

Freshman Success: A Challenge for Educators

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Headlines in all major publications shout with the need for nurses. The nursing shortage is a reality and will continue to escalate as the “graying” of the profession continues. The average age of today’s practicing nurse is 45 – 50 years of age (Ohio Nurses Convention, 1999), and the profession must not only attract young men and women into nursing, but must also help them be successful in their college experience. Success can be defined in two predominant ways: academic achievement and attachment to the major. The format utilized at the University of Cincinnati could be adapted by any major or discipline to improve student success.

At the UC Nursing College (UCNC), a group of interested faculty joined together to plan and submit a grant for the purpose of first-year student retention. As the group began to research the topic, they found a great deal of literature to support the value of intervention at the first-year student level. According to Gardener and Jewler (2001) “All students should be able to succeed in their first year of college. As educators and scholars, it is our responsibility to provide dedicated support, customized to a variety of students’ unique needs” (pp. vii). Based on research at the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience, students are more likely to succeed if certain strategies for success are followed (Gardner & Jewler, 2001). These include: planning ahead, taking charge of learning, and getting connected to the college. The UCNC proposal centered grant proposal on these principles. The grant was funded; the faculty chosen, and the real work of putting the course together began.

The goal of the Freshman Success program was multi-faceted, aiming to create an environment that provided an introduction for the student to college life, as well as, establishing a link to the nursing profession. After reviewing relevant literature on student development, the planning team concluded that utilizing nursing faculty was a major requirement. Gardner (1981) noted

Students need mentors and facilitators. Today’s students have few if any heroes. If not heroes, students need more realistic models; they need, in the words of Carl Rogers, authentic professional human beings who are worthy of emulation. They need models that exhibit professional behavior, a sense of commitment

and purposefulness, and a sense of autonomy and integrity in a world that generates enormous stresses. Students cannot be told how to do this; authenticity cannot be transmitted through lectures. Student growth must be fostered and shaped by deliberate faculty mentoring and facilitating. (p. 67)

The planning team believed strongly that the faculty role could have a positive impact on new students. To a great extent, the environment for new students must be set for openness, trust, and a forum for sharing concerns and solutions. This basic philosophy would also foster the building of a community within the student group.

Due to recent changes in curriculum, students are no longer exposed to nursing as first-year student but are currently introduced to nursing at the junior level. The new curriculum allows for students to complete the core courses during the first two years. While this enables students to have a strong foundation as they entered the junior year, many faculty members have believed that students miss socialization into the nursing role. An integral part of the new first-year student success course would be to introduce the students to the nursing college, nursing faculty, upper classmates, and to the opportunities made available by the profession. Based on these beliefs, a course was designed and made mandatory for all incoming pre-nursing freshmen.

The purpose of the course was to introduce students both to college life, as well as the profession of nursing, and to provide a sense of belonging to both. The course utilized Brower's (1990) "Seven Life Tasks for First-Year Students," including making friends, getting good grades, establishing future goals, managing time, being on alone without family and friends, establishing an identity, and maintaining physical self. Based on these life tasks, the course was designed to assist the students in their quest for academic success by providing an engaging atmosphere that would facilitate their growth, development, and accomplishment of these tasks.

The course was designed to center on academic skill development, personal success in the University, and bridging the gap between general education and nursing. And specifically, the course was intended to help students realize their role in their own success in college.

The course was approved for three undergraduate credits that would span the fall and the winter quarters. The rationale behind this credit distribution was the desire to remain connected throughout the students' first six months of the college experience. The course met weekly for 90 minutes throughout the fall quarter, with a focus on the skills that students need for early success. Topics included: time management, study skills, learning styles, test taking, stress management, and information about making healthy life choices. Time was also devoted to the introduction of available campus resources such as library, security, health center, and tutoring opportunities.

The winter quarter classes were held bi-monthly for 90 minutes. This arrangement met scheduling needs and at the same time provided the opportunity to do more in-depth assignments. The content in this quarter dealt more with engaging the students in the profession of nursing. Faculty were invited to come and share their backgrounds and professional areas of interest with the class. The purpose of this was two-fold: to

provide the opportunity for students to meet and dialogue with faculty prior to their junior year, and second, to allow for another occasion where students could see the variety and options within the profession of nursing. Another component was the addition of a “job fair,” where area hospitals as well as two branches of the military were invited to discuss scholarships, job opportunities, and professional benefits. The opportunities included health care positions while they are students as well as a glimpse into the possibilities for their future as nurses. The examination of the spectrum of nursing opportunities was concluded with a global perspective for the nurse role, and a faculty member involved with international nursing presented her experiences working in Africa. The final class was one of transition as they were acquainted with the “Ladders” program. This program and its faculty further immersed the students in the college of nursing by organizing activities away from the college designed to enhance cohesiveness amongst the students. An example of an activity was a weekend experience at a leadership camp designed to foster trust and enhance friendships. Learning activities incorporated strategies that focused on group cohesiveness, personal connection to the college, and exposure to the nursing profession. These strategies included group work, games, homework assignments, poster presentations, computer searches, and personal interviews.

The ultimate goal of all of the topics was to capture and enhance the interest of the first-year students, and to help them see how success in traditional college life can be linked to nursing. This format could be modified to create links within any academic major. For example, in time management, the basic information is taught but then the student examines the implication of time management within the nurses’ role. A day in the life of a nurse is discussed, therefore, demonstrating how this concept has far reaching effects on their ultimate goal. Each and every topic taught is then translated into the influence it has on the nursing profession.

The topics identified by the UCNC team could be easily modified to emphasize the relationship of college life skills to an academic major. The template, though, must include two core elements: fostering a nurturing environment, and developing a physical, emotional, or cognitive link to the academic discipline. These objectives can be achieved through a variety of methods. Initially, the use of guests, such as upper-class students and experienced faculty, offer answers to questions that may concern the first year student.

Assignments related to issues in the major can be threaded throughout the course. This exposure enhances the student’s connection to the major. Another strategy would be to introduce students to members of the profession, possibly through an event such as a job fair. This can enhance exposure to the role, offer opportunities that may build interest and to establish future connections.

Conclusion

In following these students through their education, retention did improve somewhat, and this is certainly an area for enhanced study. However, the most rewarding

statistic was the evidence that the students who had completed this course had a higher GPA and experienced less academic difficulty having experienced this course. The serendipitous effect was the sharing of academic problems within the student community that made viable solutions possible and increased their chances of success.

Over the two quarters the UCNC team witnessed a number of positives that seemed to support the initial goals and objectives for the experience: Student self report of developing new friendship; student self report of establishing study groups; 90% attendance rate; increased openness and dialogue with faculty; increased visibility within the college of nursing; and application and procurement of part time work in health care.

References

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