IMPROVING COLLEGE SYSTEM PATHWAYS

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

September 2008

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(Project Highlights Report)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

Over recent years, it has become increasingly common for students to pursue multiple pathways through the postsecondary education system. Current research in Canada shows that the movement of students both between and within colleges and universities is becoming more typical (e.g., Youth in Transition Survey, Statistics Canada). In Ontario's colleges, this trend is evidenced by the fact that current students are more likely to have previous postsecondary experience than in the past. In 2007-08, approximately 37 per cent of college students reported having some previous postsecondary experience; this experience could include an incomplete or a complete credential from either college or university (Student Satisfaction Survey, MTCU). Many of these students were pursuing a second credential, as 11 per cent had previously completed a college diploma, and nine per cent had a university degree. In fact, pursuing multiple credentials is the intended goal of many postsecondary students. For example, in 2007-08, 21 per cent of college students indicated that their main goal in enrolling in college was "to prepare for further college or university study," a percentage which has increased significantly from 16 per cent of students in 2000-01. In addition, many students make the decision to continue their studies while still attending college, or shortly after graduation. The Graduate Satisfaction Survey (MTCU) is administered to college graduates six months after graduation and includes questions on further education. The most recent survey showed that more than 26 per cent of the 2006-07 graduates were continuing their education within six months of graduation. Many recent college graduates choose to attend university; the percentage of graduates enrolled in university within six months of graduation increased substantially from five per cent for the 2001-02 graduates to nine per cent for 2006-07 graduates.

The available data show that significant numbers of Ontario students are moving between postsecondary institutions, and that this trend is increasing. These data emphasize the importance of addressing issues affecting student mobility within the postsecondary sector.

Ontario's colleges believe that there must be clear and transparent pathways within the postsecondary sector and that the postsecondary sector needs to optimize pathways for students. Institutional recognition of credits gained at other postsecondary institutions should preserve academic integrity and be based upon the principle of maximum recognition of students' previous learning experiences while taking into account the background and knowledge required for academic success post-transfer.

The Improving College System Pathways Project was undertaken to evaluate and strengthen pathways amongst the colleges, and has developed a framework which includes models for block transfers that will guide future improvements. The recommendations outlined in this report have been endorsed by the Committee of Presidents. Leadership for the implementation of the strategic directions will rest with the vice-presidents, academic, in collaboration with other senior college officials

2. ABOUT THE PATHWAYS PROJECT

In 2006, Ontario's colleges received funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities for the Improving College System Pathways Project. The project goals were to significantly increase educational pathways within and between colleges by developing a clearer understanding of student mobility within the system; to identify the scope of the issues related to mobility and the barriers which may exist; to design system-wide strategies; and to encourage colleges to address issues related to student mobility.

The project consisted of a research study on student mobility within the college sector and four demonstration projects.

The research study aimed to:
- Develop a better understanding of the scope and nature of college-to-college transfers and the perceptions of students about the transfer process
- Identify any unnecessary barriers to college-to-college transfers.

The research findings provided an important basis for the vice-presidents, academic, to develop strategies to improve the transfer process.

The research study collected data regarding the extent and nature of transfers, student motivations, student satisfaction and perceptions of barriers, and college staff perceptions of the transfer process. A major part of this project involved a survey administered to college-to-college transfer applicants (those who attended one college and subsequently applied to a second Ontario college. The college-to-college transfer applicants were defined as those who included a college transcript with their applications. Thus, the sample included individuals who were transferring mid-program, either to a similar or a dissimilar program, as well as those who had previously completed a college credential at another college.

The funding also supported the following college pathway demonstration projects:
- Pathways from diploma programs to college degree programs
- Bridging from apprenticeship programs to technician diploma programs
- Access and transferability of college postsecondary credit from Ontario*Learn* courses
- Pathways for adult students to college postsecondary programs.

A brief description of each project can be found in Appendix A.

3. WHAT WE LEARNED

The research findings indicate that most students who transfer between colleges are satisfied with the process; the vast majority of students seeking to transfer from one college to another found the process relatively easy, and most had their credit expectations met. Based on data collected for this project, it is estimated that between

two to four per cent of first-year students have transferred mid-program to another college.

