Access, Engagement, Retention and Success of Under-represented Populations at Ryerson University

Bridges to Ryerson, the Tri-Mentoring Program and Road to Ryerson

Report 9 | RFP-006: Student Services

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Executive Summary

Ryerson University has a number of programs designed to provide access to higher education to students who might not normally find their way to university – and to improve the engagement, retention and success of underrepresented populations. However, the effectiveness and impact of these programs have not yet been fully explored.

This research project was designed to conduct an analysis of the impact of three of these programs. Our hope is that the research outlined in the following pages will lead to a better understanding of program participants and program impacts, as well as helping to identify best practices that could serve other postsecondary institutions in their efforts to create a similar impact through programs and services for students.

The research included in-depth interviews with students in two programs: Bridges to Ryerson and the Tri-Mentoring Program. It also included interviews with three students participating in a third program, Road to Ryerson.

Study 1: Bridges to Ryerson

The Bridges to Ryerson program was designed to provide access to higher education to students who might not normally find their way to university – and to improve the engagement, retention and success of underrepresented populations. Most students who participate in Bridges to Ryerson come from low-income communities and from groups typically underrepresented in postsecondary education, such as members of Aboriginal communities, New Canadians and second-generation immigrants.

Students participate in the program on a part-time basis and are given targeted academic and non-academic supports and financial aid as needed. If they successfully complete the program requirements, they are guaranteed admission to selected programs within the university. The program requirements are as follows: Students must take two core courses for credit (one of them English and another related to the faculty in which they eventually want to study). In addition, students whose reading and writing or math skills are not at a high enough level for their desired program of study must take a non-credit English or math course.

In-depth interviews with 27 students revealed rich information about the participants' life histories and their experiences with education. From their personal stories, we identified four themes to describe their experiences:

> **Marginalization at school**: experiences as immigrant and visible minority youth often isolated or ridiculed at school.
>
> **Neglect and abuse at home**: troubled home life, family dysfunction, poverty, abusive caregivers.

Interrupted education and schooling: moving, dislocation, changing schools, negative perceptions of education system.

Lack of guidance and structure for education: absence of help with school planning, course selection, time management, study skills.

In the second part of the interviews, we focused the questions on participants' evaluation of the Bridges to Ryerson program. We found that their responses to the program and staff members were extremely positive. In this context, three themes were identified:

Opportunity for a second chance: Bridges to Ryerson provides a second chance for higher education (participants in the Bridges program are not direct entry from high school) and an opportunity for marginalized students who, otherwise, would not have access to a university education.

Desire and motivation for upward mobility: Bridges to Ryerson meets the students' strong desire and motivation for higher education, for knowledge and for future job opportunities.

Academic and structural support: Bridges to Ryerson provides support through program leaders, staff members and instructors who offer continued encouragement, trusting relationships and accessible teaching styles and approaches.

Study 2: The Tri-Mentoring Program (TMP)

Based on a framework of non-assimilation, the goals of the Tri-Mentoring Program (TMP) are to specifically address and support the unique needs of Ryerson's first-generation students, culturally and linguistically diverse students and students from low-income families – and to provide a space to celebrate differences and diversity in an anti-oppressive environment. The TMP model has first-year students paired with a trained third-year student mentor to help facilitate orientation and transition into university life. Second-year students are enrolled in a student leadership and education program to develop skills in peer support, team work, communication and problem solving. Third-year students mentor first-year students while exploring their own employability and career skills. Fourth-year students are paired with a mentor from their field of study who is in the professional world and who helps these students develop networks and employability skills and find job opportunities. (The name is based on the program having three levels of mentoring with participants being either student mentees/mentors, career mentees or career mentors.)

The TMP was established in 2001 and expanded in 2006 to include the First Generation (FG) Project. The FG project has two target groups: first-generation students at Ryerson and first-generation students/youth in the community. The goals of the First Generation Project are to increase the number of first-generation students who choose to obtain/pursue postsecondary education by providing them with support, encouragement, relevant information and inspiration – and to increase the success and retention of first-generation Ryerson students. We have

defined first-generation students as students whose parents have not attended any postsecondary institution.

Almost 2,000 students participate in the Tri-Mentoring Program, with about one-third identifying as first-generation students.

Information was collected through open-ended interviews concerning the following topics: how participants found their way to the TMP; their reasons for being in the program; barriers they had faced in their past experiences with education; what they expected from the program; and the impact the program had on their thinking, on their confidence and on their goals relating to their education and the future.

The in-depth interviews with 71 students revealed rich information about the participants' student experiences at Ryerson, both academically and socially. From these descriptions, we found that participants commonly referred to their involvement in campus life and faculty support as reasons for staying at Ryerson. We identified the following four themes relating to Ryerson as an institution:

Community and student life involvement: experiences of the Ryerson campus as diverse, inclusive and community oriented.

Program specialties and practical curriculum: Ryerson's focus on specialized programs and practical approaches.

Personal connection to and support from faculty: small classroom numbers and personalized support from professors.

Campus location: appealing downtown location for learning, opportunity and diversity.

In the second part of the interviews, we focused the questions on students' evaluation of the Tri-Mentoring Program. In this context, four themes emerged:

Support and resources: TMP provides access to knowledge about university life, student job opportunities, networking skills and development, and career connections.

Locality: TMP offers a sense of space, community and belonging for underrepresented and marginalized students, both literally and psychologically.

Accountability and purpose: students' sense of responsibility and motivation increases with the knowledge that they have someone looking up to them; mutual support for both mentors and mentees.

Leadership and interpersonal skills: TMP helps build self-confidence and develop social skills in working with the campus and community.

Study 3: Road to Ryerson

Road to Ryerson is a program for high school students who have just missed getting into Ryerson either because they may be missing necessary prerequisite courses and/or their grades may not be quite high enough for admission. The goal is to give these students a supported "second chance" at making their "first chance" of getting into university work for them. Many students "fall short" because they have not had the necessary scaffolding or help that they needed to be successful. We know that some youth in these circumstances return to high school for additional courses and to improve their grades (the so-called "victory lap"), but many do not. We work with a small number of these students each year, establishing what they need to meet Ryerson's admissions standards, and we guarantee them admission if these standards are met. The students return to high school for their victory lap, taking the courses they need to meet entrance requirements. We provide them with Ryerson University student mentors and tutors (from the Tri-mentoring Program) to help them with their additional high school work. We bring them to Ryerson for a series of campus tours and workshops so that they become familiar with the environment and with university expectations as they complete their requirements. We help them re-apply.

Despite many efforts to recruit participants, we were able to connect with only three former Road to Ryerson students who were enrolled in their first year at Ryerson. Some of the students who participate in the program are still in high school and are therefore difficult to connect with due to their age and location. Many choose other postsecondary institutions, discovering that other places may be the best "fit" for them, given their goals and their now much better high school grades. However, data from the three participants are presented as case studies in this report.

Overall, in addition to providing a vehicle for students to tell their rich and varied stories, we believe that the research demonstrates that people with very difficult life circumstances and complex educational histories can successfully access PSE (Bridges students) and that having a targeted program to overcome potential isolation and social exclusion can play an important role in student engagement and success (TMP students).

Introduction

Ryerson University is an institution located in the heart of downtown Toronto, which enrolls approximately 28,000 students in undergraduate degree programs within six faculties: the Faculty of Arts; the Faculty of Community Services; the Faculty of Communication and Design; the Faculty of Engineering, Architecture and Science; the Ted Rogers School of Management; and the Chang School of Continuing Education. Ryerson is very much an urban university that attracts the population diversity one would expect to find within a large, multicultural city. The university has a commitment to serve the community within which it is located, and access to education for underrepresented populations within the city is part of that commitment.

A number of programs at Ryerson are designed to provide access to higher education for students who may not normally find their way to university – and to improve the engagement, retention and success of underrepresented populations. However, the effectiveness and impact of these programs have not been fully explored.

This research project was designed to conduct an analysis of the impact of three of these programs. Our hope is that the research will lead to a better understanding of program participants and program impacts, as well as providing models for best practices that could serve other institutions in their efforts to create a similar impact through programs and services for students.

The research focused on three programs: Bridges to Ryerson, the Tri-Mentoring Program and Road to Ryerson. We have organized the report to reflect our findings for each program as Study 1, Study 2 and Study 3, respectively.

A research interviewer independent of the programs, but with a sensitivity to racialized and marginalized students and their experiences, conducted the research. Sabrina Malik, a former graduate student at Ryerson, met these criteria and managed the recruitment and interview process, including conducting and transcribing the interview records. Sabrina related to the research participants very well and made them feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences and stories. We were therefore able to collect details about the personal backgrounds of our participants; how they found their way to the programs; their reasons for being in the programs; barriers they had faced in their past experiences with education; what they expected from the programs; and the impact that these programs had on their thinking, on their confidence and on their goals relating to their education and the future.

