

# The Student Care Advocacy Program: The “Caring” of Baccalaureate Nursing Education

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## Abstract

**Background:** The research supports that relationships are foundational and critically important in fostering professional growth. Like many nursing colleges, Chamberlain College of Nursing, Jacksonville’s (CCN JAX’s) challenges included ensuring excellent NCLEX pass rates, reducing attrition, and increasing student satisfaction. **Objectives:** The objective of this mixed descriptive study was to determine student awareness and utilization of a Student Care Advocacy (SCA) Program. **Design/Sample/Method:** Every campus nursing course, sophomore level and above, was visited and a pre-education survey was completed. Education about the program was completed and an educational flier was distributed. Four weeks later, a post education survey was completed. Focus groups were conducted with faculty and staff, and themes were collected. **Results:** Post education, the number of students who reported they knew about the program jumped from 49% to 80%; the percentage of students who reported they knew who their faculty advocate was jumped from 49% to 73%; and the utilization of the program rose from 21% to 33%. Eighty five percent reported being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the interaction on both surveys. **Conclusion:** All hypotheses were supported and focus group themes revealed needed innovations to strengthen the program.

**Keywords:** mentoring, advocate, nursing education, formal mentoring, mentoring relationships, student advising, growth of nursing students, student satisfaction, student/faculty relationships, student success in nursing

## INTRODUCTION

“I am Chamberlain and I care about you!” What powerful words! But words are nothing without action, and the important part of the call to action is the “how.” At the Chamberlain College of Nursing Jacksonville (CCN JAX) campus, something very special and unique has been implemented. The Student Care Advocacy (SCA) Program was initiated in September of 2012. This program addresses the crucial “how” of caring.

It has often been said that no man (or woman for that matter) is an island. People need people. We can do more together than alone. These expressions abound in literature. Relationships are indeed foundational and critically important to both personal and best professional development. The best ones supply people with what they need to foster personal growth and development and even transform lives (Ragins and Kram, 2007).

As a school of nursing, the challenge was to foster this kind of environment for the students. CCN JAX sought to help students create and develop relationships which would foster academic and career growth while encouraging them to develop both personally and professionally. According to Blauvelt and Spath (2008), the National League for Nursing (NLN) advocates the use of “mentoring” to socialize and help novice nurse faculty. Ketola (2009) believes that mentoring is crucial and cites Connie Vance’s research who found in her study of 71 nursing leaders, that 83% had mentors. According to Hamilton (as cited by Ketola, 2009) mentors served as professional role models, sources of inspiration, and provided intellectual stimulation. Mentoring programs have been also developed in undergraduate nursing programs with the intent of increasing student success and helping nurses transition from academia to practice

(Ketola, 2009) Persaud (as cited in Ketola, 2009) notes that 35-69% of new nurse graduates will leave their first place of employment within the very first year. Turnover nationwide is in excess of 55%! How can we better help our new graduate nurses to become satisfied effective practitioners?

As described above, mentoring can be helpful for nursing students, new graduates, seasoned nurses, nurse leaders, and nurse faculty. Given the robust amount of information in the literature that supports human relationships as being instrumental in helping people to be successful and satisfied, implementing a program like the SCA was clearly advisable. Like many nursing colleges, CCN JAX's challenges included some basic things: ensuring excellent NCLEX pass rates, reducing attrition, and increasing student satisfaction. What better way to do this than to use the literature and figure out how! This paper describes CCN JAX's initial journey to clarify the "how," actualize a program of student advocacy and mentoring, and discover what makes it work best.

## Literature Review

According to the *Handbook of Mentoring at Work* (Ragins and Kram, 2007), mentoring was originally the pairing of an experienced person with a less experienced person with a purpose of helping the less experienced person develop. The core concept was developmental. Within that core concept, there were two basic functions. The first was to help the protégé meet career goals. This included helping someone learn the "basics" and coaching. The second function was assisting someone psychosocially. This meant bonding, trust, counseling, role modeling, satisfaction, and self-efficacy. In a study by Allen and colleagues (as cited in Ragins and Kram, 2007), mentored individuals received more promotions and earned higher salaries than their non-mentored counterparts. Thus, mentorship offered a distinct advantage (Ragins and Kram, 2007).