The research project was designed primarily to assess the perceptions of the transfer process held by students and staff; the validity of such perceptions was not addressed. However, a number of issues in the system – lack of access to clear information for students and college staff, inconsistency of processes and practices across colleges – currently seem to hinder optimal student efforts to secure appropriate recognition for credits earned at another college.

3.1.   Scope and nature of mobility

Who moves?
- Ten per cent of college applicants include a transcript from another Ontario college with their applications, indicating previous college experience.
- About one-third of these applicants actually <u>register</u> at a new college, e.g., 5,207 out of 15,983 transfer applicants in 2006, representing approximately five per cent of first-year students.
- Based on OCAS data and responses to the Graduate Satisfaction Survey, it is estimated that two to four per cent of all first-year students have transferred mid-program (either to similar or dissimilar new programs).
- College transfer applicants come from a wide range of programs. In the transfer applicant survey, 19 sending programs accounted for less than half of the total survey respondents, while the remaining respondents came from a diffuse array of other programs. It should be recognized that many of the 19 programs were preparatory programs and there are articulation agreements for many of the preparatory programs.

Responses to the survey of transfer applicants provided important insights into the motivations and opinions of this group (i.e., individuals applying to similar or dissimilar programs at another college, with either incomplete or complete previous college credentials). Some of the key findings include:

Why do they move?
- "Interest in a new field" was the most commonly cited reason for transfer; "better employment" and "personal/social" reasons were the next most frequently cited reasons.

Most college-to-college applicants are successful in achieving their transfer objectives:
- Seventy-three per cent of survey respondents who asked for transfer credit received it, and of these, only 27 per cent received less transfer credit than expected. However, it was noted that many of the respondents did not ask for transfer credit; they may have been unaware of the possibility of receiving it, or may have been intending to start this process when they registered.

Overall, respondents were fairly satisfied with the transfer process:
- Fifty-eight per cent of survey respondents rated the transfer process as "easy/very easy," while only 14 per cent rated the process as "difficult/very difficult"
- Students who attempted to transfer mid-program to a similar program at another college were the least satisfied, i.e., 24 per cent of those survey respondents rated the transfer process as "difficult/very difficult." These respondents were the most likely to ask for transfer credit, and they received credit for significantly more courses than other respondents. However, they were also the most likely to receive less credit than they expected.

3.2.   Lack of clear information about the transfer process

Most survey respondents reported college websites as helpful sources of information, although the lack of clear information about the transfer process was a frequently cited issue by students. In fact, most of the difficulties cited by the respondents related to the process being complicated, time-consuming and/or a lack of information and assistance, although less than one-third of students felt these were barriers to transfer.

Student and staff focus group feedback highlighted the need for consistent and clear information on college processes available in a variety of formats. As well, adult students spoke of the benefits of having knowledgeable college staff help them to navigate through options, application and admissions processes.

The ability of colleges to provide clear information is currently hampered by a lack of common terminology related to transfers (e.g., equivalency, advanced standing, exemption, substitution) and their appropriate uses in credit recognition. There are some existing glossaries, such as the one being compiled by the Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment (CIITE) project, which could be used as a starting point, as well as some widely accepted practices such as those related to Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition.

3.3.   Block transfer agreements

At present, there are a significant number of credit recognition agreements between individual colleges and professional associations, and agreements between individual colleges generally addressing transfers from diploma to college degree programs.

Block transfer agreements can, however, offer considerable potential to help many more students seeking transfers where there is high affinity between programs (e.g., apprenticeship and some technician programs) or where there are large numbers of students seeking to transfer (e.g., practical nursing and business programs).

Given the wide variety of college programs system-wide and the fact that a large number of students transfer between dissimilar programs, the unique pathways that may be chosen by individual students are unpredictable. Thus, it is not feasible to develop effective block transfer agreements to accommodate all students seeking college-to-

college transfers. It will be important, however, to make systemic changes that will enable these students to identify their own transfer options and navigate their way successfully to their selected goals.

