



Student Pathways into Ontario
Colleges' Bachelor's Degrees: Patterns
of mobility, student characteristics,
academic and labour market outcomes
Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Ontario Colleges have been offering bachelor's degrees since 2002, and they have grown steadily: in 2020 there were 3,896 graduates across the 12 colleges that offer college degrees.¹ Associated with this expansion, colleges have been developing a variety of pathways into their degree programs, including course credit, bridges, preparatory pathways, and block transfer. However, a significant knowledge gap exists in terms of profile of students who take these pathways, the amount of advanced standing that has been provided, and whether their academic and labour market outcomes are comparable to non-transfers. This study addresses this knowledge gap by analyzing the sociodemographic profile, educational background, pathway to degree entry, and academic outcomes of baccalaureate students at five of Ontario's colleges, who comprise 85% of degree enrolment.

Research questions include:

- 1) To what extent do students enter college degrees from previous PSE? How much advanced standing and/or transfer credit is applied?
- 2) What are the student characteristics by pathway? Does the diploma-to-degree pathway increase the diversity of degree students?
- 3) Academic Outcomes: Do college students who enter a degree program with advanced standing fare as well as students completing the full four years?
- 4) Does graduate satisfaction, labour market outcomes, or further education, six months after graduation, differ by pathway?

Methodology

The sample for the current study included all students who enrolled in a degree at one of Seneca, Conestoga, Sheridan, George Brown, or Humber College between fall of 2015 and winter of 2018 (n=21,036). Students were then followed until winter of 2020. Within each institution, individual students were followed from high school, through other PSE (if applicable), to college degree entry and either graduation or the point they left the degree. For a subset of graduates, their records were linked to the KPI Graduate Satisfaction Survey. Information on gender, age, status in Canada (international, Canadian-born, non-international), neighbourhood income (census), and region of origin in Ontario were collected for sociodemographic information. High school records were analyzed to determine grade averages and course type most commonly taken (college or university preparatory). Previous educational pathway was determined based on records submitted to the institution for external transfers, and enrolment records for those who previously attended their own institution. Students were then assigned to the appropriate pathway of high school direct, high school non-direct, internal college transfer, external college, university, or both college and university. Students who had previously attended their own college were a part of a stand-alone analysis with a variety of pre-degree information and data collected. The incidence and amount of block transfer credit (advanced standing) provided towards the degree was also collected across all transfer pathways.

Measured outcomes include enrolment status at years one, two, and three after entry (retained or graduated from initial degree program), graduation rate within four years, and overall GPA in the

¹ In comparison, the three Northern Ontario universities have a combined 4400 bachelor degree graduates.

degree. In addition, the 2017-18 graduates were linked to the 2017-18 KPI Graduate Satisfaction Survey, and employment and satisfaction outcomes were analyzed. Both descriptive and regression techniques were used in the study.

Results

Student Profile

Over half of the degree entrants (55%) had obtained some form of postsecondary education after high school, with over a third of students having previously attended their own college, 17% having attended a university, and over 11% having attended a different college before entering their college degree. Many students had attended more than one institution type. Overall, a fifth of all degree entrants had obtained advanced standing (block credit). Within the transfer population, 35% had obtained block credit, with internal college transfers having obtained the most block credit on average, and university transfers having obtained the least.

Health and community service areas had the highest share of transfer students, at 64 and 67%, respectively. Community service and hospitality areas each had the highest proportion of students who transferred internally (37 and 39%, respectively), with the health area having the highest proportion from university (31%). Degrees in the community service area had the most entrants with block transfer, with creative and applied arts having the least. Creative and applied arts and health areas more often drew students from preparatory access programs, rather than transfer or block pathways.

Since four of the five colleges were in the Greater Toronto Area, GTA colleges and universities were the primary sending institutions, with York, University of Toronto, and Toronto Metropolitan University being the top three institutions, followed by GTA colleges.

Students who transferred from university or entered the college degree directly from high school were more likely to be from higher income neighbourhoods, compared with non-direct entrants and college transfers. Students who transferred from college, either their own or an external college, were the least likely to have taken university preparatory courses in high school and to have obtained the grades and courses required for admission to a college degree. Instead, college transfers often relied on transfer pathways for degree access.

