

**Exploring "Reverse Transfer" in Ontario:
A Qualitative Study of
University-to-College Mobility**
Executive Summary



Dr. Reana Maier and Dr. Karen Robson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this study, we explore the experiences of Ontario students who have engaged in ‘reverse transfer’, i.e. moving from university-to-college (UTC), focusing on their reasons for doing so and their transfer experiences, with particular attention to obstacles they may have encountered in order to address systemic barriers through targeted policy recommendations. Data was collected through qualitative interviews with 20 participants who began their post-secondary journey in a university program, but left that program before completing it, and subsequently pursued a college program.

Our research questions were as follows:

- What factors led to the decision to reverse transfer?
- What were participants’ experiences and perceptions of the reverse transfer process, particularly in regard to any barriers encountered?
- If barriers were identified (by the participant or in the analysis phase), how might they have been reduced?

Major Findings

Transfer Motivations

- It was necessary to separate motivations for leaving university and motivations for entering college in order to fully understand PSE journeys.
- Motivations for leaving university were clustered into three themes: academic struggles, mental/physical health/SEN struggles, and future prospects. These were highly interconnected and characterized by difficulties, ranging from mild to severe, coping with university.
- Despite struggles, participants often spent prolonged periods of time attempting to progress through university before deciding to leave.
- Motivations for entering college were more practical and straightforward, related to: subject interest, college learning environment, location, and future prospects.
- UTC transfers are unique in the transfer landscape as they appear to happen only in response to plans going awry; they are never planned.
- The ‘pull factors’ of college only become relevant after the ‘push factors’ of the participants’ university experience force them to reevaluate their plans.

Transfer Experiences

- On the whole, participants found the process of transferring credits quite simple.
- Fifteen participants knew before applying to college that transferring credits would be a possibility, four were informed shortly after starting college, and one was not informed until well into his college program.
- Key sources for information on transfer credits were: online sources (primarily college websites) and college staff (student services, program staff, career services, academic advisors).
- Steps in the transfer credit process were highly similar among the participants, involving three main steps: 1) filling out a form; 2) arranging a university transcript to be sent to college; and 3) providing course descriptions/syllabi to prove equivalency.

- Six participants had all transfer credits requests approved, seven had some of their requests approved, four had no requests approved, and three did not apply for any transfer credits.
- The most common reason for having a request rejected was that the college course was too specialized, and the university course was not enough of an equivalent.
- Main transfer facilitators were college websites and college staff.
- Main transfer obstacles were highly specialized college courses and finding outlines/syllabi from university courses.
- Participants' advice to other potential UTC transfer students fell into two main categories: practical advice about the transfer process and more general advice about post-secondary pathways. In particular, they encouraged transferring students to do research, explore options, and not to let biases in favour of university over college hold them back.

Transfer Reflections

- Overwhelmingly, the participants reflected very positively on their decision to leave university and pursue college.
- Several participants expressed a wish to have transferred earlier or to have gone to college straight out of high school instead of going to university.
- There were some negative or ambivalent reflections about having left university before completing their degrees. These were largely related to a sense of personal failure and/or the negative reactions of others, particularly parents.
- Personal and external (usually parental) negative reflections were tied to cultural and societal expectations about high achievement and perceptions of university education as superior to college education, hence the language of 'reverse transfer'.
- External negative reflections were often tempered over time to varying degrees by relief over participants' improved health or state of mind or 'just doing something' and having a direction again.

Policy Recommendations

- Make transfer credits part of the college (and university) application process, or at least advise any applying student that if they have post-secondary credits, they may be transferrable.
- Colleges to target UTC transfer students with information sessions or packets advising of transfer credit process and make them aware of all support services available, academic and personal, in order to address the struggles that derailed their university studies.
- Continue to develop universal course database to facilitate transfer credits.
- Abandon 'reverse transfer' language in favour of something neutral.
- Make persistence, academic performance, and completion data available to better track PSE pathways and the success of UTC transfer students through their new programs
- More information about post-secondary pathways aimed at high school students, building awareness from the beginning that transfer is an option and may well be a feature of their post-secondary journey.