

## The Case of Baccalaureate Nursing – When Politics and Education Converge

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Humber College of Applied Arts and Technology opened in 1967 as one of a system of 22 non-degree granting, post-secondary institutions created to supply Ontario's middle-level infrastructure for the post World War II industrial and knowledge-based economy. These colleges (CAATs) were not designed to offer university transfer programs as a formal part of their mandate, rather to become a viable alternative for non-university bound students. As such, the colleges concentrated on developing programs, many of a three year duration, which would allow graduates to obtain meaningful, long term career employment. This has proven to be the case for many years, and, to a large extent, still is. Recently, however, the combination of pressure from professional bodies, together with the demands of businesses in many economic sectors insisting upon the baccalaureate degree as the minimum credential for job entry, has begun to alter the traditional playing field for institutions and governments alike.

This situation has tended to be most typified in the critically important field of Nursing. And at Humber, a large institution located in diverse, cosmopolitan Toronto, which had always been heavily involved in nursing, both in graduating students for entry to practice as Registered Nurses (RNs), and in providing many "post-diploma" fast-track offerings in specialty areas to upgrade the depth and sophistication of practicing nurses, this issue was bound to have direct impact. Indeed, as part of the College's School of Health Sciences, Humber's Nursing program was the largest in Ontario, (a not insignificant factor in terms of this case), and enjoyed a strong reputation based on high standards and a quality curriculum, delivered by committed, competent and caring faculty.

Concurrently, as was, and continues to be, the case in much of North America, healthcare (reform) had emerged as a major policy and political issue in Ontario. Nursing was one of the major flash points of this, having, in fact, reached crisis proportion. This situation was caused by a variety of factors, relating to the squeeze on health care budgets, and, concomitant escalating workloads of staff, such as early retirement, burn out, non-competitive wages, insufficient full time, and too many part time jobs, too few new graduates in the market, and, not inconsequentially, poaching by large American hospitals in States such as Texas, Florida, and North Carolina. For the Provincial government that ultimately was the only body which could act to address these problems, the relentless pressure from professional associations, such as the College of Nurses, to legislate the upgrading of their status by requiring the baccalaureate degree as the minimal qualification for entry to practice, only raised the stakes. Finally, in early 2000, the Provincial government announced that it was simultaneously going to make the degree qualification mandatory by 2005. Those already practicing under the RN designation, but without a degree, would be grandfathered. The government would also pro-act to ensure that a larger number of new graduates would be available.

Many actors in the field, particularly the colleges, warned that the education and training of nurses presented a political minefield to the government. Nonetheless, the government, through the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, decided to proceed with its decision. Implementation was easier said than done. Some universities immediately argued that degree granting was solely their prerogative and that they should simply increase their nursing enrolments. This scenario suggested that the colleges could increase enrollment in the nursing assistant programs, which they already offered, to make up nursing enrolment shortfalls in the traditional diploma programs. However, this disregarded the fact that seventy five per cent of nursing (RN) education in Ontario was being carried out in the colleges, and that few of the many excellent faculty teaching in the three year nursing programs were likely to be engaged by the universities, even as their enrolment went up, and the colleges' enrolment went down. Conversely, some colleges argued that the solution lay with giving them degree granting approval for Nursing. Not only was this position naïve insofar as few colleges were realistically in a position to offer the degree, but it also did not take into account the reaction of the College of Nurses, which, having long-battled to gain baccalaureate status for its members, insisted that these degrees must be delivered by established universities. Although the government was in the process of granting some colleges the right to offer a limited number of applied degrees in other fields, the government made it clear that Nursing was not going to be one of these.

With such disparate viewpoints emanating from stakeholder groups, the government recognized its difficult position. It soon became clear that some accommodation, which would create a working relationship/partnership between colleges and universities, was essential. The rub lay in bringing this seemingly reasonable concept to harmonious fruition. Unfortunately, the reality for the colleges, which were eager to, and assumed they could, cooperate as equals in a shared partnership, was that the universities collectively perceived that they had both the upper hand and were, indeed, the senior partners.

