

ACADEMIC FORUM



Coming Together to Succeed

Support groups can enhance the academic and career readiness of minority nursing students

by Jan Taylor Fox, RNC, MSN

Five years ago, an African-American student at the University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing was feeling lonely, socially isolated and academically frustrated. She had no friends on campus; she was failing her courses and she did not understand why she was receiving such low grades on tests and assignments. There seemed to be nowhere for her to turn—she felt there was no support on campus, no one to talk to and no way to develop the skills she needed to improve her academic performance.

This was the situation presented to me as one of the school's two African-American faculty members. I knew this student had the potential to succeed, and I knew I needed to do something to help her and other minority students who were in the same situation.

Our nursing program had a Learning Enhancement Center that offered many resources to help students, such as providing tutors and mentors to help students improve their study habits, writing and test-taking skills. But we had noticed that very few African-American students were taking advantage of the center. Clearly, for any program to succeed in improving the academic performance of minority students, it had to make them feel comfortable and accepted.

Together with the coordinator of the Learning Enhancement Center and the student, we worked out a concept for a

more culturally sensitive alternative: a support group for minority students. The objectives for the group, which was called the African-American Nursing Students Association (AANSA), were to:

1. Provide a comfortable environment where students encourage each other to develop interpersonal skills, good study habits and academic savvy.
2. Encourage students to integrate themselves into the academic and social life of the university.
3. Increase the number of minority students entering and graduating from the School of Nursing.

Creating a Network of Support

To ensure a large turnout for the support group's first meeting, we scheduled it for a time when most minority students were on campus, and we sent out announcement notices. But the primary reason so many students showed up was the persistence of the student who originally came to me in need of support. She urged many of the African-American nursing students to attend our first meeting.

During the first three meetings, students were reluctant to communicate. Again, it was the enthusiasm and urging of the original student that eventually motivated the group to talk openly with each other and with the faculty advisor about their experiences and concerns.

They began by expressing their feelings of isolation. Many of them were

shy and hesitant to participate in classroom discussions, yet they did not go to the faculty advisor for assistance because they felt asking for help would be admitting weakness. They saw the university and the school of nursing as an unfriendly environment that did not include them, and they did not feel connected to the social or educational resources of the university.

The first meetings were unstructured: the students concentrated on sharing their experiences. Eventually they began talking about practical concerns, such as professors and classes, their study problems, their test-taking abilities and where they could go for help. After establishing a habit of communication and participation in the group, the students and faculty advisor developed a more structured format to help the veteran students progress and the beginning students become integrated into the group.

One hour-long meeting was scheduled each month. The group members appointed the original student president, and she consulted with the faculty advisor and the Learning Enhancement Center coordinator to set an agenda. Generally, the group focused on a formal topic for the first half hour, such as the resources available for developing writing skills. Speakers often made presentations at this time. The president used the next 15 minutes to pass along timely information, such as news of an upcoming conference.

ACADEMIC FORUM



During the last 15 minutes, students talked informally together, often staying after the meeting to continue their conversations.

Achieving Success—Together

In the beginning, I expected that once the minority student support group had achieved its goals, the members would no longer continue to meet. I assumed they would begin to participate in the general nursing student group, the University of Texas Nursing Students Association (UTNSA), and would have no further need for the AANSA.

After participating in the support group, many students did join UTNSA and began taking advantage of the benefits offered by the university and the school of nursing. They were more comfortable expressing themselves in class and more inclined to make friends with students from a variety of backgrounds. They participated more in the general student organizations and began working with the faculty and staff on volunteer projects. Their grades improved because they were no longer afraid to use resources like the Learning Enhancement Center. But the AANSA did not go out of existence.

Currently, the group consists of 14 students, all of whom are female. Members are actively involved with other campus groups, and there is an AANSA representative on the UTNSA board. In addition, the AANSA students are actively working in the minority community. They have organized a program called "Operation Grow-a-Nurse" to tutor and mentor middle-school students. They help the students with their schoolwork and encourage them to think about furthering their education at professional schools, such as a school of nursing.

AANSA has given students and faculty the opportunity to interact with each other in an informal environment, allowing them to move beyond the formality of the academic setting. The

The group helped orient the faculty toward the needs and learning styles of minority students, which encouraged instructors to adapt their teaching styles to help students succeed.

group has changed the way faculty members work with students. They taught us that it was all right to approach a student who was doing poorly and suggest that he or she come in for help. The group helped orient the faculty toward the needs and learning styles of minority students, which encouraged instructors to adapt their teaching styles to help students succeed.

And finally, now that the group is cohesive and functioning well, it is time, based on students' requests, to focus on career development.

Tips for Organizing Your Own Support Network

We learned five main lessons from our experience with the AANSA group that could benefit other nursing schools interested in forming a minority student network.

1. There must be at least one student who is enthusiastic about the group, who urges others to participate and who takes responsibility for keeping the group active.

2. Initially, the students in the group should be close enough in culture and experience that they feel comfortable talking with each other and sharing their feelings. This group was African American, and the student interaction might not have jelled if other minorities had participated, because the shared experiences would not have been there. After the group became established, it was easier to bring in students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

3. The group's purpose was to integrate students into the university community. This process, however, takes several years and must be given time to achieve momentum. Students see other students benefiting from the group and become more interested in joining. It is only recently that the AANSA students have become involved in the larger student organization.

4. It is important to have a faculty advisor who guides the group and is someone with whom the students feel comfortable.

5. These students have commented that they would like the group to focus more on their unique cultural background and the contributions they can make as a group to the university and the community.

The participating students and I, as the faculty advisor, continue to see the group filling a need, even though the students are beginning to successfully participate in the general academic and social life of the university. ■

Jan Taylor Fox, RNC, MSN, has taught psychiatric/mental health nursing as a clinical instructor at the University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing for over 20 years. She has received seven teaching awards, has sponsored student groups since 1979 and continues to work on developing ways to bring out the potential of all students.