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***Corresponding author:** Sue Coffey, Post-Secondary Nursing Programs, Ontario, Canada;
E-mail: salim170878@gmail.com

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Review Article

In Service to Wisdom: Proposing an Egalitarian Governance Model for Post-Secondary Nursing Programs

Coffey S*, Anyinam C, Graham L and Da Silva C

Post-Secondary Nursing Programs, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Post-secondary nursing programs in Canada operate within institutional structures shaped, often without examination, by hierarchical and historically masculine models of academic governance. These models have a certain efficiency. They also systematically suppress the distributed wisdom, experience, and perspectives available within nursing program communities, undermining both the quality of educational decision-making and the professional development of those who work and study within them. This paper proposes the Wisdom Council as an alternative model of program governance, one grounded in feminist, emancipatory, and servant-leadership theory, and informed by traditions of consensus-based and participatory decision-making found in both Indigenous governance and contemporary civic deliberation scholarship. The Wisdom Council does not displace formal institutional structures but operates at a higher level of principled intent, convening faculty, staff, and students to respond collectively to identified needs, dilemmas, and opportunities. Central to the model are principles of egalitarian relationships, radical participation, and the recognition that leadership and followership are not fixed identities but fluid, situational practices. The Wisdom Council further holds that active observation is a form of full participation, and that silence, far from absence, may represent the most thoughtful form of contribution. The paper explores the theoretical lineage of this model, articulates its design and operational principles, and examines the institutional, relational, and personal conditions that must be cultivated for it to take meaningful root in nursing education contexts.

Introduction

Nursing is a profession defined by its orientation toward service that extends not only to patients, but to communities, to the health system, and to the ideals of the discipline itself. It is a profession with a substantial history of advocating for the dignity and full participation of the people it serves, and of challenging structural arrangements that exclude, diminish, or silence. And yet within the internal governance of nursing education Programs, those same hierarchies are often reproduced without examination.

The organizational charts of post-secondary nursing programs in Canada tend to follow the standard architecture of academic institutions: Program Associate Deans, Chairs, or Directors with formal decision-making authority, committees with defined mandates and membership, procedures that route input upward through established channels, and structures

in which the distribution of voice corresponds, more or less, to institutional rank. These arrangements have a certain logic. They are recognizable, they comply with accreditation requirements, and they provide clear lines of accountability. They also carry particular assumptions worth scrutinizing: who holds relevant knowledge, what constitutes legitimate participation, and whether authority and wisdom are the same thing.

The four authors of this paper, faculty members from nursing programs across Ontario, Canada, have been engaged in an ongoing collegial conversation about the gap between the values their nursing programs espouse and the governance structures those programs actually inhabit. In the course of that conversation, a proposal emerged: The Wisdom Council. The Wisdom Council is not a replacement for formal institutional governance. It is, rather, a mode of collective inquiry and deliberation designed to bring the distributed



wisdom, experience, judgment, and voice of the entire nursing Program community, including students, to bear on the questions and challenges the Program faces. It is explicitly feminist, emancipatory, and egalitarian in its orientation. And it rests on a reconception of both leadership and participation that the authors believe is not only more consistent with the values of the nursing profession but also more likely to produce decisions of genuine quality. By “distributed wisdom,” the authors mean the differentiated, contextually embedded knowledge held by all members of a program community by virtue of their distinct roles, experiences, and social locations. It is not simply the sum of individual opinions, nor equivalent to collective majority preference. It is the specific insight that a first-semester student has about the experience of clinical placement, that a support staff member has about the texture of daily institutional life, that a sessional educator has about teaching at the margins of program culture, and that a twenty-year faculty member has about what has been tried and why it did or did not hold. Distributed wisdom is irreducible to any single perspective; its value lies precisely in the differences between those perspectives and in the quality of deliberation that draws them into productive relation.

This paper offers the theoretical grounding for the Wisdom Council, describes its design and operating principles, and examines the conditions necessary for its successful implementation. It does so in a spirit consistent with the Council itself, not as a closed argument but as an opening of inquiry. This paper is a theoretical position paper. Its claims are conceptual rather than empirical in origin, and are offered as a framework for further scholarly dialogue and practical experimentation rather than as established findings.

