A NURSE AT HEART: 
THE JOURNEYS AND EXPERIENCES 
OF NURSING SCHOOL DEANS

Tammy Blass, EdD, MSN, RN
Dean, Education and Consulting Services
Los Angeles County College of Nursing and Allied Health
Introduction

- **Background**
  - Similarity to other deans versus uniqueness

- **Problem**
  - Facing significant challenges
  - Not much known about the role
  - Likely shaped by characteristics and experiences

- **Purpose**
  - Understand how personal characteristics and nursing background influence how nursing school deans experience their role and manage their challenges
Methodology

- **Research Design**
  - Qualitative Interview study

- **Sample**
  - 13 So. California female BSN & ADN deans

- **Data Analysis**
  - Recordings transcribed
  - Coding process
    - Identify codes
    - Generate themes
Themes

- Core: Always a Nurse
- Character: Playing the Part
- Context: Facing the Issues
- Connection: Creating Solutions
Core: Always a Nurse

I started as a nurse and became nurse practitioner, became nurse researcher, became nurse educator, became nurse consultant. Became, but nurse is always there… (Isabel)
I’ve always known who I am. I think I’ve always had a lot of self-awareness. I think coming from a psych. background, having that awareness, and knowing that your presence is so much more important than anything else you say or do. (Marta)
I love nursing. I think nursing offers so much diversity and there’s always something new. I can’t imagine a better career for me. I love it just as much as when I came into nursing over 30 years ago. (Kelly)
I still love working with the students. I still love public health nursing. I think once your heart is in a certain area, you never give it up. You just lose a little of your heart when you move into a different area. (Grace)
Role Transition

You have to separate yourself from patients to another barrier with students, but knowing that everything you do with students impacts patients. So, you still have that link, but you miss the fun of helping your patients and their families feel better and you miss that side of it. Just different rewards. (Isabel)
Influence of Past Experiences

Caregiver

- *I think a gardener is a good metaphor… I see my role as making sure that everyone is cared for and all the right ingredients are used to develop this beautiful flower, this beautiful rose, this beautiful person, and that’s a lot when you’re a careful gardener.* (Jessica)

- Metaphors such as “Mother” & “Hearts”
When I’m doing this job, I’m [Fran] the nursing director, just like when I started to teach and I have to get up in front of people, I was [Fran] the teacher and you just put on that role and you do what you need to do in that role. It’s the same thing here. So if they get mad, they’re getting mad at the director. They’re not really getting mad at me. I don’t take any of this personally. (Fran)
Informative Roles

Communicator

- Am I an expert on talking to people? No, I just have listened to lot of people and I try to learn what they have to teach. And I think that I did that with patients and I try to do that with students. (Barbara)

- The whole thing of listening and teaching and communicating, all parts of being a nurse. (Eileen)
I can see the face of the nurse who took me under her wing and guided me and encouraged me and helped me. So, if you can find different ones in different ways and some people don’t want a wing over them. So it’s not like you can go in maternalistic, but trying to find those buttons to push that are not the negative buttons, but the positive ones where you can reach your faculty and try and help them to soar. (Isabel)
Team Builder

- **The only kind of power that you really have in higher education is your power of influence. And you can only influence people if they believe that you are a leader. So, I think visibility, presence, your actions are really important.**

- **…there is nothing I would ask a faculty member to do that I would not do. And there’s nothing I would require of a student that I wouldn’t ask of myself as a student. (Marta)**
Supportive Roles

Advocate

Finding my voice and being able to use my voice, not only for my patients, which is where it began, but then learning to use my voice for the nurses that I oversaw. And now it’s using my voice for the students and the faculty because I sit at tables that they do not sit at. And so it’s that role of using my voice as a leader. (Marta)
Active Roles

- **Juggler**
  
  An average day is changing my hat all day long. There is definitely the information hat, a channel, a conduit of information from the university to the faculty and back. Definitely putting out fires, and the fires can be... they’re just broad, from the student who’s failing, which has a lot of emotional and crises issues to it, to someone doesn’t like their chair. (Isabel)

- **Gender Differences**
Context: Facing the Issues

- **Resource Issues**
  - Loss of faculty due to retirement:
  - Lack of clinical sites
  - More applicants than space

- **Student Issues**
  - Meeting needs of a diverse student body

- **Faculty Issues**
  - Motivation, availability, accountability
CONNECTION
Connection

Empowering faculty

- When you’re in administration, it’s to grow people. (Grace)
- I don’t mean leaving a legacy as much as how can I share and give up. In other words, if we’re writing a grant, I do not need to be the PI anymore. In fact, I don’t want that. (Holly)
Connection

- Students also know that I tend to have kind of an open door policy. As long as I’m not really tied up with anything, I’m open to meeting with students. (Diane)

- What I have to say is I really don’t want this person [faculty] mad at me, but I really want do my job. And I’m the student advocate before I’m the faculty’s friend. So as long as you can keep that out front, then I think your priorities are in the right place. (Barbara)
Connection

With my students, those that come and they’re international, no family here and I just put myself in their shoes and think…what would I do in a country where I’m just barely speaking the language and I don’t have anyone here. So I try to embrace them, too. I tell my students, “Embrace them.” Like Thanksgiving, no, it’s not their custom, but introduce them to ours. So, just the sharing …it just makes me feel good. (Cathy)
My current responsibilities are truly ensuring that these students are successful. That is, in a nutshell, what I do. (Marta)
We have an alumni association that’s very active. I try to attend their meetings. I sit on a couple of boards external to here that I have to go to. I try to keep up on what’s going on in nursing. I’m a member of the American Nurses’ Association and read those little briefs carefully and follow up on any that pertain. I’m constantly on the lookout for funding. (Grace)
Connection
Recommendations

- Strengthen connection to practice
  - Networking
  - Visibility
  - Recruitment

- Prepare future deans
  - Mentorship programs
  - Leadership & academic preparation

- Garner support from academic leaders
Future Research

- Explore nursing dean’s role among various settings & populations
- Transition to the deanship
- Challenges facing deans