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Comprehensive Onboarding and Orientation to Support Newly Hired Faculty in a Nursing Program

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Abstract

Background:
Nursing programs are challenged with retaining nurse faculty due to many complex factors, one being the problem of suboptimal transition to the role.
Purpose:
The purpose of this project was to assess the impact of an onboarding and orientation program, the Teaching Excellence Program (TEP), on the transition of newly hired nurse faculty.

Methods:
Program assessment data, including quantitative and qualitative measures of 14 participants' needs and experiences, were collected over one academic year.

Results:
A Wilcoxon signed-rank test found no discernible difference between the preprogram and postprogram survey responses. Qualitatively, participants reported positive experiences with the TEP, highlighting the value of being in a cohort that created a sense of belonging within the college and university.

Conclusion:
The inclusion of programming such as the TEP can be used as a recruitment and retention tool, especially as we navigate faculty shortages and develop clinicians as faculty members.

An inadequate number of faculty adversely affect student admissions into prelicensure and graduate programs nationally, compounding a nursing shortage now and into the future. Nursing programs are challenged with retaining faculty due to many factors, including practicing clinicians or recent graduate students experiencing difficulties transitioning to their new role in academe. Despite a growing body of research, the problem of suboptimal transition to the faculty role persists and threatens retention of critically needed nurse educators.

Background
Since the early 1990s, attempts to facilitate transitioning into new faculty roles through orientation programs have appeared in the literature. There is evidence that many nursing programs lack the infrastructure to assist in role transition from clinician to educator. A comprehensive onboarding and orientation may be necessary to improve retention. Grassley and Lambe completed an integrative review regarding easing the transition into faculty roles and reported that orientations can be strengthened with resources regarding how to teach, facilitate mentoring relationships, and build a sense of belonging and community within the academic environment.

Being unprepared to teach can lead new faculty to be dissatisfied with their role as a nurse educator. A substantial number of graduate programs in nursing do not include coursework in teaching. Yet, graduates from these programs seek and secure faculty roles. Many newly hired faculty, including those with experience of teaching, have not completed coursework in the science of nursing education, pedagogy, learning theory, or student assessment.

Mentoring can facilitate assimilation into the academic culture and support successful role transition. Agger and colleagues and Rogers and colleagues describe how mentoring can help faculty navigate roles and expectations associated with teaching, scholarship, and service. Effective mentoring can create a sense of belonging and community among nurse faculty, and improve retention. Traditional models of mentoring are characterized by a top-down, mentor-protégé, power-driven dynamic. Newer models
are nonhierarchical and characterized by collaboration and relationship building. There is debate as to which model offers the most benefit to those engaged in the mentoring relationship. A flexible approach involves tailoring the mentoring to the needs and strengths of the mentee and mentor. A comprehensive onboarding and orientation program strengthened by mentoring can support newly hired faculty, as they transition into their academic role.

For the greatest impact, onboarding and orientation should address all aspects of the faculty role that are relevant to academic appointments, including teaching, scholarship, and service within the nursing program and across the campus. In addition, this support needs to be sustained over the entire first year of a new hire, even extending into their second year at the institution when possible. Fitzwater and colleagues recommend designing a transformative, transitional experience to assist newly hired faculty to feel connected, develop confidence in their teaching role, and also build resilience skills. Therefore, an onboarding/orientation program, the Teaching Excellence Program (TEP), was developed and implemented at a college of nursing as a strategy to better support newly hired nurse faculty.

Purpose
The purpose of this project was to assess the impact of the TEP on transition to the faculty role. The TEP aligned with the strategic goals of the college of nursing to achieve excellence in nursing education and improve retention of newly hired faculty.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical basis for this project was Meleis' transitions theory, which suggests that transitioning to a faculty role is multidimensional, including changes in or loss of social networks, supports, familiar objects, and professional and personal roles. These changes can lead to feelings of instability and uncertainty, especially when transitioning from an expert clinician to a novice nurse faculty role.

