Assessing the Effectiveness of Ontario College Preparatory Programs Offered at Durham College

Executive Summary

1. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and outcomes of students that enrol in Ontario College preparatory programs at Durham College, especially for further education. Literature review demonstrates that the three factors that are widely believed to be important contributors to student success in a postsecondary environment are: *academic preparation* for the rigours of postsecondary education, *social integration* into a postsecondary environment, and *clarity of academic and career goals*. These factors are particularly relevant in the discussion of preparatory programs, because preparatory programs are intended as a means to prepare students for further post-secondary education. There are many factors that can influence students to enrol in these programs, and therefore students often enter these programs with a variety of goals and expectations. In order to explore the experiences of students in Durham College preparatory programs, this study is divided into three stages and is based on seven research questions.

Stage I: Enrolled in a Preparatory Program

1. What are the career/educational objectives of students in the preparatory programs?
2. What were the experiences of the students in the preparatory programs?
3. Did the preparatory program meet the expectations?

Stage II: Transition to a Subsequent Postsecondary Program

4. Did the preparatory program students subsequently enrol in a postsecondary program?
5. What factors, if any, can predict the likelihood of preparatory program students continuing postsecondary education?
6. What are the motivations and transfer experiences of students who transfer to a subsequent postsecondary program of study?

Stage III: Validation of Outcomes in Subsequent Postsecondary Programs

7. Are outcomes such as academic performance, retention rates and graduation rates of students with a prior postsecondary program comparable to students without prior preparatory or postsecondary program experience?

2. Methodology

The data for this project was collected in two stages. First, all of the 2,885 students who were enrolled in any of the eight Durham College preparatory programs between 2008-09 and 2012-13 were invited to participate in an online survey. The study population for this project was comprised of the 202 preparatory program students who participated in the survey. These survey respondents were offered the opportunity to volunteer for focus group participation.

In the second stage, some of the survey respondents participated in focus groups to provide further feedback on their experiences in the preparatory programs as well as subsequent postsecondary programs. Also, to gather feedback from current preparatory program students, an additional focus group was conducted that was comprised of students who were enrolled in a preparatory program in winter 2014. There were six focus groups conducted that included a total of 23 participants.

For some additional analyses and comparisons, student academic and administrative data was also collected from the Durham College student information system. Exploratory analyses, means-testing, and regression were conducted on the survey and administrative data to address the research questions. The analyses further informed the focus group questions and discussions.

3. Key Findings

The key findings for this study were:

1. Durham College preparatory programs are effectively supporting students with both *academic preparation and social integration*. Approximately 82.1% of survey respondents indicated that their preparatory program met their expectations.
2. In addition to *academic preparedness* and *social integration*, students also indicated that they expect preparatory programs to help them in developing clear *academic goals* and *career clarity.*
3. In both the survey and in the focus groups, students indicated the need for greater academic rigour in the preparatory programs. This was particularly articulated by students with prior university postsecondary credentials.
4. The majority of survey respondents sought subsequent postsecondary education with 73.1% indicating that they continued on to further study after enrolling in a preparatory program. In fact, 63.5% of the study population continued on to further study at Durham College.
5. In subsequent postsecondary diploma and advanced diploma programs, students who completed a preparatory program at Durham College had higher retention rates, but took longer to graduate, than students who did not have prior preparatory program experience at Durham College.
6. Study participants have indicated a need for greater academic rigour in the preparatory programs. This is further reinforced by the finding that the preparatory programs at Durham College appear to prepare students better for two-year diploma programs than three-year advanced diploma programs.

7. Overall, students were satisfied with the admission process and their transition to subsequent postsecondary programs, but had specific suggestions for improvements, which are listed in the conclusions section of the report.
8. Findings of this study lend credence to the value of using graduation rate as an assessment metric for preparatory programs.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that well-articulated academic goals, social integration into a postsecondary environment, the development of clear career goals, perceived usefulness of courses, and supportive faculty and administrative staff are all important factors that contribute to positive student experiences in preparatory programs, and influence student decisions to pursue subsequent postsecondary education.

Based on the results of this study, the following is a list of some of the recommendations put forward in this report for the improvement of student experiences in preparatory programs:

1. Further efforts should be directed towards clarifying the purpose of preparatory programs, encouraging students to explore student-program fit, and offering suggestions for alternative programs where applicable. In particular, students with prior university credentials need to be offered an alternative pathway of exploring college programming.
2. The definition of preparatory programs should be expanded beyond *Academic Preparedness.* In addition to *Academic Preparedness,* the development of both *Clarity of Academic and Career goals* were identified by respondents as critical deliverables for an effective preparatory program.
3. There should be greater emphasis placed on field-specific preparatory programs. Participants who were enrolled in field-specific preparatory programs were more engaged and had greater commitment towards further postsecondary education than students in more generalised programs. Students in these programs noted that field-relevant programming enabled them to successfully transition to subsequent postsecondary programs.
4. Review curriculum and workloads. Participants in both the survey, as well as the focus groups indicated that workloads that were too light, and programs with curriculum that was too easy needed to be addressed. Suggestions were made to make some of these programs more academically rigorous in order to better prepare students for their subsequent programs of study.
5. It is important for institutions to provide preparatory program students with timely and readily available information to assist in the transition to subsequent postsecondary programs. Students extensively indicated the need for proactive academic and career advising and the need for information support when transitioning into further postsecondary study.
6. More effort should be made to promote the availability of student support services. Use of student services was fairly low amongst survey respondents and focus group participants. Additionally, a number of survey respondents and focus group participants acknowledged the importance of Student Academic Learning Services (SALS) at Durham College.