

Scholarly Requirements and Support for Nursing Faculty Development and Career Advancement: A Nationwide Delphi Study

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Abstract

AIM The aim of the study was to better understand the scholarship requirements and support for nursing faculty as they work to advance their scholarship and careers.

BACKGROUND Nursing faculty are often required to participate in teaching, service, and scholarship. New faculty often struggle with the scholarship component.

METHOD A nationwide Delphi study was conducted, surveying deans and/or associate deans for research at master's and doctoral degree-granting institutions.

RESULTS Scholarly requirements provided for faculty to enable development of scholarship were well defined: having a dedicated leader; funding support; a culture of scholarship; publications, presentations, and grant writing expectations; formal programs; mentors; and support.

CONCLUSION This study provided a beginning understanding of important aspects of faculty support for scholarship and career development. More information is needed to determine if the support structures and activities described reach faculty and enhance career development.

KEY WORDS Career Advancement – Nurse Faculty – Scholarship

The role of nurse faculty is traditionally tripartite: teaching, scholarship, and service (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2018). However, many new and midcareer faculty struggle with priorities from the teaching and service components, which leaves little time and energy for scholarship. Research, grant writing, and publication scholarship activities are expectations for advancement and tenure, yet many find it difficult to perform and grow in this aspect of the faculty role.

Nursing is a practice discipline, and scholarship is an essential piece to “informing the science, enhancing clinical practice, influencing policy, and impacting best practice” (AACN, 2018, para. 7). Nurse faculty are challenged with teaching in the clinical and classroom settings and developing a program of scholarship. However, programs of scholarship must continue to grow despite other career demands, and the nursing faculty shortage also increases the need for faculty to practice scholarship. The National League for Nursing (2014) indicated

that the percentage of nurse faculty over 60 years of age increased from 9 percent to nearly 16 percent between 2006 and 2009. According to Fang and Kesten (2017), one third of nursing faculty will retire between 2016 and 2025. Most of those faculty are doctorally prepared with senior rank. Developing new faculty is essential to filling the void left by the transition of senior faculty into retirement (Fang & Kesten, 2017). With the nursing faculty shortage, it is imperative that new and midcareer faculty continue to develop their programs of scholarship and advance their careers. Establishing a strong culture of scholarship within an institution may help to motivate and guide faculty.

Faculty can find the time to dedicate to scholarship when they have intentional support (Cullen et al., 2017) and strong mentors (Pfund et al., 2016). There are varying levels of assistance and support to assist faculty with their scholarship and advancement; however, to our knowledge, there have been no published studies on the topic since 2017. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the scholarship requirements and support for nurse faculty as they work to advance their programs of scholarship and their careers. This research is especially important in light of the aging of the nursing professoriate and loss of retiring seasoned faculty (AACN, 2019; Fang & Kesten, 2017) who are no longer available to mentor junior faculty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2019, our team completed a review of the literature to better understand scholarly requirements and supports available to faculty (Van Schyndel et al., 2019). In that work, we found institutional and administrative supports were essential to develop and sustain a culture of scholarship (Cullen et al., 2017; Van Schyndel et al., 2019).

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Organizational expectations of faculty were discovered to be the foundation of a culture of scholarship. These expectations for successful development of programs of research were found in institutional values (Smeltzer et al., 2014b), leader expectations (Van Melle et al., 2014), and reward structures demonstrating the value of scholarship. Administrative support included the provision of focused, protected time (Minnick et al., 2017; Reader et al., 2015) to work on scholarly projects and research; startup funding, interdisciplinary collaboration, research assistance, and formal/informal mentoring (McBride et al., 2017; Smeltzer et al., 2016); and faculty development.

In our review, we found that mentoring was critical for faculty career development, for successful dissemination of scholarly work, and for creating a culture of scholarship (Van Schyndel et al., 2019). Different approaches to mentoring enhanced faculty scholarship and relationships promoting teamwork, collegiality, accountability, and productivity. Types and models of mentoring included peer-to-peer and group mentoring (Heinrich & Oberleitner, 2012; Reader et al., 2015; Smeltzer et al., 2014b), with structured mentoring being the most productive (Bertram et al., 2015; Cullen et al., 2017). For enhanced scholarship, we found it is important for mentors to be committed (Nies & Troutman-Jordan, 2012) and have constructive interactions (Cullen et al., 2017).

