



Policy Paper

Going the Distance: Rural and Northern Access to University Education

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Introduction

Ontario is a massive province. With over 900,000 square kilometers of landmass, it accounts for over ten percent of the land area in Canada¹. From the Canadian Shield and the Hudson's Bay Lowlands in the north, to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Valley, Ontario offers a geographic wonder for residents and visitors alike. Ontario's sheer size is larger than France and Germany combined, and home to over twelve million people.

Scattered across this area are 19 universities, 15 of which are located within 100km of Highway 401 in the southern, largely urban corridor of the province. So for the nine to thirteen percent (based on varying measuring criteria) of Ontarians who live in rural or northern regions, the question of attending higher education goes far beyond a simple question of high school grades. The fact is these students face unique social and economic barriers to a university education. Moreover, average incomes and education attainment rates in rural and northern areas tend to be lower. When these factors are combined with steadily rising tuition fees and student debt levels, it is not a surprise these students do not participate in post-secondary education nearly as much as their urban counterparts. Ontario's rural and northern students are trapped in a cycle of facing high costs with relatively low resources.

Many jurisdictions in Canada and around the world have recognized the educational challenges imposed by geography, and have developed programs to assist students from rural regions. Ontario has recently reached out to rural and northern students with the introduction of Distance Grants, available for students who live more than 80km away from the closest university. Educational institutions are taking steps to branch out into satellite campuses, with programs introduced into such communities as Barrie, Orillia, Brantford, Muskoka, and Timmins. But while these measures are recognized and applauded, Ontario does not do enough to help rural and northern individuals through financial assistance, special programs, or comprehensive research aimed at better understanding their plight.

In 2008, the Ontario budget promised "the province's education plan is creating a learning environment in which all students of diverse backgrounds are welcomed and valued – and where all students are better able to achieve their full potential."² Certainly this is a goal all Ontarians can support. But until rural and northern students receive the attention and assistance they require, it will be these students who fall well short of achieving their potential.

Principles

Principle One: A university education provides significant economic and social benefits for individuals and the communities in which they live.

There are a number of significant indicators that suggest a university education pays huge dividends for individuals and their communities. A 2004 TD Economics report states that the weekly earnings for a university graduate are 33 percent higher than a college graduate, and 61 percent higher than those who have a high school diploma.³ Further, the unemployment rate for university graduates is half that of those with only secondary school education, at 4.4 and 8.8 percent respectively.⁴ Marc Frenette estimates that the annual rate of return for each additional year of schooling lies in the rate of 6 to 10 percent.⁵ Tax records suggest that the 15 percent of Canada's population that has a university degree pay nearly 35 percent of the nation's income taxes, but receive less than 8 percent of government

¹ Statistics Canada. Land and freshwater area, by province and territory. 2005. Accessed at <http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/phys01.htm>.

² Ontario Budget 2008. Chapter I, Section D: A Smarter Ontario: Excellence in Publicly Funded Education.

³ Investing in a Post-Secondary Education Delivers a Stellar Rate of Return, TD Economics Paper, January 22, 2004. Pg. 2.

⁴ Ibid.; Pg. 2.

⁵ Marc Frenette. Too Far to Go On? Distance to School and University Participation. Statistics Canada. June 19, 2002. Pg. 1.

transfers.⁶ Further to the monetary benefits, a university education provides better communication skills, greater self-confidence, and a longer, healthier life.⁷

The social and economic vitality of a community also improves when its members receive higher salaries and experience lower employment rates. An educated workforce attracts new business and industry to a region, and generally means better access to professional services for citizens. A university education is highly correlated with the likelihood of civic and political participation within communities, especially in rural areas. 63 percent of rural university graduates reported doing some volunteering, and 84 percent engaged in some form of non-voting political activity.⁸ This is 2.2 and 2.3 times the proportion of those without high school degrees respectively, and 21 percent and 13 percent greater participation rates than university graduates who live in urban areas.⁹ Thus, it is clear that a university education provides undeniable benefits to both individuals and society as a whole.

Principle Two: No qualified student should be denied the opportunity to attend university because of geographic barriers.

Considering the significant individual returns provided by university education, it must follow that no willing and academically qualified student be barred from accessing post-secondary education due to rural or northern residency. Allowing geographic circumstances to negatively impact university attendance denies many citizens the opportunities available to the inhabitants of urban areas. This represents an unacceptable infringement on the principle of equality of opportunity. To deny equal opportunities to rural or northern citizens does a grave disservice to the economic and social viability of these individuals and their communities.

Principle Three: The provincial government has a responsibility to ensure equitable university access for all students.

The 2007 Throne Speech promised that the government would make a “major investment in the education and skills of our people,” and made direct reference to a “special distance grant for students from the north and remote areas who must commute long distances.”¹⁰ This explicit reference and subsequent implementation of the Ontario Distance Grants shows that the government understands that the needs of rural and northern students are unique when compared to their urban counterparts. Investing in university access for all of Ontario’s students needs to remain a priority, as there are many willing and qualified students who are currently unable to access a post-secondary education.

The provincial government is in the best position to provide incentives, financial assistance, and special programming for students facing geographic challenges in their pursuit of higher education. As the benefits of a university education are heavily back-loaded while the costs are borne up-front, many students face their largest barriers to education through distance, and rising costs. By helping rural and northern students meet their unique financing challenges, the provincial government will make a meaningful investment in rural and northern citizens and their communities.

Principle Four: The provincial government has a responsibility to understand the geographic barriers that currently exist.

⁶ Sean Junior and Alex Usher. *The Price of Knowledge 2004: Access and Student Finance in Canada*. Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. November 2003.

