



Leading Through Barriers: Nursing Program Heads' Perspectives on Administrative Practices in Strategic Plan Implementation

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Abstract

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Strategic planning is a critical process in nursing education, ensuring that organizational goals are aligned with quality assurance and the development of competent graduates. Nursing program heads play a central role in this process, yet their efforts are often challenged by resource limitations, workforce shortages, and organizational resistance to change. This study aimed to explore the perspectives, good practices, and challenges faced by nursing program heads in implementing strategic plans within nursing education. A qualitative narrative inquiry design was employed. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with nursing program heads and clinical coordinators from one nursing school in Cabanatuan City, Philippines, until data saturation was reached with three participants. Narrative data analysis was conducted, leading to six themes: quality audits, accountability, employee and staff development, scarcity of nurse educators, resource constraints, and resistance to change. Findings suggest that strategic plan implementation requires a holistic approach, balancing accountability and workforce development while addressing systemic barriers. Grounding in leadership and change management theories highlights the need for adaptive and transformational leadership. The study recommends resource investment, structured professional development, and enhanced organizational support. Implications include strengthening nursing leadership and management within academic institutions and informing future policy reforms.

Keywords: *Strategic planning, nursing program heads, nursing leadership, nursing education, narrative analysis*



INTRODUCTION

The role of top and middle-level management defines the goals and future path of the organization. Strategic planning and quality assurance in nursing education are both significant thrusts that enable the execution of management functions that align with the very purpose of the organization's existence.

Strategic planning in nursing focuses on the actions that nursing should undertake. It aims to enhance the distribution of limited resources, such as time and finances, and to oversee the organization for optimal performance (Ashi, 2018). Thus, the role of nursing administrators and program heads is to ensure effectiveness and efficiency in carrying out this plan, much more so in maintaining the quality of education.

Higher Education Institutions offering nursing programs should design a curriculum that will effectively develop the expected program outcomes according to HEI's horizontal typology (Commission on Higher Education, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial for nursing education programs to ensure that students possess the necessary competence in preparing for their professional undertakings.

As vital members of the executive team, nurse executives are essential in planning and implementing strategic goals to guarantee the organization's overall success (Jeffs & Merkley, 2019). They guide organizations through transitional phases that necessitate transformational leadership. Leaders must create a unified vision and establish strategic priorities; enable others to take on leadership roles; secure the necessary resources for safe care delivery; and motivate individuals to rise to future challenges.

Knowing the trends in the 21st century will help nursing programs and administrators align the curriculum to produce well-rounded professional nurses. This academic paper will dwell on the experiences of nursing program heads in an educational institution in Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines. Specifically, this would explore the institution's best practices and challenges regarding its nursing program and its implications in implementing its strategic plan.

This academic paper aims to answer the following research problems:

1. What are the perspectives of nursing program heads in the implementation of their strategic plan?
2. What are the good practices of the institution in the implementation of its strategic plan?
3. What are the challenges and barriers nursing program heads faced in the implementation of their strategic plan?

METHODOLOGY

The researcher utilized interview as the data gathering tool. This was the most suitable research gathering tool for it provided personal encounters and insights into the experiences of nursing program heads regarding the phenomenon. Utilizing an interview for narrative studies offered an explicit, theoretically based approach for researchers (Bevan, 2014).

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with narrative inquiry, which is appropriate for exploring experiences and personal accounts (Bevan, 2014). Thus, the emphasis should not be on large sample sizes. The purpose was to "collect extensive detail about each site or individual studies" (Creswell, 2013, p. 157), not to generalize the results. Purposive sampling was used in this study which included nursing program head and clinical coordinators in one nursing school in Cabanatuan City. The recorded data were transcribed following each interview. After the transcription, the data were analyzed. The content and thematic analysis was done. Thus, these approaches helped the researcher develop relevant themes regarding the participant's experiences.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participation was voluntary. To ensure credibility, member checking and peer debriefing were done. Transferability was achieved by providing a thick description of context, dependability through an audit trail, and confirmability via external peer review. Data saturation was reached with three participants.



Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis within a narrative framework. While narrative inquiry guided the storytelling approach, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic steps were applied: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes were extracted from the interview of the Chair of the Nursing Program and Content Integration and Clinical Coordinator of one of the institutions in Cabanatuan City offering a Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. As the chair of the nursing program, the responsibilities of the participants include but are not limited to curriculum design, guidance for students, timetable coordination, assistance for faculty, management of data, and assessment of programs. They serve as a link among students, faculty, and administration, ensuring that every element of the program aligns with the institution's goals and meets educational standards.

In implementing the strategic plan that accords with their program goals, nursing program heads have developed various strategies and procedures to navigate these complexities. The following themes highlight the best practices they employ to support successful implementation.

Quality Audits as vital management tool

Quality Audits are utilized to gather data on existing professional practice standards and assess them against the desired standards, aiming to pinpoint areas that may benefit from quality improvements (Ivers et al., 2012; Smyth et al., 2021).