3.4.   Models to support expansion of block transfer agreements

The work on pathways for apprenticeship-technician and diploma-degree transfers provides two practical and functional models for the development of additional transfer pathways, particularly between high-affinity programs.

The diploma-degree analysis resulted in the identification of 132 pathways, mostly based on provincial standards, related to 45 degree programs at 13 colleges. Selection of the degree programs was based mainly on potential demand for transfer as indicated by program family size and the numbers of students and graduates planning to or actually pursuing additional credentials.

Bridging pathways were mapped and validated for three Apprenticeship-Technician program groupings related to Industrial Maintenance Mechanic, Mechanical Engineering and Manufacturing Engineering; Electrical and Electrical Engineering; and Early Childhood Education. The results of this work can also be used for exemption purposes or Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, enabling apprentices and journeypersons to acquire advanced standing in technology diploma programs, or in technician level programs that are less directly related to the field in which the Certificate of Apprenticeship was earned. For example, an electrician may have formal learning and experience that can be credited toward a Manufacturing Engineering Technician diploma.

3.5.   Institutional/departmental differences in credit transfer processes and practices

Feedback from students and college staff indicated that considerable time often is required to navigate transfer students through the credit assessment processes. Inconsistencies in processes from college to college, and from program area to program area, can lead to confusion for students seeking college-to-college transfers and frustration for staff who are trying to assist them.

Survey responses pointed to a number of factors hindering appropriate transfer credit. These factors included variation in criteria for credit transfer, perceived inconsistency in decision making, and lack of detailed documentation of internal college policies and procedures.

3.6.   Program structure

Consistent with provincial policy, students achieving the same credential at different colleges achieved the same provincial learning outcomes. The ways through which those learning outcomes are achieved, however, can vary from college to college.

For those students who transfer mid-program with the intention of completing their first program at another college, differences in the structure and sequencing of courses can result in an extension of the time required to complete the program of study.
In some cases, prerequisite structures or course availability restrictions at the new college can make a transfer applicant's program of study longer, or may result in the need to drop to part-time status temporarily. A large proportion of survey respondents considered these factors barriers to transfer. The latter issue was particularly a concern where it would affect OSAP eligibility.

Greater use of Ontario*Learn* (the collaborative on-line course platform developed by the Ontario colleges) or other on-line courses to make-up missing credits was seen as an important potential enhancement in the transfer process.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Mobility and Transferability Protocol for College-to-College Transfer signed by all college presidents in 2003 included commitments to facilitate credit transfer between colleges by maximizing the recognition and transfer of learning acquired at another participating institution (see Appendix B).

The Pathways project was undertaken to build on the commitments in the Mobility and Transferability Protocol and resulted in three central recommendations intended to enhance college-to-college mobility and improve the transfer process:

1. Continue developing new college-to-college pathways in well-matched, high-affinity programs with sufficient demand
2. Simplify the process for all students seeking to transfer credits between colleges, recognizing that many students will transfer into programs without a formal articulation agreement to guide the transfer of credits
3. Provide better and more accessible transfer information to students.

These recommendations call for action by individual colleges as well as the sector and have been approved for implementation.

4.1. Continue developing new college-to-college pathways for well-matched, high-affinity programs with sufficient demand

The models developed will help to identify high demand areas for both diploma-degree and apprenticeship-diploma program mobility, and provide a framework to develop further pathways. Building on these models, colleges need to develop additional pathways and expand current pathways to continued learning for graduates of well-matched or high-affinity feeder college programs. This could include one-year technique programs to two-year technician programs and to three-year technology programs. System-wide diploma-degree block transfer agreements can be pursued in many program

areas. General Arts and Science, Police Foundations, Practical Nursing, Child and Youth Worker, and Law Clerk are examples of potential areas. As well, additional apprenticeship programs will be identified for the development of formal approved transfer pathways. Ontario's colleges will require funding to accelerate the development of significant numbers of new pathways within the sector.

Colleges also will pursue greater use of bridging programs to create smoother pathways between program areas; these programs can be offered at multiple colleges or through online learning, including Ontario*Learn*.

