



## Lab mentors in a two-plus-two nursing program: A retrospective evaluation

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### ABSTRACT

Peer mentorships improve learning outcomes, student satisfaction, and confidence levels in undergraduate nursing students. In addition, volunteering as a mentor supports leadership development and proficiency in nursing skills. This article retrospectively evaluates an educational intervention using peer mentors in a 2-plus-2 undergraduate nursing program. Students enrolled in this program take prerequisite classes at a community college, then enter the baccalaureate program at the junior level and begin their nursing courses, completing all course work on the community college campus. Senior nursing students mentored the incoming junior students during their first semester as they practiced essential nursing skills in the clinical learning lab. Junior nursing students participating in this mentorship program expressed increased confidence and decreased anxiety levels while practicing clinical skills with mentors. Senior lab mentors valued the opportunity to support junior students in skills practice, and believed participation in the mentorship program improved their own nursing skills. There are several potential benefits of extending peer mentorships to the clinical lab setting for this unique student population as they transition to a baccalaureate nursing program.

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Nursing schools face a myriad of education-related challenges, including recruitment and retention of qualified students and faculty, the support of students in clinical practice settings, and the preparation of students to achieve success on state licensure examinations and function proficiently in rapidly evolving health care environments. In response to the increasingly complex demands of the health care system, the baccalaureate degree has emerged as the recommended minimum standard for entry-level nursing practice. With several potential program options in nursing education, students follow varied paths to achieve their goals (Amos, 2017). Peer mentorships promote active and collaborative learning to support improved student outcomes in challenging undergraduate nursing education programs (Schoening et al., 2015). I retrospectively evaluate a peer mentorship program for students transitioning from a community college to a university to earn the baccalaureate degree. In this mentorship program, senior nursing students mentor incoming junior nursing students in the clinical learning lab (CLL) during their initial semester of nursing courses. Juniors enroll in both Fundamentals of Nursing and Health Assessment in the first semester. Each of these courses has a lab component in the CLL during which students

practice and master essential clinical nursing and health assessment skills, necessitating considerable student support in the clinical lab setting.

### Background

Undergraduate nursing education includes learning experiences in classrooms, clinical settings, and clinical laboratories. Peer mentorship programs are frequently instituted to support student achievement in these rigorous programs of professional development, with learning taking place across several domains. Peer academic tutors focus upon didactic learning, counseling nursing students in subject-specific knowledge, study skills, and examination-taking strategies. Robinson and Niemer (2010) found that using a Peer Mentor Tutor Program improved academic performance among mentees and reduced rates of attrition in those students who had academic mentors. Some of the peer academic mentors reported an increased interest in pursuing a career in nursing education following participation in the tutoring program (Robinson & Niemer, 2010). Jacobs, Atack, Ng, Haghir-Vijeh, and Dell'Elce (2015) determined the implementation of peer mentorship programs in undergraduate nursing education improved retention rates and student learning outcomes. As evidenced by the literature, peer mentoring supports both

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academic achievement and student satisfaction levels among nursing students.

Clinical learning experiences cause high levels of stress and anxiety for new nursing students (Li, Wang, Lin, & Lee, 2010). Nursing students are often assigned mentors during their initial clinical rotations. Walker and Verklan (2016) found that first-semester nursing students assigned to peer mentors in the clinical setting experienced less situation-related anxiety than students with no mentoring, specifically with equipment use and patient care procedures. Austria, Baraki, and Doig (2013) explored the use of peer dyads consisting of two nursing students who collaborated during clinical rotations. Collaboration in the clinical setting decreased anxiety and increased student satisfaction levels (Austria et al., 2013). The literature demonstrates that collaborative peer learning supports successful outcomes in several areas of nursing education.

With the growing complexities and challenges of the health care environment, nursing programs are increasingly reliant upon learning experiences in clinical labs to prepare undergraduate nursing students to function effectively in clinical settings. "To gain familiarity and confidence before performing skills in the clinical environment, adequate practice in a safe environment is essential" (Gabriele, Holthaus, & Boulet, 2016, p. 342). In the lab, nursing students practice clinical skills and engage in high-fidelity or low-fidelity simulations in a safe environment conducive to professional growth and development. Implementing peer mentorships in this dynamic setting promotes student success and achievement.

