

**Speech by Tim Hudak, MPP
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Colleges Ontario
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you very much.

I want to thank Colleges Ontario for inviting me to speak at this year's Higher Education Summit.

I want to commend you for your commitment to advancing Ontario's post-secondary education system.

The 24 colleges represented here today provide career focussed programs that are an affordable option for families, especially in these tough economic times.

Whether you're providing opportunities for recent high school graduates to get the training they need to enter the workforce...

...or helping adults to further their education to perhaps move up in the company or change their career path after getting laid off...

...you're playing an important role in helping families find meaningful, well-paying jobs right here in Ontario.

And your close relationship and connections with leading employers in the field helps more college grads find those jobs faster.

I also want to commend Colleges Ontario for its approach to job creation and building the economy through smart fiscal management.

For example, your most recent budget submission focused on the importance of controlling expenditures and finding ways to cut costs as a means to direct funding where it would do the most good – enhancing and building Ontario's workforce.

This includes becoming the first public sector organization in Ontario to create an energy secretariat responsible for cutting high energy costs at colleges across Ontario.

It also means calling for reductions in job killing and costly red tape, such as regulations holding back young men and women entering the trades, which I will speak to further in a few moments.

Focussing on job creation, while controlling government spending, and giving hard working families a break, are central priorities that I plan to bring to the job of Premier.

Today, Ontario has slipped from the front of the pack. We are faced with historic deficits and debt. And this month marks the sombre second anniversary of Ontario becoming a have not province.

But I firmly believe our province's best days still lie ahead.

Friends, I want to lead our province, because I believe in Ontario's tremendous potential, both in its land and its people.

In fact, it was this potential, this hope, which brought my grandparents to Ontario from then Czechoslovakia just prior to World War II.

But as a father of a young daughter who just turned three, I worry about the path we are on today.

Now, don't get me wrong, I think Dalton McGuinty means well, and I think his heart is in the right place.

But after seven years in office, he's become out-of-touch with what's happening on the ground and in households today.

And, quite simply, he and I come at the challenges Ontario is facing from completely different directions.

I believe in order for Ontario to meet its potential, we must ensure Ontario students have access to the training they need to contribute in a highly skilled workforce that will meet the needs of our 21st century economy.

I believe a post-secondary education is the great equalizer.

Regardless of one's own financial situation, a degree or diploma or a trade is the key to a better life for you, your kids and your grandkids.

That was the case with my parents, who both came from modest backgrounds. Both worked very hard and earned a post-secondary education.

Both eventually became educators – my father a high-school principal and my mother a special needs teacher.

As a result, they could afford to raise my sister and me as part of Ontario's vast middle class – and help us receive a post-secondary education as well.

As Premier, a PC government that I lead would work in tandem with organizations like yours to help ensure kids with the energy, the skills and the grades to attend post-secondary institutions should not be kept out because they can't afford it.

And in that context, today I want to outline three ways a PC government will work with Colleges Ontario to increase opportunities for post-secondary education and build a skilled workforce to meet the changing needs of Ontario's economy.

First, we will work with you to create more skilled jobs by modernizing Ontario's apprenticeship system to ensure more students see their program through to certification.

Ontario currently produces 46 percent fewer certified trades people per capita than the rest of Canada.

In fact, only about one in four Ontario apprentices are completing their programs.

The issue is not a lack of interest in skilled trades, but a lack of political will to stand up to special interests and help our young people who enrol in apprenticeship programs to navigate an unfair, complex and convoluted system.

The McGuinty government has encouraged young people to enter the skilled trades.

They also chose to put in place 300 bureaucrats at Employment Ontario to work on the apprenticeship file.

Yet they have done nothing to relieve the bottleneck that's preventing Ontario apprentices from finding a placement – because they're not addressing the underlying problems.

Colleges fulfill their role. You provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary to find a job in their chosen field.

Employers are in desperate need of energetic, skilled young trades people. So what's the problem?

At present, the Ontario government requires businesses to employ three journeymen to train every one apprentice.

This ratio means plenty of would-be apprentices are getting turned away by employers because they simply don't have enough journeymen on staff to fulfill the ratio.

