

It's Spring and Convocation is in the Air. So What?

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As I write this editorial, the sun is shining and we are having a beautiful warm summer-like day. The second in a row – a record of sorts for this spring! Now, why am I giving you a weather report? First, I am Canadian and can justify talking about the weather just about any time. But, spring and sunny days also bring convocation to mind. Thousands of student nurses have just graduated or will graduate over the next month and join the workforce. This is a particularly momentous year in Ontario because the last class of nurses prepared at the diploma level will graduate from community colleges. Next year all nursing graduates in that province will have a degree and the majority of graduates will have completed collaborative programs jointly offered by colleges and universities. By next year, with the exception of Quebec, one program in Manitoba, one in the Northwest Territories and a few graduates in B.C. and Alberta, who choose to graduate after three years with a diploma rather than a degree, Canada will be close to achieving what few other countries have managed, the conversion of nursing education from a diploma to

a degree base. Schools across the west have been graduating nurses from collaborative programs for several years now. In fact, the faculty involved collaborative endeavours have provided leadership for the rest of the country. What do we know about graduates of collaborative programs? In what ways and in which areas are they different or the same as graduates from programs that are wholly under the auspices of a university? Do they reflect the strengths of each type of institution involved? There are many different models of collaborative programs: some have students move between colleges and universities; others have students spend the first two years at a college and the second two years at a university; and still others have college students remain at their college for four years where the curriculum is the same as the degree-granting university partner in the collaboration. Is one model superior to another or others? How would that superiority be defined? Most of the collaborations in the west were entered into voluntarily by the college and university partners. This was true in parts of Ontario but some partnerships were, in fact, formed as a response to a government edict. Does this make a difference in the program that resulted? Does it make a difference in the experience of the students? Does it lead to graduates with different strengths?

Some of these questions are not politically correct. There are many sensitivities about the merits of different types of educational programs. For more than 30 years, college-based programs have been the backbone of nursing education in Canada, producing the majority of graduates. On the other hand, university programs have been evolving for over 80 years and have been attracting and graduating increasing numbers of nurses for several decades. These same university programs have been the backbone of nursing research in Canada, and the increasing quantity and quality of research have influenced the way baccalaureate students are being educated.

Canada is in a unique position to contribute to our understanding of how to educate nurses for the 21st century. I recently urged Ontario schools of nursing to undertake a study of their collaborative efforts and the products of them; however, the longer experience of western Canadian schools should not be lost in this type of study. Many countries have not yet achieved a baccalaureate degree as the basis for the practice of nursing. These countries would benefit from a careful analysis of the various Canadian program mod-

els, and the experience of faculty members and students in these programs. And, without doubt, we, in Canada, would also benefit as our programs continue to evolve. Let's take a leadership role and systematically examine what has been achieved and celebrate the fact that we are in a position to do this.