

BRANDING » CENTENNIAL COLLEGE

School touts global citizenship to set itself apart

BY JENNIFER LEWINGTON

In a highly competitive market for students, colleges are turning to online social networking sites to connect to past and future graduates.

Ontario's Centennial College has gone a step further, launching a Facebook-inspired website as a key marketing tool to raise its profile and stand out in a crowded market.

Last summer, in a \$500,000 advertising campaign aimed at attracting prospective students, Centennial posed a provocative question on its new website, humanracebook.com: "The world needs you. Will you accept or ignore this fact?" In ads that appeared online, on billboards, movie house screens and buses, the question plays off Facebook's prompt for someone to "accept" or "ignore" a request to become a "friend."

Pressing the "accept" button guides the user to Centennial's website and its Signature Learning Experience, whose central component is a semester-long course on global citizenship that is mandatory for all students.

"The Signature Learning Experience reflects our commitment to creating an inclusive, collaborative learning environment that enables students to apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to be socially responsible in a diverse world," Centennial College president Ann Buller said at the launch of the program last June.

The campaign, designed to showcase an education pro-



Centennial College president Ann Buller, second from right, led the school through creation of its new Signature Learning Experience, mandatory for all students, including Tijan Taylor, left, Gloria Flores and Tahir Khan, right. YVONNE BERG FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

gram unique to Centennial, has a bigger purpose: to raise the school's profile.

Set up in 1966 in Toronto as Ontario's first community college, Centennial today faces stiff competition from several high-profile rivals on the city's eastern boundaries: a fast-expanding Scarborough campus of the University of Toronto, Seneca College, and newcomer University of Ontario Institute of Technology on the campus of Durham College, in Oshawa.

Centennial has been feeling the financial pinch. In a sys-

tem that funds schools based on enrolment growth, Centennial's student numbers dropped to 16,700 last year, down 9 per cent since 2004. Enrolment numbers stabilized this year, but near-stagnant government operating grants have not kept pace with rising salaries and other costs.

"We had to step back," says Ms. Buller, 45.

Starting with a re-branding in 2005 tagged "the future of learning," Centennial positions itself as the place where anyone in the world can come

to study and where they can learn to work anywhere in the world. As part of the re-branding, Centennial carried out an extensive program review, adding 18 new courses.

"We needed to change to respond to what is happening in the world," says Ms. Buller, citing employer demand for graduates, with not only technical expertise but also "soft skills," such as the ability to work with people from different backgrounds. "That meant looking at our institution and coming up with a new educational proposition."

As a result, faculty developed a new course that is combined with class work, development of a personal portfolio and field trips to teach students how to think critically about the world and their place in it. After an extended pilot project, the course became mandatory in September.

In the next few weeks, Centennial expects to launch phase two of humanracebook.com, so it will evolve into a networking site for students, and to others off campus, to learn about diversity, equity and social justice in Toronto and around the world.

Second-year student Diana

Olave, whose family arrived in Canada from Colombia in 1999, describes the global citizenship course as "a life-changing experience."

The 23-year-old, who is about to graduate from Centennial and plans to earn a degree in broadcast journalism, says she gained insights into global problems. At the urging of a teacher, she and other students attended a workshop sponsored by a non-profit group, Free the Children, which inspired her to apply her jewellery-making skills to raise money for children's education programs in Africa and Asia.

Alberto Almeida, 21, who is now working on a double major in philosophy and sociology at the University of Toronto, credits the Centennial course with steering him to a possible law career.

In 2005, after an injury forced him to abandon dreams of becoming a car mechanic, Mr. Almeida went to Centennial for a general arts diploma. He took the global citizenship course while it was in its pilot phase and says it "changed the way I was looking at things."

After the course, he said, "I could no longer look at coffee

without looking around for the 'fair trade' symbol" because of the class work and discussions on the economic hardships facing Latin American farmers. He says he also acquired skills in debating and research that helped him make a successful transition to university.

"It helped me become way more focused on my goals," he says. "Now I know I can make a difference if I have a strong work ethic and put my all into everything."

The use of humanracebook.com as both a marketing tool for the institution and as a social networking site for students wins praise from education analysts.

"It's Facebook elevated to another level," says Tony Chambers, director for the study of students in post-secondary education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "I like what they are doing ... but I would caution Centennial not to hang all its future on this technology."

In the end, Prof. Chambers argues, the use of Internet-driven tools is "an add-on and not instead of" face-to-face contact between students and teachers.

Others say Centennial is just beginning to tap the potential of online social networking.

"Facebook is a ubiquitous tool that every student knows and has a profile on," says Malcolm Roberts, of Smith Roberts Creative Communications, which developed humanracebook.com. "It is the world's largest social network but it is as deep as a puddle."

By creating a new online space for students - and others off-campus - to learn about social justice issues and how to get involved, Centennial communicates a key message about the kind of graduates it aims to send out into the world, Mr. Roberts says.

"We are trying to raise the brand and brand awareness of Centennial," he says.

Ms. Buller says the measure of success will be the students themselves, and how they change the world.

"Education is a contact sport," she says. "Let the students get out there and be engaged so they get to know themselves enough to say, 'This excites me. This is what I want to do.'"

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