Creating a Global Community During the Pandemic

Many of us would agree that strength of community has always been at the heart of an independent school education. If there was ever a year to test this strength, 2020 was the year. Stories have been shared about how U.S. schools (both public and private) have navigated these times. But what about schools beyond the United States’ border? How have travel restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic impacted the ability to create a sense of belonging? How do we provide a global community of adolescents with what they need most right now, which is connection to one another?

Three Canadian schools have shared their challenges, their experiences, and their successes in cultivating belonging within their communities while navigating the challenges of the 2020–2021 school year.
A deep sense of community is at the heart of Shawnigan. The seismic disruption of COVID-19 in March 2020 challenged us to rapidly reproduce the Shawnigan experience online. In response, we created SOUL (Shawnigan Online Unique Learning)—a platform for global connection, which focused on generating belonging across time zones in a time of de-socialization for teenagers.

The success of SOUL for our students (and their families), word-of-mouth marketing, our boarding school bubble and on-campus learning, our geographic location on Vancouver Island (with its low COVID-19 case numbers) definitely have had an impact on our 95% re-enrollment and growing waiting list for the academic year 2021-22. Full boarding has seen an upsurge in demand and, here at Shawnigan, we have seen increased interest from the domestic market, the US, Europe and Asia.

COVID-19 has presented its challenges. One of our Assistant Heads has used the refrain in meetings: ‘for our next global pandemic, I’ll make a note to...’.

However, it has also been an undoubted accelerator for positive change. We have seen this in action at Shawnigan - from the implementation of a progressive new timetable to a fresh focus on inquiry-based learning, from a unique approach to the Grade 8 experience to innovative pedagogical thinking, from inspired student initiatives and leadership to envisioning our future strategic planning. It has been exciting.

In response to global events during the summer of 2020—which have resonated both widely and painfully—we have engaged in discussions with members of our community and reflected on the progress we have made over the past couple of years. We have established a ‘BE A JEDI’ team (Belonging, Continues...
Equity, Acceptance, Justice, Embracing, Diversity, Intersectionality), drawn from students, staff, alumni and governors. We are committed to championing and acting upon these values in a way that calls upon everyone to BE A JEDI.

Our Canadian and international students have consistently expressed their gratitude for returning to School in the Fall of 2020. They approached our safety protocols with grace and maturity with many making sacrifices to protect our campus ‘bubble’.

The Indian novelist, Arundhati Roy, wrote: ‘Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.’ Again and again, COVID-19 has forced us to reimagine our Shawnigan traditions and routines and it has proven to be a gateway to new ideas, initiatives, opportunities and silver linings. One Governor wrote recently with this message: ‘I am amazed how you all have turned this pandemic into one of the most creative periods in the School’s history.’

Every Shawnigan student will tell anyone that they are in the best House—and so it should be. In these times, however, the connections and bonds within House are even stronger and more important than ever before. The community has needed to be flexible, patient and supportive - with the grade 12 students picking the verb ‘Adapt’ for profiling on their annual word T-shirt for this academic year with the following definition:

adapt (vb)
To enter life’s dance with curiosity and openness; To cultivate flexibility in the face of uncertainty.
s’habituer (French)
nats’thut (Hul’q’umi’num, indigenous language of local area around Shawnigan)
Like nearly all boarding schools and schools around the world, our campus closed in early March 2020, just as we began our spring break. In the snap of our fingers, our biggest draw for families to boarding—the in-person connections—was taken away. We moved to an online platform very quickly and with relative ease. Despite our greatest efforts to stay connected with virtual assemblies, virtual house activities, and of course, all-virtual classes, it was far from the same. In my mind, there was no question as to whether we would re-open for in-person classes in the fall.

It seemed like as soon as we went online in March, we likewise started planning for re-opening in September, though like most schools around the world, we were definitely uncertain as to what it would all look like. However, my leadership team knew that it had to be done, so everyone put their heads down and simply got to work. We communicated each step, each decision, and every plan to all our constituents.

We knew that we didn’t know everything, so we continually sought—and welcomed—feedback. The challenges that we faced as we approached opening day were plentiful. The travel ban to Canada was still in effect for all our international students who applied for study permits after March 18. Study permit processing was not just slow, but at a literal standstill. We would start the year with our returning boarders, our Canadian and American boarders, and our day students. Two weeks before we were set to welcome our first group of students to campus for their 14-day quarantine, we experienced another blow: our U.S. day students who crossed the border each day to come to school would no longer be eligible to do so as they could not meet Public Health’s quarantine requirement. We connected with local families and found space in residence. Day students became boarders, moved in with local families, or started the year online. We forged ahead.

