



Colleges, Institutes and Communities: Partners in Poverty Alleviation

Submission to the House of Commons
Committee on Human Resources, Skills
and Social Development and the Status
of Persons with Disabilities

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THE ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities as it reviews the federal government's contribution to reducing poverty in Canada.

ACCC is the national and international voice of Canada's 150 community colleges, institutes of technology, university-colleges, polytechnics and cégeps¹. With campuses in over 1,000 communities, 1.5 million learners, and 60,000 educators, these institutions play a pivotal role in ensuring that Canada's labour force remains robust, competent and competitive. The education they provide draws students equally from all socio-economic quarters, and targets preparation for employment.

Canada's colleges are integrally aligned with the needs of employers. Through Program Advisory Committees to solicit business and industry input continuously into curriculum development, colleges are on the leading edge of skills identification, economic trends and market shifts. Colleges encourage business formation and sustainability by growing the local talent pool, by re-skilling displaced workers, by offering customized workplace training and by providing applied research and development support. Investment by governments in college education provides a solid 15.9 percent annual return through higher tax revenues. College students recover 15.1 percent of their investment annually for life.

Most colleges and institutes were established in the mid 1960's as a revolutionary type of post-secondary institution designed to educate unprecedented numbers of "baby boomers" and to supply the skills that even then immigration alone could not meet. The impetus was federal and provinces responded. The very foundation of today's college system was rooted in a pan-Canadian partnership.

Colleges and institutes are fundamental partners in the socio-economic infrastructure and development of their communities. Colleges deliver a comprehensive array of programs through multi-campus networks distributed over large geographical regions and serve small resource-based communities undergoing rapid change.

ACCC wishes to bring to the Committee's attention the key roles that our national network of colleges and institutes play in addressing poverty in urban, rural, remote and northern communities.

¹ This Brief will hereinafter refer to community colleges, institutes of technology, university colleges, polytechnics and cégeps as colleges or colleges and institutes .

DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Canadian society is transforming in response to the forces of globalization and the knowledge/information economy. Employers demand advanced skills which are more sophisticated than those expected even one decade ago. With natural population growth falling below the replacement rate, future economic success depends on maximizing the skill levels of all Canadians. We cannot as a nation, continue to ignore this reality.

Colleges embrace under-represented groups and reach out to those who may not otherwise have access to a post-secondary education. Colleges work with community organizations, governments and businesses to provide tailored language, adult upgrading, career, literacy and essential skills programs to close skill gaps for disadvantaged groups and enhance their capacity to participate more fully in the economy. Colleges are the entry point to post-secondary education for the majority of low-income individuals. Colleges are committed to offering innovative programs that help disadvantaged individuals build relevant employment skills.

CANADA'S CRISIS IN ADVANCED SKILLS

The key to economic and social development lies in the knowledge and skill base of human capital. Notwithstanding the downturn, Canada continues to suffer from an acute shortage of advanced skills. While the crisis is tempered in the short term, the advanced skills crisis will impact on the Canadian economy with a vengeance. Slower economic growth, lost opportunity, and compromised productivity are the consequences. Our aging population and increasing technological complexity of employment are factors.

Before the recession, long wait lists of qualified applicants impeded thousands from acquiring the advanced skills to secure employment. Waitlists are even longer now as the newly unemployed flock to colleges to re-skill. The limited capacity of colleges and institutes is an unfortunate reality.

In the pre-budget consultations, ACCC raised the specter of an economic recovery stumbling on a skills crisis that had already limited the growth of many industries. We recommended that federal infrastructure policy be enhanced as part of the stimulus package to include college expansion and renewal. Colleges had countless infrastructure needs fully designed and sitting on the shelf – projects which are critical to maintaining and expanding capacity. The stimulus package has made a dent in the critical needs, but only a dent. The capacity crunch remains.

Vigorous action on the part of the Government of Canada, in concert with the provinces and territories, is required.

