The impact of burnout on doctorate nursing faculty's intent to leave their academic position: A descriptive survey research design

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the fact that the great demands placed on many nursing faculty put them at high risk for job burnout; there are limited studies exploring the relationship between burnout and leaving their academic positions.

Objective: The objective of this study is to address the national nursing faculty shortage by examining demographics, teaching preparation in the doctoral program, and burnout to determine intent to leave nursing academia among PhD and DNP-prepared nursing faculty.

Design: A descriptive survey research design was used to identify the most significant factors related to faculty leaving.

Settings: An online national survey of doctorate faculty throughout the U.S. was administered.

Participants: A full-time nursing faculty who has earned a PhD or DNP degree in nursing with four or less years of teaching experience after doctoral program graduation was recruited.

Methods: Data collected from the online survey posted on Qualtrics. Logistical regression models were used to interpret data significance.

Results: A total of 146 nursing faculty responded to the online survey. 51.4% of the respondents (n = 75) had a DNP degree and 48.6% (n = 71) had a PhD degree. 61% of the respondents were over the age of 50 with the remaining 39% of the respondents between ages 20 and 49. PhD-prepared faculty reported higher emotional exhaustion compared to DNP-prepared faculty. Findings revealed that degree type (PhD versus DNP), age, and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization in burnout were significant predictors related to intent to leave nursing academia.

Conclusions: To address the nursing faculty shortage issue, it is critical to create supportive and positive working environments to promote the well-being of nursing faculty, provide additional emotional support for the specific PhD-prepared faculty needs that contribute to burnout, and encourage nurses to begin an academic career earlier to help retain nursing faculty in academic settings.

1. Introduction

The nursing shortage in the U.S. remains a significant problem that will only worsen if measures to address the shortage are not implemented soon (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2017). A major contributor to the nursing shortage is due to the limited number of nursing faculty prepared at the doctoral level. Data released by the AACN for the 2017–2018 academic year, reported that 1,565 positions were vacant in 832 reporting nursing schools, which implies that nearly two positions per school are needed to fill the nurse faculty shortage (Li et al., 2017). Moreover, AACN (2017) reported that in the 2016–2017 academic year, 64,067 qualified applicants were denied admission to professional baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs. This number includes the 11,859 qualified candidates applying to graduate and doctoral programs. Some of the factors that have contributed to the national nursing faculty shortage include non-competitive salaries and a limited pool of doctorally-prepared faculty available to fill positions (Li et al., 2017).

This indicates that there is potential to fill the nurse faculty shortage gap, however, the number of nurse faculty available to teach at institutions of higher learning remains limited and therefore only escalates the nursing shortage. In the near future the need for faculty will significantly increase due to the prediction that 50% of current faculty report they plan to retire by 2020 (National League for Nursing, 2010).

There remains a high demand for nurses; however, with the diminishing pool of nurse faculty, the major nursing shortage crisis will only continue.

2. Background/Literature

New faculty will face many challenges in their new professional role, which will require much preparation and support to successfully transition and ultimately retain their role in academia (Emerson and Records, 2005; Jones, 2008; Shirey, 2006). According to a modified definition by Cox (1995) a new faculty member is considered faculty who has earned a PhD or DNP degree in nursing and have four years or less teaching experience after doctoral program graduation. Faculty positions are typically comprised of expectations for teaching, research, and service. New faculty have identified stressful sources as demanding course loads, multiple commitments, and the need to remain up-to-date with current research (Shirey, 2006). Successfully balancing these expectations can be challenging for new faculty therefore providing proper supporting resources for faculty development may assist in easing the role transition and ultimately increasing competency, job satisfaction, and retention of new nurse faculty.

The literature indicates that the demands placed on nurse educators put them at high risk for burnout (Boyden, 2000; Sarmiento et al., 2003). Burnout is referred to a syndrome in which a previously committed, helping professional gradually disengages from full participation in a job in response to excessive job-related stressors (Maslach et al., 1996). Nurse faculty must teach, counsel students, work on committees, as well as engage in clinical practice with students while developing their own research. Too many tasks and too little time are frequent complaints among educators (Sarmiento et al., 2003). In this type of working environment, it is perceived to be difficult for new doctorally prepared faculty to adjust to their new roles as educators, as they are well versed in the course material but lack specific training on teaching. The lack of training can impact confidence and may add to their level of stress and therefore decreasing job satisfaction and may contribute to abandonment of their faculty positions. As support of the above statement, the National League for Nursing reported that an average of 1.7 full-time faculty members per program left their faculty position in baccalaureate and higher degree programs due to the desire for a career change. The following reasons for leaving faculty positions were reported: family obligations, salary issues, and workload concerns (Gazza and Shellenbarger, 2005). To enhance faculty retention, it is critical to further investigate factors that may interfere with faculty satisfaction with an academic career.

