Accelerated Second-Degree Program Evaluation at Graduation and 1 year later

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For an individual with a bachelor’s degree, the accelerated second-degree program offers the quickest route to becoming a registered nurse. But does this quick route lead to satisfaction with the educational experience and perceived effectiveness of preparation to be a professional nurse? The author reports the findings of a study of student satisfaction with an accelerated program of study and the perceived effectiveness of preparation for work as a professional nurse.

The number of accelerated second-degree bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) programs is rapidly increasing, and the size of these programs is expanding to increase student capacity and reach out to new student populations. Shifts in the economy and the desire of midcareer adults to make a difference in their work have led to increased interest in nursing. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing reports that the number of new accelerated second-degree programs being introduced outpaces all other types of entry-level education programs.

Individuals seeking accelerated second-degree BSN programs are informed and critical consumers of the educational experience. As students, they are motivated, engaged learners who challenge traditional thinking and have high academic expectations. Accelerated students fit the definition of adult learners: self-directed, with the ability to draw on previous educational and life experience knowledge. They are extremely intolerant of busy work and easy courses. They have a desire to learn and expect to learn how to manage real-life situations. They seek education as a way to become more competent and achieve their full potential. The accelerated student population is challenging to faculty. They ask “why” questions and expect the high level of performance from faculty and peers that they expect of themselves.

The students’ perception of satisfaction with the program and effectiveness of their educational experience is an important and reliable indicator in the evaluation of the educational program. The measurement of student satisfaction can be useful to postsecondary institutions to help them pinpoint their strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Satisfaction comprises 3 basic components: response, focus, and time. The response is a cognitive and emotional reaction to a focus with particular expectations. In this case, the focus is the student’s expectation of the educational experience and preparation for the practice of nursing. Finally, the response occurs at a point in time. The response may change at different points in time as the benefits of the experience become more or less evident. Therefore, comparison of the student’s perception at 2 or more points in time is needed for a true understanding of the meaning of the experience.

In parallel with the introduction of new programs and curricular innovation, program evaluation studies are needed. Program evaluation is a process intrinsic to nursing programs and to academia. Attention to program evaluation research and application of the findings demonstrates the program’s commitment to the student and to benchmarking over time. To maintain high levels of satisfaction and improve student learning experiences, understanding the students’ perceived level of satisfaction and program effectiveness is important. In addition, evidence of program satisfaction and effectiveness is needed for accreditation and provides a foundation for establishing program reputation, marketing, and recruitment.

Accelerated BSN programs have been in existence in excess of 15 years. Anecdotal evidence indicates that graduates of accelerated programs are preferred by employers who value the nonnursing skill and work experience these graduates bring to the workplace. Hospital employers report that these graduates are more mature, possess strong clinical skills, and are quick studies on the job. The existing studies that look at accelerated program graduates have been limited to their success on the National Council Licensure Examination–Registered Nurse. Only one study looked at perceived preparation for clinical, but it was limited to the student’s preparation to function in the role of student nurse. Consequently, although accelerated second-degree programs have become an accepted part of the prelicensure nursing education process, we have limited data supporting the graduate’s satisfaction or perception of effectiveness of these programs.

Evaluation

In May 2004, the Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing admitted its first...
cohort of accelerated second-degree BSN students. Twelve months in duration, our program includes some courses unique to the accelerated students and some courses shared with the traditional students. It is a highly intense and concentrated program of study. The courses unique to the accelerated students use an integrated approach to the study of nursing. The goal is to provide knowledge dense experiences. The curriculum is envisioned as a program of study comprising 3 parallel threads. These curricular threads, content knowledge, practice knowledge, and discipline and professional knowledge, are evident in courses offered each semester of the program. The program director teaching the first and last course in the curriculum provides a unifying point to weave together the knowledge essential to the study and practice of nursing.

This program evaluation study explores individual satisfaction with the learning experience and perception of program effectiveness. The specific foci of this study were the following:

- How satisfied are students with the program of study?
- How effectively did students perceive their preparation for practice?
- How competent did they feel to assume the position of professional nurse?
- How did perceptions of program satisfaction and effectiveness change from the time of graduation to 1 year postgraduation?

