



Building a business mindset

The Centre for Entrepreneurship at Mohawk College is a one-stop hub for students, alumni, faculty and the community



Centre for Entrepreneurship team:
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MOHAWK'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP CONNECTION

McKEIL SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

How SURGE can
help you succeed:



YOUR IDEA



MENTORING
COACHING



NETWORKING



No matter the program being studied at Mohawk College, learning the skills and mindset of an entrepreneur will prepare students for a time they might launch a business, undertake a side hustle to boost income, or apply innovation and change leadership as an employee.

“Whether you are studying to be a fitness trainer, a plumber, an electrician, a computer programmer or a social worker, thinking like an entrepreneur is an important skill to have,” says Ryan Anderson, Associate Dean of Business and the Centre for Entrepreneurship, a hub dedicated to entrepreneurship, intrapreneurship and small business that launched in November 2020.

“People are very keen to develop this expertise because, I think, there is a general understanding that more people are finding they may want to work for themselves.

This has been a tough period. People have been laid off or downsized and with that has come the need to try something new, turn a skill or passion into a business and work for themselves. Historically, a lot of new entrepreneurial ventures have been born from poor economic times. We have also seen students who have come back to school after working the early part of their career, only to want to make a similar change and become their own boss.”

Entrepreneurial skills, from strategy to implementation, are transferable across sectors and around the world.

“Mohawk has put a premium on embedding entrepreneurship into curriculum right across the campus. Being able to build a business plan, establish and understand a budget, and see market opportunities are key skills no matter what field you are in.”

Anderson and the Centre are also attuned to the concept of intrapreneurship, which is the application of the mindset of entrepreneurship—innovation, risk-taking, resiliency, constant seeking of opportunities, growth and progress—and applying that as an employee within an organization.

“Thinking like an owner is a valuable skill no matter what your role is,” says Anderson.

The Centre builds on an existing strong spirit of entrepreneurship at Mohawk. At last count, there were almost 100 courses geared towards the subject and SURGE, the college’s start-up incubator, has supported the launch of 42 student-run businesses since 2018. That includes two that went on to pitch to be on CBC’s Dragons’ Den and 22 led by women.

Amplifying entrepreneurship

In November 2020, the college took the bold step of founding the Centre for Entrepreneurship to bring SURGE and the three other entrepreneurship micro-centres —The Agency, The Collective and The Consultancy—under one roof.

The idea had been circulating for quite some time, says Anderson. It was championed by Vice-President, Academic, Alison Horton who led the advocacy of putting a strategic priority on entrepreneurship in concert with Mohawk’s long-established focus on work-integrated learning.

Anderson, who joined Mohawk in April 2020, was charged with establishing the Centre for Entrepreneurship and growing the roster of programs, resources and supports for existing and potential entrepreneurs.

“Bringing together all the threads makes for an opportunity to do even more programming. We have phenomenal entrepreneurs at Mohawk and faculty mentors that are industry leaders. The Centre is dedicated to building a pipeline and ecosystem that capitalizes on all the expertise within the college so that we can influence and inspire students to do great things.”

The Centre’s mission is to create entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial opportunities for students, alumni and

the community by creating linkages with partners, mentors and development opportunities and establishing industry-leading programs aligned with the college’s strategic plan.

The Centre is working with alumni, SURGE graduates and a roster of entrepreneurs-in-residence who include both faculty and community business owners.

Quick results

The Centre has made remarkable headway in just a year and a half. It has delivered entrepreneurial training and programming to over 4,000 students and there are now 37 programs in all faculties and schools within the college offering entrepreneurial training within their curriculum.

Hundreds have attended more than two dozen Centre events, including more than 450 who took part in the fourth annual MINDSHIFT Entrepreneurship Conference in March 2022.

The Centre established a Summit Speaker Series that features in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs in podcasts and videos. Anderson also hosted a three-part series of “fireside chats” exploring mental health for entrepreneurs with experts.

