An Innovative Strategy to Enhance NEW FACULTY SUCCESS

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Abstract:
Faculty stress is a factor in the current shortage of nursing faculty. New faculty members in
schools of nursing are subject to stress from many sources. This article reports on an innovative
strategy that decreases stress for new faculty while facilitating faculty tenure success.

Article:
Many factors have led to, and continue to compound, the current nursing faculty shortage,
mandating the development of strategies to attract high quality faculty and facilitate their success
in academic positions. This article presents an innovative strategy to enhance new faculty
success.

The Faculty Shortage The shortage of nursing faculty must he viewed in the context of the
current shortage of nurses overall. However, a shortage of faculty is especially alarming. Without
sufficient numbers of qualified faculty, we will not be able to educate adequate numbers of
nurses.

What is particularly disconcerting is that faculty are aging, and too few qualified applicants are
available to replace those who retire. On average, nurse faculty are six years older than the
typical member of the nursing workforce. The average RN is currently 44.5 years old (1,2),
while the average nurse faculty member is 51 (3), and almost two thirds are over age 44 (4).
Berlin and Sechrist report that between 1993 and 2001. there was a 17.3 percent decrease in
nursing faculty aged 36 to 45 years (5).

Recent statistics indicate that nurses graduating from master's and doctoral programs are not
choosing an academic career path. While it used to be expected that nurses pursued advanced
degrees to teach. The last 20 years have seen many career opportunities open to nurses with
graduate degrees. Moreover. recent statistics indicate that the number of graduates from master's
programs is clown 3 percent, and the number from doctoral programs is down 11.1 percent (3).

Those nurses who enter academia usually do so late in their careers. which does not lend itself to
a lengthy academic career (3). Those who leave academia do so for various reasons. In 2002,
according to a National League for Nursing survey (4), only 36.4 percent of faculty members left
their positions because of retirement. ether major reported reasons for leaving were wanting a

career change (20 percent). family obligations (14.4 percent), and salary issues (10 percent). Faculty salaries are nut competitive to positions outside of academia (6).

Many nurses are reported to leave academia because of the stresses and high expectations associated with an academic career (5). While many strategies have been proposed to increase the number of doctorally prepared nursing faculty. these individuals will not be retained if they "don't enjoy their day" (5, p. 55). In view of the current nursing faculty shortage. it is imperative that we understand the stressors and expectations faced by new faculty. as well as explore innovative ways of assuring new faculty success.

Stressors in the Academic Setting Stress is inherent in the faculty role, for• those new to the academy arid even for those experienced faculty who are assuming a new position. Although stress is individualized, situational, and often self-imposed, many factors contribute to the stress of new faculty members.

One contributing factor is expectations (7). Because new faculty desire to be successful in teaching. research, and service, meeting the expectations of the administration, colleagues, and students becomes a driving force in job performance. However, expectations are often unclear or evolving. The struggle to differentiate between actual and perceived expectations may contribute to schedule overload. In an attempt to be perceived as competent in all three areas, new faculty may assume a workload that makes it difficult to succeed in any aspect of the faculty role.

In a qualitative study of six novice faculty (7), overwhelming workload and unfamiliarity with the university culture were identified as major stressors. Evidence also exists that universities may be increasing their expectations for promotion and tenure. New faculty may be expected to do more to obtain promotion and tenure than did their more senior colleagues. which can be a significant cause of anxiety (8).

The myriad of changes now taking place within academic settings also contribute to new .faculty stress. One significant change is the shift away from the lecture method of imparting information (9). Faculty are challenged to alter their traditional views and methods of education in order to incorporate new teaching methodologies. In addition, faculty are expected to adapt their teaching and communication to an interactive, technological approach.

Particularly relevant to science-based professions is the rapid development of knowledge. such as the mapping of the genome. Nursing faculty must stay abreast of current research that can have direct impact on their didactic and clinical teaching.

An additional cause of stress has been brought about by changes in student demographics. Faculty are challenged to relate to students from many different cultures who have varying learning styles and needs. In an attempt to meet the needs of a diverse student population, many colleges and universities are making efforts to recruit minority faculty. Those faculty who are immigrants or of an ethnic minority face additional and unique stressors. Research indicates that they report higher levels of stress related to publishing demands, review, and the promotion and tenure process when compared to Caucasian faculty (10,11).

Immigrant faculty may have to overcome language and cultural barriers: Language harriers can impede effective communication with students and faculty and add to the time required to prepare lectures, grade papers, and write grant proposals and manuscripts. Cultural harriers and an unfamiliar practice environment can lead to feelings of social isolation.

Finally, the failure to identify the individual needs of new faculty members can also contribute to stress. These may include the need to form relationships, understand the organizational culture, and have a "safe harbor." or place to share their stressors with others (12). However, providing opportunities to manage stress will not facilitate the understanding of a complex organizational culture.

What About Mentoring? Mentorship programs, one means of helping faculty understand the organizational culture. are designed to facilitate the orientation and socialization of new faculty to their role in specific academic settings (13). In schools that do not have a formal mentoring program, the burden is on new faculty to seek out appropriate mentors independently. This involves risk-taking (14) and can he a cause of additional stress.

Successful mentoring relationships require time and have a direct impact on faculty workload (7,15).11 the mentor's workload is perceived to be overwhelming, the protegé may feel reluctant to initiate meetings to discuss personal issues and will only approach the mentor with concrete questions. Hinshaw (15) has pointed out that support from the administration, acknowledging the time needed to mentor new faculty effectively, would enhance the mentoring process. However, given the current faculty shortage, such support may not be possible.

