Role Model Moms Post-Secondary Academy: A University-Community Collaboration to Encourage Access to Postsecondary for Marginalized Women

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Abstract

The Role Model Moms (RMM) program supports low-income mothers completing their General Equivalency Diplomas. Postsecondary education (PSE) can break cycles of intergenerational poverty; however, existing PSE orientation resources were not designed for this group. A need existed for a new university resource utilizing a collaborative and community-engagement approach to provide tailored information on PSE for RMM participants. The RMM Post-Secondary Academy was developed to bridge this gap. It was evaluated via facilitator debriefing sessions, post-event surveys, and participant interviews, with results analyzed using basic statistics and descriptive thematic analysis. The event has run for three iterations, inviting 42, 45, and 38 women, respectively. Participants improved their understanding of and outlook on PSE. Their PSE concerns included family, financial, and academic barriers. This event provides a replicable model for responsive and cost-effective community programming. Community engagement ensured the content was relevant and applicable to the target audience.

Keywords: marginalized populations, cross-institutional collaboration, women, general equivalency diploma, grassroots

Education, especially higher education, has the potential to positively alter the course of a life, and to interrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). Accessing a postsecondary education (PSE), however, for those who would most stand to benefit from it, can be a herculean task. For a candidate from a marginalized group (or multiple marginalized groups), the social capital required to select and apply to a postsecondary program presents a considerable barrier. Postsecondary institutions, even when they do focus on improving access, often take for granted the challenges of navigating the process, including deciphering jargon, anticipating deadlines, and finding the right points of entry (Lin et al., 2001, p. 6). Add in the challenges of sorting out financial aid and housing, childcare, the complexities of pursuing education for candidates reliant on any kind of social assistance, or additional considerations for candidates with complicated citizenship status, and aspirations can quickly dissolve for even the most determined applicants. These factors, however, raise important questions: Where can institutions intentionally address barriers that prevent candidates from marginalized communities from benefiting from fully accessible PSE? What would progress in this area look like?

This article describes the development, implementation, and evaluation of the Role Model Moms Post-Secondary Academy event. A grassroots collaboration was formed between diverse University of Toronto units, faculties, and departments, various other local colleges and universities, and the City of Toronto Social Services

department. An event was developed with the aim of providing tailored information, support, and encouragement to reduce barriers in the pursuit of PSE after graduation of RMM participants. This event provides a replicable model for responsive community programming by postsecondary institutions, with the aim of providing equitable access and opportunity to an underserved population, to ultimately improve their potential for future employment, financial stability, and health.

Background

The University of Toronto (U of T), along with the Role Model Moms (RMM) program, led the initiative to develop a new higher education orientation resource targeted toward this marginalized group.

The University of Toronto

Leading the initiative is U of T, Canada's largest University, with over 90,000 students and over 21,500 staff and faculty members, spanning three campuses. The university offers undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, and stands as a "global leader in research and teaching" (University of Toronto, n.d.).

Role Model Moms

The RMM program is a unique not-for-profit educational program that supports marginalized women who face multiple socioeconomic barriers to completing their General Equivalency Diploma (GED), a high school certification equivalent. Two community-based program sites are staffed by provincially licensed teachers with backgrounds in community development, along with trained childcare workers. These two program sites are located in Glenfield–Jane Heights and Victoria Village, neighborhoods in the northwest and northeast corners of Toronto, respectively. Though participant demographic data was not collected, demographic profiles of those neighborhoods offer some insight into the communities that RMM serves (Table 1). Both neighborhoods report higher unemployment and poverty rates than the city average, and greater numbers of people who identify as immigrants and speak a language other than French or English at home. Most tellingly, education attainment rates in these communities differ from city-wide rates. In Victoria Village, 12% of the population has no educational certificate, compared to Toronto's 10% (City of Toronto, 2018b). In Glenfield–Jane Heights, 31% of residents have no educational certificate (City of Toronto, 2018a).

Program participants reflect these community demographics and are diverse in terms of age, ethnic background, country of origin, immigration status, prior educational attainment, family composition, and future aspirations. All have a common desire to make a change in their lives and improve outcomes for themselves and their children. Students are held to high expectations for attendance, effort, and commitment to the program.

