Implementing healthy work environment standards in an academic workplace: An update

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 15 September 2016
Revised 18 May 2017
Accepted 2 June 2017

Keywords:
Healthy work environment
Self-care
Civility
Appreciation
Compassionate care

A B S T R A C T

In 2005 the American Association of Critical Care Nurses defined six Healthy Work Environment (HWE) standards for the clinical setting (AACN, 2005), which were reaffirmed and expanded in 2016 (AACN, 2016). These clinical standards were adapted for use in the academic setting by Fontaine, Koh, and Carroll in 2012. The intention of this article is threefold: to present a revised version of the academic workplace standards which are appropriate for all School of Nursing (SON) employees, staff as well as faculty; to propose the addition of a seventh standard, self-care, which provides the foundation for all standards; and to describe the continuing implementation of these seven standards at the University of Virginia School of Nursing (UVA SON).

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(See Table 1.)

In 2005 the American Association of Critical Care Nurses defined six Healthy Work Environment (HWE) standards for the clinical setting (AACN, 2005), which were reaffirmed and expanded in 2016 (AACN, 2016). These clinical standards were adapted for use in the academic setting by Fontaine, Koh, and Carroll in 2012. The intention of this article is threefold: to present a revised version of the academic workplace standards which are appropriate for all School of Nursing (SON) employees, staff as well as faculty; to propose the addition of a seventh standard, self-care, which provides the foundation for all standards; and to describe the continuing implementation of these seven standards at the University of Virginia School of Nursing (UVA SON).

To implement HWE standards in an academic setting requires the support of both faculty and staff. Inviting staff and faculty to participate as equal partners in all HWE efforts is essential because both are essential to the daily functioning and success of the school. A small group of faculty and staff volunteered to begin the step-wise process of intentional assessment and to make recommendations to enrich the teaching and learning environment. This HWE team embraced the challenge of becoming a healthy academic community that promotes the values of self-care, civility, respect and appreciation identified in the HWE Standards. Although the revised workplace standards focus on faculty and staff, because the work of an academic institution is student preparation, we also include student exemplars.

Academic standard I: communication. Faculty and staff are as proficient in communication skills as they are in their respective academic responsibilities

In 2009 all SON stakeholders attended a strategic planning summit which served as the foundation for the mission, vision, and expected behaviors for the SON community (Harmon, Fontaine, Plews-Ogan, & Williams, 2012). Expected behaviors were defined by a staff workgroup and endorsed by all faculty and staff, yet a 2011–2012 HWE school survey indicated there was room for improvement. Based on these survey results the HWE team used a variety of forums, including role play and panel discussions, to provide education and engage members during all-school meetings and retreats. Participation was encouraged but not mandatory. A 2015 resurvey indicated some improvement; however, achieving skilled communication among all members of the SON academic community is a long-term process which requires ongoing dialogue to maintain awareness of behavioral expectations. Currently, applicants for positions within the SON learn about and discuss HWE expectations with team members during the interview and orientation processes. Recent applicants have cited the focus on HWE as one of the reasons to join UVA SON.

Self-assessment of personal contribution to the HWE is expected and was incorporated into the annual faculty evaluation process in 2013, appearing alongside scholarship, teaching, and service. SON staff participate in a standardized university-wide evaluation process; however, in 2017, through the efforts of the HWE, a new SON-specific performance goal was added: “Healthy Work Environment: demonstrate respect and
Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence


