

Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology

Ontario CAATS Responding to the Needs of Non-Direct Students

Issue:

In order to maintain enrolment and serve the economic needs of the province of Ontario, Ontario Colleges need to make sure they are reaching out to all relevant demographic groups. In addition to students who enter College directly from high school, Colleges also serve a significant and potentially growing number of non-direct students who fall into the following segments: those who have not completed high school, those who have completed high school, but have been out of the education system for some time, those students who may have completed full or partial post-secondary education.

This report looks at the efforts of Colleges to offer programs that specifically serve the needs of this student group and how they use their websites to reach out and market to the potential students who do not come directly from high school. Each English College website was examined to find information about upgrading programs, credit recognition and PLAR, special programs for immigrants including those who have international training or credentials, programs delivered in a non traditional format such as on-line, distance, compressed or fast track.

The research tells us that these particular groups of students are often looking for programs that have multiple entry points, flexible delivery that enables them to work too and address their family needs, prior learning and experience recognized, and shortest possible time to completion. In addition they need services that help them establish their career goals and assistance in constructing the appropriate pathways to get them there.

Research:

The purpose of this review is to examine how Ontario Colleges are marketing themselves to the target demographic of students who do not come directly from high school and what special programs they may have to serve these students.

The websites of all the English Colleges in Ontario were reviewed to see what (if any) approaches they are taking to directly market themselves to the target demographic.

The College websites were examined for information on:

- mature students
- upgrading/training programs
- internationally trained individuals (ITIs)
- prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)

Each website was evaluated on two fronts:

- Is there information on the website for the target demographic?
- How easy is it to access the information?

Findings

With one or two exceptions, none of the Colleges uses their website to market themselves to the target demographic. All of the College websites require potential students to already have quite a firm idea of which program they want to pursue and what upgrading programs they might need. The onus is on potential students to search out the information that might be relevant to them.

Lack of Information and Program Offerings

In most cases, information for mature students is not easy to find, and there are very few programs targeted to their unique needs. There appears to be more information directed at the parents of potential students than information targeted to mature students.

There are some Colleges that are making an effort to reach out to mature students and offer a variety of upgrading/preparatory programs. However, it is often very difficult to find the information. The “click count” is high and often the information isn’t “filed” in a place that is easy to find. For instance, in many cases, information on upgrading programs is found under the College Programs link. Upgrading courses fall under a number of different headings “access programs, accessibility studies, College prep.” For a mature student, unfamiliar with the nomenclature of the Colleges, this information is quite inaccessible as they really don’t know where to look for it. In addition, some Colleges organize upgrading programs through part-time studies or continuing education. A potential student would not necessarily know to look at the continuing education website. There are plenty of good offerings in continuing education for adult learners, so it is often unclear why an adult learner would choose to take a regular College program.

Mature Students

Almost all of the Colleges have a place on their website that defines what a mature student is, and in some cases refer to admissions testing and upgrading for mature students. Most often, this definition is found in the “admissions” or “how to apply” section. Very few Colleges link information specifically for mature students from the definition section. In many cases, the explanation of mature student status is focused on telling the student what they must do in order to be admitted to a College program, rather than what the College can do to help them qualify for admission to the program.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

All of the websites have an explanation of PLAR and many provide very good details on the process. However, PLAR is not being used as a recruiting tool. The possibility that you might get credit towards your College program, thereby shortening the length of the program and possibly reducing the cost, is a powerful incentive for a mature student. All of the Colleges might want to review how PLAR is presented to potential students.

Internationally Trained

Many Colleges do not have any programs for nor do they even make mention of internationally trained students. This is not surprising as internationally trained individuals are not really a significant target market in many rural and northern locations. However, many of the Colleges that are in areas that serve new Canadians would benefit from putting a link for internationally trained individuals directly on the College home page. There needs to be some consensus on how to refer to this group – are they new Canadians, immigrants or the internationally trained? The same terms should be used by all Colleges.

Outreach to Mature Students

Many of the websites are not easy to navigate and require several “clicks” before information relevant to mature students is located. A link for mature students on the home page of every College would be very helpful. The “mature student” page should contain information on upgrading, admissions to regular College programs, an explanation of continuing education versus regular College programs, a list of any special “fast-track” programs and information on PLAR.

Some thought should also be given to whether or not the term “mature student” is the right one for this group. Do these potential students view themselves as “mature students” or is the term adult learner more accurate? One suggestion is to have a drop down menu (as Confederation College does) with a more complete description (i.e. “over the age of 19 and out of school for more than five years and did not complete high school”, or “over the age of 19, high school graduate and some post-secondary education, or “over the age of 19, high school graduate, but requires some academic upgrading”). Using a drop down menu would allow the College to provide targeted information to potential students and make the website much more user friendly.

Conclusion

The College websites were examined from the perspective of someone who has been out of the educational system for a number of years and is considering going back to school as part of a career/life change. While all of the Colleges list interesting programs there appeared to be few programs that respond to the needs of this particular group. Although they profess to be the “way to more meaningful employment,” the websites certainly don’t make it easy for someone to gather all of the information they need to make an informed decision about going to College. Often, it is difficult to ascertain what credit they might get for previous education and work experience, which programs are accelerated and would fit well with the family/life demands of older students, or those programs that might be a good fit with the potential applicants’ background. The Colleges could make their websites responsive to the needs of mature students.