

Changing landscape

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The changing landscape of higher education

Pick up any newsletter or journal about higher education today and you will find at least one article or commentary about major changes underway in postsecondary education. Although it is sometimes difficult to separate trend from fad, and fact from hyperbole, higher education is indisputably evolving at an accelerating rate. Where there can be less consensus is why that change is happening and how the drivers of change in the rest of the world are affecting higher education in Ontario.

Highlighted below are four areas of significant change influencing Seneca's direction. What unites all of them is the thread of internationalization, a reminder that both directly and indirectly, sometimes positively and other times negatively, we are living in a shrinking world.

The world of work

Much has been written about the skills mismatch in Canada – the challenge of connecting the educational experience gained by postsecondary students to the requirements of the labour market. Yet that is precisely where colleges have always excelled. We use the insights and experience of our Program Advisory Committees and our expert faculty to create curriculum and learning experiences that meet the needs of employers, reflect the reality of today's workplaces and anticipate where tomorrow's careers will be made. A large majority of our students benefit from work-integrated learning opportunities from cooperative work terms to internships and placements to applied research projects.

A bigger challenge is trying to anticipate the shifts in the kind of skills in demand at any given time, and the changing nature of work itself as relentless automation and unstoppable globalization continues to reshape the essence of many occupations. As well, in many areas of the labour market demand for contractors and the self-employed continues to grow, leading to the rise of the "gig" economy. That is not just a lifestyle issue: it drives changes in curriculum and other learning opportunities to reflect the reality that our graduates will need entrepreneurial skills to be successful in virtually every occupation. We see signs of growing demand for shorter-term credentials with more focus on skills needed immediately in the work force. Seneca's response: constant vigilance about changes in the labour market,

continued innovation in program delivery and credential options, and ongoing program review and renewal.

As an employer, Seneca is experiencing the same wave of baby boomer retirements that is affecting all workplaces. We continue to focus on fostering a high level of employee engagement, meeting the challenge of renewing our own workforce by recruiting, developing and retaining employees.

A changing student population

The number of students graduating from Ontario high schools will continue to decline, bringing to a halt the steady growth that drove the expansion of postsecondary education in the province for decades. At the same time, continued strong demand for Canadian education from around the world, combined with a favourable climate in this country for immigrants, has led to a surge in international student enrolment, particularly in the large urban areas.

While growth in high school graduates is predicted to resume in the greater Toronto region in a few years, most other parts of the province will continue to see a decline, challenging the sustainability of public sector institutions in those regions and intensifying the competition for students. At Seneca, we have seen a rise in the number of mature students and expect that trend will continue. This reinforces the need for more flexibility, and delivering programs in ways and at times that meet the needs of learners who might be working, or have demanding family responsibilities, while they are returning to school.

Another reality affecting all of postsecondary education is the increase in students reporting mental health issues. Providing appropriate supports through counselling and other assistance is challenging in the absence of sufficient funding and available community services, yet we are committed to offering those supports that are vital to help all of our students achieve success.

Technology

The impact of fast-changing technology is all-pervasive in postsecondary education, as it is in most facets of our working and personal lives. Technology consumes an ever-greater share of budgets and mindshare – from the challenge of maintaining currency in applications and hardware to meeting the expectations of globally connected students and employees, from harnessing the power of data analytics to anticipating how artificial intelligence will change education. At Seneca, we are meeting that challenge with an unmatched cluster of information technology and engineering programs, and with sophisticated facilities and infrastructure throughout our campuses.

Online education continues to grow as both a standalone option and blended with more

traditional approaches to teaching and learning. It is particularly attractive for mature students, including those returning to postsecondary education to update their skills, retrain or continue their professional development while they are still working. While Seneca is a leader in continuing and online education, both are areas of increasing competition from established and new market entrants from every part of the world.

Evolving government policy

The balance of Seneca's revenue, between funding provided by public grants and funding generated by tuition fees, has swung dramatically in recent years. The direct operating grants from the Ontario government received by Seneca now represent roughly one-third of our total revenue, far outpaced by tuition from domestic and international students. The provincial government also recently overhauled the funding formula for all publicly assisted postsecondary institutions – a recognition that the public funding for education can no longer be based on the assumption that domestic enrolment would continue to grow unabated. Nonetheless, the long-term sustainability of the postsecondary system continues to be a challenge as feeder populations shrink in rural and northern Ontario.

Partly as a response, the provincial government has started to nudge the system towards greater differentiation among institutions through the signing of Strategic Mandate Agreements with all publicly assisted postsecondary institutions. For its part, Seneca's differentiation can be measured in several ways. We are among a handful of polytechnic institutions that offer a considerable number of honours bachelor degrees and graduate certificates that are applied education at its best. We are maintaining our leadership in pathways by expanding partnerships with colleges to offer degree and diploma completion to their students, building a hub-and-spoke model that benefits students from across the province. Seneca has a highly diversified approach to international education, including growing our global educational consulting services in addition to our significant international student population and many international institutional partnerships. Finally, we have a strong focus on helping our graduates develop the skills and competencies to be engaged and contributing citizens through Seneca's core literacies, the essential skill set required for success today.

Values

Seneca's values start with centring all aspects of our operations, inside and outside the classroom, on student success. While that may seem obvious, and is a starting point broadly shared in the education system at all levels, we affirm being student-centered, and focused on the success of our students and our graduates, as the foundation of our values.

We also highlight these as our core values: Respect, Excellence, Innovating, Community, Diversity.

Respect

It is a simple axiom: in everything we do, in all ways, we treat each other with respect.

Excellence

While we will always be flexible in our approach, we never compromise on quality and standards.

Innovating

From the day our first students walked through our doors in 1967, we understood that the world is in constant evolution. We are always improving, innovating and looking ahead.

Community

We build bridges and networks within our institution, to our community and across the world. And, we give back, building and strengthening the communities where we live and work.

Diversity

Seneca celebrates its extraordinary diversity as an enriching strength and a competitive advantage in today's global economy.

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