



DOCENCIA Y FORMACIÓN

MAKING THE MOST OF OUR TIME: FACULTY AND STUDENTS COLLABORATING.

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ABSTRACT

Nursing faculty members are feeling the stress of trying to meet the expectations of the academic community while addressing the concerns of the student populations. Nursing shortages both within the profession and at the academic levels are causing increasing stress for the individuals actively engaged in the performance of health care. Tenure, promotion, teaching, research, administration, practice, and service are each an integral facet of the faculty's role. In addition, as faculty members engage in these roles, students are making demands concerning the applicability of the course assignments to their professional lives. Innovative mechanisms have to be identified to reduce the stressors encountered by these faculty members while making student assignments applicable in today's work environment. Examples for this article were taken from the academic setting of an undergraduate RN-BSN and a graduate program. This article provides several options for incorporating students into various aspects of faculty roles thus reducing some of the stressors and frustrations encountered by both groups.

BACKGROUND

Nursing faculty members are rapidly becoming an endangered group of individuals. According to Furino (2000), "the aging trend in the nursing profession is even more pronounced among the faculty of nursing education programs" (p.5). The nursing profession is seeing increasing numbers of faculty members retire. With the current and projected nursing shortage, this trend is causing enormous concerns in the academic community. Without faculty members to teach individuals, the shortage will become even more of a

problem. According to Trossman (2002), the factors behind the nurse educator shortage include: the aging workforce, after-effects of health care changes, and limited time to pursue clinical practice and certifications. Innovative strategies must be carefully considered and investigated to allow for the effective utilization of faculty members' time and talents while addressing the expectations of students who are pursuing their education. Furino (2000) documents the nursing shortage as intertwined with the idea that the new generation of students has multiple career pathways from which to select for occupations. As the obstacles of limited number of faculty members and selective consumers are considered, perceptive tactics for addressing the changing learning environment must be incorporated. One solution to this growing concern is the engagement of students into a faculty's role through the involvement of individuals at all levels of the educational process. While not necessarily a new concept, this solution needs to be revisited.

RIGOROUS RESPONSIBILITIES

Faculty members at the university level have apprehensions about the multiple roles, which they have to address during the management of their academic responsibility. The interconnected roles include teaching, research and/or practice, and service to the institution and profession. Each of these roles can be overpowering when fulfilled to a professional level. When the faculty member is expected to fulfill each of the roles to the same level, the task can appear immense. According to Garner (2002), "negativity breeds negativity" (p. 12). As faculty members are progressively overwhelmed with the responsibilities of the faculty role, other employment options become inviting. As these individuals elect to leave the academic setting, the shortages in this area become more noticeable with time.

In addition to these role expectations, university teaching staff must deal with the opportunity for tenure and promotion. These expectations reflect compellingly in the area of scholarly endeavors. At times, faculty members are overwhelmed with the tasks associated with acquiring tenure and/or promotion. As individuals attempt to consistently address these expectations, the student and/or teaching, at times, seems to become a less important aspect in the entire process. The faculty must be ever vigilant to keep one role from surpassing another role.

Mechanisms to aid the faculty with managing these responsibilities and expectations become an increasingly significant aspect confronting every academic setting. As a result of this situation, faculty members must determine other ways to meet these expectations while meeting the needs of the student and the attrition rate among faculty members.

Student Involvement:

Students in an RN-BSN program are usually required to take a three-credit hour elective or independent study course. Many of the students prefer to do an independent study to accomplish individual learning objectives, which fit their identified needs. By allowing students to work independently with faculty members, the individual student has a unique experience, which reflects real world application of health care aspects. Faculty members make students aware of their individual interests via orientation periods and course discussion opportunities. Course requirements are twofold:

1. The student must consult with a faculty member and all must agree to take part. An essential component of this course is that the faculty member may or may not agree to do an independent study based on mutual interests and/or faculty workload.

2. A contract is established listing learning objectives, educational activities, timelines, specific outcomes, and methods of evaluation.

