

THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE SYSTEM IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

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The delivery of primary, secondary and post-secondary education in British Columbia, like all other provinces and territories in Canada, is governed provincially with minimal control and operational funding from the federal government based in Ottawa. Post-secondary education in British Columbia falls under a different jurisdiction of the provincial government than primary and secondary education. The mandate to create university college status was awarded to three colleges in 1989, a fourth in 1991 and a fifth in 1995. Two technical institutes were also assigned degree-granting status in 1995. The university colleges awarded the first degrees in 1991, two years following their inception. Since 1989, the five existing university colleges have granted more than 6000 degrees either on their own or with university partners, and have integrated existing diploma and certificate programs into unique and creative degree programs. The university colleges have been viewed by many within and outside the educational sector as the success story of the decade for post-secondary education. Specific information on each university college can be WEB accessed at <http://ucbc.ceiss.org>.

To understand what led to the creation of the University College and its ultimate success in such a short period of time, one has to gain a cursory understanding of the physical and social makeup of British Columbia. It is also important to clarify for the American audience the difference between “college” and “university” from the Canadian context, as the two words are interchanged rather loosely in the United States. I’ll start with this first.

The term “college” is most generally, but not exclusively, used to describe an educational institute that offers short-term certificate programs all the way up to three-year diploma programs in either adult upgrading, apprenticeships, career/technical/vocational/technology training and in some provinces up to two years of university transfer courses. The term “university” is restricted to those institutions offering academic and professional bachelor, masters or doctoral degrees. This latter distinction is less clear now that some colleges also offer bachelor and perhaps some time in the future post-graduate degrees. Colleges tend to operate with an open door admission policy within defined program quotas, while universities tend to accept the best of the applicants within strict intake quotas. Colleges tend to serve regional needs, while universities tend to have a greater provincial, national and international outreach. Colleges strive for teaching excellence, while universities place greater emphasis on pure research and publications. Colleges generally have smaller class sizes and lower tuition fees, while universities tend to have large class sizes in first year. Colleges generally have less teaching assistance. Colleges are usually faster responders to change, and generally factor employment needs of the region into the programs they offer.

British Columbia is comprised of 947,800 sq km (365,950 sq mi) with a population of 3,933,000 according to 1999 data. Slightly more than half this population resides within a small region of the southwest corner of the province in what is referred to as the Lower Mainland (Vancouver and immediate region). There are at least six mountain ranges running north/south that divide the province into isolated regions, and a very rugged and jagged Pacific Ocean coastline with many large and small islands. In comparison, the state of Texas has 692,248 sq km (267,277 sq mi) with a population of 19,760,000, and the state of Florida has 155,214 sq km (59,928 sq mi) and a population of 14,916,000. Both states lack the geographical barriers of British Columbia, and both have a population distribution with large regional centers throughout.

British Columbia has a service economy, with roughly three out of every four jobs in the service sector. Ninety percent of the employers have fewer than twenty people under salary. The primary industries in the past have been commercial fishing, forestry and mining. A decline in salmon numbers has set limits on commercial fishing. Environmental debate, the creation of several provincial parks in pristine areas rich in natural resources and on-going land negotiation settlements with first nations people has had major downside impact on the other two. Tourism has developed into a major service industry, but the new economy of British Columbia will need to depend heavily on a growing high technology sector. This means a continuing shift to more and more skilled technical jobs. In the past young people were able to find well-paying jobs in the service industry with a high school diploma or less. In the non-urban areas, which involves a huge portion of British Columbia, these jobs were in the three resource-based industries noted earlier. The economy of the province has shifted dramatically in the last decade, however, and a university degree is much more essential in obtaining fulfilling and stable employment.

