A Teaching Mentorship Program to Facilitate Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The impact of decreasing faculty numbers on the nursing shortage has been well documented. Mentoring is recognized as the most significant way to grow and nurture nurse educators. The purpose of this paper is to describe the Teaching Mentorship Program within the College of Nursing Department of Biobehavioral Health Science at a Midwestern state university. The program activities are designed to facilitate new faculty members' transition from the role of nurse clinician to the role of nurse educator, to support the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices, and to encourage the development of teaching scholarship. Outcomes of the program include retention of new faculty, improved student satisfaction with the quality of instruction, and increased teaching scholarship activities. The program demonstrates the three hallmarks of an effective mentoring program. First, the program is supported by an institutional culture that values mentoring and provides it with an organizational home. Second, the Associate Department Head and primary mentor has been an educator for thirty-seven years with expertise in curriculum development, program evaluation, and teaching methodologies. Third, because the Associate Department Head's principle role is to implement the program and serve as the primary mentor, her commitment is to provide flexible, timely access to faculty.

Index Terms: nursing education, faculty mentoring

A Teaching Mentorship Program to Facilitate Excellence in Teaching and Learning

The impact of decreasing faculty numbers on the imminent nursing shortage has been well documented. In the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) 2009 Special Survey of Vacant Faculty Positions, 554 schools of nursing reported 803 faculty vacancies (AACN, 2009). Moreover, in 2009 this faculty shortage was a major contributing factor to baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs denying admission to 54,991 qualified candidates (AACN, 2010).

Mentoring is recognized as the most significant way to grow and nurture nurse educators (Dunham-Taylor, Lynn, Moore, McDaniel, & Walker, 2008). In nursing education, mentoring is often a short-term orientation experience assisting new faculty to transition into the nurse educator role (Dunham-Taylor, et al., 2008; NLN, 2006). This orientation experience can certainly address novice faculty members' immediate need for information about school policies/procedures and the organizational aspects of teaching (i.e. syllabus preparation, use of electronic teaching platforms such as Blackboard, and the clinical evaluation process). Beyond orientation, effective mentoring is a long-term process that provides on-going support to facilitate the maturation of faculty members (Dunham-Taylor, et al., 2008; NLN, 2006).

There are three hallmarks of an effective mentoring program (Dunham-Taylor, et al., 2008; Sawatzky & Enns, 2009). First, the program is supported by an institutional culture that values mentoring and provides it with a formal organizational home. Second, the mentor is an experienced educator who has passion, confidence, and the expertise to guide others toward teaching excellence. Third, the protégée has flexible, timely access to the mentor. Literature describing academic mentoring programs tend to focus on

overall career development; however, there is a lack of publications describing specific models for mentoring nurses toward the role of nurse educator (Sawatzky & Enns, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to describe the Teaching Mentorship Program within the College of Nursing Department of Biobehavioral Health Science at a large Midwestern state university.

Purpose, Philosophy, and Objectives

The mission of the College of Nursing Department of Biobehavioral Health Science (BHS) and its 37 faculty members is to educate highly competent nurse leaders for clinical practice, academic scholarship, and healthcare administration in adult health science areas. The Department employs a Teaching Mentorship Program to facilitate its achievement of this mission through excellence in teaching and learning. Stimulated by the College of Nursing strategic goal to build a stronger learning organization with a robust culture of mentoring, the BHS Department developed this program with the primary purpose of advancing the quality of teaching and learning within the department. The Teaching Mentorship Program was formally introduced in the Academic Year 2006-2007 with the designation of the Associate Department Head position whose principal role is to implement the program and serve as the primary teaching mentor.

The program is grounded in a teaching philosophy depicted in four descriptive statements:

1. The teacher is a **facilitator of learning** who role models the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor knowledge and skills in the practice of nursing.

2. The teacher is a **content expert** who makes theoretical knowledge come alive and relevant to nursing practice.
3. The teacher is an **advocate for learning** who demonstrates a joy of teaching and a passion for discovering new knowledge.
4. The teacher is a **learner** who engages in a reciprocal partnership with students to share knowledge.

The program activities are designed to address three objectives:

1. To facilitate new faculty members' transition from the role of nurse clinician to the role of nurse educator.
2. To support the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices.
3. To encourage the development of teaching scholarship.

