

**Seneca**

# Challenge Accepted: The Sequel

The 2021-22 Business Plan

# Preface

In our fast-changing world, and in the best of times, annual business planning can feel like betting on a game of roulette. Landing on all the desired outcomes a year later carries long odds.

In the midst of an ongoing global pandemic, business planning covering 12 months into the future takes on an air of unreality. Perhaps not since the last global public health crisis a century ago have operations been so at the mercy of externalities beyond any one organization's control.

Third waves, variants, vaccine nationalism, supply chain issues: there is no limit to the uncertainty accompanying the fight against COVID-19. A year into dealing with the pandemic, we don't have enough letters in the alphabet to label all the Plan Bs.

Yet without a business plan, there is no roadmap to the desired future state, no signposts of success in meeting annual goals. Even if the route has to be constantly revised, or the outcomes recast to reflect new realities, a well-crafted business plan provides an operational touchstone through the year.

Today, more than ever, business planning must consider the depth of agility, flexibility and resilience required to navigate the year ahead. And all of that has to be accompanied by a dose of humility about the ability to predict the future.

Here is an excerpt from the 2020-2021 Business Plan, prepared two months after the onset of the pandemic in Ontario:

As this is being written, the gradual reopening of Ontario businesses and services has begun as new infections decline. The government is slowly expanding the list of what can be offered in a variety of in-person formats. Postsecondary education has not yet been given permission to return to campus, but we expect a positive decision soon.

At that moment, talk of a second wave in the fall was muted by the hope that we could strike that fine balance between freedom of movement and infection control in a return to some semblance of normalcy. We lost that battle, badly. However, as this is being written, optimistic talk about a better summer and a more open fall are punching through the extended gloom of a locked down winter.

Have we learned the lesson of the second wave? Seneca has.

Welcome to Challenge Accepted: The Sequel.

# Introduction

With a tip of the hat to Hollywood, this year's title – Challenge Accepted: The Sequel – may sound tongue-in-cheek, but the plan is all business.

Like other crises, the pandemic – horrific in its human, economic and social costs – gave Seneca an unprecedented opportunity to ask ourselves what's important and necessary to execute our core mission, and by implication what is not. This was not a reductive exercise, but an honest exploration of what we needed to do to remain relevant and effective in a post-pandemic world.

It wasn't just what we should stop doing, but equally what we needed to do differently, and start doing.

Moreover, amidst all the gloom and pain in our communities, we realized this truly was the time when we could reach an inflection point in our history if we seized the moment. It was a time when we needed to make palpable and meaningful change, beyond incrementalism.

The response of the Seneca community to the call for ideas and suggestions in the Au Large consultations was as magnificent as its response to the pandemic. Thoughtful, innovative, passionate: the commitment to helping design a new future of student success and academic excellence was outstanding.

This is the Seneca Au Large business plan. This is the year where we start the changes that will propel Seneca to emerge from the pandemic – whenever the end comes – as the equitable Seneca, the sustainable Seneca, the more virtual Seneca – renewed and infused with innovation and ambition.

Through it all, we remain true to our promise to deliver a great polytechnic education, focused on preparing our students for great careers and a life of engaged citizenry.

We began the fiscal year 2020-21 reaching deep into the well of commitment, creativity and resilience of our amazing faculty, support staff and administrators. When others paused, hesitated or stopped, we leaned in and accepted the challenge of taking on a completely upended world.

We identified maintaining our enrolment as our most important operational imperative, and executed – and more – on that imperative. It's the most basic of arithmetic: without students, the greatest plans in the world turn to dust.

Chronic underfunding by successive governments have created a culture of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship at Seneca, traits that were heavily called upon in the past year. And thanks to extraordinary work from every part of the organization, every term saw strong enrolment, culminating in the Winter 2021 term attracting a record high number of students – greater than any other college in Ontario.

In March 2020, we hunkered down. Hiring was frozen. Spending was curtailed. Most new initiatives were stopped. Important progress in areas such as Indigenous education and sustainability were protected, but expectations about progress were reset.

We also put the safety of our community first. Early on, we took the view that the best way we could contribute to the fight against COVID-19 was to keep our campus populations to a minimum, restricting access to only those programs required to do in-person teaching, with all other students and employees learning, teaching and working remotely.

We have not varied that stance one iota. And it's working.

