ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The transition experiences of novice mid-level academic nurse leaders from educators to administrators: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The shortage of academic nurse leaders (ANLs) is imminent and creates a crisis for the nursing profession. Academic administrators influence the nursing workforce's preparation. When nursing programs and educators fail to address the urgent nursing shortage, this can result in short- and long-term impacts for the nursing profession. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of novice mid-level ANLs who transitioned from educators to academic administrators.

Methods: A basic qualitative research design was conducted to gain insight into the transition experiences of 10 novice mid-level ANLs. A purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit and select qualified study participants. Individual interviews via Zoom were used to collect data from participants. The researcher used a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol. A thematic analysis with a constant comparison method, was used to analyze the data.

Results: The interview results yielded six themes, which included (1) transitioning into an academic nurse leader, (2) role preparation and professional development, (3) having support, (4) insufficient time, (5) public challenges, and (6) feeling confident but still learning.

Conclusions: The study results revealed that role preparation, professional development, and support were essential facilitators during the transition process. The results also suggested that early role preparation of emerging ANLs could build a cadre of qualified, well-prepared academic administrators, thus ensuring academic leadership succession. Recommendations for practice included role socialization, individualized leadership development programs, and formal structured mentoring.

Key Words: Academic nurse leader, Nursing education, Role transition, Academic leadership succession

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic nurse leaders (ANLs), also referred to as academic nurse administrators, play a significant role in advancing nursing, specifically since they assist in implementing nursing programs[1] and influence nursing practice.[2] ANLs are responsible for developing curricula, addressing student and faculty needs, adhering to academic policies, maintaining regulatory requirements, and responding to professional nursing trends.[3, 4] The role of ANLs is unique and multifaceted, and it impacts nursing education and nursing practice.

Mid-level ANLs, such as program directors, department chairs, or associate deans, are sub-sets of academic nurse administrators.[5] Mid-level ANLs provide quality student education and aid in preparing a competent nursing workforce.[5] The common career trajectory for ANLs starts with being educators and progresses to assuming leadership po-

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sitions.[2] Mid-level ANLs play a critical role in academic leadership succession and aid in addressing the need for qualified and experienced academic administrators.

The existing, as well as a projected, shortage of experienced and qualified ANLs poses a threat to nursing education and practice.[6] There is a significant number of ANLs expected to retire by 2025.[6] Furthermore, among newer nursing faculty members, there is a hesitancy to assume leadership roles.[1,4] The documented nursing faculty shortage[7] further compounds the issue of lacking qualified ANLs, thereby decreasing the pool of potentially qualified academic leaders.

ANL positions are complex, in terms of expectations (e.g., program delivery and addressing student and faculty needs) and associated challenges (e.g., budgeting, nursing faculty shortage, and accreditation regulation changes), thus resulting in the growing shortage of ANLs.[1,6] The National Council State Boards of Nursing identified the need for teaching experience as a qualification for academic administrators.[8] ANLs typically hold faculty positions before becoming academic administrators.[2] As noted in the 2021-2022 survey, conducted by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 17.5% of full-time faculty position vacancies require 50% or more of work responsibilities devoted to administrative functions.[7] There is a notable expectation for nursing faculty members to function in academic leadership roles, thereby reinforcing the importance of developing the leadership capacity of educators through offering opportunities for professional development opportunities and mentorship.[1,3,4,6]

To date, there has been very few studies that explored career transitions within nursing academia.[9] The most common pathway for nurses to begin their careers in academia is by becoming academic nurse educators. Various researchers have examined the transition process from clinical practitioners to academic educators.[10–13] In a qualitative study that included 15 nurse educators, Hoffman[11] explored the lived experiences of clinical nurses as they transitioned into nurse faculty roles. The participants expressed that they often felt role ambiguity and self-doubt due to the limited preparation for the academic nurse educator role. Novice educators commonly seek experienced faculty to assist them in understanding relevant teaching components. Hoffman[11] suggested the need to adequately prepare and support clinical practitioners who are transitioning into academic nurse educator roles.

