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Why colleges are increasingly being seen as the smart choice

This post-secondary option is no longer the poor cousin to university—even if your parents don't agree

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Rob Gemmell had a university degree and was working at a big box store when he was accepted into the industrial design program at Humber College. (Photograph by Cole Garside)

Rob Gemmell grew up on a berry farm in Stirling, Ont., watching his father fix or create whatever equipment he needed with whatever materials he had. It was a childhood that stoked his own passion for industrial design. (He once built an insulated dog house for the family pet, complete with a Plexiglas room with a view.) But when his portfolio of “backyard inventions” wasn’t enough to earn him a spot in the industrial design program at Carleton University, Gemmell ended up on a 13-year trek through life and higher learning. He earned a bachelor’s degree in visual arts and psychology at Brock University, worked for a year as a web designer in Toronto, but “wasn’t really feeling it,” so he spent a year in Whistler, B.C. snowboarding, and teaching snowboarding, until he ran out of money.

Back in Ontario, he landed a job at a hardware store not far from the family farm and started moving up the ranks. But he was bored. “Industrial design was still my first love.” And so, in his late twenties, Gemmell began investigating how to break into the field of his old dreams, and the industrial design program at Humber College caught his eye. In partnership with the University of Guelph, it had recently become a degree program and a winning one: Its students regularly took top prizes at the annual provincial industrial design competition known as the Rocket Show. Gemmell emailed Humber’s program director with a simple question: “I asked how many of its graduates were actually working in industrial design. He said that out of 40 (from the previous year’s class) there were 38 that he knew of. That was fantastic news—exactly what I wanted to hear.”

So now, at 32, Gemmell is in his fourth and final year at Humber and excited, at last, about what the future holds. “My only regret,” he says, “is that I didn’t do it sooner.”

No one discussed the possibility of applying to colleges when Gemmell was leaving high school in 2002. His parents had met at university, his peers were off to university, and the expectation that he would go too was firmly entrenched. Colleges have long been considered the poor cousin in the family of post-secondary institutions, a place for people who don't have the grades for university. That view is proving to be as anachronistic as a typewriter, in part because of students like Gemmell, who choose to go to college after learning what it takes to thrive in the real world—particularly a world in flux.

As technology transforms workplaces and upends business models everywhere, colleges and polytechnics are emerging not only as the right choice for many students, but the smart choice. After all, Canada's college system was created some 50 years ago to respond to the very kinds of shifting labour trends today's knowledge economy brings. They were built to meet market needs—and the market, it seems, has never been needier.

Youth unemployment rates are climbing, along with the underemployment of university graduates (as in, too many with bachelor's degrees working in big-box stores). Meanwhile, employers complain about the dearth of skilled, career-ready candidates. Coupled with the mass exodus of retiring Baby Boomers, reports of the looming skills shortage are dire: A 2013 Canadian Chamber of Commerce report estimated that skilled job vacancies will hit 1.5 million by 2016. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that 60 per cent of all new jobs created over the next two decades will require skills that only 20 per cent of the current workforce possess.

If the skills gap is going to be filled, experts predict the college system will play a major role. With the ability to create new programs quickly in emerging fields, scrap those in low demand, and set enrolment numbers to match market needs, “nimbleness is at the heart of [the college] mandate,” says Christine Trauttmansdorff, vice-president of Colleges and Institutes Canada. “As the economy changes, you have to think about what education is needed to get a good job versus what education do I need?”

Increasingly, a college education seems to be part of the answer. Many colleges have seen dramatic surges in applications in recent years, and in 2009 Statistics Canada predicted college enrolment could rise by 30 per cent, or 150,000 students, within the decade. Most revealing is that up to 50 per cent of college students today already have a university degree, or even a postgraduate degree, says Trauttmansdorff.

According to a 2013 report by Colleges Ontario, there was a 40 per cent increase in the number of university graduates going to college over the previous five years, a figure that jibes with Gemmell’s experience at Humber. “I quickly found out on my first day that half the students had university degrees, out of a class of about 60.”

The trend is so striking that colleges and polytechnics are gaining reputations as “finishing schools,” and perhaps with good reason. According to College and Institutes Canada, nine out of 10 college graduates do find jobs in their field. What’s more, research suggests employers are especially keen to have them.

A 2015 survey of 852 small-, medium- and large-sized employers in the Greater Toronto Area, commissioned as part of the George Brown College employer tracking study, found that college graduates were hired more often than university graduates over the last two years (75 per cent, versus 68 per cent). At the same time, 54 per cent of employers said they believe colleges offer more relevant work experience by way of field placements, internships or co-op work terms, while just 11 per cent felt that was true of universities.

“Universities have not been known to shape shift with the world, because [they’re] rooted in tradition,” says Karen Thomson, vice-president of marketing and strategic enrolment management at George Brown College, where 50 per cent of new programs, such as digital media marketing, relate to business. “Colleges have been much more connected to industry, in closer touch with the market and we are always evolving to meet those needs.”

In 2005, for example, George Brown was developing a construction-management degree program, which would normally take a year to launch. “But the construction industry was so desperate to have these grads, they wanted it to launch three months later,” she says—and they paid the tuition for each of the students in that inaugural class. “We had to run this blitz advertising campaign to recruit students...and of course, those first year [recruits] had jobs before they graduated.