Yet, it is widely acknowledged that the focus of doctoral education in nursing is not teaching, but rather research (PhD) or clinical (DNP) training, during which there may or may not be opportunities for exploring and understanding the art and science of teaching (Jones, 2008). Our cursory review of doctoral programs nationwide indicated that little or no attention is being paid to learning about and/or practicing teaching. In response to the nurse faculty shortage and demands to increase enrollment in nursing programs, it is of utmost importance to prepare new nurse faculty to teach in the most efficient and effective way to enable them to be successful in shaping the next generation of nurses.

In linking the issues of doctorate nurse training with the demands of nurse faculty roles, the study has the potential to create a coherent picture of the transition from the doctoral student role to that as a new nurse faculty member. Significantly, this approach contributes to the nursing literature by providing ways to use this new knowledge for refining educational and departmental approaches to reducing the nurse faculty shortage. Where previous studies have focused exclusively on either the doctoral experience or the new faculty experience, few have looked at the combined contribution of the degree granting institution and the hiring institution. A successful transition to the role of nurse faculty improves retention and ultimately, increases the number

of nurse faculty (Gazza and Shellenbarger, 2005; Johnson, 2004). The findings from this study will assist in making suggestions for future faculty recruitment strategies.

The objective of this study is to address the national nursing faculty shortage by examining demographics, teaching preparation in the doctoral program, and burnout to determine intent to leave nursing academia among PhD and DNP-prepared nursing faculty.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1. Research Design

A descriptive correlational survey research design was used to examine the relationships among the key study variables, and identify the most significant factors related to faculty retention. A national survey of faculty teaching in undergraduate and/or graduate nursing programs throughout the U.S. was administered by Qualtrics survey software. Logistical regression models were used to interpret data significance.

3.2. Participants and Setting

All 776 nursing program department heads were contacted via email to request dissemination of survey to faculty members (AACN). Inclusion criteria included being a full-time nursing faculty who has earned a PhD or DNP degree in nursing with four or less years of teaching experience after doctoral program graduation. This modified definition of new nursing faculty is based upon that proposed by Cox (1995). The survey acquired 244 initial responses, which were then reduced to yield a final of 146 participants to be used in data analysis per the exclusion criteria of failing to answer key study questions on intent to leave.

3.3. Instruments

The survey instrument titled Transition to the Nurse Faculty Role Survey (TNFRS) represented a compilation of existing questionnaires as well as questions developed to achieve the purpose of the study. Variables of interest for this study included: doctoral teaching coursework, teaching experience during doctoral education, burnout, intent to leave nursing academia, and demographic variables. To support content and face validity of the TNFRS, two doctorally-prepared nurse educators reviewed the survey and ensured the purpose of the study and questions posed on the TNFRS survey aligned. The survey was reformatted based on reviewer feedback.

3.3.1. Doctoral Program Teaching Preparation

Six questions on doctoral teaching preparation based on coursework and teaching experience were asked. Questions related to doctoral coursework offered, credit hours taken, and coursework teaching focus. Teaching experience during doctoral preparation was also explored by asking about actual experiences (mentored internship, teaching assistant, research assistant, teaching appointment inside and outside of doctoral granting institution) to practice teaching skills for faculty preparation. Categories for coursework focus and teaching experiences were identified after a thorough review of Chicagoland doctoral nursing program curriculum and literature.

3.3.2. Maslach Burnout Inventory Educator Survey

The Maslach Burnout Inventory Educator Survey (MBI-ES), contained 22 items, measuring perceived frequency of: emotional exhaustion (EE), experience depersonalization (DP) and personal accomplishment (PA). Emotional exhaustion (EE) is the tired and fatigued feeling that develops as emotional energies are drained. When these feelings become chronic, educators often experience depersonalization (DP), that is, indifferent feelings about helping their students learn and grow. When educators no longer feel that they are contributing to