This study used a descriptive, non-experimental survey design. The objective was to measure and compare the perceptions of individuals at the completion of the accelerated second-degree program or at the point of graduation (T-1) and 1 year later (T-2). The population consisted of the 22 students admitted as the first cohort of accelerated second-degree students. A valid mailing address was not obtainable for 1 graduate at the second data collection point, resulting in an accessible population of 21.

The instrument was an investigator-developed survey adapted from the university graduation survey. An example of the types of items is included in Table 1. Nurse leaders from the partner healthcare organizations and directors of other accelerated BSN programs reviewed the items for content validity. Items focused on satisfaction and program effectiveness were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = excellent/absolutely, 1 = poor/no way). Internal consistency measures (α = .82 at T-1 and α = .92 at T-2) support the stability of the instrument. A single dichotomous item focused on perceived competence to begin a professional nurse position was included on the T-1 survey. Participants were asked to create a unique identifier to facilitate tracking and comparing responses over time.

The study protocol was approved by the university institutional review board. In May 2005, in the days preceding graduation, students were asked to reply to a survey focused on satisfaction with and perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. Students received a packet with a cover letter explaining the research and their choice to participate. Students were provided a return envelop and directed to a drop box in a secured location. In June 2006, the same survey was mailed to all of the graduates of the previous years. A cover letter, survey instrument, and stamped self-addressed envelop was mailed to each graduate.

Data were entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. Separate files were created for the graduation and 1-year follow-up data. A merged file was created for the comparative analysis. The unique identifier, created by each student as part of the data collection process, was used to match responses from the 2 data collection points. Descriptive statistics were generated to gain an overall picture of the data. Paired t tests were used to compare individual responses at the time of graduation and 1 year later.

### Results

In May 2005, all 22 students (100%) completed the survey at the time of graduation. A valid mailing address was not available for 1 graduate at the time of the 1-year follow-up survey. Of the 21 mailed surveys, 17 were returned (81%). All the returned surveys from the 1-year follow-up were able to be matched with the data collected at graduation. As a result, 17 pairs of surveys were available for analysis.

Thirteen respondents (76%) were between the age of 25 and 34 years, and 4 respondents were between 35 and 44 years of age. The average interval since the first bachelor’s degree was 5.2 years. The sample included 3 men (18%), and 6 students (35%) were of nonwhite ethnicity and represented diverse cultural backgrounds. These demographics are similar to the demographics of the entire cohort of students in our accelerated program. At the time of the 1-year follow-up survey, all respondents had successfully passed the National Council Licensure Examination—Registered Nurse on their first attempt and were employed as registered nurses in acute care/hospital settings.

### Table 1. Comparison of Perceptions at Graduation and 1 Year Later

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>t statistic</th>
<th>P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your degree of satisfaction with the accelerated nursing program?</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How effective did the accelerated program prepare you for practice as a professional nurse?</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you could start over, would you choose the accelerated nursing program?</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>.020</td>
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</table>
Perception at the Time of Graduation

At the time of graduation, students indicated a level of satisfaction above the midpoint of the scale (mean = 5.059, SD = 1.34). Students also responded positively (mean = 5.176, SD = 0.95) to the effectiveness of the program in preparing them for professional practice. When asked if they would do the accelerated program again, 82% (n = 14) of the participants responded positively (mean = 5.765, SD = 1.5). In response to the dichotomous item: do you feel competent to assume a position as a professional nurse? This item had a mean score of 6.500 (SD = 0.77), and the mean score for program effectiveness was 6.235 (SD = 0.95). When asked if they would choose the accelerated program again, only 1 participant (6%) responded at the scales midpoint and 16 respondents (94%) indicated positive responses, including 12 respondents (71%) who said absolutely (mean = 6.500, SD = 0.94). On the 1-year survey, the dichotomous item related to feeling competent to assume a professional nurse position was replaced with a Likert scale item, which asked: compared with other new graduates in your work area, how would you compare your preparation to assume the position of professional nurse? This item had a mean score of 6.18 (SD = 0.809).

