

Transferability Expectations and Realities: Analysis of Incoming Centennial College Learner Expectations, Realities and Self-Adjusted Perceptions

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Executive Summary

In recent years, Ontario's credit transfer framework has improved postsecondary pathways and resources to help students receive recognition for their prior learning by expanding non-traditional pathways, notably college–college and university–college. As a result, Ontario colleges have experienced an increase in the number of incoming transfer students who wish to change their field of study, upgrade skills, earn additional qualifications, and/or geographically relocate. The credit transfer population represents a growing share of Ontario college students.

With an emergent emphasis on life-long learning and the freedom to move among postsecondary institutions, assistance in navigating the postsecondary education system has become increasingly important. It is necessary that students comprehend the academic regulations and requirements they will encounter so as to form reasonable expectations about recognition of prior learning processes. Credit transfer research has largely examined students' admission rates, performance, retention, and time to graduation. Limited research has focused on student expectations and potential expectation–reality gaps.

This research examines incoming students' credit transfer and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), collectively referred to as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), expectations and experiences. Incoming student expectations are measured against subsequent credits received, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability adjusted between the initial point of intake and near the first term's end. The first part of this analysis involves identifying potential expectation–reality gaps of incoming Centennial College RPL students.

Gaps between initial expectations and subsequent credit transfer experiences were uncommon and—in most cases—small. Students' expectations regarding the amount of transfer credit they would receive are quite accurate overall. Students determine whether to apply for transfer credit based on professional and self-assessments of curriculum affinity and generally prefer to apply for all credit at the beginning of their programs. The students in this study experienced high transfer credit success rates, which may be attributed to the application procedures implemented at Centennial College. However, students were unable to predict PLAR credit success with the same accuracy, as they either overestimated or were confused regarding this concept.

The information accumulated by students as they formulated an understanding of credit transfer and PLAR came primarily from the Centennial College website, on-campus staff and social networks. While students' expectations about application procedures were generally met, expectations regarding clear information regarding eligible credits and assistance with understanding assessment decisions were not met. While most students expected to receive clear information about transferability, many struggled to gain clarity and still possessed questions about current policies.

Regarding policies and procedures, almost all students reported expecting to utilize academic transcripts when applying for credit, and this was actualized. However, while requiring an academic transcript is universally understood by students, some cited frustration and confusion concerning the need to submit transcripts twice: once for admission purposes and again for transfer credit. Students reported utilizing course descriptions and course outlines/syllabi more than originally anticipated, and they highlighted the difficulty in sometimes acquiring this information from institutions. In addition, some students reported providing supplementary material, such as various assignments, in demonstrating their prior learning for RPL credit—although this is no longer an acceptable practice at the College. Lastly, students' knowledge of the

steps required to apply for transfer credit and PLAR was lower at the offer of admission than at the end of the first term. It is crucial to inform students of the advantages in meeting with an advisor prior to applying for credit. Students who reported visiting with academic division personnel in advance of submitting their application(s) noted the value in doing so.

Additional areas that did not meet student expectations include: 1) a lack of tuition rebates or reduced tuition costs as a result of RPL credit; 2) misunderstanding around RPL deadlines, which often resulted in students wanting extensions; and 3) block registration of courses that inhibited students from ‘topping up’ their course load in order to fast track once credit was awarded.

The second part of this analysis involved determining whether first-term academic progression affects students' satisfaction and attitudes regarding their program and RPL experiences. Students tended to be satisfied with their choices of program, as well as to attend Centennial College. While students maintained consistent levels of satisfaction with the fairness and quickness of the credit transfer/PLAR process, they expressed increased disappointment by the end of the first term with clarity and straightforwardness. Regression results provide strong evidence that credit transfer understanding, the RPL success rate, and the quickness and fairness of the RPL process are all predictors of student satisfaction with RPL credit received. In examining RPL credit success as a function of satisfaction, the results show that age, sex, and citizenship (domestic versus international) are all non-determinants of RPL success. Significant predictors include whether students possess previous postsecondary education within Ontario and credit transfer understanding. The latter result suggests that initiatives to improve understanding will likely have significant effects on both satisfaction and success.

A number of policy and procedural recommendations aimed to improve the RPL experience are provided. While the recommendations outlined are of key importance to Centennial College, many are transferable across institutions looking to critically examine their credit transfer and PLAR structures:

- *Increase Initial Support*—Support in preparing and submitting RPL applications should occur as early as the time of admission. Flagging students with previous postsecondary education upon admission and disseminating an email message via myCentennial prior to the start of term to alert them of the possibility of RPL credit would be helpful. The RPL experience would be further improved by sending RPL eligibility information and application links and forms with students' offer of admission.
- *Further Automate and Streamline Processes*—In recent years, Centennial College has moved towards automating and expediting credit transfer/PLAR processes. While students recommend an online application system with tracking functionality, this has been established by the College—effective May 2014. However, there is still room for improvement, as students state that the academic transcripts on file, as a part of their admissions, should be automatically accessed for RPL assessments.
- *Centralize RPL Support*—Students highlight the value of having access to academic division personnel through the RPL process. The current credit transfer advising and support mechanism is a patchwork of different support functions and individuals across the College. This patchwork, along with inconsistent information sharing and lack of clarity regarding the process, has resulted in a student experience that is akin to a hub-and-spoke model. Centennial College should consider centralizing support functions.

- *Improve RPL Staff Visibility and Expertise*—Centennial College should seek ways of improving RPL staff visibility and expertise. Visibility can be increased through a more established presence on campus as well as at open houses, orientation sessions, college/university fairs and pop-up advising stands. RPL advising should also have an improved online presence. Dedicated RPL staff should be able to advise students through self-assessments and identify curricular affinity between courses and programs.
- *Peer Mentoring*—Mentoring opportunities from previous RPL students is a means to guide and support incoming students about the application process. Social networks proved to be a large source of information for students; therefore, utilizing this resource further would be desirable. Centennial College should develop a peer mentoring program that draws on the expertise of previous RPL students.
- *Policies and Procedures*—Demand exists for tuition rebates, despite the current tuition framework in place at Ontario colleges, which does not differentiate between full-time course loads with or without RPL credit. Furthermore, in the event that RPL applications or subsequent appeals are denied, students wish to see a more thorough rationale.
- *Clarify Realistic Benefit Expectations*—Centennial College has an opportunity to support students during expectation formation by clearly articulating realistic benefits obtained through transfer credit and PLAR. For example, administrators and advisors should reiterate the tuition framework and dispel notions of obtaining rebates for successful transfer credit and PLAR applications when full-time status is maintained.

Glossary

- *Credit transfer* refers to the overarching system of transferring credit.
- *Transfer credit* refers to the awarding of course credit for previously completed credit obtained at a recognized postsecondary institution (Centennial College, 2014).
- *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)* refers to the process that gives adult learners the opportunity to gain credit for formal, non-formal, and/or informal learning. Learners follow a process that allows them to identify, describe and demonstrate past learning that was obtained through a collection of study, life and work experiences (Centennial College, 2014).
- *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* is an all-encompassing term that refers to all advanced standing, credit transfer and prior learning assessment and recognition processes. Central to RPL processes are the assessments of prior learning in an effort to evaluate the learner's sufficient demonstration of learning outcomes (Centennial College, 2014).
- *Expectations* refer to students' self-reported RPL anticipated outcomes.
- *Realities* refer to administrative data and students' self-reported RPL experiences that occurred within the first term.
- *Population* refers to all students across the Fall, Winter and Summer 2013/2014 cohorts who met the selection criteria and were therefore eligible to participate in the distributed surveys.
- *Respondents* refer to those students who completed a minimum of 85% of both the pre- and post-surveys.
- *Reduced course hours* refers to the credit hours associated with courses awarded transfer credit and/or PLAR.
- *RPL success rate* refers to the fraction of transfer and PLAR credits awarded relative to the amounts for which students applied.

Introduction

Ontario has experienced a rapid proliferation of increased postsecondary pathways (ONCAT, 2013; ONCAT, 2014). Specifically, colleges and universities have expanded credit transfer and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) mechanisms to be more responsive to changing student demographics. Students are increasingly mobile, pursuing multiple credentials that combine theoretical and hands-on learning experiences. Life-long learning is a necessity and has contributed to a focus on the part of governments and institutions to increase pathways, assist students in their navigation of the postsecondary education system and facilitate their entry/re-entry into the labour market (MTCU, 2011).

In 2011, the provincial government announced an investment of \$74 million for the development of a new credit transfer framework, which included the Credit Transfer Innovation Fund to assist colleges and universities in developing new credit options. The multilateral pathways and credit transfer supports established through this investment, including development of the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT), has further supported the movement towards maximizing transfer credit received by students and minimizing learning redundancy.

ONCAT has successfully facilitated growth in the number of pathways between colleges and universities; an increase in non-traditional pathways, such as college-college and university-college, has also occurred. Ontario's colleges experienced a 6% increase in the number of transfer students between 2008-09 and 2013-14, from 37% to 43% (Colleges Ontario, 2009; Colleges Ontario, 2014). The credit transfer population comprises a growing share of Ontario college students. Students cite improved career opportunities, changing fields of interest, discontent with university learning styles or environments and location as their main reasons for transferring to an Ontario college (Usher & Jarvey, 2012).

As ONCAT continues to enhance supports for students through the Transfer Guide, Course Equivalency Database and Principles for Credit Transfer Policies and Procedures, these efforts are inciting rich expectations of postsecondary institutions with regard to credit transfer. Institutions are implementing student-centred policies and procedures, developing innovative technology and data practices, and conducting and sharing student mobility research. An important facet of the student mobility research agenda is the student experience: transfer student expectations, performance, retention and time to graduation.

This research study investigates potential expectation-reality gaps associated with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)—the Centennial College collective term for both credit transfer and PLAR. Given the growing share of transfer and PLAR students at Ontario colleges, it is essential to gain a better understanding of incoming student expectations, the formation of expectations and experienced realities. By examining potential RPL expectation-reality gaps, this research aims to:

- 1) Motivate discussion within institutions regarding the effective communication of transfer credit and PLAR rights and responsibilities to students;
- 2) Support increased expectation management at the point of admission by institutions; and
- 3) Facilitate the development and revision of support structures that translate relevant prior learning into postsecondary credit.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to collect information on students' credit transfer and PLAR expectations and experiences. Incoming student expectations are measured against subsequent credits received, as well as student perceptions about transferability adjusted between the initial point of intake and near the first term's end. Study results may inform Centennial College and/or system-wide policy and process improvements. The following research questions guide this analysis:

- 1) What gaps currently exist between the amount of RPL credit expected by learners and the amount of credit actually received?
- 2) What expectation–reality gaps exist for incoming Centennial College RPL students (awarded credit and benefits; resources, sources and support; and policies and procedures)?
- 3) Does the first term academic progression affect students' satisfaction and attitudes regarding program and RPL experiences?

Centennial College

Centennial College has four campuses in Toronto, Ontario, and has been in operation since 1966; it is the oldest publicly funded college in the province. Programs at Centennial offer a blend of academic and didactic learning, ultimately preparing graduates for entry into a corresponding field of practice, advancement in a desired career, or further postsecondary education. The College offers certificate, graduate certificate, diploma, advanced diploma and degree programs covering a range of disciplines in the following schools:

- School of Advancement
- School of Business
- School of Communications, Media and Design
- School of Community and Health Studies
- School of Continuing Education
- School of Engineering Technology and Applied Sciences
- School of Hospitality, Tourism and Culinary Arts
- School of Transportation.

All students are fully immersed in the Signature Learning Experience—a distinctive experience that integrates social justice, global citizenship and equity (GCE) principles with their curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. The Signature Learning Experience prepares students to be thoughtful and transformative advocates of global socioeconomic equity by introducing them to inclusion and diversity matters and embedding GCE-specific outcomes into all programming, amongst other activities.

Centennial College is a champion of diversity and social change, and this is well-reflected in its student population. In 2013–14, 30% (10,910) of the student population, including full-time and part-time, are attending on an international student visa. In addition, the College hosted 20,363 full-time and 4,767 part-time domestic students.

Centennial College's Recognition of Prior Learning Initiative

In March 2011, Centennial College began a long-term initiative to enhance its RPL practices. This initiative, which was implemented around the time that the College received its first Credit Transfer Institutional Grant (CTIG), centred on the following objectives: 1) clarify transfer credit application and assessment standards; 2) couple transfer credit and PLAR into a meaningful process of students self-identifying their relevant prior learning; and, 3) improve communication and supports for students and staff. The College utilized CTIG funding for the improvement of data reporting, pathways development, and student and staff supports.

In clarifying the transfer credit application and RPL assessment standards, a 20-month consultation process was undertaken, which involved members across all stakeholder groups. These efforts resulted in the development of the *Recognition of Prior Learning Policy* and its corresponding procedures (i.e. *Equivalence and Substitution Procedures*, *Transfer Procedures*, and *PLAR Procedures*). The new application and assessment standards were incorporated into an online transfer credit application system, which became the exclusive application medium, effective May 2014.

Upon adoption of the new policies and procedures, Centennial College coupled transfer credit and PLAR by collectively referring to these separate mechanisms as Recognition of Prior Learning. Intentionally coupling transfer credit and PLAR signified that the College legitimizes all sources of relevant prior learning—whether from a postsecondary institution, place of employment or elsewhere. Along with this coupling, student self-assessments of skills and knowledge were incorporated via the development of the online application mechanism that requires students to review course curricula before applying for transfer credit. As part of the emerging Centre for Pathways—an initiative of the Centennial College *Strategic Mandate Agreement* (MTCU, 2014)—the College is moving towards having students self-assess all prior learning in accordance with course learning outcomes.

Currently, RPL student supports exist as a patchwork of services across academic and service departments. Students obtain support for RPL achievement through Enrolment Services, the Centre for Academic Quality, and respective academic departments across schools. The emergent Centre for Pathways will significantly improve ease of access for students by centralizing service provisions through a single window delivery model. Supports developed or otherwise enhanced as a result of this long-term project are as follows:

- Online RPL applications and assessments;
- Linking of the online system with students' Centennial College record;
- Online and print advertising of RPL options;
- Online learning modules regarding the application and RPL assessment processes;
- RPL student advising; and
- Faculty and staff support for academic partnership development and RPL assessments.

In 2015, Centennial College will look further inward regarding its RPL population. The College has been intent on ensuring that these students receive fair recognition for their prior learning, are adequately prepared, and leave the process feeling satisfied with their experience. This study offers useful insights into ways Centennial College and Ontario postsecondary institutions can reflect and refine their policies, procedures and support structures.

Review of Literature

While there is an abundant supply of student mobility literature, most of the research analyzes college–university credit transfer. A limited amount of research discusses college–college and university–college transfer, and even less literature investigates students' PLAR experiences. The literature reviewed herein focuses on student expectations and satisfaction with the credit transfer process and credit received. Pertinent Canadian and American literature is reviewed from provinces and states with an established credit transfer framework.

Student Expectations

Student-formed expectations are a key determinant of subsequent student mobility satisfaction (BCCAT, 2012; DeCock, McCloy, Liu, & Hu, 2011). Students form expectations via their perceived difficulty of the credit transfer process, the assistance they receive during this process, the information they collect, and their previous learning experiences. In their 2011 survey of recently transferred college students, Usher and Jarvey (2012) determined that students' overall satisfaction with their new institution was correlated with their perceived difficulty of the credit transfer process and helpfulness of college staff. Student expectations are primarily established through information collected from postsecondary websites and social networks (peers and family) (Andres, 1999; Hood, Hunt, & Haefele, 2009). Hood et al. (2009) state that websites and peer networks are the primary sources of credit transfer information. In surveying college students, Usher and Jarvey (2012) elaborate that students primarily utilize receiving institution websites. Other research (Andres, 1999; Flaga, 2006) echoes the importance of familial and social connections as a source of information, advice and guidance. The relevant literature does not explain if students continue to consider these sources of information to have been valuable or reliable after their transfer experience. The extent to which the information received is complete and accurate can affect student expectations. The British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) (2012) highlights the importance of targeted marketing to potential credit transfer students and ensuring effective communication of standards, services and pathway possibilities. The research, however, does not explain whether students ascribe different weights or values to information obtained from postsecondary websites, advisors, peers or family.

Student backgrounds and destinations also inform expectations. For example, in British Columbia, students who transfer institutions prior to completing their program were found to be much more likely to expect transfer credits at their new institution than those who had completed their program (BCCAT, 2012). A high percentage, nine out of ten non-completers who continued their education at a public Canadian postsecondary institution, expected to receive transfer credit.

Decock et al. (2011) found that almost two-thirds of college graduates received the expected amount of transfer credit when continuing their education. However, the results varied according to destination. Graduates who continued their education at a university were considerably less likely to have received the credit they expected as compared to those at a college. Those who continued their education at a college report receiving the expected amount of transfer credit, approximately 72%. This finding is generally explained by students returning to their college of graduation for additional studies, where they are already familiar with the supports, policies and procedures in place to assist them.

Credit Transfer Satisfaction

The literature establishes three broad tenets of a satisfying transfer experience (Andres, 1999; Arnold, 2012; BCCAT, 2012; Handel, 2006; Laanan, 1996; Roksa & Keith, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Usher & Jarvey, 2012): 1) access to clear and accurate information; 2) access to reliable and knowledgeable pathway support services; and, 3) access to improved transfer opportunities and processes, (including the application of credit beyond general education or non-core courses). Credit transfer systems and mechanisms that do not satisfy these three tenets can produce adverse effects on student transferability satisfaction. Students cite these challenges as causes of distress, confusion and/or frustration (Andres, 1999).

Clear and Accurate Information

Access to clear and accurate information supports expectation development as well as navigation through the credit transfer system. Andres (2001) found that 71% of students preparing to transfer credit were able to seek out relevant information regarding how current coursework transferred into future academic plans (e.g., program of study). This result supports the need for system-level transfer credit databases that allow students to accurately predict the amount of credit they will receive.

As students transfer between institutions, the need to familiarize themselves with the receiving institution's policies and procedures is critical. Confusion regarding variations in academic regulations across institutions is a common problem experienced by students (Carter, Coyle, & Leslie, 2011) and increases the likelihood of misaligned expectations. In the Ontario context, Usher and Jarvey (2012) found that 30% of college students lack access to necessary basic credit transfer information and 26% lack more detailed information, such as student loan effects, methods of transfer credit assessment, and transfer credit application fees. DeCock et al. (2011) add to this discussion of ineffective and incomplete communication, stating that "a significant proportion of students, particularly those transferring to a different institution, are either not informed about the amount of transfer credit to expect, or the information that they do have is lacking in accuracy" (p. 61).

Pathway Support Services

It is important to have reliable and knowledgeable pathway support services within all postsecondary institutions. Gawley and McGowan (2006), in their research analyzing the academic adjustment and social activities of college transfer students, revealed that students often receive inadequate pathways advising from those who lack detailed knowledge of the system.

Similarly, Usher and Jarvey (2012) found that colleges with the best student ratings on credit transfer possessed a culture of effective service. Students reported having negative experiences when they perceived they had been treated poorly or were given inaccurate information. A system in which staff and faculty across an institution possess basic information regarding the transfer process is recommended. Ensuring all employees have basic RPL knowledge helps students receive consistent information and ensures they are directed to the appropriate contact no matter what academic/service area they initially visit on campus.

Moreover, Andres (1999) uncovered that students underutilize pathways services, even when these supports are readily available. Lack of utilizing pathways services is often attributable to students' unawareness of the available supports—either because of limited information regarding services or inaccessible language.

Improved Transfer Opportunities and Processes

Enhanced transfer opportunities are an additional source of satisfaction for transfer students. From a student perspective, factors that may contribute to awarded transfer credit include private versus public institution, out-of-jurisdiction prior learning, program affinity, a 'transfer friendly' culture, and institutional credit transfer policies (Hood et al., 2009).

In Ontario, students have not historically been able to expect consistency and transparency in the way their transfer credit is awarded (Carter et al., 2011; Gawley & McGowan, 2006; Kerr, McCloy, & Liu, 2010). However, the new credit transfer framework has provided increased resources and sources, including an updated Transfer Guide and new Course Equivalency Database. Many institutions are now able to automatically award transfer credit (Usher & Jarvey, 2012).

College programs developed with university transfer in mind contribute to student satisfaction (Hood et al., 2009). Many colleges have developed program streams specifically designed to provide advanced standing for those students who have completed a previous postsecondary credential. Improved transfer processes are being implemented at many colleges, including providing students with transfer credit summaries at the time of admission and online application systems.

Methodology

This research utilized a mixed methods approach in order to capture students' expectations and realities regarding RPL policies and procedures at Centennial College. Pre-surveys, post-surveys, focus groups and interviews were conducted with students who applied/tested for RPL credit at Centennial College in their first term in order to measure the following: 1) incoming learner expectations against subsequent received credit; and 2) perceptions regarding transferability adjusted between the initial point of contact and the end of the first term. Data were collected across three distinct intake cohorts: 1) Cohort I: Fall 2013; 2) Cohort II: Winter 2014; and 3) Cohort III: Summer 2014. Student cohorts were followed throughout the duration of their first term. Each cohort received the same pre-survey, post-survey and focus group/interview protocol questions.

Recruitment

Incoming Centennial College RPL students were identified for participation in this research. The population comprises RPL students who adhere to the following selection criteria:

- Centennial College students entering their first term at one of the Progress, Morningside, Ashtonbee or Story Arts Centre campuses;
- A transfer credit and/or PLAR form and fee was submitted to Enrolment Services, within Centennial College's marked deadline;
- Enrolment in coursework for the duration of the first term in a certificate, graduate certificate, diploma, advanced diploma or degree program; and
- Domestic or international student status.

Once a transfer credit and/or PLAR form and fee was submitted to Enrolment Services, students were identified by student number and contacted using their Centennial College email address. In total, 384 students across all three cohorts were sent emails with an attached 'Letter of Invitation to Participate' in this research study.

