Report on the Data-Readiness of Post-Secondary Access and Retention Programs for Under-Represented Groups

Executive Summary

Prepared by:

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With over half of Canada’s population aged 25 to 34 now holding a university degree or college diploma, young adults in Canada have the highest rates of post-secondary attainment our country has ever seen. However, educational success is not shared equally among Canadians. Youth from lower income families, Aboriginals, and those who would be first in their family to attend PSE (“First-Generation” students) remain under-represented on the campuses of Canada’s post-secondary institutions. Not only are under-represented groups less likely to enrol in post-secondary education (PSE), but they are also at greater risk of leaving without completing their program. Reducing the access gap is important for promoting both equality and associated community benefits for all Canadians, as well as for ensuring a competitive labour market. Post-secondary attainment among under-represented groups represents a critical driver of future labour market growth for Canada, — otherwise we face the challenges of an aging workforce and potential declines in PSE enrolment.

Canadian post-secondary institutions have responded to access gaps with innovative programs to recruit, enrol and graduate students from under-represented groups. These efforts reflect the core of their institutional missions to widen participation in higher education, and many of the strategies appear promising. However, as noted recently by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) “there is little evidence about the effects of institutional support programmes on student outcomes.” Given the importance of reducing the access gap and the scope of institutional efforts to address it, the time is right to ask if institutions have the data they need to determine whether or not initiatives are meeting their objectives.

With the support of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) recently completed a study on the data-readiness of PSE access and retention programs for lower-income youth, Aboriginals, and first-generation students. The study methodology included an environmental scan followed by site visits to universities and colleges to learn more from institutional researchers and program delivery staff about the data they collect, access and use to support delivery and evaluation of their access initiatives for under-represented students. Key informant interviews with student financial aid organizations, provincial governments, application centres and staff from non-partnering institutions helped to provide context for the findings from the scan and site visits.

The study found numerous examples of innovative access and retention programs for under-represented groups at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Equally impressive was the demonstrated commitment of institution staff and community partners, and institutional willingness to evolve so that students from all backgrounds can feel they belong on their campuses. The study findings indicate, however, that institutions likely do not have the data required to fully assess the effectiveness of their access and retention programs for under-represented students.

Data gaps result from challenges including:

- a lack of consistent definitions for under-represented groups, resulting in incomparability over time and across institutions and jurisdictions;
- difficulties identifying the target groups, including the potential reluctance to self-identify especially at sensitive points in the student cycle;
- the inability to access or link datasets due to a lack of common identifiers and limitations imposed by the regulatory environment;
- a lack of outcome measures and longitudinal data;
- a lack of adequate resources to collect and analyze data.

Staff at partner institutions clearly showed both their determination to put the available data to the best use, and their desire to improve their data-readiness in order to rigorously evaluate and continually improve their access strategies.

The findings point to three main considerations that should be of interest for all who wish to reduce the access gap. The first is that **Transformative Institutions** appear to be the most successful in promoting access for under-represented groups. In addition to developing and implementing innovative programs and strategies, they have a commitment to evaluating the impacts of these investments. The institutional vision and objectives are clearly articulated by leadership and communicated within the institution and to community partners.

A second consideration is to put in place **A Purposeful and Coordinated Strategy**, based on input from stakeholder groups and including elements of systematic data collection, standardized questions and centralized data collection. In the United States, the Education Trust has launched an ambitious project to close the access and completion gaps between low-income and minority students and other students. The initiative brings colleges together as they each work to achieve their own overall improvement targets, with agreement to use a common set of metrics to evaluate progress. In Canada, the first steps toward creating a similar national strategy might include the creation of a task force with membership from provincial/federal, national, PSE institutional and educational leaders whose purpose it would be to hold broad consultations to begin articulating a national data strategy.

A third area for consideration is to support **Investment in Institutional Infrastructure**. This would involve increased support for program delivery staff, who often have little time or human resource capacity to implement rigorous evaluations of program outcomes. Funding for a dedicated administrative position, or staff, within the institution is another way of building infrastructure to promote access and retention initiatives. The mandate of this position would be to coordinate the collection and dissemination of data both internally and externally, realize opportunities to access or link datasets to provide longitudinal data, encourage more rigorous program evaluation, and undertake strategic planning to address institution-specific access and retention challenges.