

RESEARCH BRIEF

Exploring University Faculty Perceptions on Curriculum Evaluation

Sociology as a Case of First-Year Transferability

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Introduction

Students wishing to transfer credits from two-year colleges to four-year degree-granting universities (i.e., via vertical transfer) have long been an empirical focus of credit transfer research (Lipscomb et al. 2019; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Successful vertical transfer often requires close institutional partnerships between two- and four-year institutions (Kisker, 2007; Xu, Ran & Fink 2018). There is a growing volume of research focusing on various facets of these partnerships, such as the policies informing them (Hodara et al., 2017; Roksa & Keith, 2008), students' qualitative experiences with vertical transfer (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Maliszewski & Hayes, 2020), and the demographic variables that predict various vertical transfer outcomes (Giani, 2019; Shapiro et al., 2017).

However, missing from this literature is a focus on faculty involvement. Recent Canadian research has examined university faculty experiences participating in articulation agreements and transfer more broadly (Bowker, 2019) but does not address curriculum evaluation processes specifically. Faculty ownership over the equivalency process is widespread and underscores faculty members' role as "stewards of their discipline's curriculum" (Compton et al. 2012, p.48), yet little research examines 'how' faculty members evaluate course outlines, which are often the single object of credit transfer assessment.

Studying faculty perceptions about curriculum evaluation and transfer can be tremendously useful for policy development, as it has long been a 'black box' (Hyatt & Smith, 2020). At a provincial level, by exploring faculty decision-making, we can learn more about potential pathways and barriers for college-to-university transfer. Understanding disciplinary norms in faculty decision-making is an important but understudied facet of transfer research. By focusing on a single discipline, we can develop our understanding of the transferability of a high-demand course/elective, like sociology, offered in many college programs. More importantly, we hope this framework is replicable to other fields of study, allowing transfer stakeholders to assess comparability and alignment in course content with faculty perceptions.

In this brief, we address these gaps in faculty/transfer studies by interviewing Ontario university faculty in sociology to explore disciplinary evaluation processes and their potential relationships with transfer. We complement faculty interviews with content analysis of college and university introductory course outlines. This unique design aids in our understanding of faculty decision-making in curriculum assessment, the intersection between content creation in practice versus perception, and its implications for vertical transfer.

Framing the Problem: A Non-Standardized Transfer System

Unlike many U.S. states, wherein there are guaranteed pathways into university for many two-year college graduates, Ontario relies on a more decentralized system.¹ In the absence of guaranteed (standardized) pathways, students can either transfer a block of credits (seen in 3+1 agreements) or rely on course-to-course equivalencies. ONCAT wishes to understand the first-year transferability of high-traffic college courses like Introduction to Sociology, which are often included as electives or compulsory credits in General Arts and Science diploma/certificate programs. These programs serve as potential entry points to university and are often packaged and promoted as such. One reason for our interest in university-equivalent arts and sciences courses is that in other jurisdictions, such as British Columbia, associate degrees have served as a base for improved transfer conditions. A potential reason for such an uptake is that general education courses “may be more difficult to graft” onto “a base of career education” (Skolnik, 2010, p.14). The career-oriented structure of many college programs in Ontario makes it harder to align with the content of the general courses taken in the first year of university. What makes this study unique is that it focuses on elements that are critical specifically to course-to-course equivalencies, thereby allowing for a broader perspective, and capturing the ad hoc nature of transfer decisions. Current transfer research that interviews university faculty looks at their participation in articulation committees (Bowker, 2019), whereas the majority, outside of undergraduate coordinators or departmental chairs, may not have ever encountered transfer.

