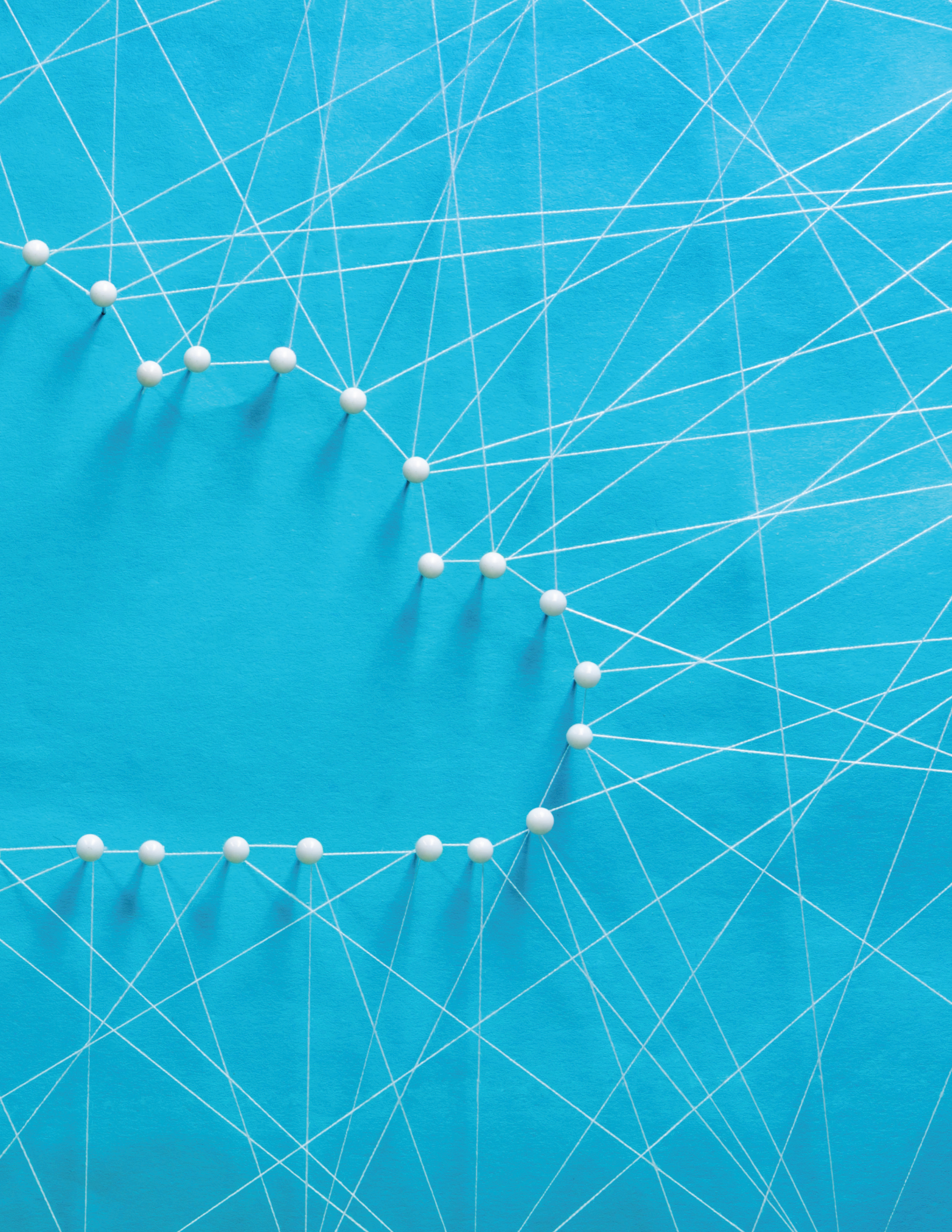


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## **How to compete for enrolment in higher education**

Managing enrolment strategically can help universities  
and colleges create meaningful experiences for their students



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Canadian colleges and universities have been engaged for years in constant and fierce competition with each other to entice students through their doors. That competition has recently become even more acute because of several developments.

Most significantly, provincial governments have put a cap on domestic tuition and tied operating grants in part to how many graduates are finding employment related to their field of study. Meanwhile, a finite number of high-value international students has put even more pressure on post-secondary institutions to fill their classrooms and labs with students already residing in Canada. The result? Colleges and universities are all looking for ways to make themselves more attractive and differentiate themselves within a crowded marketplace.