Study 1: Bridges to Ryerson

Bridges to Ryerson provides a “second chance” to access postsecondary education for capable people whose “first chance” didn’t work. It is part of a larger Ryerson access program, Spanning the Gaps to Post Secondary Education. Based on the belief that education can break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion, that higher education transforms lives and contributes to social cohesion, social stability and a civic society, Ryerson is committed to playing a role in the Greater Toronto community in terms of expanding educational opportunities

and building educational capacity. One of the university's goals is to increase the postsecondary participation of young people and adults who might not otherwise interact with or experience postsecondary education. To this end, Ryerson has created Spanning the Gaps to Post Secondary Education: several integrated programs, all with the goal of increasing access to PSE for marginalized students, with a single shared infrastructure. One program, "Information," provides individualized "maps" to postsecondary education for individuals who are interested in and would benefit from connecting to postsecondary education but are not able to make the connection. Such students have little idea how to access the postsecondary system and need information, advice and educational counselling that is relevant to their particular situation and needs. Their circumstances are seldom "typical," and their questions require ongoing conversations, not the answers available on websites

Another program is "Bridges to Ryerson." In terms of being able to participate in PSE, many adults lack the credentials to enter PSE programs because they have not completed high school; have been out of school for a prolonged period of time; and may have had quite negative experiences during their past education. They may also have very little money and limited time to do anything other than work to pay for their current living expenses, and they may be leading complex and difficult lives. We have created a series of access points, or "spans," to enable some of these individuals to acquire the skills they need and then to demonstrate that they can be successful Ryerson students.

The Bridges to Ryerson program began in September 2008 with 33 students, and 17 more started the program in January 2009. In 2009/10 there were 35 students, and in 2010/11, 38 students. From the 2008/09 and 2009/10 cohorts, 25 students are currently in Ryerson degree programs, 11 are taking additional Ryerson Continuing Education courses, 17 are in other PSE programs and 1 returned to high school. Most students who participate in Bridges to Ryerson come from low-income communities and from groups typically underrepresented in postsecondary education. Some of them are from Aboriginal communities, and many others are New Canadians or second-generation immigrants. Some are from single-parent families and others have learning or other disabilities. Almost all are recruited through the Information program within the Spanning the Gaps program, based on their goals, academic histories and current circumstances.

Bridges to Ryerson builds on existing Ryerson courses and policies. Academic Bridging Courses (ABCs) are offered through the Chang School of Continuing Education, and Ryerson has a flexible and helpful mature student policy. However, neither of these guarantees access – because even when interested adults get to the point where they can be considered for admission to Ryerson, admission is still "subject to regular procedures and competition." Bridges to Ryerson, however, provides guaranteed admission to students who obtain the necessary grades in designated courses.

Currently, Ryerson has bridges to all the programs in the Ted Rogers School of Management: Business Management, Hospitality and Tourism Management, Information Technology Management, and Retail Management. We also have bridges to Social Work, Youth and Child Care, Early Childhood Education, and Nutrition and Food – all in the Faculty of Community

Services Within the Faculty of Arts, Ryerson has bridges to Arts and Contemporary Studies, Criminal Justice and Criminology, Politics and Public Administration, and Sociology.

Courses/Program

A basic condition for the program is that in order to be successful, Bridges to Ryerson students have to demonstrate clearly that they can do relevant university work at an appropriate academic level. All Bridges to Ryerson students take two credit courses offered in the evening through the Chang School of Continuing Education.. These two courses constitute the core of their "bridge," and students are required to achieve a minimum grade of C+ in each of them in order to be guaranteed admission to their chosen program. For all students, one of the core courses is an English course. The second core course depends on their chosen program (Philosophy for students entering programs in the Faculty of Community Services or the Faculty of Arts; Management for students entering programs in the Ted Rogers School of Management).

Those students whose reading and writing skills are not yet at a university level take one or both of Ryerson's non-credit ABC English courses. This enables them to move on to the core requirements. Students interested in business also take one or more of the non-credit ABC math courses.

Thus, all Bridges to Ryerson student stake two courses for credit. Some take the two-credit courses, as well as one or more non-credit ABC English/math courses.

Student Supports

Students receive the supports they need to be successful. They are given assistance with developing and reviewing their educational and career plan, with interpreting degree regulations, with program and course selection and through referrals to on-campus resources. Workshops on learning skills and university life are also incorporated into the Bridges to Ryerson curriculum. Students have access to a Learning Skills strategist and to other student services professionals.

Study 2: Tri-Mentoring Program (TMP)

The Tri-Mentoring Program (TMP) offers support to culturally and linguistically diverse and/or first-generation students (who might otherwise be marginalized) throughout their undergraduate years at Ryerson. While these students do not need an access program, they often experience some difficulty navigating university systems once admitted.

The program was designed from an anti-oppressive student engagement framework. This framework attempts to positively engage and support students on campus while encouraging racialized and first-generation students to retain their racial/ethnic/cultural identities and external community commitments and beliefs, while negotiating change within Ryerson's institutional

structures and values. Based on a framework of non-assimilation, the goals of the TMP are to specifically address and support the unique needs of Ryerson's first-generation students, culturally and linguistically diverse students and students from low-income families and to provide a space to celebrate differences and diversity in an anti-oppressive environment.

The TMP was established in 2001, and in 2006 expanded to include the First Generation (FG) Project. The FG project has two target groups: first-generation students at Ryerson and first-generation students/youth in the external community. The goals of the First Generation Project are, first, to increase the number of first-generation students who choose to obtain a postsecondary education by providing them with support, encouragement, relevant information and inspiration and, secondly, to increase the success and retention of first-generation Ryerson students. First-generation students are defined as those whose parents did not attend postsecondary institutions. Students for this program are identified through a question that is asked as part of the Ontario university application form of all applicants to Ontario universities. The question on the application states, "Have either of your parents/guardians attended a university or college?"

Students are informed of the Tri-Mentoring Program and invited to participate through a number of methods, including direct e-mail, posters, displays during orientation, literature distribution and word of mouth. Almost 2,000 students participate in the TMP, with almost a third identifying as first-generation students. TMP participants come from various backgrounds, including low-income communities, various ethno-cultural groups, underrepresented groups in postsecondary education and New Canadians. A small percentage of TMP students identify as persons with a disability, Aboriginal, "second chance," single parent or refugee.

In their first year, student participants are paired with a trained third-year student mentor to help facilitate orientation and transition into university life. Second-year students are enrolled in a student leadership and education program to develop skills/training in peer support, team work, communication and problem solving. Third-year students mentor first-year students while exploring their own employability and career skills. Fourth-year students are paired with a mentor from their field of study who is in the professional world and who helps these students develop networks and employability skills and find job opportunities.

Study 3: Road to Ryerson

Road to Ryerson (part of Spanning the Gaps to Postsecondary Education) is a program for high school students who have just missed getting into Ryerson – those who may be missing necessary courses and/or whose grades may not be quite high enough for direct admission. The goal is to give these students a supported "second chance" at making their "first chance" of getting into university work for them.

Many students "fall short" because they have not had the necessary scaffolding or help that they needed to be successful. Potential students are identified in partnership with the Toronto District School Board and Pathways to Education (a charitable organization created to lower high

school drop-out rates and increase access to post-secondary education among marginalized youth in low income communities, through a series of targeted and coordinated supports). We then work with the students to establish what they need to do to meet Ryerson's admissions standards, and they are guaranteed admission if these standards are met. The students then return to high school for additional courses and to improve their grades (the so-called "victory lap").

Road to Ryerson students are provided with Ryerson University student mentors and tutors (from the Tri-Mentoring Program) to help them with their additional high school work. They come to Ryerson for a series of campus tours and workshops so that they can become familiar with the environment and with university expectations as they complete their requirements. They are also given assistance with their re-applications. And because the additional courses and upgrading are done in a TDSB high school, the students do not have to pay any additional costs, and they have the possibility of working part-time while studying to meet the Ryerson entrance requirements. Road to Ryerson began in 2007/08 with 13 students, and there were 23 students in 2008/09 and 18 in 2009/10. Now, 50 are in programs at Ryerson and many other PSE institutions, 1 went back to high school and 1 is in a PSE transitional program.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

It is important to understand issues of underrepresentation and marginalization in the context of recent immigration trends. The most recent Canadian census indicated that there were over 6 million foreign-born residents in Canada in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008a). By comparison, the 1901 Census counted fewer than 1 million foreign-born residents. The proportion of people born outside of Canada has reached its highest level in 75 years. In 2006, 19.8 per cent of the entire population consisted of people born outside Canada, an increase from 16.1 per cent in 1991 and 18.4 per cent in 2001.

