



MATURE STUDENTS IN ONTARIO'S COLLEGES
POLICY PAPER | COLLEGE STUDENT ALLIANCE

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Mature Students in Ontario's Colleges

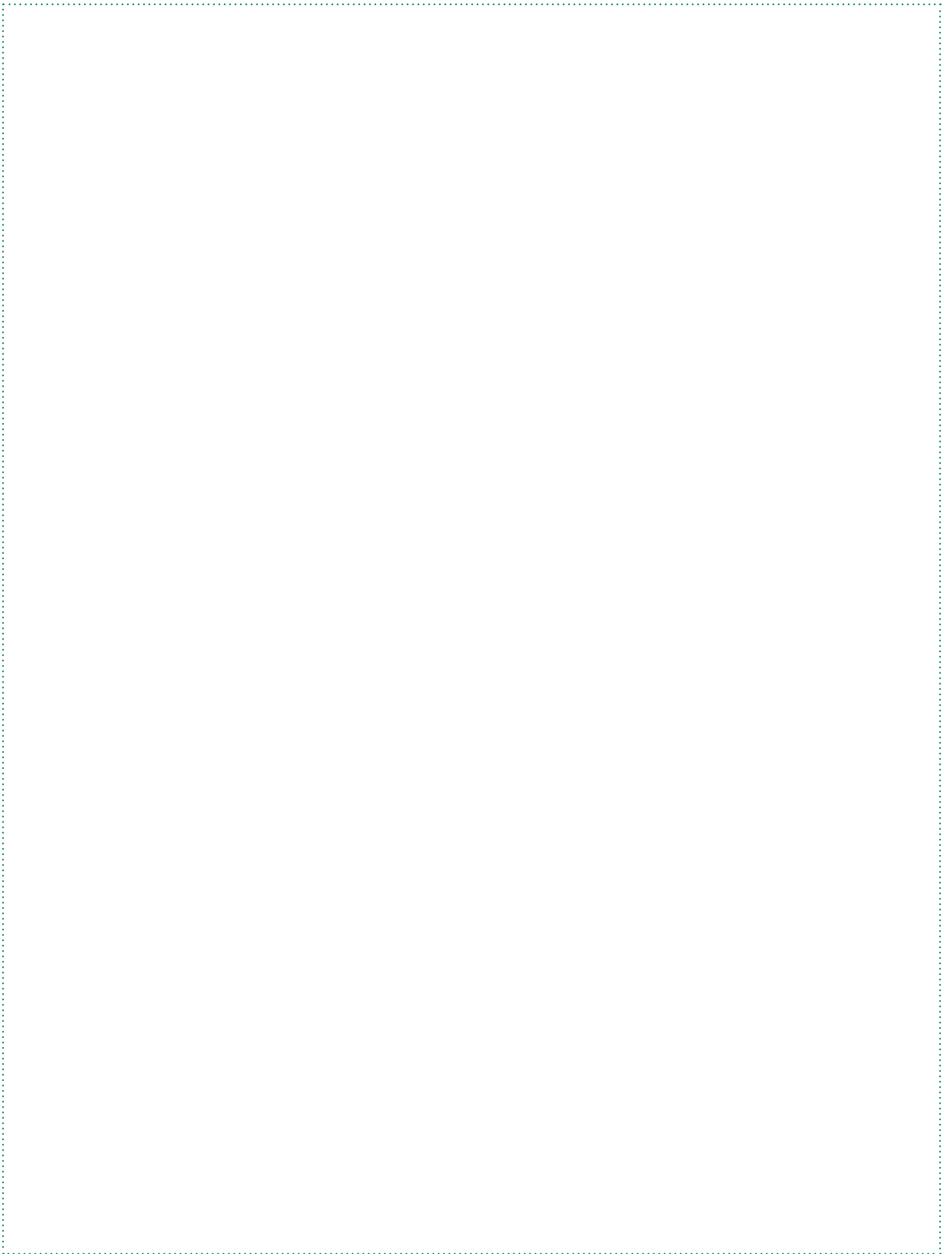
Policy Paper I December 2013

By Tamara Popovic
Research & Policy Analyst

College Student Alliance
303-372 Richmond Street West
Toronto, ON M5V 1X6
(416) 314-1212

About Our Organization:

The College Student Alliance (CSA) is a member-driven advocacy organization that has proudly served Ontario's college students since 1975. The CSA currently represents 21 student associations from 15 colleges, with over 135,000 full-time student members throughout the province.



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i | executive summary

Mature students in Ontario's colleges access a higher education system that was not built for them but was constructed for students who enter college directly after the completion of their high school education. In contrast, mature students have fewer linear paths and as a result come across issues that may not be experienced by other students in the college system. It is vitally important that mature students are supported by the government, the college, and other post-secondary education stakeholders as they pursue higher education.

Mature students' success is not only important to the students as individuals but also for Ontario's prosperity. In order for the province to reach economic targets, the government needs to ensure that 70% of the population will achieve a post-secondary education credential. This will allow Ontario to grow and strengthen its economy, as well as contribute to a better overall socioeconomic reality.

In order to establish mature students' success, colleges must expand their understanding of mature students' status. This can help colleges include more students in mature student orientation as these students may not be aware of the supports that exist on their campus. High schools also need to improve the supports for college-bound students when they access resources in secondary school. Furthermore, the college sector needs to ensure that services and supports are designed and delivered in such a way that the system accommodates the learning and social diversity of the students, including age diversity.

As many adults returning to a formal education system do not have the necessary literacy levels to succeed in college, a portal of best practices and policies to increase consistency and greater understanding with literacy and language proficiency in the province needs to be created and maintained. Additionally, colleges should provide greater consistency to the wide range of assessment and remediation approaches to literacy practices.

In order for colleges to be aware of those students who may need more academic support, all colleges in Ontario should administer intake testing to see where students' aptitude lies. In the event that students do not show academic preparedness, students should be provided with academic counseling to provide access to the necessary upgrading programs. A segment of the college population who would also benefit from this practice are recent immigrant adult students, whom the colleges should identify and monitor to make sure that they can access student services that will support their success.

Like most students, mature students' financial realities can hinder their academic pursuits. In order to alleviate this burden, funding for the Ontario Special Bursary should be reinstated by the government, as the bursary was of great benefit to mature students, academic upgrading students,

and those with the highest need. Furthermore, student financial aid administrators at Ontario's colleges must take on further training to be able to provide high-level advice to address mature students' concerns and issues with the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

As many mature students may not be able to access OSAP with the same ease as traditional students, colleges must ensure that students are aware that there are processes in place for students to appeal OSAP assessments. Furthermore, as students are at a strong disadvantage when returning to school due to the fact that their eligibility for OSAP is greatly diminished by their financial situation, the provincial government should change the OSAP formula to recognize that mature students will not have the same income upon returning to school.

Moreover, the spousal contribution requirement for OSAP should be lowered, as the majority of mature students returning to school are doing so because they want to find a way out of a difficult financial situation. Additionally, the provincial government must expand access to the 30% Off Ontario Tuition program by removing the stipulation that a student must have finished high school less than four years before starting the current program.

Age is also an issue with some employment programs; due to an arbitrary age restriction, numerous mature students are not able to access governmental employment programs created for students. To remedy this, the government must remove the age restrictions from the qualifying criteria of the Youth Employment Fund, the Ontario Summer Jobs Service, the Ontario Summer Company Program, and the Ontario Public Service Summer Employment Opportunities.

As mature students do not interact with the college system in the same way that direct-entry students do, colleges need to provide an academic orientation and a services orientation. These orientations can facilitate the transition into post-secondary education by providing mature students with information on the services and programs that may benefit them and assist them in their educational journey, such as skills workshops. Furthermore, colleges and student associations should facilitate and promote the creation and sustainability of mature student clubs, associations, and physical spaces.

