Wired for Success: Stimulating Excitement in Nursing Through a Summer Camp

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ABSTRACT

The seriousness of the nursing shortage has been addressed by both the public and professional media. The literature documents substantial support for strategies that focus on increasing the enrollment in nursing education programs and/or sustaining practice environments that contribute to higher nurse retention rates. A nursing camp is an example of an innovative strategy to stimulate excitement in a nursing career, and thus potentially limit the severity of the nursing shortage. The camp helps high school students enhance their discernment about being "wired" for nursing; learn selected basic nursing skills; job shadow; interact with current nursing students and practicing nurses; and develop themselves as educated consumers of information about nursing education programs and financial assistance for college. This article details the development and implementation of a summer residential nursing camp and describes associated outcomes for both the students and the nursing program.

BACKGROUND

The Nursing Shortage

Many factors are thought to contribute to the shortage of professional nurses, including a decline in student enrollment in nursing schools. The AACN reported that, despite a slight increase in nursing student enrollment in baccalaureate programs in 2001, since 1995, enrollment had actually declined by 17% during the same time period. The AACN concluded that the supply of nursing school graduates will not meet current or future professional nursing needs (AACN, 2001, 2002).

Nursing education programs have developed various strategies that aim to increase student enrollment. One approach is to introduce students to nursing at an earlier age. Strategies such as job shadowing with practicing nurses, offering college credit courses in health careers and medical terminology (AACN, 2000; Nursing and Health Care Perspectives, n.d.), and involving current nursing students in recruiting efforts on high school campuses (Managan, 1999) have been discussed. Carey and Decker (1998) described a practical nursing program in Portsmouth, Virginia, that implemented a successful job shadowing program as a method to increase retention of existing students.

Heller and Nichols (2001) reported a partnership developed between a public school system and a university school of nursing that established a successful Pre-Nursing Academy. The Academy provided coursework for high school students, in an effort to prepare them for college.

The literature also suggests that students' perceptions of nursing may affect future nursing school enrollment. A survey of 300 junior high
school students examined whether students' perceptions of nursing as a career would be enhanced if they were exposed to positive role models. The study found there was a lack of knowledge regarding expanded roles and opportunities for advancement, and the authors concluded that the experience of positive role models and the consideration of a nursing career were significantly related (Grossman, Arnold, Sullivan, Cameron, & Munro, 1989).

Nursing Camps

Nursing camps are an example of an innovative strategy to stimulate excitement in a nursing career. As reported in Nursing Executive Watch, a week-long summer nursing camp significantly improved seventh and eighth grade students' perceptions of nursing (“Week-Long Summer Camp,” 2001). The campers participated in a number of activities, including site visits, field trips, demonstrations, and discussions, and their perceptions were evaluated before and after the experience.

The literature also describes nursing camps delivered by nursing education programs in New Hampshire, Virginia, and Illinois whose goals were to introduce middle and high school students to nursing and other health care careers, promote interest in health care fields, and obtain accurate views of the field and dispel inaccurate perceptions (Costello, 2002; Rogers, 2001; Stawowy, 2002).

The Briar Cliff Experience

Briar Cliff University, a 4-year private university affiliated with the Roman Catholic tradition and located in the midwestern United States, offers the basic BSN and LPN-to-BSN options on campus, and RN-to-BSN options both on campus and at two off-campus sites. In addition, BSN education is offered cooperative-ly with another private college and a tribal college in a neighboring state.

Faculty in the department of nursing were concerned with improving the health of the communities in which they live and work, and it was out of this sense of community that the nursing camp program was developed. Faculty hoped such a program would stimulate interest in and awareness of opportunities in nursing, enhance perceptions of nursing as a career choice, and provide an opportunity for them to more fully participate with their clinical partners in addressing a local, regional, and national concern (i.e., the nursing shortage).

Increasing Interest in and Awareness of Nursing Opportunities

The nursing faculty developed several initiatives to promote mission effectiveness and respond to the nursing shortage. These efforts relate to increasing interest in and awareness of nursing, changing inadequate or inaccurate perceptions of nursing, increasing access to baccalaureate nursing education, developing partnerships with health-based and faith-based institutions, and investing in future nurses. In an effort to develop programs that help young people understand more fully the opportunities and rewards associated with careers in nursing, the department sponsors several programs. First, it sponsors a 4-day residential summer nursing camp, which is discussed in detail in this article. The summer camp allows high school students to earn college credits while learning more about nursing through job shadowing, working in the cadaver laboratory, and attending lectures and panel presentations.

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Planning the Nursing Camp

After a review of related literature, interviews with high school guidance counselors, the university's admissions department, and the educational services staff of a regional medical center, faculty developed the camp's objectives, content, and learning experiences; made the necessary site arrangements; and developed a business and marketing plan.