Perceptions of College Transfer by University Faculty

Qualitative studies in transfer have studied various facets of faculty involvement. Most recently, Bowker (2019) interviewed university faculty who were identified as being involved in articulated pathways and found that they had perceptions of college transfer students as being unprepared. This idea of “transfer shock” is well established in transfer literature (see Taylor and Jain 2017; Stewart & Martinello, 2012). However, most studies have failed to link faculty perceptions about college transfer with their actual evaluation processes. Qualitative research examining faculty perceptions have either been from the perspective of college faculty on student preparedness (O’Donnell, Miller & Fowler 2018) or from faculty and other ‘institutional agents’ who have an administrative function related to transfer, like departmental advisors (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). None of this research,

1. According to 2020 data from the Education Commission of the United States, there are currently 35 U.S. states with mandated guaranteed transfer policies, allowing associate degree holders to transfer all of their credits into a publicly funded institution and enter at the junior-standing level (3rd year).

however, includes interviews with faculty from a specific discipline, with either direct experience administering transfer, teaching first-year courses (often the subject of equivalency debates), or making course equivalency decisions.

Focus of This Analysis

Through this brief, we address the following questions:

1. How do college and university introductory sociology course outlines compare with one another?
2. What do sociology faculty think is important learning for first-year students?
3. How do faculty evaluation practices correspond with their perceptions of college transfer students?

Last year, ONCAT conducted a content analysis of a representative sample of introductory sociology course outlines offered at Ontario colleges (see Missaghian, 2021). The goal was to understand the structure and content of courses offered as part of General Arts and Science (GAS) programs that serve as potential launching points for students transferring from college to university. This project was also completed in preparation of the interviews to help inform questions by developing our own knowledge of what university faculty members may encounter when evaluating college-level course outlines. In this paper, we also analyze a comparative sample of university introductory sociology course outlines.

University course outlines were collected from institutions whose faculty members participated in interviews, and were freely shared upon request, or from institutions who made their outlines publicly available online. We employed a similar framework used in a previous ONCAT [report](#), which drew from ranked sociological concepts identified in content analyses conducted in the United States.² We used their ranking system to search for the presence of key sociological themes and conducted a manual reading as well. By doing this we developed a sense of how 'core' sociology is represented in Ontario university courses, which allowed for direct comparisons with their representation in college outlines. In total, 19 outlines were collected from 11 institutions. It is customary for some universities to have multiple sections of introductory classes; we wanted to include these where possible to remain cognizant of within-group differences.

2. The American research was based on analyses of course descriptions and other qualitative features found in community college course catalogues (see Rowell and This 2013; Kain et al. 2007) and survey data collected from university faculty (see Persell et al. 2007; Wagenaar 2004). They identified and produced ranked lists of the top-referenced sociological concepts/topics/themes in first-year sociology courses.

Our initial interview sample was stratified according to “high” and “low” credit transfer institutions, based on Ministry data reporting on the number of transfer students enrolled as a percentage of total undergraduates. We identified our top and bottom five, and sent out recruitment emails to faculty in those institutions.³ The top transfer institutions are normally smaller, teaching-intensive universities and those at the bottom are normally research-intensive. We also employed purposive and quota sampling to target sociology faculty that have taught first-year classes, as well as those who have acted as undergraduate chair. Administrators are often tasked with transfer requests and delegate equivalency decisions when course expertise is needed. Professors who have taught introductory sociology were recruited to capture the issues pertinent to first-year transferability. We ended up with faculty representing the top seven credit transfer institutions, but recruiting from research-intensive universities was more difficult, as faculty members were less likely to respond to our invitation. In the end, we were able to interview four faculty from research-intensive universities. Twelve faculty were interviewed in total.

