Novice Nurse Educator Entry-Level Competency to Teach: A National Study

Kathleen Poindexter, PhD, RN, CNE

Abstract

Expert nurse clinicians who are transitioning into academic positions after successful clinical careers often find they are unprepared to assume their new educator roles. Although nursing clinical expertise may be a necessary expectation, this knowledge is not sufficient to assume a nurse educator position. The purpose of this study was to identify essential entry-level nurse educator competencies, as reported by nurse administrators of accredited prelicensure nursing programs in the United States. Responses were categorized according to the type of academic institution housing the prelicensure nursing program and type of entry-level nurse educator position. A total of 374 program administrators representing 48 states participated, for a 44% response rate. The results indicate that administrators expect entry-level nurse educators to acquire teaching competencies prior to obtaining an entry-level position. Expected proficiency levels of competencies differed based on the position type and the academic setting. [J Nurs Educ. 2013;52(10):559-566.]

The shortage of nurse educators and a predicted shortage of practicing RNs has created an urgent national health care crisis (Association of Academic Health Centers, 2008; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Kimball, O’Neil, & Health Workforce Solutions, 2002). Academic efforts to increase nursing student enrollments are complicated in part by the shortage of qualified academic nurse educators prepared to teach at the undergraduate and graduate level (Fang & Li, 2011; Kaufman, 2011; National League for Nursing [NLN], 2005b). According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2012), nursing schools turned away 75,587 qualified applicants in 2011. Two thirds of the academic institutions cited a lack of qualified faculty as the primary reason for not increasing their student enrollment.

Several studies have reported that novice educators experience high levels of stress and role strain as they assume their new academic positions, which has the potential to negatively impact retention (Anderson, 2009; Cangelosi, Crocker, & Sorrell, 2009; Ruel, 2009). Other studies have shown that novice educators who participate in preparation programs to teach experience a smoother transition from clinical practice into an academic role (Baker, 2010; Cangelosi et al., 2009; Dempsey, 2007; Hewitt & Lewallen, 2010; Schoening, 2009; Siler & Kleiner, 2001). In addition, a positive transition experience increases role satisfaction and the potential for successful, long-term educator careers (Baker, 2010).

The competencies associated with expert nurse educator practice have been identified; however, entry level novice expectations are not clearly defined (Davis, Stullenbarger, Dearman, & Kelley, 2005; NLN, 2005a). Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of administrators about expected competencies of entry-level novice educators to obtain a full-time teaching position in their nursing program. Two research questions were investigated:

- What are the minimum novice nurse educator role competencies for a full-time teaching position in their prelicensure RN education program?
- Do the competencies differ by institution type (community college, liberal arts, and research intensive), and if so, how?
LITERATURE REVIEW

Advanced practice clinical experts who assume new roles as academic nurse educators have historically not been prepared to teach in an academic setting as part of their graduate program of study (Anderson, 2009; Billings & Halstead, 2008; Gaff, 2002; McDonald, 2010; Peters & Boylston, 2006). Participation in teaching preparation programs may help to facilitate a novice educator’s transition into the faculty role (Baker, 2010; NLN, 2005c; Schoening, 2009). Also, there is a growing body of evidence supporting positive nursing student outcomes when nurse educators are competent teachers and integrate evidence-based teaching as part of their academic roles (Benner, Surphen, Leonard, & Day, 2009; NLN, 2012; Southern Regional Education Board, 2002).

A literature review identified numerous studies that have been conducted in an effort to clarify role competencies and expectations of nurse educators, with progress noted in defining the overall scope of practice for nurse educators (Davis et al., 2005; Hu, Zhu, & Zheng, 2011; Little & Miliken, 2007; NLN, 2005a, 2005c; Robinson, 2009; Seccombe, 2009: Southern Regional Education Board, 2002). The majority of the studies focused on identifying generalized expert nurse educator competencies. Although these findings have been useful in the development of a national certification examination (NLN, 2009) and defining the unique scope of practice and knowledge base of expert nurse educators, they did little to clarify entry-level expectations. Several studies noted differences in nurse educator role priorities, depending on the type of prelicensure nursing program (Benner et al., 2009; Southern Regional Education Board, 2002), but they did not identify factors related to differences based on academic position and institutional setting. These variables can have a confounding effect on nurse educator role expectations and expected competencies, resulting in different requirements to assume an educator position. Consistency was noted throughout most of the studies for the need to better prepare nurse educators as they transitioned from a clinical nursing position to an academic role (Duphily, 2011; Schoening, 2009; Schriner, 2007). Concerns regarding the shortage of nurse educators, lack of available mentors, minimal preparation to teach, role confusion, and high expectations of novice nurse educators were also consistent themes (Anderson, 2009; Cangelosi et al., 2009).

