

Partnering With Schools of Nursing: An Effective Recruitment Strategy

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Recruiting competent and passionate oncology nurses is a top priority for oncology nurse leaders. Recruitment is a challenge for many specialty areas (Buerhaus, Staiger, & Auerbach, 2000); however, it is particularly difficult in oncology, an area associated with high levels of stress, toxic agents, complex research protocols, and death and dying. The challenge of nurse recruitment in oncology was underscored by a recent survey that assessed perceptions about the oncology nursing workforce among a sample of oncology nurses and nurse executives pulled from the Oncology Nursing Society membership directory. In the survey, 79% of staff nurses reported an inability to retain experienced nurses in their work settings, and nurse executives reported that a lack of qualified applicants was the most common reason for unfilled positions (Buerhaus, Donelan, Des-Roches, Lamkin, & Mallory, 2001).

In the face of such trends, nurse leaders are called on to develop creative approaches to attract nurses to their institutions. This mandate is more pressing given recent evidence demonstrating an association between adequate nurse staffing and favorable patient outcomes (Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, & International Hospital Outcomes Research Consortium, 2002; Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalski, & Silber, 2002), a relationship that is especially apparent in oncology, which, because of its complexities, requires a highly skilled and stable nursing workforce.

As oncology nurse leaders in three hospitals affiliated with the same integrated delivery system, we have worked closely with each other to monitor trends in the oncology nursing workforce and to develop creative, sound, long-term strategies to attract qualified oncology nurses. The institutions—Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (DFCI), Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH), and Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH)—re-

side in an extremely competitive market in Boston, MA, where traditional recruitment strategies, such as maintaining a competitive salary structure and participating in professional conferences and job fairs, are not enough to ensure a robust oncology nursing workforce.

A Multifaceted Recruitment Strategy

Over time, the three institutions have developed a multifaceted approach to attracting and retaining nurses (see Figure 1). The approach has proven effective as evidenced by vacancy rates among oncology nurses in the institutions between 2.04% and 4.2%, well below the average vacancy rate of 8.4% for nurses nationwide (“Telling the hospital story,” 2004). Fundamental to each institution's recruitment and retention strategy is a commitment to maintaining an environment that supports the professional development of nurses and ensures the availability of resources necessary to deliver high-quality nursing care. Only when such an environment is in place will efforts to recruit and retain nurses prove successful.

Among the institutions' most effective recruitment strategies are those that strengthen and capitalize on partnerships with schools of nursing. In general, baccalaureate nursing curricula focus on oncology in a very limited way, a factor that may help explain the small number of graduated nurses entering oncology. Recognizing this factor, the authors have worked with several schools of nursing to develop programs designed to increase knowledge about oncology nursing among faculty—knowledge that can then be passed on to students—and to expose students to the dynamic and varied nature of oncology nursing practice. In this article, the authors describe two programs that have been well received by faculty and students and have resulted in a “win-win” situation because

they help the hospitals achieve recruitment objectives and help the universities enrich their oncology nursing curricula as well as the experiences of nursing students.

A Community Health Rotation for Senior Nursing Students

During the past two years, DFCI has worked with the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB), a school that attracts a particularly diverse group of students, to

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