Nursing the Numbers Through Faculty Recruitment and Student Retention

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A lack of nursing faculty is restricting program admissions when the need for registered nurses is critical. The authors discuss an innovative project that developed a pool of educators for the Texas Panhandle and retention strategies to promote student success in the nursing program.

According to the US Bureau of Statistics, the nation needs 3.1 million RNs by 2016, which is an increase of 23% from the 2.5 million nurses in 2006. Yet, more than 147,000 qualified applicants for diploma, associate degree, and baccalaureate nursing programs were turned away in 2005 according to the National League for Nursing. The situation in which applicants are not admitted to nursing schools when the workforce demand for RNs is so great was cited in a study by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing to be primarily attributable to a serious lack of nursing faculty. Reasons for this nursing faculty shortage include increasing numbers of faculty approaching retirement, higher compensation for nurses in clinical practice, and a lack of graduate programs that are producing a large enough pool of potential educators to meet the demand for nursing faculty positions. The need for additional nursing faculty is crucial at a time when the demand for RNs is escalating.

One of the most significant sources of prelicensure education for RNs in the Texas Panhandle, composed of 26 largely rural counties, is the associate degree nursing (ADN) program at Amarillo College (AC). However, the lack of educationally qualified faculty has resulted in the inability of the program to significantly increase enrollment at a time when there are large numbers of ADN-declared majors seeking admission. Furthermore, a loss of potential graduates during the educational process due to attrition has impacted the ability of the program to produce the maximum number of RNs for the region at a time when workforce needs are most acute.

The $1.38 million Community-Based Job Training Grant, Nursing the Numbers (NTN) Through Faculty Recruitment and Student Retention, was awarded to AC under the US Department of Labor's (DOL’s) Employment and Training Administration in 2005. The purpose of the NTN grant was to increase the number of RNs in the regional workforce by recruiting and educating more nurse educators for the Texas Panhandle and by improving student retention in the ADN program at AC.

Faculty Recruitment Strategies and Partnerships

An innovative strategy for building nursing student enrollment capacity is to prepare nursing faculty through accelerated educational pathways from the pool of ADN-educated RNs who reside in the community and desire to teach in an RN program. The intent of a preliminary survey of AC ADN program alumni, conducted in August 2004, was to identify these individuals in the Texas Panhandle. A subsequent on-campus meeting, attended by more than 100 of these alumni, provided information about the educational and experiential qualifications for a nurse educator option available in one particular accelerated RN-MSN program. From this survey and meeting in 2004, it became clear that for ADN alumni to pursue a career as a nurse educator, there would have to be significant financial assistance available to them because of the loss of hours of salaried employment that completing an accelerated RN-MSN program would require. Furthermore, it was evident that collaborative relationships with training providers offering RN-MSN accelerated programs would need to be developed, and financial resources through partnerships and grant funds would have to be accessed to facilitate such an ambitious project.

Two educational providers, West Texas A & M University (WTAMU) and Angelo State University (ASU), were identified and agreed to collaborate in this project with AC. These 2 universities provided the 20 ADN RNs from the region who were ultimately selected as the project participants from a competitive pool of applicants, the choice...
of 2 different approaches to accelerated RN-MSN education. West Texas A & M University, located 15 miles from Amarillo, offers an accelerated hybrid of RN-MSN nurse education option, and ASU, located 315 miles from Amarillo, offers a totally online accelerated RN-MSN nurse education option.

Financial partnerships with 2 of the largest employers of RNs in the region were forged to support the project of preparing a pool of nurse educators for the region. These 2 benefactors, Baptist Saint Anthony’s Health System and Northwest Texas Healthcare System, provided substantial financial support to the 20 RN students selected to pursue their MSN degrees in terms of tuition, fees, and book costs. In addition, these benefactors through leveraged funds paid the salary for the grant project manager.

Nonfinancial partnerships in the community were also critical to the project. These grant partners included the Amarillo Area Center for Advanced Learning, Panhandle Area Health Education Center, the Panhandle Workforce Development Board, and Texas Panhandle Coalition for Nursing.

