

Education and Training

Going back to school:

An overview for adults

By Wendy Terry

Canadians seem to start their year in September when both they and their children go back to school. Over one in five Canadian adults attends school part time. However, adults need to start shopping for courses in August before the courses fill up.

Unfortunately for adults, there is no equivalent to the friendly high school guidance counsellor, who helps students make sense of the complex course calendars from a myriad of educational institutions; who helps students decide what is relevant to them and their goals; who gives career advice, educational counselling and financial planning assistance.

Adults are on their own. They have to get their own calendars and seek advice from many sources. Yet their need for personal individualized counselling is greater than high school students' because their education, work experience and financial responsibilities are more complex. . Furthermore, they have probably been away from the educational system for a while or are new to the Canadian system. Shopping around for adult education is a time-consuming and complicated process, like unravelling a twisted ball of yarn.

So every August, Learning Curves publishes an overview of the whole system of learning opportunities for adults accompanied by an Adult Learning Contact Chart and a Tips List for Course Shopping.

Colleges and universities are key providers but so are local schools, community based agencies, private career colleges, language schools, professional associations and trade associations. Colleges, universities and private career colleges also offer distance education courses (correspondence, on-line). All of these are discussed in this overview.

For the most part this overview focuses on adults going to school part-time at night or on the weekend through continuing education sometimes called part-time programs. But some adults go full time or part-time during the day. The admission process is more formal in the

day programs. You apply to be admitted to a program of courses and then register in a course. For the continuing education offerings there is an open admissions process—you simply choose a course, register, pay, and go.

Most adults return to work for job related reasons and this overview focuses on the needs of those. But many adults take courses out of general interest. Their numbers are growing as the baby boomers retire and take classes as a way to stay active.

Getting information

Libraries, web sites, phone lines, program officers and information nights shorten the time it takes to get information.

Most local libraries have copies of school, college and university calendars that you can take away to look through. Remember for colleges, there are continuing education or part-time calendars and full-time calendars. Unfortunately they often don't collect flyers for community-based programs, nor for career colleges or language schools. Librarians are better than Google for finding information so be sure to ask the librarian about learning information sources.

Educational providers all have websites, but there are also websites that collect comprehensive information about education and training. One is www.employmentontario.ca developed by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. For the colleges' and universities' listings, this site does not make a distinction between information for adults going back to school part-time through continuing education and going back full-time during the day. It is designed more for youth going full-time during the day. Another site is www.ontarioimmigration.ca, sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration because so many adult learners are newcomers. One site that lists community-based programs in detail is www.211toronto.ca developed by Find Help Ontario.

Now that you have flipped through some calendars and have got confused by both the calendars and the websites, you need to talk to a real person. Most educational providers have program coordinators you can talk to, but you have to ask to speak to one. Don't pay for a course at the registration desk, if you are still confused. Remember

they are selling you a course; it is in their interest to put you in touch with a counsellor.

A lot of educational providers have information nights, usually listed in the calendars, where you can talk to a number of program coordinators at one time. If you can't find a listing in the calendar, just ask the registration desk about the next one.

If you want to go full-time in the day, we strongly recommend that you talk to a program counsellor because you are applying to be accepted for a program of courses not buying one course on an open admission process. Furthermore, the whole day process is designed for youth just leaving high school and going straight on to post-secondary studies. So the full-time application forms leave little room for the long and varied work, volunteer and education history of an adult. A program counsellor will help you adapt these youth based forms to your needs.

Colleges

Whether going part-time or full-time at a college or university you should also talk to a counsellor at the Financial Services Office. Yes, there is financial support for part-time students as well as for full-timers. You do not want to overlook any financial help you can get. You may also want to compare the cost of going full time for a couple of years versus going part-time for quite a number of years. Completing your educational program as soon as possible may make more sense in terms of advancing your career..

In Toronto and the GTA, the Community Colleges are Centennial College, Durham College, George Brown College, Humber College, Seneca College and Sheridan College. All offer courses that can be taken on their own or credited towards a program of study, usually a certificate. For the most part, admissions are open. You can buy one course at a time and when you have enough courses completed for a certificate program, you then apply for the certificate. However, the courses listed in the full-time calendars are part of diploma programs which you first must be admitted to.

Two other colleges with a special focus are the Ontario College of Art and Design and the Michener Institute of Health Sciences.

Colleges are a good place for adults to start shopping for a course, first of all, because a number of courses offered at night are equivalent to courses offered in the day. So you can start part-time at night and then move to full-time during the day. Not all night courses are transferable, but the ones that are will have the same course numbers as the day courses or the day equivalent course numbers in the course calendars.

Secondly colleges have partnered relationships with universities. So you can start in a college program and bridge through to a university program. For example, Humber has partnership programs with Guelph University, Centennial with University of Toronto and so on. . As well as these partnerships, colleges have “articulation agreements” with universities. This means some college courses count as credits in a university program. However, you need to ask because giving credit for courses earned elsewhere is in your interest not in the interest of the college. All the colleges and universities have agreements with professional accreditation programs run by professional associations like the CGA Certified General Accountants Association.

