

## Identifying the Complexity of Barriers Faced by Marginalized Youth in Transition to Post-Secondary Education in Ontario

### **How do gender, race, family socio-economic status, and special education needs (SEN) interact to either facilitate or hinder access to and participation in post-secondary education among Ontario students?**

While several studies exist which point to how students' various individual characteristics serve to lessen or increase their likelihood of attending post-secondary education (PSE), the objective in this study was to examine these various status traits *in combination with one another* using a unique longitudinal data set. Specifically, what combinations of status traits serve to either advantage or disadvantage secondary students in transitioning to PSE? The development of detailed knowledge around individual combinations of traits (intersectionality framework) that facilitate or hinder PSE transition is an important first stage in creating effective policy around widening access to PSE.

### **What methods were employed by the researchers in achieving the study objective?**

To answer this question, researchers (funded through a grant by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities) used data from the Toronto District School Board's 2006 Student Census. The survey had a wide range of questions about socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the students, as well as questions about attitudes toward school. This analysis looked at around 15,000 students aged 17 years old (Grade 12) that confirmed an offer to a post-secondary institution in Ontario. The post-secondary pathways of TDSB 17 year-olds over three application years (2006 to 2009) were examined. For this group, university confirmations were 51% and college confirmations were 15%.

The method used for this analysis included three different 'models' that progressively had variables added as each model's exploration of interactions expanded. Overall, the analysis using these models examined how the intersectionality of specific status traits impacted upon PSE pathways. Our research explored the potential of differential effects from known factors that predict PSE for students. Interaction effects are a statistically sound way of examining this. For example, using this method of intersectionality showed that varying income levels impact differently on PSE confirmations by gender across different ethno-racial groups.

### **What are the results of this research?**

The findings revealed that issues of race, class, gender, and having SEN matter *very much* to the post-secondary transitions made by TDSB high school students. It was found that income, race, and gender were intimately linked in explaining the PSE confirmations of students. Key findings for these three variables included:

- Black males were significantly less likely to confirm an offer for university compared to other groups
- Neighborhood income impacted post-secondary confirmations differently between males and females; but narrowed as income levels increased, and
- Students with SEN had limited post-secondary horizons and only those with sufficient economic resources stood a chance of attending college.

These findings raise an important question:

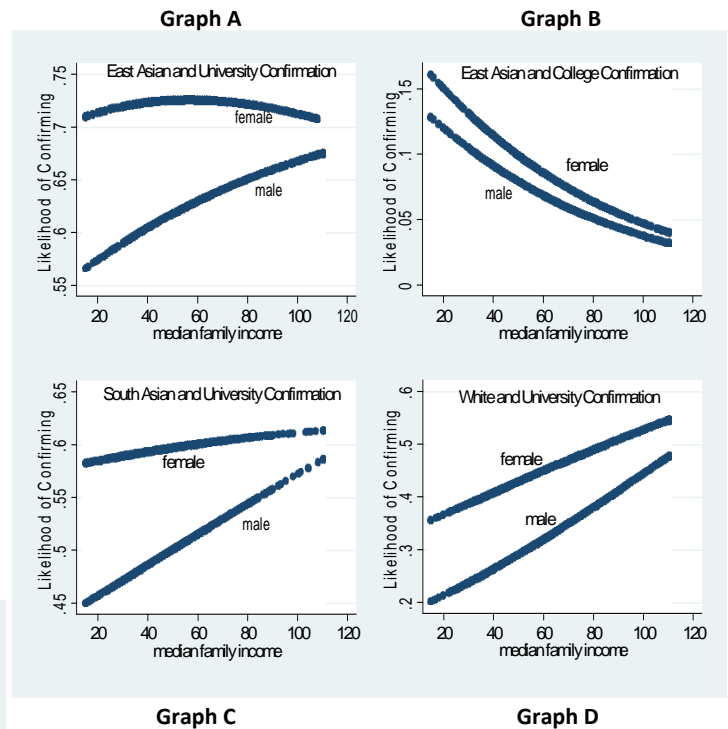
***What sorts of interventions are possible to alter these existing situations that limit the life chances of these youth to access and persist within post-secondary education pathways?***



