



Sustaining excellence and relevance in PhD nursing education

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Preparing the next generation of nurse researchers with a passion for scientific inquiry and a desire to teach is critical to advancing the nursing profession and, more importantly, to bridging the gaps in health care. The responsibility for educating future stewards for the profession and developing new knowledge of the discipline rests largely with our nation's nursing schools, particularly those institutions offering research-focused doctorates. These degree programs, which typically confer the PhD, must feature curricula that address core and emerging areas of science as well as research training experiences that facilitate inter-professional engagement in this era of team science.

As leaders with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), we applaud the work of the Council for the Advancement of Nursing Science (CANS), particularly the members of the CANS Idea Festival Advisory Committee, to stimulate dialogue on the future of nursing science among the growing community of nurse scholars. Rapid advances in health management, innovations in care delivery, and a growing emphasis on translational science and outcomes measurement underscore the need to evolve PhD programs with an eye toward sustaining both excellence and relevance. Our colleagues clearly understand this dynamic and have advanced suggestions for moving forward strategically to ensure that research-focused nursing education in the United States remains robust, responsive, and world-class.

Sustaining Excellence

For almost 30 years, nursing deans and faculty affiliated with the AACN have taken the lead in ensuring that the profession's research-focused doctorates

provide state-of-the-art education for the preparation of nurse scientists. The need to maintain high standards is gaining in importance as the number of PhD programs and graduates has proliferated in recent years. Over the last decade, the number of research-focused doctorates offered by nursing schools in the United States has grown from 92 to 134 programs, and the number of students enrolled in these programs has increased by more than 42% (AACN, 2015).

To infuse excellence into these programs, the AACN and its stakeholders developed quality indicators for research-focused doctoral programs in 1986, with subsequent revisions in 1993 and 2001. The "Indicators of Quality in Research-Focused Doctoral Programs in Nursing" (AACN, 2001) were developed through a national, consensus-building process and served as a precursor to the association's current position statement outlining expectations for PhD programs titled "The Research-Focused Doctoral Program in Nursing: Pathways to Excellence" (AACN, 2010). In this document, the essential elements needed for a successful research-focused doctorate include a well-qualified and diverse faculty; a sufficient student population with congruent research interests; adequate funding, resources, and infrastructure to promote student learning and success; and a comprehensive and systematic evaluation plan. The AACN position challenges schools to continually assess how well their programs are meeting these guidelines with recommendations to modify or discontinue programs that may fall short.

Beyond guidance from the AACN, nursing schools also look to other authorities to ensure that their programs meet the highest standards of academic excellence. In 2010, the [National Research Council \(2010\)](#) released its assessment of U.S. doctoral programs, which, for the first time in its history,

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included an evaluation of 52 research-focused doctoral programs in nursing. The inclusion of nursing among the taxonomy of research doctorates was the direct result of the AACN's advocacy efforts on behalf of the profession. The National Research Council assessment is used to help universities evaluate and improve the quality of their programs and provide prospective students with information on the nation's doctoral programs.

Sustaining Relevance

Using the AACN position statement to frame the discussion, the two CANS-authored articles in the July/August 2015 issue of *Nursing Outlook* (Henly et al., 2015a, 2015b) call on nursing's academic leaders and the larger scholarly community to work together to create a preferred future for the profession. The authors sharpen the focus on some emerging areas of science for nurse educators to consider adding to programs of study to ensure that the discipline remains relevant in creating knowledge to improve health and health care. In the spirit of continuing the dialogue to evolve the PhD, our pursuit of relevance must include a focus on several key areas, including education in the sciences, development of policy leaders, creation of a diverse community of scholars, and cross-institutional collaboration.

Education in the Sciences

In the articles written by the CANS Idea Festival Advisory Committee, the need for grounding in health and health-related phenomena is at the forefront of conversations on how best to prepare nurse scientists. The authors focus on natural science, particularly in areas such as genetics and "omics"; behavioral science, with an emphasis on areas related to behavior change for health at individual and aggregate levels; and social sciences such as health economics. A recent pre-conference held in conjunction with the AACN's annual Doctoral Education Conference also highlighted specialized doctoral programs such as those that emphasize ethics and health policy. Building on the recommendations outlined in the AACN's 2010 position paper, PhD program leaders may want to consider areas such as these to provide the broader context within which scientific evidence is translated to clinical and public health arenas using nursing's holistic lens. In the background are the evolving research methods and data analytic tools to conduct scientific inquiry in these areas. Examples include basic laboratory methods, randomized controlled trials, pragmatic trial designs, study designs that include practice-based evidence, translational strategies such as participatory action research, comparative effectiveness research, patient-centered outcomes research, and the use of big data analytics (Brenner, 2015; Grey, 2013; Horn, Gassaway, Pentz, & James, 2010; Kamal, Wiebe, Engbers, & Hill,

2014; Newhouse, Barksdale, & Miller, 2015; Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2014).

Given the level of preparation required to compete successfully for increasingly competitive research grants (Daniels, 2015), the AACN and others (Beckett, 2014) have recommended postdoctoral preparation for graduates of PhD programs who are committed to building programs of research. Postdoctoral study provides a valuable transition to a productive research career while strengthening the nurse scientist's ability to mentor and teach the next generation of PhD students. Schools looking to mount a postdoctoral program must consider what scientific foci are appropriate given resident faculty expertise and the institution's capacity to offer an experience customized to the student's goals and mentoring needs.

Developing Policy Leaders

Scientific inquiry is vital to informing health policy, improving population health, and transforming health systems. Nurse scientists can and should play a leading role in generating evidence that shapes organizational, governmental, and institutional policy. For example, in the Affordable Care Act, discoveries by nurse scientists led to funding support for nurse-family partnerships, expanding effective home visitation programs, and improving the health of vulnerable children and their families (Hassmiller, 2010).

Today's PhD programs must prepare graduates with sufficient depth in health policy to ensure that new researchers understand the connection between their scientific pursuits and serving the greater good. In fact, educating nurses with a high degree of political acumen is an expectation of all graduates of baccalaureate, master's, and doctor of nursing practice programs (AACN, 2006, 2008, 2011). Those designing PhD programs should consider how best to integrate competency in health policy into existing programs to help graduates move a research agenda forward and understand how to use outcomes of their science as a catalyst for action and change.

Creating a Diverse Community of Scholars

CANS leadership also noted the importance of having a diverse community of scholars contributing to the advancement of nursing science. This goal can be achieved by attracting students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds into PhD programs while also promoting the use of interprofessional scientific teams to address phenomena of interest to the nursing discipline. Enhancing diversity and inclusivity within the doctoral student pipeline and the community of nurse scientists is widely recognized as a top priority for the profession. Leading authorities have identified a strong connection between a diverse nursing workforce and the ability to provide quality, culturally competent patient care (National Advisory Council of Nursing Education and Practice, 2013; Institute of

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