

## Editorial

# Sharing the value: The PhD degree in nursing



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Students bring a passion for knowledge and learning to the academic setting that infuses energy into the classroom. I have found this infusion of energy to be particularly invigorating when students are working on their research doctorate. Their weaving of innovation, complexity, and theoretical perspectives all intertwine with their clinical expertise to come up with new insights. Not only are the PhD students constructing novel solutions to problematic issues, but they also challenge many of our staid and somewhat entrenched perspectives on the configuration of the curriculum.

A positive outcome of challenging our thinking in a new or different way, is that it can lead to an innovative new way of using a somewhat established process in an organization. Such was the case this past year, when PhD student gentle pushing and prodding led to the introduction of a synchronous journal club via zoom at our College of Nursing. The PhD students enmeshed in the process of conducting their dissertation research were involved and selected professional papers to review at each zoom session.

The PhD students took turns guiding the direction of each of the sessions through their facilitation of the discussions. Similar to the proverbial fly on the wall, I was poised more in the role of a listener than a participant in these discussions. As I observed the students lively and thought provoking engagement, I kept trying to think of a way to capture the significant and insightful professional discourse that I was seeing, it was exhilarating. The possibility of becoming a participant was not generally a realistic quest, though if I waved my arms or literally rang a bell, then gaining their attention became possible, and enabled students to move on to the next paper for discussion.

Moving towards the final stages of their PhD program, the students discourse clearly reflected how much the students had learned as they had advanced through the curriculum. Students provided evidence during the discussions from their curricular content over the course of the program, sharing philosopher's perspectives, theoretical insights, and the latest in the current state of the science related to their area of expertise. A strong sense of satisfaction arose within me from listening to the PhD students share, as it provided strong evidence of the accomplishments of each PhD student. The time, effort, and energy which the faculty pour into educating the PhD students, was clearly accomplishing the desired outcomes. Therefore, I was a little surprised that the focus of the session somehow turned to the decision-making process related to the decision to pursue the research-intensive doctorate (PhD<sup>1</sup>). As the discussion ensued, and I listened to the varying perspectives shared, overwhelmingly the students made the case for why the research doctorate had been the best choice for them, as they were looking forward towards completing their PhDs in nursing.

Of course, it was at this moment that my observational status changed, and the students turned to me to inquire what my thoughts were about the options available for doctoral programs. I was specifically asked about the benefits of pursuing the research intensive PhD<sup>1</sup> degree. As I was quickly considering my response, I was reminded of the foundational work of [Donaldson and Crowley \(1978\)](#) on the discipline of nursing, where they state, "We take for granted the nursing perspective as generally accepted and understood, until explanations of the particulars are required" (p. 113). I must acknowledge that in my mind at that moment I adapted the phrase to say "*We take for granted that the specific benefits of the PhD degree is generally accepted and understood, until explanations of the particulars are required*". I clearly changed the Donaldson and Crowley original statement and placed it in a different context. My lens at that moment was not the original intent of Donaldson and Crowley, but on the specific benefits of the PhD degree in nursing. However, more reflective of the intent of the [Donaldson and Crowley \(1978\)](#) paper is the notion that if research from a nursing perspective is important to the discipline of nursing, then PhD prepared nurses are needed to engage in conducting research

from a nursing perspective. As more nurse educators are projected to retire from academia, there is a significant need for more PhD prepared nurses. Fang and Kesten (2017) indicated that older faculty who might retire in the next 10 years tend to be more likely to hold a senior rank, teach at the graduate level and hold a research-focused doctorate. At the same time, Fang and Kesten (2017) found that higher percentages of younger faculty were less likely to hold a research focused doctoral degree. A concern of mine is whether there will be enough nurses enrolled in PhD programs in nursing to become our future nurse researchers. To address that concern, and to encourage more nurses to enroll in PhD programs in nursing, I am always reflecting and refining how I share the value of becoming a nurse researcher with prospective PhD students and current students who sometimes get weary and need encouragement.

As I did not sense that the students were expecting a long commentary on the value of the PhD, I gave a shortened version of the elevator speech that I frequently share with prospective students, which seemed appropriate. Upon reflection, the brief elevator speech I shared, which held pertinent content, was not adequate for that teachable moment. Greater thought is required to ensure nurses, whether they are considering graduate education, or are pursuing other avenues of professional development, understand the value of the research-intensive PhD degree option, and how their practice might benefit from the work done by researchers in nursing. Research conducted by the PhD prepared investigators can influence the discipline of nursing, especially the care of patients (Donaldson & Crowley, 1978).

Over the months since my discussion with the PhD students, I have reviewed the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2010) document where it is stated that the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)<sup>1</sup> “represents the highest level of formal education for a career in research and the scholarship of discovery” (p. 2), and my thoughts on ‘the value of the PhD degree is generally accepted and understood, until explanations of the particulars are required’. I would encourage all who are involved with healthcare, currently receive care, or will someday need healthcare, to consider how significant the contributions each PhD prepared nurse scientist is making to positively impact health. Increasing nurses understanding of why the research-intensive PhD is valuable, and being able to explain that value to others, might encourage more nurses to enroll in PhD programs.

An updated ‘explanations of the particulars’ has been provided by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2022a), *The Research-focused doctoral program in nursing: PhD Pathways to Excellence*. The document from AACN provides a fresh resource to

“stimulate strong interest among students in the nursing PhD” (AACN, 2022b, p. 1) enabling individuals to learn about the ‘particulars’ and consider exploring a research focused doctorate. A few ‘particulars’ of note, is that the PhD “prepares individuals to create, translate, and communicate new knowledge” (AACN, 2022a, p. 1) through the development of an expertise in theory, research methods and the analysis of data (AACN, 2022a). A strength of attaining a PhD is that one can practice in a variety of venues, including academia, healthcare settings or similar research based environments in roles that include, but are not limited to nurse educators, nurse scientists, and leaders within healthcare (AACN, 2022a).

According to the AACN (2022a) the research focused doctorate is “prepared to steward the profession, develop its science, define its uniqueness, maintain its professional integrity, and educate the next generation of nursing professionals (p. 1). Similarly, Morris et al. (2021), identified one of the overarching roles of the PhD prepared nurse is to be a steward of the discipline, [defined as “nursing knowledge” (p. 51)] of nursing. Given the definition Morris et al. provided, it would suggest that PhD students are to be educated to guide nursing knowledge.

In the literature, there are thoughtful perspectives available that provide ‘explanations of the particulars’ related to the significance of the PhD degree in nursing. Currently, PhD programs in nursing prepare “researchers and scholars to generate external evidence (i.e. evidence generated through rigorous research) to extend science and theory and guide practice” (Melnyk, 2013, p. 443). To build on that, Rice (2106) suggests that nurses who are pursuing the PhD in nursing are positioned to take on leadership roles in advancing the science of nursing.

Though just a few perspectives on the value of the research-intensive PhD in nursing have been described here, the exemplars that are provided are not exhaustive, nor are they intended to be. However, it is hoped that by reading the ‘particulars’, that have been provided, that it will stimulate discussions on each of the exemplars that nurses might have on the value of the research-intensive PhD in nursing. And more importantly, that those exemplars will be shared with students or potential students as they are considering the educational path that they would like to pursue. Maybe, having a greater understanding of the value of the research-intensive PhD degree in nursing will lead more nurses to enroll in research intensive doctoral programs around the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Research doctorates, PhD or DNS degrees will be referred to as PhD for the purposes of this paper.

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