

# Ontario's public colleges at

# 50

## A Better Plan

### Structured for Success

#### **Better decision-making, better decisions**

As the world of work changes, Ontario's public colleges face important decisions about how to adapt to ensure students graduate from college ready to face the challenges of the new economy. To make the right decisions, however, the right people need to be involved in making them. Unfortunately, at Ontario's colleges, that's not always the case.

Unlike many other post-secondary institutions, Ontario's colleges centralize both academic and administrative decision-making in the hands of administrators. The danger is that this can mean important decisions are made without a proper understanding of the potential academic consequences.

As Ontario's colleges turn 50, we need a new way of making these decisions so our colleges can reach their full potential. That new way is called "collegial governance," and it's based on a pretty straight-forward idea – let's let everyone make the decisions about the areas they are experts in: faculty for academic decisions, and administrators for business ones.



# How collegial governance works

The current college structure means that administrators and the President-appointed Board of Governors have responsibility for all decisions, whether they have to do with the business side of managing a large public organization, or the academic side, including admission standards, grade assignments, instructional methods, and more.

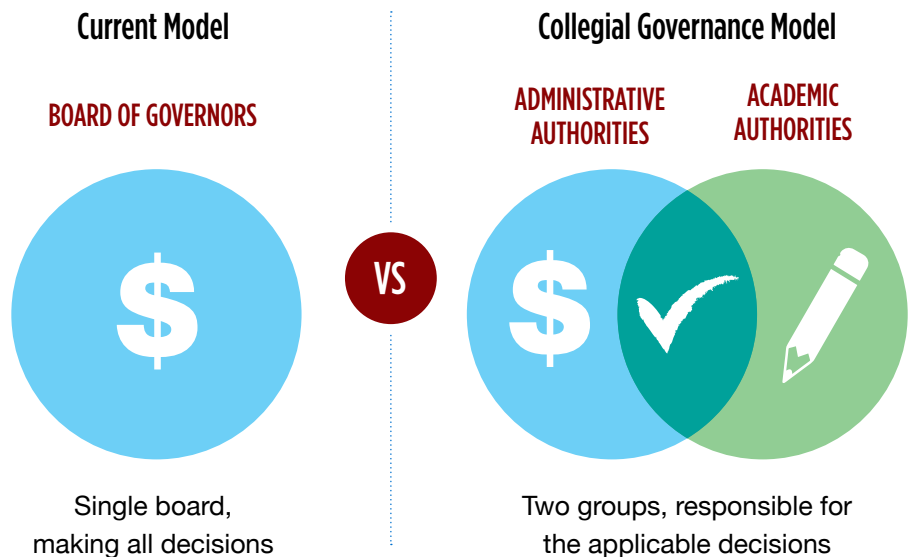
As a result, faculty have become increasingly marginalized from academic decision-making, leading to a decreased quality of education and compromising academic standards.

This is in stark contrast to the process at Ontario universities, or even at colleges in several other provinces, where decision-making is shared between administrative and academic authorities. In these institutions, their bi-cameral systems (meaning two houses) ensure that faculty and administrators are each responsible for making the decisions for which they have the appropriate training and expertise.

By introducing collegial governance at Ontario's public colleges, our colleges would have a similar balanced model, including

a Board of Governors, where administrators would decide on financial matters, and an equivalent body, such as what universities have in an Academic Senate, where faculty, along with student and administration representatives, would make academic decisions. This would let everyone focus on the areas they know best, and lead to better decision-making – and better decisions.

For example, decisions about new buildings, staffing, and operations of the college would be made by the administrators who are trained to make them. On the other hand, decisions about course delivery, graduation requirements, and how best to structure learning so students can succeed would be made by faculty with the expertise and training to support student learning.



## Case Study: Sheridan College Senate

While many colleges continue to centralize all decision-making in the hands of administrators, Sheridan College is making significant steps toward collegial governance and academic freedom.

With a 72-person Senate, 48 of which are faculty members, and

a faculty majority on all Senate committees, Sheridan has placed broad powers over academic decisions in the hands of faculty. Sheridan's Board and senior administrators are now aware that they will face serious challenges if they attempt to proceed without faculty support and approval on academic decisions, which has already led to improvements for students.

For example, while some colleges continue to report alarming stories about administrators directing faculty to change student grades to pass students with failing grades, Sheridan's model places grading policy firmly in the hands of the Senate. This means that any changes to grading policy require faculty approval – an important safeguard for the college's academic integrity.

## Our colleges' current structure is failing everyone:



### STUDENTS

- Degrees and diplomas aren't valued the same as those from other institutions
- Classes are designed based on what is cheap to deliver, not how students can best learn



### COLLEGES

- Lose the perspective of those who can warn of the potential academic consequences of decisions
- Risk their reputation when decisions lead to negative academic consequences or devalue the college's brand



### PUBLIC

- Safety can be put at risk when administrators, not faculty, decide when a student is ready to graduate
- Public money is not well spent when educational outcomes suffer because decisions were made without faculty input

## But with collegial governance, we all benefit:



### STUDENTS

- Degrees and diplomas that count the same as those issued by other institutions
- Learning conditions that are designed to allow all students to succeed



### COLLEGES

- Demonstrate awareness of academic consequences, which can strengthen reputations
- Make better decisions as a result of letting those with expertise make relevant decisions



### PUBLIC

- Public safety ensured by letting experts determine when students are ready to graduate
- Public money is well spent, providing the best educational outcomes for the money allocated

## What's the difference for students?

The impacts on students of how academic decisions are made – and who makes them – are far-reaching.

