
Sustaining the Transformation: Improving College Retention and Success Rates for Youth from Underserved Neighbourhoods

Janet Maher, Ph.D.

Senior Research Officer

Applied Research and Innovation Centre

Centennial College

Anthony Bertin, M.Ed.

Manager

Community Outreach Office

Centennial College

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ABSTRACT: Student retention is an issue of perennial interest to educational institutions and is frequently a focus of pedagogical research and evaluation of programming, although some recent literature on factors affecting college student retention recommended attention to academic preparedness and student engagement as key variables influencing college student retention. This study explored the barriers and facilitators of retention and attrition of Helping Youth Pursue Education (HYPE) program participants in regular college programming, and the role of service supports and mentorship in improving the college experience of youth from underserved neighbourhoods. The qualitative research focused on how gains in interpersonal and problem-solving skills and connecting with one or more mentors at the College related to student success. The analysis revealed that, while the current program delivery model has resulted in steady improvement in outcomes relating to application, admission and student success for those who are “ready,” more could likely be done to improve participant experience and outcomes. Recommendations for improvement focused on strategies for the early identification of HYPE program participants likely to enter post-secondary education, faculty and staff development to enhance program delivery, and consideration of other program amendments to improve outcomes. Further work is needed to explore reasons why students do not follow-through on their learning plans, and to find ways to encourage them to do so.

Introduction

Student retention is an issue of perennial interest to educational institutions and is frequently a focus of pedagogical research and evaluation of programming, with relatively less attention paid to service issues. Two recent literature reviews on the factors affecting college student attrition and retention recommended particular attention be paid to academic preparedness and student engagement as key variables influencing student retention at the post-secondary level.

This research project focused directly on identifying factors affecting retention throughout the student engagement cycle from recruitment to Helping Youth Pursue Education (HYPE), Centennial College's signature outreach program targeting underserved youth in Eastern Toronto. HYPE is part of a more comprehensive response spearheaded by the provincial government and major community agencies to design a "social opportunity strategy" to "mobilize social capital and other assets in our communities to address these roots [of youth violence]" (McMurtry & Curling, 2008, p. 18).

Program participants from the 2011 and 2012 cohorts of HYPE who were subsequently admitted to a College diploma program were invited to participate in the study, which used a semi-structured interview format to explore participant experience, skill enhancement, personal decision-making and the role of outreach and individual mentoring in retention and student success. A sample of College faculty, program staff and peer mentors were also interviewed on their experiences supporting HYPE participants during and following their recruitment to HYPE, to assist in understanding the transformation process.

Background

Centennial College has been at the forefront of addressing the educational needs and experience of marginalized and underserved populations in the Greater Toronto Area with dedicated outreach and innovative programming. Centennial's HYPE program was initially rooted in Toronto's Community Safety Plan and focused on reducing as many barriers as possible to the engagement in post-secondary education of vulnerable youth in the College's immediate catchment area.

As part of its mission to the Eastern Toronto community in which it is located, Centennial College has provided outreach programming each summer since 2004. HYPE began as a two-week drumming program for youth from the Malvern neighbourhood in 2004. A focus on training for employment and employment readiness was introduced in 2005 and 2006. From 2007 to 2009, much of the current philosophy and the program model were developed with funding from the Youth Challenge Fund for the Community Program Initiative. Through consultation with students in the program it was renamed HYPE in 2007. From 2007 to 2009, HYPE was redesigned and implemented with public and private sector support, to offer a 6-week on-campus educational experience with financial support to youth 17-29 living in priority investment neighbourhoods.

The primary objective of the program, which has maintained its current format since 2007, was to familiarize youth from underserved neighbourhoods with academic programs and services and to facilitate relationships and mentorships, supporting their academic success, should they ultimately decide to enroll at the College. Community Outreach Office staff were available to assist HYPE students with their applications to full-time study and, through a range of inreach and outreach activities, to continue to engage students, guide them to necessary services within the College, and assist them in attaining their educational goals. Participants had access to sample academic content from several schools/programs, were linked to all college services, and received a Centennial College Certificate of Participation through the College's School of Continuing Education at the end of the program.

In 2010, Centennial embedded HYPE in core College operations as a key element of its community outreach commitment, and the program continues to be offered each summer to approximately 150 participants. At the same time, the Community Outreach Office was mandated to coordinate all College outreach and engagement activities to individuals typically under-

represented in post-secondary education, specifically youth from Priority Investment Neighbourhoods, women in non-traditional careers, and members of the three Nations of the Aboriginal community, recognizing that success may not always be reflected in admission to a college program in the short term.

HYPE is an essential element of this activity and was designed to offer to youth from underserved neighbourhoods accessible opportunities by:

- reducing as many identified barriers to post-secondary involvement as possible;
- providing an on-campus, post-secondary learning experience; and
- establishing and maintaining relationships with staff and mentors to support participants through to the completion of their post-secondary education (<http://www.centennialcollege.ca/hype>)

In his phase one report for the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services on the participant experience of HYPE, Radner (2010) concluded that “although the programs were brief, youth reported real, even profound, changes in their view of themselves, their ability to relate to others, their connection to school and their prospects for the future” (p. 2). Radner’s research explored the role of mentorship and support from program staff in enhancing the interpersonal skills, self-confidence and problem-solving abilities of participants during the 2009 program. According to Radner (2010), of the approximately 150 participants offered the HYPE opportunity each year, about a third register for full-time studies in the succeeding fall or winter semester; and of those, between 30% and 40% have successfully attained a college diploma.

Literature Review

While there is some considerable literature on student recruitment and retention in general, and strategies to improve it, relatively little has been published on specific populations and strategies for engaging some of the most vulnerable youth or on the success of those strategies. Available reports typically focus on the description of small populations and limited interventions once students are “in the system.” Among the strategies identified as contributing to engagement, recruitment and retention in recent research are faculty and peer mentoring, and targeted service interventions by service staff.

