system requires students to pay their tuition, living expenses and related fees up-front, while tax credits provide a rebate later in the year. If a student's family does not earn enough to take advantage of the credits, a student has to carry them forward, and it may be years before a student has sufficient income to claim them. Sixty per cent of full-time university students do not earn enough income to use the tax credits in the year they were earned.²³⁰ Students believe that the post-secondary tax credits should be eliminated, and the funds moved into up-front, non-repayable assistance. This reform will ensure that individuals who cannot pay for higher education receive more funding to finance their education, and government assistance programs do not disproportionately benefit students from higher-income households.

Finally, steps could be taken to improve the timing of the award of grants or bursaries. Currently, most students receive funds to pursue PSE when they begin university or college. Earlier financial investments, in the form of grants that start to accumulate during secondary school and can be tapped into by students when they enrol in a post-secondary institution, would be a promising way to encourage participation of low-income

students. A Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation pilot project, which, starting in middle school, contributed money for students' post-secondary education, demonstrated success in improving participation rates.²³¹ Another similar strategy that would tackle financial barriers even earlier would be to make enrolment in the Canada

Sixty per cent of full-time university students do not earn enough income to use the tax credits in the year they were earned.

Learning Bond automatic for families who receive the National Child Benefit Supplement. Right now, every low-income family that qualifies for the National Child Benefit Supplement also qualifies for the Canada Learning Bond, which provides \$500 in one-time assistance into an RESP for a child from a low-income family, and then \$100 each subsequent year the family qualifies to a maximum of \$2,000. In his report on higher education, former Premier Bob Rae cites the Canada Learning Bond as a key tool that could be used to reduce financial barriers to PSE.²³² However, as of 2009, only 16 per cent of eligible families opted into the bond. If the bond was automatically provided to all recipients of the National Child Benefit Supplement, and held in trust for the child until he or she is ready to enter post-secondary education, it would help ensure that all youth have some savings to rely on when embarking on their higher education.²³³

Recommendation: The Ontario government should increase the proportion of non-repayable financial assistance targeted at students from groups underrepresented in the post-secondary system.

Recommendation: The Ontario Access Grants should be made available in all years of study.

Recommendation: The Child Care Bursary should be made available to all OSAP-eligible students with any dependent children under the age of 12, and grant amounts distributed through this program should more accurately reflect the actual costs of child care in Ontario.

Recommendation: The OSAP application should act additionally as an application for institutional financial assistance, and be modified so that applicants can choose to apply for only non-repayable aid.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should redirect money spent on post-secondary tax credits into the OSAP system to reduce students' up-front costs, lower the debt cap for students with financial need, and expand eligibility for loans and grants.

Extending OSAP Eligibility

There are a number of specific improvements to the Ontario Student Assistance Program that would go a long way to improving access to post-secondary education in Ontario. Several problems with the OSAP need assessment formula and the eligibility requirements for OSAP impact the ability of underrepresented groups to access the program.

Facing budgetary deficits in the late 1990s, the provincial government disqualified certain groups of students from receiving assistance for their post-secondary studies. This resulted in a 40 per cent decline in the number of students receiving OSAP, as part-time students and students with imperfect credit histories found themselves shut out of the system.²³⁴ In 2008-09, over 18 per cent of university students in Ontario were studying on a part-time basis, constituting a significant portion of the post-secondary population.²³⁵ Unfortunately, Ontario students are currently ineligible for OSAP if they take less than 60 per cent of a full course load in any term.²³⁶ Part-time students taking between 20 per cent and 59 per cent of a full-time course load are eligible for some assistance through the Part-Time Canada Student Loan (PTCSL); however, the outstanding loan is capped at \$10,000 and students must pay interest on the loans while in school. PTCSL borrowers accounted for only 0.4 per cent of all Canada Student Loan recipients, indicating few part time students are able to take advantage of the program.²³⁷ As a result, part-time learners are turning to private loans to fund their education at a higher rate than full-time students. Thirty-six per cent of part-time students reported using private loans, compared to 20 per cent of full-time students.²³⁸ These borrowers tend to face higher interest rates, faster repayment terms, and do not receive the interest relief provided in the public system.

