Continuum of Care: Geriatric Learning Environments
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As the nation’s health care becomes more patient-centered and holistic, it is important for nursing schools to effectively train their students for the continuum of care. One vital component of this continuum is the growing need to educate for geriatric nursing. Whether your nursing program has a stand-alone geriatric program or an integrated course model, it is important to recognize that both your curriculum and your environment will need to continually adjust to prepare students to care for the aging population.

Over the past several years, many organizations, such as the AACN and the Hartford Institute, have taken great strides to create best practices for nursing schools and educators in the field of geriatrics. However, the facility response is often overlooked. The following explores how to apply geriatric best practice concepts to the educational nursing environment. By taking this holistic approach, the educational experience is enhanced and ultimately results in the ability to provide better care to our communities.

“Nursing education, until now preoccupied by its efforts to address America’s critical nursing shortage, has reached a turning point as it deals with this geriatric population explosion and begins to prepare our nation’s nursing workforce to care for the elderly.”

AACN “Caring for an Aging America: A Guide for Nursing Faculty,” 2006
Understanding Changes in Demographics

The US’s elderly population is changing dramatically. According to the Administration on Aging (www.aoa.gov), the US will have around 72.1 million people aged 65 or older in 2030, more than twice the number in 2000. This rise is partially due to successful medical advances which have increased life expectancy, but also to the aging of the Baby Boom generation. The implications of these changes for the health care industry will not only include a general shortage of nurses, but an urgent demand for nurses equipped with the necessary skills to care for this special population. These skills include having the knowledge of wellness and prevention, as well as the ability to care for multiple symptoms, declining physical abilities, and psycho-social concerns. Additionally, developing the skills to work in a hospice setting, senior living center, long term care or assisted living environments are more crucial to the nursing profession than ever before.

The impact this has on newly licensed nurses is that the majority of them will be treating older adults. National demographic trends are showing that with an aging population, chronic disease growth in cancers, cognitive diseases, and heart and pulmonary diseases will also increase. This translates to a growing hospice patient base, as these four primary diagnoses account for up to 75% of hospice admissions. Surprisingly though, “fewer than one out of three baccalaureate-level nursing programs have a required course in geriatrics” (Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing, 2013). Meeting these growing demands will require a shift in pedagogy and the creation of learning environments which coincide with these evolving curriculums.

“Nurses are the largest segment of the health care workforce and play a critical, hands-on role in caring for sick and frail older adults.”

Excerpt from The John A Hartford Association Website

Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare Center for Clinical Simulation at Marquette University simulates home health situations with older adults to give their students early exposure to working with the Baby Boomer demographic.
Adapting Your Current Learning Environment

Beyond the classroom, skills labs and simulation labs are universally accepted as necessary components for nursing education. The process of planning and adapting current facilities should be closely aligned with the goals of the faculty who will teach these courses.

Modifying these environments to address topics of geriatric care can be relatively easy in most instances. However, as you make any modifications to your environment, it is important to consider the way changes to your curriculum can impact space planning. Explore the following:

- **Include other professions**: With the advent of the Accountable Care Act and HCAHPS requirements for an improved patient experience, the importance of educating practitioners, scholars, and researchers to work together as a care team instead of individually within their specialty is a primary driving force and objective for educators. The care team needs to support the idea that medical practitioners, including nurses, are in partnership with their patients. Educating nurses to provide relationship-centered health care that is comprehensive, collaborative, caring, safe, and continuous throughout the patient’s life begins in the classroom, and extends to team-based clinical site experiences. Collaborative clinical experiences, which begin earlier in the educational process, assist students in becoming accustomed to working in partnership with their colleagues and patients. Consider including students in social work, medicine, biomedical engineering and even pharmacy in both your geriatric curricula and learning environments.

- **Technology**: Planning for current and future technology trends will ensure that any adjustments to your educational spaces will be a sound investment. It is important to understand what is available, how much technology you want to adopt, and how it impacts or can allow more flexibility in your curriculum. Also, investigate the trends for the full continuum of care beyond the hospital setting. What technologies do hospice or long-term care facilities rely upon that may differ from the traditional health care environment? How can these be incorporated in your curriculum?
It is necessary to incorporate home health nursing simulations into the nursing curricula in order to prepare students to provide care in the home setting.

