The Executive Master of Science in Nursing Program

Competencies and Learning Experiences

Joan Thomas, APRN, PhD, CS
Donna Herrin, MSN, RN, CNAA, FACHE

This is the first in a 3-part series describing an executive master of science in nursing program. Part 1 describes program development built on the American Organization of Nurse Executives’ competencies and distinct features of the students’ online and on-site learning experiences. Part 2 will discuss how the 14 Forces of Magnetism are integrated across the curriculum and the unique criteria for program admission. Finally, Part 3 will describe the use of the Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows Program as the model for learning activity and Benner’s Novice to Expert theory for program evaluation.

Nationwide, hospital and health system leaders recognize that registered nurses with graduate degrees enhance executive team performance. Strong nursing leadership at the executive level is a critical requirement for achieving organizational goals, including results in patient outcomes, improving the clinical practice environment with nurse recruitment and retention improvements, customer satisfaction, and financial results. Executive nurse leadership is critical to organizational success.

Nursing administration programs have sound history of teaching the important art of leadership (ie, conflict management, collaboration, negotiation, organizational theory, leading change, etc). However, because many traditional nursing administration programs lacked emphasis on the multiple complexities of today’s healthcare system, some nurses have not developed the skill and knowledge sets needed to be successful in executive team roles.

Today’s healthcare environment requires nurse executive competence in an intricate set of relationships among its multiple participants, partners, and networks. This environmental complexity requires ever-increasing expertise in the areas of financial and cost management, cost analysis, strategic management, and planning. Nurse executives must demonstrate expertise in the art of leadership and also demonstrate well-developed proficiency in finance, strategic management, and business principles. In addition, the nurse executive must be expert in leading the discipline of nursing, evidence-based practice, and outcomes management for both patient care and the organization. These needed competencies led this university to develop the Executive master of science in nursing (MSN) program to meet the ever-expanding learning needs of nurses in senior executive roles.

At the Masters Level

Although some nurse leaders choose doctoral preparation, there is no evidence that nurse executives or other nonnurse executives must complete doctoral education to be successful in their roles. In fact, the vast majority of Fortune 500 chief executive officers are not prepared at the doctoral level. The American
Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE)—Council for Graduate Education for Administration in Nursing collaborative reported that “More recently, concerns have been expressed that a shift toward the DNP [doctorate in nursing practice] from more traditional master’s degree programs could result in future nurse executives and managers choosing to attend MBA [masters in business administration] or MHA [masters in healthcare administration] programs because of time constraints in their leadership roles. This would be unfortunate. Graduate nursing education plays an important role in both leadership development and in the generation of significant contributions to the science of nursing administrative practice.”5(p501) If this diversion to nonnursing degrees plays out over the coming years, the decreasing numbers of nurse executives with advanced preparation in the discipline of nursing could have a significant and long-lasting effect on healthcare organizations’ patient care focus and to the discipline of nursing.

AONE Nurse Executive Competencies as a Curriculum Foundation
Although the AONE’s nurse executive competencies encompass the art of leadership, they also detail the critical components of knowledge of the healthcare environment, strategic management, resource management, information technology, data-based decision making, marketing, accounting, and business.3 The AONE nurse executive competencies also outline requirements for leading the discipline of nursing, which is critical for evidence-based care and successful patient outcomes. Figure 1 provides an abbreviated listing of the AONE 5 nurse executive competency areas, whereas a more complete description of each of the competency areas is provided at the AONE web site.7

In designing the new executive curriculum, the faculty and practice partners constructed a crosswalk between the 5 key areas of the AONE 5 nurse executive competency areas, whereas a more complete description of each of the competency areas is provided at the AONE web site.7

