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Cultivating an Environment for Continued Growth in Nurse Educators

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Abstract

Along with the significant shortage of registered nurses, the United States is also experiencing a serious shortage of nursing faculty. Despite the high demand for nurses, many nursing programs are unable to accept all qualified students due to this shortage. This essay identifies reasons why nurse educators are leaving the academic setting and why there are fewer qualified and willing candidates to fill the vacant positions. In addition to discussion of the problem, practical strategies for recruitment and retention are proposed. Through appropriate planning and leadership, there are many practical solutions that can be implemented in the workplace setting to cultivate a work environment for the continued growth and retention of nurse educators.

Academic life is complex and, at times, it can become overwhelming. Higher education's changing requirements have caused a shift in faculty workload and role expectations in all academic disciplines. Nurse educators are expected to conduct research, publish regularly, write grants, provide service to the university and community, mentor students, update curricula, develop new courses, master new advances in technology, and engage in student instruction. These responsibilities must be met while struggling to find time to practice in a clinical setting, even though current practice is not rewarded with tenure or promotion. This is a tremendous challenge even for the most experienced and motivated nurse educators. The expectations can be overwhelming for both experienced and new faculty members who have difficulty balancing the multiple dimensions of their roles. These challenges

may become overwhelming and lead to job dissatisfaction.

The American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) conducted a survey on vacant faculty positions for the academic year 2011-2012. The 603 responding schools noted the top four reasons for the current nursing faculty shortage: insufficient funds to hire new faculty (72.1%), unwillingness of administration to commit to additional full-time positions (50.0%), competition for jobs with other marketplaces (33.7%), and lack of qualified applicants in the geographic area (24.0%) (Fang & Li., n.d.). While that survey emphasized the reasons identified, the majority of the literature identifies three primary areas of concern: workload, age of retirement, and salary as reasons for the nursing faculty shortage.

According to Kaufman (2007), the average workload of nursing faculty can average between 45 to 55 hours per week.

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This research also indicates that the average nurse educator works over 56 hours per week while school is in session and those with administrative responsibilities work an additional two hours per week (Kaufman, 2007). When newly hired nurse educators enter the profession, they may have fantasies of academic calendars with leisurely summers off, but the reality presents a less than utopian picture of the academic lifestyle. In fact, Kaufman (2007) found that the average nurse educator works over 24 hours per week during school breaks and vacations, while work hours for those with administrative responsibilities exceed 31 hours per week during those periods. Excessive workloads put a significant damper on job satisfaction among nurse educators, with 44 % of surveyed educators indicating that they are dissatisfied with their current workload, which appears to be undermining faculty retention (Kaufman, 2007). Exploring the workload of other practice disciplines in academia needs to be further examined to explore strategies or perks that can help nursing faculty better manage the workload. Additionally, academic responsibilities do not decrease over time or with increased teaching experience.

Age of Faculty

Along with those who leave academia due to an increased workload, there is a diminishing pool of nursing faculty because of the aging work force. According to Allen (2008), “the average age of nursing faculty in the baccalaureate and graduate degree programs is 51.5 years and the rate of projected retirements will exceed the rate of replacements” (p. 36). Nationwide projections indicated that, by the end of 2011, there would be 12% fewer nurses than needed with the figure increasing to 29% by 2015. During that same period, the demand for nurses is expected to increase by 40%

due to our aging population (Neuman, 2006). These data indicate that the present shortages of qualified nurse educators will only become more pronounced and continue to place great strain on schools of nursing throughout the country. With the continued scarcity of qualified nursing faculty, more applicants to baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs will be turned away from nursing schools. Master's and doctoral programs in nursing are not producing enough potential nurse educators to meet the demand. Efforts to expand the nurse educator population are undermined by the fact that thousands of qualified applicants for graduate nursing programs are turned away each year. In 2010, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing conducted a survey and noted that 10,223 qualified applicants were turned away from master's programs, and 1,202 qualified applicants were turned away from doctoral programs. The primary reason for not accepting all qualified students was again a shortage of experienced faculty (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2012).

Salary

Salary is also an influential factor in the employment decisions of those completing graduate education. In a comparison of responsibilities and salaries associated with various employment opportunities, faculty positions may not be as appealing as other offers. Average salaries for clinical positions have risen more than those for faculty positions because most universities are constrained in their ability to increase faculty salaries due to budgetary issues faced by many of these higher education institutions. Along with excessive workloads, entry-level salaries for faculty may discourage experienced nurses from transitioning into academia. Despite the

higher education requirements of academic positions, average salaries for full-time faculty in public institutions are often lower than a new graduate accepting a clinical position in a local hospital (Culleiton & Shellenbarger, 2007).