The exclusion of part-time students from OSAP has important access implications for women, students with disabilities, and for students

with dependent children under the age of five, because it is known that these groups are more likely to enrol part-time.^{239,240} In addition, the majority of academic bridging programs currently available in Ontario are considered part-time, excluding these students from many forms of financial assistance. By taking a lighter course load, part-time students are assumed to have more time to work and earn an income, reducing their need for additional financial assistance. However, this assumes that part-time learners earn sufficient income to support themselves and any dependants, as well as pay for their tuition and other educational costs. The policy therefore creates particular financial difficulty for students with low incomes and students with dependants who cannot earn enough to meet their financial needs. Furthermore, by not allowing part-time learners access to OSAP, the government also prevents these students from accessing numerous other forms of need-based assistance, including work-study programs, scholarships and bursaries.

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As part of the province's social safety net, students recommend that OSAP eligibility be extended to part-time students. So long as the OSAP evaluation process accurately assesses need, this will prevent part-time students who have sufficient funds from qualifying for assistance, while extending the program to address the needs of many students from underrepresented groups currently unable to qualify.

Recommendation: OSAP eligibility should be expanded to all part-time students with financial need.

Reforms to the OSAP Need Assessment

In addition to restrictive eligibility requirements, inaccuracies in the OSAP need assessment formula make it difficult for students from underrepresented groups to attend post-secondary institutions while relying on government loans. One of the most critical problems with the financial assistance system is that the mechanism used to assess a student's financial need systematically underestimates students' true costs, and there is widespread acknowledgement by many stakeholders that these assessment figures are inaccurate. This results in students receiving less financial assistance than they require for educational and living expenses, with little recourse.

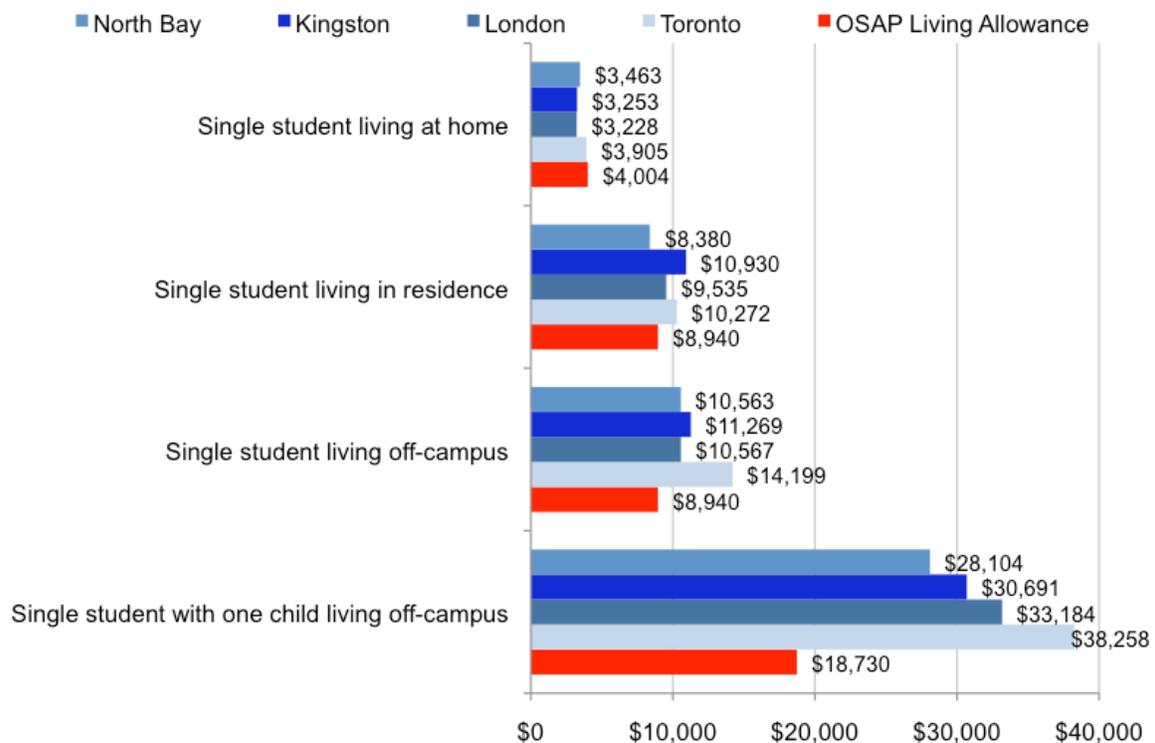
In 2003, a working group on OSAP reform commissioned a study on students' cost of living. The study, which concluded that "OSAP assessment and provision levels do not reflect actual costs," continues to be very relevant today, as seen in Figure 11.²⁴¹ According to the estimates for single students living in rental apartments off-campus, the OSAP assessment cost of living allotment over an 8-month period is \$8,940, which is nearly \$1,500 less than the after-tax

Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) for one person in an urban area with population between 100,000 and 499,999 for 8 months (\$10,359). For those attending university in cities larger than 500,000, the 8-month low-income cut-off of \$12,249 is even further from the living allowance.²⁴²

The shortfall in the OSAP living allowance can have academic consequences by limiting the educational choices of students with financial need. One student in a focus group with low-income students described how she chose not to attend post-secondary education in Toronto because she knew OSAP would not provide sufficient funds for the higher living costs. Students with financial need may be deterred from pursuing more expensive undergraduate programs, like business and engineering, in cities with higher living costs.

Students with dependants face particular financial barriers. OSAP currently estimates that a sole-support student with one dependant child will require \$18,730 to pay living costs during his or her education. In contrast, independent assessments of the cost of attending university

Figure 11: Comparison of Living Costs and OSAP Living Allowance for an 8-month Study Period in 2010-2011



full-time while supporting a single dependant approach \$30,000, pointing to a clear financial shortfall for students with dependants in the government loan system.²⁴³ The gap in living allowance becomes progressively worse with more dependent children.

“I was working 35 hours a week and driving an hour and a half to get to school and back, and OSAP took all of the money back.” Another student expressed frustration with the claw-back stating, “I might as well not have worked. I would have been a full-time student, not stressed out, and have received a grant.”

With insufficient amounts of OSAP and institutional financial assistance, many students use employment earnings during the school year as a way of meeting their costs. Students are currently entitled to earn only \$50 per week in study period income in the federal need assessment and, thanks to recent changes from the Ontario government, \$103 per week in the provincial assessment before their OSAP assistance is deducted.²⁴⁴ This ceiling amounts to less than 10 hours a week at the minimum wage, is significantly less than the average working student earns, and penalizes many students for attempting to meet their financial need.²⁴⁵ A student working part-time may subsequently be classified as having received an overpayment, and they may see the overpayment deducted from future loans, or be forced to repay the

excess to OSAP. Students who fail to rectify their overpayments may cease to be eligible for future financial assistance.²⁴⁶ One student from a low-income focus group explained, “my marks went down because I was working 35 hours a week and driving an hour and a half to get to school and back, and OSAP took all of the money back.” Another student expressed frustration with the claw-back stating, “I might as well not have worked. I would have been a full-time student, not stressed out, and have received a grant.”²⁴⁷ Students were also concerned about the cap on their weekly earnings impacting their ability to gain relevant work experience in their fields.

In order to address problems with the need assessment, students recommend that the provincial government establish a task force to revamp the OSAP need assessment. This task force must ensure that the OSAP formula accurately assesses the costs of tuition, books, living expenses, and other educational costs that a student faces in an academic year. Cost of living data should be developed specific to each post-secondary institution by reviewing local rent and living costs. This information would be used to assess students’ OSAP applications, and assistance would be customized to students at each institution. In addition, the needs of students with dependants should be re-assessed to more accurately reflect their true costs. Finally, until OSAP accurately assesses students’ needs, students should be able to earn more in-study income, as was recently enacted for students in Saskatchewan.²⁴⁸ These earnings are vital resources that students use to make up the shortfall between the amount of aid allocated by OSAP and their actual costs.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should create a task force to revamp the flawed OSAP need assessment to more accurately reflect students’ true costs and available resources.

Recommendation: As a part of the review, the OSAP living allowance should be made specific to each city to better reflect local living and child care costs.



Online Access

Online learning has great potential to reduce financial, motivational, physical and geographic barriers to access, and should be an important component of any holistic access strategy. Ontario already has a number of online learning consortia and Ontario's post-secondary institutions offer many online courses. However, the availability of full degrees and diplomas is limited, and methods of expanding online learning opportunities, including through the recently announced Ontario Online Institute, should be examined.

