

Sheridan

Friday, September 17, 2021

Members of Brampton City Council:

Further to my delegation on Wednesday, September 15, 2021, I'm writing to provide a written summary of my remarks on the urgent matter of positioning all post-secondary learners in Brampton and Peel to flourish.

International students are an integral and valued part of Sheridan's diverse learning community. They choose us for our reputation, commitment to quality, and graduate outcomes – all of which are publicly reported. There is no shortage of international demand for admission to Sheridan and our standards remain high. Over the last three years, however, the percentage of international students at Sheridan has decreased from 35% to 32% across our three home communities. In Brampton specifically, the percentage of international learners has decreased by 5% of total campus enrolment. This was intentional and responsive to concerns from our city and municipal partners about social infrastructure.

In that same time period, however, international enrolment across the City's 65+ post-secondary providers – at private institutions and through private/public partnerships in particular -- has skyrocketed. The numbers, however, are only part of the equation.

Drawing on my three decades of experience as a leader wholly focused on positioning all students to flourish, here is what I know about this learner demographic:

- international students typically come to Canada with big dreams and a lot of courage -- I'm routinely awed by their resilience;
- many carry an incredible burden of expectation;
- they all face obstacles that are atypical of the domestic student experience and are often wary of accessing resources; and,
- there is a solid body of research that can and should inform best practices for supporting international student success inside and beyond the classroom.

Further to the delegation made last week at Committee of Council by Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS) and Catholic Family Services Peel Dufferin, the challenges faced by international students are complex and laden with interdependencies. As a consequence, effective solutioning demands a deep understanding of the issues and the stakeholders. The only path forward is one grounded in innovative, creativity and collaborative problem solving

Brampton and Peel can lead social and policy innovation in this space – a view that is shared by our colleagues at Punjabi Community Health Services, Catholic Family Services Peel-Dufferin and Indus Community Services. I had very constructive, collegial calls with Gurpreet Malhotra, Baldev Mutta and Sharon Mayne Devine about how we can more effectively drive systemic change across federal, provincial, municipal, and institutional jurisdictions. To correct any misperception -- this level of collaboration with community partners including PCHS and Indus is not new. In fact, we've long worked

closely on crucial initiatives like the COMMUNITY vaccine clinic. Many of you visited the clinic and saw that collaboration in action. Those and other agencies were on a call with our teams as recently as August 26 to talk about Sheridan's services and facilitating effective referrals.

Sheridan's orientation towards radical engagement and reciprocity is central to its Strategic Plan: Galvanizing Education for a Complex World. The Plan codifies our commitment to contribute to local economies and society by offering programs that reflect labour market needs and a unique blend of teaching excellence, hands on learning, research, innovation and exceptional creativity. The Plan also underscores our unwavering commitment to equity and inclusion. A piece of this puzzle is a shift towards ensuring our leadership reflects the diversity of our learning community. In terms of positive gains, we have exceeded the federal 50:30 Challenge targets regarding gender parity and significant representation on both our Board of Governors and senior management team. I'm equally proud to report that a quarter of our Board came to Canada as international students; their lived experience and perspectives continue to inform our planning and priorities.

Above all else, Sheridan's central mission is to cultivate resourceful, highly skilled and creative people and communities through cross-pollinated, active learning and the relentless incubation of new ideas. The good news is we have evidence that our formula for driving those outcomes is working. We collect, for example, a tremendous amount of data about our students through benchmarked surveys. Sheridan's key performance indicators attest to things like student satisfaction and graduate outcomes; the National College Health Assessment provides insight into our students' mental and physical health; the National Survey on Student Engagement provides us with data about how degree students spend their time and what they gain from attending Sheridan.

We collect data to inform our practice and ensure that we're delivering on the promise of post-secondary education. This is demonstrative of the responsibility we accept for ensuring that all students at Sheridan are positioned to flourish. We know that the obstacles to success for international students are significant. That's why we have developed and implemented purposeful, custom designed, evidence-based and data-informed programming to meet their needs: we distributed over \$2.2M through our COVID Emergency Bursary; supported over 4000 international students in 2020-21 via immigration workshops; served 1,560 hot meals to international students from November 2020 to May 2021; provided \$69,750 in grocery gift cards since April 1, 2020, delivered 642 mental health/counselling appointments to international students; increased international student use of the our student health centres by 150% in 2020-2021; delivered 14 week pre-arrival orientations to 6,700 international students; and provided free tutoring, English-language support and legal advice to all international students.

We actively assess the efficacy of our work. We host 5-10 graduate students annually from York, UofT/OISE, and/or the University of Guelph who conduct research on the impact of these interventions.

