



FINAL REPORT  
RESEARCH RELATED TO POSTSECONDARY STUDENT MOBILITY

# Understanding Student Experiences and Graduate Outcomes for Durham College Graduate Certificate Programs

SUBMITTED TO THE ONTARIO COUNCIL ON ARTICULATION AND TRANSFER  
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## ABSTRACT

Research indicates that a considerable number of students in Ontario are obtaining multiple credentials. According to Colleges Ontario (2012), forty-one per cent of students in the 2011-12 year had some previous postsecondary education, 23 per cent of whom previously completed a college and/or university credential (12 percent from universities). While the assumption remains that multiple postsecondary credentials will lead to better labour market outcomes, research indicates that employment and earnings can vary by a number of different factors. For colleges wishing to attract students to graduate certificate programs, a better understanding of the experiences and outcomes of students moving into these programs is required.

This study focuses on college and university graduates who have enrolled in Ontario College Graduate Certificate programs at Durham College. These programs are geared toward postsecondary graduates (college or university), or individuals who have three to five years of equivalent experience in the related field of study. To understand the experiences of students and outcomes of graduates, this study employs a mixed methods design, which includes a survey of graduate certificate students and graduates, focus groups with graduate certificate students, and supplementary data obtained from the Durham College student database, and data available from the 2010-11 and 2011-12 KPI Student and Graduate Satisfaction Surveys. Upon project completion, there are three key recommendations that can improve the experience of graduate certificate students at Durham College: I

- (1) Review entry requirements and simplify the admissions process; I
- (2) Review and enrich field placement opportunities (where applicable); and I

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(3) Develop relevant and opportune social opportunities to encourage school-life balance.

In addition, there are three key recommendations that can improve the outcomes of graduate certificate graduates:

(1) Provide more assistance to graduate certificate graduates to locate related employment;

(2) Foster connections between field placements and future employment opportunities;  
and

(3) Provide more support to at-risk students.

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## SECTION I: BACKGROUND

### Purpose of the Study

This study focuses on the experiences and outcomes of college and university graduates who have enrolled in Ontario College Graduate Certificate programs at Durham College.

These programs are geared toward postsecondary graduates (college or university), or individuals who have three to five years of equivalent experience in the related field of study, depending on the program.

As of September 2011, Durham College offered 13 graduate certificate programs, an increase from eight in 2007. In September 2012, the number of graduate programs again increased to 16 graduate certificate programs. The graduate certificate programs examined in this study reside in four academic schools:

- School of Business, IT and Management
  - Human Resources Management
  - Sport Business Management I
- School of Health and Community Services
  - Addictions and Mental Health
  - Communicative Disorders Assistant
  - Critical Care Nursing (online) I
- School of Justice and Emergency Services
  - Advanced Law Enforcement and Investigation
  - Mediation – Alternative Dispute Resolution
  - Paralegal
  - Paramedic – Advanced Care
  - Paramedic – Advanced Care (online)
  - Victimology
  - Youth Corrections and Interventions I
- School of Media, Art and Design
  - VFX and Digital Cinema

## Research Questions

To understand the experiences and outcomes of Durham College graduate certificate students and graduates, there are two research questions under investigation. Eleven subsections help answer these two research questions, six for the first, and five for the second.

- 1.H What are experiences of students entering graduate certificate programs and how can we develop strategies that will improve the experience?
- 2.H What are some of the specific outcomes of students that complete graduate certificate programs?

### Research Question 1: Experiences of Students Entering Graduate Certificate Programs

1. Why do students choose to enrol in a graduate certificate program?
2. What success factors do graduates identify?
3. What is the level of affinity between students' prior education/work experience and their graduate certificate program?
4. To what extent are/were students enrolled in graduate certificate programs / graduates who completed graduate certificate programs satisfied with their admission experience?
5. How does the admission experience differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students?
6. What strategies could Durham College implement to improve graduate certificate students' satisfaction with their admission experience?

### Research Question 2: Outcomes of Students who Complete Graduate Certificate Programs

7. How do completion rates differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students?
8. What is the difference between students' first term marks and program completion?
9. How do final marks differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students?
10. How do employment rates and experiences differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students six months after graduation?
11. What best practices can be identified from examining the differences in completion rates, employment rates, earnings, and the relationship between first term marks and program completion?

Where possible, a comparison of three unique admission groups/subsets will occur: students who have a college diploma or degree, students who have a university degree and students who were admitted without a postsecondary credential, but have equivalent work experience.

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## **Definitions of Key Terms**

The following is a list of key terms used throughout this report:

- Banner: Durham College's student record information system
- COU: Council of Ontario Universities
- KPI: Key Performance Indicator
- KPI Graduate Satisfaction Survey: annual telephone survey conducted by MTCU among a sample of graduates who attended colleges in Ontario
- KPI Student Satisfaction Survey: annual online survey conducted by MTCU among a sample of students attending colleges in Ontario
- MTCU: Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
- OCAS: Ontario College Application Service
- ONCAT: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer
- Ontario College Graduate Certificate Program: an opportunity for postsecondary graduates or individuals with equivalent work experience to gain specialized skills and knowledge for immediate entry to a career field

## **Limitations of the Study**

Overall, generalizability of the findings is limited. First, survey sample size for the third subset of students – those who were admitted to a graduate certificate program without a postsecondary credential, but had equivalent work experience – was small (n=8) and thus, caution must be exercised when interpreting results for this particular group. Second, the focus is solely on Durham College graduate certificate students, therefore, conclusions and recommendations must be interpreted within this particular context.

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## SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Ontario's Further Education Boom**

According to Colleges Ontario (2009), the movement of students from university-to-college and college-to-college in Ontario has become more common in recent years. Seventeen percent of college students had previous university experience and 9% had a university degree, based on KPI student satisfaction survey responses in 2007-08. The same survey indicates that an increasing percentage of college students are attending college to prepare for further college or university study – an increase from 16% in 2000-01 to 21% in 2007-08. Data from the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS) shows that in 2007, the percentage of applicants with university experience—12.6%—had more than doubled since 2000. Similarly, the 2005 Council of Ontario Universities (COU) graduate survey showed that 11.5% of university graduates were attending college six months after graduation and 9.4% of university graduates were attending college two years after graduation. Clearly, there is considerable interest among Ontario students in obtaining multiple credentials.

In the past, the movement of students was thought to be a linear flow from high school to college and to university. That movement was considered unidirectional, with some exits occurring at each connection point. The term “reverse transfer,” used to describe the movement of students from university-to-college, confirms the once accepted view of student movement through the pipeline (Vaala, n.d.). However, Goyder suggests that we should consider changing our thinking from “levels” of higher education to “combinations” of higher education (2009) with students moving in multiple directions through the education system.

### **Further Education and the Labour Market**

The new website for the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) promotes Ontario college graduate certificates and accelerated diploma programs to university graduates as a way of gaining additional job-specific skills that build on their degree foundation. The ONCAT website states:

You want to build on your postsecondary knowledge and experience, add a specialization, or develop additional skills to advance your career. Ontario Colleges offer scores of programs designed or adapted specifically for university graduates. These programs have been developed in collaboration with experts from the employment sector and often include practical work experience.

Similarly, the message to college graduates interested in graduate certificate programs proclaims the following:

- Programs include specialized skills and knowledge to prepare graduates for immediate entry to a career field;

- [Programs are] sometimes designed to provide advanced study in a defined discipline for graduates of college diploma or advanced diploma programs;
- [Programs are] sometimes designed to provide a highly focused employment related credential for graduates of a university degree program in an unrelated discipline;
- [Programs are] normally completed in one year (two academic semesters); and
- [Programs] require a college diploma or university degree or equivalent, plus additional requirements specific to the program.

Although it is generally assumed that multiple postsecondary credentials will lead to better labour market outcomes, research indicates that earnings vary by credential or type of postsecondary experience obtained, field of study, the timing of credential completion, as well as student characteristics (Kerr, McCloy, & Liu, 2010). For colleges wishing to attract university graduates and offer a practical, hands-on experience that will improve graduates' employability, a better understanding of the student success factors and outcomes for students moving from university-to-college and college-to-college is required.

In line with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities policy statement on Ontario's credit transfer system (<http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca>), there is a desire on the part of colleges to increase and improve student transfer pathways, including university-to-college pathways and college-to-college pathways. Thus, this study will build on previous research to identify best practices and strategies for improving the experience and outcomes of graduate certificate students at Durham College.

## SECTION III: METHODOLOGY

### Population and Sample

This research project involves full-time students who enrolled in a graduate certificate program during the five year period from 2007-08 to 2011-12. In 2007-08, 273 full-time students enrolled in a graduate certificate program as of the November audit headcount. These numbers have grown to 438 in 2011-12.

### Data Collection Methods

The methodology for this research is a non-experimental mixed methods design, which concurrently utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data. Primary quantitative data originates from an online survey (N=280) of graduate certificate students and graduates (please refer to Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire). Primary qualitative data originates from two focus groups (N=7) with current graduate certificate students (please refer to Appendix B for a copy of the discussion guide). Two types of supplementary information also existed: culled data from Durham College's student database ("Banner") and student responses to the Ministry's KPI Student and Graduate Satisfaction Surveys over the past three years.

#### A. Online Survey

<b>Target Respondent:</b>	All Durham College graduate certificate students and graduates were invited to participate in the survey
<b>Sample Source:</b>	Durham College's Banner System
<b>Sample Size:</b>	Total of 284 completed surveys (120 current students and 160 program graduates; 61 college graduates, 211 university graduates, and 8 with equivalent work experience)
<b>Field Dates:</b>	March 5 <sup>th</sup> to March 28 <sup>th</sup> , 2012
<b>Completion Length:</b>	Approximately 10 minutes, on average
<b>Screening Criteria:</b>	Provision of informed consent prior to completing survey
<b>Incentive:</b>	Entry into a draw for a chance to win 1 of 3 Best Buy gift cards valued at \$100
<b>Weighting:</b>	None required
<b>Summary</b>	Respondents were asked a set of questions to understand their background, reasons for choosing their program, support services accessed, and anticipated/actual outcomes. The survey data was quantified and reported, and used to inform the identification of some of the common themes that were explored in the student focus groups. Where possible, results from students and graduates as well as the three admission subsets are compared

## B. Focus Group

<b>Target Respondent:</b>	After completing the online survey, all respondents were invited to participate in the focus group to explore key themes in greater detail
<b>Sample Source:</b>	Durham College's Banner System/Online Survey
<b>Sample Size:</b>	Total of 7 focus group participants (current students)
<b>Session Dates:</b>	March 27 <sup>th</sup> , 2012 (12-1pm); April 25 <sup>th</sup> , 2012 (2-3pm)
<b>Group Length:</b>	60 minutes (2 sessions)
<b>Screening Criteria:</b>	Provision of informed consent prior to participating in focus group
<b>Incentive:</b>	Pizza lunch provided to participants
<b>Summary</b>	A set of open-ended questions was designed to elicit information at a deeper level, particularly to understand their reasons for attending the graduate certificate program, their admission and adjustment experience, their experiences in the graduate certificate program, support services accessed, and goals upon graduation. Common themes from the focus group are identified and described in further detail throughout the report

## C. Supplemental Data

Data from Banner, the KPI Student Satisfaction Survey, and KPI Graduate Satisfaction Survey has been extracted to identify and compare student completion rates, employment rates, and to determine the correlation between entering marks and program completion.

## SECTION IV: DATA ANALYSIS I

Data analysis has been divided into two primary sections: experiences of graduate certificate students and outcomes of graduate certificate graduates. Within each section, relevant subsections are analyzed independently and the findings are summarized to identify strategies for improvement.