Females, older students, domestic students not born in Canada, and low-income students were the most likely to have taken a block transfer pathway. Of the 31% of students who transferred within their own colleges, almost half obtained block credit. A further 25% had taken a preparatory credential, which enabled admission directly into the degree. Students primarily transferred within similar program areas, with 76% having previously graduated, and 77% had a pre-degree average of B or better.

Student outcomes

Overall, 75% of degree students continued into their second year of their degree program, 68% of entrants either graduated or continued to the third year of their degree of entry, and 65% obtained a B average or better. Descriptive and regression analysis was performed on three separate populations: 1) the full population comprising transfers and non-transfers, 2) transfers only, and 3) internal transfers, i.e. those who previously attended their own college. Some differences in outcomes were explained by sociodemographic factors, pathways, degree program area, academic background, and college of attendance.

Pathway of entry: In the full population, transfer students outperformed non-transfer students across all outcomes studied. Within specific pathways, students who took a non-direct pathway from high school underperformed in all measured outcomes, whereas students from university outperformed in terms of grades. Despite having weaker HS backgrounds, in general, previous college students (from both internal and external) performed similarly to those entering directly from high school in terms of retention and grades and were more likely to graduate within four years.

Degree entrants who took block pathways outperformed those who had not in terms of all measured outcomes, including retention rate, graduation rate, and grades. For example, 77% of block students obtained a B average or better, compared with 61% of those without block credit. In addition, 81% of block transfers were retained or had graduated in their degree program in their first year, compared to 74% without block transfer credit. In terms of graduation rates, 72% of block students graduated within four years, compared with 41% of those without block. Within the transfer populations, those who transferred and obtained block credit also outperformed those who did not obtain block credit, an effect that was seen in both descriptive and regression models.

Sociodemographic background: Gender, age, status in Canada, and neighbourhood income had differing effects on outcomes, dependent on the population of analysis. In the full population males, younger students, students from low- or mid-income neighbourhoods, and domestic students not born in Canada often had weaker outcomes in the models studied. However, within the transfer population, older students had lower retention and graduation rates but higher grades. Additionally, in this population males and domestic students not born in Canada had lower graduation rates and grades but were just as likely to be retained, whereas students from high-income neighbourhoods were more likely to be retained, but not to get better grades. Within the internal transfer population (those transferring to a degree within their own college), these characteristics were either not significant or the results were reversed. For example, male students and students from lower-income neighbourhoods did not differ on most of the outcomes, whereas older students had weaker outcomes, and domestic students not born in Canada had stronger outcomes for some of the outcome measures.

Academic background: High school grades and course selection were both important influences on academic outcomes in the full model and within most of the transfer models. Within the transfer population, having graduated with a college or university credential previously was also a positive influence on all outcomes. However, in the internal transfer population, it was pre-degree grades, and not high school grades or course selection, that affected retention and graduation rates. However, grades in high school remained a significant influence on grades in college. This demonstrates that for transfer students, performance in postsecondary before transfer is likely of more importance than high school grades, and in particular, course stream in high school (college versus university preparatory), particularly for graduation rates and grades.

Program area: Students from degrees in community service, creative and applied arts, and health areas generally outperformed other program areas across all populations and models studied. In terms of students who transferred internally, students who took preparatory programs as degree access programs (no block credit), had higher retention rates than other pre-degree programs, but a lower share of those with a B grade or higher. When compared to those who came directly from high school, those from preparatory programs had higher retention rates and a similar proportion with a B or better.

Graduate Outcomes: Preliminary results from the 2017-18 Graduate Survey showed that students completing their degrees within three years had stronger labour market outcomes, in terms of earnings and job relatedness and satisfaction six months after graduation.

Key findings and recommendations

Key findings of the study indicate that pathways into college degrees are very diverse, with the block transfer pathway, in particular, serving as a pathway for diverse students. As well, in general, students transferring from other postsecondary education into a degree outperform non-transfers, and those with a block transfer (advanced standing) outperform others in terms of grades, graduation, and retention rates.

Recommendations include providing more support or bridging for students who enter non-directly from high school; encouraging academically strong diploma students to transfer into degree programs within their own colleges; enhancing and expanding other college-to-degree pathways and university-to-college degree pathways. In addition, to increase degree access, Ontario college certificate level preparatory programs could be created or enhanced.