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Fellowship Fridays: A Case Study in Interdisciplinary Curriculum Design to Elevate an Advanced Practice Postgraduate Training Experience

abstract

Program directors collaborated with key stakeholders to develop “Fellowship Fridays”—a new curriculum component designed to enhance peer support, professional development, and interdisciplinary learning. This structured, monthly 4-hour session brings together advanced practice provider Fellows for facilitated, multimodal learning led by the advanced practice provider leadership team. The approach prioritizes longitudinal peer support, early access to mentorship, and exposure to diverse topics, including communication workshops, social determinants of health simulation, academic development, and provider performance metrics.

The makeup of our health care workforce is shifting, driven by value-based care initiatives,

a growing mismatch between provider demand and physician availability, and recent Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education modifications of physician trainee schedules. These changes highlight the critical need to more effectively integrate advanced practice providers (APPs), including nurse practitioners and physician assistants, into care delivery models (Auerbach et al., 2018; Comunale et al., 2021). Further, with the diverse training and experiential backgrounds found among APPs, as well as the limited exposure to specialty practice received in formal training, gaps in knowledge, competence, and confidence must be bridged through postgraduate transition to practice programs. Developing and evolving a transition to practice program in alignment with national accreditation standards contributes to a high-quality learning experience and, in turn, high-quality providers after graduation from the program (Frank et al., 2020; Halfer & Benedetto, 2020). Once the program is opera-

tionalized, program directors (PDs) must solicit, analyze, and respond to feedback from the learners, as well as program faculty, to drive continuous improvement of the program.

PROGRAM CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

One large academic institution operationalized a uniquely designed APP postgraduate fellowship program in pediatrics that includes more than 20 pediatric subspecialty clinical tracks. The program offers rolling enrollment to align the onboarding of APP Fellows with subspecialty provider needs, which elevates job security postgraduation to drive retention. Competency assessments over time demonstrated an opportunity to improve learner competence related to educating other health care professionals. In addition, self-reported engagement in professional development activities, such as presenting, publishing, and teaching, was consistently falling below target outcomes, with only 21% of learners engaging in such experiences despite a goal of 40% or greater.

FELLOWSHIP FRIDAYS: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

In response to trends in competency assessments, feedback from fellows seeking greater peer support and leadership engagement, and newly published APP fellowship accreditation standards, co-PDs collaborated with key stakeholders to create “Fellowship Fridays.” This new curriculum com-

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ponent is designed to enhance peer support, professional development, and interdisciplinary learning. This structured, monthly 4-hour session brings together APP Fellows across the pediatric subspecialties for facilitated, multimodal learning led by the APP leadership team. The redesigned approach prioritizes longitudinal peer support, early and consistent access to APP leaders, and exposure to diverse topics, including communication workshops, social determinants of health simulation, academic development, provider performance metrics, and more. Before graduation, each learner also presents a professional development project to their peers during Fellowship Fridays. This exercise provides experience in completing a professional presentation and structured presentation feedback to build public speaking confidence. Use of interdisciplinary facilitators, including attending physicians, APP leaders, researchers, social workers, creative and expressive arts therapists, and more, embraces and demonstrates the value of interprofessional teaming for the learners.

Rolling enrollment in the fellowship program creates challenges to consistently operationalizing curriculum changes. Fellowship Fridays launched in July 2023, with all fellows who were enrolled before that date being offered voluntary participation, and all who enrolled after July 1, 2023, required to participate monthly for their entire 12-month fellowship program. The PDs began evaluating the impact of Fellowship Fridays through learner surveys measuring self-reported confidence in session topics, participation in optional professional development activities, and program graduation and retention rates.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The Fellowship Fridays curriculum component was designed to meet accreditation standards and to improve

peer support for the program's learners. The program was recognized by the American Nurses Credentialing Center through Advanced Practice Provider Fellowship Accreditation with Distinction designation, confirming that the goal related to accreditation standards was met. Qualitative surveys demonstrated that learners had increased satisfaction with the peer support offered by Fellowship Fridays. Learners are now reporting strong peer connections and appreciation for the networking and support they have access to, particularly when they are the only APP Fellow in their specific subspecialty. Additionally, learners report feeling valued by the organization because of having dedicated time to their development and learning, and the consistent engagement of the leadership team throughout the year.

Postintervention surveys also demonstrated a 200% increase in the percentage of learners engaged in professional development activities outside of fellowship (preintervention, 21%; postintervention, 64%) exceeding the program's goal of 40% or greater participation. Qualitative survey evidence highlights the importance of focused discussions on professional development and the professional development project as key drivers of this improvement. This increased engagement with professional development activities is critical to improve, as this improvement is correlated with greater job satisfaction (Jain et al., 2020; Pasarón, 2013). In addition, it leads to increased APP visibility, which can further drive growth for APP professionals, as well as contribute to organizational reputation.

Self-reported understanding and confidence in applying key principles are measured using a Likert scale survey covering 10 domains aligned with the session topics for Fellowship Fridays. Postimplementation data show a complete elimination of the most

negative response category across all evaluated areas. Additionally, 80% of domains now receive 100% *agree* or *strongly agree* responses, reflecting a significant improvement from baseline. Notably, all *disagree* and *strongly disagree* responses were eliminated after implementation, underscoring the positive impact of the curriculum enhancement.

Although retention is a goal of the fellowship program, it was not a primary aim specific to the development of Fellowship Fridays. However, early outcome reporting since launching Fellowship Fridays shows improved retention, and the first cohort of learners who completed the full year of Fellowship Fridays was the first cohort to reach 100% graduation and postgraduation retention. This outcome is believed to be the result of increased peer support, increased connection with the APP leadership team, and an overall growing sense of community and camaraderie during the learners' first year in a new specialty, which is a critical period that is directly related to long-term retention (Hoff et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2021).

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR REPLICATION

Throughout this process, the PDs have learned the value of listening and responding to learner feedback as a guide to curriculum and programmatic experience design. Ensuring that content and experiences are both structured and adaptable creates a program that can meet the national accreditation standards, as well as learners' needs and desires. Collaboration with key stakeholders was critical in the development of this curriculum change, as well as sustainability, as learners must be empowered at the practice level to participate in nonspecialty curriculum. Through effective use of a fellowship advisory committee, those stakeholders were

brought together and given a voice in how Fellowship Fridays would be designed and operationalized. With learners from various clinical practice settings, including ambulatory practice, inpatient acute care, critical care, and emergency medicine, this collaboration of specialty-specific leaders allowed the program to identify a balance between varying clinical demands and the need for participation in core fellowship curriculum. Without this collaboration, there was a high risk that learners would not have been made available to participate in Fellowship Fridays because of competing clinical priorities. As a result of successful stakeholder collaboration, participation has been streamlined, and barriers have been eliminated to ensure learners have full access to the entire program curriculum.

Additional considerations include the importance of determining primary goals with curriculum design changes and identifying metrics to evaluate impact. Once they have been identified, establishing baseline metrics to compare postimplementation outcomes will position PDs for effective ongoing program evolution. Outcome data can then be used to advocate for resources to support the program.

CONCLUSION

The Fellowship Fridays curriculum component has rapidly evolved from a simple concept to a pillar of one institution's APP fellowship program. Driven by national accreditation standards and trends in learner feedback, this new program has proven effective in strengthening peer support and both clinical and nonclinical skills for learners. This program's PDs encourage others to consider similar frameworks for their transition to practice programs. The model is scalable and sustainable, and it can be adapted to institutional and specialty-specific needs.

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