Many mature students are parents or have dependents during the time that they pursue their studies. This impacts their educational experience due to the fact that they have to juggle and balance familial obligations that are time-consuming and more expensive to support. Therefore, colleges must implement on-campus daycare or work with their community or municipality to develop childcare subsidies, therefore allowing mature students to balance family and school obligations.

introduction

The government of Ontario has recognized that the majority of the province's population must have a post-secondary education in order for Ontarians to succeed in the knowledge economy. In the province's five-year "Open Ontario" plan, which was launched in 2010, it was recognized that 70% of the population will need to have a post-secondary education. Ontario currently stands at a 63% post-secondary attainment rate, which is one of the highest among member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).¹

One way to fill this Open Ontario target is to expand access to post-secondary education to groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Traditionally, students who access higher education follow a very linear path on which they start their post-secondary education upon completion of high school. While this trend is still prevalent in the university sector, it is not reflected in the college sector. In Ontario's colleges, 60% of all college students in 2010 were 21 years of age or older.² Indeed, "in 2010, the majority of college applicants in Ontario were between the ages of 25 and 34 years old."³

If the Open Ontario target is to be met by the inclusion of more mature students, mature students must be supported in their endeavors. This is especially important for the province, as higher education can act as a safeguard against tumultuous economic change. This is further compounded by the fact that Canada faces a skilled-worker crisis, and research shows that a skilled labor "shortfall in the availability of workers is shown to rise to at least 200,000, and to as high as 1.8 million by 2031."⁴ The re-training of adult workers will translate into more mature students accessing the college system, especially as colleges have a mandate to provide vocational and employment skills.

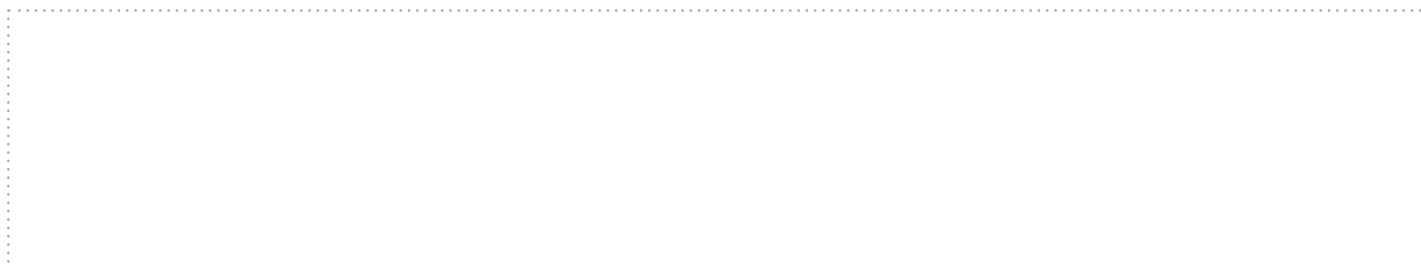
Moreover, employers are increasingly demanding post-secondary education. Post-secondary education

has a strong positive impact on an individual's employment potential when compared to that of a person without a formal education. This is true for mature students, as research demonstrates that there "are benefits in the form of higher earnings and shorter periods of unemployment for those who continue to participate in education [and attain a credential] as adults."⁵ Furthermore, children who are raised in a household where higher education credentials have been achieved by their parents tend to pursue a post-secondary education.

With the predicted labor shortage approaching, Ontario needs to put in place further supports so that mature students can access and succeed in higher education. It is proven that better educational attainment helps strengthen the economy and develop a workforce with the skills and training needed in order to have a vibrant and functional economy. This is significant, as research shows that as level of education rises in a population, so does the minimum standard of education for the economy as a whole.⁶

Furthermore, a post-secondary education and "training can act as protective factors in times of economic instability and uncertainty, contributing to improved employment prospects, income levels, health, and integration within communities and society."⁷

The harsh economic realities that Ontario is facing can be mitigated by the support of mature students' educational pursuits. Mature students in the college system are not a minority group; they are in fact the norm. The average age of a college applicant is 24 years old, and 61% of college students are over the age of 21.⁸ Furthermore, only 33% of students have entered college directly from high school.⁹ Colleges and the government must make sure that the mature student population is well served, as they exist in a system that was not created to support their needs but was created to support the needs of direct-entry students.



adult learning and education

The concept of lifelong learning is of great importance and affects a person's development at every stage of life, from early childhood education to adult retraining. Adult education is one part of the development of lifelong learning. Mature students participate in what is called "adult learning," which is a part of a lifelong learning process. While there is no absolute consensus on the terminology of "adult learning" and "adult education," adult learning is "commonly defined as the process or the result of the attainment of knowledge and expertise by adults through practice, instruction or experience."¹⁰

Adult education refers to "intentional learning opportunities which are organized structures which allow for the attainments of the skills and knowledge needed to participate fully in the economic and social life of the learner's community."¹¹ Adult education involves the pursuit of planned and intentional learning opportunities that enable adults to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to participate fully in the economy and social life of their community. Adult education empowers adults to successfully perform their roles in the workplace, in the family, and as citizens and community members.

defining mature students

Ontario's colleges define mature students as individuals who are at least 19 years of age or older and do not have an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) or equivalent. This definition excludes adult learners who may have completed high school and those who have pursued other forms of post-secondary education. This definition can result in many non-direct entrants who consider themselves mature students but do not have mature student status.

In Ontario, in order to qualify as a mature student, an applicant must have been away from secondary school studies for at least one year. Mature student applicants must also meet any specific entrance requirements of the program to which they are applying. Lastly, applicants are considered on an individual basis and are cautioned that meeting the minimum admission requirements does not guarantee entrance to a program.

BARRIER

Many students who would consider themselves mature students do not fit the narrow definition of what would qualify them for mature student status. This strict definition may cause colleges to not include these students in mature student orientation as the student may not be aware of the supports that exist on their campus.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Colleges must expand their understanding of mature students to include not only those who are coming to college without a high school diploma but also those who are returning to a formal education system after an absence of more than one year. Furthermore, colleges' understanding of mature students should also include students with dependents.

BENEFIT

Expanding mature student status would allow more students more visibility on campus and give them greater access to services that may only target mature students on campus.

Ontario's college student population is much older now than it was when the colleges were originally established. A report by Colleges Ontario demonstrates that 60% of all college students in Ontario were 21 years of age or older.¹² This is not especially surprising when taking into consideration that in 2010 the majority of college applicants in Ontario were between the ages of 25 and 34 years old.¹³ To illustrate the increased age of college students in comparison to years past, "research exhibits that age distribution of first-year college students showed (that 23%) were aged 26 and older in 2009, a slight increase over previous years due mainly to a higher proportion of students over 35 years of age."¹⁴

A recent survey on adult college students showed that many are women, attend a college in the Metro Toronto area, and are registered within a health or business graduate certificate program.¹⁵ Further research showed that many recent graduates participated in school as part-time students and were likely to be married with children.¹⁶ This brings into account that mature students are not a group with consistent needs and experiences; they bring with them a variety of life experiences and are from dissimilar backgrounds. As a result, they have unique abilities and needs when they access the post-secondary education system.

system design and pathways

Ontario’s education system is set up in three levels, namely elementary, secondary, and post-secondary. Formal education systems, like Ontario’s, have the goal of training and educating individuals within cohorts to strengthen the province’s citizenry. The benefits of higher education are emphasized in a formal education system and research has shown that those who have obtained higher education credentials benefit economically and socially. Students are directed from one level of education to another with the eventual goal of attaining a post-secondary education credential.

Students who enter into a post-secondary education program after high school are called direct entrants. More specifically, they are students “who attended high school full- or part-time [within] 12 months [of the start of their post-secondary program] ... and have no Post-Secondary Education experience.”¹⁷ These students are typically referred to as traditional students or direct entrants. A traditional post-secondary student is considered a traditional student if he or she enters a PSE program immediately following the completion of high school education.

The traditional student completes post-secondary studies without interruption and, upon graduation, can obtain employment that complements his or her skills and program of study.¹⁹ However, many mature students who access college at a later time in life mention that their high school success was related to social relationships and social support.²⁰ For many students, it was specifically a lack of social support from family, friends, and teachers that negatively impacted their motivation to pursue higher education.²¹ Students mentioned they were happy to leave high school and to be employed but later recognized a need for more education in order to find more gainful employment.²²

Mature students, however, are commonly individuals who are no longer in their first cycle of formal education.²³ These nontraditional students, in contrast to direct entrants, “are defined as those who do not enter directly into PSE from high school, including students who enter through preparatory programs.”²⁴ Typically, once traditional students complete high school, they have the option of going into university, college, a skills training program, an apprenticeship, or to seek employment.

