

## Nurse Faculty Shortage

### *Voices of Nursing Program Administrators*

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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The nurse faculty shortage has impacted current and future nursing workforce needs and health outcomes. What has not been expansively reported is the perspective of nursing program administrators as they grapple with the nurse faculty shortage and its effect in their schools.

**Purpose:** The purpose was to explore nursing program administrators' perspectives of the nurse faculty shortage.

**Method:** Administrators from 8 community colleges and 8 universities representing undergraduate and graduate nursing programs in the mid-Atlantic region participated in semistructured interviews pre-coronavirus disease (SARS COVID-19). Researchers used a 7-stage Heideggerian hermeneutic analysis.

**Findings:** Twenty-four interviews elicited 4 themes: onboarding and integration; "elephant in the room"; making do: getting by; and changing expectations.

**Conclusions:** Administrators faced increasing faculty workloads, academic/practice pay disparities, and staffing challenges—a stark contrast to their goal of teaching excellence, quality student outcomes, and faculty satisfaction. An unexpected finding was a deterioration in workplace climate and its untoward effects on meeting workforce needs.

**Keywords:** administrators, hermeneutics, nurse faculty, workload, workplace

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The scarcity of nursing faculty is a matter of national concern as it coincides with a growing demand for qualified RNs.<sup>1-3</sup> Aging faculty, impending retirements, and inability to fill vacant positions are major factors in this shortage.<sup>1,2,4</sup> The current national nurse faculty vacancy rate is 7.2%, with most of the positions (89.7%) requiring or preferring a doctoral degree, yet nursing graduate degree programs are not producing enough potential nurse educators to meet the demand.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the limited pool of doctorally prepared faculty was identified by 68.2% of nursing education programs as an impediment to filling

positions.<sup>5</sup> The disparity between academic and clinical practice salaries is among the top 3 challenges in filling vacant faculty positions,<sup>1,2</sup> as current and future educators are lured from education to practice. Finding individuals with the right specialty and willingness to teach is yet another hurdle that nursing programs face.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, this shortage has prohibited nursing programs from meeting the decades-old recommendation that 80% of the nursing workforce be educated at the baccalaureate level.<sup>7</sup> One solution is the recruitment of expert clinicians for new roles as educators, yet without adequate knowledge and skills related to teaching, they may be unprepared for the demands of clinical or didactic instruction and may not remain.<sup>8</sup>

#### Issues Identified in the Literature

Success in academia requires an understanding of learning theories, curriculum development, assessment, and evaluation, as well as awareness of a college's organizational structure and how to navigate it.<sup>9</sup> Mastering the intricacies of the academic environment takes time and is akin to the transition a novice nurse faces when entering practice.<sup>10</sup> Those new to academia often receive little orientation or mentorship but are expected to be fully integrated in the school or department culture: "Clinicians who start out as novice educators often find that the switch leads to insecurity,

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frustration, and a sense of isolation.”<sup>11(p2)</sup> The literature calls for supporting new faculty in transition from practice to academia,<sup>12,13</sup> although many administrators expect entry-level nurse educators to have teaching competencies before hire.<sup>14</sup>

Finding faculty who fit the school's culture is a critical challenge in recruitment.<sup>7</sup> Having a positive work environment that fosters collegial relationships is highly correlated with job satisfaction and retention.<sup>8</sup> Other factors associated with workplace satisfaction and retention include salary, mentorship, administrative support, culture, and work-life balance.<sup>15,16</sup> For nurse educators, excessive workload frequently contributes to disruptions in work-life balance and job dissatisfaction.<sup>17</sup>

Lee et al<sup>15</sup> explored variables related to nursing faculty job satisfaction and intent to stay. Six work factors (ie, personal and family policies, collaboration, tenure clarity, institutional leadership, shared governance, and departmental engagement) were positively correlated with job satisfaction; however, institutional leadership was the most significant in both job satisfaction and intent to stay. This study was undertaken given the importance of the perspectives of nurse leaders on the faculty shortage and the paucity of current literature on this topic.

## Method

### Design

Recruitment efforts included emails, telephone calls, and word of mouth. Twenty-four nursing program administrators from 8 community colleges and 8 universities with varied populations and programs agreed to participate (Supplemental Digital Content 1, Participants' Demographic Data Table, <http://links.lww.com/NE/B35>). Sampling was purposive and included administrators from all 16 nursing programs. Participants were provided with a description of the study and interview format, and allowed time to discuss the consent form and ask questions. With redundancy noted among responses and saturation achieved, a final sample size of 24 was considered sufficient.

### Data Collection

Two researchers, also administrators, conducted 45- to 60-minute phone interviews from May 2016 through November 2017 using a semistructured format (Supplemental Digital Content 2, Interview Protocol, <http://links.lww.com/NE/B36>). After interviews were completed, names were removed from all data sources and identified only by the type of school, that is, community college, 4-year institution, and administrator role.

### Analysis

Use of an analytical group process allowed for multiple viewpoints and addressed biases and themes that went against the pattern. Sustained and engaged interviews provided rich descriptions. Implicit in this method is the view that researchers are active participants in the analytical process, who validated interpretations of administrators' perspectives

of the nurse faculty shortage by consistently returning to the text. A modified version of the Diekelmann et al<sup>18</sup> 7-stage method was used: (1) transcribed texts were read for understanding and discussion of preliminary themes; (2) explicit and implicit meanings were extracted, and 2 themes were eliminated; (3) a hermeneutic story was developed; (4) interrelated themes were identified by returning to the whole and parts of the texts; (5) interpretations that “go against the themes” were eliminated (1 additional theme was eliminated); (6) multiple discussion and reflective group review of texts revealed a constitutive pattern present in all themes; and (7) the findings were reflected in a final research report.

## Findings

Four themes emerged: onboarding and integration; “elephant in the room”; making do: getting by; and changing expectations. The “constitutive pattern: experiencing climate change in the educational environment” was evident across all interviews/themes.

### Onboarding and Integration

Onboarding and integration are systematic processes designed to engage new employees in an organization's culture and vision, socializing them to their new roles and providing the tools and resources to be successful.<sup>19</sup> Byford and Watkins<sup>19(p3)</sup> noted that integration is a supportive process, “doing what it takes to make the new person a fully functioning member of the team as quickly and smoothly as possible.” Effective onboarding and integration lead to improved job satisfaction and lower turnover.<sup>20</sup>

Administrators often held dichotomous viewpoints about their workplaces. They identified their schools as supportive networks, embedded in scholarship and teaching expertise, but also conceded faculty worked incredibly hard to be relevant as teachers and committee members and be successful as scholars. They described faculty as tired, divided, and lacking integration with the departmental/school vision. Administrators reported seasoned faculty, who knew how to teach and understood the system, were often treading water: “When someone who has 20 years of teaching experience, who knows the ins and outs of everything, and [is] replaced with a brand-new person, they take so much time to mentor. In 2–3 years they will be good.”

Administrators did not always differentiate onboarding/integration from mentorship, thus using the terms interchangeably. Only 1 school described a formal mentorship for new faculty; several incorporated informal mentorships. Another developed a “buddy system” both inside and outside the nursing department: “Two buddies work together discussing teaching styles and various technologies” and “...mentoring them on things that you don't run into all the time-academic integrity violations, how do you manage, how do you talk to the student, what forms [do you need]; death in the family-getting incompletes, ...how we grade papers, exams.” Administrators

identified mentorship as a critical aspect of onboarding/integration: “New faculty struggle with what the faculty role is. People from practice think that all there is to teaching is teaching in the classroom and teaching in clinical. [They] don't realize that they need to publish, be on university committees....” Keeping experienced faculty was a priority. One administrator spoke of the frustration inherent in developing and keeping faculty: “You are always running short and have to pick up extra work, then have to orient and mentor new people.”

### Elephant in the Room

The phrase “elephant in the room” addresses the impact of salary on recruitment and retention of faculty. Responses included “lack of pay raises,” “salaries in the practice world are much higher, which make it difficult to compete and attract faculty,” and “how do you get faculty to teach students who are making more than they are?”

Administrators voiced concerns over low salaries and the implications of ignoring compensation issues: “the real issue is salary.” Historic differences between academic and clinical practice salaries are problematic: “Salaries in practice are higher...\$30-40 K more in practice.” Administrators felt unable to compete with practice salaries during recruitment: “We've had 2 people apply, and 1 person is an educator in the hospital making much more money. People think they can negotiate the salary, and the salaries cannot be negotiated.”

Another concern was the hiring of new faculty at salaries that were similar to or higher than those of experienced faculty. One administrator expressed the worries of others:

“There is resentment of other faculty when the new faculty get higher salaries.” When new faculty are making equal or higher salaries than experienced faculty members, morale is affected.

Administrators sensed that salary issues needed to be addressed, with 100% identifying compensation as the preeminent issue; frequently, they felt powerless: “Faculty salaries are out of our control as we do not decide salary ranges.” Remedies to address compensation varied, but all agreed on the need for a differential salary structure for nursing faculty and incentives to reward experienced faculty for their long-term service and to encourage them to stay in academia: “In a perfect world, there would be a differential salary structure for nursing that is different than other departments. A differential salary level would attract better candidates.”

### Making Do: Getting By

Administrators expressed a need “to do something” but were stymied. Solutions required planning, new ways of thinking, and strategizing skills stretched by increased administrative responsibilities and competing demands brought on by the shortage. Administrators pondered the future impact of the shortage on student admissions and quality of instruction. One community college administrator explained: “The nurse faculty shortage definitely

affects us in our numbers of accepted applicants.... We have to better identify persons who really want to teach.” “Making do: getting by” reflects the measures taken to meet these ongoing challenges.

Nursing administrators described shifting priorities and the changes made as a result of insufficient numbers of faculty, especially those with specific clinical expertise. This meant administrators compromised by using faculty from other specialties to cover difficult-to-staff areas—as 1 community college administrator noted: “These are really hard to fill, and we've had several failed searches,” and “Hiring for certain specialties is particularly difficult. Maternity or Peds [pediatrics] applicants may have certification but lack the advanced degree.” Recruitment and search cycles were ongoing with little abatement.

For almost all schools, “getting by” meant hiring more part-time/adjunct faculty: “We need full-time clinical faculty; presently we have a large number of part-time/adjunct faculty. We experience the nurse faculty shortage in that those (full-time) positions requiring advanced degrees are increasingly more difficult to fill.” The increased reliance on part-time/adjunct faculty created additional strains on full-time faculty who were called upon to provide oversight and guidance. All schools reported a need for experienced faculty with advanced education; 4-year schools had greater difficulty finding doctorally prepared faculty. For all, the nurse faculty shortage was not a theoretical construct but rather a lived experience. Moreover, “making do: getting by” represents a cyclic phenomenon. Administrators had to problem-solve from a current perspective and future orientation. Some experienced hiring freezes exacerbating their shortages. The nurse faculty shortage became the primary focus of administrators' time and energy.

### Changing Expectations

Changing expectations is described as “transitioning from one way to another...choosing meaning in moving with what is all at once known and not known”<sup>21(p2)</sup> and is a universal experience affecting health and quality of life.<sup>22</sup> Both what is known and unknown about the nurse faculty shortage are taking a toll on faculty, administrators, and, ultimately, students. Faculty find themselves unequal to the task of scholarship and research because of heavy workloads and additional obligations due to the nurse faculty shortage.

The complexity of an academic role, along with the demands on faculty, is increasing. As 1 participant noted, “[Previously], faculty had a lot of time to read and be scholarly.” Administrators found they needed to prepare for and keep pace with retiring faculty: “As I look around at the faculty age, where there are more than 10 of us at a rather ‘high’ age. This impact has resulted in a turnover, consuming us with relatively junior faculty. People are frustrated.” An unforeseen outcome of the faculty shortage strained working relationships: “People get tense and tend to overreact. Students don't get the attention or instruction they need. It becomes very overwhelming, and when morale goes down

so does quality. College administration doesn't understand nursing or give the support needed.”

Changing expectations included finding solutions. An administrator from a geographically remote university created a “grow our own program,” hiring individuals with master's degrees who became a cohesive group. In other cases, the hiring of master's-prepared individuals with no teaching experience fueled faculty resentment. Changing expectations was also reflected in the decision to hire faculty with doctor of nursing practice degrees, some of whom lacked teaching preparation, yet not all administrators agreed: “So many graduates are jumping on the DNP bandwagon, but this is not the right degree for professional educators.” Although changing expectations led to problem solving, not all solutions were viewed favorably. In addition, 2 schools experienced similar changes in morale, mentorship, and increased workload but attributed these to administrative decisions rather than a nurse faculty shortage.

### Constitutive Pattern: Experiencing Workplace Climate Change

Workplace climate, ideally, is “an intensive task environment [when] team members can mutually inspire one another and promote meaningfulness in work.”<sup>23(p292)</sup> Experiencing workplace climate change is a constitutive pattern evident in all interviews and across all themes. For administrators, the nurse faculty shortage is a lived experience.

This shortage is most cogently expressed as a sense of never-ending work: “Our folks work nonstop. In academe it [work] is always present and it doesn't go away. People choose to go back to practice because at the end of the day, you go home and you're done.” Another administrator linked workload with faculty morale: “...the harder faculty work, the lower the morale. Extra workload falls onto faculty and morale goes down.” Workplace climate change was reflected by administrators who aimed to support faculty growth and engagement in their role and provide adequate staffing and an optimal learning environment for students: “The shortage is affecting us in a different way. We do a number of things: teaching certificates, clinical faculty orientation, and a website inviting previous graduates to become adjuncts. However, the real issue is hiring seasoned faculty. There is a need for a 5-year plan.”

Administrators cited the consequences of increased reliance on part-time/adjunct faculty who lacked the desired educational background or experience: “We have issues with consistency. Some part-time faculty do not even follow the same assignments. They have a strong belief that they know better than full-time faculty because they are the clinical experts.” Concerns about workplace climate, faculty morale, and burnout were described: “Faculty are burned-out. With so few faculty tenured or in tenure lines, mentoring is arduous.” and “Faculty morale has been affected by the nurse faculty shortage. People are frustrated.”

Inability to participate in research and scholarship contributed further to low morale and burnout: “There is lack of vision from administration, little collaborative research,

and few resources.” and “We need to determine the level of emotional support need[ed] for faculty scholarship. Teaching is not a problem, it is the other areas, such as scholarship—that causes stress.” Administrators noted: “Faculty are ‘running on empty.’ No sooner are [new] faculty acclimated to their role, then someone retires, and current faculty are left to pick up the pieces.”

### Discussion and Implications

Nursing education programs are facing the consequences of faculty stress and burnout in terms of low morale and retention. Changes in educational workplace climates are exacerbated by the nurse faculty shortage, with contributing factors of excessive workload,<sup>16</sup> insufficient mentoring,<sup>11</sup> inadequate compensation,<sup>2</sup> and continuous cycles of recruitment and onboarding.<sup>1</sup> Socialization practices that highlight new employees' “authentic best selves” lead to “more engagement and a positive job attitude.”<sup>24(p16)</sup> These practices also extend to seasoned faculty who have remained in academia and are integral to institutional continuity and reputation. They are invaluable role models and mentors who influence others to become educators and support them in their integration into academia.

The “elephant in the room” reminds us that real-world issues, such as academic/practice salary disparities, are known but not always vocalized. Given the need for nursing education programs to increase enrollments to keep up with demand, these salary inequities must be addressed. Approaches needed include the following: to face uncomfortable truths, to have difficult conversations with administrators, and, for state universities with legislators, to plan to resolve salary disparities, including differential salaries and incentives for faculty with more than 5 years of experience.<sup>24</sup>

“Making do: getting by” revealed the effects of hiring increased numbers of part-time/adjunct faculty, asking faculty to teach outside their specialties, and forfeiting scholarship and excellence in teaching to cover staffing requirements. Administrators also believed that educating the next generation of nurses was exciting, interesting work and should be undertaken by those who really wanted to teach. Administrators recognized that having enthusiastic faculty who connected with students and colleagues is vital to a healthy organization.

In “changing expectations,” these same sacrifices led to increased workloads and a redistribution of how faculty time was spent, resulting in stress and inability to consistently maintain standards for teaching, scholarship, and service. Fundamental to job satisfaction and retention is the ability to produce work consistent with core values.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, administrators who cultivate a climate that promotes balance in professional and personal goals can improve faculty satisfaction with work and address recruitment and retention issues.

### Strengths/Limitations/Recommendations

This project has several strengths and limitations. Strengths included creation of field notes during/post data collection,



meeting minutes throughout data analysis, and sample representativeness with the inclusion of community colleges, and private and state universities. Two investigators using the same interview guidelines strengthened confirmability. The interplay of team analysis enhanced and verified interpretations, emerging patterns, and thematic conclusions. All administrators noted their deep appreciation for the opportunity to talk about their lived experiences. Limitations included the use of note-taking, which may have missed some language or wording. Member-checking, often used to clarify findings, is not usually incorporated in Heideggerian hermeneutical research. The authentic “here and now” response of participants within the context of temporality (time and context) is integral to hermeneutics. Therefore, when the experience is revisited, the meaning changes. Given that this study was conducted pre–coronavirus disease (SARS COVID-19), this limitation takes on a new meaning.

Further research is needed with a larger and more diverse group of nursing program administrators to learn more about their experiences with the nursing faculty shortage post pandemic. Uncovering similarities and differences based on geography, institution mission and size, and other variables specific to workplace climate will lead to a deeper understanding of factors associated with nursing faculty job satisfaction and intent to stay.

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