Chapter 1

The Preceptor Role

The nursing literature describes the preceptor as a nurse who teaches, supports, counsels, coaches, evaluates, serves as role model, and aids in the socialization to a new role. Nurse educators have assumed that a consistent one-to-one relationship with a preceptor provides the most effective mechanism for learning, whether the student is at the undergraduate, staff nurse, or graduate student level.

The preceptor guides the student into the real world of specialty practice, allowing the student to try new skills, while gaining confidence and validation. Recent research has reviewed the use of preceptorship in nursing and other disciplines and concluded that the relationship between the preceptor is pivotal, evaluation is a challenge, and preceptorship is distinct from mentorship (Billay and Yonge, 2004).

To differentiate among the roles of preceptor, mentor, and the related role of coach:

- A mentor looks after and guides the novice through a more personal, longterm relationship. Typically the mentor helps to open doors for the individual, to assist in gaining entry into places and experiences they may not have access to on their own (Barker, 2006).
- A coach helps an individual focus on a specific aspect of behavior, performance, or life. The focus is on learning and self-awareness. A coach helps the individual find his own best answers (International Coach Federation, 2007). The coach and mentor roles are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The literature is replete with issues, programs, and discussions related to clinical precepting (Baltimore, 2004; Feldt et al., 2002; Hayes, 2001; Modic & Harris, 2007). Most of the attention has been directed to clinical preceptors for new staff nurses. Less has been written about graduate student issues, and fewer articles address issues of precepting graduate students majoring in nursing administration or health systems management.
Most of the criteria for selection of successful preceptors apply wherever precepting takes place. Effective preceptors share critical characteristics:

- Desire to be a support and teacher
- Competency in specialty area
- Effective interpersonal and communication skills
- Teaching skills
- Sensitivity to the learning needs of student
- Leadership skills
- Decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Positive professional attitude
- Interest in professional growth
- Ability to provide feedback effectively to students and faculty
- Ability to provide accessibility to student for completion of projects and objectives

Likewise, the primary roles of the preceptor are universal:

- Facilitator, helping the student meet personal and course objectives
- Teacher, able to provide immediate answers to questions and correct errors as they occur
- Role model, providing leadership and professional approach to practice
- Nurturer, providing support and guidance through the difficult times
- Evaluator, providing valuable formative and summative feedback
- Resource, guiding the student to appropriate material and human resources
- Monitor, sensitive to how the student spends time without actually “patrolling”
- Socializer, assisting in the student’s integration into the culture politics, and the rules of the organization or agency (adapted from Shah and Polifroni, 1992)

Despite these commonalities, there are also subtle differences in the preceptor role, depending upon the APN or administrative role for which the student is preparing.

**The Nurse Practitioner (NP), Certified Nurse Midwife (CNM), or Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA) Student**

Objectives for students in these roles tend to focus on attainment of a pre-determined skill set appropriate for one’s area of specialty. These may range from pediatric skills to home health to critical care and other specialties for which the student is preparing. Usually there is one best way to perform each procedure or skill: intubating a patient, performing a pelvic exam, conducting an exercise stress test. The preceptor can maintain a simple checklist indicating whether the task or competency was performed correctly and the degree of independence attained. The completed checklist provides a record for later validation of completing prerequisites for certification. While subtle differences may be present across preceptors and agencies, the core components of the skill are usually consistent. Clinical decision-making is based on attention to the subjective and objective data that guide the practitioner to the appropriate differential diagnoses and subsequent plans of care.

The NP, CNM, or CRNA preceptor continually matches patient needs with the
competencies which the student must perform. The APN who practices in these roles and precepts a graduate student also serves as a guide for the student into the world of practice resources that the APN relies on.

**The Clinical Nurse Specialist**

Objectives for Clinical Nurse Specialist students reflect the spheres of CNS practice as defined by the National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists (NACNS, 2004):

- The Patient/Client Sphere
- The Nurses/Nursing Practice Sphere
- The Organizations/Systems Sphere

Precepting CNS students in management of patients/clients and in case management follows much the same path as precepting NPs: evidence-based practice, best practices, and standards of care determine the student’s objectives. However, CNS students developing their skills in the nurses/nursing practice sphere and the organizations/systems sphere learn that there is often more than one right answer and choosing the best answer requires the CNS to weigh many aspects of a situation, including the organizational culture and political considerations.

