

Transferability Expectations and Realities: Predictors of Success and Satisfaction from Student Transfer Experiences

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Ontario has been decisive in driving recognition of prior learning, and so it is appropriate to better understand institutional responses to this direction. This report summarizes the current state of credit transfer and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, collectively referred to as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), at Centennial College. The topic of Ontario RPL is particularly important in light of an increasing number of students accessing credit transfer pathways, as well as continued use of course-to-course transfer credit and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) applications.

Examining the RPL mechanism through the student experience lens is important. While institutions will mindfully and with purpose create, sometimes, robust information dissemination and support systems, occasionally such systems fail to adequately serve those for which it was intended. Using expectation-reality gaps as a barometer of student experience helps Centennial College on two fronts: 1) front end information dissemination and expectation management, and 2) back end support services.

This study uses a mixed methods design of pre-post surveying, focus groups and interviews to address three questions:

- 1) What expectation-reality gaps exist for incoming Centennial College RPL students (awarded credit and benefits; resources, sources and support; and policies and procedures)?
- 2) Does the first term academic progression affect students' satisfaction and attitudes regarding program and RPL experiences?
- 3) What aspects of RPL affect RPL success, satisfaction with the RPL process and Centennial College satisfaction?

A non-probability convenience sample was collected from the 417 RPL students across the fall, winter and summer cohorts of 2014-15. In total, 140 students (34%) completed the pre-survey and 98 of the 140 students (70%) completed the post-survey. Twenty-seven students participated in focus groups and interviews. Chi-square analysis was used to compare respondent data (from surveying) and population data (from college records), and this determined that the respondent group sample is representative of the population.

The demographic profile of an average Centennial College student is one who is classified as a domestic student in their 20s and enrolled in a diploma program. The average student will have attended 1 prior postsecondary institution, applies for 1-2 transfer credits with varying success rates across schools—School of Community and Health Studies students are most successful.

Centennial College RPL students experience an increased perceived understanding of credit transfer and PLAR from an offer of admission to the end of their first term. A significant difference was found for understanding of transfer credit between these two time periods: 60% of students have an understanding of transfer credit and its policies at offer of admission, and this jumps to 93% at the end of the first term. The same significant trend is observed with PLAR, albeit less pronounced. Comparatively, students have a much better initial understanding of transfer credit than PLAR.

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For the most part, the respondents report that they prefer to apply for transfer credit at the beginning of their program and are satisfied with the amount of credit they receive—students state that they consider it a validation of their prior learning. However, PLAR applicants show some uncertainty or dissatisfaction with the lack of credit they receive—perhaps attributable to only having a mediocre understanding of PLAR and its policies. Those who do receive credit, students claim they were able to reduce their course load, which resulted in them having more free time to focus on their other courses and employment.

While the data show evidence of students' developing realistic expectations in some areas, there are multiple occurrences of statistically significant gaps between expectations and realities. Student expectations noticeably fall short for those who expect more than three transfer credits and those who expect PLAR credit. Sizeable (10%+) expectation-reality gaps also exist across numerous other variables: reduced course load benefit, reduced educational costs benefit, additional time for employment benefit, clear information regarding eligible transfer credits, assistance with understanding RPL decisions, assistance managing the RPL file, program advising and assistance with grade calculation.

Many students stated that they had to research on their own to determine how the transfer credit application process worked, with the majority of students finding information via the Centennial website or through contacting a Centennial College staff member. Some students who spoke with a Centennial College staff member found that they received inconsistent information and were often sent to speak with more than one staff member.

The majority of students expected that a transcript and course outline would be required in order to demonstrate completion of similar course content, however, international students and students who had been away from post-secondary school for a greater length of time, stated difficulties in obtaining a course outline. Many students cite the secondary submission of a transcript to be unnecessary if they submit the same one for admission purposes.

Once students completed their transfer credit application using the online application system, they expressed their gratitude over the streamlined process, ease of use and quickness of the online system. Many students stated that they received a transfer credit decision anywhere from 2 days to 2 weeks, which was much faster than they had expected.

In regards to RPL process satisfaction, respondents find the process fair (59%), quick (61%) and clear (55%). Students do not experience a change in opinion on these three facets of satisfaction across the first term, suggesting that movement through the RPL process bears no effect. RPL students are overwhelmingly satisfied with Centennial College (78%) and their program (82%).

The researchers also sought predicting factors related to RPL success and satisfaction. The only significant predictor found for RPL success was the perceived fairness of the process. Despite findings from Arnold and Woodhead (2015) that credit transfer understanding plays a role in RPL success, those findings were not replicated in the analysis of the three 2014-15 cohorts.

Interestingly, satisfaction with the RPL process revealed two significant predictors. First, success rate has an effect on satisfaction; a likely explanation is that a higher success rate yields a narrower expectation-reality gap and leads to a more satisfying experience. Second, perceived quickness of

the RPL process is also a predictor of satisfaction. This may be explained by students' past experiences with slow, bureaucratic processes at other educational institutions.

This study also aggregated data between the 2013-14 cohorts from Arnold and Woodhead (2015) and the 2014-15 cohorts for this study. This leads to a data set that is approximately double in size, and thus may produce more predictors through regression analysis. The aggregate data set offers two predictors for RPL success: Ontario PSE credential and FQC. For predicting RPL credit satisfaction, post-awareness of transfer credit and FQC are predictors of satisfaction.

The analysis yields predictors of college satisfaction as well: clarity and program satisfaction. It is possible that students look to clarity of information and overall opinions of their program as a means to gauge Centennial College quality—and by extension satisfaction with the institution.

A few recommendations arise from the results that pertain to Centennial College RPL policy and practice. While these recommendations are specific to Centennial College, other colleges would be welcome to consider similar adoptions to their own institutional practices. All efforts should be undertaken to maintain a process that is fair, quick and clear:

- *Consistent Decision-Making:* A fair process requires consistency on at least two fronts. One, decisions must be consistent with posted standards (e.g. 80% affinity). Two, decisions must be consistent across applicants. Ability to achieve this consistency hinges on clear, published criteria for assessment along with robust transfer credit assessment training for all staff. While Centennial currently does both to some degree, it is suggested that the college revisit this and look to see how consistency can be further improved.
- *Policies and Procedures:* Administrators should change policy to allow students to use two courses from their previous institution to apply for one transfer credit at Centennial. This would allow students to apply for more transfer credits when one course alone does not meet 80% affinity.
- *Increase Initial Support:* Centennial now has dedicated pathway advisors to provide advice and guidance to prospective Centennial students. Between these advisors and the dedicated advisors for incoming students, there is great capacity for initial RPL support to be improved, including the promotion of ONTransfer.ca's course transfer function, so that students can make more accurate choices when applying for transfer credit. In order to accomplish this, RPL staff experts need to transfer knowledge and expertise to these student-facing advisors.
- *Further Automate Processes:* Centennial has an online transfer credit application system that allows students to upload transcripts and outlines; this same system allows faculty to assess applications and render decisions. However, many students cite frustration with having to upload transcripts after already providing them as part of their college applications. The college and students would both benefit from streamlining of transcript submissions, as well as incorporation of PLAR self-assessments into the online system.
- *Access to Other Institution Outlines:* While this is more of a system-wide recommendation, students find it challenging to find course outlines for courses previously taken at other

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institutions. The Ontario PSE system should consider developing a central repository of outlines/syllabi that is accessible for college staff and students.

A satisfying experience for students seems to hinge most on FQC. An RPL process that is fair, quick and clear promotes satisfaction with the RPL process. Perhaps most importantly for college consideration, a fair, quick and clear RPL process appears to promote satisfaction with the college itself.