Table 1. Community Demographics			
Demographic	**Community (%)**		
	Glenfield–Jane Heights	**Victoria Village**	**Toronto Generally**
Women	53.3	53.4	51.9
Visible minorities	76.6	59.1	51.5
Immigrants	58.9	53.5	51.2
Home language nonofficial	38.8	31.7	29.2
Poverty (Market Basket Measure)	27.4	25.6	21.9
Unemployment	11.5	10	8.2
No certificate, diploma, or degree	31	12	10

Note: Source: City of Toronto (2018a, 2018b).

Responsive Community Engagement

The initial collaboration between RMM and the University of Toronto was made through the organization's work providing service-learning placements for medical students in their foundational training years in the MD Program. All MD Program students participate in a service-learning placement organized by the MD Program's Experiential Learning Lead. These longitudinal placements, which are not clinical, explore social determinants of health via in-class and hands-on modalities. The partnerships developed for these placements are typically retained year to year.

The genesis of the Post–Secondary Academy event was organic. In 2016, an RMM teacher approached the Experiential Learning Lead (RW) to request a campus tour for her students. Unfortunately, available university tours were aimed primarily toward young, first-entry students with the intention of helping them choose which institution to enroll in. They lacked orientation to resources for first-generation students (i.e., first in their family to attend PSE) and those with family responsibilities. They did not provide information about PSE options, how to navigate the university or college services, nor customized messages for students unfamiliar with the culture and language of PSE. This presented a unique opportunity for the Experiential Learning Lead to create something new, with resources specifically tailored for this group that could be delivered within strict financial and time constraints.

What emerged was a cross-campus, cross-institutional collaboration that capitalized on the knowledge and expertise of individual staff and faculty, the in-kind resources available at U of T and other institutions, and other supports already available to participants. In May 2016, 42 mothers and their children attended the first Role Model Moms Post–Secondary Academy event at U of T. This event—a collaboration between 12 faculties/units/departments at U of T, several Toronto postsecondary institutions, three student groups (including student parents), and Social Services staff from the City of Toronto—welcomed RMM students to explore the campus with their children and to receive focused information about pursuing higher education. Relevant information, programs, and resources that parents with their specific needs could make use of were highlighted. Additional itera-

tions in 2017 and 2018 served groups of 45 and 38 women, respectively, with a similar model.

Capacity Building

The president of U of T outlined priorities for the institution, one of which is "leveraging our urban location . . . for the mutual benefit of university and city" (Gertler, 2015a, para. 1). To maintain this priority, he stated an obligation to "work collaboratively with other entities outside the University to address urban challenges and opportunities" (Gertler, 2015b, p. 8), and a goal was set to "enhance the visibility of and access to" the programs offered (p. 7). A normal route to resolving a service gap with a permanent solution at a large institution involves heavy investments of time and multiple layers of buy-in, as well as financial and other resources. In this case, the desire to respond to a present community-identified need created different conditions and presented different considerations. Within the MD Program, it was unlikely that a new role or unit would be created to address access and equity for this group for several reasons, not the least of which was that a GED is many steps removed from pursuing medical education. It is logical and prudent for departments at a postsecondary institution to maintain a focus for their work, and to operate within established frameworks most of the time. Access programming in particular is often subject to restrictions on who is served, due to either programming or funding mandates. Marginalized groups may have immediate needs but may not have resources on campus that quite address them in the right way. In this case, a gap was identified whereby existing university orientation resources did not address the specific needs of the RMM demographic. As a result, the question arose: What if there were a way to respond creatively to community requests, using minimal resources and with minimal strain on current resources?

The Experiential Learning Lead contacted her network of campus colleagues whose roles directly interacted with community, access, equity, and student success initiatives, to determine whether addressing the needs of this particular group through existing channels would be possible, and if nobody was currently working toward this, perhaps something new could be created. Those approached were enthusiastic to address this community request to bridge a

clear gap in the existing services for vulnerable populations and felt their services and roles could be tailored to this particular audience. An interdepartmental group was formed comprising staff from the Faculty of Medicine, Kinesiology and Physical Education, Arts & Science, Financial Aid, the Career Centre, the Centre for Community Partnerships, First Nations House, First Generation Students programs, Family Care Office, the Faculty of Education, Alumni Relations, and Hart House.

A group of approximately 12 staff members and the two RMM teachers met to discuss what could be accomplished to develop a community engagement approach to plan this initiative. Community engagement is a "process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997, p. 9 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997). The group recognized the need for community expertise in understanding community needs, and the importance of collaborating with community members when planning interventions that affect them (NICE, 2016). It decided first to engage with RMM students to set the agenda, and a presession meeting with RMM students was conducted to understand the optimal event mandate, structure, and content.