Elementary-Secondary to Postsecondary Educational Pathway¹⁸ p. 39

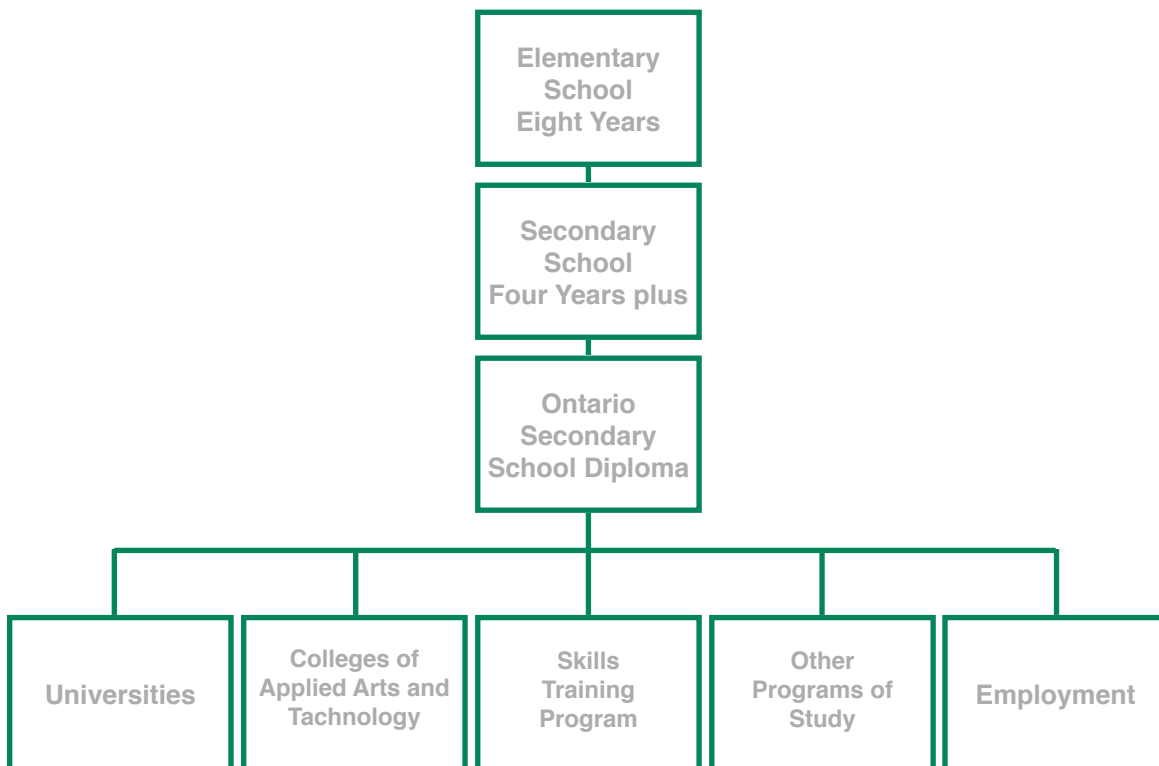
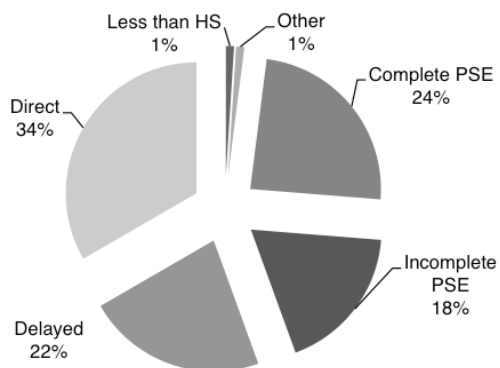


Figure 9. Pathways to College

Direct: Entered college directly from secondary school.
 Delayed: No prior PSE experience, but did not enter directly from secondary school.
 Incomplete PSE: Previous PSE experience, without a completed credential.
 Complete PSE: Previous attainment of a diploma or degree.

Sources: 2012-13 Student Satisfaction Survey (MTCU); Colleges Ontario.

In today's post-secondary education realm, nontraditional students are the fastest-growing population at post-secondary institutions.²⁵ In fact, when looking at the pathways pursued by students accessing the college system, it is clear that the traditional pathway is not the norm, as illustrated by the figure above.²⁶

Ontario has created a series of pathways, which can be defined as "a series of decisions, events and situations that relate to schooling and learning in an educational setting"²⁷ that are meant to take a student through a somewhat linear system of formal education. However, adult learning pathways are much more complex than those of traditional students, who complete their elementary and secondary education and access the post-secondary system directly after the completion of high school.

BARRIER

Mature students encounter complex and intersecting barriers in accessing higher education due to the fact that the system was designed to graduate students into linear pathways of formal education.

RECOMMENDATION 2

High schools need to improve the supports for college-bound students who access resources in secondary school. Furthermore, the college sector needs to ensure that services and supports are designed and delivered in such a way that the system accommodates the learning styles and social diversity of students, including age diversity.

BENEFIT

Recognition of mature students' nonlinear pathways will reduce students' systematic barriers to accessing a college education.

Mature students fall outside of the definition of traditional students, and tend to have more barriers than direct entrant students, namely outside responsibilities, unfamiliar academic environment, and limited social support.²⁸ As a result of their varied academic pathways and outside obligations, adult learners may easily step out for a period of time due to obligations in other areas of their lives.²⁹

Ideally, adult learners would complete a bridging or upgrading program that would allow them the chance to progress into other adult-learning programs and go into a formal training or education program. Nontraditional students may access a post-secondary education by taking part in literacy and basic-skills programming available through community-based, school board, or college deliverers or a college upgrading program in order to qualify for college entry. Other potential students, such as professionals who have been trained abroad, can access the college system through programs such as Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, a bridging program for internationally trained professionals, or an English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

These nontraditional pathways are not anomalies of the system, but exist as a result of the flexible options that Ontario's PSE sector provides to mature students and other non-traditional students. Assuredly, students who pursue nontraditional pathways "should not be regarded as 'deviant' since their presence is central to the logic of the education system."³⁰ Instead, these nontraditional students must have all of the supports they need in order to succeed in a system that was not created to suit their needs.

literacy in ontario

Literacy is a necessity for education, and the two are interlaced with one another. Literacy is more than a "basic reading ability, but rather an indication of 'how adults use written information to function in society.'"^{31,32} Strong literacy skills are closely linked to the probability of having a good job, decent earnings, and access to training opportunities. Individuals with weak literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed or, if employed, to be in jobs that pay little or offer poor hours or working conditions.³³ Literacy is also necessary for a successful post-secondary education experience.

Research has continually shown that academic underpreparedness and unpreparedness, especially in terms of literacy and basic skills, causes student underachievement, failure, and higher attrition rates.³⁴ Due to

the fact that Ontario’s college population is varied and mature students follow dissimilar pathways to accessing a post-secondary education, mature students’ abilities and literacy skills are very different as well. This issue is further complicated by the fact that many mature students’ first language is not English or French.

With Canada’s education continually ranked among the world’s best, it may surprise the reader to know that only 58% of Canadians possess the “literacy levels sufficient to function in today’s economy and society.”³⁵ In Ontario, approximately 43% of adults possess Level 1 and Level 2 Literacy on the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) document literacy scale, with Level 3 considered the minimum requirement for success in the current economy.³⁶ This means that Ontario’s levels of literacy are very close to the national average, but are not as high as those of other provinces and territories, namely Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon.³⁷

Population 16 Years and over by Prose Literacy Level, Canada and Ontario, 2003³⁸

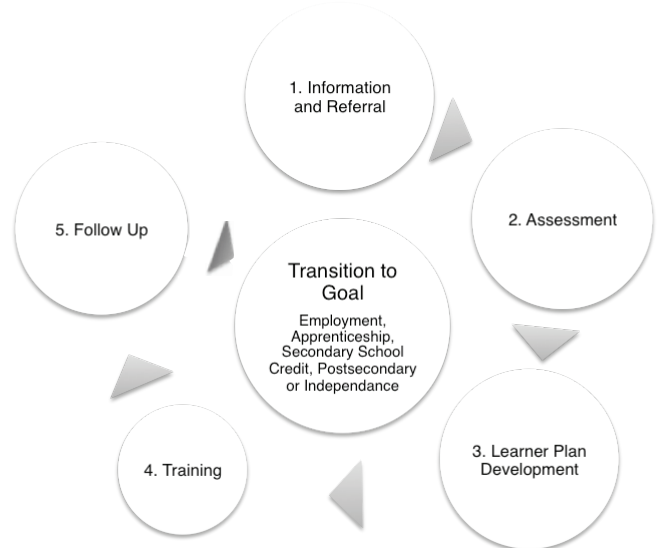
	Canada	Ontario
Level 1	19.9%	21.3%
Level 2	27.8%	26.7%
Level 3	35.4%	35.0%
Level 4	17.0%	17.0%

In Ontario, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) funds preparatory programs through Employment Ontario’s Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program in order to help its citizens attain higher levels of literacy. LBS services are provided at no cost to the learners to improve reading, writing, numeracy, and essential skills that fall within the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) Level 3, with which “individuals have the minimum skills considered necessary to cope with everyday situations.”³⁹ These services are offered through local school boards, community-based agencies, and colleges. This is especially important to mature students accessing college, as many search for a pathway to allow them into higher education with low literacy skills.

