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## Student Experiences With a Newly Developed Concept-Based Curriculum

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Curriculum change is a constant in nursing education. Little is known about the impact of curricular change on nursing students.

**Method:** To determine the overall impact of the change to the concept-based curriculum on the students, we conducted a survey and focus groups.

**Results:** The students were satisfied with the new curriculum but identified barriers to their learning.

**Conclusion:** Faculty implementing a curriculum revision should consider the impact of the changes on the students.

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### Introduction

Revision of curriculum is a constant process within nursing programs. Traditional nursing curriculum involving systems-based learning is straining under the weight of increasing content and an inability to foster critical thinking. The Institute of Medicine and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recommended a shift from abstract theory and knowledge toward contextual knowledge and clinical reasoning (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010; IOM, 2010). There have been initiatives that encourage systematic and fundamental changes in the way that nursing is taught in order to strengthen the skills of nurses coming out of educational programs and to promote lifelong learning (Benner et al., 2010; IOM, 2010). Recently, there has been a movement in nursing education toward concept-based learning (Giddens et al., 2008). Rather than focusing on organ systems and specific diseases, concept-based learning focuses on the underlying concepts behind all illnesses and human conditions. The concept-based learning model is significantly different from traditional systems-based learning. Instead of focusing on pneumonia, the focus is on oxygenation. This makes it possible for students to apply the concept to a myriad of clinical conditions and across the lifespan. Concept-based learning has been advocated as a pedagogy to improve student outcomes (Giddens & Morton, 2010; Lasater & Nelson, 2009). Our school of

nursing (SON) determined that it was necessary to complete a change to a concept-based curriculum.

The process of curriculum revision has an impact on students, but little is known about the experience of students during the transition from a traditional curriculum to a concept-based curriculum. The SON is an articulated program with an associate of science in nursing program (AS) and a registered nurse to baccalaureate of science in nursing (RN-BSN) program. The curriculum revision reduced the AS program total credit hours and changed the RN-BSN from a 2-year program to a 1-year program. The 3 + 1 model allows for 100% of the AS students to move on to the RN-BSN program; over 90% of the AS graduates choose to continue with the RN-BSN program. This equates to the majority of the RN-BSN students being novice nurses. Concepts taught in the AS program, in addition to the exemplars, focused on basic, generic competencies and skills required for the National Council Licensure Exam-Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN). The RN-BSN program expanded on the concepts and exemplars introduced in the AS program.

As a faculty, we were interested in understanding the overall impact of the change of curriculum on students. We undertook a mixed method study to provide information about the experience of the students during the first semester of the curriculum revision process.

### Background

The current curriculum was evaluated, and a new concept-based curriculum was written. A continuous challenge in higher education is preventing students from simply memorizing and repeating information. A concept-based curriculum was chosen because students

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need to be exposed to learning where they experience an increase in retention, committed participation in their learning, deeper levels of understanding, develop the ability to generalize a concept across the lifespan, and have an increase in overall motivation (Anderson & Tredway, 2009; Erickson, 2002; Giddens, 2009). During the implementation of the revised curriculum, the impact of the change on the students was evaluated by individual surveys and student focus groups. The purpose for these evaluations was to determine students' perceptions of the change in curriculum and the perceived effect on their learning.

When the SON faculty evaluated the current curriculum, it was found to be content heavy and systems based, which was not adequately preparing students for practice. New outcomes were written for both the AS and RN-BSN programs based on the Quality and Safety Education for Nurses (QSEN) Competencies. The change to a concept-based pedagogy required changes in all courses' student learning outcomes and affected students entering the program and those continuing.

### Theoretical Framework

Alves and Raposo (2007) Conceptual Framework of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education postulates that students place more of an emphasis on the way education is provided (organization and delivery on canvas) rather than the quality (curriculum design) of the education itself. Although functional value, including quality of programs, is a priority of nursing faculty, it did not translate to high satisfaction of students.

