

[▲ Home](#)[◀ Contents](#)**Bridging the Solitudes and the Challenge of the Labour Market***by Jane W. Haddad*

Paper presented at School to Work-Transitions of Marginalized Youth
At College and University: A Bridge Too Far?
October 22-23, 2004.

Abstract

In this paper the relations established through the work placement component of the Bridging the Solitudes project are viewed as a way of fostering the formation and re-formation of the occupational and civic identities of these marginalized students. Their experiences are examined in the larger context of the youth labour market.

Introduction

In the paper entitled, "Bridging the Solitudes as a College Access and Retention Program" summarized in the Spring issue of The College Quarterly by Ruth Rogers, I introduced the idea of viewing access as three links in a chain. I call the strategy © ACT: Admission, Completion and Transition. (See Figure 1). In my first paper, I discussed the barriers marginalized youth experienced in pursuing post-secondary education and compared those with the experiences of the Bridging students. I also analyzed the Common Hour as a unique strategy for overcoming attrition and facilitating the successful completion of a post-secondary educational credential.

In this paper, I address the last link in the chain of access, the transition to the labour market. The training and educational choices made in pursuit of vocational goals and the barriers and pathways which hinder or facilitate the transition to the labour market are examined. The types and organization of jobs the students have had and the role that work plays in their lives are analyzed in the context of the youth labour market. Moreover, the perceptions the students have of community agencies and labour unions as providing potential labour market opportunities for them in their occupational field are addressed. And finally, a discussion of their perceptions of their work placement experience will shed some light on the function of this part of their program on their civil and occupational identity formation.

Figure 1: ACT

Introduction to the Youth Labour Market

The ways in which the social reproduction of labour has been challenged and accommodated over time has been a central focus of youth studies in general and transition from school to work studies in particular. Current youth studies have tended to see as the traditional

youth transition from education and training to work as being progressively fragmented and individualized in the period from the mid 1970s onwards resulting in less certainty, more risk and a variety of possible (and impossible) transitions for young people (Nagel and Wallace, 1997). These changes are argued to have resulted in a period of extended youth dependency with accompanying consequences for identity formation (Cole, 1997). Occupational and career identity formation has historically been understood by the "natural" life-cycle model: The youth trains through schooling and apprenticeship to participate fully in their field as an adult and then exits the labour force upon retirement. Managers and workers alike could make sense of this pattern in the context of a working career spent within a single industry, or even single company and workplace. Dr. Sarah A. Vickerstaff, at the University of Kent, points out that this body of literature tends to assume there was a period of unproblematic transition prior to the 1970s, when the Post War II economic boom swelled labour markets. Her research tests these assumptions by looking at major life transitions of apprentices in a range of trades from 1944-1982 (Vickerstaff, 2001). While none of the college Bridging students were enrolled in apprenticeship programs, they were all marginalized from this mainstream model to varying degrees. As one Bridging student commented, "I mean come on you're only 16 or 17 and your supposed to pick your whole path through? It's like tough. I mean at 17 you're not supposed to move out. You live with your parent when you're in high school, but what if you do [move out]?..." Common Hour, November 28, 2003

As capitalism has matured, and new forms of social relations of production emerge, questions about the viability and sustainability of the mechanisms for the social reproduction of labour as a whole have been raised (Roberts, 1984). Profound changes in the concept, meaning and organization of work appear to be emerging (Livingstone, 2004). It is time to foster and nurture a social democratic model of work organization where underemployment is no longer a feature of the economy and where everyone wishing to, can engage in meaningful work. That structural barriers exist for youth entering specific labour markets has been recognized as a national problem in Canada for several years (Economic Council of Canada, 1990; Ministerial Task Force on Youth, 1996). The labour market for youth deteriorated dramatically after the recession in the 1990s (Drost and Hird, 2000). Wage levels for youth declined more drastically than for any other group in the labour force (Betcherman and Leckie, 1997). The growth of non-standard, part-time, part year jobs in the service sector in the last two decades has, on the one hand, met some of the needs of youth in terms of flexible shift work while attending school, while on the other hand creating barriers to entering full-time, well compensated, stable jobs (Harrison and Bluestone, 1998; Krahn and Lowe, 2002). Oppenheimer and Kalmijn call these types of jobs, often found in the lower tier of the service sector especially in the fast food sector, "life cycle stopgap jobs" (1995). As a group, young workers (aged 16-24) have lower wages, fewer benefits, less job security, and are less likely to be unionized than any other age group in the workforce. Employers of young workers, by contrast, frequently rank among North America's largest, wealthiest and most powerful corporations. Despite their economic marginalization and their

