

Ken Steele

Co-Founder at Academica Group Inc.

London, ON, CA

Higher Education Trendspotter/Futurist and Strategist

Biography

Ken Steele has a wide-ranging perspective on higher education as a former academic, entrepreneur, consultant and de facto journalist. He spent a decade studying and teaching English Literature, specifically Shakespearean drama, at Western and the University of Toronto. His next decade was spent in the ad agency world, where Ken won regional, national and international awards for marketing strategy, graphic design, public service, and outstanding business achievement. For the past decade, a company Ken co-founded, Academica Group, has conducted the largest PSE consumer studies in the world. More than 22,000 subscribers have come to rely on Ken as editor of Canada's leading higher ed news daily, the Academica Top Ten. He has consulted extensively with a hundred colleges and universities across the country, and delivers hundreds of keynotes on emerging trends every year. Ken also curates a new online resource, the Eduvation IdeaBank, which shares "bright ideas" reshaping the higher education landscape.

Availability

Keynote, Moderator, Panelist, Workshop, Corporate Training

Industry Expertise

Education/Learning, Market Research, Advertising/Marketing

Areas of Expertise

Emerging Trends Affecting Higher Education, Strategic Enrolment Management, Student Recruitment, Marketing & Branding, Brand Chemistry, Peak Campus, Higher Ed Revenue Generation

Affiliations

International Association of Business Communicators, Academica Group Inc, American Marketing Association, World Futurist Society, Academica Top Ten, Chair Academy

Sample Talks

The Road Ahead for Higher Ed: Emerging Trends 2014

As colleges and universities accelerate toward an uncertain future, there are nonetheless clear signs that the road ahead will be congested with local and global competition, that urbanization and immigration patterns will increasingly reroute student traffic to a handful of major metropolitan centres, that government funding will no longer fuel the status quo, and that new technologies and pedagogical approaches will leave many feeling like they are no longer in the driver's seat. The majority of Canadian institutions will face "peak campus" by 2030, and will need to serve an increasingly diverse array of students with rising expectations for personalized, flexible, unbundled and interdisciplinary educational options, career-relevant programs, work-integrated learning experiences, and accommodations and supports for special needs. Libraries, textbooks, classroom instruction, student evaluation and credentials themselves are under increasing pressure to evolve, and many institutions have already shifted into the fast lane to explore the potential of new technologies and operational strategies. Institutions that aim to survive and thrive in a rapidly-changing landscape will need to clarify their destination, and map their own unique route to get there – but no matter the route, they will need to take into account the continually changing warning signs of demographic, economic, political, social, and technological changes on the road ahead.

The Future-Ready Campus: Scenario Planning for 2025 and beyond

To set a solid foundation for long-term strategic, academic or enrolment planning, campus leadership needs to contemplate emerging trends and project a range of possible scenarios, favourable and otherwise. By 2025, many institutions will face the reality of "peak campus" as youth demographics decline and focus on major metropolitan centres, the labour market heats up and students pursue part-time and work-integrated options, and technologies allow an increasingly broad range of teaching, resources, and services to be delivered virtually. Government funding will be more targeted, and will have heightened demands for outcome-based evaluation, from student completion to knowledge transfer, employment and return on investment. Forward-looking institutions are developing new global or online markets, partnering and collaborating with a broad range of partners in all sectors, launching innovative and flexible interdisciplinary programs, and building a more coherent brand and national reputation.

The Evolving Student: Understanding Your Markets

In the past few decades, the college and university student population in Canada has multiplied and diversified exponentially, to include growing numbers of international students, new Canadians, Indigenous youth, older working students, students with special needs, diverse gender orientations and multiple learning styles. Traditional students still exist, but alongside them is arising a populous new breed of careerist and consumerist students with very different motivations, objectives and expectations. The student gene pool is diversifying, evolving, and challenging institutions to provide more academic and personal advising, enhanced residences and co-curriculars, early warning systems and proactive supports, flexible and career-focused programs, and a wider variety of pedagogical approaches. The DNA of 21st century students will increasingly be evolving through exposure to digital technologies, with growing expectations for learning that is interactive, experiential, mobile, and social. Institutions, and the faculties or schools within them, need to understand their market, anticipate its evolution, and refresh their programs, services and delivery modalities to provide the ideal environment for the new species of students to flourish.

