

LEADERSHIP & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Support for Frontline Oncology Nurses' and Administrators' Scholarly Activities

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The integral value of formal professional development and continuing education programs for nurses is indisputable. As indispensable members of the healthcare team, professional nurses in all practice roles and settings must be committed to lifelong learning to provide the highest quality of care to their patients. Despite the countless challenges that arise in dynamic healthcare settings, nurses are compelled to take advantage of emerging and existing learning opportunities to ensure that they incorporate creativity, innovation, and knowledge into practice.

Mentorship is characterized by the exchange of ideas and a dedication to professional growth of colleagues in the workplace. Tourigny and Pulich (2005) suggested that mentoring is an effective method to build nursing knowledge and expertise. In contrast to formal mentorship initiatives that specifically define the parameters, expectations, and goals of mentoring relationships, Tourigny and Pulich proposed that informal mentoring is more collaborative and allows nurses the latitude to self-select the activities that resonate with their individual professional and knowledge development needs.

Riley, Beal, Levi, and McCausland (2002) challenged the traditional notion that scholarly activity resides uniquely in academic

settings and asserted that the pursuit of scholarship is not the exclusive domain of nursing faculty. Rather, the generation and cultivation of inquiry and the development of knowledge must be integrated into all clinical nursing practice roles and settings. Those elements are critical to the advancement of nursing as a practice discipline and validate the application of knowledge acquired in practice. Scholarly nursing practice thrives in a milieu where nurses are motivated and supported by colleagues who promote critical thinking, informed decision making, and the continuous evaluation of patient care processes and systems (Byrne & Keefe, 2002). Nurses in all areas of practice acknowledge that mentoring has optimized the professional competency of their colleagues.

These concepts provided the framework that was used to establish the Scholarly Activities Working Group (Working Group) at the authors' organization. The Working Group provided an interactive forum that facilitated scholarship among oncology nurses in all practice roles and settings in the organization. The Working Group fostered collaboration between direct-care nurses and their interdisciplinary colleagues. In addition, it provided numerous opportunities for interactive feedback and role modeling and

bolstered the recognition of and placed value on scholarly activities. This article describes how the need for the Working Group was identified, how it subsequently was implemented, and how it continues to evolve as a successful model for informal mentoring and support.

Background

At Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (DFCI), nurse leaders, scientists, and educators long have recognized that the dynamic relationship between knowledge attainment and its application to practice is fundamental to professional competency. The establishment of the Phyllis F. Cantor Center for Research in Nursing and Patient Care Services at DFCI in May 2001 emphasized nursing as a practice-based discipline firmly rooted in science and the nursing process. However, a gap analysis revealed that although staff nurses at DFCI valued research and scholarship, few were actively involved in such activities. When the results of the gap analysis were discussed at an open forum, several other facts became clear. Despite having an outstanding commitment to excellence in patient care, nurses who attended the forum displayed only rudimentary knowledge of the research process, had not presented at professional

Leadership & Professional Development

This feature provides a platform for oncology nurses to illustrate the many ways that leadership may be realized and professional practice may transform cancer care. Possible submissions include but are not limited to overviews of projects, interviews with nurse leaders, and accounts of the application of leadership principles or theories to practice. Descriptions of activities, projects, or action

plans that are ongoing or completed are welcome. Manuscripts should clearly link the content to the impact on cancer care. Manuscripts should be six to eight double-spaced pages, exclusive of references and tables, and accompanied by a cover letter requesting consideration for this feature. For more information, contact Associate Editor Paula Klemm, DNSc, RN, OCN®, at klemmpa@udel.edu.

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conferences, and were not familiar with the resources in the Cantor Center. A comment by an oncology infusion nurse seemed to sum up their feelings: "I just take care of my patients. Research, publishing, and giving presentations are for nurses with advanced degrees. I wouldn't know where to begin!"

