

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ADVANCED DEGREE FOR NURSES IN HEALTH CARE

Susan J. Kowalewski, D'Youville College
Caroline J. Michalik, Roswell Park Cancer Institute

ABSTRACT

Current literature supports the promotion of nurses to the administration level focusing on areas that have shown positive outcomes such as improved patient care and staff satisfaction. An advanced degree in business, nursing, or health administration is a valuable choice for nursing administrators in today's health care environment to provide the necessary education for these positions. The primary objective of this study was to determine the benefit to hospitals of an advanced degree in the role of hospital administrators; as well as to investigate the perceptions of current nurse leaders in the hospital setting and their application of an advanced degree in administrative roles. The study was conducted using a quantitative survey designed to evaluate the gaps in the role of the advanced degree and the nursing executive and their practice in the hospital environment. An online survey provided data related to specific perceptions that included recommendations for preparation of candidates for advanced nursing positions, methods utilized to assist nurses to advance, and the requirement of an advanced degree for such positions.

JEL: M1, I1

KEYWORDS: Advanced Degrees, Health Administration, Nurses, MBA, MSN

INTRODUCTION

As the healthcare environment continues to change, it has become increasingly clear that hospital administrators must be optimally trained to manage an exceedingly cost-effective, policy oriented yet patient-focused organization. It is under this premise that the clinical leader has emerged at the executive level in hospital administration. Clinical nurses are an ideal choice for positions of leadership in healthcare organizations offering a unique perspective to patient care and administrative responsibilities.

Trepanier and Crenshaw (2013) report that the ageing nursing workforce and the potential increase in demand for nursing services in the near future, nurse executives and other nurse leaders must actively prepare for prospective leadership roles. A registered nurse at the bachelor's level possesses the assessment and technical skills to care for patients. Individuals who progress clinically to the master's level further expand their skill set to include diagnoses and can prescribe for specific needs of the patient. With this strong clinical foundation it is only logical that advanced practice nurses continue their professional journey to become a more visible organizational presence in hospital administration.

Many nurse executives have achieved success through a range of roles and responsibilities. It is commonly accepted that nurse executives at a minimum need to pursue and obtain a graduate-level degree. For those who are interested in teaching in nursing programs, a master's degree in nursing (MSN) may be necessary. For nurses interested in administrative opportunities, an MBA or master's degree in health administration are viable alternatives. There are also programs that offer a combined MSN/MBA. Those with advanced clinical expertise have the ability to gain additional credibility with nurses and other members of the multi-disciplinary healthcare team. For those without clinical practice background this rapport could be difficult to achieve.

According to Lavizzo-Mourey (2012), “to meet our nation’s health care needs, we must strengthen the nursing profession at all levels, from the front lines to the administrative ranks”. The role of the nurse executive continues to change based on healthcare reform, technologic innovation, consumerism and generational features. However, the need for the development of the applicable knowledge and expertise required is essential to ensure a nurse leader is competent to progress to the executive level. With an aging population of physicians and a limited volume of health care successors in place, there are an increasing volume of nurse practitioners replacing these physicians in primary care and hospital administration settings. There is however limited research specifically focused on the fiscal benefits to a hospital with nursing executives specifically. The primary objective of this study was to determine if there is an added benefit of an advanced degree for those in hospital administration.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: section 2 reviews prior studies and information related to advanced degrees obtained by nurses. Section 3 describes the data used and the methodology followed in the study. The results and discussion are presented in section 4. Section 5 outlines the main conclusions, contributions, and implications drawn from this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patton (2012) and Sherman and Pross (2010) note the significant role of nurse leaders in developing and maintaining effective work environments. They also explored the development of leadership skills by using the Nurse Manager Leadership Collaborative Learning Domain Framework competency for development of leaders at the unit level. The Nurse Manager Skills Inventory is a foundational component of a comprehensive initiative of the NMLP to assist nurse managers in achieving their developmental goals throughout their careers. The resulting constructive environment is evident by staff satisfaction, employee retention, improved patient outcomes and improved organizational performance (American Association of Critical Care Nurses website). Sherman and Pross (2010) indicated that there is an abundance of health care literature that continues to show the positive influence that expert, competent, credible and visible leadership has on supporting this framework related to nurse administrators.

