Direct Articulation of AD Nursing Students Into an RN-to-BSN Completion Program: A Research Study

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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to investigate the educational validity of direct articulation for AD students into an upper division RN-completion program through transfer of nursing credit. The results suggested that there is a common core of content in both associate- and baccalaureate-level nursing curricula, and that transferring associate degree nursing (ADN) credit into an RN-to-BSN upper division program is defensible. Statistical analysis revealed no significant difference between ADN seniors graduating from National League for Nursing (NLN)-accredited programs and candidates for university admission in composite scores on the ACT-PEP validation battery if the student achieved a final GPA of 2.75 or above. Based on these results, the faculty has recommended the adoption of a general policy of direct articulation for students from state-approved, NLN-accredited ADN programs into the RN-to-BSN program at La Salle University.

Introduction

Nursing has not specifically defined the concept of articulation or “joining together” with respect to educational mobility for the RN student. Some nurse educators believe in the articulation concept for those moving from AD to BSN and have designed completion programs in concert with this belief (Bullough, 1972; Lenburg, 1975; Powell, 1986; Rapson, 1987). Others have taken the position that articulation is only a temporary measure that is inconsistent with the methods and purposes of preparing “liberally educated nurses” in a university setting (Gallop, 1985). Recently, however, several states (Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas, and Utah) have established statewide articulation plans in order to allow RNs to directly transfer credit or obtain credit for work completed in a “lower division” setting. There is little or no empirical evidence to support the validity of this action, although Rapson, Perry, and Parker (1990) have examined the relationship of educational outcomes and the choice of advanced placement options.

Typically RN-to-BSN programs are designed according to an upper division model, i.e., nursing courses are concentrated in the junior and senior years. The rationale for such a design is based on the belief, widely held by baccalaureate nurse educators, that nursing builds on a foundation of liberal arts and sciences taken in the freshman and sophomore years. This model presents articulation problems for students with associate degrees in nursing who possess only lower division nursing credit and who, philosophically speaking, should not receive upper division nursing credit for lower division nursing courses.

Most RN-to-BSN completion programs have dealt with this issue by providing challenge examinations through which students can validate prior learning in nursing (Figure 1). Thus, only nonnursing credit from an ADN graduate’s transcript is transferable, and prior learning in nursing is validated with a set of nursing challenge examinations to earn advanced placement in the upper division. Despite the philosophical purity of the lower-upper division dichotomy, validation of prior learning in nursing examinations suggests shared content in ADN and generic BSN programs.

La Salle University’s BSN program for RN students is based on Knowles’ (1970) principles of adult learning. The
program also incorporates several of the open curriculum features enumerated by Notter and Robey (1979); the granting of advanced placement for prior learning through examination, program design specifically addressing the learning needs of the registered nurse student, and flexibility in scheduling course work, e.g., evenings and weekends (Notter and Robey, 1979).

Because of La Salle University's success in facilitating registered nurse students' educational advancement, in 1985, the Community College of Philadelphia's (CCP) nursing faculty requested that La Salle consider a more direct articulation plan that would acknowledge, through transfer of nursing credit, ADN content as a part of the larger professional model of nursing. In May 1985, the first phase of a long-term study began to investigate the feasibility of direct articulation into the upper division of the RN completion program by students who had successfully completed the ADN.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the educational validity of direct articulation through transfer of nursing credit. The study proceeded in three phases.

During Phase 1 the study asked: What degree of match is there between the nursing curricula content of AD programs and the ACT-PEP nursing validation battery required by La Salle University to challenge for advanced placement?

During Phase 2 the study asked: Given an 80% or better match between ADN curricula and the ACT-PEP validation battery, at what GPA could the nursing validation for ADN articulation students be waived and, in lieu, lower division nursing credit be transferred?

During Phase 3 the study asked: What is the level of academic performance of AD students admitted to the university's RN-to-BSN program through direct articulation?

Methods and Results

Phase 1
In the first phase of the study, the philosophy, goals, objectives, and content of four different NLN-accredited ADN programs—inner city and suburban, public and private—were compared with the objectives and content of the university's ACT-PEP nursing validation battery. This battery consists of four ACT-PEP nursing exams: Fundamentals of Nursing (#403), Maternal/Child Nursing,
Baccalaureate Degree (#457), Psychiatric/Mental Health Nursing (#503), and Adult Nursing (#554) (Figure 2).

The content fit of AD nursing curricula with La Salle’s ACT-PEP battery ranged from 80% to 93% with an average of 86%. The use of the nursing process, biological and psychosocial processes dealing with illness, and legal and ethical areas in the ACT-PEP examinations matched particularly well with the curricula of the four programs. Content pertinent to role development of the AD nurse appeared in all curricula but not, as was expected, in the three ACT-PEP examinations that are standardized at the baccalaureate level (Maternal/Child Nursing, Adult Nursing, and Psychiatric/Mental Health Nursing). Content concerning the role of the baccalaureate nurse in such areas as health promotion and disease prevention, the research process, leadership and management skills, and the theory that guides professional practice was absent from the ADN curricula. Moreover, La Salle’s RN-to-BSN curriculum specifically emphasizes those areas absent from the ADN curricula.

