Council of Educators of Toronto

University and college data tracking practices for first-generation and transfer students in the Greater Toronto Area

Project 2016-13

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

This study provides an overview and analysis of institutional data collection, sharing, and analysis practices regarding inter-institutional transfer and student mobility at CET member institutions with a focus on implications for first generation students. Four research questions guided this study:

1. What mechanisms or strategies are currently employed by GTA colleges and university to track and analyze data on credit transfer students in general, and first generation students specifically?

2. What data tracking analysis gaps exist among GTA colleges and universities that if addressed could assist them in their capacity to support access-seeking students transferring between institutions?

3. What capacities exist or can be developed among GTA colleges and universities to track and analyze mobility trends and experiences of credit transfer students as they move between institutions?

4. What does existing research about transfer students tell us about their backgrounds, and how could transfer pathways or supports be designed to facilitate the movement of students, including first generation students, between institutions? What implications are there for academic programming, institutional planning and student services, and system and policy change?

To address these research questions, a literature review, an environmental scan, staff discussion groups, and student focus groups were conducted. A total of nine roundtable discussions with staff from CET member institutions were held from November 2016 to January 2017. The staff members participating in the roundtables included those with responsibilities in areas related to: first generation student programs and advising; student success, access and outreach; financial aid; credit transfer policy and advising; and institutional data and research. A total of 45 staff members participated at nine institutions, including three universities and six colleges. Six student focus groups were held, involving a total of 26 postsecondary students currently enrolled at a CET member institution who were either first generation students, transfer students, or both. The focus groups took place in February 2017 on campuses within the GTA.

Key findings and recommendations are summarized by below.

Identifying First Generation Students
While all institutions work with the Ministry definition of a first generation student, multiple methods are used to identify and count first generation students. These methods, however, are not cross-referenced with one another nor is the information that is collected through each integrated into a single database. Institutions therefore do not have access to a single, comprehensive, or definitive count of the number of first generation students on campus or means of identifying or contacting them.

First generation students should be identified at their first point of entry into Ontario's education system, which for most students would be upon registration for early childhood education or for primary or secondary school. The identification would be derived from the information parents provide about their own educational attainment as part of the registration process for their children. The designation of a student as a first generation student would then be part of the student's record that would follow the student into PSE by virtue of the Ontario Education Number (OEN). This approach would avoid the many problems associated with using a variety of methods to ask PSE students to self-identify.

Identifying and Tracking Transfer Students

Institutions are able to identify students who have previously undertaken postsecondary education at another institution, but only if the student chooses to declare this previous experience on their application form. The onus therefore rests with the student: there is no system-wide data system to which institutions have access that can automatically report on a student's complete postsecondary pathway. In addition, institutions do not have access to any information on the postsecondary experience of students who transfer out of the institution. This speaks to institutions' limited access to data derived from the Ontario Education Number (OEN), which to date has not been implemented in a way that facilitates institutional planning or the design and delivery of student services.

RECOMMENDATION

The restricted access to data derived from the OEN represents a missed opportunity to enable institutions to better understand and serve their students, particularly students who transfer between institutions. For the OEN to live up to its promise, the Government of Ontario should ensure that the data be made accessible to institutional researchers, policy makers, and programs administrators, and provide a firm deadline for doing so.

First Generation Student Programs and Advising

A number of institutions are evolving their approach to first generation students, by gradually folding programs for first generation students into broader programs aimed at any student who might benefit from additional support or guidance. This broadening of focus allows institutions to adopt a "wide net" approach to outreach in which it matters less and less whether they can accurately identify whether a student is a first generation student or not – as long as all students are made aware of the supports that are available, the label attached to the student makes little difference. While some students feel pride in being identified as first generation students, and while first generation students may have distinct needs and experiences, students themselves are not looking for services linked to that designation; more than that, many students are likely to misunderstand the intention behind programs targeted to first generation students, seeing them as programs aiming to assist new arrivals to adjust to life in Canada.

RECOMMENDATION

Given the low resonance and degree of confusion associated with the term "first generation" among students, it appears that the broadening of focus or "wide net" approach in outreach and support to students reported by some GTA institutions is appropriate. The evolution of approach in outreach and service provision for first generation students should be encouraged, as it reflects the lessons learned

COUNCIL OF EDUCATORS OF TORONTO - ACADEMICA GROUP

through experience at each institution. The Government of Ontario should ensure that institutions have the greatest degree of flexibility possible in how to allocate the funding they receive to support first generation students, to ensure that this funding can be used to support approaches that the institutions believe are most likely to reach students most in need of support in transitioning into and through postsecondary education.

Advising Services for Transfer Students

A number of institutions, primarily the colleges, are evolving their approach to advising students transferring between institutions, notably by adopting an approach that is both more proactive and more integrated. This new approach is designed to support the development of a "transfer culture" in which the institution understands itself less as the singular destination for each student and more as a stop on a continuum of learning that begins before and ends after the student's current program of study. Many transfer student focus group participants reported that they had to navigate the transfer process without much assistance from the institution, and students making transfers that can be characterized as adjustments also felt that friends and families often view switching as a suboptimal outcome. The more proactive and integrated approach to advising students about transfer, reported by some GTA institutions, is likely to be helpful as it should result in an improved transfer process for students and it may help to normalize or to reduce the social stigma associated with switching.

RECOMMENDATION

Emerging approaches to advising students on mobility in and out of their current institution that are both proactive and more integrated with other services at the institution should be considered promising practices within the sector. Institutions that are not yet moving in this direction should seek opportunities to learn from the experiences of those that are. In particular, universities should seek to learn from the experiences of colleges, particularly in regard to taking on more responsibilities in the area of advising students on the opportunities for outbound transfer.

The intersection of first generation and transfer students

Services for first generation students and transfers students are currently conceived of and delivered separately, and the implications for student advising and support of possible intersections between the two groups of students have yet to be explored. There is a recognition that first generation students might be more mobile (in terms of demand for inter-institutional transfer) and may be more likely to benefit from the opening up of new transfer opportunities (pathways). That said, institutions are likely to focus more on broadening their outreach to as many students as possible, rather than on narrowing their focus to particular subgroups.

RECOMMENDATION

It is difficult to develop a better understanding of the needs, experiences and outcomes of first generation students as they pertain to mobility in the absence of comprehensive, system-wide data that allows institutions to develop a full picture of the educational pathways of students into and out of their current institution. Further progress in understanding the intersection between first generation students and transfer students can be made once data systems are strengthened as per the first two recommendations advanced above.

COUNCIL OF EDUCATORS OF TORONTO - ACADEMICA GROUP