Orientation to Facilitate Role Transition

In order to respond to the increase in faculty retirements and the increase in students enrolling in the College's nursing programs, new faculty are continually being recruited by the Department. While new faculty members demonstrate excellent clinical practice, research, and professional leadership skills, most begin their teaching experience with minimal preparation in the teaching/learning process. Recognizing the need to provide new faculty with experiences to facilitate their transition into the nurse educator role, one component of the Teaching Mentorship Program is a New Faculty Departmental Orientation. This orientation is an individualized, one year experience facilitated by the teaching mentor.

First, prior to beginning their teaching assignment, new faculty engage with the mentor to review the Department New Faculty Manual, discuss teaching role

expectations identified in the College's Guidelines for Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure, and identify actual and potential strengths as an educator and areas that need growth and development. During the first semester, the mentor guides and supports new faculty in participating in faculty development activities related to their own self-identified growth areas. These activities may include internal workshops, external conferences, or individualized development modules designed by the mentor. During the second semester, the mentor and faculty member review the teaching evaluations completed by students at the end of the first semester. This review is a venue for the mentor to provide positive reinforcement for teaching strengths and to discuss evidence-based best teaching practices to address areas needing more development. Also during the second semester, the faculty member continues to participate in development activities. At the end of this semester, the faculty member completes the College required end of year Achievement Report with special attention to describing teaching enhancement goals for the next academic year.

Support to Implement Evidence-based Teaching Practices

The Teaching Mentorship Program includes three activities to support the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices by all the department faculty. First, the primary mentor uses Teaching Enhancement Conferences to guide, support, and nurture individual faculty members' teaching expertise. These conferences may be initiated by a faculty member or the primary mentor in response to peer and/or student concerns about a specific learning experience. For example, one faculty member was having difficulty differentiating between methods to provide formative clinical evaluations to students and methods to provide summative clinical evaluations. As a

result, students were hesitant to ask questions during the clinical experience, fearing that the questions would be perceived by the instructor as a sign of their not being prepared for the experience. The Teaching Enhancement Conference with this faculty member included a discussion of nursing education literature describing formative and summative clinical evaluations.

Second, the primary mentor serves as a resource to faculty to facilitate implementation of courses (e.g. course design, test development, and selection of teaching methodologies). When it is evident from outcome assessments that a course requires revision, she shares the information with the course faculty and works with them to revise the course. For example, student evaluations of one pre-licensure course documented that the organization of the content and learning experiences was confusing to students and hindered learning. Through a review of the course objectives and a discussion of how to better match teaching methods with content (e.g. demonstration of physical assessment skills in simulation laboratory rather than classroom lecture format), the faculty were able to respond to the students' concern about the course's organization.

Third, the primary mentor assesses faculty development needs and provides programs to address these needs. When the Teaching Mentorship Program was initiated in the Fall 2006, the BHS Associate Department Head partnered with the College's Collaborative for Learning Excellence (CLE) to administer a Faculty Teaching/Learning Needs Assessment. Results of this assessment have been used to plan Lunch and Learn faculty development sessions. A partial list of these workshops include: Test Item Design and Analysis, Clinical Post-Conferences to Develop Critical Thinking Skills, Active Learning Strategies, Service-Learning to Complement Clinical Experiences, Concept Maps, Using

the Teaching Portfolio to Enhance Teaching Expertise, Tricks to Make Your On-line Life Simpler. These presentations are also available to faculty on the CLE Blackboard site. In the Teaching/Learning Needs Assessment, BHS faculty specifically identified the desire to develop increased skills in meeting the learning needs of students from diverse cultures. To address this need, two faculty development workshops focused on enhancing teaching approaches for students from diverse cultures: 1) Strategies for Teaching Nursing Students for Whom English is a Second Language and 2) Test Item Design: Avoiding Cultural/Linguistic Bias on Multiple Choice Exams. In addition, the primary mentor facilitated the implementation of a learning enhancement experience for students from diverse cultures. This experience, Communicating Across Cultures in the Practice of Nursing, is designed for new nursing students from countries and cultures other than North America and Western Europe. The purpose of the experience is to facilitate the students' transition into healthcare and education systems based on Western values and communication styles (Slimmer, Highland, & Stout, 2009).

