



# OntarioLearn: 24 Public Colleges in Ontario Collaborate to Increase Student Access to and Choice of Quality Programs and Courses



## Opportunity

OntarioLearn is a key component of online learning in Ontario. It is a consortium of Ontario's 24 public colleges who partner to share more than 1,200 online courses and several online programs to make them accessible to students across the province and beyond. In 2015-16, there were over 70,000 registrations in their shared online courses.

The idea for OntarioLearn grew from a 1994 agreement by the Continuing Education divisions of two colleges – Loyalist and Algonquin – to share a course developed and taught by an instructor at Loyalist and delivered to the computers (the term 'online learning' had not yet been coined) of students from both colleges. Enrolment grew rapidly in subsequent offerings of this first course and then Algonquin developed two more courses that it shared with Loyalist, with the partners developing a cost-sharing and revenue model that was later adapted for all partner colleges.

In 1995, the heads of Continuing Education at seven colleges agreed to work together to share courses via computers. This number grew to include all 24 public colleges in Ontario, with the two French-language colleges joining the consortium in 2012. All colleges, regardless of size, are equal partners in OntarioLearn. Each college has the option to promote and register students in their selections from the online inventory within the consortium's "seat-sharing"

model. In the seat sharing model, enrollments across all colleges are combined so that a single course may have students from some or all colleges in the province, taught by a single teacher who is hired by the host college. As described by Tracie Marsh-Fior, OntarioLearn’s Executive Director, the consortium model “resonates with collaboration and sharing”.

**24 colleges. accessible anywhere.**

**CONTACT**  
 Tracie Marsh-Fior  
 Executive Director  
 705-477-0130  
 tracie@ontariolearn.com  
 www.ontariolearn.com

**OntarioLearn**  
 Colleges Working Together

OntarioLearn is focused on providing online access to programs and courses, as an alternative to the traditional classroom approach. Regardless of work or personal life demands, geographic location, or learning preference, students can choose from a wide variety of online courses and programs offered through their local colleges and developed and taught by instructors in colleges across Ontario. Since its launch in 1995, student registrations in courses offered through OntarioLearn experienced dramatic increases, as shown below.

Academic Years	1995-1996	2000-2001	2005-2006	2010-2011	2015-2016
Registrations	500	11,314	34,299	66,620	71,250

# Innovation

OntarioLearn's innovative approaches to collaborative course development, delivery, student support, and quality assurance, as well as its infrastructure and funding model are the key to its success.

## **Course Development**

A central principle of OntarioLearn is all colleges can develop, at their own expense, online courses for the inventory but only one course is developed in any specific subject (i.e. only one Accounting 101 course). Duplication of courses is rigorously avoided through a process of "course claiming". Any college can propose a new course by presenting an outline for review by the other colleges, which agree to development or challenge it when they see duplication of an existing course. In these cases, a third party reviews the proposed and existing courses and makes a recommendation. Colleges have a year to develop approved courses. In 2015, there were 393 new courses under development.

Once given approval, the developing (host) college is responsible for the design, delivery, and updating of the course, providing the instructor, creating and assessing assignments, and determining final grades and sharing these with the registering college. The host college also retains ownership of the course.

## **Course Delivery and Student Testing**

Once a course is developed and approved, it is entered in the OntarioLearn inventory and colleges can choose to advertise it and register students, although not every course is available every semester. Courses are primarily delivered asynchronously, facilitated by the instructor at the host college. Connectivity between the instructor and the students and among the students is central to the pedagogy. Students register at their local college and take the course through their home computer or groups of students may take the course together in computer centres provided by colleges or through one of [Contact North | Contact Nord's](#)(link is external) 112 online learning centres across the province. Tests and final exams can be offered and invigilated online or in-person. The host college provides the registering colleges with the final grades, and the registering college informs the students and provides the credentials.

## **Quality Assurance**

Since 2005, standards of quality developed by OntarioLearn were applied to each newly developed course, including criteria related to the provision of essential course information, structural integrity and navigational simplicity, contents of lessons, configuration of assignments, and text and visual presentation. Recently, the [Quality Matters](#)(link is external) standards have been customized to the meet the requirements of the OntarioLearn model, then adopted and used for all courses currently under development.

