



Assessing nursing student intent for PHD study



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SUMMARY

Background: Nursing faculty shortages threaten a country's ability to produce the amount of nurses necessary to sustain the delivery of healthcare services. Programs that "fast track" graduate education options for registered nurses are one solution to the problem.

Objectives: To 1) evaluate admission criteria into PhD programs for direct entry from a bachelor's degree; 2) ascertain bachelors and masters degree nursing students' perspectives on pursuing a BSN to PhD course of study; 3) clarify factors that influence students' decision-making processes behind pursuing a PhD and identify characteristics of those who would be likely recruits for PhD study; 4) to test the survey questions to develop an instrument for future use.

Design: A cross-sectional pilot study.

Setting: A nursing program at a large urban university in the United States of America with an enrollment of over 1400 students.

Participants: Currently enrolled bachelor's, master's, and doctor of nursing practice students.

Methods: Students were sampled via a 10-question (including one open-ended question) electronic mail survey that included 1385 eligible subjects.

Results: Among the 606 respondents (57% response rate), 63% were between ages 18 and 30 and 87% indicated that full tuition funding with a living stipend would make them more interested in pursuing a PhD. Current program track was a significant predictor of course of study and area of interest ($p = .029$). Analysis of the 427 respondents to the open-ended question revealed themes around "time" and "money" as the main barriers to study. The desire to gain clinical experience prior to PhD study was the third theme and an unanticipated finding. **Conclusions:** The questionnaire offered some predictive ability for gauging intent to study for a PhD among bachelor's and graduate degree prepared nurses. The results do offer some suggestions for nursing workforce development to help address faculty shortages.

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Introduction

Reducing nursing faculty shortages to ensure the steady production of entry-level, registered nurses (RN) to work in the healthcare system ultimately depends upon RNs with bachelor's degrees (BSN) to return to school for graduate study (Nardi and Gyurko, 2013). For many countries, the PhD level is the preferred preparation for faculty, although some countries may need to focus on bachelor's or master's level preparation of faculty before PhD preparation becomes a faculty norm. Doctorally prepared faculty are also those most likely to contribute to nursing science development and health research, thereby ensuring nursing's voice in the evidence for practice. Overall, for capacity building and health systems strengthening, nurses with research skills provided by PhD preparation are essential.

Bachelor's-to-PhD educational programs are one way to address a nursing faculty shortage. These programs take candidates as: 1) direct entry from the initial BSN entry-level program, 2) diploma or associate/technical degree nurses with previous work experience who are enrolled in a bachelor's completion program (known in the United States as an "RN-to-BSN" program), or 3) nurses with BSNs who have practiced and want to go straight through for a PhD without completing a master's degree prior to matriculation into the PhD program.

With these matriculation patterns in mind, this pilot study had three goals. First, we explored admission criteria across universities in the United States (US) that have BSN to PhD programs. This step allowed us to evaluate how the profession in the US appears to address the issue. Then we aimed to ascertain bachelor's and master's degree nursing students' perspectives on pursuing a BSN to PhD course of study. Third, we sought to clarify factors that influence students' decision-making processes behind pursuing a PhD and identify characteristics of those who would be likely recruits for PhD study. The final aim of the study was to test the survey questions to develop an instrument for future studies. Our overall goal was to address the gaps in the

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literature on the subject and develop an instrument that could potentially provide useful institutional, regional, or national data for policies aimed at nursing faculty workforce development.

Background

Despite periodic alerts about nursing faculty shortages in the literature (Berlin and Sechrist, 2002; De Young and Bliss, 1995; Nardi and Gyurko, 2013), we could not locate a study evaluating nursing students' intent to pursue PhDs in nursing. Of studies related to the question of interest, Cohen (2011) studied nurses already in PhD programs and their process of completion. Plunkett et al (2010) studied a small sample of Canadian students to examine the relationship between perceived self-efficacy and intent for PhD study and found the two strongly correlated ($r = .52$). Loomis et al. (2007) discerned some of the decision-making processes behind choosing between a clinical doctorate that does not have a research focus (known as a Doctor of Nursing Practice in the US) and a PhD course of study, with "life factors" (i.e. familial commitments, age of children, partner's employment status, etc.) serving as a significant factor for most nurses when choosing which degree to pursue.

