



Executive Summary
May 2008



Opportunities for Everyone

**Programs and Services for
Disadvantaged and Low Skilled
Learners offered at
Colleges and Institutes**



Acknowledgements

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List of Acronyms

AAADD	Academic Assistance for Adults with Developmental Disabilities
ABE	Adult Basic Education
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ALP	Adult Literacy Program
ASL	American Sign Language
ACCC	Association of Canadian Community Colleges
ACE	Academic and Career Entrance
ACET	Assistant Cook Extended Training
ALLSS	Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey
ASL	American Sign Language
BC	British Columbia
CAMH	Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
CCWET	Construction Craft Worker Extended Training
CNIB	Canadian National Institute for the Blind
CPRN	Canadian Policy Research Networks
CSC	College Sector Committee
DHH	Deaf and Hard of Hearing
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
ELSA	English Language Services for Adults
ESL	English as a Second Language
E/TR	Employment/Training Readiness
FAP	French for Academic Purposes
FFC	Focus for Change
FSL	French as a Second Language
GDP	Gross Domestic Product

GED	General Educational Development
IALSS	International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey
ITI	Internationally Trained Immigrants
ITS	Information Technology Services
JET	Job Education and Training
JRT	Job Readiness Training
LD	Learning Disabilities
LINC	Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada
MID	Mild Intellectual Deficiency
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSCC	Nova Scotia Community College
OCISO	Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAC	Program Advisory Committee
PALS	Participation and Activity Limitation Survey
PLAR	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
PEI	Prince Edward Island
PSE	Postsecondary Education
SAM	Speech Assisted Math
SARAW	Speech Assisted Reading and Writing
SAS	Summer Academic Services
SIAST	Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology
SDHHS	Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services
STEP	Settlement to Employment Program
TOWES	Test of Workplace Essential Skills

Opportunities for Everyone Programs and Services for Disadvantaged and Low-skilled Learners at Colleges and Institutes

Executive Summary

This report is the result of a policy research initiative that was identified as a priority by the Board of Directors of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) in recognition of the increased demand for programs and services that address the needs of disadvantaged and low-skilled learners.

The goal of this study is twofold, first to facilitate the exchange of promising practices and lessons learned among colleges and institutes on programs and services for disadvantaged and low-skilled learners, and second to inform policymakers on this important role colleges and institutes have within education systems in Canada, in particular given the pressing need to more effectively address the literacy and adult education needs of Canadians.

For the purposes of this report, the term “disadvantaged and low-skilled learners” is used to describe learners who may be marginalized, unemployed or employed in low-wage jobs, who may not have completed high school or are under-prepared for postsecondary level programs at colleges and institutes. These would include learners enrolled in literacy, adult upgrading/adult basic education, college and career preparatory and access programs.

This study involved a review of existing research and resources available on literacy, adult learning, and programs and services for disadvantaged and low-skilled learners, and a survey of ACCC member institutions conducted via an on-line survey and interviews. Fifty-two colleges and institutes from across the country participated in the survey, which represents over one third of the 147 ACCC member colleges and institutes invited to participate.

