



# NorQuest College Fast-Tracks Program Development

How one college’s vision for strategic, labour market informed program planning streamlined the process of program development—and enabled a smooth pivot in response to COVID-19.

**LIKE MANY INSTITUTIONS WITH A SIMILAR MISSION, NorQuest College** offers work-relevant programs to a diverse group of adult learners. Recognizing that many people in Alberta are unemployed or underemployed, NorQuest’s strategic plan envisioned connecting even more students with learning opportunities that align with the province’s economic growth. To achieve this, NorQuest’s program development team launched the Fast Track work plan that used Emsi’s labour-market data to identify viable programs before developing curriculum with workforce professionals. Because this approach was intended to change and grow based on economic realities, NorQuest was equipped to pivot as priorities shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To read the full case study, visit [economicmodeling.com/NorQuest](https://economicmodeling.com/NorQuest)

## ANALYST

from



### CREATE RELEVANT PROGRAMS

You shouldn’t have to cross your fingers and hope your programs are effective. That’s why we created **Analyst**—our comprehensive labor market analysis software that gives you the labor market data you need to align programs with market demand. Discover new opportunities. Validate successful programs. Identify at-risk programs. Analyst makes objective analysis a breeze.

LEARN MORE AT:

[economicmodeling.com/  
higher-education](https://economicmodeling.com/higher-education)



### THE CHALLENGE

NorQuest College’s strategic plan aimed at addressing underemployment and unemployment in Alberta, Canada, by providing new programs that aligned with regional economic growth



### THE SOLUTION

The flexible Fast Track work plan helped identify viable new programs (using Analyst’s labour market data) and develop work-relevant curriculum



### THE RESULTS

NorQuest developed 21 new programs and launched 16 before COVID struck. The adaptable work plan then allowed the team to pivot in response to the changing needs of Alberta’s economy

# NorQuest College Fast-Tracks Program Development

How one college's vision for strategic, labour market informed program planning streamlined the process of program development—and enabled a smooth pivot in response to COVID-19.

By Anne Peasley



NorQuest College, which serves adult learners in Alberta, Canada, set out to address underemployment and unemployment challenges in the region, with an aim to double the student population by 2025.



To launch the new programs needed for such rapid growth, NorQuest implemented a Fast Track work plan: a flexible process for identifying and developing programs that reflected the regional economy's needs.



Data from Emsi's Analyst tool helped justify the new programs and ensure that development efforts were focused where they will make the most impact.



When the COVID-19 pandemic changed Alberta's economy, the adaptable plan allowed NorQuest to pivot in response.

**N**ESTLED IN THE BUSTLING CITY of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, looking to maximize opportunities that others can't see, you'll find **NorQuest College**.

Like many institutions with a similar mission, NorQuest offers work-relevant programs to a diverse group of adult learners, awarding roughly 1,500 certificates and diplomas each year. NorQuest focuses on offering work-relevant education that situates students for growth, development, and lifelong learning.

Recognizing that many people in the province are unemployed or underemployed, NorQuest developed

a strategic plan to connect even more students with learning opportunities that align with Alberta's economic growth. Laid out in *IMAGINE 2025*, NorQuest's proposed goals included expanding their student population to 40,000.

"We had many reasons to plan credit programming in advance," said Angharad Hong Brown, Manager of Program Development. "Our strategic plan set an ambitious learner target for 2025. Our college wanted to double the number of students we served and to do this, the number of programs we offer had to increase. We just didn't have enough variety to grow and attract new learners."



approval. Approved programs would then be implemented, and eventually evaluated as part of NorQuest’s regular practice of program review.

While the Program Development team provided a framework and process expertise, the team recruited subject matter experts, called Program Founders, to make sure that each program was developed appropriately for its intended career outcome. “Program Founders are envisioned to support the proposal and curriculum development phases,” Hong Brown explained, “as well as to help launch and operationalize new programs.”