Each wave of immigration to Canada has increased the ethno-cultural diversity of the nation's population. By 2006, groups representing 11 different ethnic origins had passed the 1 million population mark, and the general visible minority population had surpassed the 5 million mark (Statistics Canada, 2008a), making up 16.2 per cent of the total population in Canada. According to Statistics Canada's population projections, members of visible minority groups could account for roughly one-fifth of the total population by 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2008b). The research shows that the children of recent immigrants who were from countries other than Europe are more likely to drop out of high school (Gilmore, 2010). There are also significant differences within different ethnic groups. Using national survey data, Abada, Hou and Ram (2008) examined the saliency of structural and cultural factors for university educational attainment in Canada. They found that the children of parents from the Caribbean, Latin America and Filipino immigrant communities were less likely to obtain a university degree than children from other ethnic groups and the children of Canadian-born parents. They concluded that parental human capital as well as socioeconomic factors are related to group differences and account for the differences in the attainment of university education.

According to Labour Force Survey data for 2007-2010, the drop-out rate among Aboriginal youth, including First Nations people living off-reserve, Métis and Inuit, was much higher than the rate for non-Aboriginal youth (Gilmore, 2010).

The diversity of the Canadian population is most apparent in the country's largest and most diverse city. In 2006, the census metropolitan area of Toronto had the highest share of visible minorities among all census metropolitan areas in Canada, with 42.9 per cent of the population identifying themselves as a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2008a). According to data collected by the Toronto District School Board, the educational community within Toronto is incredibly diverse. TDSB students speak 75 different languages, 53 per cent speak English in the home, 25 per cent were born outside of Canada and 12 per cent received some Special Education support (TDSB, 2010).

The theoretical perspective guiding this research project is a framework of social exclusion and integration. This framework provides a structural approach to understanding the barriers encountered by students who are typically underrepresented in postsecondary education and who come from low-income, racialized and marginalized communities. This framework was used to interpret social inequalities in the educational and labour markets and was developed by a group of researchers in order to study poverty issues among Aboriginal communities and other ethnic minorities. Saloojee (2003 linked social exclusion to racism and social inclusion to democratic citizenship. Marnur (2002) provided ethical reflections on social inclusion. Brazzell and Reisser (1999) applied the framework to their analysis of education systems and called for "creating inclusive communities" in schools.

Galabuzi (2006) describes both the structures and the processes of inequality among social groups based on access to critical resources. Social exclusion arises from uneven access to the processes of production, wealth creation and power and is a form of alienation and denial of full citizenship experienced by particular groups of individuals and communities. In the Canadian context, social exclusion refers to the inability of certain groups or individuals to participate fully in Canadian life due to structural inequalities in access to social, economic, political, cultural and educational resources (p. 173). This lack of access is primarily due to experiences of oppression relating to race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation and immigration status.

From an anti-racism perspective, Dei (2000), James (2003) and Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt and Associates (2005) discussed the marginalized experiences encountered by racialized students that contribute to their academic difficulties. They pointed to racism as the central issue or barrier. However, they did not address the notion that Canadian multicultural society faces increasing inequality issues due to immigration trends. Most recent immigrants are coming from ethnically diverse countries, which make their children doubly "disadvantaged" as both minorities within their countries of origin and foreigners upon initial immigration to Canada.

Hrabowski (2005) and Jones (2005) focused their research on the challenging experiences of first-year students who are underrepresented minorities in university settings. They observed that first-year students had to adjust to a different cultural environment and that minority students faced many difficulties. However, there was little attention given to the students' earlier

life experience, overall university experiences and/or the effects of student involvement with mentorship programs such as the TMP.

In “Implications of Providing Access in a Context of Inequality”(Abramovitch, 2003), the author discusses educational equity in relation to class, race and gender barriers and suggests that universities must undergo change in order to make real access a possibility. Abramovitch observes that students lacking the formal qualifications to enter university are clearly “different” from other students and that it is therefore “important to develop academic and non-academic systems that will ultimately minimize (if not neutralize) the inequalities and maximize the considerable talents and skills possessed by the students. . . .” “ Clearly,” Abramovitch goes on to say, “there are substantial challenges involved in access education. Just as all things are not equal in society, it is clear that all things are not equal in education” (pp. 93-94). Abramovitch also noted that “[o]ne may want some integration, but not assimilation. Thus the goal is to ensure that the process of access education works successfully without doing damage to either the student or the institution, and where possible, enhancing both” (p. 104). While she described some of the experiences of marginalized adults participating in a full-time, full-year transitional year program, she relied primarily on her own experience as the program director rather than on direct student accounts of what did and did not work.

These issues of social exclusion and integration will become increasingly important for Canadian colleges and universities to respond to, particularly for institutions in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) as population growth and the growing diversity of that population will likely continue.

Research Overview and Objectives

This research project is designed to collect information from students in Bridges to Ryerson, the Tri-Mentoring Program and Road to Ryerson in order to observe the effectiveness of the programs and the students' success in each. In order to meet these objectives, three basic approaches were used:

1. **Interviews**. We conducted in-depth interviews to collect information with respect to student life histories based on students’ experiences, as well as their evaluation of and satisfaction with various aspects of the programs (see interview questions in Appendix A).

2. **Case studies.** We combined demographic information and the interviews to identify particular cases for further analysis. In Study 1, we identified four meaningful cases. For two of these individuals, we conducted follow-up interviews to gather more detailed information. In Study 2, we identified three meaningful cases. In Study 3, with just three participants, we described each of the cases.

3. **Academic outcomes.** In Study 1, we gathered student data about the participants’ success in completing the Bridges to Ryerson program in relation to their demographic information and themes found in the interviews. Study 2 includes an analysis of

participants' overall GPA in relation to their participation in the TMP, demographic information and themes found in the interviews. Given the small number of participants in Study 3, academic outcomes were not examined for this group. In all cases, student academic data came from the Ryerson student information system, which we accessed with the consent of the students.

The specific objectives of Study 1 were as follows:

- to examine the Bridges to Ryerson program and its services for the program participants;
- to examine the effectiveness of the program;
- to analyze the impact of the Bridges to Ryerson program on the quality of life of participants and on their life chances; and
- to gain useful knowledge to inform providers and stakeholders for future programs.

The specific objectives of Study 2 were these:

- to examine the accessibility and functionality of the Tri-Mentoring Program with respect to student engagement and retention;
- to examine the effectiveness of the program in assisting students to be successful at Ryerson;
- to analyze the impact of the program on participants' social well-being and future goals; and
- to gain useful knowledge to inform providers and stakeholders for future programs.

The purpose of Study 3 was to examine the efficacy and success of the Road to Ryerson program in connecting high school students to postsecondary education. However, because of the small sample size, we focused on providing a description of the program's impact on the three students we interviewed.

Design and Methodology

Study 1: Bridges to Ryerson

Recruitment Procedure:

The study was described to students at a scheduled class meeting by the Spanning the Gaps program director and the researcher. They identified the main goals of the study and stated very clearly that the study was entirely voluntary and confidential. They asked if the students were willing to be contacted by the researcher and made it very clear that agreeing to be contacted would not mean agreeing to participate in the study and would not in any way affect students' participation in the Bridges to Ryerson program. Contact information, including phone numbers and e-mail addresses and availability for those students who agreed to participate, was collected.

Informed Consent Process

All participants were informed, verbally and in advance of their participation, of the following: the purpose of the study and the general nature of the information being sought; the extent of their involvement; the uses to which their interview data would be put; their right to inquire further at any time into any aspect of the research; their right to withdraw at any time and to refuse to answer questions; and the procedures that would be used to protect their identity. Participants were also asked whether they were comfortable with our requesting their academic record from the Spanning the Gaps program assistant.

Participants were informed that there were no known risks to their well-being associated with participating in this project. However, they were also told that some of the questions might make them uncomfortable or cause them to reflect on experiences they would rather forget. The verbal presentation included an invitation to ask any questions they might have about the study.

In addition to receiving verbal information about the project, participants were asked to sign a consent form outlining the same information (see consent agreement in Appendix B).

Follow-Up Interviews

Four students who had agreed to participate in a follow-up interview were contacted by phone to set up a day and time to speak briefly about their experiences. Only two of the four students were available to schedule phone interviews (see follow-up questions in Appendix A and individual case studies in Appendix F).

Research Population

The Bridges to Ryerson program began in September 2008 with 33 students, with another 17 starting the program in the January 2009 session. We successfully interviewed 27 of the 50 participants, 2 of whom we were also able to follow-up with at a later date.