From 1915 until the early sixties the only university in British Columbia was the University of British Columbia (UBC), located in Vancouver. Victoria College existed in Victoria, but it was affiliated with the UBC. During the fifties other provinces began to recognize that the changing nature of Canadian society demanded a better educated workforce, and set out to establish many new universities and colleges to meet the increasing demand for post-secondary education. British Columbians continued to believe that UBC could meet these needs. In 1962, UBC’s newly elected president presented a report which advocated an immediate expansion of the university system. In 1963 Simon Fraser University (also in Vancouver) opened, and Victoria College was transformed into the independently administered University of Victoria.

The number of students attending the three universities grew rapidly in the sixties, but access did not improve much for potential students residing greater than commuting distances from Vancouver or Victoria. To increase the availability of post-secondary education throughout the province the government began to develop the college system. Two opened in 1965, with twelve others following over the next ten years. These colleges were assigned a broad mandate that included the delivery of developmental education and career/vocational training much like colleges in the rest of Canada and the United States. To address the overflow demand for university studies within Vancouver and Victoria and the lack of easy access to academic study outside these two cities, colleges were allowed to offer university transfer programs consisting of the first two years of traditional university studies. Colleges were located throughout the province in population centers and each was assigned a given geographical region to service. In time, many colleges established more than one campus in order to make them as accessible to the people as financially feasible. Enrollment soared throughout the seventies.

Despite this explosive growth in post-secondary education, it became clear by the end of the seventies that the participation rate of the province's youth in university degree programs had fallen well behind the Canadian average for all provinces. In addition, the growth in British Columbia's numbers was only keeping pace with provincial population growth in the 18 to 24 age bracket and was not improving access or attitudes regarding the need for a degree. As a result the province was relying more and more on inward immigration from other areas of Canada or other countries to meet its employment requirement for university graduates. Surveys undertaken showed that the lack of local access to a degree program was the major factor.

In the early eighties the province fell into an economic recession – the worst since World War II. What caused further damage was a government that appeared uncaring of the value of a post-secondary education. A restraint program followed and the pattern of growth in post-secondary seats stalled. Young people in particular found it difficult to find jobs and rather than do nothing they decided to seek more education. It was also discovered that those with a university education were less likely to lose their jobs in hard times, so families and schools began to preach the merits of a university degree. What arose out of this was a massive number of students unable to acquire a post-secondary education because of the limited number of spaces available.

In 1988, a government-established Provincial Access Committee proclaimed an immediate need for expanded access. Full-time enrollment in university studies for the 18 to 24 age group was the lowest in Canada, and second lowest for full-time post-secondary participation overall. In 1989 a strategy called "Access for All" was put into effect. This comprehensive initiative provided for the expansion of spaces for university programs in existing colleges and universities, expansion of spaces in career/vocational/technical and adult basic education programs in the colleges and technical institutes, funds for equipment replacement and funds to allow better access for disadvantaged groups. It also called for the creation of two new universities: the University of Northern British Columbia in the central "north" of the province, and Open University which was located within the Vancouver region but mandated to provide distributed learning throughout the province.

Of even greater note, were three other proposals:

