

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

New graduate nurse preceptor program: A collaborative approach with academia

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Abstract

The purpose of this project involved partnering experienced nursing faculty with hospital educators to enhance an existing preceptor program. The existing preceptor program consists of a six week program designed to facilitate the new graduate nurse during transition from student nurse to graduate nurse. The aim of the project was to promote preceptor and preceptor trainer competency. The project was designed to increase job satisfaction and retention of new graduate nurses as the nursing shortage escalates. Paired *t*-test of preceptor perceptions of ability to motivate, guide and educate, and evaluate new graduate nurses revealed significantly increased confidence for each of these items following completion of the preceptor training and precepting experience. The results from this study provide health care organizations, hospital educators, and faculty nurse educators with encouraging findings indicating the benefits of continued partnerships between academia and practice settings.

Key words

New graduate nurse, Preceptor, Preceptorship program, Nursing shortage, New graduate nurse retention strategies

1 Background and significance

The socialization of nurses into professional practice has gained increasing interest over the past decade. Healthcare administrators, educators, and the public have become progressively more alert to the need to recruit, mentor, and retain new graduate nurses due to current trends and predicted shortages ^[1]. A shortfall of registered nurses is projected to develop around 2018 and grow to 260,000 by 2025 ^[2,3]. The magnitude of this deficit will be more than twice as large as any nursing shortage experienced since the mid-1960s ^[2].

The nursing shortage is a global issue and not restricted to the healthcare system in the United States alone. Attention is being directed toward recruitment and retention by nurses and administrators world wide. The United States (U.S.) has tried to offset the nursing shortage by hiring international nurses ^[4]. Nurses from the Philippines, Canada, India, and Africa are frequently recruited ^[5,6]. The migration of foreign-born nurses adds to the existing nursing workforce in the United States. However, the migration adds to nursing shortages that have been identified in other countries ^[7]. This is compromising the ability of those countries to adequately address their own health care needs.

As health care systems focus on recruitment and retention of new graduate nurses, it is imperative that retention strategies be effective and examined closely. Turnover rates are often higher among new nurses than for senior nurses. The number of nurses who permanently leave nursing is significant. Turnover rates during the first year of practice range from 35% to 60% [8-10]. Recent nursing school graduates are leaving the profession more quickly than their predecessors. As many as 57% leave their first place of employment by two years [11]. Rapid attrition erodes the number of trained nurses who remain in the field [12]. Attrition results in increased cost for hospitals and institutions as they continuously hire, orient, and train new nursing professionals. Nurse recruiters calculate the cost of one new hire registered nurse as equal to the cost of one year salary. Estimated average cost is \$42,000 to replace a general medical-surgical nurse, and \$64,000 for other specialty nurses [13]. This process results in a strain on resources for that agency.

Newly graduated nurses often experience a culture shock as they transition from the academic ideal of nursing to the clinical reality of nursing practice [14]. Failure to cultivate the new graduate nurse and provide a nurturing atmosphere contributes to attrition during the first year of employment. Rapid immersion into the modern day acute care work environment and feelings of inadequacy lead many new graduates to feel overwhelmed, unsupported, and disillusioned [14]. Hospitals are trying harder to retain new graduates as a result of these challenges [15]. Methods to facilitate transition into practice are needed to minimize the resulting distress which often leads to the decision to leave the practice setting.

Assimilation through preceptorship programs has emerged as an option to increase retention of new graduate nurses during role transition from student nurse to graduate nurse [16-20]. The term preceptor means to tutor, guide, and evaluate [21]. Precepting of a new graduate nurse contributes to job satisfaction and increases long-term retention [3, 22, 23]. The importance of structured transitional programs for fostering retention of new graduate nurses in their first year is identified as a common thread by many health care systems [12, 21, 22]. Programs established by health care systems during the first year of employment help the new graduate recover from "reality shock" and provide ongoing support. According to Zerwekh and Claborn [21], the preceptor is perceived as a role model, teacher, and evaluator. As a role model, the preceptor demonstrates technical skills, planning and organizational abilities, priority setting, decision making, and communication skills during the experience [24].

