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

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PREPARED BY:

Academica Group
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List of Participants

CET Oversight Committee Members:

- **Yvette Munro**, Director, Academic Partnerships and Planning, Office of the Vice Provost Academic York University
- **Richard Smith**, Director of institutional Research, Reporting and Analysis, Office of Institutional Planning and Analysis, York University
- **Henri Decock**, Associate Vice President, Academic Partnerships, Seneca College
- **Eric Mezin**, Director, Council of Educators of Toronto (contact person for the project)
Eric.mezin@toronto.ca
416-397-0442

Participating institutions (in alphabetical order):

- Centennial College
- Collège Boréal
- George Brown College
- Humber College
- La Cité Collégiale
- Ryerson University
- Seneca College
- University of Toronto
- York University

Authors of the Report – Academica Group:

- Julie Peters – julie@academicagroup.com
- Andrew Parkin – andrew@academicagroup.com

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Executive Summary

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

1. What mechanisms or strategies are currently employed by GTA colleges and university to track and analyze data on credit transfer students in general, and first generation students specifically?
2. What data tracking analysis gaps exist among GTA colleges and universities that if addressed could assist them in their capacity to support access-seeking students transferring between institutions?
3. What capacities exist or can be developed among GTA colleges and universities to track and analyze mobility trends and experiences of credit transfer students as they move between institutions?
4. What does existing research about transfer students tell us about their backgrounds, and how could transfer pathways or supports be designed to facilitate the movement of students, including first generation students, between institutions? What implications are there for academic programming, institutional planning and student services, and system and policy change?

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

Key findings and recommendations are summarized by below.

Identifying First Generation Students

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

RECOMMENDATION

First generation students should be identified at their first point of entry into Ontario's education system, which for most students would be upon registration for early childhood education or for primary or secondary school. The identification would be derived from the information parents provide about their own educational attainment as part of the registration process for their children. The designation of a student as a first

generation student would then be part of the student's record that would follow the student into PSE by virtue of the Ontario Education Number (OEN). This approach would avoid the many problems associated with using a variety of methods to ask PSE students to self-identify.

Identifying and Tracking Transfer Students

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

RECOMMENDATION

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

First Generation Student Programs and Advising

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

RECOMMENDATION

Given the low resonance and degree of confusion associated with the term "first generation" among students, it appears that the broadening of focus or "wide net" approach in outreach and support to students reported by some GTA institutions is appropriate. The evolution of approach in outreach and service provision for first generation students should be encouraged, as it reflects the lessons learned through experience at each institution. The Government of Ontario should ensure that institutions have the greatest degree of flexibility possible in how to allocate the funding they receive to support first generation students, to ensure that this funding can be used to support approaches that the institutions believe are most likely to reach students most in need of support in transitioning into and through postsecondary education.

Advising Services for Transfer Students

A number of institutions, primarily the colleges, are evolving their approach to advising students transferring between institutions, notably by adopting an approach that is both more proactive and more integrated. This

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

RECOMMENDATION

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

The intersection of first generation and transfer students

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

RECOMMENDATION

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

Introduction

This study was commissioned by the Council of Educators of Toronto (CET), a 15-member Council with a mandate to develop and implement a collaborative and coordinated approach among educational institutions to enhance access to postsecondary education (PSE) for individuals who have traditionally experienced barriers. The purpose of the study is to provide a comprehensive overview and analysis of institutional data collection, sharing and analysis practices regarding inter-institutional transfer and student mobility with a focus on implications for first generation students.

Four research questions guided this study:

1. What mechanisms or strategies are currently employed by GTA colleges and university to track and analyze data on credit transfer students in general, and first generation students specifically?
2. What data tracking analysis gaps exist among GTA colleges and universities that if addressed could assist them in their capacity to support access-seeking students transferring between institutions?
3. What capacities exist or can be developed among GTA colleges and universities to track and analyze mobility trends and experiences of credit transfer students as they move between institutions?
4. What does existing research about transfer students tell us about their backgrounds, and how could transfer pathways or supports be designed to facilitate the movement of students, including first generation students, between institutions? What implications are there for academic programming, institutional planning and student services, and system and policy change?

A detailed analysis of government policies and programs related to transfer students and first generation students was beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to note that the Ontario government currently offers focused funding to institutions both for student transfer and for first generation students and that institutions receiving funding through these programs are required to report to the Ministry on key indicators. For example, *Credit Transfer Institutional Grants* are offered to support postsecondary institutions in projects related to data collection and reporting, transfer facilitation and student support services, and pathway projects. For first generation students, the *First Generation Project* provides funding to postsecondary institutions to work towards the goals of increasing retention and graduation rates of first generation students, establishing baseline information about first generation students, and informing the government on the effectiveness of retention activities. This study was not meant to evaluate these funding programs or their reporting requirements, but to examine the current state of data collection, data analysis, and support programming related to transfer students and first generation students generally at CET member institutions.

Definitions

FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

The Ontario government defines first generation students as a student whose “parent(s) have never participated in postsecondary studies on either a full or part-time basis anywhere in the world” (MAESD, 2016). This type of definition is referred to by Auclair et al. (2008, 4) as the “strict” definition used in most of the literature on the subject. It is, however, not the only possible definition.

It is well known that there is a continuous relationship between participation in postsecondary education and parental education: a child’s chances of accessing PSE increases with each additional year of education held by his or her parents. The concept of the first generation student, however, goes beyond this by speaking not to a continuum but to a threshold: it is not each additional year of parental education that matters, but rather the attainment of a particular level of education. It posits that parents with more than a particular threshold level of education can instill in their children the necessary informational and cultural capital for success in postsecondary studies. Auclair et al. explain:

The FGS variable or concept is a theoretical concept based on the idea of a dichotomy between secondary and post-secondary schooling on the part of parents. That suggests that the educational levels have both an institutional and an educational structural effect on the individual schooling of parents, which creates a qualitative difference between the experience of those who did not receive post-secondary education and the experience of those who took (and even completed) post-secondary studies. It means that the difference lies not only in the number of years of study or the ranking of institutions but also in the social, cultural, educational and administrative structural effects that form character (Auclair et al., 2008, 7).

The idea, then, is that parents who have crossed over a certain educational threshold hold an advantage that they can convey to their children. What the various definitions of the concept of “first generation students” refer to, therefore, is the placement of this threshold.

Most researchers use the strict definition mentioned above, therefore, because they “believe that the fact that one parent attended college or university is enough for that parent to know something about post-secondary education and to have acquired some social and cultural capital that can make it easier for his or her child to enter that level of study” (Auclair et al., 2008, 4). As mentioned, however, other definitions are possible (see Auclair et al., 2008, 5), including:

- neither parent has completed PSE (but one or both may have participated without obtaining a credential);
- neither parent accessed or completed university (but one or both may have accessed or completed college or another form of non-university postsecondary training);
- neither parent has accessed or completed PSE in Canada (but one or both may have postsecondary experience in another country);

Additionally, some definitions take into account not only the educational experience of parents but also siblings, pointing to the importance of not only being among the first generation in the family to experience PSE but also the very first person in the family to do so. Finally, in some cases it may be important to distinguish between the experience of fathers and mothers, and of children who are boys or girls, on the understanding that there may be gender-specific avenues of transmitting information and cultural capital within a family that operate between fathers or mothers and their sons or daughters (cf. Turcotte, 2011, 39).

In some studies, the choice of which definition to use is mainly an empirical question: different definitions can be tested statistically to determine which one is a better predictor of children's educational outcomes. In other studies, however, the choice of definition is related more to the choice of research question. For instance, if the question under consideration has to do, not with PSE access, but with either access to university or with successful transition from college to university, then researchers may want to focus on students whose parents have no university experience themselves. If the question under consideration concerns the educational experience of first or second generation immigrants, then researchers may want to focus on students whose parents have no PSE experience in Canada. If the question has to do with gender differences in educational pathways and outcomes, then the different influences of mothers and fathers may be an important factor to take into account.

Finally, one additional consideration to keep in mind is that the category of first generation students tends to overlap with a number of other categories relevant to research on student pathways and experiences. Students from lower-income families, Indigenous students, students from some (though not all) immigrant backgrounds, and older students are all more likely to be first generation students. This observation has two implications. The first is that it is important to keep in mind that, whatever the formal definition that is used, the concept of first generation student may capture more than just the aspect of parental education – it is a wide net that may capture other factors that correlate with parental education. The second is that the concept on its own may not always capture enough that is relevant about a student's background. Many students may be influenced by a number of overlapping factors, relating to parental education, income, and race or ethnicity. In these cases, the concept of first generation student may be limited unless it is employed in such a way that looks at its intersection with other factors (see Robson et al, n.d.). In the case of the study of first generation students, this means approaching the concept in a more nuanced fashion that considers differences between first generation students with or without parents born in Canada, or between male and female first generation students (see, for example, Turcotte, 2011, 40, 41; Kamanzi et al., 17; Smithies, 2015, 58).

CREDIT TRANSFER

As is the case with the concept of first generations students, “there is...no singular definition of credit transfer” (Durham College, 2016, 18). This has been attributed in part to the lack of a standard process among institutions of managing transfer students: “the inconsistent process of credit transfer across institutions, and uncertainty about how exactly institutions determine whether or not credits are in fact transferable, are just two of the factors contributing to the lack of a concrete definition and common understanding” (Durham College, 2016, 18).

The Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) defines a credit transfer student as “someone who has completed a course, some courses or an entire program at one institution and wants to continue their postsecondary education at another” (ONCAT, n.d., 11). This definition clearly focuses on the movement of

students between institutions. In the Ontario context, this covers the movement of students from a college to a university, from a university to a college, and between two colleges or two universities – with the forms other than college to university apparently becoming increasingly common. As Durham College explains, “the traditional framework under which credit transfer is often discussed is the pathway of ‘graduating’ from a college program and using these credits to gain access into a university degree program. This linear mobility has been challenged over recent years as an increasing number of students are moving from college to college, university to university, and university to college” (Durham College, 2016, 19). Similarly, the government of Ontario notes that while the province’s credit transfer system “is currently designed to build the college diploma to university degree pathway...it will also serve as a starting point for other pathways, including university to university, college to college and university to college” (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, n.d., 7).

By focussing on inter-institutional mobility, the ONCAT definition excludes students who switch programs within the same institution. Other definitions of credit transfer, however, include such movement; for instance, the government of Ontario’s credit transfer system policy statement speaks of credit transfer in terms of students who “move between postsecondary institutions or programs without repeating prior, relevant learning” (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, n.d., 1). This broader definition, by including the objective of avoiding the repeat of prior, relevant learning, underlines a key point, which is that credit transfer is about enabling the student to continue their education in a way that builds on what they have done before. This may be harder to justify in the context of a significant change of programs within the same institution (for example, from science to fine arts, or vice versa) -- although at the same time the recognition of credits for non-core or elective courses is also easier because there is no question of an institution not recognizing its own courses. For this reason, the desire of a student to both change the direction of their studies (switch “pathways”) while building on (i.e. gaining recognition for) some of their learning to date typically arises in the context of a switch from one institution to another. That said, the need to sometimes include program-switching in the context of a discussion of credit transfer should not be overlooked.

