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Getting to College or University Not Just About Money

Why Aren't More Low-income Kids in University?

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 CPRN review of the latest research on what determines access to post-secondary education by low-income students finds the answer is more complicated. The research shows that financial considerations do play a role in the decision about whether to attend college or university. But they aren't the only deciding factor, nor even the most important.

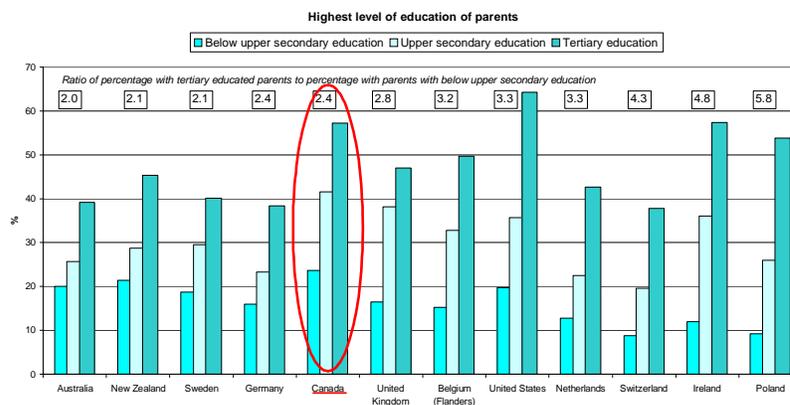
Parents Matter, Not Just Money

The consensus among researchers is that parents' education is more important than family income in deciding whether children go on to university. As the chart shows, parental education is strongly associated, across countries, with completion of post-secondary education. 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 post-secondary education (PSE) institutions matters, too, as does their capacity to meet demand.

Percentage of the population 16 to 65 years of age who have completed tertiary education, by level of educational attainment of their parents (1994-1995)



Countries are ranked in ascending order of the probability of obtaining a tertiary qualification for individuals whose parents have also completed tertiary education relative to the same probability for individuals whose parents have not completed secondary education.
Source: Education at a Glance - OECD Indicators 1996, OECD (1998a), Table A2.2.

In the global marketplace, access to higher education can mean the difference between a good job and economic and social marginalization. Up to now, Canada has performed well in this regard compared to many industrialized competitors. But there are worrying signs 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?

Early Intervention Needed

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. We need to tackle inequalities in early childhood and throughout the primary and secondary school experience to ensure equality of access to PSE.

CPRN research 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 public 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.

Research Gaps

Further research is needed 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.

Further Reading

See, in particular, *Getting There and Staying There: Low-income Students and Post-secondary Education* by Patrice de Broucker, former Senior Research Analyst with CPRN's Work Network.

A *Research Summary Table: Access to PSE* provides highlights, in tabular format, of most of the studies reviewed.

Both publications are available on the main CPRN Web site at www.cprn.org.



Interested in discussing this work or collaborating in research in this or a related area?

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