Faculty mentoring of students at risk of underperforming has been shown to have a significant effect on improving student retention from semester to semester and over the life cycle of an undergraduate student (Bowles, McCoy & Bates, 2008; Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Igbo et al., 2011; Salinitri, 2005). Faculty mentors typically assisted with student learning, study skills, and educational and personal goal setting.

Targeted interventions delivered by service staff have also been demonstrated to be effective in engaging students at risk. In a large study using data from 115 US colleges, Keup and Barefoot (2005) found that service learning was the only single intervention that led to a significant increase in intent to re-enroll, and that this appeared to be related to increased faculty interaction with students. This study provides evidence that a combination of supportive measures is likely most effective. Another large study (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008), studied the effects of student engagement on performance and persistence with a range of orientation, learning skills, mentoring and other activities, and showed that student engagement in educationally purposeful

activities was positively related to academic outcomes as represented by grades of first-year students and by persistence between the first and second year of college. A one-standard deviation increase in “engagement” during the first year of college increased a student’s GPA by about .04 points. Potts and Schultz (2008) and Jamalske (2009) reported similar improvements in retention and student GPAs with a combination of service and academic interventions.

Malatest and his associates (2009) tested an at-risk diagnostic process and case management intervention at three Ontario colleges. They reported an average Semester 2 GPA of 2.00 for students who had participated in “success” activities, compared to an average of 1.88 for the control group.

Peer mentoring and other peer assistance to students at risk of failure has been less well studied. For example, Lloyd and Eckhardt (2010) investigated the impact of an intensive general chemistry course on student grades and program graduation rates. Students in the intensive course completed the course with higher grades than those in the regular six week and twelve week sections. Of the intervention group, 38% of students ultimately obtained their degree compared with 19% in the regular six week course.

Robinson and Niemer (2010) examined the effectiveness of peer mentor tutoring on program pass rate, GPA, exam scores and attrition. Students in the intervention group attended weekly peer-mentoring sessions for the first four semesters and had, on average, higher exam scores and lower attrition rates than those in the comparison, but no significant difference was found in overall GPA. Those findings are consistent with the assessment reported by Sanchez, Power and Paronto (2006) on the effects of peer-mentoring on retention and attrition and on satisfaction with their institution: students in the experimental group reported greater satisfaction with their institution; data on retention and attrition were not conclusive. Sanchez et al. (2006) also reported on a qualitative analysis of the effects of external factors (inadequate research on the program and resulting poor fit, inadequate preparation in mathematics or other subjects) on retention and attrition.

Jenkins (2007) focused on the value of coordinating student success services with other supportive interventions and an institutional focus on retention using data from 28 American colleges, concluding that high-impact colleges – those with positive retention outcomes – were more likely than low-impact colleges to coordinate their programs and student success services, and that, in general, minority students were more successful in colleges that had support services targeted specifically to their needs.

Ryan (2004) reported on the impact of college expenditures on degree attainment with data from 363 baccalaureate level 1 and 2 institutions. Ryan reported that instructional and academic support expenditures (academic administration and curriculum development, libraries, audio/visual services, and technology support for instruction) produced a positive, significant effect on cohort graduation rates. Student services expenditures, however, did not appear to have a positive or significant effect on degree attainment.

Three recent research reports of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario provide some additional context for assessing post-secondary student attrition, retention and persistence. For example, Lopez-Rabson and McCloy (2013) explored first semester attrition at six colleges in the Greater Toronto Area, where attrition has typically been thought to be higher than elsewhere in the province, and concluded that new patterns of student mobility are emerging. Their analysis revealed that only about half of the early leavers could be considered “true dropouts,” and among those, 85% intended to resume their studies. Half of those not considered “true dropouts” already had a post-secondary credential or were currently attending another educational institution.

Gorman, Tieu and Cook (2013) focused on the role of college preparatory programs in attracting and retaining non-traditional students (that is, those who do not enter directly from high school) in post-secondary education. The qualitative research suggested that the social opportunities facilitated by preparatory programming contributed to the success of mature students by building personal relationships, self-esteem, confidence and interpersonal skills, particularly for those who reported earlier negative educational experiences. There remains a gap in the literature regarding “success rates” for such programs, although Finnie, Childs and Qiu suggested that a focus on “drop-out” and retention rates at an institutional level, rather than a system-wide level, may obscure the diversity of pathways to post-secondary education (2012, p. 5).

To summarize, much of the literature reviewed provides evidence for offering students from first generation and low-achieving backgrounds individualized support to enhance retention. Successes have been reported with all of the engagement interventions studied, including mentoring support from peers and from graduate students, staff and faculty, as well as service support and coaching in enhancing the retention and success of students. The challenge is to deliver the right service to the right student, and then create conditions for success in the regular college setting.

Method

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the barriers and facilitators of retention and attrition of HYPE program participants in regular college programming, and the role of service supports and mentorship in improving the college experience of youth from underserved neighbourhoods. In particular, it sought to:

- Assess barriers experienced by youth from underserved neighbourhoods in accessing regular college programming;
- Understand the role of mentoring in increasing student resilience, interpersonal skills and problem-solving capacity, and how and whether this differs for youth from underserved neighbourhoods;
- Contribute to an enhanced outreach and engagement strategy to support youth from underserved neighbourhoods in post-secondary education.