“The pandemic has certainly highlighted the issue but it existed long before that. Entrepreneurship is a rewarding path but it is also stressful and challenging. Mental Health is an essential component to any workplace. It impacts critical areas of business, like employee retention, hiring, performance metrics and customer service. But, most of all the Centre has a responsibility to train business leaders to be the best they can be for themselves and their employees.”

The sessions were well-attended by people from inside and outside Mohawk. They’ve since been rebranded into the Centre Snacks Series, because at 12–14 minutes, the podcasts can be consumed while getting to work, taking a break or eating lunch.

Mohawk has also partnered with Robert Gordon University in Scotland to host shared speaker events.

“We are bringing in speakers from all walks of life, in all sectors and people who have had a wide range of experiences. When we put successful entrepreneurs in front of our students, the learning is so immediate and powerful. It gives life and air to what they are learning in school.”

The Centre has developed a roster of mentors and Entrepreneurs-in-Residence from within the college’s faculty and the community, and is among three co-founders of the Ontario College Incubators Network (OCIN), which now includes 16 schools. OCIN has already

hosted team pitch events, guest speakers and group lessons for Entrepreneurship Week.

Anderson says the Centre is now working on providing a “bookshelf” of elements that faculty can embed into curriculum, including resources available through a partnership with Shopify and customized programming as needed in a range of disciplines, including skilled trades, health and wellness and engineering.

Anderson is also focused on building relationships with community organizations, including the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce and the YWCA.



Kathy and Blair McKeil

Model for other colleges

Kathy McKeil, who along with husband Blair are the namesakes of the McKeil School of Business at Mohawk, says the Centre for Entrepreneurship will be an important network for emerging entrepreneurs.

“I think this approach is going to be a model for other colleges. There has been a very positive response to what Mohawk is doing,” she says. “Ryan and the team at the Centre are incredible. They’ve done so much in such a short time. We are looking forward to finding ways to partner with the Centre. Our approach is that we want to make a meaningful impact, not just write a cheque.”

The McKeils started in the family marine business in Hamilton and now operate an alternative lender called Breakwater Financial, along with the McKeil Family Foundation.

McKeil says she is continually impressed with Mohawk. “It’s just very progressive and action-oriented. The mindset there is just to get stuff done and that’s what entrepreneurship is all about.”

Future directions

The Centre is now working on developing micro-credentials, which are highly focused, flexible and rapid training programs through Continuing Education that can be taken as standalone or embedded into a postsecondary curriculum.

The first offering is family business and succession planning. “We know there is a wave of successions coming. Many business owners are going to say, ‘I got us through the pandemic, now I’m retiring and moving south.’ So we see a need for this.”

Another micro-credential will look at mental health for business leaders.

Faculty resources

A bigger goal, says Anderson, is to see the Centre build on the success of the Small Business and Fundamentals program to lead the development of a series of degrees, diplomas and certificates in building and launching businesses.

The hope is to see entrepreneurship embedded into all programs across Mohawk.

Tara Dinyer, a professor in Health, Wellness and Fitness, is setting that example. “We are starting to see real synergies with the Centre for Entrepreneurship.”

Dinyer co-teaches a capstone course that requires students to come up with an idea and a business plan.

“Our course is 14 weeks. We can’t cover everything that can help students with this journey. So we post workshops from the Centre for Entrepreneurship that students can attend. It augments what I can offer.”

The real-world content available through the Centre is so valuable for students in their course work and as they develop business ideas, even after they graduate, says Dinyer, who has served as a mentor and faculty advisor in SURGE.

“What I love is that I can’t be an expert in everything. I don’t do app development or computer programming, and I’m not a lawyer,” she says.

“But through SURGE, my students have access to other faculty and community resources that build on what I can offer them. The Centre creates this team of experts.”

