

Diversity Officers in Schools of Nursing... Champions for Change

G. Rumay Alexander, EdD, RN

“If you touch a spider’s web anywhere, you set the whole thing trembling. As we move through and around this world, and as we act with kindness, or indifference, or even hostility toward the people we meet, we too, are setting the great spider web a-tremble. The life I touch will touch another life, and that, in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. You can’t find a better way to quantify or qualify someone’s legacy. Just think of the web you have set a-tremble.”

— Frederick Buechner

Establishing a dedicated senior-level chief diversity officer (CDO) in schools of nursing is a response to a world in which diversity has unprecedented importance. Working towards an inclusive environment is consistent with the mission statements and strategic plans of countless schools of nursing to ensure that all students are prepared for a diverse, global, and interconnected world. To do this requires a champion of change to advance organizational diversity goals and priorities. The old plaguing issues, such as hypocrisy, discrimination, and social injustice, require evaluation and resolution based on contemporary strategic thinking.

In the forefront is the acknowledgment that all of our relationships are cultural encounters with unrecognized biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. While denial may prevent recognition that these issues exist, abjuration does not correct the situation. Defending the caring culture of nursing and yet dismissing our treatment of each other and our patients with indifference ignores the root of the problem. Creating an environment of empathy and open communica-

tion is essential to produce a milieu of growth and harmony in academic settings.

Academia rewards individual achievement and nursing education exists in a culture of achievement. In our zeal to achieve, we often fall short in the examination of faculty and student relationships by failing to question the way we do things. Changes in policies, practices, decision-making, curriculum design, and the recruitment/retention of faculty and students often lack best-practice evidence. We do not spend time asking the questions and holding courageous dialogues to propel us to the preferred future we espouse. Both of these acts are deceptively simple, yet they are often avoided at all costs. A CDO’s role is to ask the tough questions, help others in framing questions, and lead the quest of curiosity. Asking questions is not only a fateful act, but it is also inherently a form of intervention. The consequence can be a shift in consciousness and subsequently, a change in the desirable ethos (underlying behavior, attitude, and atmosphere).



Strategic diversity initiatives must be treated and resourced in the same way other significant organizational priorities are considered. Acquiring a champion for change is an initiative that will sanction the organization’s commitment to addressing diversity issues. In some ways, CDOs become the “conscience” of the school. It is imperative that efforts be defined, articulated in written plans, and executed in the day-to-day activities for all students, faculty, and staff to realize the benefits of having a more diverse profession. Institutionalizing the commitment to diversity poses formidable challenges, and yet offers exciting opportunities in today’s academic environment. In many instances, the focus has been on form (bringing more faces of color to nursing), and not on substance (i.e., the

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quality of the experience). It is precisely the learning experience and particularly the environment, however, that needs attention.

Students and faculty have recounted their stories, revealing a variety of unfortunate and often painful experiences that threaten both academic success and a healthy work environment. They include the following concerns:

- Students and faculty questioning their abilities, intelligence, academic achievements, and standing;
- Feelings of displacement and alienation;
- Unwelcoming environments (e.g., derogatory racial comments in the name of learning, racial jokes and the use of sarcasm that assault the self-esteem of others, graffiti, e-mail messages, nooses, homophobia, pictures and references throughout the building depicting only White faculty, the promulgation of passive aggressive decision-making, and collegial behavior);
- Power inequities that are exploited to the point of incivility, abuse, and retaliatory actions aimed at those with lesser power;
- Using the “race card” as a manipulative and frightening method for avoiding the consequences of not doing acceptable work;
- A sense of being not as worthy or valued as the majority;
- The intractable holding on to negative views of people of color;
- The burden of representation and tokenism;
- Constantly facing fear-based odd or defensive behavior from the majority (including campus security personnel), thus having to justify over and over their presence in the school;
- The lack of privilege that comes with having campus legacy;
- Giving respect, but not receiving it;
- Ignorance of cultural and religious values and beliefs that when seen as “inconveniences” to day-to-day nursing faculty activities (i.e., lectures, clinical placements, student group-

ings for assigned class work, scheduling of exams, or major academic work) could impact one’s academic standing;

- Being questioned about their integrity and honesty, particularly if two or more students of color sit together for an exam, or simply come together for fellowship and support of one another;
- An unwillingness by the majority to give benefit of the doubt to underrepresented ethnic and minority groups; and
- Diversity issues being skirted because faculty are either unprepared or are uncomfortable talking about them – thus they are summarily dismissed as irrelevant to the caring work we espouse to be the core of nursing practice.

Form Follows Function

Nomenclature and reporting structure can become attractive distractions, or even stall diversity efforts. Because there are so few CDOs in schools of nursing, a full range of creative titles exist to choose from, including: associate dean for diversity and inclusion, assistant dean for diversity and cultural affairs, director of the office of multicultural affairs, and director of the office of diversity and enrichment. While titles create the first impression of the CDO, what is more important is the job description and the reporting relationship. To be most effective, this senior level position needs to report directly to the dean. Information, interpretation of organizational culture, and the dynamics at play should not be watered down due to fear or an obsession to be politically correct at the expense of the message in need of delivery. Leadership with the commensurate authority to make things happen will get results. Without an honest, forthright characterization of the multiple realities in which we live and the intended or unintended consequences of decisions made, the needed changes cannot be formulated for meeting the organization’s mission. CDOs should be members of the dean’s cabinet, serve on academic affairs, admissions, search, and promo-

tion and tenure committees, and be included on the agendas of orientation schedules of students, staff, and faculty. In short, they need to be at the highest level of institutional governance where decisions are made and actions are executed, and they should be visible to all of the public.