Barriers were found to exist with regard to administrative and organizational support and mentoring to enhance a culture of scholarship. These include institutional barriers (Cullen et al., 2017), administrative barriers (Cullen et al., 2017), and inadequate or absent mentoring (Cullen et al., 2017; McBride et al., 2017; Nies & Troutman-Jordan, 2012; Reader et al., 2015). Other barriers include insufficient skills of faculty to conduct scholarship (McBride et al., 2017) and lack of time (Bertram et al., 2015). Faculty workloads often increase to meet the demands, further delaying faculty ability to develop a strong program of scholarship (Mueller et al., 2016; Smeltzer et al., 2014a).

Our literature review concluded that the four major themes to building a culture of scholarship of discovery are: organizational expectations, administrative support, mentorship, and barriers to scholarship (Van Schyndel et al., 2019). Gaps in the literature include a lack of understanding about what the perceived needs of new faculty are and whether or not faculty know about or have access to resources at their own institutions.

With the current demand for faculty to meet the needs of nursing education, it is imperative that junior faculty are successful in their academic careers. However, we did not uncover any recent studies that examined the state of national resources to support junior faculty in their scholarly pursuits. In light of these findings and to gain a nationwide perspective on the scholarship requirements and support for nursing faculty, we conducted an innovative Delphi study involving experts from across the United States.

METHOD

The review of the literature regarding the development of scholarship and career advancement revealed weak to moderate levels of evidence, as assessed using the Levels of Evidence Pyramid (Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2015), and a need to gaining a better understanding of scholarship requirements and career advancement. The Delphi method allows for consensus building on a real-world topic when little is known about an issue or need (Kenney et al., 2011). We selected this method as a viable way to reach multiple national experts quickly with little expense. Experts from around the country

were surveyed to determine what is required for faculty promotion and what support is needed for scholarship to better enable nurse faculty as they work to advance their programs of scholarship and, ultimately, their careers.

Round 1

The identified informants for Round 1 of this Delphi study were experts in the area, including deans and/or associate deans for research at master's and doctoral degree-granting institutions. Following institutional review board approval, purposive sampling was used to identify potential experts at all master's and doctoral degree-granting institutions in the United States. The Round 1 survey included 10 demographic questions, followed by seven open-ended questions developed from an extensive review of the literature (see Supplemental Content for Figure 1, available at <http://links.lww.com/NEP/A237>).

Qualtrics® was used as the online survey platform for the study. A recruitment email was sent to 744 identified potential experts, along with a link to participate in the study. Potential experts were identified through websites of colleges of nursing that had master's and doctoral degree-granting programs. Email lists were compiled from program websites.

Incomplete surveys were included in this round. Round 1 data were analyzed using content analysis and frequency counts. The seven open-ended questions from Round 1 produced varying responses. Responses were compiled into comprehensive lists, and frequency counts were used to analyze the data. The top two responses for each question (three when there was overlap with responses from other questions) were used to create the Round 2 survey. In adherence with the principles of Delphi studies, the four researchers reduced the data, triangulating on each other, ensuring trustworthiness.

Round 2

The same participants identified to receive the Round 1 questionnaire were asked to participate in Round 2. Four months after completion of Round 1, an email was again sent to the 744 potential participants outlining the study with the link to participate. Follow-up emails were used twice within the 30-day data collection period to remind potential participants of the upcoming deadline for participation.

A Likert-scale survey was developed from Round 1 data and included 19 items. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement based on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). An additional question asked participants to rank order nine items as most critical for developing scholarship programs: 1) clear expectations for faculty scholarship, 2) dedicated leader to support the building of a program of scholarship, 3) financial support, 4) support services (e.g., statistician, editing support, programs), 5) active mentoring, 6) culture of scholarship, 7) formal faculty development programs, 8) release/protected time/workload reduction, and 9) administrative/organization support. (See Supplemental Content for Figure 2, available at <http://links.lww.com/NEP/A238>.) This provided information about what deans and/or associate deans for research asserted were priorities for scholarship and support for nursing faculty as they work to advance their programs of scholarship and their careers.

