

Reigniting the SPARK in Faculty Morale

Terri Teramano, DNP, RN, CNE, CHSE
Clemson University – Clemson, SC



Problem Statement

Studies report that nurse educators experience high levels of stress related to workload intensification, staffing shortages, student support demands, research pressures, and work-life imbalance. These factors contribute to low morale, burnout, and difficulties recruiting and retaining nursing faculty, which further exacerbates the global nursing shortage. Evidence-based reviews increasingly describe wellbeing in nursing academia as a critical workforce sustainability issue.

The problem of low morale and wellbeing is a not only a challenge facing Clemson University School of Nursing faculty, but universities and other organizations globally.

Project Goal:

Improve Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) scores of Clemson nursing faculty by 20% within 6 months by implementing a multifaceted intervention targeting belonging, purpose, recognition, connectedness, & joy at work.

Review of the Literature

Shortage of Nursing Faculty

In 2024-2025, U.S. nursing schools turned away 80,162 qualified applicants. Faculty shortages was named as a top reason for nursing programs not accepting all qualified applicants into their programs. [1]. Factors contributing to the shortage include wave of retirements, non-competitive pay compared to clinical and private sector settings, and lack of doctorally-prepared nurse educators.

Employee Morale & Well-Being Matter

The relationship between staff morale and employee wellbeing in the context of education is multifaceted and crucial for fostering a positive work environment, enhancing teacher satisfaction, and ultimately improving student outcomes [15]. Cultivating a positive work environment where employees feel valued and supported, was found to decrease voluntary turnover and retain skilled & experienced staff [15]. Within academia, the collective morale of staff members and their individual levels of engagement are critical in shaping not only the professional experiences of educators but also the academic and personal development of students.

Employee Engagement

Higher morale is associated with stronger employee engagement because employees who feel valued, supported, and positive about their workplace are more likely to invest discretionary effort into their work and organizational goals. [9] Highly engaged employees are emotionally connected and committed to their work, and they perform better. [6]

Intervention: S-P-A-R-K

S - Support & Belonging

Intervention Ideas: Faculty peer-mentoring program (new + senior pairs), Faculty involvement in decision-making

Evidence: Lack of belonging in healthcare is strongly associated with burnout and intent to leave [2]. Workplace loneliness and social isolation negatively affect healthcare workforce retention and morale. [5] Higher education employees who feel valued and experience belonging are more likely to remain in their institutions. [13]

P - Purpose & Meaning

Intervention Ideas: Sharing Impact Stories in newsletters or meetings

Evidence: Morale improves when employees understand how they matter. Workers told their work contributed to medical research participated more, produced more work, and showed greater motivation than workers given no purpose context [3].

A - Appreciation & Recognition

Intervention Ideas: monthly peer-nomination recognition (Faculty Shout-Outs), Implement formal recognition (School of Nursing Awards), create a Gratitude Wall (physical or digital way to show appreciation for peers), Celebration of milestones

Evidence: Recognition linked to resiliency and improved job satisfaction [17] and was a significant predictor of decreased burnout and increased compassion satisfaction. [8] Gratitude-rooted environments enhance mental health, academic success, and advocacy for healthy workplaces.[14]

R - Relationships (Connectedness)

Intervention Ideas: Collaboration groups (clinical and didactic faculty), Faculty Study Hall (faculty work alongside one another at designated time/place)

Evidence: Team-building has a positive and statistically significant correlation with employee morale, job satisfaction, and productivity. [7]. Strong relationship between having a best friend at work and employees' likelihood to recommend their workplace, their intent to leave and their overall satisfaction with their workplace. [6]

K - Kindness & Joy

Intervention Ideas: Themed social events (Hawaiian, tacky holiday sweater), Friendly competition (trivia, group games), Low-cost activities (coffee breaks, potlucks)

Evidence: 79% of employees think fun at work relieves stress & 87% of employees are less likely to leave if they are engaged at work [2].

Method

Setting: Clemson University School of Nursing

Participant Description: 42 full-time faculty members and 13 full-time staff members across two sites of instruction approximately 30 miles from one another

Intervention Use the multifaceted SPARK method during monthly faculty & staff meetings and at various times throughout the work week in the 2026-2027 academic year

- Pre-Intervention WRQoL Scale & qualitative open-ended survey about unit well-being and morale
- SPARK Interventions
- Post-Intervention WRQoL Scale & qualitative open-ended survey about unit well-being and morale & evaluation of activities