Faculty Recruitment
Generating Community Interest
Implementation of the faculty recruitment component of the grant project began shortly after the DOL announcement to AC on October 19, 2005. After a mailing list of RNs in the region was obtained from the Texas Board of Nursing, a postcard was sent to potential RN applicants announcing a meeting on the AC West Campus on November 15, 2005. The purposes of the meeting were to (1) provide information about the structure of an accelerated RN-MSN nurse educator track in either a totally online or hybrid format, (2) showcase unique features of the grant including financial support and a mentoring program, (3) present the components of a portfolio in the admissions process, (4) outline the competitive selection process, and (5) discuss the expected commitment to pursuing a position as a nurse educator after the achievement of the MSN degree.

The professional portfolio required to evaluate each applicant’s potential for success in the grant project was a major focus of the November information meeting. An applicant had to be an RN in Texas and have graduated from an associate degree or diploma program accredited by the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission. The applicant must have achieved a minimum of a 3.0 GPA on a 4.0-point scale. The required portfolio had to include official transcripts from each college attended, a resume, and 2 professional reference letters that attested to the applicant’s knowledge base, interpersonal skills, and potential for success in achieving a master’s degree in nursing through an accelerated process. Applicants were also required to write a 1-page essay in APA format presenting why they wanted to become a nurse educator.

Fifty-six of the nearly 200 RNs who attended the general information meeting submitted a portfolio by the November 29, 2005, due date. A point system was used to evaluate each component of the portfolio. The top 25 individuals who scored the most points were invited to a structured interview with the selection committee, composed of community partners, benefactors, and the co-project directors, during the week of December 5, 2005. Twenty of these applicants were selected to participate in the project, and 5 were designated alternates. The 20 applicants selected became known as scholars to promote their transition into nursing academia.

Scholars were introduced to graduate faculty members from WTAMU and ASU on December 14, 2005, at an orientation session at AC. Each university had the opportunity to showcase the specific details of their graduate programs. At the conclusion of this session, scholars decided which accelerated RN-MSN program would best meet their needs. Sixteen scholars chose to enroll in the WTAMU hybrid program, whereas 4 selected the totally online program at ASU.

Innovative Features
Funding from the DOL and hospital benefactors provided many innovative features for the 20 scholars. Tuition, books, and fees for the scholars and the salary and benefits of the full-time project manager were paid for by the hospital benefactors, which totaled approximately $380,000. Federal funds from the DOL furnished each scholar with a laptop computer to assist with required coursework, and scholars were given performance-based awards as an incentive to reduce their hours in gainful employment and to increase their motivation to complete the accelerated RN-MSN programs. These awards increased incrementally for the duration of the grant: $10,000 per scholar in year 1; $15,000 each in year 2; and $20,000 each in year 3. A child care benefit of up to $650 per semester was available from federal funds for those who met funding criteria. Federal funds also paid a stipend to the AC ADN faculty mentors who were assigned to each scholar throughout the grant project.

All 20 scholars were required to sign an Applicant’s Statement of Understanding before being accepted into the grant project. Each scholar committed to securing a nurse educator position in a college, university, or healthcare institution within the state of Texas for 3 years after completing the graduate degree. The intent of this requirement was to promote achievement of the grant’s primary goal of increasing the number of students admitted to prelicense RN programs that, in turn, would provide more RNs for the regional workforce.

Experiences of Scholars
The 20 scholars began their educational journey in January 2006. From the onset, finding a suitable “life balance” among educational program demands, professional work responsibilities, and family obligations became crucial. Frustration was evident in a survey administered in early 2006 when one scholar said, “I always seem to be studying and I still feel overwhelmed. I am keeping up, but am never able to get ahead.” The appropriate life balance differed for each scholar, but the first academic semester was particularly difficult for most scholars. In fact, 2 of the original 20 scholars actually resigned from the program during the first semester citing family obligations. These 2 were quickly replaced with 2 of the alternate candidates previously selected during the grant interview process.
The AC Faculty Mentoring program, instituted in March 2006, was developed to provide guidance and support for the scholars during their time in the accelerated educational programs and to promote the acquisition of a professional persona and image as a nurse educator. Using detailed faculty mentoring guidelines, 11 ADN faculty members served as faculty mentors for the 20 scholars. These faculty mentors met their assigned scholars at the spring 2006 Mentoring Connections social. This informal introductory social was the first of similar socials conducted semiannually through the spring 2008 academic semester to foster strong cohesive relationships. A quote from a 2008 mentor survey illustrates the significance of these relationships to one of the mentors, “It has been a joy to watch my scholars grow and learn throughout their time in the grant program. We have shared many triumphs and trials, and I have enjoyed watching them pursue their goal of becoming nurse educators.”