The roles of the nurse educator are those of teacher, scholar or researcher, nurse practitioner, and professional service provider (NLN, 2005c). However, no study was found that clarified how these expected roles differed according to type of institution and primary teaching position. A new nurse educator may not be aware of the differences between academic requirements and adequate preparation and the resultant implications on their future career trajectory (Gazza & Shellenbarger, 2005; Hewitt & Lewallen, 2010; McDonald, 2010).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework used to guide this study was the novice-to-expert skill acquisition model (Benner, 1984) applied to expert clinical practitioners and novice nurse educators. Novice nurse educators are experts within the clinical practice arena but lack the theoretical and practical skills associated with the nurse educator role that are necessary to begin practice within the academic environment.

Applying Benner’s (1984) novice-to-expert model of skill acquisition in an effort to identify entry-level novice nurse educator competencies may help to create programs designed to facilitate the development of expert nurse educators. To this end, Benner’s terminology describing the stages of expert development was incorporated into the design of the survey instrument used in this study.

METHOD

Sample and Data Collection

The research was conducted using a nonexperimental cross-sectional survey (Gillis & Jackson, 2002) designed to identify entry-level nurse educator competencies. The sample was composed of nursing program administrators representing prelicensure RN education programs accredited by either the NLN Accrediting Commission or the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. The accredited programs were identified from the lists on the NLN Accrediting Commission and the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education Web sites. The nursing program administrators of each selected program site were identified and were invited via e-mail to participate in the study. A link was provided in the e-mail that directed the participant to the survey hosted on a secure server. A second and third e-mail reminder was sent to all participants every 3 working days as a reminder to participate. No identifying information connected the participants who completed the survey to the original e-mails, thus assuring anonymity. Participants provided informed consent by returning the completed questionnaires. All participation was voluntary.

Respondents were asked to identify the minimal expected proficiency level of each nurse educator competency for an entry-level novice nurse educator to assume a full-time, nontenure- and tenure-track teaching position within their institution. Institutional settings that did not discriminate between nontenure- and tenure-track positions were asked to complete the survey using the nontenure-track response sections. An open-ended question was provided at the end of the survey, allowing the respondents to submit any additional comments or information.

Prior to beginning the study, the proposal was submitted for approval by the institutional review board, and it was deemed to be exempt.

Instrument

The Novice Nurse Educator Competencies survey was developed specifically for use in this study. The expected nurse educator roles and associated competencies were identified through a combination of literature reviews and NLN task statements (NLN, 2005a). Benner’s (1984) stages of professional development were used to categorize the level of proficiency required for each of the competencies. Content validity of the instrument was established by a team of experts according to established protocols (Cresswell, 2003).
The final instrument consists of a demographic section and a competency section that contains four domains and five teaching subscales. Cronbach’s alpha was computed for each section to determine internal consistency, reliability, and the correlation of each of the items in each section. Scores ranged from a low of 0.85 to a high of 0.96. Competence domains were categorized by nurse educator role responsibilities of clinical practice, teaching and advising, leadership and collaboration, and integration of scholarship. Competencies were rated on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 = not required, 1 = advanced beginner, 2 = competent, 3 = proficient, to 4 = expert.

Analysis

To obtain answers to the first research question, participants were asked to identify their perception of the minimal entry-level competencies associated with the role of a nurse educator. Descriptive statistics were calculated and an analysis of variance was computed to detect differences (Munro, 2004). To address the second research question, minimal levels of entry-level novice nurse educator competencies were analyzed using a primary grouping factor with three levels—institution type (community college, research intensive, and liberal arts). A univariate F test was used to determine significant overall differences among the groups. A post hoc Tukey test was conducted based on significance and test results for homogeneity. The alpha level was set at 0.05. Analysis was conducted with SPSS version 17 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York).

