Professional Development and Professional Ethics Assessment

PhD (Nursing Science) Program

March 2017

Learning Goals
Students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Disseminate scholarly projects through journal articles, books/book chapters
2. Disseminate scholarly projects through poster and podium presentations at professional conferences
3. Conduct research independently and/or collaboratively as a member of a research team

Professional Development Training

The curriculum for the PhD program in Nursing Science was developed in accordance with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing’s (AACN) (2010) guidelines for professional role development in research focused doctoral education programs. Thus, in addition to the AACN recommended role development courses in educational and interdisciplinary research, we also include three (1 credit) focused writing courses and a research practicum. The three writing courses focus respectively on: 1) scientific writing principles; 2) writing for publication, and; 3) grant writing. The research practicum provides experience working with an experienced researcher on an ongoing research project.

In addition to this structured coursework, the majority of courses require scientific writing and conference level presentations. We also provide: 1) funding and guidance to two students chosen to present their research ideas at the annual Eastern Nursing Research Society (ENRS) conference; 2) an annual Research Day where the current year’s graduates and alumni present their research, and; 3) regularly scheduled professional development seminars throughout the year. In the past year, our professional development seminar offerings included two faculty members’ programs of research, one of our faculty shared her experience submitting an R01 grant proposal, we had an interactive seminar on LGTBQ issues in the healthcare workplace (Nelson Sanchez M.D., New York Weill Cornell) and Dr. Lisa Rhody of the GC presented a Digital Initiative Workshop.

Assessment Focus

Our learning goals, and thus our assessment, focus on our students’/alumni professional development as researchers because all of our students are employed full time as either academics (clinical courses), clinicians, or administrators. The majority intends to keep their current positions and enhance those positions with their research skills. A recent publication (Armstrong, MCurry, & Dluhy, 2017) highlighted concerns of nursing faculty nationwide concerning the transition from nurse clinicians/administrators to nurse scientists. Armstrong and colleagues note the necessary identity shift and the problems associated with making that identity shift when PhD students remain very connected to the practice world. These problems include anti-intellectualism in the workplace and its hindrance on development of academically mature thinking. Results from a study of nursing doctoral students indicated that this identity shift involves the transition from consumers of knowledge to creators of knowledge—from doing to knowing (Arvidssson & Franke, 2013).
Data Collection

Student Surveys. We attempted to collect formative data from our current students \((N = 47)\) as well as summative data from our alumni who graduated after the PhD curriculum change \((N = 35)\). The Professional Development Activities Survey was developed to assess this component of our program. This survey asked all participants about number of publications and conference posters/presentations. The survey also asked participants to rate their satisfaction (very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not satisfied) with preparation for their professional role as nurse researcher through: 1) the research practicum; 2) professional development (brown bag) seminars, and; 3) coursework. Finally, we asked participants to provide suggestions for improvement of our offerings. Current students who were currently taking classes completed surveys anonymously in class. Students who had completed coursework and were registered for dissertation advisement only and Alumni were sent surveys to complete and submit anonymously online. In addition, a literature search was conducted to establish the percentage of alumni (PhD) who had published their dissertations. To allow lead time for publication, the graduation cutoff date was January 2015.

Faculty Discussions. Faculty has engaged in ongoing discussions concerning how best to enhance our students’ professional development. In Fall 2016, the curriculum committee reviewed the present sequence of courses to determine if a change in placement of methods courses would facilitate progress. Results of the professional development survey were presented at the March 2017 faculty meeting and discussed previously with the curriculum committee.

Results

Survey response rates varied from 97% (student: completed on campus) to 25% (student off campus) and 31.4% (alumni). The overall response rate was 68% from all sources.

Goals 1 and 2

Publications/Presentations: As expected, no first or second year students had any publications and only 2 of these students had presented at professional conferences. These figures take a sharp turn upward for those in the third year and beyond. Of the 23 students in this category, 14 (60.8%) had at least one journal article published in a peer reviewed journal and 16 (69.5%) had made either a poster or podium presentation at a professional conference.

Of the 11 alumni who responded, 7 or 63.6% had published at least one peer reviewed journal article since graduation and 10 (90.9%) had made at least one presentation since graduation.

Dissertations Published:
Between June 2013 and January 2015, 18 students were awarded the PhD and, of those 18, 10 (55.5%) have published their dissertations, to date.

