

Where Have All the Mentors Gone?

Connie Vance

Nurses have always known they need each other's presence to learn nursing and become the best nurses they can be. From Nightingale to the present, nurses have taught, protected, and promoted each other's potential and talent. Many generations of nurses have passed wisdom to the next generation. In the late 1970s, the concept of mentorship gained wide momentum as a recipe for career success and satisfaction. The mantra became 'everyone who makes it has a mentor.'

The first focused mentor study in the nursing profession (Vance, 1977) revealed leaders had been supported and promoted not only by preceptors and role models, but by active mentors. Previously, precepting and role modeling were nursing's major avenues for career guidance. Students and nurses began to adopt mentoring as the way to ensure successful career progression. Extensive literature; research studies; and mentor programs in schools, hospitals, professional associations, and virtual platforms now provide students and novice nurses with knowledge and opportunities for mentorship.

How does one learn and grow in a profession? In any field, there is a learning gap between 'school learning' and the actual practice. Nursing students, for example, learn about nursing in school, but they need experienced mentors to show them how to be a nurse. This process requires focused attention and sustained relationships. A big gap exists between the need and desire for mentoring and finding it. Current anecdotal and research data reveal many nursing students and nurses at all levels are not receiving the power and protection of active mentorship. Employers and the



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profession should be concerned about the lack of a mentoring workplace culture for safe practice, nurse satisfaction, and retention.

Why Mentoring?

The complexity of a nursing career requires the substantial investment of other nurses. The presence of a strong network – consisting of a variety of mentors – is vital to success and satisfaction

at every career stage, particularly the beginning and career transition points. Mentoring relationships promote talent and self-confidence. A mentoring culture in the workplace enhances quality performance, satisfaction, and teamwork.

Many nurses and students do not view their teachers, peers, managers, or leaders as mentors. Data from the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) *New Graduate Survey 2021* (Feeg & Mancino, 2022) revealed about 70% of new graduates ($n = 2,664$) claim they do not have a mentor or have not received mentor assistance with professional and career issues such as job searching advice, inspiration and motivation, encouragement to pursue further education, connecting with professional associations, opening doors to new opportunities, and providing feedback on work performance. Only 30% of survey participants reported they received mentoring.

These data raise concerns about the lack of support and guidance for nurses

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during the first job, particularly in today's challenging workplace. Mentors enable novices' enormous potential, gifts, and talents to flourish; everyone benefits, including patients and the workplace.

Additional data from the 2021 *New Graduate Survey* presented in a NSNA Faculty Forum, "New Graduate Transition to Practice: What Faculty Need to Know and Do," provides clues to challenges and dangers in the first career stage (Spector et al., 2022). Only 56% of new graduates stated they felt adequately prepared for what to expect in beginning practice. At the same time, 66% reported they were enrolled in a new nurse residency program that was typically 2- to 4-months in length. Data suggests at least 2 years of supervised practice is required for beginning competency in a career. Another finding was new graduates' preferred career choice was travel nursing.

Although travel nursing is currently a popular trend, the best practice is to gain at least 2 years' experience in a permanent position to develop competent nursing practice, critical thinking, and interprofessional teamwork before traveling (M. Vezina, personal communication, February 1, 2022).

What is Mentoring?

Effective mentoring consists of various relationships that promote development of professionals throughout their career. Beginning and advancing a career requires moving through various stages with guidance over an extended period. This process of career socialization is well documented for every profession and in corporate life. Crucial career developmental needs cannot be managed in isolation. A popular nursing framework, *From Novice to Expert* (Benner, 1984), describes how nurses move through five stages of clinical proficiency, from beginning novice to high level expert leadership. With support, students and novices evolve to think and act as nurses. Relationships with others – family, teachers, and healthcare colleagues – are also important developmental influences; however, mentoring networks and bonds among nurses are a unique crucial factor in navigating the path to career success and satisfaction. Only nurses can teach each other how to be nurses!

Reciprocal benefits are always present in the mentorship process. It is not a one-way street but a mutual giving and receiving; that is, a give-and-take relationship. Both protégés and mentors gain numerous benefits from shared

connections, exploration, learning, and collaboration.

