

# College Quarterly - Articles - College to University Transfer: An Educational Pipeline in Support of Social Equity

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College to University Transfer: An Educational Pipeline in Support of Social Equity

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Introduction

This paper will examine college to university transfer in Ontario. In doing so it will discuss the structure of higher education in Ontario; present the benefits and challenges of college to university transfer; examine the current system of transfer; and explore several strategies for improving opportunities for college to university transfer. It will be argued that increasing opportunities for transfer is not only a matter of meeting increased demand but it is also a question of social justice and equality of access. Increasing college to university transfer opportunities provides an educational pipeline for underrepresented groups.

In 2004, the Ontario government commissioned a review of the design and funding of higher education in the province. The resultant, *Ontario, A Leader in Learning* (2005) presented by the Honourable Bob Rae outlined specific strategies and recommendations for improving the system. A major component of the strategy for implementing change centered on college and university collaboration and the need for each sector to recognize each other's programming so that clear and efficient pathways could be created for students. As a result of the review the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) began to examine opportunities for improving the system of transfer of completed postsecondary credits and for the recognition of completed credentials (College Ontario, 2009a). Consequently, the ministry has launched a new ONTransfer website that aims to assist students with transfer; the new system claims to "help reduce the need to repeat similar courses or years, saving time and money, while providing a quality education" (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011, p. 1).

Ontario Colleges have been consistently advocating for improved college to university transfer. In the Colleges Ontario, *Vision 2000* (1990) document colleges urged the minister of colleges and universities to expand and improve opportunities for students to move between the college and university sector. Moreover, the Ontario-University Degree Completion Accord, 1999, also known as the Port Hope Accord set out parameters and a timetable for improving transfer. However, little follow up has occurred (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). Additionally, the College University Consortium Council (CUCC), when established in 1996 was charged with the mandate of improving opportunities for transfer, including joint education and training ventures that would facilitate the transfer of students between sectors, facilitate the creation of joint programs, and a seamless continuum of postsecondary education in Ontario (MacLennan, 2002). However, much of the work of the Council has focused on promoting collaborative programs between colleges and universities, i.e. individual agreements, rather than facilitating and promoting improved opportunities for transfer (Clark et al., 2009). Given the lack of follow through on these initiatives it is apparent that college to university transfer has not been a priority for decision makers and others in the Ontario system of higher education.

The movement of graduates between postsecondary institutions has become more common. For instance, almost 25 percent of college applicants indicate preparation for university as a main reason for applying to college, and 7 percent of graduates actually further their education at an Ontario university. Nevertheless, the percentage of college graduates that enrol in an Ontario degree program is low relative to other Canadian provinces and American states. In fact, in comparison to other jurisdictions Ontario has one of the worst rates of transfer. "The evidence of constantly growing demand from college students and graduates and Ontario's relatively low transfer rates supports the need for new direction in this critical area" (Colleges Ontario, 2009b, p. ii).

College to University transfer is most certainly an issue of access. Access should be considered not only in terms of numbers but also in relation to the composition of the participants, that is, ensuring "that access is equitable across gender groups, income categories, racial/ethnic groups, age groups (e.g. sequential, youth, adult and lifelong learners), and other important characteristics" (Educational Policy Institute, 2008, p. 2). Ontario colleges attract more students from lower socioeconomic groups than universities; in 2008, 23 percent of applicants reported a household income of less than \$30,000, while 52 percent reported household incomes below \$60,000 (Colleges Ontario, 2009a).

Higher Education in Ontario

The binary system of higher education in Ontario is comprised of 19 publically funded universities and 24 colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs). Each university is committed to research and teaching and is thereby, committed to the pursuit of and transmission of knowledge that will not only provide graduates with marketable skills but will also improve the material wellbeing of the community (Clark et al., 2009). On the other hand, the primary purpose and function of colleges is to prepare students for employment, through short term training and retraining, as well as apprenticeship, and diploma programs ranging from 2 to 3 years in length. Although the primary focus remains the same several changes over the past decade have shifted the colleges mandate somewhat so that colleges now offer baccalaureate degree programs and partake in applied research (Clark et al., 2009).

