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ONTARIO | ONTARIO

# OPENING DOORS TO NURSING DEGREES: TIME FOR ACTION

**A proposal from  
Ontario's colleges**

JANUARY 2015





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## SUMMARY

Ontario must expand the options for people who want to become registered nurses (RNs). Doing so will improve access to the nursing profession, create better pathways between the registered practical nursing (RPN) and the baccalaureate-prepared registered nursing (RN) occupations, and build Ontario's capacity to meet the province's long-term health human resources needs.

Ontario used to educate the majority of its nurses at colleges. In 2005, the provincial regulations were changed to require new nurses to hold a baccalaureate degree in nursing from a university. There are now two types of nursing education that are permitted: stand-alone university programs and joint college-university programs that lead to a university degree.

**Ontario's colleges believe it is time for the government to fill in the missing piece: colleges should be authorized to offer high-quality, four-year baccalaureate degrees that are recognized as meeting the entry-to-practice requirements for the nursing profession.**

An independent study funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has found that many colleges are preparing to offer stand-alone degrees. They are hiring PhD-qualified faculty and developing plans for a smooth transition to stand-alone status. Other colleges will prefer to continue with their current arrangements.

Colleges excel in serving students from all walks of life. A system in which both colleges and universities offer nursing programs will be complementary, resulting in a more diverse population of graduates who will better represent the overall population. This will benefit patients, the nursing profession and the population at large. Colleges can offer more opportunities to prepare health-care professionals in growing urban areas and in small communities. Colleges are experienced in providing pathways to nursing education for registered practical nurses (RPNs) and other professionals who want to advance their careers.

Ontario's college system has the experience, capacity and willingness to help meet the need for a baccalaureate-prepared nursing workforce. Rigorous national standards and entry-to-practice exams are in place to ensure that health-care quality and patient safety are protected.

Colleges have developed a multi-year implementation plan based on principles that will protect the supply of new nurses, ensure program quality, and require no new government funding.

Over time, the expanded range of options — including stand-alone programs and collaborative programs — will improve access to the RN profession.



# OPENING DOORS TO NURSING DEGREES FROM ONTARIO'S COLLEGES

Ontario must expand the educational options for people who want to become RNs.

The change that Ontario requires is to authorize colleges to offer their own high-quality nursing degrees.

Until 2005, about 70 per cent of Ontario's RNs were educated at colleges. Today, tens of thousands of RNs who graduated from Ontario's colleges continue to provide high-quality health care to patients in Ontario's hospitals and other health-care settings.

Beginning in 2005, provincial regulations were changed to require new nurses to hold a baccalaureate degree in nursing from a university. Currently, two types of nursing education are permitted: stand-alone university programs, and joint college-university programs that lead to a university degree.

Ontario's colleges believe this policy must change. Colleges should be authorized to offer high-quality, four-year baccalaureate degrees that are recognized as meeting the requirements for entering the nursing profession.

This change will make it possible for colleges to play a large and distinctive role within a long-term provincial strategy for sustaining and renewing the health human resources workforce.

This change should be made because:

- Colleges have the ability to reach out to prospective students from diverse backgrounds who have the potential to be successful in nursing degree programs.
- Many colleges are geographically located where there is a need for expanded access to nursing education.

- Colleges produce well-prepared graduates, many of whom want to work in their local communities.
- National and provincial quality standards are already in place to guarantee the quality of baccalaureate nursing programs, and colleges remain committed to meeting these standards.
- Expansion of the nursing degree options in the province can be accomplished within the province's current levels of funding support and will result in a more cost-effective use of existing resources.
- With the increasing numbers of Ontarians needing health care now and in the future, it is time to eliminate unnecessary barriers and expand the range of options for creating a strong and diverse nursing workforce.



# THE CURRENT RULES ARE HOLDING ONTARIO BACK

The collaborative partnership model was put into place by the provincial government in the early 2000s when the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) introduced a requirement for new entrants into the RN class of the nursing profession to hold a baccalaureate degree in nursing from a university.

As a result, colleges were required to terminate their diploma programs and seek collaborations with universities, as well as contribute their resources towards this change. At the time of the CNO decision, colleges were not permitted to offer degrees in any field.

The collaborative programs have been in place for more than a decade. Colleges support and value the current collaborative partnership model as one way of educating the baccalaureate-prepared nursing workforce. Many colleges have expressed openly their desire to retain this program model indefinitely.

However, the collaborative delivery model must be voluntary to be effective. It is not necessarily an optimal model for all colleges. For example, in certain models (e.g., two years at the college, two years at the university), students must transfer to a university to complete the program, disrupting established relationships and studies. Well-prepared faculty are limited to teaching in the first two years but are credentialed to teach at all levels, just as the university faculty do, making it difficult to retain them.

