

INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION IN EXTENDING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR NURSES

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INTRODUCTION

Baccalaureate education is widely recognized as being desirable for an increased number of practising nurses. The Alberta Association of Registered Nurses has been on record for many years as supporting university level preparation for nurses.

There are a number of approaches available to educational institutions so that they may open their doors to more students. One is to increase the enrolment in the basic baccalaureate program, a step under consideration by the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta. But what about the many nurses with R.N. diplomas practising in the field? How can we assist them to obtain a B.Sc.N. degree? Post-R.N. degree programs are now available at three Alberta universities: Edmonton, Calgary and Lethbridge. Provisions are also made in other provinces in Canada to integrate the R.N. in the baccalaureate program (*Canadian Nurse*, 1980). However, these programs generally require the student to attend university for at least two years, a block of time available to only a small percentage of the R.N. population. In addition, the R.N., as an adult learner, possesses unique characteristics that must be taken into consideration by the institution offering the up-grading (Cross, 1981). For example, the mature nurse-student at the University of Alberta will be a woman, on the average 33 years old, married with a number of family responsibilities. Given today's economic conditions, she is also frequently working and her income is a necessary contribution to her family or to her personal support. University attendance entails a loss of essential income. Because the programs are centered in major cities, a move is often required, causing a major disruption in the student's life and that of her family. Also, she may be in a particular career position which she is loathe to sacrifice.

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Because of these characteristics of the nurse-learner, the Faculty of Nursing of the University of Alberta committed itself in two ways to facilitate baccalaureate education. Arrangements were made to take the university to the students rather than requiring the students to come to the university. This was done by making courses leading to the baccalaureate degree available to students outside of Edmonton. Courses were offered in two centres, 150 and 250 kilometres from Edmonton. The first-year courses of the programs are spaced over a period of two years at the end of which the students enroll full-time in Edmonton for two terms to complete their residential requirement. Consequently, R.N.'s with family and work commitments can work toward their degree without any major personal upheavals, though it will take them approximately a year longer than it would if they were on-campus students.

The second way the faculty endeavored to facilitate degree attainment was in collaboration with Athabasca University in the development of the required non-clinical nursing courses. Athabasca University is a unique distance-learning institution in Edmonton. Students do not attend classes. They complete the course work at home with the help of a tutor from Athabasca University.

THE COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE

Athabasca University, established in 1970, is Alberta's fourth university. It is a regular member of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, and offers three-year undergraduate degrees leading to the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of General Studies, and Bachelor of Administration. Its mandate is to provide opportunities for higher education to adults who, because of choice or circumstances, cannot attend a traditional university. Athabasca University has tried to remove many of the barriers which have prevented adults from participating in higher education. For instance, the university has minimal prerequisites for entry to its courses, enrolments occur all year round, and the course materials are modularized to allow for self pacing. The courses make use of a combination of print, television, radio and telephone, and more recently, satellite. However, print still provides the main framework for most courses. All courses are supported by a tutorial network which allows students an important human resource during the course.

Learning in any university course involves both content and process. Because of the uniqueness of the delivery process at Athabasca University, courses are developed by teams in which each member contributes personal expertise to the final product.

It is interesting to note that Athabasca University has found the post-R.N. students to be one sector of its adult student population which does extremely well in this delivery system. They are achievement-motivated, goal-directed and capable of imposing the self-discipline necessary for distance learning. For instance, approximately one-third of Athabasca's introductory psychology course is made up of nurses (133). In general they complete the course with the highest marks, in the least time, and have the fewest dropouts. While it is typically part of the phenomenon for open universities such as Athabasca to have completion rates between 30-50% (Shale, 1980, 1982), nurses tend to complete at much higher rates, between 60-70%.

Athabasca University and the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta worked jointly on the production of several courses geared to the educational needs of practising nurses. Athabasca benefits by adding both courses and students to its programs at reduced cost and the University of Alberta Faculty of Nursing benefits by diminishing pressure on its oversubscribed post-R.N. program. Hopefully, practising nurses would benefit by having access to courses which they otherwise would not have been able to take.

The idea of the collaboration was for both universities to contribute to the development of the courses and for Athabasca University to deliver those courses subsequently. Some of the courses developed were exclusively for nurses, while others had a more general application in view of the undergraduate population of Athabasca University (e.g., adult development, child development, introductory psychology). The Faculty of Nursing provided subject-matter consultants and Athabasca University provided the delivery and process experts. Each course was produced by a different team made up of the following members: a subject-matter consultant from the Faculty of Nursing; a course manager, an instructional developer, a visual designer and an editor from Athabasca University.