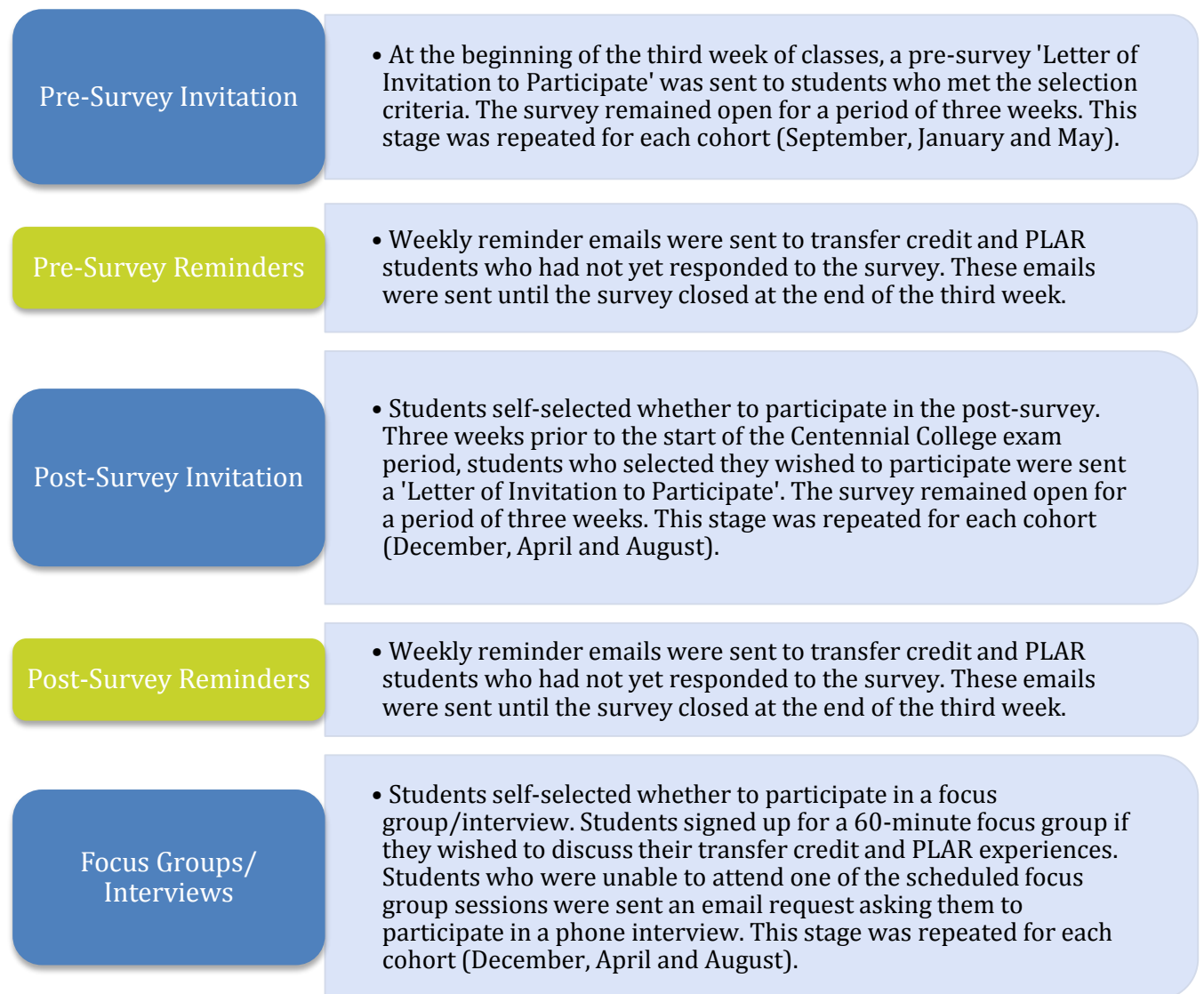
Data Collection

The research study comprised a three-stage design, which is described herein (see Figure 1).

Pre-Survey

Students were sent a 'Letter of Invitation to Participate' in a pre-survey in September/January/May that addressed: 1) their knowledge of credit transfer and PLAR concepts; 2) their expectations for the credit transfer and PLAR process and outcomes; and 3) their satisfaction with the current credit transfer and PLAR system in place at Centennial College (see Appendix A). The pre-survey was developed based on the primary research questions outlined above and related constructs. The survey took approximately 3–5 minutes to complete and was hosted by FluidSurveys. Students received a raffle ticket to be entered into a draw for an iPad 5th Generation for their participation. At the end of the pre-survey, students were asked to check a box if they wished to participate in a 3–5 minute post-survey in December/April/August.

Figure 1 | Three-Stage Design Summary



Post-Survey

Prior to students' final project and/or end of term tests and exams, the post-survey was administered. This timing was chosen in order to avoid any potential biases that may come with receiving a final grade.

Students who checked the box at the end of the pre-survey stating that they wished to participate in a 3–5 minute follow-up survey in December/April/August were contacted using their Centennial College email addresses. Students were sent a 'Letter of Invitation to Participate' in a post-survey discussing the following: 1) their knowledge of credit transfer and PLAR concepts; 2) realities of the credit transfer and PLAR process and outcomes; and 3) their satisfaction with the current credit transfer and PLAR system in place at Centennial College (see Appendix B). This survey took

approximately 3–5 minutes to complete. Students received two additional raffle tickets to be entered into a draw for an iPad 5th Generation and a \$15.00 Tim Horton's gift card.

At the end of the post-survey, students were asked to sign up for a 60-minute focus group discussing their credit transfer and PLAR experiences (see Appendix E). Those students who were unable to attend one of the scheduled focus group sessions were sent an email requesting them to participate in a phone interview. All focus groups/interviews were scheduled prior to students' final project and/or end of term tests and exams.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Students who signed up to participate in a 60-minute focus group discussing their credit transfer and PLAR experiences were contacted using their Centennial College email addresses. Students were sent a 'Letter of Invitation to Participate' in an audiotaped, semi-structured focus group discussing the existence of expectation–reality gaps and rationales for these gaps (student estimations of relevant prior learning and institutional communication of expectations and standards) (see Appendix C). Student responses provide insight into how support structures can be constructed or revised to create a more productive system. Students received a \$20.00 cash honourarium, and complimentary pizza and drinks were served at all focus group sessions.

Consent

Students were asked to provide their consent to participate in the pre- and post-surveys via a checked box before accessing each survey. In providing consent, students confirmed that they had been given the opportunity to discuss the study, all of their questions had been answered, and they agreed to participate.

Students were asked to provide their consent to participate in the focus groups via written confirmation at the commencement of each session (see Appendix G). Focus groups were audio taped with students' permission. Approximately 3 to 6 students participated in each 60-minute semi-structured focus group. Due to the confidential nature of this study, students were asked to keep all focus group discussions private (see Appendix F).

Data Analysis

Administrative data were collected via Centennial College's Banner student information system and the transfer credit and PLAR logs for all 384 students who met the selection criteria for this research study. The administrative data consist of demographic information, program and course enrolment, and RPL applications and assessments (see Table 1).

Administrative and survey data were used jointly for the quantitative analyses in this report. These data sources have been combined into a single file for analysis using SPSS 22.0 software. Since students were informed, for ethics purposes, that they were able to decline answering any question with which they were uncomfortable/did not have a response, the number of responses for some questions may vary slightly across students. Pairwise deletion was, therefore, used throughout the *t*-test and ANOVA analyses. Pairwise deletion of missing data "means that only cases relating to each pair of variables with missing data involved in an analysis are deleted" (Bryman, 2004, p. 1). Data analyses (e.g., cross-tabulation, cross-validation, regression analysis) were completed using SPSS.

Table 1 | Administrative Data

Demographics	Program and Course Enrolment	RPL Applications and Assessments
Age	International/Domestic Student Status	Number of Transfer Credit Applications
Gender	Centennial College Program	Number of Awarded Transfer Credits
High School Location	Centennial College School	Number of PLAR Applications
High School–Centennial College Time Passed	Centennial College Credential	Number of Awarded PLAR Credits
Previous Postsecondary Education	Number of Registered Courses in First Term	Reduced Course Hours

Qualitative data were analyzed by codifying themes using NVivo 10 based on focus group and interview responses and searching for emerging trends. A critical perspective was utilized throughout, which employed researcher reflexivity, collaboration, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As a means of researcher reflexivity, all members of the research team disclosed assumptions, beliefs and biases that could potentially shape the inquiry. This validity procedure identified the lenses of the researchers (social, cultural and historical forces that shape interpretation) and allowed for suspension and bracketing of researcher biases prior to analysis. Collaboration occurred by summarizing the main themes at the conclusion of each focus group/interview and asking the participants if they agreed with the summary or had anything to add/amend. Lastly, the research team transcribed all audio files from the focus groups and interviews and used an open coding procedure to name and categorize phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two research team members worked together to build the domain structure, uphold broad discrete domains, debate how the domain structure fits the data, as well as introduce new and collapse existing codes. Coding was done separately; the two researchers met afterward to compare codes and reconcile discrepancies. A consensus/core ideas file was then created as a means of transforming individual participant's narratives into clear, consistent, understandable language across cases. This file was shared with all research team members who acted as peer debriefers. Peer debriefers provided support, played devil's advocate, challenged researcher assumptions and pushed the analysis to the next level (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection Summary

The following is a summary of all data collected for the purposes of this research study (see Table 2):

- From the 384 population, 94 pre-post survey matches were attained;
- On average, the pre-survey response rate was 37% across all cohorts;
- On average, the post-survey response rate was 66% across all cohorts;
- Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 40 students; and
- No respondents chose to withdraw from the research study.

Table 2 | Data Summary

	Cohort I Fall	Cohort II Winter	Cohort III Summer	Total
Population	232	120	32	384
Pre-Survey Respondents	81	46	15	142
Post-Survey Respondents	53	31	10	94
Focus Groups and Interviews	24	13	3	40

Conceptual Framework

This section identifies the key factors affecting students' expectations and experiences with regard to credit transfer, and the presumed relationships among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, the conceptual framework is guided by behavioural psychologists Victor Vroom and George Kelly, who investigated the mental processes and constructs that individuals utilize when making choices and anticipating events. Vroom's Expectancy Theory posits that "people consciously choose a particular course of action, based upon perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs as a consequence of their desires to enhance pleasure and avoid pain" (Vroom, 1964, p. 11). While Kelly (1955) stated we are our own personal scientists, hypothesizing and making meaning, and it is through this process and the feedback received that changes what one perceives his or her position to be.

This research study examines the mental processes in which students engage when forming RPL credit expectations, how they test these hypotheses and the process of reflection (see Figure 2).

Expectation Formation

The factors that make up students' initial RPL expectations consist of entry characteristics (e.g., gender, age, domestic/international student status); the sending and receiving institution type, program affinity and the relevancy and duration of coursework; previous learning and experiences (e.g., postsecondary culture, regulations, scheduling, work habits, workplace training); understanding of RPL concepts and environment; and the value students attribute to awarded credit. Students may place varying weights on each factor when forming expectations. Initial expectations of interest in this research include predictions regarding the following:

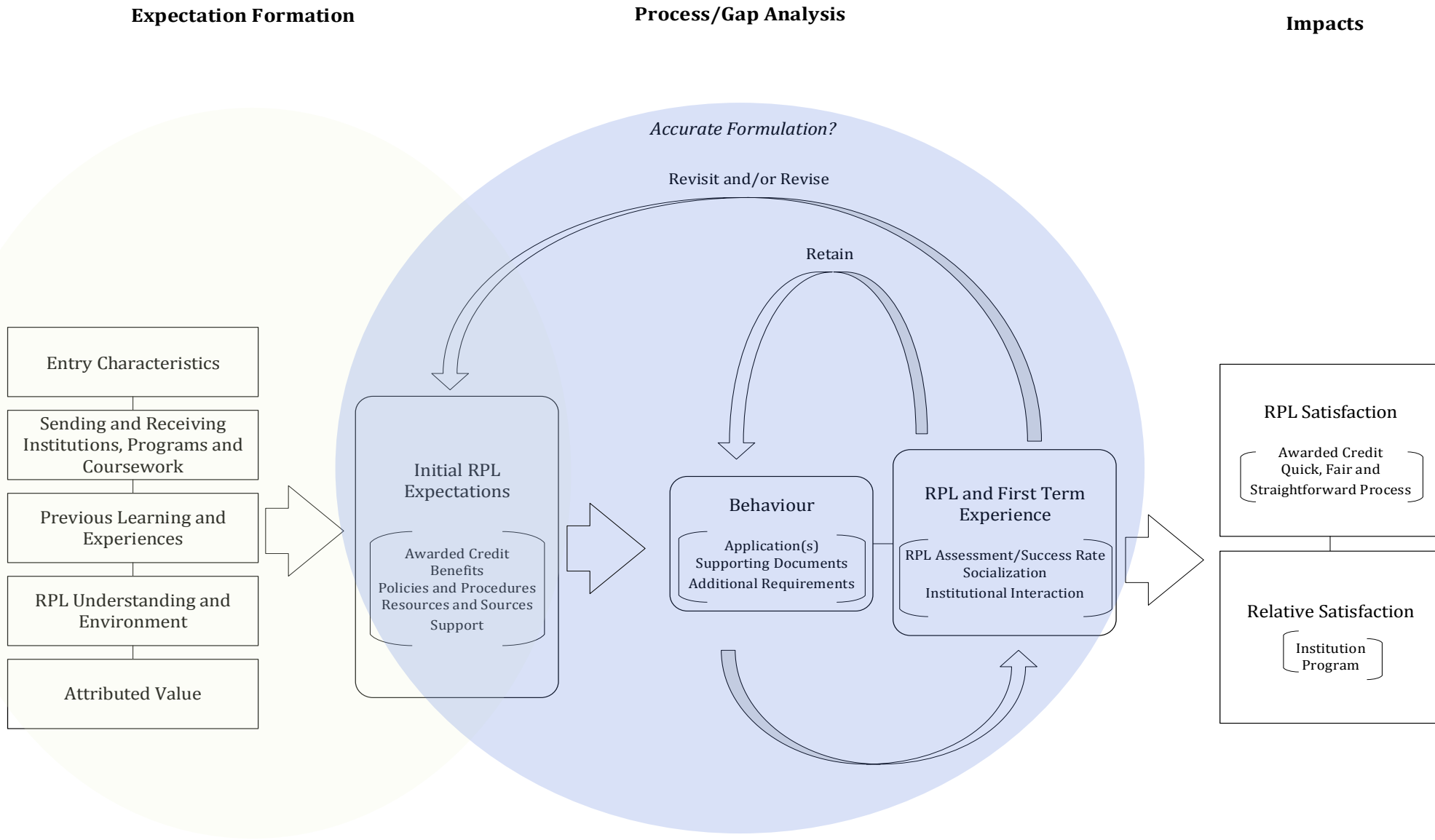
- Amount of awarded credit;
- Benefits associated with receiving credit;
- Policies and procedures governing RPL;
- Resources and sources utilized; and
- Institutional support received with regard to preparing applications, submitting documents, grade calculations, etc.

What students have learned previously in similar situations informs their self-efficacy, perceived control over the situation, trust in those who evaluate outcomes, and understanding of the policies that determine the correlation between performance and outcomes (Mischel, 1979; Vroom, 1964). Personal, social and organizational determinants are all significant influences.

Process

These expectations direct students in deciding how many applications to submit for RPL credit, what prior learning to demonstrate, and when to apply. After initially being denied credit, students may be notified that additional documentation is required and choices must also then be made. Throughout the course of the first term, students experience RPL assessment policies and procedures; socialize at their institution with peers, staff and professors; and interact with the institution itself via coursework and activities. Students reflect upon their initial expectations as compared to the realities experienced and as social scientists make judgments about whether their initial formulations were accurate. Students may decide to revisit and/or revise their initial

Figure 2 | RPL Credit Expectation Formation, Process and Impacts



position if they were unable to accurately predict the unfolding of events or receive additional information. If students are accurate in their predictions, they will retain their position and apply it to future situations (Kelly, 1955). Students may cycle through this process several times dependent on the number of credit applications submitted and the timing of these applications. Therefore, this process is both cyclical and iterative.

Impacts

Lastly, once students have completed their first term and have made any necessary revisions to better comprehend and predict future events (Kelly, 1955), attitudes result regarding satisfaction with the RPL process and relative satisfaction with institution and program selection. Satisfaction regarding awarded credit, and a measure of the quickness, fairness and straightforwardness of the RPL process can be measured and may influence students' views about their institution and program. The extent of these impacts is studied herein.

Results

This research study has three major purposes. The first is to develop an understanding of known gaps reported in the literature between the amount of RPL credit expected by learners and the amount of credit actually received. This environmental scan took place in the literature review. The second is to assess potential expectation–reality gaps of incoming Centennial College RPL students (with regard to amount of awarded credit, benefits associated with receiving credit, resources and sources utilized, institutional supports, and the policies and procedures governing RPL). The third is to examine whether first term academic progression affects students' satisfaction and attitudes regarding their program and RPL. The latter two related research objectives will be discussed in turn, after a brief profile of the RPL population and survey respondents is provided.

Definitions for Consideration

Throughout this analysis, *population* refers to all students across the Fall, Winter and Summer 2013/2014 cohorts who met the selection criteria and were, therefore, eligible to participate in the distributed surveys. *Respondents* refer to those students who completed a minimum of 85% of both the pre- and post-surveys.

Although every effort was made to include PLAR students in this research study, population and respondent groups include primarily credit transfer students, whereas PLAR students represent only approximately 1% of both groups.

Profile of RPL Population and Survey Respondents

Demographics

A set of demographic characteristics were collected using Centennial College's Banner student information system and transfer credit and PLAR logs for all 384 students who met the selection criteria for this research study. This section tests whether respondents are reasonably representative of the population by comparing observable demographics between the two groups.

Table 3 provides a summary of several key characteristics for the respondent and population groups.

These comparisons show that the percentage of males and females who applied for transfer credit and PLAR is similar between the two groups. For example, females make up more than 60% of each group. The average age between the two groups varies slightly by approximately one year, with the 20–24 and 25–29 age groups comprising the largest share. Additionally, the table shows that there are slightly more international students in the respondent group compared to the population and that respondents have been out of high school for approximately one additional year. For the majority of students, enrolling at Centennial College occurred 5–9 years after completing high school. This characteristic is reflected in the literature, as students transferring to an Ontario college are generally mature students with years of formal and/or informal learning as well as work and family responsibilities (CUCC, 2011).

Table 3 | Demographic Comparisons

	Respondents	Population
Gender		
Male	38%	39%
Female	62%	61%
Age (average)	27	26
<20	4%	7%
20–24	41%	47%
25–29	31%	24%
30–39	14%	14%
>40	10%	7%
Domestic	83%	88%
International	17%	12%
Time Passed Since High School (average)	6	5
Less than 1 Year	5%	4%
1–2 Years	17%	21%
3–4 Years	23%	26%
5–9 Years	38%	38%
10+ Years	21%	10%

The credentials in which students are enrolled across the two groups also have similar distributions (see Chart 1). Ontario college graduate certificate and diploma programs comprise the majority of students. With regard to enrolment by school at Centennial College, the School of Community and Health Studies, the School of Communication, Media and Design, and the School of Engineering Technology and Applied Science comprise the majority of students (see Chart 2).

Previous Postsecondary and RPL Credit

In drawing further comparisons between population and respondent groups, it is important to investigate the elements related to students' previous postsecondary experience, transfer credit and PLAR applications, awarded/denied credit, and reduced course hours.

First, a comparison of previous formal postsecondary education experiences that students accumulated shows that the majority of students have already attended an Ontario college or university (see Chart 3). More students in the respondent group have attended an Ontario university, while reportedly fewer attended an Ontario college. Additionally, it is noteworthy that 33% of respondents and 34% of the population previously attended more than one postsecondary institution.

