



THE PRESIDENT'S LISTENING TOUR

2014



INTRODUCTION

Soon after my appointment as President, I embarked on the Listening Tour to hear an array of opinions across all employee groups, our campuses and among our students. The tour was an outstanding opportunity to hear from employees and students – those who know Algonquin College best.

I set out to gather a broad understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing our College, to immerse myself in our culture, and to demonstrate my commitment to listening— I am open and I want to hear the opinions of our employees and students.

The Listening Tour reinforced my respect and admiration for Algonquin College, our students and employees. I feel truly honoured to have been given the privilege to serve as President and the frank and open conversations I had in all corners of the organization made me proud to be a part of such a dynamic and caring institution.

In short, I walked away from the experience with four main takeaways. It is clear that employees truly enjoy working at Algonquin College. People appreciated being asked how we can improve. There are, however, some big issues that require immediate action and finally, other key issues will require additional study and discussion.

I can confirm that we have a tremendous group of people at our College, who care deeply about ensuring this institution lives up to its boundless potential. Our goal is simple: to leave our College even better than we found it.

Algonquin College has a well-earned reputation as a leader in Ontario's world-renowned education system. We have the experience, creativity and talent to continuously improve as we uphold the highest quality of post-secondary teaching and learning. Together, we will build a legacy that will continue long after our time here.

Cheryl Jensen
President
Algonquin College

Four key takeaways emerged from the Listening Tour 2014:

1. Employees **truly enjoy** working at Algonquin College.
2. People **appreciated** being asked how we can improve.
3. A few big issues require **immediate action**.
4. Several **big issues** need more study and discussion.

OUR APPROACH

To encourage full participation among all attendees and to adhere to the promised one-hour time limit, a facilitator moderated the Listening Tour sessions. For accuracy, Information Technology Services team members recorded the sessions. The recordings were held in strict confidence and were deleted upon completion of the final report.

In total, the Listening Tour hosted 395 employees and students, sparking a candid conversation covering three questions:

1. What are the biggest challenges facing the College, now and in the future and why are we facing these challenges?
2. What are the most promising opportunities for the College, and what needs to happen to maximize the success of these opportunities?
3. If you were me [the President], what would you be focusing your attention on?

The high level of participation in all of the sessions was an encouraging sign of the commitment and passion employees and students share for Algonquin College. The following gives a summary of the themes which garnered the most discussion.

QUESTION 1

What are the most promising opportunities for the College, and what needs to happen to maximize the success of these opportunities?

OPPORTUNITIES

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Algonquin College students and employees have high standards; they strive to be more than good – they want to achieve excellence. There was broad support for our mission, vision and values. Algonquin College truly does aspire to be a global leader in digitally connected applied education and training. This quest to be a global leader has raised expectations around our academic vision, program quality, digital strategy and the need to ensure our students are successful.

“We need to be excellent, focusing on the consistent quality of our programs”

AUTOMATION AND PROCESS RE-DESIGN

At each session, whether from students or employees, we heard the call for greater automation and process improvement, and the need to replace our legacy systems with modern, mobile friendly systems. Many believe that embracing automation has the opportunity to improve program and service delivery, simplify workflows, thwart competitive threats, and enable sustainable growth.

“Technology needs to be updated. We can’t be as strategic as we need to be with the systems currently in place.”

PASSIONATE PEOPLE

Algonquin is full of passionate students and employees. They have an undeniable passion for teaching and learning. They want to make a difference on their campus, in their field, and in their community. Each group believes this passion is one of our greatest strengths. For students, they are asked for greater opportunity to wave the Algonquin flag and showcase their talents, whether in competition or in the community. Employees are asking for greater recognition of their commitment and dedication, and they too want take that passion out into the community.

“We have a passionate commitment to the college”

PARTNERSHIPS

Considered a core strength of the College, students and employees spoke of the impact partnerships has had and will continue to have on the quality of the education experience at Algonquin. Whether it was our partnership with the Students’ Association or with industry, partnerships enrich the student experience. Participants spoke of an abundance of opportunity in this area so long as we improve how individuals and departments work together to coordinate their efforts.