The subject-matter consultant provided the content expertise for the course, formulated learning objectives, and authored the study guide. The course manager facilitated the whole operation and attempted to maintain the time schedule. The responsibility of the instructional developer was to ensure a high quality of teaching by matching course objectives to the learning materials and, subsequently, to the formative and summative evaluation mechanisms. The instructional developer assisted in the modularization of the course, tailoring it to the media involved and ensuring that tests were based on what, in fact, had been taught. The visual designer undertook responsibility for graphic illustrations, photographs, and cartoons which were used to highlight particular aspects of the content. The editor's responsibili-

ty was to review all the materials, particularly print materials, for logic, sequencing, coherence and unity. The editor also formed a key link between the author's final manuscript and the physical production of the materials. The developmental process of the course was a large-scale operation and took up to six months to complete, not including physical production. Much of the time was taken up in preparing instructionally sound material that was sufficiently structured in nature to allow it to be learned in a setting much less structured than a classroom with its live instructor.

Besides being a stimulating interdisciplinary exercise for faculty from the two universities, the students benefitted from the best of a number of worlds. Disagreement inevitably arose during the course development and, if consensus and compromise could not be reached, the decision was usually deferred to the subject-matter consultant. However, given both institutions' dedication to effective teaching and a client-centred perspective, disagreements were infrequent and usually handled easily. The faculties of both institutions seemed to realize that high quality content was a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective learning.

IMPLICATIONS

What has this collaboration meant to both institutions and what does it mean for the future? On a general level, the commitment to explore each other's fields, experience the problems and probe for solutions, has resulted in numerous useful insights for both institutions. Overspecialization often results in irrelevance, stagnation and inflexibility at a time in our educational history when adaptability and diversity are more important than ever (Glenny, 1980). More specifically, we have come to recognize how important it is for cooperation, that both institutions are committed to a socially-relevant, action-based philosophy of higher education which is reflected in a dedication to effective teaching. At the moment we are attempting to complete the rest of the non-clinical courses for the nursing program. The next large test of collaboration may take place when we consider clinical teaching out in the field, possibly with some sort of decentralized internship.

There are a number of other approaches to be taken now and in the future to increase accessibility to professional education for the adult learner. We are told that we shall soon have a computer in every home (Toffler, 1981) and computer-based instruction courses are presently being developed by many faculties. Satellite transmission is being used by an increasing number of educational institutions. Telidon is an information-retrieval service presently being explored, which promises to answer a telephone request for information from data banks by displaying it on your television.

The advantages in using such non-traditional methods are many. The most obvious one is the facilitation of post-diploma education of nurses, thereby increasing the numbers of B.Sc.N. prepared nurses in the field. In addition, because limited institutional and faculty resources are real problems in expanding existing programs to accommodate these students, we can take encouragement from the knowledge that on-campus education is not the only way to go.

Experience with post-diploma students has shown us that they are an incredibly competitive group of students, mark-conscious and, consequently, quite anxious. We believe that individual, self-directed course work will eliminate exposure to rampant infectious anxiety thus encouraging more "personal best" work. Another potential advantage is that the courses presented through Athabasca University and through other alternative routes will be standardized, thus eliminating the problem of differences between sections of the same course.

There are some disadvantages to be considered. We are well aware of the need for the nurse student to be socialized over time into baccalaureate thinking, socialization which, of course, will not occur quite as thoroughly with reduced group work in courses and reduced exposure to nursing faculty. On campus, we encounter students who have difficulty integrating content from course to course, seeing associations and relationships, and discovering patterns.

It is our contention that the education of the adult learner in professional faculties needs to be approached in a creative, innovative manner, a manner which takes into consideration the unique characteristics of adult learners and their unique social, professional and personal situations. Distance learning such as that which is offered by Athabasca University is one such approach.

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RÉSUMÉ

Collaboration des universités à la formation universitaire des infirmiers

Il est de plus en plus admis que des études supérieures au niveau du baccalauréat sont souhaitables pour un nombre croissant d'infirmiers. Toutefois, l'adulte qui cherche à parfaire sa formation professionnelle possède des caractéristiques uniques dont doit tenir compte l'établissement qui offre ce genre de programme. Le système actuel qui exige que les infirmiers suivent des cours à l'université ne convient pas à ces derniers en raison des nombreuses contraintes auxquelles ils sont soumis. Il convient d'étudier des méthodes pédagogiques novatrices afin que l'adulte puisse obtenir son baccalauréat tout en s'acquittant de ses multiples responsabilités d'ordre professionnel, familial et personnel. La faculté des sciences infirmières de l'université d'Alberta a mis au point, en collaboration avec l'université d'Athabasca, des cours de nursing non clinique. L'université d'Athabasca à Edmonton est un établissement de cours par correspondance unique en son genre. Les étudiants n'ont pas besoin d'assister aux cours et ils travaillent à la maison avec l'aide d'un professeur particulier de l'université d'Athabasca. La faculté des sciences infirmières de l'université d'Alberta a fourni un expert-conseil pour ce qui est du contenu des cours tandis que l'université d'Athabasca a fourni les autres membres de l'équipe: un directeur de programme, un concepteur pédagogique, un concepteur visuel et un éditeur. Le fruit de cette collaboration est que, désormais, les étudiants peuvent suivre la majeure partie de leurs cours hors campus, ce qui facilite la tâche à un nombre croissant d'infirmiers et infirmières de métier.

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