In some collaborative models, colleges are providing more than 90 per cent of the actual curriculum for the program and are fully capable of delivering the program on their own — yet the current regulation forbids them from doing so. In one model, the college delivers 100 per cent of the program but is partnered with an out-of-province university for conferral of the degree. In these examples, the costs paid by the colleges to the universities for their role in administering the degree can be significant.

## Other provinces show that nursing education can be offered by many types of institutions

Other provinces already incorporate more than one delivery model for nursing degree programs:

- Douglas College in British Columbia offers a baccalaureate nursing degree program that has been accredited by the same national agency accrediting Ontario's nursing degree education programs.
- In Manitoba, the provincial regulatory college assumes responsibility for the quality review and approval of nursing programs instead of requiring Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) accreditation. Red River College offers an approved nursing degree program.

Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan have all shown that the delivery of high-quality nursing education is not dependent on a research-intensive university; it can be delivered in a teaching-focused institution. Nursing graduates from teaching-focused programs, whether they are through colleges or universities, work side by side with nursing graduates of traditional research universities, and all provide the high standard of care that people across Canada expect from our health-care system. The Ontario Labour Mobility Act, 2009, makes it possible for a nurse who holds a baccalaureate degree from a college in another province and who registers in that province to also register in Ontario as a nurse in the RN class.

## COLLEGES ARE READY TO OFFER NURSING DEGREE PROGRAMS

In June 2012, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) convened a tripartite nursing committee comprised of representatives of the college and university sectors, the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, and MTCU, to explore whether colleges should be authorized to offer stand-alone nursing degrees.

With extensive input from the tripartite nursing committee, MTCU contracted R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. to conduct an independent study to investigate institutional intentions and capacity to offer stand-alone nursing degree programs. Based on extensive interviews, the study found that some of the college partners were ready or near-ready to offer their own nursing degrees.

*“Institutions that indicated that they are interested in stand-alone nursing degrees generally have an implementation plan. These implementation plans ranged in duration of one to four years and could be started as early as ‘next year’ (2015) and up to four or five years in the future. These institutions have agreements with their partners on how to manage the transition. Such a plan includes provisions for enrolment, curriculum, infrastructure, and services as well as timelines for quality assurance and faculty recruitment. Ideally, these implementation plans are supported by a range of advance preparatory work in anticipation of risks and contingencies. They also include provisions for dealing with issues of contention” (Malatest, page 8).*

*“It is apparent that some institutions are more prepared than others to offer stand-alone nursing degrees. These institutions have typically completed more planning and have already taken steps toward stand-alone nursing degrees. They are also more likely to be involved in collaborations in which all partners are on the ‘same page’ regarding stand-alone nursing degrees. In a few cases, these partnerships*

*have planned for stand-alone nursing degrees by building separation clauses into their MOUs. They are also more likely to move towards stand-alone nursing degrees without a contentious separation. Preparedness can be assessed at this point by the degree to which institutions have already been working towards stand-alone nursing degrees. Some institutions have or are contemplating new health science infrastructure, independently developed curriculum, PhD prepared faculty hires, and enrolment scenarios. These institutions are also more likely to state that they are able to offer a stand-alone nursing degree on their current budget” (Malatest, page 41).*

The Malatest report also found that many colleges will prefer to continue with their current arrangements. It says that “approximately 40% of the institutions which were interviewed indicated an interest in stand-alone nursing degrees” (Malatest, page 45).

The report confirms that a nursing education landscape in Ontario with both collaborative and stand-alone nursing degree options is possible.

Colleges agree with the report’s findings and support the implementation of a multi-track approach to the delivery of nursing degrees. The government should continue to support the collaborative partnership model for nursing degree delivery, and at the same time it should approve stand-alone baccalaureate programs at colleges that demonstrate the capacity and readiness to deliver high-quality, degree-level nursing education.

# THE COLLEGE ADVANTAGE

To meet the need for qualified health professionals, Ontario has to attract and retain nursing students from all walks of life. Health professionals in the workforce need to have flexible opportunities for further education to reach their career goals. Colleges excel at serving these students.

## Reaching students from diverse backgrounds

Research has shown that the student population of colleges and universities differ. Colleges attract students from diverse backgrounds and all income levels. More than 60 per cent of college applicants are no longer in secondary school. Many are working or raising families and prefer to attend a post-secondary institution close to the community in which they live. In contrast, more than three-quarters of new university students come directly from high school and are from families in the upper half of the income levels of the population. Many will travel outside of their local community to enter a program.

