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Doctoral Education and Preparation for Nursing Faculty Roles

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Abstract

Background

Despite increased enrollment in doctoral programs and the encouraging numbers of graduates intending to pursue faculty positions, lack of adequate preparedness to assume the faculty role may adversely impact retention and consequently undermine efforts to reduce the shortage.

Purpose

Understanding doctoral nursing students' and recent graduates' expectations of their educational experience related to preparation for an academic career is needed to inform curricular revisions and advise guidance to ensure role readiness.

Methods

A secondary analysis of 24 interviews with current PhD and doctor of nursing practice (DNP) students and recent graduates from both degree programs was performed to gain a deeper understanding of expectations and perceptions of doctoral education.

Results

Two themes emerged: (1) met and unmet expectations of programs and (2) equivocal preparation for teaching.

Conclusions

PhD and DNP curricula should include coursework on teaching, as well as research, to prepare graduates for faculty roles.

Despite efforts to increase numbers of full- and part-time educators, the nursing faculty shortage is at a crisis level and continues to increase over time.¹ According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) 2017-2018 report, the faculty vacancy rate in the United States was approximately 7.9%, with the majority of reported vacancies (90.8%) for positions requiring or preferring a doctoral degree. Moreover, 57.7% of schools had full-time vacancies equaling 1565 positions, and 128 schools needed additional faculty to address expanding student numbers, despite no current vacancies.² The Institute of Medicine (IOM)³*Future of Nursing* report called on the discipline to double the number of doctorally prepared nurses in the United States by 2020. From 2015 to 2016, enrollment in doctor of nursing practice (DNP) programs increased by 15.1% whereas enrollment in PhD programs decreased slightly for the second consecutive year by 2.0%.⁴ Overall, these numbers appear promising; however, faculty vacancies persist, and fewer than 3% of nurses hold a PhD or DNP degree.⁴ Combined with relatively high levels of attrition approaching 12%,⁵ the faculty shortage remains critical. This lack of sufficient numbers of faculty with a terminal degree makes it difficult to support an expansion of student capacity in nursing programs and build the scientific foundation for nursing education and practice.

Many nurses grapple with the idea of pursuing a terminal degree. The decision to return to school is often associated with uncertain expectations relative to doctoral education outcomes and the potential return on investment.⁶ Little is known about the expectations of nurses who have chosen to pursue doctoral study with the intent to have an academic career or their perceptions of preparedness for a faculty role. The aims of this article are to describe (1) the expectations that current doctoral students and recent graduates (within 2 years of completion) from both degree programs (PhD and DNP) had for their doctoral education and (2) their perceptions about their preparedness for the faculty role.

Literature Review

Fang et al⁶ found that an estimated 50% of current PhD students were already in faculty roles, and of those who were not, 72% planned to pursue academic careers after graduation. Similarly, Agger et al⁷ reported at least half of DNP graduates seek faculty roles. While the numbers of graduates intending to pursue faculty positions are encouraging, extant literature suggests they may not be prepared for the role.⁸⁻¹⁰

Beckett¹¹ articulated the challenge faced by academic institutions as they strive to concurrently prepare PhD students with the requisite skill set for a competitive career both as a nurse scientist and faculty member. The current demand to streamline PhD coursework and rapidly matriculate students makes the challenge more difficult. Further complicating the issue, the AACN task force report¹² described the focus of the PhD in nursing as primarily research training for nurse scientists, not preparation for a faculty role. Likewise, an AACN¹³ report clarifying the practice doctorate recommended that graduates of DNP programs who aspire to hold faculty positions seek additional preparation for the educator role beyond the DNP degree course requirements. It was noted, however, that both DNP and PhD graduates are eligible to teach at the collegiate level after graduation because they have a terminal degree in the discipline of nursing.

Dreifuerst and colleagues¹⁴ found that PhD and DNP nursing students and recent graduates who responded to a national survey identified specific concerns with their doctoral education related to a lack of preparation for nursing faculty roles, including teaching students. Fiedler et al¹⁵ concluded that although recent doctoral graduates are the least prepared for teaching of the tripartite academic expectations (teaching, research/scholarship, and service), it is where they devote most of their time, and they further noted that “teaching is the penultimate scholarly activity.”^{15(p308)} The literature consistently shows that new doctoral graduates feel unprepared for a faculty role, yet their expectations relative to their educational experience and how those expectations influence their postdoctoral faculty roles are unknown. Similarly, expectations of current students are also unknown. This study was conducted to address these gaps.

