

## DECIDING FACTORS

The college visit (the admissions interview and college tour) is one of the most important stages in your career search.

This article outlines the questions you should ask yourself, the interviewer, and students currently attending the college.

The answers you receive about the training, admissions policies, enrollment process, costs, job search activities, and college rules will help you to decide whether there is a good match between you and the college.

### WHAT ARE PRIVATE CAREER COLLEGES AND INSTITUTES REALLY LIKE?

***Private career colleges are like people--each is unique. Yet, some generalizations can be made.***

- Private career colleges often specialize in several training areas.
- Most colleges are located in the main business district of a city or town or in a nearby business area. Sometimes, these colleges are in a building with other businesses.
- Carpeting, a receptionist, and a pleasant waiting area combine to make these schools look more like businesses than university and community college campuses.
- These colleges fit a lot into a little space, and some have additional classroom space in other buildings within a couple of miles of the main building.
- These colleges are student oriented. The majority of private colleges are relatively small in total student body as compared to their local community college, although in many cases the enrollment in a specific career training area at a career college might be considerably larger than the same career training area in the local public college. When you first visit these colleges, they will seem friendly and relaxed. But once you have made the commitment to your training, the college becomes as concerned with your success as you are.
- Students and/or graduates of a private college are considered, and consider themselves, as clients. The private career college is "student centred" rather than "teacher centred". The college and the students are on the same side of the fence: the college's ultimate success depends on the students' ultimate success. Since the ultimate goal is placement of graduates in related careers, all resources of the college are focused in that direction.
- Programs may be as short as three months for some careers or as long as two years for other careers. Programs attended full-time can take up to 35 hours per week. Several shifts may be available, offering classes in the morning, afternoon, and evening.

- Tuition costs depend on the length of training and the level of skills taught. Training can cost from \$1,000 to \$10,000 per year.
- The staff is small and made up of people you will see often. Usually, the college's staff includes a director, admissions personnel, financial aid counsellors, student services personnel, a job search coordinator, and teachers.
- Private career colleges are skills and job oriented. Their main interest is in teaching the specific skills that are needed in today's marketplace.
- Improving your marketability and training you for a job are the most important concerns of any private career college. Colleges continue to succeed because people like you leave as satisfied customers.

## **VISITING THE COLLEGE**

***The real test of any college will be how you feel about it.*** So, make an appointment to see the college. Although most colleges are open to meet you any time, an appointment will give you more time to discuss their programs and your future.

Make the appointment for a time when you know students are in class. This will give you a chance to see classes in action and to talk with students in the program of interest to you.

When you arrive at the college, you may be given a brief information sheet to fill out. This gives the admissions office some background on you so that the interview will be more helpful to you.

While at the college, you should ask yourself whether it is a place you want to be five days a week for six months to a year or more. Do *you* think you can handle the skills required? Do the people at the college seem as if they want to help you learn and plan for your future?

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

***Your meeting with a member of the admissions staff is the time to ask questions.*** Be sure to ask about the training courses, admissions policies, enrollment process, costs, job search activities, and school rules. Your interview should also include a tour of the college.

### **1: The Training**

***You will want to know what the training involves.***

- How long is the training? How many hours per day and days per week are required? What class schedules are offered?
- What are the skill objectives? What is learned in what amount of time?

- What kinds of things should you expect to do? How much of the course is hands-on as opposed to theory and lecture?
- How many courses are individualized, and how many courses involve working in a team? How many other students will be in the class?
- What kinds of facilities are used, and what kind of equipment is available? How much of the equipment is shared with other students?
- What background do the teachers have? For how many years and how long ago did they work in the field?
- Will your program include an actual work experience, training in a real business or industry?
- If you have a problem with part of the course, are there tutoring fees? If you don't pass a part of the course, can you repeat it without paying again?
- What kind of job can you expect to get once you finish the training?
- Are you required to take a certification test or licensing exam before you can get a job? Will you be able to apply for certification/licensing when the training is over?
- Once on a job, if more training is needed in an area, can you come back for refresher training?

### ***Things to Think About***

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The answers will vary depending on the specific training program. However, think very carefully about some of the answers.

Most career colleges stress hands-on training, learning by doing. The point of this method is to train students as quickly as possible to be job ready.

Look carefully at the classroom teaching methods. Individualized instruction encourages the development of certain skills, but it also relies on the student to stick to the task. Group instruction is more structured, with the teacher setting the pace. You will need to think about what learning environment is best for you and whether the college's structure matches your learning style. Note the student-teacher ratio. It is one of the most important factors in the classroom. Teachers can be more aware of your needs if they are not teaching too many students at one time.

Career colleges are geared to helping students from different backgrounds. A good school knows that certain parts of the training may be difficult. Therefore, many colleges offer tutoring as well as a chance to repeat part of the course, if needed.

Even if training is thorough, a particular job may use a lot of skills in one or two specialized areas. Many colleges allow students to come back at night to review and

refresh their training in an area. See if the college has a standing invitation to help you once you are on the job.

