

Student Experiences in Credit Transfer at Ontario Colleges

Summary Report

Alex Usher
Paul Jarvey

Introduction

Student pathways increasingly rely on transfer between postsecondary institutions as greater numbers of students move between institutions, pursue multiple credentials, or return to postsecondary education. In a 2011 survey of Ontario college students, 41% reported having some post-secondary experience; the same survey also found that 19% of respondents said their main goal in applying for their current program was to “prepare for further university or college study.” Transfer of credit for prior learning is clearly an increasingly mainstream educational activity, and institutions are under increasing pressure to improve the processes by which this occurs.

The mandate for this study began in 2006 when Ontario colleges embarked on the *Improving College System Pathways* (ICSP) project in order to improve pathways within and between colleges, to understand the barriers that may exist for students, and to develop strategies to improve student mobility. The ICSP identified some dissatisfaction with the existing credit-transfer process and proposed a second phase of research to explore the sources of that dissatisfaction.

The following pages report the results of a study that sought to better understand the experiences of transfer students. It investigated the sources of their satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and potential barriers to credit transfer between Ontario colleges. Between January and June 2012, 232 students across Ontario colleges were interviewed about their experiences with credit transfer. They were asked to discuss the difficulty of the credit transfer process overall, how helpful they perceived the assistance that they received to be, and a series of questions designed to look for potential barriers to credit transfer between Ontario colleges.

This study was commissioned in full by Colleges Ontario. Overall direction for the project was provided by the Vice-Presidents Academic Pathways Task Force. Funding for this project was provided by the College University Consortium Council (now the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer).

Methodology

This research used a sample survey methodology to collect mixed quantitative and qualitative data about the credit transfer experiences of students at Ontario colleges. The research instrument combined an online survey with a telephone interview. This methodology permitted analysis of the factors that contribute to difficulties experienced by transfer students and also gave respondents an opportunity to communicate their experiences in detail.

All 24 colleges participated in the recruitment of students. At each institution, e-mail invitations to participate in the research project were sent to between 100 and 150 students who had recently transferred (i.e., Fall 2010 semester and more recently) into that institution from another Ontario university or college program. Students enrolled in graduate certificate programs were excluded. Students were invited regardless of whether they had applied for or received credit for their previous

education. Students who met the above selection criteria were invited to participate in a telephone interview lasting 30-40 minutes, for which they received a small incentive payment.

A maximum of eleven students were surveyed from any single Ontario college; overall, 232 students were interviewed for this project.

Results

Who transfers in to colleges and what do they study?

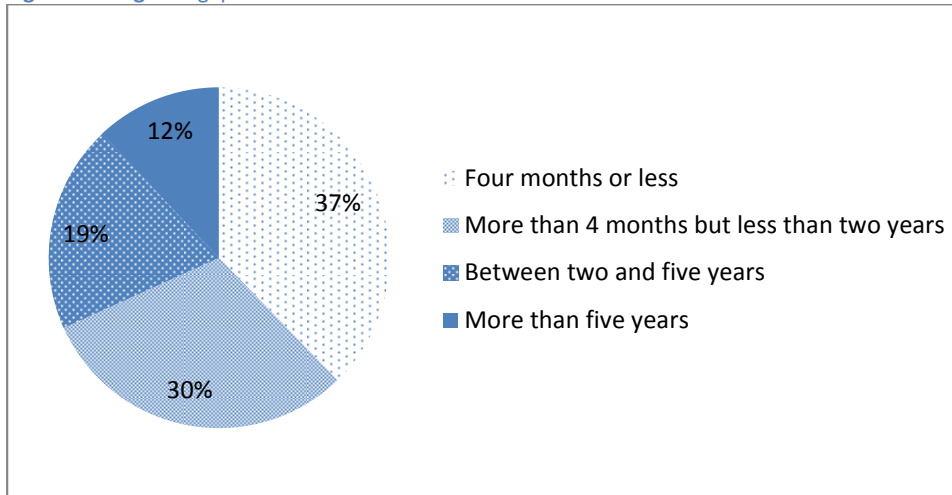
Just over 52% of respondents transferred from a university, with the remainder switching from another college. Among university students, 49% had come from an arts program; among college students, 27% came from community service programs. Transfer students from both sectors were most likely to enrol in health sciences and business programs. Overall, roughly three-quarters of students changed their field of study when switching schools. This pattern has an important impact on credit transfer as changing fields entirely significantly decreases the amount of prior learning related to the destination program, and in many cases, this reduces the amount of credit eligible for transfer.

