Assessment Spotlight: Nursing MSN Curriculum Review

Summer 2019

Curriculum review/revision is a periodic, collaborative process designed to maintain and improve the health of an educational program. It's typically led by faculty who wish to examine the components of their curriculum and its collective impact on student learning. The framework and timeline of the review process may vary; however, it's essentially strategic planning for degree programs.

UA's Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) program recently initiated a curriculum review. Dr. Robin Lawson, who is facilitating the process, observed that its value depends crucially on the buy-in and participation of teaching faculty: "Let faculty be the drivers of change. Give them the resources and responsibility to be change agents." The role of the College is to provide support, including a framework and time for the collaborative work.

Every degree program aims to produce graduates who are highly qualified in key skill/knowledge areas. For the MSN program, those key areas are the foundational disciplinary competencies established by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing ([AACN *Essentials*](#)). The competencies informed the guiding questions of the MSN curriculum review (e.g., *Do our course learning outcomes and activities align with the Essentials? How are our students doing on competency-specific measures of learning?*). Faculty used "crosswalk" maps (see snip below) to explore curricular alignment with national standards and perform gap analyses for the program and its concentrations.

Curriculum review is important for any educational program, but particularly so for programs with specialized accreditation given that (1) accreditors routinely revise their guidelines, and (2) curricula and courses evolve over time. As educators, we tend to innovate at the course level—for example, we inherit a course section/syllabus and iteratively adapt it to give students the best experience we can. Almost inevitably, that causes *drift*—certain program learning outcomes may gradually receive more or less emphasis across the curriculum than they once did. MSN faculty found variability by course offerings/sections, which meant that not all students were getting all "the same" core courses in terms of emphasized competencies. Predictably, not all students were meeting all skill-specific benchmarks.

The identification of such gaps is precisely why curriculum review is valuable. Based on their discoveries, MSN faculty have selected and refreshed five core courses to ensure coverage of key competencies across all students. Additional courses have been tweaked or created to ensure that students master concentration-specific learning outcomes. Another revision involves paired theory/practice courses: From now on, a student who has to retake one "companion" course will also retake the other. Dr. Lawson cited these as examples of empowered faculty strengthening the MSN program to help students succeed during and after their time at UA.

If you're planning to initiate a curriculum review, please contact OIE (oie@ua.edu) or explore general frameworks such as the examples below:

[University of Calgary](#) (Institute for Teaching and Learning)

[Carnegie Mellon University](#) (Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation)

[Ohio State University](#) (University Center for Advancement of Teaching)