4.2. Simplify the process for all students seeking to transfer credits between colleges, recognizing that many students will transfer into programs without a formal articulation agreement existing to guide the transfer of credits

Many students seek transfers between programs and colleges that fall outside the well-matched, high-affinity, high-demand areas. Mobility needs for these individuals can only be improved by ensuring that colleges have a transparent, accessible and flexible process that will simplify application for, and assessment and recognition of, transfer credits. An improved process would also better meet mobility needs of students taking new and evolving postsecondary programs.

Colleges intend to develop a common college sector framework for evaluating those credits based on learning outcomes. Individual colleges will then develop and implement college specific processes that are consistent with the framework.

Ontario's colleges also will pursue ways to build on the Ontario*Learn* transfer agreements with outside professional accrediting bodies (e.g., Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario, Certified General Accountants) so that courses deemed equivalent by these bodies are also accepted by colleges as equivalent.

At the individual college level, each institution will examine internal processes and work to reduce or eliminate inconsistencies related to college-to-college transfers. As part of their internal review, individual colleges will consider best practices regarding fairness and transparency of their transfer credit assessment processes.

To improve consistency in approach and results, professional development on the sector framework and institutional processes will be provided to faculty and staff involved in making admission decisions for students with previous postsecondary education, or in making decisions regarding the granting of transfer credits

4.3. Provide better and more accessible transfer information to students

Ontario's colleges are committed to improving the quality and access to information for students seeking to transfer between colleges and/or programs so that students can make informed decisions about career pathways and associated transfer credits.

Colleges will collaborate in the development of sector-wide definitions for terms used in credit transfer and develop common understandings of the criteria and methodology used in assessing transfer credit. Each college will publish its own processes and definitions in clear, easy-to-understand formats.

In the short term, all colleges will ensure that there is a clear point of contact to inform applicants with previous postsecondary education of transfer options and to help them navigate the process of applying for transfer credit. As well, each college will ensure websites and printed material address the information needs of these applicants.

In the longer term, there is a need to create a provincial source of information for all postsecondary students. A central website could include guiding principles for the treatment of applicants seeking transfer credit, a guide to credit transfer processes, information on block transfer agreements, and college contacts for further information on credit transfer. A central website for information would preclude the need for each college to maintain duplicate information on each of their websites and would be more efficient from the applicants' perspective. Such a new provincial website should not, however, be limited to student mobility amongst colleges. A new provincial website must provide comprehensive information to students about educational pathways and credit transfer throughout the postsecondary sector.

4.4 Next Steps

Using the remaining funds originally allocated to the project, the college sector will work to implement the directions presented in this report. However, it must be recognized that further provincial funding will be essential for Ontario's colleges to develop the needed block transfer agreements in critical areas.

5.   FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Improving College System Pathways Project has provided new data and insights into mobility patterns and issues within the college system. It also has resulted in the adoption of a new framework to improve transfer processes and build new pathways, with three key directions:

1.   Continue developing new college-to-college pathways in well-matched, high-affinity programs with sufficient demand
2.   Simplify the process for all students seeking to transfer credits between colleges, recognizing that many students will transfer into programs without a formal articulation agreement to guide the transfer of credits
3.   Provide better and more accessible transfer information to students.

To begin implementing the framework and directions, Ontario's colleges will pursue the following concrete strategies:

To create new pathways for high-affinity, high-demand programs:
- Develop block transfer agreements for high-volume, high-affinity programs
- Develop additional pathways from diploma to college degree programs and from apprenticeship to diploma programs.

To simplify the process:
- Develop a common framework for evaluating credit transfer across the college system
- Accept as equivalent courses deemed equivalent by outside accreditation bodies
- Leverage the benefits of colleges' investment in on-line learning to fill gaps.

To improve transfer information quality and accessibility:
- Examine internal processes and information products, including websites, to ensure that students seeking transfers have easy access to the information they need to assess their options and make decisions
- Continue to advocate for the establishment of a provincial website to ensure improved access to information about credit transfer and pathways within the postsecondary sector.
- Improve tracking systems to provide better information on transfer students to support the ongoing improvement of the transfer process.

