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THE INITIAL TRANSITION - FROM K-12 TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Bridging the Gap through Experiential Learning

Challenge Paper Prepared by

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The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

Imagine that the transition from secondary school to post secondary study is a relay race. If one runner represents the final year of high school passing the baton, or student, to a runner representing the first year of postsecondary education, then at least one out of four times the baton would fall to the ground. The transitional experience is fraught with difficulties for young Canadians as statistical portraits and anecdotal accounts attest.¹ A study conducted at Trent University, estimates that among 13 Canadian universities the average first year attrition rate is 24%.² While almost one quarter of our university entrants do not persist through their initial year, survey results from the University of Waterloo revealed that 25.6% of first year students do not feel that high school prepared them for university.³ Such poor achievement in these indicators, preparation and retention, does not bode well for our system.

The intent of this paper is to challenge this relay paradigm, and specifically to challenge the assumption that learners should be as passive as the baton, shuttled between two levels of education. For the system too escape this paradigm, we must accept three key areas of weakness and the challenge to overcome these through a new approach to transitioning learners. First, many inadequately prepared students enter PSE simply because no other option exists. Their ill preparedness is, at least in part, due to the second challenge, a lack of relevance in the process of transition. Finally, the lack of relevance leads to poor institutional and individual fit. This paper will explore each challenge in turn, then suggest interventions which, through a new educational focus on experiential opportunities, can address these areas of concern.

Currently, upon the completion of their secondary student learners have three options: entering the work force, beginning college or university. In the past, when for most youth the future seemed pre-determined, vocational study easily followed a “start school-stop-start work” path. As the economy and work world fundamentally evolved through structural change, a broader range of professions, and an increase in required education, the choices with which youth are faced increase in number and complexity. Our secondary school system and moreover our postsecondary recruitment system has not evolved concurrently and as such learners do not find themselves adequately prepared to make these very crucial decisions. Learners who are uncertain of their path may feel discouraged from attending PSE. They may also feel compelled to continue their education often attending college or university as a means to discover what they want for their future. The investment both public and personal in obtaining a post-secondary education is inefficiently used in this pursuit.

¹ The scope of this paper will be confined to the transition of students directly from secondary school to post secondary school in the traditional age range of 18-24.

² Wong, P.T.P., *Student Retention/Attrition at Trent: A preliminary report*. Unpublished report, Trent University, 1994.

³ Foley, Kelly, *Results of the First Year Transition Survey*. Unpublished report, University of Waterloo, 1998.

This is not to say that learners do not need ample opportunity to discover what path they wish to follow. Exactly the opposite is true. Fundamental to students' development is the definition of goals. Clear goals have been cited in several studies as key to persistence. The University of Guelph, University College Project Advisory Council notes that academic and vocational goals assist in persistence through improved motivation and self-perception.⁴ Learners will achieve more and experience a less complicated transition, if they do have clearly articulated goals. A study of Humber College students between 1986 and 1991 indicates that occupational certainty is the second highest factor in determining persistence for students who experience both academic success and failure. Learners might feel less compelled to attend an institution if they are either personally or academically unprepared, if another option existed.

Poor goal development is partly due to a lack of relevance in education. In a consultation document, the Council of Ministers of Education describes the importance of the public expectation of relevance in Post Secondary Education.⁵ The significance of relevance is not restricted to PSE nor to the public's expectations. Indeed, it is crucial element in each learner's understanding of his or her own development. Relevance in this case means that students should understand clearly the progression of their curricular study and the manner in which each task, activity or course prepares them for subsequent curricular expectations as well as their vocational future.

Students as young as 13 show an appreciation for the economic realities of their future career endeavours. Students in Ontario's *Aspirations Project* show a willingness to be introduced to future challenges.⁶ One student queries why they do not take exams earlier in life, explaining that they would be easier to handle if they were accustomed to them. The willingness of learners to improve their transition should be matched by other educational partners.

Instead, secondary school students are consistently subjected to warnings about university and college instructors. Once in the post-secondary system, students are threatened about the rigors of the work world, and urged to be thankful they are not yet subjected to the "real world". The longer we separate education from the real world, the longer it will take learners to achieve smooth transitions.