⁷ Investing in a Post-Secondary Education Delivers a Stellar Rate of Return, TD Economics Paper, January 22, 2004. Pg. 2.

⁸ Statistics Canada. Study: Impact of Education on Civic Engagement in Rural and Urban Canada. *The Daily*, July 17, 2006.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Moving Forward the Ontario Way, Speech From the Throne, November 2007.

<http://www.premier.gov.on.ca/documents/ThroneSpeech112907-En.pdf>

The provincial government will be unable to fulfill their responsibility to rural and northern students if they do not fully understand the social and economic barriers faced by these individuals in their pursuit of post-secondary education. In the absence of a complete understanding of the rural and northern accessibility issue, government officials will be unable to develop and implement effective policy and programs in this area.

As such, as part of fulfilling their obligations towards geographically disadvantaged students, the provincial government has a clear responsibility to promote and commission research that will contribute to understanding the rural and northern access problem and stimulate the production of viable policy solutions.

Concerns

Concern One: There is currently an insufficient level of knowledge and research on the issues surrounding rural and northern access to university.

Currently, there are only two authoritative Canadian studies dealing with the question of rural and northern accessibility, and both are more than five years out of date.¹¹ Although these studies represent an invaluable contribution to the discussion, they do not provide enough information to adequately gauge the problem of rural and northern university access, or allow for the development of comprehensive policy in this area.

There are three essential deficiencies in current research on rural and northern accessibility. First, there is no study that focuses exclusively on Ontario and seeks to understand how the unique demographics and geography of the province impacts university participation for individuals outside of urban areas. Second, no study has yet looked into the full range of social barriers faced by these potential students. While the impact of distance from school and family income are reasonably well understood, factors like parental educational attainment, attitudes toward university, secondary school performance and their connection to rural access have not been fully developed. Indeed, there may be barriers to rural and northern university participation that have not been described at all in the relevant literature. Lastly, the two studies in existence have arbitrarily determined a boundary to 80km to be outside of commuting distance from a post-secondary institution. Other distances or features have not been examined to see if a tighter correlation might exist outside of this random distance indicator.

The first step to ensuring equitable university access for students from rural and northern regions is to fully understand the challenges they face. So far, Ontario has failed to both pursue and realize this understanding.

Concern Two: Rural and northern residency is a serious barrier to the pursuit of a university education.

According to the results of the 2001 census, a young person from a large urban area was twice as likely to obtain a degree as someone from a rural region.¹² That statistic alone is enough to provide a shock to any reader. In such a prosperous province, in a wealthy nation regarded among the world's elite, the random chance of being born in a rural or northern community is enough to chop post-secondary expectations in half. While rural residency has many different definitions to different organizations, the Statistics Canada model suggests that 13 percent of Ontarians are placed at a disadvantage due to their geographic location.

One of the earliest studies involving distance and higher education comes from the American National Bureau of Economic Research. This study, for the first time, pointed out some alarming challenges:

- The closer an individual lives to school, the higher their educational attainment
- The necessity of going away from home to attend school imposes additional costs on students

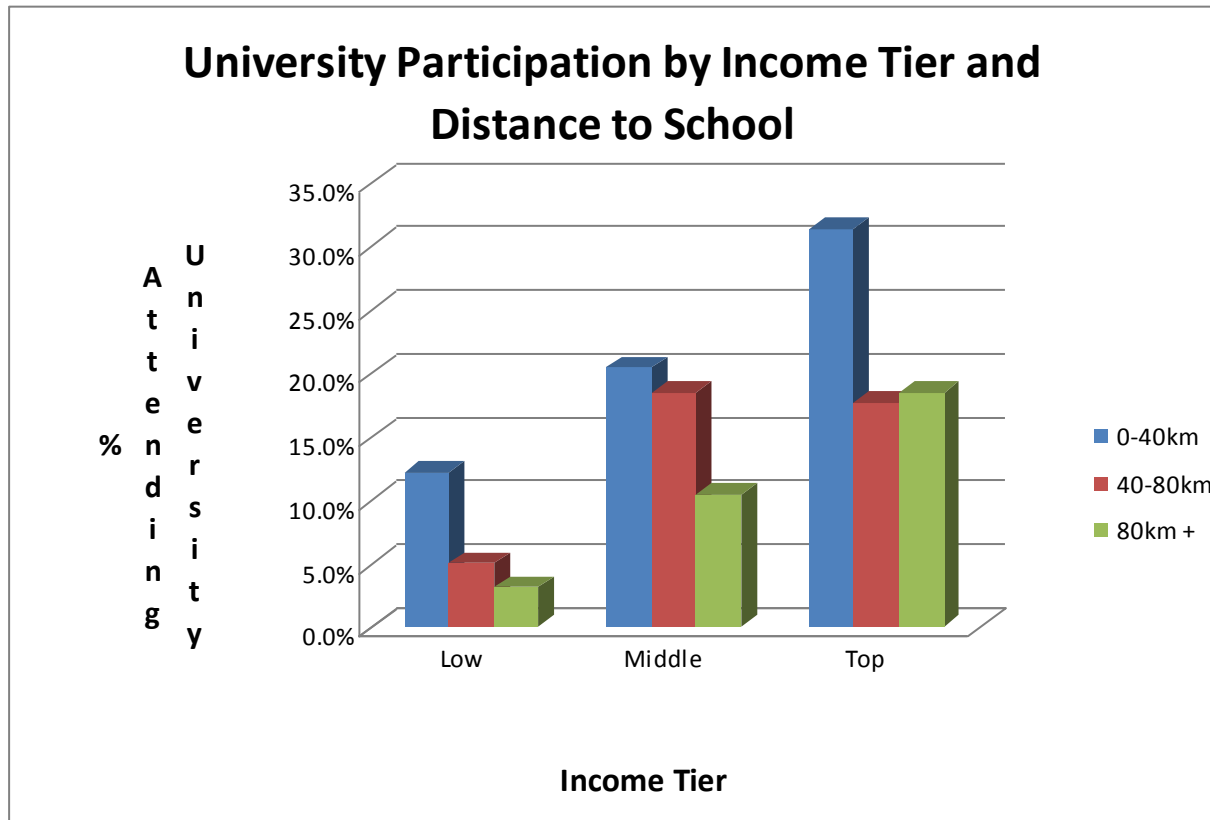
¹¹ This refers to *Too Far to Go On? Distance to School and University Participation and Access to College and University: Does Distance Matter*, both authored by Marc Frenette and published by Statistics Canada.