1.1 Existing program and setting

Lake Cumberland Regional Hospital (LCRH), a 227 bed acute-care facility located in Southeastern Kentucky, U.S., was one of the agencies assessed during this project and the setting for this study. LCRH was in the process of revising an existing preceptor program. The existing program had been in place for approximately 24 months. The program had accessible materials for implementation and evaluation, supportive administration, and experienced nurses who wished to participate in the program.

1.2 Assessment and gaps

Assessment, by interviewing current preceptors and preceptor trainers of the existing preceptor program, revealed a strong emphasis on clinical skills. An identified need was to further develop the clinical educator role of the preceptor by providing sessions related to motivation, teaching, evaluation, and providing positive and negative feedback to new graduate nurses. The preceptors were experienced nurses in need of further development in the skills of being an educator to aid in the role transition of the new nurse. Current preceptor trainers consisted of hospital nurse educators who had limited time available for full commitment to the program. Preceptor program development was assigned in addition to the educators existing responsibilities. The nurse educators were accustomed to providing patient education and staff skill training. Training preceptors to be clinical nurse educators was identified as an area that needed further development (LCRH Nurse Educator and Preceptor Training Coordinator, personal interview, July 12, 2010).

Further indication for revision was revealed in turnover data. The goal of a preceptorship program is to aid in the socialization process of new graduate nurses as they transition into the role of graduate nurse. Increased retention and increased job satisfaction are used as indicators for success. Following the first year of implementation of the program at

LCRH, employee satisfaction scores remained unchanged with 79.5% of registered nurses reporting being satisfied to very satisfied with the organization as a place to work. In addition, turnover rates increased by four percent. The turnover rate for new graduate nurses in 2011 was 42% (LCRH Human Resource Manager, personal communication, September 19, 2012). Reasons for leaving the organization included: lack of day shift position, high nurse-to-patient ratios, workload, inadequate staffing, and feeling unsupported.

1.3 Proposed program

The Nursing Education Department voiced a desire to partner with an experienced faculty nurse educator from Somerset Community College to enhance the competency of hospital nurse educators who served as preceptor trainers. The partnership was expected to provide support and promote confidence in preceptor trainers during training sessions of new preceptors. Nursing faculty and hospital educators would collaborate during training sessions, monthly preceptor support sessions, and preceptor recognition events.

1.4 Purpose statement

In today's dynamic health care environment it is essential to recruit new graduate nurses and ensure they have adequate resources and support to thrive in order to retain them in the profession. Preceptor programs have been established by many health care institutions in an effort to provide a good working environment that promotes and supports professional practice. The purpose of this project involved partnering experienced nursing faculty with hospital educators to enhance an existing preceptor program. The aim of the project was to promote preceptor and preceptor trainer competency in the ability to educate, motivate, and evaluate the new graduate nurse. The project was designed to increase job satisfaction and retention of new graduate nurses as the nursing shortage escalates.

2 Methods and procedures

2.1 Design

A pretest-posttest design was used to examine the effectiveness of a collaborative preceptor training approach in enhancing nurse preceptor confidence in the ability to work effectively with new graduates. In addition, interviews were conducted with the Hospital Nurse Educator and the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) to determine satisfaction with the partnership and interest in continuing the collaborative arrangement.

2.2 Sample

A convenience sample of voluntary participants was used for the study. The convenience sample consisted of staff nurses who were recommended by unit managers and desired to serve in a preceptor role. Surveys were distributed to preceptors prior to the preceptor training course and at the completion of the precepting experience. A total of 20 preceptors responded to both pre and post-surveys, for a 51% response. Preceptors were predominately white, female, and associate degree graduates (see Table 1). The mean age was 38.6, with a range of 23-59. The preceptors had worked an average of 7.3 years as a nurse and been employed at LCRH for an average of 4.6 years (see Table 1). Thirteen had previously served as a preceptor and seven were new to the role.