Findings

College Versus University Sociology

“I am in favor of figuring out how to package messaging about the academic streams in colleges and repackage them as groundwork laying, rather than the traditional relationship between colleges and universities, which is universities will tend to do the more theoretical or the more intellectual formation and the colleges will do the more applied formation. Separate that out a little bit more and have an academic stream for university preparation. I don't know. It may be that the packaging needs some love, rather than reinventing everything.” —Julie, Sociology Professor⁴

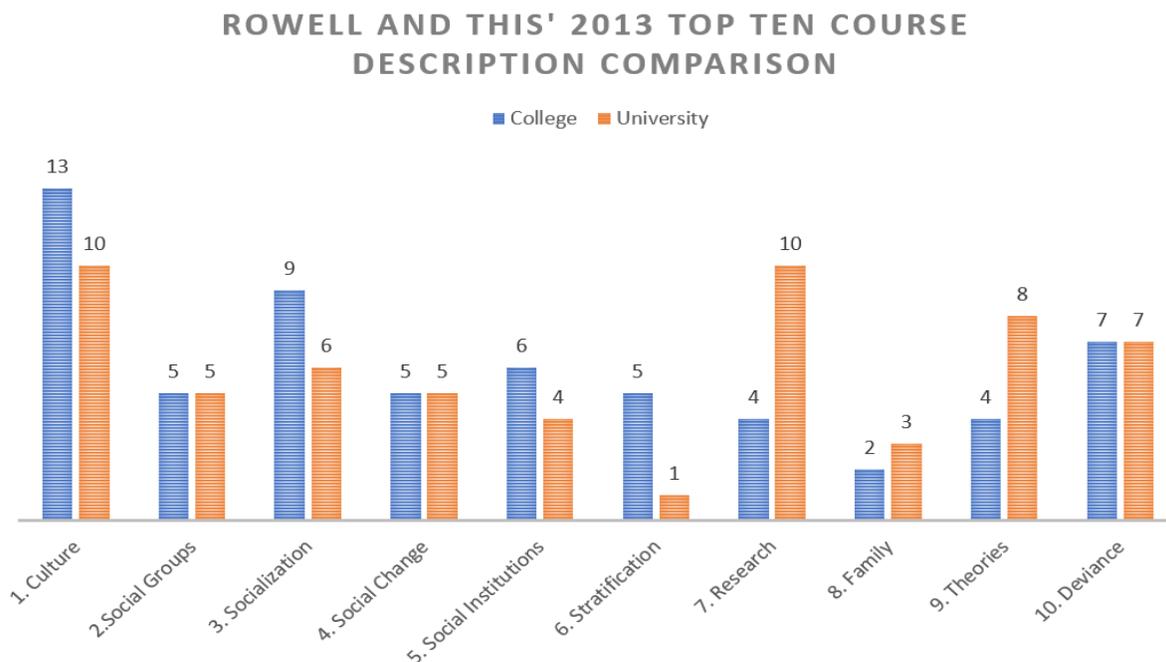
Interviews with university sociology faculty revealed, overall, that there may still be pronounced differences in the way university faculty perceive Ontario colleges and the nature and quality of the education provided therein. In the quotation above, the fundamental contrast between colleges and universities is established—colleges being places for applied career training and university serving a more holistic, theoretical training purpose. These divisions were cemented in the 1960s in Ontario’s educational policy and still linger today (Skolnik, 2010).

3. This division closely mirrored other models in Ontario, differentiating between institutions according to research-intensive versus smaller teaching-oriented institutions (Jonker & Hicks, 2016), as well as universities representative of the geographic expanse of Ontario. Universities located in the GTA, Metro Toronto, Northern, Central, Eastern and Southwestern Ontario were all represented among the course outlines and faculty interviewed.

4. Each interview participant’s name has been assigned a randomized pseudonym. Names of courses and institutions have been anonymized as “A.” For example, College “A,” University “A,” and Course “A.”