The nursing camp's objectives are to:

- Increase the visibility of professional nursing in the upper midwestern United States.
- Help the public and prospective nursing students develop accurate perceptions of professional nursing.
• Stimulate interest in nursing and help high school students discern whether nursing is a good fit for their interests and aptitudes.
• Educate high school students and their parents on how to evaluate which nursing program is best for the student.
• Engage in more collaboration with the department’s clinical partners.
• Enhance enrollment in the department’s basic BSN program.

Description of the Nursing Camp

The 4-day residential camp provides an opportunity for high school students to earn college credit while they learn about themselves, their interests and goals, and the nursing profession. Learning experiences focus on both intellectual and experiential levels. Students learn and practice several basic nursing skills and are exposed to the use of information technology in nursing. They can later see themselves at camp by accessing the nursing camp Web page at http://www.briarcliff.edu/nursing/camp.htm.

Camp activities include opportunities to:
• Job shadow in two different health care settings.
• Earn cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid certifications.
• Learn to take vital signs.
• Participate in a cadaver laboratory experience.
• Learn from a panel of practicing nurses.
• Visit with current nursing students.
• Participate in a service project.
• Stay on campus and participate in social activities.
• Be mentored by nursing alumni during their senior year in high school.

Outcomes

Several positive outcomes resulted from providing the residential nursing camp and with teaching the content on several high school campuses. These outcomes are based on the subjective experiences of the participants and their responses on a written questionnaire.

Student Remarks and Perceptions. The nursing camp participants rated the camp as a very positive experience. The most highly rated camp experiences are job shadowing, the cadaver laboratory experience, and certification in first aid and CPR. The campers shared that the experience helped them determine whether a nursing career was a good fit for them, informed them about the varieties of settings in which nurses practice, and facilitated their becoming more caring individuals. They reported that they learned a great deal about the nature of nursing, as shown by these quotes:
• The nursing camp will help me to become a great nurse...
• It helped me decide what I really want; I want to be a nurse, more now than ever...
• My job shadowing experience in the OR made today the best day in my life!

Clarifying Perceptions of Nursing. Prior to beginning the nursing camp and at its conclusion, the students were surveyed anonymously about their perceptions on nursing as a profession and how likely they were to pursue nursing careers. The survey tool was adapted from the work of Grossman et al. (1989) and asked students to react to the question, “Do you think nursing as a career provides the opportunity for you to engage in 14 specific roles.” Campers show the most growth on the items relating to nurses’:
• Using high levels of technology.
• Managing large groups of people.
• Teaching in a university.
• Being involved with research.
• Owning their own businesses.

Developing Discernment. All of the campers reflected that they were better able to discern their fit with the nursing profession. For 90% of the campers, the experience confirmed and strengthened their commitment to enter into nursing. The remaining 10% gained a more enlightened view of nursing, which helped them decide that their gifts are better directed elsewhere.

Other Outcomes

Development of the nursing camp also benefited the nursing program and its students. Though this effort, the program has been able to:
• Develop supportive relationships between alumni and future nurses.
• Increase the involvement of alumni with prospective and current nursing students.
• Enhance mentoring relationships on and off campus.
• Increase the knowledge base on high school students’ perceptions of nursing.
• Increase school counselors’ knowledge base on nursing education options, financing arrangements, and opportunities in nursing.
• Engage current students, faculty, alumni, and clinical partners in a strategy to alleviate the nursing shortage.
• Improve dialogue and collaboration with clinical partners.

Lessons Learned

During the past 2 years, nursing faculty have learned many lessons while offering the nursing camp. First, in marketing the camp, many inquiries come from small communities who read about the camp in their weekly newspapers. Second, faculty experienced the value of offering a nonresidential camp to students at local high schools. Often such a program, if it carries academic credit and is taught during the academic year, can be financed through postsecondary funds. Third, it can be beneficial to partner with local health care institutions to help underwrite the cost of the program and/or provide students with T-shirts with the name of the hospital and nursing camp.

Conclusion

Faculty has found the nursing camp experience to be energizing, exhausting, and enjoyable. The opportunity to share one’s passion for nursing through a nursing camp is a powerful experience. The summer residential nursing camp, as well as
the high school version of the nursing camp, will continue to be offered, despite positive growth in nursing program enrollment. As a service, the camp helps high school students better discern whether they are "wired" for nursing and, thus, hopefully will reduce the number of students who enter nursing school and after experiencing a difficult and unsuccessful first academic year, discover that nursing is not a good fit for them. The authors firmly believe the time invested in tomorrow's nurses will continue to benefit these young people, the community, and the nursing profession long into the future.

References
Week-long summer camp improves students' perceptions of nursing. (2001, August 17). Nursing Executive Watch, 2(31), 2-3.