Access to Higher Education: What We Know and What We Need to Know

June 25, 2004 – Anyone with children in university or college knows the unpleasant truth – a growing share of the costs of post-secondary education (PSE) is being carried by students in the form of higher tuition fees.

Between 1986 and 2001, government support for universities in Canada fell by 4.5%. Revenue from student fees more than doubled over the same period.

Just when the demands of the knowledge economy make a post-secondary education essential, it is becoming more and more expensive to get one. Governments have responded with various student aid programs, but the evidence suggests that these fall short of ensuring that qualified students won't be denied access to PSE for financial reasons.

A report from CPRN's Work Network, commissioned by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, explores what we know about how families finance post-secondary education, how this affects their debt levels, and how rising PSE costs have affected participation patterns.

A Family Affair: The Impact of Paying for College or University, by Kathryn McMullen and Fred Hemingway, finds that families are having trouble bearing up under the increasing financial burden, student debts are rising, and some students are discouraged from pursuing a higher education, or are forced to make less than ideal choices, for financial reasons.

Student loan programs have high expectations regarding parental contribution levels. Expected contributions rise steeply with family income and cumulative expected contributions can amount to many tens of thousands of dollars, especially for families with more than one child pursuing post-secondary education.

Perhaps as important, the authors conclude that we don't know enough about the current situation to design the appropriate policies to ensure access and affordability of PSE. Lack of coordination of research and data collection among the various federal and provincial actors on the student aid scene is a primary culprit. In fact, the authors argue that coordination would create sufficient savings to cover the cost of filling the most important research and data gaps.

You can access or download a copy of the report by clicking here.

You can also find more research on the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation Web site at www.millenniumscholarships.ca/en/main.html

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