

Peer Student Mentoring for Nursing Program Persistence and Leadership Development

Tanya Smith, MSN, RN, Christine Hober, PhD, RN-BC, CNE, Janelle Harding DNP, APRN-BC

Department of Nursing, Fort Hays State University

Hays, Kansas

Abstract

Mentoring relationships are used in education, practice, and administration settings to foster professional growth. Mentoring is a valuable process, requiring intentional, committed, and purposeful interactions between two or more professionals or students. At one rural university student retention and persistence was identified by administration as problematic. In response faculty devised and implemented a program providing students the opportunity to be a mentor or be mentored given that mentoring offers occasions for students to support one another while the more experienced student engages the less experienced student. This paper explains the findings of a three-year cohort descriptive mentoring study utilizing a convenience sample of admitted senior students who served as mentors for first year student mentees interested in nursing. Mentors and mentees experienced rich engagement opportunities in formal and informal meetings as faculty evaluated student persistence and leadership skills.

Keywords: mentoring; mentors; mentees; persistence; leadership

1. Introduction

Mentoring is a multidimensional relationship that empowers a humanistic relationship between a novice and more experienced professional for a mutually beneficial outcome. The mentoring relationship involves formal and informal meetings where a professional uses one or more of Roach (2002) “Cs” intentionally with another person: caring, compassion, competence, confidence, conscience, commitment, and comportment, in order to facilitate a purpose. As Wagner and Seymour (2007) explained, mentoring stimulates personal, professional, and worldly perspectives while affording an opportunity for action with self-gratification, reflection, and professional growth. Meaningful mentor-mentee relationships support students’ professional development (Al-Hamdan et al., 2014; Giordana & Wedin, 2010; Li, Wang, Lin & Lee, 2010). Mentorship is an important resource for students.

A three year nursing mentoring program was implemented at a rural university. The mentoring relationship consisted of a more educated senior admitted nursing program student (or mentor) and a novice student (or mentee) enrolled in pre-requisite educational courses for nursing. The purpose of the mentoring program was to develop a collaborative relationship between the mentor and mentee, in order to discuss or demonstrate nursing program success strategies in open, caring, and dynamic milieus. This mentorship program was intended to be an interventional approach to positively impact the nursing program persistence rates. Faculty chose a visionary mentorship model where voluntary, committed

students would provide student teaching and learning using faculty design and input. The nursing department faculty wanted to study the impact of mentoring on nursing program student persistence and leadership development. This article discusses the experience, process, and impact of nursing student mentor and mentee relationships at a rural, liberal arts, mid-west university.

2. Literature Review

Nursing program retention has been defined as the successful completion of nursing courses in sequential order in a specified time without failure (Jeffreys, 2007). Retention continues to be an important issue for nursing programs (Jeffreys, 2015; Dorsey & Baker, 2004). Some of the reasons identified for students leaving programs include: vague educational goals, dissatisfaction with the academic programs and unclear career objectives (Dorsey & Baker, 2004). Persistence is a student's decision to continue through a nursing program based on the student's belief of success. A student's belief of whether success is possible is influenced by many factors including past experience, peer interaction, and faculty support (Shelton, 2012). Additionally, Williams (2010) found four key themes related to experiences and practices of students who persisted in nursing programs: Keeping Up, Not Giving Up, Doing It and Connecting.

As Jeffreys (2007) explained, the Nursing Undergraduate Retention and Success (NURS) model gives an organizing framework for examining the factors that affect undergraduate nursing student retention and success. The model suggests that all students, regardless of prior academic performance, will benefit from student support strategies throughout pre-professional and professional education. The support strategies should provide professional socialization and educational augmentation to enhance self-esteem and promote potential success (Jeffreys, 2007; Robinson & Neiman, 2010). Mentoring has been one of the strategies utilized by nursing programs.

The term mentoring originated in Greek mythology (Grossman & Valiga, 2013). Mentor was the wise tutor of Telemachus during the absence of his father, Odysseus. Mentoring has been discussed in the nursing literature of Florence Nightingale (Mariani, 2012). More recently Mariani (2012) explained that mentoring is a reciprocal relationship between a novice (protégé or mentee) and experienced (mentor) where knowledge and competence in a teaching-learning process can be exchanged. The term mentor refers to one who guides, counsels and befriends a less experienced person. The mentoring relationship can extend over a period of years. The mentor usually sees potential in the mentee, and both parties invest valuable time and emotion in the relationship (Grossman & Valiga, 2010; Dorsey & Baker, 2004).

Dorsey and Baker (2004) performed an integrative review of mentoring programs and their relationship to retention in nursing programs. Of the 16 articles that presented research on mentoring programs, all were found to be coordinated programs with evaluation and a finite duration. About a third of the programs used peers as mentors, while the rest of the programs use clinical staff or faculty as mentors. Regarding outcomes of the programs, several reported an increased sense of socialization into the nursing profession and an increase in self-esteem. About one third of the programs showed an increase in retention and success rate on NCLEX. Dorsey and Baker (2004) concluded that while the strategy of mentor may improve retention rates, more research is needed regarding peer mentoring.

In contrast, Robinson and Niemer (2010) established a peer mentor tutor program for at-risk nursing students in a traditional BSN program. They found that while test grades improved in the intervention groups, attrition rates were unchanged. Conclusions were that broadening the relationship beyond academic tutoring might have a greater effect on retention goals (Robinson & Niemer, 2010).

