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Canada's Most Important Economic Investment: Increasing Access to College Education and Training

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Executive Summary

For Canada to succeed, all Canadians must have the opportunity to develop and use their skills and knowledge to the fullest. So said the government of Prime Minister Paul Martin in the Speech from the Throne that opened the 37th Parliament of Canada in February 2004: “Investing in people will be Canada’s most important economic investment.”

Such an investment is critical. The new economy demands an increasingly educated and skilled workforce. To remain globally competitive, Canada needs to invest in raising the overall level of education and skills across the country. As well, Canada faces a shortage of skilled workers over the next 10 years, due to both retirement and the country’s low population growth rate. To replace our aging workforce, Canada needs to look beyond traditional sources for future employees. It needs to invest in increasing the education and skill levels of:

- Aboriginal Canadians;
- Canadians with disabilities;
- Immigrants to Canada;
- Youth and adults with low literacy or foundation skills; and
- Canadians living in rural or remote areas of the country.

With improved access to, and success through, postsecondary education and training, these groups represent opportunities for Canada’s future workforce.

Canada’s colleges are opportunity equalizers; they are the most accessible option for quality postsecondary education, drawing students equally from all socio-economic strata of Canadian society. Canada’s colleges are geographically dispersed and are present in over 900 communities across Canada. Ontario’s 24 colleges of applied arts and technology are key providers of applied training in Canada. They offer accessible, quality career-oriented education and training to enhance social and economic development throughout the province and to meet local, national and global marketplace demand. Ontario’s colleges want to accelerate the pace of innovation and change to help mitigate the country’s workforce and skills shortages by leveraging and building on the strengths of the college system. The colleges want to speed up the process of creating and implementing strategies to increase college participation, retention and the successful transition of graduates to the workforce. They are proposing that the Government of Canada establish a national

initiative and provide funding to increase access to college education and training, focusing on the five key groups mentioned above.

The Speech from the Throne posed the following question: “Where do you want to be in 10 years?” Our answer: Ontario’s colleges want Canada to be ready. Ontario’s colleges are committed to helping the federal government meet the country’s education, lifelong learning and essential skills needs and be ready for the future.

Introduction: Investing in people

Investing in people will be Canada's most important economic investment."

— Speech from the Throne, 37th Parliament of Canada, February 2004

The Feb. 2004 Speech from the Throne emphasized the critical role that education and lifelong learning will play in building a 21st century economy for Canada. "Investing in people will be Canada's most important economic investment." For Canada to succeed, it stated, all Canadians must have the opportunity to develop and use their skills and knowledge to the fullest. It committed to increase access to postsecondary education and training, and to enhance opportunities for Canada's workers to upgrade skills, improve literacy, learn on the job and move onto the path of lifelong learning.

The need for broader access to postsecondary education and training is evident and well established. The new economy demands an increasingly well-educated and skilled workforce across the country and at all levels of the economy. As well, Canada will be confronted with a significant shortage of skilled workers within the next 10 years, due both to retirement and the country's low population growth rate. To help ensure that Canada continues to be a strong, prosperous and caring society in the future, postsecondary education and training need to become accessible to *all* segments of Canadian society. This forward-thinking aspiration is a central theme of the federal government's innovation and learning action plan, titled Canada's Innovation Strategy. Very much aligned with the throne speech, Canada's Innovation Strategy seeks to broaden access to postsecondary education, training and lifelong learning *especially* among groups at risk of exclusion from society. These groups include Aboriginal Canadians, Canadians with disabilities, immigrants to Canada, adults and youth with low literacy skills and Canadians in rural/remote locales. The throne speech and the subsequent budget demonstrate the federal government's commitment to broadening access to postsecondary education and training.

Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology applaud this commitment. The colleges recognize the need for change. The postsecondary education system across Canada needs to adapt in order to address the growth and diversity of student population segments in Canadian society, such as Aboriginal and immigrant Canadians. Ontario's colleges also recognize that the need for change is urgent. The skills gap facing the country, and Ontario in particular, is imminent and the necessary planning and development of strategies

to help close the gap are overdue. New curricula, innovative program delivery methods and in- and after-school support systems need to be created and tailored to meet the specific needs of all segments of the student population to help ensure academic success. Ontario's colleges recognize the need for targeted growth. The overall capacity of the college system needs to be increased to meet growing skills, knowledge and lifelong learning needs, especially among emerging and under-served segments of the population.

Ontario's colleges agree with the federal government's belief that knowledge is a strategic national asset and strongly support increasing the value of this important resource. It is in the spirit of support that the colleges created the plan in this document to accelerate the process of broadening access to postsecondary education, training and lifelong learning.

"The Government of Canada will explore how to help support the important role played by community colleges in equipping Canadians with the skills they need for the future."

Canada's Innovation Strategy,
Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning
for Canadians

The mandate of Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology is to provide accessible, quality career education and training to enhance social and economic development throughout Ontario and to meet local, regional, provincial, national and global marketplace demand.

