

Ins & Outs of College & University

This is general information only; our goal is to provide you with basic information so that you better understand the college and university system. To be sure about your responsibilities and options as a student, you should check with individual schools for their definitions and requirements. You may not know some words/terms that we use, or may be confused about some things. Read through this whole section, as most things will be defined or explained. We encourage you to check out your school's website, student services centre, school calendar, or talk to counsellors or professors to ensure that you have enough information to make good

What is a post-secondary school?

High school is also known as secondary school. 'Post' means 'after', so post-secondary means after high school. Colleges and universities are post-secondary schools.

What is the difference between a college and university?

Universities generally have a larger range of courses and more degree programs than colleges. Most colleges are smaller, have lower tuition rates, and may have fewer entrance requirements; for example, you may not need a second language.

How do I qualify to get into a post-secondary school?

Usually you have to be at least 19 years old, be a high school graduate or equivalent (i.e. completed an Adult Basic Education program or have a Grade 12 Equivalency Diploma (GED), and you need to meet the school's minimum GPA requirement, and sometimes you must pass an entrance exam (eg., in English or Math).

How do I apply to get into a post-secondary school?

You submit an application form and official transcripts, and pay an application fee. Forms are available at the school or can usually be downloaded from their website. If you are accepted, you will receive an acceptance letter that will tell you what your next steps are.

What is a school calendar?

A school calendar contains most of the info you need about a school including deadlines, fees, course descriptions, contact numbers, and other important info.

What is a transcript? And why do I need it?

A transcript is an official report of your grades. You need a transcript to register in a school or apply for funding, a scholarship, bursary or grant. Most schools charge a fee for transcripts and it usually takes weeks before you receive it; make sure you order one well ahead of when you need it. You can order transcripts from the high school office or the college/university student services centre.

What is a GPA?

GPA is short for grade point average. It is the average of your combined grades. Most colleges and universities use a system based on letter grades which are assigned a number value from 0.0 to 4.0. For example, an 'F' equals 0.0 and an 'A+' equals 4.0. Each school has a chart of how grades translate into GPAs in their school calendar. Most high schools do not use a numeric grading system; instead they give students percentage grades with equivalent alphabetical grades. Often a minimum GPA is needed to qualify for a course or degree program, or for band funding, scholarships, bursaries or grants.

What is a credit?

A credit is similar to points. For most post-secondary courses you will receive three credits for a successfully completed course. Diplomas usually require 30 to 60 credits, and degrees usually require 120 credits.

What are transfer credits?

These are courses that you can transfer from one school to another and get credit for them. For instance, you might take an English 120 course at Langara College that can be transferred to UBC so this course counts towards your degree from UBC, but the English 190 course you took at Langara may not be transferable and won't count towards your degree at UBC. You must check the British Columbia Transfer Guide to see if your courses are transferable to other schools. Also be aware that some schools or their courses are not accredited (officially recognized as teaching/credited courses).

What are prerequisites?

A prerequisite is something that is required before you can register for a course or receive a diploma or degree. For example, you might need Grade 12 English before you can take a college level English course. Or you may need Psychology 400 in order to get a Bachelors degree with a major in Psychology.

How long is a term or semester in post-secondary schools?

There are usually three or four terms during the year, each lasting approximately three to four months. You can attend as many terms as you want if you are not in a specific program, but the fewer terms and courses you attend, the longer the time it will take for you to finish your education, and you may have to attend a minimum number of courses to qualify for student loans or funding from other sources.

What is a full-time or part-time student?

Each school defines what is part-time (3 courses per term) and full-time (5 courses per term). If you are funded by your Band, you may be required to take a certain number of courses each term to remain eligible for continued funding. If you are funded by your Band, it is best to check how many courses or credits are required by your Band, rather than whether the school considers you a part-time or full-time student.

What are distance education courses?

These are courses that you can take outside of the school setting and at your own pace. You either mail your assignments to the instructor or do them online. You usually have to take the exams at a school in the presence of an instructor. Often you can access an advisor by phone or email if you have questions. You should check to make sure that specific courses can count as credits towards your diploma or degree.

How do I choose and register for my courses?

You should choose courses that will fit into your educational plan (ie: to become an accountant, you would take accounting, English, and other courses that are required for you to get a diploma or degree in accounting). You can find this info in the school calendar. If you do not know what courses to take or what diploma or degree to work towards, you should talk to a student, First Nations or faculty advisor to seek advice. You can also just take general studies of many different courses, but you should make sure to take courses that are transferable to at least one of the areas that you are considering as a diploma or degree. For some schools you can register online or over the phone, but for others you must go to the school to register. You should choose classes that fit into your schedule and leave you time to study. Many classes have options of what time of day or day of the week that you can take them. Some people prefer to choose classes based on who is teaching them; you can find info on teachers from other students or at the student centre.

What do the class/course numbers mean?

Example: Course 120 or 230. The first digit usually represents the year level of the course. The second and third digits usually specify the level within that year. Usually the higher the number, the more advanced the work. You usually have to complete courses in the order of the year they represent from the lowest year to the highest.

How do I know what books to buy for my course? And where do I get them?

The teacher/professor will give you a class outline or syllabus that lists what books are needed. You can buy textbooks at the school bookstore or you may even find them at other bookstores. The library often carries one or more copies of textbooks that can be borrowed. Some students sell their old textbooks. These books are cheaper (usually half price), but be careful – make sure the book is the right edition for your course and that it is still in good shape.

What is a lab?

Example: if you are taking a computer studies course, you will have class time where the professor gives a lecture, you can ask questions, or participate in discussions; **and** you will have lab time where you do practice exercises on the computer with a teacher in attendance to help you. The class size of a lab is smaller than for a lecture.