Table 1: Most common source and destination programs by previous institution attended

Source program	College	University	Destination program	College	University
Arts	13%	49%	Arts	11%	7%
Business	13%	3%	Business	22%	22%
Community Services	27%	14%	Community Services	18%	19%
Health and Health Sciences	11%	10%	Health and Health Sciences	28%	31%
Technology	8%	5%	Technology	11%	12%
Other	5%	4%	Other	7%	5%
(blank)	26%	16%	(blank)	4%	3%

Among project participants, the largest proportion (37%) transferred with a period of four months or less between programs. One in ten participants had transferred credit obtained over five years previously.

Figure 1: Length of gap between source and destination institution



Just over half of respondents indicated they were switching programs in order to improve their career opportunities. About one-quarter indicated that their interests had changed, but did not mention the labour market as a reason for the change in interest. Other reasons for switching included a preference for the college learning style, and increased convenience of the institution’s location. Less than two per cent of respondents indicated that lower tuition fees were a factor in the decision to switch.

A small group of 40 students may have been eligible for credit transfer but chose not to apply. While 16 of these respondents offered no reason for not applying for credit transfer, the rest gave explanations that fell into four categories. Ten respondents did not apply because they did not think their application for credit would be successful. Eight could have applied but chose not to because they wanted to improve their knowledge of the course material. Nine were unaware that credit transfer was possible, and two did not apply because they felt that the application process required too much effort.

How much credit actually gets transferred?

Within our sample, 75% both applied for and received credits. Only one in twenty students who applied received no credit whatsoever. Twenty percent of students did not apply for credit; intriguingly, just over a third of these received transfer credit in any event. This is because some programs evaluate all incoming students’ transcripts and assign advanced standing to those with relevant prior knowledge without requiring students to engage in the application process.

Table2: Sample characteristics- Application for and receipt of transfer credits

		Did you receive transfer credits?	
		No	Yes
Did you apply separately for transfer credits?	No	13%	7%
	Yes	4%	75%

Because such a large portion of students were switching fields of study, the amount of credit transfer received did not necessarily shorten the time to completion of the current field of study. Roughly ten per cent of all students received credit for thirteen or more courses, but in 40% of those cases, this resulted in a shortening of program length of less than a year (that is, general credit was awarded, but program requirements were such that not all of this credit could be used to shorten the program).

Table 31: Summary of credits received and shortening of current program of study

Length by which current program of study was shortened	%	Count	Number of credits received			
			0-4	5-8	9-12	>13
less than one semester or not at all	80%	144	78%	23%	4%	5%
one semester or more, but less than two	8%	14	14%	64%	7%	14%
two semesters or more, but less than three	9%	17	6%	12%	41%	41%
three semesters or more, but less than four	2%	4	0%	0%	0%	100%
four semesters or more	1%	1	0%	0%	0%	100%

Roughly two-thirds of all transfer students – and fully 80% of those whose transfer requests were rejected – received an explanation for the credit transfer decision. The large majority (77 per cent) of those who received an explanation were satisfied with it. Dissatisfaction with the explanation was reported almost exclusively by those respondents who had not received all the credit they expected.