¹² Statistics Canada. Study: Sources of growth in degree holders across urban and rural Canada. *The Daily*, June 2, 2008.

- Families from rural areas typically have lower educational attainment levels
- Rural families tend to have lower incomes than urban families¹³

When taken together, these factors place a clear disadvantage on rural and northern students when compared to their urban peers.

More recently, and closer to home, two Statistics Canada reports confirm this relationship. After controlling for other factors, students who live more than 80km away from a university are only 58 percent as likely to attend university as those who live within 40km.¹⁴ Nine percent of Ontario residents live beyond this 80km barrier,¹⁵ and the discrepancies are exacerbated when distance is combined with parental income levels. Consider the following graph:¹⁶



Across the income spectrum, students who live within a 40km radius of a university are much more likely to attend one than students who live further away. Moreover, the disparity in the participation rate is such that a student from the top income tier in an urban area is ten times more likely to attend university as a low-income rural student.¹⁷ Within 40km from a university, students from upper income families are 1.9 times more likely to attend university than those from lower income families. But as we move across the rural divide, rural upper-income students are 5.6 times more likely to attend university than their lowest income neighbours.¹⁸ Clearly, the physical distance imposed by rural or northern residency is a serious barrier to university access.

¹³ David Card. Using Geographic Variation in College Proximity to Estimate the Return of Schooling. Cambridge, Massachusetts: National Bureau of Economic Research, October 1993. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w4483.pdf>.

¹⁴ Marc Frenette. Too Far to Go On? Distance to School and University Participation. Statistics Canada, June 19, 2002. Pg. 20.

¹⁵ Ibid, Pg. 2.

¹⁶ Ibid, Pg. 13.

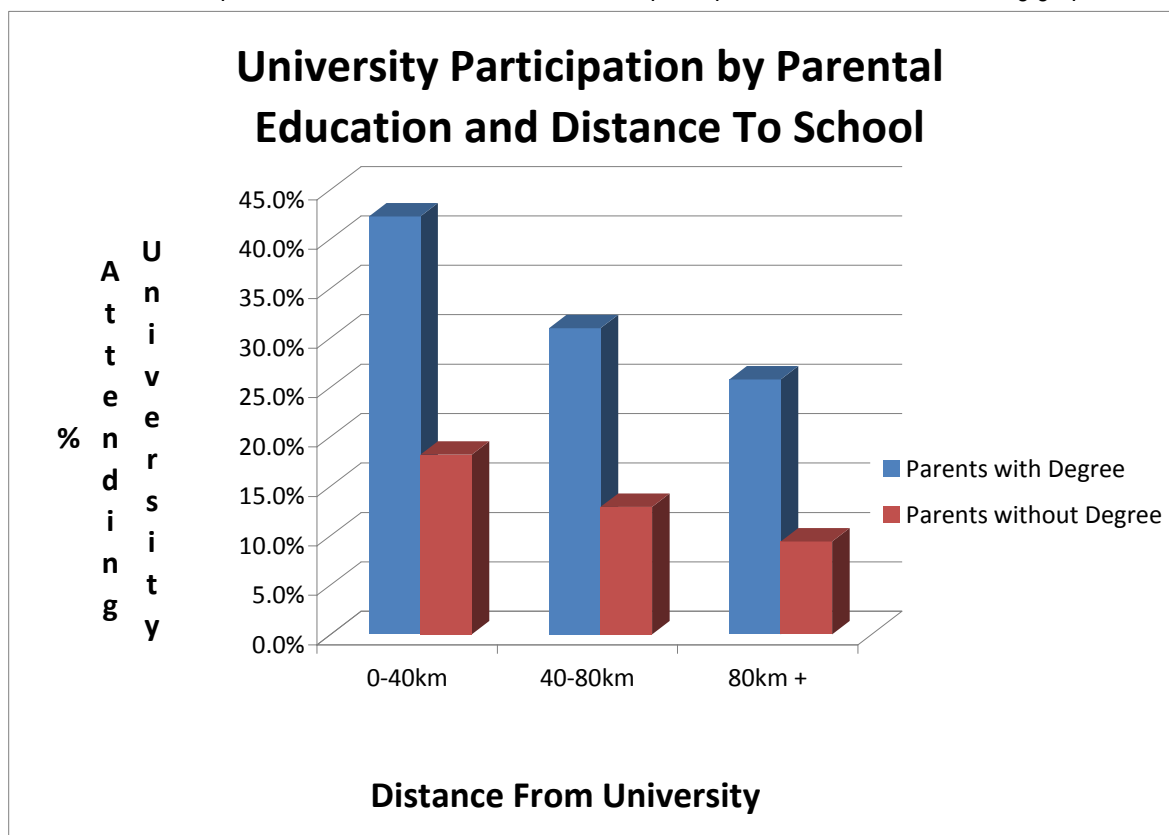
¹⁷ Ibid, Pg. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid, Pg. 3.

