# The Nursing Process as a Model for Supporting Student Attendance at State and National Student Nurses Association Conferences

Student attendance at state and national Student Nurses Association (SNA) conferences is not a simple matter. Nearly all deans or directors speak on behalf of their nursing programs as 'preparing students to be future professionals while being supportive of professional development.' Each year at SNA conferences, many deans, directors, and faculty proudly share stories of supporting students. However, many others painfully recount stress and struggles that impede or prevent student attendance. Year after year, the stories have been similar regardless of geographic location of the conferences. In 2018, to provide empirical evidence related to so many discussions, the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) undertook a national survey of faculty and administrators' perceptions of support and barriers to student attendance at state and national SNA conferences.

A total of 476 faculty and administrators from NSNA's contact list responded to a SurveyMonkey© survey sent via email. This descriptive study included 23 questions in a Likert-format; each question had space for comments. Results of this NSNA study are planned to be published in detail elsewhere. However, key insights from the study are relevant to all readers of *DEAN'S Notes™*.

NSNA's study highlighted the necessity of support from deans, directors, faculty, and students for attendance at state and national SNA conferences. However, the study also identified major needs for education throughout nursing programs about the importance of SNA conference attendance as a strategy for achieving nursing course and program outcomes
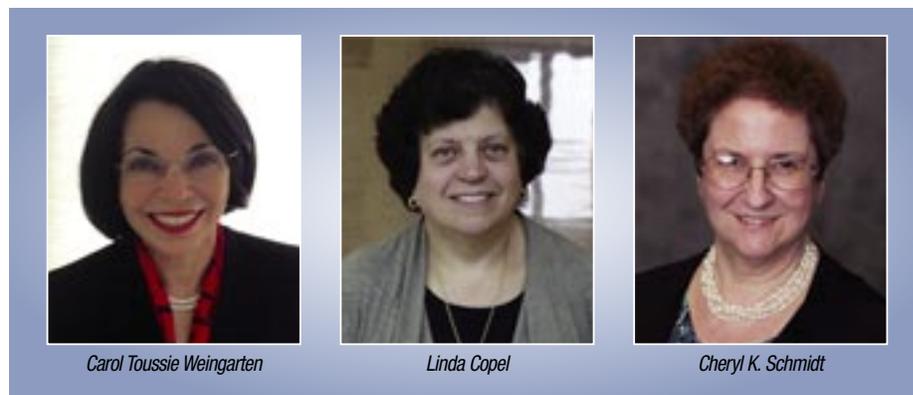
Carol Toussie Weingarten   Linda Copel   Cheryl K. Schmidt

related to course content, role formation, and professional development. Through hundreds of comments provided in the survey, a need for understanding the multi-faceted meaning of support emerged. Study findings also indicated how lack of a definition of support translated into confusion throughout nursing programs. Without clear understanding of support, the subject of SNA conference attendance became a barrier that affected student attendance and stressors for students, faculty, and administrators.

Benefits from attendance at state and national SNA conferences abound for students, their faculty advisors, and consultants who attend and the nursing programs they represent (Schmidt & Weingarten, 2016, Weingarten, 2018) (see Figure 1). This article will address the meaning of support for student attendance at conventions. In addition, a framework based on the nursing process will be proposed for translating support into strategic actions and outcomes

ensuring student attendance and program representation at state and national SNA conferences.

The Meaning of Support

The word *support* has multiple meanings, and each is critical to student attendance at state and national SNA conferences. The Cambridge Dictionary (2019b) defines support as encouragement and approval to assist a person or thing to succeed, helping someone, or something

Carol Toussie Weingarten, PhD, RN, ANEF, is an Associate Professor, M. Louise Fitzpatrick College of Nursing, Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA.

Linda Carman Copel, PhD, RN, PMHCNS, BC, CNE, ANEF, NCC, FAPA, is a Professor, M. Louise Fitzpatrick College of Nursing, Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA.