When the Ontario colleges were established in the 1960s a major issue for discussion was whether the colleges would combine lower level university general education with technical education programs or if it would concentrate on technical education alone. A discussion of the systems that are offered in other Canadian provinces and in the United States is beyond the scope of this paper but suffice it to say that Ontario established the largest system of technical colleges in North America that did not have any linkage with the university sector. In fact, the founders of the original college system did not want even a small transfer stream; it was argued that a transfer function would endanger the vocational education mandate (Skolnik, 2010). Moreover,

*the conventional wisdom is that the presidents of Ontario's universities strongly opposed the new colleges having a transfer function because they didn't want the resulting competition for students or for funding, that the presidents lobbied vigorously and skilfully to defend their interests, and that, in the end, their influence carried the day.* (Skolnik, 2010, p. 9).

Meanwhile, the Ontario Government's primary reason for rejecting transfer was to ensure the success of technical education and to reap the economic benefits of an expanded system of technical education. However, William Davis, the Minister of Education at the time in his address to the legislature stated that the exclusion of a transfer function was not intended as a choice for the long term. In fact, the system would be monitored continuously and modifications would be made as needed. However, this did not happen and as time passed the original system solidified itself (Skolnik, 2010).

The original structure and the lack of subsequent change have impacted postsecondary education in Ontario to this day. Skolnik (2010) argues that based on the experiences of other jurisdictions Ontario could have adopted the university-parallel programming in the arts and sciences and vocational programming. Such a system with its culture of transfer and government mechanisms for fostering transfer would have facilitated easier mechanisms for transfer when the era of lifelong learning arrived.

Benefits and Challenges of College to University Transfer

When the colleges were established the relationship between the colleges and universities was described by the government as separate but equal. This however was not the case and although the colleges can now offer bachelor's degrees they are limited in type and number. Hence, they offer few opportunities for students who begin college in a diploma program (Clark et al., 2009). In essence, the educational system is limiting the opportunities for these students and in doing so is preventing them from reaching their full potential. Furthermore, although collaborative degree programs between colleges and universities serve a useful purpose they tend to provide university bound students with the career expertise of the college but do not enable the college student to benefit from the university experience. Additionally, they benefit only a small proportion of the students who could benefit from an improved system

of college to university transfer (Clark et al., 2009).

With the move to mass higher education universities are often challenged by the task of serving large numbers of students with varying academic abilities. Moreover, faculty often complain about having to deal with students who are inadequately prepared for university level courses. However, with the college emphasis on teaching and learning, and the nurturing environment that this entails it can be argued that colleges are an ideal setting for preparing these students for university (Skolnik, 2010). The following statement from a college student that transferred to a university program provides a clear example of the value of the college experience in preparing students for university.

*I entered university after three (3) years at college and it was clear (to me and to others in my classes) who had been to college and who were there from high school. Those of us from college were more interactive during classes and participated more. We were more prepared, had good study habits, understood the importance of speaking with the professors and of "applied thinking". (cited in Centre for Spatial Economics, 2010, p. 7-8).*

Meeting the growing demand for higher education is not an easy task. The increased demand tends to be focussed on degrees rather than diplomas or other short term credentials and although the demand for a college education can be expected to increase during the current economic downturn in the long-term students and employers will be looking for an education that leads to a degree. However, some of the largest universities, especially those in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are at capacity (Clark et al., 2009). Improving college to university transfer opportunities is one strategy that could assist somewhat in meeting the demand for degree programs.

"As a consequence of designing a postsecondary system that consists of two independent and unconnected silos, the pathways for the optimum development of human resources and the realization of aspirations of learners in Ontario have been inappropriately limited" (Clark et al., 2009, p. 173). Therefore, the limited number of pathways opportunities for human resource development could have adverse economic consequences for Ontario as it strives to compete in the knowledge society (Clark et al., 2009). A study commissioned by Colleges Ontario (Centre for Spatial Economics, 2010) demonstrated that there are solid economic and financial incentives for developing and implementing a province wide credit and credential recognition and transfer system in Ontario. The study assumed that college graduates receive recognition for between 35 and 45 percent of their college education. If the amount of credit recognition was increased to an average of 65 percent the following benefits would ensue:

- Private benefit to each student of between \$26,000 and 50,000;
- Average annual benefit to Ontario economy over the next decade of between \$69 and \$136 million in additional GDP;
- Average annual fiscal benefit to Ontario government over the next decade of between \$36 million and \$61 million.