A system in which both colleges and universities offer nursing programs will be complementary, resulting in a more diverse population of graduates who will better represent the overall population. This will benefit patients, the nursing profession and the population at large.

Colleges have a strong record in serving students who are not well-served by other institutions. Figure 1 illustrates that:

- Colleges are more likely to serve aboriginal students.
- Colleges are more likely to serve students with disabilities.
- Colleges are more likely to serve students from rural areas.
- Colleges are more likely to serve sole-support parents.<sup>1</sup>
- Colleges are also more likely than universities to serve low- and middle-income students. Statistics Canada has found that university attendance is heavily skewed to the upper half of the family income scale. Colleges draw about equally from all four quartiles of family income — including from middle- and lower-income families.

**3.1** FIGURE 1. Relative participation rates of four student groups<sup>2</sup>

Groups of interest*	Percentage who attended college**	Percentage who attended university**
Aboriginal	38.7%	17.8%
Disability	46.2%	22.1%
Rural	44.6%	28.6%
Single parent	41.1%	36.4%
All Ontarians	36.4%	45.5%

\*Youth in Transition Survey (YITS)-A cohort

\*\*YITS-A cohort enrolled in college or university when 21 years of age

<sup>1</sup> Data on access are summarized in Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, Performance Indicators: A report on where we are and where we are going (Toronto, 2013), page 16. For additional data, see Miles Corak, Garth Lipps and John Zhao, Family income and participation in post-secondary education (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003); Colleges Ontario, Environmental scan: Student and graduate profiles (Toronto, 2013), section 3.3; Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, Second Annual Review and Research Plan (Toronto, February 2009), pgs. 39, 42.

<sup>2</sup> See Statistics Canada Youth In Transition Survey (June, 2011), also Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, Under-Represented Groups in Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Evidence from the Youth in Transition Survey (Toronto, 2011), pgs. 14-19

- Colleges have been leaders in creating programs for internationally educated professionals, making it possible for recent immigrants to put their education to full use in the workforce.

The primary explanation for these successes with students from groups that are underrepresented in post-secondary education, some of which are at a higher risk of academic failure, is that colleges have a long history of strong faculty engagement with students. A growing body of literature suggests that interaction with faculty and other students is a key determinant of whether at-risk students succeed in higher education.<sup>3</sup>

### **Colleges can make nursing degrees accessible to students**

Ontario colleges are already proving that they can offer programs in communities where there is a need for nursing baccalaureate education.

The growth in demand for nurses has been strong in major urban centres, fuelled in part by high levels of immigration:

- Colleges offer more than half of the total nursing instruction in the Greater Toronto Area.
- In Kitchener-Waterloo-Guelph, where the three local universities — University of Guelph, Wilfrid Laurier University and University of Waterloo — do not have nursing programs, the college supplies almost all of the full-time nursing faculty; the balance are supplied by McMaster University in Hamilton.

Yet the need is not confined to urban centres:

- In centres such as Barrie, Sarnia and Belleville, students can start their nursing degree at a college, but then they must travel to another city to complete their degree. No university offers a nursing program locally.
- Colleges — which have been leaders in providing local access to educational opportunities — will strive to expand opportunities for nursing education in underserved areas. For example, Confederation College, in collaboration with Lakehead University and with support from the Ontario government, has offered a nursing baccalaureate program to students in Dryden, Fort Frances, Kenora and Sioux Lookout, based at Confederation's Kenora campus.

Students who leave their communities to attend university often do not return after graduation. Colleges have the experience and commitment to serve nursing students in smaller communities where they will ultimately want to practice.

### **Access for health-care professionals who want to advance in their careers**

In addition to preparing new nurses for the practice environment, nursing degrees at colleges would offer more pathway opportunities for practical nurses interested in building on their knowledge and skills to enter the registered nursing profession.

As part of their mandate to provide pathways for working students, colleges have been leaders in creating opportunities for RPNs to access education leading to a nursing degree. RPNs have already completed two years of nursing education and are committed to working in a health-care setting.

Some RPNs may not have all the secondary school credits that would be needed for admission to a baccalaureate nursing program. Alternatively, persons initially choosing the RPN diploma may have done so for financial or social reasons, even though they would have been eligible for admission to a degree program. Several colleges have created specialized programs for RPNs who wish to pursue a baccalaureate degree. These programs are offered in a variety of flexible arrangements to meet the needs of working RPNs.

