CRNA Mentorship Program: Inspiring Future Healthcare Professionals

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Introduction

The shortage of healthcare providers in the United States has been a pressing concern, particularly in specialized fields such as nursing (AACN, 2020; WHO, 2020). To address this issue, two Certified Registered Nurse Anesthesiologists (CRNAs) at Johns Hopkins Hospital (JHH), developed a CRNA Mentorship Program. This was created to inspire high school students to explore careers in healthcare through mentorship, observation, and personal interaction with perioperative teams. This initiative seeks to address the healthcare workforce shortage by fostering interest in healthcare professions early on and equipping students with the knowledge and skills to pursue their goals.

Purpose and Goals

The mission of the CRNA Mentorship Program is to expose, guide, and inspire high school students interested in healthcare careers by providing mentorship opportunities with CRNAs in the operating room (OR) with providing exposure to the perioperative process. The program is grounded in four primary objectives:

1. Educating students about the role of CRNAs and other healthcare team members in the perioperative setting.
2. Facilitating an understanding of the perioperative process from the preoperative (pre-op) evaluation period, then to the OR, and finally the recovery room in the post-anesthesia care unit (PACU) or intensive care unit (ICU).
3. Offering insights into surgical procedures, anatomy, and sterile environments to foster foundational knowledge in healthcare.
4. Encouraging self-advocacy by requiring students to communicate directly with their mentors, thus promoting independence and professionalism.

A Brief Review of The Literature

The success of mentorship programs in inspiring healthcare careers is well-documented (Crites et al., 2023; Dutta et al., 2022). Some high school programs have focused on strengthening students' academic foundation (Harris et al., 2020), while others have shown that early exposure to healthcare environments significantly increases the likelihood of students pursuing related careers (Crump et al., 2014; Gefter et al., 2018; Schwerdtle et al., 2017). Observation opportunities, such as those offered by the CRNA Mentorship Program, allow students to develop a deeper understanding of the clinical setting, fostering confidence and motivation (Crump et al., 2014; Gefter et al., 2018; Schwerdtle et al., 2017). By emphasizing mentorship, professional conduct, and tailored learning experiences, the CRNA Mentorship Program aligns with best practices in healthcare education.

Program Design and Process

The CRNA Mentorship Program emerged through grassroots efforts, beginning with CRNAs hosting informational sessions at high school career nights and working with local guidance counselors. Initially promoted through word-of-mouth, the program expanded its reach with support from Johns Hopkins Hospital volunteer services. A collaborative effort between CRNAs, hospital staff, and educators ensures a comprehensive and meaningful experience for participants.

Application and Selection Process

To apply, students contacted one of the two CRNA program directors and submitted a 200-word essay explaining their interest and goals for participating in the CRNA Mentorship Program. A phone interview with one of the CRNA program directors served as a preliminary meet-and-greet to assess students' fit and manage their expectations. The application also included submission of a resume, which accounts for 50% of the evaluation. Students must demonstrate an understanding of the steps required to become a CRNA or other healthcare professional, ensuring their interest aligns with the program's objectives.

When accepted, successful applicants then completed additional requirements through the JHH Department of Volunteer Services, including an online application, Health Insurance Portability and Account-

ability Act (HIPAA) training, immunization records, and a parental consent form. Once cleared, the students are assigned to a CRNA mentor who works with them to create a tailored schedule.

Program Requirements and Structure

Participants range from high school sophomores to college sophomores, with on-site learning opportunities lasting from a few days to several months, depending on the student's goals. Students engaging in senior projects typically complete 72 hours over two weeks, and then present what they have learned to their school through posters or pamphlets on healthcare topics.

The CRNA Mentorship Program offers diverse observational opportunities, including time in the adult and pediatric operating rooms (ORs), Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU), preoperative and Post Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU) areas, as well as research settings. Activities are tailored to the student's interests and academic level, such as practicing airway management on manikins, tying sutures, or learning about EKG basics. Students are encouraged to actively engage with all members of the perioperative team, from the CRNAs and the surgeons, to the nurses and technicians, thereby fostering a comprehensive understanding of the healthcare environment.

The program emphasizes professionalism, with clear guidelines on attire, punctuality, and communication. Students must dress in business attire prior to changing into scrubs, communicate directly with their mentors, and prepare daily questions to enhance their learning. Shadowing sessions are limited to 4–5 hours per day to balance the students' energy levels and academic requirements with the demands of the perioperative clinical environments.

Mentorship Expectations

Mentors are pivotal to the program's success, providing guidance, supervision, and learning opportunities. Each mentor:

- Establishes clear expectations with the mentee during their first meeting.
- Ensures the student's safety in the OR while promoting a respectful, inclusive learning environment.
- Introduces students to healthcare team members, encouraging professional interaction.
- Identifies and facilitates additional learning opportunities, such as observing specific procedures or engaging in research discussions.

Mentors also play a role in evaluating the student's progress by submitting monthly reports of mentorship hours and providing feedback to the Department of Volunteer Services. The CRNA Mentors can also claim Class B credits through the American Association of Nurse Anesthesiology (AANA), which recognizes their contributions to professional development.

