Conclusion:
From Research to Action
The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation was created in 1998 with a $2.5 billion fund and a mandate to “improve access to post-secondary education so that Canadians can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to participate in a changing economy and society.” It was directed to achieve this mandate by granting scholarships “to students who are in financial need and who demonstrate merit.” This led to the establishment of two flagship programs: a bursary program, which by and large helped reduce the amounts of money students with high levels of financial need had to borrow, and a merit scholarship program, which recognized academic achievement, community engagement, leadership and social innovation. By the time its ten years of providing bursaries and scholarships is completed at the end of 2009, it will have delivered $3.2 billion in awards to post-secondary students across Canada.

As instruments of public policy, however, foundations such as the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation were intended to do more than deliver funds to clients. They were expected to innovate, to harness the insight of experts and to focus it on specific policy issues (KPMG, 2007, 19). This—and concern that access-related policy was being made in the absence of comprehensive data and research about who was and was not participating in post-secondary education and why—prompted the Foundation to create the Millennium Research Program in 2001. By the time its work is done, the Program will have commissioned dozens of studies and published over 80 reports, including this volume—the fourth and final edition of The Price of Knowledge.

In the early days of the Program, a number of questions were identified for investigation. These included questions about who does and does not attend post-secondary education and why, about the amounts provided to students through student financial assistance programs, about the effectiveness of these programs, about the importance of financial barriers relative to other types of barriers to post-secondary education and about the situations of different types of student, including the different ways they pay for their college or university studies (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2001 and 2003). Subsequently, through the development of the Millennium Pilot Projects, a number of questions were asked and investigations conducted to determine whether specific interventions could be demonstrated to have a positive and cost-effective impact on access or persistence. More recently, the Program has sought to deepen our understanding of the behaviour of particular groups of students (notably students from low-income families and Aboriginal students), of the various pathways that young people follow after high school and of the impacts of different types of financial aid programs. It has also highlighted how the country’s changing demographics mean that efforts to increase the post-secondary participation of under-represented groups of students are more important than ever.

It would be reassuring to think that each of the research questions noted above had been answered definitively. Unfortunately, social science is rarely able to solve policy puzzles the way mathematicians can solve equations. Questions are seldom answered definitively. Each study adds to our knowledge but raises new issues for exploration that were previously overlooked. The more we learn, the more we wish we knew.

Despite this, it is important to acknowledge the progress that has been made. There is no doubt—as is hopefully evident from the material presented in the preceding chapters—that we know more about post-secondary students, the factors affecting access and persistence and the workings and effects of student support policies than we did a decade ago. We know more about who accesses post-secondary education and who doesn’t, and we even know quite a lot more about why. We know how much the
14 governments involved in delivering student financial assistance in Canada spend on different programs and how these programs interact to the benefit or detriment of their clients. We know more about the goals and needs of different groups of students and are better able to appreciate what distinguishes college students from university students, older students from younger students, Aboriginal students from non-Aboriginal students, students from lower-income families from students from higher-income families, and so on. When the final results of the Millennium Pilot Projects become available, we will know more about which policies are likely to result in greater participation and success in post-secondary studies and which ones are not.

No one would ever pretend that this progress has stemmed uniquely from the Foundation’s own efforts. Many others have been active in the field, including those who were researching access long before the Foundation was created. In particular, the development of new data sources by Statistics Canada over the course of this decade has underpinned important advances in our understanding of young Canadians’ pathways into and out of the education system. The Foundation’s contribution has been not only to commission research studies to complement those conducted by others, but to collect and organize findings from a variety of sources with the goal of better informing policy discussions related to participation in post-secondary studies. What’s more, the Foundation’s own research activities were only possible because it was able to work with a wide range of partners, whether other researchers or research agencies, provinces, schools, colleges or universities.

So where have these efforts brought us? As mentioned, most of the research questions remain open for continued exploration. At the same time, partly on the basis of the research the Foundation and others have conducted in recent years and partly on the basis of the Foundation’s first-hand experience as an agency interacting with students, post-secondary institutions and governments, a number of important lessons have been learned. The inescapable need to continue research must not pre-empt us from drawing conclusions that can inform action.

First and foremost, it has become clear that access is not an issue that arises at a single moment in time, such as the moment following high school graduation when young people decide whether they will continue their studies or not. Access is an issue that must be addressed long before high school is complete and long after the first day of college or university classes has begun.

In short, all the work we have done to date has led us to conclude that an effective access policy must have three pillars:

- Better outreach to and preparation of students well before they reach post-secondary education;
- More effective student financial assistance programs;
- Improved support programs for students once they have enrolled in post-secondary education.

To some, this observation is but common sense, yet it is important to acknowledge that most policy discussions around access still deal only with the financial element and do not seriously engage with the questions of how to ensure more youth from under-represented backgrounds can be readied for the academic and social challenges of campus life and how they can be supported to succeed and excel once their classes start. Even discussions about the financial element do not always focus in a serious way on which types of financial support are likely to be most effective in improving access and persistence.

