



Category:	Student Financial Aid
Topic:	Career Seek Program
Approved:	December 2, 2007
Revisited:	N/A
Amended:	N/A
Expires:	N/A

Whereas:

Introduction

The Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations (ANSSA) is organized around the guiding principle that all willing and qualified students should be able to attend post-secondary education, regardless of their financial situation. But Nova Scotia's experience with the "Career Seek" pilot program clearly illustrates that there are a number of systemic and specific barriers to access to education that still exist for some of the province's most vulnerable populations, namely low-income single-parents on income assistance. Therefore, ANSSA calls on the province to implement a number of long and short-term recommendations that, if acted upon, will help to reduce the barriers faced by these students.

This policy was developed in consultation with a number of community organizations and poverty activists, as well as through the inclusion of suggestions and recommendations from ANSSA's Student Assembly delegates. It is not intended to be a comprehensive document outlining all of the barriers faced by this significantly under-represented group in Nova Scotia's universities – single parents on income assistance. Instead, it is intended to serve a very specific and timely purpose: to make changes to the province's Career Seek program for the remainder of its mandate. In order to provide the context in which these recommendations are being made, below some of the background of the Career Seek program is discussed, as well as many of the barriers that low-income single parents face in their efforts to obtain a university degree.

Career Seek Background

On October 26, 2006, the Department of Community Services announced a new pilot program, Career Seek. Career Seek allows income assistance recipients to continue to receive income assistance while they attend post-secondary programs of more than two years in length, a previously prohibited practice. The pilot program set aside spots for fifty individuals each year, over four years (beginning in 2007) to participate. In order to be approved to participate in Career Seek, there are a number of eligibility criteria:

- applicants must be on income assistance for 12 consecutive months;
- applicants must not have been previously supported by Community Services to attend a post-secondary program of any kind (e.g., community college);
- applicants must complete a Nova Scotia employability assessment; and applicants must enroll in a program that links to a career which will meet "the demands of the labour market."

Once applicants are accepted into the program, they are then required to apply for every scholarship, bursary and low-income housing unit available to them. Participants are also expected to carry the maximum student load debt (approximately \$12,000 per year). Career Seek case workers then attempt to identify gaps between participants' resources and needs. The Career Seek program then fills the participants' unmet need.

Early in the 2007 fall term, the current Minister of Community Services, Judy Streach, announced her disappointment that of the fifty spots available in the Career Seek program in the 2007-2008 year, only two spots were taken. Further investigation into the program reveals that the eligibility criteria listed above present many barriers for those on income assistance to enter the program.

In addition to the specific deficiencies of the Career Seek program, there are a number of other, interacting barriers that are preventing students from under-represented groups, in this case, students with dependents and students on income assistance from gaining access to post-secondary institutions.

Regulation 67 and other Access Barriers

A study from the Canadian Policy Research Networks shows that students from high-income families are two to three times more likely to go on to university than youth from low-income families¹. The study concludes that while financial considerations play a role in determining access, parental education and expectations along with geography have a strong impact on the decision-making related to educational pathways. In addition to these overlapping barriers, Canadians from low-income families are more likely to overestimate the cost of undergraduate university tuition and significantly underestimate the average salary of a university graduate². To illustrate this point, Alex Usher notes that while the average annual income differential between high school and university graduates is \$27,191, Canadians in general and low-income Canadians specifically, underestimate the differential as being \$4,885. Other studies confirm the suggestion that students from low-income families are under-represented in post-secondary education and that this barrier in access has remained constant from 1993 and 2001³. According to Usher and Junor in the *Price of Knowledge*, "low-income students, on average, suffer from a family environment that is unsupportive of education – a by-product of economic insecurity (the unequal environment theory, which is closely related to cultural capital theory)⁴."

¹ De Broucker, Patrice & Katherine Mortimer. (March 2005). Getting There and Staying There: Low-income Students and Post-Secondary Education Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, p.2.

² Usher, Alex. (July 2005). A Little Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing: How Perceptions of Costs and Benefits Affect Access to Education Toronto: Educational Policy Institute.

³ Drolet, Marie. (2005). Participation in post-secondary education in Canada: Has the role of parental income and education changed over the 1990s? Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

⁴ Usher, Alex & Sean Junor. (2004). The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, p.99.

