

# 6 tips for new clinical nurse educators

By Heidi Gerostergios, MS, RN, PCCN

Don't be overwhelmed by your new role—make a plan for success.

**BECOMING A CLINICAL NURSE EDUCATOR** is an opportunity for an experienced clinical nurse to pass the baton to a new generation of nursing students. The transition to this new role can be both rewarding and overwhelming. If you've thought about becoming a clinical nurse educator, use this article as a guide to help you acclimate to your new role.

## 1 Establish a relationship with the academic institution

Building a relationship with the academic institution and its faculty will help you better understand the academic program's mission, objectives, and expectations. Two important members of the academic nursing program are the faculty of record for the theoretical or lecture portion of the clinical course and the nursing program clinical coordinator.

The faculty of record will communicate course expectations and provide the objectives and syllabus. You'll use this information to guide clinical assignments. The clinical coordinator acts as a liaison between you, the nursing students, and the clinical site. In addition, he or she collects and confirms necessary documentation to grant you clinical clearance. (See *Document it.*)

## 2 Learn about the clinical site

After you've been confirmed as a clinical instructor, you'll participate in clinical site training, which may include orientation to the site's computer software program, medication-dispensing process, and equipment. This training will help you become familiar and comfortable with the site.

The nurse manager is the heart of the clinical unit and will be the best person to provide accurate information about its daily operations. Ask him or her about the unit's composition of nursing and support staff and patient population and acuity.

The nurse manager (or clinical nurse specialist/edu-



cator, if the unit has one) will connect you with a staff nurse to shadow as you become familiar with the unit's daily operations. Request as many hours of clinical orientation as necessary to feel comfortable working with students. Shadowing allows you to learn protocols and policies and to settle into the environment. For example, you'll learn the location of supplies, emergency code cart, medication-dispensing area and medication

## Document it

Before beginning your new role as a clinical nurse instructor, you'll have to provide several pieces of documentation, including:

- criminal offender record information checks
- up-to-date immunizations
- basic life support certification.

To prevent false representation, you'll also need to provide credentialing that attests to your relationship with your academic institution.

protocols, dirty and clean linen carts, and monitoring equipment. You'll also learn where students will store their personal belongings and take breaks. In addition, shadowing gives you an opportunity to meet staff, which will make it easier to approach them later with questions or concerns.

After you're comfortably oriented to the clinical setting, you'll begin orienting and preparing your nursing students for their clinical experience.

### 3 Orient students

Communicating early and effectively with your nursing students will enhance everyone's experience. Start with an introductory email sent to the students' university address about 3 weeks before the course start date. Be friendly and enthusiastic. Include details about the clinical site and its location, and provide information that will help students with their commute; for example, tell them about public transit and parking options.

Most clinical sites require nursing students to attend an orientation that explains the organization's mission, safety protocols, and how to obtain identification clearance. You're responsible for arranging this orientation and notifying students.

## Breaking the ice

Icebreaker activities are intended to help you and your students get to know each other. One icebreaker game is called "Have you ever?" Compile a list of fun questions to ask your students to see what they might have experienced. Here are some questions to get you started:

- Have you ever climbed a mountain?
- Have you ever traveled outside of the country?
- Have you ever ridden in a hot-air balloon?
- Have you ever surfed?
- Have you ever ridden a motorcycle?

In addition, ask your students why they want to become a nurse, what healthcare experience they have, and if they have any questions or concerns.

### 4

### Create an itinerary to structure the first day

An itinerary will help you structure your first day and guide your students' orientation. During the clinical orientation day, you'll distribute and collect any pending documentation. You'll discuss clinical site safety protocols, fire drills, security, and other types of medical codes. In addition, you'll review the course syllabus with the students, explaining clinical expectations and course objectives. You also want them to understand the student codes of conduct and professionalism. Specific topics you'll want to review include required attire and appearance, body language, respect for staff and patients, attentiveness to patient assignments, and punctuality. Spend time reviewing key topics and concerns about the clinical and provide opportunities for students to ask questions to help foster a collegial working relationship between you and them.

### 5

### Develop positive relationships among the nursing students

You want your nursing students to feel like a team. One way to start your team-building efforts is with an icebreaker activity to help everyone get to know each other. (See *Breaking the ice*.) The information you glean during this activity may help you identify any barriers to learning among the students so you can formulate a plan to assist anyone who needs help. Consider having the students participate in a scavenger hunt so they can explore the clinical environment and locate necessary equipment.

### 6

### Establish a healthy working relationship with the clinical unit

A well-informed clinical unit allows the staff to prepare for incoming students. Send a unit-wide email so that everyone receives the same information at the same time. Include dates and times of the clinical, the time students will spend on the unit, and information about what they can and can't do. You'll also want to share students' clinical experience levels and the outcomes that they're expected to achieve during their rotation. After the rotation starts, send monthly emails to the unit staff to update them on the students' progress, provide any new information about the group, and thank them for their hospitality.

### A successful experience

Use these six tips to guide you in your new role as a clinical nurse educator. Communication, organization, and enthusiasm are key to a great experience for you, your students, and the unit staff. ★

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