One other caveat is in order. Definitions of credit transfer generally exclude students who are moving between institutions in a prescribed way that is a feature of an established program, for instance, in the context of joint degree offered by two institutions that requires students to take courses at each, or a “laddered” program, such as the collaborative nursing degree program offered jointly by Seneca College and York University, in which students begin the program at one institution before moving to the other. In these cases, the recognition of prior learning is built into the structure of the program.

Literature Review

This literature review focusses in particular on the *intersection* of research about inter-institutional transfer and student mobility, on the one hand, and first generation students, on the other. That is to say, it focuses on both transfer students and on first generation students, but not separately from one another. It investigates what the literature on first generation students suggests about their interest in and experiences with inter-institutional transfer, and what the literature on transfer suggests about the particular experiences of first generation students.

A starting point for this review is the observation that there are a number of existing literature reviews and studies of each of these two subjects taken separately. The review of literature on the concept of first generation students conducted under the auspices of *Projet Transitions* still stands as the definitive work on the subject in Canada (Auclair, et al., 2008), although it has been complemented by others (see, for example, Smithies, 2015). Reviews such as these have tended to show that first generation students “suffer from multiple disadvantages: in their level of academic preparedness, in the amount of cultural and educational capital they acquired before beginning their studies, in the level of support they receive at home and at school, and in their difficulties in social and academic adaptation and integration. Considering that their parents are generally from a more disadvantaged socio-economic background than their peers, FGSs [first generation students] will also face more financial difficulties and are more likely to have more difficult living situations” (Kamanzi et al, 2010, 2). A number of recent studies of the experience of credit transfer are also available, including the review of research conducted by the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (2013) and the surveys of transfer students analyzed by Usher and Jarvey (2013) and Durham College (2016). These studies document student satisfaction with their experience with credit transfer, while at the same time identifying “a range of student concerns related to the credit transfer process and pathways” (Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 2013, 6) and areas of potential improvement.

Rather than repeat the findings of these studies, this review will address, as far as possible, the more specific issue of student mobility and inter-institutional transfer as it pertains to first generation students. It will do so by first reviewing issues around the definition of both first generation students and of credit transfer and by summarizing relevant statistics. It will then address the persistence rates, experiences and pathways of first generation students, with a particular focus on transfer. It will conclude by the discussing the implications of the literature reviewed for the remainder of the study.

A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

First generation students

It is difficult to get a system-wide portrait of the portion of college and university students in Canada or in Ontario who are first generation students for several reasons:

- Students are generally identified as first generation students by asking them to self-identify as such, and the proportion that does self-identify may not in fact include all students who meet the definition.
- Institutions may or may not collect the information in the same way or use the same definition, making aggregations of data across institutions difficult.

- System-wide data instruments (such as the Postsecondary Student Information System) may not collect or report on the data.

For these reasons, the system-wide data that does exist tends to come from student surveys, such as the Youth in Transition Study (YITS) – although this leads to a range of figures, varying according to the nature of the survey sample as well as the definition of “first generation student” that is used. According to YITS, 31% of youth (those age 15 in 1999) who access college in Ontario are first generation students¹, as are 14% of those who access university in the province (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 11). The proportion of students who are first generation students, however, would be higher if all students – including not only young students entering PSE soon after high school, but older students as well – were included (Kamanzi et al, 2010, 63). Figures using the second, slightly older YITS cohort (which is still not fully representative of students in all age groups) show that first generation students make up 37% of college students in the province and 20% of university students (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 53).

A system-wide figure for the proportion of PSE students who are first generation students is useful as a general point of reference, but at the same time less useful to institutions since the situation within each institution can be expected to vary widely, depending on institution type, location, mission and history. Some institutions clearly attract many more first generation students, measured as a proportion of their student body, than others. Kamanzi et al., for instance, note that 45% of students at UQAM are first generation students²– more than double the Canadian average for universities (2010, 63). It would be optimal, therefore, for data to be reported on an institution by institution basis using similar definitions and data collection methodologies; however, this is not currently the practice in Ontario.

Credit transfer

It is no less difficult to get a clear portrait of the prevalence of credit transfer, again due to the limited availability of systems-level data, as well as inconsistent definitions. As Kerr, McCloy and Liu (2010, 6) observe, “to date, efforts to produce a full empirical record of various PSE pathways have been faced with the challenge of limited system-wide sources of information on student mobility within Ontario’s PSE system.”

Some figures are nonetheless available. According to ONCAT, more than 55,000 students transfer every year in Ontario (ONCAT, n.d., 11). Unfortunately, ONCAT does not report the proportion of college and university students that this number represents, nor on the direction of movement. In another report, however, it does add that “the number of students seeking transfer appears to be growing. With changes to degree requirements for professional practice, the rising CAAT diploma student interest in pursuing a degree, and the sustained interest of university graduates in college graduate certificate programs, higher education institutions are finding that the transfer market is growing annually” (ONCAT, 2013, 2)

A study carried out by Durham College found that 28% of newly enrolled college students in Ontario in 2014 reported that they had some prior postsecondary experience (Durham College, 2016, 32). The majority of these

¹ Finnie, Childs, and Qiu defined first generation student as “those students whose parents did not attend any form of PSE” (2012, 13).

² Kamanzi et al defined first generation student as “a student whose parents do not hold a post-secondary degree” (2010, 1).

students had previously attempted PSE more than once. The College remarks that “given the sheer volume of students with prior postsecondary, there is a clear necessity for a provincial level credit transfer framework” (Durham College, 2016, 33). Not all of these students, however, should be considered to be credit transfer students, as some are proceeding to post-diploma or graduate certificate programs, while others opted not to request a transcript in order to apply for recognition of previous learning. In fact, about one in ten (9%) new college students could be considered transfer students in the Ontario context, meaning that they have prior postsecondary experience at an Ontario public college or university, are not enrolling in a post-diploma program, and requested transcripts, presumably to support their interest in credit transfer (2016, 33). The College points out, however, that a similar proportion (10% of new students) might have been credit transfer students but did not seek to have their prior learning recognized by requesting a transcript – raising the question of why this is the case and whether there is potential for many more students to benefit from credit transfer. (Unfortunately, there is no similar study available of the proportion of new university students with previous postsecondary experience).

Additional data is provided by the analyses of student mobility conducted by Ross Finnie and his colleagues, again using data from the YITS. These analyses are helpful in documenting the extent of student mobility in the province, although they cannot pinpoint exactly how many of the mobile students would constitute genuine cases of credit transfer according to the definitions discussed above. Referring specifically to Ontario, the data show the following:

- Two years after beginning their studies, 13% of college and 16% of university students have switched programs, with about half switching to another program at the same institution, and half switching to another institution (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 4 ff.). At the university level, the proportion of students who switch rises to 19% by the end of the fourth year of study, again with about half of these students switching to a different institution (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 20).
- Among those who graduated from college or university within the tracking period covered by YITS, “88.4 per cent of all Ontario college graduates and 79.5 per cent of all Ontario university graduates receive their diplomas from their first program at their first institution, while the rest graduate from a different program or institution” (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 29).

Note that more complete data is available for Canada as a whole, rather than just Ontario, due to larger sample size. Using the national data, Finnie, Childs and Martinello (2014) report that, five years after having begun their studies at a college, 18% of students had switched programs or institutions without yet graduating, with about half of these switching to a different institution; the figure for those beginning their studies at a university is 23%, again with about half of these switching institutions and not just programs. Among those graduating after five years, almost one in five college graduates and one in four university graduates completed a program following a switch of program or institutions.

From these different data sources, it seems that credit transfer is relevant to between one in five and one in ten PSE students in Ontario. According to Durham College, about one in ten new college students in Ontario signalled a desire to have prior PSE experience recognized, although as many as one and five could have benefitted from such recognition. Similarly, according to Finnie, Childs and Qiu (2012), between one in five and one in ten PSE students in Ontario switch programs or institutions within the first few years of starting a program of study.

PATHWAYS OF FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

Access

There remains no doubt that first generation students access and complete postsecondary education at a rate which is lower than that of students whose parents have some postsecondary experience (see for example, Turcotte, 2011; Kamanzi et al., 2010). In the case of Ontario, Finnie, Childs and Wismer report that “students with no family background of PSE attendance have an overall PSE participation rate that is 18 percentage points lower than that of students with at least one parent who attended PSE” (2011, 20). However, while first generation youth in Ontario are half as likely as their non-first generation counterparts to attend university, they are more likely to attend college – in others, within Ontario colleges, first generation students are an over-represented rather than an under-represented group. Thus “not having a parental history of PSE attendance changes not only how many individuals go on to PSE...but also the distribution of the kind of schooling they engage in (decreasing university-level schooling and increasing college-level participation)” (Finnie, Childs and Wismer, 2011, 23). Finnie, Childs and Wismer emphasize that the effect of parental education on PSE participation is “enormous,” further noting that “the effect of being a first-generation PSE student is larger than the effects for any of the other under-represented groups...Being from a non-PSE family has a greater effect than being from a low-income family (by far) or a rural area (again by far); the parental education effect is even greater than the effects of being disabled or Aboriginal” (Finnie, Childs and Wismer, 2011, 23-24).

Persistence

The focus of this literature review is less on the factors that determine initial access to PSE and more on the experiences of students, and the pathways they follow, once they begin their first program of study. It is widely assumed, largely due to the influence of the American literature and experience, that first generation students in PSE are more at-risk than other students, in terms their ability to successfully complete their studies. As Smithies (2015, 58) explains:

Most post-secondary institutions in Canada recognize that first-generation students are at higher academic risk and have implemented a variety of student support programs, and even entire courses, intended to increase both their participation in higher education and their success in achieving a credential. However, most of these programs are based on long-standing American initiatives, largely because there is a robust body of American research on first generation students and far less Canadian research. In fact, much of what we think we “know” in Canada about first generation students is actually informed by American data, without full recognition of important differences that may simply be due to the Canadian context.

In Canada, however, it is not necessarily the case that first generation PSE students are more at risk – an important point to consider when developing and delivering programs designed to assist first generation students.

Several studies based on data from YITS have shown that in Canada, the persistence rates of first generation students are generally comparable to those of their non-first generation counterparts, although the exact findings vary somewhat from study to study. At the national level, Finnie and Qiu (2008) report that parental education has little effect on the odds of a student dropping out of university, though a relationship does exist

for college students. Using the same data,³ Martinello (2008) similarly finds that parents' education is unrelated to the chance of a student graduating from their first PSE program, although in this case the conclusion holds for both university and college students. He concludes that "surprisingly, parents with more education did not appear to help students make better initial decisions about their PSE. Parents' education was not correlated with successful completion of first programs" (Martinello, 2008, 230, 235).