The hierarchical legacy: academic governance and its assumptions

To understand what the Wisdom Council proposes, it helps first to understand what it proposes to move beyond. The governance structures of most post-secondary institutions, including nursing Programs, reflect a historical inheritance from the medieval European university, an institution conceived in a particular social context and shaped by particular assumptions about knowledge, authority, and who counted as a legitimate knower. Within that inheritance, expertise flows vertically: it is concentrated at the top of organizational structures and distributed downward through curricula, policies, and procedures to those with less institutional status.

This model has been reinforced in nursing education by a second inheritance: the long subordination of the nursing profession itself to medical authority. As Roberts [1] documented in her foundational analysis of oppressed-group behaviour in nursing, the profession’s predominantly female workforce historically saw autonomous clinical judgment and professional self-determination constrained in ways they were not in male-dominated healthcare disciplines. The governance of nursing Programs has often internalized this positioning, reproducing within the academic Program a hierarchy that mirrors, rather than challenges, the power structures that have constrained nursing in clinical settings.

“I have sat in more faculty meetings where the only person who actually spoke with confidence was the Chair,” recalled one of the paper’s authors. “Not because everyone else had nothing to say. But because the structure of the meeting (who called it, who set the agenda, who had the authority to act on what was discussed) made it clear that most people’s contributions were optional, not essential. The structure communicated: Your presence is required; your voice is a courtesy.” The first-person accounts offered by the authors at several points in this paper are offered as illustrative vignettes, rhetorical examples drawn from professional experience. Readers should understand them as providing contextual texture to the conceptual argument rather than as empirical support for its claims. If future iterations of this work incorporate first-person accounts as research data, standard ethical protocols regarding informed consent, positionality disclosure, and institutional review would apply.

Romyn [2], writing from Athabasca University’s Nursing faculty, identified this dynamic clearly in the literature on nursing education governance: the persistence of “authoritarian constraints of behaviourist models” even in Programs that nominally endorse more emancipatory values. When the structures of governance contradict the pedagogical philosophy of the Program, a kind of institutional double consciousness develops: educators teaching collaborative, critically reflective practice within arrangements that model neither.

The argument for an alternative model rests on a straightforward empirical claim: That the distributed knowledge available within a nursing Program community, including the clinical expertise of staff educators, the fresh perspective of students encountering the healthcare system for the first time, the institutional memory of long-serving faculty, and the lived experience of those from marginalized communities, is a genuine resource that hierarchical governance systematically fails to access. Decisions made without that resource are, accordingly, poorer decisions than they could be.

Theoretical foundations: feminist, emancipatory, and service-oriented leadership

Feminist theory and the restructuring of power: Feminist theory provides the Wisdom Council’s most fundamental theoretical grounding. At its core, feminist governance theory is not simply about the inclusion of women (though representation matters) but about challenging the structural arrangements that concentrate power and silence particular forms of knowledge. Typically, feminist educational leadership is an approach that challenges the dominant ideology of educational administration by making visible the gendered assumptions embedded in institutional structures and insisting on their reorganization around principles of equity, relationship, and collective accountability.

In the context of nursing education, this critique carries particular force. Allen [3] described how feminist pedagogy promotes “development of an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community in the classroom; shared leadership; cooperative structures; integration of cognitive and affective



learning; and action,” and can “change the classroom into a more egalitarian structure allowing students and teachers to share information and points of view in an open setting.” The Wisdom Council extends this principle from the classroom to the governance of the Program itself. If these conditions are right for learning, why not for decision-making?

De Sousa et al. [4] offered an important complication: egalitarian structures do not automatically produce equity. A system that treats all voices as formally equal while failing to address the differential social positioning of those voices (e.g., differences of race, class, gender, academic rank, professional experience) risks masking rather than addressing power dynamics. The Wisdom Council attends to this risk by building in explicit practices of self-reflection, acknowledgment of positional privilege, and the deliberate invitation of voices that might otherwise remain marginal within the group.

