ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE IN APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

PERSPECTIVES OF PRESIDENTS OF ONTARIO'S COLLEGES ON THE FUTURE OF ONLINE LEARNING

A SNAPSHOT OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PLANS AND ASPIRATIONS

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BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY:

In June 2017, the presidents of the 24 public colleges in Ontario received a request to complete a questionnaire on the status of online learning in their respective colleges, with particular attention to their roles as leaders. Responses were received from 14 presidents of the 24 college presidents from all regions and size institutions.

These responses are presented below, using the language and emphases of the presidents, to provide a look at college online learning success stories; current, upcoming and aspirational developments linked to technological advances; the importance of collaboration; the roles of presidents in the integration of online learning; and an assessment of its future.

As well as providing insight into the state of the art of online learning in Ontario colleges, these survey findings are linked to a dinner Forum to be hosted by Deputy Minister Sheldon Levy on October 17, 2017, in conjunction with the World Conference on Online Learning in Toronto. This evening event will feature a discussion among the presidents of three invited groups of institutions – Ontario colleges, Ontario universities, and university vice-chancellors from around the world who are attending the World Conference. The results of this survey, as well as similar studies undertaken with the other two groups of invitees, will form the basis of this discussion.

It is important to note that the term "online learning" is used as shorthand to include blended learning, flipped classrooms, and technology-enhanced learning for distance and on-campus learners.

1. **What is your college's major success story to date in using technology for teaching or learning in the digital age? How did this come about?**

   The presidents' responses present multiple success stories from each college in the use of technology for teaching and learning. These accomplishments can be broadly characterized as successes in college-wide change; in teaching and learning; and in technology innovation and use.

   ### College-Wide Change

   The **successful introduction and integration of online learning** is a key success story for many presidents as an outcome of deliberate strategies and actions their institutions have initiated, invested in and supported over an extended period. Several report that online and/or blended learning is pervasive throughout their colleges – for teaching, learning, assessment, and professional development, with all or almost all courses making use of a learning management system (LMS). The number of online and blended programs and courses is steadily increasing, supported by collaborative development and sharing through OntarioLearn, community access through Contact North I Contact Nord during the past two or three decades, and funding

provided by internal and external sources, particularly eCampusOntario in the last few years.

Presidents credit this successful expansion of online learning with **improvements in service to students**, such as greater flexibility, a wider variety of programs and courses, the opportunity to study in their communities, and access to a broader range of resources. Some report increased course enrolment and improved student completion rates and IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES resulting FROM online learning.

A few presidents make an important distinction between online learning and **technology-enhanced learning**. While their colleges may not be highly active in online learning, they have widely and effectively integrated technology in their face-to-face teaching, learning, and assessment, recognizing the importance of digitally literate graduates.

A number of colleges also have been able to develop and implement **planning processes and course development tools** that recognize online learning as a core component of the curriculum, and ensure that the needs of faculty and students in online learning are supported.

Teaching and Learning

Successes in teaching and learning highlighted by presidents focus on the **development of new programs and services**, including:

- programs in which each course is offered in both synchronous and asynchronous formats;

- new fully online programs, especially in health, with some offering online labs and simulations;

- a professional development certificate program for college instructors to be made available provincially; and

- online apprenticeship programs using simulations and collaborative learning.

Accompanying the development of such programs, presidents cite the enhanced **student access and service** that they offer, especially allowing students to study in their own communities. The Northern Colleges Collaborative Program, involving six northern colleges in **sharing** curriculum, faculty and learning platforms to offer virtual classes, was cited more than once as a success story.

Technology Innovation and Use

Success is also reflected in the introduction of **new technologies that enhance course delivery and interaction**. Simulations are mentioned by several presidents as enhancements to programs in health, trades, and social services, including three virtual gaming simulations for nursing. Social media and tools such as Kahoot, Voice Thread, and Padlet are used to enhance the curriculum; and the full capacities of the LMS are being exploited, including increased use of video capture by both faculty and students.

