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Preparing nurses for work in Primary Healthcare: Lessons learned

Background: Strengthening the core of primary health care service delivery worldwide is key to improving patient care experiences, understanding of the chronic disease process, and engagement in shared decision making and self-care. On a broader scale, primary health care contributes to better population health, lower healthcare costs, and improved provider satisfaction. With the current emphasis on including registered nurses (RNs) on the primary care and other community-based interdisciplinary care teams to achieve the health acre goals, it is essential that pre-licensure nursing programs make concerted efforts to prepare nurses to be full partners in care across the care continuum, including primary care. In 2015, congruent with the current healthcare needs and trends, our College engaged in curriculum transformation with the strong emphasis on population health and preparing nurses for work in community-based clinics and other outpatient settings.

Purpose: (1) To provide the current state of affairs in primary care; (2) To provide an overview of the pre-licensure nursing curriculum transformation process and describe the key components of the revised curriculum (3) to present results from the pre-licensure program curriculum evaluation conducted to explore the stakeholders' experiences at one-year post implementation.

Sample and Methods: Curriculum transformation was guided by the principles of social justice and educating nurses to meet the healthcare needs of the 21st century. National level experts on teaching and learning, community stakeholders, faculty, and the literature review findings on the current trends in healthcare guided the curriculum transformation process. The key features of the transformed curriculum include strong emphasis on population health and thereby finding meaningful clinical experiences for students in community-based care settings across the clinical specialties. At one year post implementation, preliminary curriculum evaluation was conducted. Institutional IRB approval was obtained. Appreciative inquiry approach guided the curriculum evaluation. Data were obtained from student volunteers, faculty, nurse leaders in the industry, and nurse preceptors in primary care and outpatient clinics. All informants participated in open-ended interviews conducted by the PI and RAs on the project. Conventional Content Analysis method, as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), guided data analysis.

Findings: Data analysis revealed the following themes: (1) Divergent understandings of primary health care among faculty: An unanticipated gap; (2) Craving clarity and consistency of the Nursing role in primary health care; (3) Learning the roles of nurses in community-based care: An eye opening experience for students; (4) Recognizing the need to embrace the new curriculum by all stakeholders to ensure success in practice (6) Bringing an ideal to reality: characteristics of a successful primary health care rotation from the participants' perspectives.

Conclusions: Preparing nursing students to serve in expanded roles in the primary and other care settings requires exposing learners to all types of nursing care, including caring for patients across lifespan and across care settings from hospital to community health centers, schools, homes, and homeless shelters. In addition to basic patient care, students should be exposed to learning about care management and coordination in interdisciplinary settings, encouraged to explore a variety of career options to meet the healthcare needs of our nations in the 21st century. Expanding educational options for the students in a variety of community-based settings is not without challenges and requires faculty knowledge and desire to lead the change. Strong partnerships between leaders from academia and clinical practice and learning about the successes and challenges internationally are also imperative.

Speaker Biography

Danuta Wojnar is a Professor and Associate Dean, Seattle University, College of Nursing. She was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Executive Nurse Fellow (ENF) (2012-2015). Her research interests include promoting health and health care for underserved and vulnerable populations and improving population health through better preparation and utilization of Registered Nurses (RNs) in expanded roles in primary healthcare. As a member of the RWJF Leadership Action Group of ENF fellows she participated in the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIMF) and American Academy of Nursing (AAN) meetings to define the optimal role and scope of practice for RNs in the primary healthcare environment. In her presentation she will address the current state of affairs, the findings from one pre-licensure program's curriculum evaluation and the opportunities and challenges for the schools of nursing and healthcare partners to ensure meaningful and robust roles for nurses in primary healthcare in the 21st century.

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