The LBS Program also provides academic upgrading services to help learners get the skills they need for entry into post-secondary education and apprenticeship training.⁴⁰ In the 2009–2010 period, more than 56,000 people received LBS training, with 7 out of 10 learners going on to further education and employment. This was an increase from 51,747 learners in 2008–2009.⁴¹

As the figure above demonstrates, mature students can access LBS programming that will suit their needs and help them achieve their goals. In order to continue its support of the LBS, the government of Ontario has invested heavily in the expansion and sustainability of the program, with a two-year initiative of \$90 million to expand LBS training. Furthermore, in March 2011, the MTCU committed to sustaining this funding as well as to spending an additional \$44 million over the next three years on literacy and basic skills.⁴² Support for LBS programming is vital to the success of college students and must be maintained.

Literacy and Basic Skill Program Services⁴³



The province has also developed a framework to further support LBS Program work, with the creation of the Ontario’s Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF). MTCU, through Employment Ontario, has developed the OALCF to further adult literacy in Ontario with their LBS program. OALCF describes six broad competencies to organize a student’s progress through LBS programming; these are task-based and used to describe and track a student’s progress with adult literacy.⁴⁴

In order for students with lower literacy to be supported in their post-secondary education, they need to be identified early on in their educational career as “at risk,” meaning that they are at risk of not successfully completing their program.⁴⁵ While this is true of all students, mature students are particularly vulnerable as a result of outside responsibilities, unfamiliarity with the formal post-secondary environment, and limited social support.

Many mature students are returning to the educational system with personal barriers such as teenage parenthood,

alcohol or substance abuse, mental-health issues, developmental or learning disabilities, family issues, problems with confidence, and a lack of maturity.⁴⁶ Many difficulties that mature students face with academic under-preparedness are compounded by the students' outside barriers and obligations.

Ontario's colleges have recognized the importance of literacy for all college students and how higher literacy levels within a student population have a high correlation with retention and academic success. To raise literacy rates across the college system—and success rates as well—Ontario's colleges have “developed a wide range of practices, programs, resources, and services to assist all students in achieving their required outcomes, regardless of their beginning characteristics in terms of language proficiency.”⁴⁷

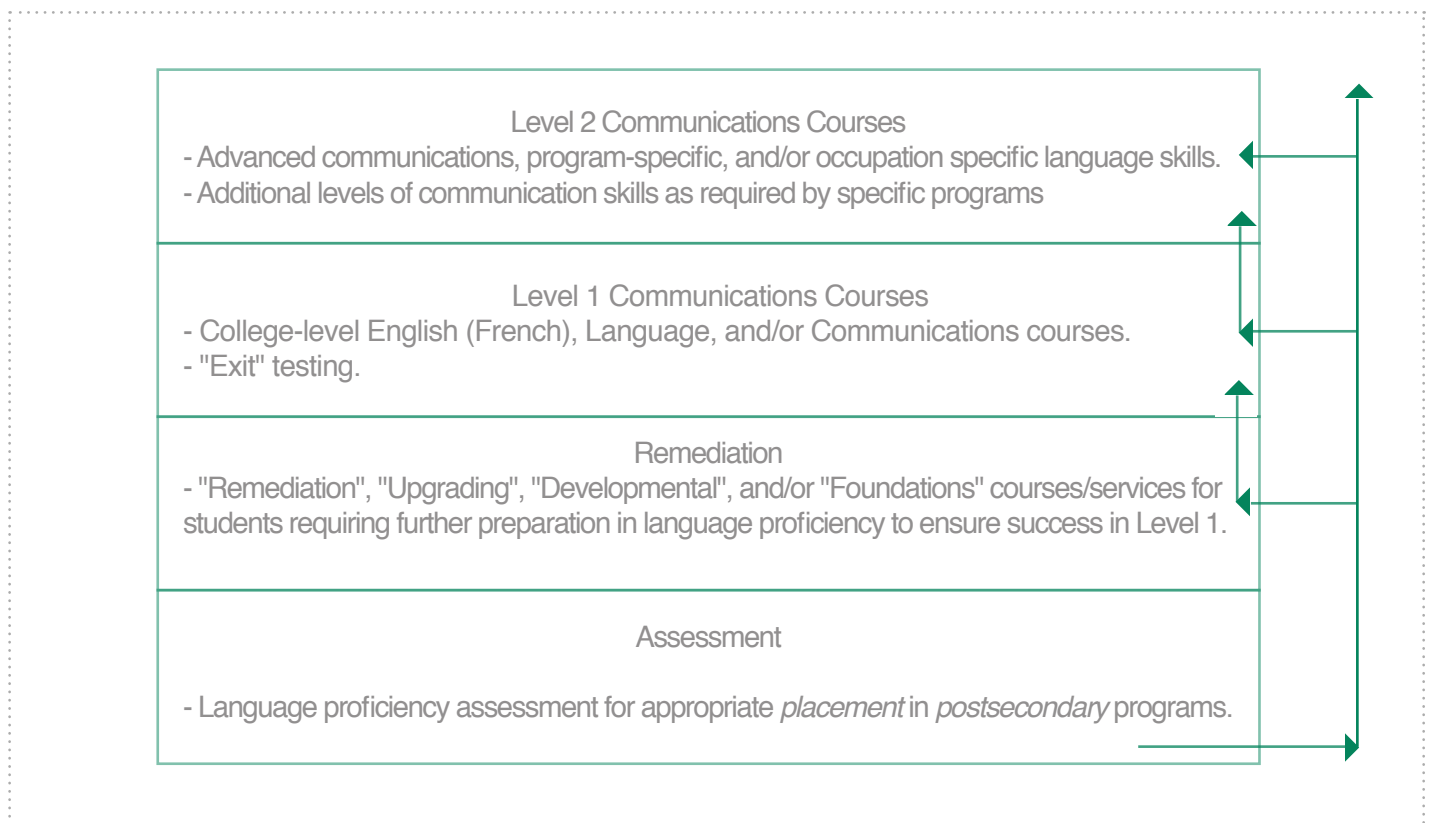
This is partially due to the recognition that “in a globally competitive, knowledge-based economy,” like Ontario's, “having a skilled workforce is necessary to ensure productivity and sustainable growth.”⁴⁸ Basic literacy skills are fundamental to these “economic benefits and [are needed] to better lives... as [they]

contribute to economic growth both directly, through increased productivity, and indirectly, by improving workers' capacity to adopt new technologies and ways of working and to spur innovation.”⁴⁹

Ontario's colleges have a verity of different courses and practices to increase literacy, which have been identified in current research. Research has described the pathways and laddering options in which a student can participate in order to achieve the necessary level of literacy to succeed in the college system.⁵⁰ This work is pictorially demonstrated in figure 10 below.

As shown in the figure below, upon entry to an Ontario college, a student will be assessed by a college in one of three ways. The first is a writing sample—with 33% of colleges conducting a language-proficiency assessment based solely on student writing samples. Secondly, with a computerized assessment of reading comprehension and/or sentence skills—with 20% of colleges relying solely on this method for assessment. Lastly, a student could have an assessment through the use of multiple measures—with 47% of colleges employing this type of assessment, which is the most highly regarded in the literature.⁵¹

Ontario College Student Assessment



BARRIER

Ontario's colleges do not share the best practices or policies when it comes to literacy and language-proficiency assessments and programming. This can limit understanding of language proficiency and literacy in the system and prevent student mobility from one college to the next.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The provincial government, with the support of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, should carry out an environmental scan and create a portal of best practices and policies to increase consistency and greater understanding with literacy and language proficiency in the province.

