

# **Colleges and Institutes Canada**

*Annual Conference 2019*

## **The Sum of Shared Efforts: Maximizing Student Success (E/SI)**

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Thank you for being here today and affording me the opportunity to talk about how we can maximize student success when we intentionally and collaboratively work together, across our portfolios. It's not lost on me that this topic directly aligns with our conference theme of "[Inclusion – A Recipe for Success](#)". I hope that the stories and examples that I'll share with you today highlight the potential and practical synergies to be realized when areas across the collegium work together toward the shared purpose that underpins every one of our institutions. In so doing, I also hope I'll demonstrate that higher education remains a compelling imperative that needs our support.

Discussing the transformative potential for higher education – for individuals and families, society and the economy – is a topic that I am deeply invested in, and passionate about. Over the course of the last thirty years, I've built a professional life in the post-secondary sector – for a long time as a learner, then as a faculty member, student affairs professional and senior administrator. Of all the titles and descriptors and across all my roles – including that of Vice-Provost, Students; Provost; and now President – what rings most true is my identity as an educator committed to fostering student success, inside and outside of the classroom. Supporting post-secondary learners, fueling their aspirations and celebrating their successes became — through those formative experiences — my professional preoccupation. How that happens – optimally – will be the focus of my remarks today: **how do we, collectively, foster and draw on every single member of the university, college, or institute community to create the 'combustion' required to maximize student success?**

This is neither novel nor new. In their landmark 2004 publication, "[Learning Reconsidered: a campus wide focus on the student experience](#)" two of the largest North American higher education organizations – NASPA and ACPA – defined learning as "a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development, processes that have often been considered separate, and even independent of each other". It recognized that the profile of post-secondary students has changed and that knowledge was no longer a "scarce or stable commodity". Broadly, it concluded that:

“...a truly transformative education repeatedly exposes students to multiple opportunities for intentional learning through the formal academic curriculum, student life, collaborative co-curricular programming, community-based and global experiences”.

Inarguably, that can't happen without all of us working together.

To start today, I want to talk about the promise of 'transformative education'; I'm then going to shift to focus on three practical and specific opportunities for enhanced collaboration between teaching & learning, and student affairs professionals: the first-year experience, campus mental health, and the acquisition of key competencies for a complex world. Then, I'm really hoping we'll have time for questions and dialogue.

I am quite confident that everyone in this room – regardless of your title or role – knows that Colleges and Universities matter and are fundamental to Canada's future as an economically secure, safe, sustainable, progressive, inclusive, and equitable democracy. With increasing intensity, however, people are openly challenging its value.

In response to this phenomenon, the President of Harvard University – Lawrence Bacow – argued that: "We need, together, to reaffirm that higher education is a public good worthy of support – and beyond that, a pillar of our democracy that, if dislodged, will change (us) into something fundamentally ***bleaker and smaller***".

Drawing on our experience, we all **know that post-secondary education matters**. For some, the impact is profoundly personal. Last week, for example, a Dean and I facilitated an intervention with a varsity athlete who has been struggling with mental health for over a decade. This amazing 23-year old Kinesiology & Athletic Therapy student and I got to know each other while working out at the campus gym. I knew something was wrong and waited for the right time to ask if I could help. That conversation opened a door to engage Dr. Michael O'Leary – the Dean of the student's Faculty, a KINS grad, and a former male varsity athlete. Michael subsequently met with the student, listened to the student, secured a commitment from that student to seek help, and co-crafted a recovery plan to ensure he graduates. Owing to Michael's skilled and caring intervention ... I'm confident that smart, skilled, motivated young man will not be labelled "failed to launch".

Other times, post-secondary drives an amazing turnaround story. For the past two years, I've had the privilege to support a young woman with a toddler whose lived experience has been plagued by complexity and challenge. She was on social assistance and estranged from positive influences and/or mentors. With the help of a community partner agency, dedicated student services staff, and caring faculty from our Skilled Trades Centre ... she now has stable housing and food security; her son is in a licensed daycare; she's enrolled in an apprenticeship program, AND she is thriving in a summer work placement that I'm confident will lead to long-term employment, economic self-sufficiency, and positive social engagement.

These stories validate — poignantly — that higher education transforms people, families, and communities. They give credence to the arguments made by McMahon in his 2009 book: [\*Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education\*](#). Essentially, his work speaks to the quantification of the combined public and private benefits of a college education. Undeniably, the rate of economic return on post-secondary education (that is, the net worth of education once costs like tuition, text books, and foregone income are considered) is significant and has continued to rise over decades. Simply put: college and university graduates experience higher levels of employment and make more money. This is a huge piece of the investment value proposition, particularly for learners and/or families looking to break the cycle of poverty.

