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Denise Amyot: a One-Woman Band in Education

Interview by Anne-Marie Paquette

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan), Canada's network of public colleges, institutes, CEGEPs and polytechnics. The association is led by Ms. Denise Amyot, its seventh President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the first woman to hold this position at CICan. On the occasion of the association's jubilee, the leader of the education community gives an interview to *Pédagogie collégiale*, in which she discusses the main challenges facing the Canadian post-secondary system and, above all, the importance of creating sustainable relationships to face them.

Denise Amyot has a diverse background: a biologist and ecologist by training; an elementary and secondary school teacher in Ontario, Quebec and the Northwest Territories; a career of over 25 years in the federal public service; an acclaimed entrepreneur, leader and mentor; a committed volunteer in a variety of fields, including health sciences and post-secondary education; and, for nearly 10 years, the CEO of CICan. Her journey is that of a woman who is not afraid of change and who is passionate about her relationships with others. *"There was a period in the past when we moved five times in 20 years for my husband's job. To be honest, I loved it, even though I had to reinvent myself each time," she recalls. "You have to go back to the ecologist in me. These migrations made me discover different ecosystems. It gave me a more global view of what was going on in my province, my country, and eventually in the world."*

Denise Amyot realized quite early on that human relationships and networking mattered a lot, both in education management and in science. *"After working in a lab for a while, I said to myself, 'I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. I love the world too much, I love too many things to be locked in a box with test tubes and a spectrophotometer,'" she jokes. "With hindsight and experience, I realize that I mostly had this misconception of science that I associated with a solitary life in a laboratory. I now know that science is much more than that. In fact, ecology, for example, my favorite science, employs a rather holistic approach. It involved looking at the whole ecosystem, looking at all the parts, making connections. And that's exactly who I am and what I do at CICan: to be attentive to possible interactions and to bring together national and international partners around promising educational projects that meet the priorities of members."*

About CICan

CICan was created by members, for members, to strengthen the network of Canadian colleges, institutes, CEGEPs and polytechnics. Since 1972, the association has acted as a national and international voice on issues of priority to its members, and more broadly to the Canadian post-secondary education system.

After 50 years of existence,¹ the idea of uniting and speaking with one voice remains very strong among the members of CICan, now to take part in powerful global movements on issues such as sustainable development, equity and inclusion, and to address an unprecedented transformation of the labour market.

¹ Readers interested in learning more about specific events in the history of CICan can consult the 50-year timeline [collegesinstitutes.ca/en/the-50-years-of-canCan].

Understanding ecosystems

By definition, ecology is the study of natural environments, in relation to the living beings that inhabit them, and, above all, the observation of the relationships that living organisms sharing the same environment establish among themselves. In this sense, Denise Amyot, the ecologist, quickly found value as a federal public servant, an environment where links between different departments and movements from one department to another are commonplace. *"I learned so much and developed so many lasting relationships in 27 years in the federal public service. But it started with my work in the Northwest Territories Department of Education. Within months, I knew what was going on across the country. I was in contact with my peers across Canada by telephone—the Internet did not yet exist—and I had all the documentation related to my specific mandates sent to me in order to find out what was being done for French-language education in a minority setting in each province and territory. Ecology, the ecosystem, again and again! And people were saying: 'Who is she? She has only just arrived, and it seems like she knows everyone and what's going on nationally.'"*

In addition to this ability to connect with people easily, education is a cross-cutting theme in Denise Amyot's career. *"I've always had an interest in education," explains she who has held key positions in various federal government departments, including Natural Resources, National Defence, the Public Service Commission, Indigenous and Northern Affairs, and Canadian Heritage. "When I was at Indigenous Affairs, I was in charge of the education file. At the Department of the Secretary of State, I was responsible for official languages in education. At Natural Resources Canada*

and Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, it was public education on resource protection and anti-racism education. At National Defence, I took care of the recruitment of teachers and principals posted to Laher and Baden. At the Public Service Commission, I was responsible for the recruitment of post-secondary students, summer employment programs and management trainee programs. When I was the CEO of the Canada Science and Technology Museums Corporation, this educational dimension was once again implicitly present. And while education is a provincial and territorial jurisdiction, there are many sectors that touch on it at the federal level, I can assure you. Thus, my time in the public service allowed me not only to meet my needs on the scientific level, which were again very strongly present, but also to work in the economic, social and cultural domains, and to enrich my knowledge and skills in education, to broaden my network and to know my ecosystem... always."