Magnet recognition is highly recognized throughout healthcare organizations as the gold standard for quality patient care, nursing excellence with innovation in professional nursing practice. This status is also dependent on leadership grounded in new data and enhancements that support quality outcomes (Caldwell, Roby-Williams, Rush, Ricke Kiely (2009). The establishment of effective and efficient work environments necessitate leadership for nurses at all levels of the organization. The nurse leader supports all efforts to engage staff in achievement at the highest level by supporting care providers with the tools to assist in advancing patient care.

Nursing administrators characteristically enter a career track at the unit level as a clinical care nurse; progressing to clinical nurse supervisor, with the prospect to continue to develop into enhanced management positions. This career progression entails preparation and action. If skills and proficiencies for nursing administrators are developed, it would facilitate the hospital being able to adapt, prosper and expand; resulting in improved patient outcomes and enhanced staff nurse fulfillment. Kleinman (2003) evaluated data from the mid 1990’s that noted the importance of developing new paths for staff nurses to be promoted to the role of nurse manager based on clinical proficiency. The promotion of nurses without management and leadership background frequently resulted in unprepared administrators that were unaware of how to function in administrative roles or how to review unit-based operations. Kleinman (2003) noted that the nurse administrator has developed qualities for success that requires business knowledge and skills. Nurse administrators work with clinical personnel, administrators, and patients. Strategic planning and accountability to the hospital board have become responsibilities of nursing administrators.

Although there has been concern regarding fewer individuals entering medical schools; leading to a concern regarding a decrease in the number of physicians; a record number of students applied to and enrolled in the nation's medical schools in 2013 (Association of American Medical Colleges website). There are recognized shortages regarding nurses. Buerhaus, Auerbah, and Staiger (2014) reported projections related to nursing shortages as early as 2000 due to projected retirements of approximately one million nurses; a second concern was that enrollment in nursing programs was declining. Also, due to the aging population, the demand for nurses was expected to increase; especially in areas requiring advanced degrees.

To increase interest in the nursing profession, organizations such as Johnson & Johnsons' *Campaign for Nursing's Futures* provided marketing targeted to promoting interest in the profession; as well as scholarships. Hospitals, health care organizations, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation created programs for not only recruiting new nurses to the professions; but also funded programing to retain existing clinical nurses. Due to these recruitment and retention efforts, there was a rapid increase in graduates beginning in 2002. "Beginning in 2004, however, the number of graduated more than tripled to over 30,000 in 2012" for master's and doctoral graduates (Buerhaus, Auerbah, & Staiger, 2014, p. 293). A significant number of these clinical nurses have the opportunity to be promoted to positions of nurse managers and nurse administrators.

Caldwell, Roby-Williams, Rush and Ricke-Kiely (2009) note that the Magnet recognition program was developed by the American Nurses Credentialing Center in 1994 to encourage quality in nursing care; increasing excellence of patient care associated with this qualification. Obtaining Magnet status is considered the highest recognition for nurses. This designation is an example of an organization's and their nursing staff's commitment to delivery of high quality of care to the community and to provide professional advancement. Since the latter part of the 2000s, hospitals have favored hiring nurses with bachelor's degrees versus associate degrees.

Kleinman (2003) developed a survey of 35 nurse managers and 93 nurse administrators to assess the requirements of nurse administrators for role preparation within healthcare organizations. The results revealed that the nurse administrations that obtained master's degrees were more likely to be clinical in nature than non-clinical. The skill set that were determined to be priorities for the nurse administrator focused on strategic planning, finance and human resources. The most desirable type of graduate degree was perceived to be a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) and a joint Master's of Business Administration (MBA) for nursing administrators.

According to Drennan (2011), one of the outcomes of nurses obtaining masters degrees is the development of leadership, teamwork, change management, and general management competencies. Nurses have options related to choice of master's degrees; Master of Science in Nursing, MBA, Health Care Administration, or the joint MSN/MBA. In many instances, a MSN is needed for individuals teaching in nursing programs.