Methods

Event Planning

Event Planning With Staff and Faculty

Several 60–90-minute planning meetings were held in the weeks prior to the event. Attendees contributed planning ideas and volunteered for tasks compatible with their interests, expertise, or position (CCPH Board of Directors, 2013). Staff unable to attend these early meetings were still able to support the event. This flexibility encouraged varying levels of buy-in and participation, and more people were able to contribute (NICE, 2016). The Experiential Learning Lead acted as the central coordinator for the large group of facilitators. In this somewhat laissez-faire collaborative approach, the Experiential Learning Lead became the person to whom other planning members were accountable. In this role, responsibilities included keeping an email list of those interested in involvement, circulating detailed meeting minutes, and acting as the central coordinator for questions regarding tasks and email updates.

Presession Meeting With RMM Students

The 90-minute presession meeting with RMM students was conducted before each event, given each cohort's unique needs (Brunton et al., 2017). The sessions were intentionally hosted in RMM classrooms, to ensure comfort for the participants to ask questions freely and openly. The sessions were facilitated by the Experiential Learning Lead and others in the planning committee, depending on availability. Facilitators asked students what they would like to learn. Students wrote their questions and concerns about PSE on sticky notes and stuck them to large pieces of chart paper. Facilitators answered some questions and brought the rest to the planning group to inform the event itself. Over three iterations, a number of consistent questions and themes appeared: how to finance an education while receiving social assistance/dealing with bankruptcy; how being a student impacts housing or childcare subsidies; how to apply to school as a noncitizen or a non-native English speaker; how to translate a diploma or degree obtained in another country; and "What is the difference between College and University?" (In Canada, a college offers career-oriented education leading to a diploma or certificate; a university offers professional and academic programs that lead to a degree.)

In the first program iteration, the broad range of presession questions led to diverse invitations to participate in event planning and facilitating, as specialized knowledge beyond that of the U of T group was needed. The intention of the event, after all, is to provide insight and information for the RMM students as a diverse group lacking in foundational orientation to the mechanisms of PSE that institutions take for granted. It is not intended as a narrow recruitment device for U of T, but as an opportunity for students who may not otherwise have a space for these initial conversations to come and learn information that can help them to set and achieve their own goals. This goal exceeded the expertise and resources of U of T alone: Some of the RMM students' career interests were better served by colleges or other universities, and the complexities of finances and housing ar-

rangements required a knowledge of social service delivery beyond the capacity of any one university or college staff member. Staff from other Toronto universities (Ryerson and York); several colleges (e.g., Humber, Centennial, and Seneca); and community caseworker staff from the City of Toronto knowledgeable about childcare subsidies, social assistance programs, and social housing joined the team. In each case, staff and faculty within U of T had contacts at these other institutions and helped to reach out and invite their participation. Additionally, current postsecondary student–parents were recruited through U of T's Family Care Office as facilitators to provide mentorship and guidance from their lived experiences. Undergraduate student leaders and medical students in service–learning placements at RMM were recruited to support children's activities and group discussions.

Structured Planning and Communication With the RMM Teachers

The Experiential Learning Lead and RMM teachers organized the full event and its promotion. This included creating the overall event agenda, organizing lists of RMM students and their children, arranging childcare, and obtaining signed liability forms. By necessity, the community partner was an active participant in this planning process; no major decisions were made without their involvement to ensure that the event met the needs of the RMM students and teachers (CCPH Board of Directors, 2013).

Location Scouting

Hart House, a unique and historic campus resource that is a part of Student Life, offered to help provide space, food, and staff for coordination and facilitation (NICE, 2016). Hart House is a beautiful, historic student center and public space with a mandate to support community initiatives and promote equity and social justice on campus. Their in–kind involvement and support were invaluable to the success of this initiative.

Childcare Coordination

Presession meetings and RMM teacher consultations emphasized the importance of the provision of childcare in RMM students' decisions to attend this event. Further, the NICE Guideline *Community Engagement*

(2016) suggests providing supports, such as childcare, to remove barriers and encourage community involvement. Childcare for toddlers to preteens was provided by program staff from Hart House and Camp U of T, a program of the Kinesiology and Physical Education department, and staff from the campus Early Learning Centre. Student volunteers also supported childcare providers. Older children were invited to attend the event to learn about PSE with their mothers. This approach reduced attendance barriers while explicitly welcoming participants as parents with families; it also aimed to emphasize to the participants' children that postsecondary is a welcoming place for them as well.