2.3 Intervention

Collaboration between academia and practice

This project involved creating a partnership between experienced Associate Degree Nursing Faculty and hospital Nurse Educators to enhance the existing preceptor training program. The Faculty Nurse Educator involved in the project was an experienced educator with twenty-four years' teaching experience. The Faculty Nurse Educator partnered with the hospital Nurse Educator during revisions of the program and also during the 2 four-hour sessions of preceptor training.

Program revision

The Hospital Educator and Nursing Faculty member met with existing preceptors and unit managers during monthly discussion sessions to investigate current practices, provide recommendations for improvement, and offer feedback for proposed changes to the existing preceptorship program at Lake Cumberland Regional Hospital. Sessions were held in the morning, afternoon, and evening to accommodate the existing preceptors and promote attendance. Agenda included best practices for methods to motivate, teach, evaluate, and provide positive and negative feedback for new graduate nurses.

Nursing Faculty mentored the Hospital Educators during course development and presentation to make the Preceptor Training workshops more interactive. The Nursing faculty educator provided interactive simulations on motivation techniques, communication, and evaluation strategies. Techniques from education workshops provided by a faculty expert were incorporated into the presentations to develop a professional learning environment.

Preceptors from LCRH identified the need to allow time for the preceptor and preceptee to meet prior to beginning of unit orientation in an effort to decrease anxiety levels of new graduate nurses. A luncheon was conducted in response to this need during the first week of new employee orientation. To continue development of this relationship, weekly sessions with the new graduate were arranged by the preceptors to provide support and feedback.

The need for ongoing support for preceptors to prevent burnout was also recognized. Monthly support sessions, conducted by faculty and hospital educators, were provided during the six week preceptor program for new and experienced nurse preceptors to provide encouragement and address challenges.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Preceptor (n=20)

Characteristic	Number	Mean (SD)	Range
Age (years)		38.55 (11.09)	23 – 59
Years as a nurse		7.3 (8.8)	1 – 38
Years at LCRH		4.6 (7.84)	1 – 35
Gender			
Female	18		
Male	2		
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	20		
Highest degree earned			
ADN	14		
BSN	6		
Preceptor Experience			
Yes	13		
No	7		

2.4 Instruments

Preceptor

The Preceptor Survey, devised by the researcher, was administered prior to participation in the preceptor training program. The instrument provided demographic information, experience, and years of RN experience. Participants rated confidence level in the ability to motivate, educate, and evaluate using a seven point Likert scale (0 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree). Open response statements included reasons for being a preceptor, fears and concerns, and perceived strengths.

The Preceptor Evaluation was administered at the completion of the precepting experience. Participants were asked to rate confidence level in the ability to motivate, educate, and evaluate using a seven point Likert scale (0 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree). The Likert scale was used to address satisfaction with both the preceptor training and the preceptor experience. Open response statements included sharing what was most satisfying and most problematic. Questions

included sharing how similar the experience was to what was anticipated and if the preceptor planned to continue in the program.

Hospital nurse educator

The Nurse Educator Evaluation, devised by the researcher, uses a combination of a seven point Likert scale (0 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree) and open response questions. The preceptor trainer was asked to rate satisfaction with the partnership with associate degree nursing faculty and its usefulness in developing preceptor abilities to motivate, educate, and evaluate. Open response statements included: benefits provided by the partnership, contributions by the nursing faculty, recommendations for change, and recommendation to continue the partnership.

2.5 Potential barriers

Support from unit managers allowing preceptors and preceptees release time from the units to attend support sessions was an identified barrier. Unit managers were reluctant to provide additional staffing needed for participants to attend the sessions. Support sessions were scheduled at a variety of times to accommodate all shifts and encourage attendance. Low attendance continued to be a barrier during project implementation. Sustainability of the partnership between Somerset Community College and Lake Cumberland Regional Hospital will be determined by both faculty and hospital administration. Satisfaction with the program and evaluation of outcomes will be deciding factors.

