

# STRATEGIC PLANNING ENGAGEMENT REPORT

December 5, 2018

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The document summarizes the results<sup>1</sup> of a strategic planning engagement process undertaken by the Humber Arboretum & Centre for Urban Ecology in the fall of 2018. The many valuable suggestions from the strategic planning engagement sessions will inform development of the Arboretum's strategic plan in winter 2018-19. Many thanks to everyone who gave of their time and energy to participate in this process.

The engagement process encompassed fourteen one-on-one interviews, six focus groups, and a survey. Participants included City of Toronto, Humber College, University of Guelph-Humber (UofGH), Humber Arboretum, and Toronto and Region Conservation (TRCA) administrators and staff, Humber College and UofGH faculty members and students, parents of Humber Arboretum campers, local community leaders, local community members, and international experts.

## SUMMARY: ONLINE SURVEY

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### What the Humber Arboretum Does Well

*"The Arboretum is a catalyst in igniting a passion for nature in people and holds a huge capacity to impact Humber College students and their wellbeing..."*

#### What is **most valuable** about the Arboretum:

- the Arboretum as an **oasis, escape** or **urban greenspace** in contrast to surroundings
- a place for people to **connect with nature**
- a place for **learning**, either through Arboretum workshops or College connections
- an area for **habitat conservation, wildlife** & the preservation of **biodiversity**
- a place to enjoy **beautiful gardens** & an extensive **tree & plant collection**

#### Ranking of the importance of **current activities**. Top three selections:

1. Experiential learning opportunities for Humber College & UofGH students
2. Programs for elementary / secondary schools focused on the natural environment
3. Nature day camp programs for ages 5-13

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<sup>1</sup> While this document represents an overview of the results, we understand the importance of considering the many detailed and valuable suggestions that were made. This detailed feedback will be reviewed & considered in-depth during the implementation planning phase of our strategic planning process.

### **Prioritization of the current functions of the Arboretum:**

- A clear top priority emerged: “Protecting natural areas & establishing wildlife habitat through conservation & restoration practices”
- Five functions – community education & nature connection; supporting health & well-being; a comprehensive plant collection; demonstrating horticultural practices; & supporting learning & research at the college - were similar in ranking, in the above order.
- Establishing the Arboretum as an integral resource for Greater Toronto was second lowest, while promotion to national & international visitors was ranked lowest.

## **The Arboretum as a Space for Learning**

*“The outdoor spaces are amazing and what can be learned while out there, if surrounded by the right people is priceless.”*

### **Teaching on-site**

Most reported uses were from programs with **well-established connections to the Arboretum** such as Landscaping, Horticulture, and Early Childhood Education. An almost equal number of uses were based on **less obvious curriculum connections** (or where the program was unclear). Some respondents had used the space as an **outdoor classroom** or participated in a **tour**.

### **Obstacles to on-site teaching**

#### Practical problems related to **facilities/ time**:

*“I have been wanting to take my class over to use a natural setting instead of the classroom but I think too many students would not take the time to walk over.”*

*“Teaching can be a bit difficult on days when airplanes fly overhead to land at Pearson.”*

#### **Lack of awareness/ belief that the Arboretum could be incorporated** into their program:

*“It would be difficult to integrate Arboretum-related experience or research into my teaching because of my discipline and the courses I teach.”*

*“... I am [not] familiar enough as how best to incorporate it and also what it may offer.”*

## **Room for Improvement**

- generating **more awareness** through better communications/marketing, more faculty- or student-specific programming, stronger partnerships with on & off-campus groups, & more support from Humber College to position the Arboretum as a central to campus
- making the Arboretum **easier to find and navigate through**, including better trail connections, on-campus signs leading to the Arboretum, a more obvious front entrance, safe paths/sidewalks connecting to campus, & wayfinding maps & signs on-site
- **lack of parking** and **concerns for safety\*** were cited as barriers to visiting, as were **accessibility issues** (\*though elsewhere the Arboretum was described “a safe place” to explore)
- desire for **more of the same** programming and partnerships the Arboretum currently offers, & the related call for **more Arboretum staff** to support current operations/allow for expansion

## A Vision for the Future

A **place for learning** & its role in **environmental stewardship, conservation, & sustainability**.

