

# A Qualitative Study of the York-Seneca Transfer Experience

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“I ought to go to university and get a degree. I had this thought for two years and finally my action was triggered by my co-worker who had been around and in his mid-50s. He asked me what I was waiting for, if I waited for one year I could wait for another year then nothing would happen to my life and I was no longer young.”

“I would recommend that students interested in transferring not fear the process of applying and not be intimidated by it.”

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### **Note:**

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## Executive Summary

The purpose of this ONCAT funded research project was to better understand the decision-making processes of students moving between the two Ontario postsecondary sectors, in both directions, and to explore their transfer experiences by conducting focus groups with a randomly selected group of students who transferred between York University and Seneca College. The intention for the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the thought process of transferring students, beyond responses to typical close-ended survey questions.

This qualitative research project aimed to answer the following three questions:

1. What are the motivating factors behind student transfer?
2. What are the experiences of transfer students with their sending and receiving institutions?
3. How might sending and receiving institutions improve the transfer experience for students?

In an attempt to understand the rationale for their decision-making and to describe the students' transfer experiences in their own words, focus group discussions were conducted with Seneca students attending York University, and with York University students attending Seneca College. The focus groups were comprised of graduates and early leavers, and provided a means to ascertain if there were any similarities and differences between the two circumstances.

In general, the responses of the focus group participants were consistent with those found in previous studies where students who transferred were attempting to increase their future economic prospects. The combination of having both a college and university education was seen as valuable regardless of where they began their educational studies. These students recognized the perceived advantages of both forms of education.

Existing structural elements such as formal transfer agreements and specific scholarships, proved to both appeal to and support decisions for transfer. And it was these structural elements that were found to make transfer easier that were cited most often as suggestions for improvement. The most common response, when asked about challenges in the transfer process, was the difficulty encountered in identifying or connecting with a person who could answer their transfer specific questions. Providing a person dedicated to supporting transfer students was suggested as a solution.

The goal of the focus group discussions was to hear the stories behind standard questionnaires (such as the Graduate Satisfaction Survey (GSS) that is part of the reporting of the Key Performance Indicators) or administrative data. The responses highlighted three themes which dominated the discussions. A number of the participants wanted to explain their circumstances to distinguish their abilities from their grades which they felt did not reflect their true potential. For them, college was seen as an opportunity to redeem themselves from poor performance at either secondary school or university. They felt their college performance reflected their true ability, rather than the previous grades which were poor because of circumstances, be it personal or as a result of poor program fit.

Although questionnaires, such as the GSS, attempt to quantify the extent of parental encouragement as a reason for further education, participants identified the pressure, whether real or perceived, for a university education. That pressure manifested itself in the original choice of schools or as one rationale for transfer.

Finally, the degree to which self-confidence played a critical role in supporting transfer decisions is clearly articulated by a number of participants in these focus groups, particularly by those who decided to transfer from college to university. It is the internalization of the encouragement from course success or faculty support, as expressed in varying levels of confidence, which ultimately lead them to pursuing other educational opportunities.