Further study by Finnie, Childs, and Qiu (2012), focussing specifically on Ontario, confirms this general pattern. In fact, they find that "the first program graduation rate is higher for first generation Ontario college students than for those with a family history of PSE" and that "first generation PSE students are also less likely to switch college programs" (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 21). They conclude that "first generation college students in Ontario do not appear to be an underperforming (or disadvantaged) group: they graduate at higher rates, they are less likely to switch programs and their rates of leaving PSE are about the same as for students with no history of PSE... There is no doubt that such individuals may still face significant problems accessing PSE... but it would appear that once enrolled, they do at least as well as their non-first generation counterparts, at least at the college level" (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 20-21). Somewhat puzzlingly, however, given Finnie and Qiu's earlier (2008) findings, they now report that "among university students, first generation PSE students have higher leaving rates and lower graduation rates" (Finnie, Childs, and Qiu, 2012, 24). In other words, having originally reported that first generation students are less likely to succeed at college but not at university, they now report that these students are less likely to succeed at university but not at college (note that the studies differ both because one focusses on the national picture and the other on Ontario, and because they are each based on different cohorts of youth from the YITS study).

As mentioned earlier, studies based on YITS data likely underestimate the challenges faced by first generation students because they exclude older students from consideration, and many of these older students are more likely to be first generation students. Kamanzi et al. (2010), for instance, finds that there are twice as many first generation students in the University of Quebec system as there are in the national YITS sample. Moreover, older first generation students (those age 21 and over) "are more likely to enroll in shorter undergraduate programs, are proportionally more likely to enroll part-time, are more likely to have been out of school in the year prior to their enrollment, and consider themselves less well-prepared at the beginning of their program than their peers. In addition, their living conditions are also different – they are more likely to be balancing work, study, and family responsibilities." For these reasons, it is perhaps not surprising that they find that "even though the younger (18-20) FGSS' rates of graduation are barely distinguishable from those of their peers, the older FGSSs have a rate of graduation significantly lower than that of their peers" (Kamanzi et al., 2010, 59).

That said, additional studies using data other than YITS also find a lack of difference in the success of first generation students once in PSE (see, for instance, Grayson, 2011). Using a longitudinal survey of low-income students from a number of provinces including Ontario who received student aid in their first year of study, Finnie, Childs and Wismer (2010) find that "first generation students are actually less likely to leave PSE in first or second year without graduating; this finding is consistent for college and university student." They conclude that "parental education does not appear to be a particularly good marker for determining which students are

³ Note however that the two studies discussed here focus on slightly different outcomes, namely dropping out and completing a first program.

inclined to leave PSE without graduating... Among students who access PSE, whether students' parents attended PSE does not make a great difference with regards to PSE experiences, in most respects." In other words, "being a first generation student does not appear to be a significant marker for encountering problems in PSE" (2010, 6, 8).

Similarly, using data from one GTA college, Smithies (2015) finds that first generation students "report behaviours, attitudes and attainments that are very similar to, if not slightly better, than their continuing generation peers, and do not actually appear to be at greater academic risk" – although she notes that her study "focused solely on students entering two-year programs at a large community college in the Greater Toronto Area, and therefore may not apply to students entering smaller colleges in less populated areas, nor to students entering university programs" (2015, 146).

Transfer

The data on the persistence of first generation students in Ontario is relevant to this report because of its implication for the intersection of first generation students and credit transfer students. If it turns out that first generation students are less likely to encounter problems as they progress through PSE, and are more likely to graduate from their first programs and original institutions, then the implication is that they may be less likely to make requests for the recognition of previously earned credits in the context of a significant pathway shift (though this is only one type of credit transfer; students who graduate successfully may also seek out credit transfer should they wish to build on their first credential). The literature, however, points to one very important caveat, which stems from the fact that while first generation students may not on the whole be at a disadvantage in terms of persistence, those who do encounter difficulties may in fact be less successful in managing the continuation of their studies.

This issue was originally flagged by Martinello. As noted above, Martinello (2008) finds that parents' education was unrelated to students' success in their first program. He finds, however, that for students who stopped their first program, "parents' education was positively and significantly correlated with the decision to re-enrol in another PSE program." In other words, while "parent's education was not correlated with successful completion of first programs...more parental education was correlated with the probability that students attempted second programs if they did not complete their first." He concludes that "parents' education appears to be related to students' ability to adjust to adversity in their first program by finding and undertaking alternative programs," and that "any overall relation between parents' education and PSE completion occurs via this mechanism" (2008, 230; 235).

This finding has been emphasized again by Martinello, this time writing in conjunction with Finnie and Childs (Finnie, Childs and Martinello, 2014). Together, they draw attention to the fact that, while first generation students are just as likely as other students to graduate from their original program (i.e. to be successful in PSE on their first attempt), they are less likely to graduate from any program – meaning that those who do not succeed on their first attempt are less likely to find another route to PSE success. Referring to students who initially enrol in a college program, they write:

Students of higher income and higher education parents are much more likely to have graduated from a second or later program or institution. Any student may find that their first PSE program, something that they chose while still in high school, is no longer the best choice for them. It appears that higher parental socioeconomic status (SES) and two parent families make students more willing and able to

make adjustments to their PSE pathway by leaving their first program and switching to another program or institution. These adjustments or changes in their pathways result in higher total graduation rates. We speculate that higher parental SES and two parent families provide more security and financial support that allows students to make more changes along their pathway to graduation. In addition, two parents and more educated parents may provide more resources and direct advice about the different opportunities for switching available and how to achieve them (Finnie, Childs and Martinello, 2014, 17).

Similarly, students initially enrolling in a university program “are much more likely to graduate after switching from their first PSE program if their parents are higher income or higher educated. Again, the increased use of switching pathways to graduation may be the result of greater security and support or better knowledge and ability to take advantage of alternative PSE pathways” (Finnie, Childs and Martinello, 2014, 19).

Parkin and Baldwin (2009, 11) have added to this discussion by connecting it with the concept of resilience. As defined by the Canadian Career Development Foundation, resilience refers to “the capacity to overcome obstacles, adapt to change, recover from trauma or to survive and thrive despite adversity” (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2007, 3). Factors contributing to resilience in youth include supportive relationships with adults and parental expectations (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2007, 3-4). Students who are more resilient have a better chance of persisting in their studies as they are better able to cope with setbacks, explore alternatives and implement a change of course. The important point here is that resilience is related to family background, placing first generation students at a disadvantage.

Yet another insight from YITS is relevant in this context, which is that, overall, successful completion of PSE is positively correlated with multiple program attempts – meaning that those who try more than one program are more likely to eventually complete than those who stick with one (Shaienks and Gluszynski, 2007, 21). Again, what this means is that the key to graduation is not necessarily the ability to make the right PSE choice the first time around, but rather resilience and the ability to navigate a change of course. The connection to the discussion of first generation students is this: while first generation students may be less likely to request credit transfer because they are less likely to switch programs or institutions, they may be more likely to be missing out on the potential benefits of credit transfer because they do not have the motivation, information, encouragement or self-confidence to explore all of their options. Non-first generation students, with their family experiences of PSE, are more likely to have the ability to consider and take advantage of the opportunities provided by credit transfer.

STUDENTS WHO TRANSFER

In addition to looking at what the literature on first generation students says about their pathways through PSE, it is also helpful to look at what the literature on credit transfer says about the profile of transfer students. As mentioned above, several studies have looked at the credit transfer experience in Ontario and have identified practices: Usher and Jarvey (2013), for instance, identify seven practices or policies that have contributed positively to the credit transfer process and student experiences, while the Durham College study concludes with 19 recommendations to improve credit transfer practices in Ontario. The focus in this review, however, are those studies of credit transfer in Ontario that have investigated which factors correlate with either the intention to transfer or to transferring, and that have asked whether first generation students are more likely than other students to follow a pathway through PSE that involves the transfer of credits.

The evidence on this question, however, is not clear, and as Smith et al. observe, “it is an open question as to how this factor [parental education] may impact college-to-university transfer success” (2016, 17). Their own case study of transfer between Seneca College and York University suggests that non-first generation students are more likely to take advantage of the possibility of university-to-college transfer, and suggest that this group of students may be among those who transfer because they may have performed poorly at university for whom “university-to-college transfer offers students a ‘second chance’ at attaining some form of credential” (Smith et al., 2016, 30; 36).

Kerr, McCloy, and Liu, however, focus on the pathway from college to university, and cite data – which they describe as preliminary and limited – suggesting that this transfer pathway acts as a mechanism to enhance access to university studies for under-represented groups of students, including first generation students: “college students from under-represented groups may indeed be taking advantage of transfer opportunities to pursue further education in university” (2010, 12; see also 25). The more recent study from Durham College, however, finds that first generation students are not in fact more likely to apply for or receive credit transfer (Durham College, 2016, 81, 85).

Additional evidence is offered by Steffler, McCloy and Decock (2015; see also 2016), who analyze data from Seneca College. They find that college students with university educated parents are more likely to aspire to and to actually transfer to university; in particular, college students whose parents combine low income and university education are most likely to aspire to transfer and to actually transfer to university. Their key finding is that “students from low income, university educated families are more likely to be using college as an access point to university” (Steffler, McCloy and Decock, 2015; see also Steffler, McCloy and Decock 2016). This suggests that the situation at a particular institution (or particular combinations of institutions, such as Seneca College and York University) may not necessarily match that which holds for the province as a whole.

SUMMARY

Three major conclusions emerge from this literature review.

The first is that, in Canada, the study of both first generation students and transfer students, taken either separately or together, is still relatively underdeveloped. As recently as 2011, Grayson asserted that “in Canada, with a few exceptions, scholars have overlooked the problems of first generation students” (2011, 606). Similarly, Smithies observes that “in Canada, there is comparatively less research [than in the US] that uses the first generation concept to analyze educational data, especially in relation to retention and persistence” (2015, 6). This lack of attention to first generation students combines with a relatively weak data infrastructure at the postsecondary level. Researchers regularly observe that “Ontario currently lacks a formalized data infrastructure with common identifiers to study these [transfer] pathways at a system-wide level” (Smith et al., 2016, 6), and that “if there is one critical item that is lacking in our collective capacity, it is the absence of a means of tracking the experiences, successful or otherwise, of the students who pass through our post-secondary systems” (Miner, 2011, 35). While this is unfortunate, one implication for the current study is that its focus on first generation students and on the data systems in place at postsecondary institutions is clearly addressing a deficit in the existing literature on postsecondary education in Canada.

