

DEVELOPING & SUSTAINING A PROGRAM OF RESEARCH FOR THE NURSE ACADEMIC

The transition from graduate student to nurse academic is filled with new opportunities, multiple time demands and faculty expectations that can challenge the new faculty member. The shift from focusing exclusively on a doctoral project to balancing between teaching responsibilities, faculty business and developing a program of research is a difficult one. The image of a roller-coaster is one that can help frame the “up and down ride” that typifies a research career. First, knowing that all that chose an academic career also have seats on the roller coaster is helpful. Knowing some strategies that can help create a more enjoyable ride is also helpful. This editorial is dedicated to the next generation of nurse researchers who have come into academia. They have the excitement, the energy and dedication to make a difference to their students, their faculty and most of all, through their research, to their patients and their communities. That passion and energy must be nurtured and maintained if nursing researchers are to continue to address key practice issues and to improve nursing care for all.

Perhaps it is noteworthy to begin this discussion with a reminder about the purpose of nursing research. The purpose as stated by The National Institute of Nursing Research in the United States is to provide a scientific basis for care of individuals across the life span. Perhaps other imminent individuals have also provided insights about essential elements of the purpose. Albert Einstein stated “If we knew what we were doing, we would not need to do it”. Anne Frank provided a powerful message when she stated “I don’t think of all the misery but of all the beauty that still remains”. Nursing research ultimately extends beyond documentation about the impact of specific diseases or health problems or the impact of social determinants on health to develop and test innovative practices and interventions that strengthen individual’s, families’ and communities’ ability to maximize their health potential.

Increasingly, nurse researchers across the globe face similar contextual factors that create unique challenges. Not all new nursing faculty members start their positions with a completed post doctorate. This can disadvantage new nurse academics when competing for research funds with other health researchers who have a longer tradition of postdoctoral work prior to entering academia. Nursing and more broadly health research has become much more specialized and diversified. There is so much published that it is difficult to keep up with the literature in any field or to establish reasonable boundaries around one’s own research program. It is as important to work out what you are not going to study as it is what you are. Investing the time to find collaborators in ever increasing specialized areas of research can be an important first step. There is increasing pressure from government funding agencies for more applied research and research that can be commercialized. Nursing research that addresses quality of life issues, health equity or social justice issues does not fit into this type of funding model. Funding agency budgets are tied to the country’s economy and as such are under intense pressure as the number of researchers increase but the available funds do not. Competition for provincial and national funds is becoming increasingly fierce, with many strong grants not funded. There is growing tension between novel but powerful dissemination strategies and more traditional views about the “gold standard” of research productivity. Is publication in an academic journal and presenting data at academic conferences sufficient knowledge dissemination? Does this traditional view contribute to the extended periods of time before research findings are incorporated into nursing practice? What else do nurse researcher need to do in terms of knowledge translation and are those efforts valued by the academic institution? Finally, there is often faculty tension between faculty administrators whose responsibility is to provide a range of professional education programs and providing time for faculty members to develop and sustain a program of research. Individual faculty members need to be active in advocating for themselves regarding time needed for research, but also must take responsibility to maximize that time.

In Nursing Doctoral Programs, you are encouraged to develop a research question that is answerable within a constrained time-limited feasible frame. As a new faculty member interested in remaining within the same field of health research, you must expand to develop your “big question” then work out a stepwise approach to answering it; taking specific elements for specific studies at the same time keeping the big question in mind. This broad statement about the purpose of your program of research will provide a guide for your entire career. You will need clarity around the question at the same time flexibility to allow it to evolve with further reflection and data. Practice articulating the “so what” question. Why is your program of research so invaluable to move the field forward? Who needs to know about your results? Dare to have a vision of how practice/policy/quality of life/nursing education could be improved if you could fully answer your question.

The faculty administrative team can provide valuable supports in terms of in-kind resources and seed funding for new faculty members. In-kind resources could include funded graduate student research assistants, decreased teaching load for your first year, individual help with writing your first major research grant application, formal or informal grant or manuscript review processes, editing services and structuring regular lunch time nursing research presentations where faculty members can present their evolving ideas and questions. Strong mentorship is imperative, especially if you have not yet completed postdoctoral work. Take time to choose your mentor. This person could also become a member of your developing research team.

Your first project should be short term and easy to complete within one year; this to demonstrate capacity to start, complete & publish data from a project. You should take care to strategically invite co-investigators on initial projects, considering research skill complementarity, mutual benefit and seniority. You are also building a research team for future studies. You are faced with a steep learning curve. Most new nurse researchers have limited experience in hiring personnel, managing a budget, taking full responsibility for recruitment, supervising data analysis and making authorship decisions. It is a time to stay focused and learn to say no to all the unexpected albeit exciting opportunities that come your way. Most opportunities will be there again, but you need to get this first work done in a timely manner.

No longer is the model of the lone researcher, working independently on their own projects sustainable or advantageous. Health issues are increasingly more complex and require transdisciplinary multi-dimensional approaches to research. Small local research groups have morphed into formal teams and national and international research networks. Successful collaborations and research partnerships are based on everyone bringing “something to the table”, whether that is fresh ideas, research methods expertise, access to participant populations, group leadership skills, statistical expertise or grant-writing skills. The skill sets should be complementary, such that all make active contributions to the research activities. Respect and openness to different ways of looking at the same health issue is essential. Look for local groups to join, search for already formed teams and networks. Are there association in your field that hold annual meetings? If possible attend and introduce yourself to some of the association executive. If community agencies are partners in the research team, it is important that there is reciprocity in the partnership.

As you move from completing your first research project and developing the next steps to address your big research question, there will be new demands on your time that require further strategic decision-making. You will need to start accepting graduate students; initially seeking a co-supervisory relationship can expedite your learning about roles and responsibilities towards graduate students. If available, develop a relationship with a librarian. They can be an invaluable source of information about how to search databases. If you did not have this opportunity during your doctoral, learn how to complete a systematic review. There is already so much information published but not accessible to practitioners. Despite all the other academic demands, you will need to continue to invest the time and energy with your research partnerships & collaborations. Those that are not sustained through ongoing communication and connection will falter with time. Sharing your evolving research ideas and questions with nurse leaders and community agencies can help focus attention on emerging health issues. You will also need to take personal time to engage in more conceptual framing, relating sets of data together. This will lead to further refinement of your research program and highlight what research project should come next and what research design is most appropriate.

A research career is a seductive life, always on the edge of discovery, being part of new ways of thinking and doing, interacting with imminent scholars and having the opportunity to make a difference to those who need nursing care. It is now less of a solo act. Rather it is being part of a dynamic think tank that can make major research contributions to advances in health and health care. As a new researcher, dare to believe that your research and your participation within research groups, teams and networks can actually make a difference. Get on the roller coaster and enjoy the incredible ride.

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