The HYPE program at Centennial College has given many young people new confidence to return to school by helping to overcome the economic and social barriers that may have interfered with school attendance in the past and by providing a nurturing, inclusive environment for youth aged 17-29, primarily living in the underserved neighbourhoods of Toronto. Benefits include:

- Tuition-free six-week on-campus summer program
- Support for applications for full-time study
- Learning from post-secondary professors
- Classes that include breakfast and lunch
- Students are provided with TTC Tokens (www.centennialcollege.ca/HYPE)

Study Design

Program participants were invited to share basic demographic information and experiences in the form of focus group interviews. Focus groups were conducted with two groups of program participants from the 2011 and 2012 HYPE cohorts, recruited from among those who were enrolled in a College diploma program in January, 2013. Attempts were made to contact HYPE participants who had, so far, not enrolled at the College or who had enrolled but subsequently withdrawn, but the researchers were unable to contact anyone in either of those categories. (At the end of March, 2013, Community Outreach Office staff made a further attempt to contact 2011 and 2012 HYPE participants who were not currently enrolled at the College, and were able to recruit 40 for a follow-up session. Of those, 18 attended the follow-up session and 6 completed admission requirements for the next academic semester.)

The second part of the study consisted of interviews conducted with College faculty members, outreach program staff, and peer mentors who had been involved in HYPE program delivery in either 2011 or 2012, to understand the challenges of working with youth from underserved neighbourhoods and to identify strategies for better serving this population. Taped interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using a content analysis approach to understand the factors contributing to retention and student success.

Data Collection

Data were collected using three sources: Community Outreach Office program administration data, focus group interviews with program participants, and individual telephone interviews with program staff, faculty and peer mentors.

Program Administration Data

The research team had access to limited program administration data, which summarized the performance of participants in the HYPE summer experience as well as their subsequent status in College diploma programs.

Focus Groups with HYPE Participants

The senior researcher invited all students from the 2011 and 2012 HYPE cohorts who were still registered full- or part-time in a College diploma program to participate in a focus group to describe their experience in the HYPE program and their progress as regular diploma students at the College. This process yielded a total of 15 students, who were interviewed in two groups in the last week of January, 2013.

Individual Interviews with HYPE Program Staff, Faculty, and Peer Mentors

All faculty, program staff and peer mentors identified by the program coordinator as involved in HYPE program delivery in 2011 or 2012 were invited to a telephone interview of their experience in the program and to make recommendations for future program development. This process yielded seven interviews of approximately 30 minutes each.

All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed, using a content analysis approach, as described below.

Results

HYPE Program Participation, Conversion, and Retention in Diploma Programs

Data on HYPE program participation, conversion and current status of enrollment and retention were provided in aggregate form by the Manager of the Community Outreach Office, and are summarized in Table 1, below.

Table 1. HYPE Program Participation, Retention, and Graduation by Program Cohort Year.

Year	HYPE Summer Program Participants	Of those, full-time applicants following year	Full time applicants as a percentage of HYPE participants	Graduates as of January, 2013	Interrupted studies, expect to graduate in 2013
2004	56	5	8.9%	n.a.	n.a.
2005	67	12	17.9%	n.a.	n.a.
2006	116	1	0.9%	n.a.	n.a.
2007	101	20	19.8%	3*	n.a
2008	91	25	31.6%	8*	3*
2009	147	37	25.2%	9*	2*
2010	140	37	26.4%	6*	0*
2011	69	20	29.0%		
2012	134	47	35.1%		
Total	921	204	22.1%	26	5

Source: Community Outreach Office – HYPE Program Data

n.a.: not available

** Number may change due to student re-engagement or interruption in study*

Over the nine years HYPE and its predecessor summer experience programs have been offered, 1204 offers were made and a total of 921 youth or 76% from underserved communities completed the HYPE summer experience program; a total of 204 or 22.1% of those who completed the program also completed application requirements and registered in a diploma program the succeeding fall or winter semester. As can be seen in Table 1, the rates of conversion (from HYPE participant to registration in a College diploma program) have risen steadily since 2009, with early indications that program conversions from HYPE in 2012 will be approximately 35%.

Most College diploma programs are either two or three years, so data on graduation rates are still necessarily incomplete. However, it appears that to the end of March, 2013, between 20% and 30% of those who entered in 2008 to 2010 academic years had already successfully completed the program in which they registered. Data were not collected prior to March, 2013 at the outreach

office on the programs in which participants registered, but staff members report the highest enrollment in business and community service programs.

HYPE Participant Focus Groups

A total of 15 participants attended one of the two focus groups conducted in the last week of January 2013, after most had spent at least one semester and often two or three semesters in a College diploma program. Four were male, and 11 were female. Six of the group had attended more than one summer session. Seven had subsequently registered in Early Childhood Education or Community Worker programs, three in Aesthetics, three in Business, one in Hospitality and one in Fine Arts.

The population served by HYPE includes a range of individuals predominantly from the adjacent community. Participants saw themselves at various points along a continuum of engagement: from those who had already made the decision to seek post-secondary education, and were mainly seeking to confirm their decision and/or find an accessible pathway to admission; to those individuals attracted by the potential for experiencing post-secondary education, but who did not necessarily see themselves at the time as candidates for post-secondary education. For them, access to food, transportation and some social interaction, were often as important as the program content. Those who engaged in the study were primarily from the first group.

Several of the interview questions gave rise to lively discussion, for example, around the role of incentives, the adequacy of motivational sessions, and the relative balance between giving a student a taste of college life in a relaxed setting and preparing them for the rigours of actual college attendance. In the data presentation which follows, direct quotes from participants are indicated, followed by identification of the speaker; { } indicates information deleted to maintain privacy of the speaker or other study participants; [] indicates a transitional or explanatory note added by the author.

Students reported on the benefits of being engaged in a number of ways:

HYPE was a big step for me... when I got to first semester in aesthetics, I knew everything because of everything I learned in HYPE ... so I wasn't struggling; I was helping other students (Focus group 2, Student A).

