

‘Back To The Future’ A Joint Adventure For Addressing The Nursing Shortage

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges facing managers in the health care industry is the recurrent nursing shortage. This paper presents a ‘Back to the Future’ innovative approach that addresses this issue. The ‘Berger Project’, a joint venture between Berger Health Care System (BHCS) and a nursing education program at Ohio University-Chillicothe, began in spring 2003. The venture incorporates a strategy that goes ‘BACK’ in time by shifting the educational setting for nursing students from the traditional college campus to the health care organization campus which was a commonplace setting ‘BACK’ in the 1940’s and 1950’s to resolve the nursing shortages--present and ‘FUTURE’. The project will culminate with an evaluation process guided by comparative research studies of the nursing students in the traditional setting and those in the ‘Berger Project’ that investigate the differences in the level of critical thinking, empowerment and retention of the graduates of the two nursing programs.

INTRODUCTION

H health care is one of the largest businesses in the United States. The United States Health Care System has been laden with increasing complexity, radical changes and skyrocketing costs. Cyclic shortages of professional nurses are one of the problems in health care that have contributed greatly to these rising costs.

Traditionally, during these cycles of nursing shortage, health care organizations resorted to national job searches as a strategy to resolve this problem (Glassel-Brown, 1998). National job searches were not only costly to the organizations but resulted in limited retention of the newly hired nurses. In addition, colleges and schools of nursing increased enrollment to alleviate the shortage of nurses. Both solutions resulted in a temporary suppression of the nursing shortage that has resurfaced in even greater proportions in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The shortage of registered nurses is a global issue and has a major impact on the quality of patient care (Brewer, 1998). Commonplace outcomes include higher incidence of errors in health care and significant safety issues such as ergonomic injuries and violence in the workplace (Cherry & Jacob, 2002). As a result of the recurrent cyclic nursing shortages, health care managers and nursing education programs have struggled unsuccessfully to resolve this problem. In addition, accordingly to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999), the need for professional nurses will be greater than any other occupation in the USA for the next decade. Consequently, innovative strategies need to be developed to resolve the nursing shortage.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Although the marketing process is a process designed to analyze and solve problems much like the nursing process, few nurses recognize marketing as an essential skill for nursing practice (Huber, 2000). Competitive marketing is an essential factor in resolving the nursing shortage.

Kotler's (1999) marketing process was utilized as a conceptual framework for the 'Berger Project'. A linear flow diagram is utilized to visualize this process: R (marketing research) → S (segments to target need) → M (marketing mix) → I (Implementation of marketing plan) → C (control for effectiveness). The investigators present the evolution of the 'Berger Project' according to Kotler's marketing process.

MARKETING PROCESS (R)

The investigators reviewed the literature to identify past methodologies utilized to resolve the nursing shortages as well as the effectiveness of these methodologies. Although commonly implemented solutions such as national nursing job searches and increasing enrollment in nursing education programs resulted in a temporary suppression of the shortage of professional nurses, the shortage of professional nurses continue to reemerge (Glassel-Brown, 1998).

Retention of professional nurses was a costly contributor to the shortage and many new graduates leave nursing after being employed only 6 months. O'Connell (1999) stressed the importance of the 'culture of change'. According to O'Connell, proximity to home, family and friends is a major factor in selecting a nursing position, and, therefore, should be considered an essential factor for nurse recruitment.

In the 1940's and 1950's, many professional nurses were educated as registered nurses in schools of nursing established by local health care organizations. Although a few of these schools of nursing continue to survive, most nursing education programs are located in colleges and universities. The transition of nursing education to a university setting transpired to elevate the discipline of nursing to an accepted profession.

Although the importance of proximity to home was identified as a potential culture change resolution to the nursing shortage, investigators agreed that, in order for nursing to maintain its acceptance as a profession, a university should be the source of nursing education. The outgrowth of the marketing research was that the investigators would go 'BACK' to the strategy of proximity to home yet bring the concept up to the 'FUTURE' by providing nursing education in collaboration with a university and university nursing faculty.

SEGMENTS TO TARGET NEED

The second task of the project was to determine the target market. The target markets can be either broad or narrow (Huber, 2000). Because of the global nursing shortage, this project would have global interest. However, the investigators chose to pilot the project in a local health care organization.

