



ONTARIO'S WATCHDOG
CHIEN DE GARDE DE L'ONTARIO

Too Cool For School Too – Ombudsman’s Remarks ***André Marin***

The report I’m releasing today could not be more timely, because it’s a back-to-school horror story. This is a stressful time of year for a lot of people – even if they are no longer students or parents with kids going back to class. For many people, this anxiety triggers a common nightmare: You’re back in school, and you have to take an exam that you’re completely unprepared for.

That’s what happened to the students in the case I’m reporting on today. But for them, the nightmare happened in real life.

The students in the Health Information Management Program at Cambrian College in Sudbury believed they were training for high-demand, well-paying jobs in the health sector, particularly in hospitals, working with complex file coding systems. They had dreams of working anywhere in Canada, in top medical facilities.

They studied for two long years towards their goal. Many spent tens of thousands of dollars on tuition, books and living expenses, only to find out that they were not only completely unprepared for the exam that would get them into the profession – they were not even eligible to take it.

That’s because the Health Information Management Program at Cambrian College was never recognized by the Canadian Health Information Management Association, or CHIMA – the national body that controls entry into the profession. Cambrian College knew this, but didn’t tell its students. Instead, it repeatedly told them they were “working on” getting CHIMA recognition, and “not to worry.” This, despite the fact that they had not even applied for CHIMA recognition until 18 months after the course started – and when they did, the program didn’t even come close to CHIMA’s standards.

When the unfortunate graduates learned they weren’t eligible to write the CHIMA exam, Cambrian offered to help them – by sending them back to school again. If they spent another year studying and another \$1,700 on tuition, they could take a course that would get them ready for the exam, and they would be reimbursed by the college if they passed.

But for some of those same students, that was just another nightmare – they signed up for the course, only to find out it was far too difficult. Their two years at Cambrian hadn’t even prepared them for the course that was supposed to prepare them to write the exam!

I launched my investigation in this case after more than half of the graduates from the first two years of this program complained. My findings were clear – Cambrian College treated them unfairly, and it was callous about their plight. It was arrogant and dismissive toward my investigation as well – an attitude that I’ve summed up in my report title as “too cool for school.”

You may recall that title from my last report, and that is no coincidence. Last month, I reported on how the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities was failing to protect students of illegal, unscrupulous career colleges that also exhibit this kind of attitude. I called on the Ministry to use its powers to crack down on these facilities so Ontario students can have confidence that they will get the education they pay for.

Although today’s report – *Too Cool for School Too* – sounds like a sequel, it is even more serious than the first, because this case involved colleges that are publicly funded, as opposed to private career colleges. Cambrian College alone receives in the neighbourhood of \$50 million every year. It’s not just the students who trust that those funds are being spent on quality education that will prepare them for gainful employment – it’s all taxpayers. We all have a stake in this.

Sadly, the Ministry doesn’t see it that way. It hands out money to colleges, but abdicates any responsibility for ensuring that they deliver the programs they promise. It says this is out of respect for the independence of colleges. But it doesn’t serve the colleges, or their communities, to enable programs that waste people’s precious time and money and don’t qualify them for the jobs they seek.

The Ministry assured me it is concerned about accountability, but I found its response weak and disappointing. I am very concerned that if it does not implement stricter monitoring of the college programs it funds, we will see more cases like this.

We will see more students like the young people we interviewed – several of them trying to make a better life for themselves and their young children – who gave up two years of their lives and wound up doing dead-end work instead of the job of their dreams.

Those students should be able to turn to their government when its publicly funded institutions let them down. The Ministry was not there for them in this case, and I hope it has learned a valuable lesson.