An Open Letter to All Nurses Returning to School for Further Education

By Vicki J. Coombs, PhD, RN, FAHA

Congratulations to all nurses who are returning to school to further your education! You come to us in our academic institutions as licensed registered nurses with years of experience or maybe just a few weeks of experience. No matter how much experience we have or don’t have, we get to make a difference for patients and families and communities every single day.

In nursing, making that kind of difference every day, makes you a leader! Making a difference every day in the lives of our patients, families and communities … that’s what makes you a leader.

I grew up in rural Ohio on a dairy farm. I always knew I wanted to be a nurse but I had a guidance counselor in high school who told me that since I came from “farm people”, I wasn't college material. He essentially told me that I should just forget my dream of becoming a nurse. No one in my family had ever gone to college so I shouldn’t expect to either. Thank goodness I didn't listen to that guidance counselor … but I did listen to my parents. I went to Miami University in Ohio and earned my Associate Degree in Nursing, then my BSN, then my MSN.

One day shortly after graduating with my Master's Degree, I was working in the coronary care unit of my local hospital and low and behold … who should come in with a myocardial infarction but my high school guidance counselor! And guess what … he was assigned to be my patient! I introduced myself to him and asked him if he remembered me. He did. I asked him if he remembered the advice he gave me about going to nursing school—he said “no”. So I proceeded to tell him that I didn’t heed his advice, went on to earn my advanced degrees and I was leaving Ohio in a few weeks to go to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland to complete my PhD in Nursing. He admitted that sometimes he was wrong about students …

No matter your position, or job, your voice has never been more important. Our healthcare system is changing very fast and nurses possess the skills that ensure that all whom we care for are front and center in any healthcare decisions that are made. We bring the patient and the family voices to the forefront and we are driven by a life-long commitment to human caring and that should be the common story of all our efforts to improve health care and health. This is what matters most!

When you tap into your passion, you are a leader. Whether it’s caring for newborns in the NICU, providing hospice care for the elderly, or working in the emergency room with trauma patients, you need to find something you love and feel passionate about it. That's what we want for you in your nursing education programs. We want you to find your passion in nursing! We will teach you how to speak about it, how to write about it, and how to advocate for it. Your nursing voice is special and unique to all healthcare providers. You spend the most time with patients and you know what they need. Always be driven to be your best. And that means getting that next nursing degree! Not just for you, but for your patients! The essence of nursing is to care compassionately. Remember that you
aren’t just a nurse, you are a leader! Most importantly, you are a leader who makes a difference in the lives of others. What could be better than that?

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