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Faculty attrition as an outcome of a college merger: Lessons learned

Gayla Love PhD, MSN, RN*

Chamberlain College of Nursing, Hampton, GA 30228, USA

Abstract
This study explores the experiences of associate degree in nursing faculty who experienced a program merger. Nursing faculty in this study reported how communication and work environment influenced their decision to leave or remain with the college. If these concerns remain unaddressed, seasoned faculty will continue to leave two-year colleges increasing the number of unfilled faculty positions.
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Academic program mergers have become a strategy to broaden institutional vision and mission, attain financial stability, and achieve academic excellence. Combining academic programs in 2-year colleges can increase status in an institution and improve educational services (Siler & Royeen, 2007). Nursing faculty play a pivotal role in ensuring the success of an organizational change effort and can impede or facilitate its success (Shera, 2008). As a result, nursing faculty face significant challenges when an academic merger occurs. Their efforts to address these challenges are critical to the success of the merger.

Although research indicates that some faculty will not be amenable to the change, few studies examine the attrition of nursing faculty during a program merger. It is important to ask how a nursing program merger influences faculty attrition rates. This article reports on faculty perceptions of a merger between two associate degree programs in Georgia that took place during 2009 to 2011. Interviews were conducted with two faculty who experienced the merger and remained on staff in the newly merged institution and five faculty hired after the merger had occurred. Although the

exact number is unknown, approximately six faculty did not remain in the newly merged school of nursing. After a difficult period of transition, the newly merged program is described as having a positive work environment.

1. Challenges of Nursing Faculty in a Merged Nursing Program

Program mergers create a new organizational culture or work environment with a new set of goals, values, and mission to which faculty in the newly formed program must adjust. Some of the challenges nursing faculty experience are poor communication, an unhealthy work environment, and a lack of support in their newly merged positions.

1.1. Culture of a Nursing Program

Organizational or program cultures function to develop as a collective identity providing guidelines on how to communicate within the organization. Individual nursing programs have their own organizational culture or way they do things to carry out day-to-day operations. This can be seen as the personality of the organization. Although nursing program curricula help guide and direct much of how things

∗ Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 404 250 8578, +1 678 748 0070 (cellular); fax: +1 404 250 8599.
E-mail addresses: phdlove2013@gmail.com, glove@chamberlain.edu

are done, the unspoken existence of a certain climate or culture influences faculty retention. Often, nursing faculty struggle to fit in with the newly formed nursing program culture, and when they are not accepted, conflict ensues. The newly formed nursing program develops its own organizational culture that may or may not offer adequate support to faculty. As the new culture is formed, groups within an organization that are more vocal become more dominant, which may suggest to others that these groups have a certain power and influence over program decisions.

Mgbere (2009) recognized two levels of culture that may be seen in a merged nursing program: visible and invisible. A visible culture is an observable behavior, such as how an individual acts or dresses, whereas the invisible culture involves the underlying value assumptions and beliefs of the individual. In addition, organizational culture provides a guide of acceptable and unacceptable behavior and the allocation of status and power within the organization (Mgbere, 2009).

1.2. Faculty Concerns

Concern about communication and the work environment related to nursing faculty roles has been discussed by Florenthal and Tolstikov-Mast (2012), Ramachandran, Chong, and Ismail (2011), and Yaman (2010). Findings from a study by Florenthal and Tolstikov-Mast (2012) suggested that conflict between faculty and staff negatively influences the organizational culture. The research findings support a lack of communication as perceived by the participant and certain communication strategies to be a contributor to tensions between faculty and staff. The researchers concluded that these perceived tensions can build among faculty and staff, making faculty opt to leave the organization.

The work of Ramachandran et al. (2011) has documented the need to convince academic programs of the gains rather than losses during mergers and the importance of introducing new elements to replace old ones. Yaman (2010) research suggested that the work environment that supports emotional assaults or fails to stop negative messages diminishes organizational loyalty and creates an unnecessary division. Nursing programs need to nurture their organizational culture to support nursing faculty but in the right balance so that they remain competitive and retain qualified faculty.

An organizational climate that treats knowledge as something that is not to be shared among colleagues openly establishes a negative environment and stifles open communication (Ramachandran et al., 2011). Clear communication reduces faculty's sense of ambiguity over colleagues' responsibilities. A positive and nurturing work environment supports the development of a sense of belonging and enhances job satisfaction. Moreover, a nurturing academic environment is critical for retaining high-quality faculty.

1.3. Program Resources

Schriner et al. (2010) reported on a reorganization of a nursing school resulting from a rise in student enrollment and the addition of new programs. Their content analysis revealed that there was insufficient administrative coverage and budgetary constraints that created additional external pressures. Faculty reported increased workload because of a lack of administrative support and limited financial support as reasons why some faculty chose to leave the organization (Schriner et al., 2010).

1.4. Reported Challenges

Some faculty see mergers as bringing about a loss of power and status. The faculty's perceived loss of power and status produces feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem, and a loss of control that leads to negative behaviors and even feelings of threat (Harman & Harman, 2008; Zakari, 2012). In addition, as faculty attempt to cope with the changing environment, faculty must also contend with new boundaries. Through the process of opening and closing boundaries, faculty are able to change, share, and learn how to navigate the new environment. Setting boundaries in the work environment provides structure, allows faculty to work more effectively as a group, and supports effective communication (Lucas, 2010).

The development and knowledge of boundaries support the establishment of teamwork, but if the boundaries are too rigid, group learning and teamwork are hindered. In a study by Lucas (2010), the concept of using teams to transfer knowledge in the form of organizational practices will be more successful if a culture of collaboration is established.

In addition, teamwork requires trust. Faculty expressed that trust in competence level and trust in intentions are important. When faculty do not perceive that trust, they may feel as though someone is trying to sabotage their position. To reestablish organizational trust and commitment, faculty must work together to validate and understand their emotions related to the changes that occurred. This support of one another is crucial to build an efficient and effective team.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding how a nursing program merger affects faculty attrition rates as related to communication and the work environment can be examined using Lewin's Change Theory. Lewin (1997) posited that any change an individual goes through requires a change in cognitive structure. According to Lewin, the individual will continue to change with each repeated experience. In some cases, an individual will identify a need for the desired change. In others, the individual has no desire to change and will only succumb to the change through direct force or obligation.

If we apply Lewin's theory to the situation described in this study, nursing faculty will first identify a problem with the old way of doing things and recognize that a change is