



GUEST EDITORIAL

On Future's Doorstep: What's in the "Tea Leaves" for Nursing Education?



Jean Giddens, PhD, RN, FAAN
Dean and Professor,
Virginia Commonwealth University



Cynthia McFadden, PhD, RN, FNAP
Dean and Professor,
Grand Valley State University

For centuries, humans have been trying to predict the future. Divination, the practice of seeking information about the future, has been performed around the world by many cultures using similar methods under different names. Some forms of divination date back well before the Middle Ages. Fortune telling, palm reading, crystal-ball gazing, and tassography (reading tea leaves) are classic examples of divination.

Our collective interest in predicting the future also has played out in literature and cinema. In a fanciful twist, the 1985 movie *Back to the Future* featured time-traveler Marty McFly who inadvertently went back in time. Because he was from the future, he knew with great clarity what the future held and was desperate to ensure that he could return to it.

In late 2016, the AACN Vision for Academic Nursing Education Task Force was charged with making recommendations for academic nursing's future – with a specific intent to clarify educational pathways and preparation needed to succeed in evolving nursing roles. As members of this task force, we can confirm that we did not have the advantage of *knowing* the future like Marty McFly, and none of us had the

supernatural *powers* of divination. But we did have the power of insight – because what we currently know and see provides the foundation for making recommendations for the future. Signals and trends are all around us in society; noticing, interpreting, and understanding signals and trends provides an opportunity to prepare for nursing education's future.

The task force members were encouraged to be inquisitive and bold. We started our work by conducting a broad environmental scan of the signals and trends – especially in the areas of higher education, the science of learning, emerging technologies, health care, and the nursing profession. This work involved reading current literature, assessing data, and interviewing leaders in a variety of areas – with the intention to understand what is on the near horizon, and gain insight to what may lie on the far horizon. One thing we learned, without question, is that things are changing rapidly. Over the past three decades, all aspects of our society have undergone significant transformation driven by advancements associated with the Information Age. No aspect of our society has been left untouched and, in fact, the pace of change has been exponential.

Our task force looked at higher education and learned that this troubled giant has endured many changes and has been slow itself to change. The value of higher education, as we currently know it, increasingly has been questioned. In many ways, higher education has fallen out of step with the needs and expectations of today's learners and employers. Current trends suggest that higher education is in the midst of significant transition in an attempt to not only stay current, but also to maintain relevance in the future society. Many of the long-standing and traditional ways of higher education are beginning to give way to alternative education models. A clear movement toward competency-based, time-variable education, a growing interest in certifications, stackable credentials and achievement badges (in some cases in favor of academic degrees), and the transformation in teaching modalities using a variety of technologies are particularly striking.

We also looked at health care, which has been described as being in a constant state of white-water change. Healthcare trends are being driven by a number of factors, especially advances in the medical sciences, policies aimed at cost efficiency, the demand for better access, improved quality, and efficiencies in care delivery. These factors will continue to drive change and have direct implications for all healthcare professions, including nursing. There is a growing need for nursing to lead through health policy and fill gaps in population health, primary care, informatics, and care coordination. The current and future demand for nurses at the point of care, and roles as nurse practitioners, nursing leaders, educators, and researchers could not be clearer.

The continued call for a better educated nursing workforce – not only defined by the degree earned, but also by progressive aptitudes – is louder than ever. Preparing the nursing workforce for the future of

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2019.06.011>

healthcare will require nurse educators to be open to change – including the types of degrees offered, future education pathways, changes to curricula, and the way students are educated. Nurse educators must also accelerate workforce diversity and contribute to expanding workforce distribution in rural and underserved areas. We must ensure that nurses of the future are equipped with the necessary competencies to advance patient care, science, and serve as healthcare leaders. Intentional and robust academic-practice partnerships are also needed to create opportunities for co-design and implementation of curricula, joint faculty/practice appointments, transition to practice, and creation of specialty practice offerings in alignment with healthcare needs.

Along with the need for a better educated nursing workforce, an intentional investment in the development and career advancement of nursing faculty is needed. Specific and planned activities are needed to help faculty advance their understanding of the academic environment, and to develop expertise in teaching, the science of learning, curriculum development, research, and other forms of scholarship.

As much as humans are fascinated by the future, many are resistant to change. This is seen throughout society, including within our own

ranks of nurse educators. Change is often perceived as a threat, particularly if it is unclear what the future holds. Avoiding change by clinging to our current practices and sticking to what we are comfortable with – particularly in light of a rapidly changing healthcare industry – will only provide temporary comfort, and potentially long-lasting negative consequences. As leaders, we have an obligation to the nursing profession, to health care, and to the general public to prepare a future nursing workforce for healthcare transformation.

Reading tea leaves involves looking at shapes and patterns formed by the leaves to derive meaning; if the meaning is not clear, imagination and intuition come into play to determine possible interpretations. “Reading the tea leaves” of the future of nursing education requires the same willingness to imagine and use intuition. The AACN’s *Vision for Academic Nursing Education*, presented in this issue of *Journal of Professional Nursing*, represents our collective best efforts to share what we have learned through our environmental scan that serves as the foundation for recommendations for the future of nursing education. On behalf of our taskforce colleagues, we hope this visionary work serves as a helpful beacon to navigate the future.