RamVision

Transformative Curriculum Design

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Abstract
This chapter discusses the Winston-Salem State University RN-BSN CBE development team’s introduction of the RamVision transformative curriculum design. On a national platform, the modernization of the traditional postsecondary education curriculum is an emerging priority. Competency-based education is a growing buzz term in higher education that emerged more than four decades ago. The baccalaureate-granting degree institutions play a crucial role in developing global citizens of tomorrow, specifically in RN-BSN programs. It is imperative to confirm that university infrastructure concerns are addressed to ensure a successful CBE program implementation. In the RamVision curriculum redesign, unique competencies identify as the Competency Domains. Moreover, selecting the best learning management system that helps the institution support its academic curriculum is imperative for the students, faculty, and administrators. Higher education holds a responsibility to stay congruent with today’s student who requires new and innovative learning pathways.
Competency-based education (CBE) is a growing buzz term in higher education that actually emerged more than four decades ago. CBE is transforming traditional higher education models in nursing programs with a shift toward student-centric curriculum and processes by focusing on real-world learning using student mastery as the metric of success. A deconstructive model and vision provides the learner with the expectations to progress in their respective program upon mastering evidence-based concepts (Brandman University, 2016).

Adult learners who adopt the competency framework may pay a set price for a program subscription, move through courses at a personalized pace, and create a customizable learning experience. Current CBE models allow the learner to transport prior work and life experiences to unlimited access to academic content. Learners earn degrees by showing mastery through completion of complex competencies. These competencies are completed by means of a scaffolded design. CBE offers flexibility, integration of student-focused technology platforms, and robust formative and summative assessments. The new inclusion of the program option in nursing education allows the learner control to accelerate a learning path at a personalized pace (Brandman University, 2016).

On a national platform, modernization of a traditional postsecondary education curriculum is an emerging priority. In 2015, the White House hosted a symposium on emerging trends in higher education with the Domestic Policy Council, National Economic Council, and the US Department of Education present. Dr. Laurie Dodge, then-chair of the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), presented on CBE’s scalability, quality, and innovation. Dodge discussed the theories, principles, and research that make CBE a future staple in higher education (Brandman University, 2016).

CBE and the Adult Learner

It is not a surprise that the average age of the student who enters and completes a four-year college education is rising, with little evidence that this trend will reverse. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017),
between 2004 and 2014 the average age of an undergraduate student increased by 16%. By 2025, the Center projects an 18% increase of students age twenty-five or older who enter a degree-granting institution. Specifically, students pursuing degrees in health-related fields are higher, as these students navigate toward healthcare jobs as a second career choice (NCES Fast Facts, 2017).

The RN-BSN CBE Connection

The baccalaureate-granting degree institutions play a crucial role in developing global citizens of tomorrow, specifically in RN-BSN programs. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) charges that all nurses in the United States hold at least a bachelor’s degree in nursing by the year 2020. According to the North Carolina Board of Nursing (2017), out of the 105,628 diverse nursing roles, nurses hold 69,130 staff positions. As of 2017, there are 41,704 registered nurses in North Carolina who hold an associate degree in nursing. This statistic is noticeably higher than the number of nurses with baccalaureate degrees in the state (Licensure Statistics, 2017).

Winston-Salem State University, a long-established HBCU (historically black college/university) in North Carolina, is centrally located in Forsyth County where there are currently 6,548 registered nurses in the area (Licensure Statistics, 2017). In addition, recent research discusses the changing face of the HBCU with the enrollment of more diverse students originating from non-minority ethnic/racial backgrounds (Gasman, 2017).

RamVision — Transformative Curriculum Design

The flexible CBE platform provides a personalized option that allows post-licensure nursing students to capitalize on experience and progress through the baccalaureate program spending minimal time reviewing concepts previously mastered. This type of curriculum redesign transforms how the nurse with an associate’s degree builds on current knowledge, skills, and abilities to demonstrate a level of competence that meets the nursing profession’s expectations of the baccalaureate-prepared nurse. The traditional curriculum is built on courses with specific objectives, which students are expected to achieve to receive credit for completion. Assignments in the courses are designed to measure a student’s knowledge about the course-related content. An average of scores from the course assignments determines the level of success
in the course but does not necessarily measure competence with relation to the desired objectives. The shift to competency-based education is a logical move that incorporates the current knowledge and skill proficiency of the registered nurse.

RamVision curriculum redesign encompasses multiple components that work together in a non-linear fashion over four phases to form a student-centered personalized learning pathway. The term RamVision was coined to represent the process used to redesign the RN-BSN curriculum at WSSU in Winston Salem, North Carolina. RamVision is the combination of key terms such as determination, action, strength, initiative, and leadership used to describe the essence of the WSSU ram with a forward-thinking perception for future developments. As the first professional program in the UNC system to offer a complete competency-based curriculum in the RN-BSN, RamVision is both scalable and student-focused.

Some may say a learning curve should be expected when trying something new. The process of transforming a traditional curriculum to a CBE curriculum may feel more like a learning curve that turns into a right angle. The redesign process for RN-BSN programs is transformational because it forces faculty to rethink how and what information is essential—based on the needs of the nursing profession, students, and other stakeholders. The learning outcomes are expressed through action words rather than nouns, allowing students to demonstrate concepts like critical thinking and creative problem solving.