The second conclusion is that the concept of first generation student may not be as relevant to the study of post-access student pathways in Canada as it is in the US. While conclusions can vary from study to study, a

number of studies have concluded that first generation students are not necessarily less successful at completing their initial programs of study or to wish to or to actually move between programs and institutions. The implication of this finding is clear, in that it suggests that student services (including credit transfer services) that primarily target first generation students may be somewhat misdirected. This conclusion has been advanced most forcefully by Finnie, Childs and Qiu, who write:

Targeting identifiable groups for interventions aimed at increasing PSE retention may not be as effective as other potential strategies for identifying those students who are at greatest risk of dropping out and not completing their studies. In particular, favouring one or two particular types of students (e.g., first generation PSE students) would appear to amount to a relatively blunt policy tool, since such a strategy will, in most cases, be targeted at students with persistence rates that are only marginally different from others (if at all) and miss others who are at risk (Finnie, Childs and Qiu, 2012, 49).

Finnie, Childs and Qiu propose instead that institutions look at other factors, “including membership in other groups or, more simply and probably more effectively, to target interventions at students according to their academic records, going back to high school and within PSE, and surveying students regarding their attitudes to their studies and how they feel about being in school and taking other such direct measures of how they are doing” (Finnie, Childs and Qiu, 2012, 49).

This recommendation aligns with two other points raised in the literature. The first is that in analyses that control not only for family background but also for factors relating to academic achievement the latter often emerge as the more significant predictor of student success. The analyses carried out by Smith et al., for instance, “makes it clear that academic performance is a chief ingredient in student success for those moving in either direction between college and university” (2016, 6). Second, the recommendation aligns with those who argue that concepts such as “first generation student” are too limited because they do not take into account the intersection of overlapping disadvantages. While Finnie, Childs, and Qiu’s recommendation to treat students “as individuals rather than as members of groups” may not be quite the same as the recommendation to look at the effect of membership in overlapping groups (based on parental education, income, race, and so on), the outcome is similar in that both are arguing for a more refined and flexible approach to supporting students.

The third conclusion is that, other findings notwithstanding, there is evidence to suggest that in some cases, pathways opened up by credit transfer systems remain particularly relevant to first generation students. First generation students may currently be less likely to attempt second or third programs should they encounter problems with their first attempt, and may therefore represent a population with a great deal to benefit from better information about credit transfer and improved credit transfer mechanisms. In addition, first generation students may stand to benefit more from particular pathways, or from arrangements between particular institutions who may enrol greater proportions of first generation students, such as Seneca College and York University. One implication of this conclusion is that general or system-wide findings may not always apply to particular circumstances – be they particular types of first generation students, particular types of transfer pathways, or particular types of institutions. Further research in this area should therefore be attentive to the possibilities of these differences.

Environmental Scan

To better understand the nature of first generation student support programs currently available on-campus at the ten PSE institutions in the GTA that are members of the CET, an environmental scan was conducted. The environmental scan involved searching each institutional website for information about first generation student support programs. It is important to note that this scan does not necessarily represent the full range of programs in place at each institution, but only those for which information was publicly available online.

Nine of the ten institutions had a webpage designed to guide first generation students to available support programs. In eight of the nine institutions, this webpage was also the homepage for a dedicated first generation student program. In one institution, this webpage encouraged first generation students to take advantage of the availability of the student support services that are available for all students.

Institution	Name of Program
Humber College	First in the Family
George Brown College	First Generation Program
Centennial College	First Generation Student Project
Collège Boréal	Projet Première Génération
Seneca College	[no specific program]
Ryerson University	First Generation Project
OCAD-U	First Generation Program
York University	First Generation Post-Secondary Program
University of Toronto	First in the Family Peer – Mentor Program

The programs in place at the eight institutions with dedicated first generation student programs were broadly similar, with one exception. While almost all programs were open to all first generation students (either through voluntary registration or on a drop-in or as needed basis), York University's program, as described on its website, is offered to incoming students recruited from local high schools. The seven programs open to all first generation students were similar in that they offered a mix of services typically combining information, mentoring and social activities (see Appendix 1). The most common program features were:

- workshops or guest speakers on topics of interest (ranging from academic skills to budgeting);
- social activities or clubs designed to help students make friends on campus and meet other students with similar backgrounds;
- advice on available financial assistance (particularly how to apply for first generation student bursaries);
- one-on-one advising;
- peer mentoring or study groups;
- referrals to generally available support services.

Less common (i.e. available at only a few of the institutions) were orientation week activities, panel discussion with faculty or staff who themselves may have been first generation students, access to online advising tools (e.g. career guidance), and information newsletters. Information about credit transfer was not specifically highlighted in any of the cases.

The environmental scan did not uncover any research or evaluation reports on the outcomes of these programs. The institution's reports on the implementation of their Multi-Year Accountability Agreements, however, typically include a description of the programs and a statement regarding their perceived success. While these reports often mention increased participation in the programs and high levels of satisfaction among participants, none provide information on outcomes (e.g. persistence or graduation rates for first generation students compared with other students).

While all the programs are listed as currently active, in two cases web links to further information were broken, suggesting that students at these institutions might not always be able to easily access the services. In one case, a link to an online resource to support first generation students led to a US website, with student testimonials that, while encouraging, may not be directly relevant to students in the GTA.

Research Method

Primary qualitative data from institutional staff and students was collected for this research study. The first component was carried out through roundtable discussions with staff from CET member institutions on the subject of institutional data collection, sharing and analysis practices regarding inter-institutional transfer and student mobility with a focus on implications for first generation students. The staff members participating in the roundtables included those with responsibilities in areas related to: first generation student programs and advising; student success, access and outreach; financial aid; credit transfer policy and advising; and institutional data and research. A total of 45 staff members participated at nine institutions, including three universities and six colleges (see Table 1). The discussions were conducted in person, with the exception of those conducted with staff members from Collège Boréal and La Cité; since the administrative offices of these two colleges are located outside of the Greater Toronto Area, the discussions took place by phone. The discussions were between 60 and 90 minutes in length, and were framed by a discussion guide that was circulated to participants in advance.

Table 1: Participation in Roundtable Discussions with Institutional Staff

INSTITUTION	DATE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
YORK	November 23, 2016	7
TORONTO	December 15, 2016	2
RYERSON	December 16, 2016	4
LA CITÉ	December 20, 2016	3
GEORGE BROWN	January 10, 2017	4
SENECA	January 12, 2017	7
HUMBER	January 24, 2017	6
BORÉAL	January 25, 2017	1
CENTENNIAL	February 1, 2017	11
Total:		45

The student component of the data collection was carried out through a series of six focus groups, with a total of 26 postsecondary students currently enrolled in a college or university in the GTA who were either first generation students, transfer students, or both (see Table 2). The focus groups took place on campuses within the GTA.

Students were recruited through Academica Group's StudentVu Panel. A screener survey was sent to panelists living in the GTA to determine eligibility to participate in an in-person focus group. To be eligible, students had to be a first generation student or a transfer student, and be attending one of the CET member institutions. All eligible participants who responded that they were interested in participating in an in-person focus group were invited to attend one of the focus group sessions.

Table 2: Participation in Student Focus Groups

TYPE OF STUDENT	DATE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
TRANSFER STUDENTS	February 16, 2017	2
FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS	February 16, 2017	4
FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS WHO HAD TRANSFERRED	February 17, 2017	3
TRANSFER STUDENTS	February 17, 2017	3
FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS AND TRANSFER STUDENTS	February 24, 2017	7
FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS AND TRANSFER STUDENTS	February 24, 2017	7
	Total:	26

The discussions were between 75 and 90 minutes in length, and were framed by a discussion guide (although the guide was not provided to participants in advance).

The students discussed a wide range of issues relating to their postsecondary experiences. This report will focus on their perspectives as they relate specifically to their experiences as first generation students, and to their experiences transferring between programs and institutions. The students' experiences were varied and are not easily summarized; accordingly, the material presented below seeks to illustrate the range of views that were expressed. In reviewing this information, it is important to recall that the participants in the focus groups are not intended to be representative of the student body in general or of particular subgroups of students. Rather, the information they provide offers specific, real-world examples that can inform the other components of the research undertaken for this project.

Staff Discussion Group Findings

The information collected during the discussions can be grouped under five main themes, as follows:

- A. Identifying first generation students
- B. Identifying and tracking transfer students
- C. Evolution in first generation student programs and advising
- D. Evolution in advising services for transfer students
- E. The intersection of first generation and transfer students

The key points relating to each of these themes is reported below. In each case, a brief summary of what was heard is provided, following by a series of more detailed key findings. This is then followed by a recommendation. The recommendations were not collected from the participants during the roundtables; rather, they are put forward by the Consultant based on our consideration of the information collected.

IDENTIFYING FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

While all institutions work with the Ministry definition of a first generation student, multiple methods are used to identify and count first generation students. These methods, however, are not cross-referenced with one another nor is the information that is collected through each integrated into a single database. Institutions therefore do not have access to a single, comprehensive, or definitive count of the number of first generation students on campus or means of identifying or contacting them. Institutions tend to use different methods for different purposes: for instance, one method may be used to provide data for reports to the government on the number of first generation students enrolled in the institutions, while another may be used to identify and reach out to students who may benefit from first generation programs or services.

Key findings:

- Students have the opportunity to identify themselves as first generation students when they apply to an Ontario college or university through OCAS or OUAC. Data from OCAS and OUAC are thus the most common source that institutions use to establish the number of first generation students on campus. However, most institutions consider this information to be unreliable, either because many students choose not to answer the question on the application form, or because many misunderstand the question. In some cases, misunderstanding results from the fact that students born outside of Canada were told that they were first generation *immigrants* during their time in Ontario's K-12 education system. Thus, as one participant explained, "the questions asked through OCAS certainly lead to many false positives and false negatives." For this reason, most institutions rely on data they collect themselves in order to identify first generation students who might benefit from support programs and services.
- Institutions use a variety of their own approaches to identify first generation students. Some use entrance or intake surveys, some use student satisfaction surveys designed to inform reporting on key performance indicators, and some use face-to-face interviews either at orientation activities, or when students inquire about available programs and services. Information from these different sources is rarely cross-checked or merged with that from other sources, and at no institution is a single "master file" with information from

all sources created. In some cases, the information collected through a survey can only be used for the purpose for which that survey was administered, and cannot be shared in order to support outreach to first generation students for other purposes (such as making them aware of other programs or services available to them on campus).

- Data generally is not used to measure the impact of programs and services provided to first generation students. The most common measure of program impact is client satisfaction surveys, where students who use a particular service are asked if they found it helpful and would recommend it to others. Results from these surveys tend to be very positive. Only rarely do institutions track the subsequent academic performance of first generation students who make use of support programs. Most institutions report that the resources and infrastructure are not available to permit this use of institutional data.
- There are mixed views as to the extent to which students appreciate being identified as first generation students. Some participants mentioned that being acknowledged as the first in their family to undertake PSE can be a source of pride for some students. Others felt that students wish to avoid being labelled or identified as different or “at risk.” Many also felt that the term “first generation student” has little resonance for students: it is a term used by researchers or policy makers and not one that is part of a student’s own sense of self. It is “a label that is not natural, in the sense that it is a concept that is a little theoretical.”

