

CHAPTER 1:

The Preceptor Role in Health Systems Management

Throughout the nursing literature, the “preceptor” is described as a nurse who teaches, supports, counsels, coaches, evaluates, serves as role model and aids in the socialization to a new role. The assumption is 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.

Of interest is the differentiation between preceptor and the coach or mentor. 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 their own best answers. A “mentor” looks after and guides the novice through a more personal, long-term 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. These important roles are discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

The literature is replete with issues, programs, and discussions related to “clinical” precepting. 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.

Admittedly most of the criteria for selection of successful preceptors applies across the board to all settings. The preceptor is expected to have the following characteristics:

- Desire to be a support/ 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/objectives

Likewise, the primary roles of the preceptor are universal:

- Facilitator, helping student meet personal and course objectives
- Teacher, able to provide immediate answers to questions/ 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 student to appropriate material and human resources
- Monitor, sensitive to how student spends time without actually “patrolling”
- Socializer, assisting in the student’s integration into the culture, politics, and rules of the organization/agency (adapted from Shah and Polifroni (1992))

Some mention of differences in precepting in clinical versus administrative settings is warranted. Students’ objectives in advanced practice nursing in clinical settings (nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist, nurse midwife, nurse anesthetist) 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 the like. Usually there is one way to perform each procedure or skill: intubating a patient, performing a pelvic exam, conducting an exercise stress test. A simple checklist of whether the task/ competency was performed correctly or not, and the degree of independence attained, are recorded and kept as 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.

One can argue that graduate students majoring in nursing administration experience a more flexible approach to their practice experiences. When their nurse manager/ preceptor is dealing with an agency problem, there is often not one tried and true method for dealing with it. 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 masters degrees in nursing administration/ management usually come from a variety of past work experiences. While some students 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, managed care has eliminated many middle management positions along with assistant manager positions. Nurse managers frequently oversee several units. Thus the student practicum may be the first opportunity to blend the theory attained from course work with a close look at administrative issues in daily practice. At the same time, nurses are 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. Nurses are also in leadership roles in health care informatics, and quality and outcomes management. It is for these varied roles that this manual is directed.

This cost-cutting scenario poses another problem, in that fewer managers are equipped with the expert executive and leadership skills required to manage in these difficult times. This makes each experienced manager, like yourself, a rare commodity and a valuable “potential preceptor” for graduate students majoring in this area.

A. Preceptor Competencies

At this point in time you may have been approached by nursing faculty to precept one of their students or you may need to informally precept/mentor staff or colleagues. 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 the following 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 below in the categories of person, knowledge, attitudes and skills. However, since the categories do not function separately in the precepting process, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Each of the attributes listed on the following page can have a complete constellation of behaviors attached to them, as demonstrated in the table below for the Skill Attribute (#4): “Teaching Skills”.

Teaching skills:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Role models and acts as resource● Articulates expectations clearly● Assesses learning needs● Collaborates with others to meet learning needs● Involves self actively with student● Thinks out loud to show student own thought processes● Asks questions that stimulate thinking● Recognizes learning opportunities● Recognizes when student is having difficulty● Reinforces learning● Facilitates problem solving by the student● Collaborates with the student to address issues● Balances between offering independence and offering assistance● Gives clear and useful feedback

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, 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; inconsistent
 4= Often this is me
 5= This is who I am

<p>1. Person Attributes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Warmth _____ - Sense of humor _____ - Maturity _____ - Self-confidence _____ - Charisma _____ - Experience with success/ failure _____ - Empathy _____ - Trustworthiness, sincerity _____ - Good example _____ - Accessible to student _____ - Flexible _____ - Accountable _____ 	<p>2. Knowledge Attributes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Solid knowledge base in management _____ - Knowledge regarding course objectives, content, learning resources, evaluation _____ - Knowledge regarding student needs and objectives _____ - Knowledge regarding interdisciplinary resources _____
<p>3. Attitude Attributes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enthusiasm _____ - Desire to teach _____ - Willingness to take time with student _____ - Respect for student _____ - Supports student autonomy _____ - Concern for student and their 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 _____ 	<p>4. Skill Attributes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teaching skills _____ - Coaching skills _____ - Managerial skills _____ - Corporate leadership skills _____ - Problem solving/ decision making skills _____ - Delegation skills _____ - Conflict management skills _____ - Team building skills _____ - Communication skills _____

Use the following Preceptor Development Plan to summarize your personal priorities.

