THE KEYS TO SUCCESS IN DOCTORAL STUDIES: A PREIMMERSION COURSE

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This article will review an innovative on-line preimmersion course for a hybrid doctor of nursing practice (DNP) program and a traditional face-to-face doctor of philosophy nursing program. The doctoral candidates include both postbaccalaureate and postmaster's students. The authors of the preimmersion course developed and initiated the course in order to address various issues that have surfaced in discussions between students and faculty. Examples of common themes identified include writing skills, statistics, life–work–school balance, and navigating instructional technology. Doctoral studies may pose challenges to students studying nursing, in regard to academic rigor and experiencing on-line education for the first time, especially for students who have been out of school for an extended amount of time or are not accustomed to a nontraditional classroom; thus, having a preimmersion course established may facilitate a smooth transition to rigorous academic studies in a hybrid program. The course, which was developed and delivered through Blackboard, a learning management system, includes the following 9 preimmersion modules: academic strategies (learning styles, creating an effective PowerPoint presentation), library support (introduction to the university library, literature review tutorial, and citation styles), mindfulness, wellness, statistics essentials, writing express, DNP capstone, netiquette, and DNP/doctor of philosophy mentorship. Each module consists of various tools that may promote student success in specific courses and the programs in general. The purpose of designing the preimmersion course is to decrease attrition rates and increase success of the students. While the majority of students have succeeded in their coursework and been graduated from the program, the authors of this article found that many students struggled with the work, life, and school balance. Future work will include the evaluation of results from graduate students enrolled in the program. (Index words: Online preimmersion course; Graduate nursing students; Rigorous academic studies; Hybrid approach; Modules; Academic success) J Prof Nurs 0:1–6, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Background

Doctoral studies have been challenging for many students, including recent graduates and those out of school for 20 years or greater. Other professions work 8.5 years in their field before entering doctoral studies compared with nurses who spend 16 years in the clinical setting or administration before returning to school for doctoral studies (Robert Wood Johnson and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation New Careers in Nursing Scholarship Program, 2013). Nurses seeking terminal degrees are often older than their counterparts in other professions, with 46 years old being the average age of a nurse completing a doctoral degree program (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2010), compared with 33 years old in other doctoral programs (Bell, 2009).

Nursing graduate programs have rigorous academic expectations, including assignments, presentations, and various on-line activities. Before starting graduate studies, students often feel underprepared and overwhelmed with instructional technologies, which pose challenges

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including navigating the learning platform, research databases, and course assignments. The learning platform is an on-line forum used for communication between the professor and the students, such as the syllabus and assignment details. Furthermore, while adapting to new technology, graduate students must balance school, work, and family responsibilities. Students thus often become frustrated and feel that they lack even the most basic skills to complete the on-line activities such as discussion posts and presentations. This article summarizes the process of developing an innovative on-line preimmersion course for doctor of nursing practice (DNP) and doctor of philosophy (PhD) graduate nursing students. Future work will include the evaluation results from graduate students enrolled in the program.

An extensive literature search with regard to the benefits or contraindications for a preimmersion program was conducted. Many compelling articles showed the importance of orientation programs for graduate studies. Orientation is important for nursing graduate students to improve the students' perceived support from the institution and ease the students into the many demands of graduate education (Cameron, 2013). "From Infancy to Adolescence: Seven Lesson for Creating a Sustainable Graduate Student Orientation Program" highlighted the importance of orienting graduate students to the ever-evolving technologies, especially in tools that can be accessed in the library (Lightman, 2015). With the mass amount of research and other data available today, graduate students can experience less stress if they know how to access library services (Lightman, 2015). Because of the multitude of personal, professional, and educational occurrences that place pressure on nursing graduate students, orientation alleviates some of students' stresses and gives students a support system from the start (Boughton, Halliday, & Brown, 2010). No contraindications were found; all literature favored an orientation for graduate students, yet no consensus on the exact process of formation of the program was given. For this reason, the authors of this manuscript felt that it was imperative to follow up and evaluate the program to uncover the benefits of preimmersion courses and discuss the process of developing the preimmersion course for nursing graduate students.

There are two different types of terminal degrees in the nursing profession, the DNP and the PhD. The DNP is a practice doctorate, whereas the PhD is a research doctorate, and each degree has a different set of objectives. The PhD objective is to prepare nurses to generate new knowledge for the science of nursing and clinical practice, with the nurse researcher conducting research studies and disseminating knowledge. In contrast, the DNP is designed to prepare nursing leaders with the needed skill set to participate in interprofessional health care teams and assist in translating the evidence into clinical practice to improve patient outcomes (Robert Wood Johnson and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation New Careers in Nursing Scholarship Program, 2013).

In 2004, the AACN endorsed the DNP degree for advanced practice registered nurses to enter practice (AACN, 2004). The AACN endorsed the DNP in order to better align nursing with other disciplines in health care. Disciplines such as pharmacy, physical therapy, and psychology have already endorsed doctoral preparation.

The driving force for the AACN's endorsement was the need for additional knowledge in caring for complex patients and the ability to practice in challenging and multifaceted health care systems, to improve patient outcomes and satisfaction, and to reduce overall health care costs. Although nursing represents the largest segment of the health care professions in the United States, with more than 3 million registered nurses, the Institute of Medicine has recommended that the number of nurses with a doctoral degree be doubled by 2020 (Institute of Medicine, 2010). According to Smeltzer et al. (2015), with the initiative of the Institute of Medicine's recommendations and the increasing number of people with health insurance, there is an increase in the need of advanced practice nurses. This further increases the need for nurses educated at the doctoral level. According to Kirschling (2014), the AACN found that DNP programs have experienced more than a tenfold growth in the last 7 years. Moreover, health care has become more challenging with increased costs and lower fertility rates coupled with an aging population. The United States spends approximately 18% of its gross domestic product on health care, making health care in the United States the most expensive in the developed world (Pande, Leive, Smitz, Eozenou, & Eozenou, 2013). Because of the increased burdens on the health care system, the nursing profession has met the demand by encouraging more nurses to obtain their terminal degree to assist in developing new knowledge, by increasing optimal patient outcomes, and by reducing health care costs. The importance of acquiring a terminal degree in nursing has come to the forefront of nursing education in recent years. The AACN has proposed the DNP as the most appropriate degree for advanced practice nurses entering practice (AACN, 2010), whereas the PhD in nursing is designed for nurses to create new knowledge (AACN, 2010).

Hybrid Approach

With the advances in academic technology and its use in delivering programs, schools have begun to offer distance and hybrid programs to provide students with access to terminal degrees. The authors' institution currently offers the DNP program in a hybrid format. Hybrid learning is the combination of technology-based instruction and live, face-to-face teaching (Lockee & Reece, 2005). During the past decade, the development of hybrid learning has grown tremendously in higher education. The hybrid approach has been successfully implemented in the health field (Hsieh & Hsu, 2011; Lehmann et al., 2013) and includes the use of digital media, which has shown a positive impact of learners' interactive preparation on achieving learning outcomes (Lockee & Reece,