

Access and Educational Attainment in Ontario

Background

Over the next decade, it is estimated that over 70% of Canadian jobs will require some form of post-secondary educational (PSE). Unfortunately, for many in Ontario education beyond high-school is not an option they consider, as various barriers stand in the way of their advancing into higher education. Traditionally, five target groups have been under represented within Ontario's post secondary education system, and they include: low-income students, aboriginal students, first generation students, rural and northern students, as well as students with dependents.

Recently, community based early outreach initiatives have shown much success in increasing participation rates in PSE amongst these groups. Early-outreach is the engagement of youth in a dialogue about education, its purpose, benefits, outcomes, and the opportunities it provides. Early outreach seeks to extend the continuum of education to post-secondary studies from an early age, as it has been shown one third of students decide whether to attend PSE before the age of nine.

Concerns

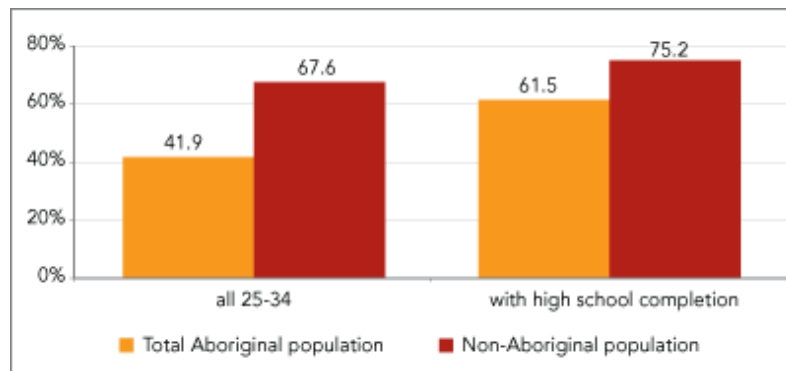
Students from the above mentioned underrepresented groups face specific barriers to accessing and persisting through PSE. While each group does in fact face its own specific barriers, many of the groups also share common barriers between them. Because of this, tailored early outreach programs have been shown to be the most effective, as they address the specific needs of the community. Specific programs, such as the Pathways to Education project in Toronto, have led to decreased high school drop out rates and an increase in the number of students attending PSE. As a result of their successes, the Ontario Government has shown some commitment to early outreach programs, but inequities still exist that need to be addressed.

Low-income Students

Participation rates for low-income individuals are consistently lower than higher income groups. In 2006-07, data revealed that over 80% of 18-24 year olds from families earning over \$100 000 participated in PSE, while the participation rate dropped to less than 60% for youth from families earning less than \$25 000. Low-income students face additional barriers to accessing post-secondary education relative to their peers. Low-income families tend to overestimate the cost of attending PSE and are less aware of financial aid available to students. Studies have also shown that, generally, more affluent students fair better academically than their low-income counterparts.

Aboriginal Students

Although participation in and success throughout PSE has been improving for Aboriginal students, they are still less likely to attend PSE than their peers. The 2006 National Census showed that amongst Aboriginals aged 25-34, 42% held a PSE credential, while 68% of non-Aboriginal young adults held a similar credential. According to the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, Aboriginal students face a number of barriers, including cultural, financial, and academic. One of the clearest barriers to access arises during high school, where nationally, a startling 40.3% of Aboriginals between the age of 20-24 did not complete high school, compared to 12.5% amongst the remainder of the population. The graph below demonstrates the impact of high school completion on PSE completion.

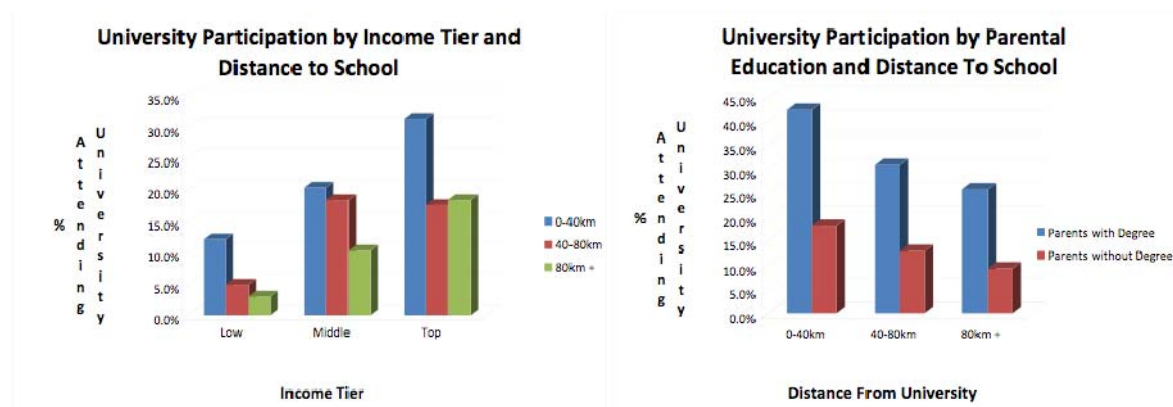


First Generation Students

Students with parents who have attended post-secondary education are more likely to participate in PSE themselves than students whose parents did not attend PSE. In 2005, just over 50% of students whose parents completed a high school degree or less participated in PSE, while over 80% of students whose parents attended university, participated in PSE. First generation students face a number of barriers to accessing PSE compared to their peers. There are academic barriers as they achieve lower high-school grades compared to their peers. First generation students are also more skeptical of the benefits of a PSE credential when compared to non-first generation students. Finally, like many other cohorts of under represented students, first generation students also face financial barriers.

Rural and Northern Students

Overall, rural and northern students in Ontario are less likely to access post-secondary education than their urban peers. Across Canada, students living in excess of 80 kilometres from a PSE institution are only 58% as likely to attend PSE as students who live within 40 kilometres of an institution. The graphs below demonstrate how this fact is only compounded by income level and parental education level.



Students with Dependents

Across Canada, 19% of women between the ages 20 and 24 had dependent children in 2001. However, only 4% of women 20 years old attending university reported having a child. Many students with dependents are only able to attend school on a part-time basis, and part-time students are unable to access OSAP. Further, a

single-parent can not concurrently receive Ontario Works and OSAP, leaving them to face additional financial barriers to education. The child care system in Ontario also is not meeting the needs of students with dependent children, creating a further barrier in the form of familial obligations.

Where OUSA Stands

1. OUSA believes that the government must establish and properly fund an arms-length foundation that supports the development of community-based early outreach initiatives across the province, which can provide information and resources to students, families, and communities to assist in making better informed decisions about educational pathways.
2. OUSA advocates for adequate funding for universities, so they are able to implement and strengthen social and academic support programs targeted for, but not limited to, under-represented students, ultimately ensuring the future success of Ontario in the knowledge-based economy.
3. OUSA asks for a strong commitment to underrepresented students through targeted grants which will ensure that these students do not face additional financial barriers to accessing PSE.