CNS students approach their clinical experiences with well-developed clinical nursing skills, but may find the nurses/nursing practice and particularly the organizations/systems skills unfamiliar and frustrating, in part because of the flexibility required. Students may prefer to concentrate on the clinical, patient-related skills and may need urging from the preceptor to participate more fully in the other spheres of the CNS role.

The CNS who precepts offers the student the first view into the role of an expert practitioner with the nurses/nursing practice and organizations/systems spheres of the role. The preceptor most likely is working with a student who is at least proficient in the patient care aspects of the role, but is still a novice in the other spheres.

**The Nursing Administration Student**

*Health Systems Management*

One can argue that graduate students majoring in nursing administration experience a highly flexible approach to their practice experiences. When their nurse managers or preceptors deal with agency problems, they usually cannot call upon one particular best practice to solve the problem. Each situation provides its own constellation of cues that direct the best decision-making approach. For students coming from a strong clinical background, this flexibility can become a frustrating experience, and one they need to be prepared for.

Students earning master’s degrees in nursing administration or management usually
come from a variety of past work experiences. While some may have been a unit or project manager, more commonly students are being exposed to the administrative role for the first time. In these times of cost containment in health care settings, nurse managers frequently oversee several units. The practicum may be the students’ first opportunity to blend the theory attained from course work with a close up look at administrative issues in daily practice.

Nurses are also assuming leadership positions outside the traditional hospital or even outpatient care setting, in such areas as managed care and health care organizations, long-term care facilities, and state and local government agencies. In these settings, most students are entering a new world and need some orientation to it before they can begin to practice leadership skills.

Today, pressures related to fiscal, regulatory, and quality of care aspects in the healthcare industry present daunting challenges and make each experienced manager a rare commodity and a valuable potential preceptor for graduate students who major in administration.

A. Preceptor Competencies

At this point in time you may have been approached by nursing faculty to precept one of their students. You may already be an expert in precepting, and readily agree to participate. However, if you have had less experience in this role, or are seeking to develop your personal skill set, then we suggest you use this preceptor self-assessment tool to guide you in this process.

Assessing yourself for precepting includes comparing your own attributes with attributes of effective preceptors. These attributes include personal ones, along with knowledge, skill, and attitude attributes. On the following pages you will find the effective preceptor attributes presented in a self-assessment format.

The assessment format asks you how strongly you think you possess these attributes AND how frequently you behave consistent with these attributes. You may find you have the knowledge, skill, and disposition to display an attribute more frequently, but because of other priorities, you do not have the opportunity to use the attribute. It is possible that some of the features within your organizational setting present barriers to exhibiting some of the attributes. Therefore, the development plan portion of the assessment asks you to consider possible changes in your system or ways of working that would enhance your precepting attributes.
The attributes are culled from a variety of sources. They are presented on the next two pages in the categories of **Person, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skill Attributes.** However, since the categories do not function separately in the precepting process, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Each of the attributes listed has a complete constellation of behaviors attached to it, as demonstrated in the diagram below for the Skill Attribute category’s “Teaching Skills.” This is an example of the array of behaviors associated with teaching skills.

### Teaching Skills within the Skill Attribute

- Recognizes when student is having difficulty
- Balances between offering independence & offering assistance
- Facilitates problem-solving by the student
- Collaborates with the student to address issues
- Recognizes learning opportunities
- Assesses learning needs
- Role models and acts as resource
- Reinforces learning
- Involves self actively with student
- Gives clear and useful feedback
- Collaborates with others to meet learning needs
- Collaborates with the student to address issues
- Asks questions that stimulate thinking
- Articulates expectations clearly
- Thinks out loud to show student own thought processes
Instructions for Preceptor Self-Assessment: Person, Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills

1. Refer to the descriptions on the following rating scale, and mark each attribute with a number that best represents you.
2. Summarize your highest and lowest attribute ratings in each category.
3. On the Preceptor Development Plan which follows, identify an action or two that you could take to strengthen your precepting effectiveness.
4. Consult the faculty member with whom you are working to assist you in accessing additional resources.

