

# **Transferability Expectations and Realities: Analysis of Incoming Centennial College Learner Expectations, Realities and Self-Adjusted Perceptions**

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## **Executive Summary**

In recent years, Ontario's credit transfer framework has improved postsecondary pathways and resources to help students receive recognition for their prior learning by expanding non-traditional pathways, notably college-college and university-college. As a result, Ontario colleges have experienced an increase in the number of incoming transfer students who wish to change their field of study, upgrade skills, earn additional qualifications, and/or geographically relocate. The credit transfer population represents a growing share of Ontario college students.

With an emergent emphasis on life-long learning and the freedom to move among postsecondary institutions, assistance in navigating the postsecondary education system has become increasingly important. It is necessary that students comprehend the academic regulations and requirements they will encounter so as to form reasonable expectations about recognition of prior learning processes. Credit transfer research has largely examined students' admission rates, performance, retention, and time to graduation. Limited research has focused on student expectations and potential expectation-reality gaps.

This research examines incoming students' credit transfer and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), collectively referred to as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), expectations and experiences. Incoming student expectations are measured against subsequent credits received, as well as student perceptions regarding transferability adjusted between the initial point of intake and near the first term's end. The first part of this analysis involves identifying potential expectation-reality gaps of incoming Centennial College RPL students.

Gaps between initial expectations and subsequent credit transfer experiences were uncommon and—in most cases—small. Students' expectations regarding the amount of transfer credit they would receive are quite accurate overall. Students determine whether to apply for transfer credit based on professional and self-assessments of curriculum affinity and generally prefer to apply for all credit at the beginning of their programs. The students in this study experienced high transfer credit success rates, which may be attributed to the application procedures implemented at Centennial College. However, students were unable to predict PLAR credit success with the same accuracy, as they either overestimated or were confused regarding this concept.

The information accumulated by students as they formulated an understanding of credit transfer and PLAR came primarily from the Centennial College website, on-campus staff and social networks. While students' expectations about application procedures were generally met, expectations regarding clear information regarding eligible credits and assistance with understanding assessment

decisions were not met. While most students expected to receive clear information about transferability, many struggled to gain clarity and still possessed questions about current policies.

Regarding policies and procedures, almost all students reported expecting to utilize academic transcripts when applying for credit, and this was actualized. However, while requiring an academic transcript is universally understood by students, some cited frustration and confusion concerning the need to submit transcripts twice: once for admission purposes and again for transfer credit. Students reported utilizing course descriptions and course outlines/syllabi more than originally anticipated, and they highlighted the difficulty in sometimes acquiring this information from institutions. In addition, some students reported providing supplementary material, such as various assignments, in demonstrating their prior learning for RPL credit—although this is no longer an acceptable practice at the College. Lastly, students' knowledge of the steps required to apply for transfer credit and PLAR was lower at the offer of admission than at the end of the first term. It is crucial to inform students of the advantages in meeting with an advisor prior to applying for credit. Students who reported visiting with academic division personnel in advance of submitting their application(s) noted the value in doing so.

Additional areas that did not meet student expectations include: 1) a lack of tuition rebates or reduced tuition costs as a result of RPL credit; 2) misunderstanding around RPL deadlines, which often resulted in students wanting extensions; and 3) block registration of courses that inhibited students from 'topping up' their course load in order to fast track once credit was awarded.

The second part of this analysis involved determining whether first-term academic progression affects students' satisfaction and attitudes regarding their program and RPL experiences. Students tended to be satisfied with their choices of program, as well as to attend Centennial College. While students maintained consistent levels of satisfaction with the fairness and quickness of the credit transfer/PLAR process, they expressed increased disappointment by the end of the first term with clarity and straightforwardness. Regression results provide strong evidence that credit transfer understanding, the RPL success rate, and the quickness and fairness of the RPL process are all predictors of student satisfaction with RPL credit received. In examining RPL credit success as a function of satisfaction, the results show that age, sex, and citizenship (domestic versus international) are all non-determinants of RPL success. Significant predictors include whether students possess previous postsecondary education within Ontario and credit transfer understanding. The latter result suggests that initiatives to improve understanding will likely have significant effects on both satisfaction and success.

A number of policy and procedural recommendations aimed to improve the RPL experience are provided. While the recommendations outlined are of key importance to Centennial College, many are transferable across institutions looking to critically examine their credit transfer and PLAR structures:

- *Increase Initial Support*—Support in preparing and submitting RPL applications should occur as early as the time of admission. Flagging students with previous postsecondary education upon admission and disseminating an email message via myCentennial prior to the start of term to alert them of the possibility of RPL credit would be helpful. The RPL experience would be further improved by sending RPL eligibility information and application links and forms with students' offer of admission.
- *Further Automate and Streamline Processes*—In recent years, Centennial College has moved towards automating and expediting credit transfer/PLAR processes. While students

recommend an online application system with tracking functionality, this has been established by the College—effective May 2014. However, there is still room for improvement, as students state that the academic transcripts on file, as a part of their admissions, should be automatically accessed for RPL assessments.

- *Centralize RPL Support*—Students highlight the value of having access to academic division personnel through the RPL process. The current credit transfer advising and support mechanism is a patchwork of different support functions and individuals across the College. This patchwork, along with inconsistent information sharing and lack of clarity regarding the process, has resulted in a student experience that is akin to a hub-and-spoke model. Centennial College should consider centralizing support functions.
- *Improve RPL Staff Visibility and Expertise*—Centennial College should seek ways of improving RPL staff visibility and expertise. Visibility can be increased through a more established presence on campus as well as at open houses, orientation sessions, college/university fairs and pop-up advising stands. RPL advising should also have an improved online presence. Dedicated RPL staff should be able to advise students through self-assessments and identify curricular affinity between courses and programs.
- *Peer Mentoring*—Mentoring opportunities from previous RPL students is a means to guide and support incoming students about the application process. Social networks proved to be a large source of information for students; therefore, utilizing this resource further would be desirable. Centennial College should develop a peer mentoring program that draws on the expertise of previous RPL students.
- *Policies and Procedures*—Demand exists for tuition rebates, despite the current tuition framework in place at Ontario colleges, which does not differentiate between full-time course loads with or without RPL credit. Furthermore, in the event that RPL applications or subsequent appeals are denied, students wish to see a more thorough rationale.
- *Clarify Realistic Benefit Expectations*—Centennial College has an opportunity to support students during expectation formation by clearly articulating realistic benefits obtained through transfer credit and PLAR. For example, administrators and advisors should reiterate the tuition framework and dispel notions of obtaining rebates for successful transfer credit and PLAR applications when full-time status is maintained.