BENEFIT

Sharing best practices will allow for a greater recognition of literacy in the system, as well as a strengthening of policies due to knowledge sharing.

With respect to the remediation methods used in the college system after the assessment stage, Ontario's colleges use three broad methods to address students' literacy needs. The first is support services, with 29% of colleges utilizing learning centers within the institution to further aid students. The second is what the authors referred to as transcript courses, which took place in 25% of Ontario's colleges; students can earn credit for these courses, but the credit is not applied toward the completion of their program.⁵³

The third remediation method was Modified Level 1 courses—which 29% of colleges relied on—in which students would participate in classes similar to the mandatory English or communications course that exists in all colleges, but with modification to make the class more manageable. For example, the modified Level 1 courses would have a lower student-to-instructor ratio to guarantee more one-on-one time for students. These classes would result in a credit that would count toward a student's program completion.⁵⁴

Lastly, 17% of colleges utilized a combination of remedial methods, with both transcripts and modified Level 1 courses. Furthermore, "half of Ontario colleges reported some form of supplemental assistance and/or dedicated 'writing centres' available to any student requesting, on a voluntary basis, additional assistance; 29% also offered organized activities related to oral language skills."⁵⁵

BARRIER

A lack of a common system approach to the assessment and remediation of poor literacy and language-proficiency practices can result in inconsistencies and a lack of communication and understanding in the college system.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Colleges should make consistent the wide range of assessment and remediation approaches as the wide range and diversity of activities, terminology, methods, benchmarks, instruments, service models, delivery agents, and measures of effectiveness in literacy and language-proficiency practices have negative impacts on student understanding and progress.

BENEFIT

Common, systemwide approaches to literacy and language proficiency can produce positive outcomes, such as facilitating communication, permitting evidence-based decision-making at both the college and system levels, and establishing portability and transferability of assessment scores and achievement, which can result in greater student transfer among colleges in Ontario.⁵⁶

For mature students, a common form of literacy remediation is the Academic & Career Entrance (ACE) Certificate Program, which is extremely valuable to students who need literacy and numeracy remediation. ACE is funded by the MTCU, and all 24 Ontario colleges offer ACE courses, which have been evaluated and determined to be equivalent to Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) college-stream courses. Students can opt to take just the prerequisite courses they require. They can also take multiple courses required to qualify for an ACE certificate, widely recognized as an OSSD equivalent.

ACE is based on the secondary-school curriculum but designed for adult learners seeking to meet the entrance requirements for post-secondary college programs. In terms of preparation for college-level classes, ACE has proven to be successful, with a reported success rate⁵⁷ of 80%.⁵⁸ This high success rate is attributed to: "(a) ACE learning outcomes tied directly to Ontario college postsecondary learning outcomes, (b) a minimum grade of 70 per cent required to pass an ACE course, and (c) flexible intake and a learn-at-your-own-pace delivery model."⁵⁹

academic upgrading

ACE is part of a bigger picture for mature students, namely that of adult upgrading programs. Mature students are nontraditional students and “do not enter directly into post-secondary education from high school, [and can include] students who enter through preparatory programs.”⁶⁰ As stated above, one of the ways mature students access a higher education is through literacy and adult upgrading programs. Adult learners have a variety of needs and motivations for accessing a post-secondary education, and their requirements and needs in order to successfully complete their studies must be addressed.

Due to the fact that literacy levels are highly correlated with post-secondary achievement, mature students who may not have the necessary literacy levels to participate in a college program will most likely fail in their endeavors. Studies have clearly reflected this trend, as graduates of adult upgrading programs have particularly high rates of completion of their college programs. Adult upgrading graduates who were tracked from their first year of post-secondary studies to graduation had an 83%⁶¹ graduation rate, in comparison to Ontario colleges’ average of 64.8%.⁶²

Academic upgrading is especially important for the retention of mature students, as students who complete a college adult upgrading program move on to post-secondary studies and are personally and academically prepared to succeed. They are also characterized as having low rates of program changes, indicating that “adult upgrading programs have helped them make the appropriate program selection.”⁶³ A recent Ontario study showed that there were strong upward retention rates for those students who completed a writing-skills course (69% retention rate), in comparison to the overall student population (63% retention rate), while those who failed to complete the course had very high attrition (with only a 27% retention rate).⁶⁴

Academic upgrading programs are vital to the success of mature students especially because one of the major concerns that mature students have is their age. In another current Ontario study, one participant expressed this common concern: “I guess because I had been out of school for so long ... I was concerned about my age. I thought I was too old. I thought I’d be in a classroom full of nineteen year olds ... and I was almost thirty. I was worried about feeling awkward.”⁶⁵

Indeed, for the student participants in this study, there seemed to be a relationship between greater time away from school and reduced confidence in academic ability.⁶⁶ This may be due to the common perception that the college-applicant population is primarily made up of direct-entrant students, which it is not. As the chart below illustrates,⁶⁷ the majority of college applicants are non-direct-entry students, with the average non-direct-entry applicant’s age being 25.6 years of age.⁶⁸ The trend of non-direct entrants applying to college has increased over the last decade, with non-direct entrants increasing from 58.8% of applicants in 2003–2004 academic year to 65.5% in the 2012–2013 academic year.

Table 1. Per cent of CAAT applicants* direct from secondary school vs. non-direct by year

Year	Direct		Non-direct		Total
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total	
2003-04	68,762	41.2%	98,082	58.8%	166,844
2004-05	61,389	38.6%	97,663	61.4%	159,052
2005-06	60,289	38.9%	94,596	61.1%	154,885
2006-07	60,225	38.6%	95,743	61.4%	155,968
2007-08	64,952	39.5%	99,652	60.5%	164,604
2008-09	68,056	38.9%	106,776	61.1%	174,832
2009-10	70,970	36.5%	123,597	63.5%	194,567
2010-11	71,480	36.6%	123,868	63.4%	195,348
2011-12	64,128	34.7%	120,921	65.3%	185,049
2012-13**	68,077	34.5%	129,356	65.5%	197,433

Academic upgrading programs, along with allowing mature students to regain familiarity with the formal education system, can also have the added benefit of helping a student to choose a better college program. Students in preparatory programs, as mentioned above, tend to stay in the program of their choice and very seldom change programs. Of those who completed a college adult upgrading program, only a small percentage of graduates changed programs in their second semester. These “program changes ranged from 12% in General Arts and Science to 2% for Technology [and only] 3% of students in Health Sciences changed programs.”⁶⁹

The idea that adult upgrading programs can provide students with clarity about their program choice is echoed in other literature. Students who participated in upgrading programs had goals that were further developed, as

they were introduced to other possibilities and options that they were not originally aware of. With regard to the training needed for specific professions upon the completion of a post-secondary education credential, “participants [in preparatory programs] gained a greater understanding of their chosen professions, which prompted them to adjust their goals.”⁷⁰

This demonstrates that adult upgrading and academic upgrading can offset the vocational indecision that “may affect motivation, academic performance and the pace at which students complete the stages of the academic track set out by the system.”⁷¹ This indecision, if not curtailed, “can also lead to backtracking, arising from shifts in direction (for instance, to complete the admission prerequisites for a new choice of program).”⁷²

BARRIER

Some mature students may access the system without a “mature student” status and may not have the academic preparedness to succeed in higher education.

RECOMMENDATION 5

All colleges in Ontario should undertake intake testing to see where students’ aptitude lies. In the event that students do not show academic preparedness, students should be provided with academic counseling to provide access to the necessary upgrading programs.

BENEFIT

Students with a potential to fail or withdraw from school due to their academic underpreparedness will be identified earlier, will access remediation programming, and will be more likely to succeed in their program.

Another group of people with a need for access to academic upgrading is recent immigrant adult students (RIAS) who access preparatory programs in order to gain Canadian credentials, usually from a previous career.⁷³ The RIAS population can be defined as people who are “over 24 years of age [and] who have been living in Canada as permanent residents or citizens for less than 10 years.”⁷⁴ Colleges play a crucial part in helping RIAS integrate into Canadian society “through the provision of educational experiences that promote academic achievement and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.”⁷⁵ Therefore, it is extremely important for colleges to understand the needs of mature students from various backgrounds.