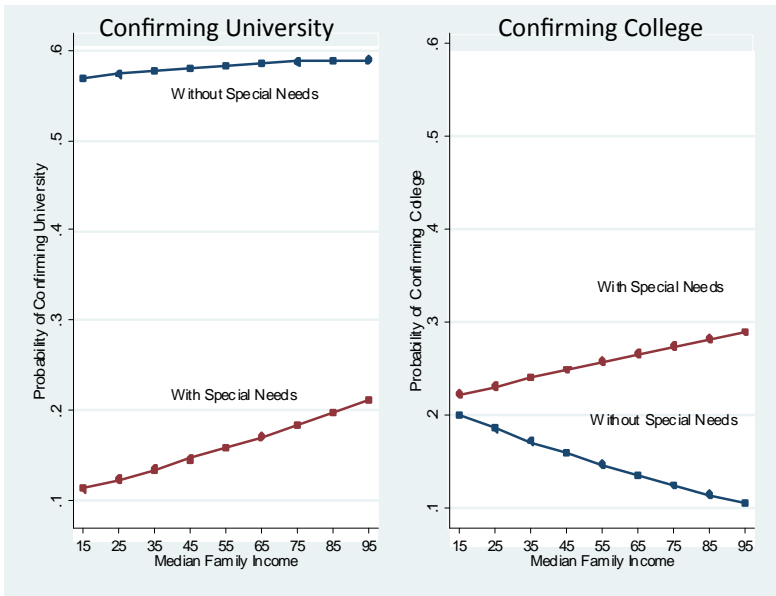
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Figure 1 illustrates different significant interactions that included these variables: East Asian, South Asian, White, income, university confirmation, and college confirmation. Graphs A to D have annual median family income along the horizontal axis and the two blue lines on each graph represent gender. Graph A shows that female East Asians had the highest likelihood of confirming university and increasing income had little effect, whereas East Asian males' likelihood of confirming university increased as income level increased. The two Graphs C and D show similar results: South Asian and White students' university confirmation likelihood increased as income levels increased, for both genders. Interestingly, Graph B shows that the likelihood of East Asian college confirmations decreased as income levels increased for both genders. Overall, the impact of income on PSE confirmation was different for males and females but this narrowed at higher family income levels.

**Figure 1: Significant Interactions and East Asian, South Asian, White, Income, and University or College Confirmations**



**Figure 2: Interaction of Special Education Needs and College or University Confirmations**



As illustrated in Figure 2, the relationship between income and confirming PSE was certainly dependent on whether a student had been identified as having SEN. In the case of university confirmations, an increase in income steadily increased the likelihood of confirming, although the gap between those with SEN and those without was sizeable. In the case of college confirmations, the relationship with income was completely reversed: college confirmation increased with income for SEN, but as income rose, the likelihood of confirming college for those without SEN was virtually nil.

### What is the impact of this research?

#### For policymakers?

Policymakers should look beyond a 'single factor' model when studying the transition to PSE by marginalized youth. The intersectionality framework employed in this study suggests that a single technique of disseminating information to students about PSE may not fit all marginalized student populations; relevant information should be geared to specific sub groups using targeted strategies.

#### For researchers?

The analysis of intersectionality groupings and an understanding of the process of communicating useful information to such groups revealed that there are at least two major issues that require future attention: (1) the social networks of students and taken-for-granted assumptions that surround the provision of information, and (2) that such information come from trusted sources.

**We argue that a one-size fits all policy approach is unlikely to be of use to addressing the inequities we observed in PSE confirmations and that rather, policy that recognizes the intersection of gender, race, and class as well as special education needs must be utilized.**