

Revolutionizing Education: Ontario Colleges Adapt to Change with Dr. Marketa Evans

Host: Maggie John

Overview:

In this episode, Dr. Marketa Evans joins us to discuss how colleges can better support students' career pathways. Dr. Evans is President and CEO of Colleges Ontario, representing Ontario's 24 public colleges. She was previously Vice President at Colleges and Institutes Canada, overseeing federal relations and advocacy. Dr. Evans shares how Ontario colleges can adapt to rapid technological changes in the workforce.

Highlights from our conversation include:

1. Colleges can make changes to teaching and learning to keep up with the rapid changes in the labour market.
2. Colleges are inherently set up as career-focused institutions, and their strong partnerships with employers and businesses helps them offer courses that meet the skills needs of employers.
3. Colleges are an affordable option for students to learn new skills and access experiential learning that will help make them more career-ready.

MAGGIE:

Well, the conversations continue. I'm now joined by Dr. Marketa Evans.

She leads Colleges Ontario, the advocacy body for Ontario's 24 public colleges. She has extensive experience in government relations, community programs, and innovation, having held leadership roles at Colleges and Institutes Canada, WoodGreen Community Services, and United Way Toronto. Dr. Evans has been a

strong advocate for creating educational systems that better prepare students for the evolving labor market and has focused on improving access to education for underrepresented groups.

Dr. Evans, thank you for joining me today.

MARKETA:

It's a real pleasure to be here.

MAGGIE:

I've been asking everybody what's the biggest takeaway, that nugget that you're going to be chewing on for a couple of days from the event these past two days.

MARKETA:

Well, the first nugget is, wow, we can do conferences different. That's for sure. This has been a really amazing couple of days, I have to say. It is a real rethink of how we bring people together.

And I think people are really enjoying sort of these deconstructed panels, the kind of opportunity to really connect with folks maybe outside of their network, but that all kind of belong in that Magnet network.

So I think one of the really big takeaways is how much more of these kind of conversations we need to be having to move the needle on talent and workforce development in Canada. And I think this is an amazing opportunity to kind of show people some really excellent best practices that are taking place across the country. But really being able to connect those dots, I think, is where the magic is going to be.

MAGGIE:

There is so much excitement. I mean, there's a lot of exciting things happening in this realm. And I'm excited for people like you who get to connect with others and see that, yeah, like there's so many people doing amazing things, wanting to work together, wanting to collaborate together. And that just might, I'm assuming that spurs you on to want to continue to do what you do.

MARKETA:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Because it is absolutely an all hands on deck time. I mean, that's how we view it at Colleges Ontario. Some of our biggest labor market challenges, certainly in Ontario and I think across the country, really are going to rely on some deep collaborations across traditional sectors. And really seeing that energy in these rooms has been super inspiring. Yeah.

MAGGIE:

So how do you envision Ontario's colleges adapting to the rapid technological changes in the workforce?

MARKETA:

We do already see a lot of adaptation in terms of teaching and learning.

So one important thing about colleges in Ontario, public colleges in Ontario, is that 70% of our learners do not come straight from high school.

MAGGIE:

Say that again. 70% of your learners...

MARKETA:

Do not come straight from high school.

So they may have gone into the workplace for a couple of years and didn't find that it was that satisfying. Or maybe they started university and didn't finish. Or maybe they did finish and then wanted to add a practical post-grad certificate to their learning journey.

Or maybe they have been in the workplace for 20 years and their job is undergoing transformation or they would like to have a change. They'd like to go into something different and they don't want to start from scratch, maybe with a whole four-year university degree. Maybe they want to take something that they can take close to home, continue to work, continue to be there for their families.

So adaptation really has been about deploying new technologies to reach those learners. And that includes everything from, you know, what we would kind of traditionally think about as hybrid learning, but also some really incredible partnerships. Colleges in Ontario are really terrific partners with each other and allow learners to stay close to home, but access a credential maybe that is only offered at a GTA college.

MAGGIE:

Does that change the way that colleges recruit, knowing that 70% of their learners are not coming right out of high school?

MARKETA:

I think it does, for sure. I think what it does mean is that we are much more attuned to some of the changes in the labor market that people need to adapt to. And it absolutely includes a lot of work that is done around continuing education.

