



## The Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows Program

### *A Model for Learning in an Executive Master of Science in Nursing Program*

Joan Thomas, PhD, APRN, CS  
Donna Herrin, MSN, RN, CNAA, FACHE

*This is the third of a 3-part series describing an executive master of science in nursing program. Part 1 described program development built on the American Organization of Nurse Executives' competencies and the distinctive features of the students' online and on-site learning experiences. Part 2 discussed how the 14 forces of magnetism are integrated across the curriculum and unique criteria for program admission. Part 3 describes the use of the Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows Program as the model for other learning opportunities. Benner's novice to expert theory for executive master of science in nursing program evaluation is also discussed.*

**Authors' Affiliations:** Assistant Professor, Loewenberg School of Nursing, University of Memphis, Tennessee (Dr Thomas); Senior Vice President and Chief Nurse Officer, Methodist Healthcare, Memphis, Tennessee, and Clinical Associate Professor, The University of Alabama in Huntsville, Alabama (Ms Herrin).

**Corresponding author:** Dr Thomas, Loewenberg School of Nursing, 610 Goodman St, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152 ([jthomas1@memphis.edu](mailto:jthomas1@memphis.edu)).

The Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows Program (Fellows Program) is a highly selective leadership program for nurses in major executive roles who seek further growth and learning opportunities to enhance their leadership skills. The Fellows Program is designed to give nursing an influential voice in transforming and improving today's healthcare system.<sup>1</sup> Twenty nurse leaders are admitted each year as a cohort to the 3-year Fellows Program. Major components of the Fellows Program include completion of advanced level leadership curriculum, participation in 7 seminars, execution of leadership projects at participants' home organizations, pursuit of individualized learning plans, rigorous coaching, and substantial experiences with senior executive mentors.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Using the 5 Fellows Program Core Competencies to Develop Students**

The Fellows Program provides participants with advanced executive skills by immersing them

into further development of the 5 core competencies that include (1) self-knowledge, (2) strategic vision, (3) risk taking and creativity, (4) interpersonal and communication effectiveness, and (5) inspiring and leading change.<sup>1</sup> The 5 core competencies are also applicable to the education and development of future nurse executives.

#### **Self-knowledge**

The first core competency, *self-knowledge*, is addressed in the initial course of the curriculum. Students undergo self-assessment evaluations to provide an insight into their strengths and weaknesses. Expanded self-awareness allows for greater understanding of personal leadership strengths as well as opportunities for personal growth and behavior transformation. In effect, information obtained through self-assessment becomes individualized roadmaps for the changes that students seek throughout the executive master of science in nursing (MSN) program. Although students often focus on correcting weaknesses, faculty



and mentors guide students toward a recognition that building strengths is critical for success as a nurse executive. The executive MSN program encourages students to focus on building areas of strengths because successful executives experience highest productivity when able to consistently use their greatest assets.<sup>1</sup>

### Model for Scholarly Activity

The additional 4 competencies outlined in the Fellows Program are addressed through the development of scholarly papers wherein students are assigned to work in teams guided by a faculty coach. Each team selects a challenge facing practicing nurse executives. The scholarly paper is initiated at the beginning of the executive MSN program and completed by graduation.

### Strategic Vision

After the student team selects a healthcare issue to tackle, students examine evidence regarding the topic. A *strategic vision* for a new approach to the challenge is developed. An executive's *strategic agility*, seeing the possibilities arising in the future and anticipating the consequences of current decisions, is critical to the success of executive teams.<sup>1</sup>

The executive MSN program enhances students' *strategic agility* by guiding them to *speak strategically*. Healthcare executives commonly use current business concepts and terms to discuss novel or innovative practices. Nurses rarely use a strategic language, which is frequently noted as a nurse executive competency gap. Executive MSN students learn the language of *visionary strategy* by means of

on-site executive development seminars and immersion into the literature of *visionary strategy*. Readings from non-healthcare publications such as the *Harvard Business Review* and *Leader to Leader* are extensively assigned throughout the executive MSN program with an expectation that students learn to *speak* using the language of *visionary strategy*. Furthermore, scholarly papers allow students to demonstrate the ability to *write* using the language of *visionary strategy*.<sup>1</sup>

### Risk Taking and Creativity

Executive MSN students exercise *risk taking and creativity* to develop innovative tactics to solve healthcare challenges. The complexities of today's healthcare systems are such that previous approaches to solving problems are being reexamined, and opportunities for nurse executives to engage in entrepreneurial *risk taking and creativity* are widespread.<sup>1</sup> By means of the scholarly paper, the faculty coach promotes entrepreneurial thinking and encourages discussion of fresh ideas to establish creative approaches to solving problems, although the elements of risk exist.