Ontario's colleges have proven themselves to be very adept at meeting the needs of their local markets and industry sector partners by creating

high-quality, affordable programming. Based on expected industry demand and the projected economics, Ontario's colleges create curricula and retool classroom and lab space to train students for tomorrow's jobs. And Ontario's colleges do this efficiently and cost-effectively, providing taxpayers an excellent return of 12.1 per cent on their annual investment in the system.¹

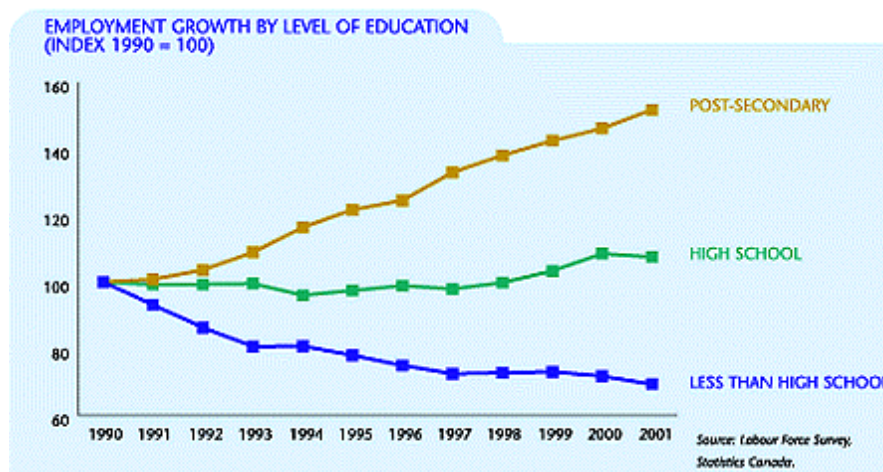
Ontario's colleges, like the Government of Canada, recognize that as accessible as the college system currently is for most Canadians, segments of the population still face challenges gaining *access to and through college*. In Ontario, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, immigrants, youth and workers with low foundation skills and people living in rural or remote communities face significant challenges gaining access to, and completing, a college education. Ontario's colleges want to change this by developing new and creative strategies and tactics that will help raise the overall level of postsecondary education and training in the province. Ontario's colleges are willing to become living laboratories of change and innovation in postsecondary education and work with stakeholders and partners across the country to create, implement and evaluate practical solu-

tions for raising the value of Canada's knowledge asset. Investing in people will be Canada's most important economic investment and Ontario's colleges want to help the federal government achieve the best return on that investment in our country.

Background: A country's greatest resource is its people

"A country's greatest resource in a knowledge society is its people."
— Canada's Innovation Strategy, Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians

Canada's Innovation Strategy, developed with input from Canadians coast-to-coast under the auspices of Industry Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, recognizes that people are a country's greatest resource in the global knowledge-based economy. In today's economy, postsecondary education and training are already required for most new jobs. And in the future, the educational demands are expected to increase. Over the next few years, the most promising jobs will require a college or university education (see figure below). It is estimated that by 2007 about 70 per cent of all new job openings will require some form of postsecondary education.² Yet current data indicate more than one in three young Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 have not participated in *any* form of postsecondary education after graduating from high school.³



Employment prospects for those with only a high school education have been flat, and are diminishing for those who have not completed high school. In the future, it is predicted that only about six per cent of the new jobs created will be held by those who have not finished high school.

Historically, Canada's record in postsecondary education has been strong. Canada has led all of the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in having the highest proportion of working-age people with a postsecondary education.⁴ Over the next few decades, however, Canada will need to increase the proportion of postsecondary-educated people in the workforce. High retirement levels and low population growth are predicted to result in a skills shortage. The Conference Board of Canada estimates a shortage of nearly one million workers within 20 years.⁵ Canada's workforce will not grow as fast as it has in the past and will be inadequate to meet the demands of a growing economy.

Canada's imminent skills shortage and increasing labour force demands will not be completely satisfied by secondary school graduates alone, a historical source of postsecondary school enrolment and workforce growth. Growth in the future will need to come from non-traditional sources as well. The options for Canada include attracting skilled immigrants to the country, ensuring those already in the workforce have the opportunity to upgrade their skill and education levels, and increasing overall workforce participation rates. Growth in postsecondary enrolment and the workforce can be expected to be the greatest among internationally-trained workers, adults already in the workforce, less advantaged youth who have not pursued postsecondary education, and individuals from disadvantaged segments of our society. Aboriginal Canadians, for example, represent one of the fastest growing segments of the population with a birth rate 1.5 times that of the Canadian population.⁶ Immigrants to Canada, another example, are expected to account for most of the net growth in the labour force by the year 2011.⁷ These groups represent sources for Canada's future workforce. Each have different needs and face different barriers to accessing the postsecondary education system and, eventually, entering the workforce.