Within the literature, a common theme emphasized was the importance of supporting academic nurse educators during their career transition process. Using a phenomenological design, Owens[13] explored the experiences of eight part-time nurse faculty during their transitions from clinical practitioners to academic nurse educators. Participants reported that social influences, relationships with other faculty, personal incentives to learn to become better educators, and support and training were crucial in forming their identity as novice clinical instructors.[13] Similarly, Miner[12] conducted a qualitative study to identify the positive aspects of the transition experiences of eight novice academic nurse educators. The most helpful support for novice educators came from mentoring relationship, collaborative environment, and sense of belonging.[12] A supportive environment and collegial relationships aided in facilitating a healthy transition from the role of clinical nurse to the role of an academic educator.[12, 13]

Formal, structured orientation and mentorship programs contributed to positive transition experiences among new nursing faculty members.[10–13] Shapiro[14] suggested that role-specific orientation programs coupled by robust mentoring facilitated the transition process of nursing faculty. It is not uncommon for new faculty members to be reluctant to ask for support, thus mentorship is a necessity. Mentorship should include regularly scheduled meetings, which can allow novice educators to ask questions and to learn from experienced mentors. Lacking structure and guidance may hinder the transition process.[14] The supportive strategies needed to facilitate the transition from clinical practitioners to academic nurse educators may be like those for transitioning from educators to ANLs.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of mid-level ANLs who transitioned from educators to academic administrators. The primary research question that guided this study was, "How do novice mid-level ANLs describe their transition experiences from educators to academic administrators?" The secondary research questions explored included:
1) What transition conditions do novice mid-level ANLs perceive as facilitators to their transition experiences?
2) What transition conditions do novice mid-level ANLs perceive as barriers to their transition experiences?
3) What outcomes do novice mid-level ANLs perceive as indicators of their successful achievement of role transition?

2. METHODS

A basic qualitative inquiry research design was used to explore the transition experiences of novice mid-level ANLs from educators to administrators. This research design was selected to understand the participants' experiences and the meaning they associated with those experiences. When conducting basic qualitative inquiry research design, participants provide holistic descriptive accounts of their experi-

ences.[15, 16] Using this design allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon of interest from individuals who experienced it.[15, 16] A basic qualitative research methodology was appropriate for this study because it aimed to examine the transition experiences among novice mid-level ANLs.

2.1 Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 10 novice mid-level ANLs with varying leadership role titles (department chair, program chair, program coordinator, program director, assistant program director, assistant dean, and associate dean). A purposeful sampling technique was used to select a sample that could best answer the research question. Participant recruitment included dissemination through the National League for Nursing, the researcher's peer networks and professional contacts, social media posts, and the snowball sampling technique. The participants were labeled as P1 through P10 and are referred to as P1, P2, etc. throughout the remainder of the text. The sample included eight females and two males. Nine of the participants identified as White and one participant identified as African American. The minimum degree that each participant held was a graduate degree. Four participants were doctorate-prepared, and four were enrolled in doctoral programs. All participants taught in a nursing program for at least one year before assuming a mid-level ANL role.

Participants who were included in this study needed to be mid-level ANLs who held their position for three years or less and had no prior experience as ANLs. In addition, mid-level ANLs who had no prior experience teaching in nursing were excluded as study participants, specifically because this study focused on the transition experience from educator to administrator. Therefore, all study participants were required to hold the position of academic educators before becoming mid-level ANLs.

2.2 Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researcher to provide structure during the interview process. The guide consisted of open-ended questions that were designed to explore the experiences of participants who transitioned from educators to administrators. Using a semi-structured interview approach allowed the researcher to elicit specific information from all participants while providing participants with the opportunity to describe their experiences and/or views on their terms.[17, 18]

Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing platform that offers online meetings, group messaging services, content sharing, and secure recording of sessions, was used to conduct the interviews with participants. These interviews were done using video, so the researcher could observe non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and gestures. Furthermore, all of the interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder and were transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, field notes were used to document nonverbal cues and other observations. Data collection continued until saturation of information was achieved and the same codes and patterns began emerging. This was evident after interviewing five mid-level ANLs. However, because interested participants were available and time permitted, data collection continued beyond saturation.

2.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis using a constant comparison method[19, 20] was used to identify, organize, describe, and report themes found within the data set. All transcripts were read and reviewed for accuracy. Field notes were taken and data relevant to the research question were chronicled and managed using NVivo (Release 1.5) software. Although each participant's experience was unique, data analysis revealed 31 codes. All 31 codes were grouped into patterns. Patterns were clustered further into themes. Once the themes were identified, transcripts were reexamined to determine the relevance of the themes to the study's purpose.