Rating Scale

1= Absent, never, definitely not me
2= Rarely, at times this is me
3= Sometimes this is me, but inconsistently
4= Often this is me
5= This is who I am
Preceptor Self Assessment

Person Attributes
- Warmth
- Sense of Humor
- Maturity
- Self-confidence
- Charisma
- Experience with success & failure
- Empathy
- Trustworthiness, sincerity
- Good example
- Assessible to student
- Flexible
- Accountable

Knowledge Attributes
- Solid knowledge base for practice specialty
- Knowledge regarding course objectives, content, learning resources, evaluation
- Knowledge regarding student needs & objectives
- Knowledge regarding interdisciplinary resources

Attitude Attributes
- Enthusiasm
- Desire to teach
- Willingness to take time with student
- Respect for student
- Support for student autonomy
- Concern for student & his progress
- Nurturance, patience
- Cultural awareness & sensitivity
- Acceptance of responsibilities of preceptor role
- Effective coping with work setting ambiguities
- Comfort with preceptor role
- Value for professional growth

Skill Attributes
- Clinical skills
- Teaching skills
- Coaching skills
- Managerial skills
- Corporate leadership skills
- Problem-solving & decision-making skills
- Delegation skills
- Conflict management skills
- Team building skills
- Communication skills
The cultural diversity of the United States has caused many people to be exposed to behaviors and beliefs that are unfamiliar and often uncomfortable for them. No where is this more evident than in the multicultural healthcare workforce. Nursing students are now being exposed to cultural competence as it relates to patient care. However, little is being written about the challenges of precepting students who are of different cultures or ethnic groups.

Use this Preceptor Development Plan to summarize your personal priorities.

**Preceptor Development Plan**

My greatest strengths:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

My greatest opportunities for improvement:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

How do I plan to improve?

What resources will I use?

How will I fix the system to eliminate barriers to improvement?

What time frames are appropriate for accomplishing these plans?
Today preceptors are being challenged to step out of their traditional views and become more open and accepting of other attitudes, values, and approaches to the work and practice environment. Chapter 5 provides excellent information on precepting culturally diverse students.

B. Knowledge and Skills for the Preceptor to Teach and Model

Each graduate nursing program designs its own objectives for the practicum experience. Usually they represent core concepts, skills, and projects that help bridge classroom theory with clinical practice. Topics depend upon the practice specialty for which the student is preparing.

For the APN Student in the NP Role, opportunities to:

• Perform and document a complete health assessment
• Analyze and synthesize a broad knowledge base to identify and manage patients’ health problems
• Select appropriate pharmacological agents, treatments, and alternative therapies
• Create sound, integrated plans of care, and implement them with patients
• Manage and evaluate preventive health care, identifying and employing community resources
• Consult, collaborate with, and refer to other healthcare professionals

Formal course objectives for the APN student in the NP role commonly include:

• Accurately obtain and document a complete health history and perform a complete health assessment, including: laboratory, physical, psychosocial, nutritional, and spiritual components
• Manage and evaluate preventive health care for populations across the life-span, including periodic health assessment, screening, health education, and counseling
• Accurately assess a patient’s developmental stage, learning readiness, and learning needs regarding health promotion and disease prevention
• Utilize assessment data as a basis for determining an accurate diagnosis and problem list
• Integrate knowledge of pathophysiologic and psychosocial changes associated with common acute, chronic, and complex health problems into clinical decision-making
• Devise and implement an appropriate plan of care for the patient with common acute, chronic, and complex health problems synthesizing knowledge from ethics, research, and biological, behavioral, and nursing science

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Choose appropriate and cost effective traditional and alternative therapeutic approaches in the management of complex health problems, with emphasis on health restoration and maintenance

Use knowledge of pharmacodynamics and pharmacokinetics, and relevant patient characteristics, to select appropriate pharmacologic agents in the plan of care

Incorporate relevant research findings into clinical care

Demonstrate the appropriate use of consultation and collaboration with and referral to appropriate health care providers

Identify community resources and advocate for patients in the health care system and the community

Identify ethical, legal, and policy issues impacting advanced practice nursing care

For the APN Student in the CNS Role, opportunities to:

Apply nursing and health-related models in clinical practice
Give competent and comprehensive specialty patient care
Collaborate with interdisciplinary health professionals to coordinate healthcare services and to implement best practice models
Implement components of the APN role including: advanced practice, case management, education, consultation, and research utilization
Address the educational needs of patients, their families, professional nursing staff, and the community at large
Mentor nursing staff in solving patient care problems
Use creative problem-solving to discover new alternatives to system problems
Identify researchable problems in clinical practice
Identify ethical, legal, and policy issues impacting advanced practice nursing care

CNS students must also meet specialty-specific objectives, for example in the cardio-vascular specialty:

Demonstrate advanced cardiovascular assessment (e.g., cardiac auscultation, complex dysrhythmia interpretation, 12-lead ECG analysis)
Provide individualized cardiovascular risk factor reduction and lifestyle management therapies for special populations (elderly, women, diabetics, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans) in a variety of settings
Develop the interpersonal and observational skills needed to effectively identify appropriate psychosocial adaptation to illness
Demonstrate the ability to provide supportive counsel to individuals experiencing psychological distress related to their altered health status and treatment regimen
Demonstrate skills and knowledge appropriate for managing cardiopulmonary and other types of emergencies that may be encountered during diagnostic testing, exercise treatments, and care of complex medical patients
Evaluate individual and group outcomes of selected cardiac rehabilitation and secondary prevention services
For the Health Systems Management Student, opportunities to:

- Assist in time management projects
- Become involved in organizational decision-making
- Participate in the change process in action
- Delegate to others
- Ensure staff competency
- Write policies
- Work through bureaucratic conflicts

Formal course objectives for the Health Systems Management student’s practicum experience commonly include:

- Apply knowledge of selected concepts, models, and theories from nursing and management sciences to the management of healthcare resources
- Describe and evaluate research findings and evidence-based practices from nursing, behavioral, public health, information and natural sciences to the management of healthcare resources for a selected problem or project
- Analyze methods and practices of planning, organizing, and evaluating used by health system managers
- Apply advanced communication skills in the processes of human resource management
- Apply financial skills in the management of human resource capital
- Analyze and evaluate health organization structure, mission, and philosophy as they relate to the development and marketing of programs and projects
- Explain how standards of care, staffing and performance, and consumer satisfaction influence management practice
- Examine how community demographics and models of care delivery affect patient access and work force requirements in both government and private delivery systems
- Analyze and appreciate ethical and legal issues associated with health systems management practice
- Discuss the broad political and economic issues attendant to the management role and the system wide implications of decisions and actions
- Identify the nature of the leader and innovator role of the nurse within and across the health care enterprise
The faculty holds students accountable for these objectives and also requires the student to define additional objectives specific to the specialty, the student’s interests, and the opportunities in the practicum setting. Using the objectives as a guide, the preceptor role is to help provide opportunities for engagement in clinical and organizational projects that require critical assessment, planning, intervention, and evaluation activities. Chapter 3 contains more information about objectives and establishing realistic objectives.

C. Is This the Right Time and Place for Precepting?

Advances in technology, societal pressures, and economic constraints have moved many healthcare services from the hospital to the ambulatory setting. Graduate programs continue to seek practicum opportunities in traditional acute and primary care settings. They also seek creative and non-traditional healthcare settings to augment the traditional patient care, healthcare systems, and managerial experiences. Your agency has been selected because faculty believe it to be an appropriate learning lab. As a potential preceptor, you need to honestly view your practice setting through a lens that sharply focuses the learning challenges and opportunities. Be realistic in identifying potential barriers for achievement of the student’s objectives.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Will my patients and the staff and colleagues with whom I interact allow the student to meet course objectives? For example, if the CNS student wishes to create community education programs, will your practice afford this opportunity?
- Are the projects and issues in which you are currently involved consistent with the student’s goals? Some students may expect to work on their own
topic of interest, for example, an administration student may want to address retention issues that are not currently an issue at your agency.

- Are there sufficient numbers of patients, units, and projects to accomplish goals? Plans for precepting are often made months ahead of time. If you anticipate significant changes in volume, changes in services, enrichment of your role, or other significant changes, alert the faculty member.
- What do newcomers to this setting usually have trouble adjusting to? Begin to view your site through the eyes of the potential student.
- What about this setting is very different from settings familiar to your students?
- What helped you feel more comfortable here when you began?

Be sure to address these factors honestly with the faculty and student. Precepting requires additional time – time to plan with the student, time to “think-out-loud” with the student, time to formulate and answer questions, time to observe student performance and coach, and time to empower the student to perform activities and assignments that you could do much more rapidly yourself. Today’s pressure to increase each employee’s productivity may create a negative learning environment. Be sure the time is right for you.

If possible, negotiate with your employer to adjust your workload during the time you are precepting. Emphasize the potential benefit to the organization of cultivating future staff members among the affiliated students. Stress the impact of favorable precepting conditions upon your job satisfaction and your professional responsibility to contribute to students’ learning. However, realize that it may not be the best time for the organization, especially if it is undergoing significant change. Being a preceptor at a future time may be your best option.

D. Relationship with Faculty

Each graduate program has its own standards for how involved the faculty member is with each preceptor, and each faculty member may have a different style of interacting. Although the student may make the initial contact to ask you about precepting, the faculty will usually follow-up to determine the appropriate match between student, preceptor, and site, and will provide a brief overview of the course objectives.

