Evaluating for Accreditation: A Structured Approach

Jerry Stamper, RN, MSN
Carolina Huerta, RN, MSN
Janice Maville, RN, MSN

Accreditation by the National League for Nursing (NLN) is a goal for many nursing programs. A major portion of the accrediting process involves total curriculum evaluation which can be a difficult process. A contributing factor to this difficulty is that curriculum development often follows a pattern of meeting immediate needs rather than establishing long-range plans. The result is a curriculum that undergoes frequent changes. Conceptual frameworks are developed and often revised; models are built and subsequently demolished; objectives are written and rewritten; content is organized, integrated, blocked or threaded.

General guidelines for curriculum evaluation can be found in the literature, but each program must develop its own systematic and individualized approach. The purpose of this article is to share one such approach through the use of portions of the NLN criteria which were successfully employed for accreditation. In order to delineate the scope, the section of “Program of Learning” from the NLN criteria for the *Evaluating of Educational Programs in Nursing Leading to an Associate Degree (5th ed.)* and its relevance to curriculum evaluation will be the major focus. Three tools were developed which provided the direction for the internal curricular evaluation.

The responsibility for completing the “Program of Learning” chapter of the self-study was assumed by the departmental curriculum committee. Initial commitment to this project was generated by establishing a tentative work schedule. The plan was to meet every two weeks but in reality more meetings were required. Several preliminary needs soon became evident. A common frame of reference was necessary from the beginning and the faculty was encouraged to define key words and concepts identified in the program philosophy and purpose. A model of the conceptual framework was constructed to assist in visualizing the interrelatedness of the curriculum parts. The *Competencies of the Associate Degree Nurse on Entry into Practice (NLN-1978)* had been accepted as the standards for the program graduates. The program’s terminal objectives were compared to the competency statement and discrepancies noted between the two were closed by new objectives or revision of existing ones. The program philosophy, conceptual framework, course descriptions, and objectives were also examined to determine evidence of these competencies. The following diagram is a depiction of the steps involved in the evaluation process.

```
  Philosophy
   ↓
Conceptual Framework
   ↓
Terminal Objectives
   ↓
Course Objectives
   ↓
Major Threads
   ↓
Instructional Objectives
   ↓
Clinical Objectives
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In addition to the aforementioned preliminaries, three instruments were developed which proved useful in identifying the relationship between the conceptual framework, objectives, curricular threads, content, and learning activities. These were of value in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and

_JERRY STAMPER, RN, MSN, Associate Professor; CAROLINA HUERTA, RN, MSN, Assistant Professor; JANICE MAVILLE, RN, MSN, Assistant Professor, Pan American University, Edinburg, Texas._

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provided the impetus for the internal curriculum evaluation. The first of these instruments, Tool A shown in Figure 1, served to identify the conceptual framework throughout the curriculum.

Although the “Program of Learning” section evaluates many aspects of the nursing unit, a major portion of the criteria requires an explanation of how the philosophy, conceptual framework, purposes, and objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Course Objectives (Theory)</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework</th>
<th>Terminal Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date of Review</td>
<td>Student as Developing Individual</td>
<td>Holistic Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop an awareness of the social, legal, and ethical components of nursing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the organizational structure of the health care system.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate appropriately with members of the health care team.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1**

**TOOL A**

**N. ED. 1701**

**FIGURE 2**

**TOOL B**

**MAJOR THREADS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Instructional Objectives</th>
<th>Psycho-Social-Cultural</th>
<th>Nutritional</th>
<th>Teaching-Learning Process</th>
<th>Pharmacology</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Legal Aspects</th>
<th>Maslow</th>
<th>Erikson G &amp; D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifies channels of communication in the clinical agency and the University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explain the concept of perception and its importance in affecting interpersonal communication</td>
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</table>
are implemented. From the program's philosophy four major concepts basic to the conceptual framework were identified. These concepts are as follows:

1. The student as a developing individual.
2. The individual as a holistic being.
3. The health-illness continuum.
4. The nursing process as utilized in nursing practice.

To validate the inclusion of these concepts within each course, all course objectives were carefully reviewed. Tool A (Figure 1) not only depicted the presence of the four major concepts throughout the nursing curriculum, but showed the progression of course objectives in relation to the attainment of terminal objectives. The process involved shading the appropriate boxes and allowed gaps in the curriculum to be assessed at a glance. These gaps were then closed by formulation or revision of objectives. This form was essential in demonstrating how the philosophy and conceptual framework are implemented in the program of learning.

The second instrument Tool B (Figure 2) was used to show progression and relationship of content threads to specific unit objectives. Eight major threads were identified which provided for the flow of the conceptual framework into unit and course objectives and provided a means for unifying the structure of content. These threads are:

1. Psycho-Social-Cultural Needs.
4. Pharmacology.
5. Communication.
6. Legal Aspects.

To ascertain inclusion of these threads into each course, all unit objectives were reviewed. Again, the process involved shading of appropriate boxes. Missing content was included or existing content was strengthened through formulation or revision of objectives. In addition, this instrument describes how the philosophy, conceptual framework, purposes, and objectives were implemented.

Following this intensive curricular evaluation, Tool C (Figure 3) was used to show the relationship between the conceptual framework, objectives and content threads. The importance of this tool was that it gathered the information assessed in Tools A and B and showed the actual progression from the conceptual framework into the stated objectives.

All three tools described proved to be essential to the curriculum evaluation process. Their value proved to be twofold. Individually, they examined specific aspects of the curriculum content. Collectively, they provided the structure for total curriculum review.

In summary, it should be noted that there is more to the accreditation process than has been described in this article. What has been shown is the necessity for programs to be individualistic and structured in their approach, while maintaining a high level of creativity.

References