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Solving Ontario's post-secondary puzzle

This is a transformative moment in the history of Ontario’s post-secondary system. We need a transformative plan.



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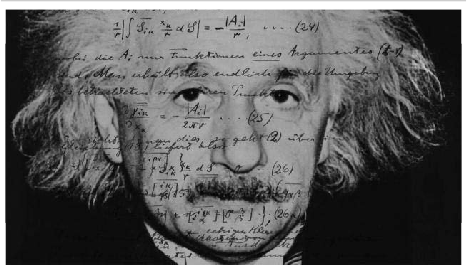


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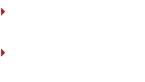
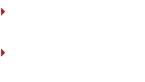
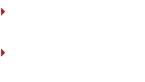
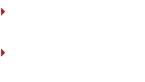
**Einstein's brain and the election results**

**By:** David Agnew Published on Sun Nov 15 2015



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Seneca College president David Agnew says Ontario needs to acknowledge some inconvenient, perhaps even uncomfortable, truths about our post-secondary system.



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*The following is excerpted from a speech delivered to the Canadian Club of Toronto:*

It’s been a decade since Bob Rae issued his “Leader in Learning” report on higher education in Ontario. His diagnosis of the post-secondary landscape in 2005 was blunt, even discouraging.

“We have a large, mature system without a sufficiently clear sense of purpose and without enough money to do the job,” he wrote. He went on to observe that the system’s efforts were diffuse, even inefficient in the way it used funding.

Ten years later, it is worth taking stock. How much has changed, and is our post- secondary system in Ontario on course to being a leader?



The picture is not uniformly positive. And we need to recommit ourselves to finding a way forward that will continue to build a post-secondary education system that serves the students, the employers, the people of Ontario with excellence — a system that meets the tests of quality, accountability and accessibility.

But first, it’s necessary to acknowledge some inconvenient, perhaps even uncomfortable, truths about our post-secondary system.

First is that among the casualties of Ontario’s fiscal realities is the short-lived increase in funding for post-secondary. Per-student funding has slipped back down to 2005 levels. Combined with stagnant and declining enrolments in several parts of the province, we have a sustainability issue among colleges and universities that will not fix itself.



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Second is that the post-secondary sector is unique among public systems in two fundamental ways. First, it’s highly competitive — both internally and against the world. And second, many institutions within the system now receive less than half of their funding from government.

Finally, in the uncomfortable truth category, we need to acknowledge that in many ways Ontario’s publicly assisted post-secondary institutions do not comprise a system. Instead, they are 44 institutions that occasionally work together, but more often do not

* or at least not enough.

There are some very strong and productive bilateral relationships around the province

* Seneca and York University is one — but on a multilateral basis, we rarely pull in the same direction.

Yet at the same time, we’re increasingly sharing the same students.

In the past year at Seneca nearly 40 per cent of our new full-time students have already studied, or earned a credential, at a university or college; in our winter semester last year more than 10 per cent of our new students had attended graduate school.

The traffic in the other direction is also substantial — there are thousands of university students who started their post-secondary journey at colleges.

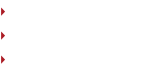
We are also experiencing a huge increase in international students. It represents a globalization of our campuses and an enrichment of the student experience, but it also represents billions of dollars being spent in Ontario.



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In the face of limited public funding and tuition caps for domestic students, international tuition has also become a vital and sustaining source of revenue for virtually all of Ontario’s colleges and universities.



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And the new-found importance of international students in Ontario has awoken us to another reality — that the true competition, and opportunity, in post-secondary is not across the GTA or even in the next province, but around the world.

Three elements form the basis of a new direction for post-secondary in Ontario.

As a start, we need a true partnership between colleges and universities that dispenses with notions of hierarchy and rests instead on the principle that we are the building blocks of a student-centred system with different but complementary strengths.

As re-skilling and second, third and fourth careers become more commonplace, colleges and universities will share even more students, who will pursue their goals by furthering their education — wherever it makes sense.



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The sophistication and expertise at colleges has grown and our credentials are evolving, and will continue to evolve, because student needs, economies and work itself are evolving and will continue to do so.

Second, we also need to get the balance between government and the system right.

That means making sure the institutions that have the responsibility of delivering quality, accountable and accessible education have the nimbleness and the tools to do our jobs while respecting the need for government to have oversight of — and a line of

sight into — the work we do.



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Finally, we have to embrace the reality that the system will, and must, transform to meet changing student needs and competition that is both broad and growing.

Innovation is alive and well in all corners of post-secondary education in Ontario: expanding world-class online education, creative partnerships with Aboriginal learners, new teaching and learning technologies at the heart of pedagogy, interesting support programs for our students with disabilities and mental health issues, groundbreaking college degrees, exciting international partnerships, more pathways for transferring students, the list goes on.

But more is needed.

Although we’ve seen innovation in institutional arrangements among municipalities, school boards, hospitals and other public sector agencies, post-secondary has been virtually immune to structural change.

It’s time to ask whether rethinking the how of delivering post-secondary education could achieve better outcomes for students through stronger critical mass, enhanced infrastructure and scale for efficiencies — a system that is truly ready for the global marketplace not just of students, but also of opportunities to share our expertise.

And as much as the fiscal situation, technology and global competition are crucially important, student mobility and aspirations should be a major driver of the transformation needed in Ontario.

We are also preparing today’s students to be lifelong learners, to be ready for multiple careers in their time in the workforce.

We need a system that treats all those new realities as normal, and makes every post- secondary journey as seamless as possible.

A number of transformational options should be explored on the twin principles that one size does not fit all and that we move ahead with coalitions of the willing. These include:

Integrated university-college and college-university models with a broad set of credentials that connect to and build on each other more innovatively than our current ladder.

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New governance structures that encompass broader regional institutions.

Larger federated structures where allied entities specialize in complementary fields of study.

Specialized roles to niche players in certain disciplines and areas of study.

We need to be creative about how we approach that transformation to preserve what’s best about our current competitiveness, how to enhance our flexibility and nimbleness, how to make sure we have the resources we need to deliver on the quality agenda that is at the top of everyone’s priorities.

From my involvement in health care governance, I will observe that locally designed partnerships and initiatives tend to be more sustainable and deeply rooted than a top- down diktat — they are built from a sense of common purpose and genuine need.

And so I say to my post-secondary colleagues: let’s not wait for anybody to draw the map for us — we can lead the way.

If this is a transformative moment in the history of Ontario’s post-secondary system, it

deserves a transformative plan.  And when students are truly at the centre, the rest follows.

***David Agnew*** *is president of Seneca College and chair of Colleges Ontario. He is a*

*former chair of Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre.*

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