After surveying the local health care organizations near Ohio University-Chillicothe, Berger Health Care System (BHCS) in Circleville, OH, demonstrated an interest and a need for a resolution for a shortage of professional nurses in their health care system.

Now that the marketing need had been established at BHCS, an ambitious proposal between BHCS and Ohio University-Chillicothe would establish the marketing mix of the marketing process.

MARKETING MIX

Kotler (1999) presents the marketing mix from the seller's point of view as well as the customer's point of view. From the seller's point of view (Ohio University-Chillicothe), the marketing mix is a combination of the

common 4 P's of marketing: Product, Price, Place and Promotion. From the customer's point of view (BHCS), marketing mix involves the 4 C's: Customer value, Costs, Convenience, and Communication.

The 4 P's

Ohio University-Chillicothe proposed a unique product—the development of a unique partnership between the Ohio University-Chillicothe campus and Berger Health Care System. The central objective for this partnership was to redirect one class of the Associate Degree Nursing education program from the institutional setting of higher education domain to a concept of primary care that is rooted in the community of the students (**Product**). All students would be admitted to Ohio University Associate Degree Program by the same standard admission criteria as all Ohio University students. Students are expected to follow the same policies, procedures, timelines and rules as all other Ohio University students.

All courses in the curriculum of the Associate Degree Nursing Program on the campus of Ohio University-Chillicothe, the general education support courses required for the Associate Degree and the clinical rotations are offered on the campus of BCHS (**PLACE**). Faculty from Ohio University-Chillicothe would instruct all nursing and support courses. Employees, who work for BCHS who meet the criteria for clinical instructors may apply to teach as adjunct faculty for clinical rotations in the delivery of this program.

BCHS would be responsible for the entire budget for 'Berger Project' that would include faculty salaries, travel, supplies, student tuition and fees, classroom facilities, computer and nursing skills lab (**PRICE**). In addition, research expenses including expenses for dissemination of research at conferences would be paid by BCHS. The estimated cost of the 2-year project was \$250,000.

The "Berger Project" would serve as a pilot study for a formidable solution of the nursing shortage. The presentation of the implementation of the 'Project' as well as the results of the research studies associated with the 'Project' would give BCHS and OU-C national recognition. Ohio University-Chillicothe and BCHS would share the promotion of the project through collaborative, as well as individual facility presentations and advertisements. BCHS would market the 'Project' to current and prospective employees as a benefit since all associated fees for an Associate Degree in Nursing would be paid by BCHS with an agreement that the employee would remain at BCHS for at least 2 years (**Promotion**).

The 4 C's

As a result of this partnership, the student would gain knowledge from a community program that is enhanced by their employer and cultural support system. The nursing students in this project are employees at the BCHS who have demonstrated their loyalty to the organization and who are rewarded by receiving tuition-free education in their own community to become registered nurses. The project permits the student to learn in a familiar environment that is conducive to learning (**Customer Value and Convenience**).

The cost of recruiting and orienting a new registered nurse is very expensive and is estimated to cost between \$8,000 and \$50,000 (Messmer, Abellera, & Erb, 1995). All 30 students in the project agreed to remain at BCHS for 2 years as a requirement for inclusion in the project which would offset some of the costs associated with recruiting and orienting new employees, as the graduates are current employees of BCHS. In addition, a grant proposal could be written to defray the cost of this project because of the monies now available for nursing shortage projects (**Cost**).

Open communication, both written and oral, is an essential component of the project. Regular meetings between administrative bodies are scheduled. Students and faculty have email access as well as a toll-free number to contact Ohio University-Chillicothe. Student handbooks are provided to alleviate concerns of the students. BCHS has direct communication with the students in the project through BCHS email (**Communication**).

IMPLEMENTATION OF MARKETING PLAN

Thirty students were admitted to the Ohio University-Chillicothe Associate Degree Nursing program by the standard Ohio University admission criteria during winter quarter 2003. Students began support courses either winter or spring quarter 2003 depending on previous learning needs. The needed support courses were offered at local high schools, Ohio University-Chillicothe, Ohio University-Lancaster to meet the convenience needs of the students. BHCS arranged the work schedules of the student/employees to alleviate any conflicts.