The government certainly understood that problems relating to institutional territoriality of degree granting rights, layoffs at colleges, finding appropriately qualified faculty, increasing lab space, and absorbing higher operating costs at universities, all suggested that the only logical solution had to involve colleges and universities acting together. But the government also believed, optimistically, that (a) a major infusion of dollars for operating, capital, upgrading of faculty credentials, and (b) a statement that it desired colleges and universities to collaborate harmoniously, would be sufficient to produce a smooth, seamless and effective transition. In the months following the government's announcement to this effect, on April 12, 2000, it became clear that this harmony would not be easily achieved.

Some colleges were not surprised. In fact, foreseeing the only viable solution to the nursing crisis, Humber, together with George Brown and Centennial Colleges had entered into discussions almost four years earlier with Ryerson Polytechnic University to develop an integrated, collaborative nursing program in order to be ready when the government actually moved on this issue. During that time, the agenda focused primarily on academic programming. Despite constant urging by Humber staff, few agreements in principle were reached on matters of policy, operations or implementation, although Ryerson regularly advised that these would not be problematic. Ominously, one week following the April announcement, progress ground to a halt. Ryerson's administration advised that it had not resolved a grievance from its faculty, but felt they would be able to do so. By September, not only had they not resolved the grievance, but they now advised they were encountering difficulty in obtaining approval for the entire integrated program (i.e., three years college, one year university), and suggested that the best they could do was an articulated (two plus two) model. To worsen matters, they also admitted, for the first time, that the University Standards Committee and Academic Council would take issue with the qualifications of college faculty, with the fact that the arrangement did not meet the University's fifty per cent residency requirement for students, and would, in all probability, dilute Ryerson's quality. A huge discrepancy was also revealed in what monies (from government funding sources) would be required by the universities, which, if taken from a fixed formula, would leave a woefully insufficient amount for the colleges. Because Humber had been assured repeatedly that all matters could be resolved equitably, this new information, in Humber's view, reflected concern about Ryerson's strategic planning abilities, and, possibly, bargaining in bad faith.

While Ryerson continued to ask for still more time to resolve their issues, Humber realized that Ryerson would not be able to maneuver these matters successfully through their internal governing bodies. In fact, additional evidence began to emerge that supported the perception that university Faculty Associations across Ontario were being advised to discourage integrated nursing programs in every university. Also, that once the government had announced the groundrules, that all colleges offering nursing must seek and conclude agreements with publicly funded universities in Ontario in order to qualify for funding, the universities knew, then, that they could control the process. Indeed, it became patently apparent that all colleges were operating from weakness. It also left a bitter taste of betrayal with those colleges working diligently on this file for years. Humber was forced to conclude that (a) many of the positions on issues agreed to in principle for four years would no longer be part of the deal, and (b) if it did settle on Ryerson's terms, it would be selling out its own program and faculty. Notwithstanding the facts that students for September 2001 entry into baccalaureate nursing were already being recruited throughout Ontario, and that securing government approval for a new partnership represented major hurdles to overcome, Humber decided that its only recourse, at this point, was to

sever ties with Ryerson as a matter of principle, and to take the risk of seeking another option.

### Questions requiring resolution

At the end of September, 2000, the President of Humber advised the Provincial Government that Humber was unable to conclude a mutually acceptable agreement, and while wishing to support the government in finding positive resolution for outstanding nursing issues, would not capitulate to the terms of Ryerson's constantly changing conditions. (The other two colleges, while also having their reservations, continued to work with Ryerson, and, in fact, still do to date). Humber also pointed out that so much damage had been done to the credibility, trust and respect between the staff of the two institutions, that even a last minute compromise would not allow a long-term relationship to be sustained in any case. Humber immediately initiated discreet discussions with Ministry officials to suggest that a different arrangement for Humber could still address the government's goals regarding nursing education, as well as preserve Humber's own academic integrity and quality. In that context, several problematic questions required speedy response, which are listed as follows:

1. Given that almost all colleges in Ontario were also encountering problems in their collaborative relationships with their university partners, would the Government agree that Humber was unique in being put in an untenable position, and, therefore, should be allowed to seek a new university partner?
2. If the answer to #1 was "yes", and considering that realistically a more flexible university nursing partner would not be available in Ontario, would the Minister permit Humber to seek a partner **outside** Ontario? Further, given that there had been a moratorium on all Ministerial Consents for the previous six years, would the Government lift that ban to allow a new potential partner access to Ontario? (It would not be feasible that Humber students travel to another province to complete their degrees; ideally, they had to be able to undertake the whole program at Humber).
3. If the answer to #2 was "yes", could Humber then find a new university partner, quickly and successfully conclude an equitable, academically-sound agreement, and establish a framework for a long term (e.g., five years) working relationship?
4. As 2000 had already turned into 2001, would Humber be able to recruit a critical mass of academically-able nursing students for a September start?
5. Faced with the fact that all institutions offering Nursing were actively and simultaneously recruiting faculty, would Humber be able to attract talented, committed faculty for the new degree level program?

