

# Private Career College Experiences in Alberta

Student, Staff, and Support  
Workers Stories

2023



## PRIVATE CAREER COLLEGE EXPERIENCES IN ALBERTA

## Introduction

There are 1,300 private career colleges (PCCs) across Canada, and around 200 in Alberta. From hairstyling to truck driving, massage therapy to medical and office assistants, 25,000 people in Alberta attend a Private Career College program every year.

Some PCCs are responsible and reputable institutions that fill an important role in the adult education and employment system. PCCs offer learners convenience, flexibility, smaller class sizes, and intensive, short-duration programs to enhance their practical skills and become more competitive in the job market. Some PCCs engage in concerning practices and leave learners on a path to nowhere and tens of thousands of dollars in debt.

Students and staff of private career colleges, as well as support workers for vulnerable learners, have shared concerns about false or misleading information given by recruiters, high-pressure sales tactics, poor quality of instruction and instructional materials, lack of job opportunities, lack of job search support, and high-debt as a result of attending a private career college.

Private career college students are more likely to be new to Canada, living on a lower income, women, single parents, and Indigenous peoples, compared to their public post-secondary counterparts. We hope the following stories will inspire changes to and improve the quality and oversight of private career colleges in Alberta. A career college education in

Alberta should be a safe and successful choice for learners, many of whom have no other options when it comes to a post-secondary education.

For more information on the issues and opportunities of private career colleges, visit:

**High Hopes, High Costs**  
Protecting Students at  
Private Career Colleges  
– Alberta Brief

To learn more about the human stories and impact on learners in Alberta, read below.

## PRIVATE CAREER COLLEGE EXPERIENCES IN ALBERTA

### Overview of Stories

The following stories are shared by former PCC students, staff and supporter workers in their own words. Some names and photos have been anonymized at the request of students and staff.



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Bookkeeping Student




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Paralegal Student



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## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS

# Jacklyn

Book Keeping and  
Business Administration Student



“I enrolled in a PCC when there was an error in my application at a public college. They were so much more helpful, friendly, welcoming, than the public college. They shared a giant stack of papers with me and all I had to do was sign. They made it so easy and exciting. They said they would take care of the funding and that I was guaranteed a job. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to pursue for a career, I just knew that I wanted to learn and wanted to find a great job. They suggested the bookkeeping and business administration program which started in two weeks. I was so excited and hopeful. I told my family and friends back in my community how great they were.

After a few weeks it became clear to me that my funding wasn’t coming from my community. I thought I was getting grants from my band. I didn’t want another loan. I confronted the school and that’s when they sat me down to explain the loan

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program. I was scared of the debt, but I was already enrolled and enjoying my instructors and the courses. I thought, oh well – if this pans out for a great job then it will be worth it. It wasn’t though.

They offered no job support or assistance even though that was part of their sales pitch. There was no practicum as promised. I sent my resume out everywhere but didn’t get any call backs. I was left \$20K in debt and still working dead-end jobs. I am still paying off this debt 10 years later. I am in a great job now but after going to back to school – this time at a local university and taking on more debt. I would be so much further ahead if I hadn’t done this \$20K program. There was no boost to my career or job prospects. I feel bad that I told others how great they were at first.

**That’s the way they work though – they promise you the world. I wish I hadn’t believed them.”**

## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS

## Sylvia

Medical Office  
Assistant Student



“I went to several different career colleges in different industries. My family and I really value education and learning, and I wanted to try out different career paths. Some of my experiences were good even if they just helped me realize that it wasn’t the right career for me. The private career college I went to for a medical office assistant program was bad. The cost was okay at \$6000 but they promised me that \$4000 of that would be covered in grants or a bursary. This wasn’t true. The

curriculum seemed good, but the promises of job experience and a practicum were not true. I had less than a month experience in a medical office and given very few responsibilities or practice. They didn’t give me the resources or tools to get a job and no employer would recognize my diploma anyway. I am still paying off the loan. I promised myself that I would have a career by the time my oldest was 6 years old. I wish that had turned out. I wish my hard work had paid off.”