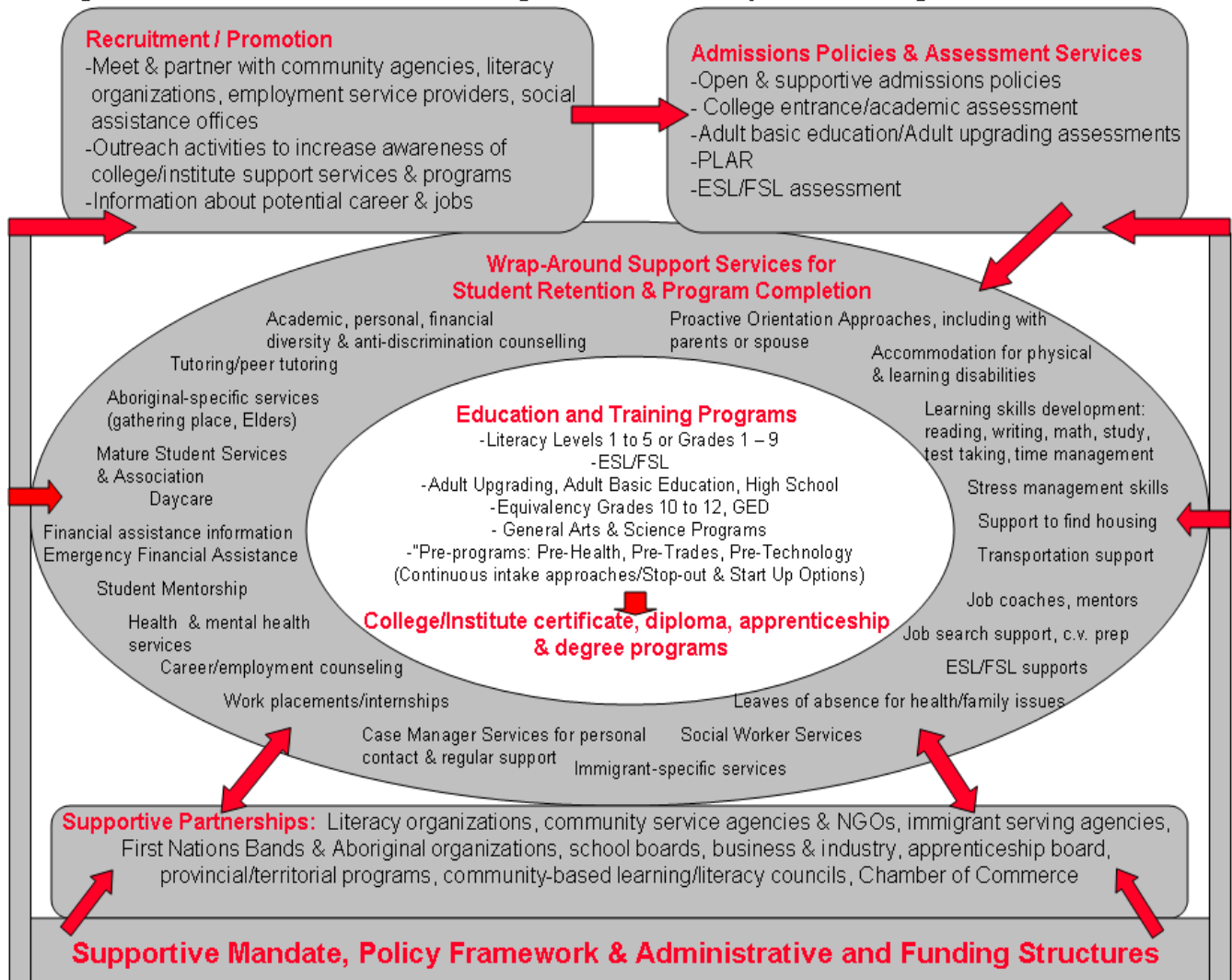
This report begins with an overview of the Canadian context in terms of the educational attainment and literacy challenges of Canadians overall and for specific disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal people, immigrants, people living in rural and remote areas and people with disabilities. This overview confirms that there is still a significant proportion of the population that does not have a high school diploma and that too many Canadians, 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.

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

The results of the survey led to the development of the process model on the following page which provides a framework for the delivery of programs and services for disadvantaged and low-skilled learners, based on the various approaches identified by

respondent colleges and institutes. It is understood that not all colleges and institutes would offer the gamete of services and programs outlined in the process model as each institution adapts to the particular needs of learners within the communities and regions they serve, according to the resources they have available.

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



2. Recruitment and Promotion of Learning Opportunities to Disadvantaged and Low-skilled Learners

Promotion and recruitment efforts are key steps for increasing awareness about the types of programs and services offered at colleges and institutes for this client group. The report describes how colleges and institutes are promoting their programs and services:

- Externally, through advertising and dissemination of promotional materials, as well as outreach activities and liaison with community partner organizations, employers and funders; and

- Internally, through orientation for new students, staff management meetings to facilitate more coordination between literacy and adult upgrading programs and postsecondary program departments, as well as with student services departments.

3. **Barriers Disadvantaged and Low-skilled Learners face for Accessing and Completing College/Institute Education and Training Programs**

The report examines the barriers disadvantaged and low-skilled learners face based on the perspective of the college/institute administrators and faculty who work with these learners. This provides a clearer picture of who these learners are and why specific education and training programs and wrap-around support services are so important. The types of barriers identified by survey respondents include:

- **Application and admissions processes** are often cumbersome, difficult to understand and lengthy, and even more problematic since most are now internet-based. Many disadvantaged and low-skilled learners do not have easy access to computers and internet or lack the literacy and technical skills required to complete on-line forms.
- **Lack of awareness and information** on how to get into college/institute programs and that they can acquire a high school equivalency in college.
- **Learning and skills barriers** including low literacy skills, academic unpreparedness, weak organizational skills, lack of study, test taking, time management and essential skills.
- **Personal issues and challenges** as many learners are intimidated by postsecondary education, have weak self-advocacy skills, lack confidence and may also have health, mental health or addictions challenges.
- **Access to transportation**, in particular for learners from rural areas.
- **Learners with disabilities** often face multiple barriers because many have weak self-advocacy skills and some are reluctant to acknowledge, self-disclose and use the services available to them.
- **Access to daycare, adequate housing and balancing family, studies and work** pose barriers for many learners to access and persist in programs.
- **Limited or lack of financial resources** because many learners do not know how to access information about sources of financial assistance and how to budget in order to cover education and living expenses.