Purpose and Goals

During a Cantor Center nursing and administrative staff meeting, a decision was reached to establish the Working Group to accomplish three primary goals: (a) increase awareness of the services available through the Cantor Center, not only in Nursing and Patient Care Services but throughout the organization, (b) support evidence-based practice and scholarly activities among the Cantor Center staff, and (c) foster collegiality. One of the nurse scientists and the administrative specialist from the Cantor Center agreed to oversee and facilitate the Working Group sessions, and several nurse leaders offered to assist them on an intermittent basis. An informal "drop-in" structure and schedule of bimonthly meetings (held at the end of the ambulatory care clinic workday, from 4–5 pm) were devised to accommodate the busy schedules of nurses and their interdisciplinary colleagues.

After the decision to implement a working group, several strategies were employed to raise awareness of the group's goals, availability, and format. Notices were posted on the announcement board on DFCI Online, the organization's intranet site, which is readily available to all employees. Additionally, a broadcast e-mail was sent internally to all nurses to stimulate interest in the group and to encourage participation. The intranet announcement and the e-mail incorporated several intriguing questions for nurses.

- Are you anticipating giving a poster or podium presentation at a professional conference this year?
- If you presented at a professional conference last year, have you considered developing your abstract into a manuscript for publication in a journal?
- Do you have an idea for a project or an abstract or a manuscript and need help to develop it further?

In addition, the scheduled dates and times of the planned sessions were posted in the monthly nursing calendar, which was circulated to all nurses and interdisciplinary colleagues in the department. The calendar included all continuing education and professional development offerings for the given month. Flyers that described the Working Group and the dates for upcoming sessions were distributed at committee meetings (including the Nursing Council [shared governance body], council subcommittees, and unit-based staff meetings) and posted in central locations throughout the institution. As the Working Group evolved, the nurses

(and their interdisciplinary colleagues) who participated in the sessions informed their peers that the mentoring they received had enhanced their professional skills. Not surprisingly, "word of mouth" among staff has become one of the most effective methods to convey the Working Group's objectives and accomplishments.

Examples of Support for Scholarly Activities

Developing poster presentations: The most frequent reason that individuals sought help from the Working Group was to develop posters for presentation at national conferences. Prior to the establishment of the Working Group, professional medical artists created posters through a process that many nurses found to be stressful and expensive. Nurses were pleasantly surprised to discover that, with the help of the Working Group and Cantor Center staff, creating high-quality posters could be fun and economical. The Working Group used a stepwise approach to achieve this end.

First, an individual created poster content in a Microsoft® Word® (Redmond, WA) file that included an abstract, background data, description of the intervention, evaluation, and visual data (e.g., graphs, tables, anecdotal feedback). Next, a Cantor Center staff member trained in photo software met with the clinician to review the poster content and plan a layout. Subsequently, a poster file was created and sent to a local copying center to be printed, at a cost of approximately \$150 per poster. Funding for posters came out of the Department of Cancer Care Education budget. The cost of \$150 per poster is considerably less expensive compared to the cost of \$600–\$1,000 per poster that had been charged by professional medical artists.

Turnaround time usually was one or two days, and the copy center provided a proof that could be checked for accuracy prior to final printing. In the first year of implementing the process, 15 posters were created. Across the board, clinicians, managers, and Cantor Center staff have expressed satisfaction with the results.

Development of PowerPoint® presentations: The institution awards an annual scholarship to a member of the nursing staff who consistently pursues and demonstrates clinical excellence. The scholarship provides financial support to enable staff nurses to participate in local, national, and international professional conferences. As such, the scholarship directly contributes to the advancement of nursing knowledge and practice. A recent recipient of the scholarship submitted an abstract to an international cancer nursing conference, and the abstract was accepted as a podium presentation. An acknowledged expert in her practice, she nonetheless sought the input of the Working Group to refine her presentation skills. She had limited experience with computer

applications, so she worked with one of the group facilitators to develop her presentation in PowerPoint (Microsoft). Additionally, she delivered mock presentations during a Working Group session and to several colleagues on her unit. She integrated feedback from her colleagues to improve the overall clarity and relevance of the presentation. As a result, she was able to effectively illustrate the impact of her role as a research nurse in influencing a patient's treatment plan, and she also enjoyed a wonderful opportunity to share best practice with oncology nursing colleagues on an international stage. She is planning to develop a manuscript to submit for publication in a professional journal and will use the Working Group to achieve that goal.