But the biggest concern that was repeatedly voiced by our leadership team was looming. How could we possibly re-create the family-feel, close-knit community that we all loved? How could we create the same connections and the feelings of belonging? We had all our students and faculty socially distancing, they were wearing masks, and we had set up so many separations to create grade and sports bubbles that this seemed impossible. We would also be asking our students to remain on campus for the entire first term with no weekend leaves, much less leaving campus to go to town. And we all knew that sports competitions or travel was uncertain.

What we didn’t realize was that the connections were already forming, even before we all arrived on campus, and they were only strengthened once we were all together, despite the many restrictions and regulations. The multiple weekly Zoom calls that we had initiated with parents and new families over the summer continued throughout the fall. Parents who joined regularly as well as those who joined occasionally created connections they hadn’t experienced before COVID. This commitment led to parents getting together to plan and implement a surprise “Parent Special” activity for all the students.
on campus. The weekly meetings also helped with support and buy-in every time we had to make difficult decisions, like no weekend leaves for boarders throughout the term and then the cancellation of parent visits (even outdoor visits) once we went into the red alert level in November. The strong parent connections also helped to keep the many international parents waiting for study permit approval and travel eligibility from losing hope.

The commitment from our student life team was to run the absolute best weekend animation (Quebec’s terminology for recreation) activities possible. Our animation coordinator engaged the Grade 12s—every one of them—to make all the activities “cool,” from the simplest of games (like Bingo) to an extravagant haunted forest for Halloween.

With no teams traveling and no external events, students became even closer than they had in previous years. In fact, they got to know students with whom they would have had less connection in a “regular” year.

The final ingredient for creating a feeling of belonging is to have a school full of grateful and appreciative students, faculty, and parents. I am not really sure how to create that part, but I live it and breathe it each and every day. Its existence is crucial and I believe that gratitude truly is the secret ingredient. It extends beyond the perimeter of our campus, into our community, and flows internationally.

Therein lies the key to what I hope will be years of future success as we move through this pandemic into our new “new normal”!

Stanstead College is an independent boarding school in Stanstead, Quebec, Canada, for boys and girls in Grades 7 through 12. The school is located on a 600-acre campus in Quebec’s Eastern Townships—just north of the Canada-United States border—and enrolls approximately 240 students.
When COVID-19 reached Canada, our “Town Hall” virtual gatherings led by our Headmaster, Mr. J. Edward Kidd, along with our leadership team, became an integral part of our school and communication strategy. With the assistance of current students and their families, both prospective and newly enrolled families have provided overwhelmingly positive feedback about these virtual events. We realized that to facilitate our enrollment for 2020/21, and to welcome back our international students, we would need to develop a comprehensive return to campus master plan. This plan included mitigation measures for a healthy campus by creating an extensive self-isolation plan on campus in August of 2020. We welcomed back to campus over 120 international students who needed care and oversight to complete their mandatory 14-day federal quarantine process. As a school, we elected to remain open every long weekend and during extended breaks throughout the school year to support our international students. This, in turn, provided international parents comfort in sending their children to Canada for schooling.

Our Ridley College Family Guild members serve an integral role in welcoming new families to the area and into the Ridley community. They are an active part of our Ambassador program and are intentional in their connection with our families. Their outreach also includes parent mentors and grade representatives who personally welcome every new family to the region. Local playdates and coffee chats truly make families relocating to the Niagara region feel like a part of the Ridley community even before they reach their new home or before their child joins our large boarding community. Along with our Family Guild, admission officers work in specific regions, connecting current families to prospective and newly enrolled members within their home country.

Helping families identify their child’s needs prior to their first day on campus is the customer service level that we strive to achieve. We believe that the admissions role does not end with an offer of enrollment; it truly begins with this. From here, our goal is to provide families with an even deeper understanding of why Ridley was the right choice of school.

Our community has strengthened thanks to our enhanced communication measures and resilient approach in solving challenges during COVID-19. Yes, we have experienced life in a global pandemic, but it’s through our parent and student feedback that we believe our value proposition has endured. Terar Dum Prosim, our school motto, translates to “May we be consumed in service.” This statement lives large at Ridley. Yesterday, today, and going forward, we are truly grateful for our students, families, and each other.

Ridley College was established in 1889 and is located in picturesque St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. As Ontario’s largest boarding program, and one of the largest in Canada, Ridley offers the International Baccalaureate continuum program (PYP, MYP, and IB Diploma, along with OSSD options). We offer classes commencing from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12/PG.