This dichotomy between applied and theoretical, however, was not represented in the content found in university and college introductory sociology course outlines. Our comparisons show curriculum content and delivery, which, for the most part, share much in common, particularly in their representation of 'core' sociological concepts (see Missaghian, 2020). For example, our analysis of course descriptions showed that core sociological concepts/topics like 'Culture' were represented as much in college course descriptions, if not more, even with two fewer outlines in that sample. The main differences are the higher incidence of mentions of 'research' and 'theory' in the course descriptions in the university outlines (see **Table 1**). The university course descriptions were generally longer and more detailed,⁵ which could explain the discrepancy; nevertheless, despite the importance of course descriptions as the face of an outline, they do not always represent content that can be found in other sections. When the entire course outlines were examined, using Wagenaar's (2004) top 11 sociological concepts for first year university courses (which focused more on sociological skills, like 'critical thinking' and 'evaluating' research), the original discrepancy between 'research' and 'theory' disappeared; college outlines cited and included these sociological skills more across the entirety of the outline (see **Table 2**). However, the simple 'counts' and occurrences of these concepts does not tell the whole story, as qualitative differences in course content still existed apart from these.

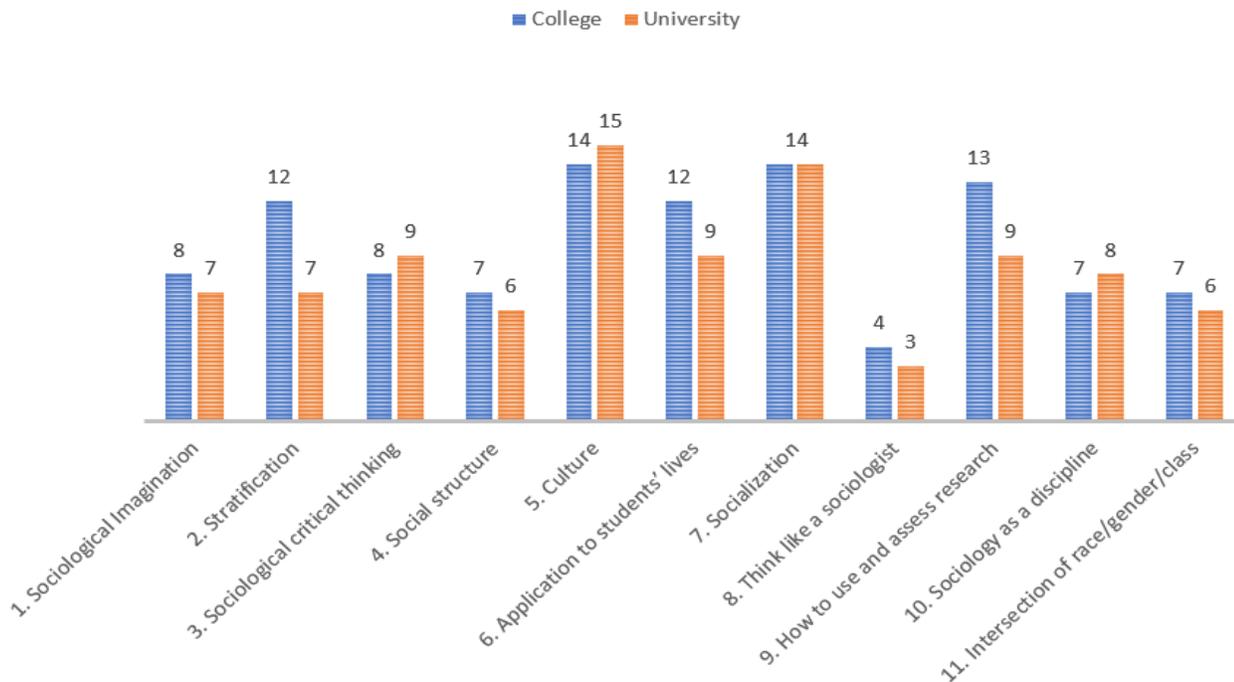
Table 1



5. This was the case for the 3/19 university courses which were full-year, but also for some of the half courses as well. The entire sample of college outlines were half-courses. Future research should also examine available continuation courses (sociology part II), where available to have more direct comparisons between college and university.