Emancipatory pedagogy and praxis: The emancipatory tradition in nursing education extends from the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1973/1993), who argued that authentic education is never a transfer of knowledge from those who have it to those who lack it, but a collaborative process of inquiry in which all participants, teachers and learners alike, engage with the world as a problem to be named and transformed. Freire’s foundational concept of praxis, the inseparable union of reflection and action, is central to the Wisdom Council’s design. The Council is not a consultative body whose recommendations may or may not influence those who retain decision-making authority. It is a site of genuine praxis: Deliberation that is expected to generate action, and action that is expected to return to reflection.

MacDonnell [5] identified five dimensions of emancipatory nursing in higher education: Reflexivity, transformative learning, interdisciplinarity, praxis, and situated privilege. The Wisdom Council engages all of them directly. Reflexivity is built into the relational norms of the Council, which require members to engage in “authentic self-reflection to participate with both humility and a sense of self-as-person/self-as-professional.” The Council’s deliberative process aims at transformative learning, for the nursing program community as a whole and for individual members. The concept of situated privilege, the recognition that individuals occupy particular social locations that shape what they can see, say, and be heard to mean, is directly engaged through the Council’s explicit egalitarianism and its insistence that all voices carry equal standing.

Servant leadership and shared governance: The servant leadership tradition, developed by Greenleaf (1970/2002) and extended by others, holds that the primary obligation of those in positions of authority is to the growth and well-being of those they serve. Servant leadership in nursing aligns with the service orientation nurses bring to the profession at entry, and nursing research has linked it consistently to reduced burnout, improved job satisfaction, and stronger patient-centred care outcomes [6,7]. The Wisdom Council is, at its deepest level, an institutional expression of servant leadership. It is a structure in which the entire purpose of gathering, the Council’s *raison*

d’être, is service to the nursing Program, its students, staff, faculty, and the broader healthcare community they will enter.

This is the meaning of the Wisdom Council’s foundational commitment to operating “in service”. It is not simply a procedural aspiration but a statement about the ontological orientation of the Council’s work. Every meeting, every dialogue, every silence is understood as an act of service. Porter-O’Grady’s influential formulation of nursing shared governance, first articulated in the mid-1980s and increasingly recognized as the model of governance most aligned with transformational nursing leadership values [8;9], carries this principle into organizational structure. The Wisdom Council goes further, including students as full members of the deliberative community and establishing service as an overarching ethical commitment rather than a management preference.

These three theoretical lineages, feminist, emancipatory, and servant leadership, are not simply additive. They each contribute something distinct, and they also qualify each other in important ways. Feminist theory insists on the structural analysis of power that servant leadership can underplay. Servant leadership supplies an ethics of care and service that feminist theory alone does not always operationalise at the institutional level. Finally, emancipatory pedagogy’s insistence on praxis, the union of reflection and action, prevents both from becoming merely philosophical. The Wisdom Council is not the logical conclusion of any single framework but an attempt to hold all three in productive tension, using the friction between them as a resource rather than a problem to be smoothed over.

Ancestral lineages: indigenous and civic wisdom council traditions

The Wisdom Council proposed in this paper has theoretical antecedents in governance traditions that predate the Western academic institution by centuries. In many Indigenous communities across North America, including the nations and confederacies of what is now Canada, governance has historically been grounded in principles of consensus, collective deliberation, and the recognition that wisdom is distributed across the community rather than concentrated in any individual [10]. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s Great Law of Peace, one of the oldest living participatory governance frameworks in the world, and one that demonstrably influenced early democratic thought, was built on the principles of “peace, leadership, dialogue, individual rights, unity, accountability, and responsibility to all citizenry” (Lyons et al., [11]).