3. RESULTS

During the interviews, participants described their overall transition experiences from educators to administrators. Participants also identified the barriers and facilitators encountered during their transition experiences. Finally, participants described what they perceived as indicators of a successful transition.

As shown in Table 1, the analysis revealed six common themes from the data. Each theme is discussed below.

3.1 Theme: Transitioning into academic nurse leader

Transitioning into an academic nurse leader refers to how the participants described their experience of moving from an educator to a mid-level ANL role. Within this theme, the patterns evident were role expectations, perceptions of experience, and changes in relationships. Role expectations refer to the participants' assumptions about their position's required behaviors, qualities, and responsibilities. Perceptions of experience refer to how the participants viewed their transition experience. Changes in relationships refer to the participant's report of how their role resulted in relationship changes with students, colleagues, and school administration.

Table 1. Themes, number of participants, and research question answered

Theme	Participant #	Research question answered
Transitioning into an academic nurse leader	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10	Primary research question
Role preparation and professional development	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10	Secondary research question #1
Having support	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10	Secondary research question #1
Insufficient time	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10	Secondary research question #2
Public challenges	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10	Secondary research question #2
Feeling confident but still learning	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9	Secondary research question #3

3.1.1 Role expectations

There were similarities and differences noted in the role expectations as described by participants. Involvement in the accreditation process, curriculum development and revision, and addressing student and faculty issues were the most cited role expectations. For example, P3 shared: "...they told me ahead of time that they were gonna revise their curriculum. So, I knew curriculum was gonna be a big part of my position."

Some participants also described the change in role from educator to academic administrator as part of the theme of role expectations. For example, P6 shared that she expected "more responsibility" when her role changed. She identified program accreditation and student support as examples of her added responsibilities. Similarly, P9 reported gaining "more responsibility and accountability... more from a leadership perspective."

Most participants stated that their role was what they expected it to be when they assumed it. P8 shared: "I didn't have any expectation that there would be less than what's currently expected." Likewise, P1, stated that "pretty much what I have (expected)" when asked about his role expectations. However, he also added, "...the biggest surprise...my involvement in recruitment and maintaining...number of students that are applying to the program...and then our accreditation". Another participant, P7, described his role expectations as dynamic and evolving. He described his role as "kind of mold and mend as we go."

3.1.2 Perception of experience

Participants reported being uncertain, insecure, or overwhelmed during the first year of the transition. The language used by the participants to describe their perception of the experience included "challenging," "different," "almost a blur," and "difficult." P1 stated that "it's been a very challenging time to try to stay up and meet the demands of the job." P2 described being "concerned that I wasn't doing either enough teaching or enough administering." P3 described her personal experience as "a difficult transition from a faculty member who is just doing your job and coming in and teaching stu-

dents...to then being the person they look to with all their issues and problems."

P3 reflected that the educator's role related to policy enforcement was "easier" than an administrator's role. P3 added that she considered leaving during her first year as a mid-level ANL, while P7 reported thinking, "What did I get myself into?" P9 perceived her first year as a mid-level ANL as "rough" and "trial and error." She shared:

> ...It was really rough right there... it was kinda trial and error. I didn't really have any guidance...my organizational skills and communication skills really helped me a lot, but as far as the administrative pieces of academia and how to manage certain events or situations, I really didn't have a lot of guidance...so it was rough.

3.1.3 Changes in relationships

The participants reflected on their relationships with students, colleagues, and administration as educators and in terms of their current role as ANLs. Some participants reported having the same relationship with students but with minor differences. For example, P2 reported increased engagements with students to get their feedback on improving the program. She stated that she tried "to get some input from them from a program level...looking for feedback in a different way." P3 also described her interactions with students as the same but observed that she saw "more students coming to me for issues that are not related to class. They come to me for school-related issues."

However, a few participants described different changes in their relationship with students. P1 stated: "I feel like there's hesitancy there now, where before, I didn't feel that...I felt like I had a stronger connection to where they could open to seek out my help." P5 reported a difference because, as a mid-level ANL, "I'm the policy enforcer." She reported a need to maintain distance and the importance of consistency regarding following the school policies to prevent student perceptions of favoritism. P7 and P8 attributed the change in the relationship with students to the change in their relation-

ship dynamics from student-teacher to student-administrator. P7 suggested that the change is "natural" and "comes with the territory." P8 noted that the relationship with students "takes on a somewhat different dynamic."

