

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) presents
Rethinking higher ed: Beyond {the buzzwords}
November 7-8, 2013
Sheraton Centre Toronto

Day One
November 7, 2013

Lunch Keynote
David Helfand, Quest University Canada

In the world according to David Helfand, North American universities are on the verge of an apocalyptic collapse. He referenced the large number of books in the last three years predicting the demise of the modern university. He said that one of the problems is that universities have had too many roles imposed on them, most of which are detrimental to the primary mission of universities: to educate.

Helfand described an occasion when he spoke to a Grade 4 class, and at the end there were 180 questions from 90 students who were burning with curiosity. He then took the bus back to his university class, and the students all sat there silently, just waiting for the class to be over. He said under his breath, "Why aren't you more like 4th graders?" One student responded with "I'm paying for a degree, not an education." Helfand noted that this is not a rare reaction and reflects how we ask students to get grades and a degree in order to get an education.

For most of history, information has been difficult and expensive to access, but now information is unlimited and free. So the old teaching model of pouring knowledge into empty vessels is ridiculous, he said. Our job now is to give students a broad set of tools for how to deal with and synthesize that tsunami of information.

Evolution is another problem. Our brains have evolved for two-way communication, so what do we do? We tell students to keep their mouths shut while the teacher talks. Socializing is equally key to learning, but we de-socialize by dividing the class at desks while we talk. Our brain has evolved for collaboration, but what do we do in universities? We call a group solving a really difficult problem "cheating." University punishes collaboration and rewards selfish individualism for a relatively irrelevant product called grades, said Helfand.

What do we do about this? We start with a blank page for the university for the 21st century, for a class of digital natives to solve the problems of the 21st century. Most universities have too many goals, so at Quest, Helfand said that he and his colleagues decided on one goal: to produce the most effective undergraduate bachelor's education possible. They have no departments or divisions in the circular academic building, and offices are assigned by lottery. Professors are called tutors and they sit at round tables with their students. There are no lectures or PowerPoint slides. It is a different physical structure in a different organizational structure, said Helfand.

The curriculum is liberal arts and sciences, and every student takes the same set of 16 courses, cross-discipline. At the end of the foundation program in second year, students get together with their advisor and establish their question. Together they work out a strategy to answer it, including in what

courses and activities that will be involved. Then in the final year, students produce a thesis which responds to that question in a project that they deliver to the entire university.

What was the result of these innovations? A group of university students solved a spherical trigonometry problem that had existed for 200 years, and their advisor had to revise his own publication and acknowledge his students for solving a major problem in the field.