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?

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 health care workforce. Nursing students are now being exposed to class topics on cultural competence related to patient care. However, little is being written about the challenges of precepting students who are of different cultures or ethnic groups. 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. Health System Management Knowledge/ Skills to be Taught and Modeled

Each graduate nursing program designs their own objectives for the practicum experience. Usually they represent core concepts, skills and projects that help bridge classroom theory with clinical practice. Some examples of typical topics include opportunities to assist in time management projects, involvement in organizational decision making, exposure to the change process in action, delegation opportunities, ensuring staff competency, writing policies, working through bureaucratic conflicts. Following is a listing of formal course objectives commonly used for the practicum experience:

- Apply knowledge of selected concepts, models and theories from nursing, management and information sciences to the management of health care resources and systems.
- Describe and evaluate evidence based/research findings from nursing, behavioral, public health, information and natural sciences to the management of health care resources for a selected problem/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 effect 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.
- Appreciate the broad political and economic issues attendant to the management role and the system wide implications of decisions and actions.
- Value the leader/ innovator role of the nurse within and across the health care enterprise.

It is the preceptor's job to help provide opportunities for clinical engagement in management projects that require critical assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation activities. More of this will be discussed under setting realistic objectives in Chapter 3.

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

Advances in technology, societal pressures and economic constraints have moved patient care from the hospital to the ambulatory setting. Graduate programs are seeking creative clinical sites in primary and non-traditional health care settings to augment the traditional hospital 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 the types of clients/ staff members/ projects allow the student to meet course objectives? Some students may expect to work on their own topic of interest, for example, retention issues that are not an issue at your agency.
- Are there sufficient numbers of clients/ units/ projects to accomplish goals? Plans for precepting are often made months ahead of time. If you anticipate significant changes in volume due to mergers, cut backs, etc., alert the faculty member.
- Will students have access to key resources? This may include political access to the network of power brokers within your organization.
- Will students have access to important meetings? You will not be able to role model specific behaviors if students are not able to “see you in action”. If this is one of the university’s first precepting experiences at your site, you may need to “check out” the attitudes regarding student attendance/ participation at key meetings.
- Are professional colleagues supportive of the student role? A supportive culture in the practice setting strongly affects positive student outcomes.
- Will staff be sufficiently helpful to the student? Again, a positive climate is critical. Assess whether students will be welcomed or merely “tolerated” or even “talked down to”.
- Are there any competing issues that make it difficult for you to take a student? Simultaneously balancing the multiple demands of students and the agency can be too taxing for some preceptors.
- 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 honestly address these factors 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/ assignments that you could 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 their own standards for how involved each faculty member is with each preceptor. Although the student may make the initial "potential preceptor" contact, the faculty will usually follow-up to determine the appropriate match between student, preceptor and site, and will briefly provide an overview of the course objectives. Be sure that the faculty member 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 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. Be clear as to the faculty's expectations of you as preceptor. Graduate student preceptors, especially in management roles often are at a premium. Be proactive in expressing your personal and organizational needs. Some preceptors opt for only the more advanced-level student to match their personality and to more easily incorporate the student into organizational projects. Others enjoy the more novice student who they can nurture along the clinical path.

Discuss ahead of time whether the assigned faculty member will be making site visits during the semester. Due to administrative pressures, explain you may not be available for extended visits, or of the need to formally schedule a meeting time in lieu of faculty "dropping in" unannounced. Some preceptors prefer the more informal, spontaneous visits as they often provide opportunity to discuss real day issues. Clarify your preference. If regular meetings are planned throughout the semester, be prepared to share an item or two during each visit so your questions and concerns get answered. Some preceptors find e-mail to be an effective alternative means of communicating with the faculty member. Chapter 3 will provide more details about the planning and summary meetings.