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Annmarie Munana
ann.munana@yahoo.com

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Academic Leaders and the Regulatory Orientation: New and Improved!

Annmarie Muñana, MSN, MJ, RN

University of San Francisco, School of Nursing and Health Professions

Author Note

Annmarie Muñana is affiliated with University of San Francisco.

Address: 718 W. Melrose Street, 2W, Chicago, Illinois, 60657, United States

Phone: (773) 580-4836; amunana@dons.usfca.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the challenges and regulatory knowledge gaps present in academic nursing leaders, explore orientation as an evidence-based approach to support leadership transition, recommend guiding frameworks, and report on the usefulness of orientations to facilitate academic regulatory compliance knowledge.

During this time of yet another nursing shortage, and considering the aging population and nursing workforce, professional organizations and nurse leaders strive to develop innovative solutions to attract individuals to nursing. The shortage is also present amongst the ranks of nursing faculty and academic nurse leaders and the profession needs strong leaders at the helm of the nursing programs to educate future nurses to meet workforce demands (AACN, 2020a). Nursing education and professional practice are exceedingly regulated through state licensures, boards of nursing approvals, and accreditations. Furthermore, institutions of higher education and nursing programs must successfully achieve academic, operational, and financial goals within this highly regulated climate. This article offers a plan to design and implement such an orientation for recently appointed academic nurse leaders.

Keywords: regulatory compliance, accreditation, higher education, nursing education, academic nurse leader, leadership transition, orientation

Introduction

The main purpose of a nursing education program is to educate safe and competent nurses to enter the workforce; however, this has become increasingly complicated in the current higher education and healthcare climates (Giddens & Thompson, 2018). Similar to the role of a non-academic nurse leader, the role of the academic nurse leader is multifaceted and complex. For the purpose of this article, an academic leader includes campus president, dean, chair, administrator, or director. A nursing program's academic leader not only oversees the academic aspects of the program, they are also expected to excel in managing operations, budget, facilities, and human resources, all within an ever-changing regulatory and accreditation landscape (Giddens, 2018). Nursing programs are beholden to the board of nursing (BON) rules and regulations, as well as the programmatic accreditation standards governing higher education and nursing education. Academic nurse leaders confront funding and budgetary issues, regulatory and accreditation requirements, limited qualified nursing faculty, and shrinking availability of clinical teaching sites (Giddens & Thompson, 2018). Nursing programs are challenged in attracting, retaining, and supporting academic nurse leaders, whether novice or experienced, and ensuring they have the knowledge and resources to be successful (Fang & Mainous, 2019). Without effective academic leaders who possess an awareness and understanding of academic regulatory compliance, programs will be unable to grow and educate future nurses to meet the demands of the workforce. Studies have demonstrated that a nursing shortage is associated with compromises to patient care quality, safety, and outcomes (AACN, 2020a). Many professional organizations, such as the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2020b) and the National League for Nursing (2020), offer a variety of valuable leadership and mentorship

programs for nursing deans or directors; however, they do not emphasize specific content related to academic regulations.

The available knowledge will inform the groundwork for a quality improvement initiative to develop a regulatory orientation for newly appointed academic leaders of a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program at a major university. This project did not receive any specific grant funding from any agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Background

The importance of compliance with the rules and regulations governing nursing education cannot be overstated. Without mandatory initial and ongoing BON approval, a nursing program cannot exist. Failure to adhere to the regulations may jeopardize the program's very existence, and, ultimately, risk removal of BON approval, leading to the program's closure. It is of utmost importance that the academic nurse leaders understand, interpret, and apply the many rules, regulations, and accreditation standards related to BON and programmatic benchmarks. Although a failure to maintain accreditation standards results in a loss of accreditation status, it is a program's inability to meet BON standards that may result in program suspension, loss of approval, and possible closure (Spector et al., 2018).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has shined a light on the importance of academic nurse leaders' knowledge and confidence in navigating regulatory changes. The numerous federal and gubernatorial mandates, directives, and waivers affecting healthcare, nursing, and education highlight the levels and layers of regulatory oversight for nursing programs. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN, 2020c) outlined a state-by-state summary of the multiple state-level emergency waivers and temporary statutory changes affecting nursing enacted across the United States in response to the pandemic. Furthermore, by June 2020, over

45 state BONs had put forth changes in education requirements for nursing programs requiring programs adjust their teaching modalities to comply with the new, albeit temporary, rules to continue to educate students (NCSBN, 2020a).

Context and Setting

Due to the high stakes associated with non-compliance, academic nurse leaders must possess the knowledge, resources, and confidence to manage a successful and compliant nursing program. Unfortunately, many nurse leaders, including deans and directors, do not receive formal training on rules and regulations for nursing education (Delgado & Mitchell, 2016).