Methods
Program assessment data from the yearlong TEP and quantitative and qualitative measures of participants' needs and experiences were used to understand the impact of supporting the role transition process of newly hired nurse faculty. This program included a one-to-one interview with each person when they first began their academic appointment and again at the end of the program. Additionally, newly hired faculty were matched with mentors who were either tenured or clinical faculty. In addition to mentor support, the cohort of newly hired faculty met in-person as a group twice a month for 75 minutes during the first semester of the program. These TEP sessions were developed and facilitated by 2 members of the research team experienced in faculty development. During the second semester, the cohort met just once a month for 75 minutes. These meetings focused on foundational aspects of the faculty role in the college, as well as accessing resources and building relationships across campus (see the Supplemental Digital Content Table, available at: https://links.lww.com/NE/B141). Other topics included pedagogical practices to assist the newly hired faculty in teaching. In-person meetings eventually became virtual meetings in the spring semester due to COVID-19 restrictions.

An electronic resource site was also developed to include teaching and learning resources and how-to videos prepared by one of the leaders of the TEP. Throughout the year, various college and university personnel were invited to speak on specific topics. For example, the chairs of different college
committees spoke to the cohort, as well as different administrative staff. Speakers from the university also shared about interacting with students in distress and support for research including maintaining a research database and resources for funding and grant management.

Each newly hired faculty member received numerous teaching resources to use independently and for cohort work. TEP leaders normed the use of “check-ins” from the beginning of the program. The check-in was loosely framed with the following questions: What happened for you since we last met? What was new? Surprising? What questions do you have/what do you hope we talk about this week? Other support activities included focused readings and book discussions, review of course design principles, and application of the transparent design framework to student assignments. By the end of the year, the cohort had met 11 times.

Participants

Participants (n = 14) were a convenience sample of newly hired faculty in their first year at an urban Midwestern private university. Most were female (85.7%, n = 12) and White (93%, n = 13), with 1 (7%) participant identifying as African American and Hispanic. The mean age was 43.7 years, with a range of 31 to 60 years. Their academic preparation included master’s degree (50%, n = 7), DNP (21.4%, n = 3), and PhD (28.6%, n = 4). Ranks included clinical instructor (42.8%, n = 6), non-tenure-track assistant professor (28.6%, n = 4), and tenure-track assistant professor (21.4%, n = 3). All participants were new to a full-time nursing faculty role within the college; however, some participants had been adjunct faculty prior to their full-time role transition (42.8%, n = 6). Most of the participants (85.7%, n = 12) had teaching experience, with an average of 4 years. Years teaching across the cohort ranged from 0 to 20 years of teaching.

Data Collection

Prior to the onset of the program, institutional review board exempt approval was obtained. Participants were asked to complete surveys to measure comfort in various areas of their faculty role (teaching and learning, using technology, and general responsibilities) and one-to-one interviews before participating in the program and after program completion. Demographic data were also collected at the start of the program.

A mixed-methods design was used to assess participants’ experiences before and after the program. Data consisted of responses from cross-sectional electronic surveys. Participants were asked questions about their instructional role and comfort level in different areas of teaching and learning, using technology while teaching, and general responsibilities within the college, such as communicating with administration and staff. Likert-type responses ranged from 1 (I have not had experience in this area) to 4 (I feel confident in this area). Open-ended questions were included to seek further information on perceived barriers and facilitators to their success, and which overall needs they felt had priority their first year in their full-time role within the college. The presurvey data also provided insights to inform programming topics during the TEP, to assist in assigning teaching mentors, and to guide goal setting for the year. The postsurvey data were analyzed to ascertain participant growth and offer programmatic assessment.

In addition to the surveys and to gain an in-depth understanding of the transition experience and perceptions of the TEP, one-to-one semistructured interviews were conducted as the participants started their first semester, and again following their first academic year in their new role. The interview
questions included topics about influence to become a full-time faculty member, experiences in role
transition, personal and professional challenges regarding the transition, and ideal mentoring. One
member of the research team conducted the interviews for consistency. The researcher followed an
interview guide, although they also used clarifying or probing questions based on participant responses.
These interviews were conducted either in-person or virtually and lasted 30 to 60 plus minutes. The
interviews were recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai (Los Altos, California), and analyzed by the research
team.

