



Case Study *December 2005*

Community-Based Learning Opportunities, Winner, 2005 Frontier College's Beat the Street Learning Centre

OVERVIEW

Frontier College, established in 1899, has developed a series of programs that address the literacy and learning needs of children, teens and adults living in urban and rural communities across Canada. The philosophy behind all of Frontier College's programs is that everyone can learn and that everyone has strengths on which learning can be built.

Frontier College's Beat the Street learning centre, a non-profit charitable organization that has been in operation since 1985, serves at-risk, street-involved and homeless youth in downtown Toronto. The centre offers individuals the opportunity to acquire basic literacy skills, high school upgrading and computer skills training in an accessible and non-threatening learning environment. The program exemplifies Frontier College's

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning.

Name of Program
Beat the Street

Date Established
1985

Skills Developed
Computer
Literacy
Self-confidence
Communication

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student-centred and individualized learning philosophy by reaching out to at-risk learners. Dubbed the "asphalt academy" in its earlier days, Beat the Street continues to provide learning programs that incorporate relevant and meaningful activities and outcomes.

OBJECTIVES

Many homeless youths are interested in improving their information technology skills and accessing further education or employment. Yet, on account of their challenging situations they either cannot access school-based learning or certification programs, or they lack the credentials and objective proof of the skills needed to take the next step in their lives. The objective of Beat the Street is to provide youths living on the streets of Toronto with the skills and knowledge to better their circumstances through possible employment and further education.

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By providing street-involved youths with broader opportunities for education, employment and personal development, the Beat the Street centre assists their transition out of homelessness. Another major aim of Beat the Street is to increase the self-esteem of individuals by giving them the skills, tools and confidence they need to succeed and to move on in their lives.

TARGET GROUPS

Beat the Street is accessible to street-involved and homeless youths in downtown Toronto, aged 16 to 29 years, who have been out of full-time schooling for at least one year. Individuals need to have strong speaking and listening skills in English and must have enough stability and support in their lives to be able to participate in the learning programs.

ACTIVITIES

The Beat the Street learning centre offers a wide-range of educational programming, including:

- a computer skills program that provides valuable training and certification as a Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS);
- a General Educational Development (GED) preparation program that prepares youths to pass the high-school equivalency examinations;

- a literacy and basic skills program that helps youths develop the skills and attitudes they need to succeed in further education and employment; and
- a digital arts program that encourages learning and self-expression.

Each year, up to 48 learners participate in MOS certification and E-Course programs through a combination of hands-on learning and textbook-based exercises. (E-Course is a training program that all students at Ontario community colleges are required to complete in order to graduate. It includes basic skills in Word, Access and PowerPoint.) Individuals work at their own pace and on their own schedules, up to four days per week. As well, learners are matched with volunteer tutors for one-to-one instruction. When the students are ready, they take the MOS and E-Course exams in the learning centre, which is an authorized testing site. The Beat the Street centre waives the \$110 exam fee. The MOS certification program in personal computing, software and keyboarding skills offered through Beat the Street is the only program of its kind in the city accessible to homeless and street-involved youths.

Beat the Street delivers over 900 hours of small-group instruction, computer-assisted learning and individualized tutoring for up to 32 youths in the GED preparation program. The nine-week course, which is offered four times per year, is taught by a full-time GED coordinator. Small-group instruction is provided four mornings per week, and in the afternoons, learners use computer-based instruction to enhance and reinforce their skills. As part of the GED preparation program, Beat the Street also provides funding for learners who cannot afford the \$80 fee required to take the externally administered examination. Beat the Street's GED preparation program is also the only one of its kind in Toronto.

For youths who do not thrive in conventional learning environments, Beat the Street's digital arts projects are effective media for learning. The projects cover both content and the development of essential and employability skills such as communication, problem-solving and teamwork.

RESOURCES

The Beat the Street centre is housed in a 2,800-square-foot learning facility complete with a state-of-the-art computer lab. The centre is run by five full-time staff and 40 volunteers. Volunteers are recruited, trained and supported to work at the learning centre.