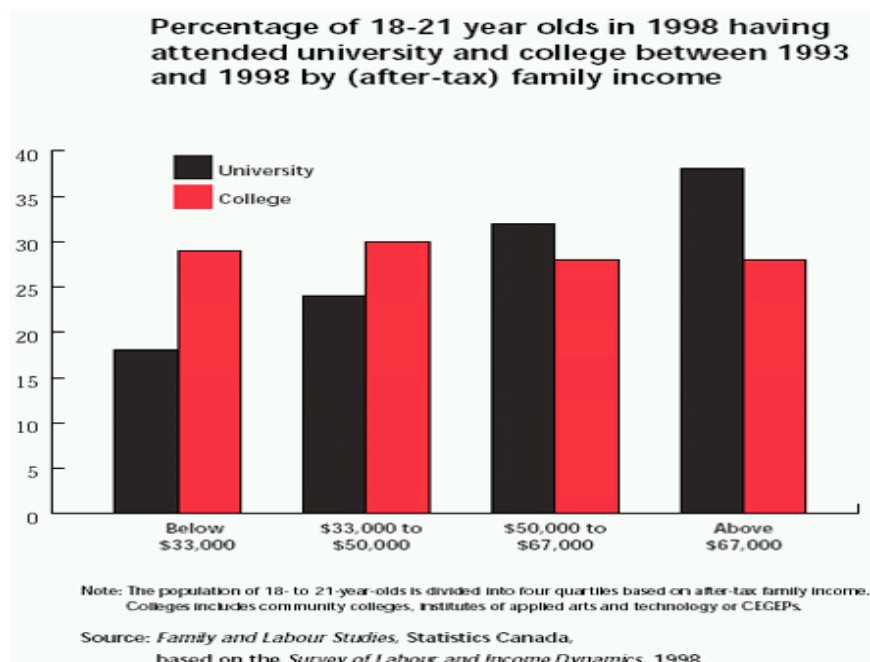
Ontario's colleges recognize the need to strengthen their ability to reach out to and meet the specific needs of the province's increasingly diverse population. Ontario's colleges will continue to adapt and enhance curriculum, delivery, in-school support and transition to better employment opportunities for:

- adults in the workforce;
- Canadians without a postsecondary education; and
- those from groups at risk of exclusion from future economic opportunity, such as Canadians with disabilities, Aboriginal Canadians, immigrants, youth and adults with low literacy or foundation skills and Canadians living in rural and/or remote areas of the country.

Colleges are opportunity equalizers

Colleges of applied arts and technology are Canadians' most accessible option for high-quality, postsecondary education.

Canada's colleges are already the most accessible option for high-quality postsecondary education. Canada's colleges are *opportunity equalizers*. For example, compared to Canada's university student population, the population of college students tends to reflect the economic strata of Canadian society in almost equal proportions (see figure below).⁸ While universities draw disproportionately more students from Canada's highest-income families, colleges pull equally from all income groups.



Ontario's colleges also serve a broad cross-section of population segments, from secondary school graduates to university graduates, from youth apprentices to adult learners, from Aboriginal Canadians to new Canadians.

- Most of those applying to Ontario's colleges for full-time study are *not* secondary

school students. Among Ontario college applicants for the Fall 2003 academic year:⁹

- 57 per cent were non-secondary school applicants and fewer, 43 per cent, were secondary school students, and
- 62 per cent were either employed full- or part-time, or working and studying part-time, during the 12 months prior to applying to college.
- Ontario's colleges deliver over 90 per cent of in-school apprenticeship training in the province. There are 60,000 active apprentices in Ontario. Between 1995 and 2002, the number of apprentices in Ontario colleges increased by 24 per cent.¹⁰
- Among Ontario college students in the 2003-04 academic year, 15 per cent reported their first language as something other than English or French. In the Greater Toronto Area, the percentage is almost twice as high; 28 per cent reported their first language as being neither English nor French.¹¹

The regional presence of colleges and their strong emphasis on vocationally-oriented curricula make them well positioned to address many of Canada's skills upgrading challenges. They offer services geared to adults, such as job-related curricula, distance learning, and flexible and short-term courses. Building on these existing services, Canada's network of colleges is well positioned to provide even better learning opportunities to the adult workforce.

— Canada's Innovation Strategy, Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians

Access to a college education is within reach of most Canadians. Almost half of all Canadians who have participated in any form of postsecondary education attended a community college or CEGEP.¹²

Canada's colleges are geographically-dispersed and present in over 900 communities across Canada.

The college system is the post-secondary opportunity equal-

izer, providing all Canadians with the option to pursue higher education and participate in the workforce. Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology are the most accessible option for anyone in the province who is seeking high-quality postsecondary education and transition to employment. Ontario's colleges serve 200 communities, employ 30,000 people, and have an enrolment of more than 150,000 full-time and 350,000 part-time students. Ontario's colleges want to take a leadership role and be a strong partner with the federal government in creating solutions to increase postsecondary access and success, open the path to lifelong learning, and help meet the workforce needs of Canada's economy.

Key population segments with college access issues

Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology have a mandate to provide accessible, quality career education and training to enhance social and economic development throughout Ontario and to meet local, regional and global marketplace demand. Like the federal government, Ontario's colleges recognize that as accessible as the college system currently is for most Canadians, segments of the population still face challenges gaining access to — and completing — college.

