

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CONNECT

COSTI Immigrant Services
Toronto, ON

Area of Practice:

- Coordination of Settlement Services in Communities with Multiple Service Providers
- Strategies for Engagement with Non-Settlement Service Providers

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BACKGROUND ON THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPETUS FOR THE PROGRAM

COSTI Immigrant Services is a community-based, multicultural agency based in Toronto, ON. Founded in 1952, it provides employment, educational, settlement, and social services to all immigrant communities, new Canadians, and individuals in need of assistance. It operates from 18 locations in Toronto, the Region of Peel, and York Region, and provides assistance in more than 60 languages. COSTI Immigrant Services uses a client-focused, proactive, and innovative approach in the planning, development, and delivery of services, ensuring that newcomers to Canada can use their existing skills, learn new skills, and participate actively in all aspects of Canadian life, regardless of language or cultural barriers.

In 2013, the Government of Ontario launched its immigration strategy, and international students were identified as a potential solution to an ageing population and shrinking labour force. At the time, international students were ineligible for settlement services funded by the federal and provincial governments, resulting in a patchwork of services / resources offered by educational institutions through their International Student Offices. As the number of international students to Ontario increased, they became overwhelmed with requests for settlement support. Many international students found themselves in precarious situations.

Ontario's settlement sector and educational institutions came together to develop a service response to meet the settlement needs of international students coming to the province. International Student Connect was created to provide settlement support to international students and their accompanying family members. To guide the initiative, an advisory committee and working groups were established under the leadership of George Brown College, with representation from stakeholders at various levels of government, educational institutions, settlement agencies, and other community networks.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

International Student Connect

Description:

International Student Connect (ISC) is a bilingual initiative that connects international students and their accompanying family members to settlement services and community networks in order to support their successful settlement and integration in Ontario. It provides settlement information through *Let's Connect* sessions and/or one-on-one sessions conducted by service delivery agencies at educational institutions, as well as resources on immigration options for transitioning to permanent residence and post-graduation immigration and settlement plans. *Let's Connect* sessions offer information on 18 different settlement topics, as well as other topics identified by the educational institution. Additional follow-up support is provided by service delivery agencies at their locations or by email / phone. ISC has developed several resources, including the Ontario International Student Guide, handbooks, factsheets, transition plans, and webinars.

Goal(s):

The primary goal of ISC is to provide an appropriate service response that meets the needs of international students pursuing post-secondary education in Ontario and their accompanying family members. The secondary goal of ISC is to achieve the following outcomes: clients receive appropriate and timely information to make informed decisions about their settlement and integration process in Ontario; clients gain an understanding of Canadian society, available services, and rights and responsibilities; clients gain knowledge about community and government services and receive support and referrals to access other services; and clients receive support to deal with immigration transition issues to settle, integrate, and participate in community life.

Target Client Group(s):

Post-secondary international students and their accompanying family members (including Francophones)

Delivery Partner(s):

ISC is administered by COSTI Immigrant Services in collaboration with the Centre de santé communautaire Hamilton / Niagara. It is co-delivered by the following 16 service delivery agencies and 21 educational institutions: Algoma University, Catholic Centre of Immigrants, Catholic Cross-Cultural Services, Centennial College, Centre de santé Communautaire, Centre for Francophone Toronto, Confederation College, George Brown College, Georgian College, Glendon College, HMC Connections, Humber College, Lakehead University, Lambton College, London Cross Cultural Learner Centre, Mohawk College, New Canadians' Centre of Excellence Inc., Newcomer Centre of Peel, Niagara College, Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Council, North York Community House, OCAD University, Peel Multicultural Council, Sault College, Seneca College, Sheridan College, St. Clair College, Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, Thunder Bay Multicultural Association, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, University of Windsor, University Settlement, Western University, YMCA of Hamilton / Burlington / Brantford, YMCA of Simcoe / Muskoka, YMCA of South Western Ontario, and York University.

Human Resource(s):

ISC has two full-time staff, including one general manager and one project coordinator, who are responsible for coordination and administration of the program.

Funding:

ISC is funded by the Government of Ontario through the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, Citizenship and Immigration Division.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

ISC provides international students and their family members with access to consistent, reliable, and needed settlement information and supports without having to leave campus. All service delivery agencies are required to have a dedicated staff in the ISC facilitator role to ensure that the

program is delivered by trained staff and all clients receive accurate, consistent, and up-to-date information.