Cheryl K. Schmidt, PhD, RN, CNE, ANEF, FAAN, is a Clinical Professor, Pre-licensure Program, Arizona State University Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation, Phoenix, AZ.

in an emotional or practical way, and providing money or physical things that are needed. Student attendance at SNA conferences relies upon encouragement, approval, and emotional support from deans, directors, the nursing program, and course faculty. Practical assistance includes releasing students from classes, scheduling tests or due dates to avoid major SNA conferences, using SNA conference programs and activities as equivalents for class or clinical time, and offering opportunities for students who attend to share their experiences and providing opportunities for make-ups that have positive rather than negative impact on students. Financial support from the program for the chapter or individuals, as well as chapter advisors, makes attendance possible for those who might not be able to attend without financial assistance. SNA chapters have diverse sources of funding. Funding may come from student activities at a college or university, the nursing program, a special 'Dean's Fund,' chapter fundraising, or other sources. As shown in the NSNA study, some advisors fund themselves for all or part of attendance, while others are financially supported by their nursing programs. Some faculty advisors are released to attend the SNA conferences and therefore able to partake in conference activities as they build relationships with the delegation they advise.

Barriers are defined as, "anything used or acting to block someone from going somewhere or from doing something, or to block something from happening" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019a, para. 1). Results from the 2018 NSNA survey indicated that blocking behaviors are realities that create barriers and have negative impact on student attendance at state and national SNA conferences. Examples of blocking behaviors include grade or other penalties for students missing classes or clinicals, faculty refusal to be flexible in scheduling alternate assignments or mining the many offerings of the conference for equivalent ways to meet course objectives, and negative attitudes toward SNA conference attendance communicated verbally and non-verbally. Lack of financial support, release from meetings or classes, penalty for arranging coverage for classes, and verbal and non-verbal communication that does not value involvement in SNAs are examples of blocking behaviors that create barriers for faculty. Absence of clear, consistent nursing program policies supporting attendance at state and national SNA conferences affects everyone.

Figure 1.
Benefits of Student Attendance at State and National SNA Conferences

• Visibility and credibility to nursing programs represented in a 60,000-member national SNA and state SNAs with several hundred to several thousand members.
• Conferences provide education, professional development, and role formation opportunities congruent with mission, goals, and outcomes of nursing courses and programs. They can be viewed as practica and simulation in alternate professional settings. Many SNA conferences have specialty programming related to clinical content, as well as leadership and professional development. Engagement in SNAs can be viewed as the start of the pipeline for current and future leaders.
• Students learn about roles of nursing, including latest innovations, in such areas as entrepreneurship and technology, and meet nursing and healthcare leaders who may be role models and sources of inspiration for their future careers. Programs on test-taking strategies, NCLEX success, and other topics provide special dimensions of learning.
• SNA conferences bring together students from diverse pre-licensure programs, ages, geographic locations, and backgrounds – just as in the real world – through educational and professional development sessions and a student Congress (House of Delegates). Attendance brings experience in diversity and inclusion as all attendees interact as students and future nurses. Networks, friendships, and collaborative initiatives form among people who may never have met elsewhere.
• Students find jobs, relevant products, and other career opportunities through interactions in the exhibit halls featured at the state and national SNA conferences. Potential employers and donors find inspiration in the students they meet.
• Student poster sessions featuring research and other scholarly projects by students, chapters, and students collaborating with faculty through courses and independent studies, bring visibility and presentation experience to presenters. Interactions during the poster sessions inspire other projects and connect presenters with those sharing similar interests, just as is done at professional meetings. NSNA sponsors the only national showcase dedicated to the scholarship of pre-licensure nursing students.
• NSNA and some state SNAs offer special advisor programming and continuing education (CE) credit for nursing faculty who attend SNA conferences. Regardless of CE credit, programming for faculty promotes interactions and learning about advisement and other areas related to teaching, nursing, and health. The advisor's role can be isolating, and SNA conferences bring opportunities for support and friendships.