But talking only about the economic benefits degrades the true value proposition of earning a degree, diploma or certificate. Drawing on McMahon's language, this places too much focus on the *personal, market outcomes* of earning a post-secondary credential. In tandem, we must talk about the bigger picture or the *social, non-market outcomes* that are achieved or advanced by going to College or University.

**What does McMahon mean by 'non-market' outcomes?** He talks about the role that our institutions play in making students healthier, more engaged and conscious citizens. This is how, frankly, Colleges and Institutes will drive — in a uniquely powerful and purposeful way — the [\*Sustainable Development Goals\*](#) we're now talking about. These effects last a lifetime and have a huge impact on both individuals and society at large. It happened to me, and – most likely – many of you.

Because it matters, I'm always mindful to acknowledge my privilege. I am a white woman who grew up in a house my parents owned. It was full of books, and my brothers and I were expected to attend College or University, in part because my Mom, Dad and grandparents went before me. I didn't work during my undergraduate studies, and I lived on campus.

My lived experience is germane: socio-economic status, marginalization and obstacles to success intersect and must be acknowledged. Many of the students I've had the privilege to support do not fit my profile. Like the two I referenced earlier, they work 25+ hours a week, commute hours a day, have partners, dependents and debt. For them, getting a good job has to be the primary objective. I understand, admire and respect that.

The literature is clear, however: even after accounting for confounding influences like race, gender, parental income, and prior health status, attending college or university has a positive impact on values, attitudes and quality of life. Evidence further suggests that the influence of postsecondary education extends beyond individual graduates to their children.

What does that mean in practical terms? College and University graduates score higher on measures of tolerance, have a lower propensity to commit crime, are more likely to vote, volunteer, participate in public debate and read to their kids. They have a greater propensity to trust and tolerate others, are less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours like heavy drinking, illicit drug use or smoking. They're more likely to engage in preventative healthcare and healthy behaviours, less likely to be obese and they cope with distress more effectively.

In summary: graduating from a college or university drives positive behaviours that make the world better. Back to President Bacow's remarks: post-secondary education counters the threat of becoming smaller and bleaker with an influx of hope and opportunity, not just for learners but for society as a whole.

This is why I describe the opportunity to lead at Sheridan as an enormous privilege and a tremendous responsibility. But what does "leading" in our space mean? What, practically, does it look like? At its core, it rests on the understanding and conviction that the personal transformation or 'magic' referenced in McMahon's work **doesn't just happen**. As posited by [Lewin](#) in 1936, behaviour is a function of the interaction that a learner has with their environment – inside and outside – the classroom. It follows then, that maximizing the impact of our collective efforts as teaching and learning, and/or student development professionals rests on two things: (a) an understanding of the Ontario post-secondary learner profile; and, (b) the body of research on optimized educational environments – physical, social, and organizational.

Let's start with our students. Bluntly: being a post-secondary student in 2019 is more complicated than ever before; the challenges and obstacles inherent in getting a degree, diploma or certificate for too many learners are significant. It's a very good news story that Colleges, Institutes and Universities in Canada are educating more first-generation participants, more first-generation Canadians, more English-as-a-second-language speakers, and more students whose lived experience could be described as marginalized.

But:

1. College and University students are poor: the average student in Canada is paying 45% more in tuition than their counterparts did a decade ago.
2. Too many post-secondary students struggle to attain or maintain positive mental health; in 2016, 44% of respondents to the [National College Health Assessment](#) survey felt so depressed it was difficult to function; 65% had experienced overwhelming anxiety; 13% had seriously considered suicide; and, a shocking 2.1% had attempted suicide. I find this heartbreaking.
3. An untenable number of our students have lived experience with violence. An estimated 1 in 3 female learners at the post-secondary level will experience sexual violence in particular.
4. Over 10% of all learners in the system have a disability.
5. Systemic racism and related barriers to access continue to negatively impact First Nation, Inuit, Métis, other racialized learners and students who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Many of these identities and lived experiences intersect, which speaks to another underpinning of NASPA & APCA's Learning Reconsidered, essentially that: "few of the social, economic, cultural, political, and pedagogical conditions and assumptions that framed the structures and methods of our modern universities remain unchanged." Notably, the authors argue that true higher education "requires the engagement of the whole student, and the deployment of every resource".

Let me be clear: the significant personal and financial investments students make today in post-secondary education and the obstacles they overcome to enroll in our institutions **compel us all to purposefully design learning environments (within and beyond the classroom) that position every student to 'flourish'.**

Fredrickson defined flourishing as "feeling satisfied with your life and also functioning well within it". When a student is flourishing, she writes, they "feel as if they are learning, growing, and making contributions to society."