Many saw the Arboretum **becoming a “hub” or “model”** for learning about these topics:

*“...a central hub for the local & Humber community to connect and engage in activities that enhance their appreciation and understanding of the natural environment & serve as a natural refuge where they can experience the benefits of nature connection first hand.”*

*“...a demonstration platform for innovative new techniques in environmental monitoring, habitat restoration & other relevant topics/technologies from Ontario and beyond.”*

## SUMMARY: ONE ON ONE INTERVIEWS

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### 1) Experiential Learning & Applied Research for Humber College students

- Importance of interdisciplinary, experiential learning opportunities like Humber Food Garden & Humber Pond Project
- Connect more with non-traditional Humber College programs
- Keep up/build on Learning by Leading™<sup>2</sup> & work-study programs
- Horticulture & Arboriculture skills for skilled workers important for City & TRCA; want to see increased attention on elevating Humber’s horticulture programs

### 2) Telling the Arboretum’s Story (Marketing)

- Leveraging the Arboretum more for student recruitment
- Find ways to increase the volume of external & community visitors
- Promote the Ravines/Humber River

### 3) Environmental Stewardship

- Be a living example of how sustainability & urban living can coexist. Promote greater principles of sustainability.
- Less labour-intensive horticulture & more sustainable practices. More focus on indigenous plant restoration & native pollinator plants
- Importance of stewardship of Ravine lands. Improved stormwater management on-campus/ Humber Pond Project are good moves

### 4) Inclusion of Indigenous Perspectives, Students, & Youth

- Keep on building & strengthening this relationship- it is getting stronger
- Include Indigenous Framework in vision for Arboretum and/or the Tripartite Agreement
- Would like to see increased connection with Indigenous students & youth

### 5) More Engagement

- More community outreach. Involve more community youth in Arboretum environmental programs.
- Connect more with Lakeshore campus

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<sup>2</sup> A Humber Arboretum-led program that develops 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (connected with Institutional Learning Outcomes) in Humber College & UofGH students through hands-on learning & leadership projects in the Humber Arboretum.

## 6) Importance of the Arboretum for the local community

- *“Great for community, for residents, for kids” “What a great place for learning for folks who live in the area”*
- *“We value their willingness to partner”* & do even more of this
- Be mindful of the diversity of the community. Act as a “soft place to land” for new Canadians to enjoy a calmer green space e.g. many Syrians are here b/c fleeing warzones

## 7) Strengthening Connections between all three founding Organizations

- Look at how Humber’s new Strategic Plan might line up with the City’s and TRCA’s Plans- specifically top areas of alignment
- Look at setting collective impact targets
- More systematic, ongoing communications with partner stakeholders, rather than just every four years. Some liked the idea of a semi-annual Advisory Committee breakfast

## 8) Health & Wellness of Humber College & surrounding Communities

- Providing H&W leadership to support key pillar of Humber College’s new Strategic Plan
- Helping with social isolation & providing intergenerational activities (ex. senior’s yoga)
- Support H&W of neighbouring communities

## 9) Connect the Community with Nature

- Many misperceptions exist in community & at Humber College about conservation, restoration, horticulture, local food, good ecological practices, etc. Help improve awareness.
- Bring back nature to the community, get people engaging in the outdoors

## 10) Think Big but be Practical

- Find your niche(s) & do it/them well
- Leverage the great partnerships available

# SUMMARY: FOCUS GROUPS

## Purpose & Programs

**Ranking current programs.** Top choices:

1. Activities that help the natural environment (planting trees, creating wildlife habitat, etc.)
2. Experiential learning opportunities for Humber College & UofGH students
3. Natural environment programs for visiting elementary & secondary schools

**Current/ ideal purpose.** Top themes:

- **Experiential Education:** A place to interact with & learn about plants, wildlife & the benefits of nature; showcase environmentally sustainable practices; where students apply theoretical learning; celebrate rich natural heritage through education, programming & research
- **Community & Social Connection:** a catalyst for integrating nature into campus & community; create positive, on-going relationships with nature; connect children with nature;

be a “positive feedback loop” – educate & get people out in nature to foster appreciation so they provide care & protection for the nature they now love

- **Health & Wellness:** serve as a stress free, tranquil oasis; the importance of this natural place for improved happiness, physical & mental health, healing & restoration
- **Environmental Stewardship:** a greenspace in an area that lacks it, preserve a piece of the natural ecosystem in a big city; showcase, serve, & protect our environment now & for the future; be an area of preservation/conservation & cultivation of plant species/thriving wildlife; understand & highlight the importance of conservation & impact of place & educate the public on this; engage industry & external partners in a purposeful way

## Four Themes

Highlights of ideas related to four pre-determined areas are summarized below.