“The theme before 2008 was, ‘one college program looks and feels similar to another,’” says Eric McIntosh, a manager of higher education transformation in Deloitte’s industry solutions practice. “Choose the geographical one that’s of convenience to you. Now, it’s ‘College A is better than College B because [...]’ Everyone’s trying to differentiate, whether that’s through the student experience, guaranteed work-integrated learning, or the likelihood of finding a job in your field upon graduation.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend. With a shift to virtual learning and the ability to support programs without geographical limitation, we’ve seen that a school’s location doesn’t necessarily matter. This is new for Canadian institutions, and will create national competition that didn’t exist to this extent before.

Faced with these challenges and the need to set themselves apart, schools are looking for ways to grow enrolment in a stable and meaningful way. That’s where strategic enrolment management (SEM) can make a difference.

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### The big picture has become a bigger factor

SEM requires schools to shift their focus. Instead of looking merely at enrolment numbers, SEM takes a more holistic view of the overall campus experience, considering multiple student touchpoints.

This comprehensive focus is often not how many universities and colleges approach enrolment. They have typically put a lot of effort into simply bringing more students in the door. For example, an institution can partner with a foreign government to fill the top of the enrolment funnel with dozens of new students. However, academic research on student success in higher education demonstrates that if those students arrive with no plan for creating a sense of community connected to their academic goals, and have little support from the institution or their home communities for doing so, those students will quite likely leave well before completing a program of study. The school, meanwhile, is no further ahead, and has in fact wasted its resources.

The lesson for post-secondary institutions is clear: students, like other consumers, vote with their feet. Which means attention must be paid not simply to recruitment, but also to retention, resulting outcomes like graduation—and indeed, the entire student journey. This premise is central to SEM.



### On today's campus, every moment matters

SEM takes the view that every interaction students have throughout their time at school is a moment that matters. Or, in other words, an opportunity to deliver on the school's promise, and to reinforce the reason the students chose that institution in the first place.

"What I like to say to folks is, 'Strategic enrolment management is the enabling of your mission, vision, and values at the individual student level,'" says McIntosh. "It's committing on who you are and where you're trying to take students."

Like a customer-centric retail organization does with its clients, an SEM-based organization will look at the full student life cycle and determine how to create a positive experience at every touchpoint. From registering for classes and paying tuition to understanding course material and ensuring a desired degree is within reach, SEM provides a framework for leadership to understand motivations, identify pain points, and figure out how to make adjustments, all to support the students as they fulfill their goals throughout their time at school.

The ultimate objective is for more students to graduate happier, confident they were supported in making the decisions that will lead to a satisfying career. They'll be more likely to say nice things about their school, which will have a positive impact on the school's brand and attract prospective new students. Given the growing need for upskilling and workforce retraining, happy graduates are also more likely to consider returning to their alma mater for other lifelong learning opportunities.



### Data must inform the key decisions

Naturally, a successful SEM initiative requires access to relevant, real-time data. Generating such data can be a challenge for many institutions. "A lot of data sits in siloes," says McIntosh. "It's what I would describe as autopsy data, which is cohort analytics of a prior [academic] term. But those students, like the autopsy patient, have already gone."

The key to success, therefore, is to deliver existing data to the right people in a timely and meaningful way. Institutions need to identify important enrolment metrics and assign responsibility for charting them. Additionally, schools should account for meaningful faculty interactions with students, which are critical to student success yet often go undocumented in data. Then, share what's working and work to improve what isn't.



### Success depends on student-centric leadership

The good news is that any institution considering a SEM plan can begin immediately. Designate the leaders responsible for strategic direction, pinpoint the inputs and outputs required to achieve specific goals, and set a desired external impact. Then, develop a holistic plan that clearly defines success. Start with the data you have now and focus on the positive actions you can take today to foster student accomplishment. Highlight and learn from the strategies that are working well.

Ultimately, responsibility for success rests with institutional leadership. Colleges and universities are far less hierarchical than private sector businesses, which means it's critical to keep everyone on the same page and working according to a cohesive plan.