Invitations to participate in the survey were sent electronically to 954 eligible participants (after recalculating for incorrect e-mails or closed programs). The initial survey resulted in a total of 374 participants. Survey responses were reviewed for completeness, and grossly incomplete surveys were deleted, which resulted in a final response rate of 44% (374 participants).

RESULTS

The survey participants represented nursing programs from 48 states and the District of Columbia. Participants from community colleges represented 32% (n = 121) of the sample, 4-year liberal arts colleges represented 49.5% (n = 185), research institutions represented 16% (n = 60), and hospital-based diploma programs represented 2.1% (n = 8) of the overall responses. The diploma programs were combined with community college responses due to the small sample size. Participants who did not identify their institution type were eliminated.

Table 1 shows the percentage of program administrators who reported what they perceived to be expected levels of competency performance to obtain a teaching position in their institutions. The percentage of responses was reported for each nurse educator competency domain and was further categorized by tenure- and nontenure-earning positions. Collectively, administrators reported that novice nurse educators were expected to be at least competent to proficient in their ability to perform a majority of nurse educator role responsibilities. Higher levels of performance expectations were reported for nursing practice competencies, whereas lower levels of performance expectations to teach were reported in the curricular development and scholar role competency domains. The expected level of skill performance for entry-level positions by competency and position, which were identified by the majority of administrators, is highlighted in Table 1. Clear administrative expectations that novice nurse educators are to assume the educator role prepared and competent to function across six of the eight nurse educator competency domains were noted.

Tables 2-4 demonstrate nurse educator competencies, as ranked by administrators in the different types of programs, further categorized by tenure- and nontenure-track positions. Results were relatively consistent among six of the eight domains, with the exception of faculty expectations in tenure-track positions in the research-intensive institutions. It is interesting to note that the nursing practice competency was ranked highest in performance expectations for liberal arts and community colleges and for nontenure-earning positions in the research-intensive institutions and was ranked fourth for tenure-earning positions in research-intensive institutions. In addition, the scholar role competency was ranked third for tenure-earning positions in research-intensive institutions and last for all other institutions. It is important to note that the rank order of competency domains does not reflect the expected level of performance. For example, the scholar role competency domain is ranked last for tenure-earning positions in liberal arts institutions. However, administrators expect that novice nurse educators are competent to perform scholar role expectations.

Results of this study reflect the institutional mission statements and the subsequent impact on nurse educator role expectations. The primary role expectations of tenure-system faculty in research-intensive institutions are to engage in research and grant writing as part of tenure-earning requirements. The primary role expectation of nurse educators in the liberal arts and community colleges is to teach the next generation of nurses. The results reported by nursing program administrators of liberal arts and community college prelicensure programs reflect the competencies required to achieve institutional goals, which prioritize nursing practice and teaching. Although prioritization of competencies varies per institution, performance expectations were reported across all nurse educator competency domains for all positions and academic settings.

Variations in expected levels of educator performance within specific competency categories are also influenced by the type of position held. Nurse educators in tenure-earning positions are generally assigned greater responsibility within the academic setting and are expected to achieve institutional goals in the areas of teaching, service, and scholarship. Nontenure-earning positions tend to be equated with more short-term contracts or clinically oriented teaching positions. The results presented demonstrate higher levels of performance expectations for entry-level nurse educators awarded tenure-track positions across all domains and academic settings. A higher priority was also placed on competencies in the areas of assessment and evaluation and curriculum design for nurse educators in tenure-earning positions than for those in nontenure-earning positions.

The final question on the survey asked respondents to share any comments or additional nurse educator competencies they considered essential to include in nursing education preparation programs to best prepare nurses for academic roles. Forty-six participants responded with additional recommenda-
tions, such as inclusion of skills that address diversity, cultural competence, civility, and caring. The need for entry-level educators to be able to communicate effectively, to be able to relate to the students on an interpersonal level, to be flexible, and to be willing to assume numerous roles within the teaching environment was emphasized. Many participant comments focused on the need for educators to be proficient in their teaching skills due to the growth in diverse student populations with unique learning styles.