Expanding the availability of online programs would be particularly beneficial for rural and northern students who are often unable to access a post-secondary institution in their communities, students with dependants and those who need to work.^{249,250} Students from a rural and northern focus group were enthusiastic about the prospect of online education, with one declaring, "I had to come to university, but I would die to do it at home. Affording rent here is huge for me. If I could, I would take online courses at home."²⁵¹ Other participants in focus groups saw online programs not as a substitute for physically attending a post-secondary institution, but as an important complement to the current system that could improve access for those unable to travel to an urban area to pursue studies. One student explained, "If it's between not going to school at all or taking online courses, it is a really good option."²⁵²

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The costs of designing new online courses are almost entirely up-front, and a sizeable investment from government must be provided to encourage institutions to develop a wider array of online

course and programs. From the perspective of the institutions, the expected future revenue from tuition fees and government grants must balance the cost of developing a course. Funds can be invested to create a higher quality online learning experience, but only if the course is scalable to greater numbers of students. Government and institutions should work collaboratively to ensure courses are designed strategically to fill system-wide gaps and avoid unnecessary duplication. It is only through greater communication and partnership (and a strong credit transfer framework) that Ontario institutions will be able to provide an online learning experience of the highest quality.

There is also evidence that online course developers at Ontario universities and colleges are not receiving the recognition and support that they deserve, thus driving away top educators from participating in this process. Most full-time faculty are stretched too thin to engage in such a time-intensive process, and tenure criteria are such that tenure-track professors are often not rewarded for time spent developing online courses. As a result, a lot of online course development is contracted out to sessional or part-time instructors who may not have a firm understanding of online pedagogy.²⁵³ If Ontario is to excel at online education, the government and institutions should stress the need to involve experienced and qualified instructors in the course design process. Perhaps a set of provincial teaching awards could be established to reward innovation and excellence in online teaching and online course development.

Of course, simply offering more online courses is not enough to guarantee greater access for students from underrepresented groups. Once online options are available, there must be a proactive effort to reach out to students and families to overcome the informational barriers that surround online learning. Furthermore, students from underrepresented groups often have unique needs that must also be addressed through additional online support. One particular challenge that must be addressed with continued government support is broadband access. Low-

income, rural, and Aboriginal families are less likely to have a home internet connection than the rest of the population, making online learning opportunities more difficult to access.

In terms of designing the Ontario Online Institute, students recommend a consortium model whereby individual courses are offered by existing institutions, but the Institute has an integrated system of admissions, student support services, quality assurance, and credit transfer to ensure student needs are addressed and all institutions are held to consistent standards. To enhance student success and degree legitimacy, university and college level courses offered through the Institute should have pre-requisites and enrolment standards comparable to other Ontario institutions. However, the Online Institute

could additionally offer academic bridging courses with open admission policies, which would enable students to qualify for more rigorous courses.

Care must also be taken to ensure that the online learning environment does not provide a second-rate educational experience. Students stress the need for adequate student-faculty interaction, the use of advanced online learning pedagogies, and robust supports for both instructors and students. Student support services should include 24-hour technology support, satellite learning centers where students can receive face-to-face guidance, as well as a mechanism for ensuring that online students have access to personal counselling, disability, financial aid, career, and diversity services.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue efforts to expand online education opportunities as a key component of a holistic access strategy for post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should develop incentives to increase online course and program offerings in post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue to invest in the Ontario Online Institute and facilitate cooperation between Ontario's post-secondary institutions on the development of a consortium model.

Recommendation: To ensure the Ontario Online Institute provides a high quality education, a quality assurance framework should be developed to ensure adequate student-faculty interaction, the use of advanced online learning pedagogies, and robust supports for both instructors and students.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should continue to invest in expanding broadband access to rural and northern Ontarians.



Institutional Supports and Transformation

With the exception of pathway mobility, most of the elements of this access strategy relate to helping individual students' overcome barriers and adjust to the institutional environment of colleges and universities. However, it is important to note that institutional shifts in thinking and practice are also important in fostering an environment that enables students from all backgrounds to succeed in post-secondary education.

Institutional practice, culture and policy needs to be responsive and open to the needs of under-represented students.

