

## Creating the Student Nurses' Association Peer Support Services (SNAPSS) Program

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Undergraduate nursing programs are known for their rigorous curriculum and their high standards. In the first year of any nursing program, students often find themselves feeling overwhelmed and discouraged. Understanding the many challenges of nursing student performance and preferences for support before and during initial nursing courses creates a need for more psychosocial support as well as academic assistance. Research indicates that providing support through developmental relationships is an effective way to help foster success.

To address these student needs, Eastern Michigan University (EMU) Student Nurses' Association, supported by nursing faculty, created the Student Nurses Association Peer Support Services (SNAPSS) program. This program draws on the lived experiences and advice of upper level EMU nursing students. Volunteer student mentors receive preparation before serving as mentors. Mentees are also volunteers and have opportunities to participate in a variety of activities ranging from one-on-one mentoring to group study sessions and social outings. This article provides information and rationale for the development and implementation of a peer-mentoring program designed specifically to provide psychosocial support for entry-level nursing students. We also provide experiential advice for deans, directors, and faculty on both the benefits of a peer-support network for students, as well as pitfalls to avoid. SNAPSS was piloted in Fall



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2013. Evaluation of the program effectiveness and outcomes will be ongoing and used for program improvement.

### Background

Mentorship programs have been found to provide many benefits to participants. An increase in confidence of both the mentor and mentee is one such benefit (Dennison, 2010; Ellison & Hunt, 2010; Giordana & Wedin, 2010).

Further, mentees benefit from personal growth and psychosocial support, as do mentors, who gain leadership skills (Dennison, 2010; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Ellison & Hunt, 2010; Giordana & Wedin, 2010; Glass & Walter, 2000; Scott, 2005). In addition to these rewards, participating in mentorship programs is also known to reduce anxiety (Dennison, 2010; Ellison & Hunt, 2010; Giordana & Wedin, 2010), partic-

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ularly in relationship to the first clinical experience (Job & Sprengel, 2004; Lee, Li, Lin, & Wang, 2010). Lowering anxiety plays a key role in improving test scores and clinical experiences for nursing students.

Despite notable gains from peer-mentoring, research indicates that strain between the mentor and mentee, unclear expectations, and lack of communication are problems that can prevent a program from succeeding (Botma, Hurter, & Kotze, 2012; Douché, Gilmour, & Kopeikin, 2007; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Job & Sprengel, 2004; Robinson & Niemer, 2010; Scott, 2005). Incomplete program evaluations and mentor feedback are additional issues that may impact success of a mentoring program (Botma et al., 2012; Robinson & Niemer, 2010). Finally, the length of the program must carefully be chosen to meet the needs of the mentees. In Scott's experience (2005), mentees expressed a desire for structured mentorship to extend beyond one semester.

Given the identified benefits of mentoring relationships (increased confidence, better grades, etc.), with an added focus of proactively addressing potential problem areas identified in the literature, the Student Nurses Association (SNA) at EMU established the SNAPSS mentoring program. At the onset of this program, support services available to nursing students included nursing faculty academic advisors, one day of orientation prior to the start of each semester, and a variety of library resources. While helpful, these failed to address the holistic needs of students facing the rigor and uncertainty associated with the first year of the nursing program. Research into academic performance of EMU nursing students, both prior to and during their initial nursing courses, revealed a potential need for more psychosocial support and academic assistance. An informal survey of 92 EMU first-year nursing students (known as Level II students), near the end of their first semester, indicated that 80% of students believed having a mentor would have helped reduce anxiety; 69% of respondents indicated they would have been interested in getting a mentor when first entering the nursing program (see Table 1). As a result of these findings, the SNA at EMU researched ways to support their first semester peers through nursing mentorship programs. This investigation led to the creation of SNAPSS.

**Table 1.**  
**Survey of Level II Nursing Students' Mean Likert Scores**

Question	Mean Likert Score
Having an upper-level nursing student as a mentor can help relieve stress/anxiety. 5 = Strongly Agree      1 = Strongly Disagree	4.1
How interested would you have been in getting an upper-level Nursing student as a mentor when you first started as a Level II? 5 = Very Interested      1 = Not Very Interested	3.8
How interested would you be in becoming a mentor to lower-level Nursing students in the future? 5 = Very Interested 1 = Not Very Interested	3.2
N = 92	

**Note:** This was an informal survey completed by Level II nursing students during their NURS208 (Art & Science of Nursing) course. Results were entered and a mean score was calculated. A Likert scale of 1–5 was used: 1 being either “Strongly Disagree” or “Not Very Interested,” while 5 was “Strongly Agree” or “Very Interested.”

