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Bridging University Institutional and Accreditation Standards: An Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN) Program Exemplar

By Robin Arends, Victoria Britson, and Mary Minton

The complexity of the health care environment requires the nursing profession to effectively anticipate current and future health care needs. Similarly, nursing education must ensure preparedness of future nursing professionals as well as meet the rigor of program accreditation standards. South Dakota State University (SDSU) College of Nursing Master's and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) programs are accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), one of the two national specialized accrediting bodies for nursing. Both graduate programs must align with an American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Essentials document that corresponds to the respective degree and specialty, e.g. family nurse practitioner (FNP). Required curricular framework, components, and competencies are mapped within *The Essentials of Master's Education in Nursing* and *The Essentials of Doctoral Education for Advanced Nursing Practice*. Both documents inform curricular content needed to meet core competencies specific to all Advanced Practice Registered Nursing (APRN) roles, such as the family nurse practitioner (AACN, 2006).

Nursing programs educating APRN students must also align curricular competencies with a document developed by The Nurse Practitioner Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties (NONPF). *The Core Competencies for Nurse Practitioners* (NONPF, 2017) outlines entry into practice competencies that graduates must meet upon graduation. This document, which provides curriculum content, is supplemented by *Population-Focused Competencies for Nurse Practitioners* (NONPF, 2013) such as those foci for Family Nurse Practitioners.

In addition to the multiple standards and competencies an accredited nursing program must follow, universities may define student learning outcomes (SLO's) statements. SLO statements communicate the knowledge, skills, and competencies that students are expected to attain at that university. SDSU has defined a broad set of SLO's as well as program specific SLO's, which the graduate nursing program (South Dakota State University, n.d.) must also align to in addition to the national standards and guidelines discussed above.

SDSU Graduate Nursing Process

To meet the requirements of the accreditation and university standards, a competency grid was developed for the MS-FNP and DNP programs and included program specific SLOs. As the SLOs are based on university and the *Essentials* for DNP and MS curriculum, the appropriate essential was matched to the corresponding SLO on the vertical axis of a spreadsheet. On the horizontal axis, all courses found in the plan of study were listed. The course assignment meeting the SLO and the essential was listed. A threshold for the criterion to meet or not meet that standard was established from the grading system in place for the Graduate Nursing program which was to receive an 81% or higher. At the end of the semester, course faculty reported the number of students who met the criterion. A designated faculty member maintains the grid. Periodic review is in place to note trends or patterns of concern, and a subsequent course and assignment review determines need for content adjustment.

Periodically, this grid was reviewed by the APRN curriculum coordinator and the graduate nursing curriculum committee to ensure assignments continued to meet the standards set forth by the accrediting bodies and the university. If a change to one set of standards was completed, the assignments associated to this standard were reviewed to ensure relevant assessment. Similarly, if a course assignment or objective was changed, the grid would be reviewed to ensure the change continued to meet the standard.

The NONPF organization provides a crosswalk that aligns the APRN core competencies with each APRN specialty. Table 1 shows an example of this crosswalk.

Table 1. NONPF Core and Population Focused Competencies Crosswalk

Competency Area	NP Core Competencies	Family/Across the Lifespan NP Competencies	Course Objective	Assignments
Independent Practice Competencies	Functions as a licensed independent practitioner.	Obtains and accurately documents a relevant health history for patients of all ages and in all phases of the individual and family life cycle using collateral information, as needed.	NURS 631 Critically synthesize data, research, and evidence to develop an effective and appropriate evidence-based plan of care for the patient, taking into consideration personal history and health status, gender, life circumstances, and genetic, ethical, cultural, ethnic, and developmental variations to ensure the delivery of high quality care to patients in the primary care setting.	NURS 631 Case Study H & Ps Genogram Validation Exam

The APRN Curriculum Coordinator and the FNP practicum course faculty reviewed this crosswalk and placed appropriate assignments with the competencies. Not all competencies are covered in the practicum courses, so faculty utilized the *Essentials* grid to ensure these competencies were being met. As the organization refines and adapts these competencies to meet changes in the healthcare field, faculty reviews the changes and ensures all competencies are met through content and assignments.

If an area in either the *Essentials* or NONPF competency grid is found to be deficient or weak as evidenced by not meeting the benchmark in content and/or assessment, the graduate nursing curriculum committee is notified and follow-up faculty meetings ensure content and assignments are appropriately revised. Ongoing review of the assessment plan each semester is crucial to ensure timely assessment of standards and competencies. Additionally, the Associate Dean for Graduate Nursing schedules an annual review to ensure this step is not overlooked. Tables 2 and 3 show course mapping for an essential and NONPF competency respectively.