Individual and personal preparation for their new roles were noted as issues for attention:

How to handle how to get into the college... (Focus group 1, Student B).

Being on time as well is really important, and having that day to day homework, college experience, but college attitude as well ... mocking what they would do on a day to day basis (Focus group 1, Student C).

You learn time management...how to put everything into a schedule... [which] helps you to prepare for college life (Focus group 2, Student C).

On the transformation experience, participants searched for ways to describe their experience:

It was a stepping stone. It doesn't honestly prepare you for what college life is about, that you have to navigate on your own.... HYPE was more relaxed, but the real college life was really hectic and sometimes unnerving. But that [hectic experience] was for a semester though, as soon as I went through with that, I was well seasoned in my second semester (Focus group 1, Student A).

The first part of it is actually doing, wanting to be there. Because it's nothing for you if you don't want to be there, it can't do nothing for you. No matter how much money they're offering you, how much tokens they give you, lunch coupons, etc. It doesn't matter, if you don't want to be there you will not achieve anything (Focus Group 1, Student D).

Participants summarized what they saw as the challenge in the following terms:

Honestly going to school, the worst part of it is applying...and they [HYPE] helped you (Focus group 1, Student A).

Role of Faculty

Although several faculty members were cited with approval by HYPE participants, and several participants reported continuing relationships with professors they have met as part of the HYPE experience, concern was expressed about the degree of empathy some of the teachers had for the HYPE population:

As for the professors...they have their diplomas, they're qualified, they've been here for years, and they're seasoned... We need to maybe find professors with a background in helping youth and with the concern and care for the students that we bring here because some of them clearly did not care, it's not that they weren't seasoned or didn't have the education to be teaching they didn't care; they did what they had to do and left after. Or... to make sure they were doing things properly because at the end of the day they got paid like a professor would and they were there to do their job.... And in college no professor holds your hand, if you don't come that's your own business and they taught you the same way, but they're not used to knowing that these are underserved children that might not even want to go to school so you have to do a little hand holding, let them know you care about them and some were not interested in that. And that's why I find you have an issue with professors... (Focus group 1, Student A).

The teachers don't know what they're getting into. When they do know what they're getting into ... the teacher (was like) I had a feeling I was coming in to a bunch of misfits and that's not the truth, it goes from low income, to people who are just getting out of incarceration and you've got to know how to deal with that (Focus group 2, Student C).

Role of Peer Mentors

On the whole, the peer mentors who had had experience of living in an underserved neighbourhood, and had often faced similar challenges with high school, were seen as critical supports to the HYPE participant who was successful in gaining admission to regular College programming:

I think my mentor through HYPE is a big help for me because she helped me through the whole HYPE...I was confused between what I wanted to do for college, whether I wanted to be in justice services or aesthetics, and it's two different things so I'm getting feedback from every single body, all the teachers, everybody, so it made me lay out which one I really want to do. Because either way I'm still helping people but in different ways so my mentor guided me through the whole way of HYPE...my first semester and my second semester and she's still here and one of my closest friends right now so that really opened my eyes... (Focus group 2, Student A).

Personally if I had a mentor as a professor at the school, I wouldn't care to listen but if I had a mentor [who was] someone like me who knows what it is, that's why they chose certain mentors, mentors that would listen to someone like us, not professors (Focus group 1, Student E).

Role of Program Staff

Program staff members fulfilled a range of important functions for youth from underserved communities. The engagement included alerting participants to specific helpful program information, as well as coaching, guiding and individual advocacy:

I was even reluctant to go on OSAP [Ontario Student Assistance Program, the financial assistance program for which most post-secondary students are eligible] because I don't want to get involved with something that I don't fully know about so I really researched it – so maybe they could educate us more on OSAP and the restrictions, so if you go and don't complete you're going to be on academic probation and when you try to get in again, you might not get OSAP... (Focus group 2, Student B).

There were some times I didn't want to come to be honest... and { } would say, it's okay, come, I'll give you lunch, it's cold, come on get up, get on the bus and come, and that really did help.... So you know it's just being not looked after but someone helping you, encouraging you, calling you out, when they don't have to. (Focus group 2, Student C)

Even to this day { } emails me... I was struggling with studying, { } giving me all these tips on studying and things and I like the fact that { } comes to our school every Thursday and checks up on us,...makes sure I'm on point, like I ain't struggling and if I am, what do I need help with (Focus group 2, Student D).

I emailed { }, no word of a lie at 11 o'clock one night, when I didn't know who to ask – I wanted to know a lot of policy in my first semester, they kept giving the CAS [Children's Aid Society is the Ontario agency with

responsibility for the protection of children and youth] number and I was like, this is not what I want to do... and I got an instant reply (Focus group 2, Student B).

I remember not that long ago, { } called me because it was very hard to get me in this school, I had a federal lien [refers to a claim by the federal government against an individual for unpaid taxes or other program benefits; typically individuals with a federal lien are excluded from eligibility for program benefits, including student loans, until the lien has been discharged], no possible way of ever getting any type of financial aid, no such thing ever and the first phase failed but they kept at it...I was just in tears and I had just had an incident where I got my hair ripped out...I ended up getting somewhere to live, { } made sure I got bursaries that I needed ... and I'm here now (Focus group 2, Student E).

I think one thing that was good, bringing it back to { } and { }, is that they could connect to us, they been through their own problems and where they've come from and what they've done so I think that was a plus because I felt more comfortable to go and talk to them, so if you could have more teachers that connected on that aspect.... Because you've got a lot of teachers that come in there ...they're clueless... (Focus group 1, Student A).

