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Education**
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What We Heard:

Building the Next Selkirk College
Strategic Plan Together

Prepared for Selkirk College

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**STRATEGIC
PLANNING AND
GOVERNANCE**



Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) is a Toronto-based firm providing strategic insight and guidance to governments, postsecondary institutions, and agencies through excellence and expertise in policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic consulting services. Through these activities, HESA strives to improve the quality, efficacy, and fairness of higher education systems in Canada and worldwide.

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Any errors or omissions are the authors' alone.

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Introduction and the Need for a New Strategy

Since January, the Selkirk College community has been engaging in a planning process to develop a new institutional strategic plan, which will guide the institution's activities over the next decade. Consultations involved individual and group internal and external consultations, as well as online surveys, all supplemented by extensive primary and secondary research. This document outlines findings from these discussions.

Consultations highlighted that Selkirk College has the unmistakable privilege of being a great source of pride, not only for those who work or attend Selkirk College, but also for the community that surrounds it. Internally, Selkirk College is seen as vital to the regional economy, population stability or sustainability and diversity. Externally, it is an essential provider of skilled workers for employers and uniquely enables access to research innovation and partnerships. Perhaps as importantly, the college itself was deemed an essential regional employer. Notably students were rarely mentioned in response to who benefits from Selkirk College's presence. The college is viewed as an employer and an economic engine first, and a place to educate students second.

While there is evidently a great sense of pride for the institution, few were able to identify specific things the college did uniquely well. Instead, respondents focused on generic qualities like "proximity to home" or "affordability," which are laudable but also limiting, particularly given the projected decline in the local youth population. Selkirk College already

suffers from declining enrolment, a trend that extends back several years now and that would have been an even more precipitous had the college not recruited internationally. This decline is particularly concerning when juxtaposed against the high number of programs the college offers and the way it offers them (often high-touch). To remain viable, the college needs to attract more students, and many of those will need to come from outside the West Kootenay Boundary Regions.

It is unclear, additionally, that the college is delivering on these strengths. Claims to affordability and access are challenged by lack of adequate transportation and appropriate nearby housing. These issues also hinder prospects of developing a vibrant atmosphere on campuses, which was frequently cited as lacking. Improving housing and transportation options will be a precondition for the college to thrive in the coming years, but the college will also need to provide an enticing reason for students to choose it over other colleges closer to their home. It needs a clearer, more distinguished identity. It cannot continue to "spread itself too thin" without sacrifices to quality and distinction, both of which are key to growing the college.

This may seem as a difficult place from which to develop a strategic plan, but there is much to build on. Throughout our engagements, we heard a great deal about what it would mean to be a thriving Selkirk College and the values and commitments that will guide strategy. Most accounts focused on three broad themes on which we expand below.



Selkirk College Commitments & Values

"[Selkirk College] Brings in jobs, brings many young minds who might like to settle down here, brings a degree of professionalism and enlightenment by educating the population"

– Participant response

Confirmed throughout both internal and external consultations is that Selkirk College's current institutional commitments and accompanying values are enduring and provide a stable foundation for future decision-making. Nothing in the consultations suggested that these needed to change or be updated. Particularly prominently featured in the consultations was how the institution planned to continue ensuring equitable access to their programs and resources, though there was little acknowledgement of there needs to be a concomitant commitment to excellence. Part of the desire to maintain access was articulated as provided through geographic dispersion, which was not only a function of government mandate (i.e., to serve underserved communities) but also core to the college's social mission (e.g., augmenting distance learning with local mentorship and social supports in Indigenous communities). However, the college's ability to increase types of access is limited by government regulations (such as the ability to grant degrees) and budgets (to expand into

evening, weekend, or more flexible programming). Nevertheless, the college's role in providing opportunity locally is deeply cherished and there is potential for considering different ways of envisioning access. Some participants identified the opportunity to leverage economies of scale by centralizing the college's offerings within fewer locations, highlighting that the current approach of providing offerings in nine locations across the region hampered the college's ability to do things in any one location particularly well. The tension between these two values is not irreconcilable, but needs to be addressed.

