



# **Aurora College Response to External Program Review of the Social Work Diploma Program**

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## Overview

The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) is responsible for ensuring that Aurora College, as the primary publicly funded postsecondary education institution in the territory, is meeting the needs of residents, employers, and communities. In 2017, in the face of declining enrolments, declining graduation rates and an increased number of students leaving the Northwest Territories to pursue their studies, the then Minister of Education, Culture and Employment committed to a review of the Social Work Diploma Program to establish a model for Aurora College that is responsive to changing labour market demands and student needs. It was at this time that the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) also commissioned a foundational review of Aurora College. The GNWT accepted the overarching recommendation in the Review that Aurora College transform into a polytechnic university.

### **Foundational Review Report – Academic Program Management**

The foundational review made 67 recommendations and focused on five areas namely governance, accountability, academic program management, operations, and student recruitment and retention. This response deals specifically with one area, academic program management. Academic programming comprises the core, required and elective courses that lead to a degree, diploma or certificate. Although Aurora College had a program review policy, it was noted that it was not implemented consistently and required additional details with respect to process and content of a program review.

There were a number of recommendations that were accepted from the foundational review in the area of academic program management. They included development and implementation of Academic Program Development and Review Frameworks that provide direction to regular program reviews and new program development. Suspension and termination of programs must also be considered during program review processes. This work has been completed along with a five-year scheduled rotational review of all programs. This work was also completed to facilitate the review of two programs that were suspended namely the Social Work Diploma Program and the Bachelor of Education Program.

## Social Work Diploma Program Review Process

The program review has three phases Self-study, External Review and an Institutional Response. What follows below is a description of each phase and the Institutional Response to the recommendations of the External Review.

### Phase 1 – Self-Study and External Review

The program review has three phases. The first phase is a self-study completed by the program staff. The self-study is a compilation of a number of items associated with the program such as student numbers, student satisfaction, attrition rates, graduation rates, degree completion rates at University of Regina, faculty to student ratios, course outlines and content, practicum experiences, and cultural activities. This phase was completed and was submitted in November 2020.

Two external reviewers were selected from schools who are part of the Academic Advisory Council. This temporary council is made up of seven post-secondary institutions from across the country who have experience in transforming from one type of postsecondary institution to another. The reviewers, from Wilfred Laurier University and Ryerson University have active social work programs at the diploma, baccalaureate, and master levels as well programs that are delivered in multiple sites and with Indigenous partners. In addition, Wilfred Laurier has social work programs that are designed solely for Indigenous students. Both reviewers agreed to participate in the review in January 2021.

### Review Scope

The reviewers were asked to review the social work diploma program curriculum for currency and relevance to present day social work practices, social work employment opportunities across the NWT as well as the connections to Northern context and its people. They were also asked to review the program through a lens of accreditation standards set by the national accrediting bodies for Canadian Schools of Social Work. Levelling and sequencing of the courses within the program was also required.

The housing issue that is highlighted by the reviewers in their report is out of scope for this review.

### Phase 2 – Document Review

A large number of Aurora College documents by the external reviewers were examined. The documents are listed in Appendix A but the entire documents can be found in the External Program Review Report found in Appendix B.

### **Phase 3 – Site Visit**

The third phase is typically a site visit by the reviewers. However, as this review was completed during COVID 19, it was set up as a virtual review. The reviewers held focus group meetings with social workers from across the NWT, graduates from the program, students who did not complete the program, former instructors, and Elders who had participated with the students in classroom and cultural activities. In some cases, due to scheduling difficulties and requests from key stakeholders, individual meetings were held to gather input and reflections about the program. This phase took longer than expected due to the restrictions of COVID 19 and scheduling difficulties As well both reviewers continued with their institutional responsibilities while completing the review.

The final report and recommendations from the reviewers was received in the fall of 2021. Aurora College is grateful to the external reviewers for their work and commitment and look forward to continued opportunities to work with our post-secondary partners as we move forward with transformation to the polytechnic university.

## External Review Recommendations

Aurora College has accepted the overarching principals behind recommendations found in the external review report. However, some recommendations are out of scope for the review and others confirm already existing practices or are being addressed through newly established procedures that external reviewers did not have visibility of due to timing of the review.

### RECOMMENDATION 1 & 2

1. **It is recommended that the two-year diploma be redesigned and offered at Aurora College.**
2. **It is recommended that a four-year Bachelor of Social Work be offered by Aurora College.**

### *Aurora College accepts these recommendations*

Aurora College remains committed to supporting northerners to achieve their post-secondary education and career goals. It is clear from labour market data and the myriad of issues facing the North that there is a need for Social Workers. These recommendations align with the intention of Aurora College to build programs using a ladder model as transformation to the polytechnic university continues. This ladder approach provides multiple entrance and exit points that will increase access to more students.

Aurora College agrees that students who have completed the previous program (or other social service-related diplomas) and have not yet obtained a BSW degree could be admitted into an advanced standing option, completing the final two years of the degree. This would also allow students who exited after completing their two-year diploma to re-enter the program later to complete their BSW. This would help support social work students who typically exit and enter the program at various points due to life circumstances. This flexibility would contribute to retention and ultimately more Northern residents working in the social work field. Offering a degree program would also provide more fully qualified social workers who could be employed.

New degree programs take time to develop as they must adhere to strict academic and credentialing procedures. Aurora College will begin work on a Social Work bachelor's degree at the same time as the Social

Work Diploma program to ensure laddering opportunities are created and curriculum supports exit and entry points for students.