The lack of relevance in a learner's transition also plays a role in the second challenge identified previously. Research from the U.S. indicates that individual and institutional fit plays a significant role in attrition.⁷ The inability to acquire significant knowledge when making the decision to attend PSE or a specific institution impedes this fit. Students make this choice aided, for the most part, by only second hand information and

⁴University College Project Advisory Council, *The First Year Experience: Responding to the Challenge*. University of Guelph, Unpublished Report, 1993.

⁵The Council of Ministers of Education, *Public Expectations of Postsecondary Education in Canada: A Consultation Document*. 1998

⁶Government of Ontario, *Aspirations Project Qualitative Research Report*. The Premier's Council on Health, Well-being and Social Justice, 1993.

⁷Tinto, V. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

publications developed within institutional recruitment departments. In fact, a national survey developed by the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium indicates that brochures and pamphlets are second only to campus visits as important sources of information.⁸ Since such publications are designed specifically as promotional tools, this suggests that learners' key information source cannot be described as impartial. In his book, *College*, Ernest Boyer observes that if you believed American recruitment brochures the majority of undergraduate lectures are held out of doors near water.⁹ Yet learners, generally have few meaningful opportunities to evaluate their choice. At Centennial and Conestoga Colleges only one third of their entering class had actually spoken to an instructor prior to attending college.¹⁰ Consequently, without direct experiential knowledge of an institution or system of study, learners are more likely to be mismatched to their institution.

The key to overcoming the weaknesses described above is through a shift in the way we approach learner transitions. Human Resource Development Canada suggests two paradigms for learning, traditional and adult workplace or learning to know and learning to do.¹¹ A third paradigm should be introduced: doing to learn.

One reason our system has failed so greatly in the area of transitions remains that we do not sufficiently equip learners to make decisions and fully comprehend the magnitude and implications of those decisions. The U.S. approach to improving transition to PSE is to treat university and college students as if they were still high school students. However, the process of matriculation is no less a process of maturation than academic and career preparation. If, as a system, we shelter learners from curricular and non-curricular expectations, we simply delay their autonomy and effectively download the responsibility of preparing learners to subsequent stages in their development. Why do we ask students to make crucial decisions about their future at 17, 18 or 19, while we do little to nothing to introduce them to the reality of these decisions at earlier ages? By adopting an experiential learning approach, learners can be introduced to new expectations and can explore their options within their current and familiar framework.

Learners and educators, government and the public must each accept a key responsibility in order to produce effective interventions to facilitate learners' transitions. Educators from secondary schools, colleges and university must work together to provide opportunities for experiential learning and to make these experiences portable and transferable. Government should facilitate the process through increasing learners' accessibility to such opportunities. The public and in particular the work world, which is ultimately a learners' destination, must also participate in offering opportunities. For

⁸ Walker, James L., *Survey of First-Year University Students: Summary of Major Findings*. Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium, 1998.

⁹ Boyer, Ernest L., *College, The Undergraduate Experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

¹⁰ Chapman, Judy, Sid Gilbert, Peter Dietsche, John Gardner, and Paul Grayson, *From Best Intentions to Best Practices: The First-year Experience in Canadian Postsecondary Education*. National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience & Student Transition, University of South Carolina, 1997.

¹¹ Human Resource Development Canada, *Updating Essential Skills for the Workplace*. Reference document prepared for the Council of Minister of Education, Canada Third National Forum on Education, 1998.

learners, there must be a willingness to explore. Exploration must not be exclusive to one system or area of study.

The system as a whole can offer interventions to assist in learners' transition. In general, several aspects should be considered in any intervention. These should be flexible and allow for as many experiential opportunities as possible. Programs should be offered by both levels of education in partnership to ensure continuity in direction and mission. Additionally, they should be offered through a consortium of institutions and not be regarded as methods to recruit students to specific institutions. Finally, skills acquired through these programs much be applicable to admissions to both college and university programs.

In order to develop new interventions, educators from secondary schools, universities and colleges should in consultation with learners, business, government and other partners develop a *Key Opportunities Inventory*, similar to the skills inventories used in the school to work paradigm. The first task in developing an inventory is to clearly articulate the decisions, and suggested timing, that a learner must make in their transition: whether to go to post-secondary education, whether to study at college or university, whether to study close to home or far from home, and what to study. For each decision, a catalogue of knowledge required to make an informed choice should then be created. From there, this knowledge should be coupled with experiences that would help learners understand the implications of each decision.