- *“As the NPCI (Nursing Program and Content Integration) chair, pivotal to my job is to see to it that quality education is being provided to our students. Primarily, I am in charge in quality audits. I conduct both unannounced and announced classroom observations to my faculty. This is for me to monitor the effectiveness of their teaching strategies and how it is aligned with the student’s learning objectives. Performance appraisal comes after. It is likewise important to highlight both the good and points for improvement in a manner that the faculty will be more motivated instead of being demoralize. I give my feedbacks in a formal manner while ensuring that they could also air some of their concerns. Our students also get to evaluate their instructor at the end of every semester. Their feedbacks are then disseminated to the faculty”*

Nevertheless, the processes of auditing and providing feedback can influence the nursing professional's role either favorably or unfavorably, potentially leading to adverse effects on their psychological well-being (Giesbers et al., 2022). The use of quality audits is a fundamental managerial function as it ensures that professional standards are being met. Thus, it is important that feedbacks, evaluations and performance appraisals are conducted in a regular basis to monitor the employee's performance. It also implies how crucial it is to ensure the learning objectives are being met as quality education is a foreground in the implementation of an academic institution's strategic plan, reflecting their vision-mission and core values.

Accountability as foreground of management

- *“As educators, we take responsibility for our actions. This involves being well-prepared, informed about the latest evidence-based practices, and offering prompt, constructive feedback. Our curriculum undergoes regular review, and we invite both peer and student evaluations to ensure we’re continuously improving. Accountability is about owning one’s learning and growth. Although it can be difficult at times, I know that I can make my staff as well as the students feel empowered by creating a safe environment where constructive feedback is given, balanced with discipline and not merely punishment”*

Personal responsibility behavior significantly contributes to improving organizational performance. The main idea behind grasping individual accountability is to foster self-awareness among employees and encourage them to take initiative in enhancing circumstances (Muhammad, 2022). The study of Rezenia et al. (2019) underscores the importance of accountability of both the managers and employees, delineating heavily that accountability increases as the power and



responsibility increases. According to White (2019), It has been proposed that enhancing student learning is best achieved by refining faculty practices. To accomplish this, every tier of the educational system must embrace accountability for faculty development. Teachers are obligated to enhance their methods, while administrators are tasked with establishing a supportive atmosphere that encourages growth.

These findings show that accountability is a phenomenon that should be a non-negotiable practice both for rank-and-file employees and managerial positions. Unity of direction is not just a mere concept but a philosophy that each should live by to sustain and improve quality practices in an organization. As such, being accountable for one's own actions fosters trust, professional growth, and maturity, which sets both a positive tone and example that leads to unity of direction.

Employee and Staff development as the cornerstone of organizational growth

- *“Aside from the CPD (Continuing Professional Development) units required by PRC (Professional Regulation Commission), we require our faculty and staff to undergo both internal and external trainings. The Institute of Health Sciences regularly holds an academic forum and training which usually lasts for about 3-5 days. The topic usually revolves around the current trends in nursing program for that year. We usually give emphasis to research as we work in the academe. So, in addition to conducting benchmarking, we send our faculty to research forums nationwide. I believe that it is important for the faculty to be continuously updated with trends in the profession to be able to adapt and implement those in shaping young professionals”.*

Continuing professional development (CPD) is essential for the continuous learning of nurses and plays a crucial role in ensuring that their knowledge and skills remain current. Mlamambo et al. (2021) argued that organizations need to provide sufficient funding and ensure that continuing professional development is easily accessible. In response, nurses should persist in their engagement with continuing professional development to uphold elevated standards of nursing care through proficient practice. The dedication to high standards in nursing is closely connected to Continuous Professional Development (CPD), which is a fundamental component of nurses' ongoing education. CPD plays a crucial role in ensuring that knowledge and skills remain current, which is essential in the constantly changing field of healthcare (Kurtovic, 2024).

With the advent of technological advances in the 21st century, it is crucial and tedious for healthcare professionals and educators to develop a strategy to meet the new generation's learning objectives and learning styles. Therefore, being responsible for one's professional growth, as evidenced by continuously reinventing skills and knowledge to uphold professional standards, is vital to being a nurse educator.

Just like in any other institution, there are certain challenges that the chair of the nursing program and content integration face in meeting the organizational standards and implementing the strategic plan. The succeeding themes present these barriers.

Scarcity of nursing educators as a reflection of workforce crisis

- *“One of the challenges we still face is the shortage of CIs (Clinical Instructors). This is the thing that frequently worries me each academic year. In addition, it is difficult to recruit employees with good credentials. I would always prefer those with post grad degree, or at the very least units in grad school, but there are times that we cannot find anyone. Because of that, we are sometimes forced to hire CIs who do not meet the said criteria since our students continue to grow but the number of faculty declines.”*

Nursing schools are rejecting an unprecedented number of potential students, mainly because there is a shortage of qualified nursing instructors (Bakewell-Sachs et al., 2022). The involvement of all stakeholders in the nursing profession and healthcare system is essential. These groups need to understand how the shortage of nurse educators contributes to the lack of nursing practitioners and should focus on collaborative strategies to boost both interest in and retention of academic nurse educators (ANEs). Professional nursing organizations have a distinct chance to advance the field of nursing amid this crisis (Quay et al., 2019). A continued partnership between the public/business sectors/business owners and leaders within the profession of nursing must exist to enhance the academic nurse educator role (Lee et al., 2024).