Table 1
Healthy work environment standards for the academic workplace.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AACN established HWE standard</th>
<th>AACN clinical standards</th>
<th>Academic workplace standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Skilled communication</td>
<td>Nurses must be as proficient in communication skills as they are in clinical skills.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff are as proficient in using and role modeling communication skills as they are in their respective academic duties and skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 True collaboration</td>
<td>Nurses must be relentless in pursuing and fostering true collaboration.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff are relentless in pursuing, fostering, and role modeling collaboration within and beyond the university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Effective decision-making</td>
<td>Nurses must be valued and committed partners in making policy, directing and evaluating clinical care, and leading organizational operations.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff are valued and committed partners in implementing shared governance within the school and university setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Appropriate staffing</td>
<td>Staffing must ensure the effective match between patient needs and nurse competencies.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff ensure the effective match between the mission of the school and designated employee competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 Meaningful recognition</td>
<td>Nurses must be recognized and must recognize others for the value each brings to the work of the organization.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff are recognized and recognize others for the value each brings to the work of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Authentic leadership</td>
<td>Nurse leaders must fully embrace the imperative of a Healthy Work Environment, authentically live it, and engage others in its achievement.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff leaders fully embrace the imperative of a healthy work environment, authentically live it, and engage others in its achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed standard</td>
<td>Nurses and nurse leaders must embrace self-care as foundational to the creation of a healthy work environment where patients and clinical partners can thrive.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff engage and are supported in developing self-care as foundational to the creation of a healthy work and learning environment in which all members of the academic community can thrive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 self-care</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Fontaine et al. (2012) and American Association of Critical Care Nurses:

Academic standard I: Skilled communication. Nursing faculty and staff must be proficient in all communication skills. This includes speaking, listening, and writing effectively in all settings, with all audiences, to foster a culture of communication and respect. Effective communication skills are essential for ensuring patient safety and satisfaction, as well as for maintaining a healthy work environment. Nursing faculty and staff must model effective communication skills and provide opportunities for students and peers to develop and hone these skills.

Academic standard II: True collaboration. Nursing faculty and staff must work collaboratively with all members of the academic community to achieve shared goals. This includes working across disciplines, within the school, and beyond the university to address issues of mutual concern. Collaboration is fostered through open and respectful communication, and by valuing the contributions of all members of the academic community.

Academic standard III: Effective decision-making. Nursing faculty and staff must be skilled in making evidence-based, ethical, and collaborative decisions. This includes being able to analyze data, consider multiple perspectives, and make decisions that are in the best interest of patients and the academic community. Effective decision-making is crucial for ensuring patient safety and satisfaction, as well as for maintaining a healthy work environment.

The process of collaboration occurs over time and with the commitment of all members of the organization. One of the pioneering collaborations is the integration of interprofessional education (IPE). This has been a long-standing and intentional strategy led by a physician Professor of Nursing faculty member and initiated with undergraduate nursing and medical students (Owen, Brashers, Peterson, Blackhall, & Erickson, 2012; Rider & Brashers, 2006). This work led to the creation of a nationally recognized Center for Academic and Strategic Partnerships for Interprofessional Research and Education (ASPIRE). The development of this center addresses two critical gaps: first, between the health professionals’ training and team-based care, and second, between education and practice. The ASPIRE Center supports the development, implementation, and evaluation of educational and clinical programs that train students, faculty, and clinicians to deliver safe team-based care. This collaboration across professional schools addresses the Institute of Medicine (IOM) 2010 goals for safe care.

In the spirit of collaboration, the Inclusion, Diversity and Excellence Achievement initiative (IDEA) is led by an Associate Dean with experience in developing best practices to promote an engaged and respectful community (Clark et al., 2011). This collaborative approach is used in developing Global Health education, transitioning our global health experiences to a model of sustained partnership with host universities and communities. These partnerships are built around a core of faculty research and student educational experiences, and they are centered on locally determined needs and priorities (Kools, Chimwaza, & Macha, 2015).

Collaborations across the University with other professional schools interested in partnering with health care and nursing are increasing. Examples include Global Health, graduate leadership education with the business schools, and joint student and faculty research teams in engineering. The percentage of non-nurse faculty who collaborate in teaching and research at the SON continues to expand and now includes faculty appointments shared with the professional disciplines of law, ethics, medicine, architecture, engineering, business, and religious studies.

With staff leadership, staff and faculty members come together to participate in collaborative community activities such as the United Way National Day of Caring. While academic, research, and clinical collaborations are critical, the faculty and staff recognize the value of building informal relationships intentionally through social and service opportunities, such as weekly wellness walks, Family Weekend events, and Commencement activities.