In these traditions, the council is not a bureaucratic structure but a living gathering of the community’s available wisdom, convened in response to specific needs and guided by norms of deep listening, respect for silence, and collective rather than individual accountability. Leaders in such systems are, as Indigenous governance scholars have described, “not authoritarian figures but are held accountable to their community’s collective wisdom and responsibilities” [10,11]. The resonance with the Wisdom Council model proposed here is not coincidental; the authors explicitly acknowledge and



honour these antecedents. The authors recognize that drawing on Indigenous governance traditions as settler-background academics requires care. These are not historical artefacts to be borrowed freely but living practices belonging to specific nations with specific protocols. Where the Wisdom Council reflects principles that resonate with those traditions, it does so by way of acknowledgment and inspiration rather than appropriation. The authors encourage programs implementing this model to seek direct relationships with the Indigenous communities on whose territories they are situated, and to consult Indigenous scholars and governance practitioners, not simply the academic literature about Indigenous governance, in any adaptation process.

In the contemporary civic sphere, the Wisdom Council Process developed by Jim Rough [12] provides a secular model of deliberative governance sharing many of the same principles: broadly inclusive participation, facilitated dialogue, genuine openness to emergent perspectives, and an orientation toward the common good rather than the advocacy of predetermined positions. Rough's documented outcomes are precisely what the authors envision: "a high energy level among participants, a strong sense of 'we', a desire to take greater responsibility for addressing collective challenges" [11].

"When I first heard the idea described," said one author during an early conversation about the Council, "my mind went immediately to the talking circles I had observed in an Indigenous community health context. The norms were different. The protocols were culturally specific. But the underlying principle, that every person present has knowledge worth offering, that the convener's role is to create conditions for wisdom to emerge rather than to direct outcomes, that felt like what we were reaching for."

The wisdom council: design and operating principles

Purpose and positioning: The Wisdom Council does not replace the formal governance structures of a nursing Program: the committees, the chairs, the administrative processes that institutions require, and accreditation standards mandate. It sits, rather, at a different level, a deliberative body concerned not with procedural management but with principled inquiry. Its purpose is to bring the collective wisdom of the program community to bear on the questions and challenges the program faces, creating conditions from which formal decisions and actions may follow.

This positioning matters. By not positioning itself as a decision-making body in the procedural sense, the Wisdom Council avoids the pattern Porter-O'Grady [9] identified in shared governance structures that lose their integrity: they risk devolving into arrangements in which input is sought while decision-making authority quietly remains with those who hold formal rank, reducing genuine participation to performance. The Wisdom Council is not a consultation mechanism. It is a mode of collective knowing that, when it functions well, makes formal decision-making processes more informed, more legitimate, and more reflective of the Program's genuine values.

Membership and inclusive community: Membership in the Wisdom Council encompasses all faculty and staff members of the nursing Program, as well as student representatives from each Program cohort. The claim behind this is epistemological, not symbolic: the wisdom relevant to any Program situation is distributed across the entire community, and any governance structure that excludes students systematically deprives itself of the most direct available knowledge of the student experience of the Program.

The inclusion of students as full Council members, rather than as occasional guest consultants or representatives to a committee whose other members hold formal authority, is perhaps the most structurally radical element of the Wisdom Council. It asks faculty and staff to genuinely hold that a second-semester student has knowledge, perspective, and judgment as relevant to the deliberation at hand as that of a twenty-year veteran of nursing education. Experience provides an irreplaceable frame of reference. It is also partial, and what a student brings is different, rather than lesser. This brings a perspective that the Council cannot generate without them.

"I have been teaching nursing for twenty years," reflected one author. "And I have stopped being able to see certain things about my own teaching clearly, precisely because I've been doing it so long. Students see those things. They always have. We just haven't consistently built structures that make their insights actionable."

Process: the convening of wisdom

The Wisdom Council meets at the call of any member, a principle that is itself a structural expression of egalitarianism. Any member of the community, whether a student, support staff member, or faculty colleague, who identifies a situation requiring collective deliberation may call the Council. The requesting member presents the situation with appropriate context, and a volunteer Council member offers to support the meeting process, attending to both the substance of the situation and the quality of the deliberative exchange.

The role of the process support person requires careful naming. The abstract notes the intention to find a term other than "leader" or "chair" for this function, and the terminological care is philosophically significant. "Leader" and "chair" import hierarchical connotations: they suggest someone who directs, decides, or holds authority over the process. The process support person in the Wisdom Council does none of these things. They hold the space. They ensure that the conditions for wisdom to emerge are maintained: That voices are invited, that silences are honoured, that the dialogue does not foreclose prematurely, and that the integrity of the process remains in service of the situation rather than of any individual's preferred outcome. A term such as "process steward" or "convening witness" might better capture this function.