Over half of the participating students (*n* = 15) were first-generation immigrants, and many others were second generation. The majority of the students spoke their native languages at home, either as their only home language or mixed with English (see Table 1). Many were from mixed-race families.

About half of the students in the Bridges to Ryerson program were over 25 years old, and one-third were over 30. About one-third also had dependants living with them, including a mixture of children and parents.

About half of the students (*n* = 13) were working full-time and had previously attempted some postsecondary education (including private career college courses). However, only five of the students had completed a college-level certificate or diploma (all in "non-academic" areas), and most of the students (*n* = 17) reported that their occupations were low-paying and minimum wage jobs (e.g., in retail and service industries).

Table 1
Demographic information for Bridges to Ryerson participants*

Age Group	Country of Origin	Home Language	Immigration Status	Relationship Status	Dependants	Employment Status	Incoming Education Level
- 25 = 14	Canada = 11	English = 12	Immigrant = 15	Single = 16	No Dependants = 18	Unemployed = 8	Grade 11 = 5
25 – 30 = 4	Other = 15	Native = 3	Canadian-born & Aboriginal = 5	Married = 4	Children = 6	Part-time = 6	High school (incl. GED) = 9
30+ = 9	Both = 1	Both = 12	Second generation = 7	Dating = 7	Children & Parent = 3	Full-time = 13	Some postsecondary = 13

*For detailed information about individual demographics, see Appendix D, Table D1

Study 2: Tri-Mentoring Program

Recruitment Procedure:

In the summer of 2009 a notice was posted on the TMP website, in the TMP office, and sent as a mass e-mail to all TMP participants (see Appendix C) indicating that students were invited to participate in a one-hour interview or focus group to ask them about their experiences with the program. The notice gave the contact information for the researcher and indicated clearly that participation was voluntary and confidential and that no TMP staff would know who had or had not contacted the researcher.

The project was also described over the phone by student summer staff to students in the program interested in training to become mentors. Contact information from those students who expressed an interest in participating was given to the research interviewer.

Due to difficulties in recruiting TMP participants during the summer semester, a notice was posted on the website in fall 2009 indicating that there would be a raffle for a $50 gift certificate redeemable at the Eaton Centre for students agreeing to be contacted about participation in the research study. There was increased interest after this.

Informed Consent Process

As noted above, the researcher contacted only those students who had agreed to be contacted. The researcher then described the study and asked for informed consent. (See consent agreement in Appendix B.)

All participants were informed, verbally and in advance of their participation, of the following: the purpose of the study and the general nature of the information being sought; the extent of their involvement; the uses to which their interview data would be put; their right to inquire further at any time into any aspect of the research; their right to withdraw at any time and to refuse to answer questions; and the procedures that would be used to protect their identities. They were also asked if they were comfortable with our requesting their academic record from the Registrar's office. If they agreed, they were then asked to include their student identification number on the consent form, so that we could access their grades using only their ID numbers.

Participants were informed that there were no known risks to their well-being associated with participating in this project. However, they were also told that some of the questions might make them uncomfortable or cause them to reflect on experiences they would rather forget. The verbal presentation included an invitation to ask any questions they might have about the study.

Research Population

During the 2007/08 academic year, the Ryerson Tri-Mentoring Program had a participation level of approximately 1,700 students. We were able to successfully recruit and interview 71 participants with varying roles in the program , including volunteer mentees and mentors, as well as students in paid positions such as lead mentor, first-generation (FG) ambassador and student administrative staff.

Lead mentors are responsible for training and managing large "clusters" of mentor/mentee pairings from their respective faculties, as well as for working with their own mentee(s), while FG ambassadors are responsible for initiating and executing outreach activities to support youth and high school students in community-based programs. Many of the FG ambassadors work in communities where they were raised and/or currently reside, and they work with mentee(s) of their own on a volunteer basis. From an employment perspective, an individual is permitted to occupy the position of either lead mentor or FG ambassador but not both simultaneously.

Most of the students were in their second year of university or higher, and many were also employed with the program as well as volunteering as a mentor or mentee (see Table 2).

Almost half of the students were first-generation immigrants and New Canadians (n = 32), and many others were second generation (n = 24). Although most of the participants spoke English at home, many spoke both their home country language and English. The majority of students identified their ethnic and cultural ancestry as other than Canadian (see Table 3).

Table 2
Tri-Mentoring Program Participants by Gender, Year and Role

Subject	#	Percentage
Total sample population	**71**	100
Gender		
Female	**43**	60.6
Male	**28**	39.4
Year at Ryerson		
First.	**11**	15.5
Second	**19**	26.8
Third	**19**	26.8
Fourth	**20**	28.2
Fifth	**1**	1.4
Graduate	**1**	1.4
Role at TMP		
Mentee		
Mentor…	**13**	18.3
Lead mentor+	**24**	33.8
First-generation ambassador+	**19**	26.8
Mentoring officer (recent).	**12**	16.9
RASS.	**1**	1.4
Placement (FG & Lead)	**1**	1.4
	1	1.4

+Indicates paid employment (either lead mentors or FG ambassadors). Cannot be both concurrently except when doing placement.

Table 3
Demographic information for Tri-Mentoring Program participants

Country of Origin	Home Language	Immigration Status	Ethnic/Cultural Ancestry
Canada = 38	English = 34	Immigrant & New Canadians = 32	Canadian = 4
Other = 32	Home country = 15	Canadian-born & Aboriginal = 15	Other = 50
Both = 1	Both = 22	Second generation (one or more parents) = 24	Mixed = 17

(For complete demographic information by participant number, see Appendix D, Tables D2 and D3.)

Study 3: Road to Ryerson

Recruitment Procedure

The study was described to students by the Spanning the Gaps program director, who identified the main goals of the study and stated very clearly that the study was entirely voluntary and confidential, which means that no faculty or staff member in the program would have any access to individual data. He asked if the students were willing to be contacted by the researcher and was very clear that agreeing to be contacted did not mean agreeing to participate in the study and would not in any way affect their participation in the Road to Ryerson program. Contact information, including phone numbers and e-mail addresses and availability for those students who agreed to participate, was collected.

Informed Consent Process

The participants were informed, verbally and in advance of their participation, of the following: the purpose of the study and the general nature of the information being sought; the extent of their involvement; the uses to which their interview data would be put; their right to inquire further at any time into any aspect of the research; their right to withdraw at any time and to refuse to answer questions; and the procedures that were used to protect their identity. Participants were informed that there were no known risks to their well-being associated with participating in this project. However, they were also told that some of the questions might make them uncomfortable or cause them to reflect on experiences they would rather forget. The verbal presentation included an invitation to ask any questions they might have about the study. In addition to receiving verbal information about the project, participants were asked to sign a consent form outlining the same information (see consent agreement in Appendix B).

Research Population

Road to Ryerson students are almost all racialized students from low-income backgrounds attending high schools where large numbers of youth drop out or do not go on to higher education. Despite many efforts to recruit participants, we were able to connect with only three former Road to Ryerson students who were enrolled in their first year at Ryerson. Many of the students in the program are still in high school and therefore difficult to connect with due to their age and location. Furthermore, many Road to Ryerson students finally choose other postsecondary institutions, based on access to the Information part of the Spanning the Gaps program. The students often discover that other places may be the best "fit" for them, given their goals and their now much better high school grades. In addition, we were careful not to put any pressure on students to participate, and for the most part, the Road to Ryerson students simply did not volunteer (see Table 4).

Table 4
Demographic information for Road to Ryerson participants

ID #	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Immigration Status	Language	Ethnic Ancestry	Program of Study
1	20	Male	Afghanistan	Second generation	Pashto	Afghani-Muslim	ITM
2	20	Female	Vietnam	Second generation	Cantonese and English	Vietnamese and Chinese	Business Management
3	19	Female	Somalia	1.5 generation	Somali	East African	Nursing

Research Findings and Conclusions

Our strategy was to analyze the in-depth interviews for major recurring themes and then to try to connect these themes to background data and academic information. It should be noted, however, that in many cases, participants did not answer all of our questions or respond to all of our probes; our numbers were small; and the range of academic outcomes was not highly varied. So this is an essentially qualitative account of what we discovered in talking to our students.

Study 1: Bridges to Ryerson

1. In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews revealed rich information about the participants' life histories and their experiences with the Bridges to Ryerson program. They commonly referred to having experienced marginalization at school and neglect at home. Of particular interest, we found that

the factors mentioned most often when participants described their experiences of being isolated and ridiculed at school were speaking English with an accent, having a minority status and being an immigrant. We identified four themes, as follows:

> **Marginalization at school:** experiences as immigrant and visible minority youth often isolated or ridiculed at schools.
>
> **Neglect and abuse at home:** troubled home life, family dysfunction, socioeconomic factors, abusive caregivers.
>
> **Interrupted education and schooling:** moving, dislocation, changing schools, negative perceptions of education system.
>
> **Lack of guidance and structure for education**: absence of help with school planning, course selection, time management, study skills.