What is student number and how do I get one?

After you register and pay your fees, you will receive a student number that allows you to get a student card that is also your library card. Your student card can get you reduced bus fare and access to other student services. There is usually no cost for a student card.

Do I need to know how to write an essay if I go to college or university?

Most courses require some degree of writing skill, but it depends on what courses you take (eg. English requires much more writing than Math). There are books that can help you learn to write an essay, or you can get help from the student service centre.

If I am having a hard time where can I go for help?

If you need help with your school work, you should ask your professor, fellow students, or student, First Nations or faculty advisor for help. There are also study groups, volunteer or paid tutors, the internet or library, and most schools have workshops on study skills, writing, anti-racism, stress management, etc. If it is a health issue, you should visit the student services centre to find out what they can do for you. Schools often have a health clinic and counsellors who can assist you. If your health issue is interfering with your studies, be sure to discuss it with your professor. If you have a disability, many schools have specific support services available. If it is a financial issue, you should talk to your family, Band, funder, or the student services centre to identify your options.

What is student orientation?

If you are in a specific degree program, you will be required to attend an orientation session where you will learn about all of the requirements, resources, and options available to you. There are also orientations at the library, student union building, or other student resources. Check with your school for more info.

What is a work/study program?

Low income students may be eligible to work at their school to earn extra money. You can apply at the student services centre. If you have somewhere specific you want to work (eg. library, childcare centre, Native Centre) check with them for opportunities, then bring that info to the student services centre to see if that is an option. There is usually a maximum amount of hours that you are allowed to work.

What if I want to play sports while I'm in school?

Most schools have sports opportunities – from intermural teams (casual) to varsity (school) teams, to course work. Check the school calendar for more info. Some athletes may be able to get scholarships due to their sports involvement. Be sure you do not jeopardize your education by taking too much time away from studying.

How will I know what my grade will be once I'm in post-secondary school?

At the beginning of the term, most teachers/professors give students a breakdown of how they will grade the course (eg., paper 15%, attendance 15%, participation 20%, exam 50%). Depending on the course, you can usually keep track of your grade during the term by adding all of your marks together.

What is a bell curve?

Some courses must have a certain amount of students who get each letter grade from A – D, therefore sometimes marks are adjusted to ensure that this happens. So although some people might qualify for what is usually a B minus, they may be bumped down to a C plus to ensure that all students fit within the bell curve. If you would like to better understand this, ask your professor or student service centre rep.

What is a department, faculty or school?

These are all basically the same thing. A psychology student may be in a Psychology Department, Faculty, or School. The name does not make much of a difference as long as the courses are accredited.

What is a diploma?

A diploma is usually a one or two year program. A diploma program may not be fully accredited, so you may not be able to transfer the credits to another school.

What is a bachelor degree?

A bachelor degree is also known as an under-graduate degree. It usually requires 60 pre-requisite and transferable courses credits, plus 60 course credits that are eligible for a specific field of study (i.e. social work may accept social work courses plus some sociology, counselling, and other courses).

What is a masters degree?

A masters degree is also known as a graduate degree. It usually requires an eligible bachelor degree plus 30 - 60 credits of courses from a specific field of study. Some masters programs also require you to write a thesis. While you may be able to teach at a high school or college with a bachelor degree, you usually need a masters to teach higher level courses, or at a university.

What is a doctorate degree?

A doctorate degree is also a graduate degree. For a doctorate, you must focus on a specific field of study and in most programs, you have to write a dissertation (i.e. a major research paper; longer than a thesis.) A doctorate usually takes two to five years to complete. Generally, you can only pursue a doctorate after you complete a masters degree.

What is a thesis?

A thesis is a major research paper on a specific area of study. A thesis is usually required to complete a masters degree. However, some masters programs only require you to do course work .

What is a major and a minor?

Generally a major and a minor is a specialization of courses in a single subject area within a degree. The difference is in the number of credits you need to qualify for a major or for a minor. For example, a major in Anthropology requires 60 credits of anthropology courses, whereas a minor requires 30 credits in anthropology courses. Usually, the courses must be within the required level of study (100, 200, or 300).

What are the costs for going to a post-secondary school?

You usually have to pay a registration fee every semester you attend, tuition/fee for each course, book costs, and the cost of transcripts (when needed). Some courses have additional costs.

What is a scholarship, a bursary and grant?

Unlike a loan, you do not usually have to pay back a scholarship, bursary, or grant. There are usually criteria that you have to fulfill to apply for them, and others to receive them. For instance you can apply for specific scholarships for your area of study (English). If you meet their requirements and fulfill the expectations of the award, they will send you a cheque. Sometimes they require that you write a letter to the person(s) who donated money to the school or scholarship. You can find information at your school, on the internet, from Indian & Northern Affairs Canada, etc. Be sure to ask the school, your fellow students, Band, or INAC for any information they might know.

If I'm Native, can I get funding to go to school?

There is limited funding available for "Status Indians" from each First Nations Band. There are usually requirements, sometimes a waiting list, and often limits on funding for tuition, books, and a living allowance. You can contact your Band for more info.

What is a student loan?

All provinces and the government of Canada offer loans to eligible low income students at a fixed rate of interest. You will not have to begin paying interest or paying back the loan until you have been out of school for a certain amount of time, but you must fulfill all the requirements for this to happen. You can get an application from the student services centre. Loans usually take 6 to 8 weeks to process, so you must be sure you apply early enough to ensure you receive the money in time for you to start school. A school may extend the deadline for paying tuition if you are waiting for loan monies to come in. Be sure to read and fulfill all requirements of the loan. Depending on what province you are in, you may be able to apply for loan forgiveness when you complete your degree. Not all applying are guaranteed to receive a student loan.