In 2013, a head-hunter approached Denise Amyot when the CEO position at CICan became available. *"Quite honestly, this position was not on my radar. I didn't even know it was available... Then I started reading about this association, which I knew a little bit about because of my position as CEO of Canada Science and Technology Museums, and for which I had made a presentation with the goal of encouraging colleges to showcase their applied research innovations within our walls. I was familiar with the mission of CICan and at that time I was also on the Algonquin College Board of Governors. As a result, I was well aware of the amazing work being done by colleges, so I thought, 'Wow, this is really for me...' And 'the rest is history,' as they say. In fact, it's as if I've been groomed my whole life for this position because a lot of the issues were related to things I'd worked on before. It was an incredible coincidence."*

With this appointment, Denise Amyot became the first woman to head up CICan, an achievement she is proud of. As is her wont, she took an early interest in the inner workings of the association and its relationship with its members. A year after she took office, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) was renamed Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) to better represent the diversity of its membership. The name change highlights the new CEO's commitment to listening and bringing people together.

Going further, together

Like the association she leads and the members she represents, Denise Amyot believes in the power of numbers to transform an ecosystem. *"With the founding of community colleges in Ontario and other provinces and CEGEPs in Quebec in the 1960s, people quickly realized that they faced the same problems and shared the same challenges," she recalls. "The power of an association is precisely that of disseminating information and sharing best practices, of influencing ideas and approaches to eventually improve what we do."* Ms. Amyot adds by drawing a parallel with a hot topic for the college community. *"Take the example of cybersecurity. Both small and large colleges have recently been heavily impacted and others continue to be. But not all colleges have been affected yet, and some colleges are developing expertise in this area," she explains. "Well, it's exactly the same with an association. When you're part of an association, you have the chance to see things evolve and observe trends. It is then easier to know where to intervene and how to support others to transform the ecosystem. In any living environment, there are always components that are affected faster*

than others, or that move faster. At CIGan, we are constantly working to adapt and undertake new projects based on the needs of the communities we represent."

The strength of numbers is also one of the levers that facilitates the work of representing CIGan in various national and international forums. Ms. Amyot is very proud to present the map of CIGan members from coast to coast in Canada.² "When I show this map and all the places where we are present in Canada, in urban, rural, northern and remote communities, in precisely 691 locations across the country, people quickly see the potential for action," she says with a smile. Add to that the fact that 95% of Canadians and 86% of Indigenous people are within 50 km of one of the campuses, and the breadth of CIGan's network is clear. "Since we developed this map, our conversations, especially with the federal government, have changed. At a glance, you can see the strength of the network we represent and all the power for change that comes with it. Let's not forget that our members provide cutting-edge training, support innovation through applied research, and work with local businesses, community organizations, and communities. All of that is very valuable!"

It also appears that the pandemic has been a catalyst for the association. According to Denise Amyot, there has been a significant increase in awareness among governments and the general public of the importance of graduates from Canadian colleges and institutes. "COVID valued the work of these graduates. All of a sudden, people realized how important they were in the job market," she says. "Many of our graduates couldn't do their work behind a screen. They were serving the Canadian public, in the field, with the dangers that entailed." She adds that over the past two years,

the association has been approached to take part in all kinds of projects to support the care and services offered to Canadians, and also in connection with the labour shortage exacerbated by the pandemic.