### 1. Stewardship of Natural Areas & Wildlife Habitats

- More inclusion of nature, ecosystems, & green infrastructure in **Humber College campus planning**. Green corridors & stepping stones of native plants that extend into & interconnect with the rest of campus; can double as pollinator & wildlife corridors / indigenous plant paths with associated signage about natural & cultural heritage
- Engage, train & reward **community &/or student volunteers** to set-up ongoing data collection & monitoring programs & replace invasive species. Create high school stewardship courses for volunteer credits. Work with local partners for annual/regular stewardship events
- **Leverage the value of existing partnerships** with City & TRCA. Better coordination & communication on stewardship. Build on existing partnerships (Office of Sustainability etc.)
- **Create new partnerships** with other community groups, organizations & stakeholders to share ideas & information with respect to management of ecologically important areas. Peer to peer learning. Recognize that what happens outside Arboretum will affect the wildlife here.
- **Invest in the space** with more staff & resources. Treat threats to the natural systems like an HVAC system at the College - core to the operating function of the facility & allocate appropriate resources to address deficiencies (i.e. Storm events, invasive species removals)

### 2. Accessibility & Inclusion

- More **accessible paths** into the forest / connection with West Humber Trail. Accessible<sup>3</sup> gardens; could be a design challenge/project for students. Consider surfaces & play areas that accommodate different assistive devices. In-ground markers for use with a cane, braille signs. Work with Humber’s experts in inclusion & universal design.
- Better **transportation & parking** options. Validate parking for visitors/volunteers, create transportation support for events. Create accessible parking spaces, dedicated Arboretum

<sup>3</sup> Wheelchair accessible, designed for various forms of autism, lowered beds, wide pathways, etc.

spaces in/outside Lot 1. Explore ways for groups & communities that don't have access to transportation to visit.

- Improve **wayfinding & signage**, including trail markers & maps that are visual & colour-coded, official signage at every entrance, & site identification & interpretive signage extending from the front of the College to, & throughout, the Arboretum.
- Bring in **community/disability/newcomer groups** & marginalized communities so they can learn about the Arboretum / nature / sustainability. Connect with Humber's Community Outreach & Workforce Development department & student clubs.
- Devise an alternative funding model / pricing structure for school groups to **remove financial barriers**; keep visits free & balance revenue generating activities with free activities to ensure people can enjoy & learn regardless of personal circumstances

### 3. Health & Wellness

- Provide **outdoor fitness opportunities** in all seasons; group classes, organized walks, low ropes/climbing wall, staff teambuilding, community group bike / walking trail tours
- Provide more **mental health opportunities**; meditation, yoga, mental health workshops; Nature Rx for students; art/journaling for adults & seniors
- Raise awareness of the **connection between nature & health**; time in nature supports mental health; need a healthy environment for healthy people; include plant & animal communities as well as human communities in implementing the Okanagan Charter
- Create more **outdoor learning & meeting spaces** to support place-based learning; circular outdoor classroom such as a solar-powered yurt; more resting / gathering spaces
- Create & make use of **wellness spaces** such as a "recovery garden"; community connections/healthy eating workshops tied to Food Learning Garden; community gardens

### 4. Experiential Learning & Applied Research

- Enhance & develop **interdisciplinary collaborations** with other schools/departments (e.g. Shakespeare in the Arboretum, arts events the public could attend)
- Reach to out to faculty to suggest best ways to **connect more program learning components** to the Arboretum
- **Increase the practical component** for existing programs (ex. Landscape Technicians identify & treat pests/invasive species, culinary students participate in Arboretum events)
- **Ideas for student research projects** can evolve from current work/research in environmental issues (pollinators, restoration, etc.) & get support through Humber College resourcing; similar opportunities for research, capstone projects around socially innovative ideas (healthy living, food security) in collaboration with community partners.
- Engage **industry, research centres & other external partners** to develop & support research pods & programs related to sustainable construction, horticulture, landscape, nutrition etc.

## Additional Themes

Beyond the pre-determined topic areas, several other themes emerged in the discussions:

- There were various calls to **increase the number of Arboretum senior staff** to: engage & support experiential learning/applied research/innovation; steward/care for the land, preserve “ecological integrity of the site”; collaborate with TRCA & City staff to carry out the Humber Arboretum Biodiversity Plan; act as stewardship coordinator with external groups; act as monitors/greeters; maintain gardens/invasive species management, “as the grounds plan to grow so does the maintenance & work load”; expand the Forest Nature program.
- The need to **create more awareness** around Arboretum programs & activities was reflected both in specific suggestions (better/more marketing, orientation tours for staff, PR/Marketing student projects) & in the fact that many focus group suggestions were for activities already taking place
- Stronger **connections to Humber College**, including physical (connected pathways, green spaces, & signage), organizational (more College consultation with the Arboretum on space planning/development, sustainability, ecology), cross-curriculum (ecological literacy taught as Gen Ed across programs), services (more support from College security), new programs & courses (parks management) & more shared activities.