

# Practical Innovation: Pivoting to meet the demands of a hybridized environment post-COVID—Humber College continues to Lead, Transform and Differentiate

Gina Antonacci, PhD

*Senior Vice-President, Academic, Humber College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning*

Interviewed by Anju Kakkar

*Humber College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning*

**Almost every aspect of our lives has been impacted by** the global pandemic. We are nearing the two-year mark since COVID-19 changed our world incalculably. Businesses and individuals have had to adapt and pivot rapidly to this changing climate. The need for innovation has propelled the age of innovation. Socrates' words ring true today more than ever, "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but building on the new."

The Canadian economy, businesses, society, and academic, including polytechnic, institutions have displayed tremendous resilience, tenacity and endurance while adapting to a hybridized reality. From ensuring program offerings meet the demands of the industry, keeping students at the heart of decision-making, to redefining what education will look like in a hyflex environment, our polytechnics spare no effort in moving forward.

We sat down with Gina Antonacci, PhD, Senior Vice-President, Academic, Humber Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning, to discuss "practical innovation" and how polytechnic institutions like Humber College are indispensable to Canada's innovative future.

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### Author Note

**Anju Kakkar** is Managing Editor of Humber Press, Office of Research & innovation at Humber College ITAL.

**Office of Research & Innovation (ORI): Historically, major global crises have accelerated technological change. COVID-19 has propelled the world to rethink and reimagine our future. Can you tell us what steps Humber took to innovate post-COVID?**

**Gina Antonacci (GA):** Recovering from the initial onset of tremendous disruption, like everyone else, we have faced challenges, but we have also witnessed some positive outcomes. What COVID did is, by necessity, it moved us forward at an accelerated pace to put some key initiatives into action. Call it "innovation acceleration"; we did not have any more time to contemplate; we needed to just do it. As a result of the pandemic, we had to first and foremost move our face-to-face courses to a remote environment. I would refer to that adaptation as a "development phase", and we began by introducing elements of Virtual Teaching and Learning. Over time, we became more adept at understanding the virtual environment. We have arrived at a place where we are well able to assess the value-add of the virtual environment and ensure that we have the capacity to continue to offer courses and programs virtually. That is something that is going to stay with us as we move forward.

Offering students added flexibility to virtually access software offered at Humber has been a top priority. Post-COVID, we worked closely with our industry partners, and now our students can access a wide availability (over 100) of software and digital resources virtually.

Another encouraging element is that we explored how we could best offer work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities to our students in a virtual format. Led by Humber's International Centre, the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

framework was introduced. COIL has been an overwhelming success that connects students with peers worldwide, taking the form of an experiential learning project or module co-created through a Humber faculty or staff “match” with a faculty or staff at a partner institution in another region or country. I witnessed COIL’s tremendous value and success first-hand—my daughter is currently enrolled in a master’s program at Nottingham Trent University, UK, and she was part of a Humber-COIL project. This framework has proven to be truly transformative for our students and institutions alike.

Recognizing that there are elements and types of WIL experiences that cannot be fully experienced virtually, Humber’s technology experts have created a number of simulated environments for our students to learn specific skills. All these initiatives will continue to be offered as we move beyond the pandemic.

We have seen remarkable growth in the area of “research.” Research has continued to thrive despite the challenges and hurdles we faced during the pandemic. Humber continues to be very proactive with our research partnerships and industry/community involvement.

**ORI: Would you agree that Humber’s current trajectory would not have accelerated, to this degree, had we not been thrust into this pandemic?**

**GA:** We recognized long before the pandemic that we had to plan for a future influenced by digitization and growing demand for experiential opportunities offered by globally recognized institutions like Humber that combine a solid academic foundation with practical learning. The pandemic thrust us into actualizing our vision faster than planned and in a most time-efficient manner. For example, we established the Humber International Graduate School (IGS), which opened its doors in January 2021. In terms of innovation and academic excellence, the final frontier is what has been identified as the “hyflex” (hybrid flexible) education model. IGS was built for flexible teaching and learning and is the perfect example of a “hyflex” model. IGS houses global classrooms that support a hyflex academic delivery, facilitating engagement with students in class and those joining virtually simultaneously.