Table 2

WAGENAAR'S TOP 11 ONTARIO COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY COURSE OUTLINE COMPARISON



The most notable of these differences was with regards to the quantity and type of readings within college versus university outlines. The university outlines often contained additional readings, besides a single textbook, either in recommended texts or mandatory peer review journal articles, which were meant to supplement reading from the primary text. Several institutions, like U of T, Western, Queen's, and York listed a central textbook, but also supplementary readings, which comprised an alternative text or shorter readings. For one of the U of T (three in total) and Western (two in total) courses in our sample, the readings consisted of multiple peer-reviewed journal articles, in addition to the required textbook chapter. The inclusion of additional readings was something that faculty pointed to in their interviews as one of several differences between college and university courses; thus their concerns here corresponded with the course outlines. During one of the interviews, Cynthia, a professor at a high CT institution, talked about her experience helping a college professor at a regional school articulate their introductory class for equivalency at her university. The college professor she worked with expressed concern about her students' overall reading comprehension and writing ability. She described the interaction as follows:

“So in our course, students were reading a chapter every week from a textbook, but also condensed or shortened academic articles. And she didn’t think that “College A” students would have the ability to kind of parse those sorts of academic journals. The same with the writing skills, the writing skills she figured were much weaker.”

Faculty also cited more rigorous writing requirements as being another key distinguishing feature between college and university sociology. For example, Julie, who was quoted at the beginning of this section, also highlighted the lack of emphasis on writing at the college level:

“The struggle that I think we had in sociology, and I think is more ubiquitous with looking at transfer credits from colleges generally, is the expectations around learning outcomes and the intensity of the writing ... Look, the writing conventions and the writing expectations and the mastery of methodological and theoretical commitments is very different coming out of the college system than the university system, at least in sociology. I would say that typically in an intro sociology course, you would expect to have several written components for which you would have to produce original analysis for which you would receive considerable feedback, both on an ability to apply a theoretical lens, an ability to present literature, to analyze original journal articles ... And also especially, how to write, reference, cite and present arguments in a more professional academic fashion.”

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the ‘rigour’ or ‘intensity’ of writing assignments, especially without access to the assignments themselves, we did scan for their presence in course outlines. We can also compare what percentage of the evaluative breakdown of courses they comprise. Our comparison of first-year sociology outlines demonstrated that the proportion of university intro soc courses that included a critical essay or essay assignment component as a significant part of their evaluation breakdown outweighed the presence of such evaluations in college. Compared with university sociology (10/19), which had just over half of their courses include a critical essay, only 4/17 college sociology outlines included a critical essay, or essay assignment component that made up a significant percentage of the overall course evaluation scheme. Thus, while faculty perceptions did not align with the presence of concepts covered in intro classes, they were aligned when it came to comments about differences in reading quantity and the presence of critical essay assignments.

Faculty Experiences with Transfer

Some of the divergences between faculty perceptions about college curriculum and how they are represented in course outlines are noteworthy because these outlines are the very tools by which faculty make equivalency decisions about transfer credits. Faculty pointed out this discrepancy on several occasions, highlighting the “underlying difficulty” of developing equivalency formulas for similar but “not equivalent” courses. Nancy, who teaches at a Northern Ontario institution, referred to the course outline as “not a good document” since faculty have to rely on “keywords.” She suggested “looking at how this is being tied throughout.” Her comment highlights some of the limitations discussed in this brief about relying solely on keywords in the course description, without looking at an outline as a whole.

In the previous section, we established that sociology faculty members perceived differences in the qualitative dimensions of college versus university education. They felt there was more of an emphasis in university on theory, methods, critical writing, and thinking, as opposed to the applied education focus on career training in colleges. Despite these sentiments, those faculty who shared their experiences with making credit transfer equivalency decisions were satisfied with granting credit equivalency and using the course outline as their tool. James, an acting chair for his department, shared his willingness to grant transfer credit if it met certain basic criteria:

“I’ll say I’ve been doing those evaluations for six months. So, I probably have the least amount of experience of anyone you’re going to interview. But what I have noticed is that when I get the request from transfer students who are trying to figure out, ‘does the intro course they took or something qualify as soc,’ I’m just looking for: was that an introductory text in sociology? Is it clearly identifiable? And then we give them the credit. I don’t know what it would take for me to say, ‘no, the intro soc or something you took wasn’t good enough for our school so we’re not going to give you that credit.’”