All of our learning environments – across our campuses and across the national system – must consistently and purposefully propel students to *flourish*, day in and day out. We do this through excellence in teaching; a robust research culture; collaborative partnerships with industry and other stakeholders; and, evidence-based and theoretically-informed student services. **Formatively, however, it demands the clear and consistent articulation of a compelling and shared sense of purpose across the academic and non-academic collegium.** Colleagues: we don't have the luxury of

fretting about silos or turf. Our mandate is too important and resources are increasingly scarce.

At the risk of being provocative, the challenge reminds me of a great kids' book: [“The Squirrels who Squabbled”](#) by Rachel Bright and Jim Field. The main characters – Cyril and Bruce – both want desperately to harbor the final pinecone of the season. Instead of working together to secure it, however, they ... don't. After a minor mishap with a bear, the prized pinecone plops into the water where it gets swooped up by a bird who swiftly and unceremoniously savors the pine nuts! The two squirrels are left adrift in a raging river and survive a harrowing trip over a raging waterfall before – bruised and bedraggled – they finally decide to try a different, more collaborative approach. Spoiler alert: the results were spectacular!

This simplified and humorous analogy aside, I invite you to consider three specific areas where you and your colleagues – regardless of title, earned credential, or organizational positioning – could, I'm certain, attain better results if you worked collaboratively instead of squabbling.

**It seems appropriate to start with the First Year Experience.** Undeniably, students need to be supported in their transition to a post-secondary learning environment. I am a disciple of [Alf Lizzio's](#), whose theory holds that the transition to college or university is optimally managed by attending to five senses: a sense of purpose, a sense of connectedness, a sense of capacity; a sense of resourcefulness; and, a sense of academic culture. Through the lens of this theoretical construct, an amazing team of leaders at York University and I developed a comprehensive, purposeful approach to the first-year called [YU START](#). The program engages faculty and student affairs professionals across the campus and is built around curricular and co-curricular learning outcomes – common language for all of us. It was created in 2012 and now serves over 11,000 new students each summer/fall. YU START speaks explicitly to things like career planning (purpose), how to take effective notes (capability), and which resources are available to help with what problems (resourcefulness). It incorporates registration processes, an on-line learning community, and an on-campus orientation event hosted by faculty and organized around academic programs of study. It's *brilliant* and brings to life precisely what Learning Reconsidered prescribed: “a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development”. Huzzah!

To navigate perspective and optimize inclusiveness, the entire first-year experience program was co-created at York by a team of faculty leaders, student affairs professionals and students. In addition to YU START, York has invested in other

amazing First Year Experience resources for faculty including:

- [The First Year Experience \(FYE\) In the Classroom Toolkit](#), a compendium of information for anyone on campus who teaches a first-year course; and,
- Workshop sessions and a Community of Practice sponsored by the Teaching Commons that include seminars and hands-on activities.

A word about the value of involving students before I leave this topic: At a focus group I hosted for first-year learners several years ago at York, a student told me his experience of on-campus orientation was excellent with one exception: a lecture his cohort got from an old guy who arrived 40 minutes late and bored the group to tears. When I asked him who the speaker was ... he responded “some guy named Dean”.

For too many first-generation participants in the system, our institutionalized language and the framing we use when speaking about our hierarchical structures and not students’ needs poses obstacles: What is a Dean? What is a Chair? What is a major? Why should a new student know any of that? For all of us, not having a sense of culture erodes one’s confidence and fosters anxiety. And if there’s one thing we know for certain, it’s that we don’t need any more anxiety on campuses in North America.

**Practical focus #2: Mental health and well-being are fundamental to learning and must be a priority for every leader, on every post-secondary campus in Canada.**

Particularly in the aftermath of tragedies on campuses across the country, attending to student mental health is a moral, ethical and risk management obligation. I won’t belabor the statistics because we all live them every day, but the [National Institute for Mental Health](#) has concluded that 75% of people who receive a diagnosis of a mental disorder are first diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 24. Of the 2 million students attending post-secondary institutions in Canada today, 50% will use mental health services; 10% of those same students will be seen in urgent or crisis situations. And, of course, this represents only those students who overcome the stigma and seek help.

Colleges and Institutes cannot solve this crisis alone, but we need to be actively engaged in fostering mentally-healthy campuses that promote wellness. To that end, the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#), the Canadian Standards Association Group, Universities Canada, Bell Let’s Talk, the RBC Foundation, and CICan are working collaboratively to establish Canada’s first Standard for Psychological Health and Safety of Post-Secondary Students. As you’ll hear at the presentation by our partners from the Mental Health Commission of Canada later this week, the objective is “to establish a practical and implementable framework that can be adapted by leaders” on every campus across the country.



