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RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

New Findings on Postsecondary Transfer Students at the University of Toronto

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Keywords

Postsecondary; transfer; University of Toronto; high school academic performance; transfer credits; academic outcomes

Overview

What are the characteristics and differences between transfer students and non-transfer students at the University of Toronto (U of T)? To answer these questions, this research study compared a subset of transfer and direct-entry students at U of T who attended high school in the Toronto District School Board. The study, which follows up on a similar study completed in 2020, looks at the relationship between high school academic performance and transfer student outcomes. This new research expands on the previous report by including the credit transfer flag, indicating whether and how many transfer credits students received at U of T.

Why it Matters

In Ontario, we lack administrative, longitudinal, and linked data that will help us understand what pathways students travel into post-secondary. While the findings from this report are specific to U of T, this information provides a model for how institutions can evaluate transfer student outcomes at their own institutions. More importantly, by linking the postsecondary data with students' high school records, we learn about early predictors of transfer success and can better identify students who may need more support when they are admitted.

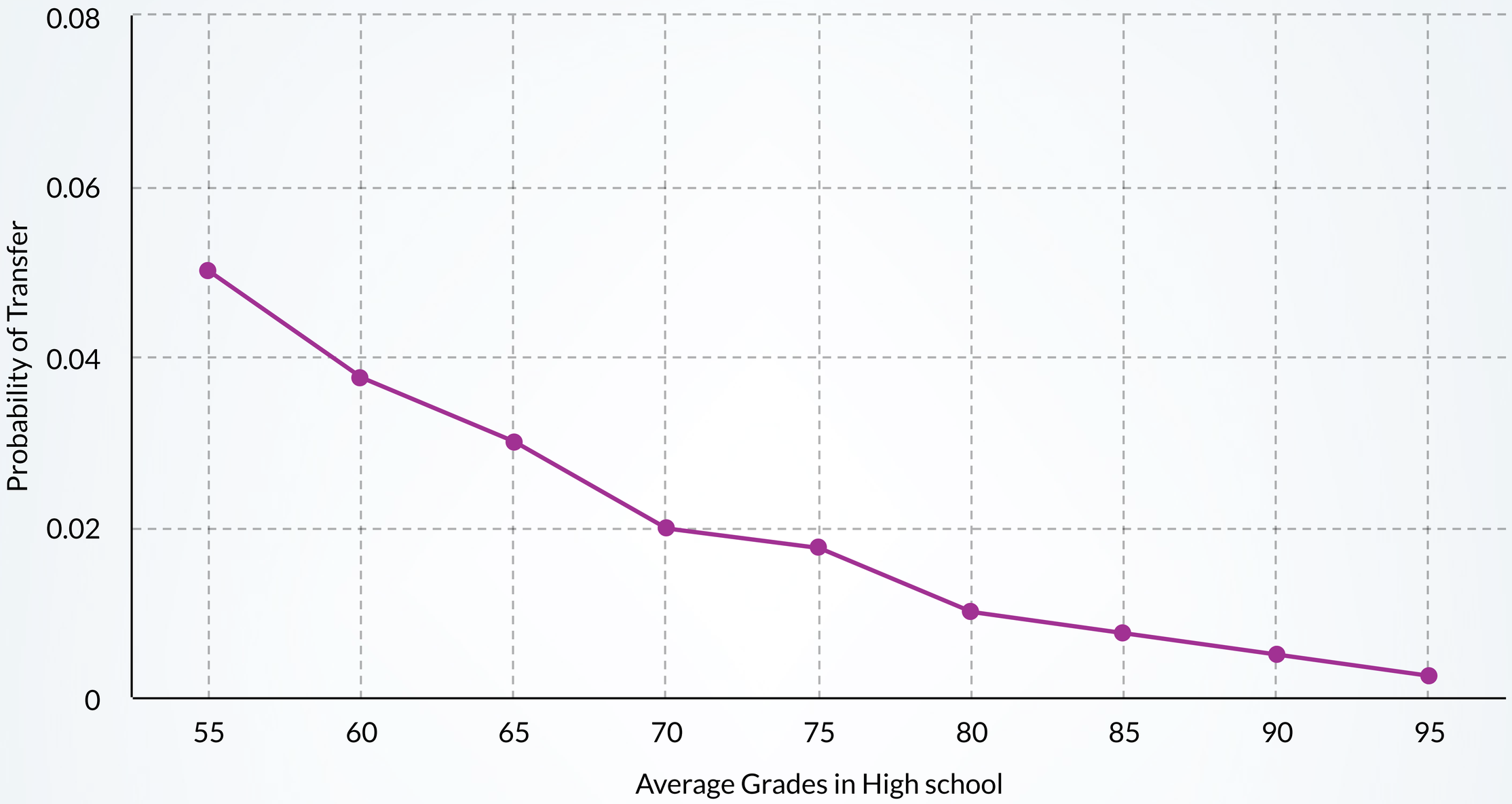
This research should also be of interest to registrars and other postsecondary administrators who make credit assessment policies at their institution. One of the significant findings is that the more transfer credit a student receives, the more likely they are to graduate.

