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Enabling Nursing Students to Achieve Their Breastfeeding Goals

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Abstract

Introduction: US workplace law requires employers to provide reasonable break time and space other than a bathroom for breastfeeding women to express their milk. However, this law does not include students in higher education institutions who choose to breastfeed, as students are typically not employed by their schools. The purpose of this report is to describe the joint efforts of faculty members and students to successfully operationalize a lactation room and develop college-specific lactation guidelines in a university in central Kentucky.

Method: Students from a college of nursing (CON) participated in a survey (N=135), of which 30% were parenting at that time (n=41).

Results: Responses from this subset were used to make the case to CON leadership and faculty to develop college-specific guidelines entitled, “*Guidelines for Lactation Support*,” which was included in students’ handbooks, and to the designated space for a lactation room in the CON building.

Discussion: The combined effort of faculty, administrators, and students was crucial to promote a breastfeeding-friendly environment in the CON.

Keywords

Breastfeeding support; Nursing Students; Policy; Lactation Room

Introduction

In the United States, federal and state laws and policies have built a framework for protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Based on the last report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) the ‘ever breastfeed’ rate among 2015 births in the U.S. reached 83.2% (CDC, 2018). Nevertheless, among these same infants, only 57.6% were breastfeeding at 6 months, and only 24.9% were exclusively breastfeeding at 6 months (CDC, 2018).

One population at risk for achieving the goal of six months of exclusive breastfeeding is student mothers — colleges and universities in particular host large numbers of students of childbearing age (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Accommodation barriers are of special importance to students seeking health professions. Medical, dietetic, and nursing students, in particular, tend toward high percentages of women who have a strong commitment to breastfeeding, but who struggle to meet their personal breastfeeding goals in academic environments (Bai, Dinour, & Pope, 2016; Riggins, Rosenman, & Szucs, 2012; Sattari, Serwint, Neal, Chen, & Levine, 2013; Sattari, Serwint, Shuster, & Levine, 2016). Support of breastfeeding as a health professional is often related to the practitioner's own, earlier experience with breastfeeding (Brodribb, Fallon, Jackson, & Hegney, 2008; Cricco-Lizza, 2009; Sattari, Levine, Neal, & Serwint, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative to assure that these women receive the support and accommodation recommended by their own professional associations while they are students (Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine, 2015; American Academy of Family Physicians, 2017; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012; AWHONN, 2015; Lessen & Kavanagh, 2015; National Association of Neonatal Nurse Practitioners, 2013).

Increasingly, these women are older, non-traditional students who have already begun their families (Gault et al. 2014). Students may spend long hours on campus, potentially impacting their ability to find private and secure spaces to express breast milk. Studies report a wide variety of experiences in the convenience of or permission for accessing such facilities by students (Dinour & Beharie, 2015; Dinour, Pope, & Bai, 2015). One Canadian study reported that student breastfeeding mothers are faced with emotional and physical challenges upon their return to school. Often these students identify lack of space to breastfeed or pump and limited administrative campus support, both of which contribute to primary reasons why student's mothers stop breastfeeding prematurely (West, Power, Hayward, & Joy, 2017).

Since March 2010, many universities have added breastfeeding and/or pumping policies and facilities for faculty and staff in response to the Affordable Care Act's changes to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Accommodations for students are not covered under this law. Title IX, which addresses the discriminations against pregnant and parenting students, considers breastfeeding accommodation and support a good practice but not legally mandated by Title IX or its regulations (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). A 2015 survey of colleges and universities across the U.S. reported 3.6% of 139 schools had an official policy for lactating students and 54.7% reported a designated lactation space accessible to students (Bostick, Albrecht, Baghdadi, Haley, & Spatz, 2016). Similarly, a 2017 survey of higher education in Los Angeles County noted that only 3% of 107 institutions had a pregnant and parenting student policy and that only 2% had a pregnant and parenting student policy that included lactation accommodations (California Women's Law Center and Breastfeed LA, 2017).

Lactation Policy and Accommodation in the University Site

In January 2010, the study site established formal lactation guidelines to set university-wide standards regarding scheduling and facilities for breastfeeding and milk expression by

university employees. Subsequently, a general acknowledgment of student mother needs was incorporated into the policy. Per policy, mothers were responsible for requesting lactation accommodation prior to maternity leave, and students and instructors planning to use lactation facilities should do so to accommodate their classes. Although students were encouraged to discuss time needed for lactation individually with their professors, it was not required for faculty to excuse tardiness or absences due to lactation. A series of rooms were identified across campus that could be used as lactation spaces; one of these locations was housed within the College of Nursing (CON) building, in an alcove within a larger multi-stalled restroom area. The policy and locations were listed on the university site's lactation webpage, which was housed within the Human Resources office. The purpose of this report is to describe: 1) breastfeeding experiences of students in the nursing program who were parenting during their education; 2) the joint efforts of faculty members and students to successfully implement an expanded lactation guideline and set up of a lactation room in a health professions college; and 3) report on lactation room utilization.