The range of experiences should be offered throughout the senior years of secondary school and more importantly through bridging programs. While the process of transition is a joint responsibility of all levels of education, it is critical, in order to be proactive, that any interventions occur before a student has entered the PSE system. Such interventions could include:

University 101 courses - Institutions such as the University of Prince Edward Island and the University of Victoria have begun American style University 101 courses. These credit courses covering such curriculum topics as the role of the university, study skills, writing techniques, and stress management appear to improve retention.¹² Again, in terms of these programs it is a question of when to offer them. Does it seem most prudent to teach learners how to be university students once they are already are? Such courses are more appropriately delivered to high school students by both college and university instructors, exploring both levels of education.

Audit courses - Secondary school students should be permitted to take college or university level courses for high school credit on a pass - fail basis. Although the learner would attend regular lectures and laboratories, both high school and PSE instructors would develop assignments and exams. Students would require access to support from both levels to ensure that this advanced study does not become overwhelming. Careful consideration would be necessary to ensure that students of all academic skill levels felt

¹²Fidler, Paul, "Relationship of Freshman Orientation Seminars to Sophomore Return Rates." Journal of the Freshman Year Experience. 3: 7-38, 1991.

comfortable taking such courses. The purpose of which would not be to challenge advanced students, but to allow all students the opportunity to experience university and college lecture styles and learning environments.

Exchanges - The opportunity to travel to another part of our country develops not only perspective but also autonomy and greater maturity within learners. Student exchanges, where volunteer families billet students, can occur according to numerous themes, language bursaries, summer employment, or academic terms.

Co-operative education - The value of applied experience can never be underestimated. Enhancement and enlargement of existing co-operative education programs should include encouraging learners to attempt co-operative placements in areas outside their usual realm of interest. By challenging themselves in this way learners gain a greater understanding of their true weaknesses and strengths.

Mentor study - Students in secondary school should have the opportunity to undertake independent projects or work study under the guidance of college or university instructors or staff. Developing personal ties and mentorship within PSE would assist the learner overcome insecurities and dispel misperceptions regarding either college or university.

Bridging Programs - Students who are not ready to attend post secondary school directly after university should be able to remain connected to the educational system during any hiatus from study. That connection could be through any of the above programs or through employment, entrepreneurship and volunteer internships. A pan-Canadian network of opportunities that could be applicable to areas of learners' possible interest should be developed through a partnership of government, business, Secondary and Post-Secondary institutions. These opportunities could involve connections with instructors at either level of education. Learners should be, additionally, provided the option of independent study related to their activity for transferable credit. In this way, learners are afforded some distance from formal education while maintaining a link to facilitate the transition to education once the student is ready to commence post secondary study.

Any programme should not exist purely on its theoretical merits and should always be accompanied by an appropriate evaluation tool. Traditional measures such as retention, persistence, student satisfaction, preparation and academic success offer some evidence of a programme's effectiveness. However, in this context they may not adequately indicate the interventions direct impact on such measures.

A series of benchmarks should then be developed in conjunction with the Key Opportunities Inventory. These benchmarks should evaluate the learners' preparedness to make each choice as outlined in the inventory, including access to opportunities, relevance of opportunities and range of opportunities experienced by individual learners. Acquiring evidence of learners' preparedness would involve some fairly intensive satisfaction surveys that feasibly could be conducted only on a rotational basis.

Provisional proxy measures could be developed between such evaluations through examination of the traditional measures list above.

More generally if such interventions are successful, our system of transition between secondary school and post-secondary education should no longer mimic a relay race. Learners should become active participants in their education. They should at each stage of their development understand how the curriculum relates to the subsequent stage and future stages. Learners should have the opportunity to experience in a structured fashion the rigors and demands of what will be expected of them in the future before they are required to make finite decisions.

To embrace the challenge of creating a transition where learners define their future goals through experience means switching from academic counselling to academic “doing”. It means that our system no longer downloads the responsibility to prepare learners’ to future educators and employers. Instead, learners purposefully choose each stage of their transition arriving prepared and experienced.