Of the nearly ten percent of Ontario's population living beyond this 80km barrier, 26 percent of them are in the lowest income tier.¹⁹ Rural families tend to typically have lower median incomes than those living in urban areas, meaning that those who need the most money to send their children to school typically have less disposable income available.

The trends show, however, that rural families are willing and determined to access a post-secondary education. When both a university and a college are within 80km of a student's home, students are more likely to attend a university, by a 22.9 percent to 14.6 percent margin.²⁰ However, when only a college is nearby, the numbers flip, and 20.4 percent attend college compared to only 13.6 percent for university.²¹ This trend clearly indicates that rural students are interested in the benefits of a post-secondary education, and would tend to prefer a university degree, but factors are shifting them towards the college system in greater numbers than their urban counterparts. As a result of distance to university, cost of a degree, perceived value, and the lack of university-educated role models, these four factors combine to limit the access of a university education to rural and northern students.

Frenette's studies also hint at the more ephemeral social barriers facing rural and northern students. In particular, he looks at the effect of parental educational attainment on rural participation. Consider the following graph:²²



Clearly, parental education is an important factor in determining university participation regardless of geographic origin. Again, however, rural students still have a much lower participation rate. The first study actually found that, after controlling for income levels, students with a university-educated parent are just as deterred by distance as students without a university-educated parent.²³

¹⁹ Ibid, Pg. 11.

²⁰ Marc Frenette. Access to College and University. Does Distance Matter? Statistics Canada. June 2003, Pg. 8

²¹ Ibid, Pg. 8.

²² Marc Frenette. Too Far to Go On? Distance to School and University Participation. Statistics Canada, June 19, 2002. Pg. 13

²³ Ibid, Pg. 3.

A 2004 OUAC Survey, given randomly to Ontario university applicants, found that 11 percent of students limited their choice of university to those in close geographic proximity due to financial considerations.²⁴ And 38 percent of those who were forced to live with their parents due to financial circumstances reported that they were not able to fully pursue their desired program of study.²⁵ Thus, it is not just rural and northern students that feel the burden of distance when pursuing a university education. However, unlike a student who has the ability to live at home and reduce their costs, rural and northern students must incur substantial transportation expenses, and live in residence or off-campus housing. 58 percent of all first year students who do not live with their parents opt to live in a campus residence, paying for inflated living costs compared to off-campus peers, and in many instances being forced to purchase meal plans as well.²⁶ As students struggle to deal with tuition and other costs that rise substantially each year, it is clear that rural and northern residency is a serious barrier that deters many from accessing a university education.

Concern Three: Financial incentives for rural and northern students to attend university do not address all their true needs.

There is little doubt that rural and northern students face economic and social challenges above and beyond those experienced in an urban environment. Therefore, it is logical to conclude in light of the provincial government's commitments and responsibilities that special assistance be provided to these students. The provincial government has recognized these special circumstances, and implemented the two-pronged Ontario Distance Grants.

The Commuting Grant is worth \$500 per academic term (typically \$1000 per year), and is available for Ontario residents who are full time students, and who live greater than 80km away from the closest institution of type (closest university if they are attending university, or closest college if they are attending college). This is available to any student who completes an OSAP application, regardless of need, and is available only if the student remains living at that address during study.

The Travel Grant is worth \$300 per year, and is available for Ontario residents who are dependent students living away from their parents during the period of study. The student must be full-time, and have moved from an address that is greater than 80km away from the closest institution of type. Once again, this is available to any student who completes an OSAP application, regardless of need.

While the government has taken the first step in identifying the special needs of rural and northern students, there is still a long way to come to ensure their unique needs are being met by our financial assistance programs. The majority of assistance for rural and northern students outside the Ontario Distance Grants comes from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). Unfortunately, this program is largely ineffective in meeting the needs of the province's students. A combination of inaccurate assessment, insufficient aid amounts, unfair categorical ineligibilities, and unfair parental support and income requirements means that many needy students cannot get the money they require.²⁷

Due to the unique financial challenges faced by rural and northern students, OSAP's systemic inadequacies have a particularly harsh impact on these individuals. From a rural and northern perspective, the primary fault with OSAP is that it does not make any provision for geographic circumstances in the assessment of student aid. All students living away from home, regardless of their area of origin or choice of school, are assessed to have a financial need of

²⁴ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Funding University Education in Ontario: Ontario University Applicant Survey Report. February 2006. Pg. 28.

²⁵ Ibid. Pg. 33.

²⁶ Sean Junior and Alex Usher. The Price of Knowledge 2004: Access and Student Finance in Canada. Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. November 2003. Pg. 136.

²⁷ For a more thorough discussion of the problems with OSAP eligibility and need assessment, please refer to OUSA's paper Building the Third Pillar: Reforming Ontario's Student Financial Aid System. Available at www.ousa.ca.

\$14,584. This amount is lower than the latest estimated Statistics Canada need of \$14,862, which comes from 2004,²⁸ and far lower than 2003 survey results that suggest dependent students living away from home needed \$17,400 per year.²⁹ These numbers exclude the inflation of 12 percent and tuition increases of 14.7 percent since 2003.³⁰ Despite all these available figures and the calculated low-balled estimate used by OSAP, the maximum annual award remains only \$11,900, representing a shortfall of thousands of dollars. This under-funding hurts rural and northern students, since they are typically under greater financial pressure than their urban colleagues.

