



DOCENCIA - FORMACIÓN

LET THE POTENTIAL RN-BSN STUDENT BE HEARD: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION ISSUES.

DEJEMOS A UN FUTURO ESTUDIANTE DE BSN QUE SEA ESCUCHADO. TAREAS DE
CAPTACIÓN Y PERMANENCIA

Sharon Cannon, **Carol Boswell, ***L. Ray White, *Dorothy Jackson,
*****Patricia Holden-Huchton.**

*RN, Ed. D. Regional Dean/ Professor. **RN, Ed.D. Associate Professor. ***MSN, RN, C, CS, FNP. Instructor.
****MSN, RN, FNP, CS, NP-C. Assistant Professor. *****DSN, RN. Assistant Professor. Texas Tech University
Health Sciences Center School of Nursing.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to describe results of two surveys undertaken by the faculty in a West Texas school of nursing. The initial survey had as its focus the assessment of factors important to registered nurses when considering a return to the academic environment for the BSN. The second survey also had a focus to assess the perceptions of currently enrolled registered nurses in the RN to BSN program. Recognizing the complexity of recruitment and retention issues for RN to BSN programs, a program decided to take a proactive position in addressing these issues. The market area for this program is a seventeen county region in a primarily rural area of West Texas. This region has a population to registered nurse ratio of 175:1 as compared to the state of Texas of 131:1. A faculty task force developed a survey tool that was mailed to registered nurses in the region. Data were analyzed to determine preferences of these registered nurses for enrollment and completion of the program. Concomitantly, the faculty also surveyed currently enrolled students to determine their perceptions of the factors important for returning and remaining enrolled. Data analysis was conducted to determine information that would have implications for future recruitment and retention strategies of the school. Both surveys provided data that assist faculty in determining strengths and barriers for the registered nurse population to recruit and retain the registered nurse population enrolled in rural programs.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es describir los resultados de dos encuestas llevadas a cabo por el profesorado de una Escuela de Enfermería al Oeste de Texas. El estudio inicial se centraba en la valoración de qué factores eran importantes para las enfermeras tituladas cuando consideraban la vuelta al entorno académico para cursar el Máster en Ciencias de Enfermería, BSN (*Baccalaureate in Science Degree Nurses*). El segundo estudio también estaba enfocado en la evaluación de las diferentes percepciones que tenían las enfermeras ya incluidas en dicho programa con respecto al mismo. Reconociendo la complejidad existente en las cuestiones de captación y permanencia de las enfermeras en los planes de estudio BSN, un programa decidió tomar una posición activa en lo que a estas cuestiones se refiere.

El área marco de este programa es una región con diecisiete condados contenida en un entorno primordialmente rural al Oeste de Texas. Esta región tiene una relación de 157:1 de población con las enfermeras en activo, en comparación con la proporción 131:1 del estado de Texas. Los profesores desarrollaron un cuestionario que fue enviado a las enfermeras registradas en la región. Los datos fueron analizados para determinar las preferencias de estas enfermeras a la hora de inscribirse y completar el programa. Paralelamente, la universidad también encuestó a los estudiantes sobre los aspectos para ellos más importantes en estas mismas cuestiones a la hora de permanecer matriculados. El análisis de los datos condujo a establecer una información que tendría implicaciones en las futuras estrategias de la escuela en cuanto a la captación y permanencia en el ya citado programa.

Ambas encuestas proporcionaron datos que ayudaron a la universidad a esclarecer los apoyos y los obstáculos con los que contaba la población enfermera para captar y retener a la población enfermera en los programas rurales.

INTRODUCTION

The current nursing shortage has both short-term and long-term implications for nursing education. Entry-level programs are struggling to increase enrollments to meet the healthcare service demands of today. At the same time, RN-BSN programs are experiencing a decreased number of graduates from Associate Degree Programs. This in turn, results in fewer BSN graduates eligible for graduate programs. Obviously, a domino effect on admissions to all nursing programs exists, even to the doctoral levels. This then impacts the number of available faculty to teach in the programs. Without enough qualified faculty to teach, enrollments will continue to decline. Add to that concern a rural component and you have a problem with monumental implications.

