

Choosing your post-secondary school

Knowing what to ask can make the decision less overwhelming

Ok. So you've decided to further your education. Congratulations – you've made a smart decision that will set you up for success in an increasingly competitive job market and allow you to explore who you are as a person. But how do you choose where to go? University? College? Public? Private? Home? Away? The choices seem endless and rather scary. At the end of the day, the decision you make should be driven by what's right for *you*. Making that decision is a bit easier when you know the right questions to ask:

What do you want to be when you grow up...or are you still undecided?

You may have a career or field of employment in mind or, like many people, be actively learning about and considering a variety of directions. If you've decided on your path, you'll need to review which institutions offer the courses/programs you require and whether or not you satisfy the prerequisites for admission. Do you already have credits from another institution and can they be transferred? Are the admission requirements demanding enough to ensure a quality learning environment? How is the final credential from the institution perceived in the marketplace?

If you haven't determined your educational destination, you might want to look at institutions that offer "laddering" programs, which allow you to begin by sampling a broad range of disciplines and earn a sequence of credentials (e.g., certificate, diploma, degree) as you progress. In this case, it would be important to select a school that offers a wide variety of programming delivered by experienced, energized, qualified faculty – and supported by strong advising services – that will allow you to experiment with diverse subject areas and keep your options open.

What value are you expecting from your education investment?

If you're on your way to a professional designation or continuous educational upgrading over the course of your life, it's important to consider the value of the credentials you earn early on. Find out whether the institution you're considering is an accredited member of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), whether credits earned can be transferred to other post-secondary institutions, and whether credentials granted are recognized broadly by governing bodies or regulatory agencies – especially if you are targeting a specific industry or specialization.

It's important to understand the difference between public educational institutions (taxpayer-supported, broadly mandated schools) and private ones (profit-driven businesses). You may also want to ask about how programs and courses are quality-controlled in terms of ongoing improvement and evolution of material.

What kind of learning environment do you prefer?

Do you prefer small classes, where you can get hands-on experience and establish a personal rapport with your instructors and classmates? Or perhaps the idea of anonymity appeals to you, and you like the idea of attending courses in large theatres with hundreds of strangers and never having to interact directly with professors. Are you intrigued by the idea of personalized learning in an environment that focuses on quality of teaching or are you more intrigued by the prospect of encountering professors who focus on research and publishing? Are you interested in establishing a network of personal connections within a "cohort" group that progresses through a program together? Is seeking a faith-based educational institution a priority for you? How strong are the connections between the institution and the local communities?

How will you fit your studies into your life?

All of us are faced with the challenge of balancing multiple facets of our lives: school, work, family, fitness, recreation. Are you prepared to commit to studying full-time or would part-time study work better? Do you prefer daytime or evening/weekend classes? Do you prefer on-campus learning or would a mix of on-campus and online programming suit you better? What does the institution offer to support flexible scheduling? Can you pursue a condensed (or extended) program of study if you wish, allowing you to graduate in a shorter (or longer) time period than average? Or are you interested in a self-paced learning opportunity, which is often what enables the "start tomorrow" offer commonly advertised in the media?

Where do you want to study/live?

Many high school grads are eager to spread their wings and enthusiastically consider leaving home to study. If this sounds like you, how far are you willing to go? Are you comfortable with the idea of seeing friends and family less often during the school year? Do you prefer to study in an urban environment or on a "destination" campus? Does the institution have student residences or offer housing assistance? Are you willing to share your living space? Will you do your own cooking or are meal plans available? Are you equipped to cover the additional costs of living away from home?

If you choose to live at home and attend a local institution, how much time from your day are you willing to commit to travel? What modes of transportation are available to you? Is there ample, affordable parking at the institution? Are there incentives to carpool?

What kind of support services and facilities are important to you?

Consider the importance you place upon accessibility to library and recreational facilities or support services such as educational advising, personal and career counselling, disability resources, study skills and assessment centres, career preparation, and guidance for graduate studies. Are these services offered with your best interests in mind or are they connected to a for-profit business where “advisors” receive commissions for each student they admit?

Are extracurricular activities important to you?

A valuable educational experience is so much more than earning a piece of paper. Employers in all industries look for involvement in extracurricular activities to determine how well-rounded an individual you are. What kinds of clubs and facilities does the institution offer? Is there an active student union society? Are there special interest groups (e.g., cultural groups, political groups, leadership development groups, groups for lesbian or gay students)? If you are an athlete, investigate what kind of Athletics program is on offer and the level(s) at which the teams compete. Are there student volunteer programs available?

Are you concerned that you may be sacrificing the opportunity to travel by choosing to attend a post-secondary institution?

Education and world travel are not mutually exclusive. Look into what the institution offers in terms of study-abroad programs, exchange opportunities, and international partnerships. Check out whether there is an international department, which can help bring the world to you through international students seeking conversation partners, tutoring, home-stays, or a social network.

Are you concerned about securing employment with a credential but little work experience?

Cooperative education (“co-op”) is a valuable program that helps students secure paid work experience related to their course of study, while still attending school. Is there a co-op program or work/study program available? Are there success stories of alumni who leveraged co-op experiences to launch great careers? Are there statistics available that document the “outcomes” for the institution, i.e., how many graduates secured employment, in which fields, for how long etc.?

Are courses of study structured in a way that emphasizes group-based, project-oriented work that mirrors a working-world environment, or are they exam-based exercises in memorization? Are you able to build a portfolio of experience that you can take with you when you graduate?

How can you afford your education?

Many people underestimate the cost of education and thus do not plan for it far enough in advance. In addition to tuition – which can range drastically depending on the institution and program you choose – costs include books, supplies, housing, meals, transportation, and personal expenses. Does the institution have a financial aid office that can advise you on the many scholarships and bursaries available? It's incredible how many student awards go unclaimed each year, so it's well worth the effort to apply. If you are considering a student loan, does the institution qualify under provincial regulations? Are you able to access funds from an RESP or RRSP? Can you structure your studies to accommodate a part-time job? Do you have to pay all fees up front or are you able to pay as you go, course by course? It's never too soon to plan for the financing of your education.

A post-secondary education experience will change your life forever. The best way to feel comfortable in making such an important decision is to be fully informed. Visit websites; call advisors; attend info sessions and workshops; tour campuses; speak with faculty, alumni, students, or people in the local communities. The resources are there for you...take charge of your decision and be confident in the path you chose.