Some of the common issues that the RIAS population can experience include barriers with language

proficiency, financial constraints, and a lack of knowledge of the PSE system.⁷⁶ As such, some colleges have courses specifically for people who need English for Academic Purposes upgrading. This program for ESL students has been proposed for non-ESL students due to the fact the “all students’ success in school depends upon proficiency in academic language, the language of classroom instruction. Whether English is the first or second language, academic language proficiency is a critical competence for students.”⁷⁷

A recent study showed that common characteristics of the RIAS population in post-secondary schools tend to be that they are strictly focused on academics, socially isolated, and unaware of support services in the school. The RIAS population tends to also struggle with a school-life balance and issues with English-language proficiency. Furthermore, faculty interaction is very important to them, and because they interact with the college system differently than other mature students, they may need more orientation and better support services that are geared to their needs.⁷⁸

BARRIER

Most recent immigrants who access the college system are mature students with very specific cultural and language barriers that may limit their success in their educational endeavors.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Colleges should identify and monitor recent immigrant adult students in colleges to make sure that they can access student services (including RIAS-specific writing support, peer mentoring, web-based social clubs, and ESL-specific programs)⁷⁹ to better help mature RIAS succeed in the college environment.

BENEFIT

Providing these supports to the RIAS population will enhance their learning experiences and further facilitate their adjustment to Ontario’s society.

finances & the ontario student assistance program (OSAP)

Another concern for nontraditional students is balancing outside responsibilities. In a recent Ontario study on nontraditional students in preparatory programs, one of the most commonly cited difficulties in the length of the program included “family-related issues, juggling responsibilities and financial concerns.”⁸⁰ This is not surprising, as many mature students “enter and exit programs in

response to family and financial responsibilities.”⁸¹ This is why regular college programs must allow for flexibility in mature students’ lives, especially as they pertain to students with dependents.

The primary reason that 23% of students withdraw from adult upgrading programs is financial difficulty.⁸² For mature students who completed an upgrading program and enrolled in a college program, 9% had to withdraw in the first semester due to finances.⁸³ Money—or the lack thereof—is a stressor in many students’ lives, but especially for mature students. One of the reasons for this is that the provincial financial assistance program is not suited to the needs of mature students.

BARRIER

The Ontario government removed funding for the Ontario Special Bursary, which provided aid to students from low-income families to assist with tuition and compulsory fees, books and equipment, and travel and child-care costs. This was especially important to mature students, as one of the targets of the bursary is students in academic upgrading programs.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Funding for the Ontario Special Bursary should be reinstated by the government, as the bursary was of great benefit to mature students, academic upgrading students, and those with highest need.

BENEFIT

Through reinstatement of funding for the Ontario Special Bursary, students with the highest need will be relieved of some of the financial stress that they experience, and this will aid students in continuing their education.

The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) is administered by the Ontario MTCU and includes repayable loans, nonrepayable grants, bursaries, and scholarships. Many students are not aware that when they apply for OSAP, they are considered for the Canada Student Loan Program as well, which is administered by OSAP. The federal and provincial formulas for calculating the loan and grant amounts are separate but work in conjunction with one another. The federal portion of the student financial aid is roughly 60%, and the provincial portion of the student financial aid is roughly 40%.

A criticism that college students have of OSAP is that it does not cover the true cost of education in Ontario. This is due to the fact that tuition fees have increased

more than student financial aid and that OSAP does not grow with the consumer price index (CPI) or the rate of inflation (ROI). OSAP was designed as a supportive program and was meant to supplement students’ existing resources. However, there have been significant improvements in OSAP over the last few years, mostly as a result of an extra \$81 million fund earmarked for financial support of college and university students that was introduced into the system in 2010.⁸⁴

OSAP calculates the amount for which a student is eligible by assessing the student’s individual situation and assigning the student to one of four categories: single dependent, independent single, married or common-law relationship, or sole-support parent. Single students with no dependents can receive up to \$360 a week during a study period. Married students and sole-support parents can receive up to \$560 per week in a study period.⁸⁵ This translates to a maximum of \$12,240 and \$19,040 per year, respectively.⁸⁶

While OSAP is a strong program that serves just over half of Ontario’s college students,⁸⁷ one of the issues that mature students experience is a result of the lack of transparency and access to information. The most common inquiries are with regard to: the website not being easily accessible and clear; the fact that adjustments to the estimate are not explained to the students; the fact that the individual college’s financial aid officers cannot answer student inquiries or that the information provided is conflicting; and that the OSAP application form is not clear and could be improved.

While the OSAP website provides general information on how parts of the program work,⁸⁸ it is difficult to access the information on how OSAP is calculated and what can affect students’ aid amounts. While there are links provided to the student to access the OSAP application form on the front page,⁸⁹ it is difficult for students to access information on the formula used to calculate their amounts, as the OSAP Eligibility, Assessment and Review Manual that has detailed information on the program is not available publicly.

Furthermore, while some of the information on a student’s OSAP calculations is available in a roundabout way through the OSAP aid estimator tool,⁹⁰ information about the maximum amount of income a student can earn prior to and during a study period without it impacting aid is not available on the OSAP website. This information

is somewhat randomly placed on a Wikipedia page that seems to have been edited by ministry or OSAP staff, as the user name in the site's revision history is "User:OSAP-MTCU." For those interested, it states that "as of 2012 students can earn up to \$3,699 in bursaries, scholarships and earnings without this amount impacting on the amount of financial assistance they receive from OSAP."⁹¹

One common complaint from mature students is that if there are any adjustments made to their aid amounts, they are not explained to the student. This lack of transparency causes students much frustration and results in students not being able to trust the program. The seemingly arbitrary adjustments seem to impact some students more than others, and access to a more comprehensive explanation of the formulas used to calculate the loan amounts would undoubtedly help students resolve this confusion. Many students are not aware that they have the option to appeal or review an OSAP decision.⁹²

This issue of a lack of information is further compounded by students' negative experiences in their interactions with their college's student financial aid professionals. While many students have had very positive experiences with staff at their colleges, many times mature students who have more complicated questions than those of direct entrants from high school are given conflicting information or no information at all when they voice their inquiries.

The group that is responsible for the student financial aid's training and updates, the Ontario Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, does provide professional development and regular updates to their members.⁹³ However, many mature students' questions are not properly addressed. If a student is seeking confirmation of the information given, he or she can only do so within the financial aid department. Students are generally not able to access the OSAP department in the ministry for questions specific to their OSAP aid because it is not the mandate of the department to provide students with customer service.

The description of the Student Financial Assistance Branch states that the branch "focuses on the administration and delivery of student financial assistance programs in Ontario," and that its purpose is to "oversee the program delivery, financial administration, technological systems, policy development, and

enforcement and investigative activities for the Ontario Student Assistance Program and other student assistance programs."⁹⁴ It is not meant to serve individual students in their applications, as the financial aid staff at individual colleges are meant to take care of student concerns.

BARRIER

Due to the fact that mature students interact with OSAP in a more intricate way than traditional students, their concerns are not as common and they are not able to access the same level of service and consistency from their colleges.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Student financial aid administrators at Ontario's colleges must take on further training to be able to provide high-level advice to address mature students' concerns and issues with OSAP. Furthermore, institutions must ensure that students are aware that there are options for students to appeal OSAP decisions if their OSAP disbursement does not suit their needs or if a student has special circumstances.

BENEFIT

If mature students' OSAP issues were addressed, they would be able to enjoy the same level of service and therefore experience less frustration with the program in general. Furthermore, this would promote better understanding of the program to mature students.

An issue with the OSAP program that adversely affects mature students is the way that OSAP is calculated. Namely, the OSAP formula takes into account students' wages from the year leading up to their application as well as their assets. Most mature students have been in the labor force before making the decision to return to school; 83% of the applicants desire to have a better career path.⁹⁵ This means that many mature students do not have the funds available to fund their post-secondary education, especially if they have dependents such as children.

Furthermore, if a mature student or a spouse has assets such as investments or a Registered Retirement Savings Plan, he or she is expected to use those assets to offset the cost of schooling. This financial pressure is exacerbated by the fact that many students give up their earnings in order to attend school full time while maintaining family obligations. The inability of mature students to access OSAP aid to help pay for educational costs is "negatively affected by

savings and assets that individuals have accumulated and by spousal income for married applicants.”⁹⁶ Considering that 65% of college applicants are not applying directly from high school, the financial aid system in Ontario must be changed to better reflect the needs of the students accessing the system.