Following the presenting member's account of the situation, members who feel called to contribute do so. Advice or counsel may be sought from particular members in advance



of the meeting, with the explicit recognition that those who hold relevant knowledge or expertise may need preparation time to offer their best contribution. This does not position those members as authorities whose input supersedes that of others; all voices carry equal value in the construction of the Council's collective response. Several operational questions require explicit addressing. The process steward should be selected by a volunteer from any member willing and equipped to hold the space, not appointed by Program leadership, with a brief orientation in facilitation norms being advisable before assuming the role. Following each Council meeting, a brief written summary of the deliberation and any identified directions for action should be prepared by the process steward and shared with the Program's formal governance body, not to transfer decision-making authority but to ensure that the Council's collective knowing is legible to those who hold it. Where Council deliberation leads to a clear direction, the Program's formal leadership should respond in writing, indicating whether and how the direction will be pursued and giving reasons if it will not. Conflict within the Council, including situations where deliberation becomes unproductive or harmful, should be addressed by pausing the session and returning when the process steward and the convening member agree that conditions for productive exchange have been restored. Finally, the model should include an informal threshold for convening. Not every Program question requires a full Council meeting, and the community will need to develop, through experience, a shared sense of what rises to that level.

Radical participation: leadership, followership, and the active observer

Reconceiving who leads and who follows: One of the most consequential conceptual moves the Wisdom Council makes is its explicit treatment of leadership and followership as fluid, situational practices rather than fixed identities or positional attributes. The Wisdom Council's operational principles hold that all members are "at all times active observers of the meeting, and as such, fully participatory and accountable in this role," and that members determine, within each situation, "whether they have further contributions to make in relation to knowledge, skill, judgment, experience, process, etc." For this fluidity to function in practice, the Council must actively cultivate psychological safety, the shared understanding that speaking, challenging, or calling a meeting will carry no professional consequence outside the Council's space. This is particularly salient for junior faculty, sessional instructors, support staff, and students, whose institutional precarity makes genuine participation a meaningful risk. The model should articulate explicit norms of confidentiality regarding who said what within Council deliberations, and Program leadership must model these norms conspicuously, accepting challenge from those with less institutional power without signaling, however subtly, that it has been noted.

This framing draws from and extends a growing body of scholarship on followership in nursing. Mamba et al. [12] observed that "shared leadership, also known as distributed leadership, is important in followership because leadership is

performed collectively by leaders and followers but at different times." By allowing followers to function as leaders within the team, shared leadership "changes the role of followers from passive to active such that they can be described as effective followers characterized by a sense of personal responsibility for achieving the defined goals." The Wisdom Council makes this insight structural: there is no standing role of leader or follower within the Council. What there is, in any given meeting, is a situation requiring wisdom, and the recognition that the relevant wisdom may reside in anyone present.

Mamba et al. [13] also noted that "organizations have traditionally prioritized developing leaders, leaving out followers in the development equation." The Wisdom Council addresses this gap directly. By placing every member in the position of both potential speaker and active observer, it creates ongoing developmental opportunities for both capacities at once. Every meeting is, among other things, a practicum in discernment: Knowing when you have something essential to offer, and when your greatest contribution is to be fully, receptively present.

Active observership as full participation: The concept of active observership is central to the Wisdom Council and represents a significant departure from most institutional conceptions of participation. In conventional meeting culture, participation is equated with speaking: Those who contribute vocally are understood to be participating; those who do not are understood to be absent, disengaged, or disinterested. The Wisdom Council rejects this equation.

Active observership holds that the person who listens with full attention, who tracks not just what is being said but how it is being received, what is emerging in the space between contributions, what the group is moving toward and what it is avoiding, is performing a form of participation that is not only legitimate but often more difficult than speaking. The active observer holds the whole of the deliberation in mind simultaneously, free from the particular focus that the act of formulating and delivering a contribution imposes. Their attention is, in this sense, a gift to the group.