We need to “build on partnerships in our community”

RETENTION

Considered the most elusive of opportunities, many spoke of the need to focus more attention to the issue of student retention. Our numbers bear this out. For all our excellent efforts, Algonquin’s retention rates are slipping. Students and employees recognize that if we could make a difference in this all important area it would have a tangible positive effect on the College’s future health. Helping students succeed is why we are here.

“Here I am not invisible, they actually care and want me to succeed”

UNION-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

Faculty, staff and administrators all raised the opportunity that surrounds improved labour relations. They recognized that the current combative approach serves neither side well and expressed a sincere hope that both sides would begin to work collaboratively. Those who raised the topic talked wishfully about the opportunity that constructive relations could bring to the College and our students.

“Let employees be part of the change with visibility, approachability, and transparency. Remove misinformation... Work with the union.”

PROGRAM MIX

What is the right mix of programs for Algonquin? The issue was raised at almost every session. Some reflected on the idea of offering a narrower program mix, believing there is merit in a program strategy that delivers fewer programs and credentials. On the other side, many suggested Algonquin needed to add to its breadth of graduate certificates and degrees, referencing institutions that offered a portfolio of programs and our need to remain a comprehensive institution. Others still preferred greater focus on vocational training. In concert, all believed that there was great opportunity in confirming our academic vision and clarifying the path we believe is most relevant to Algonquin.

We need “...to take a look at adjusting our program mix to really focus in on what our communities need”

QUESTION 2

What are the biggest challenges facing the College, now and in the future and why are we facing these challenges?

CHALLENGES

PART-TIME EMPLOYEES

The word fairness was raised in the context of our relationship with part-time employees. Some questioned the high use of part-time employees, their low levels of pay, and the risks associated with taking this important employee group for granted. Many spoke of the impact of high part-time employee turnover; including the loss of corporate knowledge; declining morale; and added workloads to search, train and retain the part-time talent needed. They fully understood the importance having a mix of full- and part-time employees, yet wondered if we have that balance right.

“When it comes to partial load and part-time hiring... there is a stumbling block if we are growing so quickly and we can’t hire the full-time support to get there.”

STUDENT MOBILITY

The #1 issue raised by our students was student mobility. Students want their options left wide open. They want and expect as few barriers to their success as possible. This desire for flexibility covers program delivery modes, program pathways (both inside and outside the college), eTextbooks, and access to services. Are we meeting up to these expectations? I think we can and must do more.

“We need to explore opportunities... the pathways and stepping stones that the College may not be expecting...”

CREDENTIALS

None of the conversations were more passionate than those that dealt with the issue of academic credentials. What was surprising was the varied opinion and complexities that make up the issue. At the highest of level some raised concern that we were abandoning our commitment to the Diploma, while others felt we were not moving quickly enough to introduce new Bachelor Degrees and the possibility of Applied Masters. More personally, many expressed deep concern that “credential creep” was starting to take root at the College. The simple truth is that the issue of credentials touches us at our core whether in a classroom or in an office. Seeking consensus needs to be a priority.

We need to “have pride in what we do; why are college credentials not enough for faculty and staff anymore”

THE SPEED OF CHANGE

Algonquin is no stranger to change and participants recognized that the College has become the respected institution it is today because of its willingness to innovate. To a person, employees spoke proudly of our leadership in areas such as experiential learning, applied research, eTextbooks, online education, international expansion, and mental health, to name just a few. Everyone recognizes that change is the new normal. The challenge is that while we have an abundance of early adopters and change champions, there are still many employees that are not yet comfortable with the speed of change. Some are unsure of the stability of their role, future transitions, or the possibilities for advancement. In honour of our values, and the health and well-being of our employees, there was a feeling that no one should worry about being left behind. Those willing to adapt must be able to secure the support they need to thrive.

“We have amazing, powerful tools; we need to do a better job of training our faculty to fully utilize those. We need to get more people involved.”

SERVICE EQUITY

Both students and employees suggested that the student experience at Algonquin varies. All raised the belief that our students deserve a consistency of support and service, especially as we extend delivery to new locations, over weekends; as we invest in hybrid learning; expand online delivery; and introduce non-traditional intake models for programs.

“The student experience differs...The level of service (needs to be the same standard) for the different audiences.”

