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Ontario college reaches out to help dropouts fill jobs: EDUCATION I Program to provide marketable skills to more than 300 at-risk youth

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TORONTO -- On the surface, it looks like any other drab, neon-lit college classroom. Some students slouch in their chairs after entering late, but most sit up with purpose for the 8 a.m. start.

Last year, it would have been unimaginable that they would be here enthusiastically discussing an essay assignment for an English class at Seneca College, reviewing concepts like inductive and deductive reasoning and going over the idiosyncrasies of the Modern Language Association's citation style.

The class is filled with high school dropouts from troubled neighbourhoods. Until now, they were young disenfranchised Canadians pushed into the workforce without the education or training to step into the thousands of good-paying jobs going begging because of a skills shortage.

The Seneca Centre for Outreach Education, launched in Toronto this fall, is trying to do its part to harness this huge natural resource trapped in poverty, struggling on welfare or toiling away at dead-end jobs, but there are many more out there. About half of all young Canadians end their educational careers at high school and do not pursue a college or university education.

"It's not only the right thing to do for the community. The only way out of poverty is education and jobs, but there is going to be shortage in this country," said Arthur Burke, Seneca's director of counselling, who is overseeing the new program. "If we don't take care of our natural resource, we're going to find ourselves in a difficult spot."

Seneca is expected to reach 325 young people, ages 19 to 26, during the program's three-year trial period. In January, another group of 25 aboriginal youth will begin the one-year program.

Each is admitted after extensive screening, including a battery of aptitude tests and a personal interview. One constant is they must be at-risk first-generation students, meaning they live in poverty, struggled through high school and come from families in which their parents did not complete post-secondary education. A community leader or parent must also recommend them.

Graduates will receive an Ontario College Certificate in General Arts and Science, allowing them to enter the workforce armed with better skills, enrol in a college diploma program, or take university preparation courses at Seneca.

Such initiatives, while vital, point to a policy vacuum. Disjointed government and business initiatives have resulted in a dismal record of letting the country's undereducated languish.

While Canada is recognized for a relatively high level of educational attainment, the adult learning participation rates of the least educated are below international standards, according to a recently published [Canadian Policy Research Networks](#) report on Canada's adult education and training system titled Too Many Left Behind.

Despite the rhetoric about lifelong learning, there are few programs and policies to help less-educated adults upgrade skills. And those in place are complex, fragmented and incomplete, the study co-authored by Patrice de Broucker and Karen Myers concludes.

An estimated nine million Canadians age 16 to 65, or 42 per cent, have low literacy skills preventing them from functioning fully in the economy, according to Statistics Canada's 2005 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey.

There are also roughly 250,000 youth 20 to 24 years old -- comprising 11 per cent of this age group -- who have not successfully completed high school and are not pursuing further educational credentials, de Broucker determined in a second study, *Without a Paddle: What to do About Canada's Youth Dropouts*.

Meanwhile, Human Resources and Social Development Canada estimates there will be 19,500 more jobs in the skilled trades than workers to fill them in each of the next six years. And according to the Information and Technology Association of Canada, half of all people working in the trades now plan to retire within 10 years.

De Broucker says the socio-economic costs of allowing such a huge group of young people to languish without the skills needed in the marketplace will at some point become very visible.

Young men form the majority -- 61 per cent -- of young people who have not completed high school and are not pursuing further educational credentials. Although there are fewer young women in this group, they have a much tougher time finding work, according to *Without a Paddle*.

Forty-three per cent of these young women are not in the labour force; they are three times as likely to be in this situation as their male counterparts.

Alexis Nixon's story is typical. At 22, she has been in and out of the workforce since the birth of her daughter, Truessa, more than five years ago. "I did find jobs that were minimum wage, but with child care, it wasn't enough. I was basically working to pay for a babysitter."

Today, her monthly social assistance cheque totals \$1,060; her rent eats up \$900. The Seneca program, which she began last month, is her way out of poverty and into university.

The young woman doesn't lack ambition or intelligence, she has simply faced huge obstacles. Nixon has been on her own since age 14 after bouncing around between her dad's house and foster homes. At 16, she became a single mom, and left high school in Grade 10.

Nixon has a knack for math and an eye for structural design. She's interested in architectural drafting and would love to become an architect. "I know exactly what I want to do," said Nixon, emphasizing she wants to provide better opportunities for her daughter.

"I need to get an education so I'll be able to do these things for her."

While Seneca's goals are clear, the signals sent by government and business are anything but, says de Broucker. "We say human capital is essential, but we let young people go without [it]."

He points to a case in Alberta. In 2003, the provincial legislature passed a private member's bill to raise the age for compulsory school attendance to 17 from 16, but the bill was never proclaimed into law. More recently, Alberta relaxed employment standards, making it easier for restaurants and the food services to hire children as young as 12.

"To me, it typifies the lack of coherence. Of course, in Alberta and the West you have major pressures from the labour market to get more people into work.

"But if we know that the long-term benefits to society and the labour market and the individual themselves is to have them stay in school, don't entice them outside."

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