

Aurora College COVID-19 Response and Beyond

Mr. Speaker, when students at Aurora College left for March break they were unaware of the uncertainty that the pandemic would bring to so many aspects of their lives, including if they would remain on track to achieve their education and career goals. I would like to share with you today some of the challenges and innovative solutions that the team at Aurora College implemented to support their students and their communities.

When the pandemic hit the Northwest Territories, all Aurora College programming was temporarily suspended while the College team planned and executed a fundamental shift in how they would teach. In a two week period, Aurora College transitioned from classroom-based learning to a distance learning format for all of its full-time certificate, diploma and degree programs. Through innovation and determination on the part of instructors, the majority of students remained on track to complete their semester.

Mr. Speaker, students who previously relied on access to a shared computer lab faced the challenge of not having the technology typically required to learn from a distance. In response to this challenge, Aurora College collaborated with Computers for Schools to provide computers to students who identified they needed one to continue their studies.

All throughout these changes to the program delivery, the College continued to consider how suspended and cancelled programs might restart, and the Aurora College team stayed in touch and followed up with affected students to support their continued educational journey ensuring continued relationships between the students and staff during this difficult time of transition.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to a monumental shift in their teaching method, Aurora College was also able to assist with the broader Government of the Northwest Territories' response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student housing in Fort Smith was repurposed to accommodate travellers returning to the Northwest Territories who needed to isolate for 14 days. In addition, the Aurora College Centre for Mine and Industry Training facility became the solution to address the need for a drive-through COVID-19 testing site for the Department of Health and Social Services.

At the Yellowknife-North Slave campus, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing staff stepped-up to inventory medical equipment and supplies used in that program and designated for use by health authorities if required. Aurora College engaged with the Department of Health and Social Services to determine how current students in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Practical Nursing Diploma, and Personal Support Worker programs could play a role in the emergency response at health care facilities. These students also participated in the emergency response either through casual employment or through their scheduled practicum.

There have also been engagements with Education, Culture and Employment to determine how students in the Early Childhood Development program could support the re-opening of day care facilities under emergency conditions.

Mr. Speaker, at the Inuvik Campus, the Arts, Crafts and Technology Micro-Manufacturing Centre has been using 3D printers to make mask tension relievers for hospital workers, and developing prototypes for door openers that allow you to open a door with your arm instead of hand. In addition, it has all the supplies and is on stand-by to produce face shields should they be required. As well, the single-student housing facility is being provided as a temporary solution to address the emergency isolation needs of the town's vulnerable population.

Mr. Speaker, as the College plans for how to deliver programming in the fall of 2020, their primary responsibility remains the health and safety of students, staff and residents. In response to the Government of the Northwest Territories' Emerging Wisely reopening plan and to its ongoing commitment to student success, the majority of Aurora College programs and courses offered in the 2020 fall semester will be delivered entirely by distance learning. Acknowledging the importance of hands-on and face-to-face learning, Aurora College continues to determine how and when critical in-person programming can happen

based on advice from Office of the Chief Public Health Officer and the Workers' Safety and Compensation Commission.

Mr. Speaker, all of the challenges faced and changes made have strengthened the College and shown that the institution is ready and capable of making the changes necessary to transform into a polytechnic university. The transformation remains on target and is more important than ever for the Northwest Territories.

There are wide ranging benefits to establishing a polytechnic university in the Northwest Territories, many of which could contribute to the social and economic recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The combined short and long-term benefits could make the transformation a focal point for drawing post-COVID related investment, primarily from the Government of Canada, but it may also draw attention from wide-ranging sources.

Mr. Speaker, Aurora College currently serves a student population that is 75 per cent Indigenous and oversees several academic and research programs in partnership with Indigenous governments. Engaging our Indigenous partners in a meaningful way in transformation is critical to its success. That is why I have written to Indigenous leaders to collaborate on an approach to how and when they are engaged in the transformation based on the principles of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

It is also important to highlight that what we are building is a post-secondary institution that reflects the values and interests of our residents. Beyond the simple mechanics of economic stimulus, residents must be inspired by new short and long-term opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, in closing I would like to say that despite the additional challenges Aurora College students have faced, it has been heartening to see their continued dedication to advancing their education. I also have to congratulate all of the Aurora College graduates of 2020 who, in the face of adversity, successfully completed their programs. They should be very proud of their achievement. Their commitment to success will serve them well throughout their lives.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.