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The Changing Landscape of Post-Secondary Education and What It Means for Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo

Dr. Scott MacPherson, President & CEO of Keyano College, joined the Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce for a thoughtful and wide-ranging discussion on the future of post-secondary education, workforce development, and regional alignment.

Throughout the luncheon, Dr. MacPherson shared a practical and community-focused perspective on how colleges and universities must evolve in response to rapid technological change, shifting labour market demands, and growing expectations from students, employers, and government. His message was clear: the pace of change is accelerating, and post-secondary institutions must become more responsive, more connected to industry, and more focused on access, skills, and student success.

For Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo, the conversation reinforced the importance of strong local alignment between education, employers, government, and schools to ensure the region can develop, retain, and attract the talent needed for long-term success.



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Key Highlights

1. Rapid Change Is Reshaping Post-Secondary Education

A central theme of the discussion was the accelerating pace of change across technology, industry, and education. Traditional models are no longer a reliable guide for the future, and institutions must become more responsive and adaptable.

Key themes included:

- The pace of technological and workforce change is accelerating
- Historical models are becoming less predictive of future needs
- Institutions must evolve faster to remain relevant
- Adaptability is increasingly more important than legacy

2. Colleges Are Evolving to Meet Workforce and Policy Needs

Colleges in Canada have undergone continuous transformation, from vocational schools to broader institutions delivering applied learning, degrees, and industry-aligned programming.

At the same time, governments are increasingly using colleges to address workforce shortages and economic priorities.

Key takeaways:

- Colleges have expanded beyond local mandates into broader, more flexible models
- Delivery methods have evolved (in-person, hybrid, online)
- Government is playing a more active role in directing programming through targeted funding
- Trades and apprenticeship training remain a critical and non-negotiable priority

3. A Shift Toward Skills, Access, and Flexibility

The conversation highlighted a growing shift away from rigid, traditional education models toward more flexible, accessible, and skills-focused approaches.

Students and employers alike are placing greater value on outcomes, relevance, and accessibility.

Key themes:

- Demand for flexible and hybrid learning options continues to grow
- Access to education is becoming as important as delivery format
- Focus is shifting from credentials alone to practical, job-ready skills
- Institutions must meet learners where they are

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4. Alignment Between Industry, Education, and Schools Is Essential

One of the strongest messages from the keynote was the need for deeper alignment across industry, post-secondary institutions, secondary schools, and government.

Without alignment, communities risk losing talent, widening skills gaps, and weakening local economic resilience.

Examples of effective alignment include:

- Industry-informed program development based on workforce demand
- Dual credit and pathway programs connecting students earlier
- Employers helping define graduate skillsets
- Ongoing program review informed by real-time industry needs

5. Keyano's Role: Local Focus, Community Connection, and Student Success

Dr. MacPherson emphasized that Keyano College's future must be shaped by the needs of the community it serves, with a strong focus on local learners, workforce demands, and long-term regional success.

Key priorities include:

- A clear focus on serving local students and employers
- Strengthening trust, visibility, and engagement in the community
- Ensuring programs align with real job opportunities
- Supporting student success through inclusive, welcoming environments
- Maintaining strong commitment to trades and applied learning



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Local Perspective

Today's discussion reinforced something our business community knows well: workforce development cannot be treated as a separate conversation from economic development. When education, industry, schools, and government are aligned, communities are better positioned to retain talent, respond to labour shortages, and create clear pathways from classroom to career.

For Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo, that alignment matters even more. In a region defined by opportunity, growth, and specialized workforce demand, strong local partnerships with Keyano College will be essential to building the talent pipeline our economy needs.

What This Means for Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo

1. Regional workforce alignment is becoming a competitive advantage

Communities that can quickly connect education to labour market demand will be better positioned to attract investment, fill critical roles, and keep local talent close to home.

2. Trades, healthcare, and applied workforce pathways remain critical

The conversation reinforced the need for continued focus on trades, apprenticeship, healthcare, and other high-demand sectors where local employers are experiencing sustained pressure.

3. Flexible access to education will matter more and more

Learners increasingly need options that fit work, family, geography, and changing life circumstances. Expanding access through flexible delivery will be key to meeting both student and employer expectations.

4. Local student retention must remain a priority

If students do not see relevant programs, clear supports, or a strong sense of belonging locally, they are more likely to leave the region. Stronger regional alignment can help change that.

5. Keyano's relevance will be shaped by relationships, not just programming

Program quality matters, but so does community trust, industry engagement, and visible collaboration. The institution's long-term strength will depend on how deeply it is connected to the region it serves.

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Looking Ahead

Dr. MacPherson's remarks pointed to a future in which post-secondary institutions must be more agile, more collaborative, and more locally responsive than ever before. For Keyano College, that means listening carefully, strengthening partnerships, and ensuring its programming, supports, and delivery models reflect the realities of this region.

For Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo, the opportunity is significant. With strong schools, engaged employers, a growing youth population, and a community that values local success, the region is well-positioned to build a more connected talent pipeline, one that supports learners, employers, and long-term economic resilience alike.

"Our members are clear about the pressures they're facing when it comes to workforce and skills. What today's discussion reinforces is that the solution isn't any one organization, it's all of us working in alignment. That's how we close gaps, create opportunity, and ensure long-term success for Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo."

Dianna de Sousa, President & CEO, Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce

