

Fulfilling a Professional Role Obligation: *Notes on an Academic Journey*

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This article describes a lifelong academic journey in the service of professional nursing, and the motivators that encouraged and sustained it over nearly 40 years. It describes how an associate degree nursing education was “good enough” to succeed in a variety of nurse leader roles...until it wasn't. Some challenges and lessons learned along the road to higher education are discussed, as is the indispensability of role models, mentors, and personal insight.

ACADEMIC JOURNEY

Since the time of Florence Nightingale, lifelong learning has been considered a foundational component of professional nursing practice. Today, the need for that foundation is more relevant than ever, as patient care decision-making and health care issues become more complex. According to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), nurses need to move beyond a task orientation of skill-based competence to practice that is based on evidence and that includes a knowledge of and the ability to address such issues as health care policy, systems theory, leadership, collaboration, and advancing research.¹ To do so, having a workforce with higher levels of education is imperative.

As nurse leaders, we may ask ourselves how well we have fulfilled this professional mandate. It is important, from time to time, to reflect on where we are, how we got here, and why. This retrospection highlights the insights that shaped the decisions we made throughout that journey. The process creates a personal historical account that forms the basis of lifelong learning stories, ones that can be shared with others. Looking back over a 40-year career, I wonder if I had known then what I know now, whether my development as a nurse leader would have been different, and in what way the attainment of an advanced degree would have influenced my role as a nurse leader in the service setting. The purpose of this article is to share that story of “how ‘one’ got there,” because it can serve as a powerful vehicle for helping others make career decisions that impact their personal and professional lives, and to describe the real-life challenges and successes.

Many years ago, I recall being asked what the 1 thing was that I would attempt if I could be assured of success. My answer was completing a doctoral degree. I chose that answer not because I planned to follow through, but because it sounded like the loftiest and most worthwhile (if not impossible) goal I could consider. It spoke more to my competitive, high-achiever needs than

to an understanding of the value of a doctorate. My experience tells me I am alone neither with respect to this lack of understanding, nor with the fears, perceived barriers, or motivators associated with achieving that goal. This article aims to offer the encouragement and insights needed to take that next step.

The road to my nursing career started after 4 years of college leading to a degree in biology, after which I entered nursing school in a 2-year associate degree in nursing (ADN) program. There were no 4-year programs near my home, and I was financially responsible for my education; I therefore had to work. At that time, there was a nursing shortage and 2-year degree RNs were being heavily recruited into hospitals. Hence, I went to work as a new graduate as part of large cohort in a critical care unit. Our combined clinical and didactic training lasted 6 months and included preceptors and hands-on lead clinical and didactic instructors. Although I never felt like I knew it all, I did feel that I knew a lot, based on my work environment. I was privileged to have had knowledgeable and patient preceptors; access to free onsite continuing education units; experience with a very acute and varied patient population including trauma, neurological, cardiac, and other populations; participation in a unit-based journal club; physician colleagues who invested in our continuing education; and American Nurses Credentialing Center certification as a critical care registered nurse. Over time, I was privileged to care for the most critically ill patients, precept other nurses, teach both patients and colleagues, and participate in the research conducted by others. These successful work experiences provided me with the rationale to defend my decision to not further my education; I even generated a list of reasons as to why doing so was unnecessary, and possibly even counterproductive.

MOTIVATION

As a bedside clinician, I had little or no desire to return to school. My interest in continuing to learn was keen, just not in a formal, academic way. As I moved into

the role of manager and then director, I was exposed to a variety of learning situations that made to question whether an advanced degree would be of value. As a nurse leader in an organization that was starting the Magnet® journey, I was responsible for helping to determine the need for a professional practice model. It was then that I began to understand the essence and components of professional nursing practice. Although I agreed in principle, I did not know that lifelong learning was a professional obligation and standard.

In retrospect, 2 opposing motivations were waging an unacknowledged war within me. One was the motivation to maintain the status quo, which was ever-present; that is, I was doing “fine,” so why bother adding work to my already-busy life? The other was the motivation to fulfill my professional role obligation of continuous, lifelong learning by advancing my education. Still, returning to school sounded like a lot of work, and I wasn’t getting any younger!