Faculty members like James were not ‘giving away’ transfer credit; they had criteria, like the quality of a textbook, for example. Janet, another undergraduate chair, also highlights the textbook as a major criterion for granting equivalency:

“So, is it just a standard sociology textbook? And then it’s more of just a check that they’ve got it, or if it’s not, what are the actual written texts that they use to support the learning? And I think sometimes I look at assessments, but also I don’t think I’d ever denied credit. Like I said before, I would never deny a transfer credit based on the type of assessment because I don’t really want to make my decisions that way.”

Janet's comments are indicative of the autonomy that faculty seemed to enjoy with regard to making credit transfer decisions. While they shared various criteria they used to evaluate course outlines, they were not hampered by them, and could use their own judgement and expertise where needed. Thomas, a faculty member and undergraduate chair cited the 'feel' he had for doing evaluations based on the expertise he had accumulated over the years. In the passage below, he elaborates on his decision-making about whether to handle a request independently or defer to one of his colleagues:

"I make the decision. I would do that (defer) if I really have the feeling this needs to be clarified, but usually I feel my knowledge is comprehensive enough in terms of looking at the syllabi to know there can never be 100% match of course, right? Because these courses are taught in slightly different ways. But I have so many years of experience, being on curriculum committees ... so I have a good sense of the standards."

The "different ways" mentioned here could also be referring to how introductory courses are packaged. Another issue faculty identified with granting equivalency were with half credits versus full-year credits. All the intro courses that we examined as part of our college outline analysis comprised half credits, or 42 hours of instruction over a 14-week period, which is standard for a course that runs for half the year. However, universities either offered their intro classes as a full-year credit (September to April), or split the class into two halves: one offered in the fall semester and the second half in the winter.

A degree of variation in how courses are delivered is inevitable, particularly in a decentralized system like Ontario's. However, this can pose problems for equivalency as we have seen in this section. As Matthew, a former undergraduate chair at a high-CT institution, states: "And quite often the people coming to us have done a half credit course or a one-term course. So that quite often was the main reason why the equivalency wasn't established." This discrepancy between course deliveries is also symptomatic of a system that relies less on articulated pathways and more on course-to-course equivalencies. More partnerships between college and universities, like the kind described by Julie in the following passage, can help facilitate more alignment between college and university curricula:

"I'm trying to remember the year. It would have been 2013, maybe 2014. Our department of sociology did work directly with colleagues at College "A" about how to create a pathway for the required first year. Our course is called Sociology "A", the Introduction to Sociology. It's got different codes at every university, but here, it's a full-year course. And I know at other universities, they will have half-year courses as your foundational. Ours is a full-year, full survey-of-the-field course."

My colleague Nina (pseudonym), who was teaching our intro course at the time, worked quite closely with colleagues at the local College "A" to look at both curriculum content, contact time, and assessment tools that would be important to have in place for our department to recognize that credit as equivalent or roughly equivalent to our intro course that opens up access to all our other courses. Because if you don't take our first-year course, you don't have the prerequisite for anything else in the program, pretty much."

Conclusion

This unique exploration finds that content between college and university introductory sociology courses exhibits many similarities, yet some university faculty perceive college curriculum and students to be less rigorous and prepared. However, even though faculty perceptions often did not match differences in curriculum, there were instances when their reservations were supported by the data. For example, faculty exhibited concerns about college transfer students' exposure to critical essay writing assignments, and we observed that only 4/17 college outlines included a detailed essay writing component amongst their major evaluations.