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## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS



# Thomas

Health Care Aid  
Student

“The teachers were nice and good at their job. The problem was that I took a student loan and didn’t even know I was doing that. I didn’t get any explanation about how the loan worked. One of the discouraging factors is that I’m still paying off the loan. I worked for a short time after my studies and I applied everywhere but couldn’t get a job. It was really expensive; the program cost me \$13,000 and after I graduated I was being paid minimum wage. It brought my credit down because I couldn’t pay off my loan. My recommendation is to better

help the newcomers. When I arrived here, I didn’t know anything about loans and I was really curious to learn something and get a great job. That didn’t happen. I just got a big loan which is a big source of stress still. We need someone to help guide us to which schools and which programs are advisable. I had to figure it out on my own. They tell you’re going to get a job and that wasn’t true. I am sharing my story because I want to help others. I want government to help others.”

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## Kaila

Office Administration  
Student

“The college was not bad at first and it made me feel hopeful and that I would get through it, no problem. Looking back, they sucked me in to joining the office administration program. At first it was easy – we were just watching movies and then we had to do hard math and I didn’t understand it. I didn’t have my grade 10 – I couldn’t do the work – I couldn’t keep up. I was pregnant and a mom. I went only for a few weeks and I just couldn’t succeed. After they got my funding, all the inspiring talk and convincing disappeared. They didn’t offer me a refund and now I can’t get a student loan for another program. I got accepted to MRU to do a criminal justice studies program and would like to go but I’m not sure how I will pay.

The career college signed up a whole bunch of Indigenous learners just to take our money. Both my sister and I walked away from this experience feeling unintelligent because we couldn’t succeed in program, but looking back I know they just wanted to take our money. A lot of people grow up on the reserve and come to the city feeling hopeful and these colleges give them a lot of hope and convince them. They tricked us in to signing up. They just wanted to take our money. They didn’t care about our success. I knew after a few weeks that program wasn’t right for me. I wasn’t getting the help or learning I needed and expected with the money I was paying. It was clear that this wasn’t going to work, but I couldn’t get a refund.”

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## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS



Loann

Business Administration  
Student

“I had almost completed my business administration program at an Alberta university and decided to take a couple of courses at the private career college just because it seemed a bit easier and cheaper. I was planning to transfer the credits to complete my degree and told them this all when I was registering. They told me I could transfer the credits, no problem. They told me the program was \$11,000 but charged me \$18,000. They

did the application for my student loan for me. They assured me the credits could be transferred. They cannot. The diploma from this college is useless and now I have this huge debt. It’s infuriating. I was trying to get ahead and now I am so many steps back. Then after all that, they offered me \$500 and a free laptop to recruit students for them. I couldn’t believe it.”

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## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS

**Yohannes****Development Service  
Worker Student**

“I was contacted by one of the college’s recruiter in Marlborough mall and they gave me very attractive information about the college, programs and benefits. I went to the college’s office and met with one of the officers who interviewed me and gave the good news that I’m qualified to enroll in the Developmental Service Worker Diploma program. I had CLB level of 5 at that time and some work experience working with people with disability in my home country. The officer promised me that I would get high quality education, practicum and job placement support with partner employers after completing the program. The officer also promised that I would get a starting wage of \$35/hour and above very easily after completing the program. They then helped me to apply for loan and grant quickly and sign all the papers required to enroll in the program. The process was rushed and now I realize that I was just being pushed to sign the papers and help them profit from the deal.

There were about 11 students when we started and only 6 of us graduated. Some of the students enrolled in the program just

because they needed the maintenance loan and grant to help them with their urgent financial needs. We had only one instructor for all the courses we took. The instructor was good, and textbooks were ok. The instructor was fired at the end of the program mainly because she challenged the administration to provide more support to the students. The college administration didn’t support the instructor and students in getting practicum and job placement support which was promised during recruitment. The college didn’t even provide the right tax slips during tax time to help us get the necessary tax credits.

**As far as I know no one from my class is working in the field we studied. I’m currently doing a construction job to pay off huge student loan which was \$22,500 by the end of the program. I wish I had competent advice before starting the program and I hope the government will put strict regulatory framework to ensure PCCs are held accountable and keeping their promises.”**

## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS



# Andrea

Paralegal  
Student

"I finished my last year of high school in Canada in 2012. Because I had small children I waited until they were all in school and day care to explore further education. I wanted to study legal assistant certificate as I wanted to help immigrants with legal issues because I had been doing volunteer work and liked it. I enrolled for an intensive 18-month Paralegal Diploma at a college closer to my house and easier to get in because they only required me to do a math and English test. They told me my English was enough, but I struggled a lot the first few months as they used terminology I was not familiar with, and my English was not that great. I tried to quit but they made some accommodations allowing me to take the same classes in the morning and in the evening.

