

Challenge for Credit in Canadian University Nursing Programs

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Proposition d'accord de crédits pour les programmes en sciences infirmières dans les universités canadiennes: Cette étude décrit les possibilités d'accord de crédits pour les infirmières autorisées qui commencent un baccalauréat en sciences infirmières dans une université canadienne, de même que les critères employés pour déterminer si certains cours peuvent être crédités. Parmi les vingt-huit écoles des sciences infirmières dans les universités canadiennes, vingt-cinq (89 %) ont accepté de participer à cette étude. Des représentants de chacune des écoles ont été interviewés au téléphone. Toutes les écoles permettent l'accès au baccalauréat aux infirmières autorisées et une certaine forme de reconnaissance pour leur diplôme. Des possibilités de *proposition* formelle ou informelle sont disponibles dans 48 % des écoles. Les critères de *proposition* dans les différentes écoles ne sont pas constants. Bien que les répondants estiment que les possibilités de proposition sont valables, ils doutent que la proposition soit utile pour mesurer le fort esprit critique requis chez les infirmières qui préparent leur baccalauréat. Une recherche supplémentaire dans ce domaine serait justifiée.

This study describes the opportunities for advanced placement available to registered nurses who are entering Canadian university baccalaureate nursing programs, and the criteria used to decide whether courses may be challenged for credit. Of the 28 Canadian university schools of nursing, 25 (89%) agreed to participate in the study. Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives from each of the schools. All provided access to baccalaureate education for registered nurses and some form of recognition for their diploma. Formal or informal challenge opportunities were available in 48% of the schools. There was no consistency in criteria for challenge among the schools. Although respondents reported that challenge opportunities had merit, they questioned whether challenge was useful for measuring the advanced critical thinking skills required of baccalaureate nurses. Further research in this area is warranted.

One aim of the nursing profession is to achieve baccalaureate preparation as the required educational level for the practice of nursing by the year 2000 (CNA, 1982). Movement towards achievement of this goal has accelerated in the last decade and become reality in many provincial, national, and international jurisdictions.

In Canada, it is commonly known that registered nurses (RNs) who obtain diplomas prior to the year 2000 will continue to be registered to practice nursing beyond that year. Despite this, many such individuals feel compelled to enrich their knowledge and skills by returning to school and earning a degree. They recognize that their ability to secure future positions will weaken as the number of graduates with degree preparation rises. It is evident that there is a need to keep up with changing trends and maintain career mobility.

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In recognition of the diverse backgrounds and learning needs of diploma-prepared RNs numerous Canadian university-based nursing programs (hence referred to as Schools of Nursing or SON) have developed post-RN programs to facilitate the completion of a university nursing degree. They are designed to build on the learning achieved in diploma programs, and are two or three years in duration. Schools with integrated curricula, where RNs and basic (four-years) nursing students complete the same program generally offer academic recognition in the form of advanced placement or block credit for RNs. However, the non-traditional learning experience of RNs normally cannot be used for credit toward a degree. Presumably previous learning and experience are valued regardless of how they were achieved, but questions arise as to how they can be recognized by universities.

One means of assessing whether previous learning is equivalent to traditional course requirements is through the use of challenge examinations. University calendars state that challenge exams can be arranged, but the criteria used to decide whether a candidate will be permitted to challenge a course are unclear. This last point is what prompted the researcher to conduct this investigation. The researcher believed that data obtained from the current study could provide a national picture on this topic and facilitate the development of departmental guidelines for challenge of courses in the new post-RN program at Brandon University.

The purposes of this study were therefore, to: describe opportunities for advanced placement of RNs entering SON programs and the criteria used by SON programs to decide whether courses may be challenged for credit.

Literature Review

Registered nurses return to school with a wealth of knowledge and experience. Most have been employed as nurses, and have rich life experiences and varied social and personal histories (Green, 1987). They have achieved success and recognition within their work environments, assumed leadership positions, developed professionally, and contributed to changes in the quality of care provided within the health care-system. Nurses have taken advantage of learning opportunities such as inservices, conferences and certificate programs, or have read extensively in their areas of interest or specialty. Yet, obtaining university credit for these achievements has not always been possible. Sullivan (1984) states that "Movement from one level to another is sometimes impossible without beginning all over and repeating content already covered in a previous program" (p.156).

