

BUSINESS STUDIES

Taking care of business – at college

Many people think of commerce programs as the sole domain of universities. They would be wrong

BY TERENCE BELFORD

In Halifax, Shawn Swinkels, 23, has his heart set on being an entrepreneur, running his own marketing company for small business. In Toronto, David Uleryk, 24, sees himself as a business executive, based perhaps in the Caribbean or Europe. In Sudbury, Carly Hughes, 22, is looking forward to a career path that will take her well beyond being a filing clerk or secretary, and in Kelowna, Reid Shillington, 34, wants a career, not just a job.

What ties all four of these young people together is that each decided the building blocks of their future lay in community college business courses. They represent a swelling tide of people – young and not so young – who are enrolling in one-, two- and three-year diploma programs, post-diploma certificate courses and even undergraduate degree courses at colleges across the country.

The reason? Colleges offer practical skills and high job placement rates, says James Knight, president of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, based in Ottawa.

"We have 155 members across Canada with about 1,000 campuses and almost all of them offer some form or forms of business courses," says Mr. Knight. "Almost all report more applicants for seats than they can place and, when it comes to finding jobs on graduation, their placement rates within six months of graduation run from 90 per cent to more than 95 per cent."

And, increasingly, those colleges are not just training young people to work for others. At a growing number there are courses and support mechanisms to teach them how to work for themselves.

THE ENTREPRENEUR

That is what drew Shawn Swinkels to Nova Scotia Com-

munity College. He had done two years of a bachelor's degree at St. Francis Xavier University before realizing a university degree alone would not take him where he wanted to go. Instead, he enrolled in the two-year diploma course in business administration with a specialty in marketing at NSCC.

His goal is to run his own shop and, now into his second year, he has already worked independently under the supervision of a faculty member to plan and launch his own marketing company for small business. He already has several clients, including his father's bowling alley, and fully expects to be up and running successfully when he graduates.

"What I liked was that NSCC has a course in entrepreneurship – even though I did not take it – and a new entrepreneurs club, of which I am vice-president," he says. "It is a great chance to network and exchange ideas. Every new idea I get, I write down in a notebook."

NSCC has about 2,100 full-time business students and offers 11 business courses, including one- and two-year courses and one-year post-graduate advanced certificates, says Bill Walsh, dean of business. More importantly, it now has that entrepreneurship course available to any student in any program, not just those studying business.

"Having those skills, that self-discipline, may prove essential to anyone in any job," he says.

THE GLOBAL VIEW

Dave Uleryk sees himself on a different path. His goal is to gain a Bachelor of Applied Business degree with a specialty in financial services from Toronto's George Brown College followed by his Chartered Accountant designation and then work maybe for a bank or one of the big accounting firms in the Caribbean, Latin



Shawn Swinkels at NSCC. PAUL DARROW FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

America or Europe.

Originally trained at George Brown as a chef with both a two-year diploma and a one-year advanced certificate, the dream of a career abroad first hit home during a placement in Italy, working in a restaurant on Lake Como. At the same time, however, he suffered knee problems and real-

ized that by age 35, a life standing over a stove all day would not be physically possible.

"I went back to George Brown and enrolled in the four-year degree program. It just seemed to make the most sense, given where I wanted to go," he says.

George Brown has among

the largest business schools in the country, with 3,100 full-time students, says Elizabeth Speers, academic director at its Centre for Business. "We have more applicants than we can handle right now, she says. "What we are finding is that, increasingly, young people see the value of learning practical skills to give them a head start on a career."

FIRST STEP UP THE LADDER

It was indeed the desire to re-enter the work force with practical skills that propelled Carly Hughes toward Cambrian College in Sudbury. She had tried a year of a degree in psychology at Nipissing University in North Bay, followed by a year working at minimum-wage jobs like waitressing. Neither proved to be her cup of tea.

"I decided to take the three-year diploma course in business administration at Cambrian because I thought, while I might have to start work at an entry-level job, my training would make it a lot easier and faster to rise in whatever job I get," she says. "It is going to give me a career, not just a job."

Cambrian offers a pair of two-year courses in general business and two three-year diploma courses, plus a post-graduate certificate in human resources, says business school dean Geoff Dalton.

"Last fall we took in 180 new students, which is up 20 per cent from the year before and in January we had so many applications we took in another 49, which is up 40 per cent from the year before," he says.

"There is terrific demand for our business courses and we can see that continuing."

FROM NAVY TO NUMBERS

Reid Shillington says he has been around the block once or twice career-wise since graduating from the University of Saskatchewan with a degree in kinesiology, sport

and leisure management about 10 years ago. He tried jobs at recreation centres in Saskatchewan and British Columbia but found them shy on job satisfaction.

He enlisted in the Canadian Navy and was sent off to Quebec, to an officers' training course, but injured his leg and had to drop out.

"I could have waited a year, recovered and then gone through the course again but then I talked with friends who were accountants. My brother is an accountant, as well. They said 'Why not try a business course in accounting?'"

That led to enrolling at Okanagan College in a two-year diploma course in accounting.

He says he loved it so much that when he graduates this spring he will transfer his credits to Okanagan's four-year Bachelor of Business Administration course and, after graduation, begin his CA designation.

"Frankly I don't know what will come after that," he says. "I just know that my two-year course showed me I really like accounting and I think I have finally found something that will give me a great future."

The British Columbia college offers four two-year courses and a Bachelor of Business Administration degree at two of its four campuses – Kelowna and Vernon, says business school dean Jayne Brooks. The other two are at Penticton and Salmon Arm.

"We have about 1,000 full-time students now but demand is so strong we took in another 100 in January, which we usually don't do," she says. "Provincial surveys show that 95 per cent of our graduates find jobs in their chosen field and that says a lot about what colleges can do for young people looking for rewarding careers."

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