At some level, I knew that an ADN was never meant to be the profession’s terminal degree.² Even so, and for many years, practicing nursing with a 2-year degree seemed good enough—*until it wasn’t*. In my case, motivation to change did not come in the form of a revelatory lightning bolt. Instead, it emerged out of many small incidents over many years. These events, together with introspection, excellent role models, and feedback, helped me better understand my inaction; that is, embarrassment and fear of failure. Embarrassment, because I was an experienced, accomplished nurse who precepted others—What would others think if I had to start back at such a basic level as a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN)? Fear of failure, because I had not been in school for decades—how would I compete, and did I have what it took?

DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP ROLES REQUIRE DIFFERENT DEGREES

Fifteen years into my career, and because I had decided to say yes to almost any professional opportunity afforded me, I accepted a management position that allowed me to hire, fire, evaluate others, and make decisions that affected the entire organization. My clinical knowledge and work experience had formed a strong practical base, but I had little to no formal education in interpersonal communication, finance, change theory, or leadership. Woefully absent was public and community health aspects of patient care, topics not addressed in the ADN program. I found the best way to get by was to listen, observe, read, and then ask questions.

Would having had further education helped me in this position? Undoubtedly. Did I get by anyway? History says: probably; I would say: up to a point. It became tougher to get by with experience and common sense. Without relevant theories behind my decisions, I now see that the good outcomes I got were at least partly due to luck. I wonder, now, at the impact I could

have had with advanced education. Looking back, I recognize how advanced education has helped me see the value of the theory–practice connections more clearly and understand why the generation of science for practice is so crucial.

From that first plunge into a formal management leadership position, many opportunities continued to present themselves and I took them. Perhaps it was a different time when “street cred” seemed to be all one needed to advance into middle (and sometimes higher) management positions. I often felt inadequate but figured I would learn on the job, without formal mentoring, as I had before. I knew little of mentoring beyond the clinical arena, nor for at least several years, was I offered the chance to formally learn from anyone.

During this time, I was a director and member of the nursing leadership team. We were crafting the vision for nursing at the facility and planning its implementation. Part of this plan included seeking Magnet status. I started wondering whether I was really prepared to contribute substantially to this endeavor. Nevertheless, once we began the Journey to Magnet Excellence™, I became heavily involved in many areas of achieving readiness.

One of the requirements to attain Magnet status was the educational advancement of staff and management. My uneasiness, the feeling I was an imposter, started to be more acute. I recall sitting in a meeting discussing minimum requirements for various levels of nurses and what professional indicators would be included on the badges (eg, highest degree and certifications). Previously, I had been fine with being an RN and having a national certification. But now, it was going to be painfully obvious that I did not have that BSN—the desired minimum requirement for all nurses, especially those in functional leadership roles. A degree in biology provided me with a strong baccalaureate base in science; however, the content was related to biology, not nursing. I knew I lacked an understanding of, at minimum, epidemiology, statistics, and the patient in the context of community.

Because the memory of the feeling I had during these discussions is so distinct, I would consider this one of the major stressors that motivated my return to school if only, at first, for the letters: BSN. As the motivation to further my education became stronger, my conscience was being pricked on an almost-daily basis. The idea of returning to school was now front and center on my radar. So, as often occurs when a major life decision is finally made, I took the initial steps towards higher education only when it was more painful for me to maintain my status quo than I envisioned it would be to return to school to continue my academic journey. It was negative motivation, to be sure. But it served its purpose. I needed to become the leader others already trusted me to be. I knew I needed the knowledge I would gain from more schooling. Although the motivation

began as something that would help me avoid ongoing shame, it ended up being about advancing knowledge to be better able to represent, understand, and advocate for nursing, nurses, and, ultimately, patients.