They're [the staff] always on top of you...they're on you to make sure your OSAP is in, everything's done on time, they make sure you get the best out of your program...I can call any of them, { } called me this morning, and I think that's what HYPE does, it makes us feel like family. You might have an issue with someone but by the end of the six weeks everyone is best friends (Focus group 1, Student B).

Focus group participants responded thoughtfully to an invitation to consider how the program could be improved:

I don't agree with the incentives. I know they're beneficial, but you don't get incentives for sitting your ass in a chair in college everyday... (Focus group 2, Student B).

The Thursday workshops, some of them were just horrible, they made no sense as to why we had to know this....they [program leaders] thought it was fundamental and then some didn't even show up, they chose people [guest speakers] who were not punctual at all and ran on their own time (Focus group 1, Student C).

HYPE participants made a number of specific recommendations for program modification and/or enhancement. Several participants noted that faculty orientation might be improved to include more "product knowledge" of the "client." Another suggested:

I just want to reiterate that the teacher be trained on what the issues they're going to be facing inside the classrooms, the backgrounds of individuals that they were going to be facing... a lot of them [program participants] come from institutions, detention centres, maybe provincial or [they've done]

federal time. So the stuff that they're going to need to know isn't necessarily always geared towards just education... (Focus group 2, Student C).

Although participants noted many advantages of the incorporation of peer mentors in the program delivery model, and expressed genuine appreciation for supports they had provided both in the summer session and in the subsequent semesters, some participants had witnessed some difficulties and recommended "background checks on your mentors; don't put two mentors that don't like each other together, fights happen..." (Focus group 1, Student C).

Another participant noted the need of HYPE students for help, saying "they take a lot of social work" (Focus group 2, Student A).

Some HYPE participants had concerns that the mandatory Thursday sessions [of the HYPE summer program] were not always presented in the most effective way. The HYPE summer program was organized so that participants focused primarily on academic aspects of the program for three of four days a week, with a series of motivational workshops typically reserved for Thursdays. The motivational workshop program was diverse with presentations by leaders of some of the college services, as well as guest speakers from the community.

The selection of topics and speakers, for example, gave rise to considerable discussion and recommendations. Participants agreed the sessions were an important element in motivating youth, but sought a way for participants to be involved in the selection and development of workshop content:

... it's usually something they've [the program administrators] picked and have interest in and we necessarily don't. And if you want a turn out you definitely could ask the students what they want to hear about, so they'd come and listen and be more involved... (Focus group 1, Student E).

The motivational (workshops) should be definitely mandatory... (Focus group 2, Student A).

Several female participants also referred to the value of workshops, which focused on building self-esteem, and wondered if it were possible to expand this component of the programming:

I think they should do more about splitting up the girls and guys, because when we had – I can't speak for the guys – when we did the girls we had the images that are portrayed for women in the media and to love yourself for you. I think that's important because in HYPE people were coming with low self-esteem and problems of their own and that really helps them (Focus group 2, Student C).

Participants saw the value in increasing the frequency of opportunities for engagement with the College:

I think they should have workshops running throughout the year (Focus group 1, Student B).

Some participants also saw particular value in having access to the College's Physical Education facilities:

And maybe they could provide a way that they could go to the gym, because a lot of students have or the clients will have built up aggression and tension (Focus group 2, Student C).

Participants also recommended that consideration be given to other forms of recognition in addition to the College Continuing Education certificate currently offered. One participant wanted to know if it might be possible to "... see if you can get a certificate after, or a partial credit for the diploma if you go on [to regular study at the College] (Focus group 1, Student B).

Interviews with Faculty, Staff, and Peer Mentors

Short telephone interviews were conducted with three faculty members who had taught in 2011 or 2012, as well as two staff members and three peer mentors who had worked with students in the 2011 or 2012 HYPE cohorts. One of the faculty informants was new to the HYPE program in 2012; the other two had participated in the previous year (2011).

Faculty

The faculty informants were asked to describe their role in the HYPE program and offered the following explanations:

My role was to teach them a few basic skills that would benefit them or help them as well as get them to work on some goals and get them to work on the future and where they'd like to go (Professor A).

I was more showing them a skill that they could learn and do and talking to them and sharing information and getting them to set some goals but I think as far as their appearance, their dress code, all that kind of stuff I tried to influence them a little by giving them uniforms [refers specifically to norms of the { } program/field of practice] to wear so they feel like they're in that role. That they envision themselves in that role... (Professor A).

The teachers distinguished HYPE participants from their usual classes:

We're assuming that the students that are coming in [to HYPE] probably have had difficulty in school before and they've had difficulty moving on to post-secondary school on their own. What we do is set up the first part of the course to be about conflict resolution, so a lot of life skills, being able to deal with conflict... time management and ... communication, so we work on all the key areas that involve being successful in the school from a social perspective (Professor B).

I think it [HYPE] de-mystifies it [college life]. From my experience I had a lot of difficulty in high school and I came from a more privileged neighbourhood in { }, but in my experience with school, high schools see

one route for students, and they're not very good at helping student to see the possibilities if they don't fit in to the regular school system. So ... [HYPE] makes it accessible and they've designed it so that the assignments are short but there's a lot of them, so continually assessing the students and giving them feedback so there are a lot of opportunities for success ... I think that is a big benefit to them.... They're linked up to the administration of the College, to help them understand how to navigate the College and so that also helps... (Professor B).

I have a couple [of HYPE participants] in my regular class... and I get a real kick out of it, you know, when I see them there I say, wow this is great this whole thing is working... (Professor C).

One of the faculty informants focused on what she thought was a real program success story:

I had a mentor last year who was in my course the year before and I had identified her as someone that had a lot of difficulty with her literacy. I was really concerned about her ability to write, she had missed a lot of stuff because she was in a violent relationship, and she was a young mom. Because we identified that she got linked up and she got the support she needed ... she ended up by January getting in the police foundations program. By the time she was in my [regular] class she was running every morning as part of the program. She was taking her daughter out; she'd put the baby in the stroller...and go running... (Professor B).