1. The Access Report called for the establishment of a coordinating council on admissions, transfer and articulation. In response the government founded the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) to facilitate course and program articulation between the various post-secondary institutions, and oversee a smooth course transfer for students moving mostly from college to university. While not a perfect system since universities retain final say in any matter, students have expressed that over 90% of their courses have transferred without difficulty into programs they were seeking. Those experiencing difficulty were generally proven to have been negligent in their course planning. Students who transferred from college to university to complete their degree perform very well at university, especially those who complete the full two years at a college before transferring. The BCCAT coordinates articulation committees and annual meetings with full college and university representation for each overlapping program or discipline within the college/college and college/university framework. The creation of this Council has played a major role in developing cooperation between the colleges and the universities, and ultimately in the university acceptance of the degree granting capacity of the colleges. More information on British Columbia's successful venture of inter-institutional transfer can be obtained from the WEB at www.bccat.bc.ca.
2. The Access Report called for the conversion of three of the existing colleges into university colleges. Cariboo College, Okanagan College and Malaspina College, each located in high-density areas outside Vancouver and Victoria, were chosen to make this transition. They were asked to add, through partnership with one or more of the existing universities, the third and fourth years of degree programs with degrees granted by the university partner. The goal was to build on existing transfer courses and programs at the colleges using the established reputations of the universities. It was argued that this was the fastest and cheapest way to bring university access to the areas removed from the existing universities. Because the colleges were partnered with a university for their third and fourth year offerings, much of the upper level curriculum development, hiring practices or research and scholarly activities of faculty were directed by that university. While this may have slowed the development of degree programs in unique non-traditional areas, it allowed for instant acceptance of the university college structure by the universities. Since the universities accepted them, then so too did the public at large. Suddenly there was legitimate degree access for some of the outlying regions of the province. After some transition period, it was expected that these university colleges would gain their independence from their partnered university.
3. The Access Report also granted the blessing for any college to negotiate with any university the development of collaborative degrees. Perhaps out of fear or jealousy of not being declared a university college, or perhaps inevitable

anyway, colleges not awarded degree-granting status welcomed the opportunity and started negotiating collaborative degrees with the universities – mainly with Open University. Seven colleges and one institute currently have collaborative degrees in place. Even some of the university colleges have them now.

In 1991, Fraser Valley College became the fourth college to award degrees. It partnered many of its degrees with Open University, and was offered greater liberty to control its business as a result. In 1995 the government awarded Kwantlen College with degree-granting status. This was in response to public outcry for creation of a university in the Lower Mainland south of the Fraser River to serve the needs of the fastest growing region in the province. It also announced the creation of Royal Roads University on the western edge of Victoria and Technical University in the Lower Mainland. There were two major differences that came with the Kwantlen announcement:

1. It was not necessary for Kwantlen to partner with any university in developing and delivering its degrees. At the same time the other four degree-granting colleges were granted their independence from university partnership. All five colleges changed their titles to include the term “University College” in trumpeting this independence.
2. Kwantlen was not mandated to offer the traditional degrees in arts and science. Government felt that UBC and Simon Fraser University could meet this need. Instead, Kwantlen was directed to offer applied degrees. The term “applied” was left undefined despite calls for clarification. This left the door wide open for the five university colleges to be innovative in their thinking for degree program development, and to focus more intensely on employer needs in their region.

At the same time, two technical institutes in the Vancouver area, British Columbia Institute of Technology and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, were awarded degree-granting status.

The current public post-secondary system for British Columbia is reflected in Figure 1, with degree-granting status clarified.

Degree programs in place in 1999 are shown in Figure 2. It is quite likely that this list is incomplete as many degree proposals, especially ones in specialized applied fields, are in various stages of approval by the colleges or government. Within each category there may be a variety of options or majors/minors that are not listed. For example, Kwantlen offers degrees in both Entrepreneurial Management and Accounting under the heading Bachelor of Business Administration, and both Fashion Design and Interior Design under the heading of Bachelor of Applied Design. Even more options are in development stages for both degree headings. In all, there are more than 160 different degrees currently being offered at the five university colleges.

How successful have the university colleges been in their short lifespan?

Some of the more obvious successes are:

1. They have received instant recognition by the universities, general public and employers. While they may still lack the full prestige of a university in the eyes of some, they are helping address regional employment shortages and better access to university degrees throughout the province.
2. The university colleges have been able to attract suitably qualified faculty committed to teaching excellence.
3. They have gained modest access to federal government and national research grants, although far less equally as the universities. Most university college research targets issues of immediate interest to the local region or a local industry. Universities, on the other hand, tend to undertake research purely to obtain a knowledge base that relates to some universal or long-term purpose or gain (for example, research on cancer). Sometimes this research activity can simply be for the purpose of more knowledge in itself (for example, a literary research). Research within the university colleges tends to serve a more specific regional social or economic need. In many ways this is because the colleges have not had ready access to funding or faculty time release to be more encompassing. More importantly, however, it is attributed to the attachment each college has to its region’s most immediate needs, and to the experiential benefits students acquire through their involvement in these locally based research projects. Malaspina University College on the Pacific Coastline has worked closely with aquaculture industry in the region on projects of mutual interest, while the University College of the Cariboo in the provincial interior has worked on separate projects in cooperation with the forestry industry and with the local ginseng farmers.
4. They have retained their mission as a comprehensive post-secondary institution, and continue to offer programs that span the range from adult upgrading and English as a Second Language through to two-year technology or professional diplomas, in addition to degrees they now offer.
5. They have retained their primary focus as institutes of teaching, and not of research despite the growth and range in the number of degrees offered. The four university colleges that had a university partnership at onset have arranged to provide some teaching release to carry out research. Generally, faculty in the university colleges are encouraged and not compelled to be involved in some form of scholarly research to stay abreast with the subject area – especially at the upper levels. Scholarly research is left open to interpretation, and may be as diverse as writing a novel or developing an industry partnership.

6. The applied degrees have been designed with advisory committee input from the community and/or industry. These advisory bodies continue to function after degree program implementation, ensuring the curriculum remains current, vibrant and meeting employer needs.
7. Their degrees are generally extensions of existing one or two year college programs. The university colleges offering traditional arts and science degrees have merely added the upper levels of a degree to a two-year lower level that was already in place. Applied degrees almost always extend from certificate and diploma programs already in existence at the college. This has allowed a seamless progression from one credential to the next, and greater opportunities for lifelong learning and job enrichment. In some cases an accelerated bridging program might be necessary to accommodate missing skills or knowledge. For example, it is becoming possible for a trades person to progress to technician level to technologist to engineer without the need to start from scratch at each step. The step from a two-year technology program to third year engineering might involve an intensive bridging to acquire the calculus and physics lacking in the technology training but required for the transition to an upper level engineering program. The relevant professional associations sanction these advancement pathways because they have been consulted throughout the planning. This pathway for progression is arguably the strongest developing feature today in British Columbia – either within any university college or between colleges and universities.
8. The creation of the university colleges has accelerated the development of collaborative degrees between institutions. One excellent example is the collaborative nursing degree established through the partnerships of four university colleges, five colleges and one university. This has allowed for the delivery of a common core transition from nursing diploma (Registered Nurse) to nursing degree over several regions of the province. This partnership supports the recent requirement by the profession for a bachelor degree in nursing in order to acquire a license to practice as a nurse in British Columbia.
9. All applied degrees incorporate acceptance of prior formal learning through transfer credit, or of experiential non-formal learning through prior learning assessment.
10. At Kwantlen, all applied degrees must incorporate an established minimum of liberal education. This ensures that no degree has an overemphasis on specialization and allows the opportunity for acquisition of the generic employability skills that are identified by employers as generally deficient in degree graduates. These include such traits as oral and written communication skills, ability to work as a team, punctuality and reliability, understanding the impact of actions taken, diversity awareness and problem solving skills that are not just mathematical.
11. The development of degree programs within the colleges has provided a sense of newness, purpose and rejuvenation, even for those departments and programs not involved with them.

What are some of the ongoing challenges:

Some of the more obvious struggles have been:

1. While some progress has been made, British Columbia still lags far behind the Canadian average for the 18 to 24 age bracket that are enrolled in a bachelor degree.
2. The diversity of degrees has led to some confusion for potential students and employers. It is becoming increasingly difficult to weigh one possibility against another within the range of program titles and claims already available. For example, what are the advantages and disadvantages of taking a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Studies over a standard Bachelor of Science in (say) biology? Some applied degrees risk becoming too specialized and serve dubious purposes outside the college's region. A strong argument still surfaces periodically for general degrees over specialized ones when career changes are anticipated.
3. The university colleges are severely underfunded. Post-secondary institutions have been asked to increase student access without additional funding. Inadequate allowance has been made for additional costs caused by inflation, collective agreement labour settlements, and unavoidable rises in costs such as worker's compensation and employment insurance premiums. Government budget norms are not adequate for the added costs attributed with upper level courses, and are far below proportionate grants provided to the universities. What highlights this shortfall is the realization that the combined university study enrollment for the five university colleges is larger than that of Simon Fraser University (which is the province's second largest university), and singularly greater than the University of Northern British Columbia (which is the fourth largest university) for four of the five university colleges. To make matters worse for all post-secondary institutions, there has been a provincially mandated five year freeze on tuition fees. This has prevented colleges from recovering any funding shortfall from government. At roughly two thousand Canadian dollars tuition per year for a post-secondary education, Canadians have access to one of the cheapest pathways to a bachelor degree in all of North America. In comparison, the tuition fee at British Columbia's universities is about 60% more, which is still cheap compared to most of the rest of the continent. Such low fees illustrate the pressures colleges face in trying to balance budgets.

4. This shortfall in funding is particularly evident in the library services provided. Many libraries are understaffed and collections are vastly inadequate. When the university colleges emerged their existing library budgets were not elevated to match those of a university of a comparable size. These libraries required much building of stock just to catch up to the standards of a university library, let alone stay current. In addition, by offering applied degrees the government falsely assumed that a resulting heavier focus on application over theory would decrease demand on library usage. To make matters worse, many university colleges function with satellite campuses in order to be closer to their communities. This required the formation of sub-libraries as opposed to the traditional centralized libraries found at the universities, and adds to the overall cost. The situation at Kwantlen is particularly serious, and means are being sought to rectify this in next year's budget.
5. The trades and vocational areas have complained that with the advent of degrees their programs have been marginalized.
6. The means to foster scholarly research is still unresolved. Access to research grants is difficult. Time release from teaching to do research is still being negotiated with the unions, and is even more challenging to resolve with the current state of underfunding. Both management and union agree at Kwantlen that time release for some can lead to an undesirable two-tier status for faculty, something observed in other university colleges when teachers of upper level courses were assigned less teaching time than those teaching the lower level courses. The impact of this unresolved challenge is a minimal interest in research, as few are willing to add this responsibility onto an already demanding workload. The lack of any clarity as to what constitutes research has not helped either.
7. The approval process for degrees, while supportively thorough, is frustrating and time consuming. It starts as a concept arising out of some source and reinforced by community and industry feedback. At Kwantlen, this concept must first have the approval by the department, the division's curriculum committee, the college's degree approval committee, the college's education council and finally the Board of Governors. Then, like proposals from any other university college or university, it goes to the government for study. If approved in principle at this stage, it returns to the college to develop as a Letter of Intent. The proposal again revisits the full internal and advisory committee approval process, before being returned to government where it now faces a degree approval committee composed of college and university presidents (or their delegates), government officials and community/business/industry representatives. If not approved, the proposal usually dies at this stage. If approved, it returns to the college for development at the full proposal stage. Usually, however, approved proposals at the Letter of Intent stage return with several conditions to resolve. Once these conditions are satisfactorily clarified or corrected with the government committee, the proposal goes through the final stage of approval at all levels, with an additional step at Kwantlen in front of the liberal education committee. Kwantlen has had two of its proposals turned down by the government committee at the Letter of Intent stage despite support from business and industry. The lack of government clarification of these refusals has left Kwantlen puzzled by the approval structure.
8. There is some concern within the academic sector that applied degrees are nothing more than two diploma programs added end to end, which would not meet the standards for a degree program. Employers do not seem to share this concern, however, but some applied and business degrees have reduced the requirement for subjects such as calculus and this has raised questions regarding outcome suitability.