The commitment to sustainability, particularly in the context of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals– which encompasses environmental sustainability, reconciliation, as well as equity, diversity and inclusion– also featured as an important undertone informing the positions of those who articulated important aspirations for the college.

Commitments

- Diversity Equity and Inclusion
- Health and Wellness
- Environmental Sustainability
- Innovation
- Reconciliation

Values

- Community
- Access
- Respect
- Excellence



Emerging Themes

“Capitalize on the Gen Z focus of sustainable environmental development that could impact – the programs we choose to teach and how we teach them (on the land training for everyone) – the way we operate (paperless, no text books, energy retrofits on buildings) – the type of people we hire (EDI, Indigenization, respect for the land) – the attention we pay to ecoliteracy curriculum and [applied learning opportunities in the region], and so on.”

– Internal consultation response

⚠ These programs were mentioned in relation to their potentials to meet regional needs, or uniquely connected to environmentalism/sustainability and/or innovation, as well as connecting with local employment potentials, though other programs at the college might also fit the parameters.

There is some overlap between these themes, and they implicate students, staff, faculty, and regional partners in different ways. It should also be noted that, as befits an exercise with wide engagement, there are themes and findings on which there is little or no consensus; different views and approaches are noted as needed.

Owning a Niche: Where Focus Fuels Growth

Many groups, though they articulated it differently, identified that one of Selkirk College’s key strategic priorities needed to be to find an area of focus. There is a sense that the institution activities are scattered with little sense of the extent to which they contribute to the college’s overall health. The Selkirk College of the future, we heard, should be one that is “not all things to all people” but instead invests strongly in one or a few signature areas. Internally, this was expressed as being “pulled into too many directions” or pursuing new governmental initiatives without regard for the extent to which they advance the college’s priorities. There was wide recognition that while the College provides many programs, only a few exceptions (e.g. Rural Medicine, Forestry, SEG, GIS, Plant Operations, and Music¹), would warrant prospective students from outside the region to consider attending. Selkirk College has experienced success with unique and in-demand programming in the past, such as with its Pharmacy Technician Bridging National Education Program, which was offered until 2018. Having programs that are distinct either in their ways of knowing and learning as well as what they learn will be

a crucial component of ensuring that Selkirk College is transformed into a place where prospective students both from the region and from across Canada.

It was also noted that the college offers some programming that is duplicative of community organizations’ offerings, which has the undesired result of increasing competition instead of access. Consultation suggested that the college would benefit from a review of programming, inclusive of continuing educational offerings, providing the opportunity for existing programs to coordinate more and for the college to evaluate which programs are aligned with the unique value proposition the college wishes to put forward.

Externally, the desire for focus and excellence go together, and it was commonly articulated as something the college had lost. Many external interested parties seemingly mourned former activities for which the college had garnered positive national reputes, such as the aviation program. Understanding that the college could not support a notoriously expensive program like aviation with such low enrolment, external participants were instead interested in replicating the positive attention that accompanies being uniquely competent or demonstrating excellence in an area of choice (which need not necessarily be aviation).

Excellence can be developed in a couple of ways: it can be a way of infusing all activities with a distinctive approach that is enveloped in institutional identity or it can be dedication to a few signature programs or areas, which in turn typically confers confidence in other areas of the institution’s offerings. In any event,



“To lure students from afar, I think the college needs to have distinct programs that differentiate it from its competitors and market more aggressively the programs the college already has that fall into that category. I also think the college needs to have solid and comprehensive articulation agreements in place with receiving institutions so students can complete their education journey as seamlessly as possible.”

— Anonymous Response

it necessarily implies having discussions about what activities Selkirk College is currently engaged in that no longer serves it. It also requires additional investment in the quality, pedagogy and delivery of a few programs, and these investments must be found in the context of current funding constraints.