**DISCUSSION**

The intent of this study was to identify preferred levels of nurse educator role competencies required of nurses prior to obtaining entry-level teaching positions. In addition, the study aimed to identify similarities and differences in entry-level requirements by academic institution types. According to the literature reviews, the type of academic institution housing a nursing education program determines, to some degree, the required qualifications and competencies to be awarded a teaching appointment (Davis et al., 2005).

As noted in the Results section, the priority given to nurse educator competencies and the level of performance expectations reflect the mission of the institution and position type. Research-intensive institutions place high value on conducting research and securing funding, which requires a stronger emphasis on scholar role competencies. Expectations for novice educators in nontenure-earning positions are similar to those in liberal arts institutions, with a focus on teaching and practice. Liberal arts institutions reflect the need to balance clinical...
competence and scholarship as part of nurse educators’ overall role expectations. Similar skills with different performance levels are expected for nontenure- and tenure-earning positions and emphasize areas of specialized nursing practice within the clinical environment. Community college results reflect a focus on clinical competence at a generalist level, whereas nurse educators may be responsible for a wide range of nursing practice competencies across specialties.

The leadership and collaborator competency domain consistently ranked high in expected levels of performance across all positions and institutions. This domain reflects professional nursing leadership activities within the profession and in collaboration with others in the health care arena. The ability to communicate with multidisciplinary health care agencies, to role model positive working relationships, and to demonstrate effective communication skills are essential components of the nurse educator role. These attributes were identified in earlier studies as characteristics associated with the most effective nurse educators (Hamric, Spross, & Hanson, 2009).

The ability of a nurse educator to facilitate learning development and socialization into the nursing profession was fairly consistent in expectations across institutions. Learning development and socialization competencies address the nurse educators’ ability to foster student learning across learning domains, to bridge theory and practice, to role model, and to provide expert clinical supervision (Kelly, 2006).

Facilitating student learning competencies and expected levels of performance was also consistent across institutions. This domain incorporates the need for nurse educators to develop a working knowledge of educational theories, teaching strategies, and evidence-based teaching practices and the ability to teach diverse learners. Novice nurse educators are expected to be competent in their information literacy skills and to exemplify the ability to engage students in scholarly activities. For example, Koerner (2002) indicated that students learn best in environments where they feel valued, respected, and appreciated by their teachers.

The educational environment competency domain describes the ability of an entry-level nurse educator to function within academia. The competencies include the ability to demonstrate understanding and respect for the values and beliefs of students and peers, in addition to supporting a collegial environment.

<table>
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<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Minimal Entry-Level Nurse Educator Competencies Ranked by Survey Responses of Community College Program Administrators</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>Rank Order Nontenure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing practice</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and collaboration</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning development and socialization</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate student learning</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational environment</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and evaluation</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum design</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar role</td>
<td>0.899</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Mean score for nontenure- and tenure-track positions. The survey response categories were 0 = not required; 1 = advanced beginner; 2 = competent; 3 = proficient; 4 = expert.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
<th>Minimal Entry-Level Nurse Educator Competencies Ranked by Survey Responses of Liberal Arts College Program Administrators</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>Rank Order Nontenure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing practice</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and collaboration</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning development and socialization</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate student learning</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational environment</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and evaluation</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum design</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar role</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mean score for nontenure- and tenure-track positions. The survey response categories were 0 = not required; 1 = advanced beginner; 2 = competent; 3 = proficient; 4 = expert.
The competency domains of assessment and evaluation and curriculum design competency domains received lower levels of performance expectations to attain entry-level teaching positions. The overall responses were equally divided across institution types. However, a significant difference was noted in the expected performance levels between nontenure- and tenure-earning positions. The mean differences may reflect the clinical role function of a nontenure-earning position and the course oversight responsibilities more closely aligned with tenure-earning positions.

Although this study indicates that administrators do not expect entry-level nurse educators to be highly proficient in these teaching role competencies, novice nurse educators reported the need to attain greater levels of proficiency in assessment and evaluation and curriculum design to better prepare themselves to assume educator roles (Barth, 2003). This may be an area that deserves reassessment by nursing program administrators.