Canada's Innovation Strategy is a national action plan to ensure equality of opportunity and economic innovation in a knowledge-based economy and society. Part of the Innovation Strategy focuses on strengthening the country's science and research capacity to build an innovative economy. The other part of this national action plan focuses on strengthening skills and learning, developing talent, and providing all Canadians with the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the new economy. With these goals in mind, the Innovation Strategy supports:

- *Strengthening accessibility and excellence in postsecondary education*,¹³ including enhancing the system's capacity to reach an increasingly diverse population and increasing participation rates among Aboriginal Canadians, Canadians with disabilities, and youth and adults with low literacy and/or foundation skills.
- *Helping immigrants achieve their full potential*,¹⁴ including ensuring immigrants have the support they need to make use of their skills and education as quickly as possible and enter the workforce (e.g., language teaching, education upgrading, PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition), work experience and placements).
- *Strengthening communities*, including “enhancing the learning capacity of children, youth and adults in rural and Aboriginal communities by providing support programs and educational opportunities tailored to the needs of the local community.”¹⁵

Segments of the Ontario population identified in the throne speech and in the Innovation Strategy have college access challenges, that is, getting *into college* and *successfully completing their college education*. They include:

- Aboriginal peoples;
- People with disabilities;
- Immigrants to Canada;

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- Youth and adults with low literacy and/or foundation skills; and
 - Rural and geographically-dispersed people.

Another segment of the population of special interest to the federal government is the French-language minority outside of Quebec who, with some exceptions, such as in the Ottawa and Toronto urban areas, are geographically dispersed across the province. Funding for French-language, postsecondary education has largely been addressed through federal/provincial agreements. Discussions between the two levels of government is ongoing and issues still need to be resolved. Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology support these discussions and recognize the special challenges of French-language colleges.

Access means more than simply gaining *entry* to college — access also means maximizing the potential of the student who has gained entry to college, to succeed *through* college to employment. Many students drop out of postsecondary education prior to completion and recent data indicate that for about 50 per cent the primary reason was a “lack of fit” with postsecondary education, in general, or the program they were enrolled in.¹⁶ Substantially fewer, 30 per cent by comparison, cited “financial reasons” for quitting. Current funding does not adequately allow colleges to fully deal with student issues like language and cultural diversity in urban and rural-remote areas, the extra time it takes for language-challenged individuals to complete their diploma or certificate program, the differences in learning styles and the need for support personnel to help students get through college successfully.

Student failure is expensive. The cost involved in a student retaking a course — after dropping out or failing — is greater than providing the right level of support, up front, to maximize initial success. For the individuals in these five population segments, for whom the federal government fears economic marginalization if something innovative is not done, gaining access to — and successfully graduating from — college are twin challenges.

Aboriginal Peoples: Delivering education and economic participation

Aboriginal Peoples are often prevented from fully sharing in Ontario's and Canada's good fortunes because they face barriers accessing and completing their postsecondary education. The Speech from the Throne directed the government to "focus on education and skills development, because this is a prerequisite to individual opportunity and full participation [in Canadian society and its economic providence]." For Aboriginal students, poverty and unemployment put them at an economic disadvantage in accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education. But Aboriginal students face other, less obvious, barriers, such as discrimination, low self-concept and institutional insensitivity to Aboriginal cultures. A recent study commissioned by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation reported that "combined with a history of forced assimilation through educational institutions, the barriers to Aboriginal participation in postsecondary education are formidable."¹⁷

The Aboriginal Transition Program for Grade 12 graduates, offered by Confederation College in partnership with Negahneewin College of Indigenous Studies, helps students develop a career plan and focuses on the English, math and computer skills that will help them integrate into diploma programs across the college. The program has resulted in increased retention and improved academic success of Aboriginal students at the college.

One aspect of the Aboriginal college access challenge is the rural and often remote dispersion of Aboriginal people across Ontario (and Canada) and the lack of proximity to postsecondary institutions. For many First Nations' students, who have grown up in small communities, moving to larger urban centres for postsecondary education is a cultural and geographical journey. English is not the first language for many Aboriginal Canadians, yet they are often treated like any other Canadian-born student in educational delivery. Education offered to Aboriginal students in their own communities would increase success, enhancing movement into the local labour force and the strengthening of the local community. Another challenge for Aboriginal Canadians is related to poor outcomes in high school and, among many who do complete high school, the lack of basic reading, mathematics, science and necessary life skills required to succeed in a postsecondary environment.¹⁸ According to a recent Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation research paper, the quality of secondary school education on the reservation does not pre-

pare Aboriginal students for postsecondary life. Poor academic preparation also contributes to high Aboriginal drop-out rates at universities and colleges.¹⁹

According to the 1996 census, the percentage of registered Indians with some postsecondary education was 37 per cent and for all other Aboriginal identity groups 47 per cent. Both are significantly below the rate for all other Canadians at 51 per cent.²⁰ In terms of having *less than a high school education*, the gap is even greater between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Canadians — almost one in three Aboriginal Canadians (29 per cent) between the ages of 25 and 44 has less than a high school education, compared to 17 per cent of non-Aboriginal Canadians. With support from the federal government, Ontario's colleges could build on current initiatives and do more to assist those Aboriginal Canadians without the skills necessary for postsecondary success make the leap into employment or further higher education.

