

Documenting a Skills Inventory for Seamless Mobility

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Project Purpose and Goals

Northern College offers adult upgrading in its traditional campuses with satellite sites in Kapuskasing, Iroquois Falls, Timmins Native Friendship Center, Cochrane, Hearst, Moose Factory, Attawapiskat, and Fort Albany. Northern College has high percentages of Indigenous learners at traditional campuses, with 100% at satellite sites on the James Bay coast. Access to postsecondary education for these learners can be limited to adult upgrading based upon prior experience in schools, and their own feelings of self-worth. Documenting a skills inventory is an innovative approach to adult education curriculum delivery, which can be evaluated as a pilot project with expansion potential across the system.

The goals of this project were to:

- Identify and document a skills inventory for learners in Northern College's adult upgrading programs.
- Provide a transcript 'type' document of these skills.
- Develop a personalized pathway for the learners from adult upgrading through to PSE and beyond.
- Formalize the skills inventory as a curriculum offering in adult upgrading.
- Build capacity within the Adult Education department to continue documenting skills inventories after the pilot project is completed.
- Create a methods manual for future skills inventory in the adult education program or beyond.

Pathway Development

To develop the 'skills inventory pathway', a unique approach was defined. Unique approaches are common at Northern College, which services a geographic area the size of France, utilizing technologies that other colleges are only beginning to employ. The unique approach was to take a 'pre PLAR' or reverse engineered PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment Recognition) approach. Rather than students coming to us to request PLAR, we would reach out to the learner and help them assess what **they already know**. In Northern and remote communities, often people work in employment where they do not have the requisite credential, but they certainly have the real world experience.

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Methodology

The first step was to hire a facilitator for the project, whose role was to determine the skills to be measured and identify a tool to use. The next step was to determine the exact skills related to existing programming to be measured. Once the skills inventory ‘tool’ for Office Administration was completed, the next step was to have learners work within the skills inventory tool, side by side with the facilitator. All learners who were interested in participating, received a handout explaining project goals and the process to identify skills, for an Office Administration career.

Each participant who agreed to complete the activity, was given a resource specifically tailored to the Office Administration program, to help them understand what the overall learning outcomes for an Office Administration certificate. This tool was entitled ***Participant’s Guide*** and provided:

1. Details of the Skills Inventory project
2. Course load for the Office Administration program
3. Course descriptions
4. Vocational learning outcomes for Office Administration
5. Employability essential skills required for Office Administration

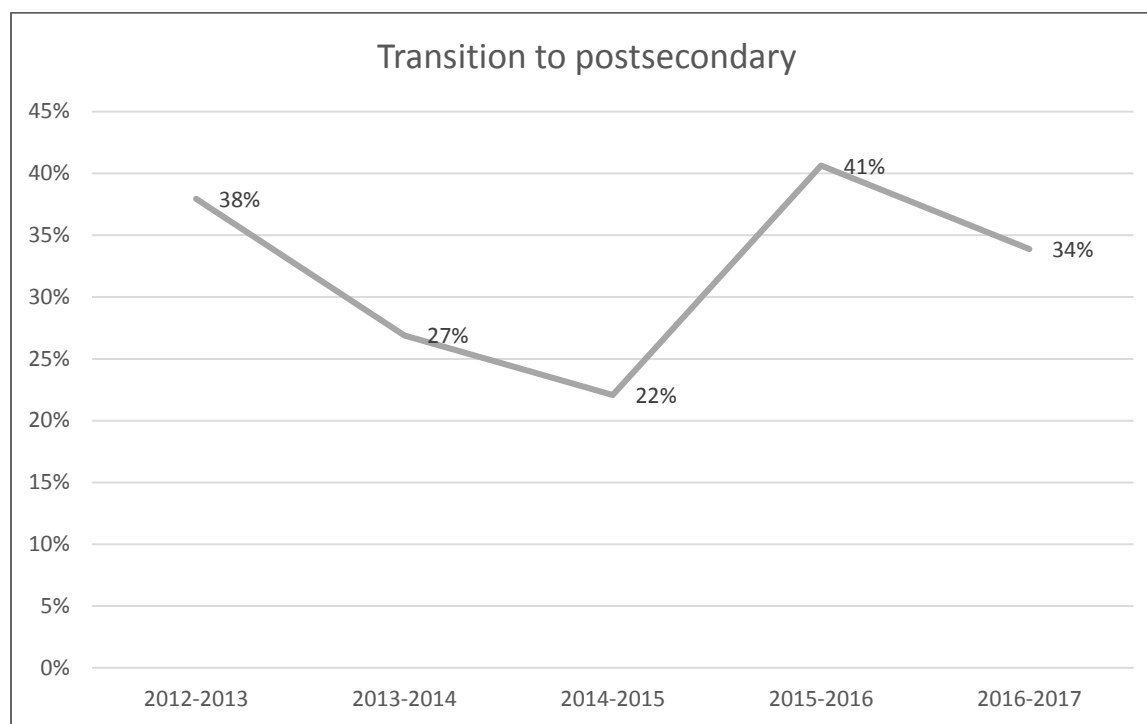
Program Comparison and Analysis

This innovative pathway did not result in a different or new credential. Rather this pathway was tested as a seamless way to engage more adult learners into postsecondary programs to obtain established degrees. The development of the project included alignment with existing, established PLAR processes.