Chart 1 | Centennial College Credential

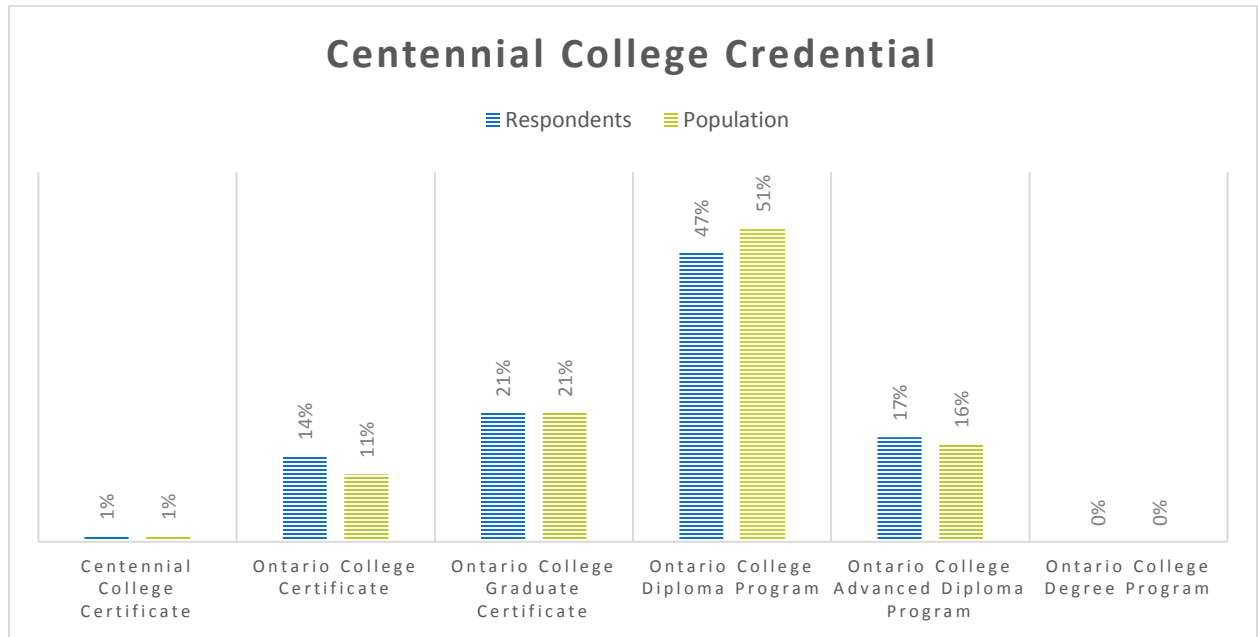


Chart 2 | Centennial College School

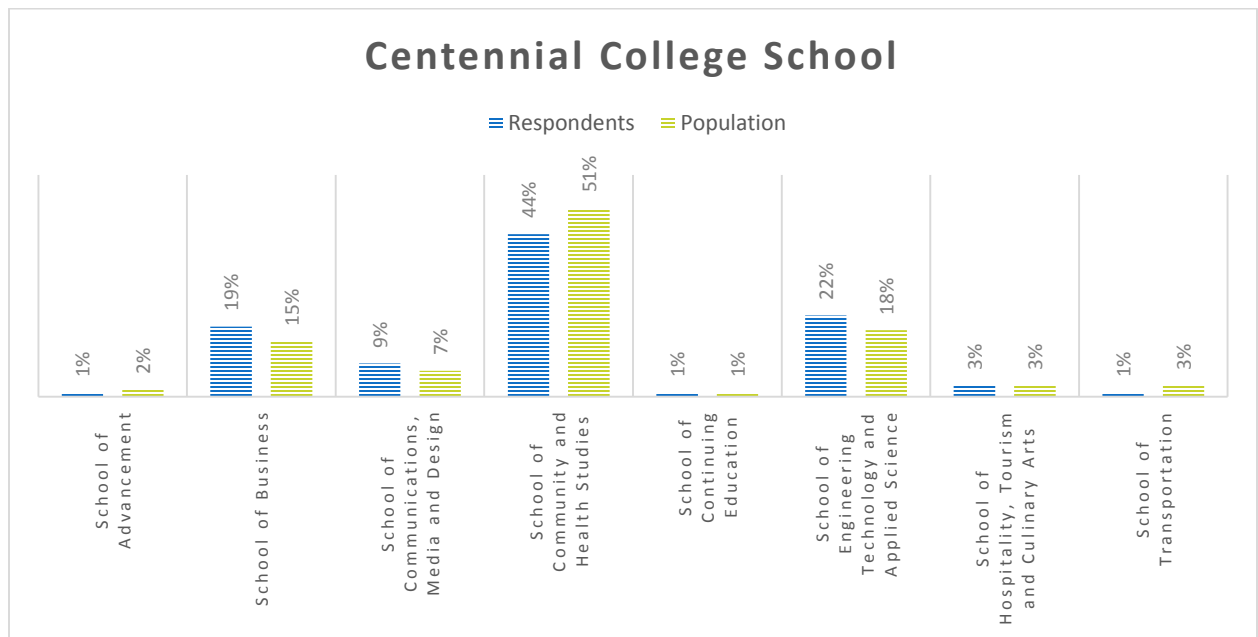
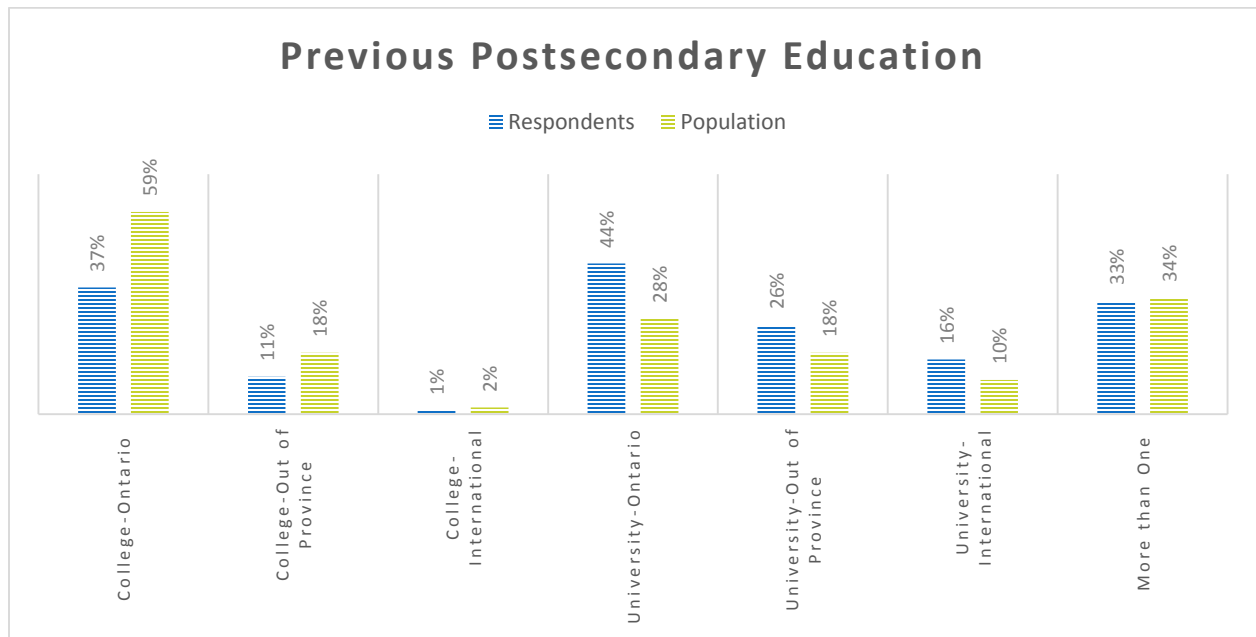


Chart 3 | Previous Postsecondary Education



Second, Table 4 provides a summary of several key population and respondent comparisons on transfer credit and PLAR applications and awarded/denied decisions. The number of transfer credit applications submitted by students in both groups is fairly similar. On average, both groups submitted 2.3 transfer credit applications, although respondents were slightly less likely to submit only one application (41%) as compared to the population (49%). Both groups were awarded 1.8 transfer credits on average, with 40% of respondents and 45% of the population being awarded one credit. Furthermore, a fairly generous number of students in both the respondent and population groups were awarded two credits—30% and 19%, respectively. Only a small percentage of students in both groups were not awarded any transfer credit. PLAR applications and awarded credit are limited for both groups.

Lastly, students benefitted from reduced course hours as a result of awarded transfer and PLAR credit. *Reduced course hours* refers to the credit hours associated with courses awarded transfer credit and/or PLAR. The majority of students in both respondent and population groups experienced a 1–50 course hour reduction, 34% and 42%, respectively. Subsequently, 27% of respondents and 19% of the population experienced a 51–100 course hour reduction. On average, respondents experienced an 84 course hour reduction as compared to the population, which experienced an 86 course hour reduction.

The charts that follow examine RPL success rates and reduced course hours by credential and Centennial College school. *RPL success rate* refers to the fraction of transfer and PLAR credits awarded relative to the amounts for which students applied. The overall RPL success rate for respondents was 80%, compared to 81% for the population. There is no significant difference between respondent and population groups, which suggests that success was not a factor influencing students' survey participation.

Table 4 | Previous Postsecondary and RPL Comparisons

	Respondents	Population
Transfer credit Applications (average)	2.3	2.3
1	41%	49%
2	28%	21%
3	12%	11%
4	11%	7%
5	4%	7%
6 or more	5%	6%
Transfer credit Awarded (average)	1.8	1.8
0	11%	13%
1	40%	45%
2	30%	19%
3	8%	9%
4	9%	5%
5	1%	5%
6 or more	2%	4%
PLAR Applications		
0	99%	99%
1	0%	1%
2	0%	0%
3	1%	0.3%
PLAR Awarded		
0	99%	99%
1	0%	1%
2	0%	0%
3	1%	0.3%
Reduced Course Hours		
0 Hours	11%	13%
1–50 Hours	34%	42%
51–100 Hours	27%	19%
101–150 Hours	15%	12%
151–200 Hours	8%	5%
<200 Hours	5%	10%

While success rates do not vary between respondent and population groups, variation by credential is observed (see Chart 4). Students enrolled in an Ontario college certificate or Ontario college graduate certificate have the highest success rates, followed by students in an Ontario college diploma and advanced diploma. Respondents in an Ontario college advanced diploma have slightly higher success rates than the population.

Chart 4 | Transfer Credit and PLAR Success Rates by Credential

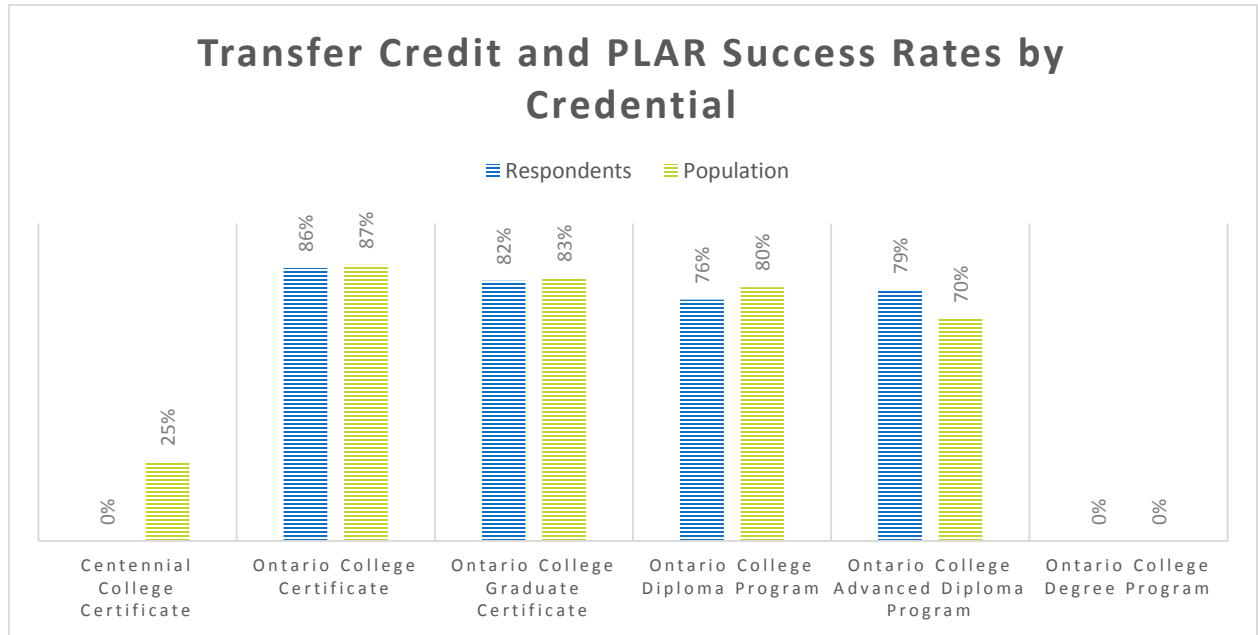
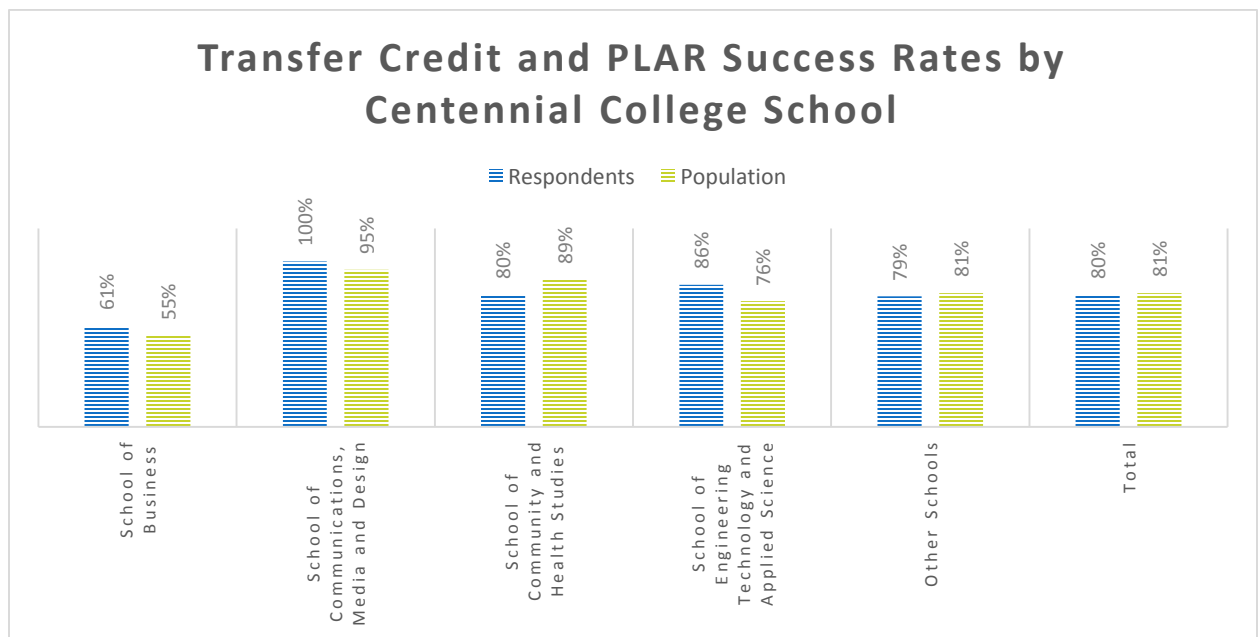


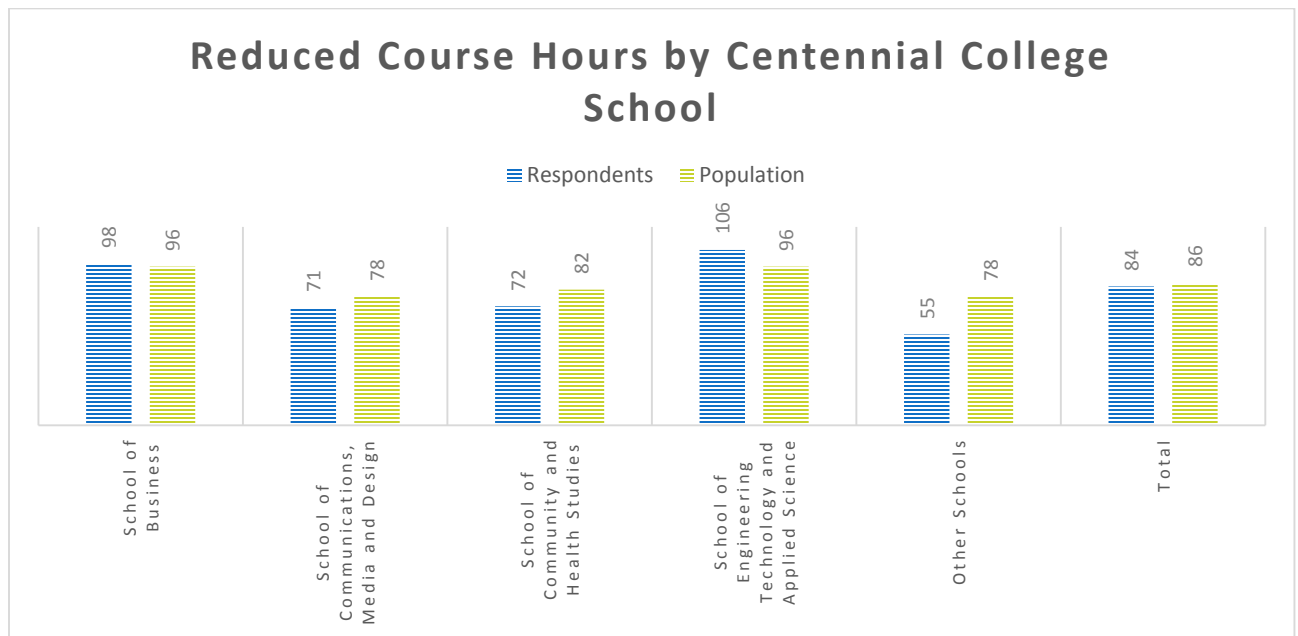
Chart 5 | Transfer Credit and PLAR Success Rates by Centennial College School



Considerable variation in success rates by school are also observed (see Chart 5). Students enrolled in Communications, Media and Design, Community and Health Studies, and Engineering Technology and Applied Science have the highest success rates. The respondent group has success rates of 100% in Communications, Media and Design, 86% in Engineering Technology and Applied Science, and 80% in Community and Health Studies. Respondents in Business are slightly less successful, with only 61% of applications resulting in awarded credit.

The last chart in this section examines reduced course hours by Centennial College school. Chart 6 shows that reduced course hours are comparable between respondent and population groups. Respondents in Engineering Technology and Applied Science and Business experienced the largest course hour reductions, 106 hours and 98 hours, respectively.

Chart 6 | Reduced Course Hours by Centennial College School



What Expectation–Reality Gaps Exist for Incoming Centennial College RPL Students (awarded credit and benefits; resources, sources and support; and policies and procedures)?

The remainder of this report focuses exclusively on respondents. First, given that students form expectations to some extent based on their understanding of RPL terminology, policies and procedures, a baseline measure of their understanding of these concepts is constructed. This provides a useful starting point for assessing how expectation–reality gaps may arise. Second, in order to identify potential gaps, the expectations that students held upon arrival at Centennial College were collected (pre-survey) and are compared to the realities that they experienced by the end of the first term (post-survey). These data, coupled with student focus group and interview responses, inform a few key expectation–reality gaps identified throughout this research.

Understanding of Concepts

To measure respondents' understanding of credit transfer and PLAR concepts, a series of questions asked students to rank (using a 5-point Likert scale) their understanding of the terms 'credit transfer,' 'PLAR,' and the policies and procedures governing how both forms of credit at Centennial College are awarded. The resulting data provide a baseline of students' understanding of RPL, from which they make decisions and form attitudes.

Chart 7 illustrates students' understanding of credit transfer and the associated policies and procedures across three time points: 1) the moment they received an offer of admission; 2) the moment they attended their first class; and 3) the end of the first term. Understanding of credit transfer and the associated policies and procedures increased from the offer of admission to the end of the first term. Post-survey measures show that 95% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the term 'credit transfer,' and 73% agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the associated policies and procedures. While the pre-survey asked students jointly about terminology and policies and procedures in one question, in the post-survey the question was split. This was done to identify potential variation in students' understanding of these two concepts. The post-survey indicates that students had a better understanding of the term 'credit transfer' as compared to policies and procedures, a finding that is further explored below.

In order to compare understanding across all three points in time, the two post-survey responses on terminology as well as policies and procedures were averaged to obtain a single measure. These time-series data show that average understanding increased gradually, from 3.55 at the initial time of offer ('Time 1'), to 3.73 at the moment the students attended their first class ('Time 2'), and then to 4.14 at the end of the first term ('Time 3'). Overall, this difference is statistically significant, where $F(2, 180) = 19.06, p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction more precisely demonstrate that students' understanding increased significantly from the offer of admission to the end of the first term ($p < .001$), as well as from the first class to the end of the first term ($p < .001$), but not between the offer of admission and first class.

Similarly, students' understanding of PLAR also increased during the first term (see Chart 8). While very few students applied for PLAR credit, it is important to examine students' understanding of this concept to determine whether additional and/or more effective information dissemination is required. Understanding of PLAR and the associated policies and procedures increased from the offer of admission to the end of the first term. However, students' understanding of this concept is considerably lower than credit transfer. Post-survey measures indicate that only 58% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the term PLAR, and 44% agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the associated policies and procedures.

Using the constructed measure of post-survey understanding (which averages respondents' understanding of terminology as well as policies and procedures), the results indicate that the mean increased over time: from 2.82 at Time 1, to 3.07 at Time 2, to 3.32 at Time 3. These differences were statistically significant, where $F(2, 174) = 13.04, p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction show that the change occurred from the offer of admission to the first class ($p < .010$) and from the offer of admission to the end of the first term ($p < .001$).

Chart 7 | Understanding of Credit Transfer, Policies and Procedures

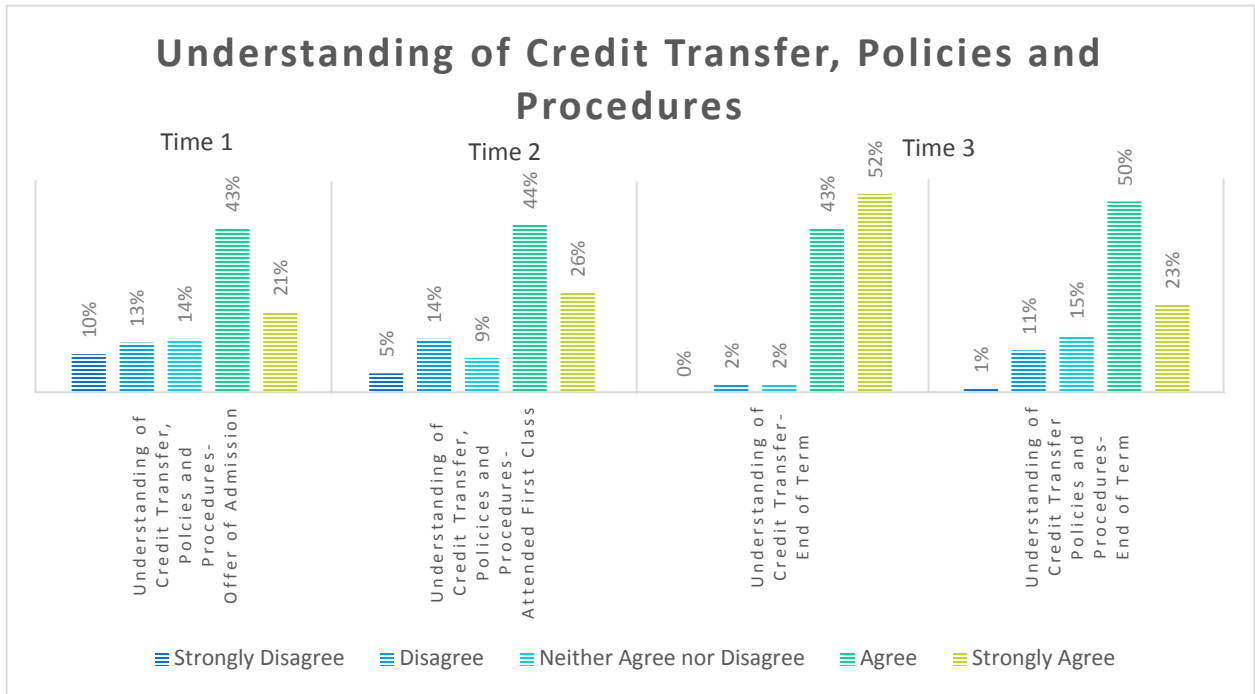
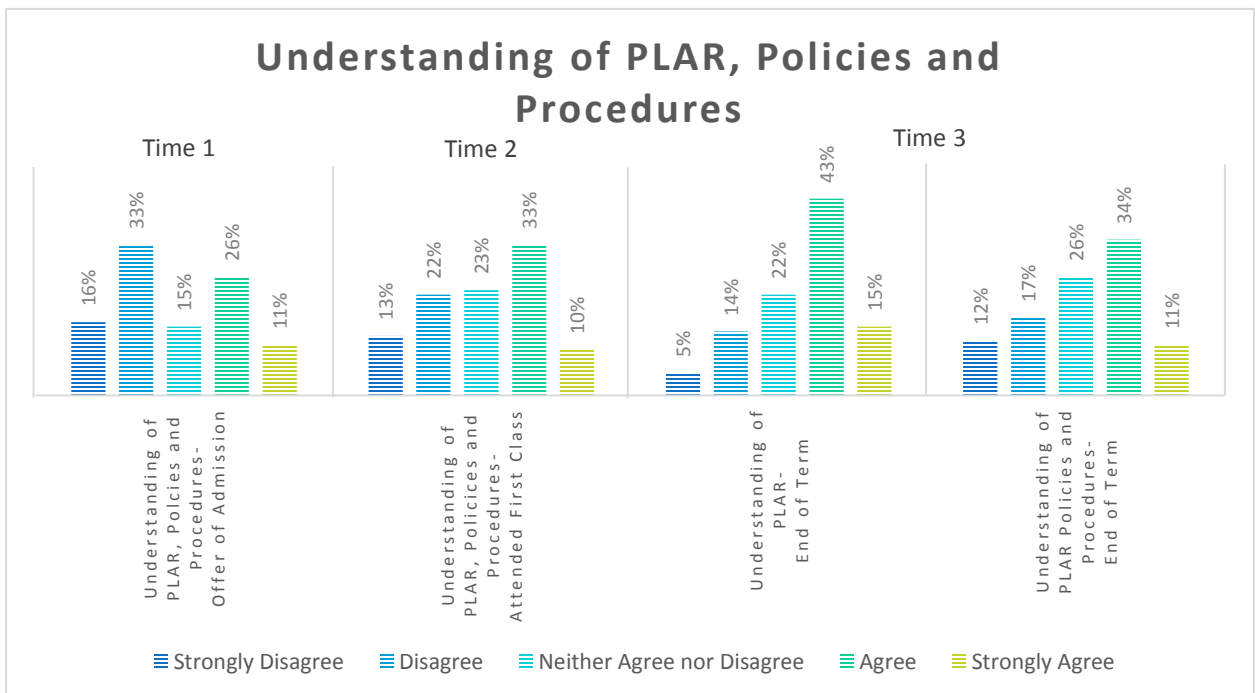


Chart 8 | Understanding of PLAR, Policies and Procedures



Consequently, survey data indicate that student understanding of credit transfer and PLAR increased throughout the first term. Students recognize and report understanding the term 'credit transfer,' but some policies and procedures may require further explanation. Nonetheless, there remains a fair amount of clarification still required with regard to PLAR. Students expressed having many questions about eligibility, timing, payments, and portfolio and challenge assessments during the focus groups and interview sessions. These insights are further explored herein.