Methods

A descriptive study was designed to determine attitudes, knowledge, and practice about human lactation among a group of nursing students, and particularly the barriers faced by students who were also parenting. The university institutional review board (IRB) approved a study conducted by an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) faculty member in the College of Nursing (CON).

An online anonymous and voluntary survey was distributed via the university student email server, to all nursing students, including undergraduate, Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), and Ph.D. students ($N=793$). Responses from students ($n=135$) were obtained anonymously with a response rate of 17%. A report of the methodology and general results of the survey has been published previously (Linares, Parente, & Coleman, 2018). The current report includes a subset of nursing student participants who were parenting at the time of the survey ($N=41$). The survey was adapted from a previous publication (Seidel, Schetzina, Freeman, Coulter, & Colgrove, 2013), and consisted of 50 items including questions inquiring on general demographic characteristics and questions on infant feeding practices, opinions, basic knowledge, and personal experience. For most items, respondents were asked to rate the statements on a Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5); other items (6) were dichotomous with "Yes" and "No" options. In addition, during October 2018, usage of the new lactation room located in the CON was tracked via a 'User Acknowledgment' document.

Results

Survey of Parenting Students

Demographic characteristics of the 41 students that were parenting are described in Table 1. In general, these students were aged of 25 years or more, White, pursuing a DNP degree, and were from outside Kentucky.

The majority reported having one child (n=18; 44%), followed by two children (n=14, 34%), and three or more children (n=9; 22%). Figure 1 depicts 68% (n=28) of parenting students had exclusively breastfed at least one of their infants. We found that 44% (n=18) of students that were parenting while at the CON experienced breastfeeding at school time and reported challenges due to school (Figure 2). These challenges included difficulty pumping their milk during school due to long hours working clinical practices; being generally time-constrained; needing to pump in a public bathroom because of the lack of access to an adequate and close lactation room; lack of support from clinical instructors or preceptors; and discomfort due to lack of privacy or seeing others' negative reactions to breastfeeding in public.

Implementing a College-based Guideline for Lactation Support

The concerns expressed in the student survey were shared with CON faculty and administrators. Faculty and administrators understood the need for additional policy guidance to clarify the student's accommodations as well as students' responsibilities concerning classes and clinical practices. A committee was created and led by the CON IBCLC faculty member. The committee used the existing university-wide lactation guidelines to develop a college-specific "*Guideline for Lactation Support*." After committee review, the document was submitted to the Undergraduate and Graduate Program Committee who had an open discussion with their faculty members about any additional feedback or modification needed in the guidelines. All undergraduate and graduate faculty members were supportive about the need to establish new guidelines. Discussion among faculty was primarily centered on where the guidelines should be published, with most faculty indicating the course syllabi and CON Student Handbooks or both. Ultimately, the approved guidelines were included in the Undergraduate and Graduate Student Handbooks, with plans to distribute among students and faculty members of the CON. Further, the new guidelines will be posted on the website of the College.

The *Guideline for Lactation Support* builds upon existing university policy by outlining a specific process for students and faculty to follow when breastfeeding accommodations are required. Policy indicates the student is responsible for initiating the conversation with the course coordinator, instructor, or preceptor prior to the first day of class. Although the policy encourages the student to use available break time between classes, it supports flexibility by professors and preceptors. The guideline also applies to clinical practices. When specific allowances are negotiated between student and instructor, the final agreement is to be set in writing.

Designated Space for Implementing a Lactation Room in the CON

Several respondents voiced concerns about having an adequate location to pump, including concerns about pumping in a restroom. From the responses, it was unclear if the respondents were reporting concerns of using any restroom in the CON, or if they were specifically unhappy with the designated breastfeeding/pumping space, that was located in an alcove in a larger restroom. At time of survey administration, the closest formal lactation room beyond the CON building was approximately a seven-minute walk; thus some students, though unhappy with location, may have opted to continue using the restroom to express their milk.

In 2014, a university-wide review of lactation accommodations determined that the alcove space, designated in 2010 before the Affordable Care Act, was no longer compliant because it was within a larger restroom space (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). The set up of a lactation room was imperative in the CON building and motivated the IBCLC faculty member to lead the creation of a new lactation room.

The IBCLC faculty member identified a small, rarely used study room within the CON computer laboratory. After the Dean received approval from the Provost to use the room, the IBCLC faculty member approached the Undergraduate Nursing Activities Advisory Council (UNAAC) to assist in decorating and furnishing the new space. The council used a Student Government Association grant to paint the room, design and install signage, and provide a small table. Additional furnishings were donated by other individuals at the university site, including a pair of sofas, another table, pictures, and a lamp. The room also has three double outlets, a hand sanitizer dispenser, and a paper towel dispenser. Mothers provide their pump and take their milk and equipment with them after pumping; as there is no refrigerator or other secure storage for equipment or expressed milk in the room. The room is routinely cleaned and serviced by university staff. Moreover, the IBCLC faculty member posted her contact information to provide the women an opportunity for free lactation counseling.