Presently in Canada there is a serious and growing disparity in university participation rates between young people from low-income and high-income families. Statistics Canada has reported that participation rates for low-income groups increased from the late seventies to the late nineties, but the percentage difference in participation between the highest income and lowest income quartiles has remained roughly the same at 20%⁵. Approximately 40% of individuals between 18-21 years old from families in the highest income quartile attend university. However, only 24% of 18-21 year olds who come from families in the lower middle income quartile attend university and a mere 19% of those from the lowest income quartile attend university⁶. Thirty-six per cent of individuals who completed high school but did not continue on to post-secondary studies reported that their decision was due, in part, to financial barriers⁷.

The barriers for students from low-income backgrounds to attend post-secondary education are clear and evidence-based. For those from low-income backgrounds who are also single parents, the barriers are increased significantly. The Canadian and Nova Scotian student assistance programs were not designed with the needs of students with dependants in mind. The overwhelming majority of students attending post-secondary institutions are “traditional students” who are still considered to be dependants themselves. Therefore the student financial assistance program does not adequately fund all of the costs for a single parent attending university. Fortunately, until 2000, single parents on income assistance in Nova Scotia were eligible for student loans to cover the costs of their education and income assistance to cover the living costs for themselves and their child(ren). However, in 2000, the provincial government introduced new regulations that prohibited this practice except for income assistance recipients attending two-year program, effectively cutting off assistance for single parents interested in attending three or four year university programs to further their education and training.

Regulation 67 of the Department of Community Services Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) program states that:

67(1) A person attending a post-secondary education program of more than 2 years shall not receive assistance unless the person is

(a) funded to attend by the Employability Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Program, which is a program for adults with vocational handicaps funded by Human Resources Development Canada in partnership with the Government of Nova Scotia⁸.

When Career Seek was introduced in 2006 this provision was added to the Regulation:

⁵ Corak, Miles, Garth Lippas and John Zhao. (October 2003). Family Income and Participation in Post-secondary Education. Ottawa: Statistics Canada Family and Labour Studies Division, pg 11.

⁶ Statistics Canada *Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID)*, 1998.

⁷ Looker, E. Dianne. (2001). Why Don't They Go On? Factors Affecting the Decisions of Canadian Youth Not to Pursue Post-Secondary Education. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

⁸ Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, Employment Support and Income Assistance Regulations http://www.gov.ns.ca/just/regulations/regs/esiaregs.htm#TOC2_7

(b) a participant in the Career Seek Pilot Project, which is a pilot project to support eligible individuals attending post-secondary education programs.

Regulation 67 itself creates unnecessary additional financial barriers for single parents on income assistance and while Career Seek was intended to compensate for these barriers, the eligibility criteria and lack of flexibility being used to implement Career Seek means that the program has so far been ineffective in reaching the neediest students.

Therefore, ANSSA:

Recommendations

Given that current support levels for low-income single parents in the form of Regulation 67 and the various provisions of the Career Seek pilot program do not align with ANSSA's guiding principle that every willing and qualified student should have equal access to a post-secondary education regardless of financial situation, ANSSA calls on the provincial government to address these access barriers through the implementation of the following long-term and short-term recommendations.

Long-term

Recommendation One: The provincial government must develop a holistic poverty reduction strategy that recognizes the central role of investments in higher education;

Recommendation Two: The provincial government must repeal Regulation 67 of the Employment Support & Income Assistance Act, thus allowing income assistance recipients to qualify for student assistance.

Short-term

ANSSA calls on the provincial government to implement the following recommendations immediately in order to use the funds already set-aside for the Career Seek pilot project to their maximum utility. These changes would introduce more flexibility into the program and should be implemented with the intent to serve the neediest students.

Recommendation Three: The provincial government must ensure a balance of loans, grants and social assistance funding for students with dependants through removing the Career Seek provision that requires participants to take out the full maximum student loan amount.

Recommendation Four: The provincial government must change the Career Seek eligibility criteria that requires participants to be on income assistance for twelve consecutive months to six consecutive months, with preferential treatment for those who have been on income assistance longer.

Recommendation Five: The provincial government must allow Career Seek participants to choose the career plan of their choice, including program of study, in the same way that every other university student is permitted.

Recommendation Six: The provincial government must develop a clear, effective, transparent, and unbiased appeals system.

Recommendation Seven: The provincial government must remove the Career Seek provision that prevents those who have already benefited from some training from receiving support through Career Seek to attend university.

Recommendation Eight: The provincial government must be more proactive and flexible in the filling of Career Seek spots in an effort to use all of the funds already set-aside for the pilot program's four year term.

Recommendation Nine: The provincial government must include a grandfather clause for those already accepted into Career Seek that would allow them to continue to receive their current levels of support.