IDENTIFYING AND TRACKING TRANSFER STUDENTS

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

Key findings:

- Institutions are able to identify students who have previously undertaken postsecondary education at another institution, as long as the student chooses to declare this previous experience on their application form. However, many students choose not to do so, either because they think a poor start in PSE may count against them, or because they are not aware of the potential advantages of making their previous PSE experience known to their current institution.
- More specifically, not all students realize that having previously earned credits recognized could benefit them in their current program of study. A number of institutions are working to raise the profile of these opportunities in order to encourage more students to seek advice on credit transfer.
- Institutions not only have an interest in knowing more about students’ previous PSE experience, they also wish to know more about the PSE pathways of students after they leave the institution. Unfortunately, institutions do not have access to any information on the postsecondary experiences of outbound students beyond the limited information available from graduate surveys. In the case of colleges, this limits their

ability to assess how well they are preparing students for PSE pathways that lead them to a university program. One college-based participant explained: “we know anecdotally that students are using some programs to get a foot in the door, and then are transferring to another program...To be able to see that, in fact, students move around all the time, and that's not necessarily a bad thing, would be wonderful -- to be able to track that both in and out.” In the case of universities, this prevents them from understanding more about how their graduates use college diplomas to complement their university degrees. One university-based participant explained: “We really are in the dark around how our graduates or non-graduates or transfer students are faring once they get to the colleges. Why are they transferring in? What was different about the experience when they got there? Why was it a better fit? All of those questions, it's really impossible to know. To me that's a huge gap.”

- The ability of institutions to understand and respond to students’ PSE pathways – including PSE experiences before and after registering at their current institution – is hampered by institutions’ limited access to data derived from the Ontario Education Number (OEN) to date. The purpose of a universal education number is precisely to facilitate the tracking of students as they move through the education system. At the moment, however, the data derived from the OEN is not shared with institutions. As one participant explained, “we’re feeding information to the ministry; it would be great if they were feeding that data back.” Another participant expressed the concern that “in fact what ultimately is released is so sanitised that it's disconnected and can't really be used.” Participants are supportive of the OEN project in theory, but in practice many appeared to have lost confidence that the data will ever be made available to institutions seeking to improve the way they support student mobility.
- As one participant emphasized, without this longitudinal or tracking data, it will be impossible to answer key policy questions: “In the end, it [tracking] should be from secondary school, to college, to university and into the labour market. Really, if we want to be serious about this issue, for first generation students too, this is what we should do. And then we could see whether there is a cause and effect.”

EVOLUTION IN FIRST GENERATION STUDENT PROGRAMS AND ADVISING

A number of institutions are evolving their approach to first generation students, by gradually folding programs for first generation students into broader programs aimed at any student who might benefit from additional support or guidance. This is based on a recognition that many students, whether first generation or not, stand to benefit from programs that may originally have been designed with first generation students in mind, such as peer mentoring programs. This broadening of focus allows institutions to adopt a “wide net” approach to outreach in which it matters less and less whether they can accurately identify whether a student is a first generation student or not – as long as all students are made aware of the supports that are available, the label attached to the student makes little difference.

Key findings:

- Institutions maintain that it is important to be aware of the particular circumstances and distinct needs of first generation students. That said, for most institutions, the category of “first generation student” was not seen as necessarily the most important one to consider when developing and delivering institutional support services to help students transition into and feel welcome at colleges and universities.
- On the one hand, the category of first generation student is too narrow. Many students, regardless of whether they are first generation students or not, may need academic, peer or financial support,

particularly students from lower-income families or students who are first or second generation immigrants. Participants maintain that these students stand to benefit from the same type of advising and services as first generation students: “what we’re finding, quite honestly, is that the services and supports that we provide to first generation students are supports that all students could benefit from.” For this reason, institutions are broadening their approach, reaching out to as many students as possible and not just to first generation students. In the case of two institutions, this means that they now no longer offer programs specifically for first generation students; instead, they seek to include first generation students along with all other students in their orientation and student support initiatives. In the case of other institutions, it means that first generation students are offered the same services as other students, though they may still be grouped together (e.g. all students may be offered peer mentoring, but first generation students may be purposely matched to a mentor who is also a first generation student, in recognition that first generation students may have distinct needs), or the institutions may still use the category of “first generation student” as a means of getting students’ attention and generating interest in the services offered. In either case, it means the issue of identifying who is a first generation student is not of paramount importance, since students who are not identified or who are misidentified can still be “caught” in the wider-net offer of services.

- On the other hand, the category of first generation student is in some ways too broad. Some institutions spoke of the importance of a finer-grained approach, that recognizes the distinct needs that some students may have because of more specific characteristics. As one participant explained: “the focus [has] moved away from first gen in particular because it was a very broad descriptor that, given the population of the college, wasn’t as helpful in getting students to services or highlighting services as focusing on other attributes or characteristics, such as Indigenous, such as youth from certain neighbourhoods, such as mature learners without high school, such as women with a focus towards non-traditional careers, or women living in poverty as sole support parents and no education, or newcomers.”
- To illustrate this point, staff at one institution were asked what would change in their provision of services to students if they were suddenly prevented from using the term “first generation student” in outreach or service delivery. The answer was that nothing would change: the institution is already focused both on casting a wide net, to reach any student requiring support, and simultaneously on a finer grained approach, which zeroes in on the distinct needs of particular student subgroups. This is not to say that this institution is not interested in or attentive to the needs of first generation students. It is simply to say that it was not felt that a singular focus on the category of first generation student was needed in order to reach those students who, by virtue of their family background, may need more assistance to transition into and through PSE.

EVOLUTION IN ADVISING SERVICES FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS

A number of institutions, primarily the colleges, are evolving their approach to advising students transferring between institutions, notably by adopting an approach that is both more proactive and more integrated. This new approach is designed to support the development of a “transfer culture” in which the institution understands itself less as the singular destination for each student and more as a stop on a continuum of learning that begins before and ends after the student’s current program of study.

Key findings:

- Generally speaking, advising for students interested in transferring between institutions has been reactive and decentralized. It has been reactive in the sense that the onus has been on the student to seek information and advice. For instance, incoming students may gain recognition for previous credits earned, but only if they declare their previous PSE experience and take the initiative to make a request. In the case of outbound students, sending institutions traditionally have not seen it as their responsibility to advise them; it has been up to the student to seek information from the receiving institution. Advising has also been decentralized, in that in many cases the source of information for students were academic advisors linked to their programs of study. By virtue of their positions within specific programs and not with the institution's central administration, these advisors were not well positioned to link their advising with other services offered by the institutions, such as career counselling or student success initiatives.
- To illustrate, one participant described the situation as follows: "transfer credit is a student-driven process...Students actually have to drive that process. They have to self-identify, and say "I think that I have some credits that I could get" -- and a lot of students don't know that. We actually did our own survey last winter... and that was one of the biggest things that came out, was that students were just not aware that they were eligible to apply for transfer credit because again, they don't identify themselves as transfer students. We as an institution don't necessarily identify them as transfer students. We don't have that kind of transfer culture."
- Some institutions, particularly colleges, are in the process of replacing this approach with a more proactive and integrated one. It is proactive in the sense that it involves more purposeful outreach to students to make them aware of the opportunities both for the recognition for previously earned credits and for outbound transfer to other institutions. It is integrated in the sense that it is delivered centrally through the main office of student services and therefore linked to other student support programs. Thus students who may seek academic support or career counselling may also receive information related to transfer opportunities.
- In the case of one college, this new approach took the form of a new advising model introduced in 2016. A participant described the model as follows: "We're working on advising institutionally to provide more consistent approaches to advising across the whole college. Instead of [there] being a whole bunch of different doors, there's one door for students to walk in, or whichever door they walk in it's the same experience...We thought that these two things need to go together, because you can't have an advisor advising on all matters academic, and ...[then] have them sectioned off [with another advisor] being able to have their prior learning recognized or being able to see where they can take for credit in the future to go to other institutions or to apply their credit somewhere else. Those two functions merged into this new advising model that we've just rolled out in September of 2016."
- Similarly, at another college, participants spoke about their work in "building a transfer culture," described as follows: "We're trying to send the message both from the academic side and the student side that you are a special population and that we're here to answer your questions and service your needs. I've actually outreached to student services to start building programming so it doesn't just stop in the registrar's office, so that it's continuing on into student services." A colleague added: "This transfer culture is starting to percolate within this institution... It's all about developing pathways, using [institution name] as a conduit to other things beyond."

- It should be noted that this type of approach requires considerable investment of time and resources on the part of the institution, including investment in training of staff in different service units to ensure that they are able to deliver their services in the context of the more integrated approach and connect students to other relevant sources of information and advice.
- Finally, a more proactive approach to advising transfer students may be helpful because it is currently not clear whether and how transfer students are welcomed into the receiving institutions. While institutions typically have a well-defined approach to welcoming first-year students (in terms of orientation outreach and activities, designed in part to familiarize new students with the range of services available to them), staff at many institutions were unsure as to whether transfer students were included in these events or not. In a number of cases, it was assumed that transfer students could opt into orientations activities should they choose to do so; in other cases, staff believed that individual academic programs would offer some orientation services to students joining them after the first year. In general, however, the lack of clarity on this issue points to a potential gap, wherein transfer students – including transfer students who are first generation students – may not get picked up in the institutions’ welcome and outreach efforts that promote the availability of advising and student support services on campus.

THE INTERSECTION OF FIRST GENERATION AND TRANSFER STUDENTS

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

Key findings:

- To date, institutions have not explored in any depth the potential intersection between first generation students and transfer students and the possible implications of such an intersection for student advising and support. Information about the two groups of students do not tend to be cross-referenced, and programs for the two groups tend to be designed and delivered independently of one another. First generation students are currently not a particular focus of advising for programs that support student mobility. In the case of one institution, for instance, “if we’re talking about our articulation agreements, in the case of this group of students [first generation students], there is nothing special that is done.”
- It is recognized however that first generation students may be more likely than other students to be in need of assistance with inter-institutional transfer. This could be because these students are more likely to encounter initial problems with program fit, and therefore may need to switch programs or institutions. It could also be because these students are more likely to find their way to degree programs via diploma programs, that is, to use diploma programs as a lower-risk entry point into PSE that can be built on as they gain experience and confidence. This recognition, however, has not explicitly shaped the design or delivery of student advising or support services.
- There is also a recognition that while the development of more and more opportunities for students to transfer between programs and institutions opens up more pathways into and through PSE that can facilitate access for students from under-represented groups, it also results in a PSE system that is more

complex and potentially confusing. The more flexible the system, the more difficult it can be to navigate, particularly for those with less information, experience, and efficacy. There is a risk, therefore, that efforts to make the system more accessible can paradoxically make it one that favours those from more advantaged backgrounds – who have more social capital and more family history with the inner workings of the PSE system. For this reason, participants in the discussion readily conceded that the intersection of first generation students and student mobility could be an interesting one to explore in the future.

