

# Nurse Leader Collaboration and Partnering: Looking to the Future

Christine M. Marsiello, MSN, RN-BC, and Theresa M. Criscitelli, EdD, RN, CNOR

In the present healthcare environment, nursing leaders need to create a positive pathway for nurses of the present and the future. No longer is nursing leadership focused exclusively on nursing practice issues specific to their areas of responsibility and oversight. The paradigm is shifting for all healthcare professionals. This is a time of significant change and opportunity.

## BACKGROUND

The 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) provides nurses with unique opportunities to deliver care and be an integral part of shaping the delivery of health care. Provisions of the ACA has strengthened funding of nursing programs by the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA).<sup>1</sup>

The ACA is not without its challenges, but at its very core, the American Nurses Association (ANA) and the American Medical Association agreed on one basic premise: healthcare for Americans. Although even experts disagree about the actual number of additional Americans who will ultimately receive health insurance through the exchanges, it is estimated that 8 million people in the United States are now receiving healthcare through the exchanges,<sup>2</sup> and another 10 million are benefitting from Medicaid expansion.<sup>3</sup> However, the true impact of the ACA remains to be seen. Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and policy reforms are raising the bar for hospitals and other healthcare organizations. With virtually nonexistent operating margins, those same organizations are forced to find new and innovative ways to deliver care with diminishing resources. To complicate matters, the northeast region of the United States, specifically the large metropolitan areas such as New York City and its contiguous suburban areas, have challenges with space and aging infrastructure. Implementation of newer technologies produces barriers on several fronts, further thinning already scarce resources.

ANA (2010) *Nursing's Social Policy Statement: The Essence of the Profession*<sup>4</sup> promulgates the professional accountability of nursing to the public and its responsibility to shift with individual, professional, and larger societal needs. Nurse leaders



in academic and clinical organizations must reflect upon this foundational document as the basis for strategies in preparing today's workforce to lead the way in effective, quality care.

The *Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*,<sup>5</sup> published by the Institute of Medicine in 2011, was authored by prominent nursing leaders and health and government professionals. This groundbreaking publication set the expectation for the direction in which the nursing profession must move towards, focusing on the strengths already grounded in nursing: patient advocacy, care coordination, holistic approach, and patient centeredness. Nursing is well poised to take a leading role in healthcare reform. In order to do this, nurses must be academically well prepared to work to their fullest potential and scope of practice. Academic nursing leaders must fully embrace and charge forward with curriculum design focusing on patient centeredness, interprofessional collaboration, efficiency, and quality. Aligning academic programs with service entities into a shared vision of the workforce of the future will provide a solid foundation for this curricular transformation.

## LEADERSHIP NEEDS

The demand for highly skilled nursing leaders has never been greater. Gone are the days of bestowing titles of nurse manager, nurse educator, and assistant nurse manager on the most clinically skilled individuals of a practice area with little formal leadership training.<sup>6</sup> Nurses in those positions are now required to participate in organizational goals and align those goals within the area of their responsibility; manage multimillion budgets; participate in organization-wide quality improvement projects; and implement new programs in their areas, all while overseeing employees, and most importantly, keeping patients safe.<sup>7</sup> Leadership competencies for all nursing leaders must be established, maintained, and continually revised, much like clinical competencies for all clinical nurses. The growth of healthcare and the growth of the profession demand these competencies. Continued professional development of nursing leaders should also be structured so that current nurse leaders, not only stay competent to do their jobs, but change and grow as the marketplace expands.<sup>8</sup> This can be accomplished through collaboration and the creation of academic partnerships.

## COLLABORATION

Collaboration is one skill that nurse leaders must embrace and continually develop. Literature supports interprofessional or multidisciplinary collaboration. It is an expectation in healthcare organizations that nurses have a seat at the table, in the C-suite, in the board room, and at high-level meetings.<sup>9</sup> This has been an extremely positive progression that has evolved over the past decade. Not much, however, has been documented of the collaboration among individual nurse leaders and the importance of this skill of collaboration within an individual setting and across other practice settings.

Within the healthcare organization, nurse leader siloes are common. Operations and professional development, while working within the same organization, often do so mutually exclusive of each other, but both have expectations of one another. A true collaboration requires operational leaders and professional development leaders to sit side by side in a flattened hierarchy under one umbrella. Departmental goal setting must be accomplished together: each accountable for individual parts of the roadmap that lead to the outcome. Professional development leaders are responsible for developing the individual nurse at all levels, whereas the operational leaders create the accountability in the performance of those nurses and the effect on patient outcomes. Nurse leaders must also be at the organizational table, side by side, with leaders from other disciplines with the objective of mutual alignment with organizational goals, while also developing a solid understanding of their role in creating and implementing strategies to advance the profession and the organization simultaneously. One significant focus must be placed on the development of the workforce of the future.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, nursing collaboration is critical in developing and maintaining successful programs within any organization. The needs are clearly multifaceted, demanding that nurse leaders from different nursing specialties be able to collabo-

rate, communicate, inspire, and empower staff and each other to take an active role in meeting organizational goals. Collaboration outside of the healthcare organization into the community has taken on new meaning in the face of healthcare reform and nurse leaders are expected to lead the way.

## ACADEMIC SERVICE PARTNERSHIPS

One type of healthcare organization/community partnership is the academic service partnership (ASP). ASPs, as defined by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, are an officially structured partnership for a university and a practice setting that have a shared vision built upon strength, demonstrating collaboration and cooperation, which supports change for the sole purpose of improvements. These partnerships are key elements for innovation and the future of healthcare. The partnerships can range from being moderately structured to highly structured. The moderately structure ASPs do not have formal contracts, strategic plans, bylaws, or financial agreements. What they do have, however, is strong nurse leaders at the helm on both sides, academic and service, who consistently communicate, share resources, and share vision/mission/goals. They have trust and respect, as well as a commitment to both the academic and service components, and mutually benefit from this relationship. The highly structured ASPs are based upon formal contracts between partners' clear strategic plans, bylaws, and a financial agreement. They reflect clear manager structure and serve mutual objectives.<sup>11</sup>

The traditional model of the preparation of the new graduate nurse was more of a handoff, without the communication. New nurses would graduate, pass their licensure exam, and be hired for their first nursing job. Armed with the tasks of injections, bed making, and the basic elements of the nursing process, this new nurse would then need to shift his or her thought process to look at nursing within the realm of governmental regulation, core measure processes, quality competencies, and policy and procedures. The tasks that they were so focused on mastering during nursing school become completely contingent upon the care delivery model of the organization. The expectation is that nurses completely redefine how they think about the care they give on a much broader level.

Although the goal of any nursing education program is the same—preparing nurses to care for a patient's diverse needs in a variety of settings—they must do so in an increasingly complex and precarious healthcare environment, and educational strategies must prepare them for these challenges. Partnering with healthcare organizations and engaging in alignment of academic goals with those of healthcare organizations will be a necessity in preparation of the workforce of the future. Leadership skills such as communication, collaboration, and teamwork must be woven through the entire program, framing the way content is delivered in the classroom and resulting in the creation of not just nurses, but future nurse leaders.<sup>12</sup> Academic service partnerships provide an opportunity for academic leaders to partner with organizational nursing leaders and professional development leaders, with the goal of creating a more specialized curriculum based on the practicality of healthcare as it will exist in the era of

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