The lactation room was formally opened to all users in June 2016. The CON included information about the lactation room in the Student Handbooks, and it was added to the online listing of lactation rooms throughout campus. Mothers who plan to regularly use the room sign a User Acknowledgement and are provided with the key code to unlock the room. Infrequent or emergency users can acquire the access code by contacting the room's monitors, whose emails and phone numbers are posted by the door.

Table 2 depicts the number of mothers who have used the new lactation room since the opening (June 2016 – October 2018). The average duration has steadily increased from 3 to 6 months. Unfortunately, the user acknowledgment logs do not identify whether the mother is a CON student or from elsewhere around the institution. Moving forward, the log will identify the user's 'base location' within the campus. During this two-year period, several 'thank you' notes have been left in the lactation room, showing the significant difference that this room has made to the users.

Discussion

The primary lactation challenges reported by college of nursing students included a lack of adequate space, limited time between classes, low instructor support, and uneasiness with breastfeeding in public. Other studies suggest the association of these factors as significant challenges to the continuation of breastfeeding (Albrecht, Wang, & Spatz, 2017; Johnson, Correll, Greene, Hein, & McLaughlin, 2012; Sattari et al., 2016). These difficulties, especially with accommodations, existed despite a university-wide policy that specifically included students, had mapped out numerous formal lactation rooms across campus and was easily discovered on the university's website.

Bostick et al. (2015) reported that several universities would “bend over backward to accommodate lactating students should the need arise” (p.5). However, the authors rightly note that official policy at the administrative level that outlines consistent expectations for faculty and staff as well as students is a stronger mechanism to shift the institution toward a culture supportive of breastfeeding students (Bostick et al., 2016). Incorporating specific responsibilities for the instructor to support the student’s breastfeeding needs should clarify the mutual expectations of instructor and student in fulfilling both classroom requirements and the physiologic needs of breastfeeding.

Despite these various policies, students may still face barriers if they see no other formal protections for their right to express their milk. No policies provide a chain for complaint against an instructor or program for failure to follow such policies; however, students could initiate a concern or complaint in the Dean of Student’s complaint website” and if she is not satisfied with the outcome of the institutional process for handling complaints, she may appeal, within two years of the incident to the Kentucky State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) portal entity. Although some advocates support using Title IX as a basis for a complaint, especially if other students received permission for similar accommodations (California Women’s Law Center and Breastfeed LA, 2017), current Title IX guidance does not specify breastfeeding accommodation as legally mandated (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Finally, a student who has work requirements as part of a class, internship, or for tuition assistance is not covered under the Fair Labor Standards Act, and so must rely on adherence to policy by their instructors and supervisors in a situation where they may have little recourse for complaint.

The process established by the CON to strengthen both policy and enhance accommodations for its breastfeeding students, reinforces its mission to promote health and well-being through excellence in nursing education, research, practice, and service while fostering diversity and inclusion. Such efforts to “walk the talk” should further empower students to overcome the barriers noted above and in other research (Albrecht et al., 2017; West et al., 2017). Our experience shows that the successful implementation of an enhanced guideline for lactation support for students at the CON, and the set up of the lactation room, were achieved with the combined effort of faculty members, administrator, and students, with the IBCLC faculty member championing this endeavor.

Limitations of this study should be noted. This study has a small sample size as was noticed by the number of students that already have children in the sample (N=41). However, we believe that the experiences that nursing students described in our study are similar to other health disciplines students in the country.

Conclusion

Colleges of nursing and other health disciplines which include breastfeeding support as part of their professional practice should encourage collaboration between students, faculty, and administration to foster a ‘breastfeeding-friendly’ environment that enables students to achieve their breastfeeding goals. Formal policies, lactation spaces, and breastfeeding support are key components. Future studies should assess awareness of the guidelines among

faculty and students, adherence to the process, and demographics of those utilizing the CON lactation room.

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Figure 1.
Infant feeding among children of nursing students (N=41)

Figure 2.
Problems preventing nursing students from achieving their breastfeeding goals (n=18)

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Parenting Nursing Students (N=41)

Variable	Students n(%)
<i>Age Range</i>	
19	0(0)
20 to 24	3(7)
25 to 30	12(29)
31 to 39	13(32)
40 or older	13(32)
<i>Ethnic Background</i>	
White	38(93)
African American	0(0)
Hispanic	1(2)
Asian	0(0)
Other	2(5)
<i>Education^a</i>	
Freshman	0(0)
Sophomore	1(2)
Junior	4(10)
Senior	1(2)
2 nd degree	6(15)
DNP	21(51)
PhD	7(17)
Other	1(2)
<i>Place of Birth</i>	
Kentucky	17(42)
Other states in the U.S. ^b	21(51)
Outside the U.S. ^c	3(7)

^aEducation = Standing at the moment of the internet survey.^bOther states in the U.S = AL, AZ, CA, CO, FL, KS, LA, MI, MN, MO, OH, PA, TX, and WA.^cOutside the U.S.= Chile, England, and Nigeria.

Table 2.

Utilization of Lactation room

Period	New mothers	Average use per mother
June 2016 to December 2016	7	3 months
January 2017 to December 2017	7	5 months
January 2018 to October 2018	9	6 months