One more change to the OSAP program that would benefit students is that of spousal contribution. OSAP assumes that a spouse (or a parent, for those students who are dependent on their parents) will contribute a certain percentage of discretionary income to the student’s school expenses. This is defined as an “annual income less applicable taxes and less a weekly living allowance based on the Moderate Standard of Living.”⁹⁷ For spouses, this translates to 70% of the spouse’s discretionary income in a study period,⁹⁸ and 80% in the pre-study period,⁹⁹ which is an improvement from the previous rate, which was lowered by 10% in 2010.¹⁰⁰ This and other barriers result in the idea that with a “higher proportion of older students with non-government sources of financing, relative to government student loans suggests that the current system may not be meeting their needs.”¹⁰¹

BARRIER

Mature students are at a strong disadvantage when returning to school due to the fact that their eligibility for OSAP is greatly diminished by their financial situation.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The government should institute credential supplements to increase employer awareness of the skills and proficiencies that students attain with their qualifications.

BENEFIT

Students will have increased ease to enter world labor markets by being able to communicate specific skills and abilities that stem from their qualifications; they will also be able to communicate learning outcomes and align them to other PSE institutions outside of Ontario, making them globally compatible.

Students who apply for OSAP are automatically considered for the 30% Off Ontario Tuition program the ministry introduced in 2011 and rolled out to post-secondary colleges in early 2012. The 30% Off Ontario Tuition, commonly referred to as the Ontario Tuition Grant (OTG) provides a maximum of \$1,730 per year for degree programs and \$790 for diploma or certificate programs.¹⁰² This program strongly disadvantages the mature student

population because in order to qualify for the grant, a student must have finished high school less than four years before the start of the current school year—or less than six years before for students with a permanent disability.

This criterion does not allow many mature students to qualify for the grant, as many mature students access the college system well past the four years out of high school to which this program limits students. As many mature students pursue part-time studies, they too are ineligible to receive the grant due to the fact that it is only available to full-time students. This program has the potential to have a strong impact on mature students’ financial situation and should be expanded to include students who are four years or more out of high school.

BARRIER

Due to the fact that many mature students enter the postsecondary system many years after high school, mature students are not eligible to access the 30% Off Ontario Tuition program.

RECOMMENDATION 10

The provincial government must expand access to the 30% Off Ontario Tuition program by removing the stipulation that a student must have finished high school less than four years before the start of the current program.

BENEFIT

The expansion of the program would allow more college students, who are at a disadvantage due to their age and educational pathways, to benefit for student financial aid, especially as many mature students have financial hardships concerns.

student employment

Student employment is an issue that is a consistent stress to college students because students’ unemployment statistics have had an upward trend over the last few years. This year, there has been a slight improvement nationally as the unemployment rate for youth aged 15 to 24 years was 16.0%, compared with 17.1% a year ago. While lower than last year, this rate is still more than double the average for the overall labor market.

The Ontario student unemployment rate of 20.9% in June of 2012 was higher than the national average of 16.9%, and employment rates of Ontario students were

among the lowest in the country.¹⁰³ This was a decline of the state of employment for students, as the July 2011 unemployment rate was 1.4 percentage points higher in July 2012. For the 2013 year, Statistics Canada has reported that the employment rate of students aged 15 to 24 who were returning to school was similar to that of July 2012. However, fewer students were working full time.¹⁰⁴

The government has pledged to increase youth employment in the province, most recently in the May 2013 budget. The government introduced a program called the Youth Jobs Strategy, which will contribute \$295 million over the next two years and aims to reduce youth employment. The strategy has four key funds:

- A Youth Employment Fund to create employment opportunities for 25,000 youth with an entry point to long-term employment;
- A Youth Entrepreneurship Fund to provide mentorship, start-up capital, and outreach for young entrepreneurs;
- A Youth Innovation Fund to support skills development in the areas of leading and managing industrial research and development and commercialization; and
- A Youth Skills Connections Fund to promote partnerships among business, labor, educators, and youth to identify and solve skills-development issues.¹⁰⁵

The biggest endowment for the strategy is for the Youth Employment Fund, with \$195 million made available in September 2013 to create employment opportunities for 25,000 Ontario youth. This will provide hiring incentives to prospective employers willing to give young professionals a chance to acquire the necessary work experience and training.¹⁰⁶ A further breakdown of these funds shows that \$45 million would go toward the Youth Entrepreneurship Fund, which has a goal to create up to 6,000 mentorship and job opportunities.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, there is a \$20 million fund earmarked for universities and colleges for their entrepreneurial programs and \$25 million for pilot projects that improve coordination between business, labor, youth, and educators for the Youth Skills Connections Fund.¹⁰⁸

Undoubtedly, the Youth Jobs Strategy will benefit Ontario's post-secondary students. However, there are issues that will arise for Ontario's mature students, namely an age limit to the largest endowment, the Youth Employment Fund. In the ministry's own words, the fund "will

provide \$195 million to help eligible unemployed youth between the ages of 15 to 29 find work."¹⁰⁹ This will undoubtedly hurt those students who are not 15 to 29 years of age, as approximately 21% of Ontario's college students are 26 years of age or older.¹¹⁰

A similar issue is experienced by students 30 years of age or older when they apply for the Ontario Summer Jobs Service, the Ontario Summer Company Program, and the Ontario Public Service Summer Employment Opportunities. These programs all have eligibility restrictions for applicants 15–24 or 15–30 years of age. With an increasingly diverse student population attending Ontario's colleges, limiting application to employment programs to certain age groups is contributing to the increasing unemployment rate for Ontario students.

BARRIER

Due to an arbitrary age restriction, numerous mature students are not able to access governmental employment programs created for students

RECOMMENDATION 11

The government must remove age restrictions from the qualifying criteria of the Youth Employment Fund, the Ontario Summer Jobs Service, the Ontario Summer Company Program, and the Ontario Public Service Summer Employment Opportunities.

BENEFIT

Through removal of the age restrictions of the above employment programs, mature students will have a chance to expand their employment, as they face the same unemployment rates as any other college students. This has recently been done in the Federal Student Work Experience Program, and students would like to see this progress made in Ontario.

The Second Careers program, introduced in 2008, is a financial assistance program created "to assist laid-off and unemployed workers in attending college in order to retrain for careers in high demand sectors."¹¹¹ Second Career provides eligible participants up to \$28,000 to support tuition, travel, books, and other training-related costs.¹¹² Since its launch, it has been accessed by 68,000 laid-off workers looking to upgrade their skills. A report by Colleges Ontario shows

that during the 2012–2013 fiscal year, 36% of Second Career clients received training at a public Ontario college.¹¹³

Of the participants in Second Careers, “more than half of the students had a Grade 12 education or less when they entered the program.”¹¹⁴ The program is great for mature students, as the average age of the participants is 40 years old, with an almost equal distribution of men and women.¹¹⁵ The program provides flexibility and choice, “with the top five most popular occupations currently being truck driving, accounting, social and community service workers, nurse aides and orderlies, and heavy equipment operators.”¹¹⁶

Research shows that the average length of training was nine months, with average funding of \$17,500. The program has high success rates, with 61% of Second Career graduates finding new jobs after three months of graduation, and of those who were working full time, the average salary was \$40,740.¹¹⁷ The ministry reported that in a recent survey “more than 97% of people who participated in Second Career said that skills training helped them find a job after leaving the program.”¹¹⁸ Support for this program must be continued, as the high success rates help many mature students who wouldn’t have been able to access higher education otherwise.

mature students' college environment

In order for mature students to succeed in Ontario’s colleges, the college campus environment must allow for the flexibility required as students attempt to balance life outside of school and family life. It is important for colleges to “deliver education to adults in settings where they are comfortable, where the learning environment is flexible, where the staff respects the learners, and where there is a sense of community [as] all these contribute to adults’ motivation to learn and achieve their goals.”¹¹⁹

In order for colleges to retain mature students after their enrollment in a post-secondary program, colleges need to understand the issues that cause mature students’ attrition. Research has shown that the “three most frequently cited factors that strongly influenced the early departure of adult students from their

college program were personal/family issues, costs, and issues with time management.”¹²⁰ This is in contrast to the issues that cause attrition for traditionally aged students, namely “change in career goals, dislike for the program, and personal/family issues.”¹²¹

Further research shows that other potential learner issues for mature students include primarily “student expectation and understanding of learning experience; goal orientation; relevance of course to work/life; availability of targeted support and student-faculty interactions”¹²² The importance of recognizing these barriers is heightened by the fact that 23% of first-year college students are aged 26 years or older.¹²³ As instructor interaction is so important to mature students’ success, colleges must be made aware of the pedagogical implications and challenges of teaching mature students. It is therefore important for colleges to make mature students aware of support services they can access on campus to mitigate the risk of mature students’ attrition.