There is little doubt that the projected population growth in Ontario will have significant impact on an already strapped system. It is anticipated that over the next 14 years Ontario will have to provide up to 104,000 new undergraduate spaces—this is roughly equivalent to the combined enrolment of the University of Toronto and York University (Van Loon, 2011). Van Loon, president emeritus of Carleton University argues that an important strategy for providing quality undergraduate education at a reasonable cost is to strengthen the relationship between colleges and existing universities. In fact, "for two decades, the provincial government has urged universities and colleges to work together ... almost alone amongst North American jurisdictions Ontario has not built clear paths for students to move from colleges to universities" (Van Loon, 2011, p. 1). Nevertheless, the Ontario government platform includes the creation of three new campuses; if handled correctly, that is, not relying solely on the research based model, this is a promising concept. Furthermore, providing financial incentives for colleges and universities to share their business will provide incentives for cooperation (Van Loon, 2011).

The colleges *Vision 2000* document (1990) acknowledged that universities were reluctant to grant credit for academic work from colleges as there was no guarantee of quality; therefore, it was recommended that consistent program standards should be developed across the college system. In 2002, the Ontario government granted the colleges responsibility in program approval and development with the understanding that quality assurance measures would be in place to ensure consistent standards across colleges. Hence, the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS) was established; OCQAS operates independently of educational institutes and government and therefore, can conduct arms-length, unbiased academic audits (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, 2011).

"When Ontario university leaders, and ultimately the Ontario government in its plan for new colleges, rejected a transfer function for the colleges, they were rejecting the idea that the colleges should provide university-level general education courses" (Skolnik, 2010, p. 6). Unlike Ontario, British Columbia built a system of transfer into their structure from the outset; they offered vocational level programming alongside university-level study (Skolnik, 2010). The transfer rate in British Columbia for arts and sciences programs now stands at over 40 percent (Clark et al., 2009). Meanwhile, the transfer rate in Ontario is substantially lower than other jurisdictions because general arts and science programs make up a very small proportion of college enrolment. On the other hand, the rate of transfer for career programs is not much lower than colleges in other jurisdictions (Clark et al., 2009). A major issue in establishing transfer arrangements for college occupational programs compared to general arts and sciences programs is the fact that regular university course sequences do not lend themselves to transfer; the university undergraduate curriculum focuses on general courses in the first two years with more specialized courses offered in the third and fourth year of study. In contrast, college students will have completed the specialized courses during their college program of study but will have completed very little in the way of university level general education courses (Skolnik, 2010). Furthermore, as college courses are very specialized in nature it is often difficult to identify an equivalent course at the university level for credit purposes (Clark et al., 2009).

Perhaps, the most significant issue that surrounds the apparent lacklustre state of the system of transfer in Ontario relates to social equity. This is in and of itself a strong argument for improving opportunities for transfer. In the United States it has been found that a number of factors are pushing students from low socioeconomic status to community colleges. These include shifts in demographics, tough admissions criteria to four-year schools, rising college tuition, and workforce training needs and requirements (Levin, 2007). "Thus, while the open access institution is becoming increasingly an instrument of the state and of business and industry, it is also a placement compound for low-socioeconomic students, including minority students and immigrants" (Levin, 2007, p. 12). Moreover, while these students are disadvantaged by their socioeconomic status many are further disadvantaged by their "social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds and conditions" (Levin, 2007, p. 10). Despite such serious barriers to success many of these college students aspire to education beyond the community college. One such student interviewed by Levin noted: "I will go on to get my BA and my master's, which I never, when I first got here, I would've never believed possible or had never considered, because it wasn't in my realm of possibilities at the time" (cited in Levin, 2007, p. 131). In reality, these students had a clear sense not only of their future aspirations but also a means by which they could fulfill these aspirations; the college experience assisted them in framing their goals and in finding ways to attain them (Levin, 2007).