When asked what could entice people to attend Selkirk College specifically, many pointed to the incredible opportunity to combine the beauty of the regional geography, with land-based learning and training (e.g. Skattebo Education Forest (SEF)). Participants were enthused at the prospect that the college could further align its offerings and approach to an environmental/ sustainability perspective, connecting with key resource(s), industry innovations and demands within the region. Selkirk College is not only uniquely situated in a stunning mountain landscape, but offers an unparalleled land-based learning environment for students to study sustainability on the front-line, where environmental issues like wildfires and resource extraction and students can have direct access to natural laboratories for learning. There was a sense, we heard, that the College should comprehensively leverage that as part of its identity to create even more purposeful programs that ignite students’ passions and provide a unique approach to existing programming. It offers adventure and meaningful professional growth leading to modern-day careers, catering to demographics that love both what the region has to offer through the college.

Spark, Cultivate, Lead: Innovation for the Future of the Region and Our Nation

To establish distinction and to extend reach , focus must be paired with innovation. Selkirk Innovates and the Technology Access Centre

(STAC) are but two instances in which the College demonstrates its capabilities with respect to providing a culture of exploration and problem-solving. These centers offer students and faculty a platform to develop innovative solutions to real-world challenges. The college has shown that it has the potential to foster innovative solutions that transcend traditional boundaries and can be shared and adopted widely, such as its prototyping/ manufacturing design work, 3D modelling of large infrastructure and social justice innovation through the Mir Centre for Peace. For Selkirk to become an institution that has a reputation that extends beyond the immediate region, we heard that it needs to leverage its ability to innovate across its curricula. Simply put, innovative yet coordinated ways of thinking through programming featured prominently. All programs under this vision, from business to nursing, are imagined in a 21st century lens to incorporate social justice, diversity, environmental stewardship, and service in the regional economic and public interest.

Of note is that consultations revealed that while flexibility is welcome and a potential source of innovation, particularly among older students who might have competing obligations (family care and work), there was little appetite for completely online programming. This, we heard, is not something Selkirk College does uniquely well and would be competing in an even larger marketplace. There was, however, a desire to introduce flexibility in program stackability and pairing cognate credentials through pathways (transfer) so that students could maximize recognition of their learning at Selkirk College. This benefits both learners who may come back to Selkirk College for reskilling throughout their career, ensuring they are keeping pace with the world of work, and for students who are unable to commit to lengthy blocks of education. For instance,



“The college is a catalyst for opening minds, fostering new ideas or perspectives and expanding diversity within and across the region.”

– External consultation response

we heard from externals that the trades are changing, and that Selkirk can work with industry to adapt the way learning happens to include those who historically would not have had the opportunity to complete a Selkirk credential or for whom long blocks of education are undesirable or that youth who are unsure of their future and do not want to “waste” getting a partial credential could engage in stackable learning.

There is also significant pride in the work the college has done with respect to Indigenous success and Indigenous reconciliation, demonstrating the need and willingness for the college to also continue to innovate structurally. The student experience with Indigenous Student Services is quite positive. Staff are reported to be really helpful and the space welcoming. The Indigenous student centre has good relationships with the Indigenous community and does tremendous work helping students reconnect to culture while providing good programming. Nevertheless, there is much more on which to innovate. For instance, Indigenous faculty and staff are required to do a lot of extra labour supporting the Institution as it goes forward in reconciliation, supporting students, and of course, supporting each other. This emotional work is mostly unrecognized by the institution. Also crucial is continuing the ongoing work of fostering relationships with Nation Partners and that any new plan, including this forthcoming institutional plan should be developed in line with the college’s expressed commitments to respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility towards Indigenous faculty, staff, students, and Indigenous communities.

Innovation is not something that is typically achieved as a sole enterprise either. Done well, we heard, innovation braids into the

existing context. Selkirk College graduates are integral to helping local industries lead in adopting evolving norms and practices. Selkirk College was seen by external partners and internal staff as a valued regional partner in advancing diversity and accessibility within industry and the larger community that needed to do this actively and continuously.

