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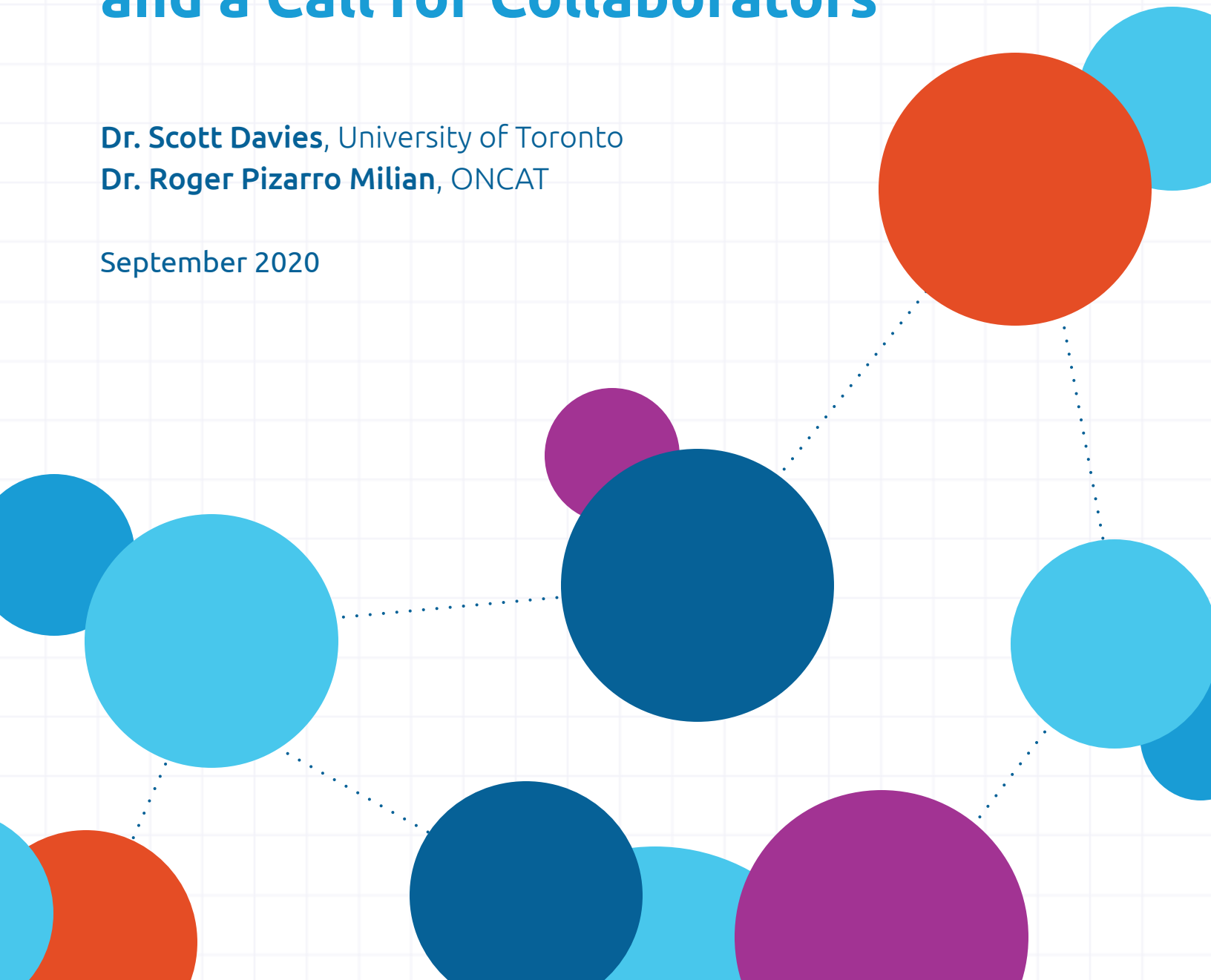
Lessons Learned from the TDSB-UT Linkage— and a Call for Collaborators

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Last week, we shared a series of findings stemming from an analysis of the TDSB-UT linkage. Using this powerful dataset, we were able to explore multiple elements of transfer within the TDSB-UT corridor. Most importantly, we were able to do so while using large sample sizes and statistical techniques that account for the mixed academic and demographic characteristics of various types of transfer students. To our knowledge, this is the first use of this sort of K–12 school board/university administrative linkage for the study of transfer in Ontario.