Based upon the above information, two students approached a faculty member who not only teaches, practices, and does research, but also has a heavy responsibility as an administrator. The faculty member hesitated at first because of her other commitments. However, she agreed to discuss their needs and interests. During their conversation, the students discussed a literacy project they had completed in one of their other courses. Since the faculty person was a co-investigator in a research project focusing on healthcare literacy, a potential idea emerged that might meet the needs of both faculty and students. The faculty member consulted with the other co-investigator. They explored several avenues to achieve positive outcomes for all involved. One idea was consistently brought forward. The co-investigators needed to have data collected for their healthcare literacy pilot project. Since the students had indicated they wanted an independent study and were interested in literacy and healthcare, the faculty saw an opportunity that would satisfy the needs of both groups. As a result, the students and faculty met and established a contract for the course.

The independent study course is a three credit hour course for a total of forty-eight hours over a sixteen-week period. The undergraduate students contracted to complete one hour of training online for the university's Institutional Review Board requirements for research data collection and one hour of project specific data collection training. Following the completion of these training sessions, they collected data for approximately twenty hours and spent at least five additional hours scoring the instruments. The remaining hours obligatory for the course were spent in consultations with the instructors and each other in the development of a manuscript for publication.

Another example of student involvement with a faculty can be visualized through the work done with a graduate student. One of the optimum community focused endeavors by the school of nursing has been in the area of collaboration with an independent living facility. The graduate student approached the faculty member to generate a multi-level educational opportunity. Through the efforts of the student and faculty member, a multifarious collaborative opportunity was developed. An initial survey was implemented to initiate discussion, which was utilized as a community project. The community project was directed at identification of the perceived health needs by a group of individuals residing in an independent living setting. Within this community project, undergraduate students were incorporated to facilitate learning prospects through the aspects of data collection and entry. The graduate student took the initiative to function as a mentor to the undergraduate students while having the faculty member work with both levels. The undergraduate students were given the opportunities to collect data, work with the analysis of data, and develop an essay which reflected scholarly attentiveness. The graduate student augmented the learning possibilities by taking on the role of mentor while addressing Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for a community project. The serendipitous results of this situation have been growth opportunities for everyone involved including the facility where the project was being conducted. The students were presented with learning opportunities, which reflected application to the workplace in a real and vivid manner.

OUTCOMES

The momentous resolution from these collaborations between faculty members and students was the following tangible byproducts. The faculty members received support to accomplish multiple activities paramount for the promotion and tenure process within the

university setting. When faculty members receive discernible outcomes from the collaborative effort, the willingness to facilitate these responsibilities and opportunities are considerably more attractive. The outcomes, which have been produced as a result of these interactions, are co-authored manuscripts on different aspects of consideration and community projects, which have had a direct, positive result for health care in this geographic area.

The students, whether undergraduate or graduate, can readily identify real world application opportunities for utilization throughout their professional lives. In the present health care arena, the ability to develop and direct collaborative efforts is becoming an increasingly valuable asset for any professional. These opportunities facilitate the networking prospects, which are then available for maximizing the ongoing performance of the professional nursing role. The self-confidence that develops from working beside faculty members and other health care providers ensures an additional level of credibility for the student.

SUMMARY

With the decreasing number of faculty members to direct the educational process and the increasing number of students who want an active role in their educational experience, innovative techniques for incorporating fresh learning opportunities becomes more imperative. The excitement of learning must become an integral part of the educational experience. This process of energizing the scholar to strive for fresh responsibilities within the profession becomes progressively more essential.

Faculty members frequently are overwhelmed with the multiple expectations for promotion and tenure requirements and scholarly activities, let alone the teaching specifications. Trossman (2002) notes that the clinical expertise and practice aspects of the profession are not viewed as paramount priorities within the academic arena. Educators are expected to be experts within their areas but the time and opportunities to maintain these areas are not positively addressed within the academic work setting. One method for overcoming these frustrations and stressors is to vigilantly pursue avenues by which the teaching specifications can be fulfilled through the use of the scholarly, research, and/or practice venues. The students genuinely benefit from interacting with the faculty in these different roles. The students profit from investigating these additional professional responsibilities in a non-threatening learning environment. The faculty members benefited from the reduction in frustrations from having to address these aspects in addition to the other role expectations. As the nuisance is decreased, retention of faculty members can be improved. As a result, all entities in the process benefited in this win/win situation. Faculty utilized multiple avenues to meet their job responsibilities while students become involved with research and scholarly activities. Perhaps the words of a popular song rings true, "What's old is new again" and provide a reminder to not overlook what has and can still be successful.

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