



Emerging areas of nursing science and PhD education for the 21st century: Response to commentaries

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 May 2015

Accepted 6 May 2015

Available online 16 May 2015

Keywords:

Doctoral education

Health

Nursing science

Nursing research

Research-focused doctorate

ABSTRACT

We respond to commentaries from the American Academy of Nursing, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and the National Institute of Nursing Research on our thoughts about integrating emerging areas of science into nursing PhD programs. We identify areas of agreement and focus our response on cross-cutting issues arising from cautions about the unique focus of nursing science and how best to proceed with incorporation of emerging areas of science into nursing PhD programs.

Author Note. Susan J. Henly was Chair of the Council for the Advancement of Nursing Science (CANS) Idea Festival Advisory Committee. She and Donna O. McCarthy were the primary writers of the paper. Jean F. Wyman was Chair of the Steering Committee, Council for the Advancement of Nursing Science, and had significant roles in the conception and implementation of the Idea Festival for Nursing Science Education. IFAC members Jerilyn K. Allen, ScD, RN, FAAN, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, Baltimore, MD, and Suzanne S. Prevost, PhD, RN, COI, University of Alabama, Capstone College of Nursing, Tuscaloosa, AL, served as nonauthor contributors.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2015.05.003>

We thank the commentators from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (Breslin, Sebastian, Trautman, & Rosseter, 2015), the American Academy of Nursing (Villarruel & Fairman, 2015), and the National Institute of Nursing Research (Grady, 2015) for their excellent discussions of our articles addressing implications of emerging and priority areas of science and their impact on preparation of the next generation of nursing scientists. Likewise, we are grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers who questioned us about some critical issues that we will address here. Our articles (Henly et al., 2015a,b) and the commentaries focused on challenges involved in integrating advances in omics including the microbiome; behavior, behavior change, and biobehavioral science; e-science, informatics, and big data; quantitative sciences; translational science; patient-reported outcomes; and health economics into nursing PhD programs.

Together, the articles, commentaries, and reviews showed agreement about the importance of these areas to the future of nursing science as it will be driven by graduates of our PhD programs. Breslin et al. (2015) emphasized the continuing evolution of nursing PhD programs to sustain excellence and relevance; they identified education in the sciences, preparation for leadership in policy, developing a diverse community of scholars, and cross-institutional collaboration as important aspects to consider as emerging areas of knowledge are integrated into PhD programs. Villarruel & Fairman (2015) considered the social mandate for nursing research; they especially emphasized the importance of social and political context in ascribing importance to research priorities and questions. Grady (2015) discussed the intersection of emerging areas of science with the four priority areas of science identified by the NINR (symptom science, wellness, self-management of chronic conditions, and end-of-life/palliative care); she also identified technology and innovation as drivers of advances in nursing science. Cautions stemming from issues about the unique focus of nursing science and questions about how best to proceed with the incorporation of emerging areas of science into PhD programs in nursing arose in the reviews and commentaries. The major cross-cutting issues involved the domain of nursing science, the link between research and practice, methods in the emerging areas with nursing science education, and challenges in the integration of emerging areas into research-focused doctoral programs in nursing. Here, our purpose is to respond to cross-cutting issues and discuss them briefly from our perspectives as nursing scientists and mentors to PhD students.

The Domain of Nursing Science

Biology and Nursing

The Council for the Advancement of Nursing Science Idea Festival for Nursing Science Education was

grounded in the recognition that nursing science is the science of health, and the emerging areas—some of which are biology based and reliant on highly technical methods—constitute a calculated projection about future directions for nursing science (Henly et al., 2015b). One reviewer said that “these foci redirect the traditional nursing doctoral program curricula in a manner reflective of the biological underpinnings of human disease and behavior.” Our view is that exposing all PhD students to omics is essential (Conley et al., 2015). Emphasizing biological aspects of health behavior and behavior change in PhD programs offers the opportunity to fully reflect the biopsychosocial dimensions of health (e.g., Shaver, 1985) and nursing practice. PhD students who are not exposed to current understandings of the interaction of behavior and biological processes may be hindered in their ability to build sustainable programs of nursing research and lead multidisciplinary research teams to inform practice and positively impact the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities, and the nation.

Nursing students have long been inculcated with the biopsychosocial view from their first undergraduate courses, but despite encouragement over the years (Cowan, Heinrich, Lucas, Sigmon, & Hinshaw, 1993; Kang, 2012; O'Mara, 2015) and the availability of resources to support research in the biological bases of nursing (Grady, 2015), few PhD programs today include biological aspects of nursing science (Wyman & Henly, 2015). The National Research Council identifies the PhD in nursing as a biological and health science degree (Ostriker, Holland, Kuh, & Voytuk, 2011), along with fields including cell and developmental biology, genetics and genomics, pharmacology, microbiology, kinesiology, and public health. More complete development of biological aspects of nursing science will bring the field into position for enhanced interdisciplinary collaboration with these related fields. This is critically important because it will bring the nursing lens to research that impacts health across the life span and care settings. It will also bring nursing science PhD programs into better alignment with bachelor of science in nursing and doctor of nursing practice programs, which rely on pathophysiological aspects of human biology for instruction about clinical management of health problems.

Emerging Areas and the Nature of Nursing

Nursing science as the science of health is expansive. It reflects the wide scope of nursing practice—from the health promotion and surveillance activities of public health nurses to the life support interventions of intensive care nurses—as well as the nursing systems of care that enable persons and populations to access and receive care. When considering the emerging areas, another reviewer asked for more discussion about the overlap of emerging areas with the view that nursing science is “unique in the ‘whole person’

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