Fortunately, post-secondary leaders already have at least one big factor operating in their favour: faculty and staff who care deeply about the success of their students. When everyone's heart is in the right place, the foundation for good-will and a desire to help students achieve success—despite the adversities of funding and crises—provides the needed infrastructure to enable good SEM practices aimed at moving the needle on student progression to completion and into the workforce.



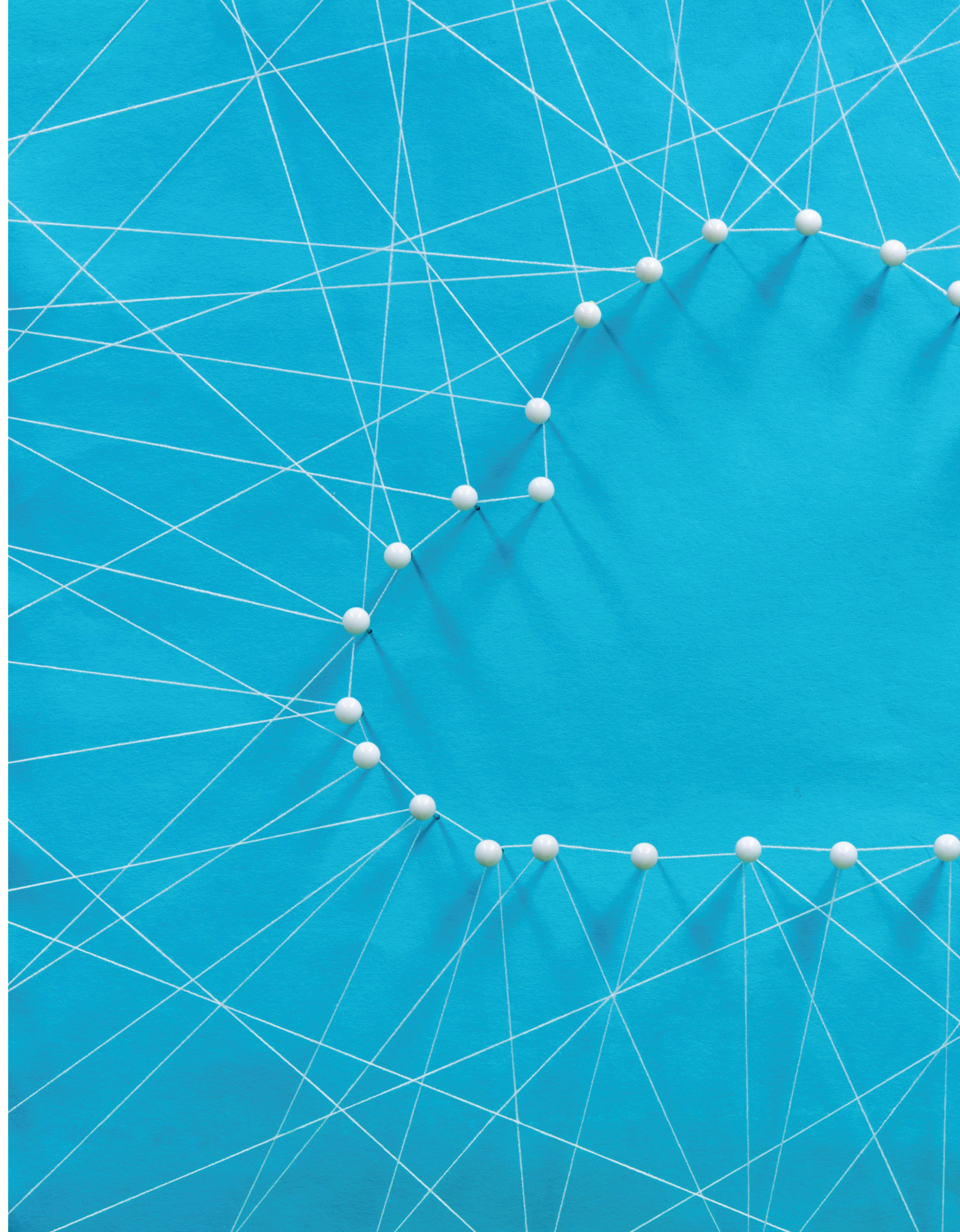
# Contacts

**Mark DiNello**

National Leader, Higher Education  
mdinello@deloitte.ca

**Eric McIntosh**

Manager, Higher Education Transformation Practice  
emcintosh@deloitte.ca





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