What comes first? Does a thriving chapter with students representing their nursing programs at state and national SNA conferences originate with students or with the deans, directors, and faculty leaders within nursing programs? The answer is 'yes,' to both. The impetus for chapter and student engagement has come from students, deans, directors, and faculty.

Precedent for altered academic schedules exists. Within collegiate and university systems, student athletes are not penalized for missing classes to play, for example, on a championship sports team. State and national SNA conferences also may be viewed as providing essential learning experiences – everyone wins by participating in the numerous opportunities conferences provide.

For deans, directors, faculty, and students, the nursing process of assessment, diagnosis, planning, intervention, and evaluation provides a framework for operationalizing and communicating support for student attendance at state and national SNA conferences. Application of the nursing process to SNA conference attendance may foster understanding and implementation of support, minimize barriers related to lack of understanding, clarify strategies for support, and achieve outcome benefits related to SNA attendance.

1) Assessment provides data and insights into ways support for student attendance at SNA conferences are interpreted within a nursing program and the nature of barriers to overcome. Assessment can identify whether new or updated policies related to SNA attendance are needed and whether the dean or director, faculty, and students have common understanding of what the SNA is, what it does, and how SNA conference attendance realizes goals of the nursing program. Few nursing programs operate with well-communicated definitions and policies related to support of SNA conference attendance. Assessment can also reveal confusion and inconsistency affecting attendance and identify specific areas where education is needed.

Figure 2.
**Examples of Strategic Interventions to Support Student Attendance
at State and National SNA Conferences**

Interventions are easiest to develop and most effective when based on diagnosed needs and strengths. Assessment data become essential to interventions, for example, confirming support or in recruiting champions for SNA conference attendance, finding creative solutions for traditional barriers, and educating people formerly blocking attendance. Collaboration among a dean or director, faculty, and students promotes understanding and outcomes.

1) Begin with valuing chapter, state and NSNA membership, and state and national SNA conference attendance as co-curricular, not extra-curricular. Address the SNA as a co-curricular activity that fosters role formation and professional development. Identify specific outcomes from attendance. Communicate the importance of involvement in faculty meetings, emails, and other communication explaining and urging support of students' activities with the SNA, including attendance at conferences. Recognize both achievements of the SNA and its members on the local, state, and national level outcomes of state and national SNA conference attendance.

2) Incorporate SNA involvement and representation at state and national SNA conferences as part of strategic planning for the nursing program and for the nursing profession.

3) Identify what currently exists, including whether a definition of support for SNA conference is understood and how support or barriers related to SNA conference attendance are shown and consistent throughout the undergraduate nursing program. In some settings, strategic interventions translate into continuing the existing support for SNA conference attendance.

4) As needed, develop a definition and clear policy of support for attendance at SNA conferences. Whether created by a committee or discussed in faculty and student meetings, outcomes should be focused on SNA conference attendance. Consultation with NSNA, state association leaders, and chapters that have strong support for SNA conference attendance can help in the process.

5) Problem solve ahead of time and come to meetings with understanding of potential obstacles and ways to address them. For example, clinical time is an issue everywhere and clinical experiences may be unique. Many nursing programs hire adjunct faculty to teach clinicals and they, as well as full-time faculty, may need education about the importance of flexibility in scheduling related to SNA conference attendance and the opportunity for equivalent experiences offered by the conferences. Sometimes only permission from a dean, director, or course leader – along with some background of the SNA – is all that is needed.

6) When possible, address funding support to make attendance possible for the nursing program's delegation and faculty advisor. While every program differs in funding sources, many deans and directors have access to funds or networks for funding of important co-curricular activities like state and national conference attendance.