importance to North America's service economy, young workers are often ignored by researchers, policy makers and trade unions (Tannock, 2000). Employment insecurity is a challenging issue that must be addressed by both unions and the state (Pupo and Duffy, 2000). Moreover, the dismal state of the economy and labour market for youth in the 1990s prompted many to stay in school longer. The probability of participating in the labour force depends on the availability of jobs (Shuk-Lin Kan and Sharir, 1996). The probability of successfully completing post-secondary studies and choosing an educational path that leads to a good paying job is much greater for middle class than less affluent or marginalized youth. In a study of young people in Ireland and England, Dr. Angela Canny found that general labour market and organizational changes have worked against youth for two reasons (Canny, 2001):

"Firstly, the shift to a service based economy has placed less emphasis on manual skills and more on 'soft' skills, which appear to benefit older adults, particularly women. Indeed, this paper argues that rather than being segmented from the adult labour market, the growth in service sector employment has exposed young people to a much greater degree of competition from adults than previous generations. Secondly, organizational change and particularly the replacement of single-tier recruitment, which in the past characterized both the retail banking and grocery sectors, with multi-level recruitment has reduced opportunities for unqualified young people to progress from the shop floor/back-office into management positions. Indeed, many of the traditional ports of entry for young people have been extensively streamlined or replaced in the drive towards flatter, and more responsive organizational structures."

This leads her to the conclusion that acquiring the appropriate human capital: skills, qualifications and credentials, are increasingly essential in preventing labour market exclusion.

In Canada and Québec, the youth likely to enter the labour market, as well as groups who are poorly and moderately educated, experience the most difficulties (Frechet, 1993). In a study of Scottish and Scandinavian youth, Ivan Harsløf argued that unstable and poor conditions offered through the new organization of work might impinge on the parallel transitions undertaken (Harsløf, 2001). In Ottawa, when pursuing education and employment, youths were often found to resort to at-risk behaviours like prostitution, panhandling, alcohol/drug use, and gang participation to meet basic needs (Lundy and Totten, 1997).

Attitudes toward unemployment differ among youth depending upon language, geographical location and gender (Wilkinson, 1999). The youth labour market is by no means homogeneous, but rather, it varies considerably between males and females, teenagers and young adults, students and non-students, place of origin and colour of skin. Visible minority youth, regardless of whether they are immigrants, suffer greater barriers to accessing the labour market than non-visible minority or racialized youth (Gunderson and Wald, 2000). The demographic changes in the labour force, including the "greying" of the population will also affect labour market participation. A decline in the number of entry-level workers, coupled with a

reduction in labour force participation rates, have led some to predict a significant shortage of workers in the near future in Canada (McDonald and Chen, 1993).

