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RESEARCH BLOG

Transfer: An Inclusive Access Route into Postsecondary Education

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Transfer is often considered a niche area within postsecondary education that is highly technical and, at first glance, unrelated to much else. After all, isn't transfer just about students applying for credit for previous learning when switching institutions?

But there is often a more complex story behind credit transfer that tells us a lot about who is transferring and how they are accessing and experiencing postsecondary education.

Existing research has shown that transfer students in Ontario are generally older (Sano, Zarifa & Hillier, 2020), have less conventional academic profiles than direct entry students (Davies, 2022) and are more likely to have poorer graduation outcomes (Walters et al. 2021). A recent study looking at transfer pathways into the University of Toronto found that transfer students were overrepresented by older, white, and female students (Davies, 2022). They also found transfer students struggled more academically and had lower graduation rates as parental income decreased.

When we consider that lower numbers of students with disabilities (Chatoor, 2021) and Black students (James & Parekh, 2021) have access to postsecondary education and experience poorer outcomes once there, it is worth exploring whether there is a connection between transfer, access, and equity.

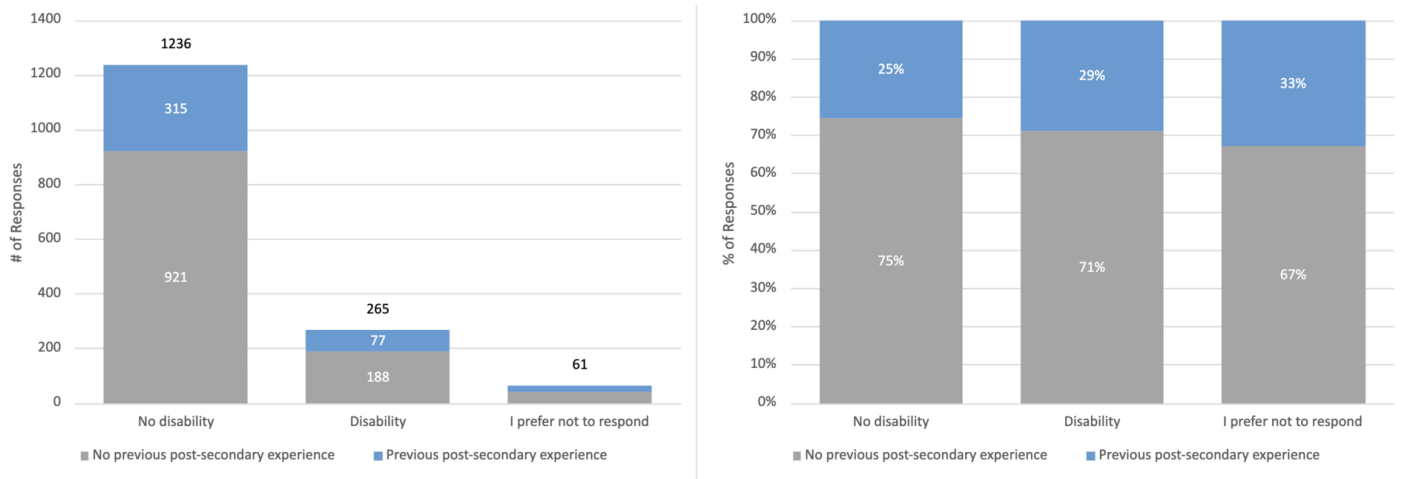
ONCAT recently funded a research project that uses the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSSE) data to consider how transfer students experience postsecondary education. Led by Stephen Tedesco and Heather Daoust at Nipissing University, the study suggests that transfer is especially relevant to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Exploring the relationship between race, disability, and previous postsecondary experience

The NSSE survey captures data about student integration into activities and programs and assesses student satisfaction with things like student/faculty interaction, availability of student support services including academic and mental health supports, and student perceptions of comfort with their surroundings.

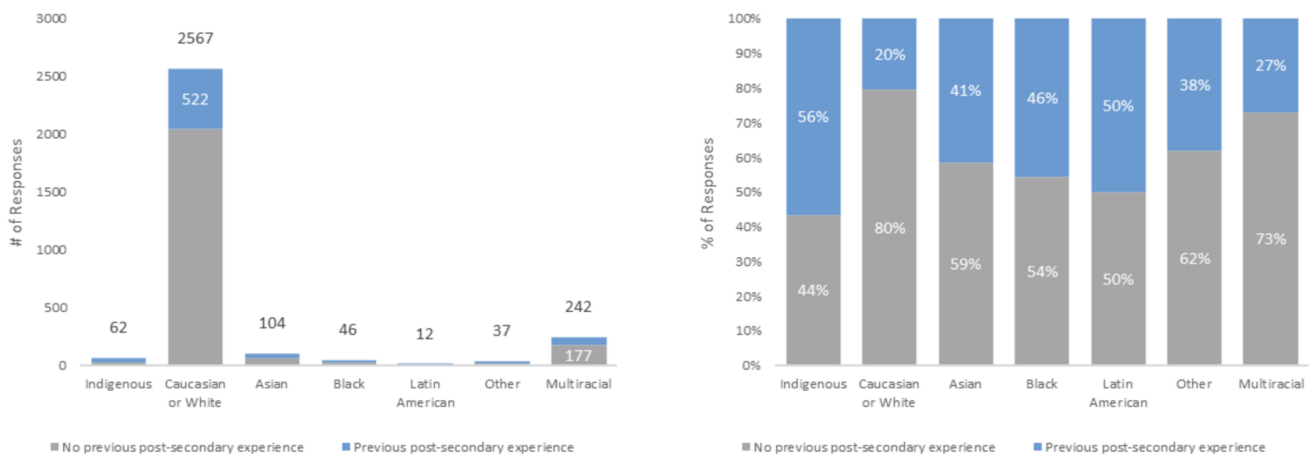
The report found that the proportion of transfer students with disabilities is larger than that of students with no disability (29.1% vs 25.5%, see Figure 1). From the perspective of postsecondary access and equity, Nipissing could potentially be serving a larger share of transfer students with self-identified disabilities and from certain ethnic minority groups, such as Black students.