After students completed support courses, they were admitted into the nursing program for winter 2004. The coursework and clinical rotations were conducted at Berger Health Care System facilities. The following is an outline of the clinical sites for each quarter:

- *Winter 2004:* Clinical components held at BCHS Education Lab and extended Care facilities in Pickaway County
- *Spring 2004:* Clinical components held at BCHS Education Lab and the Medical Surgical unit of BCHS hospital
- *Fall 2004:* Clinical components held at BCHS Education Lab and the Medical Surgical unit of BHCS. A service-learning component initiated for the psychiatric Nursing course.
- *Winter 2005:* Clinical components will be held at BCHS Education Lab and the Medical Surgical unit and the Obstetric unit at BHCS
- *Spring 2005:* Clinical components will be held at BCHS Education Lab and Adena Health Care Systems. BHCS cares for clients across the lifespan in their Medical Surgical unit. A more concentrated pediatric experience will be provided at Adena.
- *Fall 2005:* Clinical component of the courses will be achieved through preceptor experiences.

An Associate Degree Nursing class in the traditional university campus setting was admitted at the Ohio University-Chillicothe campus during winter quarter 2004. Since students at OU-C campus and at the BHCS must meet identical admission criteria, homogeneity for the research studies should be assured. Both sets of students are/will be evaluated throughout the project with a comparison of the two groups noted in the appropriate research study.

CONTROLLED FOR EFFECTIVENESS

Three research studies will be performed to evaluate the effectiveness of the “Berger Project”. All three studies are descriptive, comparative studies that will compare the 2 groups of Associate Degree Nursing students, traditional (university setting) and Non-traditional (BCHS setting) on the following variables: empowerment, critical thinking and retention.

Empowerment Study

The purpose of this descriptive, comparative research study will be to compare the empowerment of traditional Associate Degree Nursing students with empowerment of the non-traditional Associate Degree Nursing students. The following research questions will be explored over the two-year academic period using the Spreitzer Psychological Empowerment Scale (1995):

- How does empowerment differ in Associate Degree Nursing students in a traditional educational setting from empowerment in Associate Degree Nursing Students in a non-traditional educational setting?
- What is the relationship between the empowerment scores of Associate Degree Nursing students and the number of years completed in the Associate Degree nursing program?

The outcome of this study could serve to support additional collaborative educational projects between nursing service and education. It is hypothesized that nursing students who are supported by their employer and who

learn in a familiar cultural environment will have a higher level of empowerment than nursing students who learn in a traditional university setting.

Critical Thinking Study

The purpose of this descriptive, comparative study will be to compare critical thinking skills of traditional Associate Degree Nursing students with critical thinking skills of non-traditional Associate Degree Nursing students. The following research questions will be explored over the two-year academic period using the National League for Nursing Critical Thinking Test (2000):

- What are the differences between the pre-test and post-test sub scores on the National League for Nursing Critical Thinking Test for Associate Degree Nursing students in a traditional educational setting and the pre-test and post-test sub scores of Associate Degree Nursing students in a non-traditional educational setting?
- What is the relationship between the critical thinking skills of Associate Degree Nursing students and the number of years completed in the Associate Degree nursing program?

This study will analyze the critical thinking skills of nursing students in a collaborative, multi-site Associate Degree Nursing program. Critical thinking skills are essential for safe, effective nursing practice. The outcome of the study would support the ability of the graduates to deal with problems in clinical practice (Lowry, 1999). Inability to deal with problems in clinical practice can cause nurses to leave Nursing.

Nursing Retention Study

The purpose of this descriptive, comparative study will compare the length of time spent in the first job accepted after graduation by traditional Associate Degree Nursing graduates with the length of time spent in the first job accepted after graduation by non-traditional Associate Degree Nursing graduates. The following research hypothesis is generated for this study:

H: Non-traditional Associate Degree Nursing graduates will remain in their first Nursing position for a longer period of time than traditional Associate Degree Nursing graduates.

The outcome of this study could be utilized to support the benefits of off-campus nursing educational programs. In addition, costs of retention and recruitment could be offset if the results are as hypothesized.

CONCLUSION

The 'Berger Project' is in its first year of implementation. Students in the non-traditional setting present a positive, interactive milieu. The first phase of the research studies will begin next quarter. Both BHCS and OU-C are content with the proposal and suggestions for similar projects have been discussed. Once the research studies have been completed and graduation of the first class in this project has transpired, more in-depth conclusions can be made about the success or failure of this project.

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