Third, colleges do Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition of previous work and learning experience. PLAR could enable you start in a program at the intermediate or advanced level instead of at the beginning, saving you time and money. Credits earned from other post-secondary institutions can be transferred as well.

Most colleges have several locations sometimes specializing in a specific field. For instance, the Bell Centre at Centennial College specializes in graphic arts training. You could take a day and visit the sites of programs that interest you.

If you feel that you are not academically ready to handle a colleges course, the colleges have free academic upgrading programs in English, Math and the Sciences. But you can also upgrade your skills at Board of Education schools and at community based programs

If you feel you can't handle making it to a class every week at a certain time, a lot of courses are offered by distance education—online or by correspondence—so check out the Distance Education section in

each continuing education college calendar. The Independent Learning Centre offers high school credits by correspondence and on-line.

School Boards

School Boards are the same organizations that run elementary and high school programs for your children but they also offer a diverse program for adults. School boards in Toronto and the GTA offer several program areas: ESL (English as a Second Language), Ontario Secondary School Diploma programs through adult day schools or night school credit courses, General Interest courses (crafts, languages, fine arts, computers, dance etc. Then there are LINC programs (Language Instruction for Newcomers) and ELT (Enhanced Language Training) as well as training and employment programs.

Toronto and the GTA offer three main programs: English as a Second Language (ESL), secondary school credits towards an Ontario School Secondary Diploma, and General Interest courses (crafts, languages, fine arts, computers etc.) and LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers). There are separate calendars for three of the program areas, General Interest, Adult Credit and ESL. LINC programs are listed at www.settlement.org.

School board courses are taken primarily for skill development rather than for credentials though you can earn an OSSD through the adult day schools. In Toronto the adult day schools are Burnhamthorpe Adult Learning Centre, City Adult Learning Centre, Emery Adult Learning Centre, Scarborough Centre for Alternative Studies, Yorkdale Adult Learning Centre. There are two terms for adult credit courses fall and winter and three terms for General Interest courses, fall, winter and spring. ESL and LINC programs have continuous intake.

These courses are very affordable, ESL/LINC and Adult Day schools have no fees and the General Interest courses are about \$ 100 each.

Community-Based Employment and Language Training

These programs are run by community agencies like Skills for Change, or St. Stephen's Community House and funded by various government programs. These programs are designed for special needs groups such as newcomers, women, Employment Insurance and Social Assistance recipients, the physically or mentally handicapped and so on. If you fit into one of those groups, find out about community-based

programs. You will find them listed in the www.211.org web site or phone the hot line 411-497-3646. You can also go to the nearest library and ask to look at the Blue Book, a Directory of Community Services in Toronto. A Looking for Training Directory, which lists community-based programs exclusively, has been developed by ACTEW and ONESTEP.

These programs have no tuition fees. They run on varying term cycles, for example six months, three months, and even nine weeks.

Universities

There are three universities in Toronto, Ryerson University, York University and the University of Toronto. Universities usually require you to be admitted to the program of study before registering for courses. However Ryerson's Chang School for Continuing Education has open admissions courses.

Universities use mature student admissions though they do not have formal PLAR processes like the colleges. However, admission takes some time so if you are just starting to apply for admissions you may be too late to register for fall 2007 courses but in time for winter and spring 2008 courses. ESL courses are offered at all three universities.

Private colleges

Private career colleges like the International Academy of Design or Durham Business and Computer College are privately owned training schools and licensed by the Ontario government. Run on a continuous intake basis, you start immediately upon paying your tuition. They also tend to be less term-based so their offerings run continuously. You can find private career colleges listed in the phone directories under Schools- Academic Colleges and Universities or on the website for The Ontario Association of Career Colleges.

Privately owned language schools are similar to career colleges. They teach ESL as well as French, Spanish, etc. They are listed in the phone directories under Schools- Languages.

Professional associations

Professional associations are membership-based groups for people working within the same field. Hundreds of professional, business and industry associations are listed in the Associations Canada Directory

found in every library. These associations offer industry-specific training programs themselves and often offer professional certification courses in conjunction with community colleges and universities.

The following are some examples taken from the Centennial College Part-time Studies Calendar: Certified General Accountants Association, Canadian Institute of Bookkeeping, Canadian Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors, Canadian Institute of Management, Ontario Management Development Program, Human Resources Professional Association of Ontario.

Trade Associations

Associations for people working in the trades, often unions, facilitate training through apprenticeship programs. Electricians, plumbers, mechanics etc. are trained on the job by experienced trades people. The best way to get information about learning a trade is to visit an Ontario Apprenticeship Office. There is one at 625 Church in downtown Toronto, one at 1404 Bayly Avenue in Pickering beside the Go station or at the Emerald Centre in Mississauga at 10 Knightsbridge Garden Circle Suite 404.

You may be amazed at the breadth of trades learned by apprenticeship. Baking, hairdressing, early childhood education are some surprising examples.

Doing an apprenticeship, learning on the job, is one of the most affordable ways to learn as you get a wage while you are working and learning. When you need to take time off to do course work at the college, which is several weeks a year, you can get Employment Insurance.

Although the adult education system in Ontario is not organized, you can see that there are many choices available.

September 2008