

# Assessing and Overcoming the 21st Century Challenges of the Modern-Day Conservatory

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By rethinking the role of—and possibilities open to—the Conservatory, it's possible to transform it into an active and significant hub of the local community, and significant revenue generator.

Each major Canadian city is home to a distinguished conservatory—an

institution providing premier performing arts instruction. Many of these conservatories exist under the umbrella of a university or college offering professional-minded students an elite program culminating with an academic credential. Most of these institutions also offer preparatory syllabi—foundational pre-postsecondary training programs for children and youth/students who may, or may not, ultimately pursue an arts-related career. These conservatories carry onward historical traditions, schools of technique, and cultural practices; they promote the healthy debate of pedagogical curricula and show aspiring students what is possible; they introduce pupils to their first lessons and guide others towards emerging professional careers; they ultimately enhance our civilization—producing and releasing artistic beauty into the world. Yet, the 21st Century has brought with it new challenges and struggles for these performing arts schools: diminished funding, an unpredictable economy, declining patronage, an indulgent society, private/community competition, and an ongoing identity crisis. These trials have forced conservatory leadership to either find ways to adapt to current modernisms or risk becoming extinct.

Using my home institution as a case study, I will outline recent challenges and offer strategies regarding how we've moved forward in today's often difficult environment.

### **Setting the Scene: Mount Royal University Conservatory (Calgary, Alberta)**

Now in its second century, Mount Royal University's Conservatory enjoys a proud history. Past and present faculty members are recognized leaders in their field. The school has produced alumni who have established successful professional arts careers, while many other former students discovered the joy of music and now carry forward a lifelong passion for the arts.

However, the past eight years have presented new and significant challenges for the conservatory. Some of the trials began with the transition as Mount Royal changed from a community college to a university; the new Mount Royal University seemed to shift its focus towards baccalaureate degree-granting streams. This institutional transformation resulted in the conservatory being lost—absent from the agenda of a new university-focused administration. The conservatory's pre-university/preparatory program, while genuinely respected, was also not fully understood by the university culture. The conservatory's youth classes, children's programs, and community ensembles confused and even conflicted with Mount Royal's new image and brand. In 2013, the

university suspended its two-year post-secondary Music Diploma Program. The conservatory's historic financial draw had become a heated topic too. In fact, there was some debate whether the university even needed to have a conservatory.

Additionally, the conservatory's pre-university programs—always its core business—began to struggle due to intense and formidable community competition. Undoubtedly, there was a time when the conservatory offered unique and even pioneering programming—a cultural gem in the region. However, over the past decade, one need only scan the competitive arts education scene within the city to realize the conservatory's unique marketplace share had significantly diminished. Offering convenience of location, the competing programs were strategically situated to serve most communities throughout the city, while providing attractive perks such as free parking. Rather ironically, it was often former conservatory students and past conservatory instructors who launched these rival studios—the conservatory had become a victim of its own success.

### **Cue the Comeback: The Eight Foundational Pillars**

To address the growing threats, diminished enrollment and financial strains, the conservatory immersed itself into a process of extensive self-study. The methodology included querying input from a variety of internal and external stakeholder groups such as students, parents, instructors, staff, community partners, donors, senior university administration, and leadership from other benchmarking school and conservatories. With this feedback plus relevant market research, the conservatory began its journey to create a strategic plan—the first in its long history.

Moving forward, the Mount Royal University Conservatory leadership team will embrace the following eight foundational pillars—cornerstones of its forthcoming strategic plan. These objectives will act as touchstones as decisions are made and the roadmap is plotted thereby guiding our journey ahead over the coming years.

#### *Pillar 1: Sustainability*

Sustainability means managing the conservatory as an arts organization using business acumen—entrepreneurial, strategic, fiscally responsible; and cultivating a private-sector mentality while living within, and contributing to, a public-

sector institution. In sum, we will champion an artistically vibrant institution that is also financially sustainable.

### *Pillar 2: Artistic and Pedagogical Excellence*

This includes developing and delivering distinguished programming that yields a sound student experience via three key areas:

- Fostering creative expression and growth in our students.
- Providing and promoting the highest standard of arts education by employing creative instructors who are recognized industry-leaders.
- Leveraging our infrastructure—our state-of-the art/world class facilities and assets.

