The Integrated Nursing Pathway: An Innovative Collaborative Model to Increase the Proportion of Baccalaureate-Prepared Nurses

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Abstract

This manuscript describes a collaborative, seamless program between a community college and a university college of nursing designed to increase the number of nurses prepared with a baccalaureate degree. The three-year Integrated Nursing Pathway provides community college students with a non-nursing associate degree, early introduction to nursing, and seamless progression through BSN education. The model includes dual admission and advising and is driven by the need for collaboration with community colleges, the need to increase the percentage of racial-ethnic minority students, the shortage of faculty, and employer preferences for BSN graduates.

KEY WORDS

Baccalaureate Education – Nursing Education – Academic Progression – Nursing Curriculum

New models are needed to meet growing demand for baccalaureate-educated nurses in academia and clinical practice. Collaboration among academic nurse leaders across all education program levels is essential to create seamless pathways to increase the proportion of nurses with BSN degrees to 80 percent by 2020 (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011). Data for 2013 from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSEBN] (2014) indicate that, of nurses taking the NCLEX-RN® exam for the first time, only 42 percent were baccalaureate prepared. The Oregon Consortium for Nursing Education initiative projected that 70 percent of graduates from associate degree nursing programs would seek a BSN degree, but only 30 percent of eligible students actually transferred to the BSN program (Munkvold, Tanner, & Herinckx, 2012).

A meta-analysis to determine what is known about nurses’ motivators, barriers, perceptions, and attitudes about returning to school for a BSN degree found that cost, lack of support, curricular issues, and lack of self-confidence are barriers, while autonomy, quality care, improved clinical judgment, career advancement, and personal growth are motivators (Altmann, 2011). It is clear that more progression models for nursing need to be tested.

OVERVIEW OF INTEGRATED NURSING PATHWAY

The Integrated Nursing Pathway (Pathway) provides community college students a non-nursing associate degree with seamless progression through BSN education at a university college of nursing. The Community College of Aurora (CCA) and the University of Colorado College of Nursing (UC-CON) simultaneously admit students to the three-year Pathway program. Dual advising by CCA and UC-CON advisers takes place when students are admitted to the Pathway program, and students receive their BSN degree within four years. Employer preferences for BSN nursing graduates, the need for collaboration with community colleges, the need to increase the percentage of racial-ethnic minority students in pre-licensure programs, and the shortage of faculty drive this model.

PATHWAY GOVERNANCE

The UC-CON and CCA began discussing a potential partnership in 2009. The intent was to design an educational model that would provide access to BSN education for community college students and avoid the tendency of associate degree graduates to terminate their studies upon completion of the ADN degree.

Senior administrators from the two institutions addressed governance issues having to do with prerequisites, the curriculum, simultaneous admission, progression, and advisement. It was decided that the community college would retain tuition income and students would graduate from the CCA with an associate degree in general studies. Following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding,
an oversight committee was established that included academic administrators, faculty content experts, advisers, and representatives from the offices of admission and diversity.

Curriculum

The curriculum is based on The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008). Priority in the design of the Pathway was clarity of prerequisite courses and admission and progression criteria, ease of transition across institutions, and use of a cohort model where students move through the classes and program phases together. Pathway students meet the same admission requirements as others admitted to the UC-CON, but Pathway students must have an associate degree in general studies from CCA.

Students take 14 credits of prerequisites prior to application to the Pathway. Provisional admission occurs in the spring semester, while students continue to take prerequisite courses. A second admission review occurs after the summer prerequisites are completed.

Year one of the Pathway includes completion of a course co-taught by a CCA nurse faculty member and a UC-CON faculty member. This feature of the curriculum responds to calls for introduction to the profession early in the nursing curriculum (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010). The faculty-developed course, “Pathway to Professional Nursing: Quality Improvement and Safety,” includes the context of professional nursing, roles and responsibilities of the professional nurse, essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes for team participation in a culture of safety and quality improvement, and interpersonal communication skills critical to the nurse-patient relationship. Classes are taught on both campuses to give Pathway students exposure to a large university campus. Early immersion in professional nursing is a hallmark of the Pathway (see Figure 1).

Advising

To facilitate successful progression in the Pathway model, an academic adviser with a dedicated workload is assigned from each institution. Academic advising sessions for Pathway students are arranged with both CCA and UC-CON academic advisers present. Strategies that facilitate dual advising and develop a sense of student belonging to the program include an orientation specifically for Pathway students to both academic institutions. Email accounts are provided at both institutions to facilitate communication and for access to the health sciences library and facilities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The target enrollment for the Pathway cohorts is 30 students per year. However, because of a desire to get the program implemented, a decision was made to begin with a smaller cohort of 18 students. Of the 18 students in the initial cohort, 13 earned an associate degree from CCA in 2011; in May 2013, all 13 graduated from the UC-CON.

FIGURE 1. The Integrated Nursing Pathway to Baccalaureate Education.
and all passed the NCLEX-RN. The second cohort consisted of 24 students; 20 in this group obtained an associate degree, and 16 are seniors in the UC-CON. Thirty were admitted to the third cohort, and 26 who finished with an associate degree are in their junior year at UC-CON.

Evidence of increased opportunity and enhanced diversity is demonstrated in the most recently admitted cohort. The group is ethnically and racially diverse, and 25 percent are men, with 25 percent first-generation college students. With a better understanding of attrition statistics, the plans are to admit more than 30 students in future cohorts.

The Pathway emphasizes the value of a diverse student population as a way of achieving excellence in practice, reflective of the cultural diversity of health care recipients. With an average of 50 percent gender and ethnic diversity, the Integrated Nursing Pathway students will better serve the patient populations they reflect. Enrichment of the UC-CON student body and enhancement of diversity within the nursing workforce are significant strengths of the program.

The Pathway model was developed with the intent to be replicated by other community colleges and universities. CCA did not have an existing nursing program, which is recognized as an advantage in the initial development of an integrated model. A second Memorandum of Understanding has been signed with another community college, which had closed its ADN program. Community colleges with current ADN nursing programs could collaborate with a four-year college or university and offer this innovative option for students whose goal is BSN education.

CONCLUSION

The IOM (2011) recommends that nurses obtain higher levels of education through systems of education that provide seamless academic progression. This recommendation is foundational to this innovative model of nursing education. The Pathway supports the value of the community college path to nursing education and eliminates the dropout potential of ADN licensure.

The mission and goals of the partnership between the University of Colorado and the Aurora Community College System call for greater access to quality education for citizens of the state. The Integrated Nursing Pathway focuses on student potential and diversity, employer hiring trends for BSN graduates, and the need by consumers for a well-educated, diverse nursing workforce (Blegen, Goode, Park, Vaughn, & Spetz, 2013). It is a successful response to calls for radical advances in pathways to nursing licensure and a radical new understanding of the nursing curriculum (Benner et al., 2010).

REFERENCES