During the focus groups and interview sessions, students described what it means to be an RPL student, the purpose of transferring credits and any misunderstandings they wished to have clarified. Specifically, they stated that RPL entails providing evidence of similar coursework and/or experience and applying it to a current program of study in order to reduce the repetition of previously learned material and costs. Students explained their understanding in the following ways:

"For me it seems like you have been a previous student possibly at another institution. So credit transfer would mean that, whatever course you took at your previous institution that you're able to of course transfer here, to use that knowledge towards your diploma or degree."

"If you transfer over any of your credits you're a transfer student because then you're not actually taking the full course load... At Centennial College you're actually just bringing over credit you've already done and adding on extra credits."

"What we have studied we do not need to repeat that same thing. So... without repeating previous coursework or learning. Not wasting precious time... or money... as it can be costly."

With regard to PLAR, students generally possessed an unawareness of the concept. Where recognition was present, they discussed wanting information regarding which courses are (in)eligible for PLAR in advance of attending their first class.

"PLAR? What is this?"

"I actually have no idea what PLAR is."

"What do you mean? PLAR? I think that's what I'm working on, next. Because when I moved to Ontario I had another job experience and it was my own field. Like I was the Accounts Payable and the Payroll Administrator for six months as well."

"The first week of our semester our Program Coordinator asked us, 'Haven't you seen the first page of your course outlines? For this course?' and then after that I found out the course was required. My suggestion is that they have to put all this information on their website. They have the course outlines on their website... so at the beginning we know PLAR is not accepted for this course."

"I didn't know that for this is specific course PLAR was not accepted... has not been accepted. They don't accept anything they said."

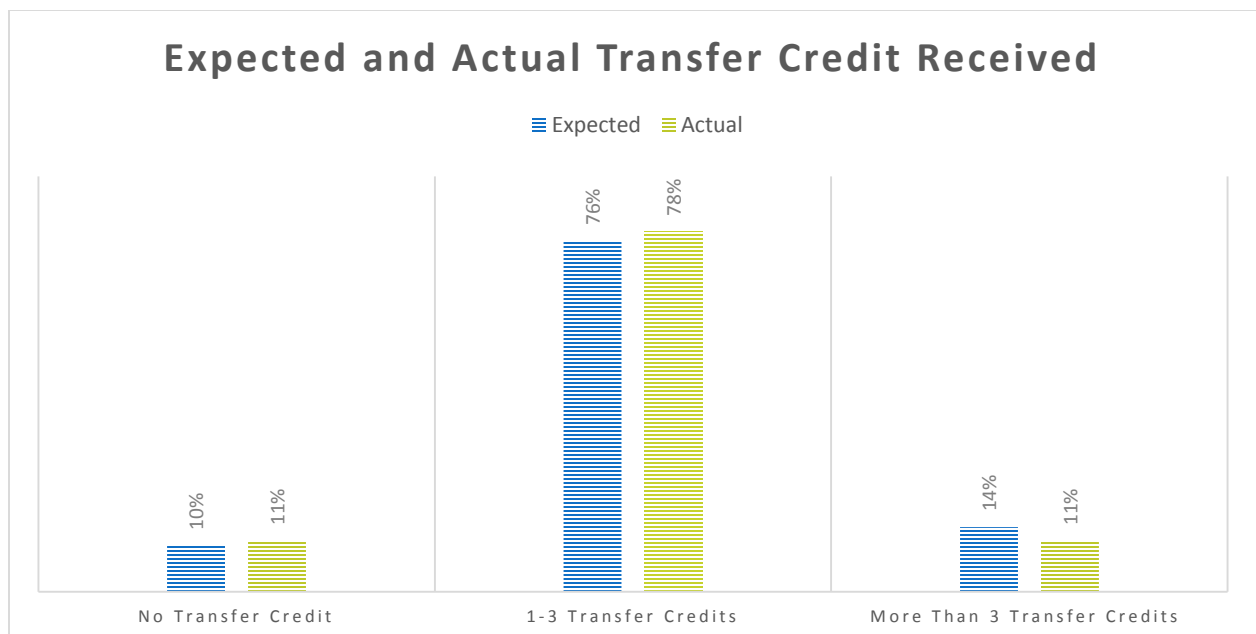
Break-out discussions regarding the purpose of PLAR often occurred during the focus group sessions and after their completion. Students wished to know how this concept varies from credit transfer, who is eligible and what is required to demonstrate prior learning.

Students' comprehension of these key concepts can impact their predictions of the amount of credit they will receive and the benefits experienced by having their previous learning recognized. An analysis of students' RPL expectations follows.

Awarded Transfer Credit/PLAR and Benefits

The first expectation–reality gap analysis delves into students' expectations and self-reported amounts of transfer and PLAR credits received, from the offer of admission to the end of the first term. The perceived benefits of awarded credit are then considered. With regard to transfer credit, Chart 9 indicates that student expectations and amount of transfer credit received are strongly aligned. Students are generally good predictors of how much credit they will receive. The majority of students expected to receive 1–3 transfer credits (76%), whereas few students expected to receive more than 3 transfer credits (14%). Overall, the transfer credit applications that students submitted were successful, with only 11% receiving no transfer credit, 78% receiving 1–3 transfer credits, and 11% receiving more than 3 transfer credits. At Centennial College, students are required to submit a separate application for each transfer credit they wish to receive. This contrasts with the policies and procedures at some other institutions, which permit students to apply for multiple credits on a single form or take automatic assessments. As a result, the marginal cost of applying (i.e. time, effort, financial cost of transcripts and international credential evaluations) for an additional credit at Centennial College is comparatively high such that students may be more likely to only apply for credits that they perceive are likely to be awarded. This may, in turn, explain the comparatively high success rates that are observed herein.

Chart 9 | Expected and Actual Transfer Credit Received



In contrast, few students expected to receive PLAR credit at the time that they were offered admission (see Chart 10). Students were also not as successful in predicting the amount of PLAR credit they would receive. Whereas 29% of students expected to receive 1–3 PLAR credits and 6% expected to receive more than 3 PLAR credits, students reported actually receiving 1% and 0%, respectively. However, administrative data outlined in the previous section revealed that only 1% of students submitted an application for PLAR credit. Therefore, at the moment students received an offer of admission, they either overestimated the amount they would receive or there may have been confusion regarding the concept of PLAR leading to misreports. Given that a limited number of students reported comprehending the concept of PLAR at the offer of admission (37%) and continued unawareness was reported throughout focus groups and interview sessions, the latter explanation may be quite plausible.

With regard to the perceived benefits of awarded credit, students report expecting reduced course loads (84%), limited repetition of previously learned material (65%), reduced educational or opportunity costs (43%), additional time for employment (38%) and family (27%), and reduced time to completion (23%) (see Chart 11). For the most part, these expectations were realized, with the exception of reduced educational or opportunity costs. Ontario colleges have a flat tuition rate for full-time study; thus, a course load reduction does not necessarily result in a tuition reduction. Part-time students, who pay tuition per course, will experience financial savings. Students expecting to receive a refund for awarded transfer and PLAR credit may be surprised to learn this will not occur.

Chart 10 | Expected and Actual PLAR Credit Received

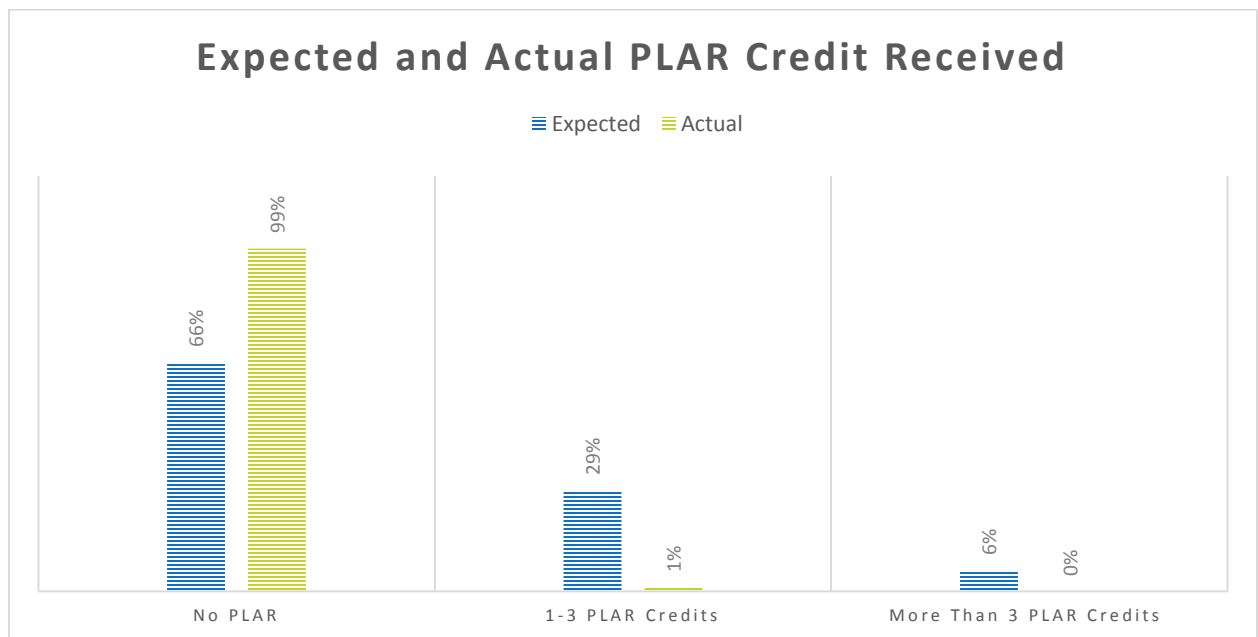
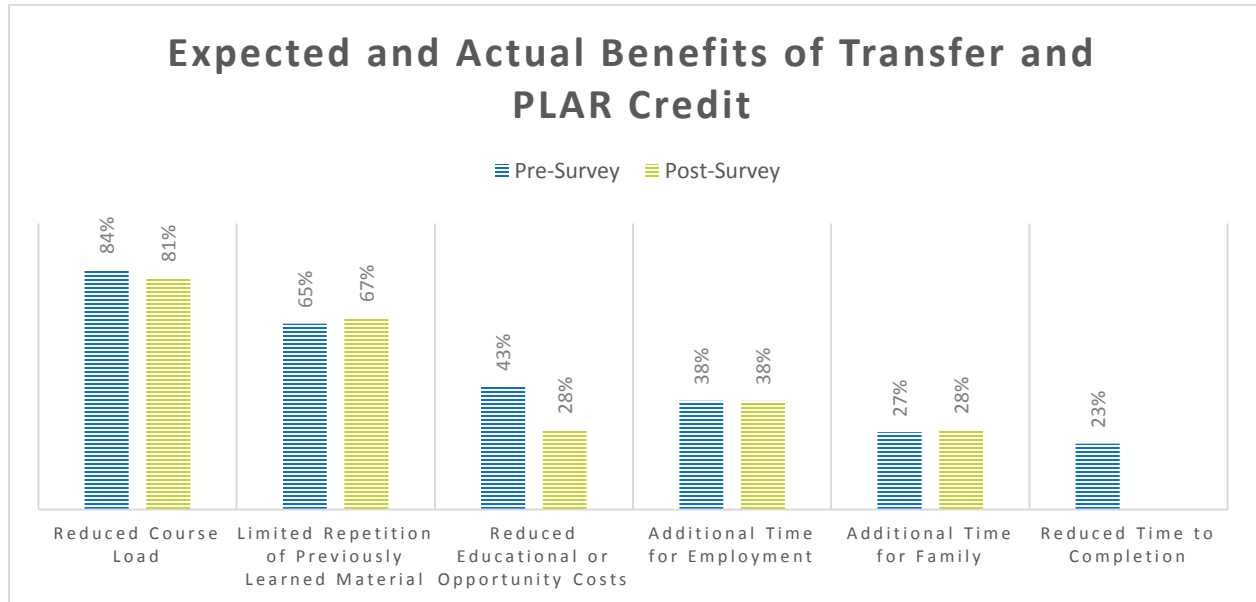


Chart 11 | Expected and Actual Benefits of Transfer and PLAR Credit



Taken together, survey data reveal that students are good predictors of the transfer credit they will receive at Centennial College, which may in part be due to the policies and procedures in place. Students' ability to predict PLAR credit is not as fine-tuned, as students either overestimate or experience confusion about this concept. The two main benefits resulting from awarded credit experienced by students are reduced course load and limited repetition of previously learned material. Students elaborated on these benefits, and the benefits of the RPL experience itself, throughout the focus groups and interview sessions.

Students explained that the benefits associated with a reduced course load include the ability to focus on other subjects, to spend more time preparing for assignments and tests, and to engage in community and family activities.

"I have a lighter semester because I have 5 credits. I did my transfer credits. So instead of having 7 courses this semester, I only have 5. So it makes it lighter and during my spare time, I do a lot of volunteer work around the school and stuff."

"It saves me time from doing the same courses, which I've already done. It also gives me more time to myself or for work or to focus on other courses that are important to me."

"Actually I have extra time for my family and going to work part-time, because one of my classes was on Friday... the only class... Geography was on Friday and I'm coming from Mississauga. So when I dropped the class, after I got an exemption for the credit, I no longer have to come to Centennial College on Friday. I have one extra day off just to have time for family, time for my assignments and things like that."

Reduced educational or opportunity costs were also discussed by students, but with a bit of frustration and confusion. Concerns regarding Centennial College's flat tuition fee policy as

well as full-time/part-time policies affecting the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), scholarships, and financial aid were shared openly by students. Some students stated that, while they were eligible for a larger amount of RPL credit, at times they were unable to apply in order to meet OSAP requirements.

"I guess with the refund, I know a lot of students are still unclear about that. When you transfer credit how does that process really work?"

"A deduction in tuition for not taking a certain class... not paying an extra four or five hundred dollars for that class... I'm paying the same amount as everybody else in my program and I'm not going to be taking as many courses."

"I'm happy about the amount I received, except that for OSAP there's a limit. I could have gotten more [transfer credit] but overall I was okay... Two courses."

"Well first of all I thought wait I already did these courses maybe I could talk to Admissions, but first because I'm an OSAP student... they limit how many credits you have to take, so I had to ask them first. I had to double check with them first. If I drop this course will my OSAP be affected?"

Residency requirements were not discussed as impinging on the number of RPL credit applications submitted; however, this may be a function of policy. The residency policy in place at Ontario colleges, based on the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' (MTCU) binding policy directive *Framework for Programs of Instruction*, allows students to receive up to 75% of credits through recognition of prior learning (equivalence-substitution, transfer credit and PLAR) for certificates and graduate certificates, diplomas and advanced diplomas, and up to 50% for degrees.

Lastly, students discussed the benefits of the RPL experience itself, an item not asked in the surveys but raised by students in focus groups and interview sessions. There was an overwhelming sense of mastery and maturity in being an RPL student. Students stated that the benefits of being an RPL student include an increased awareness of the subject matter, instructor expectations, and time management, problem solving and test taking strategies. There is also a learned knowledge of postsecondary processes and organizational structures.

"The subjects I am studying... I'm almost familiar with all of them. All except one or two. I have been through you know... I just know more."

"Having that experience of being through challenges and courses and overcoming them and being successful and knowing that, knowing how to break things down into chunks so it doesn't get too overwhelming. Some of the study habits are different than high school and a few of my student colleagues are still trying to figure it out."

"Well I mean... the expectations or the level that postsecondary offers requires a lot more from you. I've done four years at a university and coming to a college it's a lot easier, a lot simpler because I'm older so I just know what people expect, what to study, and the effectiveness of questions, and of course the pressures."

Many students described themselves as independent self-directed learners with prior postsecondary education and/or work experience.

Some went as far as to describe themselves playing a parental role in assisting younger students. They explained that the ability to be in a senior position is beneficial due to the heightened self-efficacy it provides them.

"For me, because I have been in college for let's say... I am like a mother in my class and they are like babies. They're just immature and sometimes not there to learn. They are not really focused. For me, it is just all about the learning. For example, to them it is to meet new people and you know just have a good time and for me it is all about my school."

"I think that some people who came here have only completed high school, they're sitting in this course very attentive. And I have completed a Master's degree and also have a couple of years' experience. I think it is more convenient for us [mature students], so we help them sometimes to understand the subjects."

I have one friend in the class, and he's from high school and requires clarification. So I'm available to assist all the people in the class."

While previous experience equated to many benefits for RPL students, they also experienced a few barriers. Students identified problems with regard to social fit, establishing themselves among new professors and the learning curve associated with new institutional procedures and protocols. During these moments, students sought guidance/support to aid them with their inquiries.

An analysis of students' expectations regarding the resources, sources and support available to assist them is detailed below.

Resources, Sources and Support

Herein, the analyses of expectation–reality gaps centre on the resources, sources and support that students expect to access and receive compared to those experienced from the offer of admission to the end of the first term.

The credit transfer and PLAR process is multi-faceted and requires students to research and contact service areas on campus as a means of compiling information. This information is used by students in constructing applications for credit, making credit predictions and adopting academic regulations, such as deadlines, timelines, prerequisites, and grade point averages. Students were asked to identify the resources and sources from which they received RPL material. Table 5 reveals that the most utilized resources and sources for credit transfer are internal, the Centennial College website and on-campus staff. Throughout the term, students' use of Centennial College staff increased considerably, suggesting that students are more likely to locate personnel on campus to assist them once they are established. It is also important to note that friends and co-workers are within the top three sources used and, as such, ensuring these individuals have accurate information is crucial. Note that the resources and sources utilized for PLAR are not included, due to the small number of students eligible to comment.

Table 5 | Resources and Sources for Credit Transfer

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Centennial College website	48%	48%
Centennial College on-campus staff	34%	47%
Friends and coworkers	22%	20%
Centennial College recruitment team or their agents	12%	15%
Other institution website	11%	13%
Family	7%	9%
Secondary school teacher(s) and/or guidance counselor(s)	5%	9%
Other institution staff	5%	10%

Students were further asked to detail the credit transfer and PLAR support they expected to receive, and from which they actually benefitted, throughout the first term. Table 6 highlights that students overwhelmingly expected to receive clear information regarding eligible credits (80%). Additionally, they expected to receive guidance on application procedures (52%), assistance understanding transfer and/or PLAR assessments and decisions (43%), and assistance managing their transfer credit/PLAR files (38%). However, while students received the assistance they expected with regard to guidance on application procedures, gaps were experienced with regard to clear information, assistance with understanding transfer and/or PLAR assessments, managing transfer credit/PLAR files, program advising and grade calculations. The largest gaps measured from the offer of admission to the end of the first term were clear information regarding eligible credits (80% and 47%, respectively) and assistance understanding transfer and/or PLAR assessments and decisions (43% and 23%, respectively).

Table 6 | Support for Credit Transfer and PLAR

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Clear information regarding eligible credits	80%	47%
Guidance on application procedures	52%	51%
Assistance understanding transfer and/or PLAR assessments and decisions	43%	23%
Assistance managing your transfer credit/PLAR files	38%	24%
Program advising	28%	18%
Assistance with grade calculations	14%	2%

Overall, survey data reveal that internal resources and sources were most widely used by students, alongside friends and co-workers. Student expectations about available support on campus primarily centered on eligible credit, application procedures and assistance understanding assessment decisions. While students felt they received proper guidance on application procedures, clear information about eligible credits and assistance

understanding assessment decisions fell short. These findings were mirrored in the focus group and interview data collected.

During focus groups and interview sessions, students described the Centennial College website as being the clearest source of credit transfer and PLAR information available. Students outlined three types of information they received on RPL. First, they discussed receiving *procedural information* from the Centennial College website, Enrolment Services and Academic Advising, which is outlined in the following statements:

"Advisors in my opinion their information is just on the basis of the website and the policies. They don't know the programs very well. They're not very well... I mean not aware of these things. The program details especially."

"The desk staff are helpful but mostly procedural."

"Well I talked to one point person in the office for transferring. She gave me a lot of the general information and then I spoke with two of the professors that actually were teaching the course."

"Step number one was checking the Centennial College website, I checked the requirements and grades for applying for transfer credit. And then I went and checked with a student advisor."

Second, students described receiving *program tailored information* when speaking with program advisors, coordinators, deans, chairs and instructors of courses:

"I did go and talk to the faculty member who would be reviewing my transfer credit application prior to submitting it. I'm wondering if everyone offers that, if it is that easy of a service to obtain, because while he shot me down completely at least I was able to find that out in advance."

"For me, having the Head of the English Department go through all the documents I brought. It was really helpful because she knew what the panel was expecting so she could pick certain essays that would go better... two credits I was transferring. And she mostly did everything for me, I just watched her. I'm at a loss for words. I just watched her pretty much match up things. I wouldn't have been able to do that myself because I thought maybe this essay would be better, but she actually chose items that I wouldn't have chosen."

"I took it [application] to my Program Coordinator. And then we sat down and I had to bring in my course outlines for the courses I thought that I could get. Then we sat down and discussed which one he thought better matched up with the outlines from the school here. And then I filled out the forms to get the classes."