Many observers believe that young people are major losers in the New World Order characterized by closer links between giant multinational corporations and governments. The movement to the right in the U.S.A has signaled a series of setbacks for organized labour and racialized youth wishing to pursue higher education. The Giroux's document how the progressive era "new deal" politics, where the state, business and labour cooperated to create a stable productive economy, is over. They show how the agenda to dismantle the social contract and scale back the role of the government in regulating the economy undermines democracy and civil rights freedoms in the U.S.A (Giroux, 2004). In Germany, the 35 hour week is under attack. In the late 1980s, organized labour managed to entrench into their collective agreements, the principle of being paid for 40 hours per week, while labouring for thirty-five. Siemens, the huge telecommunications giant has forced the IG Metall trade union to accept the erosion of the thirty-five hour week in recent negotiations. In other sectors, workers wages are being eroded. The threat of corporations closing and moving to low wage countries in Eastern Europe is driving the concessions (Economist, 2004;13). The understandings between economic elites and generations that fostered the collective well-being of the whole population in the form of shorter working hours, social assistance and old age security incomes is being replaced by beliefs that we are our own keepers, not our brother's keeper. The new deal is being strangled by corporate capital. We appear to moving toward what Max Koch refers to as the capital oriented flexibility road to post-Fordism where, "regulations concerning wages, working hours and dismissals are almost exclusively based on the employer's interest in decreasing labour costs, in order to gain competitive advantages for his or her company" (Koch, 2002; 202). A study of Canadian and British youth found that in both countries youth displayed "individualistic" values toward the labour market (Evans, Taylor, and Boss, 1992). Alienation from community, family, nature and the socialized institutions that serve the collective good result in youth feeling unfulfilled and disenfranchised (Cote and Allahar, 2001). The structure of the labour market that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. To paraphrase the recently deceased Jacques Derrida, "[I]n the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out. These exclusive structures can become repressive - and that repression comes with consequences" (Taylor, 2004).

One might expect that the aspirations of youth in terms of labour market participation would have declined in light of the structural changes since the 1990's. However, a recent study of youth's expectations shows that male occupational goals remained largely unchanged, while female occupational ambitions rose. Social class continues to have strong independent effects on occupational goals, which appear to be mediated, to a considerable extent, through the streaming of high school students into academic or nonacademic programs. Gender continues to influence specific occupational

aspirations and expectations, while rural youth continue to report somewhat lower occupational goals (Andrew et. al., 1999). In Europe, vocational and occupational identity used to provide the basis for motivation and good work performance, commitment and quality. However, dynamic social changes now make it difficult to develop a stable identity, and many vocational identities have been through processes of decomposition and re-composition (Brown et.al.,2001). In this fluidity, there is space to nurture occupational identities that hold lifelong learning and economic democracy as organizing principals. The placement of the Bridging students in socially progressive community-based agencies and labour unions fostered such identities.

Future Aspirations and Program Choices Of course, one must distinguish between vocational and occupational goals and the actual ways in which people are taken up in the labour market. All students admitted to Seneca College are asked to complete a questionnaire showing background data and future aspirations. It is interesting to note how the students' perceptions changed over the course of their college career with respect to their future aspirations. Upon being accepted by Seneca, students were asked what they perceived themselves doing upon graduating from college. The majority, fifty-four percent of the Bridging participants at Seneca stated they intended to obtain a full time job at this time. Thirty-eight and a half percent intended to apply to university and hence did not see their college education as the end of their post secondary education careers. Almost eight percent of the students stated they intended to start a personal business upon graduating. It is interesting to note the changes in aspirations after two years or more of college education, when the students were asked, "What is the main activity that you are planning after completing your current program?" Only twenty percent said they intended to take a university program, while sixty percent would seek employment in 2004. The percentage of students wanting to start their own business decreased to zero. These data are consistent with the responses from the Province-wide college sample.

The initial entrepreneurial bent of the college Bridging students is perhaps reflected in the large number who chose programs in the Faculty of Business over the programs available in the Faculty of Technology at the Newnham campus of Seneca CAAT. When responding to the 2003 Canadian College survey sometime later in their college careers, however, the percentage that said they would start a business dropped to zero.