2.6 Ethical considerations

This project was a partnership between nursing education faculty and hospital nurse educators to provide mentoring for an existing preceptor training program. It did not involve patient contact. The project was approved by the Bellarmine University and LCRH's Internal Review Boards prior to implementation. Evaluation forms for the experience were on a voluntary basis and the respondents remained anonymous. Issues of confidentiality and participation were explained prior to commencement of the survey during training sessions and during new nurse orientation. Participants were instructed that completion of requested materials would be recognized as consent of participation. Research data was maintained and protected by the researcher.

2.7 Data collection and analysis

A description of the project was provided to participants during training sessions and during new graduate nurse orientation. Documentation of voluntary consent and protection of the rights and anonymity of the participants were also provided. A Preceptor Survey was distributed and collected at the beginning of the preceptor training workshop to provide demographics and baseline data. A preceptor evaluation was distributed at the completion of the experience. Envelopes addressed to program participants were provided to unit managers for distribution. Each envelope contained instructions for completion, a timeline, documentation of voluntary consent, the evaluation instrument and return envelopes.

Data from the survey were entered into SPSS software, version 20. Descriptive statistics were used to portray sociodemographic and experience information of the participants. Preceptor data was analyzed using paired *t*-test of Likert scale items on the Preceptor Survey which was given prior to training and the Preceptor Evaluation which was administered following the experience. Content analysis of reoccurring themes and comments was used to analyze open-ended responses.

3 Results

3.1 Preceptor

Confidence in abilities

Paired *t*-test of preceptor perceptions of ability to motivate, guide and educate, and evaluate new graduate nurses revealed significantly increased confidence for each of these items following completion of the preceptor training and precepting experience (see Table 2).

Table 2. Paired *t*-test Results Comparing Preceptor Perceptions Pre- and Post-Intervention

	Pre-test	Post-test	t-cal	t-crit	df	p
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)				
Confidence in Ability to Motivate	2.65 (1.76)	.75 (.79)	6.024	2.101	19	.004
Confidence in Ability to Guide and Educate	2.90 (1.74)	.80 (1.00)	6.658	2.101	19	.006
Confidence in Ability to Evaluate	3.30 (1.78)	.90 (1.07)	7.931	2.101	19	.002

Preceptor perceptions prior to training

Content analysis of the open-ended questions of Preceptor Form A revealed that primary motivators for serving as a preceptor included enjoyment of teaching and providing assistance to new nurses. Other comments included helping the unit, improving retention of new nurses, and improving patient care.

Concerns and fears included teaching incorrect procedures, not having enough time to dedicate to the new nurse, ineffective communication skills, not being able to answer questions appropriately, and not having the patience needed to assist the new nurse. One respondent worried about the knowledge level of the new graduate and the liability involved.

Clinical knowledge and the ability to teach were common strengths listed among those surveyed. Other strengths included ability to encourage others, organizational skills, time management, and patience.

Preceptor perceptions following the preceptor training and precepting experience

Content analysis of preceptor responses revealed watching professional growth of the new graduate as a common statement that promoted preceptor satisfaction. Other comments included new graduate appreciation of the experience, watching the new graduate's confidence level and independence increase, and watching the 'light bulbs' come on.

Problematic areas identified during the experience included time constraints, being an observer when a skill was being performed, and frustration with having to repeat skills numerous times. High patient loads and staffing issues were common concerns.

Preceptors commented on the high quality of training and many stated the training experience and the precepting experience exceeded their expectations. Nearly all of the preceptors (95%) indicated the desire to continue precepting. One preceptor indicated not being able to continue due to returning to school full time.

3.2 Hospital educator

Feedback from the Hospital Nurse Educator will be a determining factor in the decision to continue with the partnership. It was therefore considered essential to receive feedback. Only one hospital nurse educator participated in the training and evaluation due to a vacancy which had not been filled during the implementation of this project.

