IMPLEMENTATION OF A RURAL NURSE FELLOW PROGRAM FOR SENIOR LEVEL NURSING STUDENTS

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Purpose: The Rural Nurse Fellow (RNF) Program provides an opportunity for senior level nursing students to complete a preceptored experience in a rural healthcare facility.

Background: Rural healthcare facilities continue to experience greater nursing staff shortages than more urban communities. Therefore, it is necessary that rural healthcare facilities focus nursing staff recruitment and retention strategies to ensure adequate numbers of interested and qualified registered nurses are available. To meet current and future healthcare needs of rural communities, the RNF Program was developed for senior level nursing students enrolled in a baccalaureate nursing program at one Midwestern university. The program is designed to provide exposure to rural healthcare, promote an understanding of issues facing rural healthcare providers, and allow nursing students to develop the specific skills necessary for practicing in rural healthcare facilities. Through the preceptored experience, seminar discussions, and course assignments, RNF Program students identify challenges facing rural healthcare providers and experience the role of the rural nurse generalist. From firsthand experiences and discussions, students explore issues of recruitment and retention of rural healthcare providers and identify effective strategies for dealing with challenges facing rural healthcare providers. Specifically, students and faculty have focused discussions about the role of telehealth on rural healthcare delivery. Students also analyze the impact of public policy decisions on rural healthcare facilities.

Methods: To implement the RNF Program, rural healthcare facilities in the Midwestern state and surrounding states were contacted to present the RNF Program and discuss the possibility of student preceptor placement. Information was retained on those facilities interested in nursing student preceptor placement. The clinical placement coordinators met with students prior to requesting placement for the preceptored experience. The RNF Program was described as an option for clinical placement. Students interested in the RNF Program could request a specific rural facility. Rural facilities and preceptors were orientated to the RNF program. Through the orientation, they were encouraged to provide the student with a wide variety of rural nurse roles with potential additional time spent in areas such as homecare/hospice, outpatient areas, or long term care. Students participating in the RNF Program were placed in the same clinical group and assigned an instructor who was familiar with rural health content. Seminar topics and course assignments were connected to content on rural health issues. Upon successful completion of the preceptored experience, each student was designated a Rural Nurse Fellow.

Outcomes: The Student Evaluation of Rural Nurse Fellow Program tool was developed for post-RNF Program evaluation. Data collection is planned for December 2013 and May 2014.

Conclusions: Findings from the evaluation of the RNF Program are expected to support further development in nursing student interest and preparedness for practicing in rural healthcare facilities upon graduation.

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