A study of transfer students by Decock (2006) indicated that transfer students were more likely to be female, have entered college directly from high school, and had always intended to enrol in university. Most importantly, these students would not have been able to enter university directly from high school but were nevertheless successful at university; they attained a grade point average of 3.13, or a B- letter grade. Moreover, attending college encourages students to pursue degree level programs which would have been impossible otherwise. In essence, the college to university transfer function "appears to be providing access to higher education and university for families with limited postsecondary experience and who come from middle to lower socio-economic strata" (Decock, 2006, p. 267).

It is likely that an individual who is financially and academically able to participate in postsecondary education may face barriers to access because the system does not have the capacity to meet demand; obviously, lack of capacity is a potential barrier to access and a possible cause of inequity. A possible response to lack of capacity by an educational institute is to adjust entrance requirements. However, if high school grades are used as an entry requirement for university and high school averages are correlated with socioeconomic background it is therefore likely that those from lower income backgrounds will be excluded from the system (Drewes, 2008). There would appear to be some truth to this argument as the participation rate for low income individuals is about 50 percent greater in colleges than in universities; this would suggest that colleges play an important role in making access to higher education more equitable (Clark et al., 2009). It is also suggested that,

*the overall equity of the post-secondary system could be enhanced considerably by significantly improving the opportunities for students who begin their post-secondary education in a college to continue onto a university. ... Further, creating some types of postsecondary institutions that are particularly amenable to transfers from colleges, such as open or technical universities, could also make opportunity to obtain a baccalaureate more equitable. (Clark et al., 2009, p. 159).*

In 2008 the improvement of pathways for students was identified as a high priority area for the Ontario government; the pledge was part of the government's commitment to improving quality and access to postsecondary education (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008). As a result of discussions among representatives of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), Colleges Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities and student advocacy groups the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) was established in 2011. It is the successor to the College University Consortium Council (CUCC). ONCAT is dedicated to assisting students in achieving academic success and in their future careers. Its responsibilities include the development and maintenance of a new transfer portal and a more sound transfer guide (ONCAT, 2011). ONCAT facilitates and supports collaboration and the development of transfer pathways between Ontario colleges and universities so that postsecondary options for students are optimized and the need to duplicate prior learning is reduced (ONCAT, 2011). The goals of ONCAT are to:

- Provide leadership in the development of ongoing enhancement of postsecondary education (PSE) transfer credit policies and practices in Ontario;
- Maintain the provincial PSE credit transfer portal, ONTransfer, and the Ontario Postsecondary Transfer Guide (OPTG) for students and interested stakeholders;
- Research, assess and report on credit transfer activity and results;
- Provide support and advocacy for students with regard to credit transfer; and
- Solicit, select, supervise, support and fund provincial credit transfer projects as required. (ONCAT, 2011, p. 1-2).

With the establishment of ONCAT it would appear that the provincial government is beginning to take the issue of college to university transfer seriously—it is now a matter of public policy whereas in the past the transfer system in Ontario was dependent primarily on cooperation between institutions themselves. It is hoped that the establishment of ONCAT will facilitate a corresponding increase in the proportion of college students transferring to university; in 2007, 8 percent of colleges graduates transferred to university with the highest percentages in Early Childhood Education, 10.28 percent; and General Arts and Sciences, 6.68 percent. It would appear that despite the small number of general arts and sciences programs in the province it remains one of the most common areas of transfer (Decock, McCloy, Liu, & Hu, 2011).

