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Transition to Baccalaureate Nursing Practice: Preparing Practicing Nurses for Professional Advancement^{1,2}

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ABSTRACT

Faculty at a midwest university recognized the value of building on previous experiences and education to support registered nurses with an associate degree who are seeking academic progression. The Transition to Baccalaureate Nursing Practice course was developed to facilitate a bachelor of science in nursing role exploration and academic success. This report describes the teaching strategies used and lessons learned.

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As registered nurses (RNs) are challenged to work in an increasingly complex health care environment, nursing education is called to respond to this challenge through the training and development of competent nursing professionals. In 2011, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation collaborated to produce the well-known report entitled *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* (IOM, 2011). The four key messages presented in this report identify needs within the health care arena where nursing has the capacity to represent a strong voice and advocate for change. More specifically, one of the key messages in the report calls for nurses to "...practice to the full extent of their education and training" (IOM, 2011, p. 4), and one of the recommendations is "...to increase the proportion of nurses with a baccalaureate degree from 50 percent to 80 percent by 2020" (IOM, 2011, p. 12). The *Organization for Associate Degree Nursing* (2012) supports this position and "promotes academic progression of ADN graduates in furthering education to reach their maximum professional potential" (p. 1). In addition to personal motivation to seek a higher degree in nursing, many nurses find that their employers, particularly Magnet hospitals and academic health centers, are requiring them to return to school for completion of a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) degree to maintain or grow within their positions (*American Association of Colleges of Nursing*, 2017).

Across the country, BSN completion programs are popular for nurses prepared with a diploma in nursing, an associate in science degree with a major in nursing, or an associate in applied science degree with a major in nursing to pursue the advancement of their formal education. According to the *American Association of Colleges of*

Nursing (2017), the 747 BSN completion programs offered in the United States are designed for students to complete course requirements within 1 to 2 years.

The courses in the noncohort model BSN completion program at this midwestern university incorporate the learning needs of professional, adult learners, as identified by Knowles (1990), including fostering a self-directed environment, drawing on past experiences and providing relevant and practical experiences both professionally and personally. Professional and personal motivation to return to school can vary among RNs returning to pursue a BSN degree. However, Phillips and Evans (2017) found that BSN completion students characteristically exhibit a specific motivation to "advance their knowledge and improve the quality of care they deliver while increasing their career advancement opportunities" (p. 82). Throughout the program, faculty value and draw upon students' motivating factors and previous academic preparation and recognize that this contributes to their students' success as they continue their formal education.

According to Robertson, Canary, Orr, Herberg, and Rutledge (2010), most BSN completion students work full time and are married, characteristics which are reflected in the students enrolled in this program. Faculty observed that with the competing demands of work, family life, and accelerated program structure, students struggled with the Web-based learning management system (LMS) technology and volume of required coursework. In addition, some of these students were returning to school after many years away from formal education.

Course Development

The majority of the BSN completion program faculty team started their nursing careers with either an associate in science degree or an associate in applied science degree in nursing, and two of the team

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members, including the course coordinator, had taught in associate degree programs in different areas of the United States. We believe this was important in developing the course because these faculty members were well versed in the curricula and quality of associate degree programs in nursing. The faculty identified that, in addition to a formal orientation, students needed support in recognizing the professional implications of advancing their formal education. Thus, they began developing a specific course to assist students with the transition to the academic environment and the transition they would be experiencing in their nursing careers.

The five-member BSN completion program faculty team collaborated on a one-credit hour course entitled *Transition to Baccalaureate Nursing Practice* to be taken as the first course in the BSN completion program curriculum. The course is designed to draw on students' past experiences and academic courses to build new knowledge that focuses on exploring the roles of baccalaureate-prepared nurses and strategies for BSN completion program success. The primary objectives supporting the development of this course concentrated on the need to familiarize students with the LMS and technology resources; integrate the university and program expectations and policies; introduce the professional aspects of a baccalaureate-prepared nurse, including role transition; and present resources to promote success in the program. Each of these content areas is mapped to a specific university and school of nursing outcome where one can easily see the importance of development in each of these areas.

