

## **Virtual Preceptorship: An Alternative Model for Graduate Leadership Practicums**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Background/Significance**

Given the growing complexity and demands of the health care environment, the development of future nurse leaders in business, management, and education specialties remains increasingly important. Ensuring emergent leaders have the tools and opportunities to translate education into the practicum setting is well-documented (Dyess, Sherman, Pratt & Chang-Hanisko, 2016). Providing meaningful leadership practicum experiences with academic and health care professionals is challenging given these demands of frontline leadership roles, distance learning placements, legal agreement barriers, and student work-life integration. Student-centered, virtual preceptorships are a possible solution to such challenges.

#### **Approach/Methods**

A pilot study was designed with the main goal to assess the feasibility of successfully precepting leadership and management students using a virtual preceptorship model. The virtual preceptorship model consists of a doctoral-prepared faculty preceptor, graduate leadership student, and masters-prepared on-site liaison working as a team to coordinate the practicum while mentoring and guiding students through their educational experience and career progression. This model was developed using the American Association of Colleges of Nursing *Essentials*, American Organization for Nursing Leadership *Competencies*, and Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education *Standards & Procedures* with a student-centered structure. Participants were enrolled in the University of Maryland School of Nursing, Health Services Leadership and Management (HSLM) specialty. The HSLM specialty partners with the Maryland Higher Education Commission and Maryland Health Services Cost Review Commission in an academic-service partnership supporting preparation of nurse leaders. The graduate leadership student was required to log 120 practicum hours, participate in weekly discussions with the faculty preceptor, collaborate with the on-site liaison, and complete an organizational project along with the course assignments. These study participants evaluated the model using an online tool with five open-ended questions.

#### **Results**

Four HSLM students who resided in four distant states participated in this pilot study during the 2019 spring and fall semesters. HSLM faculty members and participants evaluated the virtual preceptorship model. Three themes emerged from both evaluations: flexibility, creativity, and mutual relationships. The students identified their ability to work within interdisciplinary teams as a main contributor to their success. Students indicated that their one-on-one relationships with the faculty preceptors provided invaluable proximity to leadership. From a deliverable perspective, students found the coursework prescriptive with suggestions for a general framework along with collaboration expectations between the faculty preceptor, graduate leadership student, and on-site liaison. The feedback from the HSLM faculty assisted in curriculum adaptation to include: adjusting faculty preceptor workload to deliverables, individualizing curricular experiences based on the specialty, and establishing an orientation processes for virtual practicum students.

### **Conclusion**

The pilot study was essential to demonstrating the feasibility of a virtual preceptorship. The implementation of the pilot established that concerns regarding out-of-state preceptorships can be addressed using a virtual model, increasing school capacity to serve non-traditional students and students in an online format. Additionally, feedback from faculty, students, and liaisons provided a chance to improve the overall design of the HSLM curriculum.