### *Pillar 3: Inclusiveness*

We will promote inclusive programming that advocates for:

- A balance of elite professional programs with recreational community offerings.
- A broad range of musical styles (classical music, jazz, musical theatre, popular styles, folk traditions, world music and others)
- Recognize Indigenization within conservatory events and programming.
- Offer programming regardless of:
  - The stage the student is aspiring to (Carnegie Hall or the living room)
  - The stage of their life (children, youth, adults, seniors)
  - Their stage of development (beginner to professional)

### *Pillar 4: Community Profile*

The conservatory will be a recognized community leader and partner—a go-to educational institution for creative performing arts and cultural programming. We will work harder to advance the brand recognition and reputation of the conservatory within the surrounding community by celebrating:

- Distinguished instructors
- Student successes
- Alumni stories
- Model programming
- Unequaled facilities
- Public events

- Partnerships with other recognized community arts beacons

Factors related to success will include:

- Building a true community of invested citizens—instructors, students and staff.
- Developing a higher and broader profile for the Conservatory within the community at large.
- Establishing ourselves as a member within the larger community of conservatories (both regionally and beyond).

#### *Pillar 5: Internationalization*

This past summer, Mount Royal University's Conservatory, in partnership with the university's Languages Institute, launched the inaugural program, Global Voices. Music students from two Chinese universities travelled to Mount Royal University to study English and music, as well as explore Alberta's beautiful landscapes and experience its culture. Of course, for 20 years the conservatory was also the home of Music Bridge. These programs provided students with life-changing educational experiences. The students have now become part of the Mount Royal community and will continue to be ambassadors for the university.

Moving ahead, it's important for the Conservatory to build and maintain international relationships. We must continue to explore and nurture successful partnerships to position ourselves on the world stage. These essential international friendships provide opportunities for students and instructors to experience an intercultural exchange through music.

#### *Pillar 6: Communication*

With 15 administrative staff members, 175 instructors, and over 4,000 students, the Mount Royal University Conservatory is one of the largest conservatories in North America. When you combine those statistics with the conservatory's deep history in the community, its network of people is vast. It is essential for the conservatory to create a strategic Communications Plan. The design should:

- Strive for regular publicity in all media forms
- Improve communication both internally and externally

Ultimately, this plan must create unity among the conservatory's large and diverse community of staff, students, and supporters.

### *Pillar 7: Credential Approval*

Credential approval means working towards having all programming curricula institutionally approved and, where necessary, appropriate and available, seeking provincial approvals. We must be sure our programs are recognized in other countries and do what is necessary to assure foreign schools of our rigorous standards.

### *Pillar 8: Alumni Engagement*

We will strategically engage former conservatory instructors, students and parents, as well as champions in the community, and develop a strong alumni network geared towards celebrating student success, improving communication, supporting community growth, and advancing critical philanthropy so as to cultivate future success.

## **Leveraging the Eight Pillars to Envision the Future**

These eight pillars serve as the foundation for the Mount Royal University Conservatory's forthcoming strategic plan. Moving forward, we will refine our strategic goals to develop further strategies, create measures of accountability, and build timelines for each of the framework pillars. Even though this planning process is organic and ongoing, we have already begun to implement the ideals and goals behind this framework.

The modern-day Canadian conservatory is experiencing 21st-century challenges. How do we continue to move forward? How do we best identify our strengths, mitigate any weaknesses, capitalize on new opportunities, and confront external threats? Some of the answers are right here, via the dissemination of this writing—by sharing our unique experiences and telling our institutional stories we are presented with the opportunity to learn from each other. A necessary co-operative future includes creating a community rather than cultivating competition. There has never been a more urgent time for conservatories to communicate, collaborate and share their collective knowledge and institutional experiences. With these points in mind, I am pleased to announce Mount Royal University will host the Western Canadian Conservatories Symposium—a first of its kind event in Canada—on May 27 and 28, 2018. Registration is strong and, most encouragingly, one of the other participating conservatories has already agreed to host the symposium's 2019 second edition.

Our future is bright.

[https://evollution.com/managing-institution/higher\\_ed\\_business/assessing-and-overcoming-the-21st-century-challenges-of-the-modern-day-conservatory/](https://evollution.com/managing-institution/higher_ed_business/assessing-and-overcoming-the-21st-century-challenges-of-the-modern-day-conservatory/)