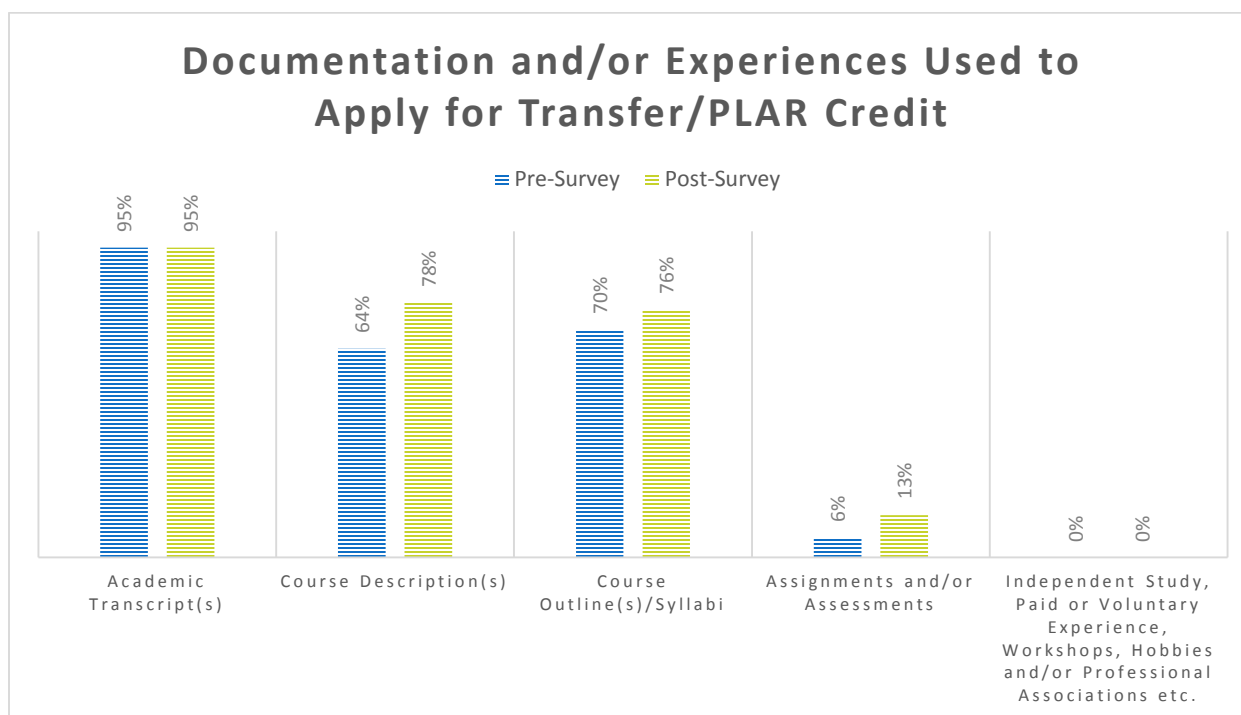
While the information outlined above is formal in nature, students also discussed the role of informal information. Students commented on receiving *insider/informal organization information* from friends, co-workers and family. These sources were typically responsible for alerting students to the possibility of RPL, informing them of with whom to speak and how to maneuver deadlines. They also acted as a sounding board, listening and directing from the sidelines with invested interest.

This type of information is particularly useful when determining the documentation and steps necessary for credit application; a more detailed discussion of these elements follows.

Policies and Procedures

The last expectation–reality gap concerns the procedures/steps that students expected and actually encountered when applying for transfer and/or PLAR credit from the offer of admission to the end of the first term. The first question asked students to identify the documentation and/or experiences used to determine whether to submit an application for transfer/PLAR credit (see Chart 12). Almost all students expected to use academic transcripts (95%), followed by course descriptions (64%) and course outlines/syllabi (70%). Notably, students reported using course descriptions (78%) and outlines (76%) slightly more than they planned. While a limited number of students reported actually using assignments and/or assessments (13%), this was almost double that of what students expected (6%). Students did not report using previous work or community experiences, which reflects the small amount of PLAR applications.

Chart 12 | Documentation and/or Experiences Used to Apply for Transfer/PLAR Credit

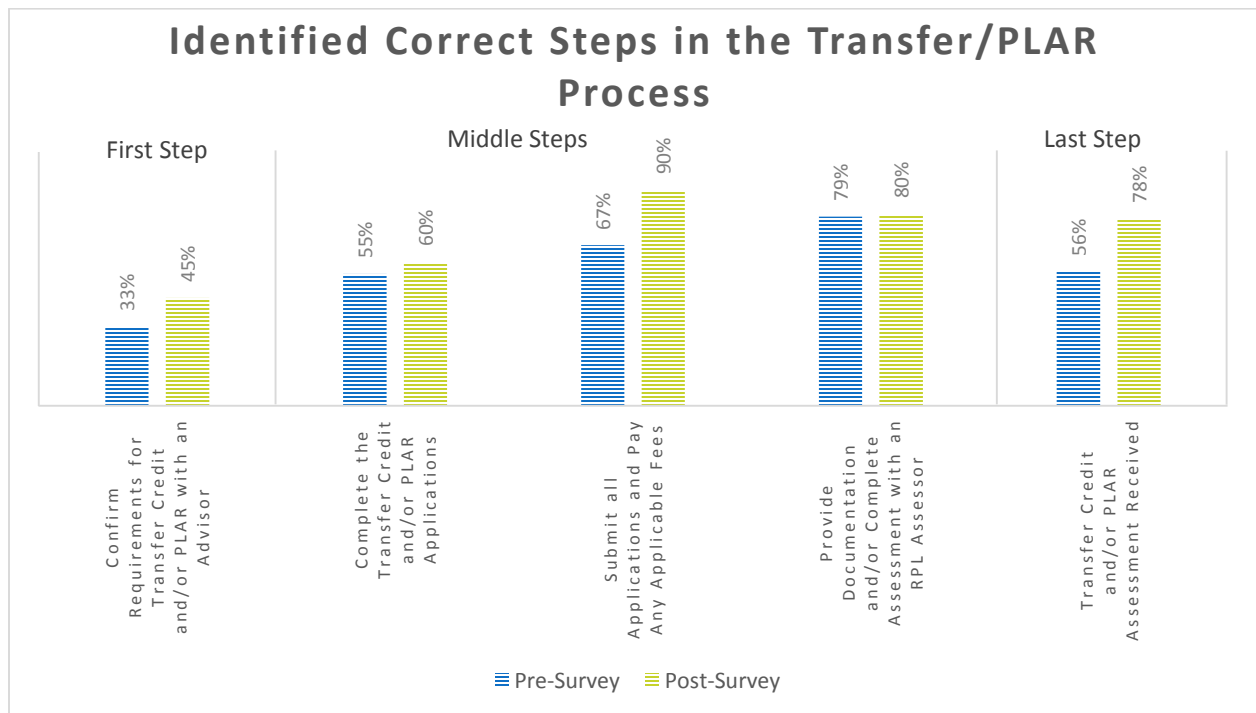


After students have identified the documentation required, they must determine the procedure/steps to apply. The application process at Centennial College is typically carried out in five stages, which have been divided into three categories for simplicity throughout this analysis: confirm requirements for transfer credit and/or PLAR with an advisor ('First Step'); complete the transfer credit and/or PLAR applications, submit all applications and any applicable fees, and provide documentation (e.g., transcripts, course outlines) for transfer credit and/or complete the PLAR assessment with an RPL assessor ('Middle Steps'); and transfer credit and/or PLAR assessment received (awarded or denied) ('Last

Step') (see Chart 13). Students were asked to identify the order in which they expected to complete these steps in the pre-survey, as well as the actual order in which they completed them in the post-survey. The purpose of this exercise is to obtain information on how often students are able to order these steps correctly. In the analysis, 'Middle Steps' were grouped together such that if a student identified completing an application, submitting an application and fees, or providing documentation and completing a PLAR assessment as being mid-process (in any order), it was considered to be correct.

The results indicate that students had some difficulty identifying the steps correctly. However, there was a substantial increase in the number of students who were able to identify the steps in order after having experienced them. Overall, 45% of students identified confirming requirements with an advisor as the 'First Step,' 77% identified completing an application, submitting an application and fees, and providing documentation and completing a PLAR assessment as 'Middle Steps,' and 78% identified assessment received as being the 'Last Step'.

Chart 13 | Identified Correct Steps in the Transfer/PLAR Process



Therefore, survey data reveal that almost all students utilized academic transcripts when applying for credit followed by course descriptions and course outlines/syllabi. A few students were asked to provide additional material outlining their previous learning in the form of assignments (e.g., essays, journals, labs) and assessments. Students' understanding of the steps required to apply for transfer credit and PLAR was lower at the offer of admission than at the end of the first term. Informing students that convening with an advisor prior to applying for credit is important and may need to be reinforced. Students

outlined a few reasons why it is advantageous to meet with a Centennial College staff member prior to credit application during the focus groups and interviews.

During these sessions, students were asked to name the documentation they expected to provide in order to receive credit and to list/illustrate the actual steps taken. Students discussed expecting to use a transcript in order to have credit assessed. However, they thought that, once the transcript was submitted for admission to Centennial College through the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS), they should not have to provide it again. The majority of students thought that the transcript would be on file at Centennial College and automatically utilized for credit assessment. A handful of students assumed course outlines would be of use in comparing curricula, learning outcomes and texts used. Students explained their rationales:

"It should be automatic. Once we have gone through the procedure, OCAS and the evaluation. If someone has already studied and applied to college that should be automatic."

"Centennial College who is receiving me as a student should have my [academic] history. OCAS should send my transcript to Centennial College so they can look at it."

"I had to come in... I was wondering why they had to have a copy of the transcript, if it was in my application."

"I know when you applied for school you sent in your transcript from the other school. I didn't know that to apply for a transfer credit it's separate from the one you sent when you applied. I didn't know that, so I had to rush to George Brown College and get the transcript."

When it actually came time for students to apply for credit, some students commented that they were shocked to learn that course descriptions and outlines were required. There was reported difficulty sourcing these items in time to meet deadlines. Moreover, a few students recalled writing letters explaining personal situations, such as time away from school and the currency of previous coursework for recognition.

The process itself when listed/illustrated by students revealed that the first step generally consists of looking for affinity in course material (previous institution and Centennial College) and compiling a case for the approval of credit. Students discussed considering the content, hours, amount, and depth of material taught in their decisions to apply:

"I think the first step would be just seeing if you have any redundancy in your course selection. So, is there something where I've done this before? And then you know request transcripts."

"I went through my courses and I realized that I had some credits that I can transfer and I applied for it. The courses that were listed in my program, I noticed as I went through the course outlines that I could match it up with the courses that I took... so say it said research methods, I took a course in university with research and so I had to go through the syllabus to see if I had actually covered what they were looking for. So each week, each week's topic."

"Step one would be looking over the course outlines for the program I want to get into, let's say at Centennial College, so that's what I did first. And then looking over the credits I already have with Seneca College, so that would be looking at previous course outlines, my transcripts, making sure I got the proper grades for the credit transfer. Then before mailing everything in I had to make sure my course outlines from my previous school were attached and ensure everything shows how the courses I took relate to the courses I'll be taking."

"Sometimes you have to do your own little research. Try to meet the expectations of Centennial College with what you've done. To make up the course hours because those hours have to be matched."

Once an initial informal assessment of course affinity is made, meeting with an academic advisor and/or faculty member was seen as useful for some students. Students stated that the benefit of speaking with a Centennial College staff member was that they received insight into the likelihood of their application being awarded credit:

"Because they [advisors] know what will be accepted or not. Some of them, they will tell you at the beginning don't waste your time... when if you prepare all of those necessary transcripts at the end of the road you will not be successful. In my opinion it would be better to know that from the beginning."

"We must have a completed application and all the supporting materials and it's most important to get it approved by the Program Coordinator. I even needed to ask if this material was enough. Kind of receive his help and advice as to whether or not I should submit this transfer credit."

As described above, assistance is helpful when deciding which additional materials to include in applications for credit.

The middle steps consist of submitting documentation and the runaround of trying to locate previous course outlines, paying for transcripts, and digging through binders and plastic totes to find assignments long since stored away.

Nonetheless, students had the most to share when describing the last step. They described having to decide whether to drop courses preemptively or to attend classes prior to receiving credit decisions.

"I got an email confirmation saying that they received my request for the transfer credit and then it was another week or another two weeks before I got a confirmation of approval. But by that time I was like it better be approved because I haven't been to that class in three weeks. I remember thinking 'Should I go to class? Should I not go to class? I could still go to class but I don't know what's going on.'"

"I did attend [class]. I was waiting and I continued to go class. I knew they were going to give me credit, but I said just in case. You know, we never know, so they let me continue going."

"Yes after you receive the credit, you have to drop, you have to at least recoup your... You have to go back into the office to let them know 'Yes, I did receive credit' and they

remove you from the class list. You have to do that. If you don't do that, sometimes they say the professor will still mark you absent or give you a zero."

When students received a decision on whether their credits had been approved, this was reported as occurring within 1–2 weeks.

Students further stated that there is minimal opportunity to add courses once awarded credits are dropped due to registration in block programs. Others described having to determine whether or not to accept awarded credit due to full-time enrolment requirements (OSAP, scholarships and financial aid) or desiring a content refresher.

These considerations and the realities experienced by students throughout the process can potentially influence overall student satisfaction and attitudes. The final section of this analysis investigates students' satisfaction with their program and RPL across several indicators.

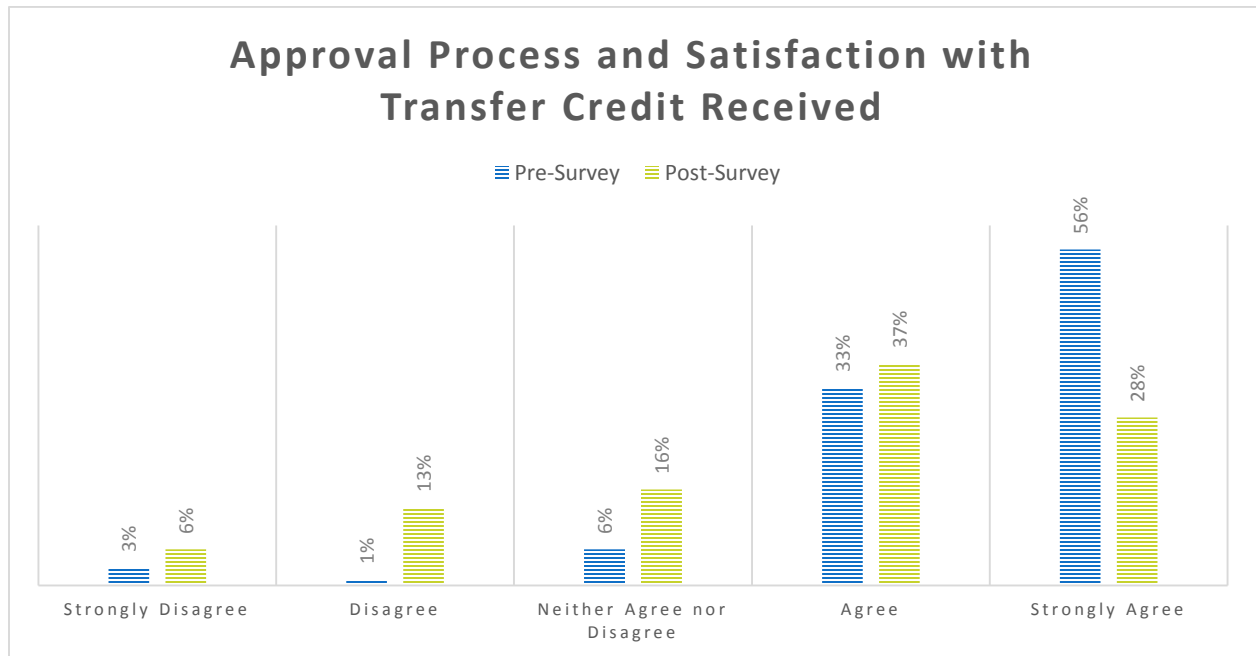
Does the First Term Academic Progression Affect Students' Satisfaction and Attitudes Regarding Program and RPL Experiences?

This section examines whether first term academic progression affects students' satisfaction and attitudes regarding program and RPL experiences. In order to identify the impact of first term academic progression, the satisfaction levels students held upon arrival at Centennial College were collected (pre-survey) and compared to those held at the end of the first term (post-survey). These survey data, coupled with student focus groups and interviews, provide insight into satisfaction and attitude (in)consistencies.

Approval Process, Amount of Credit and Timing

First, students were asked about the approval process for obtaining transfer credit, and at the end of the first term, whether they were ultimately satisfied with the amount received (see Chart 14). During the pre-survey, the majority of students agreed (33%) or strongly agreed (56%) that their request for transfer credit would be approved. However, when asked during the post-survey about their satisfaction with the amount of credit they were awarded, the percentage of students who strongly agreed dropped to 28%. The percentage of students who agreed stayed relatively constant. In the pre-survey, the mean score for students was 4.38 but this decreased in the post-survey to 3.67. This represents a significant negative shift, $t(93) = -4.29, p < .001$, in students' satisfaction with the amount of credit received compared to their earlier expectations. Since approximately 80% of all credit applications were approved, this raises the question of why post-survey satisfaction is comparatively low. This trend may suggest that student satisfaction also relies to some extent on the process taken in order to obtain credit and does not solely depend on what is awarded. Note that the PLAR approval process and ultimate satisfaction are not included in this analysis, due to the small number of students eligible to comment.

Chart 14 | Approval Process and Satisfaction with Transfer Credit Received



To investigate the determinants of satisfaction in more detail, Table 7 estimates the effects of factors related to respondents' understanding of, experience with, and applying for RPL on their satisfaction. The estimating equation is

$$Satisf_i = \alpha + \beta Und_i + \delta Exp_i + \gamma Suc_i + \theta' RPL_i + X_i' \Phi + Z_i' \Omega + \varepsilon_i,$$

where $Satisf_i$ is the respondent i 's reported level of satisfaction; Und_i , Exp_i , and Suc_i denote the level of credit transfer understanding, pre-survey credit expectation, and actual success rate, respectively; X_i and Z_i are vectors of demographic and education covariates, respectively; and ε_i is the statistical error. The inclusion of the covariates removes from the estimating equation potential demographic, program, or previous schooling effects on satisfaction that may be correlated with students' RPL experiences and, therefore, inadvertently bias the effects of interest. However, due to small sample sizes and the possibility of multicollinearity across covariates, efforts were made to avoid including an inappropriately large number of controls in any one regression. The equation was estimated in an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) framework using robust standard errors.

The results show that a student's understanding of the process of applying for transfer credit significantly improves their satisfaction. These findings indicate the merit of programs that aim to improve student knowledge of the credit transfer system. Additionally, the measures of credit success, the quickness and fairness of awarded RPL, and general Centennial College satisfaction all significantly and positively affect satisfaction levels (although this latter variable may suffer from reverse-causality bias).

Table 7 | Predictors of Satisfaction with the RPL Credits Received, Respondents

Dependent variable:	RPL Credit Satisfaction									
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Female	0.29	0.25	0.23	0.21						
Domestic	0.21	0.31	-0.08	0.25						
Age	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.02						
Ont. Coll.	0.29	0.33	-0.08	0.28	0.07	0.19				
Ont. Univ.	-0.27	0.30	-0.49	0.27	-0.36*	0.18				
Other PSE	-0.47	0.32	-0.55*	0.26	-0.24	0.17				
TCR Understanding			0.34***	0.10	0.22***	0.06	0.23***	0.07	0.20**	0.07
Pre-TCR Expectation			-0.09	0.10	-0.01	0.07	-0.06	0.09	-0.05	0.07
Success Rate			1.5***	0.42	0.93**	0.29	1.01**	0.30	0.89**	0.32
RPL was Quick					0.27***	0.07	0.33***	0.08	0.28***	0.07
RPL was Fair					0.64***	0.08	0.67***	0.08	0.66***	0.09
RPL was Clear					-0.49***	0.09	-0.51***	0.07	-0.48***	0.08
College Satisfaction					0.18**	0.07	0.14*	0.06	0.19**	0.05
Business							-0.16	0.33		
Communication							-0.68	0.36		
Health Studies							-0.44	0.27		
Engineering							-0.62*	0.30		
Ont. Coll. Diploma									0.00	0.22
Ont. Coll. Grad. Cert.									-0.03	0.23
Ont. Coll. Adv. Dip.									-0.25	0.25
Intercept	3.54***	0.53	1.47	0.81	-0.09	0.53	0.14	0.79	-0.20	0.63
R-squared	0.11		0.45		0.74		0.73		0.71	
Number of obs.	90		90		90		90		90	

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.010$; * $p < 0.050$. The following acronyms are used: Coeff. = coefficient; S.E. = standard error; Ont. = Ontario; Coll. = college; Univ. = university; Cdn. = Canadian; Int. = international; PSE = postsecondary education; TCR = transfer credit; RPL = recognition of prior learning; Cent. = Centennial; Grad. Cert. = graduate certificate; Adv. Dip. = advanced diploma; obs. = observations. The variable "Other PSE" is an indicator that is "1" if the individual attended college or university outside of Ontario, and "0" otherwise.

It is interesting to note that the extent to which the RPL process was ‘clear’ significantly influences satisfaction, but with negative sign. While it is not possible in the context of this report to identify the cause of this anomaly, the researchers offer the following plausible explanation. A student who views the RPL process as less clear may be required to provide more effort than another student who views the process more clearly in order to achieve the same credit success. Then, holding such factors as the success rate and RPL quickness and fairness constant in the regression framework, a student may be more satisfied from successfully navigating the RPL process when the effort put in was greater. Indeed, the coefficient on the clarity measure increases to nearly zero when the success rate variable and the RPL quickness and fairness measures are excluded (not shown), which supports this hypothesis of a downward bias on the clarity variable.

Overall, the results provide strong evidence that credit transfer understanding, the success rate, and the quickness and fairness of the RPL process all affect satisfaction. Given the large estimated magnitude and significance of the effect of success rate, the determinants of this variable are explored further in Table 8. Specifically, how students’ understanding of credit transfer and the types of resources that they used when applying affected their success is investigated. The estimating equation is

$$Suc_i = \pi + \rho TCRUnd_i + \phi HiGrade_i + \omega Steps_i + \tau Supports_i + X_i'Y + Z_i'\Psi + \epsilon_i,$$

where $HiGrade_i$ is an indicator of whether the respondent expects to receive an A/A+ grade, which takes on a value of ‘1’ if yes and ‘0’ otherwise, $Steps_i$ is an indicator of whether the respondent correctly ordered the steps to apply for credit, and $Supports_i$ indicates whether Centennial College (internal) supports were used when applying. The remaining variables are defined as above.

