

**Comments to the Commission on
Post-Secondary Education
in
New Brunswick**

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Introduction

Throughout the debates and submissions to date to the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick, two areas related to Allied Health education have not been addressed. The two areas of concern which I wish to comment on here are:

- The patchwork of post-secondary education sites for allied health education
- The need to award certification based upon the level of education and not the institution attended

Patchwork of Educational Programs

Currently in New Brunswick there exists a patchwork of educational programs offered at a wide spectrum of institutions. The following represents only a partial list of allied health programs offered in Saint John and Fredericton.

Allied Health Programs

- Private educational institutions
 - CompuCollege Saint John Campus - Pharmacy Technician
 - Atlantic Paramedic Academy, Fredericton – Primary Care Paramedic
- Regional Health Authority
 - Atlantic Health Science Corporation - School of Radiological Technology
- New Brunswick Community College – Saint John
 - Medical Laboratory Technologist
 - Nuclear Medicine Technologist
 - Practical Nurse
 - Pharmacy Technician
 - Respiratory Therapist
- University of New Brunswick – Saint John Campus
 - Bachelor of Nursing
 - Bachelor of Health Science
 - Nuclear Medicine
 - Respiratory Therapy
- University of New Brunswick – Fredericton Campus
 - Bachelor of Nursing
 - Bachelor of Medical Laboratory Science

Although this patchwork appears to produce reasonable numbers of qualified graduates, there is a lack of an overall perspective on human resource needs in this sector within the province. In some areas we see duplication of programs, as in the case of Pharmacy Technician, while in others we see an association of partners offering articulated programs; Bachelor of Health Science through NBCC-SJ and UNBSJ. Further we can observe different levels of educational standards amongst this group. The result is a poorly coordinated system which does not address the issue of recognized academic accreditation standards nor a process by which graduates from one program can easily ladder into another. With respect to this last point, students may be forced to repeat material which they may already have successfully completed such as courses on the

Canadian Health Care System or Ethics at both the College and the University. Similarly, students in the Practical Nurse program are given only minimal recognition for their education when applying for the Bachelor of Nursing program.

Perhaps even more distressing is the fact that no one department is responsible for the overall performance of these programs. Private educational institutions which do not specifically meet either national or provincial accreditation standards only serve to produce graduates which may place the public at risk. Differing goals of the Departments of Health and Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, make coordination of funding difficult and can lead to under funding in key areas. The poor physical plant of the College's Saint John campus and lack of current technology only highlight this issue.

The Commission should consider all post-secondary educational programs and the type of institutions that they are located in. It should put in place strict requirements to meet recognized educational standards regardless of the institution or force unrecognized programs to close so that the public is not placed at risk. It should require educational institutions to cooperate and collaborate in offering programs such that the part which each excels in, skills training compared to advanced theory, can be the focus of learning. This would facilitate the learning experience of students as they progress through college to university.

Recognition of the Level of Education

The second area of my concern relates to recognizing the level of education required to complete an allied health program and awarding the appropriate level of certification. As my experience is in the field of Respiratory Therapy, I will use that profession as an example and compare it to Nursing.

When the Respiratory Therapy program at the New Brunswick Community College was started in 1989, it began as a two year diploma program. As a result of an increasing national curriculum, in 2001 the program expanded into a two and a half year program with approximately 3400 hours of didactic and clinical instruction, still at the diploma level. With the development of the latest National Competency Profile by the National Alliance of Respiratory Therapy Regulatory Bodies, there is a need to again expand the program into three years. This will require 3600 hours of didactic and clinical instruction.

The program in Saint John has developed into one of the leading schools in Canada and has achieved both national and provincial recognition. Several graduates have been recipients of the Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists' Gold Medal award for achieving the highest mark amongst that year's first time writers of the National Registry Exam across Canada. This past year, the program was honoured with both the Gold Medal and a Bronze Medal, for the third highest mark, from over 300 writers across Canada. In addition, two members of the faculty have received provincial Excellence in Teaching awards and several actively serve on their national and provincial professional associations. In short, the Respiratory Therapy program is a well recognized program of excellence.

As can be seen, this profession has witnessed ever increasing growth in its scope of practice and resulting educational requirement. The profession remains strong nationally with significant labour demands. It now finds itself debating the issue of whether or not it should pursue a degree entry to practice.

The Bachelor of Nursing program at the University of New Brunswick – Saint John Campus has also had a very successful history. Since moving to the University from the old Saint John School of Nursing, several hundreds of nurses have graduated and are serving the health care needs of New Brunswickers. In order to graduate with a Bachelor's degree, students must successfully complete four years of progressive education comprising 137 credit hours of instruction. This translates into approximately 2800 hours of both didactic and clinical instruction.

It should be noted that a two and a half year program in Respiratory Therapy with approximately 3400 hours of instruction results in a diploma while a four year Nursing program with only about 2800 hours awards a Bachelor's degree. At first glance one can be excused in believing that a four year program will be more complex and involve more instructional hours than a two and a half year program but this is simply not the case. With a longer academic year within the College system compared to the University, 10 months versus 8 months, and a longer instructional day of typically 6 to 7 hours, the College is able to "fit" more in less time.

It could also be argued that there is more clinical time in Respiratory Therapy than Nursing which does not represent a university level of education. This argument is equally false although Respiratory Therapy does have more clinical time. This clinical portion of the Respiratory Therapy program is not only at a very high degree of learning but it is also carried out with patients at the highest level of acuity. Each clinical rotation involves both the demonstration of clinical competencies and high level critical thinking skills in conjunction with significant didactic requirements. Further, even when this is taken into account, the difference in overall hours remains approximately equal yet we are still left with a diploma versus a degree.

The point which needs to be examined by the Commission is whether a program of study should have a certificate determined by the nature of the educational institution or by the level of education required to attain that certificate? It is my contention that there is an injustice demonstrated here which has significant ramifications. In short, the Respiratory Therapy program at the New Brunswick Community College does not need to develop into a degree level program; it already is at a degree level and it should be recognized as such

Degree Creep

If certification is determined by the type of educational institution and it does not allow for professional programs to grow with their profession, then we artificially restrict the profession. The result has a negative affect upon recruiting students into that profession

since it has a negative impact upon both the professional stature and earning potential of that profession. In many minds this is the nature and concern of “degree creep”. Although I can respect the concern of many when it comes to the increasing cost of health care, it should not come at the expense of the maturing of a well recognized and needed profession. Degree creep is more of an excuse to prevent professional growth and protect professional “turf” than to address health care economics.

It should be noted that although I have used Respiratory Therapy as a diploma level example, the same arguments can be made for several other Allied health professions. Medical Laboratory Technology, Radiology Technology and Nuclear Medicine Technology are all debating the need to grow into degree entry to practice professions. All are being subjected to artificial barriers based upon the location of their education programs and downward pressure from professions which already have a degree certification level.

Conclusions

In your discussion paper you ask what the perfect post-secondary system should look like. In the area of Allied Health education it should be a coordinated system which serves the human resource needs of New Brunswick. It should place all post-secondary educational programs, no matter at what institution they are located, under one department in order that appropriate educational standards can be met. It should require either nationally or provincially recognized accreditation. It should be closely coordinated with the Department of Health to ensure appropriate clinical training is provided. It should offer career laddering, such as Health Care Aide to Practical Nurse to Bachelor of Nursing, to ensure the opportunities for continuing education of individuals and a secure future source of well qualified candidates for higher level professions. Finally it should recognize the need to award the most appropriate level of certification for the level of education without restricting it to the institution attended.