In terms of redesign, Aurora College partially agrees with the recommendations. The previous program was designed to reflect and respect northern and Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing. New program design will build on that approach and continue to be reflective of the students and communities they will serve. Program Advisory Committees will be established and will include experts in the social work field including those with lived experience.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3**

**Consideration of a Master of Social Work (MSW) is also recommended**

*Aurora College partially accepts this recommendation*

This credential will offer opportunities for advancement of Northern residents into higher level positions. Offering an MSW will be dependent on a number of factors including the successes of the earlier credentialed Social Work Program (Diploma and Bachelor) and labour market demand. The decision to develop an MSW will not be made at this time but will be reviewed as the Social Work Programs are launched and evaluated.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4**

**It is highly recommended that Aurora College offer this program directly and not in partnership with another degree granting institution.**

*Aurora College partially accepts this recommendation*

Aurora College will do an environmental scan across Canada of all social work programs to explore the possibilities of starting these programs with a partner. Working with an established program provides opportunities for developing networks outside the NWT, supports our need to ensure our programs meet national accreditation standards, provides opportunities for faculty exchanges and shared student projects, and may provide opportunities for cost sharing expenses as the new program is being developed. The long-term goal would be to

work with a suitable partner and gradually move to take on the program in its entirety.

Aurora College does not agree that a partnership model will hamper the ability to develop a northern and Indigenous program that will meet the needs of students and the labour market. In fact, there are significant advantages to working with a partner to develop programming.

Pending an outcome of the scan, a decision will be made about partnership with another degree granting institution.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5**

**Accreditation can be considered via the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) 2019 agreement with the National Indigenous Accreditation Board (NIAB). It is recommended that a Curriculum Committee be established to develop the program ensuring accreditation standards are met.**

#### *Aurora College accepts this recommendation*

During the redevelopment of the Social Work Program, Aurora College will work with accrediting bodies to ensure curriculum will meet national standards for social work programs.

### **RECOMMENDATION 6**

**A further recommendation is to hire, not only social work educators but knowledge keepers as tenured/tenure track faculty. It is vital to have knowledge keepers hired to help develop the curriculum, as well as deliver course content.**

#### *Aurora College partially accepts this recommendation*

As part of the overall transformation of Aurora College to a polytechnic university, the governance structure of Aurora College is being redeveloped to include an Indigenous Knowledge Holders Council. Recommendations of this sort will be considered in the broader context of the institution as a whole and articulated through a



strategic framework that will inform operational and strategic decision making across the whole institution.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 7**

**A Curriculum Committee should be established to create the course content for years one to four of the programs. It is recommended that Indigenous individuals with knowledge of accreditation standards for social work be part of this curriculum committee, as well as knowledge keepers and social work educators.**

#### *Aurora College accepts this recommendation*

As part of the overall transformation of Aurora College to a polytechnic university, curriculum committees will be established to support the development of new courses and programs as well as support any enhancements to programs recommended in regularly scheduled program reviews. An important component of the Social Work diploma and Bachelor's degree program will be the establishment of Program Advisory Committee and the Academic Program Development and Review Frameworks. As mentioned earlier, the Knowledge Holders Council will play an active role with this program.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 8**

**It is recommended that a Governance Committee or Program Management Committee be instituted after the development of the program to ensure ongoing quality assurance and response to community needs**

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#### *Aurora College partially accepts this recommendation*

As part of the overall transformation of Aurora College to a polytechnic university, a complete quality assurance program will be instituted as part of regular practice. Aurora College is presently working with continuous quality improvement experts in Alberta to develop our processes, guide our implementation and prepare for the accreditation review of the new polytechnic.

Each program of study will establish a Program Advisory Committee, known as PAC, which will have representation from across the NWT

including Indigenous representation, industry partners, and employers. Members of this committee will meet regularly to discuss the program, any new employment opportunities, identify practicum sites for students and to share any new advances in the field that may require additional content to be added or updated to the course/program so graduates are well prepared for the workforce. PACs are also an excellent source of resources that can be used in the program and can help to connect students to employment.

## **Next Steps**

Aurora College will complete a national scan of Social Work programs and then develop a full program proposal including current human resource needs and overall costs for consideration by the Board of Governors, the Academic Council and the Indigenous Knowledge Holders Council.

It is anticipated that the Social Work programs will be relaunched in the fall of 2023 with students graduating at the Diploma level in 2025 and at the Bachelor level in 2027.

## APPENDIX A

1. Organizational charts of Aurora College,
2. External review completed in 2017 (Laratta, John. Review of the Social Work Diploma Program Final Report Crowe Mackay LLP and Crowe Mackay Financial Services Limited, April 5, 2018) this report was not accepted by the GNWT.
3. Labor market data including postings of a number of vacant social work positions
4. The Conference Board of Canada. Labour Market Information Resource: Northwest Territories Labour Market Forecast and Needs Assessment. (2016).  
[https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/skills\\_4\\_success\\_-\\_labour\\_market\\_forecast\\_and\\_needs\\_assessment\\_-\\_resource.pdf](https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/skills_4_success_-_labour_market_forecast_and_needs_assessment_-_resource.pdf) ;
5. Aurora College Foundational Review report
6. Government Response to the Aurora College Foundational Review;
7. Social Work Program Curricular Map; and Social Work Program Brochure.
8. The University of Regina academic calendar
9. The MOU between University of Regina and Aurora College

## **APPENDIX B**

### **External Program Review Report**

Aurora College Social Work Diploma Program Review