The BSN completion program offers both completely online and hybrid versions of all courses in the curriculum. Students may choose to take courses in either format. The hybrid course meets face-to-face weekly for 5 weeks with assignments completed online through the LMS. Students in both versions of the course complete the same assignments to ensure that they learn to function in either course environment. All courses in the BSN completion program are available in the LMS at least 3 days prior to the official start date of the course to allow students to familiarize themselves with the course syllabus, course assignments, and the LMS site.

Course Assignments

During the first week of the course, the assignments are to post a personal profile, complete a scavenger hunt quiz, and deposit the signed *RN-BSN Student Handbook* acknowledgement form into the LMS drop box. The scavenger hunt quiz and the handbook acknowledgement are designed to validate students' knowledge of BSN completion program and university policies and procedures. The personal profile encourages students to become better acquainted with each other and develop a sense of community, particularly for those in online courses. Students also reflect on their personal meaning of nursing in the profile. Faculty believe that this is the first step toward understanding nursing practice at the BSN level.

The second week of the course brings opportunities for students to explore and further develop their own professional identity as BSN-prepared nurses. They complete an online quiz over this content and participate in a collegial online discussion of the five core competencies for health professionals espoused by the IOM (Greiner & Knebel, 2003). During the discussion, they are also asked to reflect on their reasons for continuing their nursing education. This discussion assignment was designed to prepare students for the requirements of professional level discussions in future BSN completion program courses and in the work setting. Faculty believe that this is the next step in the student's evolution to BSN nursing practice.

Students also write a learning style reflection paper during the second week of the course. This assignment provides an opportunity to receive feedback from faculty for writing papers in future courses using scholarly, peer-reviewed sources and American Psychological Association (APA) style. More importantly, students reflect on

specific ways to use their predominant learning style and relate it to study skills that will promote their success in the program.

The next week's art of nursing slide presentation assignment encourages students to explore the art and science of nursing and how each contributes to professional nursing practice. The process of creating the presentation prepares students for future course assignments and adds to their skill set as potential nurse leaders. Students also prepare to write their second scholarly paper in the course by submitting to the LMS drop box peer-reviewed articles, comparing associate degree in nursing and BSN roles, obtained from searching the university library's online databases.

During the fourth week of the course, students write a paper about the similarities and differences in the associate degree in nursing and BSN-prepared role and complete a quiz on academic integrity and plagiarism. The quiz validates their knowledge base, preparing them for future program assignments and potential professional presentations in the work setting. The faculty believe the roles paper exposes them to research-based evidence about the changes students may see in their practice as they progress through the program. The focus of the final week of the course is effective communication. The goal of this week's quiz is to validate the student's knowledge of this critical component of professional nursing (IOM, 2011; Kearney-Nunnery, 2016).

Lessons Learned

After the course ran for the first academic year, a team of three BSN completion program faculty discussed lessons learned from teaching the course and explored areas for improvement. Faculty recognized that reading the course syllabus and completing the new student orientation, both factors critical to success in the program, were not always done. During the second year, the course was offered, the completion-tracking feature of the LMS was set so that students had to complete the new student orientation and open the course syllabus before the first graded course assignments were made available for completion.

Greater depth was provided to the explanations in the content for how to access resources, such as the RN-to-BSN Forum on the LMS. The RN-to-BSN Forum is designed to communicate current program information, such as course schedules, scholarship and student loan opportunities, and graduation planning updates. Other new content included how to access the library chat function, the library databases, the university writing center, and free tutoring services. Students needed more direction on APA formatting, including how to use the APA manual and template paper, and an instructor led video was created and included in the course. This content was moved to an earlier point in the course to help prepare students who may be taking another course concurrently. Viewing the APA video was also set as a completion requirement before submitting the first assigned paper.

For some students, a considerable amount of time had passed since they had written a formal paper. Therefore, students were asked to submit a draft via e-mail of their second paper in the course to the writing center at the university's academic learning center for feedback that could be incorporated into their draft prior to its final submission for grading.

After each course, students are asked to complete an anonymous, online course evaluation. The course content and teaching strategies used have been rated highly each time the course has been offered. The written feedback from the course evaluations supported the numerical ratings and yielded several common themes. This statement by a student represents the theme *Course was good preparation for future courses*: "Very informative, very necessary course. I feel prepared to continue with the rest of my education as a result of this class." *Instructor feedback was positive and helpful* was a second theme

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