## **2: Admissions Policies**

***Admissions standards have been set because the school knows what it takes to succeed in specific careers.*** They want you to be able to reach your goal. You will want to ask:

- Is a high school diploma or GED required?
- Is there an admissions test? What happens if the scores are too low?
- Is a driver's license required for a job?
- Are there credit checks?

### ***Things to Think About***

Private career colleges often make each student take a test before any training begins. Tests are scary to a lot of people, but these tests will help the college judge your basic skills in reading and mathematics. Colleges don't want you to enroll in a program that you can't handle. They are about success, not failure. If your scores fall below minimum, other choices will be provided. Some colleges have a class to help you work on your skills, and others know where to send you to improve your skills.

## **3: The Enrollment Process**

***You begin the enrollment process when you first meet with the college official. Colleges handle enrollment in several different ways, but you will want to ask:***

- When is the next enrollment date for a training class? How long does the enrollment process usually take?
- Is there an admissions test? If so, when may the test be taken, and when will the results be available?
- Is there a second formal interview? Does it involve one person or a committee?
- What information does the college need before enrollment can be completed?
- When will students know if they have been accepted?

### ***Things to Think About***

The enrollment process begins with your first interview. You will probably meet with the director of the college or with another college official. Remember, your training will be a great investment of your time, energy, and money. This is the time for you to get to know the college and for the college to get to know you.

The college official will be looking at your background, your test scores, and, most of all, your interest in the field you have chosen. A college's chances of having a satisfied customer depend on this information and believing that its staff is offering you good advice based on years of experience.

#### **4: The Costs**

***The cost of training is not cheap and will vary depending on the training field and program length.*** The homework you have done will help you to do some comparison shopping. Although each college's tuition is different, colleges should charge similar prices for similar training. If the costs of attending the college you are visiting are higher than those of other colleges you have read about, ask why. Other questions you will want to ask are:

- What is included in the tuition?
- Is the registration fee included in the tuition, or is it a separate fee?
- Are books and supplies separate, and, if so, what are the estimated expenses?
- Are tools provided, or must the student pay an additional fee for some or all of the tools required for training?
- Are uniforms supplied, or do they cost extra?
- If additional help is needed, must the student pay a separate fee?
- When training is over, does the student keep the books, supplies, tools, uniforms, etc., or do they go back to the college?

#### ***Things to Think About***

At this point, you, as the buyer, should be looking for hidden costs. Paying for the training will become a big issue, so you must make sure that you know *all* of the training costs. (Many colleges include textbooks as part of the tuition.) Remember, there will probably be an application fee, which will not be refunded if you are not accepted by the college.

#### **5: Job Search Activities**

***Getting a job is the bottom line. You will want to find out how much assistance the college provides and how successful it has been in assisting graduates. Questions you will want to ask include:***

- What has your placement rate been for the past year or two?
- How many college staff members are involved in job search, and how many students do they work with at a time?

- Does the job search office staff help find part-time jobs for students who are in training? What kind of help is provided? Do job search officers arrange interviews? Do they help prepare a finished resume for each student? Do they review job applications completed by the student?
- For how long will the college work with a student on job search following graduation?
- Will the school continue to help the graduate if job search assistance is needed later on?

### ***Things to Think About***

Colleges do not guarantee jobs. However, a good college will put a lot of energy into assisting its students in getting jobs. The training program should include instruction in making up a resume, completing job applications, contacting employers, and handling interviews. If the job involves meeting the public, there should be instruction on proper dress and telephone manner. Practice interviews should be a part of the job search program and, if possible, videotaping (to help you judge your interviewing skills) should be available.

Although training you to contact employers may be part of the instruction, the job search office should also have a list of employers with whom they have worked. Job search personnel should be able to refer you to these employers for job openings. Some colleges even offer job search assistance after you have found your first job. This means that the college will assist you in finding a job years later if you return for help. This may be important to you in the future, but right now the most important assurance is that the college can help you get that first job.

## **6: The College Rules**

***The rules should be listed in the catalogue.*** The interview will give you a chance to understand them better. Private career colleges are not like high school, and there won't be pages of rules. You are an adult and will be treated like an adult. You will need to review the rules and ask:

- Is there a dress code, and what does it mean?
- What are the attendance rules, and how are they upheld?

### ***Things to Think About***

In many colleges, you will be expected to wear the same gear worn on-the-job. Requiring proper dress and behaviour and steady attendance is a form of on-the-job training.

Most colleges have strong attendance rules for the simple reason that if you aren't there, you can't learn and won't earn. If you miss too many days, you may have to meet with the director. If you miss classes too often, you may have to repeat part of the course and may even be asked to leave the college.

The college's attendance policies train you to become a good employee with good work habits.

At the time you sign the enrollment agreement, you are making your first strong commitment to be there each day to learn new skills.

