OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

ISSUE BRIEF: RURAL AND NORTHERN STUDENTS

BACKGROUND

Rural and northern students face unique challenges in accessing post-secondary education. A rural student is a student who identifies as being from outside of the following urban centers: the Hamilton, Ottawa, London, Windsor, the Greater Toronto Area, Niagara Region, Waterloo Region, Thunder Bay, and Sudbury. A northern student is a student who identifies as being from one of the following regional districts: Kenora, Rainy River, Thunder Bay, Cochrane, Algoma, Sudbury, Timiskaming, Nipissing, Manitoulin, and Parry Sound.

While the terms "rural" and "northern" may imply that they describe relatively uniform populations, this is not the case: the term rural can apply to individuals living in remote agricultural communities, in towns, or on Aboriginal reserves. Similarly, while people often consider "northern" to refer to populations living in isolated communities it is important to note that 30 per cent of Ontario's northern population resides in two cities with over 100,000 inhabitants: Thunder Bay and Sudbury. [1] Further complicating matters, 26 per cent of northern Ontarians identify as belonging to a Francophone community and 40 per cent of residents identify as Aboriginal. [2]

THE PROBLEM

Despite the existence of a substantial northern and rural population in Ontario, university education is highly urbanized and southern: of Ontario's 20 universities, 16 are within 100 kilometers of highway 401 running along the southern edge of the province. Individuals from rural and northern communities are currently less likely than their urban and southern counterparts to attend university. Research by Statistics Canada has found that students who live further than 80 kilometers from a university are 58 per cent less likely to enroll in a post-secondary institution than those who live within 40 kilometers of an institution. [3] Most of this gap is in university participation: only 28 per cent of rural and northern youth enrol in university, compared with 43 per cent of all youth. [4] Even more alarmingly, the regional gap in university participation between urban and rural youth is greater in Ontario than any other province.

The remoteness of university from rural communities combined with the diversity of rural and northern populations in Ontario means that barriers to university participation of youth in these areas are complex, multifaceted and interrelated. These include:

First generation students: Data from Statistics Canada indicates that rural students are more likely to be the first in their family to attend university. [5] First generation status is important, because parents who have attended university are important sources of knowledge and motivation for youth planning their next step beyond secondary school. In fact, parental education has been pointed to by some as the single greatest predictor of whether a student will attend post-secondary education or not.[6]

***Low-income students*:** In Ontario, by age 19, nearly half of all youth from families in the top income quartile attend university, compared to only a quarter of youth from the bottom income quartile. [7] Average incomes in rural areas tend to be lower, yet students from rural and northern areas face increased costs associated with transportation and living away from home, creating financial barriers to university education

Aboriginal students: Rural and northern students are more likely to be Aboriginal than their urban counterparts. The secondary school dropout rate for Aboriginal students is double the national average, and non-Aboriginal Canadians are five-times more likely to hold a university degree than Aboriginal individuals. [8]

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[1]Born, K., and Tepper, J. (2012). Innovative medical education in Northern Ontario. Retrieved from, http://healthydebate.ca/2012/06/topic/innovation/nosm

[2]Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario. (2009). Rural and northern community issues in mental health. Retrieved from Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario website: http://www.ontario.cmha.ca/backgrounders.asp?cID=289773

[3] Statistics Canada. (2004). Distance as a postsecondary access issue. Retrieved from, http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/200404/6854-eng.html.

[4] Shaienks, D, Gluszynski, T & Bayard, J. (2008). Postsecondary Education Participation and Dropping Out: Differences across University, College and Other Types of Postsecondary Institutions. Ottawa: Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics.

[5]Statistics Canada (2004).

[6] Finnie, Childs and Wismer. 2010. First-Generation Post-Secondary Education Students. Toronto: Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Aid Project.

[7] Berger, Joseph, Anne Motte, and Andrew Parkin. (2009). The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada. 4th edition. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

[8] Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. (2009). Post-Secondary Student Access and Retention Strategies: Literature Review. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

THE SOLUTION

OUSA's policy on rural and northern students is predicated on the understanding that students, institutions and the Ontario government share responsibility for optimizing the educational experience for all students, regardless of geographic origin. More specifically, the government should address five key areas to enhance the participation of rural and northern students in post-secondary education:

***1) Participation and Accessibility*:** To address barriers to accessing higher education the government must devote funding to early outreach programs aimed at helping connect rural and northern youth to the possibility of a university education in the early years of their studies, and also study how to better encourage university participation among qualified and willing rural and northern students.

2) Technology-Enabled Learning: Technology-enabled learning has the potential to reduce many of the existing social and economic barriers faced by rural and northern students. The government should continue to fund the Rural Connections Program to build the capacity of local municipalities in rural and northern regions to establish infrastructure that can support online learning. In addition, a new online institute should implemented to provide a hub for the development of online programs, support services for online studies, a comprehensive credit transfer system, and teaching and learning pedagogy adapted to a virtual environment.

3) Postsecondary Infrastructure: Satellite campuses in northern communities must provide a high quality education and work to serve the unique needs of their communities. The government should continue to regulate satellite campus provision, and provide additional operating grants to northern universities, to ensure these institutions are developing in the most efficient and beneficial manner.

4) Student Financial Assistance: The provincial government should increase the funding available to students under the Ontario Distance Grant, and make this grant scalable to better reflect the variation in the commuting and travel costs of rural and northern students.

5) Strengthening the Rural and Northern Identity: Currently, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) does not have a robust definition of rural and northern students, which is inhibiting policy development. In consultation with rural and northern communities and students, MTCU should work towards creating a definition of rural and northern student that accurately reflects the diversity and realities of these categories.