The following provides a demographic summary of the overall graduate certificate student universe (2007-08 to 2011-12), online survey respondents, and focus group participants:

	Universe	Online Survey	Focus Groups
<b>Total Sample Sizes</b>	<i>n=1,665 o</i>	<i>n=280 o</i>	<i>n=7 o</i>
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	26%	22%	43%
Female	74%	78%	57%
<b>Age Group</b>			
Less than 21	1%	0%	n/a
21-25	38%	36%	n/a
26-30	33%	28%	n/a
31-35	9%	12%	n/a
More than 35	18%	24%	n/a
<b>Graduate Certificate Program</b>			
Addictions and Mental Health	9%	6%	14%
Advanced Law Enforcement and Investigation	6%	3%	14%
Communicative Disorders Assistant	10%	10%	0%
Critical Care Nursing	25%	26%	14%
English for Academic Purposes	1%	0%	0%
Human Resources Management	13%	26%	28%
Mediation / Alternative Dispute Resolution	2%	1%	0%
Paralegal	8%	8%	14%
Paramedic - Advanced Care	6%	3%	0%
Paramedic - Advanced Care (online)	2%	3%	0%
Sport Business Management	7%	5%	0%
VFX and Digital Cinema	1%	1%	0%
Victimology	1%	1%	0%
Youth Corrections and Interventions	10%	6%	14%
<b>Academic School</b>			
Business and IT Management	21%	31%	28%
Health and Community Services	44%	43%	28%
Justice and Emergency Services	35%	26%	43%
Media, Art and Design	1%	1%	0%

	Population	Online Survey	Focus Groups
<b>Total Sample Sizes</b>	<i>n=1,665 o</i>	<i>n=280 o</i>	<i>n=7 o</i>
<b>Current Academic Year/Year of Entry</b>			
2007-08	14%	5%	0%
2008-09	16%	11%	0%
2009-10	21%	15%	0%
2010-11	24%	26%	0%
2011-12	25%	43%	100%
<b>Graduation Status</b>			
Current Student	25%	43%	100%
Graduate	75%	57%	0%
<b>Prior Education Completed</b>			
College (diploma or degree )	36%	21%	0%
University (degree )	50%	75%	86%
Equivalent work experience	13%	3%	14%
<b>Agreed to Participate in Focus Group</b>			
Yes	n/a	24%	100%
No	n/a	76%	0%

In each subsection, graphical comparisons will occur between the three unique admission groups/subsets. Students who transferred to a graduate certificate program from a college will be referred to as “College”, students who transferred from a university will be referred to as “University”, and students who were admitted without a postsecondary credential, but have equivalent work experience will be referred to as “Work”.

In addition, analysis of variance (ANOVA) will occur at the 95% confidence level when possible (i.e., sample sizes are sufficient). The symbols below will identify statistically significant differences between admission subsets:



Result for encircled subset is significantly higher than on of the two other subsets

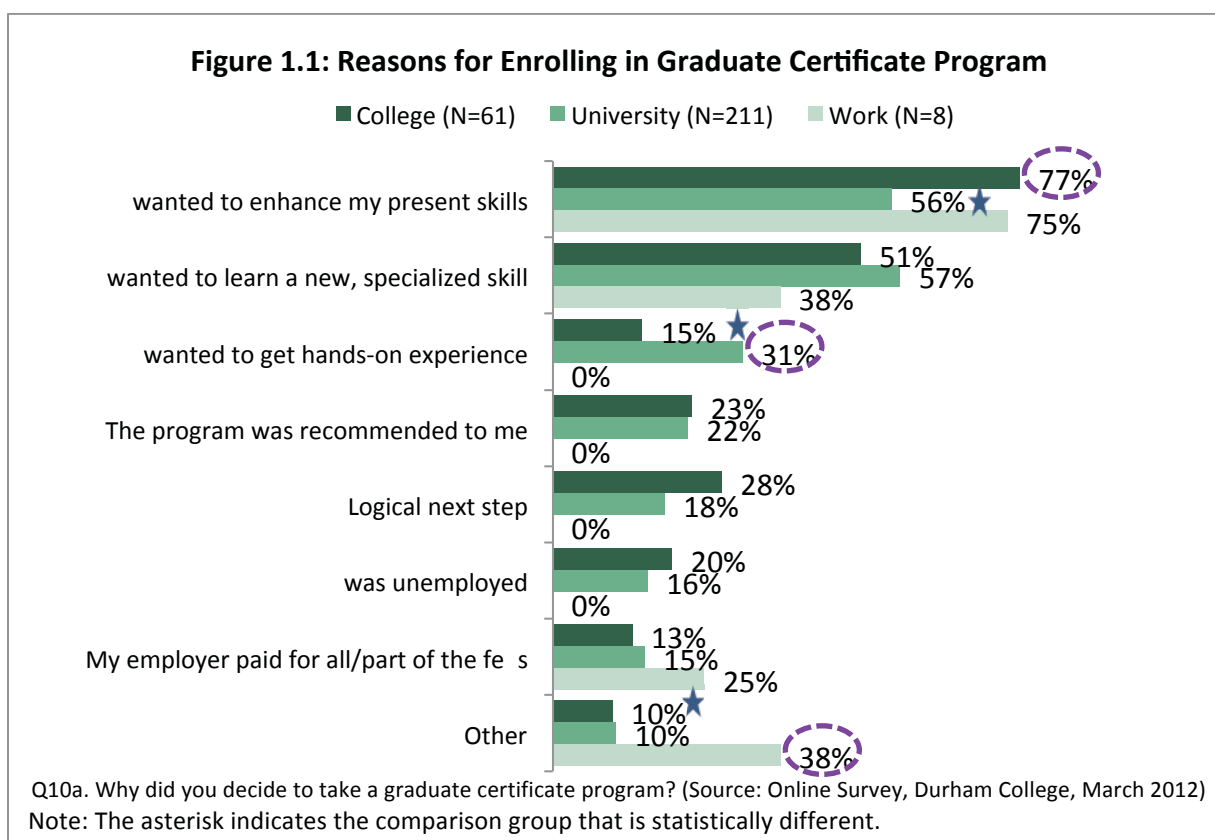


Result for encircled subset is significantly higher than both other subsets

**Research Question 1: What are experiences of students entering graduate certificate programs and how can we develop strategies that will improve the experience?**

**Subsection 1: Why do students choose to enrol in a graduate certificate program?**

Among Durham College graduate certificate students and graduates, motivations for enrolling in a graduate certificate program are linked to improving labour market opportunities or improving prospects for further education. The primary reason is to enhance present skills while secondary reasons include a desire to learn a new, specialized skill and a desire to gain hands-on experience (see Figure 1.1). Compared to those with a college credential or equivalent work experience, enhancing skills was a less prominent reason among students who previously completed a university degree. However, university graduates were more likely to cite hands-on experience as a reason for choosing a graduate certificate program.

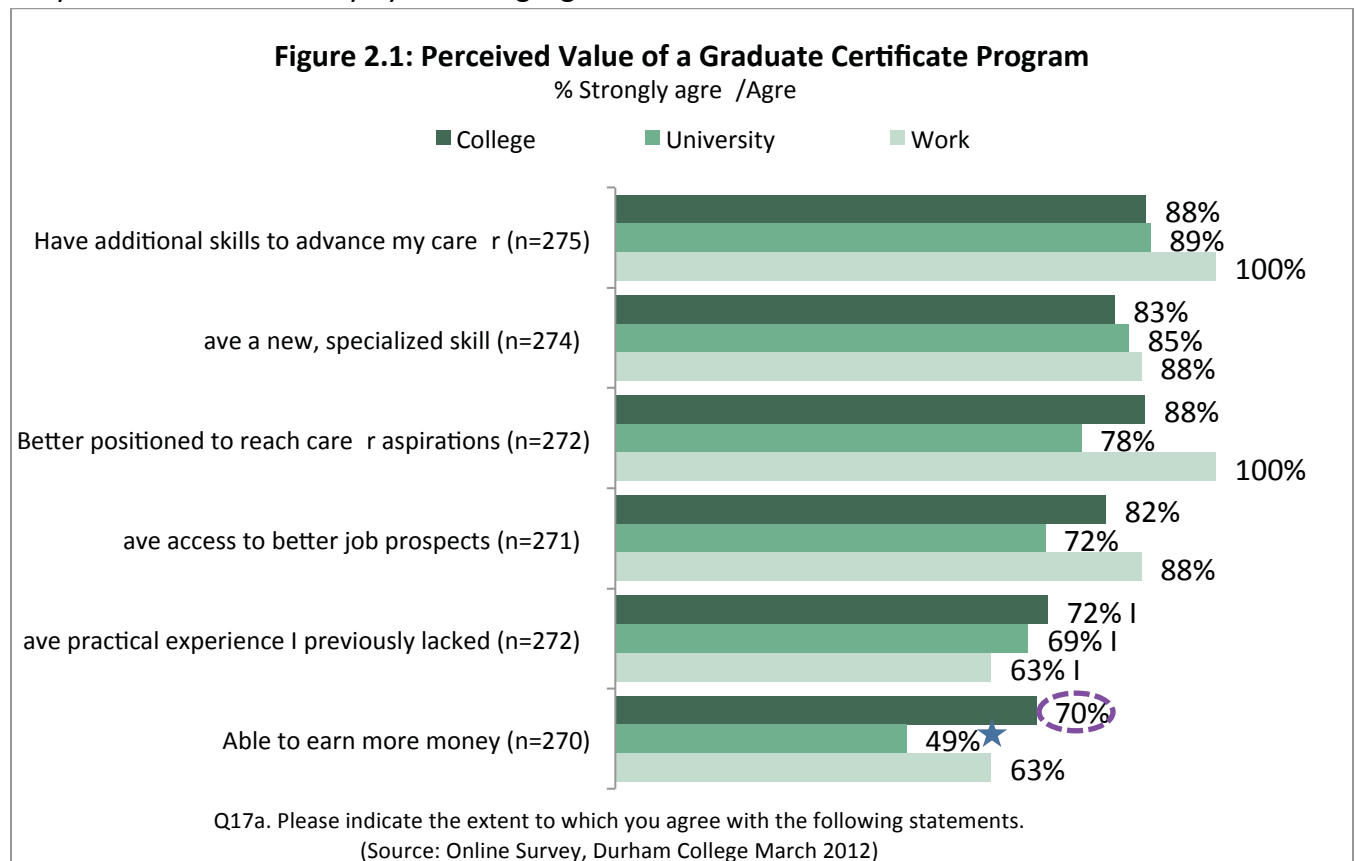


Focus group participants indicated that they had trouble locating employment and wanted to supplement their education/work experience with a credential that could act as a “stepping stone” into the job market. All agreed that the hands-on experience gained through college education is valuable and important and the majority said the field placement had a significant impact on their decision to apply. Some were also using the program as a stepping stone to gain entry into other educational programs (for example, advanced degree programs). One student

emphasized: “[I] did not feel my educational experience was done, and wanted to be able to take a graduate certificate program that I could continue on to university with if I decided to.” In the KPI Student Satisfaction Survey, which is conducted on an annual basis, respondents were asked to identify the single most important factor in their decision to attend Durham College. Among graduate certificate students who attended the college in the past five years (2007-08 to 2011-12), leading factors included “Offered the program I wanted” (49%) and location (21%). This was fairly consistent across the 13 graduate certificate programs with the exception of three: co-op work opportunities was a top factor among Paralegal and Human Resources Management students while program reputation was the leading factor among Mediation / Alternative Dispute Resolution students. Focus groups also revealed that students liked the fact that Durham College has strong ties to the local community, which would enable them to find quality field placement opportunities and even future employment.

**Subsection 2: What success factors do students and graduates identify?**

There is a strong perception among students and graduates that graduate certificates will give them additional skills to advance their career, and a new specialized skill (see Figure 2.1). Perceptions of value were similar among all three admissions subsets. However, compared to university graduates, college graduates were more likely to “strongly agree” or “agree” that they can earn more money by obtaining a graduate certificate.



Note: The asterisk symbolizes which comparison group is statistically different.



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When asked what factors helped them personally succeed in their program, many echoed that practical experience (e.g. lab work, field placements) and specialization were key components of their success. For example, one student stated that “it gives you real experience of the working environment. The faculty here is experienced in their respective fields.” Another remarked, “getting hands on experience definitely helped me obtain a job...and gave me a specialized skill set I could not have received from an undergraduate university degree.”

Many also felt that the program’s faculty also helped them be successful: “Teachers were amazing. Helpful while I was in school and afterward. They were the BEST part of that program.” Students emphasized the importance of taking advantage of their expertise: “The professors teaching the courses is what makes the program. They are great teachers who are experts in the field...and I have learned very valuable knowledge from all of them.”

