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We need more smarts for universities to work

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Is a university degree a magic bullet? Every politician seems to think so. The more young people who get degrees, we're told, the better off society will be. Higher education – the more the better – is critical to Canada's future, because it will make us more competitive and more prosperous.

“This is ... a game-changer for our country,” Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff said the other day as he pledged an extra \$1-billion in tuition aid for postsecondary students. “It's a billion dollars of new money to make us the best-educated society on the planet.”

Just one problem. Our universities admit too many people, not too few. According to Ken Coates, dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo, and Bill Morrison, a retired history professor from the University of Northern British Columbia, they're full of people who probably shouldn't be there. Their new book, *Campus Confidential*, is a bracing reality check that should be essential reading for would-be university students, their parents and anyone who thinks higher education holds all the answers.

Canada already has one of the highest postsecondary participation rates in the world. Nearly half of all high-school graduates go to college or university. Tuition rates – especially for affluent families – are a bargain. Virtually anyone who wants to can get in somewhere. But many students

aren't sure why they're there. "They and their parents have bought the mantra: Go to university, get a degree, then get a white-collar career," says Prof. Coates. Some of these kids are very smart but would be a lot happier – and, ultimately, more prosperous – working with their hands. And some of them aren't so very smart.

Canada's national conceit is that all students who want to go to university should have the chance. "University, according to this belief, is a right, like shelter and medical care," the authors write. Other countries are not so egalitarian. They limit access to publicly funded universities to students who've demonstrated aptitude and motivation. The dirty secret of our system is that a dismally large portion of students you see on campus will fail to graduate.

The vast expansion of higher education hasn't smartened up people. Instead, it's dumbed down the standards. As most employers will attest, a BA degree no longer certifies that the holder will be able to read, write or communicate. And many (if not most) undergraduates are not interested in the material they're studying. "The widespread perception is that fewer and fewer of them are participating beyond the bare minimum required for a degree," the authors write.

In the Toronto area, the provincial government is committing vast amounts of money to build more university capacity to accommodate the demand. But in many other parts of Canada, the demographic tide is flowing out. Dozens of regional universities in Atlantic Canada, Northern Ontario, the Prairies and Quebec are struggling to put bums in seats. And that means they're admitting even more students with a poor chance of succeeding.

Meantime, the return on investment for a general undergraduate degree has fallen sharply. What Canada really needs are people with trade and technical skills. There's enormous demand for medical professionals, certain engineers, IT technicians, millwrights, plumbers and electricians –

but not so much for BAs in sociology. Our graduates are mismatched to the job market.

On top of that, today's university graduates aren't just competing against each other – they're competing against graduates from around the world who can handle our knowledge jobs at lower cost. Higher education by itself can't solve Canada's competitiveness problems. For that, we're going to need a lot more smarts about what higher education can and should deliver.

Meantime, the best way for your kids to guarantee themselves a living is to do something that can't be outsourced. My hair colourist will never lack for work. Neither will a decent plumber. That's not a knock on universities. It's just a reality check.