

HEQCO

Access and Retention Consortium Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF)

Grad Track Pilot Project (Phase 1)

Primary Investigator (PI): Sarah Glen, Manager, Community Initiatives, HCF

Co-Researchers: Sam Misra, Consultant, HCF; Kate Feightner, Consultant, HCF; and Matt Goodman, Vice-President Grants and Community Initiatives, HCF

Overview

The Grad Track Pilot Project is a social intervention meant to help disengaged middle school students navigate the system so that they can access the resources they need to create customized educational pathways and learn to set goals and achieve them. Launched in September 2016, Grad Track engaged a total of 40 Grade 6 student participants in two schools in the Hamilton region. By September 2017, the number of participants had decreased to 35 due to school and/or home moves.

Grad Track is guided by research in early intervention programs in Canada and the United States. There is growing awareness in the literature that students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education are less likely to attend. Recognizing that the choice to opt out of postsecondary education is often made before students begin high school, early intervention programs are designed to provide support to students early on, to help them opt into higher education. Recognizing that those students identified as disengaged are the same students who face a “network of barriers,” and that each student will react to supports differently, there is a need for early intervention programs to balance a more individualized approach to cater to each student and a simple, systematic approach to reach a wide range of students. Grad Track navigates this balance by offering four key supports: a Grad Track student group, a learning coach, Grad Track projects and events, and personalized learning pathways for each student. Students in Grad Track spend one-on-one time with the learning coach, as well as time in their student groups, receiving a range of individualized and peer supports.

This three-year research project is the first phase of a larger longitudinal evaluation which will follow the Grad Track pilot cohort from middle school through high school and the transition to PSE. This first phase will follow students from Grade 6 to the end of Grade 9 and will aim to answer the following overarching research questions:

1. What are the impacts (intended and unintended) of Grad Track? And what links exist between Grad Track and its observed impacts?
2. What is the scalability of Grad Track?

Methodology and Timeline

This phase of the research project will follow students from middle school through their transition to high school (Fall 2016–Fall 2020).

In order to answer the primary evaluation questions, the following preparatory questions will first be addressed:

- What is Grad Track?

This question will focus on Grad Track's core program components and the characteristics of the implementation context within which Grad Track is operating. It will be answered by implementing a multiple case study of the development, implementation and evolution of Grad Track at the two pilot sites. Methodology will include: review of program documentation; descriptive statistical analysis of program administrative data; evaluator reflections on the Grad Track program and evaluator role; key informant interviews and focus groups; focus groups with students; multiple methods of gathering data from parents/families; and a descriptive analysis of available school data.

- Were the Grad Track pilot project's goals and objectives achieved?

This question will focus on how successful Grad Track has been in engaging middle school students and their parents in thinking about their educational pathways, and in contributing to their development of social and emotional competencies. It will be answered by collecting data through retrospective review and analysis of program records and data; annual one-on-one semi-structured interviews with students; multiple methods of gathering data from parents/family; semi-structured interviews with key program staff; and a review of program attrition documentation and qualitative description of unique cases.

This research project will also establish baseline data collection methods for answering the first evaluation question, using school administrative data. Further, this phase will collect data in order to prepare for answering the impact evaluation question, while creating a vision for scaling up in the future.

Contact Information

For more specific information about this project or for any questions, please contact Helen Tewolde, Senior Researcher and Manager, Centre for Equitable Access at HEQCO (htewolde@heqco.ca), or Sarah Glen, Manager, Community Initiatives at Hamilton Community Foundation (s.glen@hamiltoncommunityfoundation.ca).