

Mentoring: A Boon to Nurses, the Nursing Profession, and Patients, Too

Mentoring helps cultivate nurse leaders, retain nurses, and diversify the nursing workforce.

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In 2006, Jennifer Doering landed her dream job as a professor of nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee—a position that promised intensive mentoring and an opportunity to focus on maternal health, her area of interest.

But the timing wasn't great: the mother of a 4-year-old, Doering was putting in up to 70 hours a week at her new job and, at the same time, caring for her young daughter. She was burning the candle at both ends but, as a friend warned, she was doing it with a blow torch.

Exhausted and overwhelmed, Doering sought counsel from her mentors, two leading nurse educators who had survived the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities and who have gone on to thrive as leading nurse scientists.

"My mentors definitely helped to provide me with the long-term view," said Doering, PhD, RN, a [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation \(RWJF\) Nurse Faculty Scholar](#) (2008-2011). "When I couldn't see the forest for the trees, my mentors were there to help me see the bigger picture. They also helped me to seek more balance between work and home so that I could not only be productive, but also invigorated and passionate about moving forward."

Doering found her mentoring experience so meaningful that she explored the subject in her scholarly work. In a study about the challenges young nurse faculty face in meeting the demands of work and family, she and her research team found that mentors played a key role in enabling them to succeed. Mentors showed mentees how to find resources, and helped them write grant applications, publish scholarly articles, and refine research goals. They also helped with life outside the classroom, offering advice about career advancement and work-life balance.

"You will get further faster if people are helpful with all of those things that are not necessarily part of didactic learning," says Angela McBride, PhD, RN, FAAN, chair of the National Advisory Committee of the [RWJF Nurse Faculty Scholars \(NFS\) program](#), which offers extensive mentoring to help develop the next generation of national leaders in academic nursing.

McBride, a renowned nurse leader, ought to know. She literally wrote the book on the value of mentoring in nursing. It's called *The Growth and Development of Nurse Leaders*, and it was meant to serve as a kind of "literary mentor" for aspiring nurse leaders. "I always say you need formal education to read the lines, and you need socialization experiences to read between the lines. Mentoring is one of those socialization experiences."

Mentoring is an ongoing, collaborative relationship between two individuals, one of whom is more senior than the other. The senior partner helps the less-experienced individual mature and grow in his or her field, and benefits from the satisfaction of helping a younger colleague. "Mentoring is a way of giving back to the profession, but you also receive energy and fresh perspective from an emerging talent pool," says Christine Kovach, PhD, RN, FAAN, a professor of nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and one of Doering's mentors. "And in many cases, you are able to see some of the seeds of your research germinate and grow into new innovations and advances."

Mentoring Benefits the Whole Profession

It's not just mentors and mentees who benefit, though. The entire profession does—and patients and their families, too, according to a [report](#) on the future of nursing released by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) in 2010. Mentoring, the report found, is a good way to strengthen the nursing workforce and, in turn, improve the quality of care and patient outcomes.

Nurses comprise the largest group of health care professionals in the nation and spend more direct time with patients than other providers. As a result, they have unique insights to share in debates and discussions about health care reform. Mentoring helps nurses develop into the kind of leaders who can play a larger part in the development, design and delivery of health care, which will ultimately strengthen the nation's health care system, according to the IOM report.

Mentoring also helps health care organizations and academic institutions retain nurses and nurse educators, which can curb a shortage of nurses and nurse faculty. About one in five nurses will leave their jobs within the first year, and more than one in two will leave within seven years, according to the [RN Work Project](#), a national study of new nurses funded by RWJF.

In addition, mentoring is one strategy that can increase the diversity of the predominantly white and female profession, which in turn can help narrow health disparities, according to the IOM report. That was evident in New Mexico, where an RWJF-funded [Partners Investing in Nursing's Future project](#) provided 59 underserved minority high school students with nurse mentors and other supports.

Upon completion of [Project DIVERSITY](#), for which the Con Alma Health Foundation was the foundation lead, 100 percent of the students enrolled in a college nursing program. "Mentoring these students was one of the most effective interventions yet employed," according to an [article](#) on [MinorityNurse.com](#).

Mentoring, of course, is nothing new.

Ever since Florence Nightingale founded the profession, nurses have been taking novices under their wings and helping them learn to fly. But experts like McBride are calling for more mentoring in a more formal way and over a longer period of time.

Many organizations, including RWJF, are responding to this call.

RWJF, for example, supports a number of programs that mentor emerging nurse leaders. These include:

the [RWJF Nurse Faculty Scholars program](#), which provides each scholar with three mentors—one from the scholar's school of nursing, another from the scholar's academic institution, and the third a senior nursing leader with expertise in the scholar's general research area.

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the [RWJF New Careers in Nursing program](#), which provides grants to schools of nursing to provide scholarships and mentoring to students in accelerated-degree programs who are from groups underrepresented in nursing or from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programs [mentoring toolkit](#) is available online.

the [RWJF Executive Nurse Fellows program](#), a three-year development program for nurse leaders that includes a significant mentoring component.

the [New Jersey Nursing Initiative Faculty Preparation program](#), which is building the state's supply of nurse faculty by providing scholars with tuition assistance, a living stipend, and mentoring and networking opportunities.

Other organizations are also on board.

According to the IOM report, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing has instituted a mentoring program for new deans of nursing schools; the National League for Nursing offers writing retreats and one-year mentoring programs for nurse educators; the American Organization of Nurse Executives has developed online learning communities where members are encouraged to interact and share information with each other; and the American Nurse Association has offered grants for mentoring programs.

These kinds of opportunities are invaluable for aspiring nurse leaders, said another of Doering's mentors, Suzanne Feetham, PhD, RN, FAAN, a visiting professor at the College of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "Most of us who have succeeded in our disciplines and in life have mentors to thank for their guidance along the way."

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