In order to achieve a flexible environment, colleges must consider the barriers that mature students encounter in a system that was not created to suit their needs. Namely, they need access to knowledge of the services available to them, a safe space that is culturally appropriate, understanding from the college about their familial obligations, and flexible learning options.

Many colleges across the province have mature student spaces and mature student clubs geared toward building a support network and connecting students with the right supports. This is important, as the life experiences of mature students are very different from those students who enter college directly from high school. When mature students re-enter into a formal education system, many are unsure about their upcoming experience with coursework and the management of a work-school-life balance that typically results in personal and family sacrifices.

Mature students can feel more comfortable if they interact with other mature students, either in the form of a mature student club or association or a space on campus reserved for mature students. These types of supports “promote social networking, student support, advocacy, resources and community interaction among mature students” and are necessary for mature students’ success.¹²⁴

BARRIER

Mature students do not interact with the college system in the same way that direct-entry students do. They are burdened by outside obligations and barriers, and as a result they require tailored supports in order to participate at the same level as direct-entry students.

RECOMMENDATION 12

Colleges need to provide an academic orientation and an orientation to available services for mature students, which can facilitate the transition into post-secondary education by providing them with information on the services and programs that may benefit them and assist them in their educational journey, such as skills workshops. Furthermore, colleges and student associations should facilitate and promote the creation and sustainability of mature student clubs, associations, and physical spaces.

BENEFIT

A specific orientation for mature students would allow the college to familiarize students with the services and supports available to them, thereby increasing retention. Furthermore, with the creation and maintenance of mature student clubs, associations, and physical spaces, a sense of support and community will develop among mature students and the college.

Many mature students are also parents, especially female mature students, who tend to be single mothers with lower incomes. Approximately 22% of college students across Canada have children and are married or in a long-term relationship.¹²⁵ This is partially why so many mature students delay their education, as “one of the predictors on non-enrolment was having a dependent child,” and of those who do not attend, 9% had a child.¹²⁶ For example, many mature students have mentioned that college policies are unclear with regard to sick days. Many instructors do not show flexibility on test days if a student’s child is unwell and he or she has to stay home from class to tend to the child.

This situation necessitates colleges’ recognition that flexibility and child-care services are indispensable services for mature students. While some schools provide on-campus daycare, other colleges do not, which is a major concern for parents. On-campus child-care facilities unfortunately have very long waiting lists,¹²⁷ which can be cumbersome to many students with dependents. A study of preparatory programs showed

that students had access to subsidies for child care and transportation, which were very obviously highly regarded by students,¹²⁸ especially as there was little special funding for students with children.¹²⁹

BARRIER

Many mature students are parents or have dependents during the time that they pursue their studies. This impacts their educational experience due to the fact that they have to juggle and balance familial obligations, which are time-consuming and more expensive.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Colleges must implement on-campus daycare or work with their community or municipality to develop child-care subsidies, therefore allowing mature students to balance family and school obligations. This is especially important for students who have dependents who are too young to access Ontario’s all-day kindergarten program and for those students who have class schedules that are outside of typical daycare service hours.

BENEFIT

While this would undoubtedly benefit mature students, it also benefits Ontario at large, due to the fact that lessening the burden on parents allows them to finish their education, therefore benefitting children as “the adults in their lives gain the language, literacy, and numeracy skills that they need to effectively participate in their children’s education.”¹³⁰

Another way colleges are providing more flexibility to mature students is through online and distance education. Research illustrates the importance of online learning for mature students, as they tend to have a much higher uptake of online and distance classes than younger students. In fact, “almost twice as many adult Canadians aged 25 to 64 and participating in an education program used distance education compared to youth aged 18 to 24.”¹³¹

The government of Ontario is a supporter of online learning, and Ontario’s higher-education system has more than 18,000 courses and over 1,000 online programs and distance learning opportunities,¹³² with more than half a million student registrations in college and university online courses.¹³³ This is through such online initiatives as OntarioLearn.ca, a consortium of 24 Ontario colleges that have partnered to develop and deliver online courses and Contact North’s student portal under studyonline.ca.

conclusion

Ontario's colleges have a very good track record in supporting mature students. However, provincial and collegial programs, policies, and practices that exist can hinder students' access to a successful post-secondary education experience. These barriers are sometimes situational, institutional, systematic, personal, and financial, but they can be alleviated if small changes are made to established programs, policies, and practices.

If these improvements are made to Ontario's mature students' college experiences, mature students can more easily retrain and attain the credentials needed to help Ontario improve its knowledge economy, as well as fulfill the goals the province has set for itself for post-secondary attainment. Furthermore, there is a moral and social imperative to not hinder access to the college system, as many policies and programs have a strong and impactful bias against mature students. It is the intent of the College Student Alliance that the recommendations set forward in this policy paper will better the student experience for mature students and that policymakers, as well as college staff and administrators, will understand that the small changes being proposed can have a very meaningful positive effect for mature students in Ontario. ■

Recommendation 1: Colleges must expand their understanding of “mature students” to include not only those students who are coming to college without a high school diploma, but also those who are returning to a formal education system after an absence of more than one year. Furthermore, colleges’ understanding of mature students should also include students with dependents.

Recommendation 2: High schools need improve the supports for college-bound students who access resources in secondary school. Furthermore, the college sector needs to ensure that services and supports are designed and delivered in such a way that the system accommodates the learning and social diversity of students, including age diversity.

Recommendation 3: The provincial government, with the support of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, should carry out an environmental scan and create a portal of best practices and policies to increase consistency and greater understanding with literacy and language proficiency in the province.

Recommendation 4: Colleges should make consistent the wide range of assessment and remediation approaches as well as the wide range and diversity of activities, terminology, methods, benchmarks, instruments, service models, delivery agents, and measures of effectiveness in literacy and language-proficiency practices that negatively impact student understanding and progress.

Recommendation 5: All colleges in Ontario should undertake intake testing to see where students’ aptitude lies. In the event that students do not show academic preparedness, students should be provided with academic counseling to acquire access to the necessary upgrading programs.

Recommendation 6: Colleges should identify and monitor recent immigrant adult students (RIAS) in colleges to make sure that they can access student services (including RIAS-specific writing support, peer mentoring, web-based social clubs, and ESL-specific programs) that will help them succeed in the college environment.

Recommendation 7: Funding for the Ontario Special Bursary should be reinstated by the government, as the bursary was of great benefit to mature students, academic upgrading students, and those with highest need.

Recommendation 8: Student financial aid administrators at Ontario’s colleges must take on further training to be able to provide high-level advice to address mature students’ concerns and issues with OSAP. Furthermore, institutions must ensure that students are aware that there are options for students to appeal OSAP decisions if their OSAP disbursement does not suit their needs or if a student has special circumstances.

Recommendation 9: The provincial government should change the OSAP formula to recognize that mature students will not have the same income upon returning to school. Furthermore, the spousal contribution requirement should be lowered, as the majority of mature students returning to school are doing so because they want to find a way out of a difficult financial reality.

Recommendation 10: The provincial government must expand access to the 30% Off Ontario Tuition program by removing the stipulation that a student must have finished high school less than four years before starting his or her current program.

Recommendation 11: The government must remove the age restrictions from the qualifying criteria of the Youth Employment Fund, the Ontario Summer Jobs Service, the Ontario Summer Company Program, and the Ontario Public Service Summer Employment Opportunities.

Recommendation 12: Colleges need to provide an academic orientation and an orientation to available services for mature students, in order to facilitate the transition to post-secondary education by providing them with information on the services and programs that may benefit them and assist them in their educational journey, such as skills workshops. Furthermore, colleges and student associations should facilitate and promote the creation and sustainability of clubs, associations, and physical spaces for mature students.

Recommendation 13: Colleges must implement on-campus daycare or work with their communities or municipalities to develop child-care subsidies, therefore allowing mature students to balance family and school obligations. This is especially important for students who have dependents who are too young to access Ontario’s all-day kindergarten program and for those students who have class schedules that are outside of typical daycare service hours.

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