Recognition of the need to facilitate student mobility within the postsecondary sector prompted Ontario's colleges to undertake this project. While improving educational pathways and credit transfer processes within the college system represents a critical component of the solution, there is an urgent need to improve processes to support student mobility within the entire postsecondary sector and specifically between colleges and universities. The province's postsecondary sector needs to ensure that we have transparent pathways that maximize the opportunities for students.

APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF PROJECTS

Under the direction of a Steering Committee of members of the College Committee of Vice-Presidents, Academic, the following projects were undertaken to address the objectives of the "Improving College Systems Pathways" initiative.

Research:
- Survey of students who used the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS) to send a transcript between colleges in the 2005, 2006 and 2007 application years
- Survey of college staff regarding barriers and best practices
- Survey of college academic vice-presidents regarding issues/barriers and potential strategies for improving processes that support student mobility and credit transfer.

Diplomas to College Degrees:
- Inventory of current pathways for diploma graduates wishing to advance into applied degree programs at another Ontario college
- Analysis of demand and supply of existing articulated pathways between diploma and college applied degree programs.

Bridging from Apprenticeship to Diploma Programs:
- Modification of a curriculum mapping matrix developed by Mohawk College to identify and analyze linkages between in-class apprenticeship study and the related postsecondary credential requirements
- Mapping and validation for curriculum in three trade areas:
    - Industrial Maintenance Mechanic mapped to both Mechanical Engineering and Manufacturing Engineering technician standard
    - Electrician mapped to Electrical Engineering technician standard
    - Early Childhood Educator mapped to the corresponding ECE technician program.

Access and Transferability through Ontario*Learn*:
- Review of best practices in credit transfer across several jurisdictions
- Survey of Ontario practitioners to identify issues and barriers to acceptance of on-line courses for transfer credit
- Compilation of an inventory of credit transfer agreements between Ontario colleges and a range of professional associations, out-of-province educational institutions and international certification standards.

Pathways for Adult Students:
- Exploration of data to track graduates of college upgrading programs at one college moving to postsecondary programming at another college.

APPENDIX B: COLLEGE TO COLLEGE MOBILITY PROTOCOL

Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts & Technology,
and Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning

> Mobility and Transferability Protocol
> For *College to College Transfer*

The signatory to this protocol agrees to maximize the recognition and transfer of learning acquired at another participating institution to this agreement through formal education, or through workplace training and work and life experience.

The signatory further agrees to the following operating principles:

1. Transfer credit will be awarded to students for credits earned that are related to the program/course of study in which the transfer student will register, in accordance with the policies and regulations of the governing bodies of the institutions concerned. It is the prerogative of each institution to set admission requirements and prerequisites, to determine program design and delivery, to establish all requirements for credentials, and to limit admission to programs based on availability of resources.

2. Course or program transfer credit shall be based on an equivalency of educational achievement and of knowledge, skills, abilities, and outcomes recognizing that effective learning can occur under a variety of arrangements and conditions. This includes all forms of formal and informal learning such as self-study, workplace education, training and experience. Various methods of demonstrating or achieving equivalency may be employed such as reviews of workplace training, competency tests, challenge examinations, and other forms of prior learning assessment.

3. Transfer credit not deemed to satisfy specific program requirements should be awarded whenever possible to fulfil other general requirements, such as transfer/open credits, professional options, and/or general education credits as appropriate. In this determination, participating institutions will be guided by the Ontario Colleges' Credential Framework (MTCU 2003), as well as the guidelines for Baccalaureate programs as provided by the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board.

4. Notwithstanding the above, for those programs for which provincial program standards exist, students requesting transfer from one participating institution to another within the same program will be granted full recognition of prior credits

earned whenever possible, subject to specific institutional advanced standing and graduation requirements.

5. An institution that denies the transfer of credit shall state the reasons for the refusal.

6. Where formal transfer arrangements exist, receiving institutions should not make changes in these arrangements without providing adequate notice and lead time to other participating institutions.   The specifics of such notice/lead time will normally be outlined within each formal transfer agreement.

7. Current information must be readily available that accurately describes course equivalencies, program prerequisites, and levels of achievement on which admission and/or awarding of transfer credit at receiving institutions will be based. Each institution should identify an office that is responsible for distribution of information on transfer policies and practices.