Some participants reported changes in their relationships with colleagues after assuming their leadership roles. For example, P1 shared: "I sometimes think that they may be hesitant to tell me things even though before, I felt like I would know... I kinda missed that camaraderie sometimes that I experienced as a faculty." P7 and P9 reported strained relationships with some colleagues after the role change. P7 stated that while some faculty members were "totally support-ive," "there was definitely some animosity, some uncertainty in terms of faculty perceptions." P7 further explained that being "one of the youngest" while "some of these faculty had been teaching for years" may have caused friction. Like P7, P9 stated that most faculty and staff were supportive, but "there was conflict where people didn't really appreciate me being in charge of them." P9 described using her conflict management skills and reaching out to upper leadership to deal with this conflict.

However, two participants described a different change in their relationship with colleagues. P3 and P4 reported that their colleagues connected with them more as mentors and support persons. For example, P3 reported that faculty members reach out to her for assistance with the nuances of the educator role, like inputting grades and using educational resources. She stated, "because I do teach as well, I think I have a better relationship (with the faculty), so that's the nice thing about teaching a class and being an administrator is because I'm familiar with how everything works."

For P4, she described:

> ... I am now sort of identified as more of as a mentor, support, so people come to me now, whereas before maybe it would have been more like in passing, or maybe they would not have seen me as somebody like, I could talk to her.

Two participants reported significant differences in their relationships with the administration. P6 described an improvement in her relationship, noting that "they actually have opened up more and they're willing to talk to me and ask questions about our program and what's going on." P7 stated that his "relationship with other administrators has probably been more strengthened." However, one participant reported a different change in her relationship with the administration after assuming a leadership role. P9 noted that after the role change, "things shifted just a bit and their expectations of me was that I would probably know what I was doing with

everything, and I wouldn't need any assistance."

3.2 Theme: Role preparation and professional development

The second theme that emerged was role preparation and professional development. Role preparation refers to the factors that participants identified as instrumental in their preparation for their leadership roles. Professional development refers to individuals and other factors that contributed to each participant's development as mid-level ANLs, thereby enhancing the transition experience.

3.2.1 *Role preparation*

Most participants identified their formal education as key in their role preparation. P4 stated: "I went through a nursing PhD program, and that was obviously like a strong foundation and in terms of preparing me for a life in academics." P9 reported that her doctoral program "helped understand and connect, to be able to have practical application to the certain, the various role responsibilities in academia." P8 credited that her nurse educator certification prepared her for the leadership role.

Most participants described their previous experience as an educator facilitated their role transition. Participants noted that in their role as mid-level ANLs, they deal with the same student issues as when they were educators. P10 stated: "you still deal with the same kinds of student issues." Moreover, some participants described that their previous experiences as educators enabled them to have early socialization to the ANL role. P4 reflected that "a lot of times, I would look at my interactions with department chairs, deans, people in leadership and kind of think like, well what would I be doing if I was in their situation?" P8 explained:

> ... in my faculty role, I took on a lot of voluntary assignments, as far as helping develop new programs, so that allowed me to kind of move into this process much more easily... having already had that experience and understanding of what's necessary in order to complete the course revisions.

P8 added that serving as a lead faculty member enabled her to have a clear understanding of leadership position role expectations. In addition to educator experiences, it was noted that other leadership positions held, specifically in acute health-care settings, may also facilitate the successful transition to the ANL role. P5 described that her acute care experiences as a mid-level manager prepared her for her current role's "leadership aspects." However, she conceded that this experience did not prepare her for the "academic piece" such as curriculum and credit hour calculations.

3.2.2 Professional development

The participants reported that participating in professional development activities facilitated their role transition. P9 shared that by completing a leadership program, she felt "strengthened" and gained "more confidence" to perform her leadership role. P1 attended an administrators' workshop offered by his state board of nursing. He found that this was helpful "in understanding board of nursing regulations regarding the education, and some processes they would expect, reports, and that sort of thing." He also became a peer evaluator for a nursing program accrediting body, where he learned what to expect for his program's accreditation process.

A few participants noted that online resources for professional development were available to them through their organization. However, some participants highlighted the importance of taking the initiative in their professional development. The participants identified reading journal articles and books, watching podcasts, participating in webinars, and completing optional training classes as practical leadership development activities. P8 shared that she did "research on my own. . . about roles and expectations and ideas for how to improve as a leader." P1 stated that he investigated whenever he felt that he did not "have enough knowledge or if I'm seeing changes", such as the new nursing examination format. Similarly, P3 cited: "I attended a webinar. . . how to be a good faculty sponsor and advocate."

