

# Falling Short

Ontario has come a long way with its post-graduate offerings for RNs, but academics say there's some work to do to address the faculty shortage that looms on the horizon.

BY KIMBERLEY KEARSEY

**Nancy Purdy** says she's still not making the salary she earned as a chief nursing officer a decade ago, but the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment she feels teaching students makes up for any shortfalls in the pocketbook. A tenure-track associate professor at Ryerson University for three years, Purdy says she always knew she wanted to get her PhD and enter the world of academia, but it wasn't until eight years ago that she found herself in a position to make it happen. In 2003, she was offered a severance package when the hospital where she worked restructured. It was one of those 'now or never' situations, so she took the leap.

Graduate student Heather Thomson, on the other hand, never envisioned herself in academia when she finished her master's degree in 2009. Her vision for the future had her heading for the type of administrative role Purdy had vacated several years before. To reach that career milestone, Thomson decided to accept a fellowship doing patient safety research at the University of Toronto. Suddenly, she realized that getting a PhD, conducting her own research, and bringing it to students in a classroom was a much better way for her to leave her mark on the health-care system.

For some, the decision to pursue a PhD with the goal to teach is easy. For others, the journey may be a little less direct, and at times surprising. Regardless of how they arrive at their destination, nursing academics are welcome at the front of the classroom. In fact, their presence is needed because Ontario is facing a shortage of nursing faculty that is threatening its chances of producing the

number and calibre of RNs needed for the future.

Statistics compiled by the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) (2008-09) reveal almost 14 per cent of nursing faculty in Canada is over the age of 60. Almost 35 per cent is over 55. And yet, admission rates for nursing schools across Canada reached a 10-year high in 2009. That year, more than 14,000 students began their degrees, almost 50 per cent more than a decade earlier. There are no signs this increasing interest in nursing will wane any time soon, which begs the question: what happens when these older nurses retire? Who will teach the next generation of RNs?

It's a question that sparks a lot of debate, especially when you consider the number of Canadian nurses pursuing their PhDs – a mandatory requirement for tenure at a university – has only increased incrementally over the last five years (from 76 to 84). Forty-two nurses graduated from doctoral programs in 2009. Given CASN estimates an annual need for 650 PhD prepared nurses, this pool of grads represents less than 10 per cent of the required total.

Conversations with members of the academic world reveal there are some conflicting views on whether or not we're actually experiencing a faculty shortage. Although some suggest we're okay right now, they don't deny the reality that Ontario is likely to find itself falling short on faculty in the not-too-distant future.

Ten years ago, RNAO's board of directors passed a resolution at the association's annual general meeting to call on the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to provide more funding to



Nancy Purdy (right) and Heather Thomson take different journeys to academia, but end in the same place.

universities to expand doctoral programs in nursing and to increase funding available to universities interested in developing such programs. In 2004, then Minister Mary Anne Chambers announced at an RNAO education conference that the government would invest \$10 million over four years to fund PhD nursing programs. At the time, McMaster University, the University of Toronto, and University of Western Ontario were the only schools to offer PhD programs specifically in nursing. Since the funding was announced, three additional programs have started, at Queen's University, University of Ottawa and Laurentian University.

Betty Cragg was a nursing professor at the University of Ottawa when the funding was announced. She remembers the optimism it generated, especially since it followed an Association of Applied Arts and Technology survey that predicted almost 50 per cent of university faculty and almost 40 per cent of college faculty would retire by 2010. At the time, Cragg expected to be one of those retiring faculty members at the end of the decade. But the years that followed did not play out as she expected. Nor did they result in the number of retirements predicted in the survey.

Cragg retired in July 2011, at the age of 68. She says her later-than-expected departure was thanks to the abolition in 2006 of mandatory retirement at 65. She and three fellow faculty members retired in July, one of whom was older than Cragg. Their positions, she says, have not been refilled, but she's not sounding any alarm bells just yet. In fact, Cragg is one of those who suggests we are not

experiencing a shortage at the moment. Two years ago, for the first time in her 20 years as a professor, there were no full-time, tenure-track vacancies at the University of Ottawa. All 32 faculty positions were filled. "Full time, tenure track, the whole ball of wax," she says. She credits the university with "growing its own" (seven of the 12 who have finished their PhDs in Ottawa have been hired as faculty), but reserves some healthy skepticism about how long the university can report such favourable numbers.

Although relatively new to the academic world, Purdy is also reluctant to say the "sky is falling," but she doesn't pretend the world of nursing academia isn't facing the threat of a troubling shortage. Purdy says she works as hard as she ever did as a chief nursing officer, but doesn't feel stretched or stressed for lack of faculty. In fact, she has colleagues who are having trouble finding positions.

Catherine Tompkins, Associate Dean of Health Sciences and Director of the School of Nursing at McMaster University, sees it differently. Tompkins, who is also chair of the Council of Ontario University Programs in Nursing (COUPN), admits it's startling just how many vacancies have been recorded in Canadian universities.