One of the hurdles that rural and northern students face is transportation. The increased distance places a much larger strain on student budgets compared to urban counterparts. The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation has found that transportation accounts for roughly 12 percent of all student expenditures,³¹ and it is reasonable to assume that transportation expenditures would be greater for students who require air, rail or bus travel to return to their rural or northern communities. This comes in addition to the cost of buying new furniture and household wares that are too bulky and costly to transport large distances.

While the Ontario government has begun to recognize that rural and northern students face unique challenges in accessing a university education, the financial support remains woefully inadequate, and does not meet the true needs of students from these communities. Our students need a financial system that appreciates and meets their needs, and does not burden them with excessive debt.

Concern Four: The Ontario Distance Grants do not make provisions for a student's choice of program.

The Ontario Distance Grants are designed for students who live greater than 80 kilometers from the closest institution of type (closest university if the student is attending university, closest college if the student is attending college), but these grants make no provision for the choice of program. To use an example, a student from Bobcaygeon, Ontario wishing to pursue a degree in engineering is close enough to Trent University that they do not qualify for a commuter or travel grant, despite the fact that Trent does not offer such a degree. This student would still have the added expenses of moving far away to attend school, but is not eligible to receive money under this program.

Another situation arises if a student does not have an admissions average that qualifies them for their closest institution. A program at their closest university may require an admissions average of 80 percent, but there is another school across the province that accepts students with a 75 percent average. A student who falls between these high school averages would also be ineligible for this grant, despite having to move much further in order to attend university.

Concern Five: Rural and northern students are less inclined to pursue a post-secondary education when compared to their urban counterparts.

A comprehensive university system that adequately compensates for the disadvantages that rural and northern students face must also address issues of access and outreach initiatives. Many rural and northern families do not recognize the opportunities that a post-secondary education will bring, and their educational aspirations reflect this. "Urban parents (96 percent) are more inclined to hope that their children will pursue post-secondary studies than their

²⁸ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Easing the Middle Class Burden. February 2008.

²⁹ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada. Third Edition. 2007, Pg. 68.

³⁰ Statistics Canada. University Tuition Fees. *The Daily*. August 12, 2003 and October 18, 2007

³¹ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Pressure Points in Student Financial Assistance, March 2003, Pg. 5.

rural counterparts (90 percent),³² and rural parents are more likely to suggest college as the highest level that should be completed.

While no comparative Canadian data is available, an American study of students in grades 10 and 12 suggest that rural students have lower aspirations than their urban and suburban peers. 16.6 percent of rural students had a goal of a high school education or less, compared to 11.0 percent of urban students and 10.6 percent of suburban students.³³ At the four-year college level, equivalent to Ontario's university education, 28.2 percent of rural students wished to obtain a degree, compared to 30.8 percent of urban students and 32.9 percent of suburban students.³⁴ Just 22.0 percent of rural students desired a graduate-level education, compared to 31.1 percent of urban and 27.3 percent of suburban counterparts.³⁵

These numbers translate into data that shows an observable trend in Canada: urban youth attend post-secondary education in greater numbers than rural youth do. Results from the Statistics Canada Youth in Transition Survey show that 35 percent of rural residents have never attended a post-secondary institution, compared to only 18 percent of urban residents.³⁶ Of those that continued schooling, 52 percent of urban students went to university, 32 percent to college, and 16 percent to other institutions. Meanwhile, only 40 percent of rural students chose university, while 40 percent went to college, and 20 percent to other forms of education.³⁷ Twenty percent of rural students drop out of their post-secondary institution, compared to only 14 percent of urban students.³⁸

The barriers that rural and northern students face in accessing a university education are greater than simple financial considerations. The transition from a small community lifestyle to a large-city atmosphere is one that many students are uncomfortable and struggle with. When high school students are asked what their barriers to continuing education are, 51 percent cite a fear of leaving family and friends, behind only a lack of money, and the increased costs of living away from home.³⁹ The emotional costs of leaving home, the neighbourhood attachment, and the relative lack of university graduates in their home communities all lead to a decreased desire for post-secondary education. Given that three-quarters of Ontario students make their decision whether or not to attend university by age fifteen, and that one-third make the decision before age nine,⁴⁰ rural and northern communities are prime targets for early outreach campaigns.

Unfortunately, these targeted educational campaigns have not happened, and rural and northern students continue to desire a university education at a lower rate than their urban counterparts.

Concern Six: Rural and northern regions are critically short of professional services and are being denied the benefit of an educated population.

It is no secret that Ontario is facing a shortage of many professional services, most notably with respect to doctors. Peter George, president of McMaster University and head of a panel created to look into the shortage, has observed

³² Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. *The Price of Knowledge 2004: Access and Student Finance in Canada*. November 2003, Pg. 7.

³³ Shouping Hu. *Educational Aspirations and Postsecondary Access and Choice: Students in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools Compared*. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 11(4). April 2003.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Statistics Canada. *Participation in Postsecondary Education: Graduates, Continuers and Drop Outs, Results from YITS Cycle 4*. November 2007, Pg. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Pg. 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.* Pg. 16.

³⁹ Prairie Research Associates. *Survey of Secondary School Students*. September 2005, Pg. 54.

