



Innovation in creating a strategic plan for research within an academic community

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning for research priorities in schools of nursing requires consensus building and engagement of key stakeholders. However, traditional approaches to strategic planning using work groups and committees sometimes result in low rates of faculty participation and fail to engage other important stakeholders. The purpose of this article is to describe the unique low-cost, high-yield processes that contributed to the rapid development of our school's strategic research plan over the course of 1 month. Using the name recognition of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's annual basketball tournament, we were able to encourage high levels of participation by faculty, doctoral students, and postdoctoral fellows in not only developing a consensus around eight broad lines of inquiry but also offering tangible recommendations for accomplishing those goals within the next 5 years. Other schools of nursing seeking to evaluate their research enterprise and align their science with national priorities could easily replicate this approach.

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Introduction

Achieving consensus around a strategically planned research agenda is no small matter. It requires balancing the successful trajectories of established academic researchers with the need for cutting-edge innovation. Meanwhile, many academic nurses find themselves in a rapidly changing research environment in which new patient-centered methodologies ([Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute, 2013](#)), an emerging emphasis on the incorporation of biomarkers ([National Institute of Nursing Research, 2011](#)), and a need to increase research training opportunities

for younger nurses ([Institute of Medicine, 2010](#)) are defining features. Research communities are being challenged to come together to hold meaningful dialogues about these issues, while also proposing rapidly responsive solutions.

Strategic planning is a “systematic process of envisioning a desired future, and translating this vision into broadly defined goals or objectives and a sequence of steps to achieve them” ([Luthra, 2007](#)). Unlike long-range planning, strategic planning “focuses on the near future (3–5 years) and assumes that an organization's environment is in flux” ([Mizrahi & Davis, 2008](#)). Traditional approaches to strategic planning in academic settings have involved either face-to-face

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meetings of select representatives of the faculty (i.e., committees; [Kulage et al., 2013](#); [Milone-Nuzzo & Lancaster, 2004](#); [Peirce, Cook, & Larson, 2004](#)) or iterative multistage Delphi surveys ([Hasson, Keeney, & McKenna, 2000](#)). However, these processes frequently do not engage the entire school in conversations about the future of the research enterprise or capture the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, such as doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows. Increasing student input on the scientific development of academic environments is particularly important for continuing the generation of high-impact nursing science ([Potempa & Tilden, 2004](#)). Furthermore, previous projects in this area have been top-down approaches initiated by the dean of nursing ([Peirce et al., 2004](#)) or reactions to the pressure of external funding climates ([Kulage et al., 2013](#); [Milone-Nuzzo & Lancaster, 2004](#)). By contrast, our faculty recognized the benefits of a proactive approach to enable quick and decisive responses to emerging research trends and funding opportunities. Rather than waiting for our new dean to conquer institutional inertia, we used a period of transition within our school's leadership as an opportunity to reexamine our research priorities and develop recommendations grounded in extensive self-knowledge, which will provide an ideal starting point for our collaborative work moving forward.

Very few peer-reviewed articles have been published outlining approaches to strategic planning for research in academic nursing ([Kulage et al., 2013](#); [Milone-Nuzzo & Lancaster, 2004](#); [Peirce et al., 2004](#)). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe the processes that contributed to our strategic research plan and the products of our work. Although there may be some aspects of our experience that are unique to our institution, we believe that the process itself is worth replicating because of the excitement and unprecedented levels of involvement that it inspired within our community. It engaged all faculty and doctoral students to reflect on the aims of our science and renewed their commitment to building a research agenda benefitting this and future generations of our students and patients.

Methods

In the fall of 2013, the research center directors and the research committee of the school of nursing convened a series of joint meetings to discuss directions for future research within the school. Our school of nursing is consistently ranked in the top 10 for National Institutes of Health funding and consists of approximately 57 standing faculty, 7 research/practice faculty, 14 postdoctoral fellows, and 85 doctoral students spanning seven research centers that focus on geriatrics, global women's health, health equity, health outcomes and policy, health transitions, biobehavioral research including developmental disabilities and

autism, and nursing history. The research committee, charged with examining the research mission of the school and advising the dean and the faculty senate on policies related to research, includes the associate dean for research, three members of the standing faculty, one member of the research faculty, one student from the doctoral student organization, and one postdoctoral fellow. With the support of the seven center directors, the research committee took the lead in designing and implementing a plan that engaged faculty, current doctoral students, and postdoctoral fellows in the construction of a strategic plan to guide our research community over the next 5 years. With a spring time line and desire to engage the school's research community in a creative and fun process, we brainstormed a few possible themes and quickly chose basketball. During the month of March, the research committee used an iterative process, themed after the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) basketball tournament bracketing system, to generate research ideas and immediate actions for positioning the school of nursing for future success. The process of idea generation and prioritization is presented here.

The NCAA's Division I Basketball Championships, popularly termed March Madness, is a single-elimination, rank-order tournament played each spring to determine the top-ranking college basketball teams ([NCAA, 2014](#)). Winning teams from Division I schools around the United States are invited to participate and "seeded" or ranked based on their records relative to other schools divided across four regions. The ranked teams in each region are organized into a single-elimination bracket, which pits lower-ranked teams against higher-ranked teams ([Figure 1](#)). A loss leads to elimination from further participation in the tournament (i.e., single-elimination). Each round of play yields progressive elimination of teams; although 64 teams are initially invited to participate, the elimination of losing teams winnows the field to 16, eight, and four competing teams followed by the final national championship game. We adapted this process to develop an online, rank-ordered, pair-sorting method for nursing faculty and pre/postdoctoral scholars to vote on the school's top research priorities.

Given the popularity and general enthusiasm for the March Madness competition, we felt that important groundwork was already laid for launching an initiative to obtain faculty and student feedback. A general outline of the process and time line is shown in [Figure 2](#), which was performed from March 3, 2014, to April 6, 2014. First, for week one, blank posters and markers were placed in a public lounge outside of faculty and student offices, and e-mails were sent encouraging respondents to visit the lounge to answer the question, "What are the transformative research priorities for the nation's health in the next 3 to 5 years?" Incentives were provided in the form of snacks and beverages in the lounge, and placing basketball-themed balloons and posters throughout the school

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