A review of the websites of two colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs) in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is a strong indicator of the interest in transfer within the college sector. Both include interactive transfer guides for students (Humber College, 2011; George Brown College, 2011). However, the lack of a systemic approach to transfer in Ontario is quite apparent as both institutions are reluctant to comment on the transfer policies of the universities listed. For instance, the *Humber Transfer Guide* states: "please note – this guide is an introduction only to transfer policies at various postsecondary institutions. You will need to consult the college and university calendars and websites for further information" (2011, p. 1). Meanwhile, the websites of two GTA universities indicates that at York University more than 60 percent of college transfer students receive credit for between four and seven full courses (2011). On the other hand, college students transferring to the University of Toronto, Mississauga receive a maximum of 3 transfer credits for 2 years of fulltime study at college (2009). As of October 2010, formal agreements between postsecondary institutions had increased to 519, from 19 in 1988; "these include 435 college-university degree-completion agreements. The majority of the agreements (334) are bilateral (i.e. one college to one university); however, there are only 133 multilateral agreements (i.e., more than two institutions involved)" (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2011, p. 28). Hopefully, ONCAT will help facilitate a move towards more multilateral and system wide agreements.

In November, 2011 Colleges Ontario signed an agreement with Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI) that allows Ontario college students to complete a degree in Ireland. Conversely, Irish students can obtain graduate certificates from Ontario colleges. The agreement will allow students with a two-year college diploma to secure a degree with two years of study in Ireland, and some three year diploma graduates will be able to complete a degree with one further year of study (Colleges Ontario, 2011). This differs greatly from agreements in Ontario where college students are awarded a mishmash of transfer credits upon movement to University. Moreover, this agreement is unique in that it is a system-to-system agreement rather than merely an agreement between individual institutions. At present, the Ontario system of collaborative programming and transfer is indicative of its tertiary system; individual agreements between colleges and universities are voluntary, self-selecting and are respectful of university autonomy (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2008). It is hoped that with the establishment of ONCAT the province of Ontario will move towards a more systemized approach to college to university transfer.

#### Strategies for Improving College to University Transfer

##### Government Mandated Transfer

Although progress has been made in improving the system of college to university transfer in Ontario, it remains a challenge. Nevertheless, the establishment of the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer with its mandate of supporting and facilitating transfer is encouraging (ONCAT, 2011). On the other hand, previous "Ontario governments have been reluctant to articulate the public purposes that collaboration would be intended to serve, or to set out goals that would allow the measurement of whether those purposes were being achieved" (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 17). Moreover, Ontario universities opposition to the establishment of system-wide bodies charged with the task of regulating credit recognition has ensured that there has not been a method by which vital academic issues related to system-wide credit transfer could be resolved (Boggs & Trick, 2009).

Moving forward, it is imperative that the Ontario government by way of the Council on Articulation and Transfer Ontario implements mechanisms that support its mandate; this includes committees that develop policies, monitor transfer activities and hold universities and colleges accountable for making improvements. For instance, British Columbia (BC) has a committee on transfer and articulation and a committee whose responsibility it is to improve transfer arrangements for students in career programs such as business (Clark, et al., 2009). In fact, articulation committees exist for practically every area of study, ranging in areas from Business and Commerce to Electronic Technician, History, Political Science, Sociology and Theatre (British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfers, 2010). Moreover, the system values of transparency, fairness, autonomy, predictability and accountability are built upon trust between partners. The *Principles and Guidelines* state that in the BC system of transfer:

1. Students earn transfer credit for equivalent learning and can apply that credit to full credential requirements;
2. Students can be expected to be treated equitably by all member institutions;
3. All members acknowledge and respect the primary jurisdiction of each institution for transfer policy and academic integrity;
4. Transfer agreements are based on rigorous articulation processes and transparent communication;
5. Evaluation of the BC transfer system is focussed on assessing its effectiveness for students. (British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfers, May 2010, p. 1-3).

The majority of system-wide partnership examined in Alberta, British Columbia, California, Florida and Scotland (Boggs & Trick, 2009) were,

*characterized by an authoritative third party (such as legislature) that mandated cooperation by all institutions and prohibited free-riding; provisions to define the mandate of each segment of the higher education system and define appropriate areas for cooperation and for competition; and a governance body to oversee the implementation of the transfer arrangements. (p. 18).*

Most importantly, these systems have managed to facilitate the movement of students from college to university, where the majority of students were successful. Furthermore, successful system-wide transfer requires ongoing leadership, backed by legislature or an alternate authority so that the tenets of institutional differentiation do not undermine the movement of students from college to university (Boggs & Trick, 2009). It is suggested that as Ontario strives to establish an effective system of transfer it should be mindful of strategies that have proved successful in other jurisdictions.