A gap analysis conducted at a university-based nursing program revealed that the regulatory orientation for the new academic leaders in the BSN program was inconsistent in its delivery, content, and learning objectives. If not addressed, this represents a risk concern and potential vulnerability that could lead to detrimental effects on students and faculty, and the program itself. Although some new leaders may have had previous exposure to BONs or accreditors while participating in a site visit, they may fail to grasp the implications and nuances associated with regulatory oversight. To address this gap and decrease associated risks, an academic regulatory orientation would enhance knowledge of regulations and best practices when confronting such issues and support a nursing program's goal to graduate safe and competent nurses into the workforce.

Available Knowledge

To provide background on the problem and inform on a possible approach to solve the problem, current knowledge available was explored regarding the challenges in academic nursing leadership and the value of formal orientations in facilitating regulatory concepts and compliance learning.

Challenges in Academic Nursing Leadership

Academic nursing leadership is faced with a workforce shortage and a retention problem (Fang & Mainous, 2019; Flynn & Ironside, 2018). When starting their role, the new academic leader is motivated and eager to succeed, but workload, job dissatisfaction, and work-life balance issues may soon lead to burnout and attrition. This has had the largest impact on new or smaller programs, where 41% of deans left their posts within the first five years (Fang & Mainous, 2019). In a recent NCSBN study, Spector et al. (2020) discovered that lack of stability in a nursing program's leadership and frequent leader turnover could be warning signs of a program falling short of BON standards and at risk of losing approval.

Highlighting the nursing and academic nurse leader aging workforce and shortage, researchers strive to understand the unique challenges of academic leadership and offer recommendations to facilitate the leadership transition. With this goal in mind, many researchers have put forth competencies to reflect the responsibilities of the dean or academic leader (Bennie & Rodriguez, 2019; Giddens & Morton, 2018), describing the competencies of the academic nurse leader (Patterson & Krouse, 2015), and identifying characteristics of successful deans (Wilkes et al., 2015).

The role of a dean or director is complex and multi-layered (Bennie & Rodriguez, 2019). Following the competencies set forth by the American Organization for Nursing Leadership, Patterson and Krouse (2015) studied academic nurse leader competencies to provide a foundation for academic nurse leadership development. They described four overarching competencies: a vision for nursing education, the values of higher education, a nurturing relationship, and stewardship. Based on a study of 30 deans, Wilkes et al. (2015) detailed both personal and positional leadership characteristics of successful leaders. In addition to being

passionate and supportive, necessary attributes included being visionary; having the ability to develop faculty; possessing strong communication skills; and demonstrating leadership by role-modeling and promoting the nursing profession. Overall, regardless of characteristics associated with academic nurse leaders, the literature acknowledges the importance of adequate preparation, mentoring, and development for new and future deans to acquire the requisite attributes and promote a successful transition to leadership (Patterson & Krouse, 2015; Wilkes et al., 2015).

To overcome these barriers and to meet their charge of educating the future workforce, nurse leaders need to embrace strategies to curtail attrition and improve job satisfaction (Flynn & Ironside, 2018). The adoption of evidence-based professional development opportunities, such as formal orientations and structured onboarding will support the academic leaders (Fang & Mainous, 2019).

Formal Orientation to Support Transition to Leadership

Acknowledging that most leaders in higher education have not received adequate role preparation, studies found orientation to be an evidence-based and worthwhile method to prepare professionals in higher education for a leadership role (Wolverton et al., 2005). This is also true for nurse leaders and managers in both the clinical and academic settings, where the literature supports a formal orientation to prepare successful leaders and promote retention (Baker, 2010; Fang & Mainous, 2019; Giddens & Morton, 2018; Hudson, 2008). In a hospital setting, a pilot study of a new nurse manager orientation, Conley et al. (2007) established that a formal orientation focused on the learners' needs had a positive impact on new manager recruitment, retention, and success. Similarly, in academia, formal and structured onboarding is recommended to support leader success and prepare the next generation of academic nurse

leaders. Moreover, the leadership transition process can be further enhanced by the addition of executive coaching (Glasgow et al., 2009).

Despite the available knowledge to support formal orientations, a study examining nursing faculty and leaders in large universities revealed that only 10% of the faculty and leaders had received formal leadership training, with the majority of the participants pointing to on-the-job training as the most common method of acquiring their management skill set and knowledge (Delgado & Mitchell, 2016). Unfortunately, this failure to adequately prepare academic leaders is not just a nursing education problem, but has also been observed in allied health programs, such as physical therapy programs (Bennie & Rodriguez, 2019), and across higher education institutions (Wolverton et al., 2005).

Academic Regulatory Orientation

In carrying out their responsibilities, chief nurses or nurse leaders must make critical decisions in a challenging regulatory environment. To be confident and knowledgeable in their actions, they must have the information, tools, and resources to support an understanding of the rules and the role of the BONs (Hudson, 2008). Unfortunately, there remain inconsistencies in how the leaders acquire such information (Winstead & Moore, 2020). To address this gap in North Carolina and Oregon, the BONs developed regulatory orientations, based on data from pre- and post-orientation surveys have proven effective in providing instruction and guidance on regulatory concepts for the nurse leader (Hudson, 2008; Winstead & Moore, 2020).