Academic standard IV: Appropriate staffing. Nursing faculty and staff must have an adequate number of qualified staff to support patient care, education, and research. This includes ensuring that staffing levels are sufficient to meet the needs of patients, while also providing opportunities for professional development and advancement.

The school actively seeks employee feedback through SON and Health System surveys. Through this process, improvements and ongoing challenges are identified and shared with all. The HWE Team uses this formal feedback to analyze employee satisfaction and to plan activities to address identified need. Administrative leaders address areas of concern in open forums, seek recommendations for solutions, and follow up in individual and group meetings. The goal is to empower faculty and staff to become “valued and committed partners in making policy, and leading and evaluating organizational initiatives” (Morton, 2015, p.166). All voices are welcomed; all are invited to share suggestions or concerns on their own or another’s behalf.
Faculty and staff come together during the monthly faculty governance meetings to share updates and celebrate accomplishments. Elected staff representatives attend monthly Staff Senate meetings and report back to the SON community on University initiatives. Full time faculty members are eligible to run for office in faculty governance. Two year terms provide service opportunities on BSN, MSN/DNP and PhD programs, research, nominating, and diversity committees. The Chair of Faculty Organization is invited to dialogue with the Dean’s Council. Faculty members are elected to the University Senate and the General Faculty Council, facilitating a broader, decision-making role across the University.

Academic standard IV: appropriate staffing. Faculty and staff ensure the effective match between the mission of the school and designated employee competencies

Recruiting sufficient numbers of faculty to teach in classroom and clinical settings is a recurring challenge for administrators. Meeting the organizational needs and matching the skills and competencies of the faculty to the course and clinical content requires an ongoing commitment to providing educational support. Educational workshops are offered with lunch on a monthly basis and financial support, provided by generous alumni, is available for faculty to attend specialty and professional organization meetings for ongoing career development. The SON has become an approved provider of continuing education to support learning needed to maintain licensure and teaching competency. There is an intentional commitment to orientation, mentoring, and matching faculty advisors to students and programs.

The national nursing faculty shortage requires creative solutions (Fontaine, Koh, & Carroll, 2012; Morton, 2015 and Smeltzer et al., 2015) and openness to innovative approaches that include: new models of organizing work, ongoing assessment of work load for faculty and staff, hiring non-nurse faculty, establishing joint appointments at professional schools throughout the University, and identifying opportunities for staff to be recognized and perform program leadership roles. Mentoring staff in expanded leadership roles benefits the individual as well as the SON by releasing faculty to focus on teaching, scholarship, and service.

Ongoing professional development is encouraged. Employees have opportunities to pursue academic degrees, professional certifications, and participate in leadership initiatives across the SON, the University, and beyond. Tuition support and release time are available for certification and degree granting programs that further the mission of the University.

Achieving a HWE requires that all new hires receive an orientation to the mission and vision of the SON and the University in addition to specific job expectations. Department Chairs, with the Academic Dean, have developed systems for continued education and mentoring of faculty and staff. Educational seminars occur throughout the year with opportunities to recommend topics that support the mission. Faculty members are invited to showcase their research and teaching and to share creative ideas about engaging students in learning. There is an in-house Nursing Educational Resource Center with online resources to support faculty as well as a University Center for Teaching Excellence which provides ongoing mentoring at the request of the faculty member.

Academic standard V: meaningful recognition. Faculty and staff are recognized and recognize others for the value each brings to the work of the organization

Sustainable recognition, both formal and informal, is an important part of building a healthy community. The SON has generous staff rewards and recognition programs and encourages everyone to participate in the nomination process. There is considerable effort among leaders to recommend faculty members for awards at the school, regional, and national levels. Since every member of a healthy community also makes numerous small contributions that may not be formally recognized, personal thank you notes are part of the culture. Many SON meetings and classes open with an “appreciative moment” during which good news is shared and recognition given (May et al., 2011).