RESULTS

Round 1

Surveys were sent to 744 experts; 73 responded, though not all responded to all questions (9.8 percent response rate). Demographic

data were collected (see Supplemental Content for Table A, available at <http://links.lww.com/NEP/A239>). Each item on the Round 1 survey was an independent item; therefore, incomplete surveys remained in the analysis. Of the 73 respondents, 47 were from public universities (64 percent); 41 of 69 (59 percent) had centers for nursing research and/or administration support for external grant funding; 17 of 68 (25 percent) were from doctoral degree-granting universities with high research activity (Carnegie Classification system R1 designation).

The total number of students in graduate programs ranged from 8 to 1,400, with an average of 254. On average, there were 28 full-time faculty and 33 part-time faculty employed in the surveyed colleges of nursing. Of responding institutions, on average, 90 percent granted tenure; 71 percent of faculty at each institution were doctorally prepared, and many noted that all their graduate faculty members were doctorally prepared. The panel of experts represented all areas of the United States. Nine themes were identified during Round 1, as indicated above.

Round 2

A total of 99 surveys were returned for Round 2 (13.3 percent response rate). Partial surveys were included within the analysis and results if participants answered at least one Likert-scale item or rank ordered the prioritization items. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the 19 Likert-scale items developed from Round 1 data. Consensus (over 51 percent of participants agreeing) was achieved for 15 of 19 items (see Supplemental Content for Table B, available at <http://links.lww.com/NEP/A240>). When asked to prioritize the nine items identified from Round 1 responses to open-ended questions, 32 participants (37.21 percent) identified clear expectations for faculty scholarship as the top priority, followed by having a culture of scholarship at the institution (23, 26.74 percent), dedicated leader (11, 12.79 percent), administrative/organization support (8, 9.30 percent), and release/protected time/workload reduction (7, 8.14 percent; see Table 1).

Table 1: Prioritization of Variables

Variables for Scholarship and Support	n	%
Clear expectations for faculty scholarship	32	37
Dedicated leader	11	13
Financial support	0	0
Support services (statistician, editing support, programs, etc.)	1	1
Active mentoring	3	4
Culture of scholarship	23	27
Formal faculty development programs	1	1
Release/protected time/workload reduction	7	8
Administrative/organization support	8	9

Note. n = raw number of responses included in aggregation.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study allow for a better understanding of the scholarship requirements and needed support for nursing faculty as they work to advance their programs of scholarship and career. Round 1 revealed nine themes needed to support faculty in scholarship and advancement of their careers: clear expectations for faculty scholarship, dedicated leader to support the building of a program of scholarship, financial support, support services (e.g., statistician, editing support, programs), active mentoring, culture of scholarship, formal faculty development programs, release/protected time/workload reduction, and administrative/organization support. Round 2 allowed for consensus building on the themes derived from Round 1. Round 2 also allowed participants to rank order the variables/themes. The top three variables in order were clear expectations for faculty scholarship, culture of scholarship, and dedicated leader.

Deans and/or associate deans for research agreed or strongly agreed that their scholarly requirements for professional advancement of faculty were well defined; expectations for faculty advancement were clearly defined; having a dedicated leader aided faculty engagement and completion of research; funding support was essential; and grant support facilitated grant writing success. Mueller et al. (2016) indicated as essential clear expectations of scholarship and a transparent promotion process. Institutional and administrative support are vital when creating a culture of scholarship (Cullen et al., 2017). Developing structured programs of faculty support, especially mentoring, was also beneficial to the success of scholarship (Reader et al., 2015; Smeltzer et al., 2014b; Van Melle et al., 2014).