The faculty informants were eager to share observations and recommendations for improvement. Two of the three noted that their orientation to the HYPE summer program included a briefing by the Outreach Manager, but they still had some concerns.

In the class I taught there was quite a variance between the students, I mean some were really motivated and some were much more capable than others... I found it difficult at times managing a class that had those variations in terms of student behaviour. I hadn't taught at the college before so just finding out where the resources are was a challenge (Professor C).

Like the program participants, faculty informants had concerns about the best approach to effectively engage the youth.

My main concern with the program was that I'm not sure we were fair ... to the students in terms of expectations. And by that I mean the expectations were not high enough on the part of the program for their performance (Professor C).

Faculty made a range of recommendations, which they hoped would lead to a better experience. On classroom management, for example, while they acknowledged the value of the existing faculty orientation, informants had several constructive suggestions about classroom management.

Communication between the management of the program and the teachers could be better ... A person who hasn't done it [taught in the HYPE program] before [could have] a session with some of the other teachers ...

just to find out what works for them and what doesn't. Also I was under the impression that there shouldn't be marking ... and then I heard that some teachers do actually mark assignments and so I wasn't quite clear on the best course of action with this group... (Professor C).

The faculty informants considered it important to provide feedback on how youth could be better prepared in the event they sought admission to regular College diploma programming.

What I would have is some sort of midterm evaluation of every student, and the ones that weren't really putting forward the effort that's required or struggling in some way [you could provide] some one on one attention on how they can improve... (Professor C).

If I was running the show... accountability, I would say it's either a pass or a fail. I did give, I believe, three written tests and three practical tests just to make them realize that they do have to study, that they do have to prove that they can move to the next component... (Professor A).

Faculty spoke very highly of the role of peer mentors, noting that some managed this role better than others:

I think the mentors really need to understand more and so it was just fortunate they had that ECE, like the child and youth worker in my program last year so it was a good fit and so she really helped me...(Professor B).

Program Staff

Both program staff members who responded to the invitation to a telephone interview have had experience at the college for some years, including working in other programs. They noted that their role encompassed both outreach – linking with and engaging prospective program participants in the community – and what they described as inreach: providing supports to those who chose to seek admission to ensure they had a successful experience.

One of the program staff described a

... two pronged role ... one is looking at and supporting non-traditional students in areas where women represent less than 20 per cent of the workforce, so that means my focus is primarily on skilled trades, engineering, math, sciences, policing....

The other definition, that fits a little bit better with the Community Outreach Office is looking at women living in poverty where post-secondary education in and of itself is non-traditional, so dealing with more of the higher risk population in helping them with the confidence and momentum to be able to come back and pursue post-secondary education... (Program Staff B).

Another program staff person focused on creating a caring environment:

For those who have had a negative impact or negative experience within the school system whether it be secondary or post-secondary, they're wary of

school, so I think having a program like HYPE is a ... way to help them transition, to see that it is possible, that it is a caring environment and it is somewhere where they can be successful. A lot of the students we see have major self-esteem issues when it comes to their education (Program Staff A).

The program staff informants typically began by describing the academic content of the HYPE program but moved quickly to the benefits of engagement:

Not only does it give a taste of college and provide free education and learning materials, it also eliminates any barriers participants have to learning ... because assistance is provided with breakfast, lunch and TTC [transportation] (Program Staff A).

It's getting connected with the college... [reducing] the intimidation factor... And they're experiencing so many things in the HYPE program, they become friends so they develop a support group. In addition to the support they receive from us [HYPE staff], they receive the support of their other classmates which is pretty neat. They ... get to know other colleagues as well, people that work for financial aid, people that work in counseling office – it's like they get a head start (Program Staff B).

Central to the engagement experience in HYPE was the focus for program staff on creating a durable positive relationship with the participants:

It's different than just recruiting, getting people in a program, we're actually creating a relationship with these participants, even those who chose not to pursue full time studies at Centennial we're still keeping a relationship with these participants, whether it's helping them find work, whether it's just helping them in the right direction and the right path. We find that this has been really effective and it's been one of our greatest strengths, you know the relationship building aspect of it (Program Staff A).

Program staff members were particularly sensitive to the accessibility issues of underserved youth and strategies for individual advocacy on a broad range of issues, including program design:

... on top of that exposure to post-secondary, a sort of base needs that are being met there with food and transportation assistance, day care coverage service to those that qualify for child care expenses to the Ontario ODSP [a component of the provincial social assistance programming intended to support disadvantaged adults improve their employability], so those are some of the base needs that are being met. I know we had students over the summer last year that would admit eating at the college was the only time they got to eat so having some of those base needs met leads to the continued relationship building and support (Program Staff B).

The Community Outreach Office program staff members were the main links for participants between the summer HYPE experience and the transition to regular student life at the College and so the brunt of addressing the transitional challenges fell to them:

... you have to balance it out with the outreach and inreach but both are equally important... It gives me great pride to know that students that we

have from HYPE programs are, I would say like my family, like my kids. I want to make sure that they are succeeding before they come to college ... It's a constant checking in and making sure everything is going smoothly (Program Staff A).

The program staff informants focused on strategies they had found successful in facilitating the transition from HYPE to regular program admission, but were also concerned to engage and maintain relationships with those not currently interested in college admission:

Implement ... a more structured exit strategy so that if they haven't applied ... saying, what can we do to help you at this point, either what do you need to do to get all your ducks lined up to make it to post-secondary? Are you looking to apply to another institution? Are you looking for work and how can we help facilitate your success... (Program Staff B).