Data Analysis
Quantitative and qualitative data collected through multiple sources allowed for triangulation of
different perspectives, adding rigor to the data analysis and conclusions. The survey data were
analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to reveal themes found within the open-ended response
survey data and interview transcriptions to inform the lived experiences of newly hired full-time faculty,
as they transitioned to a new role. This process involved each research team member independently
reading the interview transcripts and responses to the open-ended questions and completing initial
coding. Then, the team met to review these initial codes and determine the codebook. Next, the
research team reviewed the transcripts and used Miro (San Francisco, California), an online collaborative
mind mapping tool, for the coding process, development of categories, reduction into themes, and
overall thematic mapping process of the data. The preprogram qualitative data were analyzed first,
followed by analysis of the postprogram qualitative data. Results were compared pre- to post-program
for each participant, and then compared as a cohort to note change. Methodological triangulation of the
data provided a clearer picture into the experiences of newly hired faculty, increasing confidence in the
themes that emerged regarding role transition.

Results
A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted to determine the effect of the TEP on newly hired faculty
members' level of comfort in their new role. Twelve of the 14 participants completed the pre- and
postprogram surveys. There was a median increase in the overall level of comfort (mean difference =
0.59), but it was not statistically significant. The survey measured 3 aspects of the faculty role:
instruction, using technology while teaching, and general responsibilities. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test
found no discernible difference between the pre-and postprogram survey responses for instruction
(mean difference = 0.68, z = 1.00, P= .317), using technology while teaching (mean difference = 0.38, z =
1.00, P= .317), and responsibilities (mean difference = 0.60, z = 1.00, P= .317). The lack of statistical
significance is likely due to the small sample size. However, the small median increases indicate the TEP
had some influence on participant comfort in their new role.

Qualitative Themes
Participants reported a positive experience with the TEP, highlighting the value of being part of a
learning community, and supportive cohort. They noted that the TEP fostered their sense of belonging
and community within the college and university. First-time faculty in the group found that navigating
the nuances of the academic environment was challenging. During the second interview at the end of
the academic year, many participants shared that they expected the transition would continue and
evolve, as they focused on gaining confidence in different aspects of their role. Three themes emerged
from the interviews and open-ended survey questions: intentional faculty development and support, navigating the faculty role, and clear commitment to faculty.

**Theme 1: Intentional Faculty Development and Support**

Prior to beginning the TEP, participants engaged in a university-wide orientation that facilitated their transition into their new faculty role. Participants particularly benefited from this orientation program to introduce new faculty from across campus to one another, and to administrators from various offices. It also included a robust session on teaching and learning. New faculty were also given a tour of the campus and surrounding city landmarks. Many participants noted that this university orientation was the most comprehensive orientation to a new role they had ever experienced and were surprised at the level of faculty support and care. The alignment between the TEP and the college and university orientation programs increased participants' sense of belonging, especially with those who were working remotely, teaching fully online, or primarily teaching in the clinical setting.

While attendance at the TEP sessions was not mandated, everyone was highly encouraged to attend, with participation consistently close to 100% for each session. Participants said the TEP provided a safe space to share their experiences and questions about teaching, learning, and their roles, thereby increasing their confidence and success as teachers. They also reported that the TEP fostered a sense of belonging and helped foster a sense of community to combat feelings of isolation. A participant noted, “Without this program in place, I wouldn't know colleagues, the campus ... there really is no reason for me to be on campus without this program.”

**Theme 2: Navigating the Faculty Role**

Many TEP participants shared the experience of transitioning from expert clinician to novice educator and navigating the faculty role. Although they had positive excitement and anticipation for their new role, many spoke about the uncomfortableness of “being a novice again,” and “having a lot of self-doubt.” The social cues of a job well done in teaching are different from clinical practice. One participant said, “I wasn't getting a lot of student feedback. Having been a clinician in practice, you're engaging with people all the time, even if they aren't saying thank you, you know you're doing a good job. I was really struggling because I didn't have that with students in my course.”

Additionally, participants thought the role of an educator would be more defined, struggling to navigate the boundaries of their position and how to balance teaching responsibilities with research and/or clinical practice. One participant noted, “It is difficult to figure out boundaries—I can work all weekend because there is always something to do.” Another explained, “It's a learning curve to figure out what needs to be done immediately versus what can wait.”