The problem is also compounded by complex funding mechanisms for faculty salaries. A national impetus has developed to provide grant dollars to increase enrollments. States are also attempting to provide more money. However, in one state a change in the way money is allocated to all public universities/colleges has been established. That state has moved from counting the numbers of students to formula funding for full time equivalent students and credit hours generated. Institutions are not funded on just numbers of students but rather on full-time students. More and more nursing students are unable to go to school full-time for a variety of reasons - family obligations and finances to name just two. Consequently, they go part-time. Schools receive fewer dollars for faculty salaries if they don't increase enrollment even more. This type of funding adds another dimension to the nursing shortage.

Recognizing the complexity of recruitment issues, one RN-BSN program in rural West Texas decided to take a proactive stance in addressing these issues in a two-pronged approach. The first phase was to assess the current market for the RN-BSN program and to

assess currently enrolled RN-BSN students. Phase two will follow with the implementation of activities based on the results of these surveys.

RN SURVEY RESULTS

During the Fall, 2001 academic year, faculty members at an RN-BSN program initiated a discussion directed toward recruitment and retention issues concerning enrollment into the program. The dialogue identified the need to analyze the expectations and desires of the potential and existing students. Two surveys were developed and through a panel mechanism, face and content validity were established.

The catchment area for this program was recognized as encompassing seventeen counties in a primarily rural West Texas area. One significant aspect when investigating the potential student population for the RN-BSN program was the ratio of population per registered nurse for this region (175) compared to the state (131). The Board of Nurse Examiners for the state of Texas for the year 2001 ascertained the presence of 3546 licensed RNs within the seventeen counties. Of this number, 2477 (69.9%) individuals listed their degrees as associate degrees in nursing or diplomas.

For the 2,477 individuals identified as educated at the associate degree or diploma level, surveys were mailed out to the addresses provided by the Board of Nurse Examiners for the State of Texas. Within each of the packets, a return stamped envelope was provided for the participants to use. The period of time allowed for the completion and return of the surveys was a three-month period. During this period of time, three hundred five surveys (n=305) were returned, which reflected a twelve percent return rate. All returned surveys were incorporated into the statistical aspect of the project.

Demographic information such as gender and educational preparation was consistent with data reported by the Board of Nurse Examiners for the state of Texas (2001). Several aspects provided interesting information. For example, even though the individuals were older, the years of nursing experience were basically equal. Of the participants, roughly 90.6% of the respondents wanted longer hours with fewer meeting times per week with the majority of the material provided via the web. Another aspect discovered through this survey was that 58.4% wanted to begin classes during the fall with summer (24.5%) gaining the next highest percentage. Fewer individuals (17.1%) stated that they would prefer beginning classes during the spring academic semester. Another important area of concern included on the survey tools addressed the issue of travel miles to access the school facility. The majority (78.6%) documented their miles to travel as being less than forty miles. The final demographic area was the question related to place of employment. The hospital setting was listed as the primary site of employment by 53.6% of the respondents.

Within the survey, the type of program offerings listed were face to face, seminar, completely online, mixture of online and face to face, summer only, and weekends only. The tool listed several options under the face-to-face and seminar options. To provide additional information, the participants were asked to consider whether they would want daytime or evening offerings for the face-to-face option (Table 1). Multiple participants omitted the divisions of days for the seminar options. Of the individuals who did complete the section concerning the division of days, the combination of Friday/Saturday did receive the greatest percentage (40%) of positive responses. The mixture online with some face to face did receive the maximum percentage of agreement (69.9%).

Following the assessment of the desired option, the same designations were presented with the question seeking the level of preference for each of the options (Table 1). Again the

same areas identified in the initial question were supported as being preferred within this question.

Table 1: Preference concerning Types of Offerings.

Designation	Prefer	Percentage	Does not Prefer	Percentage
Face to Face Weekly	158	66.7	79	33.4
Face to Face Daytime	111	48.7	117	51.3
Face to Face Evening	134	55.6	107	44.4
Seminar type 3-4 per semester	169	69.5	74	30.5
Completely online	156	59.1	108	41.0
Mixture online and face to face	197	73.0	73	27.1
Summer only	67	27.5	177	71.6
Weekends only	92	36.4	161	63.7

The final section within the tools investigated reasons given by the participants for not seeking the educational opportunities provided by the RN-BSN program at this university (Table 2). The principal reasons noted were the time restraints perceived by the participants related to returning to school. Financial barriers and family obligations were the subsequently selected reasons (18% each). One aspect, which was thought to be a foremost reason for not returning to school due to limitation resulting from the nursing shortage, was staffing needs. This aspect received only 13% of the responses.

