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RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Transfer Success at Trent University: Findings from ONCAT's DataPilot Program

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Keywords

Postsecondary; transfer students; grade point average; graduation rates; transfer credits

Overview

ONCAT launched the [DataPilot initiative](#) in 2020 to help postsecondary institutions gather transfer student enrolment data to assist them in learning more about this unique segment of their student population. In phase one, ONCAT staff helps institutions collect and categorize these data, as well as provide high-level analyses. In phase two, institutions collect and submit the same data points on direct-entry students, and ONCAT provides deeper analyses that compare indicators and outcomes between transfer and direct-entry students. Institutions also have the option of working with ONCAT to publish a public facing report of the findings.

This spotlight focuses on ONCAT's first collaborative [report](#) with a postsecondary institution, Trent University. As an institution whose proportional representation of transfer students ranks near the top of all publicly funded universities in Ontario, Trent has a vested interest in ensuring their transfer students succeed. This collaborative report will highlight several positive outcomes for transfer students at Trent. In addition to the high proportion of transfer students they enrol each year, Trent has developed a very effective transfer process with several key ingredients: strong leadership, information management systems that allow administrators to identify credit equivalencies easily, and strong supports and recruitment practices for transfer students.

Why it Matters

Collecting data on transfer students is a necessary first step in understanding transfer, particularly if postsecondary institutions have significant numbers of transfer students, are interested in recruiting them into under-enrolled programs, or would like to prioritize under-represented learners who often take untraditional, roundabout pathways into higher education. These analyses help institutions obtain evidence-informed information about transfer students at their institution and pinpoint which are more likely to struggle and what can be done to improve their outcomes.

Key Findings

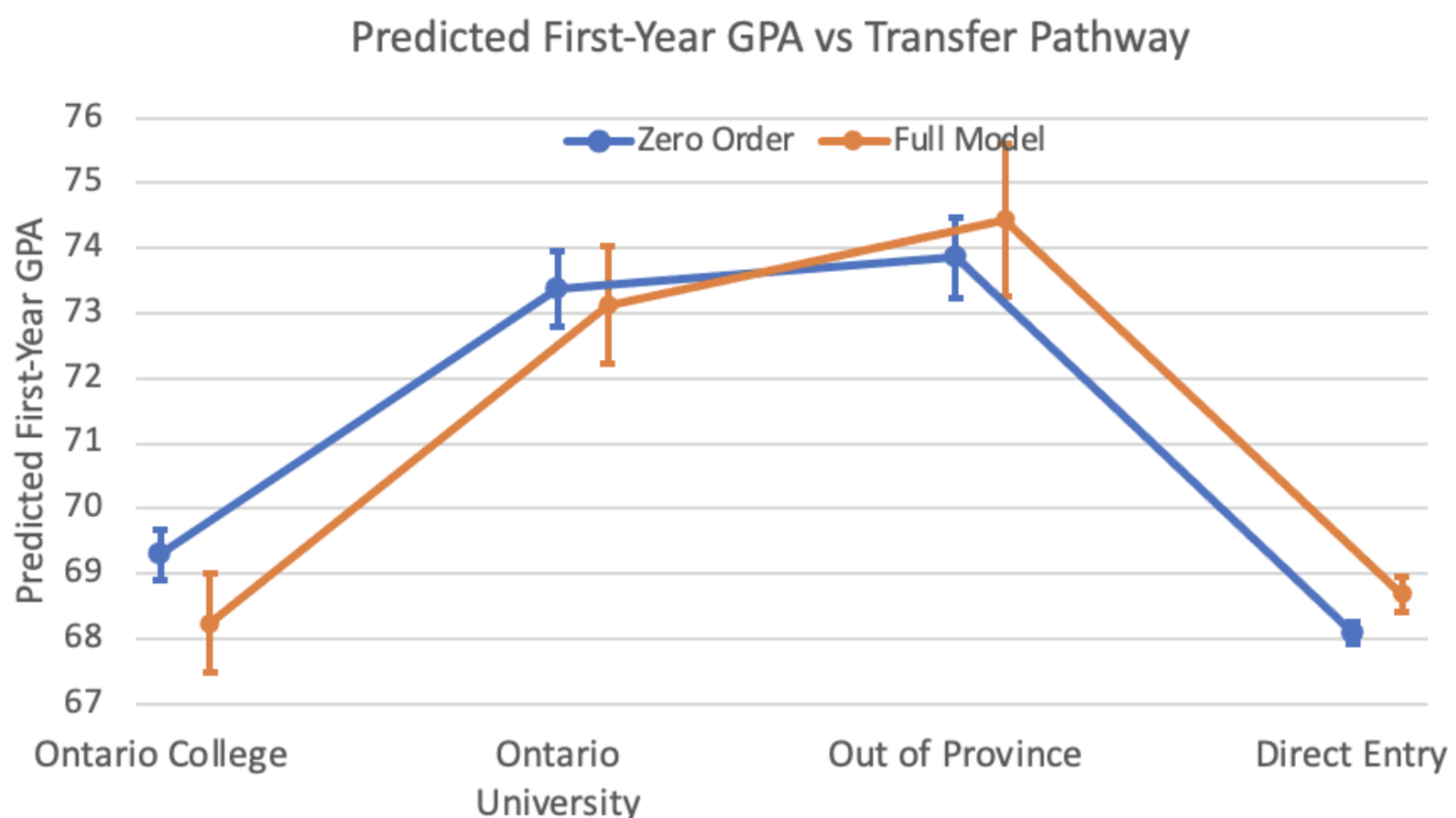
Transfer students from Ontario colleges have the lowest first-year Grade Point Average (GPA), followed by direct-entry students