Graduate certificate students and graduates also mentioned that the workload and expectations are very high; thus, self-motivation, strong time management skills and strong organizational skills are vital for success in a graduate certificate program. One survey respondent said that prospective students should “...be disciplined to set time aside to complete work. Have your own workspace that you can leave books out and get right to work. Make sure you do not get too caught up in the computer work.” Another said, “time management and commitment are key factors for success.”

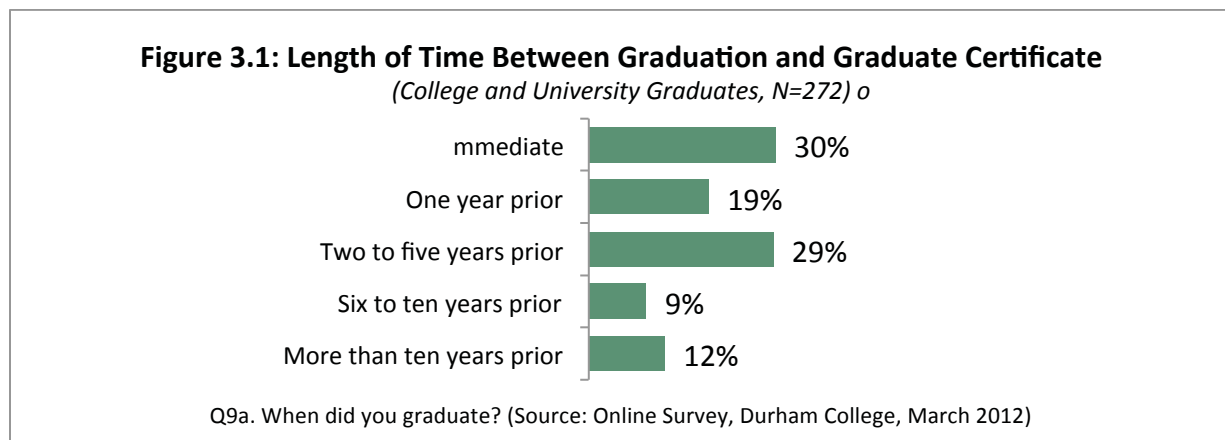
Many students emphasized the importance of being proactive in terms of asking questions, finding placements and identifying future job opportunities. For example, one respondent encouraged prospective students to “ask more questions...And be in touch every time with faculties, administration and for sure with your classmates. Give your hundred percent. Be participative.” Another stressed the importance of finding your own placement: “Do not wait on the placement coordinator to find you one because you will most likely not get the one you want.”

In addition to being a self-starter, several students and graduates also felt that having a support system is also very important. Although most agreed that graduate certificate students could not solely rely on others to be successful, they also advocated that students “connect with other students and tutors to keep involved and engaged in the course.” Another student remarked, “by getting advice from lecturers and my fellow students, I got lot of help to succeed in my studies at Durham College.”

To be successful, focus group participants also felt that prospective students should be well prepared and expect to do a lot of work in a short period of time. They recommended that students do research on the field and program before classes start, make the most of the program while taking classes, and understand where the program can take them upon graduation. Most agreed that they had little time for social activities or employment, and had to dedicate most of their time to studying and completing academic assignments or tests.

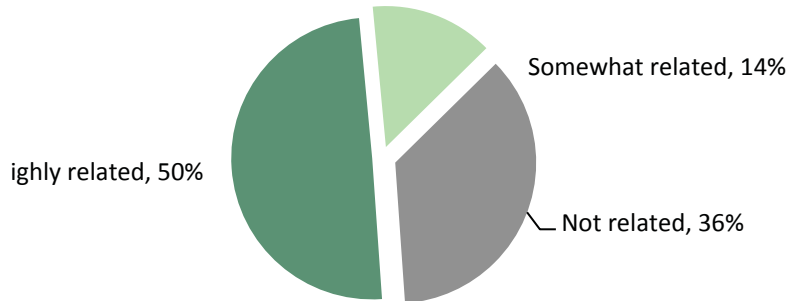
**Subsection 3: What is the level of affinity between students' prior education/work experience and their graduate certificate program?**

The length of time between graduating from university or college and enrolling in a graduate certificate program may have an impact on student satisfaction. For example, university and college students who delay their transfer are at risk of finding it more difficult to adjust to a postsecondary environment. Most postsecondary graduates said they transferred to a graduate certificate program fairly soon after completing their degree /diploma and some even did so immediately (see Figure 3.1). The majority of students and graduates enrolled in a graduate certificate program at Durham College within five years of graduating from university/college; 30% enrolled immediately after completing their postsecondary education, 19% enrolled after one year and 29% enrolled after two to five years. A small proportion (21%) delayed entry for more than six years prior to beginning their graduate certificate program.



Another factor that may have an impact on student satisfaction is the affinity between a student's university/college education and their graduate certificate program. One assumption is that university and college graduates will continue their education in a related field of study; however, this is not always the case and often depends on program availability and labour market conditions. In fact, about two-thirds of students and graduates surveyed indicated that their degree /diploma was in the same field of study as their graduate certificate program (see Figure 3.2). Overall, 50% said their Graduate certificate program was "highly related" while 14% said it was only "somewhat related" to their previous degree /diploma.

**Figure 3.2: Affinity Between Previous Education and Graduate Certificate I**  
 (College and University Graduates, N=262)



Q9c. Is your diploma/degree in the same field of study as your graduate certificate program? (Online Survey, March 2012)  
 Q9d. How related is your diploma/degree to your graduate certificate program? (Source: Online Survey, Durham College, March 2012)

Compared to university graduates, a higher proportion of students coming from colleges were likely to report that their diploma was related to their graduate certificate program. Indeed, 40% of university degree holders said their graduate certificate was “not at all related” to their degree (compared to only 20% of diploma holders). Thus, university-to-college pathways do not appear to be as seamless, despite the fact that the majority of graduate certificate students are admitted to Durham College from a university.

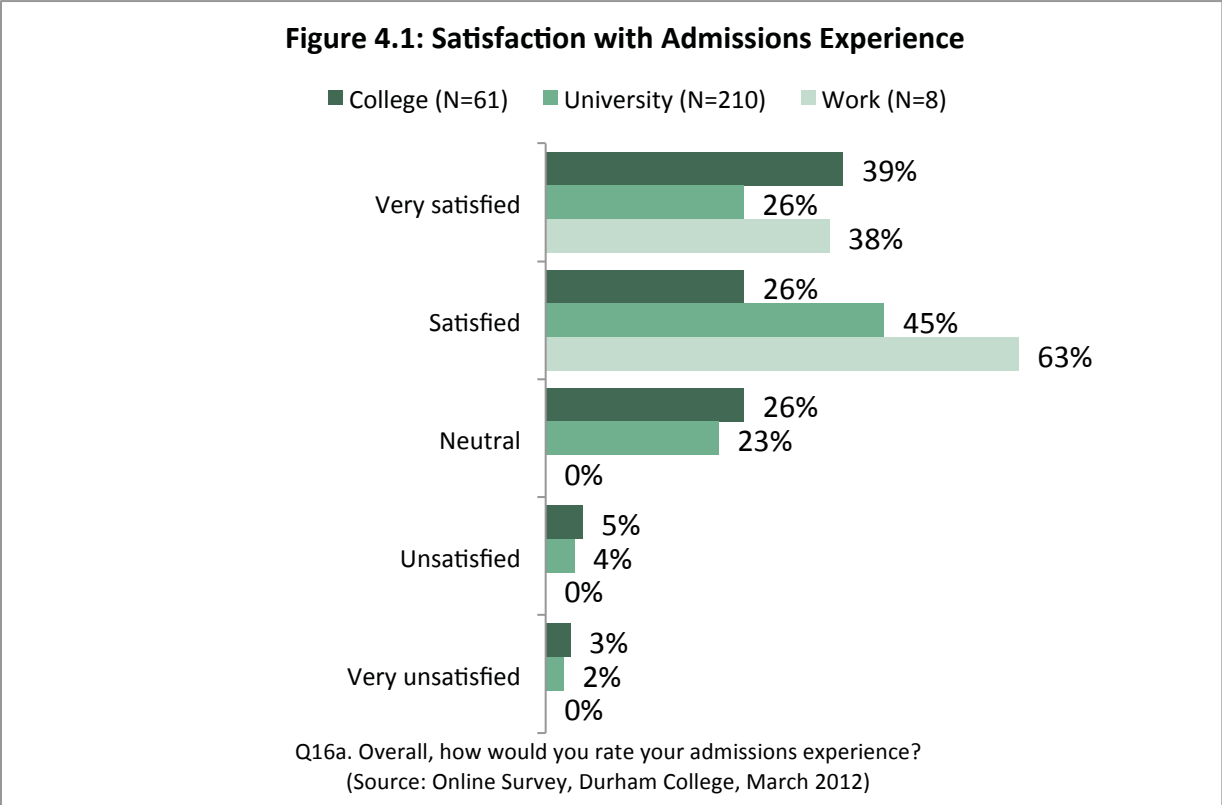
**Subsection 4: To what extent are students entering / graduates who completed graduate certificate programs satisfied with their transfer experience?**

When asked to rate their satisfaction, the majority of students and graduates (71%) indicated they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their admissions experience (see Figure 4.1). However, 23% were neutral and although few, 7% indicated they were “unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied.” This level of indifference is something that should continue to be monitored over time.

Moreover, when comparing the three admissions subsets, a smaller proportion of university graduates were “very satisfied” than their college and work counterparts, 26% in comparison to 39% and 38%, respectively. However, most did report that they were at least “satisfied” with the experience. One student indicated that there was “not enough information for students” and many felt the admissions process was confusing and disorganized.

When asked to provide more clarity in the focus group, many said that they were satisfied with their graduate certificate program overall, particularly the helpfulness of the instructors and practical application of the course content. However, despite overall satisfaction, students and graduates did experience some pre- and post-enrolment difficulties, particularly in terms of an overcomplicated admissions process and lack of support for field placement opportunities.

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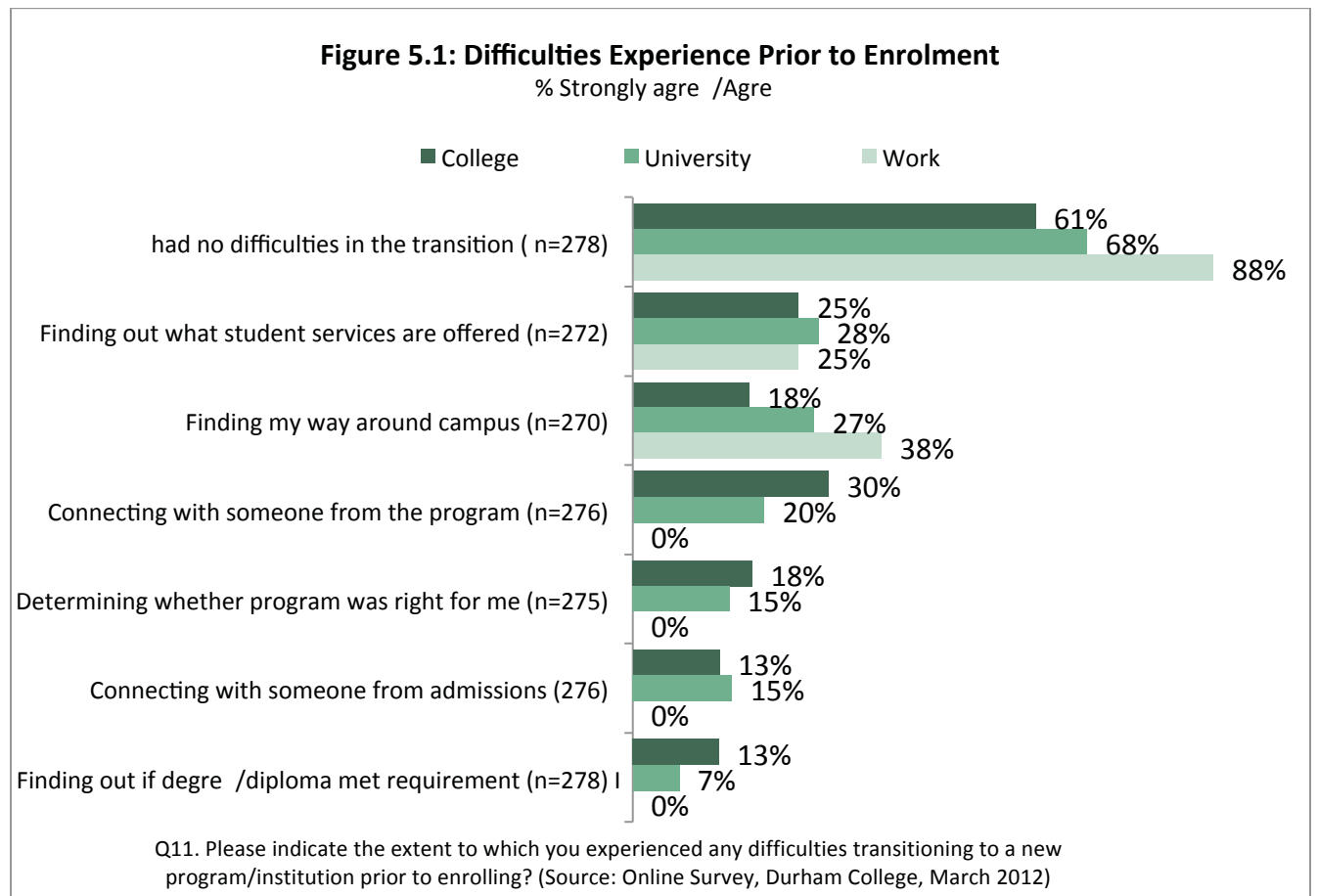
**Subsection 5: How does the admission experience differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students?**