Current graduates appear to experience mentoring differently. Lois Sarah Marshall, PhD, RN, Coordinator of the NSNA Career Center, has reported anecdotally that students view mentoring as short, task-focused transactions; for example, help with job hunting, résumé writing, interviewing, and board preparation (Marshall, 2021). The delivery concept of mentoring is also changing. Social media platforms and online communities are assuming important roles in mentoring functions. This is the new look of mentoring. This virtual connection is passive, meaningful, and strong (Luis & Vance, 2020). Important influencers are followed for their profiles, examples, stories, and solutions on Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, podcasts, Zoom, and others.

Who Are the Mentors?

In the traditional expert-novice model, the mentor is an older, more experienced person who coaches, inspires, advocates, and opens doors for a younger, less-experienced person. Today, mentoring is broader and more diverse. There are no limits to successful mentoring relationships such as age, experience, education, gender, cultural, or ethnic background (Nickitas, 2014). A variety of mentors expands learning and wisdom. Mentors can be peers, family, teachers, clinicians, managers, executives, association members, and physicians. Peer-colleague mentors are an especially valuable resource. New graduates can share valuable experiences and information with their classmates and with students coming behind them.

It is wise to have mentors from diverse backgrounds who can offer different viewpoints. An extensive pool of dedicated mentor-leaders is available to students and new graduates in the mentor programs of major nursing associations. The key is getting out and looking for people who are willing to be in your network and who will champion your goals and professional development. Ultimately, your connection power will depend on your interests, energy, and drive.

The two types of mentor relationships are:

- Protégé and mentor choose each other.
- Protégé and mentor are matched or assigned in a formal program.

Mentors assume various roles: Guide, cheerleader, coach, advocate, confidence builder, role model, sounding

board, protector, problem-solver, door-opener, and more. Nurses need different mentors for different reasons in every season of the nursing career.

For novice nurses, mentors can be survival guides and provide a safety net in new, and sometimes daunting, territory. Students, novices, and nurses care for the sick and dying in hospitals and communities in challenging situations. They deserve and need the comfort and camaraderie of affirming mentors on their journey – to lend an ear, bolster self-confidence, offer insights, and serve as advocates. The bottom line is this: The best time to have mentors is all the time. Find many mentors; do not travel alone.

Where Are Mentors Found?

In truth, mentors are everywhere. They are found in schools, hospitals, community centers, associations, businesses, volunteer organizations, religious centers, legislative-political arenas, and online platforms. Networking is the key to finding mentors; it is an essential mentoring tool (Vance, 2011). It is a cornerstone on the way to career success. Networking is establishing relationships to make things happen. Face-to-face connections, group memberships, and virtual networks are all vehicles for forming relationships with potential mentors.

A networking powerhouse of experienced mentors resides in nursing and non-nursing professional associations. Many national associations and their local chapters have created robust programs that match mentor-leaders with interested nurses and offer excellent learning and career opportunities. These expert leaders represent multiple specialty areas and can open doors, inspire, and motivate novice nurses. Joining associations and assuming beginning leadership roles provides powerful networking opportunities. The NSNA Career Center trains faculty during annual conventions and mid-year conferences to be effective mentors for students.

Long-distance national and global networking is also possible through virtual connections. The size and power of your network will depend on your desire, energy, and drive to connect. Being strategic and creative in building professional networks will put you on the path to finding mentors vital to your career success and satisfaction.

Mentoring in Crisis and Change

Nurses face enormous challenges in the current pandemic crisis. The clinical milieu is chaotic. Many leaders believe

an unprecedented crisis exists in health care and the work force in general. It has been estimated that one in five nurses have left the profession in the past 2 years and there is a pending nurse shortage. Many experienced nurses are leaving the profession or retiring early. Nurses are resigning from their home workplaces, lured by higher salaries as travel nurses in temporary positions. Preceptor burnout is also diminishing the pool of experienced preceptors for new hires. Orientation, internships, and residency programs for new graduates are reportedly being shortened or are non-existent.

Crisis and change present both danger and opportunity. The danger of the current upheaval is the difficulty pivoting to new ways of solving serious problems in health and hospital care; for example, nurse recruitment and retention activities. Changes in data-based problem solving will be essential.

