Mutineers and Nurses

Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow

Students learn through service to others

Second Quarter 2001 Volume 2 Number 2

Are grades where they should be? That was the question raised in the fall 2000 issue of Excellence in Nursing Education (Volume 1, Number 4). As part of the article, the authors requested that readers complete a short survey about their experiences with grade inflation. Though the number of surveys returned was low—27 total—the data are of interest and demonstrate the existence of the phenomenon in nursing education programs.

Are grade inflation real?

Twenty of the 27 respondents believe grade inflation is present in their courses, although there was no agreement with regard to whether it is more prevalent in one program over another. A number of respondents felt grade inflation is seen most frequently in generic baccalaureate programs, while others have observed it in graduate programs.

One respondent, who is a recent graduate of a master’s degree program, experienced it as a "career grade." He said, "I truly did make a difference in these people’s lives." Another student indicated that she plans to continue visiting residents in the long-term care facility even after the course ends. During the Very Important Kid (VIK) program, nursing students worked with children on self-esteem building activities. Each week a couple of children were chosen to be the very important kids. The VIKs were encouraged to talk about their favorite activities and things, and they received feedback from other children about their good qualities.

Commenting on her service learning project one student said, "Volunteering and conducting activities with young children was a wonderful experience. I was fortunate enough to learn from the program. I was able to realize things about the world, and I enjoyed teaching the children such valuable things." By participating in service learning, nursing students gained insight, became more dedicated to their chosen profession and expanded their understanding of nursing roles.

What is service learning?

Service learning is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience associated with relating theory to practice. Students participate in an organized service activity that helps meet identified community needs. Reflection helps the students relate the theory to their service, consequently helping students gain understanding of course content and appreciation for civic responsibility. The structured opportunities help students synthesize and derive new meaning from their experiences as they relate those experiences to course objectives.

In service learning, there is an equal focus on education and service. It is reciprocal because it benefits both the student and the service.

Members respond to grade inflation

By Joyce K. Shoemaker & Mary Britos

Are students’ grades inflated? Many respondents answer ‘yes’ to this survey question.

are students’ grades inflated? Many respondents answer ‘yes’ to this survey question. Others feel that clinical grades are generally high, allowing students who are weak in the theoretical portions of courses to pass. Student expectations and demands for As seem to be a major factor, too. One respondent stated there is a “smothering desire to avoid conflict” on the part of some faculty. Finally, lack of administrative support of faculty who record failing grades is an issue in some programs. Several respondents observed that this pressure is aimed at keeping enrollments up. One individual sadly acknowledged that the administrative edict is that students who are bright enough to be admitted will grade inflate.

In response to a question about measures taken to decrease the incidence of grade inflation, nine individuals responded that nothing is being done.

One person angrily wrote, “...it’s rampant, it’s known, it’s ignored.” Others confirmed the issue is being discussed, either with the entire faculty or in curriculum committee meetings. One individual stated there is an effort to decrease subjectivity in evaluating students combined with increasing the weight of the theory component of clinical courses. Others are considering grading clinical laboratory credits through service learning, students provide a needed community service and gain a better understanding of course content.
Taking control of your career and your future

By Gail J. Donner and Mary M. Wheeler

The tremendous changes that have marked nursing over the last half of the 20th century have brought significant challenges along with terrific opportunities. Cycles of boom and bust, as well as high unemployment and shortages of workers, have been common, and change has been the norm. These changes have created an environment in which individual nurses must take control of their careers and futures. Nurses’ dependence on others to define their future for them is a phenomenon of the past.

Career planning, a continuous process of self-assessment and goal setting, helps nurses adapt to changes in their own development, in the profession and in the world in which they live and practice. The process is really about the development of a life skill, one that nurses can apply not only in their workplaces but in their personal lives as well. It is an individual responsibility, a life-long activity, and a necessary skill in a changing world of work and health care. When one engages in the process, a sense of enjoyment, pride and energy is also realized.

Career development is an iterative and continuous rather than a linear process. It requires individuals to understand the environment in which they live and work, assess their strengths and limitations, and validate that assessment, articulate their personal career vision, develop a plan for the future that is realistic for them, and then market themselves to achieve their career goals.

To assist nurses to take control of their careers and futures, we developed a five-phase career planning and development model.

Scanning your environment is about taking stock of the world in which you live. It involves understanding the current realities in the nursing and work environments as well as the future trends at the global, national and local levels in society and health care. Through the scanning process you become better informed, learn to see the world through differing perspectives and are able to answer the question “What are the current realities/future trends?” These trends will influence career opportunities.