Key Challenges and Solutions

Navigating Institutional Requirements

The extensive onboarding process, while necessary for institutional compliance, posed challenges in terms of time and complexity. To streamline this, the program coordinators worked closely with the Volunteer Services Office to create a clear step-by-step guide for applicants. This includes colleting the student's name and contact information, information for their ID badge and parking, as well as what type of patient contact would take place.

Ensuring Student Engagement

To maximize the program's impact, mentors tailored activities to the student's career aspirations. For instance, students interested in nursing were paired with preoperative or PACU nurses, while those interested in medicine were introduced to surgeons, anesthesiologists, fellows, residents, and medical students.

Maintaining Professional Standards

Clear communication of expectations, including dress code and punctuality, helped maintain a professional atmosphere. Students were required to adhere to strict policies, such as checking in at the OR desk and following OR attire guidelines, ensuring both safety and professionalism. Participants in the CRNA Mentorship Program were provided with a list of discussion points to review with their assigned mentor to establish expectations and help them meet their goals *(Box1)*.

Impact and Feedback

The program has had a profound impact on participants, many of whom have gone on to pursue healthcare careers. Since program inception in 2013, approximately 42 students from Baltimore City and Baltimore, Anne Arundel, and Howard Counties have participated in the CRNA Mentorship Program. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 20 years of age, most being sophomores to seniors in high school, although some college freshman and sophomores did participate. The time commitment varied by the students and their goals; some were in the perioperative environment for a few days, and a couple were a year long. However, most have spent about 2 weeks in the program to fulfill the requirements of required senior projects.

Many of the students communicate back to the CRNA program directors to share updates about their educational journeys after their participation in the mentorship program. A survey was emailed to the 42 participants to gauge where they were in their educational or professional lives and to garner any feedback they would like to offer. All of the students who participated in the CRNA Mentorship Program have gone on to pursue higher education. The universities they have attended include Virginia Tech, Georgia State, University of Maryland, Indiana University, University of Pennsylvania, Washington College, Georgetown University, James Madison University, Johns Hopkins University, and Columbia University. Those not studying nursing or medicine have pursued degrees with a healthcare related focus such as computer science with a concentration in biology, bioethics, and chemical and biomedical engineering.

Box 1. Expectations for the Mentee

The student and mentor should discuss and establish the expectations and goals of the mentorship program before or at their first meeting.
- Students should bring a small notebook and pen to record what they learn each day.
- Each day, students should prepare two or more questions about health care or work experience that they can discuss with their mentor.
- Students and mentors should remain mutually respectful; the mentor should introduce the student to OR personnel including, but not limited to, the surgeon, nursing staff, scrub techs, etc.
- Personal belongings, parking, and meals are solely the student's responsibility.
- No JHH property should not be taken without permission, including OR blue scrub.
- EMERGENCY: if a medical emergency/situation occurs during the rotation, the student will be taken to the JHH emergency room as needed, or the parents will be called to pick up the student. All students must give their primary mentor a parent name and contact number at the start of the mentorship.

Etiquette
Texting and personal conversations during the rotation should be limited to emergent/urgent situations.
- Students should be punctual for committed hours discussed with their mentor. Any changes must be communicated ASAP.
- If the student is late for his/her scheduled time for an unexcused reason, he/she will be dismissed for the day. Please be on time and respect your mentor's clinical commitment.
- Personal belongings, parking, and meals are solely the students' responsibility. We highly recommend that students bring their lunch and/or a snack. Water is available to drink and a refrigerator is available to place food.

A few of the students are in the process of applying to nurse practitioner programs and several are pursing doctorate degrees in nurse anesthesiology.

The feedback received was overwhelmingly positive. Comments included: "I had an exceptional experience participating in the Hopkins mentorship program"; "I knew I wanted to pursue nursing at an early age but had never been in a hospital setting to experience it firsthand"; "The mentorship program allowed me to shadow a variety of seasoned healthcare professionals in the pediatric wing"; "The mentorship program exposed me to the nursing field and the various responsibilities come with it"; "I learned the importance of empathy and patience as the nurses interacted with patients and their families in a way that made them feel comfortable and heard" and "I observed a variety of surgeries ranging from tonsillectomies to liver transplants." One mentee shared how the experience solidified her decision to pursue nursing, describing the mentorship program as transformative.

The mentorship program also benefits the CRNA mentors by providing an opportunity for professional growth and fulfillment. By inspiring the next generation of healthcare providers, mentors contribute to addressing workforce shortages while advancing their own skills as educators and leaders.

Conclusion

The CRNA Mentorship Program exemplifies the power of mentorship in shaping the future of healthcare. By offering students a unique glimpse into the world of perioperative care, the program not only inspires career aspirations, but also equips participants with the tools to succeed in a competitive field. As the program continues to evolve, its mission remains steadfast: To bridge the gap between aspiration and achievement, fostering the next generation of healthcare professionals. Through dedication, collaboration, and a shared commitment to excellence, the CRNA Mentorship Program is making a lasting impact on students, mentors, and the healthcare community. ∎

References online:
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