MITIGATING THE SKILLS CRISIS

The vision and leadership of the Government of Canada is as needed now as it was 40 years ago when the college system was born. The federal government at that time anticipated that immigration alone could not supply the country's advanced skill needs. The distinction between education and training was overcome by new institutions that bridged the gap to a new educational culture, a legitimate and equal alternative to what universities provided. Colleges were the new players, serving learners in all stages of life, responsive to the needs of their communities, and an instrument to serve the human dimensions of productivity.

To preclude a deepening of the skills crisis, Canada must increase investments in its system of colleges and institutes. With their integral linkages to the labour market, employer-responsive curricula and entrepreneurial instincts, these institutions have the answers. A rise in college enrollment of 30 percent is needed to meet the demand for advanced skills. The capacity of the system must be secured and expanded quickly.

ACCESS FOR DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

Education is important, not only for competitiveness and prosperity, but also to enable the disadvantaged to enter the economic mainstream. While there are clear benefits for those who upgrade their literacy and education levels, the evidence indicates that lower income individuals are less likely to receive post-secondary education. The disadvantaged face barriers which make participation and success in post-secondary programs difficult or impossible.

A significant proportion of the adult population does not have a high school diploma. In small towns and rural areas for instance, high school dropout rates for youth are twice those in metropolitan areas. According to the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS), more than 4 in 10 adults aged 16 to 65 have literacy skills below the international standard considered necessary to cope in a modern society and economy. This is disproportionately the case for low income Canadians. In spite of this, there is a dearth of funding for adult literacy programs. Disregarding the connection between low literacy and poverty imperils Canada's future. There is a pressing need to address the literacy challenge.

The economic downturn has contributed to job losses for many Canadians who are consequently facing serious economic challenges, pushing them closer to the poverty line. While some can access Employment Insurance for training, many cannot. In addition, those whose benefits expire have limited access to ongoing training. The recently announced increases to the federal/provincial labour market agreements will help in the short term, however long term agreements are critical.

Various levels of governments offer programs which are intended to provide access to literacy, adult basic education and skill preparation. The funding tends to be project or individual learner based and there are inequities with respect to access, eligibility and benefits. The system complexities pose a barrier to participation.

The federal government contributes to the provincial/territorial social assistance programs through the Canada Social Transfer - the same mechanism used for the support of post-secondary education. There is a danger that the social welfare needs will result in a decline in post-secondary funding. This would contribute to greater economic decline and increased poverty.

The new need-based Canada Study Grants for post-secondary students will enable more low-income people to participate. While a positive step, the funding of \$250.00/month is inadequate to cover basic living costs for housing, child care, medical prescriptions, transportation and food.

The Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Post Secondary Student Support Program has had a 2% annual cap on increases since 1996. According to the Assembly of First Nations over 10,000 eligible students are awaiting funding.

Education and training are critical for poverty alleviation. Improving the literacy skills and educational attainment of disadvantaged Canadians is essential for economic and social prosperity.

Vancouver Community College has two Adult Basic Education programs for youth at risk aged 15 to 25. One for youth living on the street and another called “Stars for Success” for young adults who are clean (not addicted) and have lived in the street but are now in a more stable living situation. Learners are able to do upgrading and transfer to the Hospitality and Tourism Program which has a 90% placement rate in 5 star hotels.

George Brown College offers a post-secondary program for students with Mild Intellectual Deficiency and the Griffin Program for students with dual diagnoses – developmental and mental health disabilities.

Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and **Red River College** operate mobile training labs to deliver training in rural and remote communities. Programs offered include: automotive service technician, carpentry, electrical, machining, pipefitting, plumbing, welding, and industrial mechanics.

Focus for Change (FFC) is a program offered at **Algonquin College** in partnership with the City of Ottawa and is designed for women who want to acquire the employability skills necessary for entry in the work force or to continue with further training.

At **Bow Valley College**, learners who have not completed high school do not have the grades required to take the desired post-secondary program, or have been out of school for a long time can take high school courses to help them meet their goals. The college programs offer a variety of learning options including traditional classroom instruction or more flexibly scheduled learning.