Marginalization at School

A number of students reported experiencing marginalization and feelings of isolation at school with respect to racial, cultural, linguistic, class and sexuality differences. Students explicitly talked about racialized experiences at school, and recounted their experiences with race and violence. Difficulties with language also led to feelings of isolation, anger and violence, and cultural differences contributed to isolation and marginalization. Class difference was also a factor that influenced individuals' experiences, as was coming to terms with sexual identity.

In the words of one participant:

> *. . . at my school I think it was me and my sister who were the only brown kids. The term racism – when people think about racism – it's between black and white. For me personally, I believe I faced a lot of racism with the white kids and the black kids . . .*

Race, culture, language, class and sexual orientation were all factors described by participants that led to isolation and marginalization at school. We therefore conclude that difficulties with these factors in particular inhibited the students' academic growth and success.

Neglect and Abuse at Home

Many students reported experiencing neglect and abuse at home, including placement in foster care and/or group homes. As described in the following quotations, we conclude that these experiences greatly affected their interest in and performance at school:

> *[W]hen I was around the age of two, my biological mother, she was an alcoholic, she would be in and out of the house. My dad was in the military service. And so one day my mom didn't come back . . . . I survived for the period of time when I had no mother, no father, no one to care for me.*

[T]here was a lot of hitting involved I ran away one time because he hit me really bad.

The ability of some students to be successful may have been impacted by the experience of living with an abusive partner:

I was working in a shelter for awhile and then the situation when I tried to leave the relationship, I didn't know abuse until I tried to leave.

Removal from the family and placement in foster care was a factor affecting some participants' academic growth:

I grew up a lot in group homes and foster homes and any children's aid society and stuff.

[A]t a young age we kind of were put into foster care because my mom works so much jobs and she's frustrated so she used to beat us a lot.

Interrupted Education and Schooling

Another factor affecting participants' academic growth and success was the experience of moving and changing schools often. Related to the first theme, factors that caused interrupted education were often family troubles, experiences of abuse and placement in foster care:

I had a pretty rough childhood so I went to a lot of different elementary schools. I didn't go to school very often.

[M]y living situation wasn't exactly comfortable at the time when I was in high school so to me it was either my sanity or finishing high school.

[B]ecause I was in foster care, and not with my parent – my mother and stuff like, I went to a few different high schools probably about 4 different high schools. I was moved around a bit.

Behavioural problems and trouble with the law also affected some students in sustaining their education pathway:

I got arrested twice in grade 8 . . . that was one of the worst things that happened in elementary.

I was actually kicked out of grade 10 once expelled, and I was expelled in grade 11…. Just not going to class, just being a bad influence on other kids I guess . . . So I only left high school with five credits.

Lack of Guidance and Structure for Education

Many students described a lack of guidance and structure for their education, both at school and at home. Some were New Canadians and were treated differently in the school system, while others were in poor-quality schools. The impact of the experience was that they were not able to reach their full potential:

> *[T]he first thing was as soon as you came from the Caribbean country, you came with your report card, you came with everything but you were put back a grade. . . . [I]t [the school] wasn't even Ontario accredited or anything . . . so I was learned very little and it was the whole atmosphere was horrible for secular learning, for learning anything.*

Other students described being misguided by guidance counsellors or having negative experiences at private career colleges:

> *My guidance counselor was a drunk and he was really, really mean .*
>
> *. . . the guidance counselor depending on where you're coming from, they assume and then they put you in certain places where you're not good at . . .*
>
> *The only thing I can say is [private career college] ruined my life. I lost my apartment, I fell into a huge depression, my parent's disowned me for pretty much a year and a half because they supported me so much to go to that school.*

For the second part of the interview, we focused the questions on students' evaluation of the Bridges to Ryerson program. Although we attempted to include as many probes as possible during the interviews, we found that some of the questions were not fully answered by or relevant to each participant. Therefore, we have focused our results primarily on participants' responses to questions about the program and about their support system(s). In general, their responses to the program and staff members were extremely positive. They were overwhelmingly thankful because the program had given them "a second chance" to access higher education. They felt that the staff and faculty were very supportive. Three themes emerged from the interviews:

> **Opportunity for a second chance:** Bridges to Ryerson provides a second chance for higher education and an opportunity for marginalized and troubled students who otherwise would not have access to a university education.
>
> **Desire and motivation for upward mobility:** Bridges to Ryerson meets the students' strong desire for higher education, their motivation for knowledge and their desire for future job opportunities.
>
> **Academic and structural support**: Bridges to Ryerson provides support through program leaders, staff members and instructors who offer continued encouragement, trusting relationships and accessible teaching styles and approaches.

During the interviews, 12 participants indicated that Bridges to Ryerson provided a second chance for higher education that they would not otherwise have been able to access. In addition, 12 participants spoke of a strong desire for continued education and upward mobility, and 11 referred to the academic and structural support provided by Bridges to Ryerson.

Opportunity for a Second Chance

Many students indicated that Bridges to Ryerson provided a second chance for higher education that they would not otherwise have been able to access. The "second chance" to succeed in formal education is the most important starting point for many of these students in imagining the possibilities for their future. Participants described their motivation to make the most out of this opportunity to return to education:

> *I called Ryerson and asked them how I could get into Ryerson . . . . [T]hey told me about this program and they're like well it's a for sure acceptance if you complete all of the requirements.*
>
> *. . . to be successfully admitted into a post-secondary education, a post-secondary institute establishment for me would be such a personal achievement that you know, part of it is also the expectation that my mother had for me, when I think about it . . . it would be so amazing, you know, to be admitted and to actually be a student.*
>
> *It was basically my own realization that change needed to happen so that was basically it. I mean I decided to take action from then right? Surround myself with the right people, do the right things right.*
>
> *I've always wanted to go to university and I knew I would but you know, I didn't know how I would get in or that kind of thing.*
>
> *. . . you know it's one class at a time but I'm here though, I made it in the building.*

Desire and Motivation for Upward Mobility

Participants were aware of the importance of earning a postsecondary credential to improve their quality of life. Many students spoke of a desire to be recognized for the work they were already doing in the community. Many were concerned about future career plans and goals. Others talked about wanting to shift their focus from manual labour to a different kind of career:

> *So what made me actually come was I see certain people doing what they got to do and I do want a better life, there's stuff in my life that I want.*
>
> *I want to become a lawyer. But I don't know if I'm going to be ready for that because it takes a lot of years right? . . . And a lot of studying but. That's my main focus.*
>
> *I guess a dose of reality too, started using your brain instead of your back type thing.*

Because the program was not officially advertised, almost all the participants stated that they had found out about the program through word of mouth or by knowing the program director, who had many connections to Pathways to Education and Toronto community centres. We found that the participants' connection to the program director and to the other staff and the faculty support offered by Bridges to Ryerson (along with the guarantee of admission if participants did well enough) were the main factors that influenced most of the students' decisions to attend Ryerson.

Academic and Structural Support

The majority of the students praised the support (both structural and academic) provided by the Bridges to Ryerson program. In particular, those interviewed mentioned the instructors, the program managers and the administrative support:

> *A lot of support that's around you, the teachers are very accepting, like they understand that I haven't or other people haven't really been in school for so many years . . . so I found that really helpful and just baby steps that I need to take right now.*
>
> *I went to school just because he told me to. That was my main reason cuz this man believed in me so I couldn't let him down. And then I started enjoying it so I started excelling.*

Without the personal support from the program, many students felt that they would not be able to reach their goals of attaining higher education in order to improve and enrich their quality of life. Although most of the participants were extremely positive about the program, some suggested that the timing of the classes was not ideal for people coming from day jobs, that there was not enough staff to support all the students and that there was a sense of unnecessary "hand-holding." However, most of the participants agreed that the needs of the students varied and that some required more assistance than others.

One limitation that kept coming up in the interviews was the lack of space for students to meet regularly and outside of class. Many students felt that the location in the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education was problematic, since students (and anyone else entering the building) are usually stopped at the front desk as a security measure.

Some students also mentioned that the learning strategies portion of the program could be further integrated into their coursework and not offered as a separate component before class. As many students were employed full-time, they found it difficult to reach the tutorial hour before class on time. However, all the students were grateful to be given this opportunity (including the guarantee of admission) and had many positive things to say about both the instructors and the program administrators.