Executive nursing requires experience in clinical practice and business skills. Swanson and Stanton (2013) suggested that competencies are critical for nurse executives include a worldwide outlook or approach, a working knowledge of technology, expert decision-making skills, prioritizing quality and safety, politically judicious, collective and team building skills, balancing genuineness and performance expectations and coping effectively with change. Additionally, these competencies should include effective communication, relationship management, financial management, medical staff relationship, change management and strategic management. Business degrees, specifically an MBA, provide the necessary management education.

Nursing executives' foster skills and competencies necessary to improve patient care and to train the next cohort of nursing leaders. Although there is a lack of nursing knowledge specific to the MBA degree and

its necessity for administrative positions in healthcare, there is an understanding of the positive influence such a degree provides. With healthcare reform occurring on a global level, nurses in administrative roles understand the importance of the skillset an MBA affords. Antrobus and Kitson (1999) identified the importance of developing nurses and examined the broader socio-political factors impacting nursing leadership. An ethnographic approach with informal semi-structured interviews specific to 24 recognized effective nursing administrators was utilized. The study investigated profiles of effective nursing leaders and their knowledge and skill set base. The perception of these leaders was that their knowledge derived from practice directly or indirectly influenced their leadership role. Further analysis revealed that nursing leaders had certain identifiable skills essential for the nurse administrator. This included working with others to empower other nurses to be a strategic thinker, integrating research evidence with practice, having a clear understanding of self, values, purpose and meaning as well as working well with others to achieve transformational change (Michalik & Kowalewski, 2014).

The results of a 2008 study conducted by the Bureau of Health Professions noted that, “19.2% of RNs who earned a master’s degree enrolled in programs with a focus in administration, business, or management, 13.3% focused on education, and 5.9% earned public health degrees” (Gerard, Kazer, Babington, and Quell, 2014). Attainment of higher level degrees are linked to improved patient outcomes. According to Kovner, Brewer, Katigbak, Djukic, and Fatehi (2012) report that the Institute of Medicine’s committee, *Future of Nursing: leading Change, Advancing Health*, has set a goal that by the year 2020 80% of nurses will hold bachelor’s degrees. There were several factors that motivated RNs to continue with a master’s degree or higher that included professional goals and personal goals.

Prior studies demonstrate that an advanced degree for nursing administrators does provide positive outcomes and staff satisfaction (Gerard, Kazer, Babington, and Quell (2014), Kovner, et al (2012). Michalik (et al, 2014) reported that a study by Aiken indicated the need for more extensive research regarding the educational composition of the nurse workforce and the role that it plays in administrative roles. The educational composition of the current workforce requires specific training for administrative roles however; educational models incorporating this additional training would need to be developed to more effectively train future administrators. The focus from clinical care to administration have determined that leadership skills are imperative (Frederickson & Nickitas, 2011). Skills such as interpersonal (verbal and nonverbal), management, inter-professional, and mentoring had an impact on success as an administrator.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study design for this research included a format that elicited personal numeric history such as years of experience and length of employment but also allowed for feedback that was unrestricted resulting in a span of results focusing on the qualities of nursing professionals and the role an advanced degree would play in health care management. This survey established basic demographics such as gender, and allowed for communication of subjective responses not limited to pre-designated replies.

Since each nurse has different views on the role of an advanced degree and career progression, this survey allowed for a manifestation of support for what was already established in the literature search as well as create the need for additional research to evaluate the legitimacy of the current feelings expressed with regard to advanced degrees for nursing executives.

The survey was distributed utilizing Survey Monkey via an email link to individuals on LinkedIn during the summer 2013. The specific groups chosen for distribution of the survey were the American Organization of Nurse Executives, the American College of Healthcare Executives, and local Buffalo, New York healthcare executives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 100 surveys were completed and reviewed. The respondent population were 85.86% female and 14.14% male representing a variety of levels of management. There were representatives from the hospital unit management levels, directors, Chief Nursing Officer, President, Chief Operating Officer, and Chief Executive Officer. Of the responses, the majority were unit managers or directors.