And, you know, for lack of a better word, I'm just going to say micro-credentials. But micro-credentials can look very different. And they could be, you know, a short course that's maybe six months or 12 months. But it is the most important thing is that those are industry be recognized and that they have a high quality delivery model, which is really where the value proposition of a public college comes in.

MAGGIE:

What do you think are some of the key skills, Dr. Evans, that students should focus on to stay competitive?

MARKETA:

Well, we hear a lot about soft skills, of course. That's all the time that I've been in workforce and talent. That is certainly something employers keep coming back to.

I think that there's many paths to soft skills, including, of course, your outside of the school curricular and extracurriculars that you want to be doing. Work-integrated learning is a big piece of that because certainly when you can have exposure to a

workplace while you are currently studying, you can absorb some of those skills that employers are looking for, whether that's teamwork, collaboration, communication, interpersonal skills, presentation skills, and you're able to do that in a fairly low stress kind of situation if you're there on a work-integrated learning, co-op, or other similar kind of learning opportunity.

And again, colleges, that's the bread and butter of what colleges do really... work with employers to make sure that students have a chance to have a workplace experience while they're still in school and to absorb some of those soft skills.

The job market is changing, that is for sure, and I think the ability to continue to learn throughout your career, I think that is one of the really key things that as a society, we need to keep underscoring that it's not a one-and-done, it's less linear than it used to be.

It's less about, hey, you finish high school, you go into post-secondary, you go into work, and there you are. More about that sort of nimble pathway. And it might involve a lot of different times when you are kind of back in education, although it doesn't need to look like starting from scratch, from the beginning.

MAGGIE:

What strategies do you think colleges can implement to ensure equitable access to education, especially for students from marginalized communities?

MARKETA:

So one of the critical value propositions that public colleges in Ontario offer is very high affordability.

We know that Ontarians are struggling with the high cost of living and public college tuition as a return on investment remains a very, very strong value proposition. Many people don't know that tuition at a public college for an Ontario student averages about \$2,700 per year for a full-time program. That is significantly lower than potentially other pathways.

Affordability has a couple of components. One is the tuition, of course, and, you know, remaining committed to affordability, that's very much in our mantra. But again, as I referenced earlier, many of our students are coming later in life—the average age is 24—they like to have access close to home. And whether that is Indigenous communities, people in small-town Ontario, or people in the north of Ontario, having access to a place to go for higher ed and training is really, really important because it means you can stay home. You don't have to travel to another city, try to find a place to rent, have all of those additional affordability costs layered on.

Again, I think the reach of the public college sector in Ontario is one of our really important affordability drivers and continues to be something that we are really leaning into to ensure access is protected for all people who want to go on to further education and training.

MAGGIE:

Which is so important. And how can colleges collaborate with the private sector to align educational programs with the needs of the future labor market?

MARKETA:

So I think, again, that's very much, you know, colleges in Ontario were set up for a specific purpose—to be job-focused, to work with employers to drive economic growth in the local region or the local community.

That's really in the DNA, if I could say, of public colleges. Many of our instructors come from industry, in fact. We have very strong and deep partnerships with businesses and employers in each sort of region of the college.

That ranges from something called a program advisory committee, which means every program that a college offers has an external advisory council made up of employers, keeping that programming fresh, making sure that people are coming out with the right skills. And we know, as I said before, that the labor market is really changing. Technology is really changing. A lot of employers really like the fact that they have younger people coming in to do a work placement, let's say, and bringing

some of that latest technology with them, helping our small businesses, small and medium-sized businesses, really kind of lean more into digital and technology.

I think it is a really key strength of the public colleges in Ontario that has been, as I said, in our DNA from the beginning. And now what we need to do is keep that up.

As new sectors grow in the province of Ontario, we need to continue to deepen those relationships. Tomorrow's high-growth sectors may look different than today's. We all know about electric vehicles and nuclear energy and other things that are really high priority for the province in the years ahead. We need to keep up and make sure that we're continuing to lean into those employer relations.

Absolutely, that is, as I said, the bread and butter, the DNA work that public colleges do all the time in their local communities.

MAGGIE:

Thank you so much, Dr. Evans.

MARKETA:

Our pleasure. Thank you so much.

MAGGIE:

That was Dr. Marketa Evans. She is the president and CEO of Colleges Ontario.