

Executive Summary

It has been well established that different segments of the population are more or less likely to aspire to and attend college or university. In particular, students with disabilities, low income students, first generation students, students from rural communities, Indigenous students, and male students are less likely to attend university. These disparities in access are primarily a university issue, in that these groups are not generally underrepresented in colleges relative to the population. Based on these findings, it has been suggested that enhancing the college-to-university pathway may be a vehicle to reduce inequities in university access (Kerr, McCloy, Liu, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to examine the profiles and pathways of college-to-university students in order to enhance our understanding of who is accessing this transfer pathway, and their unique needs and experiences. To do this, the motivations, experiences, and outcomes of four groups of Ontario students were examined: 1) College applicants who aspired to complete a 4-year degree; 2) College applicants who did not aspire to complete a 4-year degree; 3) University applicants with a completed college credential; and, 4) University applicants with no previous PSE. This study also contributes to the literature by offering insights into the factors that may contribute to the persistence and success of transfer students.

The study had two phases. In phase one, Academica Group's University and College Applicant Study (UCAS™) database was utilized in order to compare college applicants who aspired to a degree to those who do not, and to compare university applicants who had a previous college credential to those who had no previous PSE experience. The results are based on a sample of over 125,000 Ontario college and university applicants who participated in the UCAS™ between 2010 and 2015. This included 70,813 survey respondents who had applied to Ontario universities, and 57,839 survey respondents who had applied to Ontario colleges.

In the second phase, an online survey instrument was designed to track the pathways of applicants following their application to postsecondary education. In addition to demographic questions, the survey asked about students' decision making process, application outcomes, motivations, postsecondary goals, use of support resources, and the transfer experience. 2,093 respondents completed the survey and were included in the analysis.

For analysis in both phase one and phase two, survey respondents were organized into four pathway groups:

- **Aspirants:** College applicant whose highest planned level of education is a 4-year degree program or graduate level university program (Master's, PhD etc.)
- **Non-Aspirants:** College applicant whose highest planned level of education is a college certificate, diploma or advanced diploma
- **College Transfer Students:** University applicants who completed a college credential or trades / vocational / technical school program
- **University Students With No Previous PSE:** University applicants whose highest level of education was a high school diploma

Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do the sociodemographic, academic, and decision-making profiles of Ontario college applicants who aspire to university compare to those who do not?
2. How do the sociodemographic, academic, and decision-making profiles of Ontario university applicants who had previously completed a college credential compare to those with no previous PSE?
3. What are the outcomes and experiences of college applicants with degree aspirations?
4. How do the transition experiences compare between college-to-university transfer students and those with no previous PSE?

Key findings related to each research question are summarized below, along with conclusions and next steps.

How do the sociodemographic, academic, and decision-making profiles of Ontario college applicants who aspire to university compare to those who do not?

Ontario college applicants who aspired to complete a university degree differed from those who did not aspire to a degree on a number of characteristics. Rural students, those with dependents, first generation students, students with a disability, Indigenous students, Caucasian/White students, students born in Canada, and those who primarily spoke English at home made up a significantly larger proportion of the “do not aspire to a degree” group, compared to the “aspire to a degree” group. Conversely, South Asian, Chinese, and Black students, females, single students, and those under age 25 made up a larger proportion of the “aspire to a degree” group.

Interestingly, there was no difference between the two groups in the two socioeconomic indicators examined (use of government loans, and household income).

Academically, college applicants who aspired to a degree tended to have slightly higher high school GPAs than those who did not aspire to a degree, and a slightly greater percentage had taken university preparatory courses in high school.

There were also some notable differences in the decision-making profiles of the two groups. While the most commonly reported reason for applying to PSE among both college applicants with degree aspirations and those without was to prepare to enter their chosen career, a larger proportion of applicants with degree aspirations stated that pursuing further graduate or professional study, giving back to society, and becoming actively involved in student life were reasons for applying. Further, a larger proportion of aspirants reported using almost every information source in researching their PSE options.

How do the sociodemographic, academic, and decision-making profiles of Ontario university applicants who had previously completed a college credential compare to those with no previous PSE?