The number of years of healthcare experience spanned from five years to 50 years. The average years of a position held were between five to 10 years. Sixty percent of the respondents reported that their current positions held the requirement of an advanced degree; 73% obtained that advanced degree prior to their appointment. The degree's that were most represented were the Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Master in Business Administration and Master in Nursing. 80% of respondents agreed that a clinical degree should be required for those in hospital administration. When asked how they were prepared for their administration positions the answers were varied. 28 respondents responded that they were given no preparation at all; while only 10 respondents felt they were prepared well for advancement opportunities. When questioned about the most accurate way to prepare an employee seeking an advanced position without an advanced degree, 52 recommended mentoring and coaching while only 11 felt an employee should not be offered a position unless they had already obtained an advanced degree.

While the sample size was small and makes generalizability difficult, the results do offer insight into additional research that is needed in regard to this topic. The opportunities were either readily available for advancement or required an individual to leave the organization to obtain an advanced position. It is unclear if a clinical degree would affect this result. Although the degree obtained varied among respondents, over 60% had a Bachelor in business administration degree or non-clinical degree while only 50% of respondents had a Master of Nursing or clinical degree. Doctorate degree's comprised 6% of respondents.

Although the respondents averaged between 25-40 years of employment in healthcare, their average years in their current position were only between five to 10 years. It is unclear if this finding is common in most advanced positions or based is due to the small sample size. It would seem that any nursing administrator with 25 years of experience would be valued in an executive position and would remain in that position for greater than five years. However, a nurse administrator with over 40 years of experience although valuable, may no doubt be looking toward retirement limiting the length of time in their current role. If this were the cause, it would help to support the reasoning that nurses should be encouraged to advance in the organization beginning as early as possible in their career with organizational training and obtaining an advanced degree. These nurses would be able to give an extended period of service to the organization and their wealth of knowledge and experience could advance the organization (Michalik and Kowalewski, 2014). An advanced degree although required for 60% of the respondents in their current positions. As nurses progress in their careers, Although there has been concern regarding fewer individuals entering medical schools; leading to a concern regarding patient care; a record number of students applied to and enrolled in the nation's medical schools in 2013 (Association of American Medical Colleges website). A Master's degree will prepare managers and directors at this level for the changing needs in healthcare in order to maintain a successful organization. Those reaching out for corporate positions may then make the decision to proceed to the doctorate degree.

The primary objective of this study was to determine if an advanced degree was beneficial to nurses in hospital administration. Based on the data collected, there is a significant difference in the number of males and females in administrative roles. An advanced degree has been a requirement for administrative appointments and was required prior to appointment to the position. Most respondents had the impression that candidates for advanced positions should come from within the organization and that networking should not be required. Instead they preferred to have an internal coach or mentor that would reach out to

candidates exhibiting the qualities necessary for promotion. Although financial incentives and flexible scheduling were considered valuable incentives, most respondents seem to prefer a mentor and coach who could guide and direct them in their career path. Additional responsibilities assigned under the direction of a mentor would allow the internal candidates to learn what was expected and encourage retention with the organization. Such responsibilities would include finance, human resources and medical staff affairs. Coaching and mentoring were further clarified within the survey to include either the CNO or an individual with an advanced degree in the organization that could assist with the skills needed for progression. Administrative competencies need to be developed even for those who have completed advanced clinical degree programs. This should include business skills in order to combine clinical knowledge with business operations. The nursing administrator is respected for their similar clinical skill set of those they manage. Increased responsibilities that nursing leaders can impart are the ability to set clinical goals for the organization that are attainable and to communicate and collaborate those goals throughout the organization to those they mentor. Critical thinking based on previous clinical experience is one of the advantages of the nursing administrator; an advanced business degree would guide them to make critical decisions. As healthcare continues to change, the methods utilized for patient care will continue to change and as the hospital organization continues to reform the practice of healthcare it will require decision-making that is creative and idealistic.