Rising costs in education and an impending nursing shortage give great cause for nursing programs to

retain students. Mentoring is a strategy that has shown potential to decrease attrition and improve over-all wellbeing in students. The research shows need for further investigation in the process of establishing mentoring programs for student persistence.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical works of Patricia Benner's (2001) novice to expert practice and Hersey and Blanchard's (2007) situational leadership style were blended to provide the framework for this study. Mentoring enacts a collaborative, interpersonal relationship between a novice or less experienced professional and a second more experienced or expert professional, supporting the application of Benner's theory in a mentoring relationship. Additionally, Hersey and Blanchard suggest that leaders should align their leadership style to the development level of the follower in terms of competence and commitment, framed within four development levels matched with corresponding styles of leadership. The mentor (leader) can provide interpersonal teaching in the situation with flexibility to adjust for the mentees' (follower) ability and willingness in the learning process. Mentoring in the unique situation of task and person allots the leader maneuverability to continuously assess and apply the most appropriate leadership style.

4. Methods

This cohort descriptive study utilized a convenience sample of pre-nursing freshman students in their second semester and first semester senior level nursing program students at a rural mid-west university. Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained from the university. Students were recruited using handouts, voice, and e-mail communication. Students interested in participating in the study attended an informational meeting describing the purpose of the study. All university nursing students desiring to participate were allowed. No exclusion criteria were utilized. Questions regarding participation and consent were answered. Informed consent was obtained. Senior level students identified as the mentors received a small scholarship for their time and efforts. Freshmen level students as the mentees did not receive compensation as they were predicted to receive the most benefit from the mentoring relationship. The study was conducted over three spring consecutive semesters, years 2014-2016. Year 2014 the study included 13 mentees (freshman students) and 8 mentors (senior students); year 2015 included 20 mentees and 7 mentors; and year 2016 included 17 mentees and 13 mentors.

Mentees were paired with a mentor at the initial meeting. Students were allowed the opportunity to ask questions about each other to begin the mentoring relationship. All consenting students were placed in the course management system to facilitate communication and reference mentoring documents. Students used the system to communicate with the investigators, post reactions to their mentoring relationship experiences, and to participate in the surveys. Throughout the program, all students were requested to complete an initial, mid-semester, and a completion survey. The surveys collected information regarding students' previous experiences with mentoring; their reactions to the assigned mentoring relationship; and the mentors' leadership development acquisition.

Mentoring pairs met informally one to two times before the next formalized meeting. Structured meeting opportunities were offered including a simulation lab tour and a nursing organizational meeting. However, the mentee and mentor pairs were not required to attend these structured opportunities. Mentees and mentors had the option to meet on their own to accommodate their schedules. Mid-semester and end of semester formal mentoring meetings were scheduled to offer a structured setting for the pairs to meet. At

the formal meetings (three in all) students were asked to complete surveys regarding their mentoring program experience.

Survey responses were analyzed after each cohort for study improvements such as offering the meeting times in the evenings instead of mid-day. Changes to the program were made accordingly based on feedback. 27 mentees and 27 mentors finished the cohort programs. Of those completing the final surveys, 74% (40/54) of the students were still classified as nursing majors. 85% (23/27) of the mentors felt they made an impact on their mentee and 96% (26/27) felt this program contributed to their leadership development. Mentee students' desire to participate in the mentoring program was prompted by an aspiration to learn more, obtain connections with, and gain knowledge about the nursing program. Mentor students' identified their intent to participate in the program was fostered by their yearning to help the younger students, share nursing experiences, and develop leadership skills. Mentee and mentor students concurred that their influence to choose nursing as a major was to help people recover from illness; make a difference in their patients' lives; and the student's family member is a nurse. Students identified their expectations of the mentoring project as to build a relationship; learn more about the nursing program; and build confidence in the freshmen students. Feedback from the final cohort (2016) indicated that the mentoring program was well organized, a good leadership experience, and 'fun'.

5. Nursing Practice Implications

As this convenience study showed, providing opportunities for more experienced nursing students to mentor novice nursing students is a valuable learning experience. At a foundational level, structured mentor-mentee relationships pave a reality for role development and affords an opportunity for students to help one another grow professionally. Nursing student retention is enhanced through structured mentoring processes that prepare the student for nursing program expectations. Mentoring characteristics are fostered in the senior level students alongside leadership attributes that align with the development level of the follower in an environment that instills caring, compassion, competence, confidence, conscience, commitment, and comportment (Roach, 2002).

This study found assurance of many of the practical lessons discussed in the research about mentoring relationships, in particular that: student motivation and understanding of the mentoring commitment is essential; mentor and mentee pairs should be based on mutual selection with voluntary participation; informal meetings are essential to support ongoing learning; each mentoring relationship is unique and transitions differently with leadership and follower situational factors; mentoring energizes students while building self-esteem, confidence, and leadership skills; a faculty facilitator is essential for program mechanics and monitoring; and lastly, photo opportunities with testimony are keep sake treasures. As Wagner and Seymour (2007) explained, mentoring is a multidimensional process that moves beyond cognitive and affective levels of teaching and learning by requiring reflection of self, others, and the profession.

6. Conclusion

Mentoring relationships are used in educational settings. Mentoring is a multidimensional relationship requiring intentional and purposeful interactions. This study analyzed a three year mentoring program, finding that mentor-mentee relationships positively impact student persistence and leadership development. Faculty facilitated mentorship programs are important teaching and learning resources for nursing students. Organized and thoughtful mentor-mentee relationships support students' professional

development.

7. References

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