- At the same time, participants asserted that most students, and not only first generation students, have poor information about transfer opportunities and procedures. In the first instance, this is simply a truism that applies across the student body as a whole. One participant explained: “From what I've seen, I think that the majority of students don't know that this [transferability] exists...I don't necessarily think it's top of mind for many students. I don't necessarily think that first generation students are at any more of a disadvantage than the other 50 percent of the class in there. I think they stumble across it...In general, I don't think that first gen has any less [information]. I think all students need more information.” Additionally, the Ontario PSE system has changed so extensively in a generation that parents’ knowledge of the system is not necessarily relevant for students today.
- More generally, a number of participants remarked that the students who find the system easier to navigate, or who are more aware of and interested in taking advantage of innovative pathways, are those who are more future-oriented in their thinking – and this is dependent on a variety of factors that do not reduce easily to family background or parents’ educational attainment.
- For these reasons, institutions are likely to focus on broadening their outreach around transfer so as to reach many students as possible, rather than to narrow their focus to particular subgroups. This broader focus is consistent with the evolution in both first generation student programs and advising and in advising services for transfer students, described above.

Student Focus Group Findings

FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

Collection of information about parents’ education

Most of the students participating in the focus groups had only a vague recollection of times when they were asked to provide information on their parents’ education. They were most likely to recall being asked to provide this information on their Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) application forms. Many also recall being asked to provide this information through their online college or university applications. Some students recall being asked about their parents’ education on institutional surveys. No students recall being asked this question in person by a staff member (e.g. by an academic advisor or student services provider).

Several students who participated in the focus groups did not know whether or not their parents had attended PSE, illustrating the challenge of collecting accurate information through student surveys.

Definition of “first generation student”

There is a great deal of confusion about the meaning of the term “first generation student” – in particular, students are unsure as to whether it refers to their parents’ education or country of origin (or to both). Most students, when asked, say that they know what the term means, but as they speak about it, their confusion becomes apparent. This is best illustrated by the response of one student, who gave the following definition: “The first in your family that goes to postsecondary...[pause]...in Canada...[pause]...I think.” Asked to explain why she added “in Canada,” this student said: “My parents didn’t go to school in Canada, so that’s how it is in my mind.” Another first generation student noted that he had originally misunderstood the definition when filling out his OSAP form, until someone else corrected him: “I put “no” to begin with but then I asked somebody and they said no, that means parents’ education not origin.”

It is apparent that in a region such as the GTA, where a significant proportion of students are first or second generation immigrants, confusion between the concept of “first generation student” and “first generation immigrant” is inevitable.

The label of “first generation student”

Students whose parents did not attend PSE do not think of themselves, unprompted, as first generation students: it is not part of how they naturally identify themselves. As students consider the label, their reactions range widely from positive, to neutral, to negative, as illustrated by these comments from focus group participants:

- “I see it as a good thing. You’re the first one in your family to get the education. I’m pretty proud of that.”
- “It makes me feel pretty good. My parents are proud of me.”
- “It’s a good thing...You’re reaching high expectations from your parents.”
- “It feels nice, but it doesn’t really make a difference.”
- “I am pretty neutral about it.”
- “It’s just not something I think about.”
- “I’m indifferent about it, really.”
- “I am proud of it, but it also does make me feel singled out a little bit.”
- “It depends on the context: what is your intention? ...what are you getting at?...Are you just trying to put me on this side of the table or are you trying to put me at the same table as everybody else?”
- “Sometimes people call you things to put you into a certain group, and they have other assumptions behind that as well that I don’t like.”

Interest in and use of programs for first generation students

Participating students were not very aware of the existence of specific support programs for first generation students. An exception is their awareness of the existence of bursaries for first generation students. This is not necessarily because the students had applied for or received these type of bursaries; in some cases, students merely assumed that if they were asked about their parents’ education on their OSAP applications, it was because there was some kind of bursary or scholarship related to it, though they did not know how to access these funds themselves.

Beyond financial assistance, very few students could say whether or not their institution offered specific support services for first generation students. Only one student said she had seen that a program was available

and had signed up to find out more, though in the end she did not take up the offer of support as she felt she did not need it.

When asked if they would be interested in participating in such a program, some first generation students said they might be curious to find out what was being offered, but at the same time were doubtful that they would participate. As one student said, “I’m too preoccupied with school...I don’t really have time for those sort of things.” Similarly, another said: “I would be curious but it depends on timing.” Another student said that it is not clear what the incentive would be to take time out of his schedule to participate in such a program.

The confusion around the meaning of the term “first generation student” is also a barrier to participation. Some students said that if they saw an offer of support services for first generation students, they would assume it was a program for international students or for students who are new to Canada. “I would assume that if people are first generation [students], their parents probably came from another country.”

TRANSFER STUDENTS

Types of student mobility

Students’ stories relating to their trajectory through PSE and their reasons for changing course are very individualized – in a sense, no two students’ experiences are the same. That said, the transfer experiences of the focus group participants can be grouped into two types. The first is a progression, where a student builds on experience gained to move to a more demanding program. This is typified by the transition from a diploma to a degree program within the same field of study. The second type is an adjustment, where a student changes course because their original plan is not working to their satisfaction. Progressions can be planned or unplanned – that is, some students may have always intended to transfer from a diploma to a degree program, while others may only have discovered the option of transferring after having started their diploma program. Adjustments, however, are always unplanned. The main difference among students whose transfer is a form of adjustment is the extent of the disruption. For some students, it is a question of finding their way progressively to a program that is a better fit. For other students, it is a question of withdrawing from PSE unexpectedly and rethinking their options before returning.

Further examples of the different types of transfer follow.

Progression: diploma to degree

One of the most common forms of transfer among focus group participants was the progression from a diploma to a degree program within the same field of study. Some students in this group expected to make this change within the same institution, whereas others expected to move from a college to a university. Some students were aware when entering the diploma program that transfer to a degree program was an option, whereas others only became aware after they started. Those students who only became aware after starting their diploma program said that the faculty and staff associated with their programs have done a good job of informing them about the option of transfer into a degree program (in other words, the onus was not on these students to search for the information themselves; they were made aware of the transfer options by their teachers or advisors).

Regardless of whether or not these students were aware of the transfer option from the outset, they all spoke of college as providing a lower-risk entry point for them into PSE, one that they could build on once they had

proven (namely to themselves) that they could be successful. As one student explained, “I went into it knowing [about the option to transfer to a degree program]...I wanted to know if it was something I wanted to pursue beyond just a diploma; that’s why I went to a college rather than a university. I knew that eventually if I did like it I would go to pursue a degree...so it was more like a testing ground.” Similarly, another student – who had seen many of his friends struggle with and drop out of PSE, said: “I was aware there are degree possibilities after this. I wanted to start off just with college first...and slowly go up the ladder to university.” Another student, who was not initially aware that his diploma program might lead to a degree, said that when he started PSE he doubted he would ever go to university. But after he was made aware of the option to transfer, he thought: “You know what? I’ll do it. I’ll go for it. Why not?” He explained: “I had to get into the program and go through a bit of it and sort of get my feet wet before I decided that I was going to continue on to the university level.”

Adjustment: program choice

As mentioned, transfers that stem from the need to adjust vary in scale. Experiences among the students participating in the focus groups varied from students who were looking for a better program fit, to students who did not enjoy being away from home and chose to move back to the GTA to continue their studies, to students who encountered health problems that required a change of intended career, to students whose first attempt at PSE was unsuccessful, requiring them to withdraw before returning for a second attempt.

What all these students have in common is that they needed to develop a “Plan B” – transferring was not part of their original plan for their PSE journey. In this context, transferring can be stressful both because it represents an unexpected change of course, and because it can be perceived as a sign of failure on the part of the student. A number of students spoke of their concerns about disappointing their parents, about falling behind their peers who are not switching, and about having “wasted” time and money on their first program. As one student explained, “some people might feel like there’s a social stigma behind it, because if you keep changing, some people might judge you as wishy washy – even family; and that probably makes them uncomfortable.” Another said: ““It was very emotional for me, switching, because I was so worried about my peers being ahead of me... And then my Mom, I was going to disappoint her.” Comments such as this suggest that mobility between programs and institutions – outside the context of a progressive move from a diploma to a degree – has not yet been normalized, in the sense that it is perceived as a setback or as a suboptimal outcome. (There was at least one exception to this rule, however – one student commented that she simply switched from one program and institution to a more preferable one, without it being a big deal.)

That said, the students who had transferred also emphasized that it was important for students to pursue for the best program and institutional fit, rather than feel that they had to stick with their first choice. These students observed that it was unfortunate that so many students feel pressure to stick with their programs to avoid disappointing their parents or because they feel it would be a waste of time or money to switch. When asked what advice she wished someone had given her before starting PSE, one student said that she wished someone had told her “it’s OK to change programs. It’s not the end of the world. ... It’s not that big of a deal if you want to switch programs.” Another student echoed this when asked what advice she would give a student entering PSE. She said that she would tell them to make the right call for themselves, but that “the right call can change...and that’s OK.”

Adjustment: work-related experience

There is another form of transfer that is less about matching programs and institutions with student interests and more about meeting the requirements of the labour market. In these cases, students realize toward the end of their first program that they may not necessarily have what employers are looking for – they therefore need to adjust their plans by pursuing additional PSE credentials.

This form of mobility is typified by university students enrolling in college programs after completing their degrees. From the perspective of colleges, this type of transfer might be seen as a progression and not as an adjustment – in that it is a progressive step from a more theoretical program to a more practical or applied one. From the perspective of the students participating in the focus groups, however, this type of transfer is seen as an adjustment because it is clearly a “Plan B” that they are undertaking only once they realized that their first plan – to go directly into the labour market upon graduating university – is unlikely to work out. As one student explained: “by the end of the program I was having some trouble finding work ... Everyone just kept suggesting that I go do this program at [college] because it came with co-op...It was never my plan to go to college until three weeks before I graduated university.”

A number of students agreed that this form of transfer is becoming more common. According to one student, “a lot of my friends [at college] have degrees, like me, prior to going to [college], which is weird considering you don’t need a degree to get into my program...But more than a third of us have degrees or some sort of university education before coming in...People like us are just uncertain about what their job prospects are with just one thing, so they like doing both [college and university]...a lot of my friends from university went to college afterwards. It’s becoming a lot more common to do both.”

Credit transfer experience

The experience of the focus group participants with navigating the transfer process and with gaining recognition for previously earned credits varied widely.