ACHIEVING HIGHER EDUCATION

“The beauty of...nursing is the combination of your heart, your head and your hands and where you separate them, you diminish them.”³ My head needed to be filled with new information if I wanted to do the job everyone thought I could do and was already entrusted with doing. And so...back to school I went. All I needed was to take a few more classes beyond what I had needed for biology and I would have the BSN. That was all I would need...or so I thought at the time. However, learning begets learning. Once I started—once I realized how much I had missed—there was no being satisfied with just a little more education. I owed it to myself, my employers, my employees, and our patients to continue. I would now say I also owed it to my profession to continue; I was becoming more aware of my professional obligations. These included fulfilling the mandate of a discipline oriented toward service, and of the need for lifelong learning, to be my best professional self.

As director of nursing operations, applying the knowledge and skill learned at the baccalaureate level helped me improve my decision-making capacity and stimulated my desire for more. As nice as it was to think of not having homework, I missed the motivation of being in a learning environment. So, upon completion of the BSN, and with less anguish than the first decision to return to school, I applied to a master’s degree program (MSN) in nursing leadership to begin the following semester. My intellectual curiosity and quest for knowing the “why” compelled me to continue. The horse had left the barn, so to speak. A key decision in my choice of a master’s program was its strong research. This program offered an independent study where I could pursue more robust knowledge of, and real-world experience with, for example, health care finances, a major focus of the director position I still held. It is not an exaggeration to say that classes I took for the MSN fundamentally changed the way I think, write, and perceive the world.

My thinking at this point was that the MSN would be all I needed: the ultimate degree. And it was...for a time. I was much more confident in my professional interactions and in the way I could justify my decisions. I had theory behind me now! My writing skills, although always strong, were improving. And I was sharing my master’s research internationally. Life was grand. I only fleetingly considered going on for a doctoral degree. After all, I was *definitely* not getting younger! However, as I thought about future roles, I knew I wanted to teach or conduct research. Moreover, I was intrigued philosophy, statistics, theory, and research methodology. Four years later, I realized the MSN was not going to be

my final degree. Academia was calling me back. Now, after another 4 years, I have completed all requirements for obtaining a PhD.

Challenges

Everyone’s challenges in returning to school are, undoubtedly, their own. However, I would hazard a guess that there are 3 main challenges that are shared to some degree by most adult learners: time, finances, and insecurity/anxiety.

Time. For me, the biggest challenge was an already-full schedule. I had many time commitments including work, family, extracurricular (eg, church and professional) activities, and attaining the seemingly elusive work–life balance. How would I ever be able to fit classes and homework into this mix? My husband is fond of pointing out that everything has an opportunity cost—the price of giving up one option to attain another. I had to rethink my priorities if I wanted to achieve my goal. I found that not only was this possible...it was easier than I thought. In fact, it helped me discover what was most important in my life and gave me the boost I needed to discard, or at least pare down, those activities that were not value-added.

Finances. Nowadays there are so many options for degree completion. Because finances were not a big issue for me, I chose to go with a private school for my BSN so I did not have to wait for a semester to roll around; I could just start as soon as all my transcripts cleared. This option also allowed me to test out of a few courses (saving some money). The classes I took were almost all in person, but I was able to include some online courses at the end of the BSN journey. Once I knew taking courses online was reasonable for me, I was able to complete my master’s degree completely online from a state university. This was an option that afforded me flexibility and was reasonably priced.

Insecurity/anxiety. I had not been in school for decades, despite how it sometimes felt when raising my children. My initial anxiety was fueled by the thoughts that not only would I have to stay disciplined, I would have to improve or learn new skills (eg, knowledge of new computer programs, writing in a certain style, use of online platforms), as well as learn the course material. Initially it was like drinking from a fire hose. But I was not alone. No. Many other nurses who had been practicing for over 20 years were right there with me. In my MSN program, I found that the richest discussions occurred with all the rest of the experienced nurses, one of whom was with me again for our PhD graduation ceremony 7 years later. Returning to school is part of lifelong learning and should never be a stigma or have an age limit; it is a badge of honor.

Lessons Learned

1. Things you think you could never cut out of your schedule to return to school can, indeed, be sac-

rificed with no lasting negative effect. Be willing to negotiate options to free up more time, even with your employer. I was able to adjust my work schedule in order to accommodate the class times and extra time required for site visits, etc.