Little has been written on the use of challenge for credit within university nursing programs. References are theoretical, written in the early 1970s, and

oriented to the career-ladder approach to curriculum. Moore (1972) argued that challenge examinations should be used to evaluate and recognize previous achievement. Schmiedel (1973) described her struggle to pursue nursing education using a career-ladder approach. She shared her frustration at being required to repeat previous learning and pass proficiency examinations on material for which she had previously received credit.

Hattstaedt and Isaac (1975) discussed the development and implementation of a clinical challenge examination for students who had completed a specific nursing course as part of a career-ladder program and had past education or experience in pediatrics, obstetrics, or geriatrics. They emphasized the importance of consistency among faculty regarding testing processes and the need for providing sufficient testing time. They claimed that generalizations were limited and that the exams should be validated and standardized with a larger test group.

Moore (1976) stated that the trend in the United States was toward an integrated curriculum that recognized the previous learning and experience of RNs with the use of challenge opportunities. The results of a survey of 22 Canadian baccalaureate nursing programs revealed that credit given to RNs for previous education and experience ranged from none to a maximum of 2 years (Moore, 1976). Forty-five percent of the programs indicated that credit or advanced placement for previous courses may be given either by challenge or special assessment; 68% projected increased or continued use of challenge examinations.

Marsh and Lasky (1984) suggested that the assessment of non-traditional learners be accomplished by means of a portfolio that documented their prior knowledge and skills and demonstrated equivalency with specific courses. The authors compared it to a résumé where educational, professional, and personal achievements are documented and reviewed by faculty who make a recommendation for credit. This method was developed due to the fact that challenge examination was stressful and perceived by students to be personally demeaning. Budnick and Beaver (1984), two students who selected the portfolio option, agreed that this method offered them more control and was less stressful than an examination.

MacLean, Knoll, and Kinney (1985) discussed issues related to "credit by examination" (CBE) for nursing and non-nursing support courses in an integrated curriculum. Students received credit for nursing courses if they successfully completed the equivalent of a final examination that was believed to reflect the knowledge required to achieve course objectives. Clinical practica, if required, were completed after the written exam. Students were provided with reference material for preparation and could attempt the

examination only once. The authors acknowledged that CBEs contributed to student anxiety and increased faculty workload. As a result, faculty shifted to using national standardized nursing examinations to measure nursing competency; individuals who passed the exams received 30 advanced placement credits in the generic program.

Keehn and Jacono (1987) stated that written examinations could evaluate non-clinical knowledge, but that critical thinking skills were difficult to measure in this way. They tried "participatory simulation" (interview of a simulated client and preparation of written care plan) combined with a written exam as the method of testing clinical knowledge of RNs. The authors reported that the success rate on challenge exams was high, as was the anxiety experienced by the students writing them.

In summary, there is little theoretical and research literature documenting the use and effectiveness of challenge options in nursing education. Since the 1976 survey (Moore, 1976), membership in the Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing (CAUSN) has grown from 22 to 29 (32%). With the steady increase in the number of RNs returning to further their education, there are a growing number of opportunities to apply challenge for credit.

Figure 1

Challenge for credit/interview schedule

1. How many RNs do you accept annually to your undergraduate program?
2. Describe any form of advanced placement offered to RNs by your undergraduate program.
3. Do you currently use challenge exams for any theory course in nursing for RNs?
4. Do you currently use challenge exams for any clinical/practice course in nursing for RNs?
5. Describe the criteria used in your undergraduate program to decide whether an RN is eligible for a challenge option.
6. How are students in your undergraduate program informed of the availability of challenge opportunities?
7. If you use challenge exams for theory or practice, what is the procedure for challenging?

Theory:

Practice:

8. How many students chose to challenge one or more nursing courses in the last 3 years?
9. Of those students who chose to challenge one or more nursing courses, how many successfully passed the challenge exam(s)?
10. From your perspective, how adequately do challenge exams assess an RN's knowledge in theory and/or in practice?