Opportunity also exists to reimagine strategies that value the integrity, safety, and complexity of nurses' work. Leaders must create work environments that respect, support, and appropriately compensate nurses' work. Stemming the crisis will require major action by various stakeholders. Initiatives by the U.S. Congress, state legislatures, hospital employers, and business and economic sectors are beginning, including grants and funding support for workforce retention, mental health services, nurse residency programs, and faculty education.

Action Tips to Transform the Mentor Connection

The mentor connection requires transformation to meet changing demands and responsibilities of professional practice. Novice nurses face new obligations, challenges, and opportunities. Novices must be proactive in expecting and receiving mentoring support to protect their work and careers. Leaders must find new ways to provide essential guidance.

Action Tips for New Graduates

Search for hospitals and organizations that invest in nurses' professional development and career progression. Seek employment at Magnet hospitals that have a professional practice model in place. In job interviews, inquire about nurse-patient staffing guidelines, structure of nursing orientation and residency programs, presence of onsite and continuing educational programs, and tuition

support for advanced education. Look for a competitive compensation package. Initiate contacts with former clinical faculty and preceptors for guidance on the right fit for your beginning practice. Be proactive in seeking mentors, including peers. Move outside your immediate circle to network with people in diverse fields. Connect with a leader in a specialty area of interest for advice and information. Join professional associations and meet potential mentors.

Action Tips for Mentors

Mentors deal in promise and futures. Seek out promising students and novice nurses and mentor them. Look for something in each nurse and provide opportunities for potential to emerge. Establish innovative orientation, preceptor, and residency programs that address the realities of the work environment and protects novices. Seek new nurses' input regarding clinical problems and needs. Include novices on task forces and special initiatives. Share your connections and contacts. Invite novice colleagues to meetings and programs. Sponsor novices for organizational memberships and scholarships. Discover the mutual benefits and power of multigenerational mentoring.

Four Keys to Success in Driving the Mentor Connection (Nickitas, 2014)

- 1) Raise your mentor intelligence.
 - The three ingredients of mentor intelligence are mentor mentality, mentor lens, and mentor momentum (Vance, 2011)
 - *Mentor mentality*: Acquire the knowledge and skills of mentoring through study and experience.
 - *Mentor lens*: Use imagination and intentionality to see the need for giving and receiving mentoring.
 - *Mentoring momentum*: Activate deliberate mentoring activities daily as part of your nursing lifestyle.
- 2) Be intentional protégés and mentors.
 - Be on the watch for every opportunity to find mentoring guidance. Activate your 'mentor lens' to recognize your need for mentoring. As a peer mentor, actively reach out to empower and bond with colleagues.

- 3) Engage in 1-minute mentoring.
 - One minute is a precious opportunity for quick, instant mentoring. An encouraging word, advice, comfort, acknowledgment of a job well done, a teaching-learning event, and advocacy are powerful. In 1 minute, mentors can provide reassurance and belief to budding colleagues. Novices can receive invaluable guidance and enhanced self-confidence.
- 4) Join collective networks for mentoring.
 - Professional associations are a powerful resource for group mentoring, networking, and leadership training. Building connection power through collective avenues is a must. To their credit, NSNA student leaders have been pioneering champions of mentoring for more than 25 years. Student delegates at the 1996 convention passed a resolution 'in support of the promotion, awareness, and development of mentorship programs.' At the 2002 convention, they voted 'in support of encouraging peer mentorship programs to be incorporated into nursing curricula and/or student nurses associations.' Further, students passed a resolution in 2006 'for improved preceptor programs to create a robust workforce environment for the nursing profession.'

Summary

The humanity of mentoring – the positive force of the human connection – has never been more important. Experienced nurses who can mentor new graduates are a scarce precious resource. But they exist! Nurses are compassionate and generous. Nurses have always supported their novice colleagues. When nurses champion and cheer for each other, in the good times and the bad, that is mentoring. When nurses open the door of success to other nurses, that is mentoring. Mentoring is the gift of wisdom nurses give to each other as they navigate their careers from student to novice to expert practitioner. **DN**

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