Event Delivery

Making the Event a Comfort Zone

RMM classrooms are a significant distance from the university, and their students and teachers are not necessarily familiar with campus. The "welcome" began at the subway station; staff and faculty met with the group and walked with them to Hart House (15–20 minutes at a leisurely pace). The group followed with an unstructured time for getting settled (NICE, 2016). Coffee and treats were offered, and childcare staff and volunteers were present as RMM students arrived. Those mothers whose children would participate in childcare saw them off, staff and faculty introduced themselves, and RMM students settled in for the event.

Overview and Discussion Tables

An overview of the event was given by facilitators, and general introductions were made. The group then separated to different discussion tables (NICE, 2016). Discussion was grouped into themes that responded to presession questions, including the life of a student parent, finding support, and navigating postsecondary education. Staff and faculty were seated at tables corresponding to their areas of expertise, along with current student–parents and a volunteer "timekeeper" to facilitate discussion. RMM teachers had previously divided students into groups, and each group rotated between tables at set intervals to ensure that they were able to seek out key information on each topic.

Panel Discussions

Subsequent event iterations included panel discussions, based on RMM student feedback and presession questions. Participants felt there was so much to learn that they wanted to ensure some consistent large group information delivery along with individualized information. Panel topics have included information on a Centennial College program specifically for students whose high school educations were incomplete but who wished to enter PSE, financial aid and social assistance information, campus supports for parents, application processes for specific college programs, how to support your child's application to PSE, transitional year and academic bridging programs, and city resources for families. During the lunch that followed, RMM students could connect with a staff or faculty member whose work was of interest. Table discussion prompts were available to support these conversations.

Closing the Event

RMM staff and the Experiential Learning Lead offered brief closing remarks and thank-yous to the group and its organizers. An evaluation survey was administered to participants, usually with a prize or incentive for survey completion. Next was a resource fair. The resource fair structure has varied over different program iterations. In the second iteration, an informal resource fair was offered, where staff and faculty who wished to share more information about specific resources or programs brought their resources and made themselves available for discussion. In addition, in the first iteration of the event, a small tour of campus was offered as the group was led to the subway to depart.

Program Evaluation

Evaluation Surveys

Each year, a quantitative, semistructured survey was administered immediately postevent to all RMM students and teachers, and a prize drawing was performed after all responses were submitted. The surveys asked participants to rate different aspects of the event using a Likert scale and included comment boxes for feedback and recommendations. Areas assessed in the surveys included stage of progress in GED program, satisfaction with and usefulness of event activities, and postevent attitudes and outlooks on PSE.

Debriefing Session

A few weeks postevent, the Experiential Learning Lead convened a meeting of the event facilitators and planning committee to discuss what went well and what needed work, and to obtain feedback from the group about the event. Results informed changes to the subsequent year's structure.

Participant Interviews

Approximately 6 months following the first and second iterations of the program, semistructured 20-minute interviews with a convenience sample of two participants per iteration were conducted in English by an RMM teacher. During the interviews, participants were asked about their experiences during the RMM Next Step Academy event at U of T; the interview questions are included in Appendix A. The interviews took place at the RMM classroom, and participants were consented and interviewed by the RMM teacher. All participants gave verbal informed consent for the interview. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, the audio recordings were destroyed.

Data Analysis

All survey results were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. The interview transcriptions were descriptively coded and sorted according to themes developed by the researcher TYW, which were verified with coauthors (RW, JNY) multiple times to ensure analytic rigor.

Ethical Considerations

This project was exempted from ethics review by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board due to the quality improvement/quality assurance focus of the program evaluation study.

Results

In the first, second, and third iterations of the event, the survey response rates were 67%, 36%, and 42%, respectively. Interviews conducted following the 2016 and 2017 iterations consisted of four participants representing the RMM group's diversity, including a student completing her GED, a student who had graduated from

the GED program but had not yet applied to a postsecondary program, and two women with foreign postsecondary degrees.