The criteria to compare and evaluate this pathway, was based upon trends and an identified gap within postsecondary related to engagement by adult upgrading students. As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of adult upgrading learners who went on to postsecondary at Northern College, either immediately after completing adult upgrading or later in their learning journey, has been below 50% for the past several years. As part of Northern College’s mission to “Excelling in quality accessible education through innovative programs, services and partnerships for the benefit of our northern communities”, this project is seen as part of the mandate to provide innovative services to Northern College communities. As the bulk of activity occurred at satellite sites in the College’s northern communities, this pathways project filled a gap not previously addressed.

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Figure 1 Adult upgrading learners transition to postsecondary



Implementation process and timelines

PLAR processes are already in place at Northern College; there are no approval processes required to implement this postsecondary pathways. What needs to be monitored is how many learners utilize this pathway and when. Part of the gap analysis identified, was often adult upgrading learners do not move into postsecondary programs immediately following upgrading training. Tracking these learners over time will be important to see how many actually take a postsecondary offering, and in particular those who go on to Office Administration, the program specifically targeted in this project. In addition, we included participants in the study, who were not in adult upgrading, but participated based upon community engagement. This group will also be tracked to identify how this provides seamless opportunities for this group of learners. The Fall of 2018 is the expected first intake of learners into the Office Administration program, who have come through this skills inventory project.

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Promising practices and lessons learned

Evaluation of this pilot curriculum delivery was based upon the logic model framework. The traditional logic model framework includes a balance of inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes. The measures for this project have been mapped to the logic model to demonstrate how it was evaluated.

Table 1 Skills Inventory Evaluation framework

Measure	Inputs	Processes	Outputs	Outcomes
Number of learners participating**	✓			
Office Administration program material**	✓			
Facilitator training	✓			
Skills inventory defined for Office Admin		✓		
Time on task to complete inventories		✓		
Student feedback on process and outcomes		✓		
Facilitator and faculty feedback on process and outcomes		✓		
Number accepted to PSE compared to previous years			✓	
Number of skills inventories completed			✓	
Faculty trained in skills inventory delivery			✓	
Credit recognition defined and recorded			✓	
Community engagement in education**				✓
Defined best practices in skills inventory				✓
Learner pathway expanded				✓

Promising practices

The feedback from students during this process was excellent. Many felt it was an opportunity that could not be passed up. The challenge for them was to self-evaluate, with many wanting to be 'told' what their skill level is. The emphasis on self-evaluation is important for a learner to grow and develop. The promising practice here was having this evaluation at the start of the process rather than in the middle (formative) or at the end (summative). This practice empowers learners to a far greater degree than any other form of delivery or pedagogy. This empowerment breeds confidence for the learner in themselves.

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Lessons Learned

This project provided the opportunity to learn many valuable lessons.

Lesson 1:

Estimate your time carefully when dealing with skills inventories. This is a labour intensive activity. Defining the skills, mapping them to existing program activity and consolidating how to validate them is time consuming. We estimated doing more programs, however, that would have taken the entire project time with no participants involved, so we opted to do one program and gauge uptake.

Lesson 2:

Explanations are critical. This is an innovative approach to learning, explaining the 'how' and the 'why' are necessary for learner engagement. The **Participant's Guide** is a good example of this concept.

Lesson 3:

Allow the learner to approach this in their own time frame. They may want to sit down and do several self-evaluations at once, or they may choose to do one at a time, or anything in between. Let the learner lead!

Lesson 4:

Trust the learner to know themselves. Their self-evaluations may not always be accurate, but we experienced learners tend to underestimate themselves rather than over estimate. As this was a subjective approach, faculty did not always 'believe' a learner could have the skill. Validation established the correlation between the self-evaluation and the outcome.

Lesson 5:

Prepare to change and adapt as you go. This is true of any project, but was even more evident in this situation. Even the look of the documents was revised through the process, to assure information was presented in a user friendly manner for the learner.

Lesson 6:

The team recognized upcoming change as communities will begin to see an increase in community members obtaining a recognized credential. The more community members that obtain credentials the more employers will raise expectations about the need for a credential. This will raise the knowledge and skill level within jobs within the communities. This will also hold true for all small towns and communities in Northern Ontario

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Recommendations

The skills inventory approach offers many opportunities for seamless pathways for learners. To facilitate these opportunities, the following recommendations have been made.

Recommendation 1:

Skills inventories be developed for 5-10 college program offerings in Ontario. If the most popular programs were targeted, skills inventories could be created that open additional pathways for learners.

Recommendation 2:

While internal co-curricular recognition was created, a more robust credit (badging/micro-credential) system needs to be established across institutions, to encourage the seamless nature of this pathway.

Recommendation 3:

With this tool now available, it is recommended that Northern College reevaluate the present PLAR procedures/policy. Furthermore, it is recommended that staff from Advising Services also be trained as they are the first step in meeting with potential PLAR candidates at the College.

Recommendation 4:

The adult upgrading system provincially should utilize this skills inventory approach. This would mean training on a provincial basis.

Recommendation 5:

A provincial pilot project to examine the development of a skills passport as a way to credential skills inventories should be undertaken.