

Student Experiences in Credit Transfer at Ontario Colleges

Executive summary

Alex Usher
Paul Jarvey

Executive Summary

Student pathways increasingly rely on transfer between postsecondary institutions as greater numbers of students move between institutions, pursue multiple credentials, or return to postsecondary education. In order to improve pathways within and between colleges, to understand the barriers that may exist for students, and to develop strategies to improve student mobility, Ontario colleges embarked on the *Improving College System Pathways* (ICSP) project. The following pages report the results of a study that sought to support the objectives of the ICSP by developing a better understanding of the experiences of transfer students. It investigated the sources of their satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and potential barriers to credit transfer between Ontario colleges.

Between January and June 2012, 232 students at 23 colleges across Ontario colleges were interviewed about their experiences with credit transfer. They were asked to discuss the difficulty of the credit transfer process overall, how helpful they perceived the assistance that they received to be, and a series of questions designed to look for potential barriers to credit transfer between Ontario colleges.

Broadly, students' overall satisfaction with their new school was closely correlated to the perceived difficulty of the credit transfer process and the perceived helpfulness of college staff during the transfer process.

Overwhelmingly, students in the Ontario college system who participated in this study expressed positive feelings about their institution, the staff they interacted with, and their experiences with the credit transfer process. Some students nevertheless experienced difficulties and expressed dissatisfaction. Each of the seven points below discusses a practice or policy which appears to have contributed to the credit transfer process and affected related student experiences, thus offering an area of potential improvement for some Ontario institutions:

- The accessibility and completeness of basic information about the process. Both staff and students rely on information about how to progress through the process, who to contact, required documentation, deadlines, and the simple fact that credit transfer is possible. A large majority of respondents reported looking for this information on the website of their current college.
- The accessibility and completeness of detailed information about the process, such as which prior credits might be eligible for transfer, and how credit transfer might affect schedules, tuition, and other factors. This information was often looked for online, and often provided in person, by staff or faculty.
- Respondents' most positive experiences originated from interactions with staff that were both effective and personable. Similarly, their worst experiences stemmed from instances where they perceived that they had been treated poorly.
- Respondents reflected positively when the process was streamlined and simple. Avoiding the re-submission of documents, reducing the number of forms and approvals required, and designing

for single-point of contact interactions can help to reduce the complexity of the application process for students.

- Collecting course outlines was commonly reported to be difficult and time consuming, especially for students with a longer gap between prior and current PSE. Respondents reported a number of ways in which institutions helped them with these difficulties, including helping them to contact their prior institution to request the documents, not requiring outlines to be submitted for courses that have been assessed for other students, and accepting unofficial outlines or otherwise being flexible about the documentation requirements.
- Students who waited one week or less to learn the results of their applications for credit transfer were more likely to express lower perceived difficulty, and higher overall satisfaction.
- Students who understood the reasons why their credit application was denied rarely expressed frustration. Making the rationale clear can help to encourage positive student experiences.