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A community college engineering student is transferring to university in order to earn an engineering degree. The student wants the university to credit her or him with at least some of the course work done at college.

It's called credit transfer.

The Ontario government's "Pathways Initiative," launched this spring, aims to make it easier for students like our future engineer to have their college credits accepted by a university. This project is a priority for the government, and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities is currently developing recommendations for expanding credit transfer in Ontario.

Potentially, there are a number of good outcomes for this initiative.

Students, as they mature or their interests change, could transfer to a level of education that better suits their interests and aptitudes without losing credit for the time and money they've already invested in higher education. To facilitate such flexibility is not just humane, it also makes practical sense.

We live in a world and work in an economy whose complexity has made lifelong learning a public as well as a private good. For Ontario to create a higher education system that encourages adult learners to upgrade their skills and knowledge will rebound to everyone's benefit.

But the initiative has dangers, too.

At heart, university faculty fear, this plan is about economics. Community colleges receive less per-student government funding than universities. The government's plan will, in effect, "download" the first year or so of higher education to the colleges, which will save it money.

Ontario already has dozens of credit transfer programs. Unfortunately, the university dropout rate among students who transfer from college, even those who bring credits with them, is higher than those entering university directly from high school. We need to prepare transferring students better than we have been before embarking on an aggressive expansion of the credit transfer system.

To ensure that college students meet university-level performance expectations, the Ontario government must give the community colleges more funding.

Colleges will need better libraries and more academic librarians. They will need labs that can accommodate university-level student research and more faculty who are able to supervise students performing the original research needed to equip them for university.

Colleges will have to invest substantially in higher-level courses – bridging programs – to satisfy university standards of quality, if universities are to recognize college courses as creditworthy.

There are other concerns. If the government fails to invest more in colleges but insists that universities relax their credit transfer standards, then the reputation for quality our universities have earned worldwide will be endangered.

It is penny-wise and pound-foolish to risk the reputation of Ontario universities as high-quality institutions, if their degrees aren't seen as worth much, not to mention the demoralizing impact on university faculty, administrators, benefactors and students.

Our community colleges will be threatened in a similar way. Their valuable role equipping students with job-ready learning would be diluted, as they become seen as mere junior universities.

They would also be forced into performing two jobs: academic preparation as well as career training. Without more resources, colleges could end up doing neither job very well.

University faculty have some experience with credit transfer and, while lauding the increased accessibility it gives students, we believe the government should proceed cautiously.

First, because the Pathways Initiative could cost as much money – if done with students in mind – as the government envisions saving. The government has to consider the cost-benefit ratio of this for students and institutions alike.

Second, the government has not involved faculty in this initiative. Research shows credit transfer works best when university and college faculty work together to map pathways from college to university. The government should include faculty, with their direct experience in teaching and in classroom realities, before proceeding any further.

Only with adequate investment in community colleges, and the full involvement of faculty, will the government be able to deliver what students need in a credit transfer program: clear expectations about the standard of work required at university, support in meeting those expectations, and pathways ensuring appropriate standards are maintained in the disciplines affected.

We all want that engineering student to succeed at university. We also want the engineering degree we hope that student earns to be the same high quality tomorrow as it is today.