3.3 Theme: Having support

Having support refers to the different means of support received by the participants during their role transition. Participants described that having support internally from their organization and externally from other professional and personal networks enabled their transition.

3.3.1 Internal support

Most participants identified internal organizational support as a positive factor aiding in the role transition process. The participants identified faculty, colleagues with similar roles, administrative support staff, and senior leadership as examples of organizational support. P9 shared that while her first year as an administrator was challenging, "I had a lot of support from faculty and they were understanding. . . so it wasn't as chaotic as it could have been."

Having the support of a colleague with a similar role also proved to be beneficial for some participants. P8 reported that she did not have an official mentor in her organization. However, she stated that "one of the other (mid-level ANL), she was just promoted to my direct supervisor and is kinda overseeing how I'm doing, and that she's available if I have

questions about anything." P10 also identified her colleague as her support system. She noted that "the biggest help is that the (other mid-level ANL) does the same job. And so I have someone to learn from . . . without that, I don't know what I would do." Likewise, P2 noted that the coordinator for the other program in her organization helped her transition. She explained that for accreditation, "(another program coordinator) sat with me. We would write together. . . She would help me figure out what I needed to write for the (accreditation) stuff or where to find things."

Interview participants acknowledged that having the support of the administrative staff (e.g., administrative assistants, clinical coordinators, librarians, and information technology personnel) also influenced their transition process. P2 expressed that her administrative assistant has been helpful as she assumed and learned her role, while P8 identified the clinical coordinator as instrumental in easing the transition. P2 and P8 described feeling supported in their administrative roles, and they credited staff members who were willing to share available resources and explain how to use these resources.

Senior leadership support was another factor identified as instrumental in facilitating the role transition from educator to an administrator. P1 noted that one of the senior leaders in his organization prepared a "handbook" that he used as a reference. He acknowledged another senior administrator:

> . . . Our (senior leader) here at the College is a nurse, and she used to be the Department Chair for Nursing so having her as a resource also . . . has been very, very good, because she knows from where I come. . . And she. . . appreciates this, the nursing side of things, and how they interrelate into the whole College. So, that's been valuable there.

P6 used the words "open," "willing to help," and "great with answering questions" to describe the senior leaders at her institution. For example, P6 shared that a senior administrator assisted her with doing payroll. Similarly, P2 expressed feeling supported by the dean by guiding her in learning administrative tasks, such as admitting students and assessing transfer credits. P5 also noted the support she received during her first year as a mid-level ANL. She described that "the first year I relied heavily on the (senior administrator) . . . if I had questions about the board of nursing, and the rules, and what we had to follow in order to maintain that accreditation, I would seek her out."

3.3.2 *External support*

Many participants also credited external support (e.g., professional organizations, state boards of nursing, accrediting bodies, and peers from outside the organization) for facilitating their role transition. Participants reported that external support provided opportunities to stay updated with changes, create professional networks, and share mutual experiences. P1 described his involvement in a state-wide committee:

> ...schools and clinical agencies meet and discuss onboarding and requirements that clinical agencies have. We don't have a clinical coordinator so...that's been helpful. (It was) another networking opportunity to stay in touch with other directors and as well as clinical contacts...trying to make sure you have adequate places, quality places, for students to go.

P8 reported that her membership in social media groups allowed her to understand some of the experiences of other ANLs. This information helped her in preparing for and transitioning to her new role. Similarly, P2 identified external peers who helped facilitate her transition experience. She stated:

> ... (My mentor) has been a huge help for me as far as just having, gaining some understanding of things I need to be asking for what I should be expecting. She probably helped me with expectations because she's a program director of a PhD program...she definitely facilitated my transition. And my other colleague...she has a bit more experience in an RN to BSN program...She shared some of her stuff that she's done and that helped...being able to go to some of those colleagues outside the school.

3.4 Theme: Insufficient time

Insufficient time refers to the lack of time needed to transition into the administrator role. The two patterns that were evident in this theme related to the participants' reported lack of time to learn what needs to be done and to do what needs to be done.