Ketola (2009) focused on a retrospective analysis of a mentorship program for undergraduate nursing students implemented in 1999. The program was an initially successful program, but ended in demise. Her analysis is important as it lays out six major findings that can be helpful in the development and continuation of these kinds of programs. First, she writes that students need to select their mentors but have guidance. She contends that mentorship works best when students have input into the selection of their mentors. Second, she makes the point that even mentors need mentoring. Experience alone does not a good mentor make. Hamilton (as cited in Ketola, 2009), described that there is a serious lack of talented mentors in the nursing profession. This is a sobering thought, indeed. Third, Ketola (2009) recommends that efforts need to be on socialization. This involves helping students become confident and develop a professional "soul." She discusses the concept of preceptorship which many health care organizations have utilized, but she states that this is limiting, as preceptorship is focused on tasks, and what new nurses need is far greater. Fourth, she states the "uncommitted" relationship is problematic. In other words, people must make time for this. They must be invested and committed to the process. Missing meetings or being late creates an assumption that one is not cared about. Both mentors and protégés can perceive this unfortunate outcome. Fifth, mentors and students must help each other. For example, mentors can be reassured and motivated if students give them positive feedback. Last, nursing as a profession must value mentoring. Faculty needs to support it and students need to have credit given to them if they are involved.

Allen et al., (2006) discussed the pioneering work of Erikson, Levinson, and Kram that suggests that relationships are the hallmark of mentoring and can help people develop competence, identity, and purpose. They also cite studies which conclude, simply, that mentoring is better than no mentoring. Blauvelt and Spath (2008) state, "Mentoring implies a relationship between one who is expert and another who looks to the expert for knowledge, consultation, and advocacy. A caring approach by the mentor for the protégé's well-being, growth, and success" (p.30). Blauvelt and Spath also discuss that mentors have to display behaviors which supported Leininger's care constructs. Some included empathy, stress reduction, compassion, helping, and nurturing with the successful mentor being accessible, nonjudgmental, intuitive, sensitive to feelings, perceptive, professional, respectful, and being willing to share his or her mistakes. This, according to Leininger, will enable growth personally and professionally. Blauvelt and Spath (2008) describe a formal mentoring program for nurse faculty. The program included an assessment of learning needs, weekly group meetings, and one-to-one meetings. Personal attention, encouragement, and support were given to new faculty to help them be successful. The findings showed that the mentorship program enabled protégés to have a safe place to vent frustrations, identify with their role, and socialize. It also enabled them to go beyond *surviving* to actually *thriving*. The article explains how the guidance and care that the faculty experienced will be passed to nursing students, peers, and the next generation of practicing nurses.

These principles of mentoring and relationship building through caring are embodied in Competency 2 of the NLN Core Competencies (2005) for Nurse Educators – Facilitate Learner Development and Socialization. It states that nurse

educators must share in the responsibility for helping students develop into nurses and integrate the proper values into their practice. Nurse Educators must help with socialization, growth, and development. Nurse Educators must engage in effective counseling and advisement to help students meet and set meaningful goals. Nurse Educators must help students engage in reflective peer and self-evaluation and support life-long learning. They must also model and exemplify professional behaviors including advocacy (NLN Core Competencies, 2005).

According to Harrison (2009), effective academic advising is a dynamic and comprehensive process that fosters student development. It is both an art and a science. It is a significant investment in the students and institutions they attend. This exploratory study examined characteristics and functions of effective academic advisers, comparing pre-nursing and nursing student perceptions. According to Naddler and Naddler (as cited in Harrison, 2009) there are six core functions of academic advisers. These included developing a program of study that was meaningful, developing good study skills, being knowledgeable about administrative procedures and informing students about them, being responsive to student needs and personal academic problems, assisting with goal development, and being resourceful. The results showed that both pre nursing and nursing students wanted advisors who were knowledgeable. Another theme identified was labeled fostering and nurturing. This included helping students with struggles, goals, and conflicts. Moral qualities and virtues seemed to be more important to pre-nursing students. Other qualities identified were being approachable, communicating well, being available, and being organized, being a good listener, and responding to email. Also, pre- nursing students identified qualities of intellectual and academic skills including being successful, intelligent, confident, and enthusiastic. Developing good study skills was perceived as least important by both groups.