Additional quotations related to each of the themes can be found in Appendix E. We have also identified four particularly meaningful interviews and summarized them. The case studies of participants in these interviews (including follow-up information) can be found in Appendix F.

2. Academic Outcomes

The interviews revealed that many program participants who struggled with their academic success were also those who spoke their native language or native language mixed with English at home. These students faced more difficulties in completing the Bridges to Ryerson program than those who spoke only English at home. Students who spoke their native language or mixed native language with English at home were often the children of first-generation immigrants or from immigrant families. They often reported in the interviews that their academic growth was restricted due to difficulties with language development.

Information from the interviews indicated that 12 participants spoke about marginalization at school, 13 participants referred to neglect and abuse at home, 12 spoke of interrupted schooling and education and 10 referred to a lack of guidance and structure for education. Interestingly, 5 of the students who mentioned three or more of these themes completed the program, whereas only 2 students did not (see Appendix D, Table D1).

From the background demographic information collected during the interviews, we found that home language was the only indicator of PSE success for these students. Of the 18 students who had successfully completed the Bridges to Ryerson program, 11 had spoken English at home as a child, whereas among the students who had *not* completed the program (*n* = 9), 1 participant spoke English only (see Table 5). However, the numbers did not differ in the cases of students for whom the language spoken at home was their home country language (or both English and home country language). Other background factors, such as previous education, age and employment. did not seem to have any systematic effect.

Table 5
Bridges to Ryerson academic outcomes

Bridges to Ryerson Program Status	Gender	Age	Immigration Status	Country of Origin *Q. How many years have you lived in Canada?*	Language *Q. What languages did you speak at home as a child?*	Relationship Status *Q. What is your current status in terms of a significant relationship?*	Dependants
Completed Program (*n* = 18)	M = 8 F = 10	25- = 11 26+ = 7	Immigrant = 9 Native born (incl. Aboriginal) = 3 Second-geneartion = 6	Canada = 8 Other = 10 Both = 0	**English = 11** **Home Country = 1** **Both = 6**	Single = 10 Married = 3 Dating = 5	No = 12 Children = 4 Children & Parent = 2
Did not complete program (*n* = 9)	M = 6 F = 3	25- = 5 26+ = 4	Immigrant = 5 Native born (incl.Aboriginal) = 2 Second-generation = 2	Canada = 3 Other = 5 Both* = 1	**English= 1** **Home Country = 2** **Both = 6**	Single = 7 Married = 0 Dating = 2	No = 7 Children = 2 Children & Parent = 0

*One participant indicated they had been born in Canada but had been raised predominantly in Nigeria

This pattern suggests that the students who, during their childhood, spoke only their home country language or their home country language mixed with English at home faced more difficulties in completing the Bridges to Ryerson program than those who spoke only English at home. These students were typically the children of first-generation immigrants or were from immigrant families.

Conclusions

It is important to note that our conclusions are limited by the small size of our population. However, the in-depth interviews, case studies and academic outcomes analysis provides some insights into the value of the Bridges to Ryerson program for underrepresented and marginalized individuals who want to access postsecondary education.

Based on the information gathered from the in-depth interviews, the following factors were identified most often as negatively impacting the participants' past educational experiences:

- Marginalization at school
- Neglect and abuse at home
- Interrupted education and schooling
- Lack of guidance and structure for education at home and at school

Participants stated that the Bridges to Ryerson program gave them:

- a second chance to access university and succeed in their studies,
- an opportunity for upward mobility, and
- the structure and support required to succeed in their postsecondary education.

From the demographic information (including incoming education level, employment status and occupation), we found that the only factor to affect the participants' success in the Bridges to Ryerson program was language. Of the 18 students who completed the program, 11 spoke only English at home during their childhood, while of the 9 students who did not complete the program, just 1 student spoke English only. This finding suggests that students who, during their childhood, do not speak English at home or speak English mixed with their home country language and who are often children of immigrants or are immigrants themselves, experience more academic difficulties than students who speak English only. This has led us to encourage students to make use of English Language Supports, available to all students at Ryerson, and we have adjusted the entry requirements for the Bridges to Ryerson credit English course, with more students beginning the program with the ABC non-credit course or courses.

Study 2: Tri-Mentoring Program

1. In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews revealed rich information about the participants' student experiences at Ryerson, both academically and socially. From these experiences, we found that participants commonly referred to their involvement in campus life and faculty support as reasons for staying at Ryerson. We identified four themes, as follows:

> **Community and student life involvement:** experiences of the Ryerson campus as diverse, inclusive and community-oriented.
>
> **Program specialties and practical curriculum:** Ryerson's focus on specialized programs and practical approaches.
>
> **Personal connection to and support from faculty:** small classroom numbers and personalized support from professors.
>
> **Campus location:** appealing downtown location for learning, opportunity and diversity.

Community and Student Life Involvement

Many students referred to their campus experiences as fostering a sense of community at Ryerson:

> *[I]f I get involved in more events I feel like I am part of it. I am showing to others what I have learned from Ryerson. Before I didn't get involved in many things but now I know I am going to make a lot of friends and if you make a lot of friends they will show you how to go about some other things if you don't know.*
>
> *Here you can talk to anybody. I find everybody here is very friendly, very polite, willing to help you if you ever have a question.*
>
> *I am more involved with the community coming to Ryerson, I am more involved with student life at Ryerson than I was living on campus at York.*
>
> *I felt welcomed and I felt more of a home university. And I saw myself reflected in staff, in my professors, the rest of the students, the student population.*

Program Specialties and Practical Curriculum

Participants described choosing Ryerson because of its many program specialties and its focus on practical curriculum Because of its history, Ryerson stresses experiential learning in its curriculum and has a number of unique programs:

I chose Ryerson because this is a specialized program [Public Health]. There are only four schools in this country that offer this program.

I chose Ryerson because if you want to do fashion there's only 2 schools in Canada where you can actually get a degree.

Personal Connection to Faculty

Many students felt a strong connection to their professors and instructors at Ryerson:

The things that helped me the most, really and truly . . . has a lot to do with my professors, like talking to my professors and going to my professors for help and getting connected.

[T]he professors really do genuinely care about you. I didn't think there was going to be that relationship with professors.

I actually almost didn't come to school second years actually there was a teacher who saw whatI was going through . . . she pulled me aside and took me into her office and asked me, is everything ok and I told her . . . . .I'm thankful for her and I'm sure I could always go to her if I needed any help.

Campus Location

The downtown location of the Ryerson campus appealed to many participants as offering both academic and career opportunities:

Even though Ryerson is commuter school, you never feel that, so it was a really good decision.

I wanted to be in downtown Toronto. And I came to Ryerson and I loved the campus.

I just wanted to experience something different and see the downtown lifestyle as well. Ryerson as one of those universities where I can experience all of that and have a good education.

For the second part of the interviews, we focused the questions on their evaluation of the Tri-Mentoring Program. Most of the students reported that they found out about the program through various marketing techniques (i.e., mass e-mails, tabling, campus signs and events) and word of mouth. Some of the reasons for participating included opportunities for campus involvement and employment; sense of community and purpose; cultural/ethnic/racial identification with the program and the First Generation project in particular; and an overall desire to help others based on what the participants had experienced and learned during their own first year of university.

We found that their responses to the program and staff members were generally positive. They felt that they had greatly benefited from their involvement in the program and that most aspects of the program were very important to student development and success. Four themes emerged from the interviews:

Support and resources: TMP provides access to knowledge about university life, student job opportunities, networking skills and development, and career connections.

Locality: TMP offers a sense of space, community and belonging somewhere for underrepresented and marginalized students, both literally and psychologically.

Accountability and purpose: Students' sense of responsibility and motivation increases with the knowledge that they have someone looking up to them; mentors and mentees give each other mutual support.

Leadership and interpersonal skills: TMP helps build self-confidence and develop social skills in working with the campus and community. (For a list of meaningful quotes, see Appendix E.)

Support and Resources

Many students found the TMP helpful in providing resources that helped them in their success at Ryerson. In particular, participants reported that the TMP assisted them in gaining knowledge about available services and resources at Ryerson, as well as providing student job opportunities, networking skills and career connections.

The following are selected quotes from the in-depth interviews that highlight the support and resources students received through participation in TMP, the opportunities to serve as a student staff member in the TMP office and the networking opportunities made available through the program.

It [TMP] taught me more about what services Ryerson offers.

I'd say that it really helped me be a little more motivated for looking out for what is being offered at school.

[T]he impact [of working in TMP] would be when I go to for other jobs I can take what I have learned. You learn more. That there are different cultures and there are different people.

The amount of stuff that you learn about, especially from other people from different cultures and stuff like that.