At one end of the spectrum, students moving from a diploma to a degree program within the context of an articulation agreement find the transfer process to be clear and straightforward. For instance, one student found the process to be “simple,” “convenient” and “easy.” He elaborated: “I’m happy that I am not going to be starting near the start... It’s all very clearly laid out on the website now...They lay it all out for you now. Before you had to search around to figure it out. It’s a simple transition [now]... [a] one sheet form, because they know everything about you already.”

Other students who were making a more *ad hoc* transfer did not encounter any major problems, although in some cases the students found they had to navigate the process themselves without much help from the institution. Here are some examples of this type of credit transfer experience:

- “I didn’t ask [for credits to be transferred] but they gave it to me – that’s the one thing that [institution] has done for me...I was hopeful, but because it’s college to university I wasn’t sure it was going to happen with any of them, but I actually got about half of the kinesiology program transferred.”

- “[Sending institution] did nothing to help; they were the opposite of helpful⁴...but at [GTA receiving institution] they said “no problem, we’ll take all your credits.” They even took my AP credits from high school. It was a very quick process. I literally walked to the registrar’s office, they looked at my transcripts, and they gave me the credits -- it took ten minutes.”
- “We have three elective courses we have to take, and to alleviate the course load I transferred over three credits...It was fairly easy -- there’s forms right outside in the hallway: you pick one up, you fill it out, you drop it off and a couple weeks later you can get courses transferred.”
- “I had to do it on my own. They didn’t really ask if I had anything. I had to go and say “wait, I did do some electives, I think those apply.””

Some students, however, had more frustrating experiences, particularly in being required to submit multiple copies of transcripts multiple times to different offices, in getting different or inconsistent answers from different advisors, and in not being satisfied with the reasons for why certain credits were not granted. Experiences of this type were described by one student as “incredibly annoying” – this student found it “quite irritating” that she had to repeat a course simply because her receiving institution was not aware of the curriculum taught at her sending institution. She stated: “I’m quite upset about that...because it’s setting me back quite a bit” and “I don’t understand why.” She also said that other students considering transfer should be encouraged to do so if that is the right move for them, but at the same time they should be warned that “it’s going to take up months of your time.”

Some students encountered even more difficulties and were less successful. One student commented on her experience moving to a college after completing a university degree. “I don’t like how [college] does transfer systems. You have to fill out this form to apply. It costs \$25 per credit. It’s not guaranteed. You don’t get a refund if you don’t get it. And I’d still have to pay for the full course load” [even if some credits were transferred]...“So I said forget it. I didn’t end up transferring anything...I was just so annoyed with the whole process that I just gave up.” Another student switching colleges within the GTA was not able to secure copies of his course outlines to be assessed by his receiving institution. This student said: “I wish that those two colleges would have had some kind of agreement or something to make it easier to transfer those kind of credits.” Another student assumed there was a time limit and he felt he knew there would be no point requesting credit recognition because his earlier credits were earned several years ago.

Another issue that arose in the discussion of the transfer process was problems in maintaining eligibility for OSAP. At least one student who transferred following an unsuccessful first PSE attempt reported that their student assistance was suspended due to their poor academic standing (it is possible that the student’s OSAP was suspended once they withdrew from their first institution, even though the student intended to re-enrol at a second institution the following term). They therefore had to begin their studies at their receiving institution without support from OSAP. Other students said they had had concerns about losing their OSAP eligibility during the transfer process; while this didn’t necessarily happen, they said they found it difficult to get clear answers from institutional staff on this issue.

⁴ This first institution – the sending institution in this case -- is not in the GTA.

Many students were unhappy about having to pay fees to secure the transfer of their transcripts from one institution to another, and the time it took for the transcripts to be sent. Students reported having to pay the fee several times and having to send the transcripts to several different places (i.e. to different offices in the receiving institution). This process appeared cumbersome and out of place in an era students are used to receiving their marks themselves quickly and on their smart phones.

Only two students reported using ONTransfer.ca to research options regarding credit transfer between institutions. One student reported that the website was helpful up to a point, but that in some cases it could not establish an equivalency between courses.

THE INTERSECTION OF FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS AND TRANSFER STUDENTS

The focus groups cannot be used to establish whether or not first generation students are more or less likely to transfer between programs or institutions. That said, based on the information gathered in the focus groups, two general observations about the intersection between the two groups of students can be made.

First, the experience of some participants confirms that the diploma to degree transfer pathway is particularly appealing to students who are initially less confident in their ability to succeed in PSE. As noted above, students taking advantage of this pathway – who in these focus groups were also first generation students – spoke of using college as a “testing ground” that enables them to proceed to a degree program after they had demonstrated (to themselves, as much to as anyone else) that they could be successful.

Second, outside of the parameters of an articulated program, within which the transfer process is clear, students who transfer and seek recognition for credits previously earned often feel they have to navigate the process on their own, without much guidance from the sending or receiving institution – and in some cases, against the resistance of unhelpful institutions. In this context, the outcome depends at least in some part on the student’s own sense of efficacy and determination. While this study cannot demonstrate a definitive correlation between transfer outcomes and parental education, the conversations with students tend to support the assumption that some first generation students might be at a disadvantage in this regard.

That said, there is clearly no neat divide between first generation students and other students when it comes to issues relating to mobility and credit transfer. Many students – and not just first generation students – encounter the need to make unexpected adjustments in their PSE trajectories, and many students – and again, not just first generation students – lack information, guidance or assistance when it comes to completing their transfers.

Recommendations

Based on the staff discussion group findings, five key recommendations are put forward:

1. First generation students should be identified at their first point of entry into Ontario’s education system, which for most students would be upon registration for early childhood education or for primary or secondary school. The identification would be derived from the information parents provide about their own educational attainment as part of the registration process for their children. The

designation of a student as a first generation student would then be part of the student's record that would follow the student into PSE by virtue of the Ontario Education Number (OEN). This approach would avoid the many problems associated with using a variety of methods to ask PSE students to self-identify.

2. The restricted access to data derived from the OEN represents a missed opportunity to enable institutions to better understand and serve their students, particularly students who transfer between institutions. For the OEN to live up to its promise, the Government of Ontario should ensure that the data be made accessible to institutional researchers, policy makers, and programs administrators, and provide a firm deadline for doing so.
3. The evolution of approach in outreach and service provision for first generation students should be encouraged, as it reflects the lessons learned through experience at each institution. The Government of Ontario should ensure that institutions have the greatest degree of flexibility possible in how to allocate the funding they receive to support first generation students, to ensure that this funding can be used to support approaches that the institutions believe are most likely to reach students most in need of support in transitioning into and through postsecondary education.
4. Emerging approaches to advising students on mobility in and out of their current institution that are both proactive and more integrated with other services at the institution should be considered promising practices within the sector. Institutions that are not yet moving in this direction should seek opportunities to learn from the experiences of those that are. In particular, universities should seek to learn from the experiences of colleges, particularly in regard to taking on more responsibilities in the area of advising students on the opportunities for outbound transfer.
5. It is difficult to develop a better understanding of the needs, experiences and outcomes of first generation students as they pertain to mobility in the absence of comprehensive, system-wide data that allows institutions to develop a full picture of the educational pathways of students into and out of their current institution. Further progress in understanding the intersection between first generation students and transfer students can be made once data systems are strengthened as per the first two recommendations advanced above.

The findings from the focus group component of the research are consistent with the recommendations stemming from the interviews with institutional staff. Specifically:

1. Given the low resonance and degree of confusion associated with the term "first generation student," it appears that the broadening of focus or "wide net" approach in outreach and support to students reported by some GTA institutions is appropriate. While some students feel pride in being identified as first generation students, and while first generation students may have distinct needs and experiences, students themselves are not looking for services linked to that designation; more than that, many students are likely to misunderstand the intention behind programs targeted to first generation students, seeing them as programs aiming to assist new arrivals to adjust to life in Canada. A wider net approach is more likely to reach the type of students who participated in the focus groups for this project.
2. Outside the context of articulated programs, and notwithstanding the positive experiences that some students had in gaining recognition for credits previously earned, many transfer students found they had to navigate the transfer process without much assistance from the institution. Perhaps more importantly, students making transfers that can be characterized as adjustments felt that friends and

families often view switching as a suboptimal outcome. For this reason, the more proactive and integrated approach to advising students about transfer, reported by some GTA institutions, is likely to be helpful. In the first instance, it should result in an improved transfer process for students. Additionally, it may help to normalize or to reduce the social stigma associated with switching.

In short, the findings of the focus groups serve to validate the evolution in both first generation student programs and in advising for transfer students described in this report.

Finally, a link can be made between the findings of the focus groups and the conclusions of the literature review conducted for this study. The literature review suggested that the lens of “first generation student” may not always be the best one to employ when thinking about the factors that affect PSE pathways in the Canadian context, and that student services (including credit transfer services) that primarily target first generation students may be somewhat misdirected. In the same vein, the focus groups suggested both that any student – regardless of family background – can find themselves in need of support in switching programs or institutions, and that programs targeted narrowly to first generation students may not be successful in reaching their intended clients. At the same time, the literature highlighted the fact that, in some cases, pathways opened up by credit transfer systems remain particularly relevant to first generation students. This is confirmed by the experiences of the focus group participants taking advantage of the diploma-to-degree pathway, who say this option is a lower-risk entry point into PSE that they can build upon as they gain experience and self-confidence. Thus, the first generation student lens remains relevant to credit transfer, but the ways in which it informs student support services is rightfully being rethought.

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Appendix 1: First Generation Student Support Programs in the GTA (Environmental Scan Findings)

The information contained in this chart is based on the environmental scan findings, which relied on information available on institutional websites. It does not necessarily represent the full range of activities and programs in place at each institution, but only those for which information was publicly available online.

Institution	Name of Program	Orientation activities	Peer mentoring / study groups	One-on-one advising	Referrals to other campus support services	Workshops / guest speakers	Social activities / club	Panels with faculty and staff	Financial aid advising	Online tools (e.g. career guidance)	Information / newsletter	No specific FG activities*
Humber College	First in the Family		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
George Brown College	First Generation Program			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Centennial College	First Generation Student Project	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Collège Boréal	Projet Première Génération			✓	✓				✓			
Seneca College												✓
Ryerson University	First Generation Project					✓	✓		✓			
OCAD-U	First Generation Program	✓	✓			✓	✓					
York University	First Generation Post-Secondary Program	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
University of Toronto	First in the Family Peer – Mentor Program		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				

* First generation students are encouraged to take advantage of existing advising and support services.