Development of manuscripts: Publishing is another area of scholarship that is facilitated by the Working Group. Although staff find this type of scholarly activity to be particularly challenging, they recognize that writing for publication is important for a variety of reasons. Tonges (2000) avowed that "writing for publication can establish one as an expert, lead to speaking engagements, and increase credibility both within and outside of the current organization" (p. 212).

Providing group support for individuals who have had little or no publishing experience is an effective means of bolstering their self-confidence. Some Working Group sessions provided information about the publishing process to assist new authors in honing their writing skills. The Working Group holds brainstorming sessions to help attendees identify potential topics and to offer information on manuscript development. That information is supplemented with current literature that provides strategies for publishing (Bechtel & Davidhizar, 2005; Dixon, 2001; Happell, 2005; Plaisance, 2003).

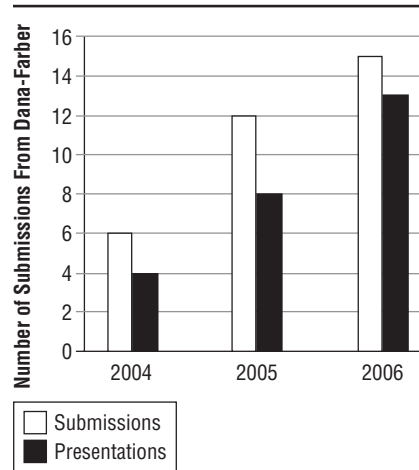


Figure 1. Three-Year Comparison of Abstract Submissions and Presentations at Oncology Nursing Society Annual Congresses

- “Thanks so much for pulling this [poster] together.”
- “I am very glad to have the Working Group here at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Today’s meeting gave me wonderful direction.”
- “I know from personal experience what a tremendous support the Working Group sessions are in helping to formulate ideas and get the abstracts written and in on time.”
- “This is quite wonderful! I will be attending several meetings.”
- “We were accepted! Our abstract will be formally presented as a poster this fall. Here we go! We’re grateful for all the help from the Working Group.”
- “My abstract was accepted. Thanks, everyone, for all of your help.”
- “Thank you for the guidance and assistance in creating our Oncology Nursing Society poster. It was a great experience to go through the process of developing and submitting an abstract and presenting a poster. Hopefully our next step will be to write a manuscript.”

Figure 2. Anecdotal Comments

Results

Working Group sessions were established in January 2005. Since then, scholarly productivity among the nursing staff has increased significantly. Submissions of abstracts and presentations to national meetings of professional nursing organizations have increased. In addition, presentations at Oncology Nursing Society Annual Congresses have increased more than threefold (see Figure 1).

Working Group sessions continue to have consistent attendance by nurse clinicians and managers from the pediatric and adult areas of the organization and from affiliate institutions. Additionally, other local institutions have expressed interest in this model of collegial support as information about the Working Group has spread. Many individuals who have attended the Working Group sessions have made positive anecdotal comments (see Figure 2).

Conclusion

The time needed to acquire the knowledge and skills required for successful involvement in scholarly activities and lack of experience in such activities are among the major factors that prohibit nurses from taking part in this aspect of nursing practice. Paradoxically, nurse clinicians and managers often are doing the most innovative and creative work, yet they are the very people who seem least apt to consider disseminating that information to their colleagues. Without such dissemination, the impact of innovative practices on quality of care and patient outcomes can be diminished. Another important reason to support the scholarly activities of nurse clinicians and managers is because they are an integral component of best practice. Thus, it behooves institutional representatives to foster the development of strategies that promote and encourage nurses to engage in scholarship. The authors of this article hope that this method for supporting scholarship will prove useful to others.

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