Pre-Enrolment Difficulties

The transition between school and college or work and college is not always a smooth one for many graduate certificate students, and there is room for improvement. While most graduate certificate students and graduates (67%) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they did not experience any difficulties prior to enrolling in their graduate certificate program at Durham College (see Figure 5.1), many faced one or more barriers during the admissions process.

The primary difficulties faced by potential students was finding out what student services were offered by Durham College, finding their way around campus, and connecting with someone from the program. These difficulties were similar among the three admissions subsets. Pre-enrolment barriers are not surprising since 70% of respondents did not transition to college right away and thus, their access to on-campus resources, which might assist them with their transition, were likely limited. Although 50% of students and graduates enrolled in a graduate certificate program that did not directly relate to their degree/diploma, very few “strongly

agreed” or “agreed” that finding out whether their credential met admissions requirements was an issue.



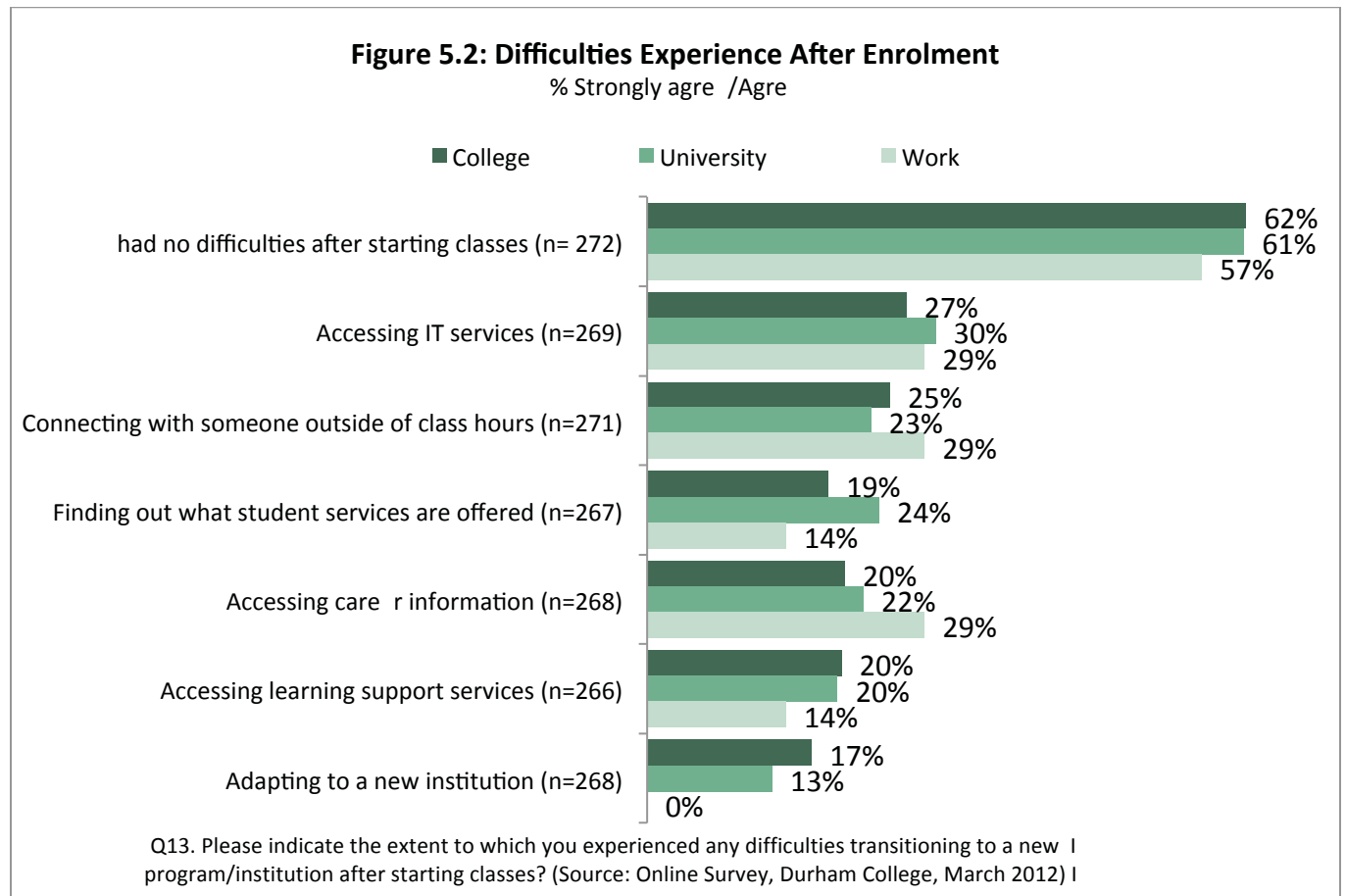
When asked to describe other difficulties faced prior to enrolling, several said they did not receive enough information from admissions and there was a general lack of communication. Some domestic students felt that the transition was an easy one, and that the admissions process was easy and Durham College was accommodating. International students, however, were not able to visit campuses and often had to rely on social networking with other students to determine if the college was the right fit. Other students said they had difficulties getting information about their specific program through the Durham College website and were not always able to speak to someone in person or ask questions, when needed. Some of the information they did receive was not always accurate and there was clearly some frustration around miscommunications.

### Post-Enrolment Difficulties

Most students and graduates (61%) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they had no difficulties with the transition to their graduate certificate program after starting their classes (see Figure

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5.2). There were no significant differences across admission subsets. Among those who did experience challenges, some found it difficult to access IT services (e.g. WebCT), connect with someone from their program outside of class hours, find out what student services are offered and access career information.



Overall, focus group participants, particularly those who had come from a university environment felt that the college atmosphere was very different from what they had expected. Students agreed that classes are more noisy and less formal, students are more disruptive and some felt that some students did not work very hard, but passed their courses, anyway. In addition, focus groups revealed that students did not always feel supported by faculty or administration, especially during field placements. One student commented that it was a challenge adjusting to the class style: “the non-linear college learning style was difficult to adapt to, and I struggled with it quite a bit during my first month.”

In terms of communications, most agreed that they did not use their MyCampus / Durham College email address very often. Some did use the internal WebCT email system, but most found it difficult to juggle multiple channels. Moreover, professors’ usage of WebCT / skill level varied from course to course, and students felt that they checked and responded to their email infrequently. Participants suggested that MyCampus / WebCT communications could be automatically forwarded to a personal email address to save time. Others suggested that every

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professor should have to take an introductory course on how to use WebCT, so that grades can be delivered in a timely fashion.

On a positive note, college professors were perceived as more supportive and more approachable than university professors or professors from other colleges. Students liked that faculty had a lot of experience in the field and provide a practical experience. One survey respondent enjoyed “the care professors take to ensure students comprehend what it is that they are learning.” Another said that “the program faculty show great concern that every student will succeed. A very open door policy.”

### Student Service Needs

Usage of various student services does not differ by admissions subset. Graduate certificate students and graduates were most likely to report using the library, food services, the bookstore, computer commons, and study spaces (see Figure 5.3). Very few used academic-related services such as peer tutoring and student liaison advising. This may be related to the fact that most graduate certificate students already have postsecondary experience and thus, they require less academic support.

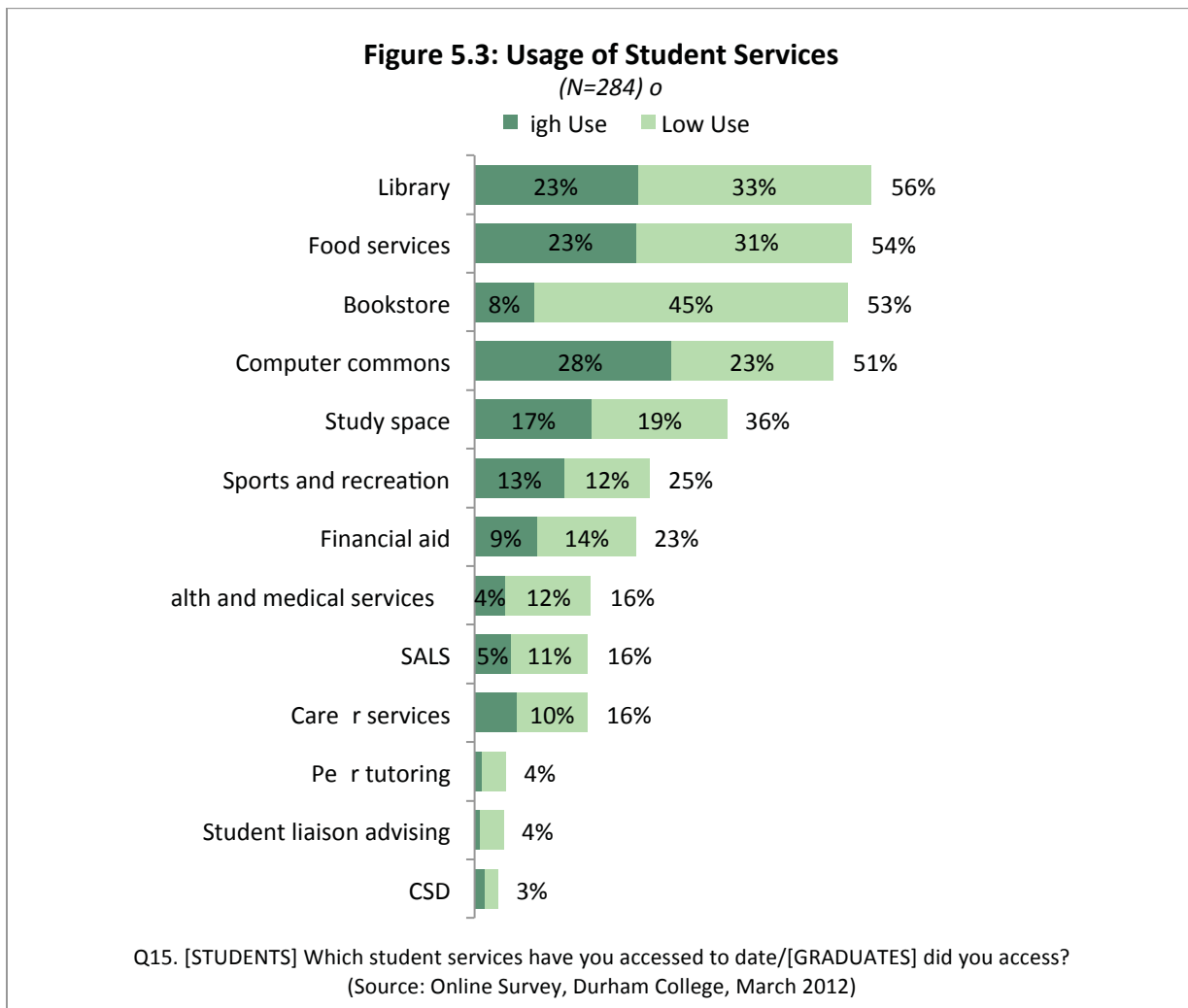
Graduate certificate students expressed some frustration around the student services they used most often. Many mentioned that it was often difficult to find study spaces and computers on campus, and many of the study spaces were overcrowded or overbooked. One respondent stated, “More study spaces would be an asset. Oftentimes students would have to study in the main cafeteria.” Another felt “there should be dedicated areas to quiet individual study (there isn't, and the library is quite loud) and there also isn't enough space on campus for group meetings either.”

