

*“Enhancing Student Success in Post-secondary Education”*

**Seneca College Background:**

Seneca College is the largest College of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) in Canada with a full time enrolment of almost 18,000 students and 90,000 part-time registrants annually. Seneca has three main campuses, one in the northeast section of Toronto, one on the campus of York University and one northwest of Toronto in King City. Seneca offers over 170 diploma and certificate programs, and since 2002, four applied degree programs.

**Project Overview:**

Student attrition at the post-secondary level has long been a concern at Seneca. The most recent graduation rate of 50.8%, as calculated according to Ontario provincial Key Performance Indicator requirements, meant the college was ranked lowest among the 24 CAATs. Seneca has fluctuated around this mark since the inception of the provincial KPI reporting system. The system average in 2003 was 57.1% with the highest ranking college reporting a graduation rate of 70.1%. The graduation rates from diploma programs are unacceptably low, and intervention strategies aimed at enhancing student success are urgently needed. In fact, the college established a goal of increasing the graduation rate by 10% within the lifespan of its new Strategic Plan. With that goal in mind, the college began assessing previous retention activities, researching best practices from other institutions, and seeking collaborative financial and academic opportunities.

Students who participated in the study were drawn from the School of Accounting and Finance (SAF) within Seneca's Faculty of Business. The present enrolment in the two diploma programs, which account for the majority of the activity in SAF, is in excess of 1300 full-time students. The two year Accounting (ACC) program is accessible to high school graduates and provides them with a solid grounding in accounting principles and practices, taxation, business law, relevant computer applications, and a wide variety of 'soft' skills including organizational behaviour, ethics and business communications, leading to entry-level positions in accounts

payable/receivables, general accounting or income tax preparation. The three-year Accounting and Finance (ACF) program provides students with a more extensive knowledge of financial accounting, cost and management accounting, taxation, financial management and computer application.

Seneca has a large second language student population, and the SAF has a disproportionately high percentage of ESL students in its programs. For that reason, and others, which we hope to learn through the study, the two programs have a low graduation rate, with ACC being just over 40% for the last three years and ACF being around 36% over the last three years. Because of the size of the School, the fact that it is comprised of two large programs, and its high attrition rate, SAF was chosen to participate in this study.

**Project Goals:**

- create and pilot a Learner Support Centre (LSC) within Seneca College as an integrating hub working proactively with selected programs and students
- identify and select non-financial risk factors to be included in this study
- assess and identify selected groups of incoming students at high risk for non-completion
- direct and support students in participating in appropriate existing or new intervention strategies
- collect the data and evaluate the impact on student outcomes and success
- extrapolate from the pilot study, factors essential for effective replication of Learner Support Centres in other Canadian contexts
- identify policy implications based on the findings
- disseminate findings, best practices and recommendations through HRSDC, Assoc. of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) Assoc. of Colleges of Applied Arts & Technology of Ontario (ACAATO), and other academic venues

The Learner Support Centre staff administered an "at risk" assessment tool, the Freshman Integrated Tracking System (FITS). After this tool identified the at risk students, they were randomly selected to participate in the project and randomly assigned to one of three groups. The experimental group was required to participate in one or more of four intervention strategies,

as appropriate to their at risk profile. The voluntary group was invited, but not required, to participate in the intervention strategies, and the third group, the control group, was to have no intervention of any kind but were able to access the services at their own initiative.

**The four intervention strategies that will be used in the project are as follows:**

- 1) **Language Skills Remediation** - 1:1 tutoring with the objective of moving the student from placement in Seneca's remedial English subject (EAC 149) to qualify for entry into the college level course (EAC 150);
- 2) **Math Remediation** - 1:1 tutoring with the objective of success in the remedial level math course;
- 3) **Career Clarification** - uses of a selected tool and professional advisement to confirm or alter career goals with the objective of confirming the current program or successfully redirecting the student to another program, where appropriate;
- 4) **Peer Mentoring** - weekly contact with a peer mentor with the objective of achieving a successful relationship with a peer mentor for at least one semester.

Although the students were only required to participate in interventions for one semester, both qualitative and quantitative data was collected for the three groups over a period of two years and correlation between intervention strategies and student outcomes determined to assess student impact. In the third year, the focus will was on evaluation of the project. Best practices, policy implications and essential factors for replication were determined and disseminated.

**Opportunities and Challenges:**

This project provided a unique opportunity to liaise with both internal and external partners throughout the duration of the study. Opportunities to meet and solve challenging issues were ongoing and without the full cooperation of these partners would not have been resolved successfully enabling the project to move forward in a seamless fashion.

The creation of the Learner Support Centre provided an opportunity for forging strong relationships with both internal and external partners. Consistent interaction with ACC/ACF faculty proved helpful in maintaining the focus of the project with students. The newly

established SMILE program (Student Mentoring in Life and Education) experienced tremendous growth due to an increased demand for peer mentors. External relationships with the YMCA of Greater Toronto were established and developed in association with the Career Clarification strategy. The Learner Support Centre worked proactively with the Learning Commons to develop and implement tutoring strategies and processes. Tutors were guided and trained in the importance of documenting information as it related to the intervention strategy of the students they met with.

In the initial phase of the pilot launch of this project, several incentives such as Tim Horton's coupons and a chance to win an iPod shuffle were offered in an effort to attract students to come in and voluntarily complete the FITS survey. To streamline this process and easily identify and meet with the first semester ACC/ACF students in a more timely manner, a unique section of the SSC100 course (Success Strategies for College) was created so that only first semester ACC/ACF students would be enrolled in that specific section (SSC102). Learner Support Centre staff visited all SSC102 classes the second week of the semester, explained the concept of the research project, asked for students to read and sign a consent form, and then administered the FITS survey. This proved extremely successful in ensuring all first semester ACC/ACF students had an opportunity to complete the FITS survey.

