

Trying On the 12-Hour Shift

One nursing program offers students a 'real world' schedule.

All too often, nursing students face the challenge of graduating without having adequate clinical time under their belts, and their introduction to the "real world" can be overwhelming. To remedy this, the bachelor of nursing program at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) has been redesigned, in part, to offer students an opportunity to work a full-time schedule during their final semester.

In this new Pacesetters program, students do three 12-hour shifts a week. But it's not some sort of draconian unpaid internship, emphasized Cathy Rozmus, DSN, RN, associate dean of the UTHealth School of Nursing. These are the rotations typically seen in nursing programs. The difference is that students are getting the bulk of them all at once, at the end of the program.

Students in the Pacesetters program do have a few clinical rotations before this, said Rozmus, and they also have simulations in the lab with manikins. "The whole purpose is to make the transition from student to new grad a little easier," she explained. "They can experience what it's like to work 12-hour shifts back to back, and importantly, they really experience continuity of care."

WHAT EXPERTS ARE SAYING

This program appears to be the only one of its kind so far, and Beverly Malone, PhD, RN, FAAN, chief executive officer of the National League for Nursing, believes that it's necessary to explore new education models. "There has been an imbalance in many programs between clinical time and theory," she said. "This is an opportunity to explore, but also to make sure it's done in a safe environment."

Malone acknowledges that a 12-hour shift is a long day, but she doesn't see the UTHealth program as a matter of just turning students loose. "We're looking for evidence-based nursing education," she said. "And I'm hoping my colleagues will be evaluating it thoroughly, to see if it works for the student and the patient."

Other experts are less than enthusiastic about this new approach, precisely because of the 12-hour shifts. "A student's job is to learn, and in order to do that, she or he needs to have an optimal cognitive ability to function, which isn't compatible with 12-hour shifts," said Jeanne M. Geiger-Brown, PhD, RN,

codirector of the Center for Health Outcomes Research at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. "It's not necessary or desirable to acclimate students to long work days."

Joanne Disch, PhD, RN, clinical professor and director of the Katharine J. Densford International Center for Nursing Leadership at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing, notes that the issue of long working hours is complex and believes that there are several creative approaches to lessening the impact of the 12-hour shift. "One is to have a full discussion with students and faculty about the issues," she said. "The problem isn't necessarily one 12-hour shift by itself, but several done in a row, without appropriate breaks, with overtime added to them, and nurses working more than one job."

WHAT THE STUDENTS ARE SAYING

The students who've finished the program are generally enthusiastic about it and don't find the 12-hour shifts to be problematic. Graduate Cara Wright found that she enjoyed having nearly all of her clinical time in the last semester and that consistency in patient care in the hospital made for a more realistic working environment. "I liked working 12-hour shifts during the week in school, so that I had more days off to do homework, study, and write papers," she said. "It was nice not to have to worry about getting clinical time and classroom time all in the same week."

Caitlin Ferris echoes her classmate's sentiments. "I'm working 12-hour shifts now and I feel as though the experience I got in my last semester of school helped me adjust to this schedule," she said. "I did have paperwork to turn in every week, but most of it I was able to complete during my shift, which is just like charting for a staff nurse."

Graduate Monica Herrera said she felt that "being able to concentrate only on our clinical rotations as we did our last semester was very beneficial."

Virginia Plumlee worked three or four 12-hour shifts each week and had a preceptor during all of her rotations. She said that gave her opportunities to practice a lot of technical nursing skills that required repetition to master. In addition, working consecutive days allowed her to work with the same patients, which helped her to experience continuity of care.—*Roxanne Nelson* ▼