The results reveal that age, sex, and citizenship (domestic versus international) are all non-determinants of RPL success. In addition, previous postsecondary education from a province/territory outside of Ontario, as well as from an international institution, do not matter in predicting success given that the point estimates for each of these variables are small and statistically insignificant. The only significant variable is the indicator of whether the respondent has previous postsecondary education within Ontario, which may suggest that incumbent effects matter. However, this variable is only significant in Regression (2), and its effect decreases in both magnitude and significance as other covariates are controlled for in the regression framework. Regressions (3) to (5) go on to include the variables measuring the reported understanding of the credit transfer process, whether the respondent correctly identified the order of steps to apply for RPL, and the resources that respondents used when applying. These results indicate that only a student’s understanding of the credit transfer process robustly matters for explaining success. Thus, programs to improve understanding are likely to have significant effects on both satisfaction and success. Whereas the ability to properly identify the order of steps to apply for RPL and the indicator of having used Centennial College supports are insignificant, this may arise since these variables are both simply precursors to credit transfer understanding.

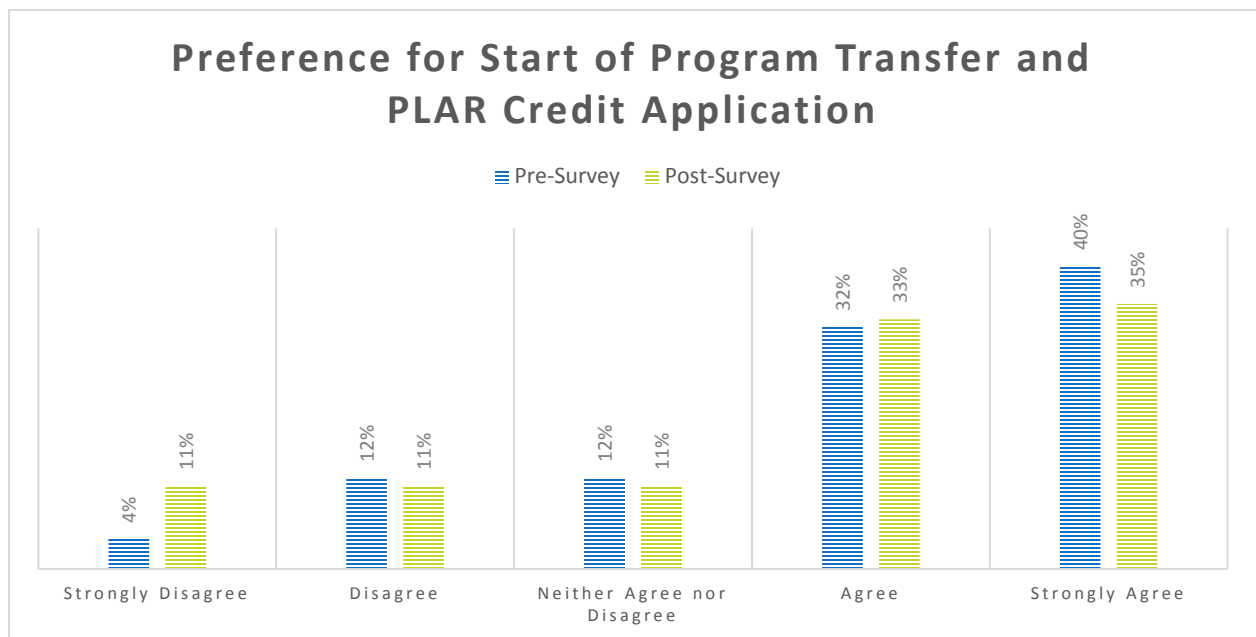
Table 8 | Predictors of RPL Credit Success, Respondents

Dependent variable:	RPL Credit Success									
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Female	-0.05	0.07	-0.05	0.07	-0.09	0.07				
Domestic	0.11	0.12	0.10	0.11	0.09	0.12				
Age	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01				
Ont. Coll.	0.18	0.12	0.19 *	0.11	0.17	0.12	0.10	0.11	0.17	0.12
Ont. Univ.	0.09	0.12	0.11	0.10	0.07	0.11	0.06	0.09	0.09	0.10
Other Cdn. Coll.	0.00	0.13								
Other Cdn. Univ.	0.05	0.08								
Int. Coll./Univ.	-0.01	0.15								
Other PSE			0.04	0.08	0.03	0.08	-0.05	0.08	0.02	0.08
TCR Understanding					0.07*	0.03	0.08**	0.03	0.07 *	0.03
High Grade Expectation					0.06	0.08	0.02	0.07	0.05	0.08
Steps Correct					-0.01	0.03	-0.03	0.03	-0.01	0.03
Used Cent. Supports					0.02	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.02	0.04
Business							-0.40**	0.14		
Communication							-0.02	0.12		
Health Studies							-0.34*	0.15		
Engineering							-0.17	0.13		
Ont. Coll. Diploma									0.01	0.10
Ont. Coll. Grad. Cert.									0.01	0.12
Ont. Coll. Adv. Dip.									-0.03	0.14
Intercept	0.85***	0.21	0.86***	0.20	0.59*	0.25	0.81**	0.25	0.39*	0.25
R-squared	.12		.12		.18		.29		.15	
Number of obs.	90		90		90		90		90	

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.010$; * $p < 0.050$. TCR understanding is based at the offer of admission. High grade expectation is an indicator that the individual realistically expects an A/A+ average. See the notes in Table 7 for more information.

Chart 15 investigates students' preferences about applying for all transfer and/or PLAR credits at the beginning of their programs. The results indicate that most students agreed or strongly agreed that they prefer to apply for all credit at the beginning of their programs in both the pre- and post-surveys. In the pre-survey, the mean score was 3.93 and, in the post-survey, it decreased slightly to 3.71, which is not a significant difference, $t(93) = -1.33$, $p > .05$. Students' preferences/attitudes were consistent.

Chart 15 | Preference for Start of Program Transfer and PLAR Credit Application



Centennial College and Program Choice

Second, students were asked about their satisfaction with Centennial College and their program choice. In both the pre- and post-surveys, 80% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their choice to attend Centennial College (see Chart 16). In the pre-survey, the mean score was 4.14 and, in the post-survey, it decreased slightly to 4.06, which is not a significant difference, $t(92) = -1.07$, $p > .05$.

With regard to program choice, in both the pre- and post-surveys, approximately 90% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their choice (see Chart 17). In the pre-survey, the mean score was 4.38 and, in the post-survey, it decreased slightly to 4.24, which is not a significant difference, $t(93) = -1.84$, $p > .05$. Taken together, these findings suggest that student satisfaction with institution and program choice remained stable throughout the credit transfer/PLAR process.

Chart 16 | Satisfaction with Centennial College

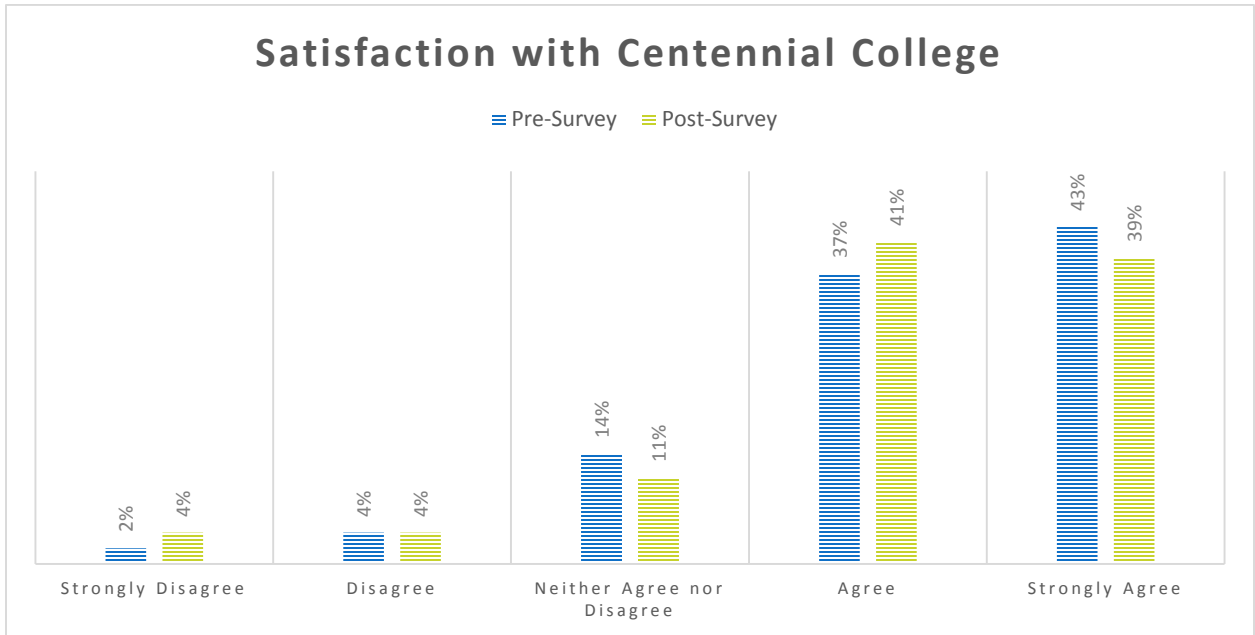
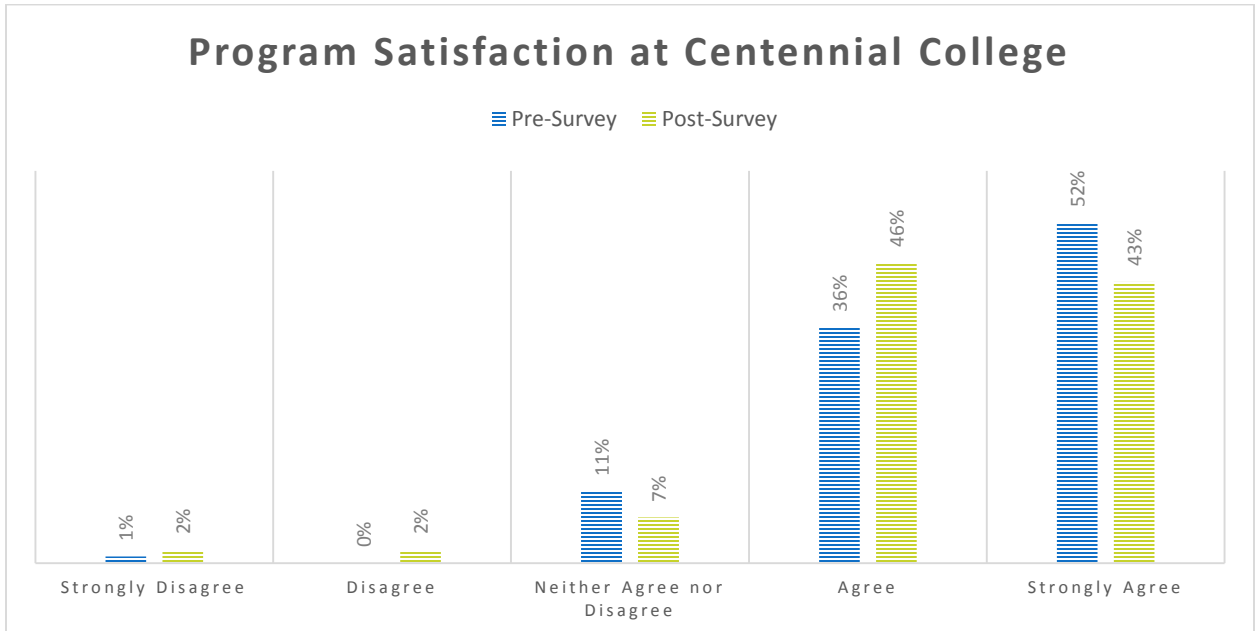


Chart 17 | Program Satisfaction at Centennial College

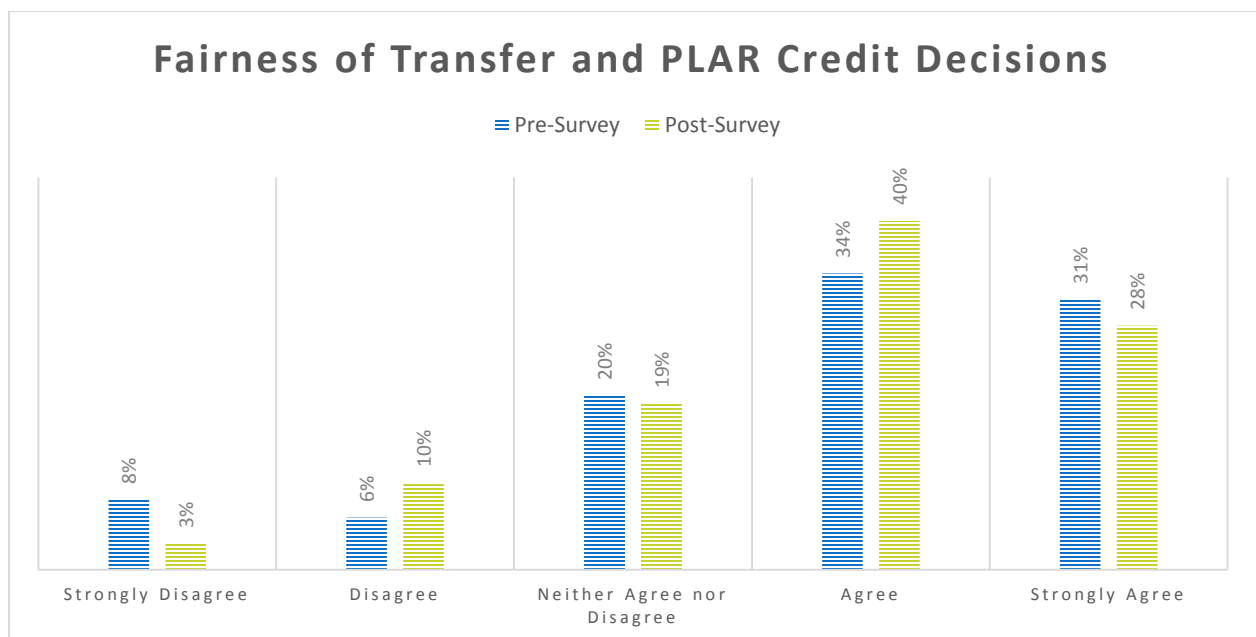


Credit Transfer/PLAR Process

Lastly, students were asked about their satisfaction with the credit transfer and PLAR process. Students indicated their satisfaction with whether transfer credit and PLAR was awarded fairly, quickly, and in a clear and straightforward manner.

Approximately 70% of students agreed or strongly agreed that transfer credit and PLAR is awarded fairly after the process was complete (see Chart 18). Only a small number of students reported they disagreed or strongly disagreed, which is consistent with the high rates of credit success. The pre- and post-survey mean scores were nearly identical (3.75 and 3.78, respectively), where no significant difference was detected, $t(92) = .332, p > .05$.

Chart 18 | Fairness of Transfer and PLAR Credit Decisions



Similarly, approximately 70% of students agreed or strongly agreed that transfer credit/PLAR is awarded quickly after the process was complete (see Chart 19). The pre-survey and post-survey mean scores were 3.49 and 3.60, respectively, with no significant difference, $t(92) = 0.88, p > .05$.

Students were slightly less positive in their attitudes regarding the process being clear and straightforward (see Chart 20). Approximately 63% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the credit transfer and PLAR process is straightforward and clear, after the process was complete. The pre- and post-survey mean scores were 3.44 and 3.42, respectively, with no significant difference, $t(92) = -.188, p > .05$.

Chart 19 | Quickness of Transfer and PLAR Credit Decisions

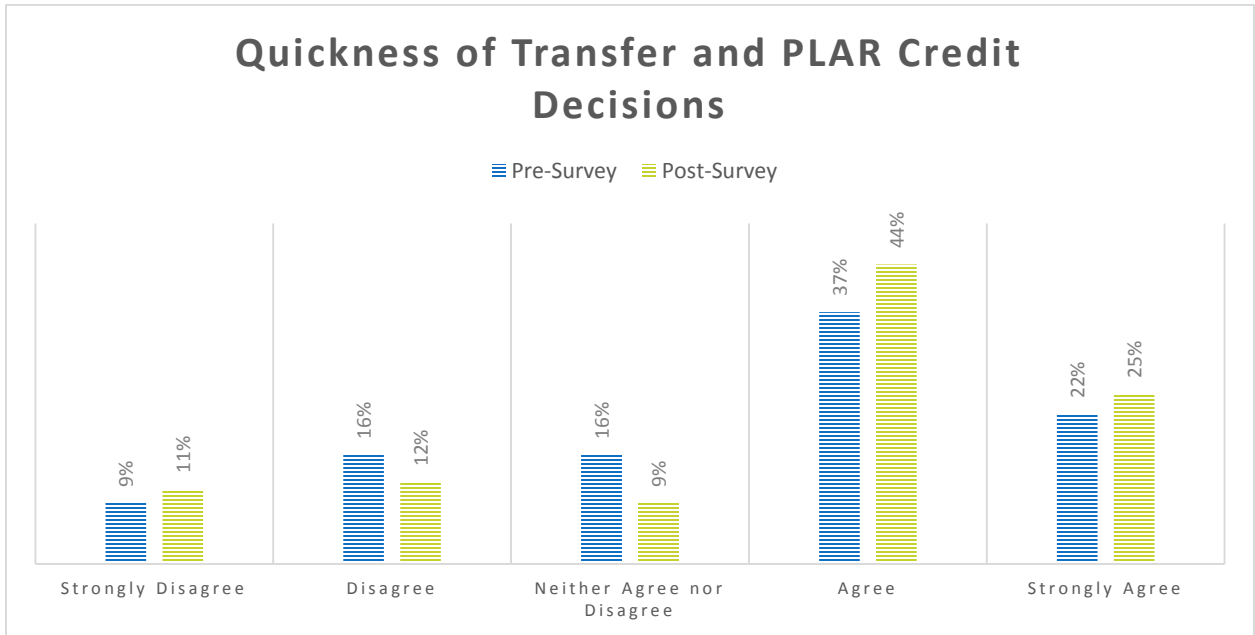
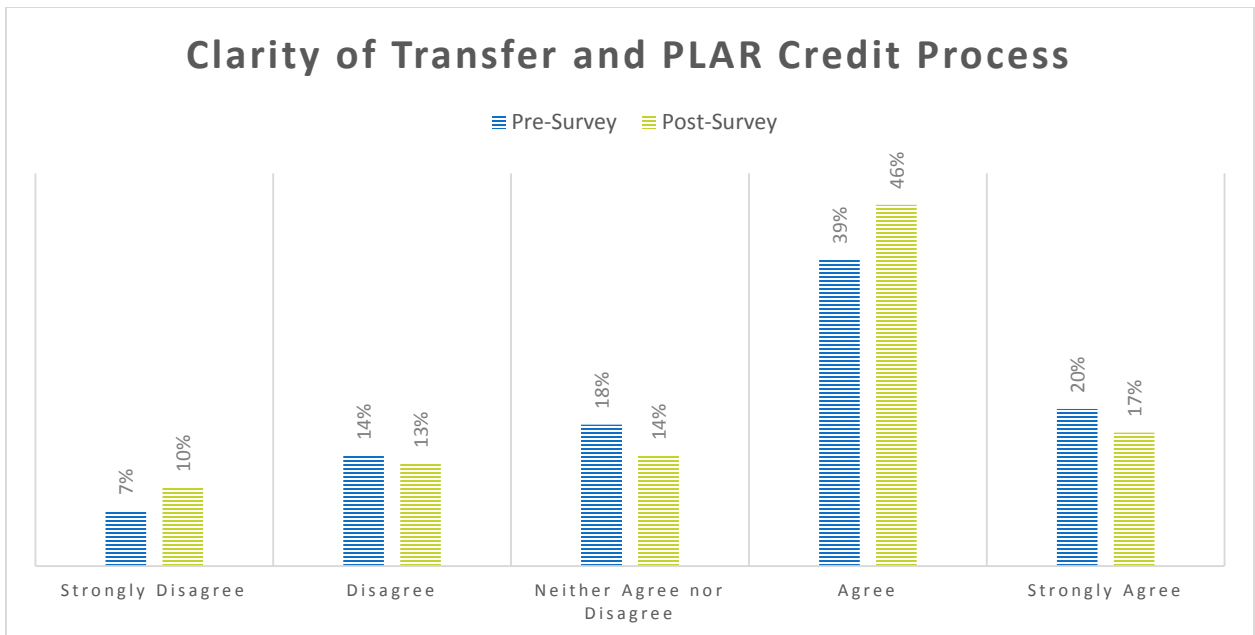


Chart 20 | Clarity of Transfer and PLAR Credit Process



On account of these findings, students tend to be satisfied with their choices of program of study, as well as to attend Centennial College overall. Students seem to be able to parse out their attitudes toward these elements of their education from the transfer/PLAR credit process, but, this issue is difficult to investigate further due to fairly high satisfaction across all credit transfer/PLAR indicators. Although some students expressed disappointment with the clarity and straightforwardness of the credit transfer/PLAR process, a relatively large fraction of the respondents were still satisfied with this issue.

During the focus group and interview sessions, students presented their attitudes toward the process in more detail, explaining their areas of clarity and confusion. Encouragingly, students stated that they felt the transfer credit/PLAR application forms were easily accessible and navigable, explaining the following:

"I was fortunate that my professor [bridging program] actually sent out an email and a copy of the form online to all of the students in the program."

"I can't really remember exactly all of what was on the transfer credit application sheet, but it seemed pretty simple. Just write down the course name and where you attended. I thought it was simple to fill out."

"The application process was made very clear. The application online and selecting the documents, that was clear."

"The application... they gave us very clear instructions."

By contrast, students also identified areas where they require *supplementary information* and/or experienced *conflicting information*.

Supplementary information was desired regarding transfer credit and PLAR contacts. While a centralized online RPL application system is in place at Centennial College, a hub-and-spoke advising model persists with students obtaining advice from Enrolment Services and the various academic departments. The online RPL application system collects students' transcripts and documents and disseminates them to Program Coordinators in the relevant departments for evaluation. However, students described choosing to visit various departments for advising prior to submitting their applications:

"Well I'm thinking do it the same way as Organic Chemistry did it. All I did was give them my syllabus and they looked it up and pressed a button, whatever button allows you to submit and approve credit. Instead of making me run around the whole school."

"I emailed the Faculty of Business, about how to transfer over credits because I didn't know anything about Centennial College before I actually tried to apply here. So, I just emailed and then I got a hold of the Head of the Faculty of Business and he just basically guided me from there on what to do."

"I had an appointment with someone in the English Department and she did it [evaluated credit] right away. She said okay, these look good, I'll just process these."

"I think my experience is probably different than most people because I submitted everything to the head person of my program."

"There should be a department strictly dedicated to the credits."

"If you could just get a single policy that can give credits for any kind of course. I wish the departments were linked to Enrolment Services... I wish Enrolment Services could do all the credits, all the administrative work in one centralized place."