### Formation of the Student Nurses' Association Peer Support Services (SNAPSS) Program

In 2013, a small committee of nursing students from first-year (Level II) and nursing alumni was convened by the SNA to discuss a student-led, peer-mentoring program. From that meeting, the SNAPSS mission statement was formulated:

*The Student Nurses Association Peer Support Services (SNAPSS) program provides academic guidance and psychosocial support to Eastern Michigan University's nursing students as they progress through the BSN program. Academically successful upper-level nursing students volunteer to be a mentor to a lower-level student. These mentors answer questions, provide workshops, and encourage social outings in an attempt to relieve stress students face during their student nurse experience.*

The SNA Vice-President presented this project to two faculty sponsors for review and input. These sponsors became champions for the endeavor. Ultimately, the entire EMU School of Nursing faculty warmly received the program during a student presentation at a departmental faculty meeting.

### SNAPSS Focuses on Areas of Improvement

The pilot program placed second-year (Level III) students as mentors, with first-year (Level II) students as

mentees, upon entry to the program in Fall 2013. Mentors and mentees were tentatively paired based on mentee preference and whether the mentor previously had classes with the mentee's professors. It was believed that matching mentees with mentors who had studied under the same professors would provide course-specific support and promote camaraderie. When mentor-mentee pairs were ineffective, reassignments were made whenever possible.

Mentors were required to attend one day of formal preparation developed and delivered by members of the SNA. Introductions took place at an event sponsored by SNAPSS, in which the program and expectations were reviewed. By doing so, we hoped to circumvent problematic issues reported in the literature as discussed previously. Our mentors were expected to provide basic lifestyle and schedule information to their mentees, social support, and experiential knowledge, but they were not to be personal tutors.

Mentors and mentees signed a one-semester contract to work together that explicitly stated expectations for communication, although the nature of the communication was left to the dyads. The mentor role was voluntary and mentors received no monetary compensation for their time. To entice mentors to volunteer, university credit for *Learning Beyond the Classroom* (LBC) and honors was offered. Despite the one-semester pilot period, mentors and mentees were encouraged to con-

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tinue their relationship. It was our hope that the dyads would flourish into longer professional relationships. It was also hoped that mentees would desire to assume the role of a mentor when they progressed to Level III.

### Unique Aspects of SNAPSS

In an effort to reduce mentee stress and anxiety, SNAPSS offered unique psychosocial support to mentees through SNAPSS-sponsored social outings. Several trips were planned to sporting events, concerts, and performances to give nursing students a short break from their scholarly activities. In addition, trivia nights and mock clinical settings were provided to offer mentees fun ways to review content and help prepare for exams.

SNAPSS was designed to be run completely by students. The SNA sponsored the program, and management of the program was the primary responsibility of the Vice-President of the SNA, with assistance from a small committee. Support from faculty sponsors was provided and included advice regarding how mentors might help mentees, ideas regarding topics that would benefit the mentor and mentee, and suggestions for mentees on topics beyond mentors' skills. Those involved in the committee were provided the experience of running a small organization and ensuring mentors were completing their tasks and ensuring that both mentors and mentees were pleased with the students-helping-students experience.

Although this particular program was initially conceived, designed, and implemented by students, administrative and faculty support and guidance was provided throughout the process and continues now as the program continues to evolve. The School of Nursing Director and the Dean for the College of Health and Human Services at EMU actively engage in this program, providing positive encouragement, approval, and support of the program, including assistance with immediate needs such as scheduling

and space when requested. Financial support was also provided for the Vice-President of SNA and one faculty sponsor to travel and present an overview of the program at a national conference.

The faculty role in this program is unique, providing guidance while creating an environment where students develop leadership skills. Faculty sponsors meet with the SNA Vice-President to offer suggestions for program development, arrange for students to attend a faculty meeting to introduce and discuss the program, help students explore and obtain approval for LBC and honors credit for mentors, and discuss evaluation measures for future program improvement.

