The last thing most new graduates expected to worry about when they entered their nursing programs was finding employment when they graduated. Although it is true that a serious nursing shortage is still anticipated within a decade (Buerhaus, Auerbach, & Staiger, 2009), new graduates today across the country are experiencing difficulty securing their first job. The economic downturn over the past 2 years has quickly changed what was once a wide open job market for new graduates. Experienced nurses in the workforce are delaying retirement and working more hours (Buerhaus et al., 2009). Hospitals are under enormous financial pressure due to the increasing number of uninsured and underinsured patients (American Hospital Association, 2009). In many geographic areas, hospitals have significantly reduced hiring. With the availability of experienced nurses, nurse leaders are more cautious about employing new graduates when they do have vacancies. Historically, the highest turnover in nursing staff occurs in the new graduate group (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009). This turnover often comes after a considerable investment in the orientation of a new graduate to the clinical setting.

The employment situation in California serves as a good example of the reversal in hiring trends. Nurse-patient staffing ratios were initially passed in 1999 and fully implemented in 2005. Initially, hospitals struggled to maintain nurse staffing to meet the ratios. The employment picture has shifted, and the California Institute for Nursing and Healthcare (2009) now estimates that 40% of new graduates will be unable to find employment in the state. Not surprisingly, many new graduates are becoming discouraged about their career choice. Nurse educators play a crucial role in helping these newest members of the profession maintain their optimism and stay engaged in the profession. The advice and support that nursing faculty provide students and graduates can make a significant difference in a successful employment search.

Student development of job-seeking skills should begin with their first clinical rotation. Nurse leaders tell us that every clinical rotation should be viewed as a job audition. While in their rotations, students are observed for their appearance, knowledge, clinical skills, communication, and engagement in their work. Employers are seeking to recruit and retain high performers (Hanson & Hanson, 2007; Hausknecht, Rodda, & Howard, 2009). It may be necessary for faculty to clearly define for students what it means to be a high performer in today’s environment and incorporate activities into classes that promote these behaviors.

Faculty should look for opportunities to have students engage with nurse leaders during their clinical rotations. Faculty can encourage this interaction with assignments. An interview assignment with the nurse leader in a unit where a student does a senior practicum experience can provide insight into the expectations that leaders have when hiring new staff. It can also strategically give students an opportunity to talk one to one with the leader and create a positive impression.

Networking is a critical skill in a tight employment market. Faculty can help introduce students to the importance of networking during their nursing program by encouraging students to attend professional organization events to meet nurses in the community. Local, regional, and international links to professional nursing organizations offer students connections to nurses in practice and potential volunteer prospects and expose them to the importance of professional advocacy early in their careers.

The mission of NSNA is to facilitate the entrance of students.
into the profession by providing educational resources, leadership opportunities, and career guidance (NSNA, 2009).

Today’s students often have specific ideas about where they want to work when they graduate. They may need encouragement to think more broadly about staff positions and not define their options for employment within a fixed subspecialty. Although most new graduates work in hospital settings, other options such as long-term care facilities are worth exploring in a tight job market to gain nursing experience.

In the last year of the nursing program, faculty should consider offering a structured program to provide students with job-seeking skills. Students may want to postpone job searches until they have taken their board examinations, but they should be encouraged to begin earlier. Nurse recruiters and managers from practice partner sites could be invited to help students gain insight into how to effectively conduct a job search. Many job interviews today are performance based, using instruments that are constructed to evaluate the responses of the interviewee to clinical situations and communication scenarios. Classroom practice with this type of interview structure will give graduates an edge in an interview situation.

Other important content on job seeking includes how to make a good first impression, what to wear to a job interview, resume-writing guidelines, and career planning and mapping (Bellack, 2005; Hader, 2005). Graduating students should be given guidance that they can demonstrate their professional motivation during a job search by taking advanced cardiac life support training, entering an RN-to-BSN program if they are an associate degree graduate, or learning a foreign language that is spoken in their community. In a highly competitive job market, new graduates need coaching from faculty about how to prepare for the interview so they truly stand out in the mind of the leader who interviews them.

Today’s nursing students are the future workforce for the profession. The transition for students from the academic setting into the practice setting is challenging and filled with a myriad emotions even when student are easily able to secure employment in a setting of their choice (Duschner, 2001, 2008, 2009; Dyess & Sherman, 2009; Pellico, Brewer, & Kovner, 2009). In the current turbulent economic environment, students may experience extreme anxiety about their job prospects. Nurse faculty play a key role in coaching and mentoring students to think strategically and maintain resiliency in their employment searches. In the not-too-distant future, we will experience another nursing shortage. These newest members of our profession will again be in great demand. Seasoned nursing faculty who have watched these cycles need to help students recognize that although finding their first professional position may be challenging, their long-term career opportunities are very bright.

References

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