Sustainability, Succession, and the Senior Faculty

Since the mid-1900s, nurses in academia have struggled to achieve parity with other disciplines by increasing both the cadre of faculty members with terminal degrees and the expectations for scholarly productivity. Now that faculty have finally achieved that parity, they find themselves at a critical juncture: the proportion of doctorally-prepared faculty is actually shrinking with the retirement of the last of the World War II generation and the Baby Boomers.

It is widely recognized that the nursing profession is threatened by a dearth of qualified faculty to fulfill the demands articulated in the Institute of Medicine (2010) report, The Future of Nursing. Approximately 280 newly graduated nurses with research doctorates and more than 2,000 new graduates with practice doctorates enter academia each year (Fang, Li, Arietti, & Bednash, 2014). Most are not prepared for academic roles. Disagreement exists as to the appropriate deployment of nurses with practice doctorates, who are likelier to be required to practice clinically to maintain advanced practice credentials in addition to fulfilling academic expectations (Smeltzer et al., 2015). In addition, retirements among senior faculty are creating a dearth of experienced academic leaders. Together, these trends challenge the sustainability of the academic discipline of nursing.

A year ago, a group of senior nursing faculty at a national networking lunch discussed their concerns related to several trends associated with onboarding new faculty members. Many senior faculty reported finding themselves juggling increasing responsibilities as they mentored their students, as well as junior faculty. Junior faculty often are protected from service and teaching responsibilities. Thus, it tends to be the senior faculty who ensure that their departments, colleges, and universities, as well as professional organizations, function (Smeltzer et al., 2014). They do this with the anticipation that they will be able to off-load these responsibilities when the junior faculty attain a degree of professional maturity. However, as expectations have risen for tenure-track junior faculty to develop programs of funded research, junior faculty’s perception that they also should serve their academic community has diminished. In addition, this message may be conveyed to junior faculty by administrators. Such messages limit junior faculty’s consideration of various leadership roles present in academia.

In reality, whether or not it is intended, the assumption of departmental or college-level leadership roles does compete with one’s scholarship. However, leadership does not preclude scholarship, but, rather, it calls for a different involvement with the scholarship. Together, the focus on research and guidance to minimize service and teaching contributes to a dearth of nurse educators interested in and prepared for positions of academic leadership. In addition, faculty whose major focus has been their own research and scholarship may have a limited understanding of the articulation of their own academic unit within their institution as a whole and of the macrosystem of higher education.

The need for institutional sustainability demands that nurse educators strategize ways to ensure that responsibilities associated with teaching students at all levels are fulfilled, academic and professional organizations run smoothly, the scientific mission is advanced, and leaders develop from within. Several thoughts come to mind:

- Protection from teaching and service must be reframed as phased introduction to those aspects of the academic role. This can foster an understanding that growth in all areas occurs and that faculty members’ priorities may shift over time. Focus on the development of a program of research and a professional reputation can be viewed as a contribution to the health of the organization.
- Doctorally prepared nurse educators who are engaged in research represent a scarce resource. Good stewardship would dictate that academic functions that can be fulfilled well by other categories of employees should be. Simultaneously, a culture of appreciation for the integral nature of all of these employees needs to be cultivated.
- Efficiency of the numerous essential processes of a school of nursing is a value to be cultivated. How can all of the functions of a school of nursing be handled with the least amount of wasted time and energy? For example, can two-person teams or individuals replace large committees? Would the organization benefit from adherence to a 1-hour limit for meetings?
- Faculties need to discuss openly within their unit, as well as with higher administration, expectations of and supports required by each category of faculty. Can they openly discuss several years in advance which people are suited to rotate into leadership roles when they
are vacated? Even more critical, are they willing to take the necessary steps to prepare them?

- Consider ways to leverage the expertise of retiring faculty, in addition to adjunct teaching. On a flexible part-time basis, retiring faculty could work with doctoral students, mentor faculty on specific activities, engage in alumni outreach, provide editorial support, manage an activity such as immersion travel, complete special projects, or write reports. Phased retirement, or a reduction of load over several years from 100% to 0%, needs to be considered.

- Finally, nurses are both blessed and cursed by their ability to make systems work and get the job done, even under suboptimal conditions. The greatest challenge for nursing leaders is to resist that inclination when resources are insufficient for quality nursing education. Programs can and do jeopardize accreditation when they undertake initiatives for which they have insufficient resources. Refusal to do so can convey the message that leaders value their students, as well as their faculty and staff, too much to compromise standards of quality.

As we onboard new faculty members, we must be mindful of the total workload of the nursing unit and of the capacity of the senior faculty. Issues related to optimal use of human resources need to be discussed openly within the nursing unit and the institution as a whole to ensure that students are well served. All faculty are leaders. Although priorities have previously led to emphasis on individual career development, the faculty shortage requires that a faculty function strategically as a team. Only then will sustainability and succession be achieved.

References


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