

## Chapter 25

# Intention, Transition, Retention: Examining High School Distance E-Learners' Participation in Post-Secondary Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Studies of student transition to post-secondary education have not examined the transition experiences of students who complete on-line courses as part of their high school curriculum. To address this area of deficit in on-line learning research, in this paper, the authors discuss a multi-year study that examined high school on-line learners' plans to participate in post-secondary education, their enrollment in post-secondary education, and their persistence in a post-secondary program. Data for these analyses were collected from student surveys as well as high school and university academic records. The results suggest that participation in on-line courses in high school is not a significant factor in the post-secondary education transition process while student academic achievement is consistently influential.*

### INTRODUCTION

In terms of overall access to post-secondary education, Canada leads by international standards. According to recent statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), almost half of Canada's working age population aged 25-64 has completed a college

or university education. Amongst the population aged 25-34, 56% of individuals have completed a college or university program (OECD, 2009). Recent studies of youth transition in Canada suggest that upwards of 75% of the country's youth participate in some form of tertiary education within the first two to four years of completing high school (Malatest & Associates, 2007; Shaienks, Eisl-Culkin, & Bussière, 2006).

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Given the economic benefits of a more highly educated populace and significant investments of public funds in post-secondary institutions and programs, a great deal of research effort has been directed toward uncovering attributes and factors associated with youth transition and successful progression through post-secondary studies. One branch of this body of transition research has focused on the factors which influence high school students' career paths and their choices of programs and institutions. Another major branch of youth transition research has examined factors that impact students' continuation in post-secondary studies from one year to the next, ultimately to successful completion of a program. Models of post-secondary choice and student retention that span the educational transition continuum have tended to consider the influences of similar student characteristics and contextual factors.

### **Post-Secondary Choice and Participation**

Considerable study has been given to high school students' post-secondary education choices (Lapan, Tucker, & Kim, 2003). This body of research has been directed toward gaining a better understanding of how students make decisions about their post-secondary education opportunities. Some of the more important influencing factors include gender, student academic ability, expectations and educational attainment of parents, race and ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Malatest & Associates, 2007; Sweet & Anisef, 2005).

### **Choice and Participation Models**

A number of conceptual models have been devised to explain the stages in students' post-secondary education decision-making (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). A frequently cited model developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identified three stages in post-secondary choice decisions: a) predisposi-

tion, b) search, and c) choice. In the first stage, grade school students decide to investigate the possibility of enrolling in a post-secondary program following high school. During the search stage, in which parents often play an influential role, students refine their options, develop preferences, and consider their qualifications for admission to a particular post-secondary program as well as their options for covering the costs associated with the program. In the final stage, a variety of social and economic factors influence the choice of institution and program.

Differences in post-secondary participation behaviours between youths of differing socio-economic backgrounds have also been accounted for using the theories of social reproduction. The notion of habitus, defined as "a system of durable, transposable dispositions" which predisposes individuals to think and act in particular ways is highly relevant to student academic intentions and ambitions (Bourdieu, 1979). One's habitus is a product of individual and collective past experiences, shaped over time across contexts and circumstances. For students who are approaching high school graduation and considering their career options, the disposition toward or against choosing to study at the post-secondary level is a product of their social class, values, culture, and identity. The formation of habitus is also closely associated with the concept of social capital. Social capital, as represented by Bourdieu (1979, 1986), facilitates the transaction and transmission of information among individuals through their relationships and increases one's ability to advance her or his interests. It is suggested that individuals who have access to information about post-secondary education through their social networks are more likely to be at an advantage in accessing information and attitudes relevant to making decisions about post-secondary options.

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