

## Stakeholder Summary

### Identifying under-represented groups a challenge for college and university access programs

Colleges and universities across Ontario are engaged in many outreach, recruitment and retention efforts to improve access to postsecondary education for under-represented groups. However, two new reports from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) find that defining which students are targeted for these programs and which groups institutions are attempting to serve are significant challenges to improving access. The studies found that the emphasis on student self-identification and tension between local demographic needs and broader ministry guidelines made providing equitable access and accurate program evaluation difficult.

#### Project Description

*The Recruitment of Under-represented Groups to Ontario Colleges: A Survey of Current Practices* examined data from Ontario college Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs), websites, viewbooks and interviews with key stakeholders involved in student recruitment from 12 colleges.

*What are Ontario's Universities Doing to Improve Access for Under-represented Groups?* examined data from university websites, viewbooks, SMAs, the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) instruction booklet and interviews with administrators from 16 institutions.

Both studies examined how institutions define and identify under-represented groups, the types of activities and programs they use to improve access and the ways they evaluate their efforts.

#### Findings

Self-identification was a major challenge identified by both the college and university sectors. By relying on students to self-identify as a member of a particular under-represented group, the onus is placed on them to recognize the potential benefit to themselves and the institution. This ignores the reality that many students may have encountered outside postsecondary education, where self-identification was detrimental to their lives. As a result, programs may not be reaching the intended students and institutional efforts to assess their impact are difficult.

Both colleges and universities most commonly focus on the three under-represented groups emphasized by the 2005 Rae review of postsecondary education: Aboriginal students, first-generation students and students with disabilities. But the issues created by attempting to serve local demographics are different between the two sectors.

In Ontario colleges, there is considerable variation in the definition of under-represented groups, with some institutions taking cues from broader Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities initiatives and funding streams, and others responding to regional demographics and focusing on local concerns

including rural students and students from low-income families. The authors argue a “one size fits all” definition of under-representation may not be workable and does not fulfill the original mandate of colleges to be responsive to their local communities.

In their outreach initiatives, colleges also face a tension between global initiatives, which focus on encouraging students to pursue any postsecondary education, and institution-specific recruitment, which is designed to increase enrolment at a particular college. The authors argue a global outreach approach may be more beneficial by creating a positive and inclusive community that can tackle common barriers facing under-represented groups.

For universities, there was considerable variation in where under-represented groups were referenced in SMAs and outreach materials. For example, Aboriginal students were featured prominently in both the SMAs and viewbooks, but appeared less prominently in the OUAC instruction booklet. In contrast, all 20 universities mentioned first-generation students in their SMAs, but only three did so in their viewbooks. Administrators suggested these differences in emphasis were shaped by their institutions’ location, mission and/or history.

In terms of serving under-represented groups, the study identifies three “types” of universities, though not all institutions are a perfect fit. First are institutions that have high admission requirements, typically with doctoral and medical programs, and target under-represented students already on a path to higher education. The second type focuses on promoting campuses as small and physically safe with ample academic support. These universities have lower admission requirements and typically target students from under-represented groups who have interest in higher education. The final type are universities that see their role as providing an opportunity for any interested student. These schools have flexible admissions processes and offer remedial programs and academic supports. Because of their emphasis on access they are less likely to focus specifically on under-represented groups, but on supports for any student.

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