Key Findings

Transfer students have lower high school grades than direct-entry students

Compared to direct-entry students, transfer students were significantly more likely to speak English as their first language, to be female, born in Canada, and to self-identify as “white.” Academically, they had significantly lower high school grades and worse high school attendance than direct-entry students. Transfer students from Ontario community colleges generally had the least conventional academic records.

Figure 2: Probability of Transferring by High School Grades (95% CIs)



Transfer students pursue STEM fields at much lower rates than direct-entry students

While 46% of direct-entry students entered STEM fields, only 26% of transfer students did so. After disaggregating the transfer pathway variable, the researcher found that transfer students from Ontario universities, other Canadian universities, and especially Ontario community colleges each entered STEM fields at statistically significantly lower rates than direct-entry students. Further research should investigate why transfer students are less likely to pursue STEM fields of study. While the current research established a positive association between number of credits transferred and graduation rates, it did not include information on whether transferred credits were part of a more structured articulation pathway. These pathways have been shown to improve transfer outcomes, and it would be useful to know what their influence would be on STEM uptake in transfer.

University transfer students are performing better than college transfer students

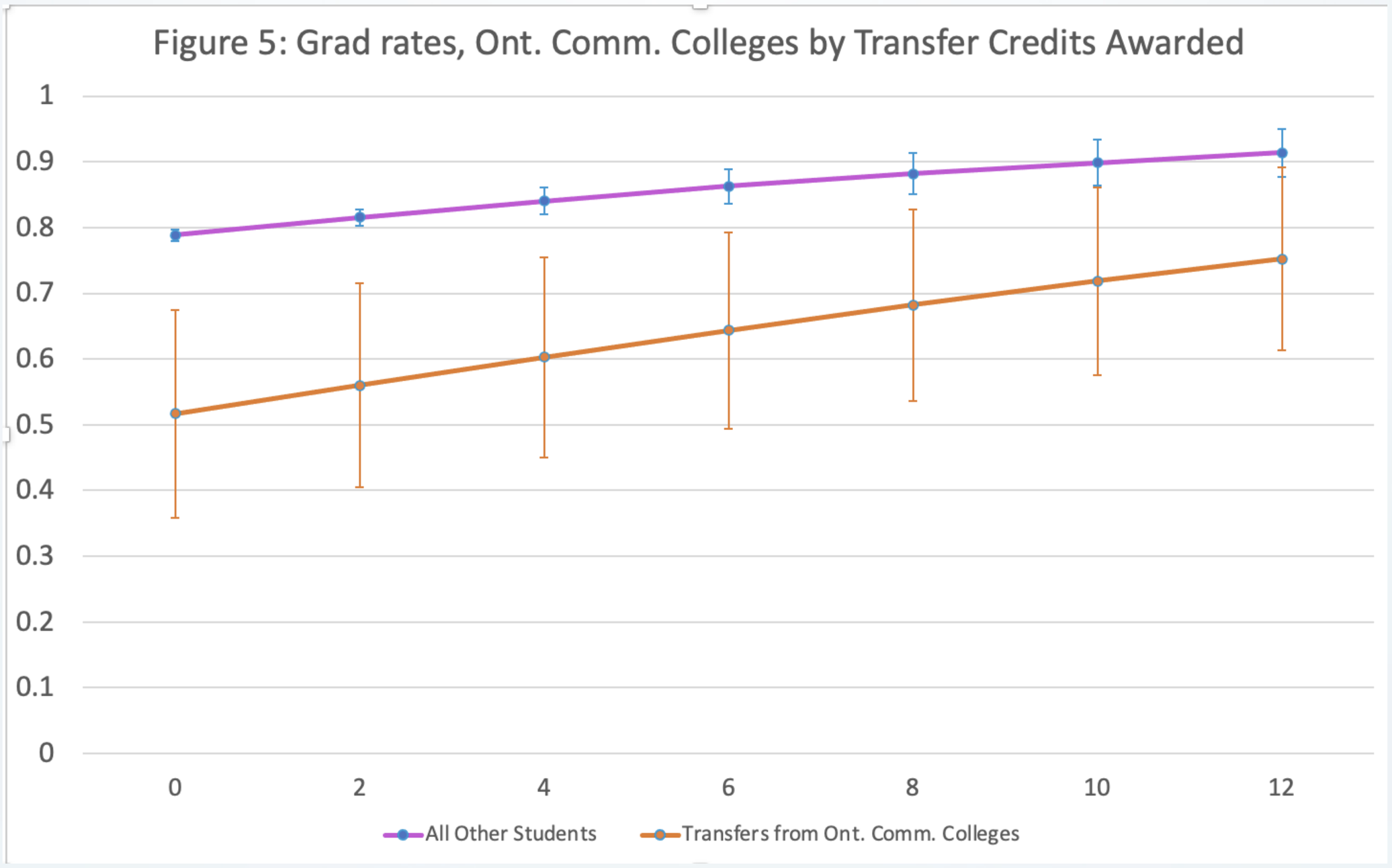
While transfer students from universities were less likely to enter STEM fields at U of T than direct-entry students, they had similar cumulative grade point averages, total credits earned, and graduation rates. In fact, transfer students from Ontario and other Canadian universities graduated at slightly *higher* rates than direct-entry students. This finding suggests that transfer students from other universities are well prepared to succeed at U of T.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of college transfer students at U of T. In addition to being less likely to enter STEM fields of study, they earned fewer total credits and had statistically significant lower graduation rates. Just over half of college transfer students graduated within the timelines of the study. The findings suggest that students' lower graduation rates are the result of weaker academic records in high school and fewer transfer credits awarded.