In Foley's study of reasons why high school graduates did not pursue post-secondary education, he found that Ontario respondents were more likely than others to say they couldn't decide on what to study (Looker, 2002;5). Once the decision is made to apply to a post-secondary educational institute, how are institution and program choices made? In Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), contextual factors such as perceived barriers to accessing post-secondary education, are thought to shape career interests, choices and identities, or opportunity structures, "within which career plans are developed and implemented" (Luzzo and McWhirter, 2001). Almost sixty-seven percent of the Bridging students at Seneca College

initially choose to their program because they were interested in a career in that field, while twenty-five percent said it would keep their options open. Compared to the general population of Seneca students in 2001, of whom, seventy-six percent enrolled in their program of study because they were interested in a career in that field and only approximately eighteen percent believed it would keep their options open.

According to Kyle, "Coming to college means when you complete it, you put yourself in a place where you could get a great job. It might take a while, but at least you have a paper that says that you accomplished this. That's yours. No body can take it away from you." Common Hour, Sept 24, 2002.

In the case of Bridging the Solitudes, students applying to the project were limited to programs of study offered at the main Newnham campus of Seneca College. In several instances, programs of interest to the student such as Nursing and Social Worker degree/diploma courses were unavailable at this campus and the student enrolled in a different program of study to participate in Bridging. In these cases, the vocational choice was obviously constrained by program availability. Nevertheless, the majority of Bridging students who did attend Seneca chose programs that they perceived as offering them a career in a particular occupational field. All of the programs available at the Newnham campus are in the Faculty of Technology and the Faculty of Business. Only two students enrolled in the Faculty of Technology. It should be noted that no apprenticeship programs were available to the Bridging students at Seneca. While one of the students continually stated he likes to "work with his hands," the occupational training necessary for working in skilled trades at Seneca is limited.

Influence of Teachers and Family Members on Program Choices

Coined by Crysdale, King and Mandell, as "Stage B" factors, such as parental, teacher and employer aspirations held for youth for schooling and work, as well as participation in "work education" have been shown to affect the transition from school to the labour force (1999). Only one student out of the 14 that started at Seneca in the Bridging program enrolled in a liberal arts program. Shayla wanted to do Social Work, which was unavailable at the Newnham campus. All the other students chose programs in two major service producing industry groups: Professional, Scientific and Technical; and Business. Where the Bridging students vary significantly from the general Seneca student population is in the role and influence of teachers on their program choice. Eight percent of the Bridging students cited a "teachers advice" in choosing a college program compared to one percent of the general population of Senecans.

One of the Bridging students had completed three years of a University degree in a Computer Engineering program in his home country of Columbia. At Seneca, he enrolled in the Computer Engineering Technologist program. All his educational pursuits have been in the direction of computer technology. He has always had the support of his only parent, his mother in his vocational pursuits. While

none of the Bridging students indicated that their parents' advice was the main reason for choosing their programs at Seneca, parental influence cannot be underestimated. It shows itself in many forms. The inter-generational transmission of social and economic status is well documented. Graaf and Kalmijn have shown a recent decrease in the association of parental occupation with their children's economic status in the Netherlands (2001). And as Dick Geary has suggested, class identities have remained important to millions of inter-generational workers over centuries of change (2001). The ways in which parental influence is felt varies tremendously. I will give just a few illustrations. Darva wanted to be a journalist, however, she altered her aspirations in part because of her perception of her mother's sense of what a good job is:

"I know if I don't finish my education or if I don't find a good job she'll [my mother will] be really disappointed... That's really why I choose business because I can be making more money than in journalism..."
Darva, Common Hour, March 25, 2004.

Another immigrant student experience demonstrates that parental support for vocational and educational pursuits is not always forthcoming. In this case, the student enrolled in a Marketing diploma program, even though she appeared to have an aptitude toward architecture. Her mother encouraged her not to follow her brother who was already enrolled in an architecture program at another college by the time she applied to Seneca. In this excerpt Diana discusses her intention to go into architecture and her mother's feelings about her attending college. The following lengthy excerpts are from a period spanning two years. The interviewers' questions are in italics.

"I wanted to get into that too.

Oh really. Are you thinking eventually you might do architecture?