Completing your self-assessment and reality check enables you to identify your values, experiences, knowledge, strengths and limitations and to marry those with your environmental scan to help you create your career vision and identify the directions to take as you plan your future. As you begin your self-assessment, you will first identify all the attributes that make you who you are and, then, what you have to offer to the environment. Completing your self-assessment and reality check will allow you to give honest and accurate answers to the two questions, “Who am I?” and “How do others see me?”

Creating your career vision answers the question, “What do I really want to be doing?” Without a vision of where you want to go, you will most likely simply react to events as they occur rather than choose a direction that helps you take advantage of an opportunity when it occurs. Your career vision is the link between who you are and what you can become. Having a career vision is a powerful motivator for reaffirming your current situation or for making a change.

Developing your strategic career plan is critical to taking control of your own career. Designing a plan is not something that someone else can do for you. You must do it for yourself to ensure that you are continually and satisfactorily progressing toward your personal career goals. By answering the question “How can I achieve my career goal?” you ensure that you have a plan that is both uniquely yours and easily converted into action.

Marketing yourself involves articulating your professional and personal qualities, attributes and expertise so that you can effectively communicate what you have to offer and why you are the best person for the service that needs to be delivered. For nurses, “How can I best market myself?” is facilitated by establishing a network, acquiring a mentor, and developing written and verbal communication skills. Your strengths, coupled with a commitment and belief in yourself, make you your own best marketer.

Gail J. Donner, RN, PhD, and Mary M. Wheeler, RN, MEd, are partners in Donner & Wheeler, a consulting firm based in Canada that specializes in career planning and development within the health and human service sectors. Their services are offered both onsite and online. You may contact them at www.donner-wheeler.com.

Donner and Wheeler have also been presenting “Achieving Your Lifelong Career” at the Sigma Theta Tau 2001 Professional Development Conferences.

Contest recognizes evidence-based practice

Have you been involved in a successful project to improve patient outcomes? Share your success with your colleagues and win free conference registration, free CE, a day at the spa, dinner for two — and more! Sigma Theta Tau International and Nursing Spectrum are sponsoring “Innovations in Clinical Excellence,” a program designed to acknowledge successful evidence-based projects. Five nurses will be recognized for their innovations.

For more information, visit www.nursingsociety.org and click “What’s New?” or call Adam Keener at 888.634.7575. Submission deadline is June 1, 2001.

Efforts show young people benefits of a nursing career

The nursing profession has never faced greater challenges. Shortages loom. Managed care is changing how and where we work. High pressure is leading to high turnover. Yet the world’s population is aging and growing, and it needs nurses more than ever.

As part of Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow, 24 nursing and health care organizations across the United States are working together to ensure that a new generation of young people learns about the benefits of a nursing career. Soon we will be advertising nationwide and reaching out to youngsters who’ve never really given nursing a second thought.

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When Bright Minds Come Together

Why you should attend Convention 2001

Beginning November 10, Sigma Theta Tau members from around the world will converge on Indianapolis to participate in the 36th Biennial Convention. “Learning and Leading Globally,” the theme for the convention, will include a variety of educational sessions, research presentations, and panel discussions that span the four-day event. To learn why you should join more than 2,000 other “bright minded” nurses at convention, read on.

More networking opportunities than you can count

Bringing members together—whether they are seasoned leaders or recent graduates—is one of the hallmarks of Sigma Theta Tau International conventions.

“Attending the receptions and visiting the lively exhibit hall are perfect opportunities to meet society leaders, get together with new friends and renew past acquaintances,” says Nancy Dickens-Hazard, RN, MSN, FAAN, chief executive officer of Sigma Theta Tau International. “We’re proud that the biennial convention provides such excellent opportunities for our members to network.”

In recent years, many members attending convention have found insightful answers to their questions about careers, clinical specialties, research interests, and education, leadership and volunteer opportunities. Attendees have also been able to share the challenges they are facing as nurses and brainstorm with colleagues to find innovative solutions.

Sponsored by the Indiana University School of Nursing and Clarian Health Partners, the Welcome Circle of Friends reception provides the first opportunity for attendees to network with colleagues and meet President Patricia Thompson and Chief Executive Officer Nancy Dickens-Hazard. The Welcome to Indy reception on the following day, sponsored by St. Vincent Hospitals and Health Care, will give the keynote address by the University of Manchester School of Nursing’s Vice Chancellor and Professor Tony Butterworth, CBE, FRGN, FRCPsych, FMedSci, FRSA, PhD, followed by educational sessions throughout the day. Using the theme, “Leading the Way for Clinical Excellence,” a diverse range of nursing topics will be featured, as well as innovations in clinical practice and new technology that can be applied to nursing practice, education and health care.