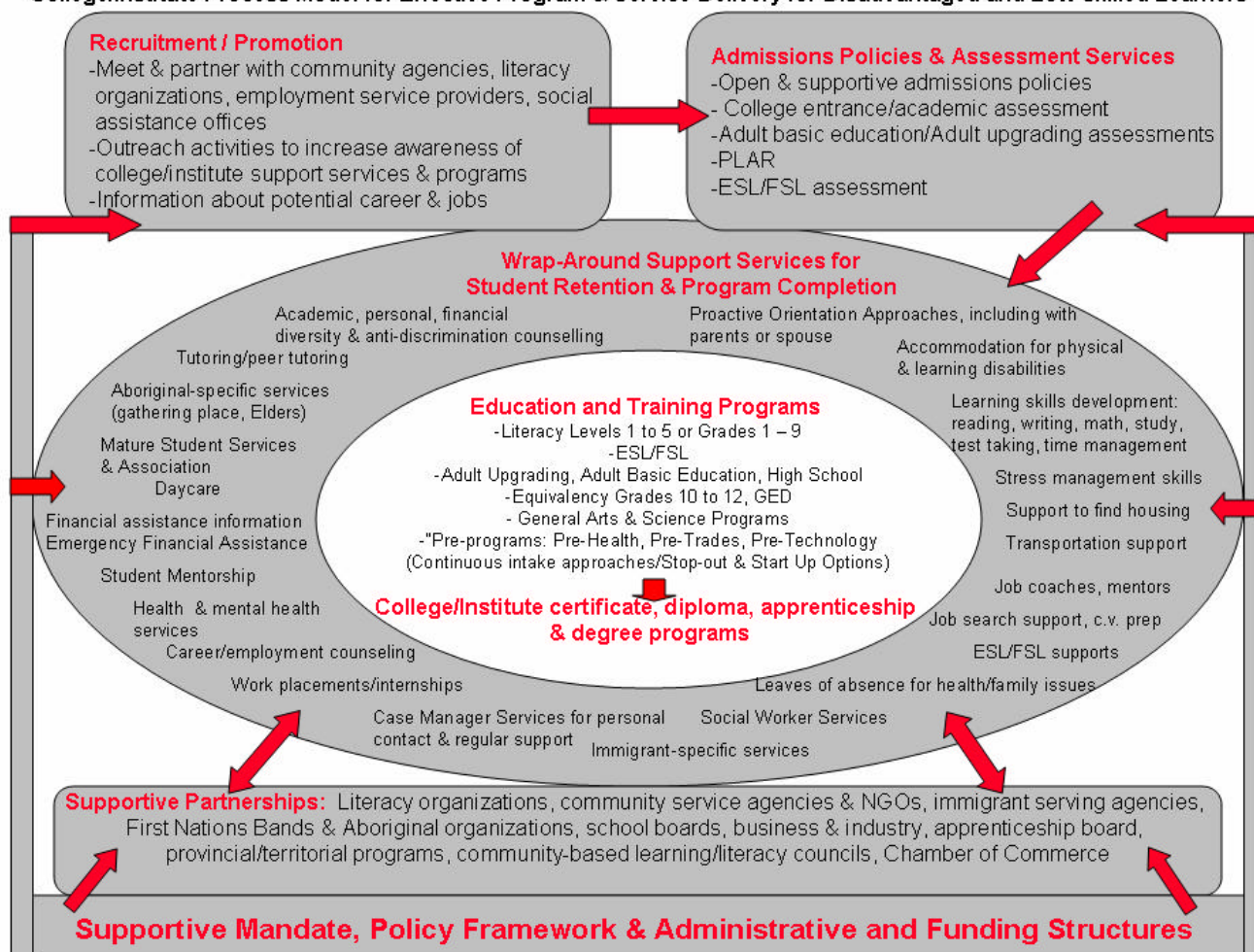
CAPITALIZING ON THE EXPERTISE OF COLLEGES AND INSTITUTES

In 2008, ACCC undertook a national study and produced a report titled “Opportunities for Everyone: Programs and Services for Disadvantaged and Low Skilled Learners offered at Colleges and Institutes”, www.accc.ca/ftp/pubs/studies/200805Disadvantaged.