The broader goal of this research brief was to explore potential first-year college-to-university equivalencies and the role of university faculty in making transfer decisions. One of our central findings is that some sociology faculty seem to hold perceptions about the college system as one whose goal is occupational training. The university system, on the other hand, serves a more intellectual purpose: to develop critical thinking about complex issues. Admittedly, we expected to see some convergence in content between college and university sociology, as we sampled courses from General Arts and Science programs that have an explicit transfer purpose (Missaghian, 2021). Thus, the expectation is that these courses should mirror courses students take in first-year university sociology.

We found support both for similarity and differences. Future research could look at the convergence of course outlines from more vocationally oriented diploma programs without a transfer purpose. However, despite GAS programs possessing the potential for higher affinity, there is certainly no widespread articulation of these courses across the sector—articulation of credits still takes place, often on an ad hoc basis, through course-to-course equivalencies. Our interviews also revealed that faculty have a great deal of autonomy in this decision-making and demonstrated consistent criteria for assessing course outlines, as well as being generally favourable to granting transfer credit.

From a policy standpoint, there are several ways to interpret these findings and their prospective implications. One potential takeaway is to consider the possibility of General Arts and Science college programs playing a similar role to transfer associate degrees in the U.S. and in British Columbia (Arnold et al., 2018). Policy makers should be aware of the potential of these programs to play the same vertical transfer function as associate degrees currently do in those jurisdictions; although currently, they represent a small proportion of annual college enrolment by program in Ontario. Having associate degrees that provide guaranteed transfer opportunities is not something that can develop without the close collaboration between colleges and universities and government support. Consequently, research like ours can hopefully help nudge the sector to begin seriously considering the development of articulation committees on a broader scale. Currently, Ontario lacks any accountability framework that would prompt university and college faculty to collaborate to discuss disciplinary articulation; GAS programs could be a good starting point, given the prospect of aligning their theoretical and methodological aims. This is not to suggest that articulation between more applied programs like police foundations, for example, should not be undertaken; certainly, these programs do provide transfer opportunities. However, as was suggested by some of the faculty interviewed here, there is an incongruity between the applied career approach in those programs versus the more 'critical', 'theoretical,' and methodologically rigorous training offered at the university level.

Given the small sample size of faculty, and the focus on a single discipline, our findings are not generalizable, either to sociology faculty in Ontario or to other disciplines. However, they do signal a need for larger-scale quantitative research on university faculty perceptions about college curricula, as well as transfer. Future researchers could administer surveys, addressing issues we have identified here, to a representative sample of faculty members across the province. This wider scan of the sector is ever more necessary given that the majority of faculty are not engaged with transfer at an administrative level.

Another limitation of this research is that course outlines, while an important tool in assessing the content of a course, are not always indicative of pedagogical practices, or the micro-interactions that take place inside the classroom. Qualitative interviews can be complemented by observational research that examines lecturing practices and teacher student interactions. These could certainly vary among different institutions, particularly those with smaller class sizes.

While several faculty members acknowledged that they had no issue granting credit equivalencies for 'high quality' courses that were similar to their introductory class, they did not believe that an equivalency necessarily meant students would be successful.

Faculty members felt more comfortable with granting unspecified rather than specified credits, prompting students to take the introductory course in their discipline. Faculty expressed a desire for students to take all the courses required of a major to help orient them to the rigours of the program and the style of sociology taught at their institution. Across all the findings, as was captured by the quotation presented at the beginning of that section, there was an implicit and sometimes explicit desire to see college diploma programs more closely mirror the theoretical and critical stances of courses taught at the university level. The applied and occupation-oriented nature of some diploma programs, it was feared, would not prepare students for the critical thinking and intellectual rigour of theoretical and methodologically rigorous university classes. These findings signal the need for articulation committees, comprised of both college and university faculty, to be formed. Analyzing high-affinity courses within high-affinity programs, as we have done here, can serve as a launching point for such committees to engage in meaningful consultation about the necessary criteria, goals, and merits of articulated pathways.

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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.