3.4.1 *To learn what needs to be done*

Some participants reported that they needed time to learn what the new role entailed. P3 stated: "There was no time to teach me how to do the role." She explained that the leadership team was busy dealing with student, faculty, and program issues that she did not have time to learn about her new role. P5 shared the sentiment noting that:

> ...Looking back, I came in on day one, and you look at the policy books and on day two, it was hit the road running ... It wasn't like anybody sat down and said, okay, here's, let's review, here's all the things we're responsible for.

P2 reported a similar experience:

> ...I would say, one of the biggest challenges was, is probably time. Not my time, but my dean's time ... I would have appreciated being able to spend more one-on-one time with her. Not just in the first two or three weeks of the, or month and a half of the semester, but like, the whole year. I think it would had been really helpful.

P10 described an initial plan to shadow the outgoing program director before assuming the ANL role. However, due to some circumstances, the plan did not materialize. She stated: "without that shadow time with the ... director, I didn't know where everything is." She further explained:

> She left me a great big three ring binder... tabbed by month. It's literally got everything she did every month. She left me a spiral notebook with just notes in it. She left me little notes all over the place, that the first couple weeks when I'd find them, sometimes I'd laugh, and sometimes I'd cry depending on what the note said...I still needed some time with her.

Other participants reported having scheduled meetings with their leadership. The participants claimed that the scheduled meetings were helpful in facilitating the transition process. P4 shared: "I think the thing that has been hugely helpful and instrumental in this transition was that our dean, the first semester, organized weekly meeting." She further highlighted the importance of the scheduled meetings:

> ...if we had not had those meetings, there would be so many things that I'd be questioning, wondering, trying to process through, but feeling like, oh, this is a big enough issue...? But since it was scheduled, then I could say, oh I'll just ask about this, we have it. And so those, I think, were extremely helpful in the transition.

She went on to say: "you can tell people, I'm here to help anytime, let me know if you need any support. But if they have to reach out, it's not going to happen in the same way as if it's already scheduled."

3.4.2 *To do what needs to be done*

Another pattern evident from the data was the insufficient time to do what needed to be done. P1 stated: "having sufficient time is a barrier. . . it's not that I don't know what needs to be done or. . . that I don't have the resources typically that I need, it's the time." The participants reported that the lack of time was primarily due to providing faculty coverage secondary to lack of instructors, dealing with student and faculty issues, and managing educator and administrator roles.

Half of the participants reported that they were expected to teach in their administrative role. P6 shared: "I think my biggest barrier was still teaching full time and trying to learn a new role on top of teaching full time." Meanwhile, the other half was not required to teach, but they provided instructor coverage when needed. For example, P7 stated that teaching was "not a mandated piece" for his role. However, he described that "he was teaching five sections of the course throughout the week. . . as well as trying to really navigate you know, into my new role here" due to the lack of instructors. P3 also stated that she provided clinical supervision several times because of instructor shortage.

Dealing with student and faculty issues also took time away from the participants to do what they needed to do as administrators. As P5 reflected:

> . . . I don't know what my barriers were other than faculty and student behavior issues in the beginning. Because you couldn't look at anything else. . . you just had to do day-to-day. You couldn't look at an annual report. . . I didn't even know there was, because again, we were just keeping our heads above water.

Another challenge associated with insufficient time was managing the educator and administrator roles. As P9 explained: "I would have to say, time to manage the teaching role and the administrative role, because there are a lot of times, if I'm present for one, I wasn't present for the other." She further shared: "If I'm not fully there for them, then I feel that I'm not doing my due diligence. Same with faculty if I'm not able to be that present for them."

3.5 Theme: Public challenges

Public challenges refer to the social and political issues that impacted the transition experiences of the participants. The most cited public challenge was the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID) pandemic. P3 stated: "I think certainly COVID impacted the transition," while P7 claimed: "I think transitioning during COVID was big." The participants identified decreased engagement due to virtual meetings, transition to online or hybrid learning, clinical placements, and instructor coverage as issues associated with this challenge. Participants reported that virtually engaging with students, faculty, and colleagues challenged their ability to connect and build relationships with them. P2 described that "getting to know people was difficult with COVID because. . . the only meetings we were having was through Zoom." P4 also noted:

> . . . Building trust I think, through COVID over Zoom has been difficult. . . we're having a hard time making this change, or moving this forward, or this is seeming to cause a big uproar. I always wondered, was it because we weren't interacting in a way that they could see, sort of that trust, or sort of the genuine place that I was coming from?