One of the outcomes of this study is depicted in the graphic below. The model reflects a holistic approach that contributes to retention and student success. Experience has demonstrated that psychological services, life skills, childcare, academic counselling, and higher instructor-student ratios make a difference.

Association of Canadian Community Colleges

College/Institute Process Model for Effective Program & Service Delivery for Disadvantaged and Low-skilled Learners



In rural, remote and northern areas, colleges are often the only post-secondary institution and play key roles in facilitating strong community revitalization strategies through local and regional, social and economic development. The shift towards a knowledge-based economy requires that these colleges deliver more sophisticated programs, including the expansion of distance and technology enhanced learning opportunities, including those targeted at low-skilled learners.

College of New Caledonia and Northern Lights College offer the Job Education and Training (JET) program which prepares people aged 17 and up with learning difficulties for entry-level positions in competitive employment. Graduates are employed in the retail, hospitality, forestry and service industries.

A new elearn network distance education centre at **Conestoga College** in Stratford, Ontario, will enable students to use e-learning stations equipped with the latest in audio and videoconferencing technology to complete college courses without having to leave their community. The new centre will strengthen this rural community by giving residents the opportunity to access world-class teaching and postsecondary programs while staying close to home.

Cégep de Jonquière and **Collège Lionel-Groulx** offer college studies integration programs offered over one semester which allows students to complete the pre-requisites required to integrate into their program of choice or to decide on a program.

Yukon College community campuses offer fast-track programs to help First Nations communities. These programs are typically offered in response to the job requirements that arise when a major development project is introduced into the community.

The majority of jobs are created by small and medium size enterprises (SMEs). In partnership with business, colleges and institutes conduct industry-led applied research and development activities that enable business to become more innovative and create more employment opportunities. Very little attention has been given to applied research carried out by colleges and their private sector partners.

Colleges and institutes are pivotal for increasing access and improving pathways for disadvantaged and low-skilled Canadians. The resources to effectively deliver programs and services for those seeking to bridge into post-secondary are fragmented and short-term. Neither these funds nor those for post-secondary programs support the additional services vital to retention and success.

Colleges are under extreme pressure to meet demand. The system is characterized by long waiting lists, aging infrastructure, deferred maintenance, antiquated teaching equipment, space shortages and an impending shortage of faculty. College capacity must be secured and new capacity developed.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEDERAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The 15.9 percent rate of return governments achieve from their investments in colleges and institutes of technology and the pan Canadian dimensions of the crisis in advanced skills constitute a compelling case for more federal investment. In fact, many helpful measures are available to the Government of Canada, some falling within current federal programs, budgets and regulations including the following:

- Engage with provinces and territories to ensure that the federal transfer payments earmarked for post-secondary education are used as intended, and that colleges and institutes of technology receive a proportionate share.
- Increase investments in human capital and knowledge infrastructure to address college capacity challenges and enhance the momentum started by the Knowledge Infrastructure Program.
- Examine all federal training programs with the goal of eliminating fragmentation, short term funding and inequities for learners.
- Increase funding for the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) Post Secondary Student Support Program.
- Increase the Canada Study Grants for low-income post-secondary students to cover basic living costs for housing, child care, medical prescriptions, transportation and food.
- Create a poverty alleviation fund for disadvantaged learners that colleges can access to enhance services. The fund would support areas such as:
 - Literacy and skills assessments
 - Enhanced counselling and tutor/mentor services
 - Technology based learning materials and technological infrastructure (e.g. broadband access).
- Expand the eligibility period for Employment Insurance recipients who are engaged in retraining to acquire the depth and breadth of advanced skills needed for Canada's future.
- Direct 5% of federal investment in discovery research to applied research, product development, and commercialization carried out by colleges and their private sector partners.
- Extend to colleges and institutes of technology the same GST exemption that has been afforded to municipalities as previously recommended by the House of Commons Finance Committee.
- Host a national summit that would bring together governments, the private sector, educational institutions and community groups to discuss strategies targeted at the needs of the population and the economy in terms of poverty and productivity.