In year 2 of the grant project, 19 of the 20 scholars began graduate course work. In December 2006, one of the 20 scholars resigned from the grant program as a result of an unanticipated job change and relocation outside the Texas Panhandle. This was a particularly stressful time for the remaining scholars; focusing on the ultimate objective of becoming a nurse educator was often difficult. In the words of one scholar, “My experience in the MSN program has been like a journey through mountainous terrain. At the beginning of each semester, I am at the base of a giant mountain. I know I must keep on climbing because each step brings me closer to my objective. When I finish a semester, it is though I have reached the mountain’s summit. From this point, I can look out over where I’ve been while visualizing the goals ahead of me.”

As the grant project moved into its third year, grant outcomes were realized. Thirteen scholars successfully completed the requirements for the MSN degree during the spring 2008 academic semester, with degrees awarded in May 2008. The other 6 scholars completed the MSN degree requirements during the summer 2008 semester and were awarded degrees in August 2008. And although the most tangible, the granting of MSN degrees was not the only outcome of this project. One scholar summarizing the overall experience in an exit survey stated, “The NTN grant allowed me the wonderful opportunity to further my education and teach nursing. I am not the same person who began the program three years ago. My world has expanded and I can’t wait to begin ‘giving back’ as a nurse educator.”

**Addressing Student Retention**

Although recruiting nursing faculty was an essential component of the NTN grant project, improving student retention to increase the number of potential RNs reaching the regional workforce was also a vital important consideration. Since the most significant student attrition rate is in the first and second semesters of the ADN program at AC, strategies to promote student retention in these semesters of the program were identified and implemented as a part of the grant project. The 4 specific strategies used during the grant project to promote student success in the nursing program were the nursing success boot camp and course modules, pharmacology care groups, supplemental instruction (SI), and an interactive Web-based student support community.

The nursing success retention strategy begins with a required 2-day boot camp immersion experience that is held during the week before the beginning of the first nursing course. During boot camp, students spend time getting acquainted with each other and the nursing program, focus on time and stress management during the nursing program, learn the basics of critical thinking and test-taking skills, and contemplate the role of service in professional nursing practice. The required nursing success boot camp concepts over the first 8 weeks of the 16-week introduction to nursing course.

Since building learning communities is a recognized component of student success and retention, pharmacology care groups were introduced into the laboratories of the second-semester pharmacology course. Pharmacology care groups are small group learning communities (4-7 students), with one specific faculty member assigned to serve as a mentor during student practice and demonstration of medication skills. Care groups help students succeed by decreasing their performance anxiety in skills competency evaluations. The care group model has been successfully used in the nursing skills course of the AC ADN program since 1997.

Supplemental instruction, a recognized academic assistance methodology, was added to both the second-semester pharmacology and medical surgical courses. Students enrolled in these 2 courses were provided the opportunity to voluntarily attend supplemental study sessions outside class 2 or more hours per week. These sessions, conducted by paid SI leaders, assist students to assimilate and apply course content and to develop study strategies and test preparation skills.

The Web-based student support community was designed to promote student retention through the integration of ADN students into the educational program and nursing profession. Students have access to program announcements, message boards, professional Web sites, potential job sites, and interactive features, such as “ask a nurse.”

**Outcomes and Developments**

Nineteen of the 20 scholars enrolled in the accelerated RN-MSN programs completed MSN degree requirements for a 95% completion rate. Nine of these 19 scholars earned a 4.0 GPA in all undergraduate and graduate-level coursework, and 13 scholars achieved a 4.0 GPA in graduate-level coursework. The range of GPAs for the scholars in graduate-level coursework was 3.75 to 4.0, and the average overall GPA for the scholars in graduate-level coursework was 3.95.

To assess scholar satisfaction with the NTN grant project, exit surveys were mailed to the scholars in June 2008. The scholars were asked to briefly describe their experiences in the grant project and to assign a quantitative rating signifying their overall level of satisfaction with the project. Fifteen of the 19 scholars completed the exit survey. In their responses, several scholars cited the stressful nature of the accelerated academic program. However, most scholars agreed that the NTN grant project was...
successful and worthy of repetition. The average quantitative satisfaction rating for all survey responses was 4.67 on a 5-point scale.