At the same time, we launched what would turn out to be the most important initiative of the year: Seneca Au Large. It evolved into a huge conversation with the Seneca community about our future, all aimed towards how we could be, on the other side of the pandemic, a renewed, thriving institution at the forefront of polytechnic education.

Au Large: To the Horizon. Challenge Accepted.

## Three Priorities

Business plans usually focus on the new and different, giving short shrift to the “business as usual” parts of the operation.

In an organization the size and complexity of Seneca, there is a lot of business as usual that requires a proportionately significant amount of time and resources to make sure it happens. Students taught, programs developed, bills paid and collected, campuses cleaned, and a thousand other daily responsibilities done, and done well.

Even as we plan how to do all or some of that differently, none of it can stop. And all of it is important in an organization with tens of thousands of students and thousands of employees, whether they are teaching, learning or working remotely or on-campus.

Equally important, particularly in a time of great disruption, is making sure that those business-as-usual activities are supported and valued. That continues to be a focus across the organization.

Given where we are in the pandemic, the 2021-22 Business Plan is taking a rigorously focused approach. While FY20-21 was appreciably better than expected from a financial perspective, among the key lessons of the past year is that we take nothing for granted.

We continue to assess risks and monitor key metrics around enrolment and our financials closely and constantly.

Key priorities have been scoped into three areas:

- Navigating through the pandemic
- Enrolment management
- Seneca Au Large

These are not mutually exclusive categories. Some ideas and innovations that came through the Au Large consultations are being implemented as part of how Seneca is navigating through the pandemic and strategically managing enrolment.

## **Navigating through the pandemic**

Perhaps no other area of the business plan is as subject to external factors as dealing with the pandemic, particularly the evolving, and sometimes reversing, public health guidance.

Throughout last year, Seneca managed the challenges of maintaining operations, and operational integrity, without serious incident. With the exception of an unexpected government rule change on class sizes, our approach to managing the safety of the Seneca community was consistent and did not require cancelling any approved activities.

Depending on the vaccine rollout, we expect the year to be divided into three phases:

- Phase One: Maintaining the current restrictive on-campus activities, limited to required in-person learning in some programs and essential employees; rigorous screening, health protocols and cleaning procedures remain in effect
- Phase Two: As more of the population is vaccinated, a loosening of on-campus restrictions to open student spaces such as the libraries, computing commons and study spaces while resuming limited food service; services would remain in virtual delivery mode and employees would largely continue to work remotely; this phase may start as early as sometime over the summer and continue through the fall
- Phase Three: With appropriate public health guidance, a resumption of full on-campus activity without health and safety restrictions such as face coverings and physical distancing; the achievement of phase three depends on Ontario reaching a level of vaccination and herd immunity where there is sufficient societal acceptance of an end to the pandemic-era restrictions; we expect that phase no earlier than January 2022, and possibly later.

## **Enrolment management**

Enrolment management is the bread and butter of postsecondary education. As enrolment goes, so does our fiscal health, and by extension our ability to invest in the people, services and activities that go into supporting a great polytechnic education.

FY21-22 will see a continuation of the emphasis on enrolment management that took on such importance in the early days of the pandemic. Seneca's approach to enrolment management has doubled down on two aspects: the use of an increasingly broad range of resources and tools to maintain and increase enrolment, and the all-institution effort to recruit and retain students.

- A continued focus on key segments: new students, graduating students, graduates and those displaced by the pandemic
- Building on pandemic-inspired recruitment methods including comprehensive call and social media campaigns supplemented by virtual events
- Increased emphasis on diversifying international markets as travel restrictions ease over the next year
- Ongoing new program development, including joint degrees with other colleges
- Exploring co-delivering master's degrees with university partners and delivering master's degrees as a standalone offering, subject to government approval
- Continuing to expand college-to-college partnerships to build pathways into Seneca's programs, particularly degrees
- Expanding microcredentials and short courses to serve the market for reskilling and upskilling, particularly among those whose careers have been disrupted by COVID-19
- Reopening a downtown location to provide more convenient access to graduate and professional education to those working in the city core.

## **Seneca Au Large**

Seneca Au Large was not cut from whole cloth. It can find its roots in many initiatives well underway at Seneca prior to the pandemic, such as the Digital Strategy, customer service strategies and growing online and hybrid program and service delivery options. Perhaps most important, it picks up on a yearning among Seneca's employees for innovation and change.

