

Tapping the Leadership Skills of Nursing Faculty:

The Benefits of Volunteering for Academic Committees

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Volunteering for committee work is an essential, but often underappreciated, component of a faculty member's academic responsibilities. Although the major focus within academia is teaching, research, and service, professional leadership is expected. Membership on and leadership within a committee is worthy of attention as a mechanism for professional development.

Grooming new nurses as leaders within this transformative healthcare environment is a critical initiative for our profession.¹ Encouraging nursing faculty to take on new roles within academia is one way to strengthen leadership development and identification. There is a shared belief, present amongst many, that “on the job” experience is one of the best ways to develop and finesse leadership skills.² Volunteering for a leadership role on an academic committee is an excellent way of highlighting leadership potential.

Twenty years ago, it was clear that barriers existed that made it difficult for nursing faculty to participate in school and university governance.^{3,4} These barriers included a heavy teaching load, a lack of collegiality amongst faculty members, and less than ideal socialization to the faculty role. Today, despite significant progress, some barriers remain. The need to socialize new faculty into how to maneuver up the academic ladder within the governance structure has been emphasized.⁵ There are multiple guidelines and recommendations on how to assimilate new faculty into a teaching or research role; however, there is minimal guidance on how new faculty should integrate school and university service through committee work.⁶ Few articles identify the benefits and difficulties inherent in being an active and responsible committee member or how faculty members can play a significant role in university governance.⁷

This article describes how one may enhance leadership capabilities through committee involvement. Benefits include: enhancing leadership capability, expanding networks and connections, demonstrating skills, and enhancing personal engagement. Disadvantages and challenges associated with committee leadership are also addressed.

ENHANCING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

Becoming a member of an academic committee is a great way to develop new perspectives at work, meet other faculty, develop relationships, and extend one’s network. Anecdotal comments and research tell us that, despite interaction with students within the classroom and with colleagues in the hallway, the daily life of a faculty member can be fairly solitary.^{8,9} It is not uncommon for faculty to work diligently each day on teaching plans and writing research grants, which limits social interactions. On the surface, the limited contacts allows one to remain focused on the tasks necessary to accomplish the rigorous goals they, and their deans and department chairs, have established for them. In some environments, faculty may be advised to avoid committee work that may take them away from other academic pursuits such as research and scholarship.¹⁰

Volunteering to be a member of an academic committee provides the opportunity to get to know people, in a working capacity, gives one the chance to learn more about different areas of the school and/or university, exposes each committee member to different data and ideas, and allows for the generation of output that can help transform academic operations. Additional benefits include learning more about how other faculty members view their roles, responsibilities, and personalities within the organization, discovering ways to improve

or enhance communication within the culture, and form new alliances amongst faculty that cross academic programs, departments, schools, and disciplines.

EXPAND CONNECTIONS

Connecting with colleagues in committee meetings provides the opportunity to expand professional relationships both within the school and across the university, through improved collegiality, expansion of strategies for managing challenging situations, and mentoring. This concept has been described as “collegiality” and highlights the importance of these types of relationships in academic environments.¹¹ They believe that collegiality, the “willingness to serve on committees,” is crucial for full functioning within a school of nursing. Forming strong connections with other faculty members, who are both senior to you, as well as with your peers, facilitates professional growth. Not only does collegiality through involvement in committee structure enhance work satisfaction, but it also leads to the development of interesting insights and new projects via conversation with those from other disciplines.

Research has identified that growth experienced by nurse faculty leaders, when faced with challenging situations, began within their work as an academic committee leader.¹² And strong leadership skills are central to the formation of stable and significant academic environments. The faculty leaders that participated in their project emphasized the benefits of reflection and learning to work with people in new ways as strategies to better cope with challenges. Leading a committee helps one improve both interpersonal and collaborative skills—skills central to growth as a person, an academician, and a professional leader.¹³

Mentoring, or coaching, is frequently found within schools of nursing. This can facilitate greater committee involvement and commitment.^{14,15} Developing stronger connections within one’s school and across the university can help faculty better understand how one’s work fits into the academic system. Faculty development is best viewed strategically through the lens of a more seasoned faculty member. Utilization of the mentoring process is one method that can encourage greater committee participation.

Additional benefits include:

- Exposure to new information because of different material discussed in various meetings
- Recognition throughout the university to propel one’s career
- Increased likelihood of being asked to join other interdisciplinary initiatives in the future
- Large “network of influence” can help one become a “change agent”

SHOWCASE SKILLS

Volunteering for leadership positions within committees and task forces can be an effective mechanism for demonstrating group management skills. Encouraging adoption of alternative perspectives and work strategies can lead to the development of new relationships and the generation of renewed energy and creativity.¹⁶ Mastery of leadership skills facilitates successful

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