With their strong geographical coverage and presence in many communities, Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology are already serving the province's Aboriginal student population, through consultative and co-operative educational ventures with Aboriginal organizations and communities. Ontario's colleges are committed to working with Aboriginal communities and the federal government to further extend and expand their reach into Ontario's Aboriginal communities and do the job they are mandated to do — help Aboriginal people prepare for employment or further educational opportunities, which would, in turn, help build native enterprise and stronger communities.

People with Disabilities: Overcoming the barriers to education

People with disabilities face significant barriers to postsecondary education. In this regard, the Speech from the Throne promised “the Government of Canada will start by working with the provinces and territories to fill the gaps in education and skills development and in workplace supports and workplace accommodation for people with disabilities.”

Seneca College in Toronto, like all of Ontario’s colleges, provides services for people with disabilities that include personal, academic and career counseling, tutoring, accommodation services and a host of other offerings. Through its three drop-in Employment Resource Centres, members of the local community with disabilities can also access these innovative services.

For reasons related to their disability, many disabled persons may not attempt to pursue a postsecondary education. And, for those who enrol, their disability may lengthen the time it takes to complete their program and increase the likelihood that they drop out.

According to Statistics Canada’s Participation and Activity Limitation Survey results (2001), there are 3,601,270 Canadians with disabilities, or 12.4 per cent of the population. In Ontario, 13.5 per cent of the population have disabilities (approximately 1.6 million people in Ontario).²¹ Currently the Ontario college system provides educational accommodation to about 13,500 full- and part-time disabled students.²² Ontario’s colleges do a good job meeting their needs, but there are clear opportunities to do more.

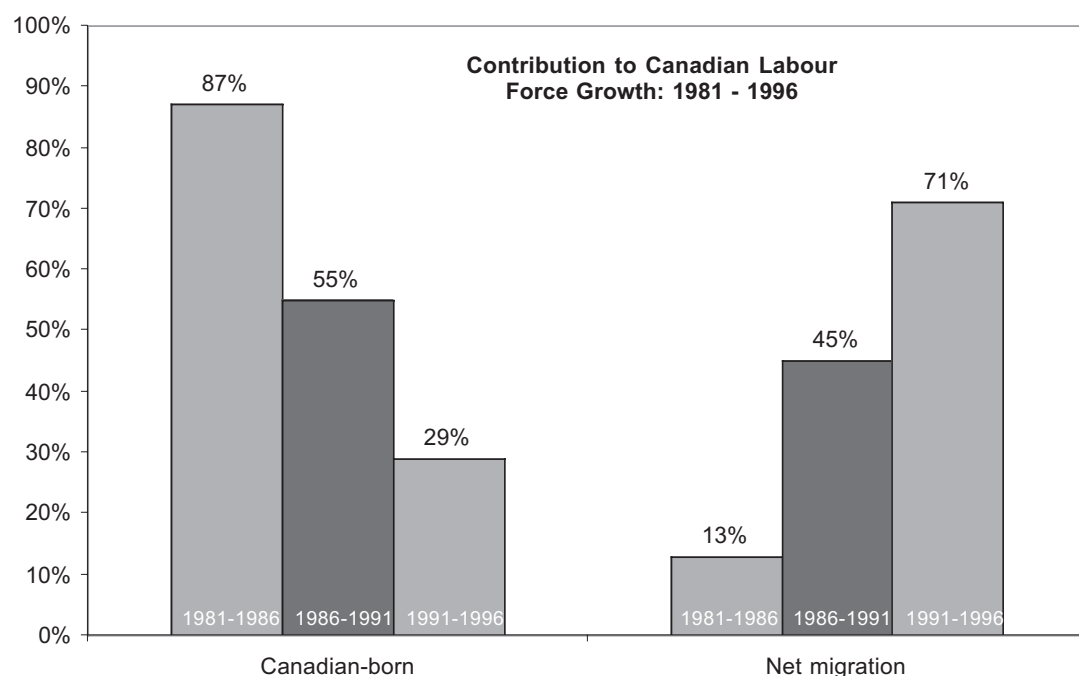
Among Ontarians with disabilities, 28 per cent have less than a high school education,²³ compared to 16 per cent of persons without a disability between 25 and 54 years of age. These individuals face an increased challenge in accessing postsecondary education or employment, requiring both academic bridging to acquire the literacy, foundation and survival skills necessary to succeed, and on-going support and accommodation for their specific disabilities. Ontario Ministry of Education data also indicate that the number of students with multiple disabilities grew by 38 per cent between 1998-99 and 2001-02.

Ontario’s colleges are ready to support the increasing number of student applicants with multiple, complex and severe disabilities. Ontario’s colleges are doing a good job today

and, with support from the federal government, will be in a strong position to increase outreach and to better accommodate young and adult students with disabilities.

