Motivating Underrepresented Students to Pursue Faculty Roles

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Increasing the number of underrepresented nurses in healthcare has the potential to facilitate the provision of culturally competent care, which, in turn, increases healthcare access for diverse patients. To increase diversity in the nursing workforce, educational programs need to recruit and retain underrepresented students. Underrepresented students will more likely be attracted to a program where there are underrepresented faculty. However, there are not enough diverse graduate students in the pipeline to increase faculty diversity. In response to this need, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and American Academy of Colleges of Nursing developed the New Careers in Nursing (NCIN) program to increase underrepresented students in accelerated bachelor’s and master’s programs with the long-term goal of NCIN students choosing faculty roles and increasing faculty diversity. Through the NCIN program, my university was able to provide scholarships, a mentoring initiative, and leadership development for second bachelor-degree students. As a result, our underrepresented student enrollment quadrupled, with zero attrition and a 100% graduation rate. These outcomes indicated that we successfully achieved the majority of the goals of the NCIN program.

The question that remained was: Did our successful underrepresented students see themselves as future faculty? The processes of recruiting and retaining underrepresented students into graduate programs, transitioning from graduate school into academia, and mentoring novice minority faculty have been recommended as steps to increasing underrepresented faculty. The absence of minority faculty role models decreases student aspirations and can affect opportunities for student-faculty connections, which may impede student engagement, professional socialization, and program progression. The lack of minority faculty may indicate to students that nursing does not value diversity, which may deter further education and limit the pipeline of nurses with advanced degrees. To assess what would encourage our underrepresented second bachelor-degree students to pursue the faculty role, a qualitative study was undertaken.

Using a qualitative descriptive design, a convenience sample of 7 of 10 students of African American descent from a cohort of 60 second bachelor-degree students was selected. While underrepresented students were defined as individuals from minority backgrounds, study participants were all of African descent. After institutional review board approval was obtained, students were contacted by phone and signed an informed consent, acknowledging that their participation in the study was voluntary. After training a peer honor student, she conducted individual 30- to 45-minute semistructured interviews guided by 3 questions designed to elicit participant perceptions of the (1) benefits, (2) barriers, and (3) motivators to pursuing a faculty role. Privacy was protected by securing data in a locked drawer in a locked office. Anonymity was maintained by referring to alphanumeric codes on the interview data and field notes. Data were analyzed by inductive content analysis. Trustworthiness of the findings was established by several readings as well as 2 participants validating data and reviewing results with a research expert.

Pursuing a Faculty Role
Benefits
Participants spoke of personal, educational, and societal benefits to being a faculty member. They imagined that serving as a role model, completing their graduate education, and meeting the rigorous requirements to be accepted into a faculty role would be personally very satisfying. Attractive aspects of the faculty role were identified as role autonomy, access to current research, and flexible work hours. Participants envisioned being a mentor, “students would see you as someone they can come and talk to,” and serving as a role model by demonstrating that being a professor is an attractive and attainable role. Minority faculty could provide students of the same race or ethnicity a comfort level that may attract them to a program where there are underrepresented faculty. However, there are not enough diverse graduate students in the pipeline to increase faculty diversity. The absence of minority faculty role models decreases student aspirations and can affect opportunities for student-faculty connections, which may impede student engagement, professional socialization, and program progression. The lack of minority faculty may indicate to students that nursing does not value diversity, which may deter further education and limit the pipeline of nurses with advanced degrees.
recognized the benefit of being able to connect to diverse patients to increase health access. One participant expressed a sense of altruism in recognizing the support she received needed to be given back, saying “I believe in the principle to whom much is given, much is expected, so it was only right to give back to the next generation of nurses.”

Barriers
The length and cost of education, the need to attend to family, and the desire to gain experience in their new nurse role, however, deterred participants from considering a position as a nurse educator as an early career option; 1 student stated that “earning money to repay loans, support the family, and transition from the indigent student role to a professional nurse” was a priority. Participants were daunted by the time and financial commitment of education required to enter the professoriate, with one commenting “the length of it scares me. I can’t really see myself going through 4 more years of school financially, and then there are the personal responsibilities.” Several participants acknowledged that with faculty salaries much lower than clinical compensation, an educator role was not an option. One individual did remark, “If I knew you could combine getting your PhD with raising a family, it [pursuing doctoral education] wouldn’t be so intimidating.” Not seeing many diverse faculty in the class or in the clinical setting led a respondent to question whether the absence indicated underrepresented nurses did not have the requirements or did not feel welcome at the university level.

Motivators
The motivators that participants identified fit into the 4 structural components that support empowerment: information, relationships, resources, and opportunities. Participants envisioned being motivated by

• receiving information early in their program about the connection between health disparities, the diversity of health providers, and the importance of underrepresented nurses contribution to healthcare;
• a trusting relationship with a mentor of similar background whom they could ask for help, identify their needs, receive support, and build on their strengths;
• obtaining financial resources for scholarships, funding, loan options, and money management; and
• access to clinical opportunities to develop the depth and breadth of experience to teach the next generation.

Discussion
By the usual measures of recruitment, attrition, and graduation rates, it appeared our underrepresented students were doing well. Class participation, clinical performance, and course grades all indicated student success and program rigor. To achieve the goal of increasing student interest in the faculty role, however, the interview data told another story. To consider further education leading to a future in the professorate, participants recognized the need for health disparity information, educational guidance, emotional support, obtainable funding, and comprehensive clinical experience. In a study of African American student success in higher education, students reported mentors creating close personal relationships to provide connections to career networks, modeling professional behavior, and collaborating on proposals for funding. Mentoring was similar to the close-knit relationship nurse advisors have with doctoral students.

Implications
In a 2005 article, I recommended a collaborative mentoring teacher-student relationship to develop leadership capacity. Today, to increase faculty diversity, an assertive, individually specific, outcome-oriented mentoring is required that begins with an engaged relationship to provide focused information, real financial resources, and professional opportunities. We have created accelerated programs for an RN, BS, or MS. Now we need to accelerate the systems response to reach undergraduates with the goal of increasing diversity in higher education, the professoriate, and ultimately the workforce.

References