Implementing a Certification Review on a Shoestring Budget

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Every facility works through budget constraints. Reimbursements for nursing education for outside conferences and speakers have virtually evaporated. Therefore, nurses are now looking to stay closer to home for education because of the loss of reimbursements and travel costs. Educators must find innovative ways to offer courses that assist nurses in professional development goals such as achieving certification as a critical care registered nurse (CCRN) or progressive care certified nurse (PCCN) while being cost-conscious. As a nurse educator and an ambassador for the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN), I have developed a creative way to offer review courses for CCRN and PCCN certification at no cost to our nursing staff on a shoestring budget.

Getting Started

Conversations with staff during walking rounds revealed their interest in obtaining certifications and taking review courses being offered in the area for CCRN certification. Further exploration by members of our Professional Nursing Council (PNC) showed that bringing in a national speaker for these reviews alone would be costly and would not meet the needs of most of our specialized nursing staff for certification. The PNC consists of nurse managers, nurses from various departments, a nurse educator, and a nursing administrator. Rather than deterring us from offering a review course, we viewed this situation as an opportunity to explore creative ways to offer a review class. In 2008, I was awarded a certificate for education from the PNC during nurses’ week, and that certificate helped me to purchase the adult CCRN review program from AACN for personal use. I reviewed the content of the course and developed a 3-week review course that would meet the learning needs of nurses seeking CCRN certification.

After gathering information on the resources needed to get started and seeking support (both financial and staff buy-in) for a CCRN review course, I attended a PNC meeting. During the meeting, many questions arose and a request for statistics on the success in obtaining certification with this method was posed. I explained further to the group about factors that could influence success. Finally I admitted that I had no statistics to share but was willing to collect data on our success in certification when offering a course. With the support of my manager, materials were purchased to offer 1 class. In addition, support was asked of the PNC members to spread the word in their departments that the CCRN review class would be offered in June. The chair of the PNC had flyers with detailed information distributed to council members so that they could help let nurses know about the classes. Further, informational flyers were sent to nurse managers and our department (Staff Development).

Resources

Before the class started, rooms were reserved, materials were purchased (Table 1), audiovisual equipment was identified for use, and tools or handouts to explain the process of applying for the certification examination were created. The attendees would have many questions about the application process, costs, where to take the test, how to obtain continuing education, how to be successful, and what to do if unsuccessful. Knowing how stressful it can be to take a certification examination, I wanted to be prepared to have the answers and offer my insight for success. The Certification Exam Handbook is a valuable resource that is readily available online through AACN (Table 1).
Materials used in the courses were the “Certification Handbook for CCRN,” “Adult CCRN review course on DVD,” and a syllabus specific to the course for each learner. The basic course materials were purchased through the support of the PNC. Additional resources offered to the attendees were made available through the financial support of the Professional Nursing Unit of the union at St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center and are discussed later in this article. The course materials identified may be found online beneath the “Marketplace” tab at http://www.aacn.org through the “Online Bookstore.” Questions about resources or discounts may be sent electronically to education@aacn.org. Bulk ordering is financially beneficial when ordering class materials or additional resources.

Class Days

Content for the class was divided into three 4-hour sessions (Table 2). The first class was presented on Monday evenings from 5 PM to 9 PM. Scheduling the class at this time accommodated nurses from both the day shift and the night shift.

Week 1 created a unique opportunity to speak openly to a group of very dedicated, skilled nurses and explain how to submit the application for certification. We reviewed the application for the certification examination; described the location of the testing site in Toledo, Ohio; and pointed out the potential cost savings if their applications were submitted as a group. Benefits of AACN membership (bulk) also were briefly discussed. Because of my nursing expertise and understanding of the testing process, I was able to dispel rumors about the examination, offer peer support, and encourage the attendees that they could all be successful if they studied. What was important to reinforce to attendees was that the review course would not be a guarantee of success but rather a starting point for individualized study and identification of weak areas. I further reminded them of how to care for themselves as the day of the test approaches.

How the nurses could obtain continuing education (CE) credit also was discussed. Staff could apply for CE credits through AACN after attending all 3 weeks of the course and completing the evaluation that is supplied within the syllabus for a fee of $20.