Peer Mentors

Peer mentors are typically graduates of the HYPE program who are supported in part during their second or third academic years by the Ontario Work Study Plan [an Ontario post-secondary education support program, designed to provide on-campus work experience for full-time students who require assistance in covering their education-related costs which are not necessarily covered by the OSAP; the program funds 75% of the salary (up to \$1,000 max per term) of eligible students employed part-time in on-campus jobs]. In addition to their work in the HYPE summer experience program, eligible mentors have assisted the next generation of HYPE participants in making the transition to full-time College study.

One of the mentors who responded to the invitation for a telephone interview was involved in mentoring in both 2011-12 and 2012-13 academic years. The other was a mentor in the 2011-12 academic year, and had since graduated and gone on to work in a community agency in the neighbourhood.

The description offered by a faculty informant characterized the role as an essential link:

I'm the faculty and I'm teaching but then we have a mentor in the class who is a student who's been in the program ... they're on their way back into another year...and so they're the ones that link them [HYPE participants] to the staff in the outreach program and that is a key element of the program (Professor B).

One of the peer mentor informants summarized her understanding of the role in the following terms:

... the second year I was more able to work with a few students that were really, really struggling – I was able to do more informal counseling and I knew the college better, so I was able to help them find resources outside of school as well... it's a lot of information sharing and helping them create networks and things like that... (Peer Mentor A).

The Peer Mentor informants were particularly mindful of the value of their experience as role models for the next generation of HYPE participants:

It makes college attainable in their own minds. It opens them up too. A lot of them[program participants] don't have a lot of people to look up to and people who are supportive and really positive in their life, so it gives them people that will support them and be positive ... it also allows them to meet other people in their same situation... (Peer Mentor B).

Their mindset changes as a result. It gives them a group of people that are in the same boat as them but want better for their own lives. A lot of the girls come from abusive relationships, I've encountered many of them, and I think it ... boosts their self-esteem definitely ... (Peer Mentor A).

One of the peer mentors spoke emphatically to the value of field trips facilitated by the HYPE summer experience:

... we toured different facilities that had to do with the human services field, like community centres, we went to one of the courts ... I really feel the need to do that in more classrooms. It ... definitely broadens their horizons, and it enables them to connect with people because ultimately, especially in human services, the more people you know, the better chance you have in getting jobs and getting accepted in further education (Peer Mentor A).

The peer mentors, in common with other study participants, were quick to focus on strategies for improving service:

...sometimes it's a little bit unorganized in how they [staff] recognize who has what issues, so when they meet the students, they gather that information right there. Because a lot of them are single moms, things like... child care is an issue. Because a lot of them (students) haven't worked and don't know that process, it's scary...

And you need to do it all in time, some of them don't do it soon enough.....then you're scrounging to help them. So if they're able to do that at the beginning, I think it would make everybody's job a lot easier (Peer Mentor B).

One of the peer mentor informants described the catch-22 of some of the student financial assistance available to regular post-secondary students:

A big one for some of my students was the bursary that HYPE gives. It's great but it's based on financial need.... When you live in [social] housing, it's very hard to demonstrate financial need because you have low rent [even though other costs may be higher] (Peer Mentor A).

In common with the faculty informants and HYPE participants, the peer mentor informants acknowledged the range of engagement demonstrated by the summer experience program participants and wondered if a variation on available incentives might work:

... sometimes with a free program, not all the students necessarily take it as seriously as they could so I thought an incentive would be, if they were able to structure that summer six week course where if they went to [the College] they could use that as like a GNED [a foundational course which is required

of all diploma students prior to graduation], I think that would be incredible... (Peer Mentor B).

Discussion

The HYPE program has evolved over the past eight years as a major initiative of the College Outreach Office. Designed to engage underserved youth primarily in the east part of Toronto where the College is located, the program offered a “taste” of college life to young people for whom the prospect of attending college was remote and often intimidating.

Key elements of the program, offered each summer to approximately 150 youth, included a six week summer experience and an opportunity to sample academic content from a wide variety of programs, as well as to get a realistic sense of the process of gaining admission to a post-secondary institution. Central to the program model was the use of peer mentors and Community Outreach Office program staff as guides in the engagement process. Academic content for the HYPE summer experience was delivered by regular College faculty, and Outreach program staff worked with other College services to familiarize youth with possible pathways to post-secondary education for those whose prior experience of secondary or post-secondary education had not been successful, or who had not been successful in gaining admission to the College.

In addition to often problematic academic records that made it difficult for those with non-standard records to be accepted into the College or to compete successfully for admission to limited enrollment programs, most youth from underserved areas faced a range of other barriers, as this research has indicated. Some had youth justice records, which would have affected their admissibility to some programs; many of the young women had young children, and may or may not have had adequate family and social supports to allow them to be successful in post-secondary education. Most faced financial barriers not fully met by the regular college financial assistance programs. Barriers to entry were also complicated for some by literacy issues or learning disabilities.

While student retention and attrition has been an issue of concern for many years, and the educational literature is replete with studies of academic and service interventions once students had been admitted to a college or university, research focused on engaging underserved youth from a student-centred perspective is very modest, consequently a major consideration in the design of the current study was to attempt to understand barriers to access more clearly from the point of view of the program participant.

Program Success

One of the unique features of the HYPE program is its focus on engagement, which stresses the building of a positive relationship with program participants whose earlier educational experiences did not often lead them directly from high school to college or university. Additional program supports delivered during the summer experience by faculty members and invited speakers provided important opportunities for program participants to expand their horizons, and the network of support provided particularly in the first regular semester by program staff and peer mentors appear to be the features most often mentioned as attractions for youth from the underserved communities.