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Funding for Beat the Street comes from a number of government, corporate and foundation sources, including: Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities; National Homelessness Initiative program, Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, administered by the City of Toronto; Microsoft Canada; Compugen; IBM Canada; and the IBM Employees Charitable Fund, Street Kids Foundation.

INNOVATIONS

Beat the Street believes that street youths should have the opportunity to increase their literacy skills in an accepting and non-threatening environment. Beat the Street's programming is innovative in its content and delivery. The programs are flexible, supportive, effective and specifically tailored to the educational needs and challenges of homeless and street-involved youth (who *may* have issues in addition to homelessness that are barriers to learning, including poverty, lack of support from family and friends, substance abuse, mental health issues, physical and psychological abuse, and developmental delays). Beat the Street staff address the various barriers to learning by having a close connection with other community-based organizations, drop-in centres, agencies and resources.

Beat the Street is involved in the Coalition of Agencies Serving Youth (CASYS), a network of organizations that serve youths in downtown Toronto. This network facilitates learner referrals and leverages the strengths and services of the programs. The network also allows for

sharing of new ideas and best practices. Some of the agencies that Beat the Street partners and networks with include: Covenant House, Eva's Phoenix, Evergreen, Shout Health Clinic, Supporting Our Youth, Street Outreach Services, YES, Toronto Youth Job Corps, St. Christopher House, Youth Link InnerCity, and Youth Skills Zone.

Beat the Street has also developed a strong network of government and corporate partners from a wide variety of sectors to help ensure the program's long-term sustainability

CHALLENGES

Homelessness is on the rise in Toronto. Many of the youths who go to Beat the Street have dropped out of school by Grade 9, or have few high school credits and poor skills. As well, they may have been involved in the "street scene" (e.g., drugs, prostitution, gangs, petty crime, panhandling), further distancing themselves from opportunities. Education has become one of the strongest tools that communities have in the fight against homelessness.

OUTCOMES

The Beat the Street program has had many positive impacts and benefits. Each year:

- up to 48 learners participate in the MOS certification and E-Course programs; and
- up to 32 youths receive over 900 hours of small-group instruction, computer-assisted learning and individualized tutoring in preparation for writing their GED.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Beat the Street provides appropriate and effective learning opportunities for street-involved youths who are ready to make the transition to work or further education. The programs offered at the centre enable youths to rebuild their confidence, begin to change the course of their lives and take the steps necessary to beat life on the streets and re-integrate themselves into mainstream society.

The Beat the Street program has had a significant impact on street-involved and homeless youths in downtown Toronto. In 1994, for example, the Beat the Street learning centre staff and volunteers provided more than 14,000 hours of one-to-one tutoring, small group classes and computer-assisted learning, allowing at-risk youths to:

- acquire the literacy and computer skills (and the corresponding certification) needed to succeed in further education and employment;
- increase self-esteem;
- enhance group skills (e.g., listening, taking turns, contributing positively);
- set short- and long-term goals;
- improve study skills and positive work habits; and
- enhance communication skills.

Thousands of young adults call the streets of Toronto their “home.” Each person is homeless for a different reason, yet they are all affected by the dangers of street life. Alleviating homelessness in Toronto and other communities across Canada not only enhances the ability of individuals to make choices about their futures, it also helps communities. Beat the Street is doing its part to ensure that Toronto is a more cohesive, sustainable and safer community for all of its citizens.

USE AS A MODEL

The Beat the Street–Frontier College model has been adapted by numerous communities across Canada, including Regina and Winnipeg. Social service organizations in Vancouver, Ottawa, Montréal and Halifax have also shown interest in this learning model. Frontier College has provided these organizations with training in literacy and homelessness programs, and strongly believes that other communities could benefit by adapting the Beat the Street model to serve their local needs.

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Over the years, Beat the Street’s creative approaches to learning and skills development have received numerous awards, including the 2004 Youth Advocate Award for Innovation from the City of Toronto.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded in part by the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Community-Based Learning Opportunities, Winner, 2005: Frontier College's Beat the Street Learning Centre
by *Douglas Watt*

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