Harrison (2009) cites that conceptual frameworks about advising students were based largely in the developmental theory introduced in the 1960s by Levinson and Erickson among others. In Chickering's model of seven vectors (as cited in Harrison, 2009), "Student's moral development is, in part, fostered by the student faculty relationship" (p. 364). The college student must develop competence, forge relationships, establish identity, and develop purpose. People who are seen as important by the student are very influential in his/her development. Harrison (2009) contends that good academic advising is tied to student academic success and that being aware of student expectations will help advisers be more effective.

Formal mentoring is also a core area of investigation. Allen et al. (2006) writes that there is a dearth of research on formal mentoring. They suggest there needs to be more research on formal program characteristics and mentoring outcomes. They contend that as formal programs are initiated, there is an expectation that mentoring will occur, but wonder will the relationships truly be successful if these important and crucial relationships are involuntary? If a third party makes a pairing, would the persons involved be as motivated? Will there be interpersonal compatibility? Would the relationship ultimately be successful? They also write that studies fail to examine the mentor perspective, focusing only on the protégé. The focus of the research was actually to examine formal mentoring programs in design and outcome for both protégés and mentors. Several hypotheses were made, and the findings were interesting. They found that voluntary participation didn't seem to make a difference in mentorship quality, but that *input* into the matching process was critical for protégés and mentors. By perceiving that their opinions were considered, they became invested in the relationship. They also found that protégés liked to role model mentors who were closer to them in rank. Mentors reported the opposite. This is very interesting because it appears the protégé needs to feel that he or she can "identify" with a mentor. Thinking, perhaps, "He is just one step above me." It is also interesting to note that what a mentor and a protégé may define as mentorship quality could be different. For example, the protégé may look to the relationship to enhance his or her growth and development while the mentor reflects on if he/she enjoyed the relationship. The study also examined training. Receipt of training did not necessarily have a positive impact mentorship quality. Interestingly, fewer training hours were related to greater mentorship quality. It was reported, however, that high quality training was associated with mentors providing psychosocial mentoring. These results are very important as they help build the groundwork for future studies on formal mentoring.

## Implementation

In June of 2012, the faculty chair initially designed a draft policy focused on standards of practice for a student mentoring program. In it included background, objectives, and process. A robust and enlightening discussion occurred with the faculty. A lot of the discussion surrounded the word "mentor." Faculty members thought it prudent that the policy use the word "advocate" rather than "mentor." The word advocate embodies the definition of mentor but lends itself to nursing as being an advocate (advocating) is what nurses are called to be (do) for their patients. Faculty chose to base the policy on Harrison's (2009) work that detailed qualities of good "advisors." Also, the word "mentor" described something the SCAs are not. This is not a mentoring program.

After a few revisions, the Standard of Practice for Student Care Advocate Program was promulgated on September 14, 2012 (See appendix A). The process involved administrative assigning of new students to specific faculty member who would serve as their Student Care Advocate. Administration would randomly assign students on individual faculty lists. The faculty was then responsible for contacting the students each session, providing an introduction and contact information. Most faculty chose email as their preferred method of contact. Encounters would be recorded on a faculty "tracking" form which was also developed by faculty. (See Appendix B and C for sample email and tracking form).

There were four main objectives for faculty during their interactions with students:

- Coach student's study skills
- Act as a liaison with students for administrative procedures
- Foster the students' professional and career goals
- Refer students to appropriate resources

This was the beginning of a program which CCN JAX hoped students would find helpful and meaningful and ultimately help make them more successful individuals.

