

# Special Report

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## **BLOCK TRANSFER: A Private Career College Student's Ladder into the BC Transfer System**

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### **Introduction and Background**

In June 2008 the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) approved a new policy to publish in the BC Transfer Guide block transfer agreements (BTAs) between BC Transfer System member institutions and private post-secondary institutions accredited by the Private Career Training Institutions Agency (PCTIA). This new policy was directed at facilitating cooperation between the public and private sectors and at improving transfer opportunities for private college students. It also provided an informal way of measuring the volume of private to public student mobility and to see if what we suspected was true: that some private/public block transfer or informal transfer agreements were already in place but just not widely known. In passing this new policy, the Council's intent was not to force institutions into agreements but rather to record agreements already in place and to encourage cooperation in forging new ones. The full text of the policy can be found at [bccat.ca/pubs/PCTIABlock.pdf](http://bccat.ca/pubs/PCTIABlock.pdf) and is titled *Recording Block Transfer Agreements with PCTIA-accredited Institutions: Policy and Process*.

More than a year later, few private/public block transfer agreements have been submitted for publication in the BC Transfer Guide, leaving us to wonder why that is. Is the volume of student transfer lower than we thought? Are there fewer agreements in place than we suspected? Are BTAs not the useful tools that we think they are? It may be that there is not a sufficiently large volume of private college students wanting to transfer to public institutions to warrant a multitude of formal block transfer agreements. A brief and informal survey of public institutions suggests that transfer students from private career colleges represent a sufficiently small group that they are easily assessed on a case-by-case basis and administrators apply whichever credit transfer tools are

practical in their particular business environments. Block transfer agreements are certainly one of those tools but, perhaps, they are simply one option among others. The extent to which BTAs are used to facilitate the admission of private career college students to public institutions is unclear right now but current BCCAT research may offer some insight in the near future. A project is currently underway to evaluate the degree to which BTAs published in BCCAT's Block Transfer Guide are effective and efficient; findings may be available by this Spring.

Meanwhile, BCCAT remains committed to its obligation to facilitate private/public cooperation by providing the BTA policy and process framework and encouraging institutions to use it. One of the core values of the BC Transfer System, and the primary function of the BC Transfer Guide, is to equip students with reliable knowledge of how and to where their course work will transfer between BC institutions. Believing that students empowered with reliable knowledge have, and make, the best choices possible for credential completion, the Council intends the private/public BTA policy to promote this core value and function. To that end, this paper explains BTAs and explores the benefits of using them to highlight their potential as versatile and efficient articulation tools. It also briefly examines the current evidence for student mobility from accredited private career training colleges to public institutions.

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## Block Transfer Agreements Explained

Block transfer agreements are an efficient vehicle for credit transfer where course content is sufficiently different that course-to-course equivalencies cannot be established. Instead, equivalency is established by assessing the completed certificate, diploma or block of course work as a whole. Evaluation of content, outcomes and level can be applied to individual courses, sets of courses, or to the entire credential and in as great or little depth as is deemed appropriate. An in-depth evaluation of each course in the block may be necessary in one circumstance but a high-level assessment of learning outcomes could be more appropriate in another. Block transfer agreements are flexible, variable and follow different models. They can cover entire years or portions of a degree, they can be with or without conditions for including prerequisites or completing additional courses, or they can correspond to a block of elective credit. For further detail on designing and building a BTA, refer to BCCAT's online publication *How to Articulate: Requesting and Assessing Credit in the BC Transfer System* at [bccat.ca/articulation/handbook](http://bccat.ca/articulation/handbook). Hundreds of examples of current BTAs are listed in the Block Transfer Guide at [bctransferguide.ca/block](http://bctransferguide.ca/block) on the BC Transfer Guide website.

The flexibility of BTAs extends to all institutions that are party to an agreement. The receiving institutions have discretion to determine the depth of assessment required, the amount of credit awarded and to stipulate how any deficiencies should be addressed. It is precisely this flexibility that makes them well suited for use with private career college programs where course content may be quite different than that delivered by a receiving public institution. This flexibility may also partly be the reason we have received fewer private/public BTAs for publication than we expected to. For example, Thompson Rivers University receives transfer students from the West Coast College of Massage Therapy and the Okanagan Valley College of Massage Therapy, both PCTIA-accredited private institutions. Applicants from the private institution are given Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) assessments and get credit for what they are determined to have learned. Although the credit awarded will vary from one student to the next, the promise of assessment gives potential transfer students the assurance they need to plan their education path. This is an excellent example of a flexible transfer agreement at work.

More straightforward examples are Royal Roads University's block transfer agreements with Eton College and Vancouver Premier College. Both private colleges offer two-year diplomas that RRU accepts for admission to the third year in their BA in

International Hotel Management program. These two agreements follow a common 2 + 2 model where a student completes the first two years at the sending institution and then, provided that other admission requirements are met, completes the final two years at the receiving institution.

