

Education and Training

Career Colleges

Intensive training, small classes

By Wendy Terry

Most adult learners are aware of the large public institutions such as universities like Ryerson, colleges like George Brown, and school boards like the Toronto District School Board but are less aware of community based providers like Skills for Change or private career colleges like Durham Business and Computer College. Private career colleges are most visible in the local employment news through their advertising. So what are these colleges and who goes to them?

Career colleges are small businesses that are run by educator proprietors and receive no government funding although many career colleges have been designated by the government so that eligible students are entitled to receive government student assistance through OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) or support from government funded labour market training programs like Second Career and Skills Development.

Students attending career colleges tend to be older than those attending publicly supported colleges—the average age is 29—and are more likely to have dependents under the age of 15. They are also less likely to be living with their parents than their counterparts in the community college system. The culture of the career college is more adult than the youth culture of the public colleges.

Career colleges, located in small, medium and large communities, tend to have smaller student populations with an average annual enrolment of 170 learners, and smaller class sizes—61 percent averaging 10-20 students.

Unlike the public college system, career college students are more likely to attend full time, 97 percent of them go full time. The career colleges provide more hours of instruction per week for a shorter number of weeks; thus adults with dependents can afford to take this shorter time out to study full time. Overall career college programs are 7 to 12 months in length compared to public college programs, which are two years or longer, despite providing a comparable number of hours of instruction. In fact a recent student survey revealed that the

shorter program duration was the reason 37 percent of the students chose to study at a career college.

As well continuous student intake and flexible class scheduling help career college students to complete their studies more quickly. Most classes run without term breaks, and over 80 percent of the career colleges take in students continuously, some even daily, but most weekly or monthly. Obviously, they do not have to wait several months to start a program after applying for it.

In return for earning their diplomas or certificates quickly students are willing to pay slightly higher total tuition fees, in order to save on living costs and enter the labour market much sooner.

According to the survey, the mean total tuition cost was \$14,364 and approximately 53 percent of students used government student loans or programs like Second Career. Twelve percent relied on lines of credit. Not surprisingly, given the adult age of private career college students, only 26 percent had funds from family as compared to 59 percent for public college students.

Overall the private career college system appeals to those looking to obtain workforce skills within a limited time. A large number (36percent) chose to go back to school to change their career or pursue a specific career. To do so career college students are willing to incur a slightly higher debt load due to higher total tuition fees that are partially offset by living expenses that are lower than those incurred by public college students.

In 2008 the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation published the results of a “Survey of Canadian Career College Students Phase II” undertaken in September 2006 and February 2007. The information in this article can be found in the Phase 11 report or in the Phase I one. There will be a final report, Phase III, on Graduate Outcomes. Other information came from the Colleges of Ontario (public colleges like Seneca) research paper “What Do We Know About The Private Career Colleges?” and a 2006, Statistics Canada article, “Canada’s Private Career Colleges: The Lesser Known Players in Post-Secondary Education” The Stats Canada study did look at student success (outcomes).

The Stats Canada report based on data from 2003 found that career college diploma or certificate holders earned almost the same as high school graduates but they were more likely to be employed. Men with a high school diploma earned \$35,200 compared to \$35,300 for those with career college diplomas or certificates however the employment rate for those with high school was 92 percent compared to 98 percent for those with career college diplomas. Similarly with women, those with high school certificates earned, \$26,500 and those with career college diplomas or certificates earned \$27,700; however, those with a high school diploma had an employment rate of 89 percent career college diploma or certificate.

The Millennium and Stats Canada studies note that the career college sector, which is much smaller than the public college system, does complement the public one in that some students want to obtain skills within a shorter time period and are willing to pay more for that.

In 2006 it was estimated that 156,107 students attend private career colleges every year in Canada (which would be the same as 312,214 students over the period that it takes to take a two year program at a public college). Over 798 colleges were surveyed of which 269 belonged to the National Association of Career Colleges and 13,721 students completed the Millennium Foundation survey. In Ontario there are 450 registered career colleges with close to 600 campus locations.

The Canada Millennium Phase II report found that for the most part these students study health programs or media and information technology programs. The Ontario Colleges study has a comprehensive list of career college programs in Appendix C. They include: Office related programs, Transportation, Construction and Related, Health, Information Technology, Engineering, Manufacturing, Services (personal), Social Services, Early Childhood Education, Mining, Design, Sales and Marketing, Hospitality, Security and others such as Landscaping, Building Superintendent. This study showed that students who received government funded labour market training like Second Career were for the most part enrolled in business related programs like accounting, Transportation like truck driving, or Construction like heavy equipment operators.

Career colleges are not students' second choice, 72percent of those surveyed said it was their first choice. Sixty percent of career college students had taken a break between high school and post secondary education. They did not go directly from high school because 44 percent were uncertain about their career choice and 27 percent had financial barriers.

Satisfaction with the program is high among career college students. Eighty-six percent were satisfied with the program. Surprisingly 53 percent of career college students felt they would find work in the field of study compared to 35 percent of public college students who felt they would.

If you want to find private career colleges rather than checking out the ads in the local papers, go on the web site of the Ontario Association of Career Colleges (OACC) or Employment Ontario. If the college is listed on these two sites, adults know that they conform to the professional standards of OACC and have been registered by the Ontario government.

March 2009