Immigrants: More efficient integration to employment

As noted in the Speech from the Throne, **immigrants** “helped to build Canada from its inception and will be key to our future prosperity.” Immigrants are essential to Canada’s future. Ontario and the rest of Canada are relying heavily on immigration to replace the country’s aging workforce. It is estimated that by the year 2010, approximately 70 per cent of Ontario’s population growth will come from immigration. Successfully integrating these new Canadians into our communities and economy is a critical imperative of the federal government.



Adapted from: Denton, Feaver and Spencer. Applied Research Branch, Human Resources Development Canada. Immigration Labour Force and the Age Structure of the Population, 1999

The Maytree Foundation reports that close to 70 per cent of new Canadians are economic immigrants and skilled workers.²⁴ Approximately 45 per cent of male and 37 per cent of female immigrants to Canada have university degrees.²⁵ For many immigrants, the work experience, skills and education they bring to our country are mostly underutilized or not utilized at all. The Conference Board of Canada estimates that between \$4.1 billion and \$5.9 billion is lost to the Canadian economy due to unrecognized qualifications, largely from internationally-trained immigrants.²⁶ On average, it takes between nine and 10 years for Canada’s skilled immigrants to find employment that is commensurate with their

education level.²⁷ In Australia, the average elapsed time for this economic integration into the workforce is closer to one to two years.

More than 100,000 *working age* immigrants settle in Ontario each year, about 60 per cent of the total number who come to Canada. Most of these new citizens are highly educated; about 74 per cent have a postsecondary education or trade certificate.²⁸ They encounter barriers to entering the workforce, including: the lack of: transferability between internationally-acquired credentials; language skills; familiarity with the workplace culture; and Canadian work experience. Most of the immigrants to Ontario require some level of support to help make the transition to the workforce. In fact, 43 per cent of immigrants had enrolled in at least one training program in Ontario, including language training (68 per cent), postsecondary courses (23 per cent) and job-related courses (nine per cent). Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) services at Ontario's colleges allow immigrants to earn college credits, based on their previous education and employment history. Yet PLAR, a key component in the recognition of qualifications and assessment of prior learning, suffers from being underfunded and is underdeveloped across the college system.²⁹

*George Brown College, Centennial College, Fanshawe College and CON*NECT are leading an Ontario college system initiative to identify and address systemic barriers faced by internationally-trained immigrants and enhance their integration into Canada's workforce. Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment is a project involving many of Ontario's colleges that will produce a blueprint describing the practical and affordable steps that need to be taken to improve pathways through the college system and into the workforce for skilled immigrants.*

Canada needs to accelerate the pace of change and increase the capacity of the college system to help move immigrants more quickly into jobs for which they are skilled.

Ontario's colleges have a history of experience and expertise in skills upgrading, retraining and preparing students for work. The colleges also offer a variety of bridging programs and support services to help immigrants move more quickly into the workforce. Ontario's colleges are working to reduce the barriers to college entry for immigrants, eliminating duplication in training and skills upgrading initiatives, and providing adequate supports (such as language training) to ease transition to the Canadian workforce. Ontario's colleges are helping to ensure that immigrants in Canada move quickly into the workforce.

Youth and Adults with Low Literacy Skills: Bridging the gaps

Youth and adults with low literacy or foundation skills are at risk of becoming increasingly marginalized in an economy and society that demand ever-higher levels of workplace skills and education. International Adult Literacy Survey data indicate that approximately one in five of Ontario adults do not have basic literacy skills and many more are considered to have inadequate skills for normal functioning in society.³⁰ Substantial numbers of youth do not receive the literacy and foundation skills training required to perform in the Canadian economy. About one in four high school students graduates but lacks some of the essential skills necessary for employment.

Many youth do not finish high school. A recently commissioned Ontario Ministry of Education study that tracked the progress of a large cohort of Grade 9 students reported that about 25 per cent of the students left high school early, without completing their course of study. An incremental 24 per cent graduated from high school and immediately entered the workforce, bypassing a postsecondary education.³¹

With fewer than six per cent of the new jobs created in the near future being available to those who have not finished high school, the risk of economic and social marginalization for these Grade 9 students appears high. The economic costs to the Canadian economy of “early leavers” is estimated to be \$4 billion over the course of one school year.³² The cost to the individual may include unemployment, reduced lifetime earnings and a lower quality of life. The access challenges for these youth are both criteria- and confidence-based; some have not fulfilled college admission requirements and others lack the confidence to attempt college. Ontario’s colleges need help to bring these youth through their doors, keep them enrolled and help them complete their programs successfully.

Niagara College in Welland offers high school students an opportunity to receive the first educational component of apprenticeship training at the college’s Motive Power Centre while they are simultaneously completing their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The MTCU funds the students’ college tuition and Job Connect gives a wage subsidy to approved employers who hire apprentices upon graduation.