Most participants initially focused more on the nuts and bolts of teaching while they gained confidence and learned the curriculum. At the conclusion of their second semester, participants described an increasing sense of comfort and confidence in their new role. Many were nervous, yet eager to get feedback from colleagues on their performance. In addition, participants commented that carefully considering student evaluations of their teaching helped them improve.

**Theme 3: Clear Commitment to Faculty**

At the end of the first year, it was clear from the data that the college and university were committed to faculty's success in their new roles. Participants reflected on the lasting impact of the university-wide orientation, and commented, “I just felt cared for already in the beginning, administrators actually
showed up and spent time with us.” Another noted, “The biggest thing was the sense of community that started with the university-wide, and then once we got to our specific program, the TEP.”

As participants reflected on their first year, they expressed the value of the cohort and were grateful for the expectation they attend each session. The TEP provided a structured opportunity to form a cohort with fellow faculty who were also transitioning to the faculty role. The check-in aspect of the cohort meetings helped newly hired faculty to “know I wasn't alone in what I was feeling or experiencing.”

Discussion

This project contributes to the growing body of work describing how comprehensive onboarding/orientation programming supports newly hired faculty, as they navigate the transition into their role. The lack of statistically significant differences in the data from the pre-/postsurveys may be due to several factors. Many TEP participants had little teaching experience and therefore could have indicated higher levels of comfort on the preprogramming survey based on preconceptions of the faculty role, when really, the faculty role was more complex than they imagined. This would be consistent with the literature on the impact of being overconfident, yet unaware.22 Another mitigating factor could be that the confidence of participants as a clinician or educator in another program may lead to an overestimation or underestimation of their teaching abilities.22

Participants who transitioned directly from a clinical to an academic role struggled the most with feeling like a novice as compared with those who transitioned from a different academic appointment. Underestimating the cultural difference between clinical practice and academe has been shown to negatively affect the successful transition and retention of nurse educators.3,8 Krause23 found that new experiences, in this case the TEP, may assist with transitioning from practice to teaching, thereby making more realistic assessments of their abilities and the complexity of the role. During the post-TEP interviews, some participants stated that the TEP showed them they were not as prepared for their new faculty role as they had presumed.

The findings revealed the impact of the TEP on social aspects of the faculty role, such as creating community and fostering a sense of belonging. The TEP provided an inclusive safe space to explore the teaching role, as well as other faculty responsibilities such as scholarship and service. Stamps and colleagues13 indicate that, without an effective orientation, many new faculty, especially those from outside of academe, may quickly return to clinical practice or seek a different role. Even experienced faculty members who are in their first year at a new university benefit from a comprehensive and welcoming orientation.2

Moreover, the project findings align with and support the Nurse Educator Transition (NET) model.5 This model describes 4 social processes that occur during role transition. The anticipation/expectation phase is a positive aspect of the transition, where faculty anticipate making a difference with students, having a more flexible work schedule, and advancing their careers.5 TEP participants indicated positive feelings toward transitioning to a full-time faculty role and making a difference through their interactions with students. In the disorientation phase, new faculty can feel confused, overwhelmed, and vulnerable, which may contribute to attrition.5 Similarly, TEP participants expressed confusion about role ambiguity, as they navigated their first semester. TEP participants experienced the information seeking phase to gather information and use mentors to better perform their role. Participants were empowered to seek information on their own, which laid the foundation to continue to develop their pedagogical practices,
seek additional opportunities through the teaching and learning center, and form their identity as a faculty member, the fourth phase of the NET model.  

Limitations
There were several limitations to this work. The TEP only included a small number of participants from a single nursing program in one university. Although the cohort included newly hired faculty from diverse backgrounds, additional research with a larger sample size across a broader geographical area and multiple types of universities is warranted. Another limitation involves the participants in the TEP who were also enrolled in the teaching certificate courses since there is overlap with the TEP.

Conclusion
The inclusion of the TEP as intentional and comprehensive onboarding and orientation programming can be used as a recruitment and retention tool, particularly with current faculty shortages. Championing programs like the TEP can set a nursing school or program as a leader in nursing education practices and faculty engagement. TEP programming portrays the school as a welcoming community and a place to grow into the faculty role.

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