

# College spreads its wings with distance-learning health-care courses

## NORQUEST COLLEGE

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The feeling at NorQuest College is that it's come through a watershed year with banners flying.

For four years, the skills-building college based in downtown Edmonton has been striving to outgrow its former role and identity as Alberta Vocational College, the traditional institution that worked well in the past, but seemed somewhat stodgy in the changing education world of the 1990s.

The transformation was a success, NorQuest president Wayne Shillington said recently.

"Now we see ourselves as NorQuest first, not as 'formerly Alberta Vocational College.' And we have started to de-fine ourselves as part of the community and to connect more strongly with employers. We are reaching out, becoming more engaged."

NorQuest recently received a strong indication of that success in the form of a report commissioned by the province and Alberta institutions on the socio-economic impact of 16 of the province's colleges and technical institutes.

The report gave an above average grade to NorQuest, saying its highly practical and jobs-based training programs provided a quick return on investment for students, and good value for the public investment in the college.

Some of the findings in the study, which was conducted by CCBenefits:

► Students enjoy an 18.1-per-cent rate of return on their investment in NorQuest, recovering all costs of their education including forgone wages in 7.5 years after graduating.

► Provincial support for NorQuest in fiscal 2001 will be fully recovered



CHRIS SCHWARTZ, THE JOURNAL

**Norquest College president Wayne Shillington in one of the school's practical nursing labs.**

in 5.7 years in the form of higher tax receipts from increased student wages, and not having to cover special expenditures, such as social assistance.

► 95 per cent of NorQuest students stay in the region and contribute to the local economy after leaving the college. After leaving, the average NorQuest student will spend 33 years in the workforce. Students who leave with a two-year diploma will earn \$140,731 more during those three decades than if they'd only had a high school diploma.

► NorQuest itself spent \$25.2 million in the Edmonton region in 2001. The college has 444 full-time and 192 part-time faculty, and paid wages of \$20.8 million in 2001.

There was nothing automatic or easy about the college's success. Shillington, who was recently given a vote of confidence by the college's board in the form of a renewed three-year contract, guided NorQuest through the stormy seas of 1990s education. So-called education "markets" were redefined, public funds were cut, and public institutions struggled to redefine themselves and their roles.

NorQuest succeeded in reinventing

itself as an institution devoted to equipping less-advantaged people for more productive roles in society, a philosophy that placed it squarely in the middle of federal and provincial "up-skilling" programs of the late 1990s and present day.

In the process, the college became not only a place for basic upgrading, but also a centre for training in such high-demand fields as health care, and a centre for equipping recent immigrants with the language and social skills they need to succeed in Canada.

The college is no longer confined to the grey concrete building in downtown Edmonton and a few outposts, either. It offers distance courses, such as licensed practical nurse and nurse's aide, that allow Albertans outside Edmonton to study in their own communities and eventually to work in them. The college is neither resting on its accomplishments, nor ignoring them. On the basis of its growing reputation in skills training, it now gets requests for educational tools such as training videos, and employers call frequently with requests for reliable workers in a job market marked by labour shortages.

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