##### General Arts and Science and Career Program Transfer

In 2010-11, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) included transfer partnerships between colleges and universities in the Multi-Year Accountability Agreements (MYAAs), and added resources to base funding to promote the development of core introductory courses to facilitate transfer and reduce the cost of undergraduate education. (Council of Ontario Universities, 2009; Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2010a, 2010b). Moreover, in 2006-2007, MTCU provided the College-University Consortium Council

(CUCC) with three million dollars in funding as part of the provincial Change Fund project. In fact, the projects funding included college-university collaborative program development by way of bilateral transfer agreements to multilateral direct entry degree completion agreements. Furthermore, course equivalencies from college programs in General Arts and Science/Liberal Arts to university Arts, Social Science and Science programs were developed (Callahan, 2009). It is hoped that these initiatives will encourage improved transfer cooperation and student transfer.

The Ontario system of horizontal differentiation whereby the non-university sector offers primarily programs of a vocational nature is not conducive to college to university transfer. This is in contrast to a system of vertical differentiation whereby "the non-university institutions offer the lower level courses in the same fields that are offered by the universities, mainly arts and sciences, but possibly including some professional fields like teacher education" (Clark et al., 2009, p. 156). Although some Ontario colleges do offer General Arts and Science (G.A.S.) programs enrolment is small and they tend to concentrate on preparing students to transfer to the college's career programs. The Ministry initiatives described above could assist with this as would the establishment of transfer committees much like the type used in British Columbia.

The development of programs aimed at facilitating transfer from college to university is suggested. College-university transfer programs are advantageous as they facilitate access of academically unprepared students to university, and negate the need for students from small towns and rural areas to move to larger cities, thereby, reducing tuition and accommodation and related costs. Alberta's Red Deer College has 300 students in seven degree-completion programs, including bachelors in education, nursing, arts and social work. In 2012 it will launch a business degree program in collaboration with Mount Royal University in Calgary (Tamburri, 2011).

On a positive note, in Ontario, Fanshawe College is collaborating with the University of Western Ontario to provide joint diploma and degree programs. Students will spend equal time at each institution (Tamburri, 2011). Additionally, in an attempt to increase opportunities for students to attend university, Niagara College and Brock University have collaborated so that applicants to Brock who do not receive direct admission from high school, but whose grades fall just short of entry requirements are recommended to enrol in the one-year General Arts and Science – University Transfer program at Niagara. Upon successful completion of the program they automatically transfer to Brock and are awarded one or two transfer credits, if they meet the GPA criterion. A unique aspect of this program is the creation of a joint Niagara College/Brock University academic advisor and the establishment of a hybrid bridging program that focuses on the academic expectations in the college and university environments, and the difference between the two (Wilson, McCaughan & Han, 2011). An expansion on these types of programming is urgently needed if the Ontario wishes to achieve a truly accessible system of Higher Education.

As some programs in the colleges are highly specialized it is often difficult to find a corresponding course in the university for the purpose of credit. Additionally, as the college graduate has already taken specialized courses the role of the university is often to provide courses of a general or foundational type (Clark et al., 2009). Herein, lays a major problem with college to university transfer in Ontario. It is argued that the introduction of a formal two-year college credential aimed at preparing students to enter the third year of a university degree is warranted; financial incentives can be used to encourage cooperation. This Associate degree model is widely used in the United States and in other Canadian provinces. In fact, almost 50 percent of four-year students in Alberta enter from colleges or two year programs in undergraduate universities. Again, there are a few instances of such programming in Ontario. Seneca College and York University have a partnership that allows students to take the first two years of York's Bachelor of Arts degree primarily at Seneca; the University of Toronto now has a similar agreement with Seneca (Van Loon, 2011). It has been suggested that joint university/college programs enhance the reputation of colleges as institutes of higher education and give assurances of access to university programming that would otherwise not be available to some students (Knoell, 1996). Again, although Ontario program collaboration efforts are admirable they are insufficient to meet the real need. An interesting solution to the issue of specialized versus theoretical concentrations is the "upside-down" or inverse degree. The occupation specific courses taken at the associate degree level are accepted as meeting the specialized requirements for the major, while the university portion concentrates on general education courses that meet the university's general education requirements (Clark et al., 2009). It has been suggested that Ontario should strongly consider the development of the programs outlined above including improved funding mechanisms to serve as a vehicle for transfer. As part of the financial incentives for university engagement these programs would be funded at a higher weight to compensate for the fact that they would only include students in their third and fourth year of study (Clark et al., 2009).