The HYPE participants who attended the focus groups spoke eloquently of the benefits of the opportunity of a reasonably accessible and short term experience, the “taste” of college

programming and its power to demystify the post-secondary experience. An integrated support program, featuring at least two distinct levels of engagement, provided additional opportunities not always available to those from underserved areas.

Senior students who had already been successful in navigating some of the barriers were hired as peer mentors to assist HYPE participants during the summer and in some follow-up activities during the academic year. The mandate of the peer mentor was to problem-solve with HYPE participants where that was possible, and to refer participants to the Community Outreach Office program staff as necessary.

Program staff, each with roots in the community and specific expertise in outreach to diverse communities and/or knowledge of and linkages with specific College services collaborated to build capacity for both HYPE participants and peer mentors to:

1. Show HYPE participants pathways to success that they have often not known to date, and
2. Focus on building trusting relationships which would help participants weather the difficulties of getting admitted to and succeeding at college.

Improving Program Delivery

As our research has demonstrated, the HYPE summer experience had a transformative effect on youth for at least the 40% of each cohort who proceeded to post-secondary education. However, the time to complete admission requirements, particularly for limited enrollment programs for the next academic session, was very short, and completing admission requirements (transfer of transcripts or other evidence of prior learning, successful completion of mandatory entrance examinations) in time and/or addressing challenges in the personal living situations of some HYPE participants compromised their short-term potential for success.

This gave rise to a staff brainstorming discussion of the initial research results to seek ways to identify individual barriers a little earlier in the summer so that those who make the decision to seek admission are more likely to be successful on their first try. Among the immediate strategies identified were pre-screening of applicants and the reorganization of program resources to expedite applications for admission from this cohort through the College system.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis reported, the researchers offered a series of recommendations for program enhancement in the following broad areas:

1. **Improving the HYPE summer experience and program design for participants:** More direct engagement of program participants in content selection, improved faculty and staff development, facilitation of access to added resources, for example, physical education facilities, field trips, and measures to improve administrative data collection and program documentation.

2. **Transitions to full-time study:** Consider strategies to facilitate earlier identification and supports for HYPE participants likely to seek admission to the next available academic session, and consider additional strategies and referral options to accommodate the needs of those who are not currently in a position to follow through directly to post-secondary education.
3. **HYPE program frequency and options:** In addition to expanding content and outreach/engagement opportunities during the academic year, consider potential of transfer credit for some HYPE program content.

Conclusion

The qualitative research focused on how gains in interpersonal and problem-solving skills and making a connection with one or more mentors at the College related to student success. Results from this small study suggest that providing students from underserved communities with an opportunity like HYPE facilitates entry to post-secondary education for a population that has been traditionally underserved in post-secondary education. It also points to a number of promising directions for further research and program improvement.

Study Limitations

This was an exploratory study, which focused on assessing the barriers to post-secondary education for underserved youth and potential pathways to facilitate their earlier and successful engagement in post-secondary education, and this paper elaborates on the critical role of the HYPE summer experience and the integrated follow-up coordinated by the Outreach Office. Because of the relative newness of the Outreach program, and an intentional focus on community outreach rather than college recruitment, a more robust analysis of outcomes has not been possible. However, the qualitative analysis suggests there could be considerable benefit to designing a study that focused more directly on factors affecting successful outcomes for this critical population in our community.

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Appendix A: Surveys/Interview Guides

- I. For HYPE participants who have subsequently registered for a post-secondary program at Centennial.

Focus Group to explore experiences of HYPE Summer Program Experience, benefits and challenges of outreach supports in preparing traditionally underserved participants for post-secondary study – to be administered between January 8 and 31, 2013 to about 10 participants from the 2009-2011 and 2012 HYPE cohorts.

Those recruited will be explicitly reminded of digital taping of the interview as per information sheet [above], and asked to consent.

1. Intro: go around the table for first name, current program and HYPE cohort attended.
2. What was your experience with the HYPE summer program at the college?
3. What was the most challenging part of the HYPE?
4. What parts of the HYPE program was most helpful in getting you ready for a post-secondary career? Can you tell me a little about how that helped?
5. What parts of the HYPE program were not so helpful or did not work well? Can you tell me more about that?
6. What is the most important thing you learned at HYPE that you think will help you be successful at college/university?
7. What has it been like attending college in the program you chose? Did the HYPE experience prepare you for that?
8. Was there anything outside your current academic program that you think may affect your success? (Probe: costs, work, family or child care considerations, role model, mentor, coming from the neighbourhood I come from, etc)
9. What changes would you suggest to the HYPE program? (prompt: any knowledge or skills gaps? Cost? Time? Resources?)
10. What do you think the HYPE program designers need to know or to keep in mind to support you better in your post-secondary career? What should stay? What should go? What new content might be helpful?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on?

Thank you on behalf of the research team.

II. For HYPE Faculty, Staff, and Mentors involved in program delivery to participants in the 2011 or 2012 cohorts.

Short telephone interview to understand experiences of faculty, staff and mentors in delivering and supporting participants in HYPE Summer Program Experience – to be administered between January 8 and 23, 2013 to 5-10 selected individuals involved in program delivery and support to one or more of the 2009 -2012 HYPE cohorts.

Those recruited will be explicitly reminded of digital taping of the interview as per information sheet [above], and asked to consent.

1. How long have you been involved in delivering the HYPE Program at Centennial College?
2. Can you briefly describe your role and/or activities?
3. What do you see as the benefits of a program like HYPE in familiarizing youth from underserved neighbourhoods with post-secondary education in 2012?
4. Are there challenges that concern you? For the youth? For program delivery staff?
5. What are the benefits of the providing an experience like HYPE to underserved youth?
6. Please describe the challenges you have encountered while being involved in supporting HYPE program participants.
7. What supports/structures are needed to support these participants more effectively?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on?

Thank you on behalf of the research team.