A further problem with mentoring relationships conies about because mentors are often seasoned faculty whose own personal experiences with tenure may be inconsistent with present-day requirements. The mentor's advice on how to focus energies may be incongruent with current expectations communicated by the university. Further, because the mentor may he a voting member with regard to the protégée's tenure. the relationship may not provide a safe environment for the discussion of stressors in the faculty role. Other strategies to address new faculty stress and facilitate success in the academic environment must be developed to retain new faculty.

A Strategy to Enhance New Faculty Success The development of a self-governing support group of new faculty pursuing tenure provided a vital strategy to facilitate faculty success at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. This group provided a noncompetitive arena where new faculty could discuss their feelings of stress and discover ways to become successful in the university's environment.

Five new faculty members from a range of ethnic groups assumed tenure track positions. Each had varied teaching, clinical, and research experience; as a group. they represented all three departments within the school. The five became acquainted at several social functions for new faculty within the university as a whole and at School of Nursing meetings.

As part of an initiative established several years ago to facilitate new faculty integration, each new faculty member was assigned as a protégée to a tenured faculty mentor (13). Mentor- ship proved to be helpful for learning how committees functioned, which activities merited involvement, and how to navigate the university system. Nevertheless, feeling a need for more.

The five faculty members began to meet informally to discuss the experience of being new faculty. These meetings started out as lunches for getting acquainted and discussing issues common to being in a new work environment. They quickly evolved into an informal support network. To provide legitimacy and formality, the group took on a name — The "MUGS" — an acronym for Mutually Untenured Group.

Group sessions centered on sharing strategies to incorporate the tripartite mission of the university — teaching. research, and service — into work plans for the semester. Because the members were from different departments within the school, each knew of different opportunities for service and had opportunities to observe different teaching strategies. All identified research as the mission that was most difficult to integrate into weekly schedules.

As each group member learned more about the others' individual research interests, they were alert to new developments in these areas and shared information. Although all had slightly different research interests, it was helpful to brainstorm about research topics and funding opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, they were able to openly acknowledge the reality that it is common to postpone research and scholarship activities, in contrast to teaching and service activities, which have specific deadlines. By discussing this issue openly and providing external motivation for one another, each group member was able to maintain research and scholarship as a priority in her work agenda.

As group cohesiveness evolved, the members decided to work together to assure success as faculty. In addition to separate scholarly pursuits, they explored the idea of pursuing a joint project and added a scholarly component to the meetings. After selecting a topic of mutual interest, they began a large, integrative literature review and worked toward formal presentation and publication.

Leadership evolved as tasks changed. All members participated fully, but the leaders varied with each activity. During. some semesters, conflicting schedules precluded group meetings. Group e-mail and small subgroup meetings helped keep the group on task to complete the scholarly activity while providing time to support one another.

This atmosphere provided a safe environment for ventilating feelings of stress. At same lime, it helped decrease stress by allowing members to complete scholarly work in a supportive group setting. Because all the members entered the group at a specific time frame, the group clarified the requirements for tenure and promotion and designed specific strategies to ensure the success of all members.

Benefits and Barriers A group such as MUGS provides clear benefits — camaraderie, emotional and instrumental support, and partners to work with to attain tenure. It was helpful that all the members of the group were at similar stages in the tenure process, so activities could be applicable to all. However, to be cohesive and functional, such groups require an investment of time. Those with unusual or very busy schedules may not be able to participate. If members are repeatedly absent, or the meetings are too difficult to schedule, the group may not function well and may not survive.

Another potential barrier is that an image of exclusivity may develop and other faculty may feel left out. The MUGs group worked to prevent this problem by making a point of forging other working and friendship relationships outside the group. This strategy helped faculty members become more fully integrated into the faculty as a whole. Another strategy to decrease the image of exclusivity would be to organize topic-oriented meetings, such as discussions of particular research designs, and open them to others who might he interested.

What Happens in the Future? For a group to continue to function, it needs a purpose. The MUGs plan to continue work on scholarly activities and to serve as a member support group. As the time to apply for tenure approaches, activities may change, hut the need for support will still be present. It is expected that the group's focus will evolve with the members' success.

Another issue to consider is how to incorporate new. faculty into a support group. If a group is active and involved in a project. the addition of new members during an intense working phase may he disruptive to the group's. goals. In addition, groups can become too large for meaningful work to occur.

Existing groups, therefore, can choose to incorporate new members or assist. new faculty in forming their own group. If a new group. is formed, it may be helpful for members of the established group to meet with the newer faculty, helping them focus on issues relevant to the individuals involved. Each established group will have to consider which strategy is best for incorporating newly hired members.

The authors are enthusiastic in recommending working support groups, such as the MUGs, as a strategy for new faculty to attain success and longevity u the academic role. In schools where there are too few new faculty members to start a group, others may be sought out Eli conferences and professional meetings. Meetings then would take place by e-mail or conference calls. While this would not be an ideal situation, it is desirable to. have at least some support from a group of persons facing similar issues.

As. the current. faculty shortage leads to greater lumbers of nurses choosing academia as a profession, new faculty will undoubtedly experience stressors in their new roles. These faculty can benefit from the formation of a support group that offers personal and professional rewards while facilitating tenure success. Indeed, the members of the MUGs expect to rename the group when they are no longer "mutually untenured," but, rather, are a tenured and successful group of nursing faculty.

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