Studies indicate that students from underrepresented groups often feel isolated and out of place in the post-secondary environment.²⁵⁴ Students from an Aboriginal focus group spoke of a high level of cultural ignorance coming from many students, but also from instructors, and felt this was severe enough to warrant specific training. One student declared, “[Cultural sensitivity training] should be mandatory for professors.”²⁵³ Similarly, in a low-income focus group, students felt that many of their peers from more affluent backgrounds could not relate to their financial difficulties, and this created barriers in social interaction.²⁵⁶ Students from rural and northern, Aboriginal and first generation backgrounds may also feel torn between the expectations of their families and communities, and the college or university environment.²⁵⁷ An unwelcoming post-

secondary environment and inflexible pedagogy, then, can be a serious barrier to the persistence of many students from underrepresented groups.²⁵⁸ Institutional practice, culture and policy needs to be responsive and open to the needs of underrepresented students.

The Ontario government, in conjunction with post-secondary institutions, has undertaken several initiatives designed to foster a more supportive campus culture. These include new student supports, the hiring of Aboriginal instructors and the offering of a more culturally diverse course selection that includes non-Western perspectives. These efforts must continue.

In order for students to be successful in their educational endeavors, institutions must be equipped with support centres that will foster a community which encourages diversity and makes students feel welcome and included in the fabric of the institution, regardless of their situation.²⁵⁹ Continued progress should include involving student representatives in the decision-making process regarding the provision of student services and recognizing and supporting grassroots initiatives headed by students, faculty or staff.²⁶⁰ The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities could support initiatives to make universities and colleges more responsive to the needs of students from underrepresented groups by funding specific access initiatives through special purpose grants, directed at the needs of specific groups and communities.²⁶¹

Recommendation: The Ontario government should recognize and develop institutional supports and transformation as a key component of a holistic strategy for access to post-secondary education.

Recommendation: All post-secondary institutions should be encouraged to be responsive to the needs of underrepresented students and place a focus on student success.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should support transformative measures designed to foster an inclusive, welcoming campus for diverse groups by offering special purpose grants to support these initiatives.



Student Support Services

A key part of transforming campuses to focus on student success is through student support services. These services help ensure that every post-secondary student has the tools and resources necessary to succeed in his or her educational pathway. Some, though not all, underrepresented groups have lower persistence rates in post-secondary education than their counterparts, and are thus more likely to dropout without completing a program.²⁶² Consequently, student support services are even more crucial to ensuring the success of students from underrepresented groups, who may have fewer financial, informational, and familial resources to rely on. A participant in a first generation focus group explained, “If you have parents who went [to a post-secondary institution], they are your support; when you’re first generation, you need external support.”²⁶³

The student success literature emphasizes the benefits of institutions tracking student behavior, so problems can be identified and addressed effectively.²⁶⁴ Student profiles should be created, with information about early semester grades as well as preregistration information. This allows support staff to have a better overall picture of an individual student’s particular learning needs. At some institutions in the United States, innovative early warning systems have already been developed. Fayetteville State University, for example, employs an early alert system where faculty members contact student affairs professionals if a student is experiencing challenges during the first two weeks of the semester.²⁶⁵ Mentors are able to

then contact students and refer them to the appropriate resources. The benefit of having this kind of intervention is that it does not rely on a student to seek out support when struggling, but takes a pro-active approach in identifying students in need of assistance. Carleton University has recently implemented a similar early warning system that, based on first semester grades of first year students, contacts those who are struggling. These students are invited to a consultation session, to make an action plan for improving their post-secondary success. During consultation, students can be put in touch with existing support services and discuss other strategies to help them cope with the university workload, including switching majors, course load or institutions.²⁶⁶

Most of Ontario’s post-secondary institutions offer a comprehensive range of academic, personal, and health related student services. However, much more remains to be done to create a truly supportive campus environment, particularly to address the unique needs of students from groups that are underrepresented in the post-secondary system. These services include mental health services, academic advising, career guidance, and special support for international students, students with disabilities, and Aboriginal students. Student support services improve student retention and graduation by fostering a connection between the student and the school, and increasing the level of student engagement.^{267,268} Research indicates that the schools with the most success retaining students from underrepresented groups are those

that tailor their support service to the specific characteristics of their student population.²⁶⁹ An American study of Aboriginal students found that availability of and engagement with specific Indigenous services was correlated with student success because these services allowed students to better connect with peers and faculty on campus.²⁷⁰