The United States' Institute of Medicine produced a highly influential report about the "Future of Nursing" in the US and it has made a global impact as a policy document (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Recommendation number 5 from the report advocates doubling the number of doctorally prepared nurses in the US by 2020 to ensure enough faculty are available for sustainable production of nursing human resources (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Furthermore, the committee recommends that evaluators monitor each school's graduates of bachelor's degree programs in nursing and ensure that at least 10% of the graduates matriculate into a graduate program within five years of graduation (Institute of Medicine, 2011). The Committee also calls for expanded funding for accelerated graduate study for nurses and urges trustees to increase nursing faculty salaries as an additional incentive to RNs to pursue graduate studies. Some of these policy recommendations can apply to the nursing profession in other countries.

Even in light of the IOM "Future of Nursing" report, there is no consensus in the US nursing community about the value of BSN to PhD programs. Mason wrote against the direct-entry BSN to PhD study option because these graduates would never have worked as direct care providers (Mason, 2003). According to Mason, these RNs would not be qualified to teach entry-level nurses in core clinical courses because of a lack of "real world" patient care experience. Another argument is if patients are the source of "inspiration" for nursing research, nurses should have some experience with patients to create better quality and patient relevant research questions and studies.

Olshansky (2004), however, in an editorial in response to Mason argued in favor of direct-entry BSN to PhD programs because they provide a vehicle for students who already know they want a research career to begin it quickly. She argued that graduates of these programs would reduce career progression issues and provide longer trajectories for a productive program of research. For the second-degree BSN student (a common educational option for students in the US and Canada) who may have previous work experience and/or a graduate degree in another field, direct entry into a PhD program might also be more attractive than completing a master's in nursing and then starting a PhD. Furthermore, PhD study in other health-related fields, such as sociology or public health, does not require previous work experience for their candidates.

With no clear consensus on the minimum number of years of clinical experience (if any) nursing faculty should have nor how recent it should be, the debate about BSN to PhD programs will likely continue. As different types of students enter the profession, the discussion will also become more nuanced. Studies such as this one can help provide some answers to what potential students want and inform strategies for increasing faculty supply.

Methods

To pursue this exploratory pilot study, we used a descriptive, cross-sectional approach to evaluate programmatic options for BSN to PhD study in nursing that would include an internal survey of matriculated students and review of national admission requirements for BSN to PhD programs. Human subjects' approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review committee at New York University. Our study focuses on US nursing, but we believe the topic has relevance across the globe.

We began our investigation by collecting BSN to PhD program data from the websites of the 71 US schools of nursing that offer the study option. Admission requirement data collected for this part of the study included Graduate Record Examination (GRE) (or equivalent) score requirements (a national standardized examination that assesses applicants' verbal and quantitative skills), minimum grade point average (GPA) (a standard measure [i.e. grade] of faculty assessment of students' course performance — see Table 1 for scoring equivalents on a 100 point scale), minimum Test of English as a Foreign Language or equivalent test scores, work experience in nursing requirements, and other program specific pre-requisites.

Because no survey to measure intent for graduate study in nursing exists, the group proceeded with a consensus model of expert panel review to develop questions for the student survey. Questions were developed by the core team, reviewed by the expert panel of experience PhD educators, and finalized through a consensus process. Prior to distribution to bachelor's and graduate students through the internal listserv system, we tested the question content and functionality of the online survey with a group of ten students who were not eligible to participate in it. No content validity or functionality issues resulted from the test.

The final online survey contains ten questions, three of which gather demographic data, including program track (e.g. second-degree BSN student). Through multiple choice options, students are asked questions about their awareness of the BSN to PhD study option, to rate the likelihood of pursuing a BSN to PhD program, the reasons for not pursuing a PhD degree immediately following graduation from their current program, and their desire to complete a formal master's degree program vs. a master's in passing (the latter a common occurrence in arts and sciences programs). Research area of concentration, while specific to the school in terms of faculty match, covers common areas of study in nursing. One open-ended question at the end of the survey asked them to describe factors that might inhibit them pursuing a PhD at present or within five years.

For online data collection, the software was set to not collect identifying data during the survey and IP addresses were set to be blocked during survey collection. A unique identifier was generated by the online survey data collection software. No data on number of views or participation rates were collected.

Table 1
US grade point average (GPA) four point scale equivalency to a 100 point grading scale^a.

GPA	Points Out of 100
4.0	95–100
3.7	90–94
3.3	87–89
3.0	83–86
2.7	80–82
2.3	77–79
2.0 ^b	73–76
1.7	70–72
1.3	67–69
1.0	63–66
0.7	60–62

^a Points may vary slightly between universities.

^b Less than 2.0 is considered failing for some US nursing programs.

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