The Solution to the Faculty Shortage

Leadership and job satisfaction are recognized as fundamental components influencing the overall effectiveness of any organization. A healthy work environment, based on strong leadership and high job satisfaction, is essential for the recruitment, development, and retention of outstanding faculty. This type of environment is not something that is just naturally present, but is a culture developed and sustained by dedicated nursing leadership. Great leaders inspire passion, empower nurses, model professional values, and listen attentively, all while supporting an environment that promotes warmth and affection towards others. When a leader creates resonance or a positive feeling, that feeling inspires people to set goals and achieve them (Brady, 2010). It is in this way that a leader generates natural motivation, boosts morale, and encourages ongoing learning among the nursing faculty.

Enhancing job satisfaction and performance in the academic work setting as well as maintaining morale is essential. Short term rewards such as bonuses and prizes, as often used in the sales profession, will not inspire faculty to work to their fullest capability. If nurse educators are to thrive and excel in their role, and become self-confident employees with long-term ambitions, the best, proven working culture has to be present every day (Stapleton et al., 2007).

Creating Resonance in the Workforce

For the first time in the workplace, four generations of nurses are now simultaneously working together.

Employees of all generations want to be acknowledged and valued by their leaders for what they contribute. It is an effective leader's challenge to explore ways to motivate each generation to foster a positive resonance in the workplace. To foster the individual development of faculty members of all generations, a successful strategy often used by executives in the business world is now being implemented in academia. Corporations have long employed professional coaches to promote collaboration, innovation, development, and employee motivation. Professional coaching is most beneficial when it is performed with individuals and within the working group or team of employees. Coaching helps identify each individual's strengths so that the achievement of work-related goals is enhanced. Positive communication between individuals, work groups, and the professional coach is the key element that connects all members of the team and enhances work performance (Stapleton et al, 2007).

Strategies to Recruit Faculty

At a time when academia is experiencing a critical shortage of nursing faculty members across the country, it is imperative that steps be taken to recruit and retain qualified educators. Led by Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-Maryland), the United States Congress recognized this need and passed the Nurse Reinvestment Act in 2002. The purpose of this legislation was to bring more people into the nursing profession, retain them in the profession, and increase the number of nursing education faculty members (Alexandre & Glazer, 2009). The Nurse Reinvestment Act provides scholarships in return for a minimum of two years of nursing service and it forgives loans for advanced degrees in exchange for a commitment to teach in any nursing education program (Allen, 2008). Even

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though this act has been law for over eight years, it has not been adequately funded to the levels that Senator Mikulski and other sponsors had hoped. Nurses nationwide must unite to request additional funds for advanced degrees that would assist with increasing the pool of qualified nursing faculty. More time and effort must be invested to encourage those already teaching to remain in their positions, even if it is in a limited capacity, while future faculty are pursuing higher education.

The absence of adequate federal funding means that it is even more imperative that nursing education institutions take the lead in recruiting and retaining qualified faculty. Institutions must build confident faculty teams capable of developing their own innovative approaches to recruitment and retention. Administrators would be wise to consider and implement the following strategies in order to provide an environment in which educators will flourish and become assets to the university:

- Assign a faculty mentor who has a similar schedule to ensure optimum availability.
- Identify the needs of new faculty members and the resources available to assist them.
- Be open and friendly to new faculty.
- Establish regular meeting dates with mutual goals and collaborative activities.
- Offer workshops and/or group seminars.
- Release new faculty from all committee work for their first year.

Mentoring in Nursing

As with any career change, the transition from practitioner to educator can often cause feelings of uncertainty, isolation, and anxiety; therefore it is crucial to the long term success and retention of newly hired faculty to fully understand their new role

and offer support. A nurse who is proficient in clinical practice is not necessarily proficient in teaching clinical skills to students. According to Cangelosi, Crocker and Sorrell (2009), "Teaching is not a natural byproduct of clinical expertise, but requires a skill set of its own" (p. 369). If novice nurse educators are to overcome the natural anxiety, fear, and tension of their new position, mentoring or coaching programs must be implemented to prepare them for the responsibilities of teaching in an academic environment.

In order to recruit and retain qualified nurse educators, the National League for Nursing (NLN) advocates the use of mentoring as a primary strategy in establishing a healthy work environment and to facilitate the ongoing career development of inexperienced nursing faculty. Mentoring is a popular concept that has been used successfully in business, education, and other disciplines to socialize individuals to new roles. Mentoring is described as purposeful activities between two individuals with a common goal of fostering personal and professional growth in the less experienced individual. The mentor shares wisdom, knowledge, and expertise, obtained through many years of experience, with the new faculty member (Blauvelt & Spath, 2008).