Most recently, Clark, Trick, and Van Loon (2011) in their analysis of undergraduate education in Ontario have set forth the establishment of a two-year credential as a viable option for the province. They propose that:

- The government should announce its intention to create a new two-year college credential that will prepare students to enter the third year of university, modeled after the associate degree in most North American jurisdictions;
- The government should convene a working group on a two-year credential, which includes representatives from the Council of Ontario Universities and Colleges Ontario, to develop a model curriculum for the credential. (p. 234).

### Teaching-Orientated Universities

As part of their recommendations for academic reform in Ontario Clark, Trick, and Van Loon (2011) propose the establishment of up to five new teaching-orientated universities; these institutions would provide a student-centered education with a greater array of options for a diverse student population, at a lower cost than the traditional university model. When recommending the creation of a two-year credential equivalent to the Associate degree they suggest that the two-year credential should be delivered by both the colleges and the new teaching-orientated universities. Moreover, these universities would provide pathways for college graduates wanting to complete a university degree. These degrees would allow students to combine their professional knowledge with the breadth of a university program. Most importantly, "to encourage the new universities to focus on this objective, the government should require them to create additional seats in third and fourth year for college transfer students so that a portion of third-year seats—perhaps, 30 percent—will be eligible for government funding only if they are allocated for students who transfer from a college credential" (p. 132). Moreover, the faculty at these teaching-orientated universities would be active in research on teaching and learning, including how students who transfer from college succeed in university.

### Open University

The creation of an institution with a mandate of recognizing prior learning in establishing flexible degree programming is warranted. An open university would play a significant role in facilitating access to postsecondary education for non-traditional groups, would recognize prior learning—including CAAT diploma credentials—and would offer flexible, cost-effective distance education (Jones & Skolnik, 2009). An open university although often synonymous with online learning is in essence concerned with open admissions and with utilizing "its resources and infrastructure that will best serve the learner's needs" (Clark et al., 2009, p. 152). Many Ontarians are currently availing of this model as in 2003-04, 6,689 Ontario residents were registered at Athabasca and at that time the annual growth rate exceeded 15 percent (Clark et al., 2009). Moreover, by 2006-07 over 34,000 undergraduate students were registered in undergraduate studies (Jones & Skolnik, 2009). Furthermore, no university in Canada has as many degree completion agreements with the Ontario CAAT's as Athabasca; in 2001 there were 190 in total covering a wide range of subject areas (Clark et al., 2009).

In the 2010 budget the Ontario government announced its intention to establish an "Online Institute" that would make the best postsecondary professors accessible to anyone that wishes to pursue higher learning. The special advisor to the government, Maxim Jean-Louis in his final report recommended "the establishment of a not-for-profit corporation to facilitate, enable, and fund support for online learning in Ontario without regulating existing institutions acquiring online education assets itself, or by granting its own credentials" (Clark, Trick & Van Loon, 2011, p. 26). Although Jean-Louis recommends that the Online Institute should not be a credential-granting institution it could be an enabler of credit recognition by requiring that all institutions applying for course development funding must include a commitment to credit recognition policies; the portal should include a feature that allows students to select courses and view credit recognition information about the course; and it should include a sector-wide working group on credit recognition. Moreover, the institute should target specific groups who are currently under represented in postsecondary education: Aboriginal students, first generation learners, new Canadians, persons with disabilities, and Ontarians in small, rural and remote areas (Jean-Louis, 2011). Although the Online Institute falls short of an Open University for Ontario, it has not gone as far as establishing a degree granting institute similar to Athabasca University, it is hoped that it will positively impact the system of credit recognition in Ontario.