Achieving Success

A supplementary question asks presidents **how these successes were achieved**. Many of the responses stress strategic changes responding to such factors as student and community needs, changes in student numbers and characteristics, technological advances that support already existing services, and efforts to differentiate the college. Some of the presidents mention that online learning is a continuation and extension of long-standing distance education offerings. Among the critical factors supporting success are:

- policy changes, including setting of specific targets for LMS integration and online course development;

- investments in technology, training, and innovation;

- faculty and staff working groups;

- support of pilots and research studies;

- support from IT services and teaching and learning centres, many of which were created or significantly expanded in response to changes in technology and pedagogy;

- faculty training and development;

- using a professional model of course development incorporating course content as well as skills development;

- funding from both internal and external sources;

- collaboration with like-minded people, with several references to OntarioLearn; and

- support, training and community access through Contact North | Contact Nord

2. **What technological innovations are you exploring that you believe will have the most impact on your college's future by improving learning outcomes or the quality of service to students?**

Among the **technological innovations currently in use, development or under investigation** that were mentioned by two or more presidents are:

- simulations for a variety of applications, including labs and experiential learning;

- augmented and virtual reality;

- mobile technologies;

- enhanced LMS use;

- use and/or development of Open Educational Resources and e-texts; and

- synchronous delivery.

Many technologies are related to **student assessment and achievement**. Among those cited by more than one president are:

- adaptive learning;
- tools to identify, track, and better serve at-risk and special needs students;
- e-portfolios;
- badges and other micro-credentials;
- online proctoring; and
- tools for enhanced written and verbal feedback.

One president stresses that these tools are as important for full-time, on-campus students, as for online learners. Three colleges include **support for faculty research, innovation, and development** as core to their innovations. One college highlights its technology lending initiative through the library, another its classroom re-design project, and a third its virtual mentor guiding students through career choices.

3. **How does the growth of online learning create new opportunities for the operations of your college? How has it contributed to new opportunities for collaboration with other universities and colleges in Canada and around the world?**

    One president's reply offers a holistic view - specifying that online learning has led to developments in curriculum, assessment, faculty role, space, and operational processes – changing the college overall.

    In their replies, college presidents outline opportunities that impact students, teaching and learning, operations, and in response to the supplementary question, collaboration and cooperation.

    Enhanced and new opportunities for students are detailed in almost all responses, citing such improvements as expanded access and flexibility; increased program and course choices and pathways; digital literacy skills; access by more students including many under-represented groups; enhanced support services; and ability to study in their home communities.

    Through online, blended, and technology-enhanced learning, college presidents report improved **capacity to respond to changing student needs** in content and teaching and learning methods. One president highlights the opportunity for on-campus students to remain connected with the college for mentoring and learning activities during practicum, fieldwork, and other periods spent off-campus.

    Among frequently mentioned **opportunities in teaching and learning** is expanded credit transfer and recognition, aided by shared online development and delivery. A couple of presidents add the assessment of prior learning as a component of this advancement. Examples of new opportunities offered by one or more presidents include development of digital capacities for faculty and students, the possibility to integrate OERs into courses, the growth in teaching and learning centres, and changes in the role of faculty from content provider to learning coach.

On an operational level, several presidents mention that online and blended learning offer the possibility of **physical space** savings, reconfigurations, and efficiencies.

The supplementary question on **opportunities for collaboration** is most often responded to **on a provincial basis**, with frequent references to OntarioLearn as a catalyst for joint course development and delivery and Contact North | Contact Nord for its teachonline.ca portal for educators. The Northern Colleges Collaborative program is also described by more than one president as an example of effective collaboration. Several responses make reference to eCampusOntario's Shared Online Course Fund for joint development of new programs and courses among colleges and with university partners. One president describes a new joint initiative, the Ontario Colleges Libraries Learning Portal, enabling students to access resources, research help, and learning objects. Another highlights the Western Region College Educator Development Program, with six colleges developing a program for faculty development, available as an open educational resource.

One president strongly **endorses collaborations across the province**: "The external organizations OntarioLearn, Contact North | Contact Nord and eCampusOntario have given our college the ability to give a wider selection of courses, to create new programs with a wider course base, accelerate interest in development of new series of courses, and provided excellent communication tools that have fostered a professional community."