Rethinking Higher Education: Innovations in Teaching & Learning

Colleges and universities face demands for change from all sides: students want more flexible, career-relevant and experiential programs; provincial governments want expanded access and enhanced student success, while also demanding ever-greater efficiencies and measurable outcomes, even while students arrive less prepared and requiring more supports than ever; the federal government is encouraging more applied research, commercialization and economic impact; employers want more “job-ready” graduates; and faculty want to maintain personal and professional quality of life. In the 20th century, PSE institutions scaled up traditional teaching by applying industrial-age models, resulting in ever-larger lecture classes, multiple-choice exams, simplified grading systems, contingent faculty, managerialism and labour unionization. Scaling up the traditional system further is not an option: the time has come to rethink some of our longstanding assumptions about residency requirements, course credits, the agrarian calendar, intellectual Darwinism, disciplinary silos, the humanities, lecture classes, libraries, textbooks, social interaction, and student evaluation. For some kinds of learners, and some programs, the time and technology have come to open our minds to consider flexible hybrid delivery, gamification and simulations, interdisciplinary courses, active and experiential learning, intelligent textbooks and adaptive learning platforms, competency-based credentials and expanded transcripts incorporating co-curriculars, work experience, and badges.

Brand Chemistry™: Strategic Institutional Positioning

In an increasingly competitive, global landscape for student recruitment, most colleges and universities desperately need to stake out a credible, compelling, and distinctive brand position, and find creative and memorable ways to communicate it to all stakeholders. Unfortunately, corporate branding processes tend to fail when applied in the collegial, decentralized culture of most academic institutions.

Building on decades of award-winning experience in brand strategy, comprehensive data on stakeholder perceptions of institutional positions, and dozens of successful rebranding projects for Canadian colleges and universities, Ken Steele has developed a data-driven conceptual model of Brand Chemistry™ which actually thrives in academic environments, gathering input from all corners of the institution and building consensus around a focused brand strategy.

Higher education institutions can assemble a unique formula for their own distinctive brand, but they must start with elements from a finite table of possibilities. Brand analysis can measure the perceptions of key stakeholders (including students, applicants, faculty and alumni), to determine which brand elements are solid, and which are still aspirational “vapour.” Assessment of competitor positions can define those high-energy elements that have real potential as differentials. Then a series of brand “fusion experiments” combine those elements in a variety of ways to ultimately arrive at a single brand formula to guide institutional strategic planning, brand creative, and marketing efforts for years to come.

Education

University of Western Ontario

Honours Bachelor of Arts English Language & Literature

University of Toronto

MA English Literature

University of Toronto

PhD (ABD) Renaissance/Shakespeare

Accomplishments

Outstanding Business Achievement Award

The London Chamber of Commerce Outstanding Business Achievement Award, small business category.

Paul Harris Fellow

My long-time Rotary Club, London South, awarded me a Paul Harris Fellowship and an Honorary Membership in recognition of years of service.

IABC London Virtuoso Award

Award for PR strategy and impact, "Breathless" Campaign for Council for a Tobacco-Free Community.

IABC London Virtuoso Award

Award for Robarts Research Institute Annual Report

IABC Canada Silver Leaf Award

National award of excellence from the International Association of Business Communicators for a campaign strategy for Council for a Tobacco-Free Community.

IABC National Silver Leaf Award of Excellence

National award from the International Association of Business Communicators for a regional youth employment campaign strategy, "Team London for Youth."

Testimonials

Christian Lacroix

"Informative, thought-provoking, and relevant are three words that describe Ken Steele's recent presentation at UPEI. His talk brought approximately 100 members of our university community together to consider the latest trends affecting the role of teachers and models of undergraduate teaching and learning. The presentation was followed by a workshop on the same topic... a great way to open the discussion on a variety of issues as we embark on an academic planning exercise at UPEI."

Sharon Carry

"We choose to have Ken come back time and again because every time he is on campus he inspires our people to innovate. Still every visit is fresh. Staff are delighted to see the Canadian post-secondary system reflected in Ken's presentations – a rare treat for those who have become accustomed to going south for inspiration. Even those who have heard Ken before walk away with something new to apply to their own work. Also, Ken has been very thoughtful about tailoring the materials to our particular needs at Bow Valley College."

Rodger Wright

"Ken Steele led off a week of strategic planning at Collingwood School by presenting multiple times to Faculty, Board members and parents. He talked with real authority about the emerging trends in education and did it in such a compelling and engaging way. He had us all thinking. It was particularly impressive that he gave essentially the same presentation three times but tailored it strategically to each different audience – brilliant!"