Despite high usage, many students were also disappointed with the Computer Commons. Students mentioned that computers and printers were not always functional, space was limited, IT support was limited, and the area was too crowded and noisy. One respondent said that “sometimes it was overcrowded. There should be more printers and more people willing to help when they jam/needed paper.” Another had a similar impression: “[There were] not enough open computers! Printers [were] always jamming/shut down for maintenance.”

In addition to these concerns, participants in the focus group also indicated that they would have liked to receive more information about what student services were available at Durham College. Many had trouble finding basic information, and some said they did not even know certain supports existed (e.g. student liaisons). Several mentioned a lack of “school spirit” at Durham College and felt this might be rectified with increased awareness and increased opportunities for social interaction. For example, because the needs of mature students are so different from younger students, students felt that Durham College should offer unique, convenient, and voluntary social networking opportunities, which are geared specifically

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toward graduate certificate students. This could help re-engage this group of students and foster a more positive college experience.



**Subsection 6: What strategies could Durham College implement to improve graduate certificate students' satisfaction with their transfer experience?**

In terms of strategies/recommendations for improvement, students and graduates of Graduate certificate programs had five key suggestions:

- i. Review and enrich field placement opportunities (where available);
- ii. Simplify the admissions process and increase college-to-student communications;
- iii. Review and improve course materials and entry requirements;



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- iv. Increase awareness and comprehension of graduate certificate programs; and
- v. Provide more support to students in graduate certificate programs.

First, students felt that the field placement opportunity could be longer and would have preferred a higher level of support to find a placement. While many enjoyed the opportunity, there often were not enough placements available to students, particularly those with a direct relation to their program. Most felt they would have benefitted from more assistance finding a placement. One student indicated that “Placements were very difficult to come by, and often, students did not receive placement information until the day before.”

When asked to describe strategies that Durham College could implement to improve the experience of Graduate certificate students, one respondent wanted the College to “Revisit placement [opportunities since] it is a major hook for potential applicants and the reality of it isn't so smooth. Edit the list of agencies frequently as to not mislead students on what agencies are taking students.” Another suggested, “Make sure everyone gets at least one placement that reflects the program and what people would be interested in pursuing.” Some also would have preferred to extend coursework over the Fall and Winter semesters (to ease workload) and then complete their placement in the summer months.

Second, there also seems to be considerable confusion around the admissions process and entry requirements. Many students expressed that they received little communication from the registrar’s office and could not find the information they required. For example, one student said “I found the individual department contact person very helpful, but I was lacking in general admission information such as: using the library site, initially accessing my WebCT/ e-mail, what my student status was, and [available] student services.”

Not surprisingly, the admissions process is particularly taxing on students who do not enrol into a graduate certificate program immediately upon graduation. One student recommended that the college “have someone available to talk you through the process of application, for those of us who have not done applications in many years.” Similarly, another respondent indicated that “applying through the college application is confusing when we have been out of high school for so long.”

Overall, most felt the admissions process should be simplified. More specifically, many indicated there should be greater clarification around who would be a good candidate for a graduate certificate program as well as closer links between what is required for acceptance into the program and what is actually being taught. One student felt that “Having a more clear description of what credentials are needed prior to being accepted into the program” would help improve the admissions process. Another respondent suggested that “Durham college could look to make the 'exemption from particular classes' based on previous education, a little bit quicker and smoother.”

Third, while many students felt that the admissions process could be more stringent in terms of qualifications and prerequisites, several also considered some of the course material as being

“too easy” or “out-of-date.” One student commented that “The suggestion to make the program better would be making sure it stays up to date on what is currently being taught in the field.” Another stated that Durham College should “Make more of the courses applicable to the overall program. Some of the courses that were taught seemed more like filler courses than courses that actually gave us knowledge that we would use in the future.”

A lack of challenging course material may be related to low entry requirements for certain programs. A respondent conveyed this sentiment: “The program accepts anyone who applies in the sense that many of the people there were not at the level that was needed and it brought the rest of us down.” This type of frustration was evident in another student’s comments: “only allowing university graduates into the program or students with equivalent work experience [would improve the program]. The maturity level of the younger students was evident.”

Fourth, given the substantial benefits of graduate certificate programs, students and graduates felt that awareness levels need to increase. One student’s comments exemplifies the importance of building awareness: “[The program could be improved by] promoting the program more. I only learned about this program 'accidentally'.” Another said that “Compared to private colleges that offer concentrated programs, I believe that Durham's was a much better option from an academic and cost perspective. Your marketing should drive those points home.”

In addition to awareness, many felt they did not have a strong understanding of how the program worked or what it would actually entail. Some said that they experienced difficulties determining whether the program was even right for them. Students did not always realize what type of commitment the program required and were surprised by the fast pace and workload when they started classes: “It was too busy. Too demanding while working full time. Wish I had time to enjoy course and not just survive.” Overall, marketing needs to increase program awareness and to ensure students have a good understanding of program expectations prior to enrolment.

Finally, there were some notable concerns regarding support levels. Focus groups showed that graduate certificate students have little to no time for social activities and most could not work part-time while completing their certificate. Many indicated that the stress levels are very high because of competing priorities and deadlines. However, some students did not feel they received enough support from the college: “I would have benefitted from getting feedback for my assignments. Feedback is essential to the student striving for better grades.” Another commented that Durham College could improve by “Making students aware of services and offering bursaries and scholarships after semester 1 grades. Most of them are for returning students and don't help the mature graduate students!” With challenging schedules and heavy workloads, these types of supports are very important and can help reinforce student engagement.

## Research Question 2: What are some of the specific outcomes of students that complete graduate certificate programs?

For subsections 7, 8, and 9, the three admissions subsets (“College,” “University,” and “Work”) are based on declarations made on applications submitted to the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS). During their application process to Durham College, students respond to a question that asks them to describe their previous education, including school name and program. Since a college or university credential is a requirement for most programs, any student who did not provide any information under previous education, by definition, is thought to have the equivalent work experience (“Work”). Given program requirements, we expect that only a very small percentage would voluntarily choose not to provide this information.

### ***Subsection 7: How do completion rates differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students?***

For the following analysis, completion rates for graduate certificate programs are based on standard program length (one year). Thus, to be considered complete, a graduate certificate student must have achieved all program requirements within two semesters. Three semester programs have been removed, including Critical Care Nursing, Paramedic – Advanced Care, and Communicative Disorders Assistant for purposes of this analysis.

Completion of two-semester graduate certificate programs within one year does not seem to be a barrier for any of the three admission subsets (see Figure 6.1). The majority of graduate certificate students complete their program within the required two semesters. However, students with a university degree have the highest completion rates over each of the reporting years, followed by those with a college credential. Students with equivalent work experience tend to have the lowest completion rates and may require additional supports.

<b>Figure 6.1: Overall Completion Rates by Admissions Subset</b>						
<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>2007-08</b>	<b>2008-09</b>	<b>2009-10</b>	<b>2010-11</b>	<b>2011-12</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>89%</b> <i>(108/121)</i>	<b>82%</b> <i>(125/152)</i>	<b>91%</b> <i>(192/210)</i>	<b>91%</b> <i>(222/243)</i>	<b>86%</b> <i>(231/270)</i>	<b>88%</b> <i>(878/996)</i>
<b>College</b>	<b>79%</b> <i>(27/34)</i>	<b>72%</b> <i>(34/47)</i>	<b>92%</b> <i>(67/73)</i>	<b>89%</b> <i>(80/90)</i>	<b>86%</b> <i>(101/118)</i>	<b>85%</b> <i>(309/362)</i>
<b>University</b>	<b>100%</b> <i>(44/44)</i>	<b>96%</b> <i>(72/75)</i>	<b>94%</b> <i>(105/112)</i>	<b>93%</b> <i>(123/132)</i>	<b>88%</b> <i>(121/138)</i>	<b>93%</b> <i>(465/501)</i>
<b>Work</b>	<b>86%</b> <i>(37/43)</i>	<b>63%</b> <i>(19/30)</i>	<b>80%</b> <i>(20/25)</i>	<b>90%</b> <i>(19/21)</i>	<b>64%</b> <i>(9/14)</i>	<b>78%</b> <i>(104/133)</i>

Based on standard completion rates: students who started in Fall 2007 and completed in Winter 2008, started in Fall 2008 and completed in Winter 2009, started in Fall 2009 and completed in Winter 2010, started in Fall 2010 and completed in Winter 2011 and started in Fall 2011 and completed in Winter 2012. Only students who started in a Fall semester have been included. (Source: Durham College Banner System, August 2012)

**Subsection 8: What is the difference between students' first term marks and program completion?**

In most cases, there is a distinct difference between first term GPA (Grade Point Average) and program completion rates among all three subsets of graduate certificate students (see Figure 8.1). Generally, GPAs are significantly lower among students who did not complete their program in the required timeframe. To improve the transfer experience of students and eventual outcomes of graduates, it is important to identify these at-risk students early on and provide support to address their specific needs. This type of support can help further strengthen graduate certificate programs at Durham College.

Figure 8.1 Comparison of First Term GPA and Completion by Admissions Subset										
Survey Year	2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	
Average GPA	Comp.	nc.	Comp.	nc.	Comp.	nc.	Comp.	nc.	Comp.	nc.
<b>TOTAL</b>	3.9 (108)	1.7 (13)	4.1 (125)	2.5 (27)	4.0 (192)	1.5 (18)	3.9 (222)	3.0 (21)	3.6 (231)	3.2 (39)
<b>College</b>	3.7 (27)	2.1 (7)	3.9 (34)	3.4 (13)	3.8 (67)	1.2 (6)	3.3 (80)	2.2 (10)	3.3 (101)	3.2 (17)
<b>University</b>	3.9 (44)	n/a (0)	4.2 (72)	4.4 (3)	4.1 (105)	1.9 (7)	4.3 (123)	3.5 (9)	3.9 (121)	3.8 (17)
<b>Work</b>	3.9 (37)	1.2 (6)	4.1 (19)	0.9 (11)	3.9 (20)	1.3 (5)	3.5 (19)	2.3 (2)	2.8 (9)	1.7 (5)

Source: Durham College Banner System, August 2012; statistical significance testing has not been applied and some sample sizes are small (<5), please interpret with caution.

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**Subsection 9: How do final marks differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students? c**

On average, graduate certificate students who hold a university degree consistently achieve stronger GPAs than the other two admissions subsets. Those who have previous college experience or equivalent work experience may require more support.

Figure 9.1: Final Cumulative GPA by Admissions Subset					
Year of Study	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
<b>TOTAL</b>	3.8 (108)	4.0 (125)	4.0 (192)	4.1 (222)	4.1 (231)
<b>College</b>	3.6 (27)	3.6 (34)	3.7 (67)	3.8 (80)	3.7 (101)
<b>University</b>	4.0 (44)	4.1 (72)	4.2 (105)	4.4 (123)	4.4 (121)
<b>Work</b>	3.9 (37)	4.2 (19)	3.9 (20)	3.6 (19)	3.6 (9)

Source: Durham College Banner System, August 2012; some sample sizes are small (<5), please interpret with caution.