2. Once you get past the skills acquisition phase of re-entering school, the learning is invigorating. You will most likely want to continue!
3. Not everyone is cut out for online learning. Know yourself. Are you self-directed, organized, and okay with non-face-to-face interactions? If so, you're a good candidate for online learning. It sometimes feels like there is more work because of the demands of posting (which ensures everyone's participation), but the flexibility is worth it.
4. Start as soon as you can, but never think it is too late. Continuing your education is a blessing, no matter your age.
5. Honest self-reflection and insight are imperative.

Importance of Personal Insight

In my experience, most performance evaluations do not give actionable or, especially, what could be painful feedback. This seemed to be particularly true in nursing. Learning requires a safe environment that gives others permission to tell us how we are perceived and where we can improve. Seeing ourselves through our own prism is not always helpful. We need to be honest with ourselves and allow, even request, others to be honest with us. Unless we give them permission, chances are they will not be as forthcoming as they otherwise might be. I began my journey of self-reflection by giving my supervisor a personal inventory survey that would reflect her view of my opportunities and strengths. Her observations were indeed revealing, if, occasionally, painful. However, receiving this feedback was another of the catalysts in my seeking further education.

Importance of Role Models and Mentors

Bill Gates, a man well-known for his business success, has stated: "We all need people who will give us feedback. That's how we improve."⁴ I have had several people who have helped me improve and grow, whether through consistently modeling the role of the professional nurse, taking an active role in my professional growth, or something as simple as a single comment. I share a few of their stories here.

Comments. There are 3 comments I recall that were instrumental in motivating me to return to school. I share them here as an encouragement because you may change someone's life or have your life changed by 1 well-timed phrase.

1. When I was first considering returning for my MSN, I was using age as an excuse. I recall commenting to my colleague that I would be a certain age, an age I considered too old, when I was done, implying it would not be worth it. Her

response: "You'll be that age anyway, whether you go to school meanwhile or not." That was all I needed to dismiss that last excuse.

2. During and after my MSN program, I had one professor who repeatedly told me she saw me completing a PhD. She believed in my work and in my ability. I never forgot.
3. After completing my MSN, a Magnet consultant at my facility was speaking to the nursing directors. While not intentionally directing her comment to me, I felt she was speaking to me personally when she said we all needed to consider continuing our education, and that she was sure at least a couple of us would complete our doctoral studies.

Modeling the professional role. The chief nursing executive who took us on the Journey to Magnet Excellence was a key role model whose everyday actions in her professional life encouraged me to expand my horizons. Instead of working with an eye to just fixing problems or getting the job done, we were involved in fulfilling a grander vision. We were professional colleagues who saw beyond the day-to-day frustrations to a view of what could be. Our fixes came in the form of culture change, not proverbial Band-Aids. This was compelling behavior and encouraged nurses from all functional roles to return to school or get certified in their specialty.

Active participation in my growth. I am not sure if everyone gets the chance to have someone invest deeply in their professional growth. I am among the privileged ones. I met my mentor when I had my ADN and was a new director. As a consultant on professional role development, she brought the profession to life in a way I had never completely grasped and had certainly never heard articulated. She left, but her message stayed and my practice changed. Thankfully, our paths crossed again a decade later. After establishing our mentor-mentee relationship, she helped me by opening up every opportunity to grow, to develop, to learn, and to soar. She instilled in me the absolute necessity of professional networking, of challenging my perceived limitations, and of embracing theory. Ultimately, I knew I needed to be at least as devoted as she was to my professional development.

Key to my journey was the desire to listen to mentors, to observe and learn from role models, and to engage in personal insight. These actions helped me gain clarity on how to be a mentor to others and give back to the profession. At the end of the day, my journey was a long and winding road of intentionality, serendipity, commitment, fear, culture, experiences, timing, and destiny. The detours were not well marked, and the destination was not always clear. However, responding to inner voice and outer prompts ultimately provided me with a rewarding and valuable experience that is now serving as the basis for a new career adventure.

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