"I was just at a CASN meeting and they were giving the numbers (for 2010)...they reported 110 vacancies." The number one reason for this, she notes, is getting qualified people to fill the positions. There are issues with funding as well, she adds. "There are hiring freezes because the universities are in challenging financial times. It's complex to know exactly what the cause is...but there are vacancies."

Purdy suggests she and other professors have a role to play in addressing the problem. Ryerson, she says, is doing a lot of the right things to promote graduate studies among students with aptitude. “As faculty, we’re always trying to support them,” she says. “We try to find opportunities for students to be research assistants...to publish with us...so if they do want to pursue a PhD or a graduate degree, they’re more competitive.”

Purdy also believes there’s a lot to be said for late bloomers who have more comprehensive practice experience coming in. Tompkins agrees.

**“Student-to-faculty ratios are growing. Before we used to have a class of 30...now it’s gone to 60. We used to supervise four students clinically, now we’re supervising half a dozen. Everything has been increasing, especially over the last decade.”**

Nurses who pursue graduate education are “not like those in the humanities or the arts where they come straight from a baccalaureate, to a master’s to a PhD and they’re graduating by the time they’re 30,” Tompkins says. Nurses “are, very often, people who are out there working in already established roles and who are planning to go back to those or planning to stay within their organizations. The career path is quite different.”

RNAO, in its *Creating Vibrant Communities* document (released January 2010), urged the government to consider some key recommendations to address the looming faculty shortage (see sidebar below). Tompkins says the recommendations are important, but suggests it’s equally important to entice more nurses to pursue their master’s degree. “We need to put the emphasis on taking in excellent master’s students because they’re going to be our pool for the PhD.”

Heather Thomson was one of those master’s students who was drawn into a PhD program. Her passion to teach is clear. But she’s the first to admit she stumbled upon that passion. She suggests that students – whether they’re pursuing a baccalaureate, a master’s or a PhD – don’t have enough exposure to the kinds of things academia has to offer. “I think as a student, you are primarily exposed to the research side of things and not necessarily the teaching piece unless you’re working as a teaching assistant (TA). If I wasn’t a TA, I don’t think I would be all that interested in it.”

Students and faculty also suggest the lack of interest in the education sector can be linked to an increase in other opportunities for nurses who have graduate degrees. Management and administrative positions – chief nurse executive is one – will draw many PhD prepared nurses away from academia. Lower salaries in the education sector are also a deterrent, as are workload issues that leave some faculty feeling they’re being asked to do more with less support.

Drawing more graduate students into

academia is important. But equally important is the retention of existing academics. University of Ontario Institute of Technology RN and associate professor Wally Bartfay, along with RNAO member and Queen’s University nursing professor Ena Howse, conducted research on the faculty shortage in 2007. Bartfay and Howse share concern about the way universities have adopted a corporate, for-profit model for education.

“At UOIT...we used to have a class of 30...now it’s gone to 60. We used to supervise four students clinically, now we’re supervising

ing half a dozen. Everything has been increasing, especially over the last decade.” He’s incensed that while class sizes are growing, universities are sometimes hiring instructors for less. Seasonal lecturers can be hired for as little as \$5,000 per course. The cost to deliver four courses – the expected course load for most faculty – is only \$20,000 as opposed to a base salary of \$80,000 for an entry level, tenure-track assistant professor, he says. “This raises questions about the quality and consistency of education, given contract lecturers are not held to the same standards and expectations as tenured professors,” Bartfay adds. He worries that if you don’t have tenured professors teaching core nursing courses, you are not providing students with “cutting edge, research driven, evidence-based” content.

Bartfay admits that Canada is about 10 years behind the U.K., U.S. and Australia when it comes to the supply of PhD prepared nurses, and the availability of doctoral and post doctoral programs. “We need a culture here to develop it,” he says, adding the shift won’t happen in the next few years. It will probably be another decade before we adopt a post doctoral training model that provides a bridging opportunity for people to learn how to write grants, teach and receive the mentorship they need to be successful in academia.

When members of RNAO debated and ultimately passed the resolution almost a decade ago to lobby the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities for more funding and better access to PhD programs for nurses, it was part of an ongoing effort to open up more opportunities for nurses, and to build the credibility of the profession. “I think we’ve come a long way,” Tompkins says optimistically. “We still have a ways to go but we’ve got more programs certainly in Ontario. The difference between the late 90s and where we are now is huge.” **RN**

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#### RNAO RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT

RNAO, in its *Creating Vibrant Communities* document (released January 2010), urged the government to consider some key recommendations to address the looming faculty shortage:

- fund universities to increase their PhD entries by 10 per year, and their master’s entries by 100 per year
- create an endowment for three-year doctoral fellowships for nurses to allow at least 15 applicants per year to advance their research and accelerate completion of their dissertations, with priority given to nursing faculty
- raise Nursing Education Initiative funding from \$1,500/student/year to \$2,000/student/year