I might. Because I really. I took two courses in high school about architecture and design and I really enjoyed it. It was so much fun – it was designing on the drafting board and we went on the computer and AutoCAD and kind of designed.

Like how did you get interested?

It started with my mom, I guess with the drawing and stuff like that and then I just started like watching TLC and Discovery and stuff like that I started to notice you like architecture, you just started noticing stuff like that and when you were picking out your courses for school you kind of read up on it and oh it's interesting so you take the course then you find out you really like it. They found out I was pretty good in it too I was getting pretty good marks.

So school was always something you had in mind.

I always wanted to go to school." Interview, July 29th, 2002.

What affected your choice of programme here at Seneca? Was

it personal interest or was it that you just wanted a career that would permit a stable income?

For me I always had two interests, I had, for business, marketing and also for architecture. I liked both. I really like architecture at one time but my brother, he went to college and he took that and I didn't want to seem that I'm following him... so I decided to go into marketing instead. It's something that I always wanted to do as well.

How much did not doing what you brother was doing sway your decision away from architecture?

I think I was the one that chose architecture first, but because he's older he was the one that got to go first. My mom (says): 'no, don't do the same thing he's doing... it seems like your following...' I like marketing too. If I didn't, I'd still go into architecture too." Common Hour, October 17th, 2002.

Would you ever pursue architecture?

I may, I think maybe I would.

I know a long time when me and my brother were still in high school right before my brother was going to graduate, she didn't want us to go on, she wanted my brother to start work right away and me and my brother we flipped out like you're crazy, you don't trust us, so we kind of talked to her and made her change her mind because now she's like oh you have to go to school, you should go to school. I guess because she talked to a lot of people too lot of people are like yeah it's better to go to school. Friends of hers, other ladies that she knows. I don't know why, she wanted... I guess actually the Portuguese community the kids have to help out the parents – after they've helped you, you have to help them. So she wanted us to go to work and help out her – it's if a child decided not to go to school it's fine they don't encourage it as much, you should go to school they don't do that as much.

What do you think if you now decided to go to work and not go to Seneca, what would your mom say?

"I think she would probably ask why, what are the reasons stuff like that but I don't see her really encouraging me too much to go to school because I don't know just now that I've been working for this year and stuff I don't feel oh you have to, you should, when I was on the waiting list and I told her about it that I was very upset she was like ok you can just work again for another year, like she wasn't too oh my god you got to call and you got to do this and you got to do that... My mom can be sometimes she can be very reinforcing and sometimes she's like oh... very relaxed and weird." Interview, Diana, August 08, 2003.

When asked if her parents put pressure on her to finish her post secondary education, Mercedes said:

"No, no, to me I think I put pressure on myself just because my mom

and my brother didn't go to school... my mom, she says, 'well it would be good' because I could get a better job and support me and my daughter, but think I put more pressure on myself than anybody around me puts on me just because I want to do better you know I want to prove to my daughter that you can always pick yourself up and keep going and strive to do no matter what. I mean how many single parents, how many single moms are out there that say 'I can't do it because I have a child. So I can't go to school, and I can't work because who's gonna take care of my daughter.' There's always ways around it and I wanted to prove to her that you don't have to take things as they come you can make your own destiny. Just because something happen in life don't just accept it and stay there. And I think I put a lot more pressure to continue and finish and to do better for myself and for her as well, as opposed to people putting it on me. I mean I think that I would be more disappointed in myself if I started and didn't finish it, because these two years have been killers for me financially just because I'm in school full-time, I'm not working full-time and it's like so many bills and I know that if I didn't apply that pressure to myself and... hold myself up and kept saying 'you have to finish it'. This whole thing for me from the beginning has been 'only til April!' and as the semester goes on I say 'you gotta another couple of more months and you'll be one step closer to the end'... It seems like it's down to the home stretch..." Mercedes, Common Hour, March 25, 2004.