For subsections 10 and 11, the three admissions subsets (“College,” “University,” and “Work”) are based on responses to the KPI Graduate Satisfaction survey regarding previous education. Those who did not indicate any previous education are grouped in the “Work” subset.

**Subsection 10: How do employment rates and experiences differ, if at all, between the three subsets of students six months after graduation?**

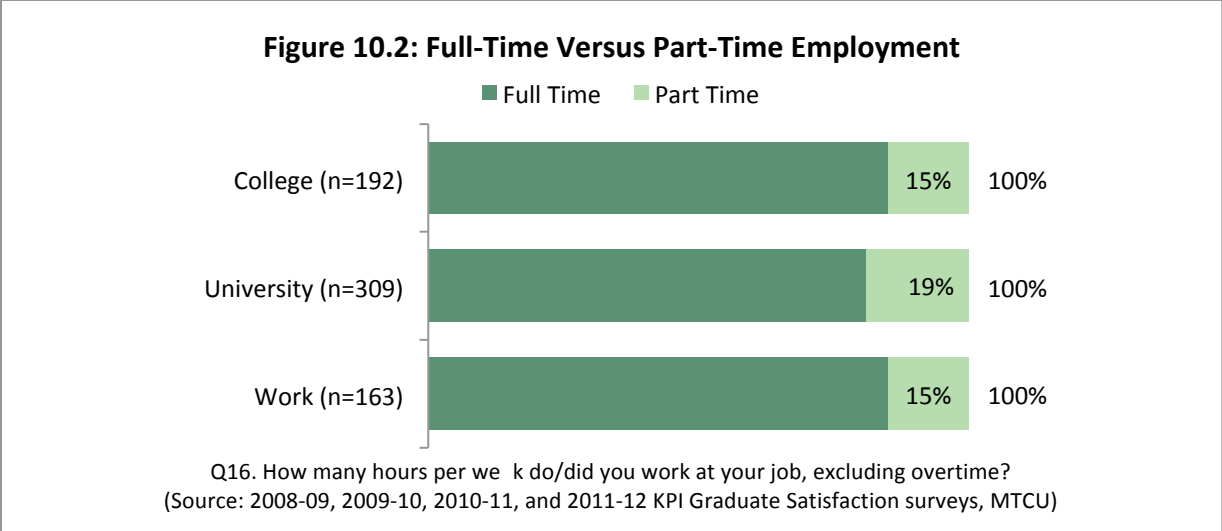
Overall, employment rates among graduate certificate students are very strong with 88% of graduates finding employment six months after graduation (see Figure 10.1). Employment rates are also fairly consistent among the three admissions subsets (graduates who entered their program with a previous college diploma, graduates with a university degree, and graduates with equivalent work experience). It is interesting, however, that although the GPAs of the work subset are lower than the other two groups the employment rates are comparable. This comparability suggests that employers are giving more credence to the work experience of graduates than actual student grades.

<b>Figure 10.1 Employment Rates by Admissions Subset</b>					
<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>2007-08</b>	<b>2008-09</b>	<b>2009-10</b>	<b>2010-11</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>92%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(94/102)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>88%</b> <i>(146/165)</i>	<b>88%</b> <i>(183/208)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>87%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(223/255)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>88%</b> <i>(646/730)<sub>o</sub></i>
<b>College</b>	<b>100%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(17/17)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>85%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(40/47)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>89%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(56/63)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>87%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(72/83)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>87%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(185/210)<sub>o</sub></i>
<b>University</b>	<b>72%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(18/25)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>88%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(66/75)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>89%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(90/101)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>88%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(122/139)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>92%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(296/340)<sub>o</sub></i>
<b>Work</b>	<b>98%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(59/60)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>93%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(40/43)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>84%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(37/44)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>88%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(29/33)<sub>o</sub></i>	<b>88%<sub>o</sub></b> <i>(165/180)<sub>o</sub></i>

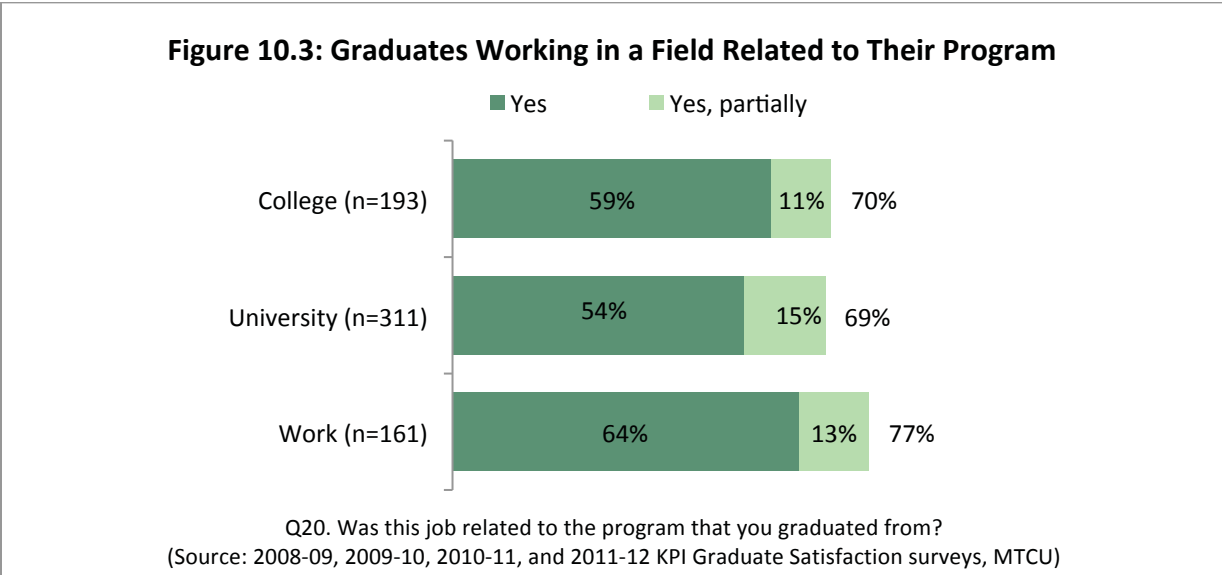
Source: KPI Graduate Satisfaction survey, which is conducted six months after graduation and funded by the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities. 2007-08 graduates completed the survey in 2008-09, 2008-09 graduates completed the survey in 2009-10, 2009-10 graduates completed the survey in 2010-11, and 2010-11 graduates completed the survey in 2011-12.

Moreover, among graduate certificate graduates who did find employment six months after graduation over the past four years, less than 20% indicated they were working part-time hours (see Figure 10.2). Part-time employment rates are similar across the three admissions subsets.

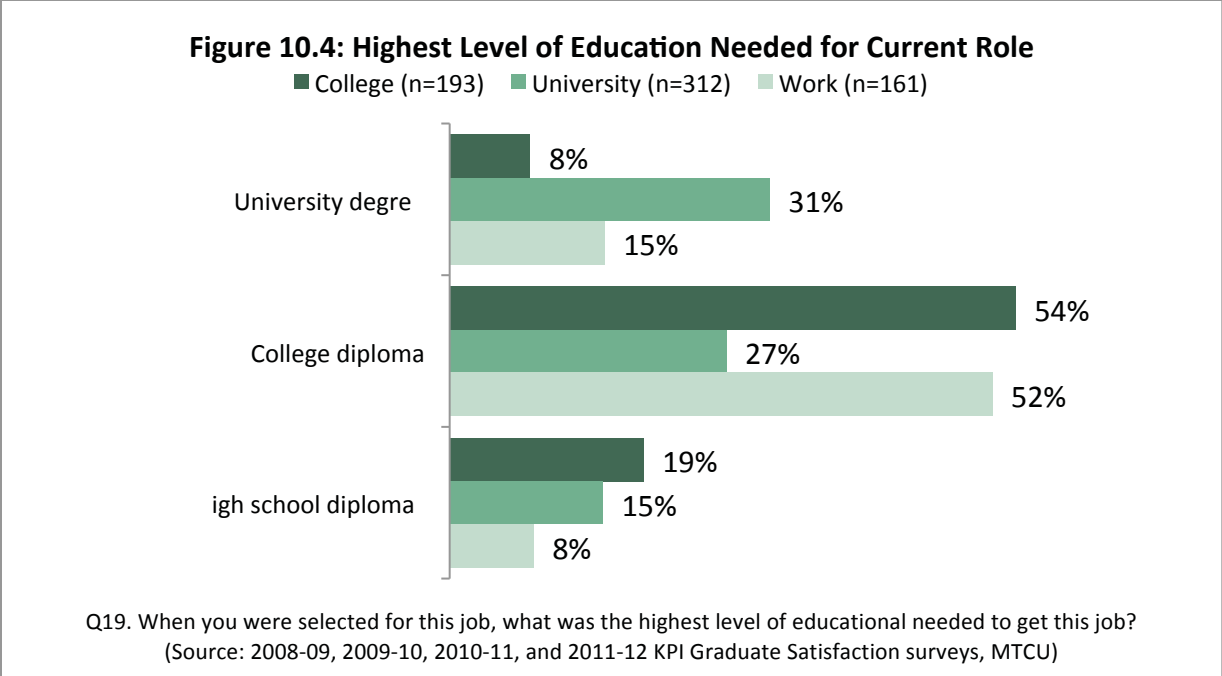
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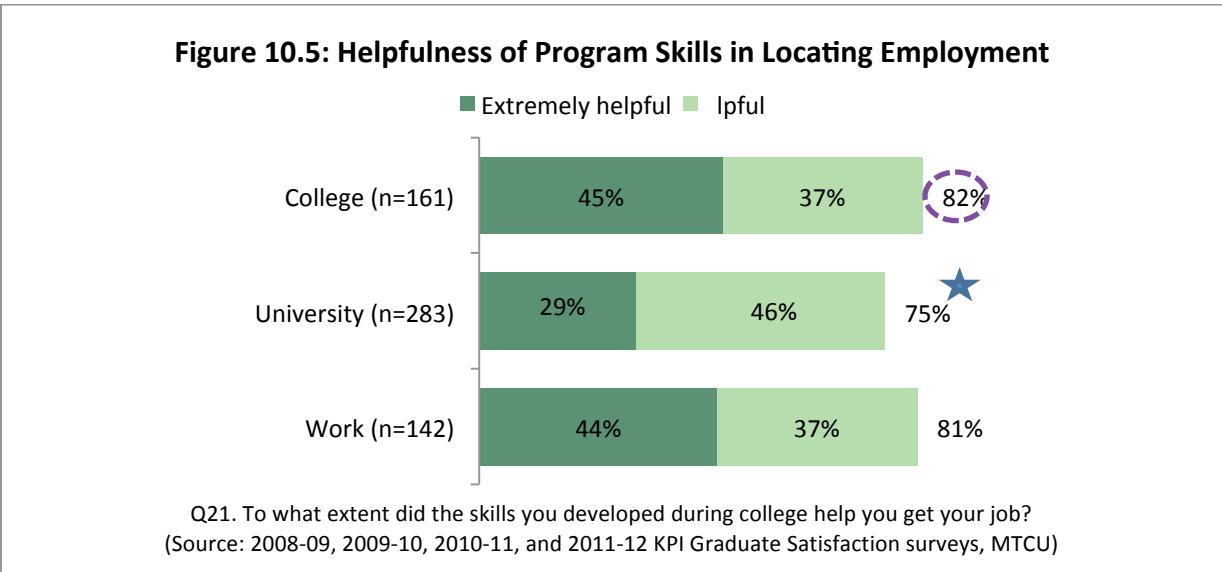
Despite strong full-time employment rates, only 58% reported that their current job is related to the program they graduated from (see Figure 10.3). Graduates who entered the program with equivalent work experience (rather than a university degree ) represent the largest proportion of students who said that their job was related or at least partially related to their graduate certificate program.



In addition, many employed graduates with a university degree (43%) said that a high school diploma or college diploma was the highest level of education needed to attain their current position. Only 31% said their job required a university degree (see Figure 10.4). Conversely, 67% of graduates with a college diploma said that a diploma or higher was required to get their job.