Participant Characteristics

The attendees were diverse in their stage of progression through the RMM program and GED attainment. The 2017 survey results indicated that 56% of students expected to complete their GED within 3 months, 31% had already received their GED and were eligible to attend postsecondary in the next available application cycle, and 6% expected to complete their GED within 3–6 months.

Event Ratings

Informally, the feedback received from RMM instructors indicated that the program was very well attended, with the majority of enrolled RMM students present. Some students who had already graduated from RMM also attended, and some brought friends and family members who were not enrolled in RMM. Survey results from the first and second iterations indicated that over 85% of the students described their experience as excellent overall, with none scoring the event below average or poor. In 2016, 79% of respondents felt welcome on campus, 93% considered the event a good use of their time, and 89% found the information presented useful. In 2017, 80% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am more likely to consider PSE," and 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more prepared to pursue PSE. Further, 100% of 2017 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the event is a worthwhile initiative, and 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced positive changes in their understanding of PSE financing, available supports, and contacts at postsecondary institutions.

Qualitative Themes

Analysis of postevent interviews provided a list of common challenges facing RMM students' pursuit of PSE (Table 2), including (1) family barriers, (2) financial barriers, and (3) academic concerns. Interview and survey results indicated that the event addressed some participants' concerns regarding these barriers. All participants noted that the event helped them to feel that PSE was possible for them. Interviewees expressed that they learned about the resources available to them and described the event as "empowering" because of their encouraging interactions with the event staff and current student–parents.

Feedback

Specific event feedback was elicited from the RMM participant interviews (Table 3). All participants believed that PSE is right for them and indicated that the event helped them see that it is a possible and achievable goal. Some RMM students were able to clearly articulate their goals and the path to achieving them following graduation from RMM. However, for some participants, individualized follow-up guidance was needed to help follow through on their specific goals. RMM students who were potentially the first in their family to attend PSE were less able to set out career goals. Among this latter group, a specific need for career counseling emerged in both the surveys and interviews. An often-repeated question was "How do I pick the right program for me?" Often, few people in their family and social support networks have attained PSE, so these women may lack adequate exposure to the different careers available with a university degree or college diploma. More information regarding how to learn about and explore different career paths would likely benefit this group.

Although the RMM program and this event intend to equip participants with resources and information to support their future pursuits, it must be noted that this support is limited by the necessary fact of participants' graduation from RMM. All staff and faculty who participated in the event provided their contact information to all attendees for future follow–up, but a comprehensive mechanism for continued support exceeds the reach of both the event and the RMM program.

Cost Assessment

The event proved to be cost-effective. Space was donated, and staff did not incur additional costs for their time. Total costs for childcare and food, including lunch, snacks, and coffee for approximately 40 RMM students and their children, plus 30–35 staff and volunteers, was approximately $1,000 CAN ($760 USD), or around $13 per person. These funds came through Hart House, with the Faculty of Medicine covering half of the costs in the third iteration. Other consumable items used, such as folders, informa-

Table 2. Common Barriers to PSE Among RMM Students		
Theme	**Topics**	**Participant quotes**
Family barriers	Balance between role as mother and as student	"I never thought that when you're a parent you could go [to postsecondary]. You have to think about your kids, you have to look after them and prepare them and you stop preparing yourself . . . when you have kids, you're done."
	Experience as a student–parent	Participants spoke with staff and current student–parents about supports available and personal experiences. "I looked at [one of the staff members] and I thought, you don't look much older than I am. If they can get to school, then I can do it too. So that was part of my motivation."
	Logistics of childcare and accommodations for unexpected circumstances	"I didn't think that they have that house for, like, if you got kids, and they even have daycare in the university, so it's super helpful." "I want to know what happens if I have a problem or I get sick."
	Impact on children	"They encouraged that parents should not stop; they can continue looking forward, and they can tell their kids, 'You can do whatever you want.' As a parent, we can show our kids and . . . they will be better people."
Financial barriers	Impact of tuition on family finances	"I know for me personally, I wasn't at that financial point . . . to attend postsecondary. If I went to school, how would my son. . . . I don't have a job. I wasn't prepared to go right away."
	Require clear breakdown of educational costs	"I want more details . . . how much it costs and how you support yourself. I'm ready to do anything if someone breaks it down for me. I don't want debt if I am not going to have a job, I have three kids to feed."
Academic concerns	Differences between college and university and how to pick a postsecondary program	Increased awareness of options and flexibility of PSE. "That one day . . . changed my perspective. Even to do a short course . . . you don't have to do a four- or five-year big thing. So, it kind of changed the way I looked at going back to school, whether it was college or university."
	Risk of poor academic performance after investment of time and financial resources	"How I'd get help in the school, like, if I don't know how to do an assignment, is there someone to help? What academic support[s] are there?"
	Transition year programs	"I didn't see myself in university, but after . . . I thought maybe I could do it. Especially for the transitional year. Because I know I cannot run into university like that, I think I needed that."
	Bridging programs	"It's not just like, go in and if you fail, you're just so disappointed . . . you can start with college and then you can go [on to university]."