This conception draws from traditions of contemplative pedagogy [14] and from the phenomenology of listening developed in the feminist philosophical tradition [15]. It also resonates with Indigenous governance principles in which the capacity to be quiet and attentive, to listen before speaking, to let knowledge settle before acting on it, is understood as a mark of wisdom rather than a failure of engagement. As the Wisdom Council's foundational document notes: "silence may be considered as meaningful a response as participation", a statement that, read carefully, is less a lowering of the bar for engagement than a raising of it.

Self-awareness as an ethical practice

The Wisdom Council's relational norms require members to engage in "authentic self-reflection to participate with both humility and a sense of self-as-person/self-as-professional grounded in self-awareness and confidence." The Council's



egalitarianism rests on this demand. Self-awareness is its ethical infrastructure.

An egalitarian structure can only function as one if its members are genuinely committed to monitoring and managing the social and positional dynamics that will inevitably be present among them. The senior faculty member who has cultivated self-awareness will notice the moment when their rank is being deployed, through tone, through the length of their contributions, through the weight with which their opinions are received, in ways that distort the deliberative field. The student who has cultivated self-awareness will notice when their hesitancy to speak is not active observership but a familiar deferral to institutional authority. The Wisdom Council asks both to name and address what they notice.

This kind of self-awareness cannot be manufactured by structural design alone. It requires cultivation, in individuals and in the shared culture of the Program community. Waterman [7] and others in the servant leadership literature identify reflective practice, structured peer coaching, and self-assessment as the means by which these capacities, including self-awareness, develop and hold over time. The Wisdom Council implicitly endorses this kind of sustained, relational developmental practice as a condition for its own flourishing.

Implementation: conditions, challenges, and commitments

Institutional conditions: The Wisdom Council will not take root in a Program community that has not prepared the soil. Several institutional conditions are necessary, if not sufficient, for the model to function as intended. First, the Program's formal leadership must genuinely support the Council's egalitarian principles, and must be prepared to demonstrate that support by modelling the practices the Council requires: speaking not first but thoughtfully, listening not to respond but to understand, and accepting that the outcome of a Wisdom Council deliberation may not align with their prior views.

Second, the Program community must develop shared fluency in the norms and values of the Council before it can rely on those norms and values in high-stakes situations. This suggests the wisdom of early, lower-stakes applications, such as inviting the Council to deliberate on questions of Program culture or pedagogical approach, before asking it to navigate a difficult interpersonal or institutional situation. As Porter-O'Grady [9] observed, shared governance structures require time to earn legitimacy within the specific culture of an organization, and deploying new governance instruments before the community has developed confidence in them invites the kinds of failure that discredit the model rather than refine it.

Third, the inclusion of students as full Council members requires preparatory support. The Wisdom Council document notes that guests "will be provided with support before their participation to understand the structure and function of the Council." This is especially important for students, who will typically arrive with deeply internalized assumptions

about the relationship between institutional rank and the legitimate authority to speak. Programs that already cultivate student voice through feminist pedagogical approaches [3], collaborative inquiry, and reflective practice will find students more prepared to take up the full participatory role the Council requires.

Navigating tensions and honest challenges

The Wisdom Council faces genuine challenges that warrant honest acknowledgment. Feminist pedagogy scholarship has identified the risk that egalitarian structures can mask rather than eliminate power dynamics, with the appearance of equal participation concealing the continued operation of social hierarchy [16]. The Wisdom Council's response is self-awareness, reflexivity, and the explicit naming of positional dynamics. That is necessary but not sufficient. Programs implementing the Council should plan for periodic, structured reflection on whether the Council's egalitarianism is functioning as intended, and be willing to revise its practices in response to what that reflection reveals.