The SON leadership team periodically evaluates its formal recognition system but understands that an inclusive environment is supported by attention to seemingly small but important details. To welcome new faculty and staff, the SON hosts “meet and greet” sessions to which all are invited. Photos and bios of new employees are shared with all by email, and welcome banners are posted on each new member’s office door. Annual “Welcome Back” events are planned for all students and employees and supported by the SON budget. Contact information is included on faculty and staff webpages and in directories throughout both nursing buildings.

Other methods of recognition and sharing include weekly emailed reviews of faculty publications in research and scholarship, an online newsletter, and a biannual magazine which shares SON awards and accomplishments throughout the academic community. In the annual State of the School Address, the Dean recognizes outstanding achievements of staff and faculty.

Academic standard VI: authentic leadership. Nursing faculty and staff leaders fully embrace the imperative of a healthy work environment, authentically live it, and engage others in its achievement

When the Dean assumed leadership nine years ago, she made an explicit commitment to promote a healthy working and learning environment. That vision now includes the Healthy Work, Compassionate Care, and Interprofessional Education initiatives which overlap and are central to the School’s Strategic Plan for all to flourish. As part of this plan, all members of the SON are encouraged to see themselves as leaders who commit to nourishing themselves, each other, and every member of the school.

Authentic leadership requires ongoing development for all faculty and staff. The SON and the University support programs to develop competencies in leading self, others, organizations and systems. Financial support enables faculty attendance and training at local and national leadership programs. Administrative and program leaders are invited to commit to their own development and to serve as role models for others (White & Fontaine, 2017).

Leadership among faculty and support staff is also encouraged. Recently, with the guidance of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and the support of the Dean, five faculty and staff members surveyed SON employees to assess how the HWE could be improved. Based on survey findings, employees were invited to carve out personal time that is not interrupted with the demands of work. This small grassroots group eliminated the expectation that employees must check emails when not at the office. After implementation of this IHI project to increase joy in work, 80% of SON employees reported that they felt less stress. A small change yielded unexpectedly positive results.

Finally, since leadership behaviors are expected of all SON employees, these expectations have been incorporated into the evaluation of all faculty and staff as a means to identify and improve leadership and reflection skills.

Proposed academic standard VII: faculty and staff engage and are supported in developing self-care as foundational to the creation of a healthy work and learning environment where all members of the academic community can thrive

“Itself-care is not selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel.” - Brown (2014)

Self-care is foundational to caring and informs all the HWE Standards previously discussed. In nursing, the need for self-care as part of a healthy environment has gained professional recognition in clinical
settings (ANA, 2015a). In the Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements, the ANA codified the importance of self-care for nurses:

“The nurse owes the same duties to self as to others, including the responsibility to promote health and safety, preserve wholesomeness of character and integrity, maintain competence, and continue personal and professional growth,” ANA (2015b), provision 5.

The authors recommend that self-care be included as an explicit seventh HWE standard, to be cultivated by academic institutions and professional nursing organizations. Schools of Nursing, which lay the foundation and help establish norms for future nursing practice, have a unique opportunity to encourage and model self-care. Faculty and staff who care for themselves are not only healthier colleagues, but serve as role models for students, our future nurses, by modeling how to strengthen personal and professional resilience. Self-care is integral to two major UVA SON initiatives—the Healthy Work Environment and Compassionate Care Initiatives.

The Healthy Work Environment initiative was formally established in 2011 and is a cornerstone of the UVA SON Strategic Plan. This initiative grew out of a purposeful Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Harmon et al., 2012) and identified statements of exactly what a Healthy Work Environment meant to faculty and staff. The “compiled wisdom” was organized into five areas—Respect & Appreciation, Communication, Workload, Physical Environment, and Interpersonal Relationships. These elements provide the framework for ongoing HWE activities.

Any employee can join the HWE Team that promotes self-care and an improved work/life balance for faculty and staff. A new website was created to share self-care resources available on University grounds and locally. Employees are encouraged to share ideas, suggestions, or complaints with any member of the team or through an anonymous online feedback link.

