A Road Toward the Future of Nursing: Paving the Way with Trust, Collaboration, and Strategic Alliances

The preface to the Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) *Future of Nursing* (2011) report begins with a statement that the report is being published at a time of great opportunity in health care. As nurse educators, our great opportunity is the challenge to actualize the recommendations contained in the IOM report.

Just as Robert Frost faced a divergence in the road, so too does our profession. Frost’s (1920) poem “The Road Not Taken” describes two roads diverging and the decision to take one road over the other having a major effect on the future. Our profession faces such a divergence in the road toward the future of nursing. Should we, as nurse educators, take the path that is paved with trust and creates strategic alliances? Or should our educational programs continue down the path of separatism, continuing to construct walls around and between educational pathways for our students? Will our educational programs be able to produce graduates capable of the transformations called for in the IOM’s report?

It is interesting to note that the creation of associate’s degree programs more than 50 years ago signaled another divergence. At that time, 85% of the nursing workforce was supplied by hospitals, but several factors converged to elevate nursing into community colleges. After World War II, women became interested in a collegiate career, and the profession was eager to take control of its own education.

Baccalaureate education supplied 15% of the workforce, but nurse educators at community colleges were able to affect nurse education in a way that the smaller number of baccalaureate institutions could not (Orsolini-Hain & Waters, 2009). Currently, more than 60% of new nurses come from community college programs. Associate’s degree nursing programs provide a dynamic and effective pathway into nursing practice for many students who do not have access to traditional baccalaureate programs (National Organization of Associate Degree Nursing, 2006).

Nursing programs today cannot produce enough graduates to meet the demands of health care, which means that associate’s degree nursing programs continue to play a vital role in meeting the need for nurses (Miles, 2008). Therefore, any move toward addressing the future of nursing, including meeting the education needs of future nurses, must rely on strategic alliances, collaboration, and trust.

Elmuti and Kathawala (2001) described strategic alliances as partnerships between competing entities to achieve strategically significant objectives that are mutually beneficial. The potential of strategic alliances in achieving the goals identified in the IOM’s *Future of Nursing* report are enormous, particularly those focused on transforming nursing education. Active and ongoing partnerships must exist between associate’s degree and baccalaureate nursing programs that address seamless transition from associate degree to the baccalaureate, including dual admission, curriculum reframing, articulation agreements that are comprehensive and specific, and addressing the barriers to continuing beyond the current degree.

In the past, barriers that have prevented educational programs from working together have included differing philosophies and visions, thereby creating a clash of cultures. Elmuti and Kathawala (2001) cited cultural clashes as the primary problem faced in creating strategic alliances.

As educators, we must work to form strategic alliances that will result in achieving the goal that 80% of the nursing workforce hold a baccalaureate degree by 2020. This goal will be achievable only through a new focus on collaboration. Understanding why alliances fail will be integral to our success. Potential causes of failure of strategic alliances include lack of trust, lack of coordination between schools of nursing and other strategic partners, differences in attitudes among partners, varying curricular expectations, and, most importantly, failure to grasp and articulate strategic intent.

Building trust will be one of our first challenges in creating strategic alliances. Transparency, integrity, and consistency are three important strategies to assist us in achieving the IOM’s goals. The IOM’s report encourages educational collaboratives, which seamlessly connect students to schools, fostering a culture that promotes and values academic progression. As leaders, we must facilitate constructive relationships among our faculty and administrators, which build trust and commitment toward achieving these common goals. This will require frequent and open communication. The willingness to communicate is often more important than the content of communication, building trust, and good will and contributes to positive energy and perceptions.

We challenge our colleagues to con-
sider the road less traveled in the past, and transform it to become the preferred pathway to the future. From Frost’s (1920) poem:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(lines 16-20)

We can make a difference in the future of nursing, but we must take a road paved with trust, collaboration, and strategic alliances to actualize this future.

References

Alexia Green, PhD, RN, FAAN
Professor and Dean Emeriti
Texas Tech University

Judy Beal, PhD, RN
Professor and Interim Dean of Nursing
Simmons College

Sondra Flemming, MSN, RN
Vice President
El Centro College

Gloria Cater, PhD, FNP-BC, RN
Dean
Roxbury Community College

The authors have no financial or proprietary interest in the materials presented herein.
doi:10.3928/01484834-20110920-01