Youth and adults with limited literacy and foundation skills represent a large pool of potential workers if the gaps in these essential skills can be filled. The risk of their becom-

ing excluded from participating in, and profiting from, Canada's future providence must be of great concern for the Government of Canada.

Ontario's colleges currently offer literacy and foundation skills programs that enable individuals to pursue postsecondary education or to enter the workforce. These existing programs are under increased pressure from the high volumes of participants. Access to such programs is also geographically limited, having been eliminated completely in some locations, even while there is substantial demand in rural, remote, Northern and Aboriginal communities. Often, more than just basic academic skills are required. Depending upon their literacy level, education and employment history, some individuals need career and employment counselling as well as assistance with the personal and social skills necessary to manage in the workplace. Ontario's colleges want to help the federal government deliver on making access to postsecondary education easier to those with no or low literacy and foundation skills.

Rural/Remote Communities: Strengthening communities through education

Those who live in rural/remote, geographically-dispersed communities are less likely than their urban contemporaries to participate in postsecondary education. While the growth of postsecondary education in Canada has taken place in both urban and rural communities, the expansion into rural Canada has not been sufficient to close the gap with postsecondary attainment in urban Canada.³³ Compared to the Canadian average, the overall gap in educational attainment is widening slightly in predominantly rural areas as the proportion of people with less than a Grade 9 education is becoming more concentrated in these areas. According to Statistics Canada's analysis of national trends, individuals living in rural northern regions are almost twice as likely to have less than a Grade 9 education than the average Canadian.³⁴

Part of the urban-rural education gap is the result of geography, that is, limited access to postsecondary education in or near one's own community. The college system needs to increase the delivery of education *into* Ontario's rural and remote communities, yet the costs associated with such delivery, and of rotating such itinerant programs to avoid year-to-year duplication, is expensive.

Northern College serves a vast geographical area of 93,000 square kilometres and many of the communities it serves are accessible only by plane or boat. Responding to a critical shortage of nurses in the north, Northern College delivered a program that allowed students to remain in their home communities while completing postsecondary education, maintain work and family commitments, and add to their nursing qualifications. This program generates a flexible future workforce for local health care agencies.

Education needs to be brought into Ontario's small communities. Ontario's small towns are losing their youth to urban centres and those who stay face unemployment. Ontario's colleges need to strengthen their relationships with the local school boards, industry and business and deliver relevant education and skills training into the community. Requiring students to travel to distant urban centres for postsecondary education contributes to the drain of young employable individuals from rural communities.

Other contributors to the rural education gap include the average level of educational attainment in the community and the educational requirements of jobs in the local

economy.³⁵ For example, students are less likely to move on to postsecondary education if they live in communities where the average level of education is low, employment rates are low and/or the educational requirements or earning potential of jobs are low. All these conditions are more likely present in rural and remote communities than in large urban centres.

The federal government's direction in the Innovation Strategy is to help rural and remote communities become more economically viable by changing the North's dependency on the traditional natural resource-based economy. Yet one of the challenges for rural Ontarians is the limited breadth of educational programming available, compared to that offered their urban counterparts. Confederation College in northern Ontario, for example, serves an area comparable to the size of France. There are nearly 75 communities, but the population is less than 230,000. With a relatively small populations spread over large geographical areas, Ontario's northern and rural colleges, such as Confederation College, are constrained in their ability to deliver the same breadth of diploma and certificate programs available in more highly-populated urban areas. The economics involved in delivering quality education to small classes of students are not sustainable.

In Ontario's North, when students apply to college, they choose the local college first and then decide on the specific program of study. If the rural and northern colleges do not offer the specific program the student wants, he or she may go elsewhere. As students move out of the rural communities in search of postsecondary education and opportunity, the likelihood of their returning diminishes. Limited programming limits the possibility for innovation and growth in rural and northern communities.

The Government of Canada, in the Feb. 2004 throne speech, committed itself to strengthening the country's communities: "Large and small, rural and urban, Canada's communities are facing new challenges, often without sufficient resources or the tools they need." Part of the strengthening of rural communities includes broadening access to education and enhancing "the learning capacity of children, youth and adults in rural and Aboriginal communities by providing support programs and educational opportunities tailored to the needs of the local community" (Canada's Innovation Strategy, National Summit on Innovation and Learning). One solution is to expand broadband access into rural and remote areas to enable e-learning and to support building stronger communities. Ontario's colleges want to provide basic literacy and foundation skills to rural and remote citizens and broaden and tailor their more advanced postsecondary offerings to specific community needs.

Conclusion: Where do you want to be in 10 years?

In 10 years, Ontario's colleges want Canada to be ready for the workforce and skills shortages by increasing college participation and success, leading to employment, among the five population segments.

The February 2004 Speech from the Throne asked: “Where do you want to be in 10 years?” Our answer: *Ontario's colleges want Canada to be ready.* Ontario's colleges want to accelerate the pace of innovation and change to help mitigate Canada's imminent workforce and skills shortage, leveraging and building on the college system's strengths to achieve this

objective. Ontario's colleges want to speed up the process of creating and putting in place the correct strategies to increase college participation and retention and the successful transition of students to the workforce. Ontario's colleges are committed to opening their doors even wider to meet the needs of the province's increasingly diverse population, focussing on increasing access to Aboriginals, people with disabilities, immigrants, youth and adults with low literacy and/or fundamental skills and people living in rural or remote areas.