Table 2: Reasons Given for Not Seeking Further Educational Opportunities

Reason for Not Seeking	Percentage
Financial Barriers	18%
Family Obligations	18%
Cost of the Programs	12%
Time Restraints	23%
Teaching Methods Employed	3%
Does Not Realize a Need for Further Education	4%
Employment Restrictions	13%
Other Reasons Listed	9%

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENTLY ENROLLED RN-BSN STUDENTS

In order to complement data received from registered nurses not enrolled at the university, the faculty decided that students currently enrolled in the RN-BSN program represented an important voice for the issues of recruitment and retention. Therefore, all students attending the RN-BSN program during the Fall, 2001 semester (n=25) were asked to complete a narrative questionnaire.

The survey consisted of nine open-ended questions covering the following: 1) What were the reason(s) you chose to attend this program? 2) Was the decision to attend this program appropriate for you? 3) Why or why not was the decision to attend appropriate?, 4) How many other BSN completion programs did you consider?, 5) What are the strengths of the program that have enabled you to pursue your degree?, 6) What are the barriers of the program you would suggest be changed?, 7) Would you recommend this program to another RN?, 8) Why or why not would you recommend this program to another RN? and 9) Please offer any comments you believe would be helpful in the efforts to expand the RN-BSN program.

RESULTS

Of the 25 students attending classes in the Fall 2001 semester, all 25 (100%) returned a survey. The students were asked to answer the questions related to their individual association with the program. For question one, responses included themes of geography, delivery of program, reputation, cost, professional growth, and treatment of students. Specifically, comments included "location or close to home or work" (n=21) to describe the importance of geography when obtaining further education. This group of students deemed Internet classes, distance education courses, and on-line education as valuable. Reputation

of the program, reputation of the faculty, and prestige were comments demonstrative of the concept of reputation of the program.

It is important to note that all students in the RN-BSN program are eligible to apply for scholarships due to the generosity of the local community. All students who apply for scholarships generally are approved for partial or full scholarship. This process accounts for the theme of cost as a reason for choosing to attend this program.

“I desire to attain personal growth”, “I want to improve my job performance”, “I want to have more doors open to me” “I want to be a better nurse”, “I want to increase my education” and “I want to re-enlist in the military” were comments indicative of professional growth.

Students’ perceptions of how they are treated were a theme that emerged from the data. Students’ comments reflected they were treated in a “friendly” manner. They also noted attention was given to the needs of the working RN student. Twenty-three students answered “yes” to the question asking if attending the school was an appropriate choice. The reasons given mirrored those given as to why the student chose to attend.

Students were asked to identify the number of other BSN programs considered. The number of programs students considered other than this program ranged from zero to three. Specifically, 11 (44%) students did not consider any other program; four (16%) students considered only one other program; six (24%) students considered two other programs; and four (16%) students considered three other programs.

When asked the question of identifying the strengths of the program that have enabled the student to pursue the degree, respondents generally reflected the same comments as to why they chose to attend this program. There was one exception, however. For this question, “classmates” were also identified as a strength of the program. Students identified the strong, supportive network that exists among the students and how each student learns from the others in the network. These comments reflected a positive quality of the program that provides the impetus for the development of additional student to student peer relationships to enhance the overall positive regard a student has for being in the program.

For the majority of students who identified barriers, the most frequently identified barrier had to do with course requirements. The amount of reading required for a course, the number of assignments required for a course and the lack of availability of readings and printed materials for a course were most frequently cited by students as barriers they experienced in the program. In terms of clinical requirements, students who perceived this to be a barrier expressed this as “too many clinical hour requirements and not getting recognition for experiences in the work world as a registered nurse”.

Reasons given for those who answered yes as to why they could recommend the program again had to do with the reasons given as to why they chose the program initially. The majority of respondents who answered yes to this question stated that the program was “student friendly” or “friendly to the working RN”. The other reasons given for a positive recommendation had to do with geography, reputation, cost and opportunity for professional growth.