Perception 1 Year After

The overall perception of students remained positive 1 year after graduation. The mean response related to program satisfaction was 6.294 (SD = 0.77), and the mean score for program effectiveness was 6.235 (SD = 0.95). When asked if they would choose the accelerated program again, only 1 participant (6%) responded at the scales midpoint and 16 respondents (94%) indicated positive responses, including 12 respondents (71%) who said absolutely (mean = 6.500, SD = 0.94). On the 1-year survey, the dichotomous item related to feeling competent to assume a position as a professional nurse, 88% (n = 15) responded yes and 12% (n = 2) responded no.

Change in Perception: Graduation and 1 Year Later

Finally, the student’s responses were compared at the 2 data collection points. A paired t test was used to analyze the change in each student’s paired responses. Overall, all items were rated more positively 1 year post-graduation (Table 1). Interestingly, the students paired responses reveal that the 2 students who did not perceive they were competent for practice at the time of graduation had a positive perspective of their performance compared with their new graduate nurse peers.

Discussion

Accelerated students are described as having very high expectations of themselves and their knowledge and ability to function effectively in the work setting. Of note is the fact that the 2 individuals who did not feel competent to assume a position as a professional nurse rated their satisfaction with the accelerated program as excellent. And although their ratings of the program’s effectiveness were slightly lower, they were still positive. These findings may lead one to wonder if the negative response to the “competent to assume a position as a professional nurse” item was related to their personal high standards of self-performance and the normal anxiety associated with entering the workforce.

A reassuring finding is that at the time of graduation, students indicated if they could start over, they would choose the accelerated nursing program again. As experienced college graduates and astute consumers of educational programs, it is important that graduates are satisfied with the process and outcomes of their educational experience.

At the 1-year postgraduation survey, the mean scores were higher on all items. This finding indicates that with time, graduates were more positive about their educational experience and preparation for practice as an outcome of their program of study. My experience working with these students is that they always craved more knowledge, skill practice, and comprehension of content. The increase in their satisfaction and effectiveness ratings of the program may be explained by this behavior. At the time of program graduation as emerging nurses, they perceived the need to know more to be competent. But once in the workforce, they were able to make comparisons between themselves and other new graduate nurses. As they reflected on their educational experience and the outcomes of their learning experiences in comparison to others and to the expectations of the work environment, they were able to make a more informed and realistic decision about the quality of their educational program.

Conclusions

Studies of satisfaction and effectiveness are critical components of a quality program. The intention of this program evaluation research is to improve effectiveness in meeting programmatic goals and achievement of learning outcomes, thereby providing benefits to both the program and the students. The function of program evaluation research is to maintain quality, assess the effectiveness of curriculum, and facilitate program improvement. The results of this study provide insight into each of these functions.

Our program was conceived as an educational innovation to prepare competent professional nurses to meet workforce needs. This study provides a starting point for program enhancement and replication of the research for achievement of benchmarking indicators. Although the size of this study may limit its generalizability, the high percentage of participation provides useful information and contributes to the knowledge of the discipline. The program was designed with the intention of a faculty mentor’s presence to integrate the parallel curricular threads in the study of nursing and to facilitate the learner’s reflection on his or her developing image as a nurse. The findings of this study provide evidence that these intentions were positively perceived by the program’s participants.

In a time of constrained university resources and the public’s need for competent nurses, understanding the effectiveness of our educational programs is essential. If we want to attract quality students to nursing, we must offer programs that are effective in preparing graduates for practice and meets the needs of this unique population of students seeking a fast track to the study of nursing. Studies such as this provide evidence that a fast track to a career in nursing is effective and culminates in a satisfactory learning experience in the eye of the critical consumer that is the accelerated program graduate as a new nurse. As the most rapidly growing segment of the nursing education landscape, studies of the outcomes of accelerated second-degree programs are critical to the
nurturance and growth of this new strategy of educating nurses.

REFERENCES