### Conclusion

The system of postsecondary education in Ontario has seen little change since the establishment of the Colleges of Arts and Technology (CAATs) in the 1960s; unlike other jurisdictions in Canada and the United States Ontario established the largest system of technical colleges in North America that did not have any linkage with the university sector. While the exclusion of a transfer function was not intended as a goal in the long term the original system structure remains relatively intact to this day. In essence, "the original decision about transfer has had adverse consequences for student mobility and personal development, social equity, and the efficiency of the postsecondary education system" (Skolnik, 2010, p. 2). With the

establishment of the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) it would appear that the Ontario government is beginning to take the issue of college to university transfer seriously. As the process evolves, it is imperative that the government mandate cooperation between institutions and provide the leadership necessary to ensure that clear and efficient pathways are available to students.

It is argued that the absence of effective pathways for human resource development could have serious effects on Ontario's economy especially in light of the need to compete globally and in the knowledge society (Clark et al., 2009). Moreover,

*it has been suggested that for individuals from under-represented groups such as aboriginal students, students with disabilities, first generation students and low income students, improving transfer pathways from college to university would provide a more equitable opportunity to obtain a degree. (Kerr, McCloy, & Liu, 2010, p. 12).*

There is little doubt that implementing a system of transfer in Ontario poses a major challenge. Nevertheless, despite these challenges the benefits are immense, and as other jurisdictions have demonstrated a system wide approach is possible without compromising individual institutional autonomy or the quality of the system. Moreover, a number of strategies for improving the system of transfer in Ontario have been suggested. These include a government mandated system of transfer to teaching-orientated universities and the alternative to the Open University, the Online Institute.

In the conclusion of their text *Academic Reform*, Clark, Trick and Van Loon acknowledge that although their recommendations for reform are ambitious they are by no means unattainable. In the past, Ontario has adapted to change to meet critical needs. For instance, the college system was created in less than three years and the university system added an additional 90,000 undergraduate spaces between 2000 and 2006—to meet the demands of the double cohort. "In each case, the government made the decisions about what needed to be done and worked with higher education leaders to get the job done" (2011, p. 239). Therefore, as in the past, it is possible for the government to enact real change by following through on its commitment to improving quality and access to postsecondary education, including equitable access to university for traditionally underrepresented groups; a major means to this end is college to university transfer. All that is needed now from government and from postsecondary leaders and institutions is the courage to act.

"Higher education is a human task" (Clark, Trick & VonLoon, 2011 p. 242) and as such government, college and university leaders are crucial to its success. Moving forward, it is imperative that the Ontario government take charge and mandate cooperation by all institutions. While previous governments have been reluctant to interfere with the Ontario postsecondary system of horizontal differentiation or with the autonomy of universities it is imperative that the Council on Articulation and Transfer Ontario implements mechanisms that support the transfer mandate. This includes committees that develop policies, monitor transfer activities and hold universities and colleges accountable for making improvements. In fact, the strategies outlined in this paper could be implemented without compromising the quality or integrity of the university sector or the institutions themselves.

It is important to note that despite the apparent lack of control from the government and the challenges inherent in the system successful student-centered partnerships between colleges and universities have been established over the years. It has been found that successful collaboration is not dependent on altruism, or trust between the parties, or for that matter the presence of an external authority. Instead, "cooperation persists because the actors expect to continue to interact for the indefinite future, and each fears that cheating will lead to the end of the partnership and a return to a purely competitive relationship" (Axelrod, 1984, p. 182). Herein, lies the key to the implementation of a successful system of transfer in Ontario. College and university institutions and leaders must realize that access and social equity is at the heart of the system of postsecondary education in Ontario. As Gale (2009) argues it is imperative that equity is positioned so that concerns about equity are at the centre of debates on higher education, and the equity practices of both government and institutions are more accountable. In the end, colleges and universities must embrace the transfer function so that they can truly "represent their respective communities and reach parity with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, and social class standing" (Zamini, 2001, p. 22).

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[Contents](#)