Mentoring is relevant across the entire career continuum of an educator and encompasses many aspects of professional growth. It can be used to orient new faculty, socialize faculty to the academic community, and develop teaching, research, and service skills. A successful mentoring program is essential to facilitate the growth of future leaders in nursing and nursing education. There are a variety of styles, or models, which can be effectively utilized in mentoring relationships; therefore enabling all members of the academic nursing

community to establish and maintain healthy work environments (Beres, 2006).

Too often, new nurse educators are not provided with the support system necessary to instill the confidence that will allow them to carry out their new job responsibilities to the best of their abilities. “Nurse educators should not feel they are in boot camp during their first full-time teaching year, but instead should feel they are being nurtured and provided with the tools they need to be successful in academia” (Kaufman, 2007, p. 239). If a university desires excellence and productivity from its new professors, the seasoned university faculty must devote time and energy to engaging in professional coaching or mentoring programs in order to lend their expertise to new faculty.

Established faculty must identify creative options for increasing the supply of nurse educators and then mentor them in their new role.

For the mentoring process to be successful there must be a genuine desire on the part of the mentor to promote the development of fellow and future colleagues (Brady, 2010). Ideally, the entire faculty shares in the responsibility of establishing a healthier environment in which novice nurse faculty might develop a sense of belonging. This is essential for the successful retention of faculty members (National League of Nursing, 2005). It is important that the mentor be a seasoned faculty member who radiates enthusiasm and positivity. Along with enthusiasm for the job, the mentor must be accessible, approachable, nonjudgmental, intuitive, empathic, and professional. A good mentor must work well with others and have an extensive knowledge of nursing education. It is also crucial that the mentor have a strong working knowledge of the policies, procedures, and goals of the educational institution so that these values can be passed on to the novice educator (Blauvelt & Spath, 2008).

Peer mentoring is another type of support for new faculty that has proven effective for nurse educators. In peer mentoring, the new faculty members join forces to pool resources, information, and support each other. Collaborating with others may help new faculty overcome feelings of isolation. Additionally, peer mentoring groups might lead to collaborative research teams that can help new faculty engage in scholarly activities. While peer mentoring may be very helpful and contribute to the morale and self-confidence of new faculty members, it cannot replace the contributions of a seasoned faculty member in cultivating a healthy working environment.

Strategies for a Thriving Faculty

Given the current nurse faculty shortage, strategies must also be implemented to retain existing faculty. While excessive workloads directly impact job satisfaction and attrition rates in academia, there are many additional considerations that may foster long-term growth and retention in both new and experienced faculty members. In order to promote a healthy work environment and enhance job satisfaction, nursing education administrators should consider implementation of the following strategies:

- Develop and support a mentoring program.
- Reward faculty who mentor.
- Consider flexible working schedules.
- Recognize excellence by acknowledgement in meetings and department publications.
- Focus on learning instead of faults and liabilities.
- Encourage faculty to maintain clear boundaries between work and home life.
- Promote productive team dynamics.
- Foster effective communication.

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- Provide tuition reimbursement for advanced degrees.
- Promote scholarship.
- Provide competitive salaries.
- Develop faculty fitness programs that encourage healthy living through regular exercise and sound nutrition.
- If monetary compensation is not possible, assign a graduate assistant.
- Design a retirement system plan that supports the inclusion of productive retired faculty.
- Redesign current faculty workload to accommodate part-time retired faculty.
- Retired faculty could teach, tutor, counsel, supervise skill labs, mentor faculty, assist with research projects and/or serve as ambassadors to the community.

Cultivating a workplace that is perceived by faculty as positive, productive, enriching and satisfying will help entice new faculty and retain current faculty longer than originally planned. Faculty who are satisfied in their jobs will be more effective educators, which in turn will lead to more positive student outcomes (Kaufman, 2007). A healthy work environment and increased faculty satisfaction will also help recruit nurses into faculty roles. A structured support system employing a team concept and a mentoring program will help promote long-term growth and retention of all faculty members and provide the environment required for enhanced job satisfaction.

Conclusion

One of the strongest motivators for nurse educators to enter and continue in the role is that teaching provides an opportunity to influence student success and shape nursing leaders of tomorrow. Like any professional endeavor, teaching offers distinct benefits and challenges. Schools of nursing and clinical nurses must continue to partner to

find creative ways to reduce faculty shortages and facilitate the recruitment and retention of nurse educators with the academic excellence needed to sustain the future of the profession. Based on the acute nurse faculty shortage and the increasing average age of current faculty, it is imperative that the next generation of nurse educators work in an environment that is nurturing. Administrators in academic institutions must attend closely to the needs of their nursing faculty and implement strategies for recruitment and retention. Mentoring programs, self-renewal, and organizational support are key strategies to enhance professional development, prevent burnout, and enhance retention.

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