The response of the Hospital Educator was very positive. She identified the following strengths in the faculty educator: enthusiasm for the project, dedication, communication, professionalism, and ability to present course materials in an engaging manner. She 'strongly agreed' to the usefulness of the partnership in providing materials, information, and strategies to assist in developing preceptor abilities to motivate, educate, and evaluate. Additional comments included "sharing the most current and best practice evidence regarding the learning needs of new graduate nurses as well as reflecting on nursing theories which exemplify how new nurses gain and synthesize knowledge was beneficial to myself and the preceptors." Incorporating role-playing with scripted responses was mentioned as a valuable learning experience. She commented that "the opportunity to observe and practice different scenarios proved to be one of the highlights for the preceptors as validated by evaluations and direct feedback." These techniques were adapted from training sessions spent with a professor from the Education Department at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

The Hospital Educator found that partnering with nursing faculty was immensely beneficial for portraying the perceptions and expectations of the new nurse. She recommends continuation of the program without any reservations. "I would definitely recommend continuing the partnership as I believe that we share the same commitment and passion to providing nurses with all of the necessary tools, skills, and knowledge to provide the best possible care for our patients." The CNO at LCRH has also voiced satisfaction with the project and intends to support continuing the partnership.

3.3 Limitations

The study used a convenience sample which consisted mostly of graduates from one associate degree nursing program (85.7%). A second limitation was the small sample size of preceptors and new graduate nurses. The lack of use of the discussion board by preceptors and new graduate nurses is an additional limitation. The discussion board could not be evaluated as a method of providing additional support for either group.

4 Discussion

The results of this study provide encouraging support for the value of partnerships between academia and practice settings to prepare preceptors with skills to ease the transition of the new graduate into practice. Preceptors indicated increased confidence in the ability to educate, evaluate, and motivate with paired *t*-test scores significant at any level. Preceptors increased confidence in the ability to serve as a clinical educator for the novice nurse created a nurturing learning environment for the new graduate.

Preceptorship programs are used to bridge the gap between nursing education and the reality of the workplace. New graduate nurses experience significant stress during the first 3 months of the clinical practice, which has been identified as the most stressful time during a nurse's career^[25]. The role of preceptors to prepare new or transitioning nurses to function more efficiently has become increasingly important. Preceptors have the ability to shape, nurture, influence, and support new graduate nurses. Nursing administration and nursing educators must collaborate to provide training and support needed to encourage experienced nurses in the role of preceptor. The preceptor training will assist in laying the ground work for preceptorship program development. The program represents a cooperative effort to alleviate the effects of the problem in order to bridge the existing gap between academia and the workplace. The major goals are to increase learning, efficiency, and self-confidence in the new graduate nurse. The projected result will be enhanced retention, greater job satisfaction, better patient outcomes, and a healthier community.

Faculty nurse educators can contribute to existing preceptor training programs by sharing knowledge on how to motivate, educate, and evaluate new graduate nurses. Preceptors are typically skilled nurses who know how to be nurses. What they often don't possess is how to be an educator and meet the needs of new novice nurses who are still learning.

5 Implications and recommendations

The results from this study provide health care organizations, hospital educators, and faculty nurse educators with encouraging findings indicating the benefits of continued partnerships between academia and practice settings. The findings provide support for the development of partnerships to train nurse preceptors as novice nurse educators. Turn-over rates at LCRH will provide additional data to indicate the success of the preceptorship program and changes that were implemented. The anticipated increase in job satisfaction and retention of the new graduate nurse will provide positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

Recommendations include, continued implementation and evaluation of partnerships between academia and the practice setting is needed using larger samples. Continuation of discussion groups with existing preceptors to obtain feedback to help structure the existing programs proved beneficial in this study and attendance needs to be encouraged. New graduate

nurse satisfaction surveys at three month intervals during the first two years of employment would provide valuable insight to assist the organization in retention strategies.

Key points

As health care systems focus on recruitment and retention of new graduate nurses, it is imperative that retention strategies be effective and examined closely.

Academic and clinical practice partnerships are a win-win strategy to provide a smooth transition for new graduate nurses into professional practice.

The results from this study provide health care organizations, hospital educators, and faculty nurse educators with encouraging findings indicating the benefits of continued partnerships between academia and practice settings. The findings provide support for the development of partnerships to train nurse preceptors as novice nurse educators.

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