Most commonly, students reported visiting the English Department and General Education and Liberal Studies Department in the School of Advancement directly regarding the evaluation of communication and general education courses. They expressed being unsure of who was in charge of handling their applications and at what points decisions were being made:

"I had no idea who I had to talk to but I looked at the course code, and it was mostly the GNED and the COMM courses that I wanted to transfer. So, I went to the GNED office and I asked somebody and they told me to contact maybe the Head of the English Department, so I had to do all this research, trying to look for this faculty member online."

"I don't know about other students, like if they were lucky enough to even make that initiative to like... I'm just really keen. That's why I did all that research but in that aspect, I wish it was a bit more clear as to how to talk to somebody and get the process going."

"I couldn't understand if the Program Coordinator will decide, the Advisor will decide, Admission Officer will decide... of course not Advisor but Admission Officer will decide regarding credit or the Coordinators or... cooperating with each other. I didn't get at the end of the road... What's the process?"

"I received an answer very quickly because I went directly to the department however I was told that if I had gone through Admissions, went through the whole process from the beginning that it would take quite a while."

Students also requested more transparent evaluation criteria for communications and general education courses.

"If you have any questions... like I never actually took any English courses, in university. But I wrote a ton of papers.... So I didn't know if that would be acceptable or not."

"COMM170, COMM180... I didn't know you could use a Humanities or some other essay course to fulfill that requirement. So once I spoke to someone he said just bring in everything you've done and then we'll go over it."

"When I applied for a GNED credit I thought I had to specifically apply for the course that I had picked. So, I ended up using two perfectly good courses when I could have just used one to apply for transfer credit, for my one course."

Lastly, once students received assistance with their applications, they often desired more information regarding transfer credit decisions. Rationales for denied credit were sought by

students who thought they should have received credit due to misunderstandings with course content or material learned.

"A clearer reason for why it wasn't granted."

"Most of them [Advisors/Program Coordinators] didn't give a proper reason why I wouldn't receive transfer credit."

"For students who applied for transfer credit but didn't get the transfer credit... I think an explanation as to why it is not accepted, or why this transfer credit is rejected should be given. I think it is logical to do so."

"And the reason for that is I strongly believed that I would get the credit, which was declined. And the reason for it being declined wasn't given to me. But that was something that I really wanted to... or something that I wished to get some feedback on."

Conflicting information was experienced with regard to the deadline for applying for credit each term. Students commented that the deadlines were not always adhered to or well-known:

"The deadline is not very... transparent I guess. It's more like a recommendation than a deadline."

"I did miss the deadline and it was still approved. Why is there a deadline? And for other people who think that they missed the deadline and don't have a friend who can tell them 'Oh okay, just try it anyway and they'll just probably take the courses' that is unfortunate."

"I didn't even know there was a deadline. I wasn't aware of the deadline and I honestly thought the Program Coordinator would say 'You've got this past education so you need to be... I'm going to give you credit for COMM170 and COMM180'."

"Just the deadlines. Well, I thought coming into the program that I would probably get maybe a week or two as a deadline but I realized that the deadline had passed. In order to apply, you had to do so before you started the program."

Students stated that they wished for extensions on the deadlines to apply for credit.

The last question in each focus group and interview asked students to comment on the support structures that could be constructed and/or revised to provide a more productive system at Centennial College. These responses are detailed in the final section of this report, which will bring together results and recommendations and outline areas for future research.

Discussion and Conclusion

This report concludes with a summary and application of the research results, followed by a discussion of institution-level policy and procedural recommendations. While this report expands research on the college RPL student experience, it also provides a number of transferable insights into how students form RPL expectations, and on effective institutional practices in communicating RPL rights and the improvement of student support structures.

Summary

Students' understanding of credit transfer and PLAR increased throughout the term. Students recognized and reported understanding the term 'credit transfer' but required clarification with policies and procedures. Students' understanding of the term 'PLAR' required a fair amount of instruction. The main benefits resulting from awarded credit experienced by students were reduced course load and limited repetition of previously learned material. Students reported using their free time to focus on remaining coursework, employment, volunteering and/or family.

After a measure of students' understanding of these concepts was collected, the first part of the analysis involved identifying potential expectation–reality gaps of incoming Centennial College RPL students. Gaps between initial expectations and subsequent credit transfer experiences were uncommon and—in most cases—small. Students' expectations regarding the amount of transfer credit they would receive are quite accurate overall. Students determine whether to apply for transfer credit based on professional and self-assessments of curriculum affinity and generally prefer to apply for all credit at the beginning of their programs. The students in this study experienced high transfer credit success rates, which may be attributed to the application procedures implemented at Centennial College. However, students were unable to predict PLAR credit success with the same accuracy, as they either overestimated or were confused regarding this concept.

The information accumulated by students as they formulated an understanding of credit transfer and PLAR came primarily from the Centennial College website, on-campus staff and social networks. While students' expectations about application procedures were generally met, expectations regarding clear information regarding eligible credits and assistance with understanding assessment decisions were not met. While most students expected to receive clear information about transferability, many struggled to gain clarity and still possessed questions about current policies.

Regarding policies and procedures, almost all students reported expecting to utilize academic transcripts when applying for credit, and this was actualized. However, while requiring an academic transcript is universally understood by students, some cited frustration and confusion concerning the need to submit transcripts twice: once for admission purposes and again for transfer credit. Students reported utilizing course descriptions and course outlines/syllabi more than originally anticipated, and they highlighted the difficulty in sometimes acquiring this information from institutions. In addition, some students reported providing supplementary material, such as various assignments, in demonstrating their prior learning for RPL credit—although this is no longer an acceptable practice at the College. Lastly, students' knowledge of the steps required to apply for transfer credit and PLAR was lower at the offer of admission than at the end of the first term. It is crucial to inform students of the advantages in meeting with an

advisor prior to applying for credit. Students who reported visiting with academic division personnel in advance of submitting their application(s) noted the value in doing so.

Additional areas that did not meet student expectations include: 1) a lack of tuition rebates or reduced tuition costs as a result of RPL credit; 2) misunderstanding around RPL deadlines, which often resulted in students wanting extensions; and 3) block registration of courses that inhibited students from 'topping up' their course load in order to fast track once credit was awarded.

The second part of this analysis involved determining whether first-term academic progression affects students' satisfaction and attitudes regarding their program and RPL experiences. Students tended to be satisfied with their choices of program, as well as to attend Centennial College. While students maintained consistent levels of satisfaction with the fairness and quickness of the credit transfer/PLAR process, they expressed increased disappointment by the end of the first term with clarity and straightforwardness. Regression results provide strong evidence that credit transfer understanding, the RPL success rate, and the quickness and fairness of the RPL process are all predictors of student satisfaction with RPL credit received. In examining RPL credit success as a function of satisfaction, the results show that age, sex, and citizenship (domestic versus international) are all non-determinants of RPL success. Significant predictors include whether students possess previous postsecondary education within Ontario and credit transfer understanding. The latter result suggests that initiatives to improve understanding will likely have significant effects on both satisfaction and success.

Expectation Adjustments and the Role of the Scientist

Conceptually, students reported forming expectations according to their background characteristics, sending institution(s) and program affinity, previous learning and experiences, and understanding of RPL. Students reported that their confidence in the likelihood that they would receive credit was based on high grades, program affinity, duration of coursework completed (e.g., one semester, two semesters) and currency (e.g., completed previous coursework five years ago). RPL understanding and the value attributed to receiving credit also seem to drive students' expectations. Some students expressed desiring credit in order to have more free time to work, to manage family commitments and to reduce commute time to Centennial College.

These factors impact the amount of credit students apply for and, as the first term progression occurred, students reported reflecting on their original expectations. Student hypotheses regarding the amount of awarded credit, benefits associated with receiving credit, resources and sources utilized, institutional supports, and the policies and procedures governing RPL were tested. As feedback was received, students either retained their position or revisited it.

With regard to the amount of credit, many students were correct in their expectations and, therefore reported satisfaction with this indicator. Others reported the need to revisit why the credit for which they applied was not approved. Some students were reflective scientists, realizing that the affinity they thought they presented in fact did not meet Centennial College's policy, whereby an RPL assessor identifies a minimum 80% affinity of learning outcomes or content between the previously completed course and the Centennial

College course. Realizations that course descriptions and course outlines/syllabi were required also prompted some students to re-consider their initial position.

Students commonly stated that sitting in the classroom with their peers and hearing their stories of RPL credit also made them revisit their initial positions. For some, these conversations reinforced that their learning was adequate to receive credit and that they properly prepared their applications, whereas others realized that they would not receive credit or deserved more credit. Students reported becoming aware of additional credit transfer opportunities when speaking with their peers.

While most students who were denied credit revised their initial expectations after learning more about the policies and procedures governing RPL at Centennial College, survey results revealed that understanding improved over time, a small portion of students retained their position that it was the College that was incorrect in their assessment.

The amount of time students cycled through this process was dependent on the number of credit applications submitted and the timing of these applications. For example, students who received credit for some applications and not others recalled retaining, revisiting and revising their initial expectations. This process/gap analysis eventually led to the student judgments about satisfaction reported above. While behavioural psychology successfully assists in explaining how RPL students rationally update beliefs as new information becomes available, future extensions may include the use of Bayesian updating. Additionally, cross-institutional investigations of expectation formation, updating, and experienced realities are necessary for a more thorough analysis at the system level.

Recommendations

A number of policy and procedural recommendations aimed to improve the RPL experience are provided. While the recommendations outlined are of key importance to Centennial College, many are transferable across institutions looking to critically examine their credit transfer and PLAR structures. The following insights are a result of this research:

- *Increase Initial Support*—Support in preparing and submitting RPL applications should occur as early as the time of admission. Flagging students with previous postsecondary education upon admission and disseminating an email message via myCentennial prior to the start of term to alert them of the possibility of RPL credit would be helpful. The RPL experience would be further improved by sending RPL eligibility information and application links and forms with students' offer of admission.
- *Further Automate and Streamline Processes*—In recent years, Centennial College has moved towards automating and expediting credit transfer/PLAR processes. While students recommend an online application system with tracking functionality, this has been established by the College—effective May 2014. However, there is still room for improvement, as students state that the academic transcripts on file, as a part of their admissions, should be automatically accessed for RPL assessments.
- *Centralize RPL Support*—Students highlight the value of having access to academic division personnel through the RPL process. The current credit transfer advising and support mechanism is a patchwork of different support functions and

individuals across the College. This patchwork, along with inconsistent information sharing and lack of clarity regarding the process, has resulted in a student experience that is akin to a hub-and-spoke model. Centennial College should consider centralizing support functions.

- *Improve RPL Staff Visibility and Expertise*—Centennial College should seek ways of improving RPL staff visibility and expertise. Visibility can be increased through a more established presence on campus as well as at open houses, orientation sessions, college/university fairs and pop-up advising stands. RPL advising should also have an improved online presence. Dedicated RPL staff should be able to advise students through self-assessments and identify curricular affinity between courses and programs.
- *Peer Mentoring*—Mentoring opportunities from previous RPL students is a means to guide and support incoming students about the application process. Social networks proved to be a large source of information for students; therefore, utilizing this resource further would be desirable. Centennial College should develop a peer mentoring program that draws on the expertise of previous RPL students.
- *Policies and Procedures*—Demand exists for tuition rebates, despite the current tuition framework in place at Ontario colleges, which does not differentiate between full-time course loads with or without RPL credit. Furthermore, in the event that RPL applications or subsequent appeals are denied, students wish to see a more thorough rationale.
- *Clarify Realistic Benefit Expectations*—Centennial College has an opportunity to support students during expectation formation by clearly articulating realistic benefits obtained through transfer credit and PLAR. For example, administrators and advisors should reiterate the tuition framework and dispel notions of obtaining rebates for successful transfer credit and PLAR applications when full-time status is maintained.

In conclusion, there are minimal expectation–reality gaps for incoming Centennial College students. Students apply for RPL credit with significant precision; success rates are quite high. The few notable discontinuities that exist concern information clarity, the credit transfer process and available supports.

Credit transfer understanding, RPL success rate, and perceived quickness and fairness of the RPL process are all predictors of student satisfaction with RPL credit received. What was not found in this study was a strong relationship between RPL satisfaction and Centennial College satisfaction with either the student’s program of study or the institution overall. This finding may indicate that students are able to separate service and academic functions. Nevertheless, due to fairly high satisfaction across all credit transfer/PLAR indicators, it is difficult to deduce this exclusively.

Ontario’s colleges are in a strong position to work collaboratively with prospective and current students in managing their expectation formation and supporting development of reasonable expectations for their RPL experience. Working alongside students, amendments and additions to current support structures can be implemented. It is essential that administrators ensure that the policies and procedures in place are serving students.

Minimized gaps in expectations and understanding of RPL promotes a greater likelihood of student RPL satisfaction.

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Appendix A

Transferability Expectations and Realities Survey 2013/2014

Letter of Invitation

Greetings,

We are writing to request your participation in the research study entitled, *Transferability Expectations and Realities*. For 5 minutes of your time, you will receive an opportunity to win an iPad 5th Generation. There will be additional participation opportunities to win a tablet and/or receive a cash honourarium.

As an incoming Centennial College student with potentially relevant prior learning, you have been identified as a participant candidate for this study. Your candidacy for participation has been based upon your application for transfer credit and/or prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) for the 2013-2014 academic year.

Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take a moment to read the details of this study and its benefits.

WHO IS CONDUCTING THE STUDY?

All research will be carried out at Centennial College under the supervision of Christine Helen Arnold, University of Toronto/Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), and Sean Woodhead, Centennial College.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to collect information on students' transfer and PLAR credit experiences, especially at the point of intake. The data will be used to measure incoming student expectations against subsequent received credit, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability. Study results may inform College and/or system-wide policy and process improvements.

WHAT WILL YOU NEED TO DO IF YOU TAKE PART?

As a part of this study, we are asking you to participate in a survey discussing your: 1) knowledge of credit transfer and PLAR concepts; 2) expectations for credit transfer and PLAR processes and outcomes; and 3) satisfaction with the current credit transfer and PLAR system in place at Centennial College. This survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete and you will receive an iPad 5th Generation raffle ticket.

In addition, we will collect information from your academic record regarding demographics, registered courses and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applications.

You will be asked to provide consent to be a part of this research study by checking a box on the survey itself. In providing consent, you confirm that you have been given the opportunity to discuss the study, all of your questions have been answered and you agree to participate.

WHO IS ORGANIZING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?

This study is organized and funded by Centennial College and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT). In 2011, the provincial government announced funding of nearly \$74-million over five years to operate a new centralized system that facilitates transfers among institutions. New centralized credit system objectives include: 1) reducing the need for students to repeat coursework; 2) developing more transfer opportunities; 3) providing on campus advisors and orientation programs; and 4) refining a centralized website that will assist students in identifying credits for transfer (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011). Centennial College is supporting this provincial initiative by participating in and leading many transferability projects, including this study, which will provide fruitful recommendations regarding necessary RPL support structures.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES IN TAKING PART?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. The research risk is extremely low. You will be instructed to share and disclose only that information with which you are comfortable. The data collected is not sensitive and there is no more risk involved than in everyday interactions.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

Participation in the research study benefits participants and the scholarly community. In identifying RPL reality-expectation gaps, colleges and universities can use the study results to:

- 1) Motivate discussion within institutions regarding their effectiveness in communicating credit transfer and PLAR rights and responsibilities;
- 2) Participate in expectation management at the point of admission; and
- 3) Develop or revise support structures that facilitate the translation of relevant prior learning into postsecondary credit.

WILL MY TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Yes, all responses will be kept strictly confidential and your involvement is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question with which you are uncomfortable. You will not be judged or evaluated and you will not be at risk of harm. All data collected from individuals who choose to withdraw will be removed from the study results. Your identity will be kept anonymous within all research writing and publications.

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CONTACT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

If you are interested in participating in the *Transferability Expectations and Realities* research study, please complete the following survey. Your contribution to this study is greatly appreciated. Responses are requested by [insert date].

<http://fluidsurveys.com/s/TransferabilityExpectationsandRealities/>

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study, please contact ethics@centennialcollege.ca or the Chair, Dr. Lynda Attack at latack@centennialcollege.ca.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have about this study. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,



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Appendix B

Transferability Expectations and Realities Survey 2013/2014

Pre-Survey

Sent from Manager, Pathways & Academic Partnerships to incoming Centennial College students who have applied for transfer credit and/or PLAR credit

This survey will collect information on students' transfer and PLAR credit experiences, especially at the point of intake. The data will be used to measure incoming student expectations against subsequent received credit, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability adjusted between the initial point of intake and near the first term's end. This survey is being conducted by Centennial College and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT). All answers will be kept strictly confidential and used for statistical purposes. While participation in this survey is voluntary, your cooperation is important to ensure that the information collected in this survey is accurate and comprehensive.

This survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Students who complete the survey will receive a raffle ticket to be entered into a draw for an iPad 5th Generation.

Participant Consent: I have been given the opportunity to discuss this study. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this study and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time. ☐

Student Number: _____ Program: _____

Demographics

1. You most closely identify as:
 - ☐ A domestic student born in Canada
 - ☐ A domestic student not born in Canada
 - ☐ An international student born in Canada
 - ☐ An international student not born in Canada
2. Where was your high school located?
 - ☐ Within Canada (Please specify province) _____
 - ☐ Outside of Canada (Please specify country) _____

3. What was your overall average grade in high school?
 - ☐ 90% - 100% A+
 - ☐ 80% - 89% A
 - ☐ 75% - 79% B+
 - ☐ 70% - 74% B
 - ☐ 65% - 69% C+
 - ☐ 60% - 64% C
 - ☐ 55% - 59% D+
 - ☐ 50% - 54% D
 - ☐ 0% - 49% F

4. Between finishing high school and enrolling in your current Centennial College program, the following amount of time has passed:
 - ☐ Less than 1 year
 - ☐ 1-2 years
 - ☐ 3-4 years
 - ☐ 5-9 years
 - ☐ 10+ years
 - ☐ Did not graduate high school

5. (Please select all that apply) Prior to enrolling at Centennial College you:
 - ☐ Were employed in a job that is related to your current program
 - ☐ Volunteered in a role that is related to your current program
 - ☐ Had a hobby or hobbies related to your current program
 - ☐ Completed university, college, polytechnic and/or vocational/technical education related to your current program
 - ☐ Completed workshops or seminars that were not for college or university credit and related to your current program

6. (Please select all that apply) If you completed postsecondary education prior to enrolling at Centennial College, what form of education did you complete?
 - ☐ Attended a Canadian college, polytechnic and/or vocational/technical institution
 - ☐ Attended a Canadian university
 - ☐ Attended an international college, polytechnic and/or vocational/technical institution
 - ☐ Attended an international university
 - ☐ Did not study at a university, college, polytechnic and/or vocational/technical institution

7. Your current Centennial College program is a:
 - ☐ One year certificate program
 - ☐ Two year diploma program
 - ☐ Three year advanced diploma program
 - ☐ Four year degree program
 - ☐ One year graduate certificate program

8. You expect to complete your program within:
- ☐ One year
 - ☐ Two years
 - ☐ Three years
 - ☐ Four years
 - ☐ Five years
 - ☐ More than five years
 - ☐ Do not expect to complete my program
9. Ideally, you hope to complete most courses with grade points of:
- ☐ 90% - 100% A+
 - ☐ 80% - 89% A
 - ☐ 75% - 79% B+
 - ☐ 70% - 74% B
 - ☐ 65% - 69% C+
 - ☐ 60% - 64% C
 - ☐ 55% - 59% D+
 - ☐ 50% - 54% D
 - ☐ 0% - 49% F
10. Realistically, you expect to complete most courses with grade points of:
- ☐ 90% - 100% A+
 - ☐ 80% - 89% A
 - ☐ 75% - 79% B+
 - ☐ 70% - 74% B
 - ☐ 65% - 69% C+
 - ☐ 60% - 64% C
 - ☐ 55% - 59% D+
 - ☐ 50% - 54% D
 - ☐ 0% - 49% F

Credit Transfer and PLAR Concepts

11. (Please rank on the scale) At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you understood the term 'credit transfer' and the policies and procedures regarding the awarding of credit.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
12. (Please rank on the scale) At the moment that you attended your first class at Centennial College, you understood the term 'credit transfer' and the policies and procedures regarding the awarding of credit.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

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13. (Please rank on the scale) At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you understood the term 'prior learning assessment and recognition' (PLAR) and the policies and procedures regarding the awarding of credit.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
14. (Please rank on the scale) At the moment that you attended your first class at Centennial College, you understood the term 'prior learning assessment and recognition' (PLAR) and the policies and procedures regarding the awarding of credit.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
15. (Please select all that apply) Your understanding of credit transfer has been informed by:
- ☐ Family
 - ☐ Secondary school teacher(s) and/or guidance counselor(s)
 - ☐ Centennial College recruitment team or their agents
 - ☐ Friends and coworkers
 - ☐ Centennial College website
 - ☐ Centennial College on-campus staff
 - ☐ Other institution website
 - ☐ Other institution staff
 - ☐ ONCAT website
 - ☐ Other: _____
16. (Please select all that apply) Your understanding of PLAR has been informed by:
- ☐ Family
 - ☐ Secondary school teacher(s) and/or guidance counselor(s)
 - ☐ Centennial College recruitment team or their agents
 - ☐ Friends and coworkers
 - ☐ Centennial College website
 - ☐ Centennial College on-campus staff
 - ☐ Other institution website
 - ☐ Other institution staff
 - ☐ ONCAT website
 - ☐ Other: _____

Expectations and Preferences

17. At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you expected to obtain:
- ☐ No transfer credit
 - ☐ 1-3 courses of transfer credit
 - ☐ Approximately 1 term of transfer credit
 - ☐ Approximately 2 terms of transfer credit
 - ☐ Approximately 3 terms or more of transfer credit
18. At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you expected to obtain:
- ☐ No PLAR credit
 - ☐ 1-3 courses of PLAR credit
 - ☐ Approximately 1 term of PLAR credit
 - ☐ Approximately 2 terms of PLAR credit
 - ☐ Approximately 3 terms or more of PLAR credit
19. (Please select all that apply) At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you expected to use the following documentation and/or experiences to determine whether to submit an application for transfer credit and/or PLAR credit:
- ☐ Academic transcript(s)
 - ☐ Course description(s)
 - ☐ Course outline(s)/syllabi
 - ☐ Assignments and/or assessments
 - ☐ Portfolio(s)
 - ☐ Independent study, personal projects and/or reading
 - ☐ Community and family activities
 - ☐ Paid or voluntary work, travel and/or military service
 - ☐ Hobbies and/or professional associations
 - ☐ Non- university and/or college courses and/or training programs
 - ☐ Seminars and/or workshops
 - ☐ Other
20. (Please rank all that apply in order) At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you expected to complete the following steps when applying for transfer credit and/or PLAR credit:
- Confirm requirements for transfer credit and/or PLAR with an advisor
 - Transfer credit and/or PLAR assessment received (awarded or denied)
 - Provide documentation (e.g. transcript(s), course outline(s) etc.) for transfer credit(s) and/or complete PLAR assessment(s) with an RPL assessor
 - Complete the Transfer of Credit Application and/or PLAR Application
 - Submit all applications and any applicable fees

21. (Please select all that apply) At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you expected to experience the following forms of credit transfer and/or PLAR support:
- ☐ Clear information regarding eligible transfer credits
 - ☐ Guidance on application procedures
 - ☐ Program advising
 - ☐ Assistance with grade calculation(s)
 - ☐ Assistance managing your transfer credit and/or PLAR files (e.g. deadlines, transcript(s), documents etc.)
 - ☐ Assistance understanding transfer credit and/or PLAR assessments and all decisions
22. (Please select all that apply) At the moment that you received an offer of admission to Centennial College, you expected to experience the following benefits if awarded transfer credit and/or PLAR credit?
- ☐ Limited repetition of previously learned material
 - ☐ Reduced course load
 - ☐ Reduced time to completion
 - ☐ Reduced educational or opportunity costs
 - ☐ Additional time for family
 - ☐ Additional time for employment
23. (Please rank on the scale) When you applied for transfer credit and/or PLAR credit, you expected the application to be approved and the requested credit to be awarded.
- | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Neither Disagree Nor Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
24. (Please rank on the scale) You would prefer to apply for all your transfer credit and/or PLAR credit at the beginning of your program.
- | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Neither Disagree Nor Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
25. (Please rank on the scale) You would prefer to apply for your transfer credit and/or PLAR at multiple points throughout your program.
- | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Neither Disagree Nor Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|

Satisfaction

26. (Please rank on the scale) You are satisfied with choosing Centennial College for your postsecondary education.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

27. (Please rank on the scale) You are satisfied with your choice of program at Centennial College.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

28. (Please rank on the scale) You believe Centennial College fairly awards transfer credit and/or PLAR credit.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

29. (Please rank on the scale) You believe Centennial College quickly awards transfer credit and/or PLAR credit.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

30. (Please rank on the scale) The process of obtaining transfer credit and/or PLAR credit at Centennial College was straightforward and clearly outlined.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

Thank you! We appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey. Your feedback is important to us and will assist in improving Centennial College's credit transfer and PLAR system.