Activities to Encourage Teaching Scholarship

AACN defines the scholarship of teaching as “inquiry that produces knowledge to support the transfer of the science and art of nursing from the expert to the novice, building bridges between the teacher’s understanding and the student’s learning” (AACN, p. 3, 1999). The AACN Position Statement on Defining Scholarship for the Discipline of Nursing delineates several exemplars of teaching scholarship including recognition as a master teacher, grant awards in support of teaching and learning, completion of program evaluation studies, publications, conference paper presentations, and student mentoring (1999). The primary role of the Teaching Mentorship Program in

encouraging teaching scholarship is to serve as a resource to faculty as they work toward achievement in these areas of scholarship. For example, the Associate Department Head has mentored faculty in the process of designing and implementing program evaluation techniques to assess outcomes of active learning strategies in the classroom and high fidelity simulation learning experiences. She also serves faculty members by suggesting presentation/publication opportunities and reviewing grant and award applications. During the last four years, BHS faculty members have increasingly engaged in and been recognized for teaching scholarship activities. Two Department members have been awarded the University's highest teaching award, two members have received the University's Council for Excellence in Teaching and Learning Teaching Recognition Award, and two members received University awards for student mentoring. In 2008, a Department member was the recipient of the highly competitive Illinois Board of Higher Education Nurse Educator Fellowship. Department faculty have also been awarded University, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and Illinois Board of Higher Education teaching and learning grants. Faculty members' teaching scholarship has been disseminated at national professional meetings and through publications (Corbridge, et. al, 2008; Corbridge, Robinson, Tiffen, Corbridge, 2010; Robinson, 2009; Simmons, 2010; Slimmer, Highland, & Stout, 2009). The motivation of the Department faculty to enhance their teaching expertise has been the most important factor in increasing the amount and quality of their teaching scholarship. The Teaching Mentorship Program serves as a catalyst for this motivation to be transformed into action by raising the visibility of teaching scholarship within the College and growing a culture in which teaching scholarship is valued.

Program Outcomes

In 2008, BHS Department faculty members completed a survey to evaluate their perceptions of this initiative to support teaching skills and scholarship. The mean scores for both Relationship with the Mentor and Goal Setting with the Mentor was 3.5 (1=not helpful; 4=very helpful). Of the ten new faculty members who have joined the Department since 2006, only two have left. One resigned due to a health problem and one resigned because her husband took a job out of state. In addition, the College's AACN/EBI Undergraduate Nursing Education Exit Assessments have demonstrated increased satisfaction with the quality of instruction. Undergraduate student satisfaction increased from 5.00 in 2005 (prior to the Mentorship Program) to 5.67 in 2009 (1=not at all satisfied; 7=extremely satisfied). In the 2009 Exit Assessment, the undergraduate program was ranked number one for overall program satisfaction among its Select 6 Comparison Group comprised of other colleges of nursing in large research universities.

The Teaching Mentorship Program demonstrates the three hallmarks of an effective mentoring program. First, stimulated by the College of Nursing strategic goal to build a stronger learning organization with a robust culture of mentoring, the program is supported by an institutional culture that values mentoring. Moreover, as a formal, structured program, it has an organizational home providing it with administrative and financial resources. Second, the Associate Department Head and primary mentor has been a nurse educator for thirty-seven years with expertise in curriculum development, program evaluation, and teaching methodologies. Third, because the Associate Department Head's principle role is to implement the program and serve as the primary mentor, her commitment is to provide flexible, timely access to faculty.

Suggested Implementation Strategies

Not all nursing education programs have the organizational structure and resources to implement a teaching mentorship program in the same manner described in this paper. However, other strategies can be employed to achieve the goals of facilitating new faculty members' transition from the role of nurse clinician to the role of nurse educator, supporting the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices, and encouraging the development of teaching scholarship. For example, rather than having an associate department head coordinate the entire program, mentoring role responsibilities can be divided among several senior faculty members. In smaller nursing programs, the mentorship program might be centralized rather than each department/division implementing its own. If a nursing program does not have senior faculty with expertise in curriculum development, program evaluation, and teaching methodologies, the nursing faculty can collaborate with the teacher education faculty at their institution to increase knowledge and skills in evidence-based teaching practices and teaching scholarship. Finally, the entire teaching mentorship program can be implemented in phases rather than all at once. A first step might include describing the faculty's philosophy of teaching and completing a mentoring needs assessment. Second, an orientation program for new faculty can be developed. Last, activities to support evidence-based teaching practices and to encourage teaching scholarship can be designed.

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