University Access, Engagement, Retention and Success of Under-Represented Populations

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Introduction

Ryerson University has a number of programs designed to:

- provide access to higher education to students who may not normally find their way to university

- improve the engagement, retention and success of underrepresented populations

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Introduction con't

- The project involved 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**.

- The project was designed to give us a comprehensive understanding of the impact and effectiveness of these programs.

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The Programs

Bridges to Ryerson

- Bridges to Ryerson is designed to provide access to higher education to students who would not normally find their way to university.

- Most students who participate in Bridges to Ryerson are from low-income communities; from Aboriginal communities; from groups typically under-represented in post secondary education; many are New Canadians; many are single parents; many have learning disabilities; some will have experienced homelessness.

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The Programs con't

Tri-Mentoring Program

- Based on a framework of non-assimilation, the goals of the Tri-mentoring program (TMP) are to 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.

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The Programs cont'd

Road to Ryerson

- Road to Ryerson is a program for marginalized high school students who have just missed getting into Ryerson either because they may be missing necessary 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.

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Results: Bridges to Ryerson -- Life Experience Themes

(27 participant interviews)

- **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

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Results: Bridges to Ryerson -- Program Themes

(27 participant interviews)

- **Opportunity for a second chance:** 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:** meets the students' strong desire for higher education, motivation for knowledge, and future job opportunities

- **Academic and structural support**: provides support through program leaders, staff members and instructors who offer continued encouragement, trusting relationships and accessible teaching styles and approaches

Results: Tri-Mentoring Program -- Ryerson Themes

(71 participant interviews)

- **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

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Results: Tri-Mentoring Program -- Program Themes

(71 participant interviews)

- **Support and resources**: provides access to knowledge about university life, student jobs, networking skills and development, and career connections

- **Locality:** offers a sense of space, community and belonging for under-represented and marginalized students, both literally and psychologically

- **Accountability and purpose**: leads to increased sense of responsibility and motivation; mutual support for both mentors and mentees

- **Leadership and interpersonal skills**: builds self-confidence and develops social skills in working with the campus and community

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Results: Road to Ryerson

The three participants:

- **had struggled in high school and had faced difficulties in accessing post secondary education**

- felt that they could not have **achieved their goal of attending university** without the help of the Road to Ryerson program

- found the program extremely helpful in **orienting them to university life and preparing them for the academic expectations of a post secondary education**

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Conclusions: Bridges to Ryerson

- Bridges to Ryerson serves students who would not otherwise be able to access PSE and who are clearly "different" from other students.

- Part of the goal is to minimize the differences and maximize the students' considerable talents and skills, but in a framework of non-assimilation.

- **We clearly learned that students with very difficult life circumstances and problematic educational histories can access PSE (and our more current experience tells us that they can be successful once access is achieved).**

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Conclusions: Tri-Mentoring Program

- The TMP offers culturally and linguistically diverse students, who might otherwise be marginalized, support throughout their undergraduate academic years.

- The TMP's anti-oppressive model of student engagement encourages students to retain their diverse identities while negotiating change and growth within traditional institutional structures and values.

- **The TMP stories indicate the importance and value of a specially targeted program for feelings of inclusion and engagement, and for engendering a sense of community, place and belonging.**

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Conclusions: Road to Ryerson

- Road to Ryerson was designed to provide a seamless, but supported route to university for students whose initial lack of success in being admitted was due to systemic factors.

- The program represents a modified form of "affirmative action" in which Road students enter PSE with the same qualifications as other high school students.

- **The Road to Ryerson stories speak to the benefits of a meaningful "second chance." Students clearly valued the orientation, preparation and support they received, as well as the opportunity to gain confidence, both academically and socially.**

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Conclusions: General

- Having the rich life stories and descriptions of student experience helps us to better understand who our students really are and what needs they have.

- We had wanted to link student stories with academic outcomes, and there was an indication that language/immigration issues were a factor, but our numbers were too small.

- The information received from this project has led to some modifications in parts of our programming and clearly confirmed our belief in the value and impact of these programs.

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