Access to College or University: Much More Than a Financial Matter

Thursday, March 24, 2005 – Young people (aged 18-24) from high-income families are more than twice as likely to go to university in Canada as young people from low-income families.

Enrolment in Canadian colleges and universities is at record levels, but tuition fees are also breaking records.

Are finances the reason behind this university participation gap?

A new CPRN report, ***Getting There and Staying There: Low-income Students and Post-secondary Education*** by Patrice de Broucker, Senior Research Analyst with CPRN's Work Network, reviews the research on the determinants of access to post-secondary education by low-income students and finds the answer is more complex.

According to de Broucker, the research shows that financial considerations do play a role in the decision about whether to attend college or university, but they are not the only deciding factor, nor even the most important.

"The consensus among researchers is that parents' education is more important than family income in deciding whether children go on to university," says de Broucker. "Parents' aspirations for their children, encouragement in primary and secondary school, and the quality of information about the costs and benefits of post-secondary education, are also critical."

The geographical proximity of PSE institutions matters, too, as does their capacity to meet demand.

In the global marketplace, access to higher education can mean the difference between a good job and economic and social marginalization. Canada has performed well in this regard, to date, compared to many industrialized competitors. De Broucker sees worrying signs, however, that our standing is slipping.

What can we do to ensure that all who need or desire a university education have the chance for one?

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Opportunities for higher education can be lost long before a young person is finishing high school. The effects of low income, low parental aspirations and other environmental factors can be felt much earlier.

"Financial support for university or college students is important, but it doesn't address the reasons students fail to get the grades they need to get into university," says de Broucker. "We need to tackle inequalities in early childhood and throughout the primary and secondary school experience to ensure equality of access to PSE."

De Broucker highlights a number of areas for policy action:

- *Early Intervention* – We need better academic preparation in primary and secondary school, better information about PSE options and availability, and an effort to counter the idea that PSE is unaffordable.
- *Diversity of Pathways* – We need more vocational options that provide a real alternative to PSE and a path to satisfying and rewarding employment.
- *Information and Counselling* - Schools must devote more resources to information and guidance services, including discussion of financial issues.
- *Tuition Policy* – Sustained state funding is needed if we are to limit the share of PSE revenues that come from tuition fees, and tuition fees should be guaranteed for the duration of a given program.
- *Financial Aid* – We need to correct the current trend that is shifting financial aid away from low-income students towards students from higher income families.

De Broucker calls for further research in a number of areas, among them; determining whether students from low-income families get lower returns from post-secondary education and experience higher debt loads; assessing the impact of tuition fee increases by socio-economic background and program of studies; and, assessing the effectiveness of student aid in helping those who most need it.

A "Research Summary Table: Access to PSE" provides in tabular format further details of the literature review completed for this paper. The table provides highlights of the research results for most of the studies reviewed.

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