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## HOT TOPICS IN EDUCATION

# Inside the “Invisible Sector” of Higher Education: What Do We Know About Canada’s Private Career Colleges?

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Career colleges and private training institutions, known in some provinces as private vocational or occupational providers, make a significant contribution to education and learning in Canada, with thousands of Canadians graduating each year from hundreds of these institutions. Canada’s career colleges are for-profit businesses or not-for-profit organizations (including special interest organizations and unions) that are registered with their province or territory to deliver training geared toward specific occupations. They typically offer certificate and diploma credentials, and provide an alternative to the public college system.

## Career Colleges Are Not a New Phenomenon

Although they exist in hundreds of communities across Canada, these colleges operate more or less under the public radar—often until negative incidents or bad press force them to the surface. Private career colleges in Canada, such as the Maritime Business College in Nova Scotia and Willis College in Ontario, date back to the late 1800s. The career college sector burgeoned in the 1980s, at the same time that training in computer-based technologies became highly sought after and government policies were introduced to facilitate training for in-demand jobs.<sup>1</sup> By 1989, upwards of [190,000 students were enrolled](#)

in 1,000 private career colleges.<sup>2</sup>

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## The Career College Sector Is Vast Insights. Understanding. Impact.

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We are dedicated to building a better future for Canadians by making our economy and society more dynamic and competitive. Today, the career college sector has a presence in all provinces. Over 1,300 registered private career colleges operate across all of the provinces and territories—seven times the number of public colleges in Canada. Career colleges in eight provinces enrol upwards of 170,000 students annually—about one-fifth the number of students enrolled in the public college sector.<sup>3</sup> (See charts 1 and 2.) The territories, which have no public university and one public college each, are served by eight career colleges. Over 600 career colleges are located in Ontario alone.

## Career Colleges Are Distinct From Public Post-Secondary Education

Career colleges are quite heterogeneous. Some of the larger ones, such as Academy of Learning and Herzing College, offer programs in a range of subjects similar to public colleges, including business, IT, and health care. But smaller colleges—of which there are many—often focus on a particular sector or trade and offer a level of specialization not found in public colleges. The Vancouver Film School, Le Cordon Bleu Culinary Arts Institute, and Blanche Macdonald Centre, for example, offer a small number of highly-focused programs and are recognized as elite training institutions in their respective fields.

Other defining features of career colleges are that they are:

- **Small.** Even a cursory average demonstrates around 130 students (annually) per career college; a stark contrast to public colleges that typically enrol students by the thousands. Many are much smaller than this. The Saskatoon School of Horticulture, for example, enrolls fewer than 20 students annually, giving students a close-knit educational experience and a generous student-to-instructor ratio.
- **Flexible.** Many career colleges offer programs that can be completed in a short time frame because of compressed schedules and fewer electives or general education courses than are often required at public colleges. BayTech College in Moncton, for example, offers a welding certificate that can be completed in 16 weeks, while the comparable public college program takes one year. Many career colleges also offer continuous intake or monthly program start dates, as opposed to three- to four-month-long semesters with fixed start dates of September and January common in the public sector.
- **Responsive.** Career colleges can react quickly to employer and student demand for training, which is important for meeting immediate labour market needs. Some career colleges are capable of introducing a new course in as little as eight weeks from when the

demand is identified. In the public sector this process normally takes much longer.

## Understanding Canada’s Career Colleges

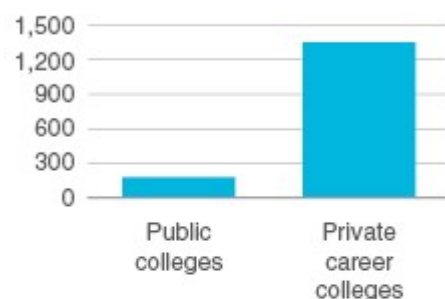
Their significant scale and distinctiveness from the public college sector make private career colleges worthy of serious study. Yet career colleges are seldom considered in public discussions of skills and training needs, an issue that Glen Jones says has relegated them to the misunderstood and overlooked “invisible sector” of private training in Canada.<sup>4</sup>

The Conference Board of Canada is examining the role of private career colleges in our post-secondary education (PSE) system as part of a broader inquiry into Canada’s skills and training needs. In particular, we are looking at the roles, responsibilities, and results associated with Canada’s career college sector. We want to know:

- What needs and gaps are career colleges responding to in the labour market and publicly provided career training?
- What can Canada learn from career colleges to make education and training throughout the broader PSE system more accessible and applicable to our current and future needs for skilled workers?
- What challenges and issues of this sector do education stakeholders collectively need to address?

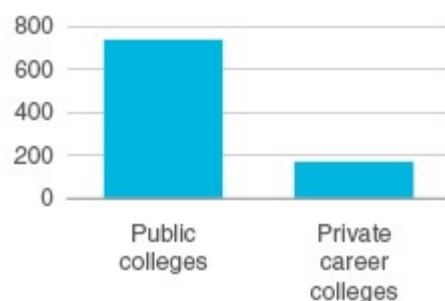
Over the coming months, we will be conducting interviews with proprietors of career colleges, their students and graduates, and employers who have a vested interest in the graduates these institutions produce. We have also launched a [survey](#) of students and graduates of private career colleges to learn about their career college experience and what outcomes they experienced after graduating.

Chart 1  
Number of Private Career Colleges Versus Public Colleges



Notes: Sources spanned several years. There are no career colleges in Nunavut. Sources: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; Government of Alberta; Government of Manitoba; Government of New Brunswick; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador; Government of Nova Scotia; Government of Prince Edward Island; Government of Quebec; Government of Saskatchewan; Government of Yukon; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities; B.C. Private Career Training Institutions Agency.

Chart 2  
Number of Enrolments in Private Career Colleges Versus Public Colleges (000s)



Note: No data was found for Quebec, Northwest Territories, Yukon, or Saskatchewan. Sources: Statistics Canada; Alberta Association of Career Colleges; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities; B.C. Private Career Training Institutions Agency; Manitoba Ministry of Education and Advanced Learning; New Brunswick Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training, and Labour; Government of Nova Scotia; P.E.I. Department of Innovation and Advanced Learning; Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Advanced Education and Skills.

If you know a current or former career college student (or if you are one yourself) we would love to hear from you! Contact [Liz Martin](#) at the Conference Board.

This project is part of The Conference Board of Canada’s [Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education](#). Preliminary findings will be shared at our third annual [Skills and Post Secondary Education Summit](#), November 3–5, 2015 in Edmonton, Alberta.

Watch for future commentaries and a full report in 2016.

## Related Webinar

[Partnerships Between Post-Secondary Education and Canadian Business: Ensuring Future Prosperity](#)

September 17, 2:00

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- 1 Sharon Li and Glen Jones, “The ‘Invisible’ Sector: Private Higher Education in Canada” in *Private Higher Education A Global Perspective*, eds. K. M. Joshi and S. Paivandi (Delhi, India: B. R. Publishing, 2015).
  - 2 Robert Sweet, “A Profile of Private Vocational Training Schools,” *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 23, no. 3 (1993), 36–63.
  - 3 Based on 739,959 enrolled in 2012–13. Statistics Canada, CANSIM 477-0019. Enrolment data for career colleges are not collected on a national scale, and provinces and territories vary in their publication of this data.
  - 4 Glen Jones, *The Invisible Private Sector*, March 31, 2015. (accessed July 21, 2015).

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