

Packing a Bag for the Journey Ahead: Preparing Nursing Students for Success

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Abstract

The author describes a creative method to support and to educate nursing students about strategies for success.

Never has it been more important to nurture and support students pursuing a nursing education. Our nation's nursing shortage is a well-documented problem that is worsened by demographic factors such as the aging nursing workforce, the aging of the general population, and a declining number of young people in the workforce. The nursing profession continues to fail to attract a large percentage of minorities or men. Declining applications and enrollment in schools of nursing only exacerbate the situation (Langston, 2001; Meadus, 2000; "Nursing shortage," 2002).

Some schools of nursing now have to admit smaller classes of students due to a shortage of nursing faculty. In addition, the average age of most nursing faculties is in the fifties. Consequently, most schools of nursing will be dealing with huge holes in their nursing faculties in the next decade. So, in addition to a nursing shortage, the profession is dealing with a nursing educator shortage as well ("A lot to learn," 2001).

According to the National Student Nurses' Association, academic ability, responsibility, acceptance and caring, eagerness to learn, confidence, and determination are the keys to a successful student nursing experience. While these qualities form the foundation, college counselors and nursing faculties need to find creative ways to provide information, support, and encouragement to traditional and non-traditional nursing students.

A Well-Packed Solution

Students need to be provided with the tools that will enhance their education and success, so I "pack a bag" for students at the very beginning of their education.

I introduce them to this "luggage" as an ice-breaking activity, an orientation activity that I call "The Road to a Successful Journey in Nursing." We do this activity on the first day of class, in addition to reviewing policies and dress codes.

I begin by telling the students that they are about to start a journey, and we discuss what one does to begin a journey or trip. Usually students mention things such as getting a map, planning where they are going, making reservations at a hotel, and preparing a schedule or itinerary. The conversation ends with a discussion of the need to pack a bag that includes all the items needed on a trip. I tell the students that I have packed for them, for the trip ahead.

I then give each of them a small paper bag and ask the class not to open the bags until everyone has received one. The excitement level rises as the bags are passed from the front of the class to the back, as everyone loves to receive an unexpected gift – and nursing students are no exception.

Once each student receives a bag, all are asked to dump the contents on their desks. What they discover is that each bag is filled with a variety of inexpensive items: a calendar, a rubber band, a penny, a paper clip, an eraser, a pen, tissues, smiley stickers, a joke, chocolate hugs and kisses, a party horn, and a candle. Each item represents different qualities or strategies to assist them in a successful semester and, I hope, nursing education (De Wit, 1999; Dunham, 2001; Katz, 2001).

Keeping a Calendar

The calendar represents the three most important strategies needed for the trip: time management, time management, and time management! This usually generates a laugh, but leads to a serious discussion of managing reading assignments, written assignments, and projects. I stress that time is one of their most precious resources and that they must make the most of their time. I advise them to keep a date book or planner, so that they can easily keep track of important events such as birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, assignment due dates, and test dates. They should also use the calendars to make daily, weekly, and monthly to do lists. I urge them to make assignments manageable by breaking them into smaller components, and remind them that if time management is a problem, they can consult resources such as instructors and the library.

Stretching Themselves

The rubber band represents flexibility. Sometimes, I say, they will have to give a little (as I stretch my rubber band gently), and sometimes they will have to give a lot (and I stretch the rubber band wider). I note that they may need to lower their expectations for perfectly clean homes and nightly home-cooked meals. Because so many students are married and/or parenting, working, and attending school, I instruct them to ask family members for help. (Even small children can set the table or feed the pets.) They must be flexible and creative in finding time for study, and as priorities may change, and emergency or family situations may occur, they will need to adjust to whatever change comes their way.

Not Just a Penny

Students also need to be advised to manage money as judiciously as time. They and their families have made sacrifices for them to attend school, so they should develop a budget. I urge them to look realistically at spending habits and to identify places where they can adjust spending. They must factor in the additional expenses of transportation and meals at school and clinical sites. I also encourage them to pursue grants, scholarships, and work-study programs available here at the college. Budgeting and taking control of financial situations will reduce their overall stress.