### Interpersonal Communication

The *interpersonal communication* competency is addressed by 2 methods. First, on-site experiences assist students to develop *interpersonal communication* skills such as active listening, providing appropriate feedback, and managing power imbalances. The faculty coach guides and monitors the students' practice of those skills as they function in assigned teams while planning and dis-

cussing the progress of scholarly papers. Feedback on completed written assignments for the scholarly project paper is also expected.<sup>1</sup> The faculty coach praises the use of constructive communication skills and privately addresses comments and behavior not conducive for effective *interpersonal communication*.

Presentation of scholarly papers is used to develop *interpersonal communication* competency. During on-site experiences, students have opportunities to develop an executive presence with the assistance and coaching of professional communication experts. Executive presence goes beyond speech and presentation delivery skills, as it involves the ability to articulate clear, strong messages that engage and influence the audience. Executive presence is an essential quality for effectiveness as executive team members.<sup>1</sup>

### Inspiring and Leading Change

*Inspiring and leading change* uses various methods, many of which overlap with all Fellows Program core competencies. The purpose of all scholarly papers produced by the executive MSN program is to *inspire and lead some type of change* in the healthcare system. Publishing new approaches to solving health system problems is one mechanism to *inspire and lead change*, and therefore, scholarly papers are submitted to peer-reviewed journals. Other techniques that the executive MSN program uses to develop competency in *inspiring and leading change* include teaching students how to (a) use different styles of leadership to influence others, (b) involve multiple stakeholders in change processes,



and (c) move from strategy to execution.<sup>1</sup>

### **Other Key Components of the Fellows Program**

In addition to the 5 core competencies, the Fellows Program has 3 other major components that include (1) leadership seminars, (2) mentoring experiences, and (3) developing business planning competencies.

#### **Leadership Seminars**

The executive MSN program provides on-site executive development experiences that are modeled after the Fellows Program leadership seminars at the beginning and end of each semester.<sup>1</sup> The on-site learning experiences take place over a 2-day period in a luxury hotel that offers housing, meals, and classrooms for the students. On-site experiences provide an opportunity to learn from leading national and local nurse executives, other leading healthcare executives, non-healthcare corporate leaders who led their companies to positions of excellence, and the University of Memphis faculty.

#### **Mentoring Experiences**

The mentor experience is designed to provide nurse leaders in the Fellows Program opportunities to develop depth in the Fellows Program's 5 core competencies. The Fellows Program encourages its participants to seek mentors from outside the field of nursing and healthcare.<sup>2</sup>

Students complete the executive MSN program with a 140-hour practicum experience guided by expert nurse executive mentors. The executive MSN program allows mentors to determine how to

best structure the students' residency experiences. Some activities that mentors are encouraged to consider include assisting students with (1) accessing key corporate individuals to expand learning about various executive roles; (2) performing projects with guidance from mentors; (3) accessing meetings of nursing executives, medical staff, and other team meetings; (4) accessing the organization's board meetings (or a portion of such meetings); (5) shadowing of mentors at specified times or days; and (6) arranging opportunities to interview or observe individuals/teams in the organization.

#### **Developing Business Planning Competencies**

The Fellows Program emphasizes the development of business plan writing skills as well as mastery of the language of finance, often known as the language of power.<sup>3</sup> Acquiring the ability to create business plans that achieve results is a major curricular component of the executive MSN course, Financial Management and Resource Allocation for Patient Care. This course, along with Fundamentals of Accounting; Health Care Finance I; and Health Planning courses, stress mastery of the language of finance which is critical to successful executive team membership.

Nurse leaders often have the best plans for decisions about patient care delivery, population healthcare, and education for nurses.<sup>3</sup> If they are not able to speak the language understood and valued by executive team peers, nurse leaders may not gain the necessary support.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the executive MSN program highlights competency development of

business planning skills as well as mastery of the language of business.

### **Benner's Novice to Expert Theory for Program Evaluation**

Benner's<sup>4</sup> theory of novice to expert is used to evaluate the executive MSN program. Students perform evaluations of their competency in relation to each of the American Organization of Nurse Executives' competencies<sup>5</sup> and Forces of Magnetism<sup>6</sup> by using an evaluation tool that provides ratings as novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, or expert.<sup>4</sup> Self-evaluations occur at the beginning of the executive MSN program, after completion of all course work, and after completion of practicum experiences. In addition, nurse executive mentors, using the same evaluation tool, perform evaluations of students at completion of practicum experiences. The novice to expert levels have been previously outlined as framework for graduate nursing administration curriculum by the 2006 American Organization of Nurse Executives-Council on Graduate Education for Administration in Nursing task force.<sup>7</sup>

### **Summary**

The goal of the Fellows Program is to develop fully effective nurse executives to solve major challenges within hospitals, large health networks, public health organizations, and nursing education systems.<sup>1</sup> The executive MSN program uses concepts of the Fellows Program to begin development of nurse leaders who will eventually accomplish the same goals. Benner's novice to expert theory assists students, faculty, and mentors to determine



if competencies are being developed and expanded.

### REFERENCES

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