Academic decisions can include: the types of evaluation used to measure learning; what courses can (or should) be offered online instead of face-to-face; what knowledge is required to graduate and work in a field; what academic standards are enforced when determining whether students have that knowledge; and a multitude of other questions. They can affect both the ability of a student to complete a degree or diploma, and the value of that degree or diploma when students apply for work or further credentials.

Consider the growing trend of using online or hybrid (a mix of online and face-to-face) courses in place of traditional classroom delivery. Looked at purely from a cost-savings perspective, it's easy

to see why administrators like online delivery as a way to increase class sizes while decreasing costs associated with classroom teaching.

But only looking at it from that perspective ignores the fact that faculty know some students struggle to learn online, and some courses are ill-suited to be delivered that way. When faculty are a part of these decisions, they bring additional perspectives on how students learn, what material requires in-person delivery, and the limits (and advantages) of different teaching methods. With this additional input, colleges can make decisions that find cost-savings where possible, while ensuring that quality of education, and accessibility for all students, remain priorities.

And while colleges are offering an increasing number of degree programs, students may not be

aware that these degrees are not always seen as the equivalent of those from other institutions. For example, though a number of colleges now offer degree programs in business, a close look at the admission requirements for Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programs, show that universities do not always recognize these degrees, with some, like Ryerson, specifically noting that college degrees are not sufficient.

Finally, academic decisions can also have serious implications when graduates start looking for work. In one recent case that made headlines, international students graduated from Niagara College only to discover that because the majority of their courses were delivered online, they were ineligible for work permits after graduation.

## Beyond decision-making – the importance of academic freedom

While collegial governance speaks to the larger decisions made at the college level, academic freedom is also important at the individual course level, where faculty need to be free to make academic decisions. Allowing faculty to determine how best to deliver and evaluate the content within a course leads to better educational outcomes for students, and strengthens the reputation of our colleges.

Academic freedom is also critical to the degree programs offered by Ontario colleges. Many of these programs are subject to audit by the Postsecondary Education Quality Assurance Board (PEQAB), which requires that colleges meet a standard for academic freedom and integrity. Without this standard being met, degree quality is at risk, as are these programs themselves.

At a more fundamental level, academic freedom is important not only to ensure the right decision is made, but also to ensure that the right reasons are behind the decision. Take the situation when students appeal a failing final grade. While administrators are known to push faculty to adjust grades upwards in order to keep retention rates high and ensure students continue with their program (and their tuition payments), faculty look at the particular circumstances of the individual student and determine whether an adjustment, or an opportunity to make up missed or failed assignments, is justified. While the latter supports academic integrity by ensuring that students in particularly challenging circumstances are given a fair opportunity, the former risks the reputation of the program and the institution by threatening its integrity.

If we truly want Ontario's public colleges to be leaders in delivering quality education, we need to protect and foster academic freedom – for the sake of our students and our colleges.

### Excerpt from the 2014 Report on Education in Ontario Colleges, page 58

“ In Ontario community colleges, faculty currently have no guaranteed academic freedom. This means that management can completely control what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is evaluated. It does not matter if the professor teaching a course has a Ph.D. and 20 years of experience in her field, while her manager has absolutely no relevant expertise; the manager can dictate academic terms to the faculty member. Such a situation sounds absurd to many who first hear it, and yet the lack of academic freedom has been a constant fact, and constant source of conflict, from the very beginning of the CAATs. While at times and in certain institutions there have been cultures of collegiality in which managers left academic decisions largely to faculty, these instances have always proven to be fleeting, and susceptible to changes in management, changes in government mandates, and funding pressures. Today, with a climate of intense fiscal austerity, and a corporate approach to administration, the lack of college faculty academic freedom is being felt more acutely than ever. ”

### Read the full 2014 Report on Education in Ontario Colleges:

<https://opseu.org/information/college-faculty-caat-report-education-ontario-colleges>

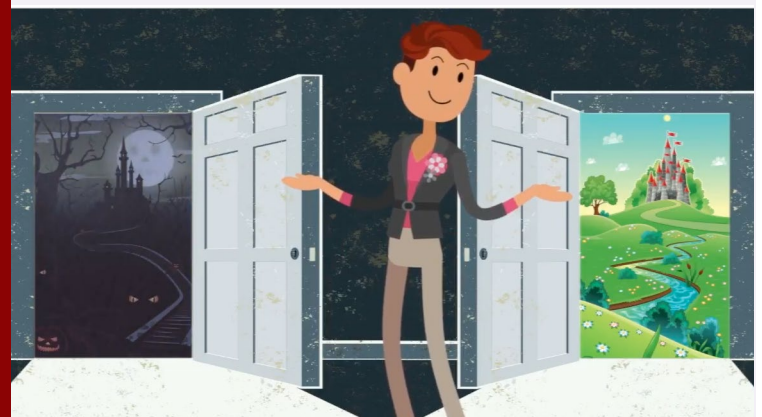
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- Learn more about this and other issues online at: [www.collegefaculty.org](http://www.collegefaculty.org)
- Let your local executive committee know that you want to help at your college



**WATCH OUR VIDEO AT**

<https://youtu.be/HHhjLNVmiR4>