

Understanding Student Experiences and Graduate Outcomes For Durham College Fast Track Programs

Durham College
2012

Outline of the Study

“This study focuses on the experiences and outcomes of university graduates [who] have enrolled in accelerated (“Fast Track”) diploma programs at Durham College”. (p. 4) These compressed programs are designed for domestic and foreign bachelor’s degree holders to complete the Advanced Diploma requirements in 2 semesters. (p. 4) The study was based on a survey of students and graduates (26 surveys representing a response rate of 21%), focus groups, supplementary information drawn from Durham’s student data base and the college’s Key Performance Indicator (KPI) results. The study population was 21 years of age or older.

Two major research questions were considered:

- i) “What are the experiences of students entering Fast Track programs at Durham College, and how can we develop strategies that will improve the experience?” and
- ii) “What are some of the specific outcomes of students that complete Fast Track programs?” (p. 4)

This study is distinct in considering transfer student satisfaction and outcomes through the entire admission/program-of-study/graduation/employment continuum and offering recommendations for improvement of the entire pathway in order to better meet students’ employment goals.

Findings

The Students: Fast Track programs are chosen to acquire skills and hands-on experience to enhance job and career prospects. (pp. 11-12) Almost half of the respondents were unemployed prior to application. 60% indicated that their further study was intended to enable them to “earn more money”.

Over half began their further study within one year of graduation and an additional 35% transferred between 2 and 5 years after graduation. (p. 13) About 1 in 12 transfer students finished their degree more than 10 years earlier. While 1 in 4 (24%) reporting that their graduate certificate program was “highly related”, over half report that it was not. (p. 14)

Student Satisfaction: 69% of the respondents were satisfied with the transfer experience -- 12% reported being “unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied”. (p. 14)

With respect to the transition process *prior* to enrolment, 3 in 4 reported experiencing no difficulties. However, 36% of those surveyed reported difficulties “determining whether or not the program was the right fit” (36%) and “finding out about student services”

(36%). (p. 15) Approximately one quarter experienced difficulties “connecting to admissions” (24%). (p. 15) Some reported difficulty understanding admissions requirements with international students often reporting difficulty obtaining the needed evidence of prior education completion. 1 in 3 experienced difficulties “connecting to someone from the program” (32%) and “finding their way around campus” (32%). (p. 15)

While 84% reported having “no difficulties *after* starting classes”, those that did noted problems related to:

- “accessing career information” (25%),
- “finding out what student services are offered” (21%),
- “connecting with someone from the program outside classes” (20%),
- “adapting to the new institution” (12%),
- “accessing IT services” (13%), and
- “accessing learning support services” (8%). (p. 16)

The campus resources most used by transfer students included:

- Computer commons (88%),
- Library (80%),
- Food services (76%),
- Bookstore (76%)
- Study space (60%),
- Career services (60%),
- Medical services (56%),
- Financial aid (48%),
- Sports and recreation (44%), and
- Student academic learning services (28%).

The “students and graduates of Fast Track programs had five key suggestions:

- “Increase Fast Track program awareness and comprehension”;
- “Clarify entry requirements and simplify the admissions process”;
- “Improve class scheduling and loosen time requirements” (ease workload pressures);
- “Expand focus on and enrich practical experience”; and
- “Provide more assistance to students to locate field placement opportunities.” (p. 18)

It is important to note that 1 in 3 students experienced difficulty deciding whether the program was a good fit for them. Others observed that prerequisite requirements could be refined to minimize the number of instances where the Fast Track curriculum was found to be duplicative, too easy and/or very difficult. (p. 19) While there were criticisms of the fast track model related to stress, scheduling and workload, most appreciated the accelerated model’s value in preparing them for earlier entry into the workforce. (p. 19)

Student Outcomes: Not surprisingly, the program completion rate of Fast Track students is significantly higher than for 3 year diploma program students. Even when comparing final year completion rates, the Fast Track students are 16% to 27 % (depending on the program) more likely to graduate within the planned time. (p. 22) This study also found a “strong relationship between first term GPA and program completion rates for both Fast Track and diploma students. (p. 23)

Graduate Outcomes: Although the results varied by program, the overall graduate placement rate was higher for 3 year diploma than for Fast Track graduates. Fast Track graduates were less likely than diploma graduates to report that their employment was ‘full-time’ and ‘very related’. (p. 25) Even so, 88% of the Fast Track graduates over a 2 year period reported that “the skills they developed in their program were “extremely helpful” or “helpful” in terms of locating employment (p. 26) and 79% reported that they were satisfied with “the program’s preparation for the job market”. (p. 27) These findings, and the student recommendations related to them, are reflected in the report’s recommendations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report offers 6 recommendations, 3 to enhance the *experience* and 3 to improve the *outcomes* of their studies:

Recommendations to Improve the Fast Track Program Experience:

First, the two pronged recommendation to “increase pathway affinity and simplify the transfer process” (p. 29) pursues alignment of advance information, admission requirements, prerequisites, program rigour and workload demands. (pp. 29-30)

Second, the recommendation to “strengthen and enrich the field placement opportunity” addresses the comparative (to diploma graduates) underperformance of Fast Track graduates in the job market. Transfer students typically placed a good deal of importance on the field placement component of their program but some complained of the rushed struggle to find a placement, questioned the lack of support from the college, and were dissatisfied with the value of their placement to their job search. (p. 30) The study recognizes that these challenges emerge from the intensity of the program and recommend a number of support network strategies.

The third recommendation proposes the development of “relevant and opportune social opportunities to encourage a school-life balance. Strategies to manage a demanding workload, part-time work and external obligations include programs to develop time management skills, “unique, voluntary social networking opportunities”, peer study strategies and special activities targeted at enhancing job search. (p. 31)

Recommendations to Improve Graduate Outcomes:

Fourth, the recommendation to “provide more assistance to Fast Track graduates to locate employment” (p. 31) was also triggered by the concern about the comparatively lower full-time and related employment rates of Fast Track graduates (as compared to diploma graduates). Lunch and learn, networking, job search skills and career building strategies were all suggested.

Fifth, “foster[ing] connections between field placements and future employment opportunities” stress refinements that will better use work experience as a springboard into a related workplace. Program leaders were advised to ensure that field placements are “meaningful”, provide appropriate student support, apply classroom learning, and provide the experience need to be successful in the job market. (p. 33)

Finally, the need to “set expectations early on and develop a support network for at-risk students” (P. 33) emerges from evidence that first semester underperformance correlates with a lower rate of persistence in the program. “Setting expectations during the admissions process”, “fostering collaboration”, facilitating the development of student support networks and after hours extra help were listed as effective support strategies. (p. 33)