



Profession at the crossroads: A dialog concerning the preparation of nursing scholars and leaders

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of a practice discipline's terminal degree is to develop wise scholars to guide the profession in anticipating and meeting the health-related needs of those served via philosophical, conceptual/theoretical, and empirical inquiry on behalf of professional practice. Each of these dimensions is important for the discipline's ability to meet its obligations to society. However, contemporary circumstances have created a context within which the maturation of the profession may be threatened by an imbalance among the three dimensions of PhD education. Specifically, we discuss the possibility of a tilt toward the empirical at the expense of the other two. Yet, the philosophical and conceptual/theoretical dimensions are those that have permitted core disciplinary knowledge to be developed. We aim to create a dialog about current challenges and the responsibilities of the discipline's scholars for stewardship of the discipline and offer some strategies to ensure balance among the three equally important dimensions.

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In this article, we document our recognition that there is an urgent social responsibility to promote the optimal development of nurse scholars and leaders who will work to improve individual and societal health through an explicit grounding in the discipline of nursing. Moreover, we argue that the goal of preparing exemplary scholars is consistent with the goals of nursing and a moral imperative for the discipline. Our purpose was to raise the consciousness of nursing's scholars and leaders about our future as a discipline, the dangers we are facing due to lack of clarity around purpose, and our responsibilities as disciplinary stewards. For the discussion, we rely on Donaldson and Crowley (1978)

definition of a professional discipline as “embod(ing) a knowledge base relevant to all realms of professional practice and which links the past, present and future” (p. 117). This broad definition, although subject to contemporary refinements, remains relevant. We contend with the notion of “core disciplinary knowledge,” and its meaning and significance in the ongoing development of disciplinary scholars as recommended by Thorne (2014). In line with these notions, viewing the scope of the discipline's knowledge interests broadly facilitates the profession's visionary actions and current practices and permits the profession's evolution in response to change and future developments in health care.

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For the purpose of clarity, a discipline, then, is inextricably related to the profession as a practice and can be distinguished as the body of knowledge that underpins the profession's actions and guides future growth. The shifting social, political, economic, and environmental contexts of contemporary health care influence service professions and their contributions in a variety of ways. We explore the nature of contemporary influences on the development of the discipline's scholars and emerging scholars. An ongoing dialog and the development of strategies are needed to influence nursing's preferred future, one that balances the philosophical, conceptual/theoretical, and empirical aspects of nursing's disciplinary knowledge development (Fawcett & De Santo-Madeya, 2013) to optimally meet the profession's goals. We propose ways to anticipate and balance the weighty effects that current funding initiatives and their priorities can have on PhD nursing curricula and on what should be considered the full range of nursing inquiry to advance the discipline, nursing knowledge development, and nursing as nursing practice. Finally, we offer some strategies to ensure that nursing's scholars are able to advance the discipline. What is needed is a secure grounding in philosophies of nursing science, the possession of appropriate research and collaboration skills, and the ability and motivation to critique the political, socioeconomic, and ethical environments within which practice occurs and evidence is used.

Background

The future of nursing as a discipline is at a dramatic crossroads. The direction proposed by our scholars and leaders at this point in time must be carefully mapped as it will influence the future of nursing as a discipline and profession. Key to the profession continuing to meet its social commitments related to promoting human health and well-being and relieving suffering is how we conceptualize and implement nursing PhD education, its foundations, purposes, and characteristics. Both PhD and practice doctorates can be thought of as terminal degrees in nursing; however, our focus in this article was on the development of disciplinary scholars and researchers grounded in pluralistic nursing philosophies, conceptual models, and theories which has been the purview of nursing PhD programs.

Both historical developments and contemporary circumstances have helped to create a context within which the current maturation of "nursing as nursing" practice, science, and knowledge development is threatened. Thorne (2014) has recently argued that without clarity on what constitutes core disciplinary knowledge, we are at risk of losing our identity,

especially within the context of the current focus on interdisciplinarity. According to Fawcett (2007), "nursing qua nursing practice is based on unique nursing knowledge rather than knowledge developed by members of other disciplines. Unique nursing knowledge is evident in the many conceptual models of nursing, [and] the more than 50 middle-range theories ..." (p. 98). In agreement with Fawcett and Thorne, our perspective is that disciplinary knowledge, and nursing inquiry in general, differs substantively from knowledge developed by other disciplines. We concede that nurses, like the scholars of other disciplines, have successfully shared and adapted knowledge and theories to meet their unique disciplinary goals. Nevertheless, the challenge remains that we need to bring concepts, theories, or knowledge from other disciplines into alignment with, and to be informed by, nursing's goals and practice environments. We affirm that, then, nursing inquiry results in the development of disciplinary knowledge and is explicitly rooted in the philosophies and nursing philosophies that give, and have given, rise to the epistemological structure of the discipline. Nursing inquiry addresses nursing's foci of concern, as discussed in more depth shortly, and results in substantive areas of disciplinary knowledge development that are framed within nursing's purposes, goals and perspectives, conceptual models, and theories. We offer as one example the many middle-range theories (practice oriented) derived from Roy's model of the human as an adaptive system developed, tested, and refined for nursing practice.

In sum, we grant that many nurses who conduct research that is not explicitly based on nursing perspectives, as defined previously, may well be serving the human good, but it is questionable whether such research will contribute to the development of unique nursing knowledge, thus the discipline. Failure to pay attention to this distinction between nurses who undertake research that is not explicitly based on nursing and nurses engaged in nursing knowledge development risks the discipline and the profession. Our concern is that the balance can easily tip toward the former, nurses who undertake research that is not explicitly disciplinary based to the detriment of disciplinary development.

The opportunities to advance the discipline through research and funding from external sources have provided for the development and refinement of certain types of knowledge. However, this same precious resource, the existence of funding sources, can detour us away from pursuing other important forms of disciplinary inquiry. Specifically, our concern is to ensure an ongoing focus on illuminating, studying, and explicating the discipline's phenomena of concern from the point of view of nursing's unique foci and perspectives. This emphasis is crucial to the continuing existence of the profession (Thorne, 2014).

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