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Teachers rush to get master's as colleges offer degrees

The Canadian Press

TORONTO — Despite having decades of experience, some teachers are rushing to get a master's degree to stay qualified as colleges morph into degree-granting institutions.

A quiet rivalry has always existed between colleges and universities, one promising practical courses, the other, theoretical, some long-time college faculty members have said.

But as more and more colleges offer degrees, the pressure is on for people like Mary-Lu Zahalan to shore up their resume with academic qualifications.

"In the big picture, this will be the best thing that ever happened," said Zahalan, an instructor with Sheridan College's Music Theatre-Performance Program. Zahalan recently acquired her master's degree.

"But absolutely I was skeptical. I was frustrated by the lack of respect -- sounds rather harsh-- but that kind of feeling that you're not as respected if you're a performer and not an academic."

There are six colleges in Ontario with applications before the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities for new or revised degree programs, among them is Sheridan College.

Greg Peterson, the music theatre program co-ordinator for Sheridan, has watched as some of his instructors scurry to get their qualification just in time for the program's degree granting transformation in 2011.

Zahalan went all the way to Liverpool's Hope University to get a master's in popular music with a focus on The Beatles.

"It was the first year that the master's was being offered and she's now an expert in The Beatles," said Peterson, chuckling, as he explained the lengths some have gone to in order to get letters "MA" behind their names.

For some of the full-time instructors, the degree is a rubber-stamp of sorts, especially for teachers already skilled in the practical elements of musical theatre training.

The head of the dance division in Sheridan's program went to York University to get an MA in dance, but ended up studying modern dance, very different than the ballet, jazz and tap used in musical theatre.

"For her, she said it was a mixed blessing. She learned a whole bunch of new vocabulary, but the application of this would be limited in our field," admitted Peterson.

The ministry grants a degree program to a college after it's recommended by the Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board. The board reviews the proposal by examining the content of the college program, its resources and its faculty.

"While a master's or PhD isn't explicitly required, PEQAB may require specific credentials of faculty relevant to the program being proposed," said Linda MacKay, a spokeswoman for Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, in an email.

Zahalan would have kept her job without the master's, but would have had to give up her role as the head of the commercial performance department that she helped create. For Sheridan's theatre program, most of the full-time staff will be required to have an MA to teach.

"In our field of study that's very difficult, because there are very few degrees or programs that offer master's in the field we study in," explained Peterson, adding he's not aware of

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a single university in Canada that offers a master's specifically in musical theatre.

Some argue the push for instructors to have more and more academic credentials to teach seemingly practical, hands-on classes is only natural given the demands of employers in today's labour market.

"Everything we do as a society is more and more complex," said James Knight, the president and CEO of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges.

Knight said college teachers, like the population in general, need to have a higher level of post-secondary achievement.

"Yes, some people with great experience may, from time to time, be unhappy with this, but that's where we're heading as a society," said Knight, who added colleges take pride in their faculty's achievements.

Peterson said he was given an exemption from the MA requirement, because he has been with the program for many years.

"I'm five years from retirement. Do I really want to go and get my master's, spend all that money?" said Peterson. "I thought, 'I can't do that.'"

He will walk the program through its transformation over the next few years, and then retire, likely handing it over to someone with a master's degree.

Peterson said he's thrilled to be a part of the program's change, but admitted he has mixed feelings about the graduate degree requirement.

However, he said having faculty with more credentials could expand the musical theatre discipline.

"Having a full-time faculty with master's (degrees) in the field of music theatre would legitimize the art form and actually encourage universities here in Canada to offer up master's programs in music theatre," said Peterson.

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