I think that one of the advantages to the TMPs is networking and networking in your field can be beneficial down the road.

. . . it is so useful . . . you get a career mentor in your 4th year, and people don't understand that networking is how you get job, it's not what you know so much, is who do you know. The first time I attended and I met somebody who is in my field, completely in my field, she is in marketing and advertising, she is Ryerson graduate, same program, and so it really helped.

Participants spoke about the value of the career mentorship program for fourth-year students, as well as helpful academic and career advice they received from their mentors. They discussed opportunities that inspired their career choices and the guidance received from mentors about program choice. Others praised the career mentorship program within TMP:

TMP has made a major major impact because working with kids I've decided that as my major, criminal justice, I do want to get into the law eventually, I don't know what aspects yet, but I definitely want it to be something where I'm involved with youth.

He switched to finance and he was so happy and told me about finance. Based on where I came from and everything growing up, I want to help people be more financially stable in their lives. Again with the whole tri mentoring thing my mentor was really good to me. I was lucky I had one that was always willing to talk to me and willing to answer any of my questions.

. . . it just opened my eyes to just totally different worlds and it kind of gave me that break from studying when I needed that break. I was still learning, but I wasn't learning through a book. I was learning through peoples' stories and peoples' experience. And I think that's one thing that we strive on, because everyone has an opportunity to tell their stories.

Locality

The importance of having a multi-functional space on campus that encourages a unified sense of diversity was mentioned often. Many participants felt that they belonged somewhere and felt safe in the TMP office. It is a space designed for students to feel welcome and comfortable, and it has common space that is shared equally by staff and student participants:

[G]oing into the office, it was a safe place for me, and there was always, always someone to talk to, whether it be personal advice, academic advice or just how to get involved, tri-mentoring was there for me.

[I]t's a space to kind of feel you can be yourself in terms of being a cultural student member of Ryerson.

I realized there is a group of kids like me. When I found that group they were all into Tri-mentoring for some reason and it made so much sense, this is a very diverse group of kids. I thought okay this is where I belong.

A lot of times certain issues that you talk about like just certain discussions within the office we discuss a variety of things like racism and then just having that space to talk about things and feeling comfortable talking about it is really good to have.

Accountability and Purpose

Many participants described the satisfaction they felt because of helping others in the program as mentors and/or FG ambassadors. They also spoke about the reciprocal nature of the mentee/mentor relationship:

I think it [TMP] contributes to my success, I feel rewarded when students are helped. And that's what helps me to get along.

The best things are that she is there for me too. It's not like I'm just there for her. I don't really like the term mentor and men tee because I feel like we are both mentors to each other.

. . . it is a relationship that goes both ways. I'm not the only one there giving my time and not getting anything back from it. I'm getting a lot back. Whatever I am putting in I get most of it back, if not all of it.

I feel like it gives me purpose here at Ryerson.

Leadership and Interpersonal Skills

The TMP offers leadership and interpersonal skills training in partnership with other student services. Many students found that participating in the TMP helped them gain the confidence to assume leadership positions, both within the program and out in the community. Some simply appreciated the gain in interpersonal and social skills that the TMP experience provided for them:

Community-wise, I am really involved in terms of leadership, I've worked for the liberal campaigns just because I am interested in what happens to our society because involved in politics.

Tri-mentoring has helped so much because I had my personal experience and half of it is about tri-mentoring and about my involvement. And I think just because I have such a high leadership position because I am a lead mentor, it helped me so much.

The best is probably meeting new people . . . I've developed myself to be a little bit more interpersonal and tri-mentoring for me was a great outlet for me to practice that social skill.

Additional quotes related to each of the themes can be found in Appendix E. We have also identified and summarized four particularly meaningful interviews. One participant is a mentee

training to become a mentor. Three of the participants are mentors: two are employed at TMP as a first generation ambassador and lead mentor, respectively, and the third has been paired with a career mentor. These case studies can be found in Appendix F.

2. Academic Outcomes

In order to assess the participants' academic performance, we collected the GPAs of the 62 students who included their student ID numbers on the consent form. The average GPA of these 62 students was 2.94. Table 6 provides the data for GPAs as they relate to TMP role, gender and other demographic factors. (For more detailed information, see Appendix D, Table D3.)

Table 6
Academic outcomes for Tri-Mentoring Program participants

	Characteristic	Total (*n* = 62)	GPA (average)
Role at TMP	Mentor	50	**2.94**
	Mentee	12	2.90
Gender	Male	24	2.83
	Female	38	2.99
Immigration status	First-generation immigrant	20	2.96
	1.5-generation immigrant*	8	**2.81**
	Second-generation immigrant	22	**2.81**
	Canadian born	12	3.36
Year in school	First	10	2.94
	Second	18	**3.16**
	Third	16	2.68
	Fourth	17	2.26
	Fifth or graduate	1	2.70
Language at home	English	28	3.02
	Home country	14	3.02
	Both languages	20	**2.78**

*1.5- generation immigrant indicates immigrating to Canada at age 10 or younger.

Linking the background demographic information collected during the interviews with the participants' GPAs, we found the following three patterns: mentors (*n* = 50, GPA = 2.94) had an

average GPA that was .04 points higher than the average GPA of mentees (*n* = 12, GPA = 2.90).

This difference can be explained by difficulties that first-year students face in transitioning to university life. We also found that some mentees had trouble connecting with their mentors, which indicates that some first-year students in our study lacked adequate mentor support and guidance. However, the difference may also be explained by mentors in second year having the support of the program:

> *I was ready to drop out of school. After my second year, I was ready to drop out, I was ready to call it quits. And getting involved and meeting new people and seeing that somebody actually had a hope in me and that someone actually cared [I continued]. (FG Ambassador*

In terms of employment, 28 of the 58 mentors worked for the TMP as either a lead mentor or an FG ambassador. Some participants indicated that the TMP was a flexible and accommodating program to work for, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> *A lot of times the reason why people do bad[ly] in certain academics is due to the fact that they have issues going on, if it's internally or externally . . . that issue can make a difference between getting an A+ and B- on a test. It's deeper than how much we write down on paper and the reports that we do. The Tri-mentoring program is more than just what it says on paper, it's a lifestyle, it's a movement, it's powerful, it's something very strong. [FG Ambassador]*

> *[L]ast week I got this opportunity to do an internship and I was supposed to be working and my boss was like yah, yah you can make up the hours some other time. So it's always nice to know that if I was sick, or if I needed to do something with school, they would always be okay with that.* [Lead Mentor]

Second-generation immigrants (*n* = 22, GPA = 2.81) and 1.5-generation immigrants (*n* = 8, GPA = 2.81) had average GPAs that were .15 points lower than that of the average first-generation immigrant (*n* = 20, GPA = 2.96) and .55 points lower than the average GPA of Canadian-born students (*n* = 12, GPA = 3.36).

This pattern indicates that participants who were children of immigrants or immigrated to Canada when they were 10 years old or younger may have more difficulties in their academic progress compared to those participants who immigrated when they were older or were born in Canada. This demographic and academic performance analysis is consistent with the literature, as researchers have found that second-generation immigrants are often caught between cultures, thus experiencing higher levels of cultural confusion. The information is also consistent with our interviews. For example, one participant noted the following:

> *Probably it was a culture thing, you know, I do have friends that are not black but the majority of the time it's hard to relate because of . . . the way I live at home is not the same as the way they live at home, maybe because of the socioeconomic status that*

> *they have, these kids are going to parties everyday and they afford to take a cab all the way somewhere and all the way back and I can't do that kind of stuff.* [Second Generation]

Participants whose home languages included both English and their home country language (*n* = 20, GPA = 2.78) had an average GPA that was .24 points lower than that of participants who spoke only English (*n* = 28, GPA = 3.02) or their home country language at home (*n* = 14, GPA = 3.02).

This finding is consistent with the pattern indicating that participants who were children of immigrants or immigrated to Canada when they were 10 years old or younger may have more difficulties in their academic progress as participants who speak both their home country language and English at home are most likely to be children of immigrants. As indicated in the case analysis, one participant clearly described the language problems she had faced:

> *I could speak English just not as well as the other kids, so that was just like an insecurity, and . . . there were a whole bunch of bullies that came with that and they threw me in ESL for so long. I didn't speak for 2 years, I just didn't talk. I find I do that a lot when I go into a newer surrounding. I just won't talk and then finally I will talk. And I did that when I first came to university, I didn't talk for a year*. [1.5-Generation Student]

It was also the case that in this sample, second-year students had the highest GPA (*n* = 18, GPA = 3.16), while fourth-year students had the lowest (*n* = 17, GPA = 2.26). It is difficult to draw conclusions from this pattern, as many other factors are involved, such as an increased academic workload in the third and fourth years of university, as well as the fact that the sample was limited and therefore likely unrepresentative.

