

'If you build it right, they will come:' Queen's B-school architect, +VG Architects



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When Queen's University School of Business students arrived for fall classes this week, they immediately gravitated to amphitheatre-style steps inside the school's west wing that officially opens today.

"If you build it right, they will come," says Peter Berton, a partner with +VG Architects and the lead architect on the \$40-million project. On a visit to the Kingston, Ont., campus this week, he watched 30-40 students mingle on the wide steps before heading to class, exactly as imagined in the design.

His aphorism also applies to the school, which has managed a 40-per-cent rise (to 450 students in this year's incoming class) in undergraduate commerce enrolment over the past five years.

Despite taking in more students, the acceptance ratio of one in 10 applicants for the four-year program is unchanged from a decade ago – a reflection of rising levels of participation in post-secondary education that have offset a lower birth rate.

"The demand side for our programs has gone through the ceiling in the last few years," says Dean David Saunders. Economic uncertainty, he adds, has fuelled interest in business education and Queen's, like others, has expanded offerings of MBA and graduate studies.

As beneficiaries of rising demand, business schools have been squeezed on space to accommodate higher enrolment, growth in specialty MBAs and new faculty hires. Across Canada, half a



dozen schools are wrapping up multi-million-dollar expansion projects. At Queen's, its new 75,000-square-foot, five-level west wing houses wired classrooms, breakout rooms and

common areas for students, multipurpose conference rooms and more than 50 additional faculty offices. The glass-front wing links to older parts of the school – a heritage 1982 red brick schoolhouse and an award-winning east wing addition designed by +VG a decade ago.

The school is using the expansion to rethink content and delivery of programs. Under discussion, pending faculty approval, is a possible restructuring of timetables for first-year students to take all classes in the new wing instead of migrating elsewhere on campus for electives. “With a class of 450 and the space to hold them, we can start to do some very interesting things as a cohesive group,” says Dean Saunders. Students would still take electives, just later in their program.

The notion that good architecture can influence behaviour – as with the students on the amphitheater steps – resonates with the dean. For example, the ground-floor amphitheater steps lead to a flat-floor classroom with moveable tables and chairs (instead of regular stadium-style seating) for flexible groupings of students. When the classroom is not in use, a back wall rises vertically into an atrium, creating an event space that stretches back to the amphitheatre steps. “Architecture [is] being used as a measure of the calibre of a school,” says +VG’s Mr. Berton, of the wave of B-school expansions.

+VG Architects is a full-service architectural firm offering new design, expansions and heritage restorations for cultural, educational, municipal, justice, healthcare, residential and recreational facilities. Our staff of +50 operates in four offices in Ontario, in Brantford, Toronto, Kitchener and Belleville. **See www.plusvg.com for more information**