Method

A non-experimental descriptive survey design was used to obtain information about the current status of challenge opportunities in the Canadian SON. The target population was 29 Canadian university SON with membership in CAUSN that provide access for RNs to complete a baccalaureate degree in nursing. The researcher's own institution was excluded from the study. The dean, director, or chair of each of the remaining 28 SON was sent a letter requesting their participation. These individuals either consented to participate or designated an alternate representative of the SON to respond. The final sample consisted of 25 respondents (89%). An interview guide (Figure 1) was sent to each SON representative and a telephone interview was prearranged. The duration of the interviews varied from 2 to 46 minutes, being longer in cases where the SON provided challenge opportunities or where clarification of the interview questions was needed.

Results

All participants agreed that RNs return to university with a wealth of experience and knowledge that should be recognized and built upon. All SON provided access to baccalaureate education for RNs through integrated or post-RN curricula.

The number of nurses accepted annually into each program varied according to whether programs were integrated with or independent of the basic baccalaureate program, and whether entrants were full- or part-time. Since the numbers secured during the individual interviews were approximate, data prepared by CAUSN for the 1991 academic period were used (Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing, 1991). Admissions offered for post-RNs ranged from 0 to 169 full-time, and 1 to 570 part-time, students.

Advanced placement for diploma graduates varied according to the overall baccalaureate program length, number of credit hours or units required for the degree, and whether the program was integrated or post-RN. Advanced placement was commonly in the form of block credit ranging from several credit hours up to a maximum of two years.

Formal or informal challenge opportunities for theory courses were available upon individual student request in 48% of the SON. Formal processes were in place in 20% of the SON, the majority of which were in western Canada. The courses that could be challenged for credit varied from all courses to specific ones determined by faculty. Clinical courses could be challenged in 16% of the SON, all of which were located in western Canada.

Students were informed of challenge options through the university calendar, word of mouth, the student association, during orientation, by faculty upon admission, or a combination of these means.

The SON held different criteria for eligibility for challenge; the following describes the most common procedure. The student challenging a course applies to the university approximately 6 to 8 weeks before the course is offered. The request is sent to the dean or director of the school who refers it to the most appropriate person in the faculty. The student usually provides written and/or verbal documentation to demonstrate that course objectives have been met in alternate ways. Documentation reflects previous employment, education, life experience, and professional or volunteer activities (or a combination thereof). This requirement for extensive documentation to support a request for challenge reportedly discourages students from applying. Letters of reference from employers outlining job responsibilities, and assessment interviews can also be required. These provide an opportunity to point out strengths and limitations of the applicant concerning potential for success on the challenge examination. Interviews help the faculty and/or student make the final decision regarding the challenge option. In two of the SON interviewed, the student's decision to challenge was not questioned and no documentation was required to support the request.

Informal challenge processes were available in 28% of the SON, the majority of which were in Quebec and Ontario. No specific criteria to determine eligibility for challenge were outlined. Students could be exempt from portions of a course or simply write the final exam based on the course professor's assessment of their academic and experiential background.

All SON with a challenge option provided students with a course outline, bibliography, and other resources that might be appropriate for exam preparation; however, no course instruction was offered. If the challenge was permitted, the student was usually required to pay a challenge fee and write an exam and/or complete a clinical component arranged by the course professor. In some cases the exam was held during the regular exam period for the students enrolled in the course.

Participants indicated that, except for one school in the western region, the number of students selecting the challenge option were few, and that they were normally successful. Limited statistics were available on these issues.

There were diverse perspectives regarding the adequacy of challenge exams for assessing theoretical and/or practical knowledge. Most of the SON that used them stated that challenge exams meet a local need. However, there was also agreement on their disadvantages: they provoke student anxiety and

increase the faculty workload. Respondents agreed that challenge exams were useful for measuring knowledge of factual information, but questions and doubts were raised as to how well they measure advanced critical thinking skills. Several respondents shared the perception that students who meet the requirements of a challenge exam should have the same basic knowledge as others completing the course traditionally.

Discussion

The data suggest that the challenge process is not clear-cut. Despite their similarities, the 25 SON programs included in this study were unique in their approaches. Issues relating to student anxiety, increased faculty workload, and ambivalence of faculty regarding the merit and utility of challenge options also appear to have lingered over the past 15 years. These findings are consistent with the literature and may be attributed to the philosophies of the institutions and programs or the individual professors, and/or to the considerable variability in interpretation of the challenge concept.