Most of the participants were satisfied with their experiences in the program; however, a few suggestions for improvement did come up consistently during the interviews. For example, many of the students wished to have a larger and more visible location for the program office and lounge; some students specifically suggested that the office be moved out of its basement location to a central area, to promote access and participation. Another, related suggestion was to increase marketing efforts by implementing different means of promotion and publicity, in order to increase the program's presence on campus. Many students felt that the benefits of participating in the TMP were not explicitly acknowledged across the campus.

In terms of participation, 7 of the 13 first-year students who were interviewed indicated that the mentee experience was sometimes unsatisfactory. Some mentees found that their mentors were unavailable and often too busy and/or disinterested to provide sufficient guidance – academic or otherwise. Some participants suggested that a more rigid screening process should be implemented during the mentor orientation. Others felt that the program should provide more resources to mentees if they were experiencing difficulties connecting with their mentors. Still others found that there was inconsistent communication with their lead mentors, who may have been overloaded with the numbers of mentors and mentees they were managing (ranging from approximately 20 to 100 mentors and mentees). Despite these limitations,

participants expressed their overall satisfaction with the program and wished to raise awareness about the many benefits of participating in the TMP.

Conclusions

Some limitations to Study 2 include a small sample of mentees (*n* = 13) compared to the sample of other students involved in the TMP (*n* = 58). Although every effort was made to recruit an equal number of mentees and mentors, more mentors were willing to participate in the study. It would also be useful to have included an equal number of volunteer and employed TMP participants to address any biases the student staff may have had.

Based on our in-depth interviews, case studies and academic outcomes analysis, it is clear that the Tri-Mentoring Program is a useful means of engaging and retaining underrepresented and marginalized students at Ryerson. This program provides support and encouragement for participants to succeed academically and prepares students for the professional world. We found that TMP provided the following:

Support and resources
- Locality
- Accountability and purpose
- Leadership and interpersonal skills

In addition to these themes and by linking the demographic information with the interviews, we also found the following:

- On average, mentors maintained a slightly higher academic average then mentees. This difference can be explained by the difficulties faced in transitioning to first-year university and trouble connecting with mentors for support. The support that mentors receive from the program and flexible employment options may also contribute to the higher mentor GPA scores.

- Second-generation and 1.5-generation immigrants had lower GPAs than first-generation immigrants and Canadian-born students. This pattern indicates that children of immigrants and students who immigrated at age 10 or younger experienced greater academic difficulties than participants who immigrated as teens or adults and students who were born in Canada. The greatest discrepancy was found between Canadian-born students and children of immigrants (second-generation immigrants) or 1.5 generation students, i.e., students who had immigrated to Canada at age 10 or less.

- Participants who spoke English and their home country language at home had lower GPAs, on average, than those who spoke only English or their home country language at home. This finding is consistent with the previous finding as second- and 1.5-generation immigrants likely speak both English and their home country language at home.

- Therefore, language and immigration status were the strongest indicators of participants' academic success.

These characteristics are consistent with our findings in Study 1 and speak to the many difficulties faced by students who must negotiate between two cultural identities. For example, children with parents who do not speak English or speak very little English may find themselves as "cultural translators," essentially subverting the role of child and guardian. This can lead to a lack of support or guidance from parents and increased responsibilities at home. Second- and 1.5-generation students may also find themselves disadvantaged in receiving help with homework and other language-based activities. Often intersecting with race, class differences may also affect these students' progress in school. They often find themselves contributing to the household income at a younger age than their peers, thus using up time that would otherwise have been spent on schoolwork and/or extracurricular activities. In essence, this group is doubly "disadvantaged" due to structural inequalities in language and immigration status.

Study 3: Road to Ryerson

As noted earlier, the three participants all self-identified as visible minority. Two participants spoke only their home country language at home, while one participant spoke both her home country language and English. All three of the participants were offered admission to Ryerson University in the full-time program of their choice.

All of the participants had struggled in high school and had faced difficulties in accessing postsecondary education. They all felt that they could not have achieved their goal of attending university without the help of the Road to Ryerson program. In addition, they all found the program extremely helpful as an orientation to university life and as preparation for the academic expectations of a postsecondary education:

> *It's definitely helped a lot. I mean the experience itself allowed me to come here, be in the environment of university students, so just that alone really helped. And it definitely helped me when I actually did come here because I knew where everything was.*

The participants had many positive things to say about their experiences:

> *I just think this program is really helpful. I am quite happy with it.*

One of the participants recalls how the program had helped him to grow and gain confidence:

> *It's surreal – when I came in September and I came up the stairs in the subway station and I looked outside I was like wow, I can't believe I go here now . . . it was less than a year and I think it's changing me, I can't tell but when I think about it, it has, in a way it has for the better . . . in the way I think, how I deal with certain situations, it changed me like that.*

The case studies for all three participants are included in Appendix F.

General Conclusions

As we noted earlier in the introduction, Ryerson has a number of programs designed to provide access for those who would not otherwise find their way into university – and to improve the engagement of students who might otherwise face marginalization. This research was designed to enable us to share the stories of students participating in these programs and to gain a better understanding of their life experiences both within the program and beyond.

With respect to the Bridges to Ryerson students, we clearly learned that students with very difficult life circumstances and problematic educational histories *can* successfully access PSE. The themes that emerged from their life stories are a testament to this. Almost all the students experienced some form of neglect or abuse at home and negative experiences at school, including marginalization, interruptions in education and a lack of guidance and structure for education. The Bridges to Ryerson students told us about how much they valued this "second chance," how they believed the program would lead to better life circumstances and how important the academic and other supports were to them. However, they also noted the need to better integrate information about learning strategies and the difficulty of some aspects of scheduling.

The stories provided by the TMP students clearly tell us about the importance of providing a specially targeted program to overcome feelings of isolation and exclusion and to increase student engagement and retention. We also learned the undeniable value of a program that engenders a sense of community, place and belonging. Although the TMP students were very positive about the program, they have encouraged us to promote it more effectively and have shared with us the fact that some mentees experienced difficulties accessing their mentors. The information received from this study has already led to modifications in parts of our programming. We also discovered that two factors affecting their academic success were language and immigration status; specifically, these include speaking both English and their home country language and being a child of immigrants or immigrating to Canada before the age of 10. These characteristics speak to the many difficulties these students have encountered in negotiating two cultural identities, such as finding themselves as cultural translators for their parents, lack of support and help with homework, and increased financial burdens at home.

Road to Ryerson was designed to provide a seamless and supported route for students whose initial lack of success in gaining admission into university was due to systemic factors. If we had been better able to recruit a larger sample of students from the Road to Ryerson program, we may have been able to gain a better understanding of those students in need of access support and guidance in general and not merely in the form of a structured bridging or access program. Given the limitation of the very small sample size, we still found that the Road to Ryerson stories spoke to the benefits of a meaningful "second first chance." The students clearly valued the orientation, preparation and support that they received, as well as the opportunity to gain confidence, both academically and socially.

Of course, we would have preferred fuller participation, especially from the Road to Ryerson students. However, we were very careful not to coerce and pressure students to participate. In

conducting future research, we would attempt to design an equally non-pressured but more effective method of soliciting participation. In addition, future research might focus more on participants' identities not only as Ryerson students, but also as contributing members of their communities.

Having rich life stories and descriptions of the students' experiences has helped us to better understand who our students really are, the barriers that they have faced and/or are still overcoming and what their educational needs might be. We were also able to get a much deeper sense of what does and what does not work well for them. This is important as Abramovitch (2003) has noted: "Success must be determined not only by how well the student does, but also by how well the system is able to meet the needs of the student" (p. 103). We will continue to work toward meeting the specific needs of underrepresented and marginalized students, with the goal of establishing a socially and educationally inclusive university environment.

Returning to the notion of social exclusion, our participants described factors leading to their marginalization and identified the structural inequalities that subsequently denied them access to PSE. We found that the oppressive and isolating barriers affecting our students most are firmly embedded in their experiences as "other" in terms of their race, class, sexual orientation, immigration status, language and childhood experiences both at home and at school. Galabuzi (2006) argues that the experience of social exclusion arises from unequal access to the processes of production, wealth creation and power (p. 173). The most effective way to break this cycle of exclusion and bridge the poverty gap is to increase access to higher education. By employing a grassroots, bottom-up approach, we are now better equipped to address *why* this population has struggled with a lack of access and what specific barriers they might be battling with. Perhaps most importantly, we have provided not only a path for underrepresented students to access and engage in PSE, but also a vehicle through which to tell their powerful and inspirational stories of courage and perseverance.

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