Ontario's colleges strongly believe that an investment in promoting, enhancing and enabling access to, *and success through*, college would pay significant dividends. These dividends would extend beyond the members of these five groups; a federal government investment to increase college participation, retention and transition to employment will help offset the skills shortage and benefit the economic future of the entire country. Creating a national initiative and providing funding specifically targeted at the government's priority population segments would encourage and enable Canada's colleges to develop innovative pilot projects to reach out to members of these segments. Ontario's colleges are asking the federal government for a financial investment to accelerate the development of new approaches to creating and delivering education and skills development to those population segments at risk of exclusion from Canada's future.

The objective of this investment would be to sponsor college-based innovative projects of five or less years' duration across Canada, focussed explicitly on the needs and circumstances related to the government's five priority population segments. The funds would be allocated by a council of peers — including representatives from colleges, the five priority population segments, business, industry, government and non-governmental organizations — to evaluate and select the best college proposals for innovative access projects, based on pre-established criteria.

Submitted proposals would be judged by the council based on the following:

1. A sound business case for the project, including a description of the need, population segments targeted, detailed outcomes and deliverables, and the expected return on investment.
2. A detailed project work-plan describing the major activities, timing, project and reporting milestones, budgets and accountabilities.
3. A plan for disseminating the design, results and implications of each project to colleges and key stakeholders across Canada to help ensure broad implementation and application.
4. A realistic business plan for the sustainability of the initiative beyond the life-cycle of the project phase.

While the focus of these initiatives will be on finding innovative answers to long-standing access challenges, building on and enhancing what is successful today will be key. As well, inter-college cooperation and planning will be promoted to take advantage of the economies of scale across the country, to encourage multiple perspectives and to help ensure the broader applicability of initiatives. At the same time, business, industry and community partnerships and consultations will be required to ensure non-college voices and perspectives are taken into account in planning and implementation. Examples of the types of projects and initiatives that might be considered for funding are attached in Appendix A.

Ontario's colleges want to accelerate the development of strategies to increase participation and success in college and transition to employment among the federal government's five key population segments. If this strategy development starts soon — and it needs to start soon — the negative impact of the imminent skills shortage upon the economy will be reduced. Ontario's colleges propose that the federal government allocate \$100 million of the total national investment for Ontario-based initiatives to increase college access among the five key groups. Ontario's colleges also propose a target date of 2005 for the first project submissions, with the implementation of initiatives to start in 2006.

Ontario's colleges have the experience, expertise and commitment necessary to help the federal government realize its goal of improving and broadening the paths to postsecondary education and lifelong learning, the route to participation in Canada's economic future and prosperity. Ontario's colleges want Canada to be ready for the future and are prepared to help the federal government meet the country's education, lifelong learning and essential skills needs.

Appendix A:

Project Examples

Appendix A: Project Examples

Projects sponsored by the college access investment initiative would be based upon, and designed to meet the specific needs of, the five target groups. The precise nature of these needs, and the potential solutions and initiatives to address them, will vary across Canada. Provinces with higher population concentrations of one of the five groups may focus on this group more so than on the others, based on need and opportunity.

Examples of the types of projects that would be considered for funding might include the following:

- **Research and evaluation:** Research projects related to improving college access and success among the five priority segments, or the evaluation of existing or proposed programs to determine how well they achieve these ends.
- **College preparatory programs and services:** The development, implementation and evaluation of programs and services intended to provide inadequately prepared students with the basic academic bridging and coping skills necessary to succeed in college.
- **Innovative and alternate program delivery methods and mechanisms:** The creation and evaluation of innovative means of delivering college education more efficiently and cost-effectively to students in these five segments.
- **Transition to employment programs and models:** Building programs to help equip people with the essential employment skills, such as language, literacy, numeracy and social workplace skills, to enter or re-enter the workforce and succeed.
- **College education outreach and promotion:** Targeted communications and initiatives to increase enrolment and participation in college programs clearly linked to industry and/or community needs.
- **New program and curriculum development:** The development of new programs and curriculum, based on consultation with business, industry and/or community stakeholders and with a focus on meeting their and students' needs.
- **Special student support and services:** The design and evaluation of student services and tools to increase the success of members of the five priority groups at college through to graduation and once they enter the workplace.
- **Demonstration projects:** Time-limited projects involving technical assistance and/or professional development activities for college faculty and administrators to improve

their ability to provide quality college education for students in the five priority segments. Examples include in-service training, professional development, distance learning, training in the use of assistive devices and/or educational technology, and applying and implementing research results related to access and the education of the five priority population segments.

- **Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR):** Projects aimed at streamlining and making PLAR more efficient and increasing its reach among the internationally-trained and others with existing but unrecognized skills and qualifications.

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