FUNDING DECLINE

Employees understand that Algonquin College is operating in a challenging financial context. They know competition for scarce government funding will become even fiercer in the years ahead. They understand that public funding per student continues to decline and that today government revenue makes up less than 39% of our budget. They fully appreciate that to counter this decline Algonquin will need to think creatively, evaluate new markets, and become more entrepreneurial. In fact, employees have a long list of ideas they believe can help and they are looking for ways to have their ideas and voices heard.

“We need to expand our definition, and redefine who our client base is.”

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

Employees and students alike recognized that for the next 10-15 years the direct from high school market segment will decline. Staff understand that we are an aging population and to deal with its impact we will need to adjust. To compensate, both groups identified the need to target new markets, expand our program mix, and improve our productivity. This will require an agile College workforce able to adapt to different audience needs, wants and abilities.

We have the “opportunity to attract more non-direct students”

QUESTION 3

If you were me [the President], what would you be focusing your attention on?

FOCUS

COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

The most frequently raised issue during the Listening Tour was communication and cross-college collaboration. Employees want increased transparency. They want to understand how decisions are made and be provided an opportunity to have their say. Equally, all of us are seeking the time and space to collaborate with colleagues, in and outside of our departments, to brainstorm new ideas, all in support of the College mission and vision. Employees want the opportunity to build academic, research, and administrative “communities of practice” in order to share inspirations and work on common goals. All of these statements speak to the need to build opportunities for more communications across all groups. This is not a new request, simply one we need to act on a little faster.

“We need to develop a culture to capture the creative ideas staff and faculty have...give people the enthusiasm that yes they are going to listen to me and its worthwhile to express these ideas”

AUTOMATION

Automation and process modernization was seen by all as an area requiring immediate attention. Employees want greater clarity of the College’s automation direction and an opportunity to share their thoughts on which projects should be placed at the top of the priority list. More specifically, they want the much talked about Automated Grade Reporting project completed.

“Our systems will enable us to meet our opportunities.”

CAREER SUPPORT

Employees and students are looking for help managing their career path. From succession planning to credential creep, from training to work experiences, it is felt that ensuring the College has the right mix of career support is essential for both our key stakeholders. Employees and students alike are seeking individual career plans to help them transition and advance their careers. All concerned stated that new efforts are required in the area of career planning, job shadowing and career linked training.

“We need succession planning”

RETENTION

The community is also looking for a coordinated approach to retention. They realize that conquering retention is the holy grail of challenges, and at the same time know that improving retention could have the greatest impact in the lives of our students. All recognized the complexity of this challenge. Improvements in retention have the potential to give the College more control over our fiscal health. The community wants us to give retention renewed focus.

“Consider the week off in the winter semester...to go into midterms with projects and assignments, I was getting behind.”

PROGRAM AND SERVICE OPTIMIZATION

There was a feeling that the College needs to optimize the program and service mix to meet the highest standards of excellence; to realize efficiencies; and to align academic and non-academic administrative opportunities. Algonquin College employees see opportunity for cross-disciplinary, cross-departmental pathways and programs that will recognize the diverse experiences of learners, their health and well-being, and their career goals. Much thinking and work has already been done in this area. Some said that we need to surface those conversations across the College, seek the community’s feedback, and begin implementing.

“Algonquin needs to consider phasing out programs that are not performing well and expanding those that are”

“We need to outline how to operationalize the new idea; communicate the full plan and evaluate the implementation.”

“We have a lot of expertise within the college but we are not set up in a way that we can call on that expertise to work on these types of projects: we need to align our structure to our priorities.”

“We do too much, and we need to ask ourselves if there are things we should do differently or stop doing”

“Focus on excellence. The evolution of our curriculum occurs in silos not across all programs, modes of delivery.”

ACTIONS

As a result of the Listening Tour, there are two categories of actions to be taken.



Question 1

From your perspective,

- what are the most promising opportunities for the College, and
- what needs to happen to maximize the success of these opportunities?

ALGONQUIN
COLLEGE

IMMEDIATE ACTION

There are a number of issues that we can begin to address immediately.

ESTABLISHMENT OF TASK FORCES

The President's Council team will support the creation of three task forces, each one running no longer than six months. Each will be required to hold public sessions, draft and release to the community an interim and final report.

