

College or university? For many, the answer is both

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When Cameron Grant attended St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary, an arts school in his hometown of Brampton, he was passionate about acting.

And looking ahead to his post-secondary education, he liked what he heard about the drama and theatre studies program offered jointly by Sheridan College in Oakville and the University of Toronto, Mississauga (UTM). After four years, he would earn a diploma in acting and an honours bachelor's degree in theatre.

"In a lot of theatre programs in Canada, you're either studying theatre in a more academic sense, or you're studying theatre in a very practical, studio-based conservatory and you're not really getting a lot of academic stuff," said Grant, who completed his studies in the spring.

"What drew me to this program is that I would do both at the same time, and both of them would complement each other. And I really liked the idea that I wouldn't just be an actor, that I'd also be an academic, because I was an honour-roll student in high school."

Now 22, Grant said the program exceeded his expectations. "There's so much opportunity on both campuses to learn and really do in-depth study of acting as well as studying everything around it. I've taken theatre-management classes, I've taken classes about creating documentary theatre pieces."

Collaborative college/university programs — those that confer both a degree and a college diploma or certificate (and usually incorporate some workplace learning) — have been available in Ontario for about 15 years.

Zachary Rose, executive director of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), said his organization's members, mindful of the job market, support "anything that can help you to seamlessly incorporate the advantages and the practical, hands-on experience of college into a higher education pathway."

There are now at least 45 joint college/university programs in Ontario, and that number doesn't include those that confer a bachelor's degree but no diploma (registered nursing is a prominent example).

The array of subjects is vast. Brock University in St. Catharines, for example, offers close to 30 joint programs with various colleges. Courses of study include a child and youth studies/child and youth worker diploma (with Durham College), a game design/game development advanced diploma (with Niagara College), and women's and gender studies/social service worker diploma (with Sheridan College).

The University of Guelph-Humber launched in 2002 as a response to the "double cohort" (the doubling of high school students starting post-secondary education because of the elimination of Grade 13) with three joint programs and 197 students. It now has seven honours degree/diploma programs, 4,700 students, and hopes to expand to 10,000 students by 2024.

According to Dr. John Walsh, vice-provost and chief academic officer of Guelph-Humber, "Students, employers and graduate schools want graduates who have applied skills as well as those traditional, university-level, critical-thinking skills that actually prepare a foundation for them in the future." He said collaboration between universities and colleges "has been steadily growing for a number of years."

Laurie Rancourt, senior vice-president, academic, at Humber College, noted the joint approach isn't suited to all courses of study. But she cited a "real value and richness" in combining the approaches of a college and a university in certain disciplines — such as kinesiology, "where the value of having the combined applied and theoretical approach is huge to students and to employers..."

Tuition for these collaborative diploma/degree programs is on par with university fees. Marks and prerequisites must meet university standards.

"Students get a diploma and a degree for the time and the cost of a four-year degree," pointed out Bill Summers, vice-president of research and policy for Colleges Ontario. "And it combines the best of a sort of traditional university, theoretical education with the best of a college applied education, so students can enter the marketplace with the benefits of both and have some marketable skills that will make them more job-ready.

"There's a growing trend in Ontario for many university grads to come back and do a college diploma after they finish, or we have one-year graduate certificate programs that university grads will do to get more career-specific skills," Summers continued. "That has grown tremendously in the last five years...But that model is at least five years of education."

For Rachel Chin, majoring in human biology at the University of Toronto, Scarborough (UTSC) while also doing the joint program in new media offered by UTSC and Centennial College made sense because she wanted to hedge her bets regarding future work.

"Initially, going into university, I was all about med school," said the 21-year-old from Toronto, who is in her fourth and final year and will earn an honour's bachelor's degree in both human biology and new media studies. "But I felt it was easier to get my foot in the door with something media-related. And that was something I really enjoyed...I always had design or art on the side. You don't have to go through nearly as much formal schooling as you would as a medical student in order to be employable. It was a way for me to just build my portfolio early on and if I decide to go work in the new-media industry then I'll have the skills to do so."

She's been happy with the joint program, and especially enjoyed its three-month placement earlier this year in which she was part of a four-student team creating a website for a Toronto spa.

"We learned different aspects, like how to run a business in terms of project management," said Chin. "It's a big change from sitting in a lecture and just listening to a prof talk for three hours. It was really hands-on; you got to really immerse yourself in that experience."

Tomson Varghese, 25, who completed an honours bachelor of business administration and diploma in business administration at the University of Guelph-Humber in June, is proud of the fact he's one the first two graduates from his school hired by a large international consulting company, Accenture, a job he said would typically go to a graduate of a more established institution.

Varghese, from Brampton, contends the program and the institution offer opportunities recruiters are taking note of. "When employers look at our resumes, they see the practical and theoretical aspects of our education."

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