"Our goal is to build a dataset that allows us to track student mobility within the GTA comprehensively. If you are reading this, and are in an educational institution within the GTA, consider this an open invitation for you to participate in this data-sharing pilot!"

Our primary learning from this exercise is that transfer students are far from a homogenous group with respect to their early academic performance, demographic profiles, and eventual outcomes. As it pertains to outcomes at UT specifically, we see that there are great disparities in graduation rates across different transfer student types, with those transferring from an Ontario community college being particularly disadvantaged. Given such insights, we think it is prudent for university administrators across the system to analyze incoming transfer flows carefully, evaluate performance at the granular level, and identify those groups requiring the most assistance. Such analyses should allow under-resourced institutions to better allocate funding and resources to ensure the success of those in greatest need.

Of course, there are important limitations to this work:

1) First, we examine only those students who travel the TDSB-UT corridor. While this provides us with access to rich data from TDSB administrative records, it also limits generalizability. It is plausible that students coming into UT from other school boards perform differently and even in ways that contradict our findings. We can't rule that out. At the same time, we also don't have theoretical or empirical reasons to expect strong and systematic deviation from our observed findings. Given the relative parity in the funding and quality of education across publicly funded school boards in Ontario, we don't expect school board-level effects, net of student demographics.

2) Second, it may be that trends differ at other receiving institutions. It is possible that in institutions with transfer student offices and greater availability of supports, the direct-entry/transfer gaps in performance shrink in size. Again, this is plausible, but we imagine that it would take considerable efforts to override the patterns in disparities that we have observed, especially for transfers originating from community colleges. It is important to keep in mind that colleges and universities are operating at the very tail-end of the student life course. It is wishful thinking to assume that they can undo a lifetime of inequity in the span of a few years.

3) Third, considering our findings, we believe that many colleges may feel, and even have some evidence to support, that their out-going transfers outperform direct-entry counterparts at receiving universities. This is certainly plausible, and there may be some variation in the outcomes of transfers from different colleges, net of students' demographic characteristics. Again, we are not convinced that, in a system like Ontario, where there is relative parity in the quality and funding of our public colleges, these differences would be significant. We are open to being convinced otherwise, though.

However, we think it is important for stakeholders to be conscious of the quality of the evidence they may currently possess about the performance of their out-going transfers. Is it more than anecdotal? If so, is it based on multivariate models? If so, does it encompass a reasonable set of academic and demographic controls? ONCAT is more than happy to work with our sector partners to help them improve their evidence base on transfer student performance.

At ONCAT, we are very much aware that the financial and human resources to perform this sort of work is not available to every institution within our sector. We also understand that data-sharing, beyond a few exemplary cases (e.g., Seneca-York), remains quite limited, and often does not link to administrative data in the K–12 system. To help bridge this gap, we will be coordinating and funding a data-sharing pilot within the Greater Toronto Area over the next two years to extend the TDSB-UT linkage and include additional partners.

Since last summer, we've been working to establish a project charter with the Toronto District School Board, City of Toronto, and the University of Toronto, with a view towards developing a model that can be scaled to other school boards, colleges, and universities.

We've also been working closely with IT at the University of Toronto to set up data transmission protocols and build a digital 'fortress' at the Data, Equity & Policy (DEPE) Lab to house project data. Our goal is to build a dataset that allows us to track student mobility within the GTA comprehensively.

