Getting There From Here:
Early Intervention Programs

ABACUS
Advancing Post-Secondary Access

Fiona Deller • Executive Summary

There is a growing consensus that post-secondary education is important to the economy, to the social and economic health of society, and to an individual's ability to participate and contribute fully in society and the labour market. However, not everyone has the same equity of access to post-secondary education in Canada, particularly underrepresented groups including low-income youth and those whose parents have not attended post-secondary. Early intervention programs are designed to help those youth who might otherwise not participate in post-secondary education get the resources, support and information they need.

This brief summarizes a report on the research that underpins ABACUS, an initiative to increase post-secondary access in Hamilton. Commissioned by Hamilton Community Foundation and supported by The Fairmount Foundation, it provides an overview of early intervention programs and how they support students from at-risk, underrepresented backgrounds or first generation youth to graduate from high school and to gain access to post-secondary education. The full report is available at ABACUSatHCF.ca/early-intervention

Accessibility to post-secondary education

Those who generally have the most difficulty in society also have the most difficulty accessing post-secondary education. Aboriginal youth, youth with disabilities, low-income youth, youth whose parents did not attend post-secondary (i.e., first generation youth), youth from some visible minority groups, and youth from rural and remote locations are less likely to attend post-secondary education.

The reasons why some youth do not attend post-secondary education vary, and include distance to the nearest university, cultural

> **Disadvantaged youth face a network of barriers, not simply a single barrier, which are difficult to separate and address effectively – barriers they tend to have faced from an early age**

barriers, academic unpreparedness, family expectations, less access to informational and motivational supports, and the prohibitive costs of post-secondary education.

The factors that determine participation in post-secondary education are usually summed up as follows:
- Parental education (largest determinant of participation)
- Financial
- Academic achievement/preparedness
- Information and support
- Peer group influence
- Self-confidence/self-esteem

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The "tipping point" and the theory behind early intervention

While financial barriers are real to many youth, parental expectations and academic preparedness have much more of a direct, observable impact on participation. When to begin addressing these barriers – that "tipping point" when a youth makes that conscious decision to participate in post-secondary education or not – is critical. The more barriers that a youth faces, the more difficult the intervention process will be.

A youth's motivation is affected by the encouragement and support he or she receives from community, peers, school and parents.

In Grades 8 or 9, or perhaps earlier, youth from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds often consciously or unconsciously select out of the path to post-secondary education for different

> **Somewhere along the way, youth decide not to go, or that it is not for them, too hard, too expensive, too unrealistic, too far, or they never consider it an option in the first place**

reasons – the tipping point. Early intervention programs tend to address that tipping point by assembling a variety of interventions in one program. The hope is that the package of incentives and motivations will have the effect of addressing the network of barriers and tip the individual student (back) toward thinking of post-secondary education as a possible and achievable pathway.

Early intervention program examples

In the early 2000s, the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation and some provincial governments created several pilot programs to test what types of early interventions would work in Canada. While they are few in number and in many ways in their infancy, they have shown some success. The real long-term lessons are from the U.S. where early intervention programs have been in place for upwards of four decades and number over 1,100. While federal funding provides some of the support for these programs, much of the funding comes from other sources such as private foundations, individual post-secondary institutions, school boards and state governments.

Of the nine early intervention programs reviewed, each had a slightly different approach to early intervention; all of them, however, were based on the needs of the different states or communities and their specific environments at the time of development.

Common intervention program components

Although each of the programs serve different communities and use different approaches, these early interventions fit into four broadly defined categories: 1) financial, 2) academic, 3) information, and 4) support/counselling.

Financial incentives

The majority of early intervention programs have some form of financial incentive or support – usually focused on paying for part or all of tuition, and sometimes subsidizing other higher education costs as well as books and other materials. Financial incentives are usually, but not always, a part of the early intervention package.