The scholar role competency was ranked as the lowest level of expected performance to obtain an entry-level teaching position, with the exception of tenure-earning research positions. Administrators from liberal arts institutions were divided regarding their expectations related to tenure earning. The overall mean score reflects the variability across institutional expectations and between nontenure- and tenure-earning positions related to scholarship. Nontenure-earning positions and community college appointments tend to place greater emphasis on competencies related to clinical practice (Davis et al., 2005).

The information obtained from the current study may be useful in a variety of contexts. Nurses who are contemplating a nurse educator position, but are unfamiliar with the academic environment, variations, and culture, may find the results valuable as they seek an educator position that is best suited for their individual qualifications and skill levels. Nurses who are contemplating an academic position may not be aware of the variability that exists among nursing programs. This knowledge of potential educator role expectations may provide areas of inquiry, which may help a nurse to make an informed career decision.

Nurses who aspire to pursue academic careers in the future can use the information as a framework to provide guidance for development of career trajectories. Nurses should be provided the opportunity to develop the appropriate competencies deemed important to those in an academic environment, thus facilitating an informed and intentional transition process into a nurse educator role.

Nurse educator preparation programs can use the information provided in this study to guide the development process of novice nurse educators. Novice nurse educators are expected to assume entry-level teaching positions with specific levels of established proficiency in nurse educator competency domains. Competency statements noted within each of the domains can be used as a framework for the development of course content incorporating essential nurse educator knowledge and skills. Nursing program administrators in community colleges and liberal arts institutions clearly established a preference for nurses who acquired a core knowledge level of basic nurse educator role competencies and clinical nursing practice. Nurse administrators in research-intensive institutions had a strong preference for scholar role competencies.

Qualified and competent nurse educators facilitate the development of qualified and competent nurses prepared to assume successful nursing careers. Precarrience nursing programs engage in continuous quality improvement efforts so that graduates are prepared with the knowledge and skills required to address the current and emerging health care needs of the nation. Preparation for the role of a nurse educator ought to undergo a similar process to properly prepare graduates with the knowledge and skills required to address current and emerging educator roles requirements within the academy. The educational development required to prepare nurse educators can be provided in a number of formats, from formal graduate programs of study to innovative comprehensive orientation programs. The growing body of evidence supports the need to better prepare nurse educators with the skills and knowledge to successfully transition into an academic role. Studies support improved educator satisfaction levels, increased retention rates, quicker assimilation into the educator role.
role, and improved student outcomes (Anderson, 2009; Baker, 2010; Gazza & Shellenbarger, 2005).

LIMITATIONS
A limitation of the current study design was solicitation of responses from nursing program administrators exclusively. The incorporation of search committee members or chairs may have provided different results. The length and detail associated with the survey design was also noted as a deterrent by some administrators, which resulted in some incomplete participant data responses or refusal to participate. The survey was also administered during the spring semester when a number of programs (and administrators) were noted to be on break. This may have had an impact on the number of completed surveys.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Significant efforts have been expended over the past few years to identify and define a scope of practice for nurse educators. This study found that administrators held high competency expectations for entry-level novice nurses to obtain entry-level positions. A similar study comparing novice educators’ expectations related to their perceived entry-level competency expectations may provide additional insight. The results could provide guidance to further develop nurse educator preparation and orientation programs.

Subsequent studies could potentially explore the relationship between nursing program administrators’ reported entry-level competencies and qualifications and the potential impact on nurse educator role transitions, student outcomes, and educator retention rates. Results could further delineate and substantiate those qualifications and competencies that significantly impact nurse educator role transition and performance outcomes.

CONCLUSION
Nursing programs housed in community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and research-intensive universities require a different set of nurse educator qualifications and competencies that reflect the unique mission of the institutions in which they are located. The need for educators to assume positions within academic environments in the numbers that are projected across the United States will require careful planning to prepare nurses located. The need for educators to assume positions within academic roles.

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programs, large numbers of qualified applicants continue to be turned down [News release]. Retrieved from http://www.nln.org/newsreleases/ndsdec05.pdf


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