

# **Transfer Pathways: Strategies for Success in the Transition from College to University in BScN Collaborative Programs**

**Executive Summary  
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In 1999, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care announced that a four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) degree would be mandatory as the entry to practice for nursing graduates (Council of Ontario Universities [COU], 2013). As a result of this decision, the government funded collaborative partnerships between university and college nursing programs across the province. The delivery structure of the collaborative partnerships are guided by a variety of factors such as previous relationships among the partners, geographical distances, and available resources (Zorzi et al., 2007). The York-Seneca-Georgian Collaborative BScN Program is an example of such a partnership. It is considered an articulated program with an integrated curriculum, characterized by delivery of the first two years at either Seneca or Georgian College, and the last two years at York University.

At York University, nursing students in the Collaborative program were demonstrating signs of having difficulties with transitioning from the colleges to the university, despite a seamlessly integrated designed university curriculum. They were also less successful in the nursing registration exam than the 2<sup>nd</sup> Entry BScN Program at York, and other schools of nursing in Ontario.

The primary purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the current transition difficulties experienced by the York-Seneca-Georgian Collaborative nursing students as they transition from the college sites to the university setting. Strategies to better facilitate the transfer process and foster student success were also explored. There are critical reasons for better understanding the transition challenges of Collaborative program students. At the individual level, students have invested emotionally and financially, as much as \$60,000 over four years of education. For the University, it is important to successfully retain students as the inability to do so has serious financial and reputational implications. In addition, the Ontario Government has made a large investment in educating nursing students in order to address the continuing human resource challenges in the health care sector. Thus it is imperative that students are as successful as possible in transferring from the college to the university, in graduating from the program and ultimately in passing the nursing registration exam. A secondary purpose of this research was to offer generalized recommendations based on the findings, to foster successful college-university partnerships and transition practices for other programs.

Over the last two decades, more research has focused on student success in institutions of higher education. There is a growing institutional interest in establishing conditions for student success as a focus on student success and retention are critical as institutions face an increasingly competitive environment, higher expectations to demonstrate measurable performance to governments and accrediting bodies, and a diminishing fiscal climate.

Through 11 focus group interviews, comprised of students and faculty from the three partner sites, qualitative data were gathered on the transition experience from the college settings to York University. Perceived differences and expectations between a college and university setting were also explored. Students and faculty were then asked to either identify whether they felt they were

prepared to transition in year three, or make recommendations as to how better to support successful transition and student success.

Using Lizzio's (2006) *Five Senses of Success Conceptual Framework* to guide the data analyses, the findings indicated that many students felt uncertain about the transfer process; were concerned about the university level academics; and had a sense of not being connected to the York community. This resulted in feelings of loneliness and disconnection that can lead to confusion regarding their own student identity and purpose. However, it is important to note that some students did not find the transition as difficult as others. These students, while reportedly maintaining previous college ties, demonstrated a different perception of the university experience, in that it offered new opportunities for becoming part of a larger community. In order to assist students to develop a sense of purpose, recommendations were made by focus group participants on how to emphasize similar academic and teaching expectations and experiences across the four years. To assist in feeling connected with the new academic environment, they also recommended such activities as mentorship programs, a strong orientation process, campus tours and welcome events when transitioning to the university site.

A sense of resourcefulness is important to develop in order to navigate the university setting. Students identified how it would be beneficial to be exposed to well-organized, timely, accessible, and consistent communication, systems, procedures and resources that would foster self-directedness. Learning the academic culture and core scholarly values and expectations is central to fostering a successful transition. Students and faculty expressed concerns in the difference of academic standards, such as scholarly writing, between the college and university settings. Partnership infrastructures that enable all three partner institutions to have consistent expectations, shared academic data and teaching across sites, communication, and coordination of the delivery of a single curriculum in an articulated collaborative program were identified as being very important for fostering an academic culture across all four years.

The findings from this study have implications not only for collaborative nursing programs but could also inform student transitioning support structures in other college-to-university academic programs. The challenges of student transition related to inter-university and college-to-university transitions have recently prompted political changes. Since 2011, the Ontario government began focusing more on the changing learning needs of students and labour market demands (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities [MTCU], 2011). As a result, the Ontario Credit Transfer System was developed to improve transparency and access to student transfer pathways, and enable more choices for obtaining post-secondary education (MTCU, 2011). One of the goals of the credit transfer system is to assist students transfer their course credits and transition from college to university programs. While there is evidence that broader changes are being undertaken, the findings of this study may contribute to strategies that support student success during transitional experiences.