As a single parent, Mercedes often runs into discriminatory employment practices:

"I notice too, I've been recently looking for a new job,... they're very reluctant, I mean they try to get personal with you 'do you have a family?' 'are you married?' and all that stuff. After I say 'no, I'm not married' and then they'll be like 'well, do you have a family?'... if I say that I have a child they'll be like 'oh, oh okay...' and they're taking aback by it. The minute they find out that you're a single mom, because they don't think that you can be reliable, because it's just you taking care of that child. So I've kind of learned to use where they don't ask, I don't tell." Common Hour, February 19, 2004.

Perceptions and Experiences of Employment

The perceived ability to make money from being able to find a good job is a huge motivator of program choice and occupational identity among the Bridging students. The students demonstrated a considerable knowledge of the conditions of the labour market and had very clear ideas of what constitutes a good and bad job. Job security and employer's initiatives to intensify labour were frequent topics of discussion in the common hour. None of the students felt they had job security in their jobs. When asked if she had job security, Mercedes says,

"No just because it's part-time they kind of get you in that. They know that you don't have a union so they can do whatever they want. They can give you the hours they want, cut them, subtract here, add there. It's basically, like (Kyle) said, they use you to their purpose and when they're done they can say 'okay, nice knowing you, goodbye.' Management can change, and new management coming in doesn't agree with what the old management is doing so they're going to

change it. I don't think that any job is secure. I mean you can have security for a period of time but that can drastically change and then you're back to square one where you have to fight to get that security back for another period of time." Common Hour, February 19, 2004.

In discussing post-Fordist changes in the economy, Kyle says: "Yeah but look at where we are right now. Back in 1950 you got guys who get a job and they stay there until they retire, right? Nowadays because they get this new solution 'oh, we can sub-contract this out, we could do this, we could do that.' That's the way they're trying to go right now. I guarantee you if it stay like we won't be staying at our job for like a year or something like that. We'll be moving around so much." Common Hour, February 19, 2004.

When discussing further changes in the "new" economy, Mercedes talks about the inherent contradictions: "But that's what I never understand, like some employers do advertise where you always have to be moving up or moving on to something new, but then again in order to get a job, employers want to see stability. They want to see the fact that you've been somewhere for a long period of time, where you're reliable enough that they're able to hire you. They contradict themselves when your going into the workforce where they want stability yet they want you to move fast paced and that can mean getting something new down the line."

Several of the students had unpleasant experiences at their workplaces. Some involved poor health and safety conditions and others involved non-payment of wages for hours worked. Diana recalls her experience working at the Canadian National Exhibition, which she has done for several years: "My summer job I worked at the Ex (CNE) for the two weeks and you know the holiday is time and a half, and I worked the Labour Day and we didn't get paid for the Labour Day. Like I didn't check. Like, last year I worked there too and I never like kept track of my hours because you just write it in, like the manager writes it in for you, like the time you come in and the time you leave. So you don't keep anything unless you go home and you write it in yourself. And then I was working with a friend and she was keeping track of all the hours and...she (the manager) never said we wouldn't get paid the time and a half, so I had to call the one that hired us, her name is PK, I had to call and ask her what's going on. But she went to London for a week and only came back last week. And I had to ask her and she said 'well okay I'm going to check your hours and call you back and let you know if you got paid or not'. We already did the math, we already know that we didn't get paid, I think that they're just kind of giving us the run-around. And my friend she's really sure she wants to call the labour board... like I want to get paid, I don't want to get screwed. Like right now I'm kind of doubting if they paid me last year because I never kept track. Yeah she kept calling and yeah, I didn't get into the office yet, that there's a bigger boss above her, she says that she hasn't given her the chance to look at the hours. My friend was like 'do we need to tell them that we need to call the Labour Board or can we just call and tell them to... work it out for us?'" Common Hour, October 1, 2003.

Kyle had two negative experiences with employers that were set up through a youth employment service.

