



OPERATIONS AND EFFICIENCY

Focused Future: A Strategic Plan to Reshape the Future of Education

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With the demands of the workforce evolving rapidly, colleges and universities need to find ways to stay relevant and focused on their students' and communities' future. Sheridan College published its five-year strategic plan, Sheridan 2024, to reshape the current educational structure to help students, industry and their surrounding communities. But is the plan too ambitious? Janet Morrison discusses Sheridan's bold plan, the challenges they'll face and how they envision the future of postsecondary education.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What were some of the motivating factors behind the decision to establish such a bold strategic plan?

Janet Morrison (JM): The process used to create this plan was highly consultative, representing the curation of over 3,000 voices, both internally and externally. It also represents a careful and considered review of the research and the forecasting information on the economy and the future of work.

By all accounts, we're living in a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Flourishing in this VUCA world will be characterized by disruption and new possibilities, demanding emotional acumen and competencies like agility and collaboration,

critical thinking, creativity. This is what we hear from employers even today, and was the driver of our new plan.

Everybody at Sheridan lives to be accountable to our learners and our communities, as well as to industry and employers. And so the plan compels us to combine discipline-specific technical skills with soft skills to ensure they're ready to adapt, re-gear and seize on emerging opportunities.

Sheridan 2024 builds on our rich history of creativity and innovation. It carves out this new and unique space for us in the postsecondary spectrum that combines our commitment to quality, an unwavering commitment to quality assurance, and our commitment to fostering value for communities and industry.

Evo: How would you define the difference between colleges and universities when it comes to the future of work?

JM: In Sheridan 2024, we clarify that we no longer identify as a college or a polytechnic or a university. Instead, we believe that the future of higher education is composite.

Our degree intensity, our commitment to quality, our longstanding investment in graduate-prepared faculty members, our investment in library and learning services—combined with our commitment to hands-on applied learning, experiential education and work-integrated learning—speak to a shifting place. All the pieces that may have traditionally lived in the university space or in the community college space are coming together in the applied research and the economic development space where polytechnics sit.

All of those positions on the postsecondary continuum have to come together in a new composite space to deliver on the needs of learners, employers and communities.

The future is compelling everybody to rethink, reengineer, reimagine and we take that obligation seriously. The plan is an outcome of that self-reflection and contemplation about what people are going to need going forward to flourish and thrive.

Evo: How do you expect program and service design to evolve?

JM: Program design at Sheridan has always been aligned with emerging social and economic needs. We developed and launched the first undergraduate degree in cybersecurity in Canada back in 2004, which was thanks to pressure from faculty. They identified this imminent need for data security professionals and started this

program that had an initial class of 10 students. That cohort is up at 350 today, almost all of whom find well-paying jobs immediately after graduation.

We have always been in the business of trailblazing and game changing. Part of that can be attributed to our professional advisory councils, which are comprised of industry experts and who are tied to each of our programs. They provide ongoing input and advice on trends, which informs both our programming and our curriculum, and also influences how we teach.

The strategic plan challenges us to think about how we combine that forward-focused educational lens with the development of capabilities to design and foster lifelong learning. How are we ensuring that students are positioned to pivot with agility and change management skills? How are we cultivating creative thinking, critical thinking, initiative, the ability to collaborate working groups and to really understand what equity and inclusivity looks like in workplaces, and more broadly in their communities?

It's that that combined composite space, not just across the higher education continuum, but across the hard and soft skills continuum, which employers, industry leaders and forecasters tell us is going to be all important as the world changes and evolves.

Evo: How will Sheridan engage with the broader communities that it serves to advance those strategic goals?

JM: We're an anchor institution in three significant Ontario communities—the town of Oakville, and the cities of Brampton and Mississauga. Engaging with those communities, the employers and the industry that drives their economic productivity is a key pillar in achieving our strategic objectives. The key to that is fostering reciprocal work-learn relationships, be it work-integrated learning or experiential learning opportunities.

Our Continuing and Professional Studies Division recently launched a partnership with an industry consortium that provides students with eight weeks of industry specific classroom learning, followed by an eight-week paid work placement. Being responsive to talent needs is essential. In this case, we focused on an identified skills shortage in a specific industry and aimed to guarantee successful students with job opportunities and a career path they can follow locally and then nationally if they want to. It's a great example of how we can be nimble and agile in working with our communities and employers while simultaneously creating benefits for students.

We recognize our role as city builders and as community leaders, and so we need to go beyond supporting our communities through programs and leverage our

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physical space as well. Sheridan has been committed to sustainability for many years, both as an academic institution and then as an anchor institution. One of the projects related to that is Mission Zero, which is a portfolio of initiatives launched in 2010 to cut our energy and carbon emissions in half, and to virtually eliminate the waste we send to landfills and to restore a biodiversity on our campuses.

We're sharing our in-house expertise in the area of sustainability for 21st-century organizations with all of our communities. For example, we're working with the town of Oakville and the city of Brampton to help them develop community energy plans with targets and roadmaps for reducing energy and greenhouse gas emissions.

It's about finding areas of shared interest.

Evo: How important is the role of continuing and professional education in achieving the goals laid out in Sheridan 2024?

JM: Our commitment is to be a hub for skilling, reskilling and upskilling. All indications are that an investment in continuous learning is absolutely essential. After all, just because graduates have earned particular credentials doesn't signal they no longer have any need for skill and competency development. To continue to invest in reskilling and upskilling in particular within professional studies is an important piece of building a sustainable career.

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Most of our learners combine a university and a college credential, and about 30% of our learners come to Sheridan with a university degree in-hand—data that is consistent for colleges across Canada. This confirms the message that there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

The first credential is not the be-all-and-end-all, and our commitment is to ensure that there are a variety of offerings designed in partnership with professional advisory committees and industry contacts. We also need to ensure there are a variety of learning options available with flexible and personalizable scheduling options.

There are a wealth of opportunities available for people to fuel their career aspirations, and programming that has traditionally lived within continuing and professional education is a major piece of the puzzle.

Evo: How do you see the role of the college evolving as it starts to realize this vision for its future?

JM: All of us who invested in fueling economic development and social innovation spend an inordinate amount of time these days thinking about how to deliver on that mandate. What we're talking about now at Sheridan is positioning ourselves on this notion of individual transformation.

Higher education has this unique capacity to change the trajectory for individuals and families,

communities, and hopefully the planet.

But this notion of transformation requires us to incubate a new future for higher education. Having worked 30 years in the university sector, I'm convinced that this composite approach, an unwavering commitment to quality, and an investment in a very tight alignment between industry needs and personal skill development is the path forward.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Postsecondary institutions of all stripes cannot get hung up on their designation as a university, college or polytech, but instead focus on how they can serve the needs of their communities and key stakeholders.
- Continuing and professional education will play a central role in the future of higher education by supporting flexible programming structures and driving impactful outcomes.
- There are no one-size-fits-all approaches in education anymore. Instead, institutions must create offerings that serve individuals across the 100-year life.



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