### Research Question and Hypotheses

As the months went by, faculty became disappointed that students "were not taking advantage" of the program and verbalized this in several faculty meetings. Meetings with students seemed few and far between, and faculty was challenged with how to really help the program to "take off!" Faculty felt that they could not be good advocates if students were not making the effort. A faculty champion for the program was appointed and with this new appointment new ideas and new strategies emerged. Nadder hypothesized that despite what faculty deemed as their best effort in reaching out to students, students were still not aware of the program. A second hypothesis was that once students were aware of the program, more students would take advantage of it. And third, if students did take advantage of the program, they would be satisfied or very satisfied with the experience/ interaction.

### METHODOLOGY

In this simple, descriptive mixed design, a questionnaire was drafted and sent to administration for approval. The survey was administered followed by education about the SCA program. This occurred week 2 of the 8 week July 2013 session. An educational flier was disseminated to students as well. Then, 4 weeks later a post-education survey (Appendix D) was administered to the students with the same questions (without the demographic section). Both surveys were exempt from IRB approval. The qualitative component included collecting themes from faculty focus groups regarding the pre-education survey results.

With the help of a colleague, nine classes were visited and the "pre-education" survey was administered. After the collection of the surveys, the education was provided to students and the flier was handed out (see Appendix E).

In addition to the personal education delivered in each of the classes, the program was advertised on the "loop" which is a TV monitor in the common area that broadcasts student events and important college happenings. Students and faculty serve on this committee and are kept abreast of what is happening.

Once results of the pre-education survey were tallied, a meeting was held with the campus president to discuss the results. It was decided that discussion of results would now need to occur with CCN JAX faculty. Faculty was sent emails asking them each to come to a group session the following week. In addition to the campus president, four other focus groups were held involving the Faculty chair, Director of Center of Academic Success, and seven faculty members. Focus groups were 30 minutes in length each and facilitated by the lead researcher.

### RESULTS OF PRE-EDUCATION SURVEY

The number of surveys collected was 132. Data showed that 54% of the student sample responded that they didn't know what the program was, 49% responded that they didn't know who their Faculty Advocate was, and only 21% had actually been in touch with their Faculty Advocate. The bit of good news was that, of the 21% who had been in touch with their Faculty Advocate, 85% reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the interaction. There was also a section of the survey that collected demographics (See Appendix F and G for survey and numbers tallied).

## Results of Post-Education Survey

The same week that the focus groups were conducted, the post-education survey was completed. Eight classes were visited and 102 surveys collected. When these post education surveys were tallied, data revealed that 80% knew what the SCA program was and 73% knew specifically who their faculty advocate was. Also 33% had been in touch with their faculty advocate showing an increase of 12% in 4 weeks. 84% responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their interaction (See Appendix I). The results of the post education survey were revealed in the last week of the session during the Student Retention meeting. Each member reviewed the pre-education survey and results, methodology and procedure, and the themes of the focus groups. A copy was also given to the campus president.

### Qualitative Phenomenological Data Collection: Focus Groups

Packets were handed out to each participant of the focus group that contained:

1. Findings/statistics of tallied pre-education surveys
2. Copy of pre-education survey
3. Copy of post education survey
4. JSRP action plan SCA program focus area
5. Copy of educational flier
6. Current policy and procedure for the SCA program
7. One page literature review on elements of mentoring
8. Copy of Elizabeth Harrison's article (2009) on good academic advising

Members of the focus groups were asked to review the pre-education survey results and comment in a general way about the following two questions:

1. What do you think of these numbers?
2. How do we make them better?

## RESULTS OF FOCUS GROUP EXPERIENCE

Several themes emerged. The themes included inaccuracy of faculty/student advocate lists, meaningful pairings, role clarification, program merit, and increasing utilization.

