



# PhD programs in nursing in the United States: Visibility of American Association of Colleges of Nursing core curricular elements and emerging areas of science

Jean F. Wyman, PhD, RN, FAAN\*, Susan J. Henly, PhD, RN, FAAN

University of Minnesota School of Nursing

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## ABSTRACT

Preparing nursing doctoral students with knowledge and skills for developing science, stewarding the discipline, and educating future researchers is critical. This study examined the content of 120 U.S. PhD programs in nursing as communicated on program websites in 2012. Most programs included theory, research design, and statistics courses. Nursing inquiry courses were evidenced on only half the websites. Course work or research experiences in informatics were mentioned on 22.5% of the websites; biophysical measurement and genetics/genomics were mentioned on fewer than 8% of program websites. Required research experiences and instruction in scientific integrity/research ethics were more common when programs had Institutional Training Award funding (National Institutes of Health T32 mechanism) or were located at a university with a Clinical and Translational Science Award. Changes in education for the next generation of PhD students are critically needed to support advancement of nursing science.

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## Introduction

Preparing PhD graduates who can advance nursing science, steward the profession, and educate future nurse researchers is critical ([American Association of Colleges of Nursing \[AACN\], 2010](#)). Educating students to ensure breadth of knowledge across the domain of nursing science and depth of knowledge within a specialized area of research is central to creating a strong foundation for an academic and research

career. Developing nursing scientists who can advance the science of the discipline as well as function on interdisciplinary teams is a key component of plans for improving the nation's health ([Institute of Medicine, 2011](#)).

Following early and gradual development of PhD programs in the United States ([Carter, 2006](#)), a 1984 consensus conference on quality of doctoral programs in nursing cosponsored by the Division of Nursing of the Department of Health and Human Services and the AACN ([Jamann, 1985](#)) issued the first criteria for the

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\* Corresponding author: Jean F. Wyman, University of Minnesota, School of Nursing, 5-140 WDH, Mail Stop 1331, 308 Harvard St SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

E-mail address: [wyman002@umn.edu](mailto:wyman002@umn.edu) (J.F. Wyman).

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**Table 1 – Evolution of Curricular Elements in American Association of College of Nursing Statements on PhD Program Quality**

Date	Program Emphasis	Core Curricular Elements	Other Elements
1987	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faculty conceptualization of nursing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History and philosophy and their relation to nursing knowledge</li> <li>Existing substantive nursing knowledge</li> <li>Theory construction</li> <li>Social, ethical, and political issues of importance to the discipline</li> <li>Research designs, methods, and analytic techniques</li> <li>Data management, tools, and technology</li> <li>Student research opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cognates reflect philosophy, purpose, and objectives, student research area/minor field</li> <li>Instruction not restricted to formal courses</li> </ul>
1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faculty expertise and scholarship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History and philosophy of science, relation to nursing knowledge</li> <li>Existing and evolving substantive nursing knowledge</li> <li>Methods and processes of theory/knowledge development</li> <li>Social, ethical, cultural, economic, political issues in nursing, health care, research</li> <li>Progressive, guided, independent student research experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nursing core/cognates consistent with program goals, student area of focus</li> <li>Instruction not restricted to formal courses</li> <li>Core content is identifiable</li> <li>Role preparation complements past experience, career goals</li> </ul>
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistent with mission of parent institution, discipline of nursing, degree awarded</li> <li>Faculty expertise, scholarship determine specific program foci</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Historic and philosophic foundations to nursing knowledge</li> <li>Existing and evolving substantive nursing knowledge</li> <li>Methods and processes of theory/knowledge development</li> <li>Research methods and scholarship appropriate to inquiry</li> <li>Role development: academic, research, practice, policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No mention of cognates</li> <li>Formal, informal learning focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social, ethical, cultural, economic, political issues in nursing, health care, research</li> <li>Student development as nursing leader, scholarly practitioner, educator, and/or scientist</li> <li>Socialization for role development</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highly individualized program of study</li> <li>Expertise in core knowledge, methods of the discipline</li> <li>Depth in selected area of research</li> <li>Programs should educate in all core outcomes</li> <li>Emphasis on one or more areas of science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History, philosophies of science</li> <li>Scientific methods, including team science</li> <li>Advanced research design, statistical methods</li> <li>Research ethics</li> <li>Data, information, knowledge: management, processing, analysis</li> <li>Ways of knowing and habits of the mind</li> <li>Concepts and components of scholarship</li> <li>Mentored research experiences, including interdisciplinary mentors</li> <li>Preparation of research grants and manuscripts</li> <li>Structured/guided clinical or practice experiences as needed to inform one's area of science and its application</li> <li>Theoretical/scientific underpinnings of nursing, other disciplines</li> <li>Practice knowledge that informs nursing science, its application</li> <li>Culture of nursing and practice environments</li> <li>Strategies to influence health policy</li> <li>Professional values</li> <li>Scholarly writing</li> <li>Leadership related to health policy and professional issues</li> <li>Intra-, interdisciplinary communication skills</li> <li>Leadership in intra- and interdisciplinary research teams, culturally competent science</li> <li>Mentoring</li> <li>Art and science of teaching and learning</li> <li>Mentored, integrative, applied experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No mention of cognates (except if educator role)</li> <li>Formal, informal learning for depth in area</li> </ul>

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