This study reinforced what was found in the literature: that a culture was embraced within most schools/colleges of nursing surveyed. About half of the programs felt there were an inadequate number of senior faculty experienced in scholarship available within their program. A shortage of experienced senior faculty may lead to difficulty in finding an adequate number of qualified mentors. Without proper mentoring, a culture of scholarship is difficult to sustain (Cullen et al., 2017; McBride et al., 2017; Nies & Troutman-Jordan, 2012; Reader et al., 2015). Mentors are also able to provide guidance for novice faculty with grant writing and publications.

The barriers were also consistent with the literature review. Faculty who have underdeveloped skills and insufficient time have difficulty with scholarship development (Bertram et al., 2015; Reader et al., 2015). Cullen et al. (2017) identified that there is a lack of organizational intention to develop junior scholars. External funding is needed to contribute to research; more support is needed to guide faculty with successful publications/presentations (Bertram et al., 2015; McBride et al., 2017; Solis, 2017). The results of this study were consistent with the literature in identifying that institutional and administrative support was needed to create a culture of scholarship. Mentoring was also identified as an important part of the process for developing scholarship and career advancement.

The fact that the results of the study were in coherence with the review of the literature reveals that the supports and barriers have not changed over time, and the problems with barriers persist, especially in light of senior faculty availability for mentorship. As the professoriate ages (AACN, 2019) and seasoned faculty retire and leave the university, it is expected that junior faculty will continue to have difficulty developing their programs of scholarship, making achievement of career milestones more difficult.

Limitations

The limitations in this study included a smaller-than-expected sample size. The limited number of responses could indicate nonresponse bias. Another potential bias is the development of the tool from the deans and directors who took part; many of them represented universities and colleges where expectations for scholarship are well supported. We were not able to identify gaps in these supports in all kinds of institutions. Also, as a weakness common to Delphi studies, the instrument used was not tested for validity and reliability.

Another limitation is that the identified experts might assert that there is adequate support of (primarily) junior faculty, but in fact, it may not be adequate, or junior faculty may have difficulty identifying and utilizing the support structures available. It is possible that new or junior faculty's experience may reflect that they do not have adequate support for expectations for scholarly production. This represents another possible area for research: Do junior faculty know about and use the supports that are available in their institutions to engage in scholarly endeavors and, in turn, advance their careers?

Implications

Although the response rate was small, we were able to glean some information about what was available and what is happening in schools and colleges of nursing in the area of faculty development of programs of scholarship that enhance career advancement. Deans and other leaders in schools/colleges assert that there is a culture of scholarship at their institutions that drives faculty work. Although many of the schools reported support available, such as mentoring and grant writing, not all reported these supports. Leaders in universities and colleges of nursing need to query their own faculty to determine what the status of their culture of scholarship is and whether faculty can and do use the support systems in place to assist them in their scholarly endeavors.

For faculty to engage in their full faculty roles, developing programs of scholarship is essential; yet, many faculty cannot do this without the support of a culture of scholarship and specific assistance, such as developing programs of research and grant writing. Although grant writing is expected at reporting institutions, only about half noted that grant support was available. Thus, there is a gap between expectations of scholarly production and available support or assistance.

Mentoring and release time are also needed to facilitate the growth and development of a program of scholarship, and findings from this study indicate that these are available. However, only about half of the institutions reported that senior faculty members were available to mentor junior or new faculty members, creating a gap. More information is needed to determine if junior faculty know of the supports available in their departments, schools, and colleges and if they are able to tap into these resources.

The study also leaves intriguing questions: Does having these resources available actually translate into increased scholarly production? More research is needed to see if these reported supports actually result in faculty development and career enhancement.

Conclusion

This nationwide Delphi study of deans and/or associate deans for research in master's and doctoral degree-granting institutions provided a beginning understanding of what leaders in nursing education reported were important aspects of faculty support for scholarship and career development. Although these supports may be available

in some institutions, little is known about what kinds of supports are the most meaningful for new or junior faculty seeking to advance their careers by developing their programs of scholarship. More information is needed to determine if these support structures and activities actually reach junior faculty and whether they actually enhance career development.

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