The backward design curriculum model is frequently used in the development of CBE curriculum. There are three stages to backward design: identify the desired result, determine acceptable evidence of learning, and design learning experiences and instruction (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). However, the traditional backward design model does not take into account the intricacies required to incorporate a crosswalk of concepts to meet the demands of multiple accrediting agencies. When transitioning from a traditional curriculum model that is based on accreditation standards to a CBE model, it is essential to start the crosswalk from the accreditation requirements to the newly developed competencies from the onset of the redesign. Therefore, when redesigning the RN-BSN curriculum, the accreditation agencies’ requirements were used as the driving force to identify the basic competencies all students are expected to achieve prior to receiving the baccalaureate degree. In the RamVision curriculum redesign, these basic competencies are identified as the competency domains.
Competency domains are brief descriptions used to categorize specific learning outcomes or competencies. To ensure a cohesive crosswalk between the traditional and CBE options, individual courses in the traditional curriculum should be dissected using the course objectives to develop program-specific subcompetencies. During the development of subcompetencies, multiple course objectives might be combined into one subcompetency. The newly developed subcompetencies should then be mapped back to the appropriate competency domain to eliminate duplication of competencies that may have been identified in the courses across the curriculum to ensure all essential accreditation requirements are met.

The next step in the process is to develop criteria to measure each competency prior to the development of the assessment. The criteria should help to determine the method and type of assessment used to evaluate student competence. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), learning experiences should be planned with the final assessment in mind. Therefore, learning activities should be curtailed toward the competency and assessment. A detailed rubric is an essential tool used not only to evaluate student performance but to guide students and provide essential feedback for performance improvement.

**Selection of a Learning Management System**

The teaching and learning process is consistently evolving (García-Peñalvo & Forment, 2014). The evolution is linked to context and persuaded by technological, pedagogical, or sociological trends (García-Peñalvo & Forment, 2014). One of the most common tools used in eLearning is the learning management system (LMS): 100% of the universities have at least one LMS (García-Peñalvo & Forment, 2014). Selecting the best LMS that helps the institution accomplish its academic curriculum is imperative for the students, faculty, and administrators (Wright, Lopes, Montgomerie, Reju & Schmoller, 2014). While preparing to select an LMS platform, we had many questions: Which LMS do we choose? What do the terms mean? How will the LMS best benefit our program? How much will it cost? Will the LMS collaborate with our infrastructure? Is the LMS student friendly? Who needs to be involved with this process? From these questions, we came up with a model to assist us with selecting the best LMS platform to meet the needs of the RN-BSN CBE option. The LMS is a vital component of the CBE program’s efficiency and connection with the program outcomes. The selection model we incorpo-
rated included the following actions for stakeholders (including IT personnel, faculty, and academic staff):

- Collaborate to assist with the decision making and selection criteria.
- Review the institution’s infrastructure.
- Identify program needs.
- Create the timeline for the selection process, training, and testing phase.
- Perform analysis of LMS software advantages and disadvantages.
- Evaluate the LMS features and functions.
- Review LMS immediate and sustaining costs.

**Infrastructure**

When implementing any new academic program, making sure the proper infrastructure is in place is key to ensuring success. Because CBE is such a new endeavor within the higher education landscape, making sure that infrastructure concerns are addressed is tantamount to a successful implementation.

Initially, the CBE redesign team consisted of the RN-BSN faculty and grant investigators. It became evident very quickly that additional essential members would need to be added to assist with the implementation process. With the assistance of UNC General Administration, a consultant was hired as the CBE project manager to oversee the following initial tasks: facilitate identification of the LMS for the CBE pilot, develop a project plan and timeline, assist with the marketing plan, manage meetings with WSSU key stakeholders to discuss enrollment management infrastructure, assist faculty with curriculum redesign meetings, and serve as the coordinating liaison for the LMS, UNC General Administration, and WSSU faculty and staff.

At the outset, the main focus was the curriculum redesign and choosing a learning management system. As time progressed, questions arose such as: How much will we charge for tuition? How will billing and course registration work? How will financial aid work? How will we market and recruit students? As a result of these questions, a team of key university stakeholders was assembled. We started the WSSU CBE Change Implementation Team, whose members include faculty/staff from the following departments: enrollment management, admissions, financial aid, registrar, finance, information technology, faculty development, marketing, and UNC General Administration.
Our CBE Change Implementation Team meets on a monthly basis to discuss issues/concerns and to make decisions. Bringing key university stakeholders together brought up more questions that needed to be answered such as: What is our implementation timeline? How will SAP (Standard Academic Progress) be determined? What will the academic transcript look like? What academic policies need to be updated for CBE students? Answers to these questions are not easily applicable to all but should be individualized to meet the needs of the students and institution. It is important to work directly with the departments whose workflows will be impacted by implementation decisions. This also helps to get buy-in from important university stakeholders.

