

Understanding Student Experiences and Graduate Outcomes For Durham College Graduate Certificate Programs

Durham College
2012

Outline of the Study

This study focuses on the experiences and outcomes of college and university graduates who have enrolled in Durham College's Ontario College Graduate Certificate programs. (p. 5) The findings were based on the results of 284 online surveys, insights from a focus group, and analyses of student and graduate grade and program completion data and key performance indicators (KPI). The survey sample included both certificate students and graduates, from 14 programs, representing a slight gender bias towards females. Having transferred from university or college or admitted with relevant work experience, they were older (99% were 21 years of age or older).

The study brings the distinct benefit of considering transfer student satisfaction and success through the entire admission/program-of-study/graduation/employment continuum and offers its recommendations for improvement of the entire pathway.

Findings

This research focused on 11 study questions most of which compared findings among those admitted university, from college and with 'equivalent work experience'.

Reason for Choice of Program: Most surveyed students reported that their choice of further study was to enhance present skills or develop new ones as a "stepping stone into the job market". (p. 14) Over 4 in 5 survey respondents expected their program to add "additional skills to advance [in] their career". (p. 15) University graduates were two times more likely than college graduates to be seeking "hands on experience" while 'equivalent work experience' admits were almost twice as likely as college and university graduates to receive employer financial support. College graduates were most likely to pursue further study to "earn more money". Multi-year student satisfaction KPI data identifies "program I wanted" and "location" as key choice factors. (p. 15)

Program Relatedness: 2/3 of the respondents perceived their prior and further study to be "highly related" (50%) or "somewhat related" (14%) with university students twice as likely to report their further study to be "not at all related". (p. 18)

Satisfaction with the Transfer Process *Before Class Start:* Transfer students report being satisfied with their transfer experience (65% for college graduates, 71% for university graduates, and 100% for the "equivalent work experience" admits). (p. 19) 88% of 'work experience equivalent' admits, 68% of university graduates and 61% of college graduates "had no difficulties in the transition". (p. 20) Those difficulties reported include "finding out what student services were offered ..., finding their way around campus, and connecting with someone from the program". (pp. 19 - 20) Somewhat

over 1 in 10 had difficulty connecting with someone from admissions or determining program fit. (p. 20) Concerns about the transfer process were greater among those who had been out of school for some time. (p. 24) Students recommended simplifying admission process, enhancing communications and increasing staff availability.

Satisfaction After Classes Began: Almost 2/3 of the students and graduates surveyed (61%) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they had no difficulties with the transition to their graduate certificate program after starting their classes. They were most likely to use library, food services, the bookstore, the computer commons and study space and unlikely to use academic student services such as peer tutoring. (p. 22) Those that faced difficulties cited challenges related to accessing learning, information technology and student support services; connecting with faculty outside class hours; and accessing career information. (p. 21)

Concerns expressed about the program demonstrate the connection between pre- and post-admission issues and their resolution. While the report describes field placement as "a major hook for potential applicants" some students who were not satisfied with this component of their program. These suggested providing clearer advance information, enriching workplace opportunities and improving staff support. (pp. 23-24) Others felt that the fit between some students and their program could be improved by providing more information to better assist students' choice and introducing more stringent admission requirements. (p. 25)

Student Success: 'One year completion rates' during the 5 years ending in 2012 range from 82% to 91%. These vary annually among university graduates (88% – 100%), college graduates (72% - 92%) and equivalent work experience (63% - 86%).

First term GPA also differs among the three groups with university transfers outperforming both college graduates and 'equivalent work experience' admits. University graduate cumulative GPA scores exceed those of college transfers. Not surprisingly, "GPAs are significantly lower among students who did not complete their [certificate] program in the required timeframe". (p. 27)

Graduate Satisfaction and Outcomes: An analysis of graduate perceptions, satisfaction and employment rates is also include in this study. "While employment rates [for these programs] are strong across all three student subsets ... university graduates are finding the skills they learned less helpful in finding employment ... are less satisfied with the preparation they received for the labour market" and are unhappy with "working in positions unrelated to [their] program". "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". (pp. 36-37)

Conclusions and Recommendations

As noted above, the most striking dimension of this study is its tracking of student satisfaction and outcomes along the entire admission/program-of-study/graduation/employment continuum of the transfer pathway. Central to this are the

recommendations intended to support student attainment of their principle program-related goals: to acquire the experience and skills that will “strengthen [each graduate’s] resume and [help] find full-time employment” (p. 35) and/or “advance in their career” (p. 15). These include:

- providing information that will help potential applicants self-select the pathway and program that best fits with their needs and goals;
- ensuring that admission standards and prerequisites are appropriate to the academic demands of the program;
- Ensuring that the program is effective in preparing students for related employment,
- enhancing student preparation for their job search;
- ensuring that the work experience component of the program is meaningful, relevant, supported and connected to future employment opportunities; and
- supporting job search and career development priorities.

Recommendations to Improve the Graduate Certificate Experience:

First, the study recommends a review of entry requirements and simplification of the admissions process. These improvements are expected to partially address the confusion about the transfer process and concerns about the program related to requirements, challenge and workloads. (pp. 34-35)

Second, the advice to “review and enrich field placement opportunities (where applicable)” is offered to address student concerns about this important part of their program. Most graduate certificate students are attracted to programs that include field practice to acquire the experience and skills that will “strengthen their resume and [help them] find full-time employment.” (p. 35)

Third, the recommendation to “develop relevant and opportune social opportunities to encourage a school-life balance” is offered to address the different interests of the older transfer population and to help them balance their program workload and external life obligations. (p. 35) Suggestions involve collaborative learning, age-appropriate social networking, fitness and nutrition initiatives and events that support employment search.

Recommendations to Improve Graduate Outcomes:

Fourth, the recommendation to “provide more assistance to graduate certificate graduates to locate relevant employment” (p. 36) was triggered by the significant proportion of university graduates who were “less satisfied with the preparation they received for the labour market” and the unrelatedness of their ultimate employment. (pp. 36-37) Recommended job search strategies include network building, improving interview and resume preparation skills, and developing enhanced approaches to career building.

Fifth, “foster[ing] connections between field placements and future employment opportunities” would better use work experience as a springboard into a related workplace. Program leaders were advised to ensure that field placements are

“meaningful”; apply classroom learning; offer relevant, hands-on experience; are supported by college staff; and contribute helpful developmental feedback.

Finally, the need to provide “more support to at-risk students” targets those who are not succeeding in their first semester of study, college graduates and “equivalent work experience” students who typically earn lower GPAs and are more likely to drop out. The study recommends earlier interventions, collaborative learning strategies, support networks and more attention from professors. Providing better pre-admission program information to help students self-select and introducing more rigorous admission requirements are also suggested.