

Help choosing a university in BC

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Below is information that has been gathered from professors, alumni and the universities themselves to describe some of the strengths and weaknesses of 11 universities in BC. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) informed coverage of the type of undergraduate education. But, most importantly, we spoke to real-life students about the good and bad of their university experience.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

University of British Columbia

Research powerhouse by the beach

Vancouver

Students: 57,000

Cost: \$5,300

Awards: \$35-million

Pro: World-class research opportunities

Con: Academic competitiveness and snobbery

Huge UBC is making genuine efforts to improve the undergraduate education experience. The innovative Co-ordinated Arts and Arts One/Science One programs offer alternatives to 350-student lectures, the Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative is improving science teaching, and UBC has achieved one of the lowest professor-to-student ratios in Canada. Its reputation for extreme academic competition (bordering on snobbery) persists and it's still possible to feel lost among 47,000 undergrads, but nearly 90 per cent of students get involved in a club or other campus activity by fourth year. Plus, Wreck Beach (clothing optional) is within walking distance.

Hotshot prof: Marcello Veiga, a leading mining engineer, is known on campus for his musical lectures.

Notable alumnus: Rumana Monzur recently defended her master's thesis just two years after being blinded in a horrific attack in Bangladesh that drew international condemnation.

Students say: "Though the size of the school can initially be intimidating, it's easy for everyone to find a niche."

- *Farah Adamali, fourth year nutritional sciences*

Capilano University

Educating performing artists

North Vancouver

Students: 7,500

Cost: \$3,500

Awards: \$1.9-million

Pro: BC's cheapest university

Con: Recent budget cuts to fine arts and computer science

Capilano was founded by education idealists who were too radical even for the leftist bastion at Simon Fraser University in the 1960s. Since then, the compact campus nestled on a mountain

in sleepy North Vancouver has shaken off any overt political leanings and developed notable programs in jazz performance, musical theatre and film studies. Students note that with no residence or pub, this commuter campus becomes a ghost town on weekends.

Hotshot prof: Lars Kaario, choral studies instructor, has performed for the Dalai Lama with his internationally touring choir Laudate Singers.

Notable alumnus: Musical theatre actress Elicia MacKenzie won the CBC show How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria? in 2008.

Emily Carr University of Art + Design

Leader in fine arts

Vancouver

Students: 1,800

Cost: \$4,600

Awards: \$94,000

Pro: First-rate artists as professors

Con: No distinct campus feel

While co-op placements for artists are rare at most universities, Emily Carr students enjoy opportunities such as curating at local museums and designing at BlackBerry and Facebook. Ninety-two per cent of graduates from the past 15 years are employed. Students complain that Emily Carr's location on touristy Granville Island lacks its own distinct character, but all that will change when the university moves to a new \$134-million campus in 2016.

Hotshot prof: The renowned painter Landon Mackenzie was featured in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver.

Notable alumnus: Amanda Forbis and Wendy Tilby were nominated for an Academy Award in 2012 for their animated short film, Wild Life.

Students say: "You will not get a foot in the door after graduation if you rely solely on your classroom education."

– *Christine Novosel, second-year design*

University of the Fraser Valley

Bargain tuition, small classes

Abbotsford

Students: 10,000

Cost: \$4,300

Awards: \$1.2-million

Pro: Cheap tuition

Con: Limited research opportunities

Since UFV became a full university in 2008, it has maintained strong vocational programs (90 per cent of its apprenticeship graduates find related employment) and the benefits of studying at a college, such as easy access to faculty and an average first-year class size of 32 students. Some research opportunities exist. For example, Lenore Newman, Canada Research Chair in Food Security and Environment, conducts important research into the impact of climate change on food security, a fitting issue to probe at a university situated in some of the most productive farmland in the country.

Hotshot prof: Horticulture professor Tom Baumann’s research involves inventing the perfect strawberry.

Notable alumnus: Evangeline Lilly, actress on ABC’s Lost, has won multiple Saturn Awards and a Golden Globe nomination.

Students say: “The professors at UFV changed my life. I was not a strong academic student until one professor believed in me. That wouldn’t have happened at a school with larger classes.”

- *Shane Ryan Potter, fourth-year English*

Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Flexible and practical

Surrey

Students: 17,500

Cost: \$4,600

Awards: \$1.7-million

Pro: Lowest minimum entrance marks in British Columbia

Con: Few research opportunities

Kwantlen’s unique status as a polytechnic university enables it to focus on flexible programs that allow students to choose between certificate, diploma and degree options. As Kwantlen has no residences, many students save money by commuting from home to one of the university’s four convenient locations and more than 80 per cent come from the Lower Mainland. Research opportunities are thin since Kwantlen is still transitioning into a full-fledged university, but new projects such as the recently created Institute for Sustainable Food Systems are being developed.

Hotshot prof: Chad Skelton, journalism instructor, is a five-time winner of the prestigious Jack Webster Award that recognizes excellence in B.C. journalism

Notable alumnus: Baltej Singh Dhillon was the first RCMP officer allowed to wear a turban.

University of Northern British Columbia

Sustainability specialists

Prince George

Students: 4,200

Cost: \$5,500

Awards: \$2.5-million

Pro: Great access to professors

Con: Lousy transit service

UNBC calls itself Canada’s green university, and it appears to be following through on its proclamation. It’s been recognized for its sustainable practices by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education and Mediacorp Canada. UNBC aims to serve the region with programs such as its health major that trains students to work in rural communities. Despite success in creating an engaging educational environment with a 10-to-1 student-faculty ratio, UNBC struggles to fill its seats, which has led to recent budget cuts. Campus is perched on a hill overlooking Prince George, which students complain isolates them from the community.