No program or software implementation is without challenges, and implementing a new RN-BSN CBE academic option has presented many. Some of those challenges include: gaining buy-in from key university stakeholders, finding time to come together as a group (CBE Change Implementation Team), finding time to have subcommittee meetings as needed, and establishing how billing and financial aid will work. Working together has enabled us to problem-solve and make effective decisions as a holistic unit.

**Implementation Lessons and Timelines**

The biggest takeaway from implementing a new CBE program is the importance of having a timeline. Making sure everyone is on board with the timeline and implementation plan is a major key to success. A project manager who can manage day-to-day operations, assist faculty, and maintain project timelines is essential. The timeline is a way to keep everyone informed of what needs to be accomplished, by whom and by when. While the obvious point of the timeline is to keep a detailed list of tasks and due dates, it is important to remain flexible and to be prepared for and expect changes.

Faculty workload is another important aspect of CBE program implementation for which we may not have adequately planned. When planning a CBE program, it is important to appropriately estimate the enormous amount of time needed to develop the curriculum, work with the LMS to upload curriculum content and learning resources, and to do LMS testing and training. These are specific items of a CBE implementation that faculty are a key part of and therefore faculty workload plays heavily into making sure these items are completed on schedule.
Mentor-Faculty Roles

The restructured student support role is emerging as a six-letter word: mentor. The RN-BSN student transition to a CBE program may be influenced with regard to a formally implemented mentorship support model. In other CBE programs that we benchmarked, mentors are employed with the institution full time and require a master’s degree or higher with recent experience in their respective discipline. Students are assigned a student-mentor, who is the lifeline for the student throughout the program trajectory. As experts in the program’s academic requirements, a student-mentor provides day-to-day support with students via diverse educational platforms. A student-mentor is able to navigate students toward graduation as evidenced by their proficiency in the program’s academic requirements.

Additional roles in CBE program planning are that of content expert and course mentor. Both of these roles may hold terminal degrees and are subject-matter experts. The course mentor manages assigned courses and supports students using integrative technology software and processes. The course mentor role is not to be blended with the role of the evaluator, a content expert who exclusively is involved in the assessment’s evaluation. Student contact with mentors are expected to hold consistency and mirror the anticipated student to faculty conversations in higher education. Additionally, the US Department of Education rules for federal aid eligibility require regular and substantive interaction with undergraduate and graduate students in distance education programs (Brandman University, 2016).

Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention of nursing students is an ongoing concern. The issues involved with recruiting a student and keeping that student engaged in the program must be continually monitored. There are many reasons for student attrition—work schedules, negative experiences with courses, inability to manage the rigor of course assignments, financial hardship, and dissatisfaction with the institution to name a few. The importance of a smooth and effective transition into the academic setting requires due diligence on the institution’s behalf. From admissions, to the registrar, to financial aid, to student billing and receivables, nursing faculty and staff all play an integral role in setting a positive and rewarding experience for the student.
In an effort to increase the number of baccalaureate-prepared nurses in the workforce to 80% by the year 2020, we have identified the following recruitment and retention strategies for the RN-BSN CBE option.

Recruitment

- Create Interactive Eligibility Model (located on the institution’s website) to assist the student in determining if they are eligible to apply to the CBE option.
- Attend community colleges, hospitals, and nursing organizational events (NCNA, ANA, etc.) that target prospective students. If possible, offer scheduled transcript review and a personalized plan of study during the visit.
- Complete a complementary transcript review and personalized plan of study on a specific day of the week.
- Keep a database of prospective students on a shared system; do frequent follow-throughs with prospective students who have either received transcript reviews and/or expressed interest at a recruitment event.
- Make transcript review results and personalized plans of study available on a shared system, so other faculty can communicate with the student.
- Provide non-monetary incentives to current students who refer five or more peers to the regional coordinator for a transcript review.
- Provide clear communication of the program, such as a program flyer outlining the benefits, cost, admission requirements, curriculum, and contact information.
- Advertise on your institution’s website, the institution build board, and the North Carolina Bulletin and network with other community college and hospital colleagues.

Retention

- Provide timely and consistent communication from admission to graduation.
- Provide strong student advisement.
- Provide academic and technology support.
- Provide interactive orientation to CBE.
- Facilitate relationship-building activities between students and faculty.
Create a newsletter outlining achievements, opportunities, motivational points, and program-specific topics to assist the student with learning.

Provide resources for financial assistance, housing, and so forth to meet any unmet needs that would hinder the student in being successful.

As a program, we have to show and maintain interest in assisting the nursing student to “enter to learn, depart to serve” in a rewarding and timely fashion.

Summary

More than six hundred colleges and universities plan to or already have developed CBE programs (NCES, 2017). Today higher education is meeting new innovative technology platforms, faculty perspectives, and the state of today’s learners. Higher education holds a responsibility to stay congruent with today’s student who requires new and innovative learning pathways. Faculty and student inquiry of the CBE model is rising and includes a call for more cohesive and coherent learning systems. Furthermore, this student-centered model is receiving high acclaim on a national stage. The WSSU RN-BSN CBE Ram-Vision model will transform higher education’s approaches toward curriculum design, the role of the faculty, and student-empowered learning.

References


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