■ RETENTION/STRATEGIC ENROLMENT MANAGEMENT (SEM)

TASK FORCE: to address changing demographics; tasked with raising first term retention by 1.5%. This task force is to be chaired by Claude Brulé and Laura Stanbra.

■ AUTOMATION AND PROCESS IMPROVEMENT TASK FORCE:

to address service and workload concerns; tasked with crafting a priority list of automation projects for 2015-2016 and ensuring Automated Grade Reporting pilot is completed and fully implemented for the Fall term 2015. This task force is to be chaired by Duane McNair and Doug Wotherspoon.

■ PART-TIME PAY GRADE TASK FORCE:

to address concerns surrounding part-time pay rates; tasked with reporting back on options to improve part-time pay. This task force is to be chaired by Diane McCutcheon and me.

Each of the task forces is to host a minimum of one public information session and is required to submit to the College community an interim report by March 15 and a final report no later than June 15, 2015.

LEADERSHIP RE-ORGANIZATION

At numerous sessions, you talked about the need to align the College with its strategic direction. I believe that the College's organizational chart should clearly identify the priorities of the institution. In consultation with the President's Council, I am pleased to announce a small restructuring of responsibilities to better position the College to deliver on the College's Strategic Plan, as well as the big issues identified in the Listening Tour.

■ **1. ACADEMIC QUALITY:** Our strength must always be the quality of our academic offerings. After the President, the most senior position at Algonquin is the one responsible for our advancing our academic strength. As part of this re-organization, we are changing the title of the chief academic officer to Senior Vice President, Academic.

■ **2. ALIGNING ADMISSIONS:** Changing demographics means it is going to become more and more challenging to convince prospective students to make Algonquin their first choice. We will need to become more efficient at marketing, recruitment and ultimately admitting new students. To align our admission processes, we are shifting responsibility for recruitment and marketing to the Office of the Vice President, Student Services.

■ **3. IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS:** At every stop on my Listening Tour you spoke of the need to improve how we communicate and collaborate. To ensure we continue to communicate effectively, both internally and externally, we are shifting responsibility for communications and government relations to the Office of the Vice President, International, Communications and Strategic Priorities.

■ 4. MAKING TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION A TOP PRIORITY:

We have decided the time is right to add a senior position responsible for delivering on our soon to be completed digital strategy. While we have some ideas of the scope of responsibilities that could be included in the new role of Vice President, Digital Technologies and Innovation, we will be seeking feedback from the community before finalizing the position.

Recognizing the need to be financial responsible and believing that the College has the right number of senior administrators, the changes detailed above are position neutral and leaves the current size of the President's Council unchanged.

BOARD OF GOVENORS

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ISSUES DIRECTED TO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

There are some issues that are more complex than others. While the Listening Tour format is effective at surfacing issues, the format is not ideal for identifying collaborative solutions. A process that raises options and encourages solution-focused debate and deliberation is required.

To continue the conversation, I have asked that a number of key issues be included in the College's upcoming strategic plan engagement effort. As you know, our current strategic plan runs through 2017. In December, your Board of Governor's directed senior management to launch an 18-month engagement process aimed at drafting the next version.

Based on the feedback from the Listening Tour and other planning efforts, we have selected a process that will engage all stakeholders in deep conversation about our future. The Strategic Planning process will continue the conversation on a number of critical issues. They include:

- ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE
- PROGRAM MIX
- STUDENT MOBILITY
- PARTNERSHIPS, AND
- INNOVATION & RISK TAKING.

PRESIDENTIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Over the coming months, I will strive to address personally some of the other issues raised during the Listening Tour. There are a series of opportunities revolving around communication, collaboration, career planning, part-time employees and the speed of change, which I believe I can support individually.



THANK YOU

My Listening Tour proved to be an invaluable way to gather ideas from a wide range of participants representing every aspect of the life and work of Algonquin College. The input provided will continue to inform College operations in both the short and long term, all the way through to the strategic planning process that will shape the College's future.

Thank you to all those who participated in my Listening Tour. Thank you to all those who volunteered to participate, took time out of their day to send me their thoughts, whether in-person or online, and spoke candidly about their aspirations for the College. I feel privileged that I have been entrusted with the responsibility to lead Algonquin College and I will work to earn the trust of our students, our employees, and our Board of Governors each and every day onward.

