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“Gappers” more employable, less wealthy: study

By Nick Taylor-Vaisey | July 3rd, 2008 | 4:47 pm

Taking time off before going to university or college a mixed blessing, according to Canadian Council on Learning

Taking time off between high school and university or college might make students more employable, but it may also mean that they'll make less money than those who enrolled in higher education immediately.

That's the conclusion of a recent **report** from the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), “gappers” — students who take at least four months off to travel or work before entering the post-secondary world.

In terms of employability, gappers apparently hold the advantage over non-gappers; employment rates are 87.5 per cent and 79.6 per cent, respectively.

But non-gapper university graduates earn on average \$85 more per week than gappers with the same level of education: \$625 compared to \$540. However, college graduates earned similar income regardless of how much time they took between high school and post-secondary studies (\$552/week for non-gappers, \$550/week for gappers).

The basis for CCL information on income levels was a Statcan **report** on gappers, which referenced the 2004 Youth in Transition survey. The study did not normalize for differences in high school performance among the two groups, nor did it present data

showing whether the gappers had lower high school grades than their non-gapper peers.

The report suggests that gappers with university degrees are more employable “because they finish their post-secondary studies with more experience in the work force.” Those who went straight to university after high school make more money because, according to the report, they “finish ... earlier and have more time to reap the income-based rewards.”

There is no explanation offered for the similar income levels earned by gapper and non-gapper college grads.

University of Ottawa education professor Joel Westheimer said that the report brings to light a broader issue about the changing role of universities.

“The thing that caught my attention is not so much the employability and income gap, but the very fact that there are more and more gappers,” he said. “The trend clearly also reflects something students think they are missing from the current university experience.”

Westheimer said that as universities and colleges focus increasingly on performing a job-training function, students and their families are looking elsewhere for what he called “life training and exposure to the broader world.”

The report had its shortcomings, Westheimer said. It didn’t differentiate between the kinds of experiences students have during their gap in studies, nor did it pay much statistical heed —beyond an initial explanation — to the reasons students take time off.

Westheimer added that gappers are a diverse crowd, not just a group of people who take time off for the same reason, and that makes empirical analysis of their experience quite difficult.

“(The CCL) can’t be very conclusive. The report points to a trend that is worth more careful study, but because of the difficulty in creating a control group, it’s more exploratory than conclusive,” he said.