**British
Columbia's
Public
Post-Secondary
Institutions**

Main Campuses:

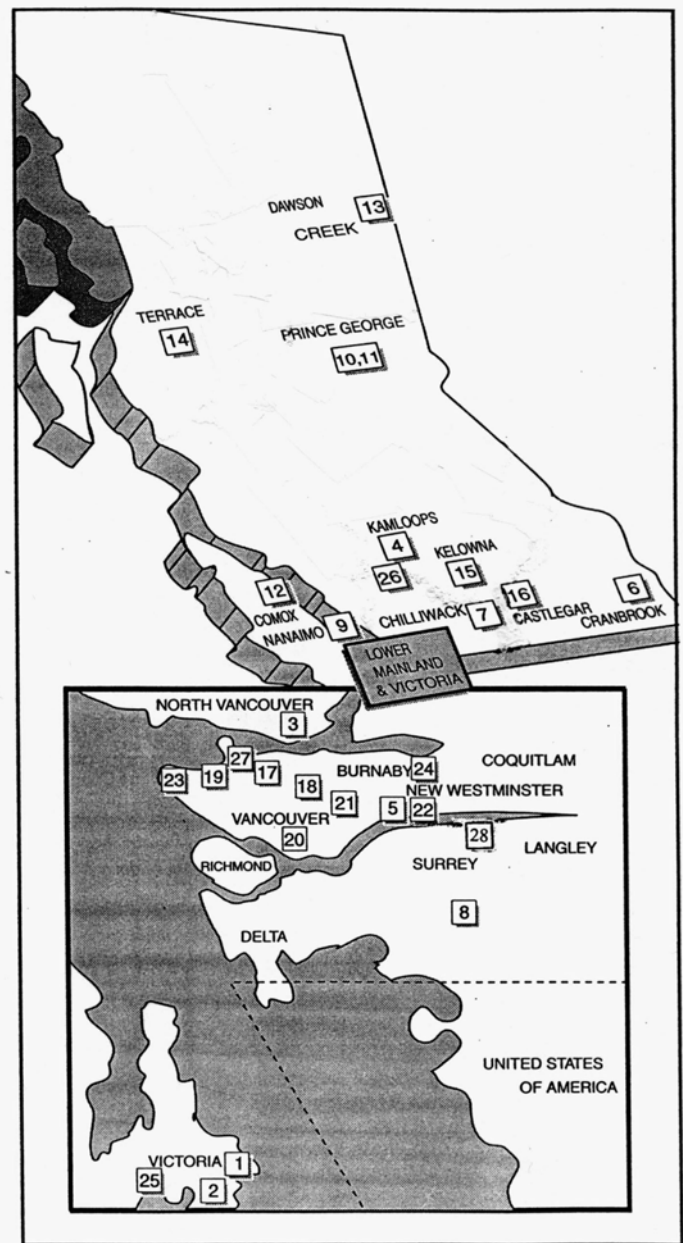
1. **University of Victoria** (1963)
2. *Camosun College* (1971)
3. *Capilano College* (1968)
4. **University College of the Cariboo** (1970)*
5. *Douglas College* (1970)
6. *College of the Rockies* (1975)
7. **University College of the Fraser Valley** (1974)*
8. **Kwantlen University College** (1981)*
9. **Malaspina University College** (1969)*
10. **University of Northern British Columbia** (1994)
11. *College of New Caledonia* (1969)
12. *North Island College* (1975)
13. *Northern Lights College* (1975)
14. *Northwest Community College* (1975)
15. **Okanagan University College** (1965)*
16. *Selkirk College* (1966)
17. *Vancouver Community College* (1965)
18. **British Columbia Institute of Technology** (1964)*
19. **Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design** (1978)*
20. *Langara College* (1993)
21. **Open University** (1988)
22. *Justice Institute of British Columbia* (1978)
23. **University of British Columbia** (1915)
24. **Simon Fraser University** (1963)
25. **Royal Roads University** (1996)
26. *Nicola Valley Institute of Technology* (1983)
27. *Institute of Indigenous Government* (1995)
28. **Technical University** (1999)

* Did not have degree granting status when opened

Font designation:

- Bold: grants Bachelor degrees
- Italics: offers collaborative Bachelor degrees
- Normal: does not offer degrees

FIGURE 1



Source: Much of the above data comes from the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) *B.C. Transfer Guide* found on-line at <http://www.bccat.bc.ca> or from the institutions' historical files.

