

TRANSITIONING FROM DEPARTMENTS TO SCHOOLS OF NURSING: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF JOURNEYS BY TEN DEANS



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Transitioning from a department to a school of nursing creates an environment that is more conducive to attracting qualified faculty and enhancing program growth to meet the projected nursing workforce needs. A comprehensive review of the literature revealed limited research to guide nursing programs considering this transition. This qualitative study explored the conditions and outcomes associated with successful or unsuccessful attempts to transition from a department to school of nursing from the perspective of 10 deans affiliated with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN). Meleis' transitions theory (2010) guided this study in its exploration of facilitating and inhibiting conditions. With institutional review board approval and participant permission, interviews were conducted in-person or by telephone, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were independently reviewed and coded for emerging themes. Content analysis revealed the following themes: titles matter, support is essential, voice at the table, buy-in or dissension, it just brings nursing to totally different level, think differently, and legitimizing your position. For these deans, consideration of the facilitating and inhibiting conditions is critical in determining whether decisions are favorable and in support of the transition. Developing an understanding from the experiences of these 10 deans offers guidance to nursing academic administrators who are contemplating transitioning from a department to a school of nursing. Future research is needed to explore conditions relative to faculty governance and infrastructure, examine the experiences of those undergoing transitions, and expand study findings to develop a self-study guide for programs in assessing their readiness for such a transition. (Index words: Transition; Department; School of nursing; Qualitative research) *J Prof Nurs* 31:464–474, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

CRITICAL NURSING FACULTY shortages exist, and projections for the future are even more dismal in determining the nursing workforce needs for the future given the aging of the population. Increased interest in nursing as a career choice is evident by data that suggest more than 78,000 qualified students are turned away annually from nursing programs because programs lack the faculty, clinical agency and preceptors, classroom/laboratory space, and budgetary resources to accommodate the admission of additional students (American

Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2014a). With the need vast, the co-investigators believe that the ability of a department to transition to a school of nursing has the potential to afford additional resources necessary to recruit and retain qualified students and faculty, advocate for classroom/laboratory space and clinical agency needs, secure fundraising and endowment funds, and enhance scholarship and research productivity through greater grant funding opportunities afforded to schools versus departments of nursing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the conditions and outcomes associated with successful or unsuccessful attempts to transition from a department to school of nursing.

Although a review of the literature in nursing, health, higher education, business management, and dissertation abstract databases revealed little research to guide nursing

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or other programs considering this transition, there are narratives to support transitioning from a department to a school. Barchi (2007) reported that transitioning from departments to schools of health professions, nursing, and pharmacy raised the schools' national profiles to compete on the same level with peer institutions; the schools received their deserved visibility and prestige, which was validated by increased undergraduate and graduate enrollments. A School of Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) transitioned from a department to a school, which according to the Director of HTM Student Services helped its identity (Purdue University, 2013). In transitioning from a department to a school of earth sciences, Bair (2008) noted an increase in the ability to attract qualified faculty including an endowed faculty scholar, growth in diversified research strands and funding sources, as well as a restructuring of faculty workspace and administrative leadership. Norwich University (2012) implemented a new academic organizational structure, thereby "elevating" the department to a school of nursing with expectations to increase graduate enrollment, develop interdisciplinary projects, and establish community and practice partnerships. In a proposal to change the status of a department to a school of nursing, Johnson, Halbgewachs, Dawson, Acquaviva, and Brannon (2010) projected that creating a school of nursing would bring greater regional and national visibility, better position the school to attract faculty and funded researchers to expand the University's NIH portfolio, and create new donor opportunities. In another proposal to transition from a department to a school of nursing, Barakzai (2013) highlighted that the status of a school will enhance professional academic activities and adventures, such as increased access to federal research grants, opportunities for research collaboration with other institutions, assistance in attracting qualified exceptional faculty in the current competitive market, opportunities for establishing international collaborations, as well as increased the number of financial donors. Furthermore, Barakzai noted that an Internet search revealed that National Institute of Nursing Research-funded grants were primarily distributed to nursing programs with school and college status rather than to departments of nursing.

Schriner et al. (2010) found little research on organizational change in nursing education. Similarly, an updated literature review by the authors revealed no research articles on this topic. As a result, a broader search of change within higher education was conducted. Institutions of higher education are an excellent choice for the study of organizational change because most nursing programs are structural units within a college or university.

Employing a process-oriented focus, Barth (2013) examined the dynamics of and between facilitators and barriers for sustainability in teaching, research, and campus operations. With regard to campus operations, he explained that there is an ongoing implementation process for structural innovation, which involves personal commitment, early adopters, collaboration, coalitions, and feedback. Supportive internal structures were emphasized as being most important to influence the

degree of implementation for the structural change. Consequently, Barth concluded that structural innovation not only will enhance sustainability as the transformation process gains momentum and the improvements are experienced by faculty, students, and administration, but also will increase external visibility.

In meta-ethnography of 13 qualitative studies, Hoover and Harder (2014) identified nine themes that characterize the organizational change processes. Themes included the impact of organizational culture on university initiatives, a sense of territoriality with conflict and competition for sustainability, a collective emphasis on collaboration in the processes of change, the importance of committed individuals, individual knowledge and worldviews that shape the practices and structures, the importance of personal characteristics in influencing change or overcoming barriers, the interplay between people and structures for achieving change, the role of power, and the importance of dialogue, networks, and relationships in the process of organizational change. The researchers concluded that these themes exposed the actual and potential contradictions and tensions between organizational structures, and they recommended that future researchers explore positive and challenging stories of organizational change.

In a special issue of 25 years of *Higher Education Policy* (1988–2013), Fumasolia and Stensakerb (2013) reviewed 26 studies, of which 5 articles were on organizational change, and found that external environmental factors and internal dynamics of power, structure, process, and organizational culture play a role in organizational change. However, the researchers concluded that, "there is a need to better understand the organizational transformation of the university" (p. 26). Further commenting that if researchers want to investigate how universities change, then there ought to be a focus on specific exemplars of organizational transformation.

Recognizing the need for exemplars of organizational transformation, particularly in nursing education, this study explored the conditions and outcomes associated with successful or unsuccessful attempts to transition from a department to school of nursing. The co-investigators recruited Chief Nursing Administrative and Academic Officers from AACN Baccalaureate and Higher Degree Nursing Programs who have attempted such a transition. For the purposes of brevity, the title "dean" will be used throughout this article to represent all chief nursing administrative and academic officers.

Theoretical Framework

Meleis' (2010) transitions theory initially identified three types of transitions relevant to nursing: developmental, situational, and health–illness, which occur at the individual, dyadic, or family level. After a review of the literature, a fourth type identified as organizational transition was added to the theory (Chick & Meleis, 1986). According to Meleis, organizational transitions are changes in the organization precipitated by external factors in the social, political, or economic environment or by internal factors in the structure, function, or

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