



HOW TO BE **SUCCESSFUL** IN NURSING SCHOOL: WHAT EVERY STUDENT SHOULD KNOW

By Jacqueline DeBrew and Lynne Lewallen

Nurse educators know what successful student nurses look like. It's easy for them to identify the traits and characteristics that they believe lead a student to succeed in a clinical course. However, they often do not share these characteristics with their students. Here we present what your instructors may expect from you in the clinical setting.

What Does "Successful" Look Like?

In a qualitative study examining clinical evaluation, researchers asked experienced nurse educators to identify characteristics of successful student nurses in the clinical setting (Lewallen & DeBrew, in press). Below are a few points they stressed.

Successful students are prepared. Being prepared for clinical means that you are on time, dressed appropriately, and have your required paperwork and equipment, such as a stethoscope. This may seem like common sense; however, students who are late, have forgotten their watch, or have not prepped for the day, set an early indication that they aren't going to be on top of patient care. Make sure you follow your school's dress code and policies related

to jewelry, tattoos, and piercings. Be sure that your uniform is clean and pressed. If you don't look professional, staff and faculty won't think you are serious about becoming a nurse.

Successful students are able to think critically. Successful students demonstrate critical thinking by being able to plan and prioritize care for their patients. They also show that they can think critically by being able to adapt the plan of care as patients' needs change. Planning care and prioritizing patient needs shows you understand the patient's diagnosis and prescribed medications and treatments. You will be expected to pull information from past courses and your past clinical experiences to apply to this patient situation. This goes back to being prepared—if you have learned

Made available courtesy of the National Student Nurses Association:
***Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the National Student Nurses Association.



all you can about the patient situation before you come to clinical, you will be better able to make changes in your plan of care as needed.

Successful students have a positive attitude with an eagerness to learn. Successful students approach the clinical day with a positive attitude and show their instructors that they really want to be there. These students also find things to do when the day gets slow, and never waste their time just hanging around and talking. Demonstrate your eagerness by offering help to other students and speaking with the staff nurses about what skills you would like to work on if opportunities should become available. The more experiences you can have, the more knowledge you will have to draw on in the future—that helps you think critically!

Successful students are effective communicators. Not being able to communicate with faculty, patients, and staff was overwhelmingly cited by faculty as a reason they failed students. Effective communication includes both written and verbal communication, as well as an ability to build relationships and work well with others. These students also asked appropriate, thoughtful questions, which made it clear to instructors that they were engaged with their patients and had an understanding of the patient's care. Asking questions is important, but asking too many questions makes faculty unsure of the student's confidence and knowledge. When you approach your faculty member with a question, make sure you have already tried to find the answer yourself. Tell your instructor what you have tried, and what you think the answer to the question might be. This shows you are thinking. It is also important to be friendly to your patient and to the nurses. If you develop a relationship with your patient, you can provide better nursing care to that patient. If you develop a relationship with the nurses on the unit, you will have a better chance to be invited to help them and learn new things while doing it.

Successful students show progress throughout the course. How do you handle feedback from your instructor? Students who accepted feedback and made necessary changes were viewed more positively than those who became defensive when given constructive criticism, or who never made attempts to change their behavior. Faculty gives feedback to students to help them grow. Demonstrate progress to your instructors by accepting their feedback graciously—even if it is difficult to hear—and then making an effort to consciously change these behaviors. Your first reaction to being criticized might be to defend yourself, but try to approach criticism by thanking the person for their comments. Then pay close attention to the comments to see how you can improve. You will be given constructive criticism throughout your career, and now is the time to learn to accept it and to examine it for areas where you can improve.

Putting It All Together

Putting this information into practice may seem overwhelming. Be sure to review and adhere to the rules and policies found in your student handbook. Many of these behaviors—especially those related to preparation—are outlined in the student handbook. This may be one reason that faculty might not explicitly re-state these expectations to their students. Another

reason some faculty may not be sharing this information with students is because it is second nature to experienced nurses. Therefore, they may not be reinforcing and repeating this information with students who need it, especially those who are new to the nursing program. Also, some of these behaviors are not viewed as “teachable.” The idea is that you either have it, or you don't. And if you start the course one step behind because you were late, or don't seem comfortable around patients, then instructors will wonder if you have the capability to move to the more complex skills that they are hoping you can acquire in the course.

Another suggestion is to be open and honest with your clinical instructor. Students sometimes worry that they will be viewed as weak for sharing obstacles, such as learning disabilities, family problems, or even fears. Most likely, your instructor will be glad that you are upfront about any perceived weaknesses, and will want to help you, as long as you are willing to accept help. Teachers want to teach, and when you point out your learning needs to your instructor, he or she can then adapt the teaching plan to meet your needs.

Finally, recognize that clinical is your opportunity to learn. Take every advantage of being a student that you can! When you are assigned to a clinical unit, learn all that you can about their *typical* patient population. While in the clinical setting, maximize every moment you can by seeking out learning opportunities, helping your classmates, or simply sitting and talking with your patients. (Patients are often the best teachers around!) Finally, talk with your instructor and the staff nurses about nursing. This is your chance to see “real world” nursing in a safe environment. Spend time trying to learn from the professionals what it's really like.

If you can approach your clinical experience with a good attitude and solid preparation, you will be able to put into practice all the information you have learned in your classes and your studies. Clinical in nursing school is your opportunity to begin your journey as a life-long learner. ∞

References

Lewallen, L. & DeBrew, J. (in press). Successful and unsuccessful clinical student nurses. *Journal of Nursing Education*.



Jacqueline DeBrew, PhD, APRN, BC, teaches undergraduate nursing students, as well as MSN students, at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) School of Nursing. Her clinical interests include geriatrics, and community health. Her research interests include nursing education.



Lynne Lewallen, PhD, RN, CNE, ANEF is on faculty at the UNCG School of Nursing and has taught BSN, RN-BSN, MSN and PhD students. Her clinical area is maternal-child nursing, and she does research about nursing education.