⁴⁰ Council of Ontario Universities. *Applicant Survey Highlights* (Toronto: COU, 2003).

that, “small communities, particularly in Northern Ontario, have been hard hit by the doctor shortage.”⁴¹ The most recent data available suggests that only about 10 percent of doctors in Canada practice in rural areas, while 20 percent of the population lives in rural areas.⁴² Furthermore, in Ontario, 13 percent of the population is identified as rural, however only 7.3 percent of medical school applicants were coming from rural areas.⁴³

Lower university attendance overall from rural and northern regions means that there will be proportionately less doctors and other professionals, such as lawyers, dentists, and engineers, from these communities. The environment of a rising debt level and the staggering amount of aid required to finance these long term, specialized areas of study, means that many rural and northern students will opt to take higher-paying jobs in the cities rather than return to their communities upon graduation. A study done in 2000 by the government of Alberta shows that 89 percent of students who came from large urban communities returned to these, while 5 percent moved to a small urban community, and 6 percent moved to a rural community. In stark contrast, 49 percent of students with rural origins moved to a large urban community, 14 percent moved to a small urban community, and only 37 percent of rural students returned to rural communities after graduation.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, engineering, law and medicine students were least likely to return to their roots, while education, nursing and social work graduates were most likely to return to smaller communities.⁴⁵

Given that educated people are also the most likely to leave rural communities,⁴⁶ rural communities face many disadvantages when it comes to education. Not only do young people have fewer educated role models and community leaders, entire communities lack access to many professional services. If rural communities do not see and realize the benefits that these leaders and role models bring, fewer and fewer rural and northern residents understand the scope and perspective that a university education can provide. Unfortunately, rural communities continue to be left behind, and do not have access to many of the benefits and professionals as their counterparts in cities do.

Concern Seven: Ontario’s Aboriginal populations are disproportionately concentrated in rural and northern areas, and face further challenges in accessing a university education.

Aboriginals in Ontario face challenges in their educational pursuits, and there are a number of factors that contribute to their persistent underrepresentation in higher education.⁴⁷ Compounding this, however, is the fact that many of our Aboriginals are located in rural and northern areas as well. One in five of Canada’s Aboriginals live in Ontario, and they comprise approximately 1.7 percent of Ontario’s population.⁴⁸ While relatively small compared to the large number of people in this province, the population growth is a staggering 500 percent faster than the rest of the

⁴¹ Canadian Medical Association Journal, New Ontario panel to look at physician shortage. http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/201/300/cdn_medical_association/cmaj/vol-162/issue-6/0860b.htm

⁴² Canadian Council on Learning. Aboriginal and rural underrepresentation in Canada’s medical schools. April 17, 2008, http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Templates/LessonsInLearning.aspx?NRMODE=Published&NRORIGINALURL=percent2fCCLpercent2fReportspercent2fLessonsInLearningpercent2fLinL20080417AboriginalRuralUnderrepresentationMedicalSchoolspercent2ehtmpersent3fLanguagepercent3dEN&NRNODEGUID=percent7bADE21A07-F151-4749-979B-4A4732F62AAApercent7d&NRCACHEHINT=NoModifyGuest&Language=EN#_edn2

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. The Price of Knowledge 2004: Access and Student Finance in Canada. November 2003, Pg. 314.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Pg. 314.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Pg. 314.

⁴⁷ For a more thorough discussion of the challenges that Aboriginal students face, please refer to OUSA’s paper Aboriginal students in Ontario’s post-secondary education system. Available at www.ousa.ca

⁴⁸ Statistics Canada. Off reserve Aboriginal population: Provincial and territorial reports: Ontario. October 31, 2006. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-618-XIE/2006001/reports/ontario.htm>

province is growing.⁴⁹ Seventy eight percent of Ontario's Aboriginal population lives off-reserve, meaning that 22 percent of live on reserves that are typically in remote rural or urban areas.⁵⁰ Among the three subgroupings of Aboriginal Canadians, a further 13 percent of North American Indians live in rural areas off-reserve, 29 percent of Métis live in rural areas, along with 12 percent of Inuit.⁵¹ It is clear that the Aboriginal community faces the barrier of rural and northern residency in much greater proportions than the remainder of the Ontario population.

Aboriginal youth are optimistic about their education futures, with 72 percent reporting that they believe they will receive the level of education they desire, and 70 percent of parents believing this as well.⁵² However, the desired education falls below the expectations of the rest of the population, as only 70 percent of Aboriginal youth expect a post-secondary education, compared to 90 percent of non-Aboriginal youth.⁵³ The reality is far more sobering: 58 percent of those living on-reserve have not even completed a high school education,⁵⁴ and among those who have completed high school, only 65 percent have pursued a post-secondary education within two years of high school completion, compared to 80 percent of the non-Aboriginal population.⁵⁵ Overall, 39 percent of working-age Aboriginals have graduated with a post-secondary degree, compared to the Canadian achievement rate of 54 percent.⁵⁶

There are many factors that affect the degree to which Aboriginal students attend our universities and other post-secondary institutions. Income levels on reserves that are less than half of the national average,⁵⁷ compounded with the effects of first-generation student status, compounded with rural and northern residency creates a recipe where fewer Aboriginal students are able to succeed. The Ontario government has not addressed this need adequately, leaving a segment of our population incredibly vulnerable to cycles of poverty and low post-secondary attainment.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: The provincial government must embark upon a program of research and study in order to properly understand the social and financial barriers facing students from rural and northern areas.

In order to help rural and northern students access the substantial benefits of a university education, the provincial government must first understand the challenges they face. Currently, there is insufficient research on this topic to facilitate a thorough understanding of the needs of rural and northern students, and to develop holistic policy solutions.