Owing to a rich consultation process, I'm confident that the standard will draw on promising practices for creating mentally healthy campuses -- communities where the policies, practices, programs and the leadership cultivate and live a culture of compassion. Done right, it's a commitment that is 'lived' across the organization -- within and beyond classrooms. What about your registration, enrollment, petition, progression or graduation policies might be revised to promote healthy communities? How are faculty trained to respond to students in crisis? Are there effective referral protocols in place? What do we know about the interaction of pedagogy and positioning students to flourish?

For a guide on this, look no further than the [Okanagan Charter](#), which includes two calls to action:

1. Embed health into all aspects of campus culture, across the administration operations and academic mandates.
2. Lead health promotion action and collaboration locally and globally.

The first involves embedding health into all campus policies; creating supportive campus environments, generating thriving communities and a culture of well-being; supporting personal development; and, creating or reorienting campus services. The second call involves the integration of health, well-being and sustainability across disciplines to develop change agents; advancing research, teaching and training for health promotion knowledge and action; and, leading and partnering towards local and global action for health promotion.

Fundamentally, the Charter rests on a whole-system, comprehensive and campus-wide approach that is participatory and engages the voice of students. It speaks -- explicitly -- to the value of developing trans-disciplinary collaboration and cross-sector partnerships.

If you're looking for a powerful commentary on the imperative to embed mental well-being across curriculum and pedagogy, check out the article published by Baik, Larcombe and Brooker in the Feb 11, 2019 edition of the Journal of Higher Education Research & Development titled: [How Universities can enhance student mental wellbeing: the student perspective](#). Perhaps surprising to some, when University students were asked what could be done to improve their well-being, most of their recommendations related to academic teachers and teaching practices - NOT to student services or the imperative for more counsellors.

For practical tips on what that might look like, check out [Enhancing Student Mental Wellbeing: A Handbook for Academic Educators](#) produced by the University of Melbourne. It includes great sections on curriculum design, teaching strategies, and having difficult conversations.

If you're looking for Canadian models to emulate, check out the [University of Calgary's Campus Mental Health Strategy](#), which includes six areas of focus:

1. Raising awareness and promoting well-being;
2. Personal resilience and self-management;
3. Early identification and response;
4. Direct service and support;
5. Institutional policies, processes and procedures; and,
6. Supportive campus environment.

Included in the last foci is an explicit acknowledgement that “student life programming is an integral component of creating a supportive environment for students”, and that “curriculum and instructional design impact student mental health and well-being”.

Key, related actions include a commitment to: “promote teaching and learning practices that integrate inclusive curriculum and pedagogy and that include concepts of mental health and wellness”. Leadership on this front is coming from The Teaching & Learning Subcommittee at the University, which sponsors a long list of workshops including: Reducing Stigma in the Classroom; Helping Students Help Themselves: strategies and resources to promote self-regulated learning; Responding to Students in Distress and Creating a Supportive Learning Environment; and Using Mental Health and Wellness as a Framework for Course Design. Most of these are co-facilitated by clinician-scientists, academics and/or student development professionals.

**Finally, I want to talk about the future of work and the key competencies learners will need in the future to thrive — economically and personally.** This topic is an anchor of Sheridan's new, five-year Strategic Plan: **Galvanizing Education for a Complex World.**

In [Preparing Tomorrow's Workforce for the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#), Deloitte concluded that supposed “soft skills” are now fundamental to succeeding in a world of unprecedented change. Specifically, the report trumpets: communication, critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, initiative, leadership, social emotional learning, teamwork, self-confidence, empathy, growth mindset, cultural awareness and ... **creative thinking** – something we think about a lot at Sheridan.

Last month, the Toronto-based Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship issued the latest in a rash of reports on the future of work.

Titled, [Turn and Face the Strange: Changes Impacting the Future of Employment in Canada](#), the report echoed what we've seen previously from Deloitte, RBC and The World Economic Forum – specifically, that “creativity could soon be the most in-demand skill sought by employers across all industries”. A recent IBM study based on 1,500 interviews with CEOs from around the globe titled, [Capitalizing on Complexity](#), identified creativity as the most important leadership quality. The report notes that creative leaders “take more calculated risks, find new ideas, and keep innovating in how they lead and communicate”.

