

Chapter 7.

Making Precepting a “Win-Win” Experience

A. Challenges to the Role

Most managers precept because they feel a responsibility to give back to students to repay their own learning experiences. They may appreciate the opportunity to teach and realize that they are influencing practice and promoting nurse administrators and future nurse leaders. Precepting can also stimulate one’s own thinking and provide alternative ideas. However, it is unrealistic to expect managers as preceptors to repeatedly put extra effort into their day’s work without experiencing stress or even burnout. It is not easy to be a preceptor. If you are new to the role, there is much concern about “getting it right”, and being able to successfully guide the student to both his/her and the faculty’s satisfaction. You are learning how to balance your time with the student, how to assist them in navigating your environment, and how to beneficially work with your staff. You are constantly seeking out appropriate learning opportunities, and trying to realistically evaluate student progress. This can be very taxing to the new preceptor.

As time goes on and you get especially good at precepting, faculty may tend to use you constantly (each semester, sometimes even during the summer), and/or ask you to take on the challenges of a difficult student. Both of these situations can eventually drain you of your energy. Even when precepting comes easy and you find it stimulating, the responsibilities of your “day job” may continue to change or escalate, again adding demands and stress to you. How can one successfully survive in this role?

B. Survival Skills

Preceptors need to be proactive to prevent “preceptor burnout”. Pay attention to the warning signs, such as lack of enthusiasm, feelings of not being able to take on one more student, lack of interest in student projects, assigning the student to other colleagues rather than role modeling yourself, offering limited student feedback and the like. Use these suggestions to guide you through the rougher times.

- ❖ Balance the amount of time you spend with the student. No one can survive having an observer constantly under foot. Provide opportunities when the student can work alone on a project or with other staff. This is not “dumping”, but rather expanding the student’s learning opportunities.
- ❖ Determine the appropriate amount of your personal investment time for each student. Realize that not every student demands the same amount of effort. Some students are self-starters who, after an appropriate orientation to your setting, can manage independently. Let them do this. It will foster their independent growth while providing you some “down time”. Save your closer supervision for the more novice students.

- ❖ Be prepared with ideas for student projects that will benefit your work situation and institution. Many students do not have pre-determined plans in mind, and will be grateful for the opportunity to tag onto a work-site project.
- ❖ Utilize the faculty early when you recognize a repeating problem with a student. Don't feel it is only your issue to deal with.
- ❖ Be honest about taking a break from precepting for a semester or two when you need some personal "R&R". Perhaps you can suggest a substitute colleague within your institution who could serve as preceptor for a semester. They may enjoy the opportunity to learn a new role. If not, just provide the faculty with some advance time to make alternative arrangements.
- ❖ Proactively try to arrange your day's schedule so that on "student days" you have a more flexible workload. Many preceptors realize that they can't handle having students on days when certain meetings will be held, or during special planning periods. It is okay to ask the student to work more independently, or to come on a Thursday rather than a Friday.
- ❖ Use your coaching skills when working with students. Remember you do not have to have all the answers. Through appropriate questions students will find their own best answers.

C. Preceptor Recognition

Realizing the demands of the role, faculty are concerned about expressing appreciation and reaffirming the great value of preceptors. Unfortunately, commensurate financial rewards are simply not available in the academic environment. The faculty will entertain your suggestions about meaningful, feasible rewards. You may want to explore use of university resources. Some may be available on an informal basis, such as attending a particular lecture or workshop. You may be able to arrange such opportunities without formally "auditing" a course. Some preceptors enjoy the opportunity of guest lecturing for one of the theory courses. Or you may be interested in co-authoring an article with a student or faculty member regarding some of your experiences. In time you may be eligible for an adjunct faculty status. Let the faculty member know what type of compensation works best for you.

School of Nursing faculty as a group possesses an impressive array of expertise in areas that might be useful to your agency. It may be possible to negotiate for some consultation services in outcome measurement, informatics, quality improvement, and other areas of expertise. Take advantage of whatever opportunities are available. This is the best way to make the precepting experience a "WIN-WIN" for all.