After I finished all the courses and it was time for my practicum they told me that my English was not good enough but I wrote a letter indicating that they had accepted me into the program knowing my level of English. After I pressured them they helped me to find a practicum and I was able to graduate.

As far as I know none of the people close to me were able to find a job as paralegal. I moved to Ontario and when I approached college branch in Ontario, they told me that my studies were not accepted as such in Ontario, and I had to do the whole program again.

I still owe more than \$35,000 on my loans from a \$40,000 program and have not been able to pay it back as I am struggling financially."

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## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS



## Ameerah

Human and Community  
Services Student

“The school, at first when trying to recruit students, is very much interested and attentive. Once they finally succeeded and the student is already attending the school, when you have inquiries, it was very difficult to talk to them. Most of the times, you get no response at all. The marketers, in my own opinion, used an unprofessional way of recruiting, convincing their prospects in taking the course. The marketer’s main focus is to win the students so they can earn their commission. Most of the times the students do not even know what they are getting into. They are not aware what program they

enrolled. Marketers will tell them that they don’t have to attend school every day after receiving their funding. The school admin/marketers promised a referral fee to all students, but after successfully recruiting the students, when you follow up, you don’t get any response from both the school admin and the marketers.

**In my opinion, the school and the marketers both shared one purpose: Focus on the money and not thinking of the students concerns.”**

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## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STUDENTS



## Margarita

Rehab Therapy Assistant  
Student

“I heard about Rehab Therapy Assistant Program from someone who was working at the College as I was there looking for information about other programs. I asked about its cost, including books and supplies, and how long it would take to finish. I did not think too much about the cost then, since what was important for me was I would get certified after the program. The staff from the college also gave me a list of books to buy and I paid for it. However, the books did not arrive for some time, and we did not have any references while taking up the classes. There were also three different teachers teaching us alternately and unfortunately, we found out towards the end of the

program that they were not the qualified and right teachers for the program. And what’s worst, we found that the college did not have a legal certification or permit to run the program at that time. We learned about this when we could not do our practicum at the hospitals or clinics – we were not accepted because the program was not legit. When we discovered this, our group tried to convince the college to pay back our tuition costs but nothing happened and the branch we called told us that we could not do anything about it because they were a private school. In then end, I lost \$15,000 and six months of study, and ended up with no certification or job for taking the program.”

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## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STAFF AND SUPPORTER WORKERS



Aydin

Former Recruiter  
for a PCC

“The college I worked at had a whole finance team who aids the students with step by step instructions to apply for a student loan to pay the high tuition. Many of the students who would attend are on social assistance or un-employed, making the concept of a 25K loan hard to grasp. Many students saw the loan as an escape from their poverty and would use the money for personal reasons, then be in a tough spot when it came time to start school.

**The private college system is using the student loan system to their advantage. It felt like we were tricking students into getting a loan they did not need. Many students need a step between poverty, addiction, or homelessness, instead of jumping straight into college.** I ultimately chose to leave this profession as I felt very uncomfortable tricking students into large loans they cannot repay. I really think there needs to be more regulation on this.”

## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STAFF AND SUPPORTER WORKERS



# Jason

PCC  
Instructor

“The college I work for will straight up, bold face, lie to students. They will do anything to get students to sign up. They exaggerate the quality of the facilities and equipment. They say you will have access to the equipment but the students don’t.

**The quality of the program is a concern.**

**The materials we are given are outdated.**

**It’s up to the instructors who care to make the curriculum up to date and high quality.**

The good instructors put in a lot of unpaid overtime to make the curriculum not a mess. A lot of students have low morale. A lot really struggled. Some worked really hard and I felt like we let them down. I think a majority of our students do not go on to work in the industry. The other instructors and I have intentionally passed students who should not have graduated but we

couldn’t bear the idea of them having to pay tens of thousands of dollars to repeat the classes. They let students repeat a course three or four times, just to take their money. I have fought with administration on prerequisites. They will put students in a class they aren’t qualified for just so they are in four classes (to meet the student loan requirements) but the student hasn’t done the first level and so the students fail, lowering their morale, just taking their money. The focus is on recruitment and money. They will sign up anyone – someone without computer literacy. The focus should be in prerequisites. Ensuring students have what it takes to succeed.”

## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STAFF AND SUPPORTER WORKERS



## Humaira

Former PCC  
Instructor

“It was only after I started to teach that I realized that something was wrong. **There was no curriculum provided and I was asked to develop everything from scratch using Google. The slides of the previous instructor were low quality, and I didn’t really understand the process of enrolling students all year round.** There would be a new student in my class every week which was extremely confusing for them and frustrating for me, at the same time. There was no rubric developed for the grading process and there were no guidelines and structure around writing exams. All the classes were online and within months, the number of my students increased from 10 to almost 60. Except for one or

two, most of the students were absent or disengaged. Most of the time, the cameras were off, and you wouldn’t know as to how many students were present in the virtual classroom. We were asked to remain logged in for the entire duration of 4hr class even if the actual teaching time was one hour.

I noticed that most of the instructors they hired during that time were mostly racialized women and were underpaid. I quit after a few months of teaching. I felt that a lot of things that were happening there were unethical, and it was nothing but a scam on multiple levels.”

## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STAFF AND SUPPORTER WORKERS

## Roxanne

Settlement Program  
Coordinator



"I was working at an Edmonton based newcomer serving agency in the spring of 2022 when staff members started to flag that a number of our clients began coming to us in distress after losing their vital Alberta Supports benefits. They were primarily from the Syrian community - resettled refugees - and they were losing their benefits because they or their family member had signed up for a program at a private career college and, during the process, had taken out a student loan.

As more and more clients came forward to tell their stories, many commonalities emerged. They had all been approached by the same person, an Arabic speaking recruiter working in Edmonton. **They had all been rushed through the admissions process - sometimes taken to a hotel for group information sessions where they would be signed up on the spot.** None of them had actually completed their English competency exams - many were CLB level 1 and 2 or lower, which based on the college's own standards do not meet admissions requirements. **They were told misleading information about the college and its programs and were aggressively convinced to sign up. Some of them were even told to open separate bank accounts to receive student loans without notifying**

**the government and losing benefits.** The recruiter is a known figure in the Arabic speaking community, and many of our clients were afraid to come forward or file police reports out of fear of retribution.

Working with our clients to unenroll from the college, return their student loans, and reenroll in Alberta Supports benefits was a nightmare - for example there are no interpreters at Alberta Student Aid and every time you call you get a new agent that has no context about the situation. We had even found, in some cases, that the recruiter had created a new email in the client's name to put on registration forms, which only he had access to, making it even harder to fix. Meanwhile, during that time these clients and families anxiously awaited the return of their benefits so they could provide for themselves. We ended up having to create a how-to-guide for case workers and other frontline staff with step-by-step instructions on how to help their clients navigate all the different systems involved.

There are around 40 clients that I know of through working with and collaborating with other service providers that have been affected by this, and those are only the ones who are comfortable enough to come forward."



## STORIES SHARED BY FORMER PCC STAFF AND SUPPORTER WORKERS



## Zaid

Settlement  
Practitioner

“I became aware of the issues happening at Private Career Colleges because the families that I work with, many of them resettled Syrian refugees, started losing access to their government provided benefits through Alberta Supports after enrolling in a program at a private career college. These families did not understand why they had lost their benefits – nobody, not the college nor the recruiter – had warned them, and some individuals had even been told explicitly that their application would not affect their government benefits – an outright lie.

The more I heard from my clients, the more concerned I became. They were approached by an Arabic speaking recruiter who misled them about the application process, the student loan program, admission requirements, English language benchmark requirements, and more. **Many of them had an English level of CLB 1, meaning they did not meet the minimum qualifications to attend the college in the first place. It also means that there was no way they would be able to comprehend any of the paperwork presented to them by the recruiter.** None of the clients I heard from had actually

completed an English test, and many of them did not even sign the paperwork themselves – instead, their signature was apparently forged by the recruiter. The recruiter preyed on their vulnerability, given that they are just beginning to understand the Canadian system and how it all works, they were all misled to believe that this was the best thing for them.

So, having been misled by a recruiter to enroll in a program that they did not qualify for, and having had a Student Loan opened in their name for a program they would likely never attend, these individuals and their families were then cut off from Income Support, child care, and other government benefits. They were taking English classes at the time, so losing child care was a big deal. Unenrolling from the PCC, returning the Student Loan, and reinstating these benefits is not an easy or timely process and has left many of the families I work with in financial crisis.

These newcomers are doing everything they can to establish themselves in Canada and build a future for their families – we need an education system that supports them, rather than preys on them.”

## STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLISHING ORGANIZATIONS

## Francis Boakye

Executive Director  
of Action Dignity



ActionDignity is committed to working with equity-seeking groups and communities to bring about transformational changes in our society. What this means in practice is that ActionDignity addresses issues of inequities faced by racialized communities because of systemic failures and inadequate protection through bold policies. **The past few years have seen some career colleges exploiting and using gaps in the system to their advantage by misleading prospective students at these colleges. Most of these students are Newcomers, racialized and single mothers whose precarious economic conditions make them susceptible to well-orchestrated scams by some of these**

**colleges.** Stories from affected individuals from the community are saturated with feelings of despair, vulnerability, and hopelessness. As an organization that works to influence policies, systems and services that benefit marginalized members of our community, ActionDignity believes eradicating the root causes of feelings of vulnerability requires addressing the underlying systemic flaws by changing existing policies of career colleges to ensure better protection for the most marginalized among us. Systemic failures call for systemic fixes through bolder, enforceable policies and regulations for better educational and career outcomes for the community.

## STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLISHING ORGANIZATIONS

## Anila Lee Yuen

President and CEO  
of Centre for Newcomers



**Situations where newcomers are scammed through the dishonest and manipulative sales techniques of some private career colleges is unfortunately very common. Newcomers are especially targeted because of the systemic discrimination they already face in the labour market.**

The vast majority of newcomers to Canada are here because they have a skillset that Canada needs. They also speak English or French, fluently. Upon arrival, however, they learn that many employers and the general public do not recognize their credentials. There is an unspoken rule in our society where all experience must be Canadian experience and all education must be Canadian. This inability to work

in the field and with the position that newcomers were granted entry into Canada for, creates ideal conditions for some career colleges to take advantage of the need for newcomers to have Canadian credentials in order to actively participate in the labour market. At the Centre for Newcomers, as a full service settlement agency, with over 250 partners, we do our best to create opportunities for newcomers to learn about accreditation in Canada, in order to choose the best option for themselves; while we continue to advocate for credential recognition of all newcomers to Canada.

## STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLISHING ORGANIZATIONS

## Meghan Klein

Executive Director of Edmonton  
Mennonite Centre for Newcomers



Enrolling in an education program is an act of hope and ambition, two characteristics that newcomers to Canada certainly possess. When immigrants and refugees embark on an educational path, it is with the goal of investing in their future success and that of their families.

Newcomers, especially refugees who have arrived here after surviving much upheaval, are on the whole a resilient and intelligent group of folks who demonstrate determination to find their footing in a new place. Nevertheless, there is so much to learn about Canadian customs, languages, and norms upon first arriving in Canada. It is an overwhelming time.

**It distressed me deeply to learn about the predatory practices of some private**

**career colleges that specifically target newcomers, preying on the vulnerabilities of people still learning English and trying to understand how our systems work in Canada. The cost of these unscrupulous practices ripples out from individuals to families to communities to society as a whole. We are all paying the price.**

As Albertans, I believe it is incumbent upon all of us to uphold high standards for our educational institutions and processes, ensuring they are accessible, delivering quality programming, and operate based on ethics our entire community can be proud of. Private career colleges are part of our education ecosystem and we need a system of checks and balances to ensure all our institutions of training and learning are not only reputable, they are trustworthy.

## STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLISHING ORGANIZATIONS

# Jeff Loomis

Executive Director  
of Momentum



We first heard about issues related to private career colleges through our financial empowerment and skills training programs. Participants have shared personal stories over the years about staggering student loan debt, poor job prospects, and broken promises from some of these institutions.

There are reputable schools who do wonderful work preparing students for careers and they operate with integrity. It is also clear that there are some private career colleges that do not offer a high-quality experience for students, especially considering the high cost. The troubling practices of some colleges include high-pressure sales tactics, providing false or misleading information and offering poor quality learning experience that can

put vulnerable learners at risk of serious financial strain. We have a system in Alberta that has allowed these unethical colleges to flourish at the expense of vulnerable, often low-income learners and to detriment of more professional private colleges.

**Post-secondary education should be helpful, not harmful. Post-secondary education shouldn't be a gamble, especially for marginalized learners, but that's exactly what's happening with some private career colleges in Alberta. Concerning stories from students keep coming and it's heartbreaking. We must improve the safety and quality of all colleges in Alberta.** We can develop a reputation for having the safest and highest-quality private career colleges in Canada.

### LEARN MORE:

**High Hopes, High Costs**  
Protecting Students at  
Private Career Colleges  
– Alberta Brief



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