The profiles of university applicants with a previous college credential and those with no previous PSE experience also differed significantly, with many of the traditionally under-represented groups in university making up a larger proportion of the population with a previous college credential. In particular, there was a larger percentage of first generation students, students with a disability, lower income students, Indigenous students, Black students, and rural students in the previous college credential group compared to the university applicant group with no previous PSE. These findings support previous research that suggested the college-to-university pathway may serve as a vehicle for under-represented students to access university (Kerr, McCloy, Liu, 2010).

Academically, university applicants who had completed a college credential were much less likely to have taken university preparatory courses in high school than those with no previous PSE experience, and their average high school GPA was significantly lower. More applicants with a previous college credential reported that hybrid/blended learning was their preferred

course delivery format, though overall on-campus courses were preferred by the largest proportion of both groups.

Motivations for applying to PSE and information sources used differed between these two groups as well, though the most striking finding was that university applicants with a previous college credential showed a much greater certainty that their academic program would lead to a satisfying career and that their academic program was right for them.

What are the outcomes and experiences of college applicants with degree aspirations?

Of the college applicants with degree aspirations who responded to the follow-up survey, about half still aspired to complete a degree, 13.4% had successfully transferred, and 39.4% no longer had aspirations for a degree. While just over one-third of those who no longer aspired reported that their interests had simply changed, an equal proportion stated that they no longer planned to attain a degree because they could not afford university.

Among college students who still aspired to complete a degree, approximately one-third did not know whether there was a formal transfer agreement in place between their college program and the university program they would apply to, and two-fifths did not know how much credit they expected to receive for their college education. Lack of guidance on application procedures, a lack of clarity between various credit granting processes, and finding/confirming requirements for transfer credits were the most frequently anticipated challenges. However, 42% said they did not expect to experience any challenges in transferring to university.

How do the transition experiences compare between college-to-university transfer students and those with no previous PSE?

University students with a previous college credential were less satisfied than non-transfer students with all aspects of their university's application and transition process that were examined. Areas where the largest proportions of college-to-university transfer students felt their university needed improvement was in relation to academic orientation, providing information about the admissions process and requirements, providing information about required courses, and campus orientation.

In comparison to non-transfer students, college-to-university transfer students were more likely to participate in classroom discussion and engage in student–faculty interactions such as discussing assignments/grades, ideas, and career plans, but were less likely to engage in on-campus volunteer activities, student clubs, and cultural events.

In terms of on-campus resources, financial aid and personal counseling were accessed by a greater proportion of college-to-university transfer students than non-transfer students, but fewer accessed orientation programs and recreation and athletic facilities.

Conclusions

The results of this study confirm previous research showing that the college-to-university transfer student population has a relatively large proportion of traditionally under-represented groups compared to those who are entering university from high school, supporting the idea that the college-to-university pathway may serve as a vehicle for under-represented students to access university (Kerr, McCloy, Liu, 2010). These students were shown to be highly engaged in their learning and academically confident, a finding also supported in previous research (Pendleton and Lambert-Maberly, 2006). However, the results also suggest that more work needs to be done to support both the admissions process and the university transition experience. Traditional university channels for information provision, such as viewbooks, brochures, open houses, and university fairs are not being heavily accessed by college-to-university transfer students. Rather these students seem to rely more on interpersonal contact for their individual circumstances, such as emails and phone calls with university staff, talking with a professor, and informal visits to campus. Similarly, university orientation programming is often geared primarily to the direct-entry student and transfer students are much less likely to participate. Orientation, particularly to the academic expectations of university, was a key area where transfer students felt their university needed to improve.

While college-to-university transfer students tend to be highly academically engaged, engagement outside of the classroom is also challenge. This is likely related in part to age differences, as college-to-university transfer students tend to have more outside responsibilities such as dependent children, as well as less financial support. Developing flexible ways to enrich the non-academic experience of college-to-university transfer students should be priority.

Overall, increasing the number of students utilizing the college-to-university transfer pathway should help to reduce inequities in overall university participation; however, the results also demonstrated that there are still inequities in the aspirations of college students that reproduce those seen in the college-university divide. These inequities require further attention.