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Elevating Research: An Important Role for Nurse Leaders

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As leaders, we recognize the importance of professional scholarship to provide the evidence needed to transform practice. One key initiative for the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE) is the elevation of nursing research and AONE competencies for nurse executives emphasize utilization, dissemination and participation in studies.¹ However, given our current healthcare climate and

competing priorities, nurse leaders must often focus efforts on fiscal responsibility and operational effectiveness, making time and resources to support nursing research challenging. Initiatives that do not directly impact patient care, such as research, may be given a lower priority. Given today's pressures, nurse leaders may question whether support for nursing research is feasible for their organization.

FEASIBILITY

Although most leaders acknowledge the inherent value in research, they may lack the conviction that participation is feasible, particularly in non-teaching facilities. Participation does not require all leaders to become principal investigators or statisticians. Supporting research within our clinical environments by allowing researcher access is a major contribution that many can readily provide with minimal investment of time or precious resources. Supporting and encouraging participation of our staff in surveys, focus groups, or clinical trials can greatly facilitate the research process by increasing sample sizes to expedite valid and reliable research findings. Allowing graduate students to complete research projects on their units supports scholarship in our own staff and exposes coworkers to critical thinking outside their normal routines. Acts as simple as sharing e-mail lists with researchers can

make a huge difference in the opportunity to participate. For example, AONE provides their membership list to researchers for a nominal fee. By providing an environment for the conduct of research, staff are exposed to the research process, and collaborative relationships develop with researchers who bring scholarship to our normal working environments.

The feasibility of implementing nursing research lies in the ability to foster internal and external collaborations and partnerships. Nurse leaders may explore available electronic resources, current evidence-based practice teams and quality improvement initiatives. Leveraging current activities such as student project requirements and faculty research priorities help create successful longstanding partnerships. For example, a nursing leader may find that the policy/procedure team encounters issues where insufficient evidence supports a particular practice. These gaps in knowledge are great opportunities for research.

Table 1. Feasibility of Nursing Research

Topic	Evaluation
<i>Electronic resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to a medical library? • Access to Internet sources • Institutional review board • Journal articles • Journal clubs
<i>Current processes for research and EBP protocols</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are these written? • Are they routinely updated? • Are references provided to the end user?
<i>How and where do nurses get their information?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they know what resources are available? • Are they accessing your EBP sources? • If there is a gap in knowledge, do nurses know what resources are available to them to help design and conduct research?
<i>Do you have nurses who are nationally certified?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, do they need continuing education to retain certification? • How do they share the national nursing organizations information with your institution? • How can the institution partner with certified nurses to promote EBP and research?
<i>Interdisciplinary support</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are other disciplines involved in EBP or quality improvement activities? • Do interns and residents (of all disciplines) have an expectation to complete an evidence based project?
<i>External partnerships</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What universities/colleges provide students? • Do students routinely do projects? • What are the research trajectories for faculty that work with your hospital? • Are departments within your institution conducting evidence-based projects or quality improvement that may lend themselves to further formal research.

EBP = Evidence Based Practice.

Another avenue to make research feasible in your organization may be accomplished with academic partnerships. Under the direction of their faculty advisor, many students are required to conduct a literature review to answer a clinical question. These reviews may serve as a spring board to nursing research in your clinical environment. Additional questions you may explore to assess feasibility of research are outlined in [Table 1](#). Although feasibility may be one stumbling block, another is the assessment of cost versus benefit.

COST–BENEFIT

In practicing clinical environments, cost effectiveness may be an issue in supporting or funding research. Every dollar spent “out of standard” is often scrutinized, making it imperative to understand the cost–benefit ratio for this future investment in knowledge. Nursing research benefits may be long term, making it difficult for clinical nurse leaders to support participation. Recognizing the value of research in a wide variety of areas, in the current cost-conscious climate, for research to be successful, it must be focused on high-risk, problem-prone, and operational issues and include cost as one of the outcome measures. For example, nurse leaders may find research opportunities that align with patient safety goals such as decreasing central line–associated blood stream infections. The outcomes of this research would be reported, not only as decreased infection rates, but also in cost avoidance and projected lives saved. Aligning research with the operational goals such as health information technology, meaningful use, and care transitions will provide much needed information for the future of nursing.

Research in nursing leadership is often lacking for 2 reasons: lack of funding and lack of participation. There is ample evidence that we need transformational nurse leaders to move towards healthcare of the future; however, few funding sources currently support this type of research outside of large academic centers. Although nurse executives need to lobby for internal support for leadership research, there are also external support structures available. Examples of external funding for leadership research include the local AONE affiliate chapter research grants and other professional organization grants such as Sigma Theta Tau International.

CONCLUSION

As we prepare nurses for the future, as leaders we need “to build a robust research base that transforms our delivery model.”² Nursing cannot afford to sit back and hope that the evidence we need for future transformation will come from outside our profession—we are accountable to assure we have the knowledge needed to transform our models of care, our care deliver, and to assure our patients they will receive safe, high-quality care. **NL**

References

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