An administrator from TRU informally reports that although there are some challenges, students from private colleges are generally well prepared for the transition to degree studies and, in the case of applied degree programs, are sometimes better prepared than transfer students from other public programs (G. Tarzwell, *personal communication*, January 30, 2009). Over all, the sense at TRU is that transfer students from the private colleges are performing as successfully as any other types of student. Royal Roads University monitors grades, writing skills and class participation carefully and reports similar performance from their private college transfer students as from other types of students; they have similar rates of success in academics as

well as in the post-graduation job market (T. Wykes, *personal communication*, February, 2009).

Using the TRU and RRU agreements as examples, there is every reason to believe that cooperation between the public and private sectors benefits institutions as well as students. Transfer agreements can create a pool of prospective students for public institutions for

admission to the second and third years of a program where attrition can be a challenge. They encourage the private college system to adopt the norms and standards of the public system where it is appropriate and practical to do so. BTAs also create transfer options for students that might otherwise have no access to higher education and credential completion. Students can also have more confidence in their future options when choosing private college programs that they know transfer to public programs.

## Mobility of Private Career College Students

In March 2008 and March 2009, the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation published results of surveys of private career college students and graduates conducted to understand who they are, why they chose private career education, how satisfied they were with it, and what they went on to do after graduating. Findings suggest that private college students represent a different student pool from the one that public institutions typically draw from; they choose institutions and programs that will quickly increase their employment prospects; the majority are satisfied with their education and they have high post-graduation employment rates.

Compared to public college students, private career college students tend to be older (mean age of 29), predominantly females (72%) with dependent children and are less likely to have access to financial assistance from their own parents. Eighty percent of students surveyed indicated that private career college was their first choice. Twelve percent would have preferred a public college and eight percent would have preferred a public university. Two-thirds of graduates surveyed reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their private college experience and 79% of them were employed within nine months of graduation, predominantly (80%) in the fields of, or closely related to, their education.

This suggests that the majority of private career college students specifically chose private education for training and employment purposes and are satisfied with their choice. Even so, we also know that having credits transferable to the public system is very important to them. Eighty-seven percent of private career college students rated this as being important or very important in the PCTIA's 2007 publication of survey results titled *Private Career Training Quality Initiatives in British Columbia*. From this, we know that they want to transfer but do they actually do so? It appears that they want to be assured of the option, and rightly so, but they may not actually exercise the option in large numbers as far as we can tell. There are no firm mobility numbers to rely upon because private college students cannot currently be tracked with PEN numbers as public institution students are.

Statistics from the PCTIA's *2008-2009 Annual Report* indicate that there were 41,257 graduates from their member colleges in 2008. The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation's Graduate survey results indicate that only 11% of graduates surveyed pursued any further studies and of those, more than half (55%) chose a private career college again. If we can assume that private college graduates in BC are not significantly different than the survey population in general (i.e. all Canadian private college graduates) then we are talking about a pool of approximately 2042 potential transfer students that are interested in BC's public universities and colleges. This suggests that the volume of private to public student transfer is relatively low because the appetite for it is relatively low. If this is true and if public institution administrators are finding practical ways to assess and award credit to those private career college students that they do get, then is there a problem here at all? It may be that private college administrators perceive that the problem is greater than it is because public institutions are dealing with private college transfer students on a case-by-case basis and not as much through negotiating formal articulation agreements with the private career institutions. Perhaps there is not a large-scale problem but rather an isolated one and an opportunity to identify best practice.

## Conclusion

It appears that the private and public education sectors are two parallel systems, each with a different purpose and each successfully achieving that purpose. Students choose one over the other for specific, different and equally valid reasons. Both are largely turning out satisfied graduates with high employment rates and with a relatively small group of private college students who want access to the public system remaining. This is not to say that there are no challenges. We've heard from the public sector that the private institutions do not appreciate how much work and expense goes into forging formal block transfer agreements. We've heard from the private sector that some public institutions dismiss their requests for cooperation without any reasonable consideration.

Bridging the post-secondary education sector's private/ public divide continues to be a challenge and both sides have their complaints; some are justifiable while some spring more from suspicion than fact. None of them should present an insurmountable hurdle to forging useful transfer agreements if we accept certain differences and agree on an appropriate perspective to adopt. Both the sender and the receiver must begin with a realistic and appropriate perspective. The sending institution should make informed, reasonable requests and accept that some will be turned down for appropriate reasons. The receiving institution should be willing to assess appropriate articulation requests with sincerity and consider each on its own merits. Our shared goal should be to accept that each side has its own language, culture and practices while understanding that we share the same goal: to facilitate student transfer where it is appropriate and for the benefit of all.

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We encourage all public and private institutions that are currently considering an agreement to refer to BCCAT's online resources and to contact us with questions or for guidance. Public institutions with block transfer agreements already in place with PCTIA-accredited private institutions are asked to forward them to BCCAT for publication using the form attached to our *Recording Block Transfer Agreements with PCTIA-accredited Institutions* policy which can be found at [bccat.ca/pubs/PCTIAblock.pdf](http://bccat.ca/pubs/PCTIAblock.pdf).

## References

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