People & Systems: Enabling the Conditions to Execute

There is no doubt the Selkirk College of the coming decades, as described through consultations, will look very different from the Selkirk College of today. Its structures and offerings will need to align with specific institutional strategies and goals. People across the institution will need to be empowered to effectively advance priorities.

The college will need to undertake a thorough assessment and modernization of its processes and their execution via information technology systems to bolster enrolment and retention management initiatives. The current ecosystem is inadequate in several aspects and has plagued Selkirk College’s staff for years. The Student information system lacks necessary features. Other systems in human resources and finance are described as inefficient and overly time consuming. This inadequacy creates a ripple effect of inefficiencies, causing tasks like registration, grade reporting, and enrolment management to require much more time and effort than should be necessary, distracting from priority work that benefit students, leaving many frustrated and/or without access to crucial information. To address these issues and support future enrolment and retention management efforts, the college will need to prioritize the development of more robust



“Feels like a place where people come for class, and then leave ... create more reasons for people to spend time on campus together outside of class.”

– Internal consultation respondent

capabilities in its processes first and information technology systems, allowing for effective decision-making.

Consultations also revealed how staff and faculty could benefit from more cross-silo / departmental knowledge and understandings about decision-making, which could be more inclusive and transparent (e.g. communicating program costs, student enrollment, etc.) as a means of building trust and galvanizing the community towards important change. The motivations for this kind of increased communication could help support more cross departmental sharing and learning of informed practices, help to avoid redundancy of processes, as well as support uniting everyone (within their respective roles and responsibilities) behind prioritized initiatives in line with the new strategic priorities. Internal respondents consider effective communications as foundational to support the execution and success of the future strategic plan, and necessary to having frank and open discussions to make necessary, but often difficult choices. Further, consultations also identified a need for the implementation of more measures of accountability for plans and projects, to evaluate both ongoing progress and capacity for developing and/or adopting new initiatives.

Further comments noted that a close evaluation of how people are deployed and to what end could also help align staff deployment with strategic objectives, while increasing engagement with respect to supporting new strategic directions. Staff and faculty also shared some concern that they are “stretched beyond capacity” in fulfilling their responsibilities, often with few proof points of the success, such as increased retention or student success, of their hard labour. Indeed, comparative data shows that Selkirk College

performs poorly relative to provincial peers with respect to graduation rates and retention.

We also heard that to execute a strategy of redefining Selkirk College in coming years will necessarily include increased Indigenous representation in institutional governance, which in turn shapes how decisions are made and with what perspectives. This will be one of several crucial steps in ensuring the future direction of the college is aligned with the needs as aspirations of Indigenous peoples in the region, creating conditions to engage in a process of giving back to those who for thousands of years have been stewards of the lands on which the college sits, lands which this strategy articulates are crucial to the future of the college. Indigenous faculty and staff also articulated the need for allies and for the support of non-Indigenous people in this work, which can start with cultural orientation for new staff, particularly in college organizational and administrative units.

The college will also need to increase marketing efforts in an effort to better communicate Selkirk College’s strengths and the opportunities that attending Selkirk College provides. Both internal and external respondents shared the need for the college to develop a fulsome communications and social media strategy aimed at extending the college’s reach. In other words, once the college can articulate its distinctive appeal to people in the region, it will need to develop the capacities to communicate it broadly.

Internal stakeholders identified the need to invest in making Selkirk College campuses “more lively”, particularly the more isolated Castlegar main campus. Suggestions included expanding indoor/outdoor student recreation and athletic options (including more culturally diverse options, e.g. cricket or sports that



invite more gender inclusivity); introduce a student 'pub' or restaurant to socialize; develop a collegia space or 'student hub' to better integrate student supports, services and connections. This would be one of the crucial innovations allowing for Selkirk to develop an enticing value proposition to students from outside the region. External comments focused on blurring the distinction between campus and community. Currently, while primary campuses exist in Nelson, Trail and Castlegar, only Trail offers a public face right in the downtown, keeping the college at the centre of community life.

