Evidence Brief

Seven Good Practices for Encouraging Youth to Attend
Post-Secondary School

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, Google, and Google Scholar using the following key terms: "post-secondary education", "college", "high school", "transition", and "youth".

Summary of Evidence:

**Seven Good Practices for Encouraging Youth to Attend Post-Secondary School –
and for Supporting the Transition from Secondary to Post-Secondary School**

1. **Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.**
   Research shows that the intersections of race, gender, income, parental education, and special needs affect access to post-secondary education in Canada (Finnie et al., 2015; Robson et al., 2016). Organizations should be mindful of differences among youth, and develop flexible, comprehensive programs that allow young people to participate in a diversity of activities according to their individual needs and interests. For example, the Pathways to Education program is structured around four 'pillars' of support (counselling, academic, social, and financial), and includes regular meetings with a case worker, tutoring, group activities, career counselling, college transition assistance, and financial support. This model has been effective in increasing high school graduation and post-secondary enrollment (Oreopoulous et al., 2017).

2. **Include mentoring opportunities.**
   Marginalized students often lack support networks that can raise aspirations and expectations about post-secondary education. Mentors can help mitigate these barriers by building a young person's **social capital** – the benefit that comes from social networks and that enables individuals to achieve in ways that they may not be able to on their own (Shier et al., 2018). Access to social capital has been linked to more successful transitions from high school to post-secondary school (Klasik, 2012; Klevan et al., 2015; Stephan, 2013).

   Organizations serving marginalized youth should recruit mentors with similar backgrounds as the communities they serve. Research has shown that mentoring is most impactful and meaningful when mentors have overcome adversity and can relate to shared life experiences, particularly

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for Black and racialized youth (Jarjoura, 2013). Mentors with similar backgrounds can serve as role models, and even confidants, as students might feel more comfortable talking to them about their struggles (Maher & Bertin, 2013). They can provide valuable information, advice, and social contacts during this challenging time.

3. **Foster spaces where youth can meet and develop relationships with trusted adults.**
   There is evidence that youth benefit from relationships with trusted adults: non-parental adults "with whom young people are willing to be vulnerable or whom they are willing to risk relying on" (Meltzer et al., 2018, p. 576). Trusted adults differ from formal mentors, as they are people who youth have independently *chosen* to trust. They may offer support, encouragement, and role modeling, as well as practical assistance such as coaching or tutoring, assistance with resources, and helping youth out of difficult situations. Organizations can encourage the development of these relationships by fostering intergenerational community spaces. Keep in mind that paid professionals, such as youth workers, can also become trusted adults, and pay attention to the institutional context in which these relationships develop.

4. **Focus on social and emotional skill development.**
   Emotional and social competencies are important in the successful transition from high school to university (Parker et al., 2004). Instead of focusing solely on academic abilities, organizations should strive to support resilience factors such as intrapersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management (Marcotte et al., 2014). Recognize that marginalized young people often experience more challenges during this period. For instance, first-generation students report feeling more anxious, less confident, and more isolated than other students (Davis, 2010; Martinez et al., 2009); many feel disconnected or misunderstood by their families and communities upon transitioning to post-secondary school (Davis, 2010).

5. **Offer practical guidance to demystify post-secondary education.**
   Schools often fail to provide students with adequate information about post-secondary options, financial aid, and career opportunities (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Meltzer et al., 2018). Many marginalized students lack access to social networks where they can find this information, and they might struggle with academic jargon when accessing existing resources (Brown et al., 2016). They can benefit from practical guidance on the application process, academic expectations, and day-to-day post-secondary life.

   It is particularly important to educate students about the costs and benefits of post-secondary education, as those most in need of support are generally not aware of financial aid opportunities (Baum & Flores, 2011). Evidence suggests that low-income students and their parents/caregivers often *overestimate the costs* and *underestimate the benefits* of post-secondary

education (Miner, 2011; Pathways to Education, 2016). A recent study found that many Canadian students who cite financial barriers can afford higher education but do not see the *value* in it (Finnie et al., 2015). Youth workers can counsel students about different sources of financial aid and help them make informed decisions, keeping in mind that some low-income students might be particularly debt averse.

6. **Reach out early.**
Marginalized youth are often challenged by 'the violence of low expectations': the tendency of stigma and stereotypes to produce low aspirations (Ramsaroop, 2015). There is strong evidence that applied/academic streaming in Ontario's school system contributes to widening achievement gaps and perpetuates economic and educational disparities (Hamiln & Cameron, 2015; OECD, 2012). Data from 65 countries show that streaming produces lower outcomes for lower-income groups, in part due to differences in teachers' expectations (OECD, 2013).

Organizations should engage students at a young age in order to offer a source of support and inspiration, and counsel students on how they can apply their skills and interests towards different majors and career paths. If possible, work with Grade 8 students to ensure that they understand the implications of their course selections, such as the importance of taking and passing key 'gatekeeper courses' (Bangser, 2008). Early interventions can also harness young people's upwardly mobile aspirations to better support transitions from secondary school (Shier et al., 2018).

7. **Engage parents/caregivers.**
Family plays an important role in informing students' choices about post-secondary education (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Ross, 2015). Parental/caregiver involvement in education has been shown to improve academic achievement, graduation rates, and the transition into – as well as attainment in – post-secondary education (Glogowski & Ferreira, 2015). Organizations should consider engaging parents/caregivers through parent/caregiver education programs and student-parent/caregiver counselling sessions. Entrusting individual staff with the responsibility of engaging parents/caregivers has proven beneficial for many programs (Glogowski & Ferreira, 2015). Keep in mind that different levels of parental/caregiver support can create different kinds of pressure, and find out how to best support individual students in their decision-making.

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