The more transfer credits a student receives, the more likely they are to graduate

In addition to investigating academic performance, graduation rates, and fields of study, the researcher ran some logistical regression analyses to estimate whether having more transfer credits awarded would boost graduation rates for college transfer students and all other students. Figure 5 shows sizeable gaps in predicted graduation rates between college transfer students and other students when both groups are awarded zero transfer credits; the predicted gap is about 30%. However, looking at 6 and 12 credits awarded, that gap shrinks to about 20% and 10%, respectively, meaning that the predicted graduation rate for college transfer students rises by about 25% if the awarded credits rise from 0 to 12. Overall, these various analyses strongly suggest that being awarded higher numbers of transfer credits can improve university outcomes for transfer students and could help those from colleges narrow gaps between themselves and their peers.

Figure 5: Grad rates, Ont. Comm. Colleges by Transfer Credits Awarded



Takeaways

This research and the similar study that preceded it suggest that college transfer students face deeper social and academic challenges than do direct-entry students. All transfer students incur financial and social costs when they move residences, experience strains from losing old peer networks, and encounter stress as they cope with U of T's competitive environment.

But college transfer students experience these strains while also often lacking the same academic preparation for university enjoyed by their peers. Many of their challenges stem from receiving insufficient credit for previous work. Despite these setbacks, about half remain "on-track" after transferring. The other half fall "off-track" and fail to graduate. They enter U of T already with fewer academic resources than others and are granted fewer transfer credits than their university counterparts.

To address these challenges, institutions should think about two policy improvements:

1. Since awarding transfer credits is associated with better outcomes among all categories of transfer students, universities should strive to develop mechanisms that might award more such credits while retaining their academic integrity. Currently, each institution has its own credit-awarding procedures, but more could be done to systematize their efforts in ways that might grant more credits to deserving students.

2. Since high school track records are important predictors of university outcomes, and since transfer students tend to have worse track records on average than direct-entry students, universities may wish to also provide transfer students (and other students too) with extra academic supports, such as remedial programs, mentoring, etc.

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oncat.ca/en/projects/pse-transfers-tdsb-uoft-data-linkage

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.

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