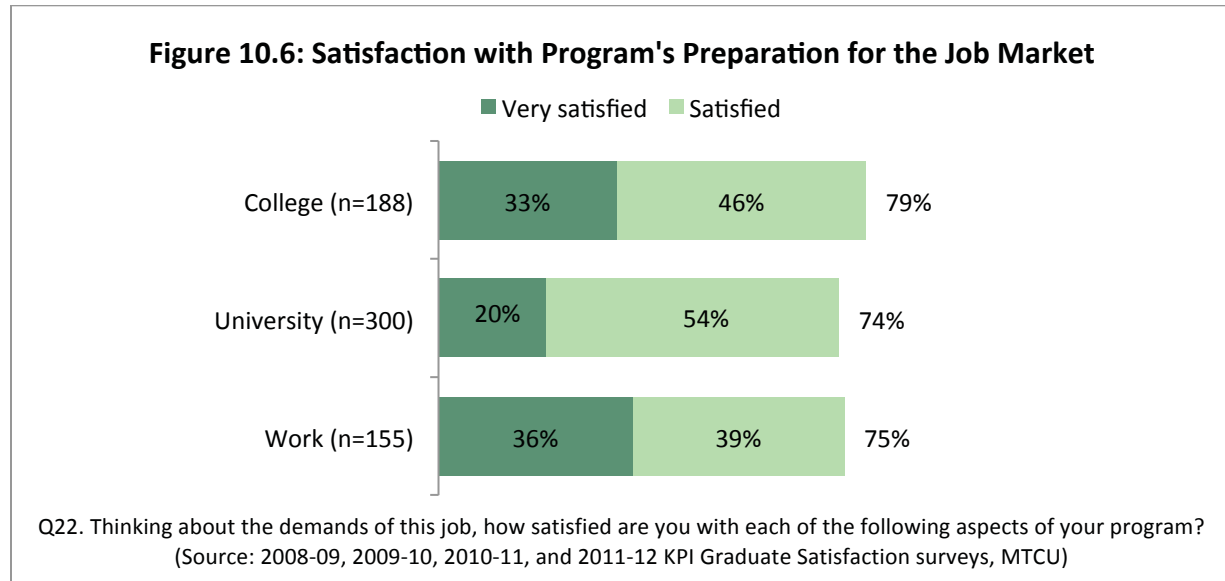


Approximately 80% of graduate certificate program graduates, from the past four years, indicated that the skills they developed in their program were “extremely helpful” or “helpful” in terms of locating employment (see Figure 10.5). A smaller proportion of university graduates (29%) felt that the skills they developed were “extremely helpful,” compared to 45% of college diploma holders and individuals with equivalent work experience. An analysis of variance test indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between college graduates and university graduates when reporting the helpfulness of program skills.



Note: The asterisk symbolizes which comparison group is statistically different.

Moreover, when asked to think about the demands of their job, only 20% of graduate certificate graduates with a university degree said they were “very satisfied” with the preparation they received from their program, which is again lower than the satisfaction levels of the other two admissions subsets (see Figure 10.6).



***Subsection 11: What best practices can be identified from examining the differences in completion rates, employment rates, earnings, and the relationship between first term marks and program completion?***

Graduate certificate programs are offered in an accelerated, intensive format as a way to prepare students for a particular field of employment and to reduce their chances for attrition. Completion rates are very strong among all admissions subsets with almost all students completing their programs within the standard time frame (i.e. two semesters). Additionally, the majority of students who complete graduate certificate programs at Durham College are able to find full-time employment six months after graduation, which is very encouraging.

Completion rates and marks are strongest among those entering their program with a university degree. College entrants and those with equivalent work experience tend to have lower completion rates and are achieving strong, but relatively lower GPAs. This suggests that these two subsets may require greater academic support to help them complete the program successfully.

Interestingly, graduate certificate students who enter their program with a university degree tend to be less satisfied before and after graduation. Just 26% of current students said they were “very satisfied” with their program (compared to 39% of those who entered the program with a college diploma and 38% of those with equivalent work experience). Although this group enrolled in a graduate certificate program to enhance their current skills or develop some new ones, only 29% rated the skills developed in their program as “extremely helpful” in terms of



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locating employment opportunities. Additionally, only 20% said they were “very satisfied” with the preparation they received for the job market.

Although labour market conditions are outside the control of the college, job searching strategies and career counselling are examples of how the college might help to improve the experiences of students who complete graduate certificate programs. Since the program is only two semesters, it may be difficult to offer as much support to these students; however, guidance from the college could help ease the transition to the labour market and increase employment. These and other best practices to improve graduate certificate student outcomes are discussed in further detail in the recommendations section (please refer to Section V).

## SECTION V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

To improve students' satisfaction and graduates' employability, this research has focused on developing a better understanding of the experiences and outcomes of students moving from a college diploma, university degree, or equivalent work experience to a graduate certificate. This understanding can help reveal strategies that will enrich the experience of these students and improve the outcomes of those who complete the program. These students are usually mature, and as such, they come to college armed with different knowledge and experiences than direct-from-high school students. Coming from a postsecondary or workforce environment, their needs and expectations are decidedly different from students who are entering college directly from high school.

The first part of this study examined the admissions experiences of graduate certificate students and graduates. Overall, students are positive about graduate certificate programs at Durham College and most complete their programs, but this research revealed that there are some opportunities to increase satisfaction and engagement. Students identified five strategies that Durham College could implement to improve graduate certificate students' satisfaction with their admissions experience:

- i) Reviewing and enriching field placement opportunities (where available);
- ii) Simplifying the admissions process and increasing college-to-student communications;
- iii) Reviewing and improving course materials and entry requirements;
- iv) Increasing awareness and comprehension of graduate certificate programs; and
- v) Providing more support to students in graduate certificate programs.

The second part of this study examined the outcomes of graduate certificate graduates. Although it is generally assumed that multiple postsecondary credentials will lead to better labour market outcomes, this is not always the case. While program completion rates and full-time employment rates (six months after graduation) are relatively strong among all three admissions subsets and strongest among university graduates, significantly fewer graduate certificate students who hold a university degree (the largest subset) say they are working in a field related to their program. Moreover, among those who are employed, only 29% said the skills they developed in their program were "extremely helpful" in locating employment and even fewer – 20% – said they were "very satisfied" with the preparation they received for the labour market. There is clearly an opportunity to improve the labour market outcomes of students who enter graduate certificate programs with a university degree.

## **Recommendations for Improving the Experiences of Graduate certificate Students**

From this research, we have identified three key recommendations that can improve the experience of graduate certificate students at Durham College:

- (1) Review entry requirements and simplify the admissions process;
- (2) Review and enrich field placement opportunities (where applicable); and
- (3) Develop relevant and opportune social opportunities to encourage school-life balance.

### **Review Entry Requirements and Simplify the Admissions Process**

Students are increasingly pursuing multiple credentials through the postsecondary education system. According to Colleges Ontario, the movement of students between colleges and universities is becoming more common. Students attending Ontario colleges are more likely to have previous postsecondary experience than in the past, and this trend is growing. Therefore, the continued development of college-to-college, university-to-college, and work-to-college pathways is critical. More importantly, these pathways should have a high degree of affinity to ease the transition process for each of these three unique groups.

Program affinity between the college and other postsecondary institutions needs to improve as this has been defined by the ONCAT as one of the elements making current college-university partnerships successful. However, 40% of degree holders said that their degree was “not at all related” to their graduate certificate. Comparatively, only 20% of college diploma holders indicate the same. Some study participants said they were dissatisfied with the lack of fit between what they learned in their previous postsecondary program and what they were learning at Durham College. Focus groups also revealed that the program requirements did not always correspond to course material.

A lack of clear information around the admissions process was a frequently cited difficulty faced by students and graduates. Many students experienced challenges communicating with admissions and often could not find the information they required. There was often confusion about prerequisites and many were unable to determine whether the program would be a good fit for them. Student and graduate focus groups highlighted the need to simplify the admissions process, clarify requirements, and provide more information to students so they can make informed decisions about their education.

Related to program affinity, clearly defined entry requirements will also have a significantly positive impact on students entering graduate certificate programs. A Colleges Ontario report (2008) indicates that “The ability of colleges to provide clear information is currently hampered by a lack of common terminology related to transfers (e.g., equivalency, advanced standing, exemption, substitution) and their appropriate uses in credit recognition” (2008). Many students felt the admissions process should be less lenient, and did not always perceive the course materials as challenging enough. Students suggested that some students were

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underprepared for the workload and that entry requirements should be reviewed to ensure stringency and academic rigour.

### Review and Enrich Field Placement Opportunities (Where Applicable)

Students who enter a graduate certificate program at Durham College are predominantly looking to enhance current skills, gain new, specialized skills or to strengthen their resume and find full-time employment. This is a driving factor in the pursuit of further education. Thus, the importance of having good work experience opportunities needs to be stressed.

Focus groups revealed that students were excited about their program's field placement opportunity. Many had already experienced some difficulties locating work prospects and thus, they were looking to develop the practical skills they needed to succeed. The field placement was perceived as an important next step to put the theory they learned in college or university into practice.

However, because of the fast pace of the program and competing time commitments, it was often difficult for students to find their own placements and most stated they were provided with little supervision or guidance. While many enjoyed the opportunity, there often were not enough placements available to students, particularly those with a direct relation to their program. Most felt they would have benefitted from more assistance finding a placement. In addition, the opportunity was often considered too rushed and not meaningful enough to make a positive impact on their career search.

A one-year graduate certificate program requires an intensive time commitment from students. A support network that includes professors, graduate ambassadors, peers and career services staff, could help alleviate some of the added stress of finding placements. This type of support is particularly important given that many students cited a lack of school-life balance while completing their graduate certificate program.

### Develop Relevant and Opportune Social Opportunities to Encourage a School-Life Balance

A solid support network is also important for other areas of college life. Balancing school work, a social life and in some cases, part-time work, can be challenging for students. Graduate certificate students, in particular, need to find strategies to manage their fast-paced workload. It is also important that students learn good time management skills so that they can allot time for social activities. Almost all focus group participants agreed that their social lives were somewhat strained, and they spent a lot of their time studying for tests or working on assignments.

Moreover, because of the age gap, many were unable to connect with younger students at the college, who comprise the majority of the student population. Most graduate certificate students have already graduated from college or university and thus, their experiences and needs are quite different from students who came to college directly from high school. They are

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also strong academically and do not see as much value in academic supports such as student liaisons or peer tutors; however, other types of on-campus resources or supports could help alleviate the stresses of a demanding program.

Focus groups highlighted the need to offer unique, voluntary social networking opportunities for graduate certificate students and their peers. Ultimately, these opportunities should be tailored toward the needs and wants of these particular groups. Some examples might include peer study groups, group fitness challenges or lunch and learn sessions. Peer study groups would give graduate certificate students the opportunity to lean on other students to ask questions, help solve complex problems, and take advantage of other students' strengths. Group fitness challenges would provide graduate certificate students with a list of nutrition and wellness activities that exist outside the gym and help them stay motivated in a team environment. Finally, graduate certificate student lunch and learn sessions could include speakers such as former graduates, professors or industry employers to provide students with a wider support network and focus on relevant issues such as, interviewing skills, resume writing and employment opportunities.

### Recommendations for Improving the Outcomes of Graduate Certificate Graduates

In addition to improving the experience of current students, we have also identified three key recommendations to improve the outcomes of graduate certificate graduates:

- (1) Provide more assistance to graduate certificate graduates to locate relevant employment;
- (2) Foster connections between field placements and future employment opportunities; and
- (3) Provide more support to at-risk students.

### Provide More Assistance to Graduate Certificate Graduates to Locate Relevant Employment

The Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) promotes Ontario college graduate certificate programs to college and university graduates as a way of gaining specialized skills and knowledge that assist in the preparation of graduates for immediate entry into the labour market. Students enter into graduate certificate programs with the hopes of honing their current skills and developing new ones, in order to find relevant employment after graduation. Employment rates are very strong among graduate certificate graduates with over almost 90% of students finding employment six months after graduation. In addition, the majority of those employed are working full-time.