Trends and challenges for a better world

In addition to these very current issues, other challenges of paramount importance animate the CEO of CIGan, her team and the members of the association. First and foremost: the environment and climate change. "The fight against climate change is the top priority. When you look at the position of Canada, we could do a lot better. When I think of the forest fires, severe storms, hurricanes and floods that we have in this country, I am far from optimistic. Indigenous people say that the decisions we make, we have to make for the next seven generations. We haven't done that and we're going to pay the price," she says. Like the Canadian government, CIGan has made a commitment to be carbon neutral by 2050. This, according to Denise Amyot, is a concrete example of how the association, whose mission is to build a better future for individuals and communities, can and must act. "We said to the government, 'Look, we have 691 campuses across the country, millions of students and graduates, motivated staff, and we're all over Canada. Imagine the leverage we have.' We are facing an enormous challenge, but we also have the potential to meet it. When you look at everything we do in colleges: student engagement, applied research, training, there's no denying the power of this network."

In the coming years, the CEO hopes that CIGan's orientations and actions will be even more closely aligned with

the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).³ "We already have 27 member institutions (including 9 in Quebec⁴), i.e., 20% of campuses, that have formalized their commitment to a more equitable and sustainable world by signing the SDG agreement. We want to see more and more of them, because we have until 2030 and because there is not one college institution, not one college technology transfer center (CTTC) that is not affected by the major challenges targeted by the SDGs."

² Readers wishing to consult the map of CIGan members across Canada can find it on the association's website [collegesinstitutes.ca/our-members/members-map/].

³ The United Nations' "17 Goals to Transform our World" propose a path forward to a more sustainable future for all. They "aim to address social, economic and environmental challenges. By bringing together both developed and developing countries, the SDGs are a roadmap to achieve better and more sustainable futures for all. The timeline for achieving the goals is 2030" (UN - Sustainable Development Summit, 2015).

⁴ The Quebec CEGEPs and colleges that have signed the SDG agreement are Cégep du Vieux Montréal, Cégep Édouard-Montpetit, Cégep de Saint-Félicien, Cégep de Trois-Rivières, Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles, Cégep Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Collège Montmorency, Collège de Rosemont and Collège Bois-de-Boulogne.



Source: SiberianArt/iStock

While Denise Amyot believes in the ability of individuals to mobilize and fight, as a network, against problems, injustices, and inequalities, she is adamant about the essential role that education plays in improving people's lives and sustainable development. As a first-generation student herself—one whose parents have no higher education credentials—she understands the importance of access to quality post-secondary education. "The great strength of colleges, CEGEPs, and institutes is accessibility. There are no closed doors. It's often the first door or the

last door to post-secondary education for many individuals. There is an abundance of opportunities, a wide range of programs for high school graduates and for adults who want to further their education or vocational training," she says. "For many students who don't have the role model of parents having attended a post-secondary institution, there are all kinds of mechanisms in place in CEGEPs and colleges to help them. One example is the Springboard to a DCS pathway in Quebec, which has its equivalent in other Canadian provinces in so-called pre-technology programs."

A large part of Denise Amyot's work as CEO of CICan is to bring together parliamentarians and national and international partners around promising and sustainable educational projects that meet the priorities of the association's members. Cultivating good business relationships and convincing funders is something she knows well. She is an entrepreneur after all. When a new employee once asked her, "How do projects land on our desk, Denise?" it was rather her mentor side that took over. "Look, you need to see what's

going on, hear what's being said. It's also important to understand the need that's being expressed and to imagine what CIGan could do to help. Sometimes you get a call, but more often than not, you have to seize the opportunity. Basically, you have to look for ways to connect and make connections." That sums up who Denise Amyot is: a woman of leadership, relationships and drive. —



Denise Amyot has been the CEO of CIGan since 2013. She has worked as an assistant deputy minister in the federal government. There, she also held key positions in various departments including: Human Resources Development Canada, National Defence, Natural Resources Canada, Indigenous and Northern Affairs, and also the Northwest Territories Department of Education. She serves on the boards of the Qatar Foundation, the Montfort Hospital, the Canadian Science Policy Centre (CSPC) and the Forum for International Trade Training (FITT), among others.

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