2) Diagnosis of support and barriers for student attendance at SNA conferences provides direction for planning and intervention. For example, does the dean, director, faculty, and staff share a common definition of support for SNA involvement? Does the need for developing policies related to SNA conference attendance exist? With transitions in personnel and students an expectation rather than an exception, how is support for SNA conference attendance communicated through the year?

3) Planning for student attendance evolves from assessment and diagnosis of strengths and needs related to support. Planning provides goals for outcomes that are both realistic and needed within each nursing program. Examples of planning include goals of student, advisor, and program representation at SNA conferences. A target number of students attending can also be a goal. For some programs, sponsoring four students is a major achievement, whereas other programs will define support for SNA conference attendance through sponsorship of a busload of 40 students. Related goals can focus on production of definitions and policy related to support for SNA conference attendance.

4) Interventions that maximize support and minimize barriers flow from assessment, diagnosis, and planning goals for specific outcomes. Every nursing program has an outcome of preparing nursing leaders, yet many nursing programs do not realize that co-curricular involvement in the SNA provides opportunities such as a practicum for what is taught in classrooms and clinicals, simulation for future leadership through real pre-professional conference involvement, and entry into the pipeline for future major leadership roles. NSNA.org is a rich resource for faculty, students, and academic programs. The information and activities presented through the website and the many opportunities communicated via email and other media can be adapted for use in almost any curriculum. Figure 2 provides examples of interventions related to support for state and national SNA attendance.

5) Evaluation relates directly to goals identified in planning goals of student, advisor, and program representation at SNA conferences. For example, did a targeted number of students and faculty advisors attend the SNA conference? Does the nursing program have a clear definition and policy related to SNA conference attendance? Were previous barriers such as negative consequences of missing class or clinical to attend SNA conferences removed? Reflecting on the meeting of goals specified in the planning phase of the nursing process can be a source of pride for the nursing program and its students and can also provide direction for future work.

In summary, evidence from the 2018 NSNA survey of faculty and administrators' perceptions of support and barriers to student attendance at state and national SNA conferences and years of stories heard at these conferences can be summarized succinctly. It's up to all of us – including deans, directors, faculty and students. Student attendance depends on a well-communicated understanding of the definition of support; celebration of attendance, chapter, and individual achievements; and education for everyone about the importance of state and national SNA conferences as co-curricular activities. Provision of resources, including financial resources, help students and their advisors attend these conferences. Well-crafted policies can help even the least experienced adjunct clinical faculty support student attendance with confidence in knowing they are also helping to meet outcomes of their nursing programs. **DN**

References
Cambridge Dictionary. (2019a). *Barrier*. Retrieved from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/barrier
Cambridge Support. (2019b). *Support*. Retrieved from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/support
Schmidt, C.K., & Weingarten, C.T. (2016). How to help students get the most from an NSNA convention: What deans, directors, and faculty need to know. *DEAN'S Notes, 37*(3), 1-3.
Weingarten, C.T. (2018). From punishment to permission – What a difference a policy can make! *DEAN'S Notes, 40*(2), 3.

www.facebook.com/NSNAinc   www.twitter.com/NSNAinc

NSNA MidYear Conference
October 31 – November 3, 2019
Hyatt Regency O'Hare, Chicago, IL

As the only organization representing 60,000 pre-licensure nursing students in varying levels of degree programs, the National Student Nurses Association (NSNA) invites you to attend the 37th Annual MidYear Conference at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare in Chicago! The conference will give attendees the opportunity to:

• Hear from an engaging Keynote Speaker.
• Have a mini NCLEX® review.
• Become American Red Cross Disaster certified.
• Workshop with fellow students and professionals in the field.
• Hear from practicing nurses about the education and experience needed to practice in a variety of nursing specialty areas.
• Learn about emerging roles for nurses.
• Visit with future employers and academic advancement in nursing in the Exhibit Hall.
• Faculty workshops offering contact hours.

The deadline to register for the MidYear Conference is October 7, 2019. Register online today by visiting NSNAMidYear.org