The problem with the shortage in nursing educators goes beyond institutional policies. Just like in any other nursing fields, this scarcity reflects state policies and the country's working conditions. This phenomenon has been a barrier to the



profession for many decades now. The government and professional organizations need to be urged to take action in order to further improve the benefits for nurses in the Philippines. This should address issues such as financial compensation and reasonable working conditions to help resolve the shortage.

Resource constraints as barriers to facilitate learning

- *“Budget-wise, compared to other nursing schools, I would admit that we are lacking the necessary medical equipment, mannequins and tools for our students to utilize during our clinical skills and return demonstration. I am also involved in budget allotment so I usually allot most on affiliations and clinical duties. Only few of can be allotted to acquisition of these materials, it is like always the last priority given the limited budget that the program has.”*

Nurse administrators have been acknowledged for their significant contributions and need to expand their duties beyond care quality and staffing to include financial skills as well (Bayram, 2022). Gaining proficiency in budgeting improves your capability to allocate resources, plan strategically, and make decisions. This can increase the effectiveness and likelihood of success (Fauer, 2024). Thus, an important quality of any professional holding an administrative position is financial literacy and budgeting skills along with advocating for program’s resource needs.

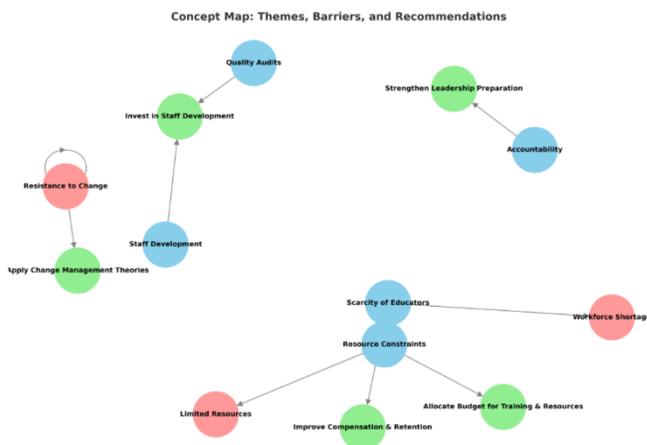
Employees’ resistance to change as a challenge to meeting endeavors

- *“My faculty consist of various ages and experiences. There are young ones and the experienced ones who are visiting professors. Due to the advent of technology, some of my faculty are not able to adapt and still resort to traditional strategies. For example, in recording grades. Most would already use Excel or other apps but some would still utilize paper and pens. I am all for intellectual autonomy and freedom but failure to streamline the process sometimes affect the deadlines of submission of these grades. If these are not encoded timely, it would always reflect the time management and competence of the entire program. So, things like that. I know it sounds very minor but it can likewise affect the efficiency of my staff in doing their job”.*

Change is a very complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is intertwined with the understanding of nursing practice, so, resistance to change in nursing can be considered as an important challenge (Cheragi, 2023). Resistance to change can result in the failure of the change initiative, as it can introduce expenses and delays into the change management process (Furxhi, 2021). The change theory of Karl Lewin emphasizes that restraining forces affect how organizations and individuals act, ultimately determining the outcome of change. In this instance, it is essential for administrators and managers to implement and adapt the said theory as the faculty’s resistance to change will nonetheless affect the overall efficiency of the organization. Facilitating and leading the three stages of change (*unfreeze, change and refreeze*) gradually can lead to long term benefits and increased capacity.

Faculty adaptation to technology varied: *“Some still resort to traditional strategies...”* This reflects Lewin’s (1951) change theory, where restraining forces undermine innovation. Resistance prolongs inefficiencies (Furxhi, 2021). Leaders should apply Lewin’s unfreeze–change–refreeze cycle and Kotter’s (1996) model to build coalitions, empower faculty, and institutionalize reforms.

Thematic Diagram



Legend: Blue: Themes; red: barriers; green: recommendations

Figure 1: Thematic Diagram

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that the responsibility of organizational growth and quality assurance do not only solely lie on the role of the administrators but a shared responsibility among all stakeholders. Implementation of strategic plan in the nursing program is significantly influenced by multiple barriers, which if not addressed properly can hinder organizational growth and realization of long-term goals. Investing to employees as the primary machinery for quality education still remains the foundation and cornerstone for growth. Without investing to such, the program will continue to struggle in adapting to emerging challenges.

In addressing the stated objectives, the study concludes that successful implementation requires a holistic, theory-informed, and collaborative approach that strengthens institutional leadership, sustains workforce capacity, and ensures quality assurance. Implications extend to nursing leadership in academe, where administrators must balance immediate barriers with long-term strategic growth.

In summary, successful strategic planning and implementation requires a holistic and well-rounded approach, which includes addressing the said barriers directly while fostering an adaptable, well-resourced and accountable workforce.

Conflict of Interest

This research was not funded by any organization. Hence, there is no conflict of interest.

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