Distinct Features of the Online and On-site Learning Experiences
After extensive research, the development of the Executive MSN program replicated some components of...
of model executive MBA programs. The executive MSN program is a hybrid that combines both online and on-site learning experiences. The online component consists of innovative teaching strategies such as problem-based learning, case studies, narrated PowerPoint presentations, team assignments, and discussion questions requiring students to use high-level critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The 2-day on-site Executive Development Experiences are held at the beginning and end of each semester. There are exceptions to this structure in the first summer term when students are enrolled in Financial and Cost Accountings and the concluding summer term before beginning the practicum experience. The on-site Executive Development Experiences provide students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AONE Nurse Executive Competency Area</th>
<th>Executive MSN Courses with Course Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication and Relationship Building</td>
<td>Communication and Relationship Building for the Nurse Executive Creates skills to effectively communicate, manage relationships, influence behaviors, support diversity, implement shared decision making, support community involvement, manage medical-staff relations, and support academic relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the Healthcare Environment</td>
<td>Health Policy Creates skills needed to articulate payment systems and regulations that affect organization's finances; describe local, state, and federal laws/regulations that affect patient care; participate in legislative processes concerning healthcare; and interpret impact of legislation on nursing and organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Skills Developing Organizational Leadership Creates skills including foundational thinking skills, personal journey disciplines, systems thinking, succession planning, and change management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism Accountability, Advocacy, and Ethics Creates skills to promote accountability, develop career planning paths, integrate high ethics into the culture of the organization, mentor others in using evidenced-based management practices, advocate patient care as the core of the organization, ensure nursing involvement in organizational decisions, and promote participation in professional organization(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Skills Fundamentals of Accounting Provides an accelerated and in-depth introduction to the conceptual foundations of accounting as a dynamic information system for measuring and communicating economic and financial data for planning and control purposes Accounting for Decision Making Provides an accelerated and in-depth introduction to managerial and cost accounting and illustrates the use of management accounting information in decision making settings Financial and Human Resources for Patient Care Creates skills required to articulate business models for healthcare organizations, use accounting principles, analyze financial statements, manage financial resources by developing business plans, establish accurate charging mechanisms, and educate others on financial implications of patient care decisions Marketing, Strategic, and Information Management Creates skills to implement strategic management; analyze marketing opportunities; use hospital databases, decision support, and expert system programs to plan operational processes and systems; evaluate utility of information systems; involve nursing in planning, designing, choosing, and implementing information systems; and analyze benchmarking, financial, and occupancy data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: AONE, American Organization of Nurse Executives; MSN, Master of Science in Nursing; CMI, case mix index.
the opportunity to learn from nationally recognized nurse executives, other leading healthcare executives, non–healthcare corporate leaders who led their companies to positions of excellence, and university faculty.

Once coursework is complete, the program is concluded by student participation in a summer long Scholarly Synthesis Course and a Nurse Executive Practicum under the guidance of a nurse executive mentor. The site of the practicum experience may be in or outside the student’s employment organization.

The curriculum was developed in partnership with practicing nurse executives who are leading complex systems and understand the requirements of today’s executive nurse leader. A focus on nursing and clinical operations along with creating integrated patient care delivery systems, integrated case management/quality management systems, and automated clinical-decision support and documentation systems (design and implementation phases) are required. Any gaps in nurse executive education curriculum are filled due to collaboration between university faculty and nurse executives who hold expertise in development and implementation of enterprise-wide leadership advancement, performance improvement, and education initiatives.

The Executive MSN program supports the enrollment of full-time employed registered nurses because only 2 courses per semester are required. The curriculum consists of 11 semester courses (3 hours) and a summer semester practicum course (4 hours), for a total of 37 hours. Like most Executive MBA programs, students are admitted as a cohort and remain together during the 2-year program.

Summary
The Loewenberg School of Nursing Executive MSN program is considered a model for combining the best in nursing (AONE Nurse Executive Competencies, the 14 forces of Magnetism, and the Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows Program) to develop leaders for the future. The healthcare environment requires nurse executive leaders with competence in both the intricacies of patient care as well as financial and business expertise as primary members of senior executive teams.

REFERENCES