4. **Assessment Services**

The majority of respondent colleges and institutes (85 percent) confirmed that they offer assessment services specifically for entrance into adult upgrading and adult basic education programs. Since adult upgrading programs are typically modular and based on individualized learning, assessments enable learners to begin at the appropriate level within the program. Colleges and institutes also offer general college entrance or academic assessment services, largely for mature students applying for postsecondary level programs, as confirmed by 79 percent of respondents. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) continues to be an important part of assessment services available at colleges and institutes as confirmed by 65 percent of respondents. In addition, well over half of respondent institutions (58 percent) confirmed they offer English or French as a second language assessments, largely benefiting international and immigrant

students attending colleges or institutes for language skills upgrading or for entry into postsecondary career or technical programs.

5. Wrap Around Support Services

The term “Wrap-Around Support Services” is being used in this report in order to reflect the need for these services to be holistic and meet the needs of disadvantaged learners in a comprehensive manner. As shown in the *College/Institute Process Model for Effective Program & Service Delivery for Disadvantaged and Low-skilled Learners*, colleges and institutes identified a wide range of services that should be available either through the institution or through partnerships and referrals to community, social and health services agencies. These services are important for those learners in upgrading and preparatory programs, however they are also key to assisting learners in postsecondary level programs who may be facing challenges such as personal, health or mental health difficulties, a learning or physical disability or lack of financial resources.

Learners in this client group also face barriers for accessing these support services. Many are intimidated by the college environment, are afraid to ask for help or simply are not aware that such services exist. In terms of improving the delivery of support services and addressing learners’ barriers to accessing these services, colleges and institutes emphasized the importance of introducing more flexible and proactive approaches for increasing learners’ awareness of available services. The importance of providing faculty and staff with training on the early identification of learners at risk and the support services to which learners should be directed was also identified as an important measure for improving the delivery of these services.

6. Education and Training Programs

The report describes the following types of education and training programs colleges and institutes deliver to meet the particular needs of disadvantaged and low-skilled learners. It must also be noted that many disadvantaged learners are already in postsecondary level programs and that it is through the wrap-around support services that colleges and institutes reach out and address the needs of these learners.

▪ Literacy and Basic Skills Programs

A significant proportion of institutions in the country are offering literacy and basic skills programs, as confirmed by 60 percent of respondent institutions. The literacy programs described in this report are for learners requiring upgrading from a Grade 9 level and below. Depending on the jurisdiction, delivery of literacy programs is done either directly on college/institute campuses or in partnership with community literacy organizations. The delivery approaches vary, ranging from instructor-led approaches in classroom settings, one-to-one tutoring and computer assisted programs.

▪ Adult Upgrading and Adult Basic Education

The adult basic education and adult upgrading programs offered at colleges and institutes bridge the high school – postsecondary gap for many learners who may not have completed high school or who are under-prepared for postsecondary programs due to a lack of high school pre-requisites. All respondent colleges and institutes with the exception of those from Quebec (88 percent of respondents) confirmed they offer adult upgrading or adult basic education programs that enable learners to gain the equivalent for Grades 10 to 12. In Quebec, adult upgrading is exclusively the responsibility of the school boards.

One of the most common characteristics of these adult upgrading programs is that they are offered on a continuous intake basis throughout the school year. Respondent colleges and institutes emphasized the importance that these programs also offer disadvantaged learners flexible stop-out and start-up options so that if they encounter personal, family health challenges, they can stop temporarily and then start up where they left off. These programs are generally offered tuition free for residents of the provinces and territories where they are offered.

- **College Preparatory Programs**

College preparatory programs include all other programs that prepare learners for entrance into career, technical or apprenticeship programs at the postsecondary level, as well as for university transfer or degree programs. These programs are different from the adult upgrading programs described above because they are generally geared to learners who already have their high school diploma or equivalent but are missing some pre-requisites for the specific career or technical programs they are intending to apply for.

These programs include General Arts and Sciences programs offered at institutions in some jurisdictions, as well as the “pre-programs”, “foundations” programs or “access” programs offered at colleges and institutes across the country in various fields ranging from pre-health, pre-trades and pre-technology. The report includes examples of these types of programs offered at colleges and institutes across the country.

- **Programs specifically for Learners with Disabilities or Special Needs**

Colleges and institutes are also delivering upgrading and employment readiness programs tailored to the needs of learners with specific disabilities or special needs such as those who are deaf and hard of hearing, visually impaired, or have developmental disabilities and learning disabilities. The report includes descriptions of the programs colleges and institutes identified through the survey.