The course’s first DVD was then started. A syllabus was provided along with instructions for staff about what order the content for the night would be, when breaks would occur, and how the time would be divided. The DVD was paused approximately halfway through the 4-hour class for a break. After the break, a sheet was circulated asking whether attendees were interested in purchasing or ordering the additional study materials such as the “Core Curriculum” and the practice exam. The AACN’s education department offers discounts when items are purchased in quantity, and the items ordered would arrive in approximately 2 weeks or at the end of the course.

Week 2 began with the second DVD (Table 1). At the end of the class, participants were reminded that a bulk application could be made in the last week if 10 applicants were interested in applying for the CCRN certification exam or for additional PCCN certification. (Questions about the bulk discount may be sent electronically via e-mail to certification@aacn.org.)

Week 3 was when the final DVD was shown. At the end of the class, questions and answers were completed and applications were reviewed for completeness. The first group was able to submit applications in bulk because we had enough participants who were interested in taking the examinations for both certifications. As the facilitator, I offered to be the contact person with AACN and created a template that could easily be completed with the information requested by AACN, gathered all the completed applications and payments, and submitted the order to AACN as directed. An e-mail communication was received from AACN that the documents were received. All applicants received a postcard with directions to finalize the process and schedule their own examination.

Feedback and Results

The course itself was much like being at the National Teaching Institute (NTI) review
classes, but without the cost. The expertise of the speakers offered insight into each system and additional test-taking tips or key content pieces to watch for on the certification examination. Because of its size, the class created a more social atmosphere, which was relaxed and supportive. At the end of the class, each attendee was asked to evaluate the program; this evaluation was in addition to the evaluation to be submitted to AACN for continuing education credit. Summative evaluation of the course indicated that the method of learning, timing of the class, and teaching effectiveness were all above average to excellent. Seven participants stated that they would be applying for the examination and 100% reported that the discounted materials offered in the class were beneficial. Almost all participants (90%) reported that they were satisfied with the knowledge they obtained from the program. Comments from the attendees were as follows: “well organized, very helpful,” “having the book first would be helpful,” “this gave me an idea on a global level of my weaknesses,” and “great job.” The first class reported an 86% pass rate (6/7) on the certification examinations. In addition, in 2009, these certification classes are being offered quarterly, with increased availability of resources and changes in the class based on previous attendees’ comments.

Future Class Support

Having results from our first review class and thanks to the interest among nurses in this type of class for certification review, I was able to report our successes to the PNC. Overwhelming support was received both professionally and financially to obtain additional course materials for 2009.

The Professional Nursing Unit of the union at St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center has financially supported the additional programs and purchased resource materials to offer a unique “library loan” program. Nurses may borrow a current “Core Curriculum for Critical Care Nursing” with a written check as a deposit and study for the examination. At the predetermined date, if the book is returned in the same condition as it was loaned, the check is returned to the borrower. Many of the nurses have chosen to purchase the book for their own reference (at the bulk cost), and replacement books have been ordered. In addition, the practice examination for certification is given as a gift to all who attend all 3 weeks of the course.

Summary

Offering any educational program on a limited budget can be a challenge. This article offers readers the opportunity to explore creative ways to offer cost-conscious quality certification review on a “shoestring” budget.

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Footnotes

“In Our Unit” highlights unique practices, innovations, research, or resourceful solutions to commonly encountered problems in critical care areas and settings where critically ill patients are cared for. If you have an idea for an upcoming “In Our Unit,” send it to Critical Care Nurse, 101 Columbia, Aliso Viejo, CA 92656; fax, (949) 362-2049; e-mail, ccn@aacn.org.

Financial Disclosures

None reported.

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Further Information

1. AACN. How to Prepare for Your Exam: Exam References.
Do you want to start a housekeeping business on a shoestring budget? If YES, here is a complete guide to starting a housekeeping business with NO money/experience. Some people take this as a full-time business, whilst others do this on a part-time basis. This type of business to a large extent requires that you pay full attention to so many things. This only goes to mean that you have to a kind of person who love to put things in place. On a shoestring budget definition: with very little money to spend | Meaning, pronunciation, translations and examples. shoestring budget. Collins English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers. Nearby words of 'on a shoestring budget', on a razor's edge, on a roll, on a shoestring, on a shoestring budget, on a short fuse/have a short fuse, on a slant.