### Implementation of the Action Plan

While there was no guarantee that answers to the questions listed above would all be positive for Humber, the administration was reasonably confident

that it could both come up with a workable plan, and implement it effectively. For one thing, Humber already had strong links with the University of New Brunswick (UNB), one of the oldest and most respected in Canada, and was already engaged in an active partnership, offering a degree completion Bachelor of Nursing, (both at Humber and through distance applications, using faculty from both institutions), for practicing registered nurses who did not have degrees. This successful relationship provided the catalyst for discussions relating to offering a generic nursing degree at Humber. A team was sent to Fredericton, New Brunswick to explore and, hopefully, to work out details for offering a collaborative, integrated Bachelor of Nursing (BN) degree.

The "fit" between the two institutions proved to be excellent, not only because they respected and trusted the strengths of each other, but also because there was "value added" for each institution. Humber sought a partner that would allow Humber to teach most, if not all, of the courses; that would grant the degree, monitor curriculum, evaluation, and teaching, and would accept graduates to a Master's degree without prejudice. For its part, UNB was eager to access the vast array of resources available at Humber and in Toronto (e.g. teaching hospitals), and saw both a new revenue stream and strong potential for qualified applications to its Master's degree in Nursing.

Equally as important, UNB was not a fair-weather friend. It would not give in to the pressures of some of the Ontario university community to resist any arrangement with Humber. And it was able to circumvent major deal-breakers that Ryerson could not. For example, UNB was already experienced in offering its degrees at off-site locations, and did not believe that such arrangements would threaten its own residency and faculty hiring regulations. Within two months, a Letter of Understanding had been signed by both institutions, essentially allowing Humber faculty to teach all four years of the program, creating an arrangement that met Humber's needs and expectations for the delivery of a high quality, degree level program. This helped immeasurably in recruiting students because they could remain at one location for all four years, and in attracting faculty who were interested in teaching at the degree level.

While continuing negotiations with UNB, Humber attended to due diligence on other critical areas. Foremost was securing a signal from the Government that this initiative would receive support. Humber's Board of Governors did its part by unanimously passing a motion supporting the administration's actions to procure Ministerial Consent for the proposed partnership with UNB. Also, as it approached the Minister for support, Humber was always careful to couch its case in terms which stressed the integrity of the College and its faculty as it strove to offer high credibility nursing education, which ultimately could only help Ontario address its nursing crisis.

Naturally, Humber also leveraged the fact that it already had the largest nursing program in Ontario, graduating annually more than ten per cent of the Province's total RNs. It also recognized that the Government was somewhat disappointed with the manner in which the universities had handled nursing education with the colleges, and that they seemed more concerned about preserving their monopolistic territory (i.e. degree-granting) than helping to solve a serious public policy issue. In short, Humber tried to position itself not as self-serving, but rather as attempting to find a pragmatic solution to help Government address the Nursing issue. As one example, Humber stressed it could always take more students into the program if that would help solve the pending shortage of nurses.

Following several exploratory discussions with the Minister responsible for colleges and nursing education, and/or her senior staff, it was confirmed that if a sound, collaborative agreement with UNB could be reached, Ministerial Consent to allow UNB to offer its program in Ontario through/with Humber would be forthcoming, together with the funding that had already been made available for Ontario-based partnerships. Though this process provided some anxious moments as it worked its way through the government formalities, Ministerial Consent was given on March 9, 2001.

While the two most important hurdles had been cleared, Humber still had to launch the program with a class of students in a scant five months. Because Humber had passed the point of no return in Ontario, failure was not an option. Ontario's universities were upset that Humber had been allowed to deviate from the ground rules requiring colleges to establish partnerships with Ontario-based institutions, while many colleges were unsympathetic because they were frustrated that they had found no alternate route to improve their own frustrating relationships. More important, however, was the fact that the Minister had spent considerable political capital in championing this issue within her government, and had absorbed some political heat personally. Humber owed the then Minister no less than rewarding her faith by delivering on its own end of the bargain.

