

The Successful Redesign of a Student Nurse Extern Program



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In this article, the authors emphasize the importance of a student nurse extern program in creating a pipeline for qualified bedside nurses. Through collaboration with the human resources department and the nurse management group, professional development educators in one hospital redesigned and reenergized the student nurse extern program to meet the needs of the externs and the healthcare system.

The Baby Boomer generation is causing many changes in health care. Nurses are growing older, retiring, and becoming a part of the patient population they once served, and there are fewer new nurses. This situation is known as the “perfect storm” of health care. Organizations requiring trained clinicians are faced with the question of who will be left to take care of the patients. By the year 2020, experts predict a registered nurse (RN) shortage of greater than 800,000 (Rozycki, 2006). This shortage is forcing many facilities to become creative in recruitment and retention efforts. Creating a pipeline of capable, efficient, quality bedside nurses using a student nurse extern (SNE) program is one way to address the issue. The SNE program is an opportunity for nursing students from local colleges to enhance their technical skills and to experience the role of the bedside nurse under the guidance of an experienced mentor. The goal of an SNE program is the enculturation of participants into the hospital environment while giving the hospital staff an opportunity to work with poten-

tial candidates prior to actually hiring the graduate into the system.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Roper St. Francis Healthcare (RSFH) is a 500-bed health-care system composed of two major hospital facilities in Charleston, South Carolina. For many years, RSFH has had an SNE program in place. The overall purpose was to provide nursing students with the opportunity to develop hands-on skills and increased confidence in providing patient care. The program allowed for externs to be hired at any point during the school year. The lack of standardization of the SNE role and lack of a formal program allowed for many deviations. Although guidelines for the extern role were distributed, students were often assigned the duties of a patient care tech and therefore were frequently underused. The SNEs were hired, recruited, and evaluated by the nurse manager from each unit; there was no governing body to supervise this group, nor a formal process to recruit them into the system once they had completed their nursing programs. Comments from participants indicated that having more exposure to the RN role and fewer experiences within the technician role would increase their level of satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted during the planning phase in the development of the revised SNE program. The purpose was to determine the best practices of other hospitals with SNE programs. The literature revealed support for a change to a structured program focusing on the RN role and highlighted the recruitment and retention success of conducting a summer-only program (Starr & Conley, 2006; Stinson & Wilkinson, 2004) and the importance of placing externs with specific RN mentors or preceptors (Johnson, 2001; Siegel & Borgio, 2003; Scott, 2006).

In addition to a literature review, the author contacted extern program directors of hospitals with summer-only extern programs to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. Discussion with statewide hospital directors revolved around the skills that externs were allowed to perform in accordance with the state Nurse Practice Act. Contact with directors of successful programs from around the country assisted in the overall development of the program. Attendance at National Nursing

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Staff Development Organization conventions also provided the opportunity to learn of successful extern programs throughout the nation.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Based on the literature review and best practices from other hospitals, a proposal was developed for a summer-only nurse extern program. The 2008 program was redesigned as a 10-week Summer Nurse Extern program. A task force was created that included professional development education specialists, nurse manager representatives, and human resource (HR) nurse recruiters. The task force reviewed the variables that influenced the need for change and formulated the redesign proposal. The key changes to the new program were as follows:

- This was a summer-only program with one hire date for all nurse externs.
- The nurse extern was placed with a designated RN mentor.
- Nurse externs did not have their own assignments but worked with the RN mentor.
- Nurse externs worked the same schedule as their mentors.

The goals of the program redesign included the following:

- Improve the extern's satisfaction with the program.
- Increase the level of confidence in providing care.
- Increase exposure to the RN role.
- Develop time management skills. Refine clinical skills.
- Standardize the role of the extern on all units.
- Improve recruitment rates of nursing graduates from the Nurse Extern Program.
- Decrease time for orientation of new graduate nurses who participated in the Nurse Extern Program, thereby saving salary dollars.
- Provide a pool of excellent graduate nurses from which to hire new staff RNs.

OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES

Although the task force had determined the goal and scope of the program, there were several system issues that needed to be addressed. A main concern from the HR department was the need for revision of the SNE policy and the SNE job description. Another issue involved the need to continue a relationship with those student nurses who did not meet the program's criteria. In addition, the financial impact to the organization had to be resolved because the SNE program would require additional full-time equivalent (FTE) positions.

