

Editorial

THE CANOPY OF HEALTHCARE FOR RURAL AND UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS STRENGTHENING THE ROOT SYSTEM: DEFINING SUCCESS

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Funny how a simple concept like success can be difficult to recognize. Look up the word, and you find it comes from the Latin *succeder*, which means “1. result; outcome 2a. favorable or satisfactory outcome or result...” (p. 1421). The conference entitled *The Canopy of Health Care for Rural and Underserved Populations: Strengthening the Root System* was jointly sponsored by Binghamton University, Decker School of Nursing (DSN) and the Rural Nurse Organization (RNO). After spending the last two years working on the planning of the conference, I found myself wondering, was it a success?

About a month before the conference, this area of upstate New York experienced one of the most devastating floods this region has ever seen. The conference hotel was flooded. The University Downtown Center that houses the Offices of the Continuing Education and Outreach (CEO) of Binghamton University had 17 feet of water that has closed the building until at least the next academic year. The server that held the conference webpage was underwater. Those of us on the planning committee were asking “should we go forward or postpone the conference”? Scheduled presenters were asking if the conference was still on. We knew several of our speakers, both national and international, had flights booked. It was with a sense of relief that we received the word from the hotel that they would be up and functioning in time for the conference, which was now three weeks away. Those working in the offices of CEO, as well as myself and the other members of the planning committee, went to work letting everyone know we would be having the conference. There were still many last minute planning details and tasks to be carried out. There were issues with the webpage for registering as well as some delay for those trying to secure a room at the hotel. I felt some sense of success in just being able to bring this conference to fruition despite the obstacles faced by the region after the flood.

I was on the planning committee for a similar conference held in Binghamton in 2002. The conference had been planned originally in October of 2001 the events of 9-11 delayed the conference a year. Still the 2002 conference had around 200 attendees. As we began the planning for the 2011 conference, this number was the target; yet we only had a little over 100 people attending on day 1 and fewer on days 2 and 3. Certainly not the outcome numbers we had worked for in planning this conference. It is a good thing that rural nurses have never labeled success as only being about large numbers.

This was an international research conference, and indeed, we attracted people from not only the US but also Canada, New Zealand, the Philippines, Turkey and Indonesia. There were presentations that focused on work done in rural and underserved populations in these areas, as well as in the Bahamas. There are many other countries where rural populations dwell. I would have loved to see representation from more areas in Asia, Africa, and South America, but given the state of the world economy, I can evaluate the international aspect of this conference as a qualified success.

The rural regions from this country were well represented with presenters alone coming from 22 different states. There was representation from many schools in this country that focus their research and outreach toward rural populations. Programs represented included but were not limited to East Tennessee State University; College of Nursing at Montana State University

(Bozeman), Missoula Campus; University of Central Florida; University of Nebraska Medical Center; University of North Dakota; University of Virginia; and the Decker School of Nursing, Binghamton University. There was a smattering of health care professions beyond nursing attending. Those attending the conference included students, faculty, clinicians, and researchers. Attracting fields other than nursing is an area where there was limited success but the diversity of the audience in terms of where they practiced, the areas of research, and their educational backgrounds make me believe this was a successful conference.

I personally enjoy research conferences since they stimulate my thinking. At conferences over the years, I have met many people who have become friends. I meet nurses and other health care providers, researchers and academics who are interested in similar areas, and I often am able to build bridges regarding future projects with these individuals. Our 2011 conference was no different. I had a wonderful time interacting both socially and professionally with people I have known for years and those who I was meeting for the first time. I was able to connect with people and connect people, including doctoral students, with others who had comparable research interests. Using these criteria, I would evaluate the conference as a great success. I have received several emails, notes and calls that support this evaluation of a success for professional networking and building bridges for future work.

This conference was only possible with the work of many. Although those many are too numerous to mention, I do want to acknowledge the phenomenal work of those on the conference planning committee. Representing the RNO was Deana Molinari. Those on the committee representing the DSON, BU included Cindy Altmansberger, Jill Andrews, Judy Kitchin, Mary Muscari, Gale Spencer, Fran Srnka-Debnar and Karen Zanni. Representatives for the Zeta Iota chapter of Sigma Theta Tau, International were also on the committee. I want to thank those from CEO, Jennifer Lawson, Lisa Olbrys, and Jim Scott. The support of Dean Joyce Ferrario made the conference possible. I also want to acknowledge the work of the staff of the DSON, who listened, supported, pitched in to fill the gaps, and kept the efforts afloat. Cheers, to Cindy Altmansberger, Mary Petersen and Sharon Stiner. Finally, there was a cadre of students, without whom I would have been lost. Thank you to Louis Alerte, Bioengineering Graduate Student and Eva Kamer, Linguistics Undergraduate Student. Lastly, I have to recognize the work of Jill Andrews, PhD student and DSON faculty. Her attention to detail, sense of style, and just plain old hard work were key factors in making this conference a success!

As an academic I think of myself as a “tough but fair” in my evaluations of the work of students. It is difficult to know am I applying the same criteria to my own work. In my final analysis, I believe that this conference, focused on rural and underserved populations, was successful. To be sure, there is room for growth. I am hopeful that the next rural conference will not be plagued by disasters, natural or otherwise. I also hope that the next rural nursing conference will be bigger and even more successful. Although we may never really be able to evaluate this outcome, the final measure of success of this conference, for those of us in attendance will be asking ourselves did it play some part in helping to strengthen the root system for the canopy of health care for rural and underserved populations.

REFERENCES

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