Project Pilot: tropical themed meeting with team games

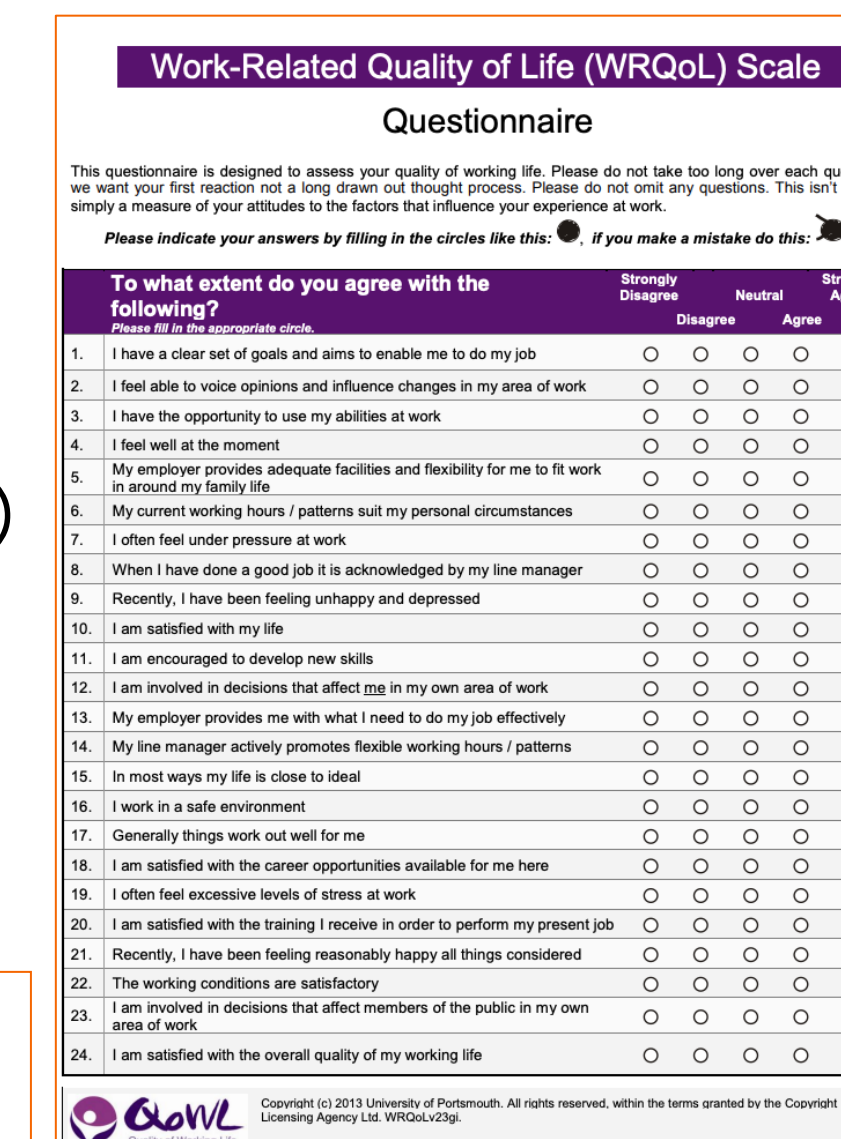
Measurement Tool

Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) Scale

The Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL), originally created in 2007 by Van Laar & Easton is a 23-item psychometric Likert scale used to gauge the perceived quality of life of employees as measured through six psychosocial sub-factors.

The six sub-factors are:

1. General Well-being (GWB)
2. Home-work interface (HWI)
3. Job-Career Satisfaction (JCS)
4. Control at Work (CAW)
5. Working Conditions (WCS)
6. Stress at Work (SAW)



Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) Scale

Validity & Reliability of the WRQoL Scale

A study by Ruotolo et. al [12] examined the work-related quality of life (WRQoL) among rehabilitation healthcare professionals and found that the WRQoL scale is a valid and reliable tool to assess the quality of working life in this population. Internal consistency analysis showed statistically significant results (Cronbach's alpha >0.70).



Project Pilot: Tacky Holiday Sweater Themed Faculty & Staff Development Day

Evaluation Plan

Outcomes of the baseline and post-intervention WRQoL Scale will be compared to the UK Higher Education Norms, which are divided into Lower QoWL, Average QoWL, and Higher QoWL percentiles for the full scale WRQoL score and each of the six sub-factors (GWB, HWI, JCS, CAW, WCS, and SAW).

Additionally, outcomes will be measured using a paired T-test evaluating the change in WRQoL scale scores from pre- to post-intervention. Further analysis of changes to the specific sub-factors the WRQoL scale, specifically the WCS (Working Conditions), SAW (Stress at Work), and the GWB (General Well-Being) factors.

Qualitative survey results will be analyzed to identify themes for consideration of future interventions.

Potential Barriers & Solutions

Barriers

- Time constraints
- Faculty Skepticism
- Leadership Buy-in
- Participation Fatigue

Strategies

- Integrate into existing meetings
- Use co-design approach
- Present relevant data
- Keep activities optional & varied

Next Steps

This quality improvement project will begin in Fall 2026 at the start of a new academic year, and will continue until May 2027. Pre-assessment data will be collected from faculty. Activities will take place during monthly faculty & staff meeting and throughout the academic year during work hours. Post-assessment data will be collected in April 2027 and data analysis conducted.

Acknowledgments & Sources

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Scan the QR code for full list of references



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Biography

Terri Teramano, DNP, RN, CNE, CHSE is a senior lecturer in the School of Nursing at Clemson University and an experienced nurse educator with a strong commitment to advancing nursing education, workforce development, and professional engagement across South Carolina. She brings over a decade of clinical experience in acute care and nursing leadership, alongside extensive teaching experience across undergraduate and RN-BSN programs. Her scholarly and professional interests include experiential learning, simulation, systems thinking, rural and Appalachian health, curricular development, and transition-to-practice initiatives. She serves as the AACN Essentials Champion for her school and has been instrumental in alignment of curriculum with the 2026 Essentials and the university's strategic plan. She currently serves as the Academic Nurse Faculty Administrator on a \$3.75M HRSA Workforce Development grant preparing pre-licensure nursing students to care for patients in the rural Appalachian acute and long-term care settings of South Carolina. Dr. Teramano is actively involved in state and national nursing organizations, serving in leadership roles that support nurses and nursing students through education, mentorship, and professional development. She is passionate about strengthening the nursing workforce and preparing the next generation of nurses for practice excellence and lifelong learning.

Contact Information



Terri Teramano, DNP, RN, CNE, CHSE
Senior Lecturer
Clemson University
tabercr@clemson.edu