Academic achievement/preparedness

Simply getting students enrolled in post-secondary education is not adequate if they do not have the appropriate academic preparedness and skill requirements to stay in post-secondary education and complete their studies. Academic components can be anything from tutoring to pre-college on-campus programs, to a requirement to keep grades above a certain average, to an enriched curriculum for students in the program. Anecdotal and evaluation evidence suggests that academic pre-college preparedness is greatly enhanced by building in a component that gives the participant some contact with a college campus. The ability of students to "see themselves" on a college campus is thought to have the tipping point effect for some students.

Information

Information on college applications and requirements, applying for student financial assistance, and expectations for standardized testing to get into certain programs are core components in most early intervention programs. It makes intuitive sense that students who are making certain decisions about their future are helped by easy access to information about their choices and the requirements attached to those choices. In the best-case scenario, easy access to good information can provide part of the motivation a student needs to "tip" toward

> **Engaging parents is critical – and also challenging**

going on to post-secondary. Information on its own has almost no effect in changing graduation rates or post-secondary enrolment. Most programs now include a parental workshop component or other mentoring/counselling that not only creates a broader relationship, but also helps the information "stick."

Support and counselling

Support and counselling – from guidance counsellors, tutoring and mentoring, to community and parental support – are built into most successful early intervention programs. Most programs combine the information and the expectation of academic success with various supports (i.e., after school and weekend clubs, homework clubs, neighbourhood mentor and role models) to achieve the expected results. Some programs take the approach of providing a variety of supports, which are individualized to each student depending on their specific needs and/or their age.

The literature increasingly supports the concept that parental involvement and community support is key to the successful completion of the program by participants; however, it is also acknowledged that parental engagement can be one of the most challenging components of a program.

Successful program approaches

Despite the growing body of literature on early intervention programs, too little is still known about their success and how they affect post-secondary participation; however the consensus seems to be that there has been an aggregate increase in success rates of programs overall. In addition, beyond the four components identified above, some common approaches that also seem particularly effective in successful programs are:

- A primary person who monitors and guides the student over time
- Good instruction coupled with challenging curriculum that is carefully tailored to the students' learning needs
- Longer-term interventions: the longer students participate in a program, the more benefits they report
- Cultural awareness of students' backgrounds – many programs find that they have more success with some groups than with others
- Positive peer support – students are more likely to succeed when a peer group provides academic, social and emotional support
- Financial assistance and incentives – for many low-income students who identify post-secondary education as a goal, scholarships and grants may be essential to realizing that goal

Evaluation and what works

Of the nine programs reviewed, five have published recent external evaluations. Some programs have annual reports that track and follow up with program alumni; others have site evaluations. While many programs simply do not have the data infrastructure, some do rely on either high school graduation rates or track program participants through college/university as ways of assessing success.

If a program lacks resources such as funding and/or staffing, it can be difficult to prioritize evaluation over operating the program. The constant evolution (or devolution)

Programs are best served by the early development of data infrastructure and evaluation processes – but should not be immobilized by the lack of either

of programs means that few student cohorts receive the same program experience from year to year; however, this is generally positive and in keeping with the research on what works in student access.

Finally, it is important to note that students selected into some early intervention programs have in many ways already shown motivation and ambition to do better, or their parents have chosen it for them. This makes these students more likely to succeed even before the program. Determining whether it was the program itself that helped them achieve, or if they were already predisposed to achievement, despite having some disadvantages, can be difficult. Programs that do not require a student to apply are therefore perhaps a better test of how the program elements affect the most vulnerable students.

Summary and conclusion

Despite the limitations of the programs themselves and the gaps in the research, early intervention programs are currently one of the more interesting ways of addressing the needs of youth who traditionally do not go on to post-secondary education. At the same time, however, it makes sense that providing those elements lost in social and cultural capital (e.g., information, financial incentives, counselling and mentoring support, academic support) should help underrepresented students achieve. Until a more systemic approach is identified, early intervention programs may be the best approach available.

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