If you are reading this, and are in an educational institution within the GTA, consider this an open invitation for you to participate in this data-sharing pilot! If you are not a decision-maker but would benefit from having access to this data: get on the phone, call up your senior leadership, and ask them why they aren't participating in this project.

We look forward to hearing from you.
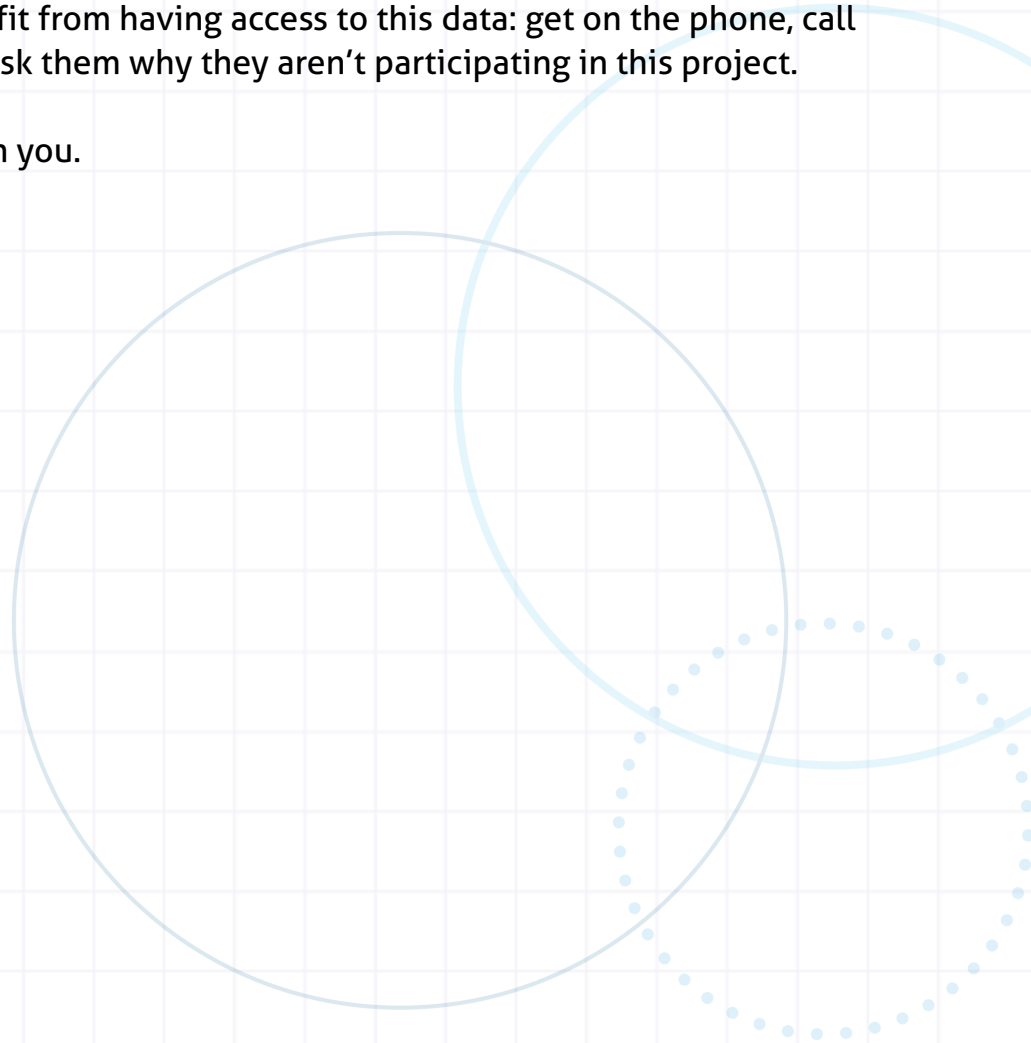
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oncat.ca/en/projects/tdsb-ut-linkage-and-transfer-project

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.