A second challenge is institutional legibility. Academic institutions operate within accreditation frameworks, governance policies, and administrative structures that do not naturally accommodate the kind of fluid, situation-responsive, egalitarian deliberation the Wisdom Council proposes. Navigating this tension requires neither the abandonment of the Council model nor the pretense that institutional structures do not matter. It requires the careful, principled work of building a relationship between the Council's principles and the institution's requirements, each informing and constraining the other. Several additional risks require naming. Tokenism is among the most insidious. Students and staff may be present in the Council while the relational and procedural norms continue to favour senior faculty voices, producing the appearance of egalitarianism without its substance. Co-optation is a related risk. The Council's language and form can be adopted by institutional actors while its principles are gradually hollowed out, particularly if its deliberations begin to be used to ratify decisions already made. Confidentiality norms must be made explicit from the outset. Members need clarity about what may be shared outside the Council's space, so that vulnerable participants are not exposed. Accountability, too, is a genuine question. When a Council deliberation informs a decision that proves harmful, the diffuse nature of collective wisdom-sharing can make responsibility difficult to locate. Programs should think carefully, before implementing the model, about how accountability will be understood and held. Workload is also a material concern. Participation in the Council represents labour, and for sessional faculty, students, and support staff, that labour may be uncompensated and unacknowledged in ways that reproduce the very inequities the Council aims to address. Finally, silence within the Council is not uniformly wise or reflective. Some silence signals intimidation, uncertainty, or the quiet persistence of hierarchy. The process steward and the broader community must develop the capacity to distinguish between these kinds of silence and to create conditions in which the former can surface and be addressed.



“There will be times,” one author acknowledged, “when the Wisdom Council identifies the wisest course of action and the institution’s formal processes will not immediately support it. That’s not a failure of the Council. That’s a description of the work of change in institutional contexts. The Council gives us a place to hold our values together, even when we cannot yet fully enact them. And that matters.”

The developmental potential of the model

Among the most compelling aspects of the Wisdom Council model is its developmental potential, not just for the Program, but for the individuals within it. Nursing shared governance literature is consistent in finding that participation in structures of genuine collective decision-making develops leadership confidence, deepens professional identity, and increases commitment to the Program and profession [17,18]. The Wisdom Council extends these benefits to those who are learning, gradually and with support, to recognize the value and legitimacy of their own voice [19,20].

For students, this dimension is particularly significant. Students who participate in a Wisdom Council that genuinely values their contributions will graduate having spoken in a professional community of diverse expertise and having been heard. They will have developed a conception of professional participation that extends beyond compliance and task performance to include genuine engagement with the values, challenges, and collective life of the profession. This is a central educational outcome. It is exactly what nursing education aspires to produce.

Conclusion

The Wisdom Council is, at its most fundamental level, a proposal about what nursing education communities owe to one another. It holds that every person within a nursing Program, from the most senior faculty member to the newest student, brings knowledge, perspective, and wisdom relevant to the collective life of that Program. It holds that governance structures that fail to access and honour that distributed wisdom are not merely inefficient but ethically insufficient. It holds, finally, that cultivating an egalitarian, participatory, reflective governance culture within nursing Programs is the mission expressed, made visible in how the institution treats its own people.

The Wisdom Council is not a utopian proposal. Its authors have no illusions about the difficulties of building and sustaining egalitarian structures within institutions that were not designed for them, among communities of people who carry the full weight of their social and professional conditioning into every meeting room they enter. The challenges of implementation are real, the risks of co-optation are genuine, and the work of developing the individual and collective self-awareness the Council requires is slow and demanding.

The authors’ conviction, grounded in professional experience and in the literature they have reviewed, is that the work is both necessary and possible. The nursing profession has always found ways, despite structural constraints, to insist

on the dignity and full humanity of those it encounters. The Wisdom Council asks that nursing education Programs turn that same commitment inward: toward the communities of faculty, staff, and students who are, every day, in the work of forming the next generation of the profession.

To be in service to the program, to the students, to the profession, to the people who will one day be patients in the care of the nurses being educated here, is not a constraint on governance. It is its purpose. The Wisdom Council is a structure designed to keep that purpose visible, central, and alive.

Author Note

The authors are faculty members from four post-secondary nursing Programs in Ontario, Canada, and write from a shared commitment to egalitarian, emancipatory approaches to program governance. This paper does not represent the official positions of their respective institutions. Correspondence may be directed to the lead author.

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