We want to continue to create hyflex situations where faculty and students are supported with the required technology in order to make it work while also continuing to be a leading polytechnic offering face-to-face applied learning opportunities in a safe environment.

Forging ahead, it is about creating refinement and sophistication

when it comes to seamlessly intertwining these different yet codependent models.

**ORI: What were the challenges Humber faced to adapt to this changing environment, especially adapting to a hyflex environment? What are the challenges that keep you up at night?**

**GA:** From an academic perspective, the challenge moving forward is to determine a cohesive and compatible balance between face-to-face and virtual delivery—what does that look like, and how do we create fulfilling virtual experiences for our students. I am confident that we will get better and excel and that we possess the capability to continue to adapt and innovate.

Admittedly, some of our students stated that an online learning environment might not suit them best. Applied learning is what attracted them to an institution like Humber, combining both theory and experiential learning. During the pandemic, the challenge for us was to ensure that those students had opportunities to defer some of the courses that were totally applied in nature and support them as they completed other required online courses.

Furthermore, the academic leadership team has worked closely with faculty, and we have made some choices around specific courses and programs that will remain fully online henceforth. Notably, the pandemic has underscored the importance of face-to-face learning. Moving forward, it is about trying to meet the needs of the diverse group of students that we serve, and we remain dedicated to continuously providing the best possible options for hands-on learning, virtual learning and a hyflex experience.

The only thing that really ever keeps me up at night is ensuring that we are meeting the needs of our students; students are always at the centre of our decision-making.

**ORI: Canada scored an overall C in innovation as per the Conference Board of Canada’s Innovation Report Card 2021. In particular, Labour Productivity scored a D. What role can polytechnic institutions play to prepare the future generation to meet the demands of workplaces, skills and competencies in the age of innovation?**

**GA:** I am confident that Canada’s colleges and polytechnic institutions are best positioned to assess where those gaps are, what gaps exist in skilled environments, and how to address them. There is a difference between a labour shortage versus a gap in skilled labour. Pertaining to a skilled labour shortage

that has not been trained appropriately to work in specific areas, I believe that we have the ability to assess and come up with strategies to address this, for example, in the form of micro-credentials where we offer very specific industry-based courses. The key is that we need to be connected to the needs of the industry. Fortunately, we have built robust industry and community relationships, and we are continuously evaluating feedback from our Program Advisory Committees (PACs).

We also need to continue to engage in research. Humber's rising ranks in research and industry partnerships are a testament to our constant collaboration with internal and external connections. These partnerships and deep-dive discussions on the specific subgroups of industries and the specific skills and competencies required inform and assist us in designing and developing courses, programs, and training.

**ORI: Can innovation be taught in classrooms?**

**GA:** Of course! Innovation is not just for students; it is for each of us. Innovation is about moving forward. Within the context of the college, innovation belongs to all of us; no matter what your role is, no matter where you sit in the college, you have an opportunity to think about ways that we can innovate, ways that we can grow, ways that we can be better, and ways that we can look at new opportunities. I look at innovation as a generic skill that we all require to move forward. We will continue to talk about how we build our capacity to be innovative and that it is not something that just belongs to people in certain roles. We can all be innovative thinkers, innovative doers, and have an innovative discourse.

The Centres of Innovation (COIs) at Humber champion “innovation” and “innovative discourse”, and we are going to continue to move this dialogue forward. I am an advocate of promoting productive dialogue on innovation; that is how you get buy-in, get people to connect, and recognize that it is not something to be afraid of; in fact, it is something that we are all good at. We all think about the future. So let us do it in a way that helps move Humber forward.

**ORI: “Innovation is a generic skill,” we remain encouraged and inspired by your words. Lastly, tell us how you have tackled achieving a work-life balance in this changing environment?**

**GA:** It has been a challenging time to engage in work-life balance. Each of us is responsible for achieving that balance, and some of us are better at it than others. I know that we must take care of ourselves so that we can take care of others. We must be role models and emphasize that self-care comes first. In our strategic plan, we have made a commitment towards being a healthy campus, and we encourage self-care and caring for others.

**Reference**

The Conference Board of Canada. (2021). *Innovation report card*. <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/focus-areas/innovation-technology/innovation-report-card>.  
Humber College. (2018). *Lead, Transform, Differentiate: 2018-2023 Strategic Plan*. <https://humber.ca/strategic-plan/>