The task force redefined the job description and revised the policy to meet the goals of the program and the organization in collaboration with the HR department. The issue of building relationships with those

denied entrance to the program was resolved by designing a letter thanking them for their application, stating why they were denied entrance, and providing them alternative job opportunities within the organization.

The financial impact of such a program was one of the biggest obstacles the team faced. Initially, the SNE FTEs were divided among the inpatient units that would use externs. The task force was interested in increasing the number of SNEs and thus needed to increase the SNE FTEs. The main focus was not increasing the program budget. After discussing the program with the vice president of HR, the task force proposed using the money available in the current open RN positions to fund the expansion. If all went as planned, the SNEs who were hired into the system after graduation would have a shorter orientation period, resulting in a savings.

The next process involved presenting the program to the nurse managers and clinical nurse specialists (CNSs). Acceptance of the program was required to standardize the role of the SNE across the organization. The two manager representatives of the task force met with the hospital manager/CNS groups hosted by the vice presidents of nursing to lay out the goals, the operational aspects of the program, and the financial impact to each unit's budget. Buy-in to the program was immediate, and all managers expressed interest in hosting a summer extern. Overwhelming approval for the changes to the current program was also obtained from staff after a presentation to the professional development shared governance council.

CANDIDATE SELECTION

Application to the program was through the online position manager. The "job" was posted and advertised. Flyers were sent to the deans of the nursing schools in the local area and other large nursing schools around the state. In addition, flyers were given to students during their clinical rotations and to nursing faculty in the facility. The HR members of the task force advertised at local college job opportunity fairs, promoting this position as a stepping stone to a future nursing position. This advertising resulted in over 50 completed applications being submitted for 29 positions. The "job" was then closed on the online position manager after 8 weeks. Human resource staff performed the initial screening of the applications to ensure that all requirements were met.

PILOT SNE PROGRAM

In May 2008, the first Summer Nurse Extern Program was launched. A total of 29 externs were selected by managers and CNSs of the two facilities. Orientation for the externs included a general hospital orientation by the HR department on Day 1 and a nursing orientation by the professional development department on Day 2. On the second day, the vice presidents of nursing met with

the new externs for lunch to welcome them to the program, followed by a class on computer programs used on the inpatient units. Externs attended an Advanced Skills Class on Day 3, which provided hands-on practice in performing selected nursing tasks. The externs were also given the opportunity to renew their basic life support certification during orientation. For the remaining 9 weeks of the program, the externs worked the same full-time schedules as their mentors. Externs were not counted in staffing and did not have their own patient assignment.

Although the state board of nursing considers externs as unlicensed assistive personnel, the students were still able to improve their nursing skills while working alongside their mentors. Some of the skills in their job description include physical assessments (with RN cosignature), urinary catheter insertion, dressing changes, venipuncture, and tracheotomy care. The externs also attended two shared governance council meetings to expose them to the professional role of the RN at RSFH.

Halfway through the 10-week program, the professional development task force members hosted a luncheon for the externs. At this time, the externs had an opportunity to evaluate the program, their mentor, and the unit on which they were working. This format allowed the externs to express any issues midprogram so that adjustments could be made based on their feedback. Findings from the midprogram evaluations assured the task force that the program was meeting the externs' needs.

At the conclusion of the summer program, the externs, mentors, and managers were invited to attend a graduation ceremony. After a breakfast buffet, the externs reported what they had learned through participation in the shared governance councils.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

After the 2008 summer program, the externs completed an evaluation to determine how well the goals of the program had been met, rated on a 1-to-5 rating scale. Favorable results were obtained when compared with the

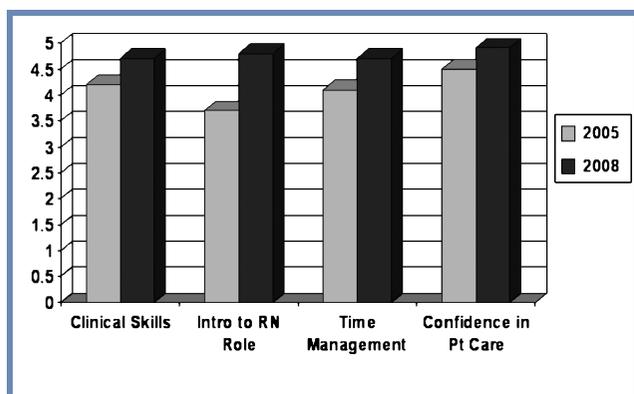


FIGURE 1 Extern goals.