However, although employment rates are strong across all three of the student subsets (those who enter the program with a university degree, those who enter with a college diploma, and those with equivalent work experience), university graduates are finding the skills they learned less helpful in finding employment, and they are less satisfied with the preparation they

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received for the labour market. Furthermore, many were working in positions unrelated to the program from which they graduated. These are substantial areas of concern given that improving skills and bolstering employment opportunities are two of the primary reasons why students enrol in a graduate certificate program.

Graduate certificate programs are compressed; hence, there is little time to provide students with the preparation they require for the job market. Nonetheless, skills like resume writing, interviewing, and networking could all be incorporated (where possible) into the curriculum. In particular, the field placement is a good place to integrate career-building techniques such as networking (discussed in further detail below). As mentioned earlier, since time is a barrier, lunch and learn sessions could also provide graduate certificate students with valuable lessons from former graduates, professors and industry-specific employers. Proactive strategies such as these can help improve the eventual outcomes of graduate certificate graduates, particularly degree holders, in the labour market.

### Foster Connections Between Field Placements and Future Employment Opportunities

The field placement is an opportunity for students to gain valuable hands-on experience. It can provide students with soft skills such as interpersonal, communication and teamwork skills and ideally, it provides work experience that is directly related to the student's area of study. Many graduate certificate students felt they could leverage their placement opportunity into a future career. This is not surprising since the main reason for enrolling in a graduate certificate program is to complement previous education with job-ready experience and skills.

However, focus groups revealed that students were often disappointed with their placement experience and many did not feel the opportunity was "meaningful." By meaningful, many indicated the placement was not related to their program, did not offer enough work experience (observation rather than participation) and supervisors did not or could not provide constructive feedback. In some cases, there also seemed to be a lack of communication between professors and field supervisors so students said they did not always feel well supported.

To improve and ensure that graduate certificate students gain relevant employment upon graduation, the field placement opportunity should have good connections to the labour market in order to bolster students' employability. This should be the place where students can learn employer expectations once in the workforce, and apply what is taught in the classroom. Placement opportunities should give students the experience they need to be successful in the job market.

### Provide More Support to At-Risk Students

There is a strong relationship between first term grades and final program completion rates. While most graduate certificate students are strong academically, those who have below

average grades in their first semester are at risk of leaving. This underscores another area in which setting expectations during the admissions process (for example, emphasizing heavy workload and conflicting time demands), and providing a support network, could benefit graduate certificate students.

Furthermore, students who hold a college credential or have equivalent work experience tend to have weaker completion rates and lower GPAs (compared to those with a university degree). This suggests that this group could benefit from additional academic supports to ensure that they understand course material, set realistic course goals, and ultimately, to help them to be successful in their graduate certificate program.

Fostering collaboration in classrooms (e.g. having students work together or evaluate one another) is one way to help build a support network. Professors can also continue to let students ask questions and when needed, meet with them after hours to provide extra help. These small steps can help further strengthen graduate certificate programs at Durham College.

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Graduate Certificate Student and Graduate Online Survey**

Durham College is conducting this survey as part of a research project to better understand the experiences of students in Graduate Certificate programs. Graduate Certificate programs are designed for students who have already completed a degree or diploma program, and this study will explore the transfer from the completed program to the Graduate Certificate program. This study will also explore anticipated and/or actual outcomes after graduation, including completion rates, employment rates, and earnings. The purpose of the research project is to develop strategies that will improve the student experience.

We're interested in hearing about your experiences. Your participation is completely voluntary. Only the research team will have access to your responses. Responses to the questions will not be linked to individual respondents in any reporting and no one will be identifiable in any reporting.

If you decide not to participate, there will be no impact on your future dealings with Durham College. If you decide to participate in the survey, you may end the survey at any time without giving a reason; in this case, any data you have provided will not be used. If you decide to participate, all of your responses will be kept confidential. If you have any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, please skip them. The data will be stored on a secure Durham College server. All data collected from this survey will be destroyed seven years after the full completion of all reports as per Durham College policy.

The survey will take less than 15 minutes to complete. By completing the survey, you will be entered into a draw for one of three prizes of a Best Buy gift card valued at \$100.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Debbie McKee Demczyk, Principal Investigator, at [Debbie.mckee@durhamcollege.ca](mailto:Debbie.mckee@durhamcollege.ca)

1. [COMPUTED] Number of surveys completed: 280
2. Informed Consent: By checking the "yes" box below, you confirm that you have read and understand the information about this research project. You agree to voluntarily participate in this research and give your consent freely. You understand you can withdraw from the survey at any time, without penalty, and you do not have to give any reason for withdrawal.

Yes, I give my full consent to participate in this study. I

No, I do not want to continue with this survey. I

*Demographics o*

o

3. Please identify the Graduate Certificate program that you enrolled in:
  - € Human Resources Management
  - € Sport Business Management
  - € Addictions and Mental Health
  - € Communicative Disorders Assistant
  - € Critical Care Nursing (online)
  - € Advanced Law Enforcement and Investigation
  - € Mediation – Alternative Dispute Resolution
  - € Paralegal
  - € Paramedic – Advanced Care
  - € Paramedic – Advanced Care (online)
  - € Victimology
  - € Youth Corrections and Interventions
  - € VFX and Digital Cinema
  - € Biomedical Engineering Technology
  - € Biotechnology Technologist
  - € Chemical Engineering Technology
  - € Electronic Engineering Technology
  - € Environmental Technology
  - € Pharmaceutical and Food Science Technology
  
4. In which academic year did you enrol in this Graduate certificate program?
  - € 2007-2008
  - € 2008-2009
  - € 2009-2010
  - € 2010-2011
  - € 2011-2012
  
5. [COMPUTED] Graduated
  - € Yes [IF Q2 = 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10 or 2010-11]
  - € No [IF Q2 = 2011-12]
  
6. Your current age:
  - € Less than 21
  - € 21-25
  - € 26-30
  - € 31-35
  - € More than 35

7. Your gender:

- Male
- Female

8. The education you completed before entering this program: (Select all that apply)

- College diploma [if yes, go to the next two questions]
- University degree [if yes, go to next two questions]
- Other: please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

9a. When did you graduate? [only for those who completed a college diploma or university degree ]

- The academic year immediately preceding enrolment in the Graduate Certificate program
- One year prior
- Two to five years prior
- Six to ten years prior
- More than ten years prior

9b. Did you graduate from a Durham College diploma program?

- Yes
- No

9c. Is your previous degree /diploma in the same field of study as your Graduate Certificate program?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable: please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

9d. [IF YES AT Q9c] How related is your degree to your Graduate certificate program?

- Highly related
- Somewhat related
- Not at all related

9e. [only for those who had equivalent work experience] How related is your previous work experience to your Graduate Certificate program?

- Highly related
- Somewhat related
- Not at all related

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o  
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*Decision to Enrol/Transfer o*

10a. Why did you decide to take a Graduate Certificate program? (select all that apply)

- € I just completed my diploma/degree and this was the logical next step
- € was unemployed
- € wanted to get hands-on experience
- € wanted to enhance my present skills
- € wanted to learn a new, specialized skill
- € The program was recommended to me
- € My employer paid for all/part of the fees
- € Other: please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please indicate the extent to which you experienced any difficulties transitioning to a new program/institution prior to enrolling. I

Prior to enrolling, I had difficulties...		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Finding out whether my diploma/degree met the admissions requirement.				
2	Connecting with someone from admissions.				
3	Connecting with someone from the program.				
4	Finding out what student services are offered.				
5	Finding my way around campus.				
6	Determining whether the program was right for me.				
7	had no difficulties in the transition prior to enrolling.				

2. Please describe any other difficulties you faced prior to enrolling:

\_\_\_\_\_

*Experiences While in the Program o*

3. Please indicate the extent to which you experienced any difficulties transitioning to a new program/institution after starting classes.

I

After starting classes, I had difficulties...		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Connecting with someone from the program outside of class hours.				
2	Finding out what student services are offered.				
3	Accessing career information.				
4	Adapting to a new institution.				
5	Accessing IT services.				
6	Accessing learning support services.				
7	I had no difficulties in the transition after starting classes.				

4.H Please describe any other difficulties you faced after starting classes:

\_\_\_\_\_

15. Which student services have you accessed to date [current students]/did you access [graduates]?

[fourth and fifth column only appear if “yes” in column three ]

	Service	Yes/No (15a)	If yes (15b)	Any difficulties? Please describe: (15c)
1	Student Academic Learning Services (SALS)	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
2	Centre for Students with Disabilities	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
3	Peer tutoring	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
4	Computer commons	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
5	Library	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
6	Study space	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
7	Food services	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
8	Student liaison advising	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
9	Bookstore	€ Yes	€ High use	

I

		€ No	€ Low use	
10	Sports and recreation	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
11	Health and medical services	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
12	Career services	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	
13	Financial aid/scholarships/bursaries	€ Yes € No	€ High use € Low use	

16a. Overall, how would you rate your admissions experience? I

- € Very satisfied I
- € Satisfied I
- € Neutral I
- € Unsatisfied I
- € Very Unsatisfied I

I

16b. Additional comments on your admissions experience: I

\_\_\_\_\_ I

o

*Perceptions about the value of a Graduate Certificate program o*

17a. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements. [for current students]

After completing a Graduate Certificate program, I will...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1 I will have access to better job prospects.				
2 I will be able to earn more money.				
3 I will be better positioned to reach my career aspirations.				
4 I will have real-world, practical experience that I previously lacked.				
5 I will have a new, specialized skill.				
6 I will have additional skills to advance my career.				

17a. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements. [for graduates]

I

	After completing a Graduate Certificate program, I...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I have access to better job prospects.				
2	I am able to earn more money.				
3	I am better positioned to reach my career aspirations.				
4	I have real-world, practical experience that I previously lacked.				
5	I have a new, specialized skill.				
6	I have additional skills to advance my career.				

17b. Please describe any additional factors that make a Graduate certificate program attractive to prospective students:

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#### *Success Factors of*

18. Reflecting on your experiences both while deciding to enrol and after you enrolled, what factors would you say have helped you personally to succeed that you would like to share with prospective students so that they can be successful?

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#### *Strategies that Durham College could implement of*

19. Reflecting on your experience both while deciding to enrol and after you enrolled, what strategies could Durham College implement that would make Graduate Certificate programs better? Think about the application process and the program itself.

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#### *Additional comments of*

20. Please provide any additional comments that would be helpful in this study:

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21. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group to explore these topics further?

Yes I

No I

I

o



*Draw for \$100 Best Buy Gift Card (optional) o*

Please provide the following information if you wish to have your name included in the draw for three \$100 Best Buy gift cards. Your personal information will not be connected to any survey responses and will only be used for purposes of the draw.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Graduate Certificate Student Focus Group Discussion Guide**

### *Introduction*

- Review Information Letter
- Review confidentiality
- Explain nature of research project, role of note taker, PI
- Max time 1 hour
- Participants may withdraw at any time

### *Informed Consent*

- Ensure signed consent forms received from all participants

### *Questions*

- Why did you choose to enrol in a graduate certificate program?
  - Why Durham College?
  - Why not another option such as university?
  - Impact on personal life (especially for those with families, commuters, working)
  - Life outside of college?
  - Role of field placement opportunity
  - Was this another step in furthering your education (e.g. a Master's program)
- Describe your admission experience
  - Challenges getting information?
  - Hard to return to school?
  - Feel supported by the college? By family and friends?
  - Did strike have any impact? |
- Describe your experience in your program
  - Learning environment different from university?
  - Communications with/access to professors
  - Interaction with student liaison |
- How you think it will affect your career after graduation
  - Better job prospects?
  - If working – promotion? More pay?
  - New job/career opportunities?
  - What are your goals? |
- What student services are you using?
  - Why or why not? What can be changed?

- Recommendations (based on responses to above questions)
  - Would it improve the experience/service?
  - Communications?
  - For example, instructional material on operating a computer (for WebCT, MyCampus, etc.)
  
- What would you recommend to prospective students thinking about enrolling in a Graduate Certificate program?
  - Why? |
  
- What would you recommend to Durham College administration to improve Graduate Certificate programs?
  - Why? |



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