Satisfaction with the transfer process

Broadly, students’ overall satisfaction with their new institution was closely correlated to the perceived **difficulty of the credit transfer process** and the **perceived helpfulness of college staff** during the transfer process.

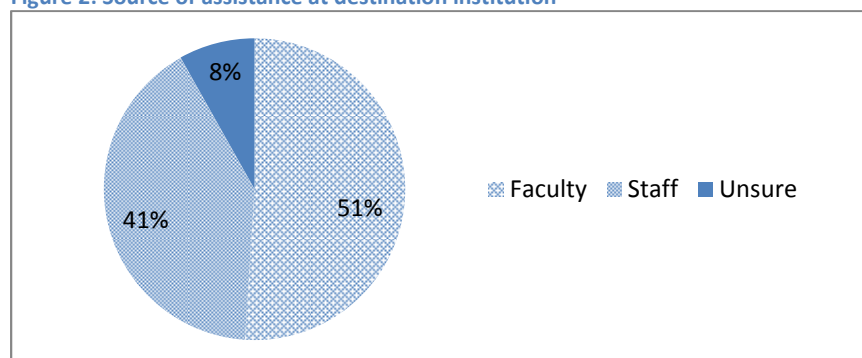
Across the entire sample, 60% of students described the process as “Easy” or “very easy”, compared to 19% who described it as “difficult” or “very difficult.” Perceptions of the difficulty of the process were directly related to the amount of time it took students to prepare their applications (including all supporting materials) and how long it took for them to learn the result of their application. Students who took less than one week to prepare their application and supporting documentation were more likely to reflect positively on all aspects of the experience. This was especially true for level of difficulty, where respondents for whom the process took more than one week were also much more likely to rate the process as difficult (4 or 5 on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is *very easy* and 5 is *very difficult*). Similarly, when it took over one month to learn the result of their applications, students were less likely to find the process easy (1 or 2 on the same scale) and more likely to find the process difficult (4 or 5) than other respondents. Students who waited one week or more were less likely to find the process easy (1 or 2) than respondents who waited for less than a week.

Student descriptions of the transfer process buttress the statistical case. Students frequently reported that the most difficult part of the process was waiting to know what the result of their application would be, sometimes attending classes for which they would be exempted if their application was successful. Students also pointed to the amount of time and effort required to retrieve course outlines as the most difficult part. In three isolated cases, the long amount of time required by the process made credit transfer impossible because the semester in which the credit would have been applied was completed.

Using the same scale, 74% of respondents gave staff involved in their transfer process a 1 or 2 (i.e., “helpful”), compared to just 11% who gave staff a 4 or 5 (i.e., “unhelpful”). Again, length of time required to prepare an application was a major factor, with students who required more than 1 week of preparation being significantly less likely to view staff as “helpful.” Another key determinant of satisfaction – at least among those who did not receive the amount of transfer credit they desired – was the explanation they received (i.e., why their application for credit transfer was accepted or rejected). Where students received no explanation or one they felt to be insufficient, they tended to rate the staff as unhelpful and hence be less satisfied overall with their new program.

The most common source of a positive impression was from instances where staff dealt with the issues brought to them promptly and effectively. In these cases, the staff person had the knowledge and resources to help the student, or knew the appropriate staff person to deal with their concern. Of particular importance is the fact that these people tended not to be registrarial or admissions staff. It was often faculty that helped students through the process, a fact that underlines the need to think of academic staff as being “front line” workers when it comes to assisting students.

Figure 2: Source of assistance at destination institution



More generally, students who found the staff helpful tended to describe their experiences in terms of “friendly, personalized service.” Descriptions of unhelpful interactions focused on staff not knowing the answer to a question, being provided with inaccurate information, or of being sent to the incorrect office to have a question answered or issue dealt with. Many of these students felt they were being “bounced around” between offices or “passed on” to another staff member.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overwhelmingly, students in the Ontario college system who participated in this study expressed positive feelings about their institution, the staff they interacted with, and their experiences with the credit transfer process.