Like so many other areas, postsecondary education will be changed by the acceleration of pre-established trends through the pandemic, as well as the emergence of new opportunities in the wake of huge economic dislocation.

Taken together, the Au Large initiatives position Seneca to continue its leadership in polytechnic education, delivering on our core mission while being ready to take on those new opportunities as well.

Seneca Au Large has three pillars: an equitable Seneca, a sustainable Seneca and a more virtual Seneca.

Together, they represent the underpinnings of the renewed Seneca – the Seneca that will emerge from the pandemic thriving and continuing to lead. And these three areas have become organizational imperatives for Seneca in FY21-22.

## **The equitable Seneca**

Educational institutions play a special role in building a more equitable world. We are many things – employer, teacher, gathering place, social venue, community space – and we have unique opportunities to model examples by what we do, how we do it and the environment we create for teaching and learning.

An Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee has been established to advise the President on policies and procedures to build an equitable Seneca, free of systemic racism and bias.

In FY21-22, the Committee will focus on three initial tasks to contribute to building the equitable Seneca:

- Developing anti-bias and inclusivity programming for all current and new employees, with similar programming for students; working with Human Resources and Student Services, resources will be developed for use this year
- Implementing a voluntary census to establish a database, and baseline, on the diversity of Seneca’s students and employees to allow progress to be measured; the goal is to complete the first round of both censuses this year
- Reviewing admissions, retention and disciplinary policies and procedures for students and of hiring, promotion and disciplinary policies and procedures for employees to identify and remove any systemic biases; reviews will be completed this year along with action plans to address shortcomings and gaps.

Ongoing work will include revising curriculum to incorporate citizenry, intercultural relations, ethics and inclusivity and assessing new programs with an EDI lens. Through Advancement, we are encouraging the establishment of bursaries and scholarships to support racialized and minority students.

## **The sustainable Seneca**

Sustainability as both a core value and operational priority has been widely embraced in the Seneca community, with equal attention to reflecting the commitment to sustainability in academic programs, in services and in our physical spaces. Ongoing projects include retrofitting campuses for energy efficiency, sustainable landscaping and waste reduction initiatives.

Beyond environmental sustainability, Seneca is supporting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, a wholistic approach to sustainability that includes economic, cultural and social goals as well.

In FY21-22, sustainability goals include:

- Through broad consultations, creating a formal and first-ever sustainability plan to set goals and improve performance across academic and operations

- Establishing a permanent Office of Sustainability to build partnerships across Seneca to advance the awareness and practise of sustainability
- Aligning curriculum and research in Seneca Business to the Principles for Responsible Management Education, a global initiative among business schools to incorporate sustainability across all forms of business education and operations.

### **The more virtual Seneca**

Literally dozens of initiatives are underway to create the more virtual Seneca. Every part of Seneca is affected.

Collectively, these will propel Seneca into the post-pandemic world in a leadership position, offering more convenient access to programs for students, broadening the range of programs and courses to meet market needs and taking full advantage of the digital strategy to streamline services.

What follows are major areas of activity, highlighting initiatives with the most significant impact on students, employees and the community.

In FY21-22, goals include:

#### Academics

- Determining what programs and courses will be offered post-pandemic in online, hybrid and in-person formats
- Exploring new online markets across Canada and the world
- Expanding the use of extended reality in programs, including virtual, augmented and simulated learning applications
- Continuing to expand training for online teaching and learning

#### Services

- Developing a new services model to offer students a superior services experience, including adopting service standards
- Continuing all transactional services in an online and self-serve model while exploring adding virtual connection options to the transformational in-person services through service hubs
- Starting a triage front-end for students to streamline access to relevant services and assistance
- Providing just-in-time technology support to employees when faced with situations requiring immediate support

### Working Remotely

- With the advice of an employee committee, developing a post-pandemic Working Remotely policy that balances the desire for more remote working options with operational needs

### Infrastructure

- Converting classrooms into labs to accommodate more students in high-demand programs
- Launching a new student intranet to improve communications
- Exploring a distributed computing commons model across more areas of our campuses
- Going cashless across all campuses in all services
- A comprehensive space audit to reimagine both academic and office spaces to meet post-pandemic needs