ONCAT researchers explored the relationship between students' first-year GPAs and the types of transfer pathways they take into Trent University. After controlling for key demographic and program level indicators, they found that transfer students from Ontario colleges have the lowest first-year GPAs, while out of province university transfers had the highest.

These findings are not entirely surprising given that direct-entry students and college-to-university transfer students are potentially experiencing a university environment for the first time. In contrast, one might expect that university-to-university transfer students have had the benefit of experiencing their first year of university at a different institution.

Figure 1 represents the average GPA among students in each transfer category (see [full report](#) for details about methodology).

Figure 1: Predicted First-Year GPA vs Transfer Pathway*



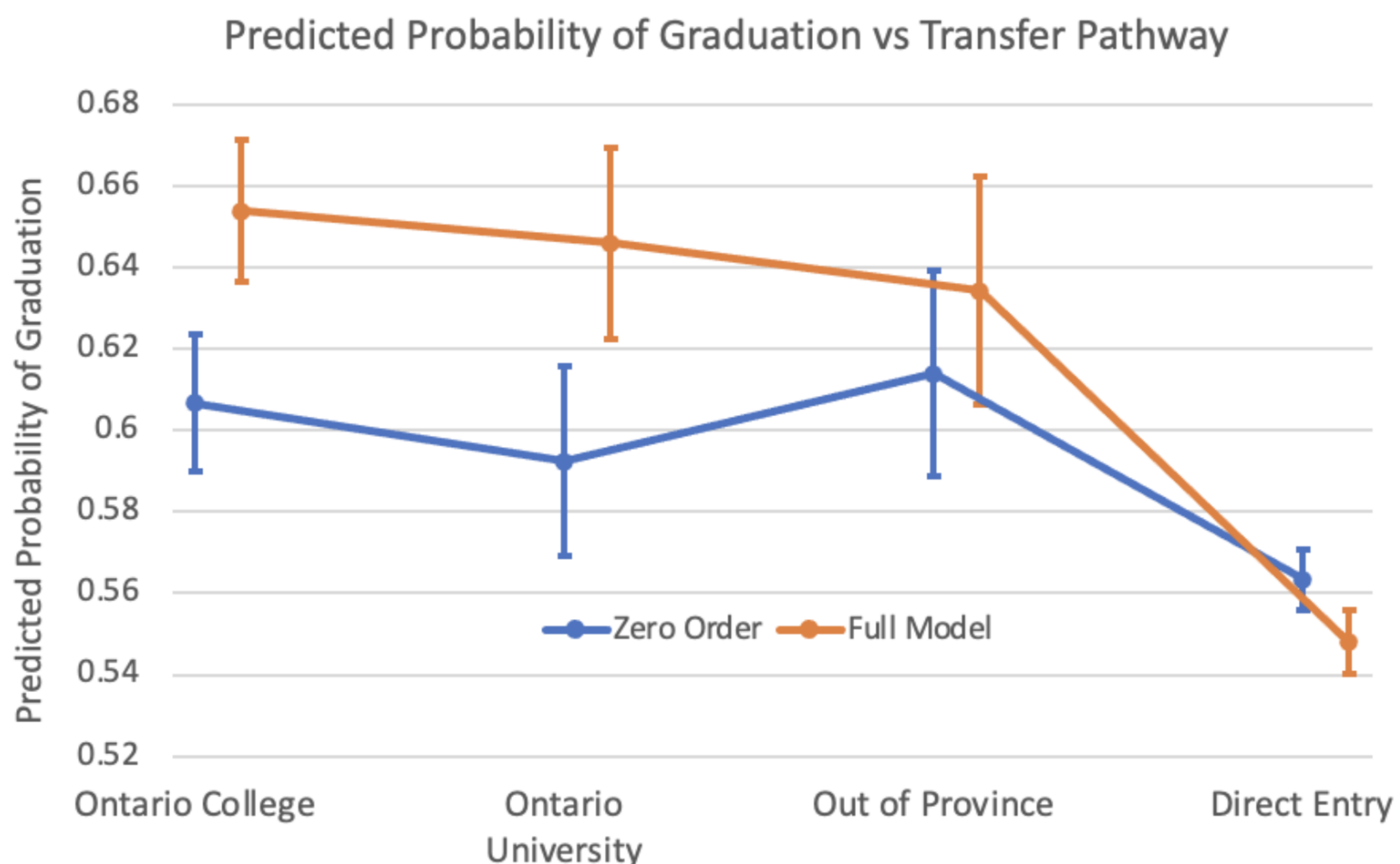
*These pathway categories include students who may or may not have followed an articulated pathway or block transfer arrangement.