Although the formal recruitment of students could not formally begin until the Consent had been received, Humber had been quietly lining up prospects, and was ready with a focused campaign to market the Nursing degree. It was true that many potential candidates had already accepted offers from other institutions, but Humber was not without some key assets, including the strategic location of the College in the western quadrant of the populous Greater Toronto Area, the fact that no competitors offered nursing there, the availability of all four years at one campus, the established reputation of Humber in the Nursing field, particularly with hospitals, and the fact that, traditionally, many Nursing students enrolled as mature adults, a group that fortuitously made late personal educational decisions. As a result, a respectable 89 qualified registrants began classes in September 2001. By

September 2003, the program had come into its own, and with 253 in their first year. Humber's Nursing program remains the largest in Ontario.

Finally, Humber sought to attract highly qualified faculty (i.e. with advanced degrees, and particularly the Doctorate in Nursing), from a restricted field that had been thoroughly combed through for months by other institutions. Again, Humber had some strengths, one of which being that some staffing could be deferred to subsequent years, as, of course, in September 2001, the College would only be offering the first year of the degree program. There already existed a large pool of qualified professionals, who were working in the well-populated city (GTA is now close to six million). The trick was to attract some of the best to Humber. The combination of Humber's location (i.e., suburban, with no commute to downtown), reputation of program and quality of working environment, and an optional research/publication requirement attracted a surprising number of excellent candidates. For example, Humber was particularly successful in hiring some formidable people from hospitals. For these new faculty, college teaching was a way of continuing to use their expertise in a less stressful environment. Indeed, by September, Humber was able to round out its faculty with outstanding people, while conversely, those Humber faculty who had been teaching diploma nursing, but did not wish to teach in the degree program, found a satisfactory niche in the large Registered Nursing Assistant Program. At the time of writing (January 2004), the degree-nursing program at Humber has put down solid roots, the partnership with UNB has proven to be strong and harmonious, and encouragingly, there are even signs that relations with Ryerson's program have begun to improve.

### **Additional Observations**

Resolving complex situations of educational public policy in a pragmatic, positive fashion, relies at least as much on careful case management, persuasive diplomacy, and dexterity in working within the political system, as it does on the seeming logic and/or educational value of any position. In that connection, some suggestions for practitioners, which emerge from this case include:

- Before engaging in any activity likely to be controversial, even explosive, assess and understand the educational and political environments well.
- Always play from strength. Never overplay an institution's hand, a mistake that could lead to public embarrassment, even humiliation. There are no long term kudos for hubris, bravado, or mishandling sensitive situations.
- All risk-taking should be structured in a calculated way which predicts success with reasonable confidence. Certainly, never knowingly set up failure by overestimating manageable goals.
- Know and cultivate (political) allies, who could well vary from issue to issue. Above all, make absolutely sure that the College Board and faculty are on side before taking the issue to the outside.

- Using your best available, external, political intelligence, know your opponents and neutralize their actions in-so-far-as possible.
- Work hard to develop a well recognized track record for delivering on commitments and promises, so that decision makers can have confidence in positive outcomes if they support your case.
- Work actively to cultivate relationships and extend personal networks **long before** their intervention and help on a key issue is required. No one likes being obviously "used", and it is harder to ask for favors if no bond has been nurtured. No matter what his/her occupation or rank, remember that everyone is human, and requires positive attention and feedback.
- Build credibility by always exhibiting integrity, honesty, and supportive behavior.
- Always take the high road regardless of the outcome. Win without gloating; lose without moping. Above all, never slander others to further your own cause. Cheap shots can come back to haunt you, and negative behavior will only diminish you.
- Never try to force positive response by embarrassing the government into action; you will rarely win public relations contests with their ability to put a favourable spin on their position. Besides, remember that government officials can have long memories, and so there is little value in winning a battle, yet losing the war.
- It is very difficult to gain approval for your case if the action to be taken does not advance the government's agenda. Understand the government's point of view and needs on every issue. Focus on providing resolutions to issues which both help you and solve their problems. The goal is to have converging agendas produce mutually beneficial results.
- Never forget that, in the final analysis, it is not only about education; it is also about optics, perception and politics.

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