

## **Student Connections Program Management Response to Recommendations of Formative Evaluation**

The Student Connections Program (SC) has consistently met or exceeded its national targets and has fulfilled the requirements of both its own terms and conditions, as well as those of the Youth Employment Strategy (YES). A rich data set, combined with semi-annual surveys of clients and youth, facilitate performance measurement and reporting on an ongoing basis and allow for adjustments to certain program parameters. These data will also be beneficial in developing a summative evaluation in 2007-08.

Continuous discussions and open consultations amongst Industry Canada program staff, the contribution recipient (Association of Canadian Community Colleges or ACCC), and the 15 universities and colleges delivering the program (SC Administrative Centres or ACs) also ensure that any changes made can respond quickly to opportunities or issues raised. In particular, considerable progress has already been made since the Formative Evaluation report was written.

**Recommendation 1:**            Develop a contingency plan for product renewal in the event that the ACCC's current strategy fails.

**Management Response:**    *Agreed.*

Given that information technology is such a fast-moving field, it is essential that the product modules used to train business and senior clients are continuously updated. ACCC therefore developed a product renewal strategy to leverage the extensive knowledge that exists within centres. In response to the Formative Evaluation, ACCC moved quickly to develop a complete plan to accelerate the process of updating product modules, in consultation with the ACs. All products will have been reviewed, updated and available in both official languages by August 2006. The plan will be monitored closely and will be supplemented by contracting for product updates, if necessary, as a contingency plan. ACCC also immediately rectified a clause on intellectual property which may have inhibited sharing of product by some ACs in their 2006-07 agreements with colleges and universities.

The product renewal strategy includes product development by individual ACs, supplemented by review and quality assurance by other ACs, faculty members outside the ACs and private sector partners and contractors, as necessary. Products are incorporated into a new content management system which will allow for continuous updating, collaboration and sharing of products amongst ACs. The content management system replaced an outdated and expensive training and certification platform; problems with the platform which had been encountered at the time of interviews for the evaluation have since been resolved. Measures are in place to monitor progress on development, which has been excellent to date, and a product development committee has been formed with ACs.

It should be noted that client surveys carried out two times per year by an independent firm consistently show that clients believe that the training they receive is practical, relevant, up to date and that the youth who deliver the training are capable. Despite the issues raised by ACs, many products (particularly those which are within the e-commerce suite of products and which assist in meeting IC's objectives with respect to SMEs) have been updated over the past two years. Six out of 7 E-Commerce First Step national products have been updated for use by all ACs. Innovation in product development is actively encouraged. Additional products or additions to existing modules have been developed by individual ACs, tested in one market and later become part of the national suite of products (e.g. Search Engine Optimization and On-Line Business Research modules added in the past two years).

**Recommendation 2:** Explore options for securing additional funding and getting greater flexibility in the terms and conditions governing youth employment for the program.

**Management Response:** *Agreed.*

Student Connections derives its funding entirely from the Youth Employment Strategy (YES, \$2.9M G&C, \$0.6M, O&M). At the time of the last YES renewal (2003-04 to 2007-08), additional terms and conditions were imposed that youth must return to studies following an internship, that internships must be short term and that contribution agreements should be no longer than one year. Little can be done immediately to change these parameters. However, in the event of YES renewal, recommendations will be made to the interdepartmental YES community for changes with respect to these and other parameters, as well as with respect to additional funding. Notwithstanding the YES requirements, the Student Connections terms and conditions and contribution agreement with ACCC, as well as the excellent collaborative relations with ACCC and with the ACs, do provide flexibility to make some changes in the program; these have already been made in agreements with ACs for 2006-07.

Additional funding would alleviate most concerns expressed in the Formative Evaluation without commensurate increases in overhead costs; such additional funding would allow for greater efficiencies, expanded regional outreach particularly to official language minority communities, and somewhat greater contribution to salaries of Coordinators at ACs. Already, revenues retained by ACs and in-kind contributions contribute another \$1 to \$1.5 million to the program and are used for hiring more youth, training more clients, local marketing and coordinator salaries and overhead. ACs have stated that they had no difficulty recruiting adequate numbers of youth; in 2004-05 there would have been demand for another 60 internships.

**Recommendation 3:** Examine its reporting requirements to determine whether the reporting burden on AC, which increased when SC began to be delivered through a contribution agreement, can be reduced.

**Management Response:** *Agreed.*

More rigorous performance and reporting measures were introduced in 2003-04 as part of the move to contribution agreements to ensure better accountability for monies received; these are not considered to be an unreasonable burden. Benefits which have been achieved are clear audit trails, clear adherence to the spirit of the program's objectives, engaged senior management in the academic institutions delivering the program, and an ACCC-instituted rotation of audit and evaluation activities. These are considered to be a very positive factor for program design, even though it posed challenges for the ACs.

ACCC is however exploring with ACs how very specific individual reports they currently require could be streamlined to reduce the time required by ACs for reporting. Other reporting requirements imposed by an AC's host institution may also add to the reporting burden but cannot be influenced by ACCC.

It should be noted that the measures instituted in 2003 did result in the loss of some ACs which may have been unwilling or unable to subject themselves to a more rigorous approach and more rigorous financial accountability. ACCC has had little difficulty in replacing these ACs with new ones, emphasizing to senior management at host institutions that this is a contribution program, and that other valuable benefits derive from it, including greater involvement with their local business community and relevant work experience gained by their students.

**Recommendation 4:** Explore options for easing the pressures new AC face when they join the program and must establish themselves in local markets for SC products and services.

**Management Response:** *Agreed.*

ACCC has already moved to assist new ACs to ease pressures. These include formal orientation sessions for new coordinators, mentoring by Coordinators in established centres, rigorous business planning and evaluation of plans and advice by ACCC; and assistance in marketing. ACCC also place particular emphasis on appropriate placement of Student Connections within the host institution, having found from experience that placement in a business-oriented environment produces the best success. Activities around celebration of the 10 year anniversary of the program should also help to build awareness and attract revenue-producing clients.

Early indications are that these measures are resulting in quick establishment of centres. For example, two newer centres established in 2005-06 exceeded their client targets (La Cité Collégiale in Ottawa by 129%, Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador by 106%). Another centre established only in January 2006 (at University of Alberta in Edmonton) had by mid-March already hired all their interns and established key marketing initiatives including seminars at an Open House and e-newsletters, which resulted in numerous client leads.