## Student Support

Through the OntarioLearn website, available in English and French, students can search and access the online program and course inventory, as well as find information on registration processes and the experience of online learning. To support the virtual campus experience for learners online, OntarioLearn has forged partnerships offering virtual proctoring, virtual tutoring, eTextbooks and the services of Ontario College library and resource teams. Students can connect with a single sign-on to a secure video collection (McNabb Connolly database), search for eBooks, connect with library teams in social Hubs online, or link directly to registering college library contacts for help with study skills, research and more. Students are surveyed after the completion of every course and their perspectives continue to guide course modifications and improvements.

## Technological Infrastructure

Four different learning management systems (Blackboard, D2L, First Class and Moodle) are utilized by the colleges and students connect with a single sign on to their courses through the highly secure OntarioLearn Portal. OntarioLearn manages several firms dedicated to education technologies to provide the infrastructure and customized technological support. Technological support for faculty and students is provided 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year, using phone, online ticket, and live chat (8 a.m. to 8 p.m. in French).

## Funding Model

OntarioLearn developed a self-supporting revenue model based on college fees and student tuition; its operational funding does not come from government sources, although specific projects may receive funding.

Each college pays a membership fee to OntarioLearn. Online students pay course registration fees to the college at which they register. The registering college then distributes a portion of student fees to:

- The host college for developing, maintaining and providing the instructor for the course;
- The Technical Service Provider;
- OntarioLearn administration; and
- The registering college retains a portion of the fee.

## Outcomes and Benefits

### Student Choice

Students have access to a much wider selection of quality-assured online programs and courses than any individual college is able to offer, as well as technological support on demand. The policy of providing only one quality online course in any subject area means

development time and resources are dedicated to expanding, rather than duplicating, the inventory and offering steadily increasing choice to students and prospective students.

## **Student Access**

From 1995 to 2015, there were more than 775,000 enrolments in courses offered through OntarioLearn. Flexibility is provided by courses starting each semester, with some offering monthly start dates as well. Students register at, and have all communication through, their local college, making the process transparent to them.

The courses are offered through Continuing Education divisions of the colleges, serving students who cannot or choose not to attend face-to-face classes. In many cases, the courses are equivalent to the day-time courses, allowing students to take advantage of OntarioLearn courses to recover course credits to complete their program requirements at the same standard as full-time students. New courses that may not launch due to small numbers of registrants at any one college can be successfully offered through OntarioLearn as minimum numbers are met through combined registrations across the province.

## **Student Success**

In 2015 student success rates were 77%, with retention rates at 89%.

## **College Flexibility**

Through this collaborative model, colleges can offer wide-ranging access and options in online learning to students, while limiting their investment of time and resources in the development and delivery of courses. Regardless of the scope of their course development activity, each college can offer students as many courses as they choose from the active inventory each semester with the seat-sharing model offered by OntarioLearn. Colleges benefit both educationally and financially through their partnership.

## **Challenges and Enhancements**

The pace of change in technology creates challenges for currency and responsiveness, as well as a greater need for faculty training and support. At the same time, the colleges are being asked to do more with less, adding additional pressures for funding.

The exponential growth of online learning is expanding the marketplace and the competition for students.

The Government of Ontario has recently made funds available to post-secondary institutions for the development of online courses, programs, modules and student and faculty supports through [eCampusOntario\(link is external\)](#). This provincial focus and commitment to online learning and the collaboration of post-secondary teams has enabled colleges to access funds via a competitive process to increase the number of fully online resources and learning opportunities. Colleges have often included OntarioLearn in these bids.

With the availability of social media and other new technologies, faculty need encouragement and support as they integrate these new learning tools into their course designs and interaction with students.

Branding of OntarioLearn and creating wider awareness of its collaborative model can be challenging as it functions behind the scenes, providing support and services to its college partners, but not directly interacting with students or college management on a day-to-day basis.

## Potential

Tracie Marsh-Fior highlights a number of areas of potential development for OntarioLearn. These include trades and apprenticeship training, which is opening up to online learning, with simulations and other technologies offering possibilities for hands-on practice. In addition, Interactive gaming and social media are very familiar to many current and prospective students, offering new approaches for learning, communication, assignments and motivation.

A greater focus is being placed on making complete programs available for online delivery. In 2015, 552 partner programs were available online, with nine programs currently under development. In the interests of quality control, no more than four colleges are involved in the development of the courses that constitute any one program. Recent grants awarded will increase the number of shared programs, a priority for the consortium with its Digital Strategy 2017.

## For Further Information

Tracie Marsh-Fior  
Executive Director  
OntarioLearn  
[tracie@ontariolearn.com](mailto:tracie@ontariolearn.com)