(Source: Yeager & Gotwals, 2009)

- **Importance of Home Health Simulation**: Geriatric home health simulation environments should be considered to enhance the education process and specifically target the unique concerns involved with Geriatric Nursing. While it is common for simulation environments to adapt to train for a variety of conditions, most environments focus on simulation for acute and inpatient care rather than the scenarios that nursing students are likely to experience when caring for older patients in a home setting. Home settings can be unpredictable, unfamiliar and potentially uncontrolled. Therefore, a very flexible simulation environment must be available in order to prepare students to safely practice in the home environment and minimize the stress of transitioning from the learning environment to the working environment. Consider acquiring residential style furnishings as well as mobile equipment to prepare nurses for the differing environments.

- **Support Space**: To prepare for adjustments in curriculum and simulation, consider how much support space you may need to adapt your classroom or lab environments. As noted previously, home health simulations require a different set of equipment and props to be used by students. Determining the amount of space and location required for storing items needed for various scenarios will create a more efficient, realistic training experience.

- **Consider Geriatric Simulation Patients**: Caring for patients who are advanced in age can often be overwhelming for new nurses. Many do not have experience in caring for, or in some instances, interacting with the older population. To reduce anxiety and allow for better critical thinking when practicing, you may want to explore engaging older adults to act as simulated patients. For realistic training, consider how to provide “on stage” and “off stage” entries for simulation patients (SP) and students. This concept can minimize or, in some cases, completely eliminate the crossover of SPs and students in the simulation environment, providing a much more life-like simulation. Also important to these simulations are the observation and debrief components. Incorporating technology into home health simulations with SPs allows many students to observe and learn remotely without compromising the realism of the training experience. If simulation patients are not an option, consider purchasing a geriatric Sim model which to provide more realistic simulations for students than a standard Sim model could provide.
• **Take Cues from Health Care’s Evolution:** As stated previously, our country’s health care is shifting to meet the changes in both demographics and policy. As you explore integrating more gerontology training into your curriculum, review the trends in today’s health care environments.

One such trend is Evidence-Based Design which is design research conducted in health care environments to document the effects of a number of factors on patient, staff and organizational outcomes. Research has been conducted on factors such as noise levels, furniture arrangements, air quality and positive distractions has shown to improve quality, safety and clinical outcomes. Some of the research conducted on geriatric patients includes: risk factors and characteristics of falls of elderly patients; daytime sleeping, sleep disturbance, and circadian rhythms in the nursing home; the interrelatedness of wandering and wayfinding in persons with dementia. Training new nurses to be aware of these best practices can improve the quality of care they will deliver.

Changes in the US’s demographics and health care delivery system must be reflected in the way today’s nursing students are educated. Providing both a curricula and a learning environment which educates students in the particulars of care for the elderly will prepare your students to be as successful as possible when they enter the workforce.
About Kahler Slater

Kahler Slater has invested more than 20 years building a specialized practice that focuses specifically on designing learning experiences and environments for Health Science Education due to the rapidly changing nature of health care today. Designing nursing education facilities requires extensive and specialized experience. Changes in attracting students, retaining faculty, serving patients, advancing technology and evolving curriculum and pedagogies are at the core of Kahler Slater’s knowledge base for planning and design. Kahler Slater’s Academic Health Sciences Team has developed an expertise in planning and designing nursing and health sciences education experiences that foster hands-on learning and interdisciplinary approaches.

Nursing Experience

University of Wisconsin - Madison
School of Nursing

Case Western Reserve University
Francis Payne Bolton School of Nursing

Elgin Community College
Health and Life Sciences Building

Florida Gulf Coast University
College of Health Professionals Building

Marquette University
Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare Center for Clinical Simulation

Metropolitan Community College
Penn Valley Health Science Institute

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
College of Nursing

The University of Iowa
College of Nursing Clinical Education Center

University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh
The Clow Social Science Center and Nursing & Education Building

University of Colorado
Anschutz Medical Campus

For more information, visit www.kahlerslater.com/nursing.
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