If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Sean Woodhead at swoodhead@centennialcollege.ca.

Please check the box below if you wish to participate in a 5 minute follow-up survey in (December/April/August). You will receive an additional two raffle tickets for the iPad 5th Generation draw for your participation. ☐

Appendix C

Transferability Expectations and Realities Follow-Up Survey 2013/2014

Letter of Invitation

Greetings,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the *Transferability Expectations and Realities* research study. We enjoyed learning about your initial: 1) knowledge of credit transfer and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) concepts; 2) expectations for credit transfer and PLAR processes and outcomes; and 3) satisfaction with the current credit transfer and PLAR system in place at Centennial College.

Having almost completed your first term at Centennial College, you will have now experienced the credit transfer and/or PLAR system in relation to your coursework. Therefore, we are contacting you at this time to participate in a follow-up survey. We would like to hear about your first term and the realities you have experienced.

Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take a moment to read the details of this study and its benefits.

WHO IS CONDUCTING THE STUDY?

All research will be carried out at Centennial College under the supervision of Christine Helen Arnold, University of Toronto/ Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), and Sean Woodhead, Centennial College.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to collect information on students' transfer and PLAR credit experiences, especially at the point of intake. The data will be used to measure incoming student expectations against subsequent received credit, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability. Study results may inform College and/or system-wide policy and process improvements.

WHAT WILL YOU NEED TO DO IF YOU TAKE PART?

At this stage in the study, we are asking you to participate in a follow-up survey discussing your: 1) knowledge of credit transfer and PLAR concepts; 2) realities of credit transfer and PLAR processes and outcomes; and 3) continued satisfaction with the current credit transfer and PLAR system in place at Centennial College. This survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. You will receive a \$15.00 Tim Horton's gift card as well as two additional raffle tickets for an iPad 5th Generation draw!

You will be asked to provide consent to be a part of this research study by checking a box on the survey itself. In providing consent you confirm that you have been given the opportunity to discuss the study, all of your questions have been answered and you agree to participate.

WHO IS ORGANIZING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?

This study is organized and funded by Centennial College and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT). In 2011, the provincial government announced funding of nearly \$74-million over five years to operate a new centralized system that facilitates transfers among institutions. New centralized credit system objectives include: 1) reducing the need for students to repeat coursework; 2) developing more transfer opportunities; 3) providing on campus advisors and orientation programs; and 4) refining a centralized website that will assist students in identifying credits for transfer (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011). Centennial College is supporting this provincial initiative by participating in and leading many transferability projects, including this study, which will provide fruitful recommendations regarding necessary Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) support structures.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES IN TAKING PART?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. The research risk is extremely low. You will be instructed to share and disclose only that information with which you are comfortable. The data collected is not sensitive and there is no more risk involved than in everyday interactions.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

Participation in the research study benefits participants and the scholarly community. In identifying RPL reality-expectation gaps, colleges and universities can use the study results to:

- 1) Motivate discussion within institutions regarding their effectiveness in communicating credit transfer and PLAR rights and responsibilities;
- 2) Participate in expectation management at the point of admission; and
- 3) Develop or revise support structures that facilitate the translation of relevant prior learning into postsecondary credit.

WILL MY TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Yes, all responses will be kept strictly confidential and your involvement is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question with which you are uncomfortable. You will not be judged or evaluated and you will not be at risk of harm. All data collected from individuals who choose to withdraw will be removed from the study results. Your identity will be kept anonymous within all research writing and publications.

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CONTACT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

If you are interested in continuing your participation in the *Transferability Expectations and Realities* research study, please complete the following follow-up survey. Your contribution to this study is greatly appreciated. Responses are requested by [insert date].

<http://fluidsurveys.com/s/TransferabilityExpectationsandRealitiesFollow-Up/>

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study please contact ethics@centennialcollege.ca or the Chair, Dr. Lynda Attack at latack@centennialcollege.ca.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have about this study. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,



Christine Helen Arnold
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education
University of Toronto/OISE
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Sean Woodhead
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Appendix D

Transferability Expectations and Realities Follow-Up Survey 2013/2014

Post- Survey

Sent from Manager, Pathways & Academic Partnerships to incoming Centennial College students who have applied for transfer credit and/or PLAR credit

This survey will collect information on students' transfer and PLAR credit experiences, especially at the point of intake. The data will be used to measure incoming student expectations against subsequent received credit, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability adjusted between the initial point of intake and near the first term's end. This survey is being conducted by Centennial College and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT). All answers will be kept strictly confidential and used for statistical purposes. While participation in this survey is voluntary, your cooperation is important to ensure that the information collected in this survey is accurate and comprehensive.

This survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Students who complete the survey will receive a \$15.00 Tim Horton's gift card as well as two additional raffle tickets for an iPad 5th Generation draw! Gift cards will be mailed to students' home addresses or made available for pick-up at Centennial College.

Participant Consent: I have been given the opportunity to discuss this study. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this study and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time. ☐

Student Number: _____ Program: _____

Demographics

1. You most closely identify as:
 - ☐ A domestic student born in Canada
 - ☐ A domestic student not born in Canada
 - ☐ An international student born in Canada
 - ☐ An international student not born in Canada
2. Has your program at Centennial College changed since enrolment?
 - ☐ Yes, a program change has occurred
 - ☐ No, a program change has not occurred

3. You expect to complete your program within:
- ☐ One year
 - ☐ Two years
 - ☐ Three years
 - ☐ Four years
 - ☐ Five years
 - ☐ More than five years
 - ☐ Do not expect to complete my program
4. Ideally, you hope to complete most courses with grade points of:
- ☐ 90% - 100% A+
 - ☐ 80% - 89% A
 - ☐ 75% - 79% B+
 - ☐ 70% - 74% B
 - ☐ 65% - 69% C+
 - ☐ 60% - 64% C
 - ☐ 55% - 59% D+
 - ☐ 50% - 54% D
 - ☐ 0% - 49% F
5. Realistically, you expect to complete most courses with grade points of:
- ☐ 90% - 100% A+
 - ☐ 80% - 89% A
 - ☐ 75% - 79% B+
 - ☐ 70% - 74% B
 - ☐ 65% - 69% C+
 - ☐ 60% - 64% C
 - ☐ 55% - 59% D+
 - ☐ 50% - 54% D
 - ☐ 0% - 49% F

Credit Transfer and PLAR Concepts

6. (Please rank on the scale) You are aware of and understand the term 'credit transfer'.
- | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly
Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Neither
Disagree
Nor Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly
Agree |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
7. (Please rank on the scale) You are aware of and understand Centennial College's policies and procedures regarding the awarding of transfer credit.
- | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly
Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Neither
Disagree
Nor Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly
Agree |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|

8. (Please rank on the scale) You are aware of and understand the term 'prior learning assessment and recognition' (PLAR).
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
9. (Please rank on the scale) You are aware of and understand Centennial College's policies and procedures regarding the awarding of PLAR credit.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
10. (Please select all that apply) Your understanding of credit transfer has been informed by:
- ☐ Family
 - ☐ Secondary school teacher(s) and/or guidance counselor(s)
 - ☐ Centennial College recruitment team or their agents
 - ☐ Friends and coworkers
 - ☐ Centennial College website
 - ☐ Centennial College on-campus staff
 - ☐ Other institution website
 - ☐ Other institution staff
 - ☐ ONCAT website
 - ☐ Other: _____
11. (Please select all that apply) Your understanding of PLAR has been informed by:
- ☐ Family
 - ☐ Secondary school teacher(s) and/or guidance counselor(s)
 - ☐ Centennial College recruitment team or their agents
 - ☐ Friends and coworkers
 - ☐ Centennial College website
 - ☐ Centennial College on-campus staff
 - ☐ Other institution website
 - ☐ Other institution staff
 - ☐ ONCAT website
 - ☐ Other: _____

Realities and Additional Expectations

12. For your current Centennial College program you obtained:
- ☐ No transfer credit
 - ☐ 1-3 courses of transfer credit
 - ☐ Approximately 1 term of transfer credit
 - ☐ Approximately 2 terms of transfer credit
 - ☐ Approximately 3 terms or more of transfer credit

13. For your current Centennial College program you obtained:
 - ☐ No PLAR credit
 - ☐ 1-3 courses of PLAR credit
 - ☐ Approximately 1 term of PLAR credit
 - ☐ Approximately 2 terms of PLAR credit
 - ☐ Approximately 3 terms or more of PLAR credit

14. (Please select all that apply) You utilized/referenced the following documentation and/or experiences when submitting an application for transfer credit and/or PLAR credit:
 - ☐ Academic transcript(s)
 - ☐ Course description(s)
 - ☐ Course outline(s)/syllabi
 - ☐ Assignments and/or assessments
 - ☐ Portfolio(s)
 - ☐ Independent study, personal projects and/or reading
 - ☐ Community and family activities
 - ☐ Paid or voluntary work, travel and/or military service
 - ☐ Hobbies and/or professional associations
 - ☐ Non- university and/or college courses and/or training programs
 - ☐ Seminars and/or workshops
 - ☐ Other

15. (Please rank all that apply in order) You completed the following steps when applying for transfer credit and/or PLAR credit:
 - Confirm requirements for transfer credit and/or PLAR with an advisor
 - Transfer credit and/or PLAR assessment received (awarded or denied)
 - Provide documentation (e.g. transcript(s), course outline(s) etc.) for transfer credit(s) and/or complete PLAR assessment(s) with an RPL assessor
 - Complete the Transfer of Credit Application and/or PLAR Application
 - Submit all applications and any applicable fees

16. (Please select all that apply) You experienced the following forms of transfer credit and/or PLAR support:
 - ☐ Clear information regarding eligible transfer credits
 - ☐ Guidance on application procedures
 - ☐ Program advising
 - ☐ Assistance with grade calculation(s)
 - ☐ Assistance managing your transfer credit and/or PLAR files (e.g. deadlines, transcript(s), documents etc.)
 - ☐ Assistance understanding transfer credit and/or PLAR assessments and all decisions

17. (Please select all that apply) You experienced the following benefits having been awarded transfer credit and/or PLAR credit:
- ☐ Limited repetition of previously learned material
 - ☐ Reduced course load
 - ☐ Reduced educational or opportunity costs
 - ☐ Additional time for family
 - ☐ Additional time for employment
 - ☐ N/A
18. (Please rank on the scale) You applied for all your transfer credit and/or PLAR credit at the beginning of your program.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
19. (Please rank on the scale) You expect to apply for additional transfer credit during the course of your program at Centennial College.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
20. (Please rank on the scale) You expect to apply for additional PLAR credit during the course of your program at Centennial College.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

Satisfaction

21. (Please rank on the scale) You are satisfied with choosing Centennial College for your postsecondary education.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
22. (Please rank on the scale) You are satisfied with your choice of program at Centennial College.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

23. (Please rank on the scale) (Please rank on the scale) You are satisfied with the amount of transfer credit you have currently been awarded at Centennial College.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
24. (Please rank on the scale) You are satisfied with the amount of PLAR credit you have currently been awarded at Centennial College.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
25. (Please rank on the scale) You believe Centennial College fairly awards transfer credit and/or PLAR credit.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
26. (Please rank on the scale) You believe Centennial College quickly awards transfer credit and/or PLAR credit.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree
27. (Please rank on the scale) The process of obtaining transfer credit and/or PLAR credit at Centennial College was straightforward and clearly outlined.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither Disagree Nor Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

Thank you! We appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey. Your feedback is important to us and will assist in improving Centennial College's credit transfer and PLAR system.

If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Sean Woodhead at swoodhead@centennialcollege.ca.

Please check the box below if you wish to participate in a 60 minute focus group discussing your credit transfer and/or PLAR experiences. Students will receive a \$20.00 cash honourarium for their participation. In addition, complimentary pizza and drinks will be served at each focus group session! ☐

Appendix E

Transferability Expectations and Realities Focus Group

Letter of Invitation

Greetings,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the *Transferability Expectations and Realities* research study. We enjoyed learning about your: 1) knowledge of credit transfer and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) concepts; 2) expectations and realities; and 3) satisfaction with the current Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system in place at Centennial College.

We are contacting you at this time in response to your interest in participating in a 60 minute focus group discussing your credit transfer and/or PLAR experiences. A focus group consists of a small number of individuals brought together to discuss their perceptions, opinions and beliefs on a specific topic. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members.

Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take a moment to read the details of this study and its benefits.

WHO IS CONDUCTING THE STUDY?

All research will be carried out at Centennial College under the supervision of Christine Helen Arnold, University of Toronto/ Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), and Sean Woodhead, Centennial College.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to collect information on students' transfer and PLAR credit experiences, especially at the point of intake. The data will be used to measure incoming student expectations against subsequent received credit, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability. Study results may inform College and/or system-wide policy and process improvements.

WHAT WILL YOU NEED TO DO IF YOU TAKE PART?

At this stage in the study, we are asking you to participate in audiotaped, semi-structured focus group that will center on the existence of expectation-reality gaps and rationales for these gaps (student estimations of relevant prior learning and institutional communication of expectations and standards). Your insights will reveal how support structures can be constructed and/or revised to provide a more productive system. The focus group will be audio taped with your permission. Approximately eight to ten students will participate in each 60 minute semi-structured focus group. Due to the confidential nature of this study you will be asked to keep all

discussion that takes place within the focus group private. You will receive a \$20.00 cash honourarium for your participation!

You will be asked to provide consent to be a part of this research study by written confirmation at the commencement of the focus group. In providing consent you confirm that you have been given the opportunity to discuss the study, all of your questions have been answered and you agree to participate.

WHO IS ORGANIZING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?

This study is organized and funded by Centennial College and the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT). In 2011, the provincial government announced funding of nearly \$74-million over five years to operate a new centralized system that facilitates transfers among institutions. New centralized credit system objectives include: 1) reducing the need for students to repeat coursework; 2) developing more transfer opportunities; 3) providing on campus advisors and orientation programs; and 4) refining a centralized website that will assist students in identifying credits for transfer (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011). Centennial College is supporting this provincial initiative by participating in and leading many transferability projects, including this study, which will provide fruitful recommendations regarding necessary RPL support structures.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES IN TAKING PART?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. The research risk is extremely low. You will be instructed to share and disclose only that information with which you are comfortable. The data collected is not sensitive and there is no more risk involved than in everyday interactions.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

Participation in the research study benefits participants and the scholarly community. In identifying RPL reality-expectation gaps, colleges and universities can use the study results to:

- 1) Motivate discussion within institutions regarding their effectiveness in communicating credit transfer and PLAR rights and responsibilities;
- 2) Participate in expectation management at the point of admission; and
- 3) Develop or revise support structures that facilitate the translation of relevant prior learning into postsecondary credit.

WILL MY TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Yes, all responses will be kept strictly confidential and your involvement is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question

with which you are uncomfortable. You will not be judged or evaluated and you will not be at risk of harm. All data collected from individuals who choose to withdraw will be removed from the study results. Your identity will be kept anonymous within all research writing and publications.

CONTACT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study please contact ethics@centennialcollege.ca or the Chair, Dr. Lynda Attack at latack@centennialcollege.ca.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have about this study. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,



Christine Helen Arnold
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education
University of Toronto/OISE
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Canada, M5S 1V6
c.arnold@utoronto.ca



Sean Woodhead
Manager, Pathways & Academic
Partnerships
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Appendix F

Transferability Expectations and Realities Focus Group

Consent Letter

[Insert date]

To the participants in this study,

The purpose of this study is to collect information on students' credit transfer and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) experiences, especially at the point of intake. The data will be used to measure incoming student expectations against subsequent received credit, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability. Study results may inform College and/or system-wide policy and process improvements.

All research will be carried out at Centennial College under the supervision of Christine Helen Arnold, University of Toronto/ Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), and Sean Woodhead, Centennial College.

In 2011, the provincial government announced funding of nearly \$74-million over five years to operate a new centralized system that facilitates transfers among institutions. New centralized credit system objectives include: 1) reducing the need for students to repeat coursework; 2) developing more transfer opportunities; 3) providing on campus advisors and orientation programs; and 4) refining a centralized website that will assist students in identifying credits for transfer (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011). Centennial College is supporting this provincial initiative by participating in and leading many transferability projects, including this study, which will provide fruitful recommendations regarding necessary Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) support structures.

The audiotaped, semi-structured focus group will center on the existence of expectation-reality gaps and rationales for these gaps (student estimations of relevant prior learning and institutional communication of expectations and standards). Your insights will reveal how support structures can be constructed and/or revised to provide a more productive system. The focus group will be audio taped with your permission. Approximately eight to ten students will participate in each 60 minute semi-structured focus group. Due to the confidential nature of this study you will be asked to keep all discussion that takes place within the focus group private. You will receive a \$20.00 cash honourarium for your participation!

Participation in the research study benefits participants and the scholarly community. In identifying RPL reality-expectation gaps, colleges and universities can use the study results to:

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- 1) Motivate discussion within institutions regarding their effectiveness in communicating credit transfer and PLAR rights and responsibilities;
- 2) Participate in expectation management at the point of admission; and
- 3) Develop or revise support structures that facilitate the translation of relevant prior learning into postsecondary credit.

Involvement in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time or decline to answer any question with which you are uncomfortable. You will not be judged or evaluated and you will not be at risk of harm. All data collected from individuals who choose to withdraw will be removed from the study results. Your identity will be kept anonymous within all research writing and publications.

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study please contact ethics@centennialcollege.ca or the Chair, Dr. Lynda Atack at latack@centennialcollege.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation.



Christine Helen Arnold
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education
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252 Bloor Street West
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c.arnold@utoronto.ca



Sean Woodhead
Manager, Pathways & Academic
Partnerships
Centennial College
PO Box 631, Station A
Toronto, Canada, M1K 5E9
swoodhead@centennialcollege.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Name: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Please initial if you agree to have the focus group audio taped: ____

Please initial indicating you have received your \$20.00 honorarium: ____

Appendix G

Transferability Expectations and Realities Focus Group

Protocol

Focus Group Protocol – 60 minute session

I. Settling in (5 mins)

- a. Welcome focus group participants to the session.
- b. Research team introduction.
- c. Describe the purpose of the study.
- d. Describe the voluntary nature of participation and ask participants if they are comfortable having their discussion audio recorded. Inform participants that those who wish to withdraw from the study may do so at any time; all data collected from these individuals will be removed from the transcripts. Thank and dismiss those who are not interested in continuing their participation. Remind participants that due to the confidential nature of this study they will be asked to keep all discussion that takes place within the focus group private.
- e. Ask the focus group members to introduce themselves and state their program at Centennial College.

II. Clarifying terms and concepts (10 mins)

- a. What does it mean to be a 'transfer student' and/or 'PLAR student'? Do you use these terms to refer to your situation?
- b. Has your experience at Centennial College differed from that of your high school counterparts? (*Prompts: admissions, financial, coursework*)
- c. From your experience, map/illustrate the process for receiving transfer credit and/or PLAR at Centennial College? Please include all required processes/stages. What processes/stages were you not aware of upon intake?

III. Warm up –Information matrix (15 mins)

- a. Ask participants to fill in a matrix identifying incoming expectations for credit transfer and/or PLAR at Centennial College and their rationale. Identify credit transfer and PLAR expectations separately (if applicable).

	Grades	Previous Program/ Coursework	Application/ Documentation	Policies/ Procedures	Timing	Assessment/ Amount of Credit Awarded
Expectation(s)						
Rationale(s)						

- b. Reporting out
 - i. At the point of intake, what expectations did you hold for credit transfer/PLAR?
 - ii. What was your rationale for these expectations?
 - iii. What resources and/or sources informed your expectations?

IV. *Realities and satisfaction (25 mins)*

- a. What criteria does Centennial College use to award transfer credit? Were you aware of these criteria from the point of intake?
- b. Are you satisfied with the amount of credit you have been awarded? Reasons for dissatisfaction? (*Prompts: original course or program was not designed for transfer; courses could not be used toward certificate/diploma/degree; did not know or understand transfer requirements*)
- c. What policies and procedures for obtaining transfer credit and/or PLAR credit at Centennial College were clearly outlined at the point of intake?
- d. What policies and procedures for obtaining transfer credit and/or PLAR credit at Centennial College were not clearly outlined at the point of intake?
- e. What support structures can be constructed and/or revised to provide a more productive system at Centennial College?

V. *Wrap-up (5 mins)*

- a. Summarize the main themes of the conversation – what did the research team hear? Go around the room to see if the participants agree with the summary and to see if they have anything to add, amend, etc...
- b. Have we missed anything? Is there anything else that you wish to share that we haven't asked?

Thank participants for their time. Ask if they have any questions. Provide contact information if participants have anything additional they would like to share.