## **WALKING THROUGH THE COLLEGE**

***Following the interview, the admissions officer should offer you a tour.*** Although there will be a lot of things to see at one time, you should just try to get a strong feeling for the way the college serves students. Ask if you can sit in on one of the classes for a few minutes. While in the classroom, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the textbook material easy to read?
- Is the teacher lecturing, or leading the class in hands-on instruction?
- Do students seem to have enough to do, and are they enjoying what they are doing?
- Does there seem to be enough equipment for each student, or does it look as though students have to take turns?
- Does the area look clean?

The college probably will have a student lounge. Ask if you may spend a few minutes in the lounge to talk with other students. You might ask the following questions:

- Are you getting the training you expected?
- Do you think you're getting your money's worth?
- Do you know other students who graduated, and did they get good jobs?

As you walk through the halls, notice the displays on the walls. They can tell you a lot about the college. If you don't see anything, you should be cautious. Some typical items are:

- School membership plaques and licenses
- A part-time jobs board
- A display of recent graduates and the jobs they got
- A display of student projects
- Awards given to outstanding students in the college
- News about upcoming student events, meetings, and graduations

## PAYING FOR THE TRAINING

***As you have already read, training can be costly. The main forms of financial assistance available to help students who may qualify for assistance are:***

- Federal assistance called Canada Student Financial Assistance. These are federally insured loans that must be repaid after graduation.
- Provincial loan assistance programs - providing loan assistance which must be repaid after graduation.
- Provincial grant programs - providing grants or bursaries which do not have to be repaid.
- Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). This federal department can purchase training at approved private colleges, they may also allow students who are eligible for unemployment insurance benefits to have those benefits continue while they are retraining or upgrading their employment skills. This must be pre-approved by a training counsellor at a Canada Employment Centre.
- A number of agencies sponsor their clients in training programs at Private Career Colleges. Some examples are: the Workers' Compensation Board; organizations that work with the disabled; and Native Groups and Band Associations. If you feel that you may qualify for assistance at any agency, your first contact should be with an education counsellor at that agency.
- Part-time employment. In addition, many career colleges may provide scholarships, bursaries or individualized tuition assistance plans.

Government financial assistance forms or applications can be very confusing. This is another area in which the private career college can help you. Each college has a financial aid staff person to work with you. He or she is ready to go through the forms with you and tell you what information you must provide. Keep calm: it may take several weeks for the federal government to determine if you qualify for financial aid.

***Don't forget that there are deadlines for requesting financial aid.*** Find out when the financial aid application is due. Even if the deadline is approaching and you are not sure whether you want to attend a college, you can still send in your financial aid application. Your financial aid can be used at any eligible college. But remember, the amount of aid may change because the determined need is based on the difference between the cost of the training and your available resources.

Please note these two bits of advice on financial aid. **First**, the government is very serious these days about the repayment of government loans for education. **Second**, be sure you are clear about which part of your aid is actually a loan. Find out when you must begin to pay the loan back.

In addition, you may want to look for a part-time job. Many colleges have a part-time jobs board. The jobs listed will not be glamorous or pay well, but they can provide a way to get the money you need while in training.

## **SPEAKING UP**

The following checklist in "SUMMING IT UP" will help you remember the things you want to ask at the college. Even if you are not a person who usually asks a lot of questions, you must remember that what you learn in your college visit will affect your future. Your concerns and questions are one way you can let the college staff know that you are serious about your future career.

Seeing the college will give you a lot to think about. Once you have seen what the college looks like, how it runs, what's involved in the training, and how much it will cost, you can begin to make a decision.

### **SUMMING IT UP YOUR CHECKLIST FOR THE COLLEGE VISIT**

#### **1. The Training**

How long does it take to complete training?

What are the choices for attending class? Are classes offered during the day and night?

What skills will be taught?

How much of the training is hands-on, and how much is lecture?

How many students are in a class?

What equipment is used?

Is there an opportunity to get work experience?

Is tutoring available?

Can a student repeat a part of the course if needed?

What kind of job can be obtained when the training is over?

Is a certification test or licensing exam required before getting a job in the field?

Can a student return later for refresher training?

#### **2: Admissions Policies**

Is a high school diploma or GED required?

Is there an admissions test, and how are the scores used?

Is a driver's license required for a job?

Are there credit checks?

### **3: The Enrollment Process**

When is the next enrollment date for a training class?  
If there is an admissions test, when may the test be taken?  
Is there another interview before acceptance?  
What information does the college need before acceptance?

### **4: The Costs**

What is included in the tuition?  
Is the registration fee separate?  
What are the estimated expenses for books and materials?  
Are tools provided, or must they be paid for separately?  
Are uniforms supplied?  
If extra help is needed, is there an additional fee?

### **5: Job Search Activities**

What has been the college's placement rate for the past year or two?  
What companies have hired graduates?  
What is the typical beginning position, and what is the starting salary?  
How many students does the job search staff work with at a time?  
What does the job search office do to assist in locating part-time jobs for students while they are in training?  
What does the job search staff do to help in getting jobs for the graduate?  
Are skills to make the graduate more employable part of the training, and when does this instruction begin?

### **6: The College Rules**

What are the college's rules for behaviour and dress?  
What are the attendance rules, and how are they upheld?