P4 further shared her observation that "a lot of people's uncertainty, just sort of in general, was heightened during COVID." P8 described finding communication "limited" due to the pandemic. She expressed disappointment with the inability to "kinda just pop in someone's office to ask a question." Participants also shared the challenges they faced transitioning to online or hybrid education delivery. P1 noted that COVID had been taking a big part of his time. Participants reported the need for creativity and flexibility in designing educational opportunities that meet the student learning needs and program outcomes.

This issue was especially challenging for ANLs of programs requiring clinical components. P2 described the challenge she faced with securing clinical placements, stating "hospitals closing to students and not letting the students in. And it was like, every other day, they were trying to figure out where, what were they going to do with the students." In addition to clinical placements, some participants described the issues with scheduling time for students to practice clinical skills in the skills laboratory, assessing students, and balancing student-faculty ratios. P6 shared:

> . . . We were allowed when we were totally online to have students come in to work in the sim lab on a one-to-one basis. So that was very difficult getting it scheduled and ensuring that all of the students were coming in to pass their skills. And very tedious to teach all of the students, one on one. That was very challenging.

One of the participants also identified social justice as another public issue that impacted her role transition. P4 explained that social justice combined with the pandemic challenges affected building relationships. She stated:

...the climate of the country was a challenge...we had a lot of social injustice and a lot of unrest ...at the same time that we were dealing with COVID, we were also from a leadership perspective, trying to introduce and bring forth some more change in terms of diversity, equity, inclusion...to try to be making some of those changes at the same time (with) COVID and trying to do everything online, I think was...challenging and difficult to try to build trust with people...that could sort of influence other things that maybe were happening.

3.6 Theme: Feeling confident but still learning

Feeling confident but still learning refers to the novice mid-level ANLs' perceived indicators of successfully transitioning into their new role. Eight participants responded affirmatively and reported feeling less overwhelmed, becoming more comfortable in the role, and being where they needed to be. For example, P1 described feeling "like I've been successful for the most part," while P8 reported that she does not "wake up dreading the day." P5 stated: "I feel just now I'm getting to where, within this last year, where I need to be as a director, and taking full responsibility for what the role is."

The participants identified the following as indicators of successful role transition: (a) self-perception, (b) knowledge of student learning and program outcomes, (c) ability to organize and manage workflow, (d) performing management functions, and (e) positive feedback from students, colleagues, and senior organizational leadership. For example, P8 explained: "I think that the work that I'm doing is having a positive impact" based on the feedback from students and administration. However, the participants also noted that while they may have transitioned into their new roles, they are still in the process of learning. P4 stated:

> ...I think I have (successfully transitioned into new role). But I don't think I can say it's done and perfect. But I feel happy. I am liking the position. I'm glad I did it...There's still a lot of things that can be done going forward but I don't feel like I'm just barely keeping my head above water. I feel like I'm capable of doing it...but not like, I'm good, I don't need anything else.

P9 shared the same sentiment by explaining:

> ...I would have to say that if I went through Benner's novice through expert, I wouldn't say I'm expert, but I would have to say that I am,

mostly there. But there is still a lot more to learn. I still think I'm still growing. I wouldn't say that I'm completely transitioned. I think there's still more development to happen.

The participants identified developing leadership skills as the most common area for improvement. Examples of leadership competencies included effective communication, faculty development and engagement, conflict resolution, time management, and becoming a change agent. P4 cited having critical conversations to discuss faculty performance evaluations and present unpopular decisions as sample scenarios where communication skills are essential. Participants also highlighted the importance of conflict management to address student and faculty issues. For example, P6 described that she needed to be assertive when dealing with challenging students, while P1 stressed the importance of documentation for grievances and appeals.

Two participants reported that they had not transitioned into their new roles successfully. P2 stated: "I still have to ask a lot of questions. There's still things I think I haven't seen, I haven't done." She further noted that she needed to "get to a point where I don't feel like I need that confirmation all the time, that yes, this is the way, this is the person you talk to, this is how you read this." Similarly, P10 shared that she had not transitioned into her new role, but she is "getting there, getting more organized." She stated that an indicator of successful role transition would be "my students and my staff are a little happier than they were, they have more satisfaction, just because things are running more smoothly."

4. DISCUSSION

The result of this descriptive qualitative study draws a significant picture of the experiences of novice mid-level ANLs as they transition from educators to administrators.

