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RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Student Pathways into Ontario Colleges' Bachelor's Degrees: Patterns of mobility, student characteristics, academic and labour market outcomes

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Introduction

Since 2002, colleges have been offering bachelor's degrees in Ontario. Now that Ontario colleges can also offer three-year degrees, we can expect to see more students enrolling and graduating from an Ontario college with a BA. Students who enter college degree programs often do so using transfer pathways, either from the same college diploma program or a university. To understand these pathways and how students' academic and labour market outcomes compare to direct-entry students, Ursula McCloy and Gerardo Infante conducted a study using data from five Ontario colleges that comprise 85% of college degree enrollment.

The data includes all students who enrolled in a degree at Seneca, Conestoga, Sheridan, George Brown, or Humber College between fall of 2015 and winter of 2018 (n=21,036). Students were then followed until winter of 2020. Within each institution, individual students were followed from high school, through other PSE (if applicable), to college degree entry and either graduation or the point they left the degree.

Key Findings

Student Profile

Over half of the degree entrants (55%) had obtained some form of postsecondary education after high school, with over a third of students having previously attended their own college, 17% having attended a university, and over 11% having attended a different college before entering their college degree. Many students had attended more than one institution type. Overall, a fifth of all degree entrants had obtained advanced standing (block credit).

Within the transfer population, 35% of students had obtained block credit, with internal college transfers having obtained the most block credit on average, and university transfers having obtained the least. Females, older students, domestic students not born in Canada, and low-income students were the most likely to have taken a block transfer pathway.

Students who transferred from college, either their own or an external college, were the least likely to have taken university preparatory courses in high school and to have obtained the grades and courses required for admission to a college degree. Instead, college transfers often relied on transfer pathways for degree access.

Student Outcomes

Overall, 75% of degree students continued into their second year of their degree program, 68% of entrants either graduated or continued to the third year of their degree of entry, and 65% obtained a B average or better.

In the full population, transfer students outperformed non-transfer students across all outcomes studied. Degree entrants who took block pathways outperformed those who had not in terms of all measured outcomes, including retention rate, graduation rate, and grades.

In terms of graduation rates, 72% of block pathway students graduated within four years, compared with 41% of those without block pathways. Within the transfer population, those who transferred and obtained block credit also outperformed those who did not obtain block credit, an effect that was seen in both descriptive and regression models.

High school grades and course selection were both important influences on academic outcomes in the full model and within most of the transfer models. Within the transfer population, having graduated with a college or university credential previously was also a positive influence on all outcomes. However, in the internal transfer population, only pre-degree grades, not high school grades or course selection, affected retention and graduation rates.

Key Takeaways

College degree programs provide access to students who have lower high school grades and cannot apply to university degree programs. Additionally, these pathways provide an important access route for diverse students.

As other studies have demonstrated (Davies, 2022; Missaghian, 2022), credit recognition plays a significant role in student success. Those students who received block credit had higher grades, retention rates, and graduation outcomes than those who did not.



<https://oncat.ca/en/projects/student-pathways-ontario-colleges-bachelors-degrees-patterns-mobility-student>



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.