Hotshot prof: Kathy Lewis was a recipient of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Medal for her pioneering work in forestry.

Notable alumnus: James Moore, former federal Minister of Canadian Heritage, recently became Minister of Industry.

Quest University

Liberal arts in the mountains

Squamish

Students: 540

Cost: \$29,000

Awards: \$7-million

Pro: Unique, individualized education

Con: Lack of course options

At Quest, you get what you pay for. The tiny six-year-old school, an outlier for its high tuition, is attracting well-deserved attention for netting top rankings in the NSSE. Under its “block system,” students take one intense class a month. Seminars trump lectures, the average class size is 16, and the absence of majors necessitates personalized education. A generous scholarship program eases the tuition pain. Campus overlooks a breathtaking panorama, but students, who are required to live on campus (\$10,000 with full meal plan), complain about its isolation.

Hotshot prof: Annie Prud’homme-Généreux won the North America-wide National Association of Biology Teachers Award in 2012.

Notable alumnus: Only three classes have graduated so far, but alumni landed in graduate school at Stanford, McGill and the London School of Economics.

Students say: “I prefer densely populated metropolises to pristine forests but chronic cabin fever can be abated with the occasional hitchhike to Vancouver.”

– *Sophia Leonard, second-year arts and sciences*

Simon Fraser University

Interdisciplinary education leader

Burnaby

Students: 30,000

Cost: \$5,600

Awards: \$11-million

Pro: Large, comprehensive co-op program.

Con: Soulless commuter campus

SFU was founded in the 1960s by idealists who believed departments “created mistaken intellectual boundaries in the student’s mind,” as the school’s architect Arthur Erickson once wrote. While the university is no longer a bastion of radical leftists, the legacy of this utopian education model remains in high-quality interdisciplinary programs such as environmental science, First Nations, international studies, and the innovative undergraduate semester in dialogue. Students complain that its mountaintop concrete campus is dreary, but branch campuses in downtown Vancouver and Surrey are more lively.

Hotshot prof: Mark Jaccard, environment economics prof, served on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

Notable alumnus: Terry Fox studied kinesiology and played on the junior varsity basketball team.

Students say: “Classes are big, but as you progress, seminars are smaller. I have had the luck to have very engaging professors.”

– *Graciela Hernandez Cruz, third-year international studies*

Thompson Rivers University

Accessible education pioneer

Kamloops

Students: 24,000, including online

Cost: \$5,100

Awards: \$2-million

Pro: A beautiful campus close to holiday destination Shuswap Lake

Con: A smaller school's course offerings are more limited

TRU's history (it was created when University College of the Cariboo and BC Open University were combined in 2005) explains much about its mix of online and distance courses, trade and vocational programs and traditional university programming. With 22,000 students, half of whom are enrolled in distance or online programs, TRU succeeds at making education accessible to many with flexible programs such as its bachelor in interdisciplinary studies that allows students to direct their final two years of study. Senior students rated TRU above average on NSSE, but students complain of few internship and co-op opportunities in some programs.

Hotshot prof: Naowarat (Ann) Cheeptham was awarded a prestigious residency in Washington by the National Science Foundation and American Society for Microbiology.

Notable alumnus: Dean Fortin, mayor of Victoria, used to work in a sawmill in Kamloops.

Students say: “In the faculty of arts especially, there are wide programming gaps and limited opportunities to investigate areas of interest outside of the mainstream.”

– *Dylan Robinson, fourth-year philosophy*

Vancouver Island University

Education for the outdoorsy

Nanaimo

Students: 18,000

Cost: \$4,300

Awards: \$920,000

Pro: Diverse student body from strong international recruitment

Con: Lacking social scene

Formerly called Malaspina University-College, VIU is known for its flexible, part-time offerings and non-traditional programs. Want to be a park ranger? The unique bachelor of national resource protection may be for you. Although Nanaimo lacks character, VIU's location boasts great access to beaches and recreational trails.

Hotshot prof: Grant Murray, Canada Research Chair in Coastal Research Management, leads the university's interdisciplinary Institute for Coastal Research.

Notable alumnus: Rebekah Shoop founded Alianza, a non-profit that aims to provide medical assistance to Mayan communities in Guatemala.

University of Victoria

Pacific Ocean U

Victoria

Students: 20,000 students

Cost: \$5,700

Awards: \$9.1-million

Pro: Chill island vibe

Con: Sleepy Victoria

Surrounded by dense forests and the Salish Sea, University of Victoria is heaven for the outdoorsy adventurer. The university boasts a noted mechanical engineering program and one of the largest co-op programs in Canada. The ambitious Ocean Networks Canada (ONC) initiative, with its cabled undersea observatories, established Victoria firmly on the world stage of ocean discovery and innovation. Undergrads benefit from research opportunities and topnotch interdisciplinary programs at ONC and the School of Earth and Ocean Sciences. Students are laid-back and environmentally conscious and they speak highly of the friendliness of their idyllic campus, but the city of Victoria (commonly described as a city for “the newly wed and nearly dead”) is a bit too cute to be cool.

Hotshot prof: Philip Dearden, geography professor and coauthor of a leading textbook on environmental change, recently led a field course to India.

Notable alumnus: Stewart Butterfield founded Flickr and was included in Time magazine’s 2006 list of the most influential people in the world.

Students say: “I feel that I am a person, not a number, and some profs even know me by my first name.”

– *Erin Eidsvik, second-year biology*