Sanford (1994) reported that “chief executive officers (CEOs) felt that the best education of nurses in administration was a bachelor’s degree in nursing, combined with an MBA.” It appears an MBA provides a better background for the necessary skill set for nurses promoted to positions in administration. One response by institutions of higher education have been marketing MBAs to hospitals and health care facilities and the creation of a hybrid graduate degree, the MSN/MBA. Tuition reimbursement though available at many hospitals, does not entirely compensate monetarily for master’s and doctorate degree programs. It has been suggested that hospitals choose prime candidates within the organization and fully pay for the entire cost of an advanced degree (MBA) in order to encourage nurses to continue on in their education. An increase in salary may help to off-set this expense however most hospitals will likely not give an advance without a promotion.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The primary goal of this study was to determine the benefit to hospitals of an advanced degree in the role of hospital administrators; as well as to investigate the perceptions of current nurse leaders in the hospital setting and their application of an advanced degree in administrative roles. The study design for this research included a format that elicited personal numeric history such as years of experience and length of employment but also allowed for feedback that was unrestricted resulting in a span of results focusing on the qualities of nursing professionals and the role an advanced degree would play in health care management. Based on the data collected, there is a significant difference in the number of males and females in nurse administrative roles. An advanced degree has been a requirement for administrative appointments and was required prior to appointment to the position. Most respondents had the impression that candidates for advanced positions should come from within the organization and that networking should not be required. Instead they preferred to have an internal coach or mentor that would reach out to candidates exhibiting the qualities necessary for promotion. Although financial incentives and flexible scheduling were considered valuable incentives, most respondents seem to prefer a mentor and coach who could guide and direct them in their career path.

Limitations of this study include the relatively small sample size; a larger sample size would provide more robust data and results. As with self-report surveys, it is possible that responders did not provide accurate responses; although the questions were not overly personal. Including additional questions related as to options the respondents may have chosen instead of the degree completed would have been interesting to evaluate.

Future research related to accountability and inter-professional practice for health care providers could provide data for institutions of higher education offering advanced nursing degrees to assist in decision making related to strategic planning and resource management. Comparing why nurses continue their degrees and in what specific disciplines in different areas of the country could also provide pertinent information related to future recruiting opportunities.

If hospitals were to promote from within, executives would need to make a determination of viable candidates in the organization and take the risk of assisting financially with the expectation that the candidate would complete the program and stay with the organization. Many candidates if promoted or given financial reimbursement frequently leave the organization for more advanced opportunities or better financial compensation. Networking is a very viable option for those who aspire to advance in their career. It creates mentor opportunities as well as a variety of potential job placements. Networking provides a sense of the current healthcare environment and the direction needed for change. With multiple perspectives available to the nurse looking for opportunities for promotion within their organizations, they will quickly build their business sense and plan for any changes that may be necessary. Although it may seem easy to require an advanced degree for any newly appointed nurse executive, many qualified nurses in today's healthcare environment have been in healthcare for many years and are not eager to return to school at a time so close to retirement. These candidates should not be overlooked; they have a multitude of experience. These individuals should be mentored, coached and encouraged to set obtainable goals that will allow them to accept an advanced role while working to achieve their advanced degree.

Incentives suggested for preparing internal candidates for advancement included tuition reimbursement, mentoring, seminars and webinars focusing on leadership development as well as additional responsibilities within the organization to grow professionally. Succession planning that is hardwired within the organization was a suggestion given for internal advancement, however this would require hospital organizations to develop specific curriculum or to partner with a particular university to offer such training to employees. Less costly options included mentoring from those in the organization that had already obtained an advanced degree as well as tuition reimbursement, flexible scheduling and salary incentives.

Hospitals will need to better prepare nurses hoping to advance in the organization. The transition from clinical care to the ranks of administration is not always a seamless one. Clinical expertise and experience frequently do not provide the background necessary for today's administrative roles. Without the prerequisite education, aptitudes, and capabilities; administrators can be deemed ineffectual and unable. An MBA or master's in health care management with its formal business education has been shown to be relevant for the role of nursing administration; providing needed coursework for success.

An advanced clinical degree most likely should not be required for those in the Chief Financial Officer position of the hospital organization; however an argument can be made to show the benefits of a clinical degree for those at the corporate level including the president, vice president, chief operating officer and chief executive officer. The dual MSN/MBA appears to be the best alternative for nurses moving into administration; providing additional clinical as well as the business education fulfills the educational requirements. Any nurse looking to advance their career should seek out opportunities and accept opportunities that presents to increase their working organizational knowledge; especially with the interactions with different departments. The more assignments, situations and challenges that a nurse can expose themselves to will prepare them for an advanced role. These opportunities will no doubt take them outside of nursing, but they will continue to have an effect on patient care and will provide value to the organization.

