

## **Bridging the access gap: It starts with first-generation students**

**JUDITH MAXWELL**

JUDITH MAXWELL IS THE FORMER HEAD OF THE ECONOMIC COUNCIL OF CANADA AND CANADIAN POLICY RESEARCH NETWORKS  
GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE  
MAY 19, 2008 AT 8:23 AM EDT

It's called the access gap and it's been getting wider.

According to the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 81 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds whose parents have university degrees participate in postsecondary education, compared to 53 per cent for young people whose parents did not go past high school. About 40 per cent of 20 year olds showed no sign of attending a college, vocational or university program in 2003.

There are at least three reasons to encourage these young people to become the first generation in their family to complete a postsecondary program. Most job creation in future decades will require a degree or diploma; Canada is already facing selected labour shortages; and, just when we need them most, the number of 18 to 24 year olds will begin to decline after 2011, as a result of the baby bust of the 1990s.

The young people facing the access gap come from low-income families - many are aboriginal or children of recent immigrants. For these families, the average \$16,800 annual cost for a full-time university program is intimidating.

But the first barrier they face is not financial, it's attitudinal. In a Statistics Canada study ("Why Are Youth from Lower-income Families Less Likely to Attend University?"), Mark Frenette found that barriers related to academic ability, high school quality and parental influence account for 84 per cent of the access gap.

"First-generation youth are less likely to plan for higher education, to be convinced of its benefits or to have above-average high school grades," adds the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation in the third edition of "The Price of Knowledge."

How, then, do we influence the attitudes of these young people? The best way to start is to help them become successful high school students.

The Pathways to Education project in Toronto's Regent Park shows that low ambition and low marks are a social blight that can be overcome. With the help of mentors and tutors from Grade 9 on, and the promise of a \$4,000 bursary on graduation, dropout rates for Regent Park students have fallen from 56 per cent to about 10 per cent; teen pregnancies have plummeted, and so have crime rates. After graduation, college and university enrolment almost doubled, and 85 per cent of those enrolled were first-generation students.

These students show how important motivation and self-confidence are to education outcomes. And their success has provoked provincial departments of education to begin talking about early intervention.

Manitoba may be the first province to address the access gap at its roots. In his recent budget speech, Greg Selinger, Minister of Finance, promised to increase the number of students able to successfully pursue postsecondary education by improving high school graduation rates, with a special focus on under-represented groups.

Other provinces, including British Columbia, Alberta and Nova Scotia, are trying to build awareness of postsecondary options. "Our single biggest concern," said one student aid administrator, "is to reach the students who are not predisposed to postsecondary education. We have to reach them early on - Grade 10 or earlier. We need to talk about the value of higher education first. Opportunities for financing will come later."

If governments do take an active role in supporting young adolescents at risk of dropping out, they will certainly need the help of community organizations like the Regent Park Community Health Centre, which spearheaded the Pathways project.

The next challenge will be to include support for first-generation students in the complex web of student financial aid, which currently costs governments \$6.4-billion a year. That system strongly favours students from middle- and high-income families.

The outcry about excessive student debt burdens in the 1990s led to two major changes in student aid. The first was a dramatic increase in tax credits and other forms of tax relief.

These tax savings (which cost governments \$2.6-billion) cover between one-third and one-half of tuition, depending on the province. But, because of the way tax credits work, the benefits go mainly to students and families with middle and higher incomes.

The second was an effort to curb the amount of debt a student could accumulate by offering grants and debt remission schemes. The combined cost of loans, grants and debt remission amounts to \$3.8-billion a year.

The good news about grants is that students who receive them have a higher probability of completing their programs.

The bad news is that they do not serve the needs of low-income students because they are debt averse. In most cases, you have to take on a loan to qualify for a grant.

The main option for first-generation students is the "access bursaries" provided by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation and the federal government. The bursaries will be replaced in 2009 by the \$350-million Canada Student Grant announced in the federal budget. But it will certainly take more than \$350-million to narrow the access gap.

The key is to help young adolescents become keen students. Once first-generation students graduate, there is a high probability that their children will enroll in higher education, too.

### **By the numbers**

81

Percentage of 18 to 24 year olds whose parents have university degrees who participate in postsecondary education.

53

Percentage of young people whose parents did not go past high school who participate in postsecondary education.

40

Percentage of 20 year olds who showed no sign of attending a college, vocational or university program in 2003.

\$6.4-billion

Cost per year to governments for student financial aid.