4.1 Transitioning into an academic nurse leader

Role issues, such as role conflict, role strain, and role ambiguity, were the most cited challenges during the transition to and within academia.[13, 14] The role of ANLs is multifaceted and variations in role titles based on the structure of educational institutions add to the complexities and diversities in the role expectations.[2, 6] These factors contributed to the wide range of role expectations among novice mid-level ANLs. It is recommended that clear role expectations be established to address the role issues associated with assuming leadership roles.

4.2 Role preparation and professional development

The transition of nurse educators into the ANL role is a logical progression.[6] Senior academic leadership often of-

fers mid-level administrative roles to faculty with proven academic abilities and achievements but minimal leadership experience or skill. Academic administrators received minimal training to prepare them for their new roles and gained leadership experience primarily on-the-job.[3,5,6] It is recommended that formal educational preparation, role socialization, and informal and formal academic leadership experiences, as well as professional development opportunities be offered to current and emerging ANLs to support their career advancement.

4.3 Having Support

Having internal and external support facilitated the role transition of novice mid-level ANLs. Encouragement and support are necessary for a successful transition into leadership roles.[2] Peer mentoring may help novice academic administrators gain practical exposure and coaching from experienced ANLs.[1,3,4] Additionally, providing clerical and administrative support was crucial in facilitating the transition of educators to administrators by decreasing the workload for ANLs.[5] It is recommended that collegial, administrative, and organizational support be provided to novice mid-level ANLs to facilitate their role transition.

4.4 Insufficient time

The research literature on the experiences of ANLs highlighted the complexity of the leadership role and the challenges associated with the increased workload and long work hours.[2,6] A formal succession plan may address the expected leadership gap in academic nursing.[1,4] However, due to a lack of financial resources, intentional succession planning may not be feasible for some organizations. Limited financial resources leave leaders without the necessary learning and growth opportunities to succeed.[4] Formal mentoring with scheduled meetings between mentor and mentee may be an alternative option to support novice academic administrators.[1,14] It is recommended that a formal succession plan or structured mentoring program, with monthly mentor-mentee meetings, be implemented to allow ANLs to become acclimated with their administrative role.

ANLs described that not having enough time to complete administrative tasks was a barrier to their role transition. Management functions is the most significant challenge for ANLs and was the primary source of role strain.[3,9] Challenges associated with the management function of administrators include budgeting, nursing faculty shortage, program delivery trends, student and faculty needs, and accreditation regulation changes.[3,9] It is recommended that academic institutions support novice ANLs by providing clerical staff, release time, and sufficient instructor coverage.

4.5 Public challenges

The pandemic posed diverse challenges to nursing education.[21,22] Program changes, such as transitioning learning into an online environment and modifications in clinical experiences while providing student and faculty support and ensuring meeting program outcomes and student learning needs, were the most reported impact of the pandemic on nursing education.[21,22] While the pandemic presented challenges, it also brought opportunities to reimagine how nursing programs can be delivered. It is recommended that academic institutions develop plans to mitigate the possible effects of public challenges that may occur in the future.

4.6 Feeling confident but still learning

Development of professional identity may be an indicator of a successful role transition.[13] Additionally, ANLs require leadership qualities to be effective in their roles. Academic administrators must possess critical skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and analytic competence.[6] The findings from this study indicated that novice mid-level ANLs have various perceptions of outcomes indicative of a successful role transition. It is recommended that a clear definition of the role expectations be used to evaluate the role transition progress of new academic administrators.

5. CONCLUSION

Transitioning into leadership roles within nursing education formed the basis for this qualitative study. Role expectations, educational preparation, professional development, support, resources, and leadership competencies were the themes noted in the literature review and this current study. Novice mid-level ANLs encounter facilitators and barriers as they transition from educators to administrators. Development of competencies and increased self-confidence were indicators of a successful role transition.

This research study revealed the transition experiences of novice mid-level ANLs. It also highlighted the importance of early role preparation of emerging academic nurse administrators in building a cadre of qualified and well-prepared ANLs; thus, ensuring academic leadership succession. Future research might be aimed at understanding the degree of the value and benefit of formal mentoring and orientation programs in facilitating successful role transitions. Additionally, the effects of intentional succession planning in the transition of mid-level ANLs should be further explored to expand the knowledge on how intentional succession planning can address academic leadership needs.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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