Peer mentors in the clinical lab setting serve as extensions of nursing faculty, providing immediate constructive feedback, guidance, and support to students. Gabriele et al. (2016) found that using peer mentors to support skills practice in the learning lab helped to identify students who were having difficulties and improved student outcomes through immediate feedback. Gabriele et al. (2016) used video-assisted technology to allow peer mentors to evaluate mentees on specific skills, including medication administration, patient assessments, and the principles of asepsis. Students expressed that real-time feedback from peer mentors helped them to improve their skills. In addition, the lab faculty members believed that having mentors in the clinical lab provided additional resources for students in this busy learning environment (Gabriele et al., 2016). Brannagan, Dellinger, Thomas, Mitchell, Lewis-Trabeaux, and Dupre (2013) found that peer teaching in the lab improved psychomotor nursing skills, critical thinking skills, and interpersonal communication skills in mentees. Both the peer mentors and the mentees in this study evaluated the peer-teaching experience positively (Brannagan et al., 2013). The extension of peer mentorships to the clinical learning environment is beneficial to students and faculty, supporting improved learning outcomes in undergraduate nursing education.

### Mentorship Program

I am the clinical learning coordinator at a satellite campus of a large state university. In this variation of the "two-plus-two" program model, students initially study at the community college for 2 years. Qualified students who apply and are accepted may transfer to the state university satellite program, which is located on the community college campus. These students enter the baccalaureate nursing program as juniors and begin their nursing courses during the first semester, enrolling in Foundations of Nursing and Health Assessment, both of which have a clinical component in the CLL. Miller and Durham (2014) point out that students transferring to a university from a community college have unique needs as they must acclimate to higher levels of academic rigor. In response to these needs, the student services department at my institution selects high-performing senior students each year to serve as peer mentors to the incoming junior cohort, facilitating the challenging transition from the

community college to a baccalaureate nursing program. The primary purpose of peer mentors in higher education is to ease the transition for college students by providing academic and psychosocial support (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015).

I developed the Lab Mentorship Program for the Fall 2016 semester. This peer mentorship program emphasized collaborative learning in a safe environment to improve proficiency and perceived confidence with nursing skills among the participating students (Schoening et al., 2015). The preselected peer mentors from the senior cohort were e-mailed and invited to voluntarily participate in the Lab Mentorship Program. There were two open lab practice sessions offered per week in the CLL during which junior students practiced skills learned in the Foundations of Nursing and Health Assessment classes. The mentors were asked to attend at least two open lab sessions per month. There were no formal assignments made—a mentee was free to seek out help from any of the mentors present in the lab during an open practice session. The senior mentors guided and facilitated the junior nursing students as they practiced newly acquired nursing skills, including vital signs, basic wound care, physical assessment, sterile gloving, and oral and injectable medication administration. The senior mentors supported the junior students as they prepared for clinical skills assessments by faculty. For the Health Assessment class, the mentors also served as standardized patients to allow the mentees to simulate assessment skills. There were 51 students in the junior cohort who were eligible to attend open lab practice sessions and 13 senior students who volunteered as mentors in the Lab Mentorship Program during the Fall 2016 semester.

This protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB). The educational intervention was assigned an exempt status in accordance with the designation of minimal risk to the subjects and participants. The protocol reviewed by the IRB included a waiver of informed consent. I conducted a retrospective evaluation of student feedback following voluntary participation in the mentorship program. Junior and senior nursing students who participated in the program either as mentors or as mentees were invited to provide feedback during a program evaluation session. All data were deidentified, and no identifiable characteristics of the participants were included in the evaluation of the data.

### Results

Evaluation is an essential step in the process of developing a robust peer mentorship program (Botma, Hurter, & Kotze, 2013). The mentors and mentees were invited to attend a group program evaluation session at the end of the Fall 2016 semester. During this session, attended by the mentors and mentees together, the students provided open feedback to me about the Lab Mentorship Program. Specifically, the students were asked to evaluate the program according to the following questions:

- What went right? What did you find beneficial about the Lab Mentorship Program?
- What went wrong? What did you dislike about the Lab Mentorship Program?
- What are some suggestions to improve the Lab Mentorship Program in upcoming semesters?

These questions were posed to both the mentors and mentees who were present at the evaluation session. The 13 volunteer senior mentors were invited to attend the group session. Of the 51 students in the junior cohort, 20 students attended open lab practice sessions in the CLL at least twice per month throughout the Fall 2016 semester, as evidenced by the attendance log. These 20 students, identified as the mentees, were invited to attend the program evaluation

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