Summary: Goals 1 and 2 met, There is strong evidence of a growth trajectory in publications and presentations. Also, 55.5% of our graduates have published the results of their dissertations in peer reviewed journals or as books.

Goal 3

The focus of this goal’s assessment was on how students/alumni perceived that the respective coursework prepared them to conduct research independently and/or collaboratively.

Research Practicum: Of the current students who responded to either the on campus or online survey and who had completed the research practicum \((n = 23)\), 12 (52.1%) were very satisfied, 8 (34.7%) were somewhat satisfied and only 3 (13.04%) were not satisfied. Of the 11 responding alumni 6 (45.6%) were very satisfied, 5 (54.5%) were satisfied and none were not satisfied.
Summary and Remarks: Of the 31 student/alumni responses only 3 (9.6%) were not satisfied. The most frequent suggestion for improvement was finding an appropriate match for the student. Most who made this suggestion wanted to feel that the practicum moved them forward in their own dissertation work.

Professional Development Seminars: Of the 38 current students responding to this question, 19 (51.3%) were very satisfied, 17 (45.9%) were somewhat satisfied and only 2 (5%) were not satisfied. Of responding alumni (n = 11), 36.4% were very satisfied, 36.4% were satisfied and 27.3% were not satisfied.

Summary and Remarks: The majority was very or somewhat satisfied with these offerings. Suggestions for improvement included increasing the number, focusing on nursing research exclusively and, including student and alumni presentations as offerings.

Writing Courses: Thirty two current students have completed at least one of the writing courses, 14 (43.7%) were very satisfied, 14 (43.7%) were somewhat satisfied, and 4 (12.5%) were not satisfied. Of the 11 alumni, 4 (36.4%) were very satisfied, 7 (63.6%) were somewhat satisfied and, 4 (36.4%) were not satisfied.

Summary and Remarks: Though most were satisfied or very satisfied, many had suggestions. Students as well as alumni often remarked that the courses should be placed earlier in the program. As well, many students remarked that the current offerings (scientific writing, grant writing and writing for publication) may need to be expanded. Suggestions for additions were: a specific course on writing the literature review, focusing on skills needed to write the proposal/dissertation, an pre-program course and a refresher course as an elective.

Overall Coursework: Not all students responded to this question; perhaps because it was placed last on the survey. Of the 32 respondents, 16 (50%) were very satisfied, 15 (46.8%) were somewhat satisfied, and 1 (3.1%) was not satisfied. For alumni, 7 (63.6%) were very satisfied, 4 (36.4%) were somewhat satisfied, and none were not satisfied.

Summary and Remarks: Though students and alumni were satisfied with the overall coursework, many suggestions were offered. The most frequent suggestions were placement of courses, guidance, and mode of delivery. Regarding placement, many suggested that they needed to begin working on their dissertation topics from the start yet did not know how to do this. It was suggested that a seminar that resembled the dissertation seminars be offered during the first year. Also, often suggested, was more frequent guidance both from peers who were in the program longer and from faculty advisors. Lastly, online course offerings were suggested by a few who felt that their time on Fridays could have been better spent by getting one on one guidance from faculty/senior peers.

Proposed Changes
These results were shared with both the curriculum committee and the general doctoral faculty and the following measures will be taken:

1. Invite selected recent graduates as well as recent students who have defended their proposals to speak present their work at monthly professional development seminars
2. Develop a required summer “Scholarly Institute” focusing on skills for scholarly writing and reading research during the summer before entry to the program
3. Develop a course focusing on writing the literature review to be offered during the winter break (first year) to prepare students for the first exam at the end of the first year
4. Revise content of one of the first year courses to include a forum for discussion of viable research projects/concepts
5. Encourage students to meet with their faculty advisors informally early in the process. Also encourage faculty to engage early students in discussion of their research plans.
6. Continue to encourage publication and presentations and give public recognition in newsletters and on webpage to students who have published/presented.