1. The SCA student assignment lists prepared for each individual faculty member must be accurate. It is very important that faculty get a complete and correct list of all students assigned to them. This could be better supported if IT personnel and administrative personnel set up each faculty member with a distribution list in his/her email each session. Administrative personnel should work with the registrar to ensure accuracy of list each session and should not rearrange students unless necessary.
2. It is best to pair faculty and students in a meaningful manner. Some thoughts are to include taking information from the survey students complete in the new student orientation and adding questions to it about ethnic background, cultural background, ties to military, interests, hobbies, and other demographics. Then administration would need to make appropriate pairings. It was also suggested that one faculty could take an entire cohort of students. For example—being the “mom” or “dad” of the cohort.
3. Faculty needs training about their specific role as an “advocate.” The focus groups recommended that administration prepare a list of resources so that faculty can properly follow up or refer students as needed.
4. Overwhelmingly, the faculty felt that the program was valuable and had merit. They saw the benefit in these kinds of relationships. Faculty suggested that initially surveyed students marked that they didn't know what the program was because they didn't know the formal name of the program, which was identified on the survey. It was also suggested that perhaps some students did not care about the program and that should have been a choice to select.
5. To increase utilization, faculty and staff need to get more creative with “selling” it to students. Some ideas were meet and greets, teambuilding, games, personal letters, getting creative with specific list of students (for example, if a faculty member likes pies, having a pie theme and sending a recipe with each email blast), and the concept of “families” where each member of an advocate “family” would wear a certain color sticker on the identification badge to identify him/her as a family member. This would support unity and promote the program.

## Limitations

The sample utilized was a convenience sample. It was very representative of the campus nursing courses at CCN JAX, but a better representation would have been obtained if it had been conducted in a variety of nursing schools who had implemented the SCA program. The results would be more generalizable if a random sample over a greater area had been obtained.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

All three hypotheses were supported by the sample data collected. Over half the students surveyed did not even know about the program prior to the education that was provided. The number jumped to 80% post education when the students were surveyed 4 weeks later. Also, the utilization jumped to 33% from 21%, so a 12% increase was realized in just four weeks! The great news was that data showed, in both the pre-education and post education surveys, students continued to rate their interaction with their advocate as being very satisfied or satisfied. This would support that students perceived that these relationships contributed to school and professional success. Forging these relationships with students is thus purposeful and meaningful.

Results highlighted that continued advertising and marketing of the program is in order. Campus faculty and administration will implement focus group suggestions to make the program better and stronger. Faculty will attend some training and that there will be appointed an overseer to assure that faculty is reaching out to their student advocates. Further research effort will be aimed at focusing on those students who have taken advantage of the program and examining qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitatively, a researcher will find out what students have found meaningful and if it has helped them be successful, and quantitative research could examine at evidence such as those students' NCLEX pass rate (first attempt), retention in the nursing program, class grades, and satisfaction.

It is apparent that mentoring is evolving. The SCA program has many elements of mentoring intrinsic in the faculty student relationships. There are exciting new developments in mentoring. These include looking at both the mentor and protégé (both sides of the relationship), looking at both the positive and negative experiences, looking at affective, cognitive, psychomotor aspects, the significance in learning, the impact of personality, the effect of emotional intelligence and how emotional intelligence effects it, and socialization. In the SCA, advocates and students are paired up in a formal and structured way. In other words, pairings are not voluntary, but assigned. This formal type mentoring is also a core area of investigation in mentoring research as well as e-mentoring, especially with communications becoming more electronic. Traditional relationships are being replaced by non-traditional including formal assignment, peer mentoring, and group mentoring. Given all of these possibilities, new frameworks, models, and theories are needed. It is also important to bridge the gap between research and practice. In other words, when a program is put into place, it is important to look at the evidence and not develop it without the guidance of empirical research. Future research must look at current issues and challenges (Ragins and Kram, 2007).

This program, adopted at CCN JAX, contributes to the working knowledge and body of research. Thus, the findings of this study are important. The SCA is a positive advocacy program with elements of the mentoring relationship which will support and encourage students as they matriculate through the program. Another goal is to continue the research and explore the hypothesis that this program creates a perceived professional growth experience which prepares the student for practice. This study will also help other organizations as they implement programs such as these which present their own set of unique challenges.

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