Published in final edited form as:

Nurse Educ. 2018 ; 43(3): 115–116. doi:10.1097/NNE.0000000000000472.

Project Timeline Template: A Guide for Successful Completion

Karen Hande, DNP, RN, ANP-BC, CNE and Julia Phillippi, PhD, RN, CNM, FACNM

Associate Professor (Dr. Hande), Assistant Professor (Dr. Phillippi), School of Nursing, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, United States

To earn their Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree, students must meet multiple deadlines from course and university sources. The process of collecting and managing these expectations is often confusing for both faculty and students. Students and project faculty need comprehensive guidance to understand some adjustable due dates may be flexible to meet short-term goals, while firm deadlines must be set for completion of the DNP project. Clear, early guidance on expectations can expedite project completion.

Through meeting the DNP essentials,¹ the DNP degree prepares nurse leaders to implement evidence into practice which requires management skills. Consistent with Project Management Principles,² establishment of goals in a large project increases the likelihood of on-time completion. Some goals can be moved while others must be met for the project to continue. For example, some due dates for the DNP project can be rescheduled by a few days to weeks to accommodate student or faculty needs, while deadlines must be met for student progression. The first time individuals manage a large project, they can benefit from directed guidance on how to develop and organize goals. Requiring students to set and meet intermediate project goals provides a scaffold for the budding skills they will use as nurse leaders.

Consistent with the Adult Learning Theory, adult learners need information presented at the time they are ready to learn and favor a problem-centered approach to self-directed learning.³ Students are ready to learn Project Management Principles² to be successful in their DNP project. Using Adult Learning Theory³ and Project Management Principles,² course faculty in a DNP program created a DNP project timeline to delineate each step of the project process (Supplemental Digital Content, Timeline).

Development

The goal was to provide a comprehensive timeline for students, course faculty, and project team members to follow throughout the project process. The timeline template delineated the required proposal and project components and incorporated course, college, and university deadlines. The timeline established expectations by: providing an overview of the DNP project process requirements from project proposal through dissemination; identifying each person's role (student, course faculty, team leader, and team member); and stating

Corresponding Author: Dr. Hande, Vanderbilt University School of Nursing, 603c Godchaux Hall, 461 21st Avenue S., Nashville, TN 37240 (Karen.a.hande@vanderbilt.edu).

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

short- and long-term due dates and deadlines while allowing some scheduling flexibility. We present a timeline from our program as an example for other faculty to adapt to the needs of their program and students.

Implementation

We implemented the timeline in 2015 in the 3 synthesis course series that guide students through the DNP project process. Course coordinators emailed the timeline template to the students at the start of each of the synthesis courses. They instructed students to review the information and add any relevant personal events that would affect scheduling (eg, facility accreditation at worksite, major family occasions). Students shared their personalized timeline with their project team, and the faculty discussed the due dates of items within the established deadlines based on their professional availability. This allowed faculty and students to differentiate the due dates that could be moved within the confines of the deadlines that must be met for project completion. For example, the faculty could allow the student to submit a draft earlier or later than the due date that the timeline template suggested. Once the student has outlined their needs, the faculty then ensured they had room in their schedule to provide the student timely feedback. Due dates could also be shifted in response to faculty professional and personal obligations (eg, conferences, grant applications).

Once approved by all team members, the timeline was signed in ink or using e-signature capabilities in PDF format. The signed timeline was then archived in the student portfolio and in faculty files as an informal contract among everyone involved in the project. Early establishment of dates allowed faculty to set individualized calendar reminders based on the personalized timelines. In addition, faculty could reference the timeline in communications with students as an objective measure of their progress. If students did not progress according to the timeline, a revised timeline could be produced. When the student and faculty met to review the revised timeline, this meeting served as a prompt to clearly assess if the student could complete the course or program on time and articulate this to the full project team.

Evaluation of Timeline

Student response to the timeline was positive. In formal and informal feedback, students preferred the guidance on suggested intermediate due dates for project components more than the previous approach of solely providing course and university deadlines. They also reported having flexible due dates differentiated from deadlines for progression.

Faculty appreciated a prompt early in the semester to discuss deadlines and expectations. They expressed that having a contract with clear goals acted as an objective measure of student progress, allowing early intervention if students were not engaged in the process. The timeline facilitated communication by focusing the dialogue on pre-established student and faculty goals, which promoted professionalism when one or more team members did not perform according to expectations. The timelines allowed faculty to schedule time for assessment of doctoral student work into their schedule at the beginning of the semester.

This protected time facilitated timely feedback to expedite student progress. Students were more likely to be successful and satisfied with their education if they had received personalized feedback in a timely and professional manner.

The timelines have been in continual use since their introduction. While it is difficult to measure their effect in our complex educational environment, faculty believed they have increased the quality of the program and decreased difficulties in dealing with struggling students. With strong student and faculty support, the timelines are an essential aspect of our synthesis course series as they streamline student progress towards meeting the DNP Essentials.¹

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

Funding:

During manuscript production, Dr. Julia C. Phillippi was supported by grant number K08HS024733 from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

References

1. American Association of Colleges of Nursing. The essentials of doctoral education for advanced practice nursing. <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/dnp/Essentials.pdf>. Published 2006. Accessed July 12, 2017
2. Project Management Institute. A guide to the project management body of knowledge. 5th. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute; 2013.
3. Knowles, MS. The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy. Wilton, CT: Association Press; 1980.