Table 2. DNP Program SLO #4 with DNP Essential VIII

Student Learning Outcome	Course Specific Content	Course Assignment Metric	Course Assignment Benchmark	Outcome
<p>SLO 4 Integrate cultural learning into nursing practice to effectively tailor health care to the diverse lifeways of clients.</p> <p>Essential VIII: Clinical Prevention and Population Health for Improving Health</p> <p>Recognizes that the master's prepared nurse applies and integrates broad, organizational, client-centered, and culturally appropriate concepts in the planning delivery, management, and evaluation of evidence-based clinical prevention and population care and services to individuals, families, and Aggregates/ identified populations.</p>	<p>NURS 615</p> <p>One module on cultural care</p>	<p>NURS 615</p> <p>Graded discussion and optional final exam essay questions</p>	<p>NURS 615</p> <p>90% of students will receive 92% or above on graded discussion of a cultural case scenario.</p>	<p>Fall 2016</p> <p>MET 100% of students achieved 92% or higher.</p>
	<p>NURS 675</p> <p>Demonstrate cultural knowledge by creating a culturally specific teaching tool to enhance knowledge levels and awareness when providing culturally competent health care for a specific cultural group.</p>	<p>NURS 675</p> <p>Cultural Teaching Tool Grading Rubric (Internal Evaluation)</p>	<p>NURS 675</p> <p>90% of the students will receive 92% or higher.</p>	<p>Spring 2016</p> <p>UNMET 82.3% of the students received 92% or higher</p>

Table 3. NONPF, NP Core, NP Population Specific Competencies and Supportive Content

NONPF Competency Area	NP Core Competency #1	Family/Across the Lifespan NP Competency #1	Supportive Curricular Content
Leadership competencies	Assumes complex and advanced leadership roles to initiate and guide change	Works with individuals of other professions to maintain a climate of mutual respect and shared values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of each APRN specialization • Role of the FNP in the healthcare setting • Translational leadership models

One challenge to this process is that there are two sets of standards (Table 2 and Table 3) to ascertain student learning. While standards are generally congruent between the university and accreditation, some differences exist such as content pertaining to Family Nurse Practitioner skills. Faculty must recognize these differences and ensure students meet both standards. Meeting both standards may indicate removal

of a curricular component that is no longer relevant to university or accreditation standards; however, faculty may have difficulty letting go of a topic they feel is important. To support making curricular changes, faculty use a process-oriented dialogue. This dialogue occurs over the course of both fall and spring semester via formal committee meetings of the Graduate Curriculum and Graduate Faculty as well as taskforces initiated by the Associate Dean for Graduate Nursing. The task force process includes course faculty feedback to the larger committees. The graduate nursing curriculum committee puts forth recommendations to the Graduate Nursing Faculty committee where a final vote is taken for consensus.

Another challenge is communication. Faculty must understand the importance of communicating changes within a given course. Academic freedom allows faculty to make changes to curriculum to meet the needs of the course. However, courses, as a part of a larger assessment plan, need to meet the standards set forth by the accreditation agencies and the university. Making sure faculty communicate changes to the assessment or curriculum team is important. In addition, making sure faculty continue to have freedom to teach the concepts as they see best (while meeting standards) is an important part of the process. To build awareness and foster consistent communication, a line item specific to practice standards and guidelines is on all our monthly committee agendas. In addition, the APRN curriculum coordinator takes an active role in periodically reviewing syllabi and corresponding with faculty for courses and assignments that are marked for meeting competency assessment criteria. Dialogue through taskforces, curriculum meetings, and faculty meetings ensure appropriate input is solicited to meet all standards and competencies.

Overall, this process has strengthened the program and student learning by identifying appropriate content and learning assignments to guide curriculum based on the assessment plan. This plan includes both university and accreditation standards. In addition, content and assignments, which do not meet university or accreditation standards, are reviewed to determine their importance within the full curriculum.

Lessons Learned

Having key members of the faculty who are familiar with both the University and Accreditation assessment standards is vital. The composition of the committee or select group should ensure that if a faculty member leaves, he or she is not taking the wealth of information with them. This committee or select group must have an awareness of the interplay between the university and accreditation standards regarding the assessment process. A change in either set of standards has implications for the type of assessment data needed and possibly the method of data collection.

Each level of a department has an assessment plan and disseminates this plan to the faculty members. In the College of Nursing, this means the undergraduate, master's, DNP, and PhD program of studies should each have an assessment plan. Many aspects of these plans will be connected as common courses are shared; however, they may address different objectives for a given degree. It is important for the program of study to align with accreditation standards along with the standards set forth by the institution to develop an assessment plan. The assessment plan should indicate both course and assignment specific detail matched within an SLO or accreditation competency. Multiple points of data collection for a given criteria is important to track the number of students who met the requirement as well as provide opportunity for those who did not meet the requirement to do so.

It is important to share the assessment plan with members of the faculty. Faculty may be unaware of the pertinent role they play in program assessment and may not realize how changing objectives and course assignments affects the assessment plan. In this way, faculty should be aware of the communication needed for changes within a course. Reviewing the course syllabi can ensure pertinent information is not removed

and can easily be assessed for any needed adaption, i.e. identify accreditation standard or university standard with each course SLO and assignment. Consequently, assignments that do not meet any given standard are reviewed. Aligning syllabi objectives and assignments to the *Essentials* and NONPF competencies removes unnecessary content. In addition, assignments acknowledge the component of the assessment plan for students. Finally, curriculum and assessment committees should collaborate to ensure collection of data needed to complete the assessment plan.

Developing an assessment plan to ensure students are meeting requirements from both the university and accreditation standards is a challenge. Meeting standards for different organizations that may have similar but slightly different requirements requires attentiveness on part of the program to ensure students are meeting all expectations. However, organization and communication helps create a plan with clear measurements of student learning to ensure they are ready to meet the needs of the workforce. Having both accreditation and university standards strengthens outcomes and enhances the curriculum for students.

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