Colleges also have a long history of supporting working students who need to transfer from one college to another. To help students whose work takes them to new locations, academic leaders across the colleges have made a commitment to ensure program pathways within and among colleges are developed to facilitate credit recognition and transfer and avoid the duplication of learning for students.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Kay M. McClenney, Research Update: The Community College Survey of Student Engagement, *Community College Review* 35:2, (2007), pgs.137-146.

## COLLEGES HAVE THE EXPERIENCE, CAPACITY AND WILLINGNESS

Ontario's college system has the experience, capacity and willingness to help meet the future need for baccalaureate degrees in nursing. Rigorous national standards and entry-to-practice exams are in place to ensure that health-care quality and patient safety are protected.

### **Colleges already deliver degree programs in many fields**

Colleges have more than a decade of experience in offering degree level education that is valued by students and employers alike. Since 2002, many colleges have offered four-year degrees that meet the provincial standards for honours baccalaureate degrees. Today, more than 17,000 students are enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs offered by colleges. A 2010 report done for the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, also by R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., confirmed that the colleges' four-year degree programs are responding to employers' needs for graduates with degree credentials in specific fields. The report found that employers experienced a high level of satisfaction with degree graduates.

### **All nursing programs are subject to rigorous national standards**

Every nursing program — including all of Ontario's collaborative programs — is accredited through CASN. The College of Nurses of Ontario has designated CASN accreditation as a requirement for the purpose of program approval. Since 2005, all students entering the profession must be graduates from a program that has achieved CASN accreditation. Colleges support continuation of this CNO policy.

The accreditation process includes an institutional assessment of the ability of each college partner of a collaborative program to meet the CASN accreditation standards. This "education unit" assessment is independent of the university partner's assessment, providing colleges

with valuable information about program quality and infrastructure supporting the school's capacity to meet CASN requirements, as well as the colleges' infrastructure to support the nursing school. Colleges support the CASN process and are aware that a college must successfully complete a two-stage CASN review if it is to offer a stand-alone degree program.

In addition to the CASN review, colleges that wish to grant their own degrees would be required to comply with provincial degree quality legislation. All proposals would be reviewed by the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), an arm's-length government agency responsible for assessing the quality of college degree programs and out-of-province university degree programs. On PEQAB's recommendation, the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities has authority to approve college degree programs. The review process through PEQAB is one of the most rigorous quality reviews in existence, requiring colleges to meet more than 200 benchmarks.



## **Research and scholarship in college nursing programs**

Colleges offering a stand-alone nursing degree would be required to provide evidence of the presence of a scholarly environment for the study of nursing. The CASN accreditation framework includes the assessment of a research and scholarship environment by examining the scholarly activities nursing faculty undertake in order to maintain currency in their profession and promote scholarship in their students.

In the current collaborative nursing degree model, colleges have already demonstrated that their faculty is engaged in scholarly work across all areas examined by CASN, and some colleges have demonstrated that they fully meet the research and scholarship standard expected by CASN.

Like CASN, the PEQAB degree quality reviewers require colleges offering degree programs to provide evidence of research and scholarship capacity. Recent discussion with PEQAB indicates that the reviewers' handbook will reference the same approach that CASN utilizes for the assessment of scholarly activities, more closely aligning the two processes.

The academic qualifications of college nursing faculty have also been substantially strengthened. With rare exceptions, all full-time nursing faculty at colleges hold a graduate degree. Consistent with the PEQAB requirement for a proportion of full-time teaching faculty to be PhD-prepared, most programs have several faculty members who hold or are pursuing a doctorate. An increasing number of faculty members hold a graduate degree in nursing, while others may hold a graduate degree in education or other fields and have many years of practice experience in the profession and in teaching nursing.

The changes colleges have made over the past decade mean that some colleges already have the strength to offer high-quality nursing baccalaureate education today. Colleges that wish to offer their own baccalaureate programs are committed to continuing to meet the CASN accreditation and provincial requirements.

## **The college learning environment**

The colleges' success in offering baccalaureate nursing education builds on their historic strength in creating applied learning environments. With a focus on teaching excellence, colleges promote active learning to equip students for entry into their chosen profession.

College faculty and administrators work closely with their program advisory committees, which include employers and students, to ensure that the curricula are relevant and reflect the practice environment. They have long-standing experience in clinical education and relationships with clinical providers and have demonstrated the capability to adjust rapidly to the changing needs of the health-care system.

### **All new nursing graduates must pass rigorous national exams**

To provide further assurance of quality, all graduating students must pass the Canadian Registered Nurse Exam (CRNE) on completion of their nursing program in order to be eligible for registration in their jurisdiction. Registration is compulsory to practice. Beginning in 2015, Canadian nursing students will be required to write the U.S. National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN), which is used by the nursing regulatory boards in all states.