While a comprehensive program plan may seem inflexible and rigid, Hong Brown’s experience showed quite the opposite. “Rather than limiting our ability to seize new opportunities,” she said, “the plan provides us with full working knowledge of the context in which we do so. This is a living plan. It changes and adapts. Every year we update our three-year work plan.”

To operationalize NorQuest’s high-level objectives at the program level, Hong Brown needed a process for controlled and sustainable—yet rapid—growth.

Enter the New Program Development process and the launch of the Fast Track work plan.

## HOW TO FAST TRACK THE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

For new program proposals, Alberta’s Ministry of Advanced Education requires evidence of industry or market need, including evidence of student demand, labour demand, and support from industry, employers, and professional organizations. To build a comprehensive need-based case for each program, Suathim turned to **Analyst**, Emsi’s labour market analysis software, which provides data that allowed Suathim to compare NorQuest’s proposed programs with real-world economic and employment needs.

## BUILD A TEAM, MAKE A PLAN

Knowing she couldn’t succeed alone, Hong Brown quickly expanded her team from one person to four, including Senior Academic Development Specialist Jay Suathim. Together, the team developed the Fast Track Program Development Process in response to the bold vision laid out in *IMAGINE 2025*.

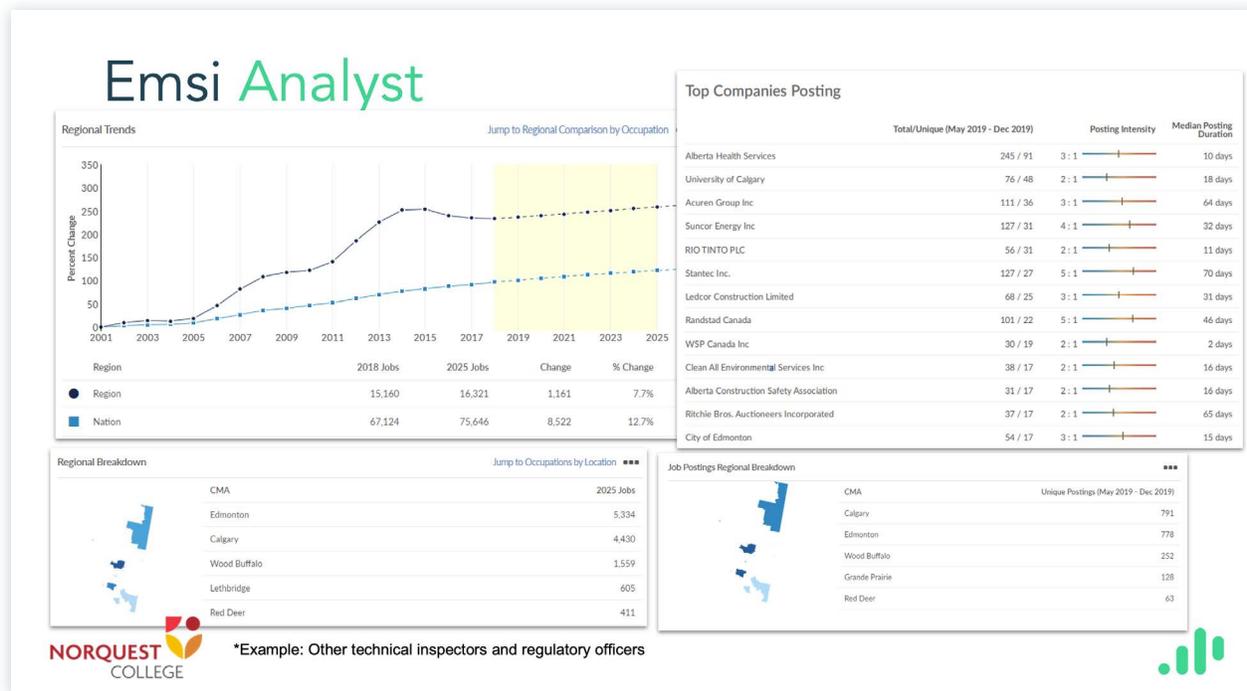
“The goal of the program development process is to increase the speed at which new ideas are validated and also to increase the academic rigor in the proposal development,” said Suathim. “We hope to also improve the implementation of new programs.”