The data indicate that 48% (12/25) of Canadian SON use a formal or informal challenge examination option. Moore's (1976) survey projected that 68% (15/22) of the SON would continue or anticipated future use of challenge examinations. Had this goal been realized, it would have constituted a 23% increase over the 1976 figures. In reality, the increase was minimal (2.6%) despite a 32% increase in the number of SON over this time period. Various forces may have impeded the development of challenge opportunities as projected: changes in the administrative leadership of SON; the emergence of specialized post-RN programs; hesitance to change in an effort to protect vested interests and maintain the status quo or complexities associated with academic bureaucracies. Finally, perhaps students perceive formal challenge as requiring more energy expenditure than enrolling in the course.

Many questions about the challenge process remain unanswered, and may provide the basis for future research. In subsequent studies perhaps, terms of reference should be established for concepts such as challenge for credit, credit by examination, credit for placement, advanced block credit, and credit by exemption. A national perspective on the challenge concept might be beneficial for faculty and students. It would be interesting to know what the nurses who pursued the challenge option think of the process. How consistently is the informal challenge mechanism applied? What impact do faculty opinions about the challenge process have on students' selection of this option? Do challenge exams measure learning that is in keeping with course expectations? How do challenge procedures encourage or inhibit students from pursuing the option? What impact do criteria for challenge have on a faculty member's academic freedom?

Since the completion of this project, the Department of Nursing and Health Studies at Brandon University has developed and implemented guidelines for challenge (Figure 2). They were drawn from the guidelines used by the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Manitoba, the data generated by this project, the literature, and faculty feedback. It is hoped that the guidelines may be of use to other universities considering similar developments.

Figure 2

Challenge for Credit of the Department of Nursing and Health Studies at Brandon University

Overview

Nursing faculty believe that there are several ways to demonstrate acquired knowledge, behaviours, and skill with respect to courses offered by the Department. Non-traditional learning, normally external to the University, coupled with formal and life experience may be assessed to be equivalent to that offered in specific courses.

General Departmental Guidelines

The student who wishes to challenge a Departmental course should be familiar with the University guidelines outlined in the General Calendar (4.3.9) and complete the documentation required by the University on the form available through the office of the Registrar. A fee for challenge will be levied.

The student should be aware that a course may be challenged only once and that the grade obtained on the challenge will be that which will appear on the transcript and will contribute to the degree line and cumulative grade point averages. Regulations governing grades will be applied to courses challenged. Challenge opportunities will depend on faculty availability.

All courses offered by the Department, except those with a practicum component, to a maximum of 15 credit hours will be available for challenge. Permission for challenge will be subject to approval of the course instructor.

Students who have requested the opportunity to challenge a departmental course may not audit any part of that course. A student who audits a course may, after the course is completed, subject to the approval of the course instructor, be allowed to challenge the course, provided that the challenge fee is paid.

All students requesting the opportunity to challenge a course must be admitted to Brandon University and accepted to the Department of Nursing and Health Studies before their request will be considered.

Departmental Procedures

1. Complete the University Challenge for Credit form available through the Registrar's office.
2. Complete the Departmental Challenge for Credit form and submit it to the course professor at least 6 weeks prior to the beginning of the course.
3. The course professor will meet with the student to discuss the request and subsequently make a recommendation regarding the student's eligibility to undertake the challenge.
4. The course professor will inform the student in writing regarding the decision.
5. The student will then make the appropriate arrangements with the course professor regarding date and time of the challenge.
6. The course professor will not review course material or provide tutorial assistance to the student in preparation for the challenge.
7. The course professor will direct the student to appropriate resources used in the course and provide the student with a copy of the course syllabus.

I. TO BE COMPLETED BY STUDENT REQUESTING TO CHALLENGE A COURSE

Name: _____ Student # _____

Name and number of course to be challenged: _____

Please describe your reasons for selecting the challenge option to meet the requirements of this course and provide appropriate documentation to support your request in the space provided. Additional relevant documentation may be submitted. Documentation would normally be expected to reflect previous employment, education, professional and volunteer activities, and life experiences. Letters of reference from employers outlining job responsibilities relating to the course would be useful.

Student Signature: _____ Date _____

*Guidelines developed by M.A. Andrusyszyn with Department faculty input; adapted from Challenge for Credit from the University of Manitoba Faculty of Nursing.