“ I did a factory job too and I quit in one day. I went there and they hired me the same day and they asked me to work right. I worked that day right. It's like paper, Atlantic Packaging. So there's 25 pound paper, you got to fold them and put them on a skid. And each level there's five rows and you gotta go sixteen high. And they want you to do like, if you can to seven skids in a day then they give you like a ten cent bonus... So after your shift you're itchy 'cos of the paper... I get cut up because the paper is sharp. And the guy goes 'are you coming back tomorrow?' and I go 'yeah' but I didn't go back. Did you ever get paid? Oh you know what, they have this policy, you have to work three months to get the first day pay. So I end up not working, I end up not getting paid for that day... And the next thing, I get a job, I get a next job - I'm not even joking - I get a next job from the employment center and what happened there I was doing like lights and stuff for the pool and you know those corrosives and all those things from the pool, from the chlorine, I was up there and I was taking the lights out and I think one of them hit me in my eye like a little piece. I think it give me an infection, the next day my eye was swollen big. And I almost got electrocuted there too. I was putting in this bulb and for some reason I see like fire and I wanted to jump in the pool. My summer was bad man. .. Yeah, and I end up working two days and I didn't get paid for it. ... They tell me they were gonna call me and give me some hours and they never did. I called back and the lady's like 'oh, you know she's kind of busy right now.' So I didn't even bother man. The youth agency said it was going to be 24 hours a week right... and when I go there the lady's (tells) me that they gonna call me if they want me. So I wasn't gonna go back. So that's five hours there... with no pay.” Common Hour, October 1, 2003.

Vocational identities tend to be constituted and reconstituted according to the degree of contestation and acceptance of the forces of influence and change that act on individuals. In offering a non-corporate workplace environment, the work placement experience provided a force of positive influence on the student's occupational and civic identity formation. This in turn fostered a commitment to community involvement and perhaps in a small way, what Katherine Erika Laxer calls “union rejuvenation”, which the author defines as the effective trade union recruitment and representation of youth for the purposes of union renewal (Laxer, 2001). While I will not comment on the perceptions of the work placement supervisors, I will now turn to a discussion of the student's perceptions of their non-corporate work placement experience.

The Work Placement Experience and the Transition to Work
Only one student somewhat disagreed with the following statement after completing a work placement at a not-for-profit community agency or a labour union in the summer of 2004: “ I now see community agencies/labour unions as a real opportunity for employment for me in the future.” All the other students surveyed responded with either strongly agree or somewhat agree. Two students said they strongly disagreed with the following statement, while six indicated they strongly agreed or somewhat agreed: “I am

more likely to consider a career with a community agency/labour union as a result of my work placement experience.” The best thing about working for a community agency according to Shalya was, “the fact that someone wants to make a change in the community.” Diana said the best thing for her was, “that [good] feeling you take home with you.” For Oksana, it was the “sense of ‘saving the day’ for someone.” The best thing for Kyle was that, “the togetherness was very strong.”

The work placements gave the students an opportunity to experience working in a non-corporate workplace and opened up the idea that the not-for-profit sector of the economy could be a place of employment that does socially useful work and fosters community development. This is one positive outcome of the project that I think is essential for developing responsible civic identities in youth that might otherwise be disaffected from their communities and roles as citizens in a democracy.

The college Bridging students’ experience of their non-corporate work placements demonstrate a positive force to counterbalance their experiences in the world of business, where they encountered disrespect, poor health and safety and poor wages.

Conclusion: The Challenge of the Labour Market The central objectives of the Bridging the Solitudes project were to attempt to facilitate post-secondary educational access to marginalized youth, to better understand their success and failure in pursuing post-secondary education and to attempt to cultivate new mechanisms for them to participate in community agency and labour union work. The transition into the labour market after post-secondary education is problematic for peripheralized groups, such as the youth in this study. Racism in the labour market leading to over-qualification and underemployment of visible minorities has been well documented. Reaching a glass ceiling still occurs for many women in various occupational categories. Only recently have efforts been made to make workplaces accessible for physically challenged employees etc. Yet, work and working is fundamental to one’s identity, shaping one’s sense of self and civic responsibility. Our occupations largely determine our level of power, privilege and status in society. It is the primary source of our identity and how we define ourselves. For many of us, work is fulfilling and personally satisfying. But for more and more of us, work is something we endure to ensure our survival. We spend over a third of our lives at work and yet few of us have control over that work. We have to change that.