### **Detailed Descriptions of the Intervention Strategies**

#### **Language Skills Remediation / Math Remediation:**

The objective of the language skills and math remediation interventions was for those students who tested below college level English and Math and had been placed in preparatory courses, to receive a passing grade and progress to college level EAC150 and/or QNM106. This would be achieved through 1:1 tutoring on a weekly basis through the Learning Commons Resource Centre.

At the beginning of the semester, students were identified and selected for participation in this strategy based on their College Placement Test (CPT) in English and/or Math. The CPT placements and the student's individual FITS results were combined to create a Personalized

Learning Plan (PLP) that outlined the prescribed intervention strategies the student would potentially benefit from. Students were invited to come to the Learner Support Centre to discuss the results of their PLP. Those students who required language skills or math remediation were required to attend weekly tutoring sessions in the Learning Commons for the duration of the semester.

### **Outcomes - Language Skills/Math Remediation:**

Having an orientation to the Learning Commons provided students with an opportunity seek assistance in subjects where they required additional help. Although some students opted not to continue with their English or Math tutoring as per their PLP, they made specific use of the Learning Commons to request tutoring in other subjects and access various workshops offered throughout the semester. For example, in the last semester of the project, one student accessed the Learning Centre a total of 42 times for tutoring in several subjects. On an anecdotal level, students reported on their involvement with the Learner Support Centre and Learning Commons as being beneficial to their overall learning experience "*I feel like someone cares about my learning*". It was also noted that students continued to randomly visit the Learner Support Centre throughout the semester to seek further advice and redirection with respect to their studies.

### **Career Clarification:**

This strategy utilizes selected tools and professional advisement to confirm or alter career goals. The objective is to confirm the current program or, where appropriate, successfully redirect the student to another program. The results of the FITS assessment tool are used to identify the students' need for participation in this strategy. This strategy consists of 3 phases: the assessment, results consultation and follow-up. During the assessment phase, students are asked to complete the following:

- 6 timed differential aptitude tests (DAT) assessing verbal reasoning, numerical ability, abstract reasoning, clerical speed and accuracy, mechanical reasoning and space relations.
- 1 personality inventory exploring personality style – Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator (MBTI)

- 1 interest inventory – the Strong Interest Inventory (SII)
- 1 Personal History Form

Results consultation involves a one-on-one ninety minute session with a Career Counsellor from the YMCA of Greater Toronto and serves as an initial information consultation and review of the assessment results. Students are asked to attend a thirty minute follow up session with the Career Counsellor, a week after their results consultation.

### **Peer Mentoring:**

The results of the assessment tool (FITS) are also used to identify the students' need for participation in this strategy. In this strategy, students are paired with trained peer mentors in similar programs and are asked to make weekly contact with an objective of achieving a beneficial relationship for at least 1 semester.

### **Outcomes-Peer Mentoring:**

From all indications, Peer Mentoring has been the most popular intervention strategy. Students, who have developed successful relationships, extol the benefits derived. They feel that being paired with a Mentor is a great opportunity which has assisted them in settling into the college. They feel that every first semester student should have a Mentor as it enhances their chances of succeeding in college. Some students have even indicated that their self-esteem and confidence have improved, as a result of this relationship. One student sums up his experience as follows: *“In my first semester in college, the knowledge I have gained from my Mentor, supported me a lot. He was very encouraging, motivating and helped to improve my self-confidence. Thanks a lot for an amazing Mentor!”*

### **Outcomes - Career Clarification:**

This strategy demands the greatest number of hours of the students' time; nevertheless, the overall feedback is positive. Students who participated and completed all 3 phases indicated that the process was worthwhile and the results, did, in fact offer guidance. One student felt that *“after my first meeting with the Counsellor, I understood myself better; I know who I am and what my personality styles are. I discovered that I can overcome any obstacles because I have*

*more strengths than weaknesses. By participating, I have come to the conclusion that the career I have chosen is right for me. I can now concentrate on my studies because I am clear regarding my capability and preferred career”.*

### **Final thoughts:**

It is expected that the Learner Support Centre will contribute to the linking of the various services and academic departments within Seneca College. Each area performs its own specific functions in support of student persistence and success, all with good intentions, but each working within its own sphere of responsibility. The connection of these spheres, however, through a Learner Support Centre that facilitates the diagnosis and prescription of individual needs, reinforces each area's effort and assists in the development of a community for support for the students.

This project serves as an excellent example of applied, action research that benefits all the participants to varying degrees. For the HRSDC, the results will support their objective to promote a lifelong learning culture and to assist in the development of a demonstratively tangible learning system. For Seneca, the project ignites the development of a coordinated service to facilitate activities leading to greater student retention. And very importantly, well-managed, properly researched support strategies will augment the students' opportunities to achieve their academic and career goals.

We are grateful to HRSDC and thank them for their support. Initial results indicate a positive relationship between participation in interventions and student retention.

### **Biographies**

**Karen Spiers** is a Research Assistant with the "Enhancing Student Success in Post-Secondary Education" Research Project at Seneca College. Karen has held various positions within Seneca College, including the Faculty of Continuing Education and Training where she helped launch the English for Academic Purposes Program.

**Denise Williams** is a Research Assistant with the "Enhancing Student Success in Post-Secondary Education" Research Project at Seneca College