Figure 1. Summary of Demographic Data 2006 to 2020 – Disability



While the ethnic background of students that responded to the NSSE at Nipissing appears to be predominantly white, a wide range of ethnicities are represented at the university. It is worth mentioning that the proportion of transfer students for the white ethnic category is the lowest compared with all other ethnic categories, even though the reported counts for the non-white ethnic student categories are very low (see Figure 2). For example, nearly half of all Black students at Nipissing that responded to the surveys are transfer students. For an institution committed to access and equity this finding is important, since Black students have been found in other studies to be the most likely to take an indirect pathway to university and have the lowest graduation rates compared to other ethnic groups, including white students (James & Parekh, 2021). Thus, Black transfer students are a particular student group of interest and can benefit from targeted supports that would help them integrate into their new institutional surroundings.

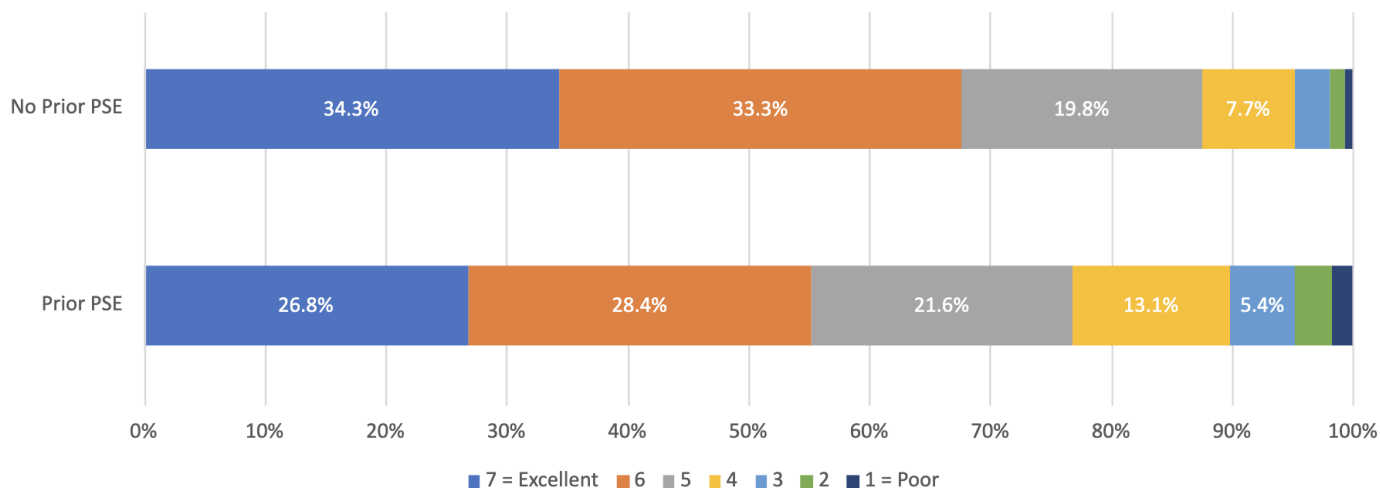
Figure 2. Proportion of NSSE respondents by self-reported ethnicity



Exploring the relationship between student satisfaction and previous postsecondary experience

The Nipissing team conducted mainly descriptive statistics and t-tests to explore the group differences (transfer versus non-transfer) in student survey responses. Future research using the NSSE could look to expand beyond t-tests that explore the relationship between pathways and student satisfaction while controlling for other variables like disability. Below (see Figure 3) we see that there are some notable differences in how transfer students expressed satisfaction with their interactions with other students, which is an important aspect of students feeling comfortable and succeeding in their studies. More transfer students had scaled responses closer to 1 = (poor) when characterizing the quality of their interactions with other students. The differences between the two groups are statistically significant. Future research could include disability as a control variable between the two groups to assess its influence on student interactions.

Figure 3. Student responses around quality of interactions with other students at Nipissing



Conclusion

While the NSSE is a self-selected sample of first- and fourth-year students at Nipissing, these answers reveal another notable trend. The share of transfer students who filled out the NSSE at Nipissing (21.9%) is much higher than the average estimate of the transfer population in Ontario, which is about 8% (see Zarifa, Sano, & Hillier, 2020). According to data that ONCAT receives from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, the proportion of transfer students at Nipissing is 42.5%. The NSSE percentages would likely be bolstered if students from all four years were surveyed.

Transfer students are a significant population at Nipissing and other Ontario universities, colleges, and Indigenous Institutes. When we consider these averages in connection with the nature of the NSSE survey questions, which attempt to measure how students integrate, enjoy, and experience the various aspects of campus and academic life, it is easy to see how this kind of data can be analyzed to address issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as overall retention strategies for transfer students. As a less conventional route that offers flexibility, transfer can play a pivotal role in expanding access to postsecondary education for students.

If you are interested in learning more about this project or conducting similar research at your institution, please don't hesitate to reach out to:

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Established in 2011, the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) was created to enhance academic pathways and reduce barriers for students looking to transfer among Ontario's public colleges, universities, and Indigenous Institutes.