Efficient:

ISC is coordinated at the provincial level, which ensures standardized service delivery across educational institutions in Ontario. At the same time, *Let's Connect* sessions are customizable to meet the specific needs of educational institutions and/or international students and their accompanying family members. For example, information / resources can be shared via an information booth, drop-in sessions, one-on-one sessions, or structured workshops at various times of the day or week. Clients can also opt to meet with ISC facilitators off-campus, if that is most convenient for them. ISC facilitators receive a manual and customizable slide deck with detailed instructions on preparing their presentations, as well as monthly updates and a quarterly newsletter outlining policy changes affecting international students.

Relevant:

ISC provides information and resources to international students and their accompanying family members so that they can make informed decisions about their life in Canada pre- / post-arrival and pre- / post-graduation. Each *Let's Connect* session is tailored to meet the unique needs of participants in that session. Guest speakers, such as bookkeepers ("Filing Income Taxes" workshop) and immigration consultants ("Immigration Pathways" workshop), are invited as appropriate.

Sustainable:

ISC was implemented as a bilingual program to ensure both Anglophone and Francophone international students would benefit from the program. As a result of a third-party evaluation conducted in 2016, several changes were made to ensure the program's ongoing success. For example, ISC has expanded its online presence to include free, on-demand webinars that are accessible 24/7, as well as a chatbot that was recently beta-tested at several educational institutions. Information was also re-organized from multi-page handouts / booklets to one-page handouts with links to further information.

Transferable:

As a bilingual program, ISC could be replicated by other provinces or territories. The foundation has been set, and the training / resources created could easily be adapted to meet the specific needs of other provinces or territories. The Conference Board of Canada identified ISC as one of six best practices to improve student recruitment and retention in Quebec.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

ISC is a three-way partnership between COSTI Immigrant Services, settlement agencies, and educational institutions in Ontario. By and large, settlement agencies are not funded to serve the needs of international students and their accompanying family members, and thus have limited experience with this population. Most International Student Offices at post-secondary institutions do not have expertise in immigration and settlement. ISC provides an opportunity for open dialogue, relationship-building, and coordinated service delivery between the program partners.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

ISC is the only provincial program that provides services to international students and their accompanying family members. Clients are able to access settlement information that is specific to their context, either online or in-person through *Let's Connect* / one-on-one sessions with a trained facilitator.

High Client Uptake:

Ontario continues to attract a high number of international students, and so the need for ISC continues to remain high. Service delivery agencies, educational institutions, and other community partners do outreach through social media marketing, direct marketing, flyer promotions, student ambassadors, and word of mouth. Information about *Let's Connect* sessions is also posted on the ISC and partner websites. To date, the program has served over 18,000 clients.

High Client Retention:

ISC has high client retention. Service delivery agencies and educational institutions work collaboratively and refer clients to each other as appropriate. After the initial meeting, ISC facilitators also follow up with clients by email / phone to ensure their settlement needs are being met.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

ISC monitors and tracks progress using different assessment and measurement tools. The data show that the program is creating positive outcomes for clients. For example, a third-party evaluation was conducted in 2016, which included a review of ISC documentation and administrative data; interviews with 4 settlement agency managers, 4 ISC facilitators, and 8 international student office managers / coordinators; surveys of 149 ISC workshop participants and 12 ISC facilitators; and observations of ISC sessions. The findings suggested that the program was fulfilling an important need in settlement services for international students and their accompanying family members. The ISC was well positioned to fill the service gap with respect to the needs of Ontario's international student population, and international students who attended *Let's Connect* sessions were making good use of the information acquired.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

ISC is monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis. Progress and outcomes are tracked using a multi-pronged approach. A centralized database is used for data collection, reporting, and analysis, including the number of *Let's Connect* sessions delivered, number of participants who registered and attended, session topics ranging from most to least popular, questions / comments / concerns raised by participants during and after *Let's Connect* sessions, and topics delivered during one-on-one sessions. Narrative reports are completed and submitted by service delivery agency staff on a quarterly / annual basis, which include statistical and narrative information, successes and challenges, gaps and trends, information on the collaboration between the service delivery agency and their partner institutions, and recommendations. Feedback is also collected from service delivery agencies and educational institutions involved in ISC through an annual survey. In addition,

the ISC project team conducts workshop observations at each participating institution twice per project year, and feedback is provided immediately to the ISC facilitator and subsequently by email.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

COSTI Immigrant Services

<http://www.costi.org>

International Student Connect

<http://www.internationalstudentconnect.org>