As a result, a student's only choices are to find opportunities in other provinces that have a more favourable journeyman-to-apprentice ratio, find a temporary job while they hope and pray for an opportunity to open up, or consider a different career altogether.

Not only is this a disincentive for young people to enter the trades in the first place – if it is allowed to go unchecked, Ontario will face an increasing shortage of skilled trades workers.

We want to help more talented young men and women enter the trades and make it more affordable for small businesses to hire new workers by modernizing Ontario's antiquated apprenticeship system.

That means bringing Ontario's outdated 3-to-1 journeyman-to-apprentice ratio into the 21st century – making it a 1-to-1 ratio – helping students to navigate a convoluted system and building on colleges' historic strengths.

And it means increasing colleges' role in linking students with employers who need them.

It's time we showed our young people – and employers who earn a living building, installing and repairing the things we use everyday – that we are serious about encouraging more people to enter the skilled trades.

Second, we will target the red tape getting in the way of job creation and economic growth.

This isn't just about easing the paperwork burden on small business owners so they can focus more of their time growing their business.

This is also about easing students' journey through post-secondary school so we can get more Ontario students out in the workforce sooner.

The legislation pertaining to colleges is outdated, cumbersome, and leaving Ontario unprepared to meet its future needs.

As you pointed out in your report "*People Without Jobs – Jobs Without People*" 700,000 people in Ontario will be considered unemployable in a little over a decade due to inadequate skills and education.

One way to cut red tape, that I would like to hear more of your feedback on, is in regards to credit transfers.

Let's face it, at 17 or 18, trying to decide which career is right for you is a daunting task. Often, after a year or two in a program, students decide it no longer meets their future goals.

But Ontario students today will commonly lose credits they've earned when moving between different institutions or programs.

This setback is a major disincentive for the student's continuing education – and sometimes results in them dropping out or moving out-of-province to finish their education.

If they stay, it means spending even more on tuition as they essentially start over.

If I am given the honour of becoming the next Premier of Ontario, I will work with groups like Colleges Ontario and the Council of Ontario Universities to cut red tape and find the best practices – to modernize the post-secondary system so students can focus on earning the degree or diploma that works best for them.

Which brings me to my third point – we will invest in Ontario students first.

Our Party recognizes the importance of all Ontario post-secondary institutions, whether they are colleges or universities, to our economic growth and prosperity of Ontario families.

That hasn't always been the case under the current government.

The latest example is their plan to pay \$30 million dollars in scholarships to bring 75 foreign PhD students to Ontario universities.

Our PC Caucus rejected this idea from the start. Richard Florida is not the be all, end all when it comes to post-secondary education.

At a time when Ontario families are struggling to pay for their children's education and tuition fees which are the highest in the country, Dalton McGuinty is overlooking Ontario students by creating a rich scholarship program exclusive to foreign university students.

The Premier said he wants to attract `the best and brightest` students to our universities. I say focus on Ontario's best and brightest first.

In addition to neglecting our own talented students, I believe this new program also fails to acknowledge the value of colleges.

College is an affordable option for students whose families are experiencing tough times – who are spending their savings on the hydro bills instead of tuition for their kids.

Our PC Caucus, with Jim Wilson, PC Critic for Training, Colleges and Universities in the lead, launched a petition calling on Dalton McGuinty to cancel this program and instead invest those funds in Ontario students.

Jim is currently in consultations with students and post-secondary institutions, to find the best ways the government can reinvest those funds to benefit Ontario students.

Ladies and gentlemen, I firmly believe that Ontario's best days are to come.

We have a dedicated workforce and strong, driven entrepreneurs. We have vast and valuable resources that are the envy of the world.

And we're on the doorstep to 135 million consumers across the border in the United States. We just need the right kind of decisions and the strong leadership to move our province forward.

We need to modernize Ontario's post-secondary system, and cut the red tape that is holding back Ontario students from reaching their full potential. We NEED to invest in Ontario students first.

I want to create an Ontario where more students can smoothly access the trades and provide a better life for their children and grandchildren.

I want to thank you once again for the good work you do to strengthen our economy by educating the workforce of tomorrow.

Working together, we can once again restore Ontario to its rightful place as the economic powerhouse of Confederation.

My friends, Ontario can lead again.

Thank you very much.