

College to seek U.S. accreditation

No Canadian system; president says it's needed to attract foreign students

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WITH no national accreditation process for post-secondary schools, Canada could be missing out on attracting crucial interest from international students, according to Capilano College president Greg Lee.

Earlier this month, Lee announced that his college would seek formal accreditation from an American agency, in response to a complete absence of similar organizations at home.

The Washington-based Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is one of six regional agencies with accreditation powers overseen by the U.S. Department of Education. It evaluates public and private institutions based on self-assessments and peer reviews.

Canada has no comparable national system. Lee said that might have been acceptable when most of our colleges and universities were publicly funded and fairly consistent in quality, but the proliferation of private schools has made accreditation a necessity.

"Canada is the only country among the developed nations that doesn't have a national ministry responsible for post-secondary education," Lee said. "There's no federal presence that's taking the leadership."

North Vancouver MP Don



CAPILANO College president Greg Lee says the proliferation of private schools in Canada makes a national system of accreditation a necessity.

Bell said that he only recently learned that Canada lacks a national accreditation system through discussions with Lee.

Bell called the creation of such a system an "excellent idea," and said that he would be meeting with Lee again soon to get a better idea of the benefits and issues involved.

A mark of accreditation could be the deciding factor for foreign students looking to study in Canada, Lee said. Without a formal system in place, he said Canada could be shooting itself in the foot.

That's because foreign students, who currently account for fewer than 10 per cent of Capilano's students, are big contributors to the economy. The average international student on the North Shore spends more than \$25,000 in the community

each year, resulting in a \$20-million boost to business.

But there's another reason for schools like Capilano to compete for students from overseas. With the country's birth rate declining, colleges need to think internationally if they want to fill classrooms and tuition coffers.

According to a StatsCan report released in 2005, elementary and secondary school enrolment both began a slow decline in the mid-1990s.

Lee said that college and university enrolment numbers have also peaked in recent years, and he expects them to begin falling off. "If numbers are declining in the school system, they'll decline in post-secondary, too," he said.

In the spring, Lee announced that Capilano College would be applying for designation as a regional university. At the time, he said that identification as a university could help to attract foreign students.

While the school system is finding itself with more resources than students, holes are also beginning to open in the workforce. Bell said that, as baby boomers retire, Canada will need trained immigrants to pick up the slack.

Canada also depends on international students to build international connections that last beyond graduation, Bell said.

Foreign students gain a "social education" about Canada and according to Bell "that helps our prominence on the world scene, and helps people understand the

difference between Canada and the United States."

In British Columbia, the Private Career Training Institutions Agency is the sole organization to offer accreditation to colleges, but its services are only available to private colleges. The PCTIA requires registration from any school whose programs exceed 40 hours, and whose tuition is greater than \$1,000.

The PCTIA requires accreditation for any school that wishes its students to be eligible for StudentAid BC, but the foreign students that colleges are so desperate to attract aren't eligible for this assistance. Of the 471 schools registered by PCTIA, only 198 have gone through the process.

Still, Lee said that when prospective students overseas look to Canada, the only accredited schools they'll see are private colleges, and this gives them an edge over public institutions.

That can be especially misleading for students coming from places with weak public education systems. "In many countries the best institutions are private," Lee said.

Lee has reviewed PCTIA's process, which his public college is not eligible for, and said that it is, "not as rigorous or in-depth" as the American process.

Only one other Canadian school has completed the American accreditation process. Alberta's Athabasca University is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Learning.