Sheridan invests to address mental health, food insecurity, housing, immigration matters and gender-based violence (including sex trafficking). In addition, we've launched targeted, special hiring processes to better meet our community's needs. Sheridan employs five South Asian doctors in the student health centre, one of whom provides culturally-specific cognitive/behavioral therapy for South Asian students. There are also four nurses and one nurse practitioner who identify as South Asian; the latter was herself an international student from India. All of our services can be provided in multiple languages including Hindi, Punjabi and Gujarati.

Our work is fueled by collaboration. Many international students, for example, do not reach out for help due to shame and stigma; they need to develop mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour before they are in crisis. In partnership with SOCH mental health and the Centre for Campus Innovation in Mental Health, Sheridan created five videos about mental health geared towards our South Asian student population on topics like depression, risky behaviours and suicide. The videos were produced in Punjabi and English.

We take a comprehensive approach to healthcare and wellness. All international students at Sheridan are required to purchase comprehensive health insurance through Guard.Me International Insurance. Recognizing that international student mental health and wellness needs are deeply rooted in cultural values systems, Sheridan also procured “keep.meSAFE”, a mental wellness international student support app designed specifically for international students. This app provides multilingual culturally-based mental wellness support to international students no matter where they are in the world. It provides self-help resources in the form of articles, podcasts and videos as well as real time phone, chat or video based mental wellness counselling in the language of the students’ preferences. In the 2020 – 2021 school year there were 2,310 downloads of the keep.meSAFE app by Sheridan International students, 4,587 self-help articles/podcasts/videos were accessed and there were 204 counselling appointments for international students.

Even with all of these supports in place, however, some students at Sheridan still fall through the cracks. As an educator, a researcher and leader deeply invested in the transformational power of post-secondary education, I’m concerned about *every* international learner – regardless of their institutional affiliation.

Certain things are foundational to learning: personal safety, food security, safe and affordable housing, and the senses of purpose and belonging. Recent tragedies and a spate of media coverage has brought this again to the forefront, but this has been a growing issue in Canada for some time. Every leader at Sheridan is horrified to hear that a student has been exploited, hurt, or is hungry, facing extreme financial insecurity or unbearable stress and anxiety. We are committed to doing whatever we can to provide support, prevent tragedy and put people on the track to thriving. I believe that Sheridan is living its commitment to all our students but more and better is always possible. What I’ve outlined to this point however is just one piece of the solution – it’s what Sheridan brings to the table.

As a recent report issues by One Voice Canada suggests, larger scale reforms are needed; specifically, Sheridan supports the call to improve the integrity of the international student program and the welfare of international students, through three specific actions:

- Conduct a comprehensive evaluative study of the international student program, examining the period between 2014 and 2020.
- Regulate and reduce tuition fees for international students.
- Increase funding and training for specialized services within postsecondary international student offices.

Similarly – we support calls by the World Sikh Organization for the federal government to:

- Crack down on employers and immigration consultants engaged in illegal and harmful practices.
- Be aware and vigilant of exploitative practices and ensure other levels of government and partners are committed to a zero-tolerance policy.

- Review and revise the criteria of federal permanent residency programs to reflect the current economic hardships.
- Urge provincial governments and post-secondary institutions to address the significant and growing inequities in tuition fees.
- Pressure the provincial ministries to enhance existing and develop tailored settlement supports.
- Work diligently and quickly to address the backlog of visa applications.

Little of this is new for Sheridan. We've been advocating for years on the urgent need for government investment in student mental health. I chaired a national committee that worked with Bell Canada and the Mental Health Commission of Canada to establish a new Standard for Psychological Health and Safety for all Post-Secondary students. This work recognizes that postsecondary students are particularly vulnerable – and that they need access to timely, effective, culturally relevant and flexible on-campus mental health care that responds appropriately to their unique needs. I also sat on a federal advisory committee aimed at addressing gender-based violence – including sexual assault, sex trafficking and harassment – on Canadian campuses. The resultant framework is impacting practice and will have an impact.

Sheridan and other partners must now, however, turn our attention to addressing these issues through *more* collaboration, *more* creative problem-solving, and *more* constructive dialogue.

Following from consultations with key partners and community leaders, Sheridan has offered to co-host a roundtable with the City of Brampton that would be convened immediately. In that small group discussion forum, senior leaders will come together to plan a large summit to be held this winter. Our shared goal is to position Peel Region as the best practice model for international students in Canada. I believe that is achievable. Sheridan will cover convening and hosting costs; we would ask two esteemed colleagues from the services sector to co-chair. Together, we will collect data, relevant reports, and conduct applied research to better understand the lived experiences of international students, hear community concerns and incorporate feedback from service providers on the front lines.

Sheridan has been a proud pillar of the Brampton community, growing in step alongside the City, for over 50 years. We're eager to continue to play a leadership role and help those who need us the most. We hope you'll join us in this important effort.

Sincerely,



Janet Morrison, PhD
President & Vice Chancellor

cc: Hazel McCallion, Chancellor, Sheridan
City Clerk