

## A message from Dr. Janet Morrison



### Taking Action

June 11, 2020

Colleagues: we truly are living through unprecedented times, not only as a consequence of the pandemic but, more broadly, in the context of cries for justice and an end to systemic racism. As a community leader, a feminist, an educator and mother, I am compelled to do more than just issue a statement. Too many of our students, faculty and staff who self-identify as racialized have shared lived experiences that, without question or further discussion, demand change.

The stories I've heard and read this week are, sadly, consistent with those I've been privy to since joining Sheridan in 2017. Notwithstanding the strength of character and generosity that defines our learning community, multiple planning processes have highlighted the imperative to significantly advance equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) across the organization. Specifically, we heard this at the Academic Planning forums, throughout the consultations we used to inform our new Strategic Plan, and most recently at focus groups tasked with informing a new Campus Master Plan to transform our built environment.

**I want to be very clear that we have not been sitting idle in the face of documented instances of inequity, injustice and marginalization that undermine mental health and leave valued members of our community without a sense of belonging.** Specifically, Sheridan has undertaken a number of initiatives over the last three years to respond:

- Our 2019/20 budget reflected a 300% base increase for the work of the Centre for Equity and Inclusion (CEI). As a result of this funding, new full-time continuing positions were established including a Senior EDI Officer, a CEI Intake Coordinator, a Sexual Violence Response Specialist, and a Dispute Resolution Officer. Notwithstanding the pandemic-related hiring freeze, we are proceeding with a search for an additional Manager to further support the unit's work.
- Dr. Jane Ngobia was named Sheridan's first Vice President, Inclusive Communities. Earlier this year, she completed a robust Listening Tour to better understand the lived experience of students, faculty and staff across our programs and Faculties.
- While CEI was originally located only on the Oakville campus, we established a physical presence at the Brampton and Mississauga campuses also.
- An EDI Advisory Council was formed that includes faculty, staff and student members; together, they developed and approved an EDI Action Plan. This Plan, and – of note – an Equity Statement of Commitment, was approved by Sheridan's Board of Governors. The Board has since passed several motions to support Sheridan leadership as it implements equity initiatives across the organization; further, they have asked for quarterly updates on our progress and their impact.
- Senate approved Sheridan becoming a signatory to the Dimensions Charter and participating in the Dimensions Pilot program. Both recognize that equity, diversity and inclusion strengthen the research community and the quality, relevance and impact of research.
- CEI developed an Implicit Bias Training module that is ready to launch. Already, many leaders of the Executive and Decanal team have completed Intercultural Competence training to develop self-awareness and the capacity to distinguish people's behaviors from one's own perspectives.
- We undertook an Employee Diversity Census, which will facilitate a baseline understanding of the diversity of our employees. Results are expected next month (July) and will enable evidence-based decisions about addressing barriers in the workplace and the needs of our diverse communities.

This work was foundational, and intended to serve as building blocks for further, more substantive change. Clearly, that must now be accelerated to safeguard our individual and organizational integrity.

To that end, we will continue to engage employees, students and alumni in conversations about their lived experiences and what we still must do better. Not surprisingly, the issues of utmost concern are different depending on the discipline, Faculty and/or campus. Three consistent and specific areas of focus have, however, emerged that will underpin our immediate action plan: academic hiring; training; and, access.

- To the first point, I have no doubt that the Employee Census data will, once available, confirm a lack of diversity amongst some segments of our teaching collegium. Our intention is to focus intently on those programs by posting positions specifically designed for racialized and Indigenous candidates. This will, by necessity, involve some disruption to our normal hiring processes because – to be frank – our current practices are built on a legacy of racial bias that needs to be upended. Ontario's Human Rights Code recognizes that employee recruitment strategies of this nature may be necessary to rectify the historical disadvantage experienced by specific marginalized groups.
- With regards to training, our identity as a learning community is grounded in a commitment to being learner-focused. Simply: despite the unwavering commitment that everyone on our campuses has to our students, this is undermined if we're not actively exploring the construct of unconscious bias and how it impacts culture, policies, practices, curriculum, pedagogy, and interpersonal relationships. Without reservation, I will be accepting responsibility for ensuring every employee at Sheridan receives relevant training on identifying, addressing and preventing bias and oppression.
- Finally, we need to think about ensuring equity of access to our programming. I feel strongly that this demands a two-pronged approach. First, we need to launch a scholarship program to promote the recruitment and enrolment of racialized and Indigenous applicants. Second, we need to develop a program in close consultation with our community partners that will intervene and facilitate access to developing skills and interests related to our disciplinary strengths (eg: engineering, music theatre, animation, creativity) at the primary school level, regardless of economic status or race.

I am so proud to lead at Sheridan, surrounded by colleagues who care. The stories we're hearing right now are heartbreaking, precisely because of our unwavering commitment to collegiality, students and their success. Our Provost and I spoke this morning about the impetus this has provided for each of us to consider how our teaching and leadership – however well intentioned – may have negatively impacted learners and colleagues from diverse backgrounds. We agreed that this is painful to process and accept but – at the same time – crucial to moving Sheridan forward.

At this time, I'm reminded of a quote from Maya Angelou: *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."* Right now, there is a unity of voices imploring us to learn and change. Knowing you as I do, I have every confidence we will individually and collectively heed the call.

Sincerely,

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