While this report outlines recommendations specific to the York-Seneca-Georgian Collaborative BScN program, the following are more generalized recommendations based on the findings to foster successful college-university partnerships and transition practices.

## **1. Structural Conditions for Collaborative Institutional Success**

- Enable clear and transparent expectations regarding the delivery of collaborative programs, by developing a mutually agreed-upon Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that describes the expectations of each partner, related responsibilities, decision-making and conflict resolution processes, governance, communication structures, admission requirements and procedures, program requirements, financial arrangements etc.;
- Form committees such as an Advisory, Executive, and Policy and Curriculum Committee, etc., to support clear and transparent expectations. Membership should consist of appropriate representatives from all partners and student representatives where appropriate;
- Ensure consistent and regular committee meetings take place, involving all representatives and stakeholders, and where outcomes are communicated across sites, as applies;
- Explore the feasibility of one central communication point that provides students with a 'one stop' location for all program-related information across the 4 years;
- Ensure consistency and transparency in admission processes and standards by utilizing one application centre such as the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC). Where this is not possible, it is recommended that representatives from both the university and college partners participate in a single application and acceptance process across all sites.
- Establish structures and systems for an integrated, pan-institutional academic database or similar systems, to better share registrar and student information over the 4 years; and
- Institute pan-institutional teaching and a schedule of visiting lectures to ensure curricular continuity and foster collaboration, student transition and academic success.

## **2. Student Services/Support and Community Building**

- Create mentorship programs that could link upper year students with those transitioning into the university setting. This practice can provide transferring students with critical transition information to lessen their degree of uncertainty and stress, as well as provide an anchor to their new academic home;
- Enable students to access university services such as the libraries and athletic programs prior to transitioning to the university setting.
- Develop communication strategies to ensure consistent and timely information across all four years. Multiple communication vehicles are recommended, such as a common program website for all 4 years (both for admissions and in-program information), establishment of an e-newsletter, regular and timely emails, and a transitioning student handbook and 'next steps' fact sheets;

- Establish campus visits and opportunity to participate in transitional activities such as program and professional development activities, program specific orientations, tours of the university, welcome events focused on assisting them to acclimate to the larger university campus;
- Provide opportunities for students to meet with friendly and informed students and faculty from the university prior to the transition period and specifically just prior to the actual transfer time;
- Assist students in achieving school/work/home life balance through communication of additional scholarship opportunities, workshop offerings, as well as ways to connect during the regular school day as well as through electronic means;
- Provide supports and information for 'first-generation' students and their families as they adapt to the rigours of a university program; and
- Provide students with a structured transition program such as the recently introduced YU START program at York University and providing incentives for students to complete the program during the summer of their transitioning year.

### **3. Academic/Curricular Changes**

- Ensure consistency and collaboration in the program and integrity of the curriculum throughout the 4-year program, through practices such as ensuring consistent learning objectives, sharing of course syllabi, shared teaching across sites, and consistent expectations and evaluation processes over the four years;
- Introduce specific student success strategies/modules into the beginning of Year 3 academic course curriculum and provide incentives such as participation marks to ensure students learn quickly about using learning resources at the University;
- Offer specific workshops (i.e., on scholarly writing skills, writing multiple choice exams) to equip students with the necessary skills and tools needed to foster their transition from the college to the university;
- Establish agreed-upon learning outcomes and methods of evaluation across the curriculum.
- Enable students to experience university by opening doors to the possibility of taking university electives during the first two years of study; and
- Provide opportunities for strategies as cross teaching, cross appointments or team teaching across sites to facilitate continuity in the program and the student's academic experience. These strategies would also enable a better understanding of the expertise within each of the partners' faculties.

## **Future Research**

As post-secondary education pathways with college and university partnerships are becoming more widely accessible, it is important to continue to implement research on the types of delivery structures, and the successes and challenges experienced by students and institutions. While there has been a proliferation of research in student success during the transitional period, almost all focuses on students entering university from high school. Some minor efforts have been made to better understand the mature student experience and strategies that support success for this cohort. Nevertheless, there is a marked gap in research pertaining to students transitioning between institutions, particularly between Colleges and Universities.

Common strategies to foster student success and ways to improve program delivery need to be identified. Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods and longitudinal studies of all four years of the program in terms of student outcomes are recommended. Quantitative data such as students' admission GPA, length of program completion, number and type of courses dropped or repeated and GPA accumulated across four years may provide insight into predictors of academic success. Qualitative studies can glean more insight into the student experience and how it changes across the program. Only through comprehensive analyses of all four years of student achievement, across partner sites, will collaborative programs be better able to understand academic and system barriers and strategies to foster success.