FIGURE 2

DEGREES GRANTED BY THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGES

	Kwantlen University College	Malaspina University College	Okanagan University College	University College of the Cariboo	University College of the Fraser Valley
Bachelor of Science	TBA	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bachelor of Arts	TBA	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bachelor of Education		✓	✓	✓	
Bachelor of Science in Nursing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bachelor of Science in Massage Therapy	TBA				
Bachelor of Science in Science Education	TBA				
Bachelor of Science in Pest Management	TBA				
Bachelor of Business Administration	✓		✓	✓	✓
Bachelor of Social Work			✓	✓	✓
Bachelor of Arts in Child and Youth Care		✓			✓
Bachelor of Natural Resource Sciences				✓	
Bachelor Degree in Computing	✓				✓
Bachelor of Applied Journalism	✓				
Bachelor of Applied Psychology	✓				
Bachelor of Applied Design	✓				
Bachelor of Criminology	TBA				✓
Bachelor of Tourism				✓	
Bachelor of Fine Arts			✓		
Bachelor of Accounting	TBA				
Bachelor of Technology in Aviation	TBA				

This list is not likely complete and does not include degrees at various stages of approval.

Brief Update – October 2004

A great deal has taken place since the writing of the above paper. Some of the key developments are:

- ✓ The Government of British Columbia has implemented a revised process at the Ministry level for the approval of all new degrees proposals that in some ways simplifies and in other ways complicates matters.
- ✓ In December 2003, all colleges in British Columbia were granted authority to offer Applied Degrees, and all university colleges, BCIT and Emily Carr were authorized to offer applied Masters Degrees.
- ✓ Also in December 2003, Kwantlen University College was granted approval to offer Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees in addition to the Applied Degrees that it was already authorized to offer. In essence, this allowed Kwantlen to do the same thing that the other university colleges were already able to do.
- ✓ Many new degrees have been introduced throughout the province over and above those listed in Figure 2. For example, Kwantlen offers a Bachelor of Applied Arts in Psychology, a Bachelor of Applied Design in Fashion Design and Technology, a Bachelor of Applied Design in Graphic Design and Marketing, a Bachelor of Applied Design in Interior Design, a Bachelor of Applied Journalism, a Bachelor of Arts in Community Criminal Justice, a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting, a Bachelor of Business Administration in Entrepreneurial Leadership, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and a Bachelor of Technology in Information Technology.
- ✓ Commencing September 2005, Kwantlen will introduce Bachelor of Arts degrees with Majors in Criminology and Psychology, and Minors in Criminology, English, History and Psychology. Further Majors and Minors are at various review stages.
- ✓ The “university campus” of Okanagan University College has become the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan Campus, whereas the “college campus” has reverted back to being Okanagan College. This Fall 2004 announcement by the Premier of British Columbia has both UBC and OUC in intensive discussion on how best to but this in action.
- ✓ In Fall 2004 the Premier also announced that the University College of the Cariboo would convert into the newest public university in the province, absorbing along with it all “college” programs currently available there as well as Open University - which would relocate from Burnaby to Kamloops. The new university is called Thompson Rivers University.
- ✓ In Fall 2004, the Premier of British Columbia has announced the funding for 25,000 post-secondary spaces over the next six years.
- ✓ Meanwhile, two past university presidents have announced the formation of two new private universities – one in Squamish and one in Victoria.