

Drop in economy spurs spike in college applicants

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Applications to community colleges in Ontario jumped by 10 per cent this winter, one of the first signs that the failing economy is increasing demand for postsecondary education.

The unexpected rise in applications - close to double the increase for the winter term last year - was felt across the province and was driven by individuals returning to school, said Linda Franklin, president of Colleges Ontario.

Health-care programs such as nursing and personal-support workers, and business and accounting courses attracted the most interest, she said.

"I don't think there is any question that this is a sign of things to come," she said. Unemployment levels for unskilled workers are on the rise and colleges expect to draw more workers looking for retraining as well as students from high school, she added.

The real test will come with the fall term, when colleges accept the bulk of their applications. Last fall, applications rose by 5 per cent, but Ms. Franklin said the increase could be in line with the winter number.

A recent ad campaign by the province to promote its new retraining program also may have had an effect, she said.

An increase in applications also is expected for Ontario universities. The deadline for high-school students to apply for September entrance is next week and the head of the province's central application centre anticipates demand will increase, just as it has in other economic downturns.

Applications to Ontario universities rose by 4.1 per cent last year. George Granger, executive director of the Ontario University Application Centre, said he would not be surprised to see a similar jump this year, judging by early activity and attendance at the university fair in Toronto this fall.

"We think the economy just emphasizes the need for better credentials for young people," he said.

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