In a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity ... Sheridan's bold new Strategic Plan commits the entire organization to nurturing S-Factor skills – those needed by every member of the organization to flourish in a rapidly changing world. The S-Factor skills will be co-created with our students, faculty and staff during the 2019-20 academic year and thereafter implemented across everything we do: curriculum and co-curricular experiences; people and organizational development; career readiness; community engagement, and more. What we've heard already – through a strategic planning process that engaged over 3,000 voices – is that we need to contemplate key competencies like agility, resilience, communication, intercultural competence, and – *for sure* – creativity.

Creativity is a cornerstone of Sheridan's institutional identity and pedagogical approach; it lives in our DNA and is a key differentiator in our Strategic Mandate Agreement.

From recruitment processes to classroom experiences, and from research projects to space planning, we are dedicated to promoting creativity across all of our campuses and programs. Our Creative Campus commitment builds on scholarly and industry research that identifies creativity as the production of novel ideas that have value; the precursor to innovation; and an essential skill for academic and career success that can be enhanced through teaching and training.

I want to share some practical examples of how this happens in a way that links directly to Learning Reconsidered, and – specifically – the purposeful design of transformational learning experiences that “repeatedly expose students to multiple opportunities for intentional learning through the formal academic curriculum, student life, collaborative co-curricular programming, community-based and global experiences”.

- **Let's start with the formal academic curriculum** -- Sheridan offers 23 four-year Honours Bachelor Degrees across many fields, all of which require Creative Thinking. It's not just Animation and Musical Theatre (although these might come most immediately to mind because our alumni keep winning Oscars, and *Come From Away* – the hit musical that was first developed at Sheridan through our formal incubator for new musical works - continues to be feted with Tony and Olivier Awards)! We offer a Board Undergraduate Certificate in Creativity and Creative Problem Solving that is open to every degree student at Sheridan. Students are required to take six courses that teach them to synthesize thinking styles, produce and implement new ideas, solve complex problems, instigate change, and build creative capacity. Over 1,300 degree students have enrolled in a creativity course related to this additional credential. The Undergraduate Board Certificate is supported by three full-time Professors of Creativity and Creative Studies, the first positions of their kind at a post-secondary institution in Canada.
- **In terms of community-based programming** -- Through a collaboration with SUNY-Buffalo State, 300 Sheridan employees – including student staff and leaders – have completed Level I training in a Creative Problem Solving (CPS) process that helps people to tackle problems that are ill-defined, novel or ambiguous. Two of our Professors, Dr. Michael McNamara and Dr. Sara Cumming, used CPS to facilitate discussions among local social service agencies and community groups to develop fundable social innovations in support of affordable housing, employment services and food security.
- **Finally, and holistically, our Creative Campus commitment** delivers a distinct out-of-classroom experience that encompasses (among other things):

  - the annual [Temporary Contemporary](#) competition, which brings public art installations to Sheridan's campuses that rotate each year
  - our Creative Campus lecture series, that brings renaissance thinkers to campus to explain how they adopt and approach creativity. Past speakers include Ken Dryden (six time Stanley Cup champion, author, and politician), Roberta Bondar (astronaut, neurologist, photographer), Roberta Jamieson (Indigenous leader and former Ombudswoman), and Ben Weinlick (social innovator and founder of Think Jar Collective). Events are free, open to the Sheridan community and public, and live-streamed.

- Our partnership with the Brampton Library and Brampton's Economic Development office to launch a [Maker Space](#) at Brampton Library
- Our [Creative Campus Galleries](#), which showcase and catalyze creativity and provide opportunities for interdisciplinary inquiry and exchange across Sheridan and its communities.

I wanted to leave you with this particular example because it – by design – engages the entire Sheridan community in driving towards a shared purpose. This is highly à propos, given the theme of this talk.

Creativity, as we define it across our campuses, Faculties, programs and credentials ... entails new ways of understanding, new ways of meaning, new modes of expression and new ways of producing knowledge and original ideas that have value. Living our identity as Canada's Creative Campus demands that our amazing faculty, dedicated student affairs and services staff, genius student leaders, and a strong team of administrative leaders -- COLLABORATE, COOPERATE, CO-CREATE, CONSPIRE, AND – ultimately – DELIVER. Bearing witness to this in action as Sheridan's President and Vice Chancellor has been nothing short of game changing for me.

Though not new or original (Learning Reconsidered was first published in 2004!), I submit that re-thinking our work to consider ***the entire campus as a learning community*** and ***every person who works therein as an educator*** is fundamental to meeting the demands of leading in our sector, at this moment in time. I believe — with every fiber of my being — that this approach is the only path to realizing the true potential of our efforts: the transformative power of post-secondary learning. Simply put: we cannot, my friends, be Squirrels Who Squabble.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you this morning and for the enormous investment each of you makes in teaching, learning and human development every day on campuses across our country.