- **English / French as a Second Language Programs**

Just over one third of respondent institutions identified English / French as a second language programs that are available to address the needs of disadvantaged and low-skilled learners. These programs are largely targeted to immigrant students who do not have adequate language skills in either English or French and who face language barriers for accessing opportunities in the Canadian labour market.

- **Career and Employment Preparation**

The report also describes career and employment preparation programs which provide learners with job readiness training, occupation-specific training including occupation-specific language training for recent immigrants, workplace essential skills training and career preparation and workplace skills development training. Some colleges and institutes identified integrated programs which combine upgrading of basic skills and work experiences and job specific skills, or indicated that employment readiness training is integrated into career and technical programs.

7. Funding Sources and Challenges

Funding was identified as the most significant challenge by respondent institutions, with 81 percent of respondents indicating this as a significant challenge. The report provides an overview of the funding sources and challenges colleges and institutes identified for the development and delivery of programs and services for disadvantaged and low-skilled learners and well as learners' funding sources and the challenges they face in accessing funding.

- **Funding Sources and Challenges for Program Development and Delivery**
Colleges and institutes are accessing funding for the development and delivery of programs and services for this client group largely from provincial and territorial government programs, but also from federal government departments such as Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. There is a general sense that institutions do not have enough resources and funding to effectively deliver the program and support services to meet the demand within their communities. Most colleges and institutes must apply for outside funding to help cover the costs of these programs, however for the most part they must rely on fragmented and short-term project-based funding models that do not provide stable funding. Respondent institutions also emphasized that there are higher costs associated with delivering programs and services for disadvantaged learners because of the complexity of learners needs and a higher instructor-student ratio that is required.

- **Funding Sources and Challenges of Learners**
There are various funding programs for learners available through provincial, territorial and federal governments for social assistance and employment insurance recipients, as well as programs aimed at assisting learners from specific under-represented groups such as Aboriginal people, immigrants and people with disabilities. However, many learners find it difficult to access these funding sources due to the complexity of the systems in place and the restrictions of many of the programs that are available. For example, many provincial/territorial and federal government programs are employment or postsecondary-level focused therefore learners who must begin in literacy or adult upgrading programs are often not eligible to apply.

8. Institutional Policies and Structures

The report provides an overview of the types of supportive policies and structures colleges and institutes identified as contributing to the more effective development and delivery of programs and services for learners in this client group, including for example:

- **Supportive admissions policies and structures** are important for facilitating learners entry into their programs. This includes offering one-stop services that offer options for more personalized service as required.
- In terms of **assessment services**, colleges and institutes generally have an in-house assessment centre to assist with the placement of learners in appropriate programs, in particular for learners with mature student status, or those lacking high school or Canadian credentials. An individual intake assessment is preferable for adult upgrading learners. Prior Learning Assessment Services is an important part of college and institute assessment services, and some institutions are offering prior learning assessment in a more integrated manner by centralizing the service within adult upgrading programs.

- The key approach for effective **student services** that provide holistic wrap-around supports for all learners is to have a centralized student services department that is visible and easily accessible on campus.
 - a) **Integrated institutional structures and services** help to ensure that learners' needs are addressed in a holistic manner and provide learners with easier pathways between upgrading and postsecondary programs by, for example offering dual credit options through partnerships between colleges/institutes and high schools; and by offering bridging opportunities between literacy, adult upgrading and postsecondary programs.

9. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Colleges and institutes identified lessons learned and future directions related to addressing the needs of disadvantaged learners, as well as enhancing institutional programs, support services, structures and the faculty and staff who work with these learners. Colleges and institutes have learned that they must provide more individualized services that account for learners' life experiences and the barriers they face that make participation in education programs and retraining difficult or even seem impossible. Institutions have also learned that the success of the programs for this client group depends on a strong, long-term commitment to providing the mix of wrap-around support services and tailored programs that best address the needs of particular groups of disadvantaged learners.

Colleges and institutes foresee there will be an increased demand for this type of programming and expect they will have to develop more programs to meet the demand. Integrated approaches that combine literacy, adult upgrading and postsecondary courses, and tie in employment readiness training and the required support services are essential to facilitate transitions and enhance opportunities for success. The delivery of student services must turn to more proactive approaches that engage learners at the beginning of their programs and follow through to facilitate their transition into the world of work.

The results of this study confirm that most colleges and institutes would like to expand on the program options offered for disadvantaged learners and continue to work collaboratively with community partners to make learning opportunities more accessible and learning environments more supportive and inclusive.