Making work meaningful and socially useful for all human beings, especially those who have been relegated to the margins, is a huge challenge. The way that workplaces are currently organized in this society has led to both a degradation of work in some economic sectors, as well as an increase in control and discretion over some work practices by some workers. Unfortunately, the latter is not keeping up with the former. Even when structural adjustment theory is applied to understanding high levels of unemployment from downturns in the economy by economists, the number of opportunities for people to use their skill, knowledge and decision-making capacity as workers is diminishing. “Jobless recoveries” are commonplace (Parkinson,

2004). There simply are not enough good jobs available to utilize the skill and competency of the available labour force (Livingstone, 2004). Of course, what happens to people at work often transposes into how they are at home and in their communities as citizens. Exercising the capacity to make decisions at work is more likely to lead to strong decision-making and participation at home and in one's community. When a workplace is organized democratically, workers will exercise their democratic rights outside of the workplace as citizens. Thus the organization of work affects and shapes the roles of workers as members of a community. Disaffection from the community leads to disunity and the breakdown of civil society organizations. The kind of democratic society that we must envision and want to participate in must include democratic work place organizations and the sustainable production of goods and services. The larger project of "access" and the Bridging strategy ACT has to include building positive occupational identities and democratic workplaces, which are featured in non-profit community agencies and trade union organizations. Unfortunately, corporate workplaces that perpetuate discrimination, underemployment and work degradation provide a negative model of citizenship that is detrimental to groups of individuals, society's cultural identity and the very earth itself. Collectively we must begin to challenge the organization of the corporate workplace. We must begin to create organizational structures with a view toward the democratic empowerment of employees. I am not suggesting that not-for-profit organizations automatically take up this challenge and I do not want to reify this sector. For example, the incident involving Concert Properties, a housing construction company run by a board of directors composed of past and present labour union leaders, recently donated over \$16,000 to the Liberal Party of British Columbia and became a member of the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships without the knowledge or consent of the members (Offley, 2004). Nevertheless, this is the challenge of the labour market. The Bridging the Solitudes project provided the opportunity for youth who have been marginalized by current social formations to experience a non-corporate workplace structure that created a space for an integrated occupational and civil identity to emerge and be nurtured.

End Notes:

1. For a critique of the assumptions underlying making investments in developing intellectual or human capital in order to compete in the knowledge society, see (Haddad, 2004).
2. This data is based on answers to questions asked upon being admitted to Seneca College, 2001. Background Question #18.
3. Question #8 of the 2003 Canadian College Student Survey.
4. Program choices were restricted to those offered at Newnham campus, including those offered in the Faculty of Business and the Faculty of Technology. See www.senecac.on.ca.
5. A Liberal government of Ontario initiative targets youth who have dropped out of high school and then returned to enroll in skilled trades training. Construction trades, Industrial trades, Motive Power trades and Service trade programs are targeted. See http://ogov.newswire.ca/ontario/GPOE/2004/08/05/c8728.html?lmatch=&lang=_e.html

6. In the last few "job-less recoveries" the Dow Jones Stock Exchange saw increases in stock values, while employment stagnated or declined. "During the jobless recovery of 1991-92, the Dow rose 11% in a four-quarter period in which U.S. employment was flat. The Dow also increased 25% during 2003, when the U.S. economy shed almost 600,000 jobs."

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Jane W. Haddad is a Liberal Studies Professor at Seneca College. She can be reached at jane.haddad@senecac.on.ca

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