

RETAINING THE WISDOM: ACADEMIC NURSE LEADERS' REFLECTIONS ON EXTENDING THE WORKING LIFE OF AGING NURSE FACULTY

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Aging nurse faculty members are vital human resources who serve as educators, researchers, and leaders within baccalaureate nursing (BSN) programs. On average, aging nurse faculty members are over 50 years of age and face key retirement decisions over the next decade. The purpose of this study was to begin to build substantive theory about academic nurse leaders' perceptions of extending the academic working life of aging nurse faculty members. Nine academic nurse leaders from BSN programs nationwide were interviewed in this grounded theory study. Data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis. Four categories emerged: valuing aging nurse faculty, enduring environmental challenges, recognizing stakeholder incongruence, and readjusting. Findings reveal that aging nurse faculty members are highly valued by academic nurse leaders, bringing wisdom, experience, and institutional, historical, and cultural awareness to their many roles. Yet, some aging nurse faculty fail to keep knowledge, skills, and teaching modes current, which is problematic given the multiple environmental challenges that academic nurse leaders face. Stakeholder incongruence arises as a mismatch between the needs of the BSN program and the skills and contributions of aging nurse faculty members. BSN programs, program leaders, and aging nurse faculty members can lessen incongruence by readjusting to address the pressures, tensions, and ongoing change. (Index words: Nursing education; Employment of older workers; Dean, academic; Faculty; Retention; Aging; Nursing shortage; Workforce; Academia) *J Prof Nurs* 30:34–42, 2014. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The wisdom of the wise and the experience of the ages may be preserved in quotations

[(I. D'Israeli, 1849).]

THE UNITED STATES faces unprecedented challenges in providing high-quality, affordable, and accessible health care to an aging population. The growing demand for health care services and an aging health care workforce together provide strategic roadblocks and challenges in the health reform process and the provision of care.

Nurses comprise the largest group of health care providers in our system and are a cornerstone to quality

care at the bedside and beyond. Projections show that nursing will continue to experience high job growth with 711,900 registered nursing jobs projected to be added between 2010 and 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In recent years, new initiatives have been implemented to rejuvenate interest in nursing as a profession, thereby increasing the number of students seeking enrollment in nursing programs nationwide. Qualified students, however, are being denied admission to colleges and university programs because of a nurse faculty shortage. In 2011–2012, over 75,000 qualified applications were not granted admission into nursing programs nationwide (Fang, Hu, & Bednash, 2011), largely because of the nurse faculty shortage.

Longer life spans, increased fiscal needs, and challenging economic circumstances are prompting aging workers, including nurses and faculty members, to reconsider retirement plans and the possibility of an extended working life. These same issues are providing human resource challenges and opportunities, including

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capturing and capitalizing on the value that is brought to baccalaureate nursing (BSN) programs by aging nurse faculty.

Review of the literature shows that nursing workforce studies have historically focused on direct care providers rather than nurse educators. Few scholarly studies focusing on aging nurse faculty have been conducted, and those that have been published focus on retirement versus extending the working life. As society faces nurse faculty workforce challenges, it is important to understand what colleges and universities can do to extend academic employment of aging nurse faculty, 50 years of age and older. The purpose of this study was to generate grounded, substantive understanding of how academic nurse leaders of BSN programs perceive the potential extension of the working life of aging nurse faculty.

Methodology

Design

Grounded theory and constant comparative analysis were used for this study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The methodology was a natural fit for studying the social process and social structures related to extending the academic working life of aging nurse faculty.

Sample

Theoretical sampling was used and included nine female participants ($n = 9$) between the ages of 44 and 71 (mean of 59 years of age). Contact information was obtained through the American Association of Colleges of Nursing directory. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they had primary responsibility for leading the BSN program. Participant titles included dean, associate dean, director, professor, and former dean. The diverse group included seven Caucasians, one African American, and one Hispanic. The academic nurse leaders worked in diverse settings including large, small, public, private, urban, and rural institutions in nine states. Length of employment at the organizations ranged from less than 1 year to greater than 25 years (median = 7 years), and length of service in the current positions ranged from less than 1 year to greater than 10 years (median = 1 year). The majority (eight) worked in public institutions, and one worked in a private religious university. Of the nine participants, five worked in academic health centers. The student population of the schools ranged from 3,600 to over 30,000 ($M = 22,333$). The total number of nursing students in each school ranged from 315 to over 1,500 ($M = 765$) and comprised 2.1% to 9% of the study body. The size of the baccalaureate program ranged from 255 to 1,250 students ($M = 543$, median = 400) and comprised 51% to 89% of the institution's nursing student population.

Data Collection

The data were collected from January to March 2008 via audiotaped, in-person, and telephone interviews. Participants completed a 5–10-minute demographics questionnaire and a 1 to 1.5-hour interview. An interview guide was developed and utilized. The guide focused on topics

directly tied to aging faculty within baccalaureate programs such as problems and challenges; effects of continued employment on ability to meet program goals; organizational and human resource factors that have facilitated, complicated, or hindered employment; specific experiences in which the institution had a difficult decision to make about employing or not employing an aging faculty member; personal factors that have facilitated, complicated, or hindered decisions; the meaning of the phrase extending the work life as it relates to retention of aging nurse faculty; suggestions regarding how programs can successfully extend the work life of faculty; and thoughts related to the academic nurse leader's vision regarding extending their own work life.

The earliest interviews were loosely structured and designed to gain understanding about the participants' experiences with the employment of aging nurse faculty. For instance, one question asked, "Tell me about the effect of employment of aging nurse faculty on the ability to meet baccalaureate program goals." Concurrent data collection and analysis were utilized throughout the study. As later interviews were completed, the questions served to test and develop the emerging theory. Nonverbal information about the setting and circumstances of the interview were captured in field notes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the investigator or an experienced transcriber.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Office of Research Subject Protections and the Human Subjects Review Board. Participants were informed about the study, including the risks, benefits, voluntary nature of participation, and procedures to ensure confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained, including permission to audiotape the interviews. Interviews were conducted with privacy by telephone or in a participant's office.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. The interview data from the first three interviews were input into NVivo 3.0 qualitative analysis software and categorized. Because of technical challenges encountered using the software, the remainder of the analysis was completed without the use of NVivo. Open, axial, and selective coding guidelines were used. In open coding, initially, line-by-line analysis was used to identify concepts and ascertain their properties and dimensions. Similar happenings, events, objects, actions, and interactions were grouped together into categories. As the study progressed, larger sections of data were coded—in some cases, entire sentences or paragraphs. A chart was developed to complete a comparative analysis. Codes for each interview were listed side by side. During axial coding, the relationship between categories and sub-categories was examined in regard to their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

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