Beyond these three pillars, a number of specific lessons can be identified that help to define what an effective access policy should look like.

- Since students from segments of the population currently under-represented at the post-secondary level face a complex set of interacting barriers, policy responses must be comprehensive, which means they must include financial assistance as well as academic and other forms of student support.
• Support programs should take effect long before the student has completed high school. Many students could benefit from being recruited into outreach programs as early as elementary school or the first years of high school.

• Student financial assistance programs should be modernized to ensure not only that they reach students early enough to influence their educational aspirations and planning, but also that they are easy to access and navigate, that they deliver the best types of aid to the students who need it most, that they adequately covers costs and that they keep debt levels in check.

• Strategies to improve access to post-secondary education should include career development initiatives. Career development can provide students, including those from under-represented groups, with the information, skills and strategies they need to help them navigate the transitions from secondary to post-secondary education to the labour market.

• Institutional outreach initiatives must go hand-in-hand with “in-reach.” This means that colleges and universities must go beyond the question of access to address the question of how best to support different types of learners during their studies to ensure success. Most importantly, post-secondary institutions must recognize that better education outcomes require changes to the institutions themselves—in terms of the way they relate to students at every stage of their journey through the education system—and not just changes to the students.

• Governments should seek to maximize value for money by directing their financial support for students to programs that are likely to have a positive impact on the objective of improving access and student success (such as grants for students facing financial barriers). Since public resources are limited, such programs should be given priority over expensive programs that do little to improve education outcomes, such as universal tax credits or rebates.

• Appropriate government programs are the backbone of any access strategy, but governments acting alone cannot achieve the progress that is required. Community organizations, businesses and post-secondary institutions all must play their parts in reaching out to young Canadians to encourage them to raise their aspirations and to equip them with the skills and resources they need to succeed in higher education.

• “One size fits all” approaches are rarely appropriate. Students (or prospective students) from different parts of the country or from different groups face different challenges and are likely to respond differently to particular programs. Moreover, it is not only young people finishing high school who stand to benefit from programs to facilitate transitions into higher education and the labour market; access strategies should focus on adult learners as well. Program design and delivery must be flexible enough to respond to these realities.

• Programs must be evaluated to ensure they are having the intended impact. In practice, too few policies to improve access and student success programs are properly evaluated. Governments and non-governmental organizations must embrace a “culture of evidence” that leads them to collect and analyze the data needed to reach conclusions about whether their programs are achieving the expected results.

• The country’s diversity should be used to its advantage. Rather than lament the lack of a federal ministry of education, Canada should take full advantage of the learning and partnership opportunities that stem from having 13 different education systems within one country.

As the Foundation closes, then, it leaves behind these observations, along with the many other findings summarized in this volume, in the hope that they can form a coherent starting point for subsequent policy-making to improve access to post-secondary education—a starting point of the type that was lacking when the Foundation itself opened its doors. Clearly, this list is hardly a detailed “how to” manual, one that is easy to implement and that can guarantee success. Rather, it is a general guiding framework that
can point policy-makers and practitioners in the right direction to ensure that gradual progress can be made.

Meanwhile, the research itself should continue. As mentioned above, it is possible to celebrate the advances in knowledge that have been made while being conscious of how much we still do not know. It would be a mistake to think that all the questions have been answered. At the very least, changing economic conditions and the continuing evolution of government programs make it necessary to stay on top of trends in post-secondary participation and persistence. Equally important is the dissemination of research in a manner that makes it accessible and useful to practitioners. Research on access must continue, but it must not continue simply for the benefit of researchers.

At the same time, while new data should continue to be collected, there is also the need to make better use of the data that already exist. These include not only national survey data such as those collected by Statistics Canada, but also provincial and institutional administrative data which might hold many lessons about how programs affect particular students in particular circumstances, if only they could be accessed for this purpose. Thinking about how to broaden the range of data that is collected is important, but so is asking the right questions of the information that is already at hand.

This book ends, therefore, with two messages that hopefully appear complementary and not contradictory. First, research must continue in order to inform action. Second, we do not need to wait for more research in order to act intelligently. We hope that the research conducted by the Foundation has not only established the rationale for action—the connection between the country’s future economic prosperity and quality of life and its ability to improve access to and success in post-secondary education—but that it has also succeeded in establishing the general directions that policy needs to take.

At the end of the day, however, research on its own does not solve problems. Progress is made through the actions of dedicated individuals in all sectors who seek to provide opportunities in higher education to Canadians from all backgrounds. These individuals work in a variety of settings: in legislatures; in government departments and offices; in schools, colleges and universities; in community organizations; and in businesses. We wish all of them the best of luck, for Canada needs them to succeed.

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