

College constantly forced to adapt to meet student needs

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Leith Dunick



Confederation College president Jim Madder delivers his state of the college address on Wednesday; May 24; 2017 (Leith Dunick; tbnewswatch.com)

Thunder Bay school might be celebrating its 50th anniversary, but it's certainly not standing pat says president Jim Madder.

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THUNDER BAY – The ability to adapt on the fly is what's going to keep schools like Thunder Bay's Confederation College relevant moving forward.

College president Jim Madder on Wednesday agreed a school that stands still too long is one that likely won't succeed.

"One of the characteristics of a college is constantly looking at what it's doing, how it's doing it. Is it in the right place? Do we have the right supports for students," Madder said, moments before delivering his annual state of the college address to community leaders.

"We have 600 students in our upgrading programs. That's unheard of for a college of our size. Every college is different. Every college has to respond to its community needs and has to say this is where we are now, but if in five years from now we're in a different place, we've got to respond to that."

Celebrating its 50th year, Confederation College is not without its challenges, first and foremost changing

demographics in Ontario's north.

Madder stressed the need to attract students from southern Ontario to make up the difference, noting the regional population decline is anywhere from one to three per cent each year.

The signs are good so far, he said.

Over the past three years the number of students coming from the south had doubled, to 523. The college also boasts 634 international students from 18 countries, combined about 15.8 per cent of the 7,297 students attending the school this year.

Confederation College has continued to grow and adapt to meet those challenges over the past 50 years, Madder said.

"We started off with one campus and we now have nine campuses, providing support for people right across Northwestern Ontario. We started off with no technology and now you can't deliver programming at all without technology in our own classrooms, let alone across the north," he said.

"The changes during that time period are quite remarkable."

Things will continue to shift in the years ahead, he added.

This fall the Minowaadiziwin Wellness Centre will open, followed shortly thereafter by a Tech Hub that will allow the college to expand its technology and manufacturing programs, as well as a partnership with the Northwest Innovation Centre.

Having a wing at a new high school in Sioux Lookout dedicated to the college and a new program teaching Indigenous governance are also highlights, Madder said.

Don Campbell, the chairman of the college's board of governors, said throughout the school's history it's had to be willing to change or face irrelevancy.

"One of our mandates is jobs for our students and jobs have to be filled by employers throughout Northwestern Ontario. So we have to keep up," Campbell said. "This isn't a local issue. This is a world challenge and we're going to meet that challenge."