Nevertheless, several areas were identified where at least some institutions could improve. Each of the seven recommendations below discusses a practice or policy which appears to have facilitated the credit transfer process (or otherwise contributed positively to the student experience) where it was encountered.

- i. **Colleges with the best ratings ensured that staff and students had easy access to basic information about the credit transfer process.** Basic information includes the fact that credit transfer is possible, how to progress through the credit transfer process (explicitly), required documentation, contact information (which offices or individuals should be contacted for each step of the process), and important dates and deadlines related to the process. This information is crucial for students interested in initiating the credit transfer process, and for any staff who might assist them. Information needs to be accessible to staff as well as to students, and should be prepared with both audiences in mind.

Early knowledge of credit transfer allows students to start the process earlier, making it less likely that they will face time constraints or have to attend courses for which they expect to later receive credit— a common complaint among respondents. One student suggested making credit transfer a prominent part of the Common Application Form on www.ontariocolleges.ca, and another suggested sending a letter or email about credit transfer to all new students with prior PSE experience. Students at three colleges reported being told about credit transfer during a presentation or student orientation. Overall, respondents indicated that they looked to the website of their current college more often than any other resource.

- ii. **Colleges with the best ratings also provided detailed information about the process.** After students initiated the credit transfer process, it was common for them to have more detailed questions about which of their credits might be eligible, and how credit transfer might affect them. Detailed information should include details about the assessment process so that students can make a reasonably accurate guess as to whether their application will be successful (possibly including a list of courses that have been accepted for transfer credits in the past) and a clear description of how credits might affect scheduling and OSAP eligibility. Making this information publicly available can help staff and students avoid serious problems (like dropping to part-time status and inadvertently initiating OSAP loan repayment), and provides a resource to answer common questions. Most students looked for this information on the website of their current institution.
- iii. **Colleges with the best ratings demonstrated a culture of effective service.** Respondents' most positive experiences originated from interactions with staff who were both effective and

personable. Similarly, their worst experiences stemmed from instances where they perceived they had been treated poorly. In many cases, students described ending up in the office of a sympathetic dean, faculty member, or other staff person who helped them initiate the process or deal with an issue. A system in which many different staff and faculty understand the basics of the credit transfer process is more robust and reduces the chances that students will be frustrated by a staff member who is unable to assist or provides inaccurate information.

- iv. **Colleges with the best ratings had streamlined credit transfer application processes.** Wherever possible, avoiding the re-submission of documents, reducing the number of forms and approvals required, and designing for single-point of contact interactions can help to reduce the complexity of the application process for students.
- v. **Colleges with the best ratings provided support to students experiencing difficulty obtaining course outlines or course descriptions.** Collecting course outlines was commonly reported to be difficult and time consuming, especially for students with a longer gap between prior and current PSE. Respondents reported a number of ways in which institutions helped them with these difficulties, including helping them to contact their prior institution to request the documents, not requiring outlines to be submitted for courses that have been assessed for other students, and accepting unofficial outlines or otherwise being flexible about the documentation requirements.
- vi. **Colleges with the best ratings assessed applications in one week or less.** Students who waited one week or less were more likely to express lower perceived difficulty and higher overall satisfaction. Setting a one week-turnaround as a service benchmark would thus be an effective step to improving the credit transfer experience. Similarly, top-rated institutions promptly notified students of the results of the credit transfer application (by email or otherwise). This practice reduced delays between the assessment of the credit transfer application and the applicant learning the result.
- vii. **Colleges with the best ratings provided justifications for both assessment results and policy positions.** Students who understood the reasons why their credit application was denied rarely expressed frustration. Very few students both understood the rationale for the decision *and* disagreed with it. Making the rationale clear can help to encourage positive student experiences. This also applies to fees paid for credit transfer assessments, impacts on course schedules (or lack thereof), and consistency of tuition fees despite credits granted.