

# FACILITATING THE TRANSITION OF NURSE CLINICIAN TO NURSE SCIENTIST: SIGNIFICANCE OF ENTRY PhD COURSES

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Transitioning into the role of nurse scientist requires the acquisition of new knowledge but also involves the development of new scholarly skills and the appropriation of the unique values and goals of the new role. Students engaged in doctor of philosophy education in all practice disciplines are confronted with a necessary shift in perspective and identity from that of the practice expert to the research scientist and experience a tension referred to as the research–practice dualism. The purpose of this article is to examine the ramifications of this identity shift in nursing doctor of philosophy education and to detail one program's strategy to address the inherent tension. This transition into the role of nurse scientist includes learning to value scholarly literature, expanding one's philosophical and disciplinary vocabulary, cultivating disciplinary inquisitiveness, learning scholarly communication and dissemination skills, and developing new collegial relationships. It is essential that this process of transitioning from clinician to scholar be purposively supported from the outset of the program. Faculty must critically examine current educational strategies and design new approaches to more effectively integrate the practice and science worlds, thereby enhancing program completion and graduating nurse scientists who are equipped to contribute to the knowledge of the discipline. (Index words: PhD nursing education; Scientist identity; Clinician perspective; Nursing science) J Prof Nurs 0:1–7, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**S**TUDENTS IN ALL practice disciplines, engaged in doctor of philosophy (PhD) education, are confronted with a necessary shift in perspective and identity from that of the practice expert to the research scientist (Murray & Aymer, 2009). This shift creates a tension often referred to as the *research–practice dualism* (Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, & Piert, 2013). For nursing students, who often continue to practice while studying, experiencing this identity shift can be particularly problematic. The transition from clinician to nurse scientist is not simply the acquisition of new knowledge but involves changing values and goals and developing new scholarly skills (Murray, Stanley, & Wright, 2014; Rehg & Smith Battle, 2015). In nursing, PhD students are challenged to bridge from directly participating in patient

care to generating knowledge influencing patient care. In other professional literature, this identity shift is referred to as moving from a first order field (practitioner) to a second order field (Murray & Aymer, 2009) and is often interpreted as devaluing the student's original commitment to practice (Sussman, Stoddart, & Gorman, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to examine the ramifications of the identity shift in nursing PhD education and detail one program's strategy to address the inherent tension. This first requires an examination of the role and expectations of the PhD in nursing. Literature describing the PhD student experience across all disciplines is reviewed with particular attention to the tensions created by the research–practice dualism. The first PhD semester is examined closely because attrition is often highest during that time (Graves et al., 2013). Finally, the example of first semester educational strategies in one nursing PhD program in New England provides insight into ways to promote the skills required for a nursing PhD while also supporting the students engaged in this identity shift. Graduating a nurse scientist who values and effectively integrates clinical and scientific knowledge remains the guiding goal.

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## Literature Review

### PhD Education in Professional Disciplines

The Carnegie Foundation publication *Formation of Scholars* (Walker, Golde, Jones, & Bueschel, 2008) sets the tone for reexamination of all research-based doctoral programs. The themes raised in this report are reflected in multidisciplinary literature. This literature points to high attrition rates, lengthy progress through the program, lack of diversity, lack of interdisciplinary experiences, lack of preparation for the faculty/teaching roles and, at times, lack of social relevance or narrow programs of research (Austin, 2002; Beckett, 2014; Lewallen & Kohlenberg, 2011; McEwen & Bechtel, 2000; Potempa, Redman, & Anderson, 2008).

Research-focused PhD programs are designed to meet certain disciplinary expectations. Beyond exposure to content in traditional courses and development of scientific skills, what is the purpose of the PhD in nursing? As a nursing scholar, Thorne (2014) describes this as exposing the student to the “intellectual structures within which the discipline delineates its unique focus of vision and social mandate” (p. 1). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2010) defines the “core of the PhD program as an understanding of nursing and the development of competencies to expand science that supports the discipline and practice of nursing” (p. 4). Stated more succinctly, the PhD-prepared nurse serves both as a scholar and teacher, extending the knowledge of the discipline while professing or teaching it to others (Edwardson, 2004).

### Student Experience in PhD Programs

PhD students in every discipline undergo a process of socialization to the student role, academic life, and the discourse in his or her specific discipline. Students often wonder if they can perform adequately, if they even belong in the program, or if in fact they want the kind of work associated with a PhD role (Austin, 2002; Russell, 2015). Haggis (2006) notes that students coming from the various ranks of clinical professionals can have particular difficulty with the demands and organization of doctoral work and management of time. They quickly become aware that they have entered a foreign community (Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007). In the first year in particular, they not only feel vulnerable and unsure but must also learn the language, discourses, and etiquette of a foreign academic culture (Haggis, 2006). This feeling of an uncertain terrain crosses over into specific required program tasks such as literature search strategies (Fleming-May & Yuro, 2009), how to frame questions of import to the discipline, and ways to present and substantiate scientific arguments. Students often have a sense of being an imposter and wonder why they were chosen for admission when sitting among so many bright peers (Cohen, 2011).

Those same stressors and anxieties experienced by doctoral students across the disciplines are also evident among PhD nursing students. Nurses may in fact be at a

greater disadvantage pursuing the PhD as compared to other disciplines. Dreher and associates state in a discussion of the sacred cows in nursing, “veneration or reverence of experience” remains a dominant influence in the nursing discipline (2014, p.105). The strength of this bias in the nursing culture raises a concern as to whether a prospective PhD student adequately understands or, more importantly, appreciates the nurse scientist's relationship to practice (Beverly, 2014).

### Experiencing the Identity Shift

New students in a PhD program often struggle with a shift in identity as they transition from clinician to scholar. Against the backdrop of the intellectual demands of a PhD program, the identity shift to that of a nurse scientist is experienced at a very personal level. Compared to most other PhD students, nurses remain connected to the practice world, continuing a practice or clinical educator role while pursuing a part-time program of study. One discussion suggests that this is more than an economic choice. Even when providing full financial support to full-time PhD students, those same students continued to average 33 hours per week in practice (Effken, Boyle, & Isenberg, 2008). The faculty further observed that these working students managed to complete courses successfully but failed to find the time for the “synthesis and intellectual creativity, which are so crucial to doctoral education” (p. 251).

Total immersion is the best strategy to achieve any role transition, including one from clinician to scientist. However, this is a difficult task for the typical part-time (or full-time but still employed) nursing PhD student. As the Carnegie study indicates, the challenges of doctoral study are felt by all but are particularly apparent among students of color, women, international students, and those attending part time (Walker et al., 2008). These students “continue to be socialized at their place of employment, which is notoriously anti-intellectual, where doing is valued over thinking” (Anderson, 2000, p. 196). With a foot in both the practice and academic world, it is particularly challenging for these students to develop more academically mature thinking—the hallmark of the scientist. In one recent phenomenological study (Arvidsson & Franke, 2013), nursing doctoral students making the transition from clinician to researcher described a process of viewing nursing in a new way and arriving at a deeper understanding drawing from a researcher's perspective. Students transformed by moving from a focus on what nurses do to one of what nurses know (Arvidsson & Franke, 2013).

### Preparing Nurse Scientists

Although the student may be moving through an identity transition, the faculty's primary objective must still be to provide the educational experiences, knowledge, and skill development to prepare students as nurse scientists. Any strategies to facilitate the student's transition must also contribute to this primary educational mission. In order to be well prepared as a nurse scientist, PhD

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