Be sure that the faculty shares the current course syllabus with you and any changes in the curriculum. This helps insure your integration with the graduate program. The faculty member will assume responsibility for assuring that the student has met the licensure, insurance, and health screening requirements of the school. Verify that these requirements also satisfy the requirements of your agency.

The faculty member may plan an initial face-to-face meeting with you and the student to review objectives and course expectations. If you are new to precepting, be sure to ask for such a meeting. Clarify the faculty member’s expectations of you as preceptor.
Graduate student preceptors are at a premium. In other words, you are in the driver’s seat. Be proactive in expressing your personal and organizational needs. Some preceptors opt for only the more advanced-level student to match their personalities and to incorporate them more easily into organizational projects. Others enjoy the more novice student whom they can nurture along the clinical path.

Discuss ahead of time whether the assigned faculty member will be making site visits during the semester. Make a plan for faculty visits that will work for you. If you expect to be unavailable for extended visits, particularly if unannounced, let the faculty member know. If you need to formally schedule a meeting time in advance, let the faculty member know how far in advance you need to schedule and if there are particular times that will never work, or will be preferable.

Some preceptors prefer the more informal, spontaneous visits as they often provide opportunity to discuss immediate issues. Clarify your preference. If you plan regular meetings throughout the semester, be prepared to share an item or two during each visit so that the faculty member can address your questions and concerns. Some preceptors find e-mail to be an effective alternative means of communicating with the faculty member. Chapter 3 provides more details about the planning and summary meetings.

Your preceptor role adds two more relationships to the interdisciplinary constellation of relationships in which you practice. As in all relationships, success is based upon a good balance of asking for what you need and sharing your perspective, expertise, and perceptions. Help the student learn to:

- Ask for help when needed
- Ask for a different approach if indicated
- Ask for feedback

And help the student learn to share with you.

- Share previous experience
- Share perceptions of the practice environment
- Share feedback about your precepting techniques

Ask and share with the student and with the faculty member. Encourage the faculty member to ask and share with you. Particularly if you are precepting for the first time, both the faculty member and the student can acquaint you with the graduate program and help you gain insight into your special contribution to the goals of graduate nursing education and the mission of the university.

E. Conclusion

Chapter 1 has introduced the preceptor role and some of the important considerations when precepting graduate students in APN and Health Systems Management programs.
When precepting puzzles you…
or you have a question, just

**Ask the Preceptor’s Preceptor**

Sharon and I used to work together on the unit. We got to be really good friends. We even got together with our families. We kept in touch after I left that hospital to go for my Master’s and become a CNS. I’ve told Sharon how much I love this role and she decided to go back to school too. Now it’s time for her practicum and she’s asked me to precept her. The school says there’s no policy against it. Is it a good idea to precept a friend?

A. No way. You can’t possibly be objective. You’ll be either far too lenient, far too critical, or give her all kinds of extra experiences that you wouldn't make available to a student who wasn’t your friend.

B. Great idea! You practically finish each other’s sentences. Since she can read you and knows what you’re thinking, she’d be easy to precept. And since you know her so well you wouldn’t have to waste a lot of time assessing her learning preferences and learning needs.

C. Only you can answer this one. Whether or not you give her critical and objective feedback in your friendship, you must do so to precept her effectively. You will need to take the lead and clarify with her at the outset how the preceptor relationship will work. Have a serious discussion with her before you make the commitment. Can you each fulfill your professional roles in the preceptorship and keep you friendship intact?

C. is the best answer. If you and she cannot act professionally and objectively, or if doing so would strain your friendship, you must decline. Why has she asked you? A sound reason is that your practice offers her opportunities to meet her specific objectives. If your role and your setting match her goals, **AND** if you and she can set and respect the parameters of the preceptorship, go ahead. If you do, plan to touch base on the issue from time to time during the preceptorship. Because of your special relationship, you may get feedback from her that will increase your effectiveness as a preceptor with her and with others in the future. As well as you know one another, she does not know what you are thinking as a practicing CNS unless you tell her. An important preceptor action is to **think-out-loud** so that the student begins to learn your thought processes. It was a good idea to check to see whether the school had a policy that applies to this situation.

Similarly, if you are approached to precept a student who is also an employee in your work setting, consider carefully the possible implications and complications that can arise. AACN (2000) recommends that students seek preceptorships in settings other than their work settings.

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