The main research into the topic of rural and northern access has come from two Statistics Canada papers, published in 2002 and 2003. In identifying variables and methodology, 40km and 80km from universities and colleges were determined as arbitrary distances that might deter students from commuting. Further research has used these thresholds to mark distances that would qualify students as "rural", and the Ontario government has used the 80km standard when creating the Ontario Distance Grants. In addition to other variables and factors that affect the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Changing Course: Improving Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education in Canada. September 2005, Pg. 2.

⁵³ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada. Third Edition. 2007. Pg. 57.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. Changing Course: Improving Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education in Canada. September 2005, Pg. 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.4.

educational attainment of rural and northern students, new research must include an examination of which distance standards should be used when addressing the needs of Ontario's students.

Thus, the provincial government must invest in independent research into this phenomenon, and commit to conducting its own inquiry under the auspices of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Until this process is initiated, the provincial government will lack the tools to make a real difference to rural students and communities.

Recommendation Two: The provincial government must provide appropriate financial assistance to rural and northern students in need.

Although research into rural and northern accessibility is incomplete, there is enough evidence to suggest that university participation in these areas is hindered by the high relative cost of education, and lower average student resources to cover these expenses. As such, the government must commit to providing financial support to students from these areas.

The Ontario Distance Grants have begun to provide direct, up-front assistance for students, but these measures do not come close to meeting the needs of students from these areas. A commuting grant of \$500 per term works out to just over \$30 per week of assistance. Considering the rapidly rising price of vehicles, fuel, and public transportation passes, this is nowhere near appropriate for students whose round-trip commute is upwards of 160km per day. Likewise, a \$300 annual grant for students who need to move for their education may cover one or two trips home for a visit, and likely not even one trip if air travel is required. This says nothing to the effect and costs of transporting household goods and furniture, or purchasing additional supplies for their new home.

The universality of this grant means that students who do not have financial need are eligible to receive assistance, in effect taking money directly from other students that could be benefitting. And the application process includes automatic processing for Ontario student loans, even for those who are debt-adverse.

The Ontario government must ensure that these grants are converted into targeted assistance, where only students with need are awarded grant money. Every student who qualifies should be able to receive assistance that takes into account increased travel expenditures for round trips home, including situations where universities close their residence system during extended school breaks. It is through visiting friends and family during academic breaks, and returning home for summer that students are able to retain links to their home communities, which in turn enhances the likelihood that students will return to their communities after graduation. Only when rural and northern students are placed on equal financial footing with their urban counterparts will we see the discrepancies in university attendance rates begin to disappear.

Recommendation Three: The provincial government must allow students in need to apply for targeted grants without applying for loans.

For many Ontarians, fear of going into debt plays an important role in determining post-secondary education choices. Research by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation shows that, among high school seniors, fear of going into debt was identified by 25 percent of students as a barrier to continuing on to post-secondary education.⁵⁸ Among students who would like to continue with their education but intend to work first, debt-aversion jumps to 32 percent of respondents.⁵⁹

In order to apply for the current Ontario Distance Grants, students are required to complete an OSAP application form. For many students, the knowledge that they may be given a loan and incur debt through this program is

⁵⁸ Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada*. Third Edition. 2007. Pg. 37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; Pg. 37.

enough to discourage them from applying for the grant. The Ontario government must provide an option for students to receive this, and other targeted grants, without simultaneously applying for a student loan.

Recommendation Four: The provincial government must comprehensively review the OSAP assessment model to reflect the true cost of higher education in the province, including regional flexibility for the cost of living, and reducing expected parental contributions.

Ontario students are underserved by the current OSAP model, which calculates an estimated student need at a lower rate than any other research body, and then provides less funding than the need it estimates. When part-time employment or other measures are used to try and reduce this funding gap, OSAP then withdraws a portion of the assistance, leaving many students in a situation where they are forced to take higher-interest, private sector loans or postpone university attendance entirely.⁶⁰

Of specific concern to many rural and northern students, is that farming and agricultural assets are included when assessing the expected parental contributions. While these families may have significant assets on a balance sheet, land and equipment are essential for the family's employment and economic well-being. With the limited cash flow that may be seen in a farming family, it is unreasonable to suggest that families should be forced to quite literally sell their farm in order to finance a student's education.

The Ontario government must overhaul the entire Ontario Student Assistance Program, beginning with a realistic expectation for parental contributions, an accurate costing of the educational expenses incurred, and assistance that meets the assessed needs identified. A fundamental cornerstone of this program must be a provision for geographic variations across the province. The cost of living in Toronto is not the same as Waterloo, Kingston, or Sudbury. A 'one-size fits all' mentality is not the right approach to ensure student success, and the current OSAP model contains many gaps that need to be promptly addressed by the Ontario government.

Recommendation Five: A rural or northern student's choice of program, or their academic standing, should not be a barrier to accessing the Ontario Distance Grants.

Students from rural areas are frequently faced with the situation where their closest university does not offer their desired program of study. Even if a student lives within 80km of a university, that institution does not necessarily provide an area of study that coincides with that student's interests. Certain faculties and programs are not offered at every university, and students should not be denied a Distance Grant if their interests are not represented at a nearby university.

Likewise, many similar programs across the province have differing entrance requirements. If a student is not offered acceptance to their preferred program at institutions within 80km of their home, but are admitted to an identical program at a farther university, this student faces many of the same access barriers as students who must move more than 80km to attend their closest university. OUSA believes that students who face these barriers beyond their control should qualify for Ontario Distance Grants.

Recommendation Six: The provincial government must implement and encourage new programs aimed at improving university access for rural and northern students, including early outreach.