Other campuses need to increase outreach that will open up avenues for collaboration and partnership on issues of mutual interest (such as better transportation in the region or housing). This could involve opening access to college spaces for local business or community groups to economically utilize, provide additional youth programming in the summer months for regional residents (e.g. connect with BC Career-Life Education (CLE) courses), and otherwise inviting community members to take advantage of the current sporting/athletic centre(s) to mingle students and community beyond academics.

Concluding Thoughts

From the above, it is evident that the future of Selkirk College is one of significant change. To meet community needs and to expand its reach and reputation, Selkirk College will become more focused and coordinated. While striving to consider all voices is commendable, prioritizing a multitude of needs at the expense of a clear direction can dilute the college's impact. Moving forward, Selkirk College must embrace honest conversations about trade-offs, acknowledging that prioritizing focus does not negate the value of diverse perspectives. Only then can it ensure that well-intentioned efforts translate into meaningful progress.

It will need to organize itself in new ways to deliver on new and emerging expectations, it will be able to become a more dynamic and distinctive institution. Undoubtedly, this will be a large undertaking that will require sustained commitment and dedication over many years to the college's mission as well as to the notion of a flourishing, strong West Kootenay Boundary region. It will also pay dividends as the college boldly works towards reinventing itself to the benefit of all in the Kootenays.



Methodology

Between January and April 2024, Selkirk College in partnership with Higher Education Strategy Associates completed consultations on the development of a new strategic plan. These included both internal and external consultations and online surveys— one directed at internal staff, faculty and students, while the other was designed to capture feedback and insights from external / community stakeholders. In an effort to support transparency, engagement and community involvement a mixed methodological approach was adopted in support of gathering maximum internal college and external community perspectives.

Consultation sessions and individual interviews were conducted with internal staff, faculty and students, by both HESA and Selkirk staff. Additionally, HESA conducted a series of external consultations which took the form of individual interviews and group sessions with industry and community partners, donors and alumni, as well as chambers of commerce, local/regional government representatives and interested citizens as well as with regional First Nation and Metis communities. Participants were offered the opportunity to consult with us in confidence if we thought this would be helpful in ensuring a full and frank exchange of views.

Internal and external individual interviews and group consultations included over 100 participants. In addition, there were over 230 complete responses to the internal survey (with 410 respondents participating overall), and over 70 completed responses to the external survey (with 186 respondents participating overall). Of the internal survey respondents 55% identified as students, with a

further 22% identified as instructional employees (Faculty, Instructor, Faculty Assistant), and a further 14% were administrative staff and 5% management and senior leadership.

These consultations were also supported by a comprehensive, targeted communications campaign to encourage participation directed by the college, including an online information page hosted on the college website and a social media campaign.

In support of the consultation process, extensive research was also conducted to complete an environmental scan designed to provide critical demographics and data to help situate Selkirk College within the current post-secondary sector regionally, provincially and nationally.

Approach to Listening, Learning & Analysis


Questions posed to all participants were open ended to allow for issues and opportunities available to Selkirk College to emerge. Our team took extensive written notes during the consultations, highlighting themes of interest to which we returned in analysis. For this exercise the HESA team relied entirely on qualitative coding rather than charting frequency of keywords, as we were in a position to make judgments about the importance of themes in real time while collecting the data. We identified distinct themes from our conversations and considered their importance in context given the natural flow of conversations. We sought in later engagements, such as through the online survey, member checking, or in engagements with external stakeholders, to validate



impressions that were unearthed during initial consultations.

We used this process to identify the key themes around which we could construct a narrative about the college's strengths and challenges, as well as likely prospects for the future. This narrative reflects a distillation of the feedback received based on HESA's experience in strategic planning. This resulting "What We Heard" report is a culmination of results so far but is not final. The questions that accompany this report, for instance, are in themselves another way in which HESA seeks to validate the conclusions drawn from consultations so far and feedback will serve to inform the contents of the strategic plan.





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