Transfer students graduate at higher rates than direct-entry students

Since Trent University is the first participant in phase 2 of the DataPilot, we lack comparable data from other institutions to make broader claims about the differences between direct-entry and transfer students with regards to graduation outcomes. However, [a study looking at graduation rates among multiple types of transfer students and direct-entry students at the University of Toronto](#) found that transfer students from colleges in Ontario had lower graduation rates than direct-entry students.

At Trent University, however, ONCAT researchers found a different pattern. Transfer students from Ontario colleges had the highest comparative graduation rates, followed very closely by students from other Ontario universities, then students from out of province (both college and university), and finally direct-entry students. The difference between college transfer and direct-entry students is statistically significant, while the differences found amongst the other transfer student pathways are not.

Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Graduation vs Transfer Pathway*

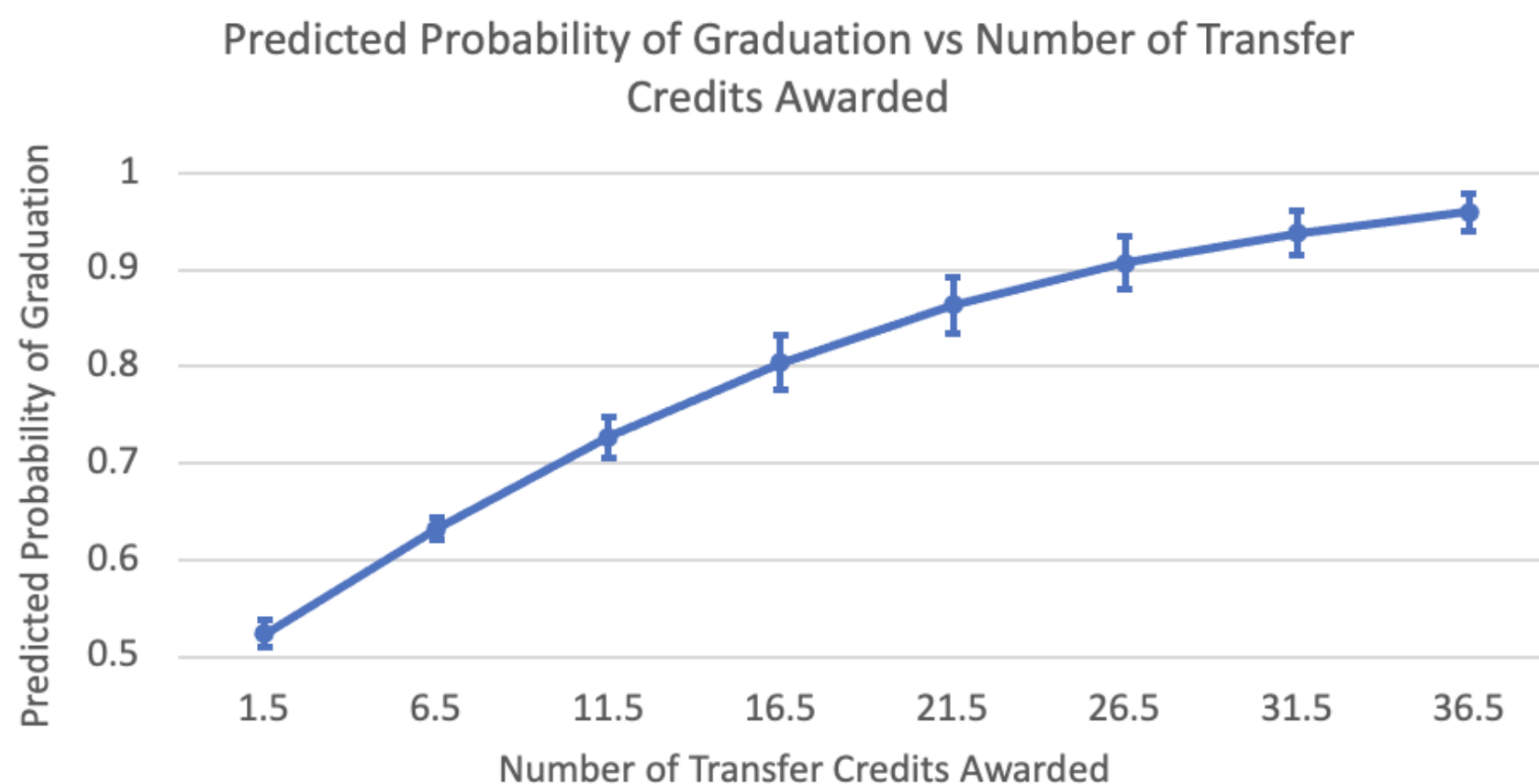


**These pathway categories include students who may or may not have followed an articulated pathway or block transfer arrangement.*

The more transfer credits a student receives, the more likely they are to graduate

As with the findings from [the previously mentioned research at the University of Toronto](#), ONCAT found a positive association between mean transfer credits awarded and graduation rates. When focusing on the average amount of transfer credits awarded, Trent's mean credits for college transfer (4.6) is considerably higher than the mean reported in the University of Toronto report (2.6) ([see Davies, 2022](#)). This finding might help explain the high graduation outcomes for Trent's college transfer students (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Graduation vs Number of Transfer Credits Awarded