The 19 scholars began accepting nurse educator positions at Texas colleges, universities, and healthcare organizations upon graduation. Seven of the 19 scholars were hired by AC as full-time ADN faculty members, and 4 scholars accepted full-time or part-time faculty positions at WTAMU. One scholar was hired as a part-time instructor for the online ADN program at ASU. Three scholars accepted nursing education positions in Texas Panhandle hospitals and healthcare organizations. Four of the 19 scholars remain in the labor pool for nurse educator positions.

The 2 retention strategies, SI and pharmacology care groups, have yielded favorable results during the tenure of the grant project. Students who attended 5 or more SI sessions in one of the second-semester courses supported by SI consistently achieved a mean numerical grade 3 points higher than the overall classroom mean for all students. Course grades of those students who attended fewer than 5 sessions or chose not to attend SI were at least 2 points below the overall mean. Students in the pharmacology laboratories with care groups have excelled in medication competency assessments, and these students have strongly indicated in surveys that this strategy has helped improve their performance by decreasing their anxiety and increasing their confidence in their abilities.

As a result of the availability of additional MSN-prepared faculty, AC will begin increasing ADN program admissions incrementally each semester for the next 3 years. The program admitted 35% more generic students in fall 2008 than in fall 2005 when the NTN grant was awarded. Initial projections are that 545 additional graduates will enter the workforce by 2010 as a result of the faculty recruitment and student retention strategies used by the NTN grant project.

**NTN Model**

The NTN model reflects the interrelationships between faculty recruitment and student retention in promoting program capacity, student success, and student graduation. Two problems, student attrition and lack of MSN-prepared faculty, were identified and addressed through individualized strategies. The strategic solutions, although developed separately, were formulated to achieve a common goal of community and educational partners in increasing the number of RNs in the regional workforce (Figure 1).

**Future Opportunities**

The NTN model could be replicated in whole or in part to combat nursing faculty shortages and student retention issues. Although the influx of new faculty from the NTN grant project will ease the nursing faculty shortage at AC for the next few years, additional faculty retirements coupled with increased student enrollment will necessitate the hiring of new nursing faculty. A funding source for repetition of the faculty recruitment component of the grant project should be identified, and the process for continual renewal of a pool of MSN-prepared faculty should be replicated on a smaller scale. All 4 student retention strategies provided sufficient success during the grant project to warrant their continuation after the conclusion of the grant period at AC expense.

**References**

Simulation Resources

Nursing schools both in the U.S. and internationally are realizing the benefits of simulation activities for our students. Navigating the growing research results, educational development and clinical evidence related to simulation can be a challenge to faculty. Several online resources provide a reputable summary of current simulation information.

NLN has developed the Simulation Innovation Resource Center (SIRC), a simulation resource readily accessible for NLN members. The SIRC “is an online e-learning site where nursing faculty can learn how to develop and integrate simulation into their curriculum, and engage in dialogue with experts and peers” (1). The SIRC allows schools and other agencies to share their simulation developments by providing a link to a different simulation center each day. Filling out a simple questionnaire regarding your simulation center allows you to share your resources. The SIRC also features online courses developed by a variety of simulation experts that include topics such as “Designing a Simulation Center,” “Guidelines for Simulation Research,” or even “Programming a High Fidelity Simulator.” SIRC also features links to pertinent events related to simulation.

The International Nursing Association for Clinical Simulation and Learning (INACSL) is another useful resource. The mission of this organization is to “promote and provide the development and advancement of clinical simulation and learning resource centers” (2). Membership in INACSL allows access to the Journal of Simulation in Nursing,” the INACSL email list serve, and provides tips concerning the management of Simulation Centers and Learning Resource Centers. The site also provides links to Simulation Centers at various universities.

Additionally, the manufacturers of Simulation equipment provide valuable resources. Laerdal (makers of Resusci Anne®, SimMan® and SimBaby) provides both training and educational information on their website (http://www.laerdal.com/default.asp). Medical Education Technologies (METI), makers of the high end human patient simulator iStan®, supports the Human Patient Simulation Network (HPSN). The HPSN website (http://www.meti.com/hpsn_main.htm) provides videos, links to workshops and presentations, an online HPSN community forum, archives of HPSN Newsletters and even a Blog. All of these resources may prove helpful to faculty as we use more and more simulation strategies in nursing education.

REFERENCES