Geoff Roberts

“Ken’s presentation to our Board and our school Leadership Team was a critically important component of our comprehensive preparation towards the creation of our next strategic plan. He was delightfully provocative and entertaining, and the presentation was data-rich. He was able to answer any and all questions about the university and college environments with confidence and grace. Ken Steele’s perspectives and wisdom were invaluable.”

Barry Hughes

“Ken’s presentations were outstanding. Knowledgeable and insightful, he engaged well with his audience and stimulated lots of questions during his data-rich talks. Clearly Ken is an expert in the developing world of PSE, and we were grateful that he was able to get us up to speed.”

Don Gnatiuk

“Ken Steele and Academica Group proved to be invaluable to GPRC as we refined and refreshed our brand. Ken engaged all segments of our widely varied stakeholder group, and provided insightful recommendations for our consideration. Ken Steele is the type of consultant who reveals, rather than creates, a suggested path based upon skillful research and interpretation.”

Catherine Mateer

"I can't thank you enough for the wonderful day that you spent with our faculty and staff. I can't believe how hard we worked you, and how much we packed it. You were such a trooper! I have had wonderful feedback on your presentation and visits."

Steven E. Franklin, PhD

"When organizing our Board of Governors' Planning Session, I couldn't think of a better speaker than Ken Steele to discuss the broader education landscape. Ken has a comprehensive understanding of the latest trends, opportunities and challenges facing higher education."

Robert E. Simmonds

"The comments received from our delegates [to the Canadian University Boards Association 2012 conference] suggest that, in addition to being informed, they were also entertained and, dare we say, maybe even charmed."

Donald E. Burke

"Your presentation had a strong, positive impact upon the Board. There was very strong, unanimous endorsement of the value of our time together. They said that the information you presented provided them with needed context and a greater understanding of the Canadian scene in PSE. In short, your time with us accomplished everything that I had hoped! My suspicion is that they will want to engage with you again in the future. Thanks, again, for your work with our Board. It was time well-spent and a great investment in the future of Booth."

Dr. David J. Helfand

"Ken showed up on our BC campus at 8PM after a flight from Ontario and didn't lose a minute — working a faculty gathering for information all evening. He then plunged into a day and a half of meetings with a perspicacity unmatched in my experience, emerging with a thorough understanding of who we are and what we needed. His tactical and strategic recommendations helped lead to a 51% increase in enrolment this fall, and he continues to help us spread the word about our new University long after his contract was up."

Eileen De Courcy

"If you are lucky, every now and then you may have an opportunity to witness real mastery. Ken Steele provided this opportunity in a masterful, thought provoking presentation. He has a unique ability to transform data into a riveting, visually pleasing story that has big and lasting impact."

Christine Tausig Ford

"My day would not get off to the right start without reading Ken Steele and Academica's Top Ten. It's the first email I open every morning... For anyone looking for the scoop on Canadian higher education, you can trust Ken Steele to keep you informed and connected."

Gerry Kendal

"Ken has provided critical consultancy as we look to understand our current and future student milieu; then, and perhaps of even greater value, he has provided critical facilitation as we look at ourselves in reaction to those understandings. We are much the better for Ken's insights and counsel."

Dr. Leo Groarke

"Ken has a truly remarkable command of current developments in the world of postsecondary education, both in Canada and beyond. His presentations are engaging, stimulating, and provocative — and delivered in a manner guaranteed to make audiences think about the future direction of PSE and the ways in which their own institutions might make the most of them. I recommend him highly."

Tracy Edwards

"Ken is an excellent speaker who can engage a variety of audiences from faculty through to Board members. Ken always includes provocative ideas that challenge existing paradigms and cause audiences to walk away with lots to think about."

Dr. Dave Marshall

"Ken's unique perspective on the Canadian post-secondary sector was evident at every step in the Positioning Summit, market survey, and his comprehensive White Paper."

Dr. Alan Shaver

"Canada is lucky to have Ken Steele, one of the most knowledgeable and trusted analysts of the remarkable changes we are seeing in PSE in Canada. Never one to pull punches he nevertheless delivers difficult news and uncomfortable insights in a convincing yet low key and gentle manner."

Marilyn Luscombe

"Ken Steele is a very dynamic and talented speaker and facilitator. Not only does he spell-bindingly paint a picture of the future of PSE, he also skillfully assists his audience to engage in vigorous discussion of key issues. Highly recommended!"

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