

Executive Summary

Studies on college to university transfer typically focus on a discrete aspect of the pathway, such as who aspires to transfer, who ultimately transfers and why, or outcomes after transfer to university. In contrast, this paper focuses on understanding the entire pathway, using the Liberal Arts Transfer (LAT) program at Seneca College as a case study.

Seneca's LAT program evolved from a two-year General Arts and Science (GAS) preparatory program launched in 1986,¹ into a joint university transfer program with York University in 1998. LAT is both innovative and academically intense. Students are required to take a full college course load, maintain an overall "B" average, and take college and university courses within the same academic year. LAT graduates can potentially receive as much as two full years of credit towards a Bachelor of Arts degree at York.

The analysis sample for this study included two populations: 1) 3,622 entrants who began the LAT program at Seneca in 2005–2012 and 2) 1,268 LAT students/graduates who transferred to York University between 2002 and 2012.

Research questions included the following:

- What are the characteristics of students entering the LAT program?
- What is the share of entrants who progress into second year and eventually graduate from LAT?
- What share of LAT entrants, including leavers and graduates, continue on to York?
- What are the sociodemographic and academic characteristics of those who transfer?
- What share of transfers graduate from York University? How do they perform at York academically?
- What are the sociodemographic and academic characteristics of those who are successful at York after transfer?

Method

Six datasets were linked to create a student-level dataset that includes the following variables: high school performance, neighbourhood income (using 2006 census data), aspirations for transfer, previous education, English-language proficiency, demographics, and Seneca and York academic outcomes including grades, completion, withdrawal, transfer, and graduation.

Regression models (OLS) were run to control for the independent effects of each variable, and multiple models were run with various subgroups.

Results

Progression to graduation from LAT

By the end of year two, 34% of all LAT entrants had switched to another Seneca program, 45% had left Seneca without graduating, 10% had graduated from LAT, and 11% were still enrolled in LAT. By the end of year four, 15.2% of the entering cohort had graduated from LAT.

¹ In 2008, the GAS program was re-named the Liberal Arts Transfer (LAT) diploma program to better reflect the program's content and role as a pathway to a degree in the humanities and liberal arts. Seneca entered into a joint agreement with University of Toronto in 2008. This study, however, focuses on the Seneca to York transfer pathway.

Higher grades in high school (particularly in university preparatory courses) and college-level English at entry were important influencers on whether a student stayed on track in first year and completed the LAT program on time.

Propensity to transfer to York University

Of the York stream entrants, 64% were under the age of 20, and 48% were male. Eighty-nine percent were Canadian citizens, with 73% reporting English as their first language. In terms of socioeconomic status, 71% did not have a parent with a university degree, and 24% came from lower income neighbourhoods, defined as the bottom tercile of the Ontario population. Over two-thirds of entrants took mostly university preparatory courses in high school, however 76% had averages under 70%.

Only 7% of the 2002–2010 York stream entrants had high school grades and courses required for university entrance in Ontario, yet 82% had plans for university after graduation from college. Many of these LAT cohorts continued to struggle academically at college. Over one-half left Seneca without a Seneca credential or without transferring to York.

Of those who graduated from LAT, 61% transferred to York. More than one-quarter (26%) of entrants transferred to York by 2012, but less than half (12%) graduated from LAT before transfer. Nearly one-quarter of LAT entrants (23%) graduated from Seneca, but did not transfer to York by 2012.

Academic performance in high school and at Seneca (LAT), English-language proficiency at college entry, and graduation before transfer were independent influencers on whether a student transferred to York. Students who took mostly college preparation courses in high school and obtained an average of less than 70% were particularly at risk for not transferring or graduating. Only 46% of those who did not both graduate from LAT and transfer to York were placed in college-level English compared with 69% of those who both graduated and transferred to York.

Graduation from LAT before transfer had a major influence on whether the student transferred, even when controlling for grades at Seneca. Obtaining a Seneca GPA of greater than 3.0 increased the likelihood of transfer to York by over 40 percentage points, the largest influence of all variables.

The influence of parental education, first language, and status in Canada differed little across pathways. Gender and age had little or no effect, nor did year of entry over the study duration. Previous university did not affect propensity to graduate or transfer, but aspiration for university upon entry had an effect. Aspiration for university was higher for both graduates and non-graduates who ultimately transferred to York, than for their non-transfer counterparts.

Post-transfer outcomes at York

Transfers who were LAT graduates, non-Canadian citizens, younger, and obtained good Seneca grades were more likely to achieve a York GPA of 5.0 or higher, the minimum required for graduation with an honours degree from York. The transfer's age did not influence their York GPA, but their neighbourhood income did. Higher-income students were more likely to transfer and to attain a GPA of 5.0, but not more likely to graduate.

Compared to LAT students who transferred without graduating from the program, those who graduated before transfer were more successful at York—they had more transfer credit and were stronger academically.

There was a clear relationship between grades at Seneca and performance at York, irrespective of graduation or articulation status at Seneca. Only half of transfers to York who had a Seneca GPA of below 3.0 (70%) graduated, compared with the 70% of transfers with a GPA of 3.0 and above. Graduates

of the articulated LAT stream were the most likely to graduate from York (76%). They had the highest graduation rates and grades, took less time to complete, and were more likely to complete a four-year than a three-year degree program.

Graduates of the articulated stream who withdrew had a higher York average, at 66%, compared with 53% and 56% for LAT non-graduates and LAT non-articulated stream graduates respectively. More than half of those who transferred without completing LAT ultimately withdrew from York.

No clear relationship between high school grades and success after transfer could be established. Likewise, a student's first language and English-language placement at college entry were unrelated to their academic success at York.

Conclusions & recommendations

Students need comprehensive academic supports to ensure success in LAT, from college entry through to university graduation. Only about 16% of LAT entrants ultimately graduated from York. Seneca and York need to inform prospective students of LAT's intense academic requirements for completion, transfer, and graduation from York. Current admission standards for LAT are minimal, requiring only an OSSD and Grade 12 English. More than three-quarters of LAT entrants had a high school average of less than 70% and nearly half did not place in college-level English. Over half of transfers had a Seneca GPA of less than 3.0, and half of those ultimately withdrew from York.

The results of this study, however, also showed that some students performed well academically despite weak high school backgrounds. Once they transferred, their high school performance was no longer a good indicator of how well they would perform at university, whereas their college grades were. The regression models showed an independent effect on graduating even when controlling for academic or sociodemographic factors, which likely related to a high level of student resilience or determination to finish a credential despite struggling academically. Any review of admission standards will need to provide open access, allowing students who struggled in high school or performed poorly in a previous post-secondary program, to pursue a viable pathway to university.

About half (51%) of the entering class did not graduate from Seneca with any credential, and did not transfer to York. Of those who did transfer, 20% did not graduate from LAT or from York within the timeframe of the study. Students need to have other credential options, such as an alternate diploma or degree pathway at Seneca or other colleges.