

The push is on to diversify construction sites

By the time a generation of construction workers retires in 2027, Ontario colleges hope a cultural shift will be well under way

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In 2014, Tricia Ward walked into an employment centre and was asked if she'd ever considered working in the trades. The Regent Park resident had not, but decided to enrol in construction boot camp program Hammer Heads. She says it's the best thing she could have done for herself.

Now in fourth year, she's the program's youth co-chair and has almost completed her 9,000-hour plumbing apprenticeship.

"Being female and Black, the pressure I feel is different. On some job sites the guys can be harder on you because you're different," says Ward, who now lives in Etobicoke, bought a car and can afford to travel. "But I have a pension. I can take care of my family. I don't have that constant worry that I did in 2014."

She has gone through many industries – administration, fitness advisor, sales – but doesn't see construction as a last-ditch option, but rather a "stepping stone into the world."

Around 87,000 of Ontario's half-million construction workers are set to retire in 2027. To fill the gap, industry groups and schools like George Brown College and Fleming College are seizing the opportunity to make the male-dominated field more diverse by courting youth, Indigenous people, women and visible minorities.

Hammer Heads is 12 weeks long and aimed at youth living in under-resourced neighbourhoods in Toronto. Since its inception in 2009, it has produced 369 apprentices in the construction industry, created 41 journeypersons, graduated 13 Indigenous people, and had 18 female candidates. To date, 85 per cent of its graduates represent

non-traditional populations. The program offers health and safety training and academic upgrades, and removes many barriers they face to ensure they graduate.

“Most of them don’t have cars so we bus them around the city,” says James St. John, manager of the Central Ontario Building Trades and director of Hammer Heads. “Part of our program is that students have to do an academic upgrade. A few of our trades require a grade 12 level math and we help them attain that and get the GED.”

In April, Ontario Construction Secretariat CEO Robert Bronk was at Future Building, a three-day construction event aimed at attracting students in grades seven through 12 with a focus on Indigenous and at-risk youth, as well as adults in career transition.

“Why is it important to diversify that workforce? A lot of reasons,” says Bronk. “You tend to work in crews of four-to-five people, and study after study shows the more diversified the crew, the better creativity, problem solving and productivity you’re going to have. It’s a competitive advantage – it’s not just about doing the right thing.”

Fleming College in Peterborough has a two-part diversity plan, says Maxine Mann, dean of Fleming’s School of Business and School of Trades and Technology. The school focuses on making sure current students enter safe, inclusive work environments while actively recruiting the next generation behind them.

“We do a fair bit of work with women in trades and teach them about safe work environments,” she tells NOW. “We work with employers in use of language, space, inclusivity and understanding what all that means.”

She’s conducted focus groups with women who are graduating to find out what’s most important to them, and feeling safe physically and psychologically is a big issue. For trades people who’ve been working in their fields for decades, this is a newer concept, she says.

Fleming has female faculty front and centre on both high-profile project work and in the community. Hiring efforts for male faculty has focused on ensuring they are a good fit for the new, progressive era of trades.

Toronto’s George Brown College is actively recruiting diverse future students to enroll in its apprentice programs in trades such as construction and maintenance electrician, millwright, residential air conditioning systems mechanic, and more.

Denise Devlin-Li, GBC's Chair, School of Apprenticeship and Skilled Trades, says the school has made several partnerships in order to recruit more "non-traditional" students to their programs.

They've joined forces with George Brown's community partnership office, and in tandem with YWCA, have offered a pre-apprenticeship general carpentry program as well as one in refrigeration and HVAC for women. That initiative ended up with four graduates coming back to register in the HVAC post-secondary program this past January.

Last summer, the school and Miziwe Biik Aboriginal Employment and Training teamed up on a carpentry program, and there are plans to offer it again. Many of those Indigenous participants were women.

Colleges often target grade school students for recruitment to put the option on their radars early on. "They're young but that's a time that's pretty influential," says Devlin-Li.

Last year, George Brown hosted a one-week Skills Ontario camp for co-ed grade seven and eight kids to expose the youth to different trades. Fleming has held events for girls in grades four through seven.

The outreach is paying off, but it's a slow process. George Brown has seen a light increase in enrolment as a result of these initiatives. "In the case of the YWCA program, four [female] graduates coming back to take the HVAC program is a huge number," says Devlin-Li. "Most of the time there's only one or two."

The situation is similar for women instructors. She counts approximately seven female faculty members across different programs, including the program coordinator. "We're slowly increasing our numbers," she says.

Classrooms are still widely male, though culturally diverse.

"It's very difficult to change that perception in the public eye," Devlin-Li says. "We know that being an electrician is a great career, but there is much more we can do as colleges to get the overall population to realize that."

When Mann became dean at Fleming, the trade school was one to three per cent female; now it's 12 per cent.

“Inclusivity brings people in and if you become known for that, you get lots of great students and not just women,” she says. “We have more African-Canadian, Indigenous and people who identify in a variety of ways. They are educating all of us, because this is new to all trade schools. We’re learning from students, too.”