An onboarding plan covering BON approval, accreditation, site visits, and related regulatory requirements contributes to a successful transition for nursing education leaders to carry out their responsibilities in a manner consistent with the governing regulations (Giddens & Morton, 2018). Nursing program leaders and faculty shared that education and training on

accreditation ahead of a site visit decreased stress and anxiety, leading to a meaningful accreditation and learning experience (Davis et al., 2015).

Finally, it is noteworthy to emphasize that a solid grasp of BON rules, accreditation standards, and data-driven benchmarks, including board pass rates, retention rates, and graduation rates, is insufficient. A recent study by the NCSBN (2020) found that quality indicators, such as faculty qualifications, faculty to student ratios, and stability of program leadership, represent key criteria to guide and inform on a successful program (NCSBN, 2020b).

Recommendation

It is not uncommon to find academic nurse leaders who come to their role unprepared and without the requisite awareness and understanding of the regulatory and accreditation requirements. The lack of formal processes for leadership orientation and support may result in leader turnover and instability, both are regarded as signs of a program in trouble (NCSBN, 2020b).

Whereas a BON's mission is to protect the public, and programs that comply with BON rules produce safe and competent nurses; an accrediting body, in granting accreditation, speaks to the quality and integrity of the program (Spector & Woods, 2013). A regulatory orientation is a critical aspect of the onboarding of new academic leaders. State BONs, such as Texas, North Carolina, and Oregon, offer new nurse leaders, including those in academia, a board-sponsored orientation. Separately, accrediting agencies, such as the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education or the Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation, also offer their own workshops or seminars to present information on their processes and standards. Topics in their orientations range from the value of accreditation and applicable standards, to the various resources to support the preparation of self-studies and site visits (AACN, 2020b; NLN, 2020).

The review of the literature supports the recommendation to develop a comprehensive formal academic regulatory orientation for nursing program leaders that integrates both BON and accreditation content. This innovative and efficient approach would help the learners appreciate the similarities, overlaps, and differences between BON and accrediting agency oversight. The transition to a nursing dean role is both a challenging and fulfilling journey (Green & Ridenour, 2004). It is expected that academic nurse leaders who participate in this orientation, will experience an improvement in their regulation and accreditation knowledge and enjoy an increase in confidence when handling compliance issues.

When considering frameworks or models to guide the development of the orientation, there are two models that seem to fit well together. For the orientation curriculum, the project may rely on a human-centered design (HCD) approach (Babich, 2020). The model focuses on the learning needs and desires of those who will ultimately be the recipients of the intervention—the new leaders. Additionally, the curriculum and design take into account the new leaders' perspectives and perceived needs (IDEO, 2020). In the first of three phases, the inspiration phase, the aim is to explore the learners' desires to inspire the solution to the problem. This is followed by the ideation phase, where ideas are gathered from the learners and subject matter experts to guide the development of an orientation to engage the learners. The final step is the implementation of the product or solution—the regulatory orientation (IDEO, 2020).

The new academic leader experiences a transition in practice as they go from faculty to leader. Having begun their career as a faculty member, many academic nurse leaders, although knowledgeable about curriculum and teaching, come to their leadership role with limited academic leadership preparation (Glasgow et al., 2009). To support their leadership transition, the American Nurses Credentialing Center's (2020) practice transition (PTAP) model provides a

framework to guide the orientation's design, outcomes, and alignment with nursing program's parent institutional culture and leadership. The frameworks described complement each other and may serve to create excitement, participant engagement, and support practice transition.

Conclusion

Higher education is subject to numerous regulations and oversight (Koebel, 2019). Given the significant repercussions of a university or academic program's non-compliance, possibly resulting in program closure, leadership must be well informed and confident in their knowledge and in applicable regulations. Unfortunately, new academic leaders are unprepared and hampered by a steep learning curve (DeZure et al., 2014). The academic nurse leader role is critical to the future of nursing workforce but comes with unique challenges requiring careful preparation (Green & Ridenour, 2004). Although academic nurse leaders may participate in leadership development, specific instruction on legal aspects of nursing education, compliance, and BON and accreditation oversight is not consistent, and in many instances, it falls below competing topics, such as budgets, faculty, and staffing, on the priority list.

Nursing program academic leaders must be familiar with state licensing, BON regulations, and programmatic accreditation processes and oversight in order to promote and maintain regulatory compliance to successfully guide their nursing programs. As reported in the literature, a formal orientation is a valuable tool in new academic leader onboarding and regulatory training. To support a successful leadership transition for new academic nurse leaders, for nursing programs should consider the design and implementation of an enhanced new leader orientation to include an academic regulatory orientation building on available resources and in alignment with the university's enterprise compliance plan.

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