One particular support service that has a great deal of influence on access is affordable child care. There is evidence that institutions with adequate, affordable daycare spots have higher degree completion rates for students with dependants, mature students, and part-time students.²⁷¹ In addition, researchers have pointed out that Aboriginal students in PSE tend to be both female and mature students, increasing the likelihood that they have to care for children while attending school. Aboriginal students often cite a lack of affordable child care at or near their institution of study as a barrier to participation in post-secondary studies.²⁷² Despite the need for these services, a Canada-wide study found that in 2010 only 7.5 per cent of institutions had daycare facilities available for incoming students.²⁷³ In addition, a recent audit found that where facilities exist on campus, a shortage of spaces means wait-times average 12 to 18 months. The provision of affordable child care at post-secondary institutions is one example of how a student support service could improve access to PSE for a number of underrepresented groups.

In addition to merely existing, support services need to be utilized, and students should be encouraged to take advantage of the resources available. One first generation student explained that their campus “has so many services that nobody knows about. ... They’re not well advertised; it’s not a matter of them not having them so much as people not knowing about them.”²⁷⁴ Emphasizing this point, a study found that early leavers made significantly less use

of available student support services, particularly tutoring and counselling services.²⁷⁵ Additionally, Ontario students who were surveyed both at the beginning and end of their first year indicated that the availability of student supports was significantly less than anticipated.²⁷⁶ Another study of supports provided at Ontario colleges found that a majority of students at-risk of not completing their program did not take advantage of the remedial services.²⁷⁷ To be effective, student support services must be developed in a holistic manner and “woven into comprehensive plans of action” that address the academic, social, emotional and financial needs of students.²⁷⁸

Students further believe that significant increases in ancillary fee levies should not be used exclusively to pay for improved student support services, as is done currently on most campuses. Rather, support services should be funded by dedicated incremental funding from the government. The Ontario government is in the best position to fund support services and regulate their quality, through the use of targeted funding to encourage institutions to invest in programs for traditionally underrepresented groups and through more robust multi-year accountability agreements. Within the funding framework, there already exist a number of special funding envelopes and grants to ensure adequate funds are devoted to specific aspects of the post-secondary system. A new special purpose operating grant in the provincial funding formula could dedicate a portion of incremental per-student funding to student support services. Targeted funding is the most effective lever of government to drive institutional action, and there is precedent for these direct investments, as over \$10 million was targeted last year to support for Aboriginal students and students with disabilities. Directly tying funding to student supports will send a signal that student success is a public priority and encourage colleges and universities to take advantage of funding to improve their student supports.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should ensure that adequate support services are available at all institutions to support the unique needs of students from underrepresented groups.

Recommendation: In conjunction with post-secondary institutions, the Ontario government should work to develop early warning systems to reduce first and second year attrition rates.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should provide dedicated funding for student support services through the use of a special purpose grant. Furthermore, the government should regulate the quality of student support services through its accountability framework.

Evaluation Measures

With respect to all of the initiatives outlined, students believe evaluation and modification of programs in response to findings is an essential component of designing programs that are effective in improving access and serving the needs of students.

Evaluation and modification of programs in response to findings is an essential component of designing programs that are effective in improving access and serving the needs of students.

A lack of program evaluation has plagued previous attempts to improve access to PSE for underrepresented groups. When the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation began its work disbursing grants to students with need, they found that a lack of evaluation of previous programs, in addition to knowledge gaps, made it difficult to know what strategy would be most effective for reaching the students with the most need.²⁷⁹ In the decade that has passed since the Millennium Foundation began work, not

enough has changed with respect to evaluation and knowledge surrounding the effectiveness of programs designed to improve post-secondary access. A 2010 evaluation of first generation access initiatives found that inconsistent definitions of first generation students, obtuse budgeting, and variable measures of success made it difficult to ascertain just how effective these programs were, which led to the decision to discontinue funding the initiatives and redirect the funding to retention programs.²⁸⁰

Evaluation is important because it provides information about the strengths and weaknesses of programs, as well as an opportunity for students, parents, faculty and administrators to provide feedback on how the program could be improved.²⁸¹ Consequently, evaluative mechanisms should be built into the plans for new programs and initiatives to address access issues. That said, a lack of objective, quantitative data on a given access program does not necessarily warrant ending the program, as has happened in the past. If there is substantial research identifying the need for a certain support, that support should still be funded and evaluation measures should be developed over time.



