

NorQuest worthy recipient of public and private support

Community college needs funds for expansion

It's a bright, sunny morning at the end of August. At NorQuest College, a grey concrete block on 108th Street, the lobby is filled with students registering for class.

This isn't your ordinary college crowd. About 25 per cent of NorQuest's students are recent immigrants or new Canadians. NorQuest students speak 37 languages. One quarter of the students are aboriginal. And NorQuest has the largest number of students with physical and learning disabilities of any college in the province.

The lobby is full of toddlers, scooting behind pillars and hugging teddies, while their mothers fill out forms. The student's average age at NorQuest is 33, and more than half the students have dependent children.

NorQuest got its start, 37 years ago, as the Alberta Vocation College, a training school run by the province. But in 1998, NorQuest got a new name and identity. It's now a public community college. And as colleges like Grant MacEwan move away from the "community college" model, and evolve into "university colleges," Norquest, too, is redefining itself.

The college still offers junior high and high school courses for adults. It still runs Edmonton's biggest English-as-a-second-language program. And it still helps disabled workers retrain for new jobs. But NorQuest also runs Canada's largest program for Licensed Practical Nurses. It offers a Social Worker diploma, in conjunction with Maskwacis Cultural College. It runs programs to train dental office assistants, nursing aides, forklift operators, graphic artists, Web page designers, and office managers.

And it's bringing in revenue by



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selling its services to Alberta businesses, who bring in NorQuest staff to train their staff.

"We don't want to be a pale imitation of Grant MacEwan," says NorQuest president Wayne Shillington. "We want to be a community college, in the true sense of why community colleges were created."

Last year, enrolment at NorQuest rose almost 10 per cent. About 10,000 student attended programs offered by the college last year. And an astonishing 95 per cent of the students who completed career training at NorQuest found jobs after graduation, thanks, in part, to the college's comprehensive job placement service.

But with success comes growing pains. Already, students and office staff are spilling out of the main concrete tower and into nearby buildings. There's no day care for the students' children. There are no residences, long or short term, for out-of-town students. The school's largest auditorium seats only 175.

Shillington dreams of a larger, more inviting campus, which will invigorate the downtown core.

"We're a truly urban campus. We're right on the sidewalk. Let's turn that into an asset," he says. "I want the college to become a magnet, a gathering place for the community."

Expansion will cost money, though. NorQuest has a budget of \$33 million, about \$18 million of which comes of the province.



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Wayne Shillington

Shillington says NorQuest gets less core funding, on a per student basis, than any other community college. The college is gearing up for its first external fundraising campaign. But unlike the University of Alberta or Grant MacEwan, NorQuest has no fundraising experience. Last year, it ran a small in-house campaign and raised \$45,000 from staff and graduates.

But it's hard to think of a better win-win strategy for Edmonton's public and private sector than to support NorQuest. First, the college is on the front lines of integrating new immigrants and aboriginal Albertans into the workforce and into "mainstream" culture. That's vital work, not just for Edmonton's social welfare but for its economic future. Plus, the college is training the skilled workers local employers are seeking, particularly in the health-care sector. Finally, NorQuest's growth could help revitalize one of the bleakest parts of the downtown.

Shillington knows he must raise the public profile of his college if he wants donors to ante up. He hopes to infect the city with what he calls "NorQuest disease."

"We have a very high conversion rate," he grins. "It's a passion. This is a special place, a place where students' lives change for the better."