### Literature Review

The transition from a systems-based, content-driven curriculum to a concept-based curriculum is a complicated process because of many factors, including but not limited to faculty motivation, the lack of resources and time, an impending faculty shortage, lack of control over external factors, and limited evaluation materials on successful implementation of concept-based learning. Although this transition is challenging, the literature supports the need for curriculum focused on student-centered learning, improved critical thinking and clinical reasoning skills, and a decrease in content overload (Anderson & Tredway, 2009; Erickson, 2002; Giddens et al., 2008; Martin, 2002). There are a variety of publications and research on concept-based curriculum but limited information on students' perceptions of curriculum change. Following a method implemented by Giddens and Morton (2010), two levels of assessment were delivered to students within the first semester of the concept-based curriculum implementation: individual surveys and focus groups.

#### Focus Groups

A focus group interview is a form of qualitative research, which has not been popular outside of business studies until recently (Cheng, 2014). Focus group interviews include a moderator who is impartial to the discussion and has no influence on the group being interviewed (Cheng, 2014). Often, participants are surrounded by their peers and perceive the experience as social and comfortable. Data gathered in focus group interviews are not discovered in individual surveys or individual interviews (Connelly, 2015). Focused on an optimal approach to qualitative research, including focus groups and interviews, Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007) identified a 32-item checklist for successfully reporting on qualitative research. Findings include three domains: (a) research team and reflexivity, (b) study design, and (c) analysis and findings. Each domain details steps that, when reported appropriately, will communicate the value found in the qualitative findings. Cheng (2014), with a focus

on various areas in academia, and Connelly, (2015) with a focus on nursing, support these study findings. A focus on setting, duration of interviews, open-ended versus focused questions, and data saturation are key areas repeated throughout the literature as valuable to data collection. Focus group interviews are used to study many areas of interest in education and may be used as a valuable data collection method (Traynor, 2015).

#### Curriculum Change and Students

Students' perceptions of change are not the same as faculty member's perceptions. A change in curriculum causes transition stress for both faculty and students. The word *transition*, as defined by Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (n.d.), is the passage, movement, development, or evolution from one stage, state, subject, or place to another. Transition is a change; it takes time and often requires major adjustments. Pena (2010) proposed a perspective on students experiencing transition in education. He identified characteristics that impact the learning of students during a transition. These include the following: (a) novices are not passive learners who just follow rules; (b) novices need freedom; (c) there is always an experience of personal responsibility; and (d) for an expert, intuition only represents a portion of the problem-solving process, which is always analytical besides intuitive; experts need implicit but also explicit knowledge (Pena, 2010). Many faculty are not experienced in the skill of real-time conflict resolution surrounding course changes. Volden and Melland (1999) reported on an effective small-group process they performed with students to facilitate change and manage conflict in the classroom.

Anderson and Tredway (2009) implemented a "backward design" (p. 112) approach to curriculum development and focused on the same concepts of perceived change, including students' perception of "acceptable evidence" of understanding. In this approach to curriculum redesign, students are utilized as stakeholders in the curriculum. With the overall goal to promote critical thinking and to create a student-centered course, Anderson and Tredway (2009) discovered a solution to address change and increase student involvement. Students' input and perceptions were used to evaluate the course and make changes they found valuable to the application of their learning and required skills.

Nixon and Williams (2014) utilized this same perspective on the value of student input in overall curriculum design and learning. In an effort to keep curriculum fresh and engaging, faculty developed a module focused on student engagement and preparation for real-life application. Although students did not redesign the curriculum, they were the focus of this creative implementation made by faculty. When students are considered and included in the evaluation of curriculum, the literature reflects increased satisfaction for both faculty and students (Erickson, 2002; Giddens & Morton, 2009; Giddens et al., 2008; Nixon & Williams, 2014).

### Method

#### Design

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to achieve the study objectives. Students were surveyed via an anonymous electronic questionnaire midsemester following implementation of the concept-based curriculum. Student volunteers from the same student sample met in focus groups later in the semester to address specific questions related to their experiences with the newly developed curriculum in the classroom. The focus group coordinator asked the following three questions: "What is helping you learn in this course?" "What changes would assist you in learning?" and "Any other comments you have specifically related to the strengths

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