“Employers value the educational opportunities our convention provides attendees,” says Barbara Robinette, RN, MSN, director of constituent services. “These chapter representatives elect the new officers, vote on changes to bylaws, approve resolutions, and receive reports from headquarters and committees.”

Excellence in nursing

Throughout the four-day convention, excellence in nursing is showcased in the presentation of prestigious awards. The Episteme Award, funded by the Baxter Foundation, acknowledges a major breakthrough in nursing knowledge development. It will be awarded Monday during the scientific sessions.

“Presenting awards during the Sigma Theta Tau International convention enables us to recognize the tremendous contribution nurses are making in health care,” says President Pat Thompson, RN, EdD. “It is also an opportunity to share their inspiring stories with other nurses and perhaps future award winners.”

Additional awards, including the founders, chapter, communication and technology awards will be presented during convention.

Need more information?
To learn more about convention and sponsorships opportunities, visit our Web site at www.nursingsociety.org or call 888.634.7757.

From the creative arts displays and poster presentations to the educational sessions and awards, nurses bring their enthusiasm for excellence to Sigma Theta Tau’s biennial convention.

Have a recruitment or retention success story?
Call for Poster Presentations 2001 Biennial Convention, Indianapolis, Indiana

Submission Deadline: May 31, 2001 (postmarked)

As part of the society’s 2001 convention, the International Public Relations committee would like to showcase best practices in the recruitment and retention of future and current nurses. All recruitment and retention levels and venues will be considered, including:

• Elementary and middle school children
• High school students
• Second-career individuals
• Health care organization

For more information and submission requirements, visit www.nursingsociety.org, e-mail pr@tsu.edu, or call Amy Macke or Kathy Bensson at 888.634.7757.

LEARNING & LEADING GLOBALLY
MEMBERS & CHAPTERS

EXCELLENCE IN NURSING EDUCATION • April 2002
when seen as a positive learning experience, service learning is also correlated with better grades and a deeper commitment to graduate.

Making service learning a reality
To make service learning a reality, courses need a transformation from traditional modes to service learning, and faculty needs to assess the teaching style and situation. For example, does the teaching style fit and does the course lends itself to service learning? Do the course goals and objectives suit service learning, or do new goals and objectives need to be developed? Before implementing a service learning project, faculty should identify the knowledge, skills and attitudes they want students to develop. Then faculty can seek out appropriate experiences, so there is a clear connection between course objectives and service activities and students can do projects to develop the intended knowledge, skills and attitudes. To find a good match in the community, it helps when the faculty or students have already developed relationships with community agencies. Volunteer action centers, United Way, the chamber of commerce, businesses, child-care centers, churches, group homes, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, social services and university services are all potential sites for service learning.

Once a community agency has been identified, course requirements will need to be revised. Will service learning be required or optional? How many hours will be required? How will the service learning be connected to course content and evaluated? What will be deleted and replaced with service learning? Logistics also need to be planned. Students may need transportation to get to a community site. Students also need to schedule their time according to their availability and the organization's needs. Agencies need to know when to expect students, and monitoring student time will also need to be planned. For example, will the faculty give direct supervision, or will a mentor or supervisor in the organization be present? How will the time be recorded? Will they keep a diary recording their time and events or will they keep a reflective journal? Liability issues will also need to be addressed.

Because collaborative service is designed to meet a community need and facilitate student learning, preceptors may need to be oriented to the role, and students need orientation to the agency. Throughout the process, student learning needs to be assessed. Among other things, oral and written projects and reflective journals can be used for evaluation. It is also important to structure student reflections into the course.

Once the service learning project is complete, accomplishments should be celebrated. Thank you letters, certificates of appreciation, gifts and receptions are some ways to celebrate. Experiences should also be evaluated. The students, faculty and community members can do formative and summative evaluations to facilitate continuous quality improvement.

In the end, service learning helps the university become a part of the community by meeting a real community need while enhancing student learning. Anne Marriner Tomsy, RN, PhD, FAAN, is a professor with Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN.

An elaboration of this content may be found in Academic Service-Learning: Faculty Development Manual by Kathleen Stacey, Dale L. Rice and Georgias Langer. It is printed by the Office of Academic Service-Learning at Eastern Michigan University.