On a more macro-scale, the provincial government should be transparently tracking the participation, persistence, and attainment rates of each underrepresented group each year and setting public goals for improvement. Each component of the holistic access strategy should then strive to help achieve the provincial goals. However, each individual initiative cannot be evaluated to the same system-wide benchmarks, since different programs use different approaches and attract students with different characteristics. For example, an early outreach program targeted at the most at-risk students may have a lower success rate than a similar early outreach initiative in which students self-select into the program.²⁸² A university or college that attracts a higher proportion of at-risk students may have a higher attrition rate than another institution that does not prioritize access initiatives. Different definitions of success may be appropriate to different individuals and circumstances.²⁸³

To facilitate robust tracking of student participation, persistence and attainment, including being able to capture student mobility across institutions, a unique identifier for each student will be absolutely necessary. Past attempts to capture student enrolment and retention have been limited by institutional-specific data. Longitudinal surveys have shown that our understanding of student access and mobility is largely incomplete because there is no existing mechanism for tracking students through elementary school, secondary school and PSE.²⁸⁴

The forthcoming implementation of the Ontario Education Number, a unique student number that tracks Ontarians from first contact with the Ontario education system throughout their entire education, should be utilized to improve current understandings of educational pathways, transitions, participation rates and outcomes.²⁸⁵

Recommendation: The Ontario government should recognize the need to continually evaluate its holistic access strategy for post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should commit to transparently tracking participation, persistence and attainment rates of underrepresented groups and setting public goals for improvement.

Recommendation: The Ontario government should recognize that one-size-fits-all evaluative measures are inappropriate in measuring the success of access initiatives, and evaluative mechanisms should be targeted at the specific characteristics and objectives of individual programs.

Recommendation: The Ontario Education Number should be immediately implemented through to post-secondary education and used to improve evaluation of current initiatives and understanding of participation in post-secondary education.



CONCLUSION

Overall, Ontario has one of the highest post-secondary participation rates in the world. Upon more detailed analysis, however, students from several groups are still strongly underrepresented at college and university, and it is these students who must be included if Ontario is to keep pace with competing jurisdictions and further increase post-secondary attainment levels. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, it is becoming progressively more difficult to find stable, well-paying employment without a post-secondary education, yet millions of Ontarians lack a post-secondary credential. These individuals risk being shut out from the various economic and social benefits of higher education. In particular, students from low-income, rural and northern, Aboriginal, and first generation backgrounds, students facing gender and race factors, and students with dependants, face disproportionate barriers in accessing Ontario's post-secondary system.

As this access strategy has discussed, the barriers these students face are numerous, complex, overlapping and interrelated. They include, but are not limited to, financial, informational, motivational, academic, physical, racial, gender and geographic factors. As a result, no single initiative or action will significantly reduce stagnant, and in some cases widening, attainment gaps. It is critical that a holistic, comprehensive, multifaceted strategy be designed and implemented, including mechanisms to simultaneously address different barriers in a variety of ways. Ontario's students hope that a concentrated effort by government, communities,

primary and secondary schools, post-secondary institutions and other stakeholders will emerge to eliminate participation gaps in Ontario's post-secondary system.

Above all, the role of the Ontario government is critical in this endeavour. Without leadership from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and the Office of the Premier, early outreach programs will go unfunded, efforts to improve pathway mobility will stall, financial assistance will not meet student need, online education opportunities will not materialize, curriculum change will be delayed, and institutional support programs will remain an afterthought. We can no longer afford to continue the pattern of piecemeal, one-off programs within each Ministry's limited sphere. Our youth deserve better.

Thus, to ensure open communication and create a venue to nurture innovative ideas, students recommend the creation of a task-force on access, with representatives from across government, as well as students, educators, and experts in the field, to build on the progress that has been made, and begin the process of implementing further change.

Ontario continues to lead Canada and most of the world in attainment for post-secondary education, but maintaining this competitive advantage and creating a more equitable society will require increasing the accessibility of higher education to students from underrepresented groups. The future of our province depends on it.

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