

## Canada: passport to higher ed, lower cost

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By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | December 25, 2008

Over the years, Americans have often turned to their Northern neighbor in times of need or convenience, whether to evade the draft or buy prescription drugs. Now, as the US economy heads south, growing ranks of New England students are looking north to Canada as a college destination.

Colleges in eastern Canada report mounting interest this fall among high school seniors from the Northeast, with a recently stronger US dollar making already low tuition costs even more of a bargain for Americans.

Although applications for next academic year are not due for at least a month, schools from Toronto to Halifax say many students in the Boston area and throughout the region are drawn by the allure of an international college experience relatively close to home.

Dalhousie University in Halifax, for instance, said requests for information from New England students have tripled this fall. McGill University in Montreal, where 100 students from Massachusetts enrolled this fall, and the University of Toronto, Canada's largest university, have also seen a new level of interest from across the border.

The number of Americans studying abroad has more than doubled in the past decade, and high school counselors say the influx to Canada reflects a broader trend of students attending foreign universities full time.

Since 2001, the number of American attending college in Canada has risen by 50 percent to about 9,000, according to Canadian Embassy in Washington.

Now, with the greenback packing more punch (as of Tuesday, one US dollar was worth \$1.21 Canadian dollars), Americans' dwindling college savings go that much further, said recruiters and guidance counselors.

The Canadian dollar's "decline is unfortunate for us, but good for American students," said Adam Lotesto, a recruitment officer at the University of Toronto. "They can have a great education at a great value."

Because they are publicly funded and heavily subsidized by their government, Canadian universities are generally less expensive than American private schools and some public universities, even for international students who pay more than their Canadian counterparts.

American students can also receive US government-backed loans to attend Canadian colleges and are eligible for merit-based financial aid from the institutions, although public financial aid is restricted to Canadians.

Canadian colleges say they have increased recruiting throughout the region, particularly in the Boston suburbs, to build upon rising demand. Dalhousie University has doubled its number of high school visits and college fairs in New England in the past two years, and earlier this month, the Canadian Consulate in Boston held its first college fair, drawing scores of families and school counselors.

"Students are willing to look more broadly geographically," said Brad MacGowan, a college counselor at Newton North High School, which has sent 10 students to McGill in the past three years. "And Canadian colleges are looking for them."

The Canadian Consulate has been hosting meetings between college recruiters and high school counselors for years.

The colleges say the increased interest owes as much to their strong academic reputations, diverse student bodies, and settings in attractive cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax as cost. American students had been applying to Canadian colleges in greater numbers for several years, even when the weak American dollar drove up tuition costs before its reversal, they note.

But this fall, economic concerns have assumed a renewed prominence.

"The big piece is the cost," said Chuck Bridges, vice president of external affairs at St. Mary's University in Halifax, which charges about \$16,450 tuition in US currency. "We figure it's roughly half the cost of a comparable university in New England."

Average tuition and fees for full-time undergraduate international students are \$14,487, according to government statistics, far less than for many US private four-year schools and some public research universities. Canadians pay substantially less - sometimes a small fraction - than foreign students, giving universities a strong incentive to recruit internationally.

For Ian Sandler, a senior at Brookline High School who is applying to McGill, the prospect of attending a renowned university at a discounted price is enticing.

"With the current economic situation, it's definitely in the back of my mind," he said.

But just as important, he said, are McGill's academic strengths, its size - about 24,000 undergraduates - and location in Montreal, a cosmopolitan yet highly livable city.

That's also the sales pitch at McGill's rival, the University of Toronto. Rob Steiner, the university's assistant vice president for strategic communications, said the school and the city offer vast cultural diversity for students eager for a cosmopolitan environment in their native language, relatively close to home.

"An hour away from Mom and Dad but a fundamentally different setting," he said.

For most students, Canada more readily conjures images of caribou and frozen tundra than bright lights and big cities. College counselors say few students suggest Canadian schools at the start and often greet the idea with frowns and furrowed brows. Yet in a chilly economy, they are warming up to the idea.

"Students don't usually come in and say, 'I want to go to Canada,' " said Joan Casey, a Brookline education consultant. "But then they hear about the cost and think: '\$18,000 for everything? That's pretty amazing.' "

Counselors said students are also drawn to a simple admission process at Canadian schools, which rarely includes an interview or essay, and relaxed admission standards compared with selective US colleges. Facing far less competition, students with so-so grades and SAT scores can land at a better school than they would otherwise, counselors say.

"It's pretty tough for an American student with that kind of profile to get into an urban university at that price and caliber," Casey said of top Canadian schools.

Emily Acevedo, a senior at Brookline High School, has set her sights on Concordia University, a 45,000-student college in Montreal. She initially visited schools in North Carolina and Virginia, but found their college towns too small and confining.

She loves the idea of studying in an exciting place she's never been, and her parents love the Canadian cost. Off went the application a few days ago.

"Extra stamps and all," she said. ■