**Phase 2**

To further validate the correlation between the community college programs of study and the first 20 credits of La Salle University’s nursing major, the ACT-PEP nursing validation battery of tests was administered to 425 ADN students 1 week prior to their graduation. All four examinations were completed by 419 students. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All students were required by their individual schools to maintain a C average (2.0) in their major. All tests were administered in accordance with ACT-PEP Guidelines and Procedures for Test Administration. Tests were scored by ACT and results returned to La Salle. Final student transcripts were provided by the schools and used in the analysis.

The relationship between AD seniors’ (N=419) performance on the ACT-PEP validation battery and their final GPA was examined. To this end, ADN students were categorized into four groups: Group 1 consisted of all students; Group 2 of students with GPA>2.5; Group 3 of students with GPA>2.75 and Group 4 of students with GPA>3.00. Mean composite scores and standard deviations were computed for each group. The data (Table 1) suggest a direct relationship between final GPA and composite mean score on the ACT-PEP validation battery. To further confirm this relationship, final GPA and ACT-PEP composite means were subjected to a Pearson's r (r = .69, p < .000).

ACT-PEP composite means and standard deviations of ADN seniors (N=419) and 1987-1988 La Salle University candidates for admission to the nursing program were compared using a t test for independent samples. Results of this analysis (Table 1) revealed no significant difference between ADN seniors and La Salle University candidates for admission in composite scores on the ACT-PEP validation battery if the student achieved a final GPA of 2.75 or above.

Further, an analysis of variance was computed on the composite scores of the students from different schools. No significant difference was noted, F = .3382, (df 7, 411) (Table 2).
Phase 3

Phase 3 of the study, evaluating the academic performance of direct articulation students, is in the early stages. Twenty-nine AD students were admitted to the RN-to-BSN program under the direct articulation policy, i.e., 20 credits of lower division nursing courses were accepted in transfer in lieu of successful completion of the ACT-PEP nursing validation battery. Direct articulation students’ transcripts are reviewed yearly for academic progress. To date, of the 29 students admitted under direct articulation, six have completed requirements for graduation with excellent academic performance—mean final GPA of 3.6. The remaining 23 students have completed an average of 24 credits with a mean GPA of 3.4. When sufficient data are available, the academic performance of students admitted through direct articulation will be compared to students who have taken the ACT-PEP nursing validation battery as part of the admission process to the nursing program.

Discussion

The results of Phase 1 of this study indicate a common core of content in both associate- and baccalaureate-level nursing curricula. This common core involves the use of the nursing process, biological and psychological processes involving illness, and legal and ethical issues. Content related to health promotion and disease prevention, the research process, leadership and management skills, and the theoretical basis of professional practice is most commonly found at the baccalaureate level. This breakdown is analogous to what Stevens (1981) referred to as the inclusion model, i.e., so-called professional content includes a core of so-called technical content. The inclusion model suggests that transferring ADN credit into an RN-to-BSN upper division program is defensible. The 80% to 93% fit between lower division nursing curricula content and La Salle University’s ACT-PEP nursing validation battery supports the inclusion model described above.

The results of Phase 2 of this study revealed no significant difference in ACT-PEP composite mean scores among students in the four ADN programs participating in the study. This finding confirms the common core of content across these programs. Further, results revealed a strong correlation between the GPA of the senior ADN students and their composite (mean) score on the ACT-PEP validation battery. The strength of this relationship, combined with Phase 1 results, enabled faculty to endorse a policy that permits the transfer of lower division nursing credit in lieu of successful completion of the ACT-PEP validation battery for those candidates who had earned a final GPA of 2.75 or above.

Results of Phase 3, in its early stages, suggest that students admitted through direct articulation demonstrate a high level of academic performance. Faculty evaluations suggest that direct articulation students are competent, committed adult learners who perform well both in the classroom and in the clinical area. Further, direct articulation students consistently report satisfaction with the RN-to-BSN program. They generally agree that nursing content presented to them in upper division nursing courses is new to them (health promotion, family- and community-centered, theory- and research-based approach) and provides a broader and deeper base for their nursing practice.

Based on this research, the La Salle University faculty recommended the adoption of a general policy of direct articulation for students from state-approved, NLN-accredited ADN programs into the RN-to-BSN program.

Limitations

Although the number of students involved in the study was sufficient, all of these students were located in a rather confined geographical area. This could limit the study’s generalizability to other areas of the country. The author does recommend replication of this work.

References