Healthcare leaders need to have knowledge in health and social policy as well as management and research. However nursing practice is key and cannot be lost in the process since this is the foundation of patient

care. Career paths for nurses should be revised to include political, managerial, academic and clinical domains. This study has provided an analysis of the current literature within the context of nursing administration and the role of an advanced degree. It has examined nursing leadership and supports the value that nurse executives can provide in senior level and corporate administration roles in healthcare settings. In addition it has shown what possibilities are available for growth of those looking to advance to higher levels of the hospital organization.

REFERENCES

American Association of Critical Care Nurses Website.

<http://www.aacn.org/wd/practice/content/nursemanagerinventorytool.pcms?menu=>

Antrobus, S. & Kitson, A. (1999). Nursing leadership: influencing and shaping health policy and nursing practice. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 29(3), 746-753.

Association of American Medical Colleges website. <https://members.aamc.org>

Buerhaus, P. I., Auerbach, D. I., Staiger, D. O. (2014). The rapid growth of graduates from associate, baccalaureate, and graduate programs in nursing. *Nursing Economics*. 32(6), 290-311.

Caldwell, S. D., Roby-Williams, C., Rush, K., & Ricke Kiely, T. (2009). Influences of context, process and individual differences on nurses' readiness for change to Magnet status. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Journal Compilation, 1412-1422.

Drennan, J. (2011). Masters in nursing degrees: an evaluation of management and leadership outcomes using a retrospective pre-test design. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 20, 102-112.

Frederickson, K. & Nickitas, D. ((2011). Chief nursing officer executive development: A crisis or a challenge? *Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 35(4), 344-353.

Gerard, S. O., Kazer, M. W., Babington, L., & Quell, T. T. (2014). Past, present, and future trends of master's education in nursing. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 30(4), 326-332.

Kleinman, C. S. (2003). Leadership roles, competencies, and education: How prepared are our nurse managers? *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 33(9), 451-455.

Kovner, C. T., Brewer, C., Katigbak, C., Djukic, M, & Fatehi, F. (2012). Charting the course for nurses' achievement of higher education levels. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 28(6), 333-343.

Lavizzo-Mourey, R. (2012). The nurse education imperative. *Public Health Nursing*, 29(2), 95-96.

Michalik, C. & Kowalewski, S. (2014). The significance of advanced degrees in relation to health care administrators. *The International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 4(2), 24-30.

Patton, P. (2012). Making the transition: An interview with nurse chief executive officers at catholic health initiatives. *Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 36(1), 35-40.

Sanford, K. (1994). Future Education: What do nurse executives need? *Nursing Economics*, 12 (3), 126-130.

Sherman, R., & Pross, E. (2010). Growing future nurse leaders to build and sustain healthy work environments at the unit level. *OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 15(1) Manuscript 1.

Swanson, M. L., & Stanton, M. P. (2013). Chief Nursing Officers' Perceptions of the Doctorate of Nursing Practice Degree. *In Nursing forum* Vol. 48, No. 1, 35-44.

Trepanier, S. and Crenshaw, J. (2013). Succession planning: a call to action for nurse executives. *Journal of Nursing Management*. Vol. 21, 980-985.

BIOGRAPHY

Susan Kowalewski is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Business Department at D'Youville College. Her research appears in journals such as *The International Journal of Business and Social Research*, *The International Journal of Management and Marketing Research*, *The Global Journal of Business Research*, and *The BRC Journal of Education*. She can be reached at D'Youville College, 320 Porter Avenue, Buffalo, New York, 14201, kowalews@dyc.edu.

Caroline Michalik is an operating room supervisor at Roswell Park Cancer Institute. Her research appears in journals such as *The International Journal of Business and Social Research*. She can be reached at Roswell Park Cancer Institute Elm & Carlton Streets, Buffalo, NY 14263, Caroline.Michalik@roswellpark.org

