



Project Insights Report

College Transformation



PARTNERS

Atlantic Colleges
Atlantique



LOCATIONS

New Brunswick
Newfoundland and
Labrador
Nova Scotia
Prince Edward Island



INVESTMENT

\$3,465,687



PUBLISHED

October 2024



CONTRIBUTORS

Steven Tobin,
*Strategic Advisor at
FSC*

Executive Summary

The “College transformation des collèges” project aimed to enhance accessibility to postsecondary education for equity-seeking groups in Atlantic Canada. Project administrators used innovative approaches to align education with evolving economic and workforce needs. Through the incorporation of universal-design-for-learning principles, program administrators developed seven pivotal pilots to address both labour shortages and skills gaps, focusing on creating inclusive and flexible learning environments. These pilots were propelled by human-centred design research, which was intended to help the college understand and dismantle barriers that inhibit program completion and employment among underrepresented groups.

Universal design for learning principles are a set of guidelines designed to create inclusive and accessible learning environments that meet the diverse needs of all learners. Human-centred design research is an approach to designing services and systems that deeply considers the needs, preferences and limitations of the end user.

During the pilots, a structured methodology involving case study analyses of each pilot program was adopted to gauge the effectiveness of innovative strategies in fostering inclusivity. Insights were drawn from in-depth interviews with participants and collaborative discussions with industry stakeholders, which informed the continuous adaptation and enhancement of program designs. The findings underscored the crucial role of adaptability and collaborative learning in educational success. Recommended practices include ongoing stakeholder engagement and flexible program delivery to refine educational outcomes. The research underlined the significance of supporting educators and coordinating at regional levels to extend the impact of universal design in curriculum development.

This project emphasized equity, diversity and practical skills development and focused on participatory program design. This project has broader applicability in driving positive change across the education sector, ultimately benefiting students (especially those from equity-seeking groups), industries and the wider community.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** The robust application of human-centred design research facilitates a deep understanding of the diverse nature of end-users' needs and enables programs to be tailored accordingly, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience.
- 2** Self-paced learning enables continuous intake and enhances flexibility, but groups with multiple barriers need and benefit from ongoing instructor support.
- 3** Collaboration with industry partners plays a significant role in supporting the skill content and design of training programs that enhance learner outcomes.

▶ The Issue

The project “College transformation des collèges” aimed to address rapid technological changes in Atlantic Canada by transforming the public college education and training system to meet the evolving demands of the economy and diverse workforce. The project’s goal was to build organizational capacity, enhance regional expertise in addressing sector needs by creating innovative delivery methods, and improve accessibility and inclusivity in postsecondary education for equity-seeking groups.

Multiple barriers prevent individuals from equity-seeking groups from entering or completing college-based training programs and securing employment. Indeed, traditional educational methods often fail to meet the diverse needs of students, leading to disengagement and limited academic success.

To that end, human-centred design principles were deployed at the project’s inception to better understand the needs of these populations. This research enabled programs to be designed in a manner that focuses on user needs to improve their attraction, accessibility and completion. This, then, facilitated sustained, quality employment. At the same time, education and training programs are often disconnected from the local and regional demands of employers. As a consequence, the pilots placed great emphasis on industry collaboration and creating sustainable partnerships with industry leaders.



What We Investigated

The seven pilot programs were designed to test, evaluate and develop solutions to enhance the college system, promote collaboration and improve access to postsecondary education for equity-seeking groups.

The main focus was identifying which innovations were effective for both end-users and employers to inform future program offerings while responding to regional demand. The research used a case study approach, examining each college's unique pilot program to evaluate its impact, and conducting a cross-case analysis to identify emerging best practices. The methodology included in-depth interviews with participants from targeted training groups and focus groups with employers in key industries.

The central research question was how to help individuals from equity-seeking groups succeed in college-based training programs in Atlantic Canada. To answer this question, project administrators gathered information to better understand potential pilot participants' core needs and values related to education, upskilling and job placement. It also sought to consider the broader context of their lives, which could affect their interest in participating, as well as their ability to. Project administrators collaborated with industry representatives, employers, licensing bodies and organizations serving equity-seeking communities to ensure a holistic approach.

The pilots included a range of different interventions, including early childhood education, prior-learning assessments, and microcredential programs in the aquaculture, information technology and nursing sectors. The programs were primarily offered through a microcredential approach, i.e., using short, focused learning experiences to address specific skills needed by employers. These programs provided flexible, targeted training opportunities aligned with industry needs. The chosen approach allowed project administrators to understand the needs of potential participants and industry partners, thereby addressing critical questions about how best to support equity-seeking groups, create accessible learning paths and meet labour market needs.

✔ What We're Learning

Micro-credentials address employer needs

Collaboration with industry and government partners played a significant role in supporting program initiatives. External stakeholders provided valuable insights and resources, enhancing the project's overall impact. Through this engagement, project administrators realized the importance of offering short, focused learning experiences to address specific skills needed by employers. In other words, these microcredential programs developed within the various pilots were able to provide flexible, targeted training opportunities aligned with industry needs.

Universal design fosters inclusion

Universal-design-for-learning principles were impactful in aligning assessments with learning outcomes and fostering supportive classroom environments, thereby creating inclusive learning spaces for diverse needs. These principles were applied to align admission requirements with diverse learner needs, and ensure opportunities for individuals with varying skill levels. From this, program administrators learned that some industries face challenges in attracting participants with prior knowledge in specific fields, and that streamlined assessment processes add clarity and consistency. In this way, universal design helped address barriers faced by equity-seeking groups and, as a result, improved completion rates.

Self-paced learning should be balanced with instructor support

The pilots also highlighted the advantages of self-paced learning. Allowing for continuous intake, and allowing learners to progress at their own speed and schedule enhances flexibility and accommodates diverse learning styles. However, groups facing multiple barriers, such as those with limited access to resources, technology or prior educational opportunities, often require and benefit significantly from ongoing instructor support. This support can help address specific challenges, provide guidance and ensure that all learners can fully engage with and benefit from the learning experience.

★ Why It Matters

Equity-seeking groups continue to face barriers to education and learning. Part of the challenge lies in the way traditional education programs are designed. However, this project offers crucial insights for policymakers and educators by demonstrating that collaborative engagement and innovation in educational institutions can enhance program effectiveness and student outcomes for these groups. In particular, the project showcased how incorporating equity, diversity and inclusion into curriculum design and implementation can lead to impactful results for all stakeholders. Such an approach is important for addressing the needs of equity-seeking groups and ensuring that educational practices are inclusive and responsive to all students. The project also highlights the necessity of providing robust support and professional development for educators during periods of significant change, as well as the need to enhance industry collaboration to ensure that skills development meets the needs of regional employers.



**State of Skills:
Leveraging the Skills of
Newcomers**

The quality and intensity of employer engagement is critical to the overall success of interventions to support newcomers.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Finally, the project's findings also stress the importance of offering practical learning experiences tailored to diverse demographics, enhancing workforce preparedness and aligning education with real-world requirements. By emphasizing impact assessment and collaboration with industry partners, the project demonstrates that effective communication and partnerships maximize program outcomes.

► What's Next

For the Atlantic Colleges Atlantique, the project provides a road map for the design and implementation of future programs that promote inclusive education and workforce development. In particular, it highlights the importance of maintaining flexible program delivery options and fostering strong industry engagement, ensuring that educational programs are effective and relevant.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

Tobin, S. (2024). *Project Insights Report: College transformation des collèges*. Atlantic Colleges Atlantique. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/college-transformation/>

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



College Transformation is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

© Copyright 2025 – Future Skills Centre / Centre des Compétences futures