Cooperation with international experts and partner institutions, reaching greatly extended student populations, and the use and sharing of international resources are referenced as possibilities and realities, with one president stressing the opportunities for students and faculty through globally networked learning.

4. **What is the most important thing you can do as President to advance the cause of online learning at your institution?**

Presidents describe their role in advancing online learning in their colleges in **both inspirational and practical terms**, using such phrases to describe their inspirational role as "champion adoption and innovation", "profile and support", promote and support investments", "encourage a culture of innovation", "advocate and support through resources", "invest in required human and physical resources", and "affirm strategic importance."

Presidents further see their role as **ensuring the alignment of online learning with the vision of the college**, as well as its integration into strategic, budget, and planning documents and inclusion in discussions at meetings of the Board of Governors.

Supporting, encouraging and recognizing faculty development and innovation are listed as essential activities by several presidents, with more than one working to change the reward system to encourage risk

taking and re-considering the faculty workload formula.

Presidents also have a role to play in advocating externally with the Ministry especially regarding needed changes to the funding model and supplementary resources. Internally ensuring that sufficient resources (financial, human and capital) are allocated to encourage innovation and development.

5. **There are different institutional responses to the opportunities and challenges posed by online learning. Some executive heads have made this a major strategic planning issue while others prefer to encourage pockets of innovation as they emerge. How would you characterize your own approach to this and why do you think this approach is best for your college?**

In response to whether online learning is a strategic planning issue or encouraged through pockets of innovation, **most presidents reply that they support both activities**.

Online learning is described as "embedded in", "integrated in", and "a big part of" **strategic, academic, business, and technological plans**. Concrete activities, goals and metrics are articulated so that progress can be supported and measured. Presidents foster the strategic approach so that systems and structures can be put in place to support change, a cultural shift, and sustainability, with well paced and integrated developments that are assimilated in all aspects of college operations.

In addition, several presidents **combine the strategic approach with support for pockets of innovation** as an institutional value, through supporting and celebrating advancements and initiatives. Two presidents particularly highlight faculty training and development initiatives as core approaches to encouraging innovation.

Four presidents describe **approaches that are based on pockets of innovation** rather than strategic planning, stressing the importance of program suitability and faculty acceptance, as well as the essential role of management in encouraging and supporting these activities. A limited ability to invest is also a factor in choosing this approach for at least one college.

6. **Where do you see online learning at your institution in five or ten years? Is this issue prominent in your recent SMA submission?**

Answers to the question of where online learning will be in five or ten years demonstrate a strong consensus among the presidents, with the descriptor used the most often being "growth". This growth is articulated in many concrete examples:

- majority of programs will be hybrid using analytics and adaptive technology to improve student outcomes;
- program reviews in place to identify online learning potential;

- all students to have an online learning experience by 2020;
- online learning as a major objective, to be expanded in collaboration with other colleges and universities;
- online learning will be more prevalent, with increased commitment to quality;
- greater research on effectiveness and best practices and
- online learning is a key to the present and the future of higher education.

Improvements in student outcomes and changing roles for faculty are mentioned as consequences of this growth.

The great majority of presidents respond that online learning is in the SMAs, often using adjectives such as "prominent" and "significant". A few presidents did not reply to the question but no one stated that online learning was not part of their SMA.

FINAL COMMENTS

The voices of the presidents presented throughout this summary clearly indicate that online learning is a significant and growing component of teaching and learning at their colleges. Whether the focus is fully online, blended or technology-enhanced learning, presidents offer success stories and outline ongoing and future developments that will impact students, faculty, and colleges. The central role of provincial collaboration in the development and delivery of online learning is a strong message, as well as the potential on national and international levels. Although individual college experiences, goals, and strategies differ, the commitment to growth in online learning is clear.

A quote from one of the presidents' submissions presents an image for the future of online learning that can be seen as reflecting many of the directions and visions expressed by many other respondents:

"Students can have even more flexible access and complete online courses that integrate seamlessly into the requirements for diverse academic programs. Collaboration for program development and review, enhanced credit transfer, recognition of prior learning, and flexible learning through online offerings will have become part of the "mainstream" institution and system culture."