## PROPOSED IMPLEMENTATION PRINCIPLES

Colleges propose an implementation plan based on these principles:

**Managed implementation.** The government should continue to monitor enrolment levels in colleges and universities to ensure that a stable and predictable supply of nurses is maintained provincewide and in local/regional markets.

**Continuity in the number of graduates produced province-wide.** Any change in a partnership should not change the total number of graduates annually. Colleges with the intent of establishing stand-alone nursing programs are committed to delivering the program within their share of the enrolment for the collaborative program.

**Continuity in clinical education placements.** Any change in a partnership should include a plan for both partners to ensure that students will still have access to high-quality clinical education placements at appropriate health-care sites. Colleges will continue to utilize their expertise and experience in incorporating simulation into the learning environment to improve nursing education.

**Protection for students in-program.** Students who have enrolled in a collaborative program should have the opportunity to complete the program within a reasonable number of years and to graduate with the credential that was originally promised to them.

**No additional provincial funding.** Any costs associated with changing a partnership or creating a stand-alone program should be paid by the institutions, without additional cost to the government or students. Some colleges would actually save by the discontinuation of the fee charged to the college by the university partner.

**No orphan programs.** If a collaboration is to dissolve, both the college partner and the university partner must be in a position to continue or mount new stand-alone programs if they so wish (or alternatively, to enter into another collaboration). The viability of doing so must be assessed before any new stand-alone programs are approved.

**Reliance on national accreditation standards.** Every program must be approved through the accreditation process of CASN, as required by the entry-to-practice regulation adopted by the government on the advice of the Council of Nurses of Ontario.

The appendix provides additional details on implementation. It is expected that the implementation plans will be based on these principles.

## BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMS

This proposed process will build on the success of the government's investments over the past decade to bring all nursing programs to the baccalaureate level. It will ensure a stable and predictable supply of nurses, protect the government and students from additional costs, and apply uniform quality standards to all programs.

Over time, the expanded range of options — including stand-alone programs at colleges and collaborative college-university programs — will improve access to the nursing profession, create additional pathways amongst all nursing occupations, and build Ontario's capacity to meet the province's long-term nursing needs.

## APPENDIX: PROPOSED IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The policies and processes needed to implement stand-alone nursing degrees at colleges include a requirement for colleges to demonstrate that they can deliver high-quality nursing programs. As well, implementation processes must include a means of confirming that the dissolution of the partnership and the implementation of stand-alone programs are achievable and consistent with the implementation principles outlined previously.

### Regulation change

The government of Ontario should approach the College of Nurses of Ontario to seek a change in the current entry-to-practice regulation of the Nursing Act, which requires that new nurses hold a baccalaureate degree in nursing “awarded by a university in Canada.”

### Pre-qualification review

The government should establish a process whereby each college that wishes to offer its own baccalaureate nursing degree program would be required to submit a pre-qualification application to demonstrate it has a robust plan to offer a stand-alone program that meets CASN accreditation standards and PEQAB standards and benchmarks.

Unless the partners agree otherwise, the financial assumption of the pre-qualification review should be that, after the separation, each institution will enrol and teach the number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) that is in proportion to its current share of teaching in the partnership, funded at current MTCU rates per FTE and at current levels of tuition and fees. No special funding should be assumed or expected.

It is expected that the ministry would appoint an impartial external expert panel to review pre-qualification applications and recommend those that meet requirements to proceed to a full application process.

### The application process

Colleges that successfully complete the pre-qualification review would be invited to submit a full application to offer a nursing degree program. This would entail a more detailed assessment of the institution’s capacity to offer the degree.

### Establishment of new programs

Throughout the implementation process, government will need to work with the post-secondary sector to manage the policy change in a manner that protects the stability of the nursing supply and ensure that each partner in a collaborative program has the ability to deliver a stand-alone program or enter into another collaborative partnership.

Colleges with aspirations to offer stand-alone nursing degrees are at different stages of readiness. For some, the transition to stand-alone programs will be a longer process. An evaluation of the policy change following the implementation of the first college stand-alone programs will provide government and the post-secondary sector with the information needed to move forward with broader implementation of stand-alone nursing degrees.



ALGONQUIN COLLEGE  
COLLÈGE BORÉAL  
CAMBRIAN COLLEGE  
CANADORE COLLEGE  
CENTENNIAL COLLEGE  
CONESTOGA COLLEGE  
CONFEDERATION COLLEGE  
DURHAM COLLEGE  
FANSHAWE COLLEGE  
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GEORGE BROWN COLLEGE  
GEORGIAN COLLEGE  
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