Establishing environments that are inclusive, open, and flexible is a complex undertaking. It requires acknowledging and understanding differences in people and their experiences of marginalization and being supportive of constructs and perspectives integral to issues of diversity (e.g., the ecological, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts of behavior), social constructs, and social-identity development. Significant insights occur about the experience of difference when there is a diversity champion to reframe what to think about and what to examine. This champion of change gives voice to those who are on the margins so that democratic dialogue, inquiry, and mindful reflective practices are employed. **DN**

Resources

Additional information to share with your students on diversity in nursing education and practice, as well as providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services is available through links found on the NSNA Web site at www.nсна.org/faculty/resources.asp, which includes:

- Chapter 2 of the 2004 *National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses*.
- *Minority Nursing Statistics Report* from the 2000 *National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses*.
- Office of Minority Health National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) *Standards Crosswalk to The Joint Commission 2008 Standards* for hospitals, ambulatory, behavioral health, long-term care, and home care.
- A video (56K or 300K) is available from The Joint Commission Web site, outlining how their 2009 *Accreditation Manuals and Standards* can now be accessed easily online through their new technology services, called E-dition, including crosswalks to older standards.

For more information about the CDO role, including a sample job description, please contact:

University of North Carolina Chapel Hill School of Nursing
Room 1810 Carrington Hall
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7460
(919) 966-7767

Health Care Coverage – Important Benefit for NSNA Members

Working with United Healthcare®/ Student Resources, NSNA members have access to affordable health care plans for themselves, their spouses, and their dependents. In addition, coverage can be extended for 9 months following graduation (certain restrictions apply). Included with every student health insurance policy is the UnitedHealth Allies® discount card for dental and vision care, prescription drugs, and wellness products and services.

For details and online enrollment, please direct students to <http://www.uhcsr.com/NSNA> **DN**

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CoverTheUninsured

Cover the Uninsured Week 2009

March 22-28, 2009

NSNA supports this important initiative and encourages chapters to get involved in *Cover the Uninsured Week 2009*. Campus events and activities are planned to raise awareness of and call for solutions to provide health care access for the 46 million Americans (including 9 million children) without health insurance.

During these tough economic times, more and more Americans are losing their jobs, resulting in loss of health insurance coverage. As a new Administration and Congress examine this issue, NSNA encourages faculty and students to contact legislators to make health insurance coverage a top priority.

This program is an excellent initiative for Legislation Education Projects and NSNA Leadership University credit (<http://www.nsnaleadershipu.org>). Here are just a few ways chapters can participate:

- Host a *Cover the Uninsured Week* event on campus;
- Share current uninsured facts and news with faculty and students (http://covertheuninsured.org/facts_research); or
- Promote *Cover the Uninsured Week* in local communities.

For more information and ideas on how to participate in *Cover the Uninsured Week 2009*, go to http://covertheuninsured.org/how_to_help

www.CoverTheUninsured.org

Celebrate Your Students' Involvement in NSNA

NSNA now offers a graduation cord that demonstrates your program's pride in nursing and nursing education. The blue and white cords, with a distinctive charm that displays the NSNA logo, can be worn with other honor cords. A portion of each purchase benefits the Foundation of the NSNA's General Scholarship Program. Graduation cords are \$10 each (not including shipping and handling) and will only be sold in bulk to schools of nursing. A minimum of 10 cords must be ordered. Shipping and handling is \$8 for each order, regardless of the quantity ordered. Please allow 7-10 business days for delivery. To order NSNA graduation cords, visit www.nсна.org/forms.asp. Thank you for supporting the future of nursing through NSNA! **DN**



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Calling Faculty Leaders:

NSNA's 57th Annual Convention Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center in Nashville, TN

Faculty Pre-Convention Workshop

Moving Beyond Lecture: Principles of Active Teaching

Karen T. Pardue, MSN, RN, CNE

Wednesday, April 15 • 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

This workshop explores a wide variety of instructional strategies that faculty can incorporate into classes to promote learner engagement and involvement. Six contact hours will be awarded for this program by the National League for Nursing, an approved provider through the International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET). Continental breakfast, breaks, and lunch will be provided. A separate registration is required for this pre-convention faculty workshop, which is co-sponsored by the National League for Nursing.

Visit in the NSNA Web site (www.nсна.org/meetings/convention_schedule.asp) for complete convention information. There are additional faculty workshops on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday that are included in the Faculty Advisors/State Consultants or Sustaining Member Convention registration.

Optional Tour Programs Available During Annual Convention Week

NSNA is working in collaboration with the Key Event Group, Nashville's premier event planning company, to offer our attendees and exhibitors the opportunity to explore Nashville, the "Music City." Review the available tours offered by going to www.nсна.org/meetings/convention.asp and take note of registration deadlines. The registration form (found at the end of the tour descriptions) can be faxed to 615-356-9285, or mailed to The Key Event Group, Attn: NSNA, 95 White Bridge Road #500, Nashville, TN, 37205. **DN**

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