Appendix B: Staff Small Group Discussion Guide

Introduction

- Introduce purpose of the project
 - CET
 - Definitions
 - First generation students (FGS), Transfer students
- Introduce interviewer and participants (roundtable)
- Recap parameters
 - Time available
 - Recording
 - Attribution
 - Group discussion (not series of one-on-one interviews)

Data: what the institutions know about FGS and transfer students

- How does the institution identify FGS?
- How does the institution identify incoming transfer students?
- Do you have numbers?
- Does the institution identify outgoing transfer students (e.g., numbers, destinations, reason)?
- Are these two groups ever cross-referenced (e.g., profile of transfer students)?
- Does the institution track the success of either group? How? Which indicators?
 - How is the information used?
 - How is the data that is collected analyzed and used to inform decision making?
- To what extent does the institution work with others to produce system-wide data?
 - Across the GTA
 - COU / Colleges Ontario
 - Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development
 - Statistics Canada
- What data gaps exist?
 - What underlie the data gaps (capability vs capacity)?
 - What are current data priorities (are gaps being addressed)?

FGS student services

- Describe the evolution of programs (history, current status, future directions)
- What is current sense of impact of programs:
 - On individual students?
 - On institutional culture, priorities, practices?
- What information exists on students who utilize the services (backgrounds, needs, outcomes)?
 - Program data
 - Institutional data
- What information would be helpful to have? How could it be used?
- To what extent is transfer an issue for FGS?
 - For incoming FGS?
 - For outgoing FGS?
- Are FGS at an informational disadvantage when it comes to knowing about how to take advantage of credit transfer opportunities?
- How could FGS be better served?
- Has there been any evaluation conducted of FGS programs?
- To what extent has data been used in the design or evaluation of FGS programs?

Transfer students

- What data do you use and/or need to keep track of student mobility? How is this data used?
- How are transfer students welcomed? What services do they get and how do these differ from those offered to other students?
- Does the institution track how successful transfer students are, compared with other students?
- Among transfer students, are FGS students “flagged”? If so, what is the outcome?
- Do FGS have distinct needs from transfer students?
 - Differences between incoming and outgoing FGS transfer students?

Review of key issues

- How could transfer pathways or supports be designed to facilitate the movement of students, including first generation students, between institutions (e.g. college to university, university to university, university to college)?
- Should there be a specific FGS + transfer student policy or program?
- What implications, if any, might there be from the following perspectives - academic programming, institutional planning, student services, or system/policy change?
- Institution’s views on how student transfer supports social mobility
- Contribution to, or knowledge of, best practices to support transition for FGS transfer students? Are they the same as those for other types of transfer students?

Conclusion

- Final thoughts
- Thank you

Appendix C: Student Focus Group Discussion Guide

Introduction of participants / roundtable

- Opening remarks about study, focus group overview, voluntary nature, importance of confidentiality, etc.
- Introductions around the table
 - First name (only)
 - Institution
 - Program
 - Destination / aspiration: what do you want to do next? (quick comment only)
 - Note anyone who is already planning to transfer e.g. college to university

Exercise 1

- X's on sheets on the wall (move around the room)
 - When did you decide you wanted to go to college / university (continuum: "as early as I can remember" / Grades 8,9,10,11,12 / after HS e.g. while I was working)
 - What were you doing in the year before you started current program: (options on wheel: in HS / working / looking for work / travelling / nothing / in another college or university program)
 - Parents / guardians PSE (one each for mother and father) (continuum: did not finish HS / HS / apprenticeship / college / university / MA or PhD or grad degree / I don't know / separate box for finished education in Canada or in another country)
- Quick look and reflection
 - Do answers cluster or are they spread out?
 - Anything surprising?

Exercise 2

- On sheets of paper (questions already marked; hand out papers)
- Write first words that come to mind (just whichever first come to mind / quick answers / don't overthink)
 - How did you feel on first day or in first week of college / university? (emotion)
 - [note: don't specify whether first or current institution unless asked; cross reference later with those who are transfer students]
 - What do you wish someone had told you (e.g. if you had met graduating student before you started, what would you have wanted them to tell you?)
 - What was most surprising thing you found out after you started?
- Quick roundtable: participants read out answers to each
- Themes? Or all answers all over the place?
- Prompt: to clarify – when you walked on campus for first day of class did you feel at home / lost / stranger / among friends / welcome / overwhelmed / routine or no big deal / excited about next step / bored / etc.? (probe for sense of feeling welcome, comfortable, at home)

Discussion – orientation / support services

- How did you know where to go / what to do / what to expect / what to expect in first weeks of current institution? (even if not first program)
- Where did you get information?
 - It was obvious / looked it up on website / wasn't hard to figure out
 - Friends / siblings
 - University / college staff

- Took part in orientation / welcome activities (before prompt)
- I did not seek assistance
- Prompt: experience of orientation activities
 - Who took part?
 - What kind of orientation activities did you participate in (e.g. academic orientation activities such as note-taking, advising, writing tutorials, social orientation such as Frosh Week, social events and outings, tours)
 - How did you find out about them? (received email / letter / phone call; search for information on web / found out when I got to campus)
 - How useful?
- Use of any other services after first week? How about...
 - Academic support / guidance (e.g. writing centre, advising, math support centre, met with faculty member, Library workshops)
 - Mentor / peer support (e.g. faculty advisor, peer advisor/tutor, student support group)
 - Career guidance (e.g. Career Centre)
 - Student Financial Services (e.g. bursaries/scholarships office, Financial aid office)
 - Health, Counselling and Disability services (e.g. office for students needing accommodation, health services/doctor's office)
 - Social activities (welcome activities) (e.g. outings, Frosh events, Residence Life events)
 - Student-led clubs and organizations (e.g. student council/union, clubs)
 - How did you find out about them? Did they find you or did you find them?
 - How useful?
 - How friendly / approachable?
 - Recommend to others?
 - Any services missing?
 - Looked for something and didn't find it?
 - Wish someone was available to help you with....?

Student information data

- Recall of information requested on applications (OUAC / OCAS): outside of all the information needed to identify you (name, address) and about institution, program, etc., do you recall being asked any information about yourself / your background / your family? What was is?
 - Unprompted: any mentions of parents' education, Aboriginal status, disability, other?
 - Prompt: do you recall being asked about parents' education?
 - If yes, was that easy to answer? Did you know? Did you have to check?
 - Did anyone answer "don't know"; why (did you really not know)?
 - Why do you think they asked? Why is knowing about your parents' education important?
- Institutional collection of information
 - Recall of ever being asked about parents' education by institution?
 - Institutional survey?
 - Service intake?
 - Other?
 - Comfortable disclosing this information? Any reason why you wouldn't want to tell someone or have somebody know?

First Generation Students – recognition / awareness of term

- Anyone heard it before?
- Anyone know what it means?
 - Discussion
 - Clarify (not about immigration status)
 - Provide definition (neither parents has PSE experience)
- Based on that definition, who here would describe themselves as FGS?
- Is this a term you would ever use to describe yourself?

- If opening exercise had been to tell me about yourself, how many would have said “I am a FGS”?
- How do you feel about being called a FGS?
 - Probe for: proud / don’t care or not relevant or important / annoyed or offended (don’t like labels)
 - What’s in it for you: any advantages to being known as a FGS?
 - Is there enough recognition of this achievement? Should there be more recognition / celebration?
- Do you know if your college / university has any programs or services specifically for FGS?
 - If yes, what are they?
 - How did you find out about them?
 - Did you take part? Or anyone you know?
 - Were they helpful? Why or why not?
 - Would you recommend them?
 - Would you be interested in services designed especially for FGS?
 - Probe for financial matters (budgeting, sources of financial aid, etc.)

Transfer and mobility

- Show of hands: how many different colleges / universities attended so far (only 1, 2, more than 2)
 - Doesn’t matter if you completed
- How many do you think you will attend before you are done (only one; 2; more than 2)
- Friends’ experience: is “more than one” typical or the exception?
- Discussion: why more than one (for those who have or are planning to / or thinking about friends who have or might switch); probe for:
 - Discontinued (started, stopped, came back) because of personal/financial reasons
 - Discontinued (started, stopped and came back) because of academic reasons
 - Program switching to find right fit (switch once you know what you really want to do)
 - College as pathway to university: always wanted university degree but needed college to get in the door
 - College after university for job skills
 - Articulated / ladder program (switching part of program)
 - Graduate diploma / degree (first degree no longer enough?)
- Do you think most students these days start out thinking they will get everything they need at one (first) college or university, or do you think most start out already planning to move between institutions, picking up parts of what they need at each one?

Is switching easy? (credit recognition)

- Is it easy to move between institutions?
 - (note: answers will vary depending if focus is on grad degrees or second degrees, as opposed to mid-program transfer)
- Advantages?
- Disadvantages? Any risks? Anything to lose?
 - Unprompted: note mentions of risk of losing credit / standing / having to start over
 - Prompt: can you keep credits earned / get recognition of learning to date?
- Experiences of credit transfer
 - Direct experience
 - Applied for credit recognition – why or why not?
 - What happened?
 - Was credit recognized? [note: high or low affinity programs?]
 - Was process clear? Fair?
 - Was information accessible? Clear?
 - Were you satisfied with outcome?
 - Treated better or worse than peers in similar situation?

- Indirect experience (what they have heard from others)?
 - Can credits be recognized?
 - Where to get information? Where would you go for help?
- Opportunities for transfer
 - Are there enough options to transfer between institutions? Should there be more?
 - What would this look like? More join programs?
 - Should transfer be promoted more? Why or why not?

Transfer information and support

- What if you wanted to transfer to another institution? Where would you go to find out? Is there someone around to help you?
 - Is information easily available on website?
 - Sending institution website?
 - Receiving institution website?
 - Other, e.g. ONCAT or ONTransfer.ca?
- Has anyone ever asked for support for transfer / counselling / advice / information?
 - How helpful was it? Did you get the information you wanted?
 - Did anyone at your college / university raise this issue with you, or did you have to be the one to seek out information and advice?
- How easy or hard was it to get the information you needed? Do you think most other students are aware of the possibilities?
 - Probe for: do you have to have “inside knowledge” to come out ahead?
- Would you recommend transfer to other students why or why not?

Welcoming of transfer students

- Any orientation offered?
- Outreach?
- Did you need help finding your way around or did your experience at previous institution provide you with what you needed?
- Did you need any information, services or support, but not get it (or not know where to find it)?
- What more could be done to welcome transfer students?
- Feel differently from other students (less a part of institution)?
- Were you asked about parental education (to identify as FGS) at any stage of transfer / welcome process? Would you have liked to been asked / offered support?

Wrap-up

- Wrap-up exercise: prepare to be a mentor
 - You are going to meet new student – a FGS student whose parents don’t have PSE experience
 - You’re getting ready for the first meeting: write down on paper in front of you the one thing you’d want to say to that student in that first meeting, to help them get started at college or university
 - What one “word of wisdom” would you want to be sure to pass on
 - Write on piece of paper
 - Leave time to write
 - No need to read answer, just hand in papers
 - Focus group complete when everyone is done