Given the stressors that nursing students face, a Peer Support Services Program offers a means for students to find needed support and socialization that will foster their success in nursing school. Deans, directors, and faculty are in an ideal position to help students in the development, launch, and ongoing evaluation of such a program. Students will need assistance with creating, planning, and implementing the program's activities. This may include scheduling, advertising, mentor preparation, mentor-mentee contract development, data retrieval and analysis, as well as program revisions and guidance to address unexpected problems along the way. The idea of developing and implementing a program such as SNAPSS may seem overwhelming to students, particularly when they are inundated with school work. However, when deans, directors, and faculty provide the leadership and support needed, they will be richly rewarded through the creation of a student culture that benefits all who are involved.

### Future Research Needed

To ensure that SNAPSS fulfills its mission, evaluation and future research is needed on various areas of the program. Additionally, to qualify for LBC and honors credit, evaluation of the program is an ongoing require-

ment. Evaluations of mentors and the program were distributed to mentees at the start of the semester, mid-semester, and at the end of the semester. Research to evaluate grade differences and reported anxiety and stress levels – between students in the program and those who are not – is needed. As this data is gathered and analyzed, it will be used to improve the SNAPSS program. Responses are confidential and only SNAPSS committee members and faculty can access the evaluation results. A qualitative study on the perceived benefits of the program will also be designed to further document the advantages of peer-mentoring programs. When completed, the results of this research will be added to the already growing body of information on peer-mentoring programs for nursing students and may be used to assist other nursing programs in development and implementation of such a program. **DN**

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## National Student Nurses' Association 63rd Annual Convention Phoenix Convention Center • Phoenix, AZ – April 8-12, 2015

### Pre-Convention Faculty Workshop

*Debriefing Across the Curriculum: Creating Conversations to Facilitate Learning*

Wednesday, April 8, 2015, 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.  
(Registration and workshop fee required)

**REGISTRATION INCLUDES:** Full-day workshop, continental breakfast, lunch, and 6 CEU hours

Following the succession of events, debriefing is an interactive, guided, insightful conversation exploring what happened to those engaged in the experience. This presentation teaches methods for debriefing using a simulation teaching strategy in the classroom and clinical setting.

**Facilitators:** Susan Gross Forneris, PhD, RN, CNE, CHSE-A, and Mary Fey, PhD, RN, CHSE. Both speakers are Simulation Scholars in Residence, National League for Nursing.

**Sponsors:** National Student Nurses' Association, Brooklyn, NY, and the National League for Nursing, Washington, DC

### Convention Program Highlights

**Keynote Speaker:** Gerri Lamb, PhD, RN, FAAN, Associate Professor, Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ

**Endnote Speaker:** Maureen Shawn Kennedy, MA, RN, FAAN, Editor-in-Chief, *American Journal of Nursing*, Wolters Kluwer Health, New York, NY

### General Sessions

*The Future of Nursing Campaign: A National Progress Report*

Susan B. Hassmiller, PhD, RN, FAAN, Senior Advisor for Nursing, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, NJ

### Nursing Ethics and Moral Courage: Doing the Right Thing

Cynda Rushton, PhD, RN, FAAN, Anne and George L. Bunting Professor of Clinical Ethics, Berman Institute of Bioethics/School of Nursing, Professor of Nursing and Pediatrics, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

Veronica Feeg, PhD, RN, FAAN, Associate Dean and Director, Doctoral Program in Nursing, Molloy College, Garden City, NY

### Additional Topics for Faculty

- Having Fun Yet? Incorporating a Video Game into a Nursing Pharmacology Course
- Clinical Decision-Making Challenges: Strategies for Success
- Diverse Faculty – Diverse Students
- Grant Writing 101 – Tips for the Novice
- The Future of Nursing: Purpose, Power, and Passion – Discussion with Marsha Howell Adams, PhD, RN, CNE, ANEF, FAAN, President National League for Nursing
- National Council of State Boards of Nursing Update
- Getting Yourselves (and Students) Published: A Prescription for Success
- Coaching and Mentoring Nursing Students

This activity has been submitted to the North Carolina Nurses Association for approval to award contact hours. The North Carolina Nurses Association is accredited as an approver of continuing nursing education by the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Commission on Accreditation. **DN**