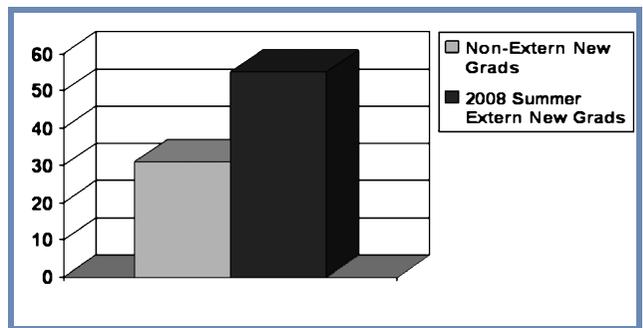


FIGURE 2 Percentage acceptable at Performance-Based Development System (PBDS) baseline.

externs' perceived success in meeting these goals in the years prior to the revision (see Figure 1). When asked their views on the strengths of the program, externs commented the following: "Really seeing how RNs function on the floor and seeing how different people handle the stress when things go wrong," "Just giving a realistic view of what the RN does," "Being able to be side-by-side with the same nurse throughout the program. I was able to see the actual nursing skills I needed to refine," and "Direct, hands on experience." These comments, in addition to the evaluation scores, verified the success of the program and demonstrated that the program truly met the goals of improved satisfaction for the externs.

The first graduates of the inaugural summer program completed their nursing programs in December 2008. Of the 15 December graduates, 11 accepted positions at RSFH (73% retention rate compared with the previous program's rate of 57%). Of the remaining four, one was not recommended for hire by the manager, one was moving out of state, one was no longer in the RN program, and one accepted a position at another healthcare facility.

The task force tracked initial assessment results for the new graduates on the Performance-Based Development System, a computerized competency assessment that every new RN completes upon hire. The 2008 summer program's December graduates had a 45% acceptable rate for baseline assessment compared with a 33% rate for 2008 new graduates as a whole, demonstrating an increase in critical thinking skills (see Figure 2).

Another tribute to the success of the program was a doubling of applicants for the summer 2009 program. There were 125 applications for the 25 available positions between the two facilities. Overall satisfaction with the 2009 summer program was again high, with an overall 4.6 out of 5.0 rating by participants. The managers and mentors also gave high scores for satisfaction with the program, sustaining the gains attained in 2008.

IMPLICATIONS

During the course of creating and implementing the new program, many lessons were learned. The task force

members recognized that the applicants should be interviewed by those nurses who would be working with them in the program. In 2009, this suggestion was presented to members of the retention and recruitment shared governance councils who agreed to assist with the process. A decision was made to use an interview panel consisting of two shared governance members and a CNS and/or clinical manager. Behavioral-based peer interviewing was used in 4- to 8-hour blocks of time, making the job of interviewing a large number of applicants easier for panel members.

It was also determined that additional education was needed for both the mentors and the externs. Initially, there was no training for the RN mentors, which caused some confusion. The task force determined that by providing a mentor class and written materials, including biweekly evaluations, standardization of the extern role throughout the organization could be better accomplished. Increasing the initial education piece to the externs regarding the expectations of their role also required some additional instruction.

One of the most surprising findings at the end of the program was the positive comments by externs who worked evening and night shifts. These externs expressed feeling extremely welcomed and needed by other staff members when working the shifts that were traditionally staffed at lower levels. The following year, managers were encouraged to request evening and night shifts for summer externs to enhance acceptance by staff members.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the redesign of the program has resulted in a successful SNE program. Key components to this success include the following:

- Placing the extern out of staffing, ensuring that the extern is able to shadow the RN mentor
- Assigning externs to work the schedule of one or two specific RNs, thereby providing consistency
- Standardizing the role of the extern throughout the healthcare system

Overall, the greatest strength of the redesigned extern program at RSFH was that, through individual support by RN mentors, nursing students believed that they had a better understanding of the role of the professional RN.

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