Takeaways

Perhaps the greatest takeaway of this inaugural DataPilot report is that college transfer students are successful when compared with other pathways into Trent University. Although they may struggle academically in their first year, their graduation rates are higher than direct-entry students.

This story is very positive because it suggests that even though college to university transfer students face challenges, they can be supported to succeed. It also upends a common myth, particularly in universities, that transfer students cannot overcome this initial academic hurdle.

Considering that 16% of all college transfer students travel articulated pathways at Trent—more than any other transfer student—understanding the importance of this relationship can help policy makers support and promote the extension of articulated transfer agreements in the province. Currently, one of the major challenges to achieving further articulation is the differing amount of transfer credit that institutions award and the lack of a centralized reporting mechanism where ONCAT can track, with representative data, the total number of articulation agreements in the province. As ONCAT collects this information in increments with the DataPilot, it hopes to understand the nuances of credit transfer and how to best support a variety of students that move between postsecondary institutions in Ontario.

Further Reading

To read the full report, visit [our website](#).



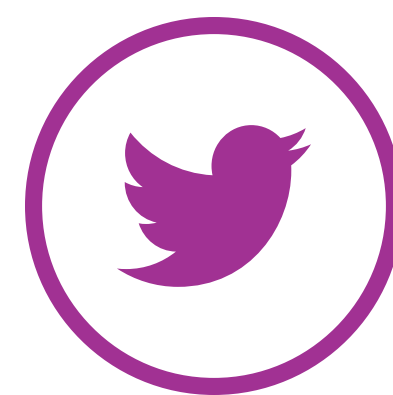
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Established in 2011, the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) was created to enhance academic pathways and reduce barriers for students looking to transfer among Ontario's public colleges, universities, and Indigenous Institutes.