‘Leaps and bounds ahead’

Entrepreneur-in-Residence Erin McCluskey says she sees great things ahead for students who develop their business leadership qualities while learning technical skills at Mohawk.

McCluskey wishes she had that opportunity while studying design at another college.

“I didn’t know where to register a business or what accounting software to get or how to file my business taxes or how to negotiate my rent or trademark my logo. I had to figure that all out. I would have been leaps and bounds ahead with just a basic business grounding.”

She is a partner and creative director at The Laundry Design Works, a boutique design and brand strategy agency in downtown Hamilton that has a roster of high-powered apparel, sports and hospitality clients.

She says when she speaks to students, she stresses the importance of networking.

“What you know is still key but relationships are everything. So joining industry organizations and getting on boards and volunteering your time for worthy causes are opportunities to show who you are and what you can do.”



Erin McCluskey, partner and creative director at The Laundry Design Works

The connections built in the early years of The Laundry are driving the agency's work now, says McCluskey. "It's so much more than handing out business cards. It's about making genuine connections with people you want to do work with." Another key message McCluskey offers is that entrepreneurs can't

be afraid to fail, because lessons come from mistakes.

"I hope to continue a relationship with the Centre for Entrepreneurship because I love what they are building over there. In typical Mohawk fashion, it's hands-on and will really help people at a fundamental level."



Videographer Geet Chahil grateful for business advice through SURGE

When Geet Chahil graduates later this semester from Television and Communications Media, he feels he will be well prepared to take his video production company to the next level.

He started Geet Chahil Productions Inc. three years ago and decided to join SURGE last year.

"I was linked up with a business coach and that has been phenomenal. He's been a fantastic resource."

During weekly meetings, Chahil talks to his coach about what he's accomplished, what he's working on and future goals. Chahil has forged a niche in marketing videos for businesses that weave in storytelling.



Geet Chahil, Television and Communications Media student

"If you can't find a job, you can't apply all these creative skills you have.



Starting your own business isn't easy. There are a lot of things to learn, and to do that in school is a great running start."

– Geet Chahil

"My coach has been a nice sounding board for me. There are so many things to take care of in the creative fields. Creatives, especially, tend to struggle with business. They can create the best videos, photos and graphic design, but they struggle with selling themselves."

Working with a business coach has shortened the learning curve on business plans and marketing strategy, says Chahil. Joining SURGE has also allowed access to a lawyer to read over Chahil's client contracts and even resulted in job referrals.

"I think the biggest thing is that my coach has helped me shift my focus from one-off videos for clients to a series of videos for a fixed fee that build on one another. That is a stronger strategy that means more steady income and a pipeline of work that evens out the peaks and valleys of freelancing."

His coach has also helped Chahil get more confident about networking. It's all resulting in a business that is taking off. "If not for SURGE, I wouldn't be here this fast."

Chahil is excited to see Mohawk expand its entrepreneurial resources for students. "If you can't find a job, you can't apply all these creative skills you have. Starting your own business isn't easy. There are a lot of things to learn, and to do that in school is a great running start." ■■■

Mohawk's entrepreneurial micro-centres

SURGE is Mohawk College's start-up incubator, offering free one-on-one mentoring and supports to Mohawk students and alumni who are entrepreneurs or want to become entrepreneurs.

The Agency is a highly successful experiential learning program within the McKeil School of Business in which students from Advertising, Public Relations, Marketing, Graphics, Broadcast Media, Journalism and Photography work together to solve communication challenges for for-profit and non-profit businesses.

The Collective is an inventory of student freelancers in a variety of fields, including media, communications, construction and skilled trades, and software and web design. The Collective includes a mandatory boot camp for students and alumni to teach the operations, legal and marketing skills needed to create and run a business.

The Consultancy is a paid experiential learning opportunity for select student intrapreneurs who act as consultants and work within teams to help community businesses launch products, digitize, undertake market research and enhance their operations. ■■■

Learn more at
entrepreneurship.mohawkcollege.ca