A Simple Paper Clip

This item signifies the need to stay organized. Students must have a quiet place to study with all of their supplies and materials close at hand. I advise them to clear the clutter – not just to put things down, but away. As the old adage goes, “a place for everything, and everything in its place.” This practice saves time. I add that, with organization, even short periods of time can be used productively. As an example, I note that time waiting at the doctor’s office can be spent studying flash cards or definitions.

A Useful Eraser

Everyone makes mistakes, I remind them; they just must learn from mistakes, correct them, and move on. Dwelling on past mistakes is a waste of time, and their value as human beings is not diminished by failure. Instead, I urge them to use mistakes and small failures as learning tools, to explore the causes and effects of an error, to make improvements if they can, and to change the approach in the future. Along life’s journey, some of the best lessons come from what we get wrong rather than by what we get right. It’s just important for them to find their way back to the road that leads to their destination.

The Write Thing

Students must be reminded to do the “write” thing – their own work, giving credit to sources. I explain that academic integrity is a reflection of personal integrity. In nursing, they will be trusted with people’s lives, so they must be worthy of that trust. Honesty and integrity cannot be compromised, I note, so they must be true to themselves, to classmates, to patients.

Shedding Some Tears

Nursing is not an easy profession. I stress that they will face difficult classes, demanding patients, and long hours of preparation. These tissues are for the tears of anger, frustration, sorrow, and ultimately joy they will shed as they achieve their goal. Undoubtedly, they will shed tears with and for both patients and their families.

Remembering to Smile

Here, I urge the students to love themselves, to believe in themselves, to encourage themselves with positive self-talk. Negative thoughts can increase stress and anxiety, so I remind them of the story of *The Little Engine That Could*. ("I think I can, I think I can, I think I can....") Though they will probably be their own worst critics, they must try to be their own best friends.

The Power of Laughter

We all must see the humor in the world; we must laugh long and hard and often, as "laughter truly is the best medicine." Humor has been found to decrease pain, minimize stress, and serve as an outlet for many negative emotions.

Chocolate Hugs and Kisses

Everyone needs love and support. With these treats, I encourage my students to maintain a strong support system – to share their trials and tribulations with their families, to make them a part of the journey. I also ask them to be a strong support system for each other. Though they may not know each other at this moment, the people sitting around them are destined to become very important people in their lives as they share some of the most difficult yet meaningful times of their lives with each other. I challenge them to savor that, to nourish it.

A Joyful Noise

With this party horn, I want them to remember to make time for fun. I caution that they may burn out if they do not allow some personal time. I advise them to schedule time for activities they find fun, to take time to enjoy a hobby, read a book, or take a bubble bath, as a little down time is refreshing and energizing. As a result, they will be more alert and better able to work and to use study time.

A Well-Lighted Destination

This candle symbolizes the need to keep focused on long-term goals with their "eyes on the prize." Even as they struggle, there is a "light" at the end of the journey: their completion of the nursing program. Even this destination may not be the ending point. It may be only a brief stop on yet another journey. This candle will continue to light their paths as life-long learners with unlimited destinations. I urge them to have a great trip!

All in the Bag

This exercise gives students concrete reminders of the topics we have discussed and the strategies that we have identified for success in nursing school. Each student is encouraged to keep the bag some place visible where he or she can review the contents when feeling discouraged or overwhelmed.

I find that students receive so much information in the first couple of weeks of school that it becomes a blur to them. Providing students with tangible reminders of the strategies and characteristics that will help them to be successful keeps these lessons in their memories.

Student and faculty response to this activity has always been positive. Even a year later, many students can tell me what items were in the bag and what each item represents. Further development of many of the strategies, such as time management and study skills, takes place throughout the first semester of school, but the groundwork is laid with this simple activity centered on a brown paper bag and a few dime-store items.

I encourage everyone, nursing professor and student alike, to "pack a bag." We've all got a long, exciting journey ahead.

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