While the primary focus of the HWE is the well-being of faculty and staff in the academic workplace, the Compassionate Care Initiative (CCI) takes an even broader focus. Its goal is to cultivate a resilient and compassionate healthcare workforce through innovative educational and experiential programs. In the spirit of building a healthy community for all, CCI offers classes and activities open to everyone, including local clinicians (Bauer-Wu and Fontaine, 2015). Information on CCI activities is widely disseminated via email and available on the SON website. The SON provides dedicated space for quiet reflection; meditation and yoga classes are offered in a special classroom with yoga mats and cushions, as well as a donor supported “Resilience Room” with mats, rockers, and soft lighting which remains open at all times to accommodate drop-in visitors as well as organized classes and workshops.

Classroom activities vary by faculty and subject. While students learn that Registered Nurse (RN) turnover is high for newly licensed RNs, estimated to be at least 17% the first year of practice and 33% the second (Kovner, Brewer, Fatehi, & Jun, 2014), they also learn positive self-care skills to mitigate burnout and compassion fatigue. Students develop their own self-care plans. To help promote daily self-care practice, undergraduate nursing students attend an off-site, day-long retreat focused on compassionate care of self and others, conducted by experienced nurses. Retreat activities include mindful breathing, walking and eating, reflective journaling, group sharing, and other self-care strategies. Through anonymous online feedback, students have revealed a heightened awareness of the importance of self-care to successful nursing practice:

• “Learning young in our career to take care of ourselves is critical to contributing to our longevity and resiliency…”

• “It’s important for nursing students to learn strategies for self-care as students, so we are able to implement them early in our careers. We do not have to be an experienced nurse to practice resilience.”

In collaboration with the School of Medicine, nursing and medical students have formed the Student Ambassadors of Resiliency program, which aims to educate students and clinicians about the importance of interprofessional collaboration, appreciative inquiry, mindfulness and other resilience-related issues. The CCI also invites clinical ambassadors from the practice environment to join student, faculty, and staff ambassadors from the SON to explore opportunities and share self-care practices with colleagues. The CCI offers a space for all to come together, evaluate current practices, and consider new ones.

The SON has benefited from leaders willing to champion, and seek funding for, self-care initiatives. Yet many of the activities offered are “homegrown” and inexpensive. Staff members organize regular wellness walks that provide an opportunity for students, staff, and faculty to take a break, come together and promote wellness. A faculty member hosts an informal group of students, staff, and faculty who share an interest in crafts; another hosts poetry readings. Many who attend are inspired to volunteer to lead sessions in their area of interest and expertise. The promotion of self-care takes many forms, and can grow out of the needs, interests, and skills of the academic community.

Conclusion

For over a decade six HWE standards have served as a guide to achieving healthy work environments in the clinical arena. Now is time for SON faculty and staff members to role model and instill these behaviors in future nurses. For this to happen, change is needed. We need to acknowledge the importance of and invest in establishing a HWE and begin viewing self-care as enhancing, rather than taking time away from, our focus on practice, academics, and careers. We recommend that all schools of nursing adopt the six established HWE standards as well as this new seventh self-care standard. While we, faculty and staff, are accustomed to being attentive to the well-being of students and patients, it is just as important to assess our own and our colleagues’ well-being. Stress can impede our ability to practice, teach, complete research and function well. Staff and faculty who practice and model self-care not only benefit from personal stress management, but also encourage students to begin a lifelong habit of self-care. A growing body of evidence illustrates the value of self-care to organizations as well as individuals.

We acknowledge that changing the workplace culture is hard work. Change requires a long term commitment by many individuals who are willing to honestly assess the landscape and begin addressing the issues that arise from that assessment. Yet, when employees know that they will be treated in a respectful manner as part of an inclusive workplace culture, the workplace becomes a place where employees want to work because they feel appreciated and emotionally and physically safe. A HWE provides a space for all workers to thrive and succeed, regardless of role or title. Creating a welcoming and supportive academic workplace is a challenging and ongoing journey; each member of the community bears responsibility and the revised HWE Academic Standards provide the map.

Acknowledgments

The authors extend appreciation to all members of the Healthy Community for their contributions to, involvement with, and ownership of the HWE at the School of Nursing.

References