The final question in the survey asked for comments that would be helpful to faculty in our efforts to expand the RN-BSN enrollment in the program. Suggestions fell into two categories: classroom and clinical requirements. Comments included the need for more face-to-face instruction, less clinical hours, and less classroom assignments.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

So what is the faculty to do with results of surveys such as these when considering program expansion? It is important to note that students are enrolled for a variety of reasons and with varying degrees of expectations of course and clinical requirements (Table 3). The RN-BSN option is typically designed to recognize and reward prior learning and to build on the qualities that adult learners bring to the educational environment (Creasia & Parker, 2001). This school of nursing uses several models of awarding academic credit to RNs for prior education and experience to facilitate the educational mobility of the RN. For example, there is direct transfer of credits, holding lower division nursing credits in “escrow” until completion of program components and helping students develop portfolios for review by faculty. This process is well supported by the profession as noted in the AACN (1998) document, Position Statement On Educational Mobility. Providing multiple options to meet the needs of the students aids in the development of a positive reputation for the program, which is an important recruitment and retention mechanism for any program.

Table 3: Implications from Study

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A focus for recruitment should be toward hospital staff since approximately 50% of the respondents listed this setting as their place of employment.2. Program offerings should employ a combination of online and face-to-face instruction. The number of face-to-face opportunities should be restricted to approximately three to four sessions per semester for all of the courses during each semester.3. The survey identified the summer and fall semester as the key semesters for beginning a new cohort of students.4. Careful attention needs to be given to time expectations for the courses and curriculum issues since this reason was the highest identified reason for not returning to the academic process.5. Current students identified location, cost, and quality of the program as important aspects for returning to a program. Schools of nursing need to carefully consider these aspects as they work to improve and change their offerings.

Creasia and Parker (2001) suggest that registered nurses, as student consumers, should consider cost, financial assistance, quality, accreditation, and accessibility as important factors when making decisions about selecting educational programs. Our surveys indicated students in this program or considering this program make their decisions to attend on factors that closely parallel the suggestions of Creasia and Parker (2001). Location and cost were strong factors for the majority of students choosing this program since this program was “close to home/work or available by internet” and is reasonably priced. The fact that those students who apply for a scholarship are granted a full or partial scholarship due to the generosity of the community is well supported by the students in the survey. Given the nursing shortage and fluctuating economic trends in this area, financial assistance is a huge consideration for the registered nurse desiring to continue with professional education. Employers in this area are generous with tuition assistance or reimbursement, but the

demands of the work force are such that employers are not in a position to release many registered nurses to go to class. Therefore, the mixture of online and face-to-face classes incorporated into this program is supported by the survey results as a reason for choosing a program over others.

According to AACN (1999) in the document, *Distance Technology In Nursing Education*,

Careful use of technology in education may well enhance the profession's ability to educate nurses for practice, prepare future nurse educators, and advance nursing science in an era when the number of professional nurses, qualified nurse faculty, and nurse researchers is well below national need (p.3).

Students verified overwhelmingly that distance education technology, while not infallible, is a strength of a program. The vast majority of students could see no other way to advance their education if it were not for distance education. Although distance education was highly valued, the respondents did note that some face-to-face sessions were expected and appreciated.

Another implication identified from this process was the need to direct recruitment efforts toward the hospital nursing staff. Although all areas where nurses are employed need to be included into a recruitment plan, it was interesting to see the high number of survey responses returned by hospital nursing staff members. As a result of the hospital nursing staff responsiveness, the feedback gained provided insight into their needs and expectations.

A final area for discussion concerning results from these surveys is in the area of when to enroll new cohorts of students. Out of the three options - summer, fall, and spring - the two options, which received the highest agreement, were the summer and fall semesters. These two times seem to meet the expectations of the potential student population better than the spring option.

CONCLUSION

The purposes of these two surveys were to identify what a program needs to examine in order to retain, build on, and redesign that which is positive about the program and to eliminate or reconfigure that which is not important to the acquisition of the BSN for the registered nurse population in this area. Students who completed the surveys were very positive about the program, but also offered suggestions to remove some of the barriers that could impede their progress. The faculty believe it is important to build a program based on overall trends in higher education, nursing education, nursing practice, and local community needs. The registered nurse population in this area has provided much impetus for focused change, but also affirmed what can be done in the way of program course offerings and delivery methods to ensure an effective and positive program. A vast majority of the students will recommend the program to another registered nurse, which will impact the local rural nursing community in a positive way.

Market assessment results provide necessary information to successfully recruit potential students as well as to retain them. The second phase of this project is to implement results with the ultimate goal to increase enrollments and retention of students for the RN-BSN program and to promote life-long learning with the intent to continue their education in the graduate program. Thus increasing the number of faculty qualified to teach and ultimately increase the number of students enrolled in basic nursing education programs.

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