"No matter where a student may live in Ontario, they deserve access to opportunity through postsecondary education,"⁶¹ declared Chris Bentley, former Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. The financial and

⁶⁰ For a more thorough discussion of the problems and solutions for OSAP, please refer to OUSA's paper Building the Third Pillar: Reforming Ontario's Student Financial Aid System. Available at www.ousa.ca.

⁶¹ Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Improving Access to Higher Education for Rural Students in Southern Ontario. News Release, March 6, 2007.

distance challenges have been thoroughly discussed in other sections of this paper, but simple funding of new initiatives does not have the desired impact if strategies are not used to educate the population.

A 2007 report suggests that less than 16 percent of high school seniors that planned to access government financial aid had a fair amount of understanding about the programs.⁶² These trends are unsurprisingly exacerbated in households where students have the lowest chance of furthering their education: low income families, Aboriginals, first-generation student households, and rural residencies. The report claims that these groups are underrepresented because they face not just one barrier, but a combination.⁶³ In order to increase the presence of these groups in post-secondary education, the government must implement and promote early outreach initiatives in rural and northern communities.

A shining model of a successful early outreach program comes from the Regent Park neighbourhood in Toronto, through the Pathways program. In a neighbourhood plagued by cycles of poverty, the high school dropout rate has plummeted, and 90 percent of students who have applied to post-secondary education have been accepted.⁶⁴ OUSA commends the success of this program, and urges the government to create an independent, arms-length foundation to distribute stable, sustainable funding to programs which reach out to underrepresented communities, including those in rural and northern areas of the province.

Recommendation Seven: The Ontario government should create and promote a province-wide distance learning strategy.

Not all forms of learning happen directly in the classroom, and distance education is a particularly attractive option to students from rural and northern communities. The availability of technology and support to obtain a post-secondary education without leaving one's home community is a valuable resource that is currently under-utilized in the province.

The Ontario government has established a patchwork of distance learning initiatives across the province, most notably Contact North, working with 13 northern colleges and universities to provide access to 89 remote communities in Northern Ontario. The recent expansion to Southern Ontario included the launch of elearnnetwork.ca, which has five centers working with thirty two postsecondary institutions. While these programs are incredibly valuable to the citizens they serve, the Ontario government could do more to enhance distance learning strategies in the province. The provincial government must create and adequately fund a distance learning umbrella group which coordinates, streamlines, and promotes the distance learning options and opportunities at all of Ontario's universities. Working through or with programs such as Contact North and elearnnetwork.ca, meaningful distance learning must increase the number of programs available, bring them into more communities in the province, and allow every Ontario resident the opportunity to pursue the distance learning program of their choice, regardless of location.

Conclusion

Ontario's rural and northern students have much to gain from a university education, as do the communities in which they live. However, in the face of numerous social and economic barriers to access, these students need help to achieve their goals.

OUSA believes that increased rural and northern university access is best achieved through a well-informed and progressive system of financial aid and innovative programming. The provincial government of Ontario, acting in

⁶² Joseph Berger and Anne Motte. *Mind the Access Gap: Breaking Down Barriers to Post-Secondary Education. Policy Options*, November 2007. Pg. 45.

⁶³ *Ibid*, Pg. 46.

⁶⁴ For more information and statistics about early outreach initiatives, please see OUSA's policy paper *Early Outreach Programs: Reaching Out Early to Reach Higher*. Available at www.ousa.ca

partnership with its universities, is in the best position to provide this aid and stimulate the development of new programs. Through a commitment to research, comprehensive review of the OSAP system, targeted financial aid, and an investment in the capacity of universities to accommodate non-urban students, Ontario can build a university system that works for all its residents.

The Ontario government has made a clear commitment to its rural and northern residents, and to the goal of accessible university education. Indeed, by fulfilling these promises through investment and research, Ontario's rural and northern citizens will reap the rewards for generations to come.

Rural and Northern Students Policy Statement

WHEREAS a university education provides significant economic and social benefits for individuals and the communities in which they live.

WHEREAS no qualified student should be denied the opportunity to attend university because of geographic barriers

WHEREAS the provincial government has a responsibility to ensure equitable university access for all students.

WHEREAS the provincial government has a responsibility to understand the geographic barriers that currently exist.

WHEREAS an insufficient level of knowledge and research on the issues surrounding rural and northern access to university currently exists.

WHEREAS rural and northern residency is a serious barrier to the pursuit of a university education.

WHEREAS financial incentives for rural and northern students to attend university do not address all of their true needs.

WHEREAS the Ontario Distance Grants do not make provisions for a student's choice of program.

WHEREAS rural and northern students are less inclined to pursue a post-secondary education when compared to their urban counterparts.

WHEREAS rural and northern regions are critically short of professional services and are being denied the benefit of an educated population.

WHEREAS Ontario's Aboriginal populations are disproportionately concentrated in rural and northern areas, and face further challenges in accessing a university education.

BIRT the provincial government must embark upon a program of research and study in order to properly understand the social and financial barriers facing students from rural and northern areas.

BIFRT the provincial government must provide appropriate financial assistance to rural and northern students in need.

BIFRT the provincial government must allow students in need to apply for targeted grants without applying for loans.

BIFRT the provincial government must comprehensively review the OSAP assessment model to reflect the true cost of higher education in the province, including regional flexibility for the cost of living, and reducing expected parental contributions.

BIFRT a rural student's choice of program, or their academic standing, should not be a barrier to accessing the Ontario Distance Grants.

BIFRT the provincial government must implement and encourage new programs aimed at improving university access for rural and northern students, including early outreach.

BIFRT the Ontario government should create and promote a province-wide distance learning strategy.