For Thomson, the countries that will lead in the information economy will be those who can “educate their population in a relevant way.” And what adds to the relevance of any program are the credentials of the people teaching it. One factor that cemented Gemmell’s decision to enrol in the industrial design program at Humber, for instance, was discovering that one of its professors was working at Ferrari the year before. “But every prof at Humber had this. The sketching professor had worked as a sketcher all over the world, in the real world, at big, successful companies.”

Attracting faculty members with close ties to industry is a win for all sides, Trauttmansdorff says, as instructors have an opportunity to see up-and-coming talent, and students get the chance to work with up-to-date experts using the latest technology, such as 3D printers or certain software packages. It also fosters a partnership in which schools can say to interested companies, “Yes, we can help you develop your prototype. There’s really a flow of innovation.”

But it’s usually not the students who have to be convinced of the value of a college education—it’s their parents. A 2008 poll by Canadian research firm the Strategic Counsel found 30 per cent of parents said they would be “disappointed or embarrassed” if their child went to college. In contrast, surveys suggests that about 60 per cent of high school students say their parents expect them to go to university.

Colleges “have an image problem, there’s no question,” says historian Ken Coates, Canada Research Chair in regional innovation at the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan. “We have this sense of hierarchy: if you are really smart, you go to university.”

Canadian society still overemphasizes universities as the only choice for post-secondary education, has a huge preference for white-collar work, and associates colleges with blue-collar jobs, which they see as low status and unappealing.

“It’s an old-fashioned attitude, carried forward by parents who went to university in the ’70s and ’80s, which is kind of sad, but it’s not connected to the realities of today,” says Coates. It’s also a view prevalent among new Canadians who “still see university as ‘it.’ It’s the city on the hill, the thing that we aspire to, and the pressure [on students] to go is really, really intense.” Yet university is simply not for everyone, and at some institutions he says the dropout rate is as high as 30 per cent.

Thomson, however, believes that parental bias against colleges is a problem that time will cure. “As our graduates become parents they will have a better understanding of all the options. They won’t have this archaic system of associating status where it’s not appropriate.” She sees the evidence already: the older the student, the less influence parents have over his or her education choices.

Erin Everard, a 24-year-old from Paradise, N.L., grew up assuming she would be the first generation of her family to go to university. Her mother, a gas station manager, and her father, who owns a sub shop, raised her with the idea that “you have to have a degree, it doesn’t matter in what. It’s something solid.”

An A student in high school, she enrolled at the Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) with plans to become a teacher. But teaching, she decided, wasn’t for her and neither, it turned out, was her university experience.

While she maintained marks in the 70s and 80s in most courses, math was her undoing—calculus in particular. She failed it three times. Despite asking for extra help from the professor (who was too busy to provide it), then hiring two private tutors, she felt largely on her own, a small fish in a vast, indifferent ocean. Everard left the university for a year, and used the time to take a remedial math course at College of the North Atlantic (CNA), a 17-campus public institution based in Stephenville, on the island's west coast.

"In math class at MUN, I was one of 200 students and got no extra help even if I asked for it. At college, there were 15 people in my CNA math class. It was a big difference, and it was the difference that I needed," she says. "I went from failing math three times, to getting 95 per cent in my first math class, and I got 65 per cent in that dreaded calculus, so enough to transfer" for a university credit.

With its large, impersonal classes, no mandatory attendance or personal attention, the university structure is so loose, says Everard, that even "incredibly smart students can have issues." And while her parents were initially taken aback that she might not return to university, "when they saw the jump in my marks, they were very supportive. They just want me to be successful."

By then, Everard, who serves as president of the CNA's student union, was convinced that college, despite "the stigma that it's lesser," was the key to that success, with its full-day, five-day-a-week program and personal attention. "The instructors knew my name, offered their support, there was structure. I didn't want to go back to university and be a number again."

In fact, Everard is now doing her part to fight the stigma college students face. As part of her three-year diploma in business management with a specialty in accounting, she did a work placement at a local company where interns from the university were given laptops, the use of company cars and a paycheque. As a college student, she had to have her own laptop and vehicle, and she worked for free. “They were getting \$15 an hour. I got nothing,” says Everard, who is now investigating how to make the internship system more equitable.

Everard already has a job offer in the waiting, but now plans to pursue a commerce degree online through Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, B.C. She’ll need a degree, she says, if she hopes to land her dream job and work in CNA’s student development services. The irony of needing a university degree to work at a college— a “minimum requirement,” according to the job description—is not lost on her. “I don’t really agree with it, but that’s the way it is,” she says. Yet her desire to do the job has a lot to do with spreading the word about what colleges have to offer. “I think students have no idea they have choices. I know I didn’t.”

It was a long process of discovery that lead Gemmell to the same conclusion. When he was rejected by Carleton’s industrial design program 13 years ago, he assumed that career “was off the table.” But he’s come a long way since then. As part of his final year of study at Humber, he’s working on a personal safety device that would deploy in the event of an avalanche, a potentially life-saving technology he plans to unveil at the next Rocket Show. He’s also spent a rewarding summer working in his field with software designer Autodesk, a stint that’s led to a possible job opportunity upon graduation. Down the road, he plans to launch his own company. Its specialty? “Backyard inventions.”