The plan includes a seven-step process. Potential program ideas were vetted by the Academic Leadership Team. Viable program ideas then moved into the development process, including labour market research and curriculum development via the **Developing a Curriculum** (DACUM) method, before being presented for internal and external

“Emsi provides the detailed data on Canada-wide information including occupation analysis, post-secondary program, job postings, industry analysis and demographic data,” said Suathim about using Analyst. “For example, we use a search based on NOC code,

NorQuest’s 7-step Fast Track program development process





Emsi Analyst data showing regional job trends, top companies hiring, and job location and demand.

the National Occupational Classification code, to determine regional trends in job postings.”

Using Emsi data to help conduct market research ensured that each program was justified in terms of unique value proposition, labour market needs, and societal benefit. The team was confident that the programs selected would be worth the time and effort of developing them. After all, a key consideration when moving fast is to make sure that you’re moving in the right direction. “We want to ensure that we avoid creating programs that nobody wants or needs,” said Hong Brown

To create work-relevant curriculum, focus groups of working professionals in fields corresponding to each program come together to help develop learning outcomes that reflect the day-to-day reality of the workforce. Suathim explained, “Out of these focus groups, we capture the major duties and tasks as well as the necessary knowledge, skills, and traits that are needed for this occupation. A traditional DACUM

process takes up to four days to do, but we have a modified version that we can do within one day.”

These skills and competencies are captured and organized into a chart, which is then used to design curriculum by mapping skills and competencies to program learning outcomes, and then again to specific courses.

## WHEN THE FAST TRACK BECOMES TOO FAST

The Fast Track Program Development process greatly expedited the elapsed time from “idea” to “enrollable program” (which would normally be measured in years, not months), but the team encountered a few speed bumps.

For one, the team’s focus on speed and efficiency found them occasionally falling out of sync with existing college processes. “We introduced a new process and tried to create buy-in while developing 15 new programs all at once with the Fast Track,” explained Hong Brown, “and



Results from a DACUM session

that resulted in some unexpected delays, resistance and implementation problems.”

This challenge extended to external review, as well. “I don’t think that anyone believed us when we said we would be sending in 15 program proposals for approval,” said Hong Brown with a laugh. Waiting on the approval process created very short windows to operationalize and market the new programs before their scheduled launch date. Program Founders often bore the brunt of this time crunch, working with the Office of the Registrar to ensure that programs were logistically ready to accept new students.

But the team prevailed: with the Fast Track Process, the Program Development team got NorQuest’s *IMAGINE 2025* off to a rapid start by developing 21 out of the 50 planned new programs—all before 2020.

## THEN COVID STRUCK

Despite developing a plan and a process that allowed them to tackle seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the Program Development team found that their rapid growth was still vulnerable to systemic challenges, such as those brought on by a global pandemic. With limited enrollment and no existing track record

of success, NorQuest’s new programs were incredibly fragile. Nine of NorQuest’s new programs were cut in the wake of COVID-19.

“New program development is facing an uncertain future,” said Hong Brown. True to the “living plan,” her team was asked to pivot away from program development to **microcredentials**. “We are currently developing our microcredential framework and governance structure, including taxonomy and approval processes. Microcredentials are buzzy for all the right reasons, as they are meant to be short-term and focused.”

As COVID changes the global landscape, which in turn changes the Canadian labour market, NorQuest has responded by changing their strategic vision. Equipped with the ability to collect accurate labour market data, and guided by a living plan that incorporates—rather than being disrupted by—new opportunities, Hong Brown, Suathim, and the Program Development team are poised to adapt to these challenging times. ..||

*If you liked this story, you may be interested in reading more **case studies**. If you’re looking for solutions for workforce-data needs, check out **Analyst**. If you have a different question altogether, **reach out** and we’ll get you an answer.*