Table 3. Event Feedback From Interviews and Surveys		
	Aspect of Event	**Feedback and Participant Quote**
Strengths	Childcare	Allowed participants to attend event given their childcare responsibilities. "The way you handled the children, I really appreciated that. Persons took their children and they were well taken care of. It's a very good thing, so you can reach out to more people when kids are playing."
	Interactive structure	Able to speak to different facilitators about experiences and expertise. "It was a great opportunity to visit U of T. . . . I would never have thought [I] could go to the university and meet with the people who work there and all of the things they thought to prepare for people who didn't think they had the resources to go to university."
	Written materials	Allowed participants to review for the future. "The way we had brochures for future reference [worked for me]."
	Positive change in participants' opinions of whether PSE is a suitable option for them	Event addressed specific concerns and barriers (Table 2). "I didn't expect I would find out things that would help me as a young single mom. . . . I would have thought, honestly, 'You can't do it, it's not for you,' . . . but I found out they have many ways, you can, you can do it. So I'm glad I went because I learned many things I didn't know."
Areas for Improvement	Lack of structure at discussion tables	With multiple RMM students sitting per table with staff, it became difficult to address all participants' concerns. "I couldn't get my point in . . . and one person would talk more than one person." "When people are in a big crowd . . . you don't get much out of it." Information given at each discussion table varied depending on the questions asked by RMM students. More structure to consistently communicate information relevant to most students (see Table 2). "It should be more general during the main part, [with] specific questions at [the] end."
	Time	Not enough time to have all questions fully answered during the event. "I needed more time with the different workers, like there was social workers, I think, financial workers, Ontario Works people, and I didn't get the chance to [discuss] one and one with all of who I wanted."
	Written materials	Participants would appreciate financial and childcare information in written form. "I would like to see everything written down."
	Need for individual counseling	"Maybe if there could be booths. . . . it's my time to go sit down and talk to the person one-on-one. They wanted to talk by themselves and they didn't get the chance to express what they were going through. So if they could put a personal touch, like I could sit and say this is what is going on. How would I do? How would I go?"
	Need for follow-up guidance	"That day was like an engine turned on, everyone was so happy, it was unbelievable, to know you can actually go there. All the fire that was that day, the emotional moments, they pass. It's time to move on it right away, to keep on inspiring them and not let it finish."

tion printouts, name tags, and pens, were gathered from the organizers based on availability (e.g., extra folders and name tags from a prior conference, promotional pens and notepads from a department or institution). Other novelty items, such as keychains, t-shirts, and tote bags, were provided as they were available, which RMM students appreciated.

Discussion

Implications of Early-Stage Assessments

Formal interview and survey feedback, as well as informal feedback, indicated that this event provided a valuable opportunity for mothers attaining their high school equivalency diplomas to explore postsecondary options with explicit acknowledgment of factors such as income, family responsibilities, academic background, housing, and immigration. Attendees appreciated the opportunity to be supported and encouraged by staff who had knowledgeable answers to their questions. The presence of multiple institutions was helpful to promote an understanding of the conceptual differences between college, university, and professional training programs, and to clarify the value of high school diplomas in relation to future goals.

The RMM student group is unique in lacking the kind of cultural capital common among students entering university. Although first-in-family and mature applicants do enter PSE in significant numbers, they are rarely the focus of information events. Finnie et al. (2012) indicated that for first-generation students, access to PSE is the principal barrier to attendance, and once enrolled, "they do at least as well as their non-first-generation counterparts" (p. 22). Our interviews and survey results indicated that prior to the event many participants did not think PSE was right for them; afterward, however, they expressed feeling better prepared to pursue PSE and that it was a viable option. Education, along with factors such as role models and employment opportunities, are key "poverty exits" and can contribute to the ability of individuals to break intergenerational cycles of poverty (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009).