**Professional Ethics**

**Learning Goals**
Students will demonstrate the ability to:
1. Evaluate and solve ethical problems in educational and health care research with vulnerable populations
2. Apply the appropriate principles, rules, and regulations when planning and conducting research with human subjects
3. Demonstrate application of ethical principles in their scholarly writing

**Ethics Training**

*Ethics Coursework.* Our curriculum includes two formal *bioethics courses*. The first course is offered during Spring of the first year and the second course is offered during Fall of the second year. The content of these courses and their placement within the curriculum was designed to provide immediate relevance and direct application for these adult learners. Bioethics 1 concentrates on theories and models that are pivotal in examining ethics and ethical decision making in nursing. Thus Bioethics 1 is offered during the first year when students are immersed in foundational theoretical courses. Bioethics 2 emphasizes research ethics involving elimination of health disparities in vulnerable populations and is a natural fit with the second year’s focus on research design and methods. In Bioethics 2, students must satisfactorily complete both Human Subjects Protection (HSP) training and RCR training. In addition, *our three writing courses* include material on ethical conduct in scientific writing.

*General Coursework.* A major focus of our curriculum is meeting the health care needs of vulnerable populations. Thus, course-specific ethics training is embedded in each course. For example, Quantitative and Qualitative Research Design courses include significant content on strategies to insure that the voices of the vulnerable are heard. Likewise, the two Applied Statistics courses include content on strategies to account for differences based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc.

**Assessment Focus**

In Spring 2016 we conducted a mapping of our curriculum and, at that time, we agreed that our formal coursework in ethics provided a foundation in ethics. We also agreed that it was imperative that we stress the importance of ethical conduct in research in each of our courses. Our ethics learning goals emerged from this discussion. Because satisfactory completion of our two ethics courses and three writing courses insures that our students have received formal ethics training, along with HSP and RCR training, we focused our assessment on evaluating the continued ethical development of our students throughout the program.

**Data Collection**

We asked faculty for their assessment of students’ development of professional ethics and to suggest ways to enhance such development. The learning goals were presented along with
examples of how students might demonstrate development of these goals. Follow up discussion was held at a faculty meeting.

Results
Survey data was obtained from 9 of the 12 faculty currently teaching courses in the program and discussion included all teaching faculty.

1. Evaluate and solve ethical problems in educational and health care research with vulnerable populations
The majority (6/9) were somewhat satisfied with students’ development towards meeting the first goal. In addition, two faculty were very satisfied and one was very dissatisfied. Survey comments and ensuing discussion reflected the sense that students struggle to understand the research process and methods and this hinders their ability to understand ethical issues. It was also recognized that there was indeed a developmental trajectory and our graduates do ultimately demonstrate the ability to evaluate and solve ethical problems in their field.

2. Apply the appropriate principles, rules, and regulations when planning and conducting research with human subjects
Seven of the 9 faculty who responded to the written survey were somewhat satisfied and the remaining 2 were very satisfied. In discussion, there was general consensus that our students learned the appropriate principles, rules and regulations in Bioethics II as well as bioethics training embedded in all coursework. One identified problem, related somewhat to the first goal, was students’ ability to consider the relative effort/risk to participants as well as participants’ time/effort. This is especially important because many students will be conducting research with patients.

3. Demonstrate application of ethical principles in their scholarly writing
Again, survey data showed general satisfaction of faculty (8/9 somewhat satisfied and 1 very satisfied). Ensuing discussion centered around enhancing proper citation and attribution of ideas in students’ scholarly writing.

Proposed Changes
When proposing changes to enhance our students’ ethical development we recognized and agreed with Armstrong and colleagues (2017) caution that, as clinicians, our students do not come to the program with a strong background in the research process. Thus our students must first make the shift from the practical (what nurses do) to the abstract (what nurses know). This involves a process that Armstrong and colleagues call “pulling it up” or moving from practice-based to abstract thinking. We also recognize that, in the nursing discipline, scholars are called upon to bring that abstract thinking back to the practice implications. Thus we understand that this is a tall order and recognize the efforts we and our students are making to fill that order.

We are satisfied with the content and placement of our bioethics courses and will seek to enhance ethics development by doing the following:

- Goal 1: Clarify the role of the faculty advisor during the first and second years. Encourage students to meet with their advisors monthly to discuss their progress towards identifying a significant research problem that fills a real need in their field.
- Goal 2: Devote at least one of our professional development seminars per semester to presentation and discussion of real life problems encountered while conducting research. An example might be a presentation of data collection issues
encountered in a hospital setting or with nurses. Application of ethical principles involved may serve to bridge the gap between doing and knowing or taking the practical and pulling it up to the abstract.

- Goal 3: Supplement our 3 existing writing courses with an intensive summer seminar prior to entering the program. Also, make available proposals and dissertations the exemplify proper synthesis and critique of the work of other investigators.

**References**