The Role Model Moms Post-Secondary Academy event is a replicable model for responsive community programming. A nimble, diverse team, composed of individuals from relevant departments and institutions under the leadership of a central coordinator, can work efficiently to create the event and its components. Existing networks, formal and informal, are helpful in creating this team. Each team member selected tasks they already had expertise and skill in, and preparation time is quite minimal. The central planning group can accommodate members from any department or unit, at any level or stage in their career. In terms of leadership, having one team member focused on overall coordination of all activities and one team member focused on logistics and coordination on the day worked very well. Though most hours were invested in this project closer to the event date, there was no point at which work on the event impeded normal job duties for any team member.

Recommendations

To successfully replicate this model at other institutions, we offer our recommendations and lessons learned:

- **Campus community leadership**. Community leadership within the campus community was a key factor in the success of the program. Success of the program's first iteration rested upon the ability of the program's leads to identify supportive partners within departments at U of T and outside the university. Fostering professional communities and collaborative practices within an institution is vital for allowing this type of organic, responsive programming to take place.

- **Community involvement**. The impetus for holding this event came from the community, not from a postsecondary institution. By reaching out to RMM participants before the event to learn about their needs, we ensured that we had the right people involved, and that the information and support they provided was relevant and specific.

- **Cast a wide net**. By reaching out to staff and faculty from multiple departments and institutions, the level of specific information we were able to offer was high. Further, we provided a strong, responsive, and useful program for diverse at-
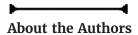
tendees by including people outside our own institution.

- **Program evolution**. The overall intention of this event—to introduce, welcome, and enroll women who are traditionally discounted from higher education—will take an investment of time. As we continue to program for this group, we continue to learn about additional support and circumstances that make for more successful outcomes. Our event, in conjunction with the supportive programming that RMM students receive through their program, is intended to provide a foundation for PSE.

- **Continued support**. We believe it is key for postsecondary institutions to continue building the supports that marginalized students need when they actually enroll. Enrollment in a postsecondary institution is just the first, often difficult, step in achieving higher education; continued support and networking are crucial for the successful completion of a chosen program and ultimately for securing employment after graduation. Providing all participants with contact information for all staff and faculty at the event is important. It would be useful to consider ways to continue to provide direct application and exploration support to participants, though this exceeded the capacity of our particular event.

- **Long-term evaluation**. The long-term impacts of this program on participants and their families may take years to be fully realized. One-year follow-up interviews with participants may usefully track out-

comes, as well as identify ongoing barriers holding them back from attaining their goals. Two RMM student attendees have since enrolled in postsecondary programs, and shared that they found out about these programs and met the relevant contacts at the event.

Conclusion

The World Health Organization (2011) stated, "Education is a human right [and] enhances people's capacities to have decent jobs and fulfilling lives"; furthermore, "education provides vital skills and knowledge that influences well-being directly and indirectly" (p. 2). In response, postsecondary institutions are challenged to provide equitable access to all learners. The Role Model Moms Post-Secondary Academy event was created to help provide equal access by introducing tailored information on PSE options to a marginalized group of women that included student-parents, first-generation students, and mature students. The innovative approach to responsive community programming used in the planning and delivery of the event drew on the skills and expertise of a wide range of facilitators, faculty, and staff from multiple institutions and departments, resulting in a specialized resource delivered with limited financial and time expenditures. Involvement of the target audience from start to finish is an integral part of developing a program that is actually relevant and applicable to the specific needs of the group. Positive participant feedback suggests success for a program aiming to provide access and opportunity, and ultimately improving the long-term outcomes of participants and their families. As one participant noted in her interview, "Keep going so we can have more hope and not just settle for less . . . think big."

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Appendix A. Participant Interview Questions

Tell me about your experience at the event. What was it like?

What worked for you and what didn't work for you at the event?

How did the event work with your kid(s)?

What did you think you were going to get out of the event before you went to it?

What did you actually get out of attending the event?

How did your opinion change about what it is like as a parent–student attending post-secondary schooling?

Was there any change in how prepared or not prepared you felt to go to post-secondary school?

How did/did this event change whether you thought post-secondary was right for you and your family members?

How does this event change what you and your family members are going to do, if anything, about post-secondary schooling?

If you came to this event next year, what would you want to know more about?

Is there anything else you want to add?