Methods

Design

Using a qualitative descriptive design, the authors conducted a secondary analysis of data from an original, larger mixed-methods study designed to explore doctoral nursing education in the United States. Following institutional review board approval for exempt research, the mixed-methods process used in the original study involved several phases utilizing different research strategies and traditions to elicit information about the expectations and perceptions of participants’ experiences during and after obtaining a doctoral degree.¹⁴ Respondents from 7 geographically diverse states were solicited by direct e-mail to complete a survey focused on decisions to enter doctoral education, choices between PhD and DNP programs, satisfaction with the educational experience, and the benefits, consequences, facilitators, and barriers associated with pursuing a terminal degree.¹⁴

To gain an in-depth understanding about the survey results and trends following data analysis, respondents in the original study were asked at the end of the survey if they were willing to be interviewed about their doctoral program experience. A semistructured interview guide was developed

to collect data that would provide a broader perspective and deeper understanding of survey answers. During qualitative analyses for the original study, substantial data related to lack of preparation for the faculty role were noted. Therefore, while role preparation was not a specific focus of the original study, the rich data collected warranted further analysis.

Participants

During the original study, a research assistant purposively selected participants for interviews to reflect educational and geographical diversity.¹⁶ The participants (n = 24) were a nationally representative sample (2 each from northeastern, western, midwestern, and southern regions of the United States), which included 12 current doctoral students (6 DNP and 6 PhD) and 12 recent doctoral graduates (6 DNP and 6 PhD) who obtained their degree within the past 2 years. The doctoral student sample included 2 males and 10 females with ages ranging from 24 to 41 years. The recent graduate sample included 1 male and 11 females with ages ranging from 26 to 59 years.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted using a central telephone line where the interviewer and interviewee each confidentially called into a common number to further protect the identity of both parties. The interviewers used a semistructured guide to explore the participants' unique stories about their decision to pursue doctoral study and expectations and perceptions about their doctoral education. To ensure understanding and respondent validation, interviewers asked clarifying and probing questions based on the aggregate results of the survey data. During the interviews, member checking was used to ensure participant meanings were understood and support data credibility.

Analysis

The 30-minute interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed initially for general themes for the original study. The data were reanalyzed for this study by researchers that included some members of the original study team as well as new researchers to bring a fresh perspective. All of the original transcribed interviews were used.

As part of the content analysis, investigators used a preexisting coding system¹⁵ derived from Vroom's¹⁷ expectancy theory. Vroom's¹⁷ theory is based on 4 assumptions that provide insight into how a person's expectations impact his/her views of an experience. First, people join organizations (eg, doctoral programs) with expectations about their needs, motivations, past experiences, and future goals. Second, an individual's involvement is a result of conscious choice. Third, people want different things from their investment (eg, good salary, job security, advancement, and challenge). Finally, people choose among alternatives to optimize outcomes for them personally. Two team members with expertise in qualitative methods first independently coded each transcript, followed by full team review of thematic decisions to establish confirmability of interpretation.

Results

During the interviews, participants, irrespective of degree sought or current employment status, discussed their expectations for doctoral education. All participants who were current students (PhD and DNP) intended to either remain in a faculty role or seek a faculty appointment upon graduation,

while all participants who were recent graduates were already in a faculty role. Participants shared insights about their expectations and preparations related to the faculty role upon graduation.

Two major themes emerged from the participants' narratives: (1) met and unmet expectations of programs and (2) equivocal preparation for teaching. Although these themes complement each other, there are distinct differences. The expectations described in the first theme focused on the skills and knowledge the participants hoped or had hoped to gain in their doctoral programs, whereas the second theme illuminated how they perceived they would be or were prepared or unprepared to teach.

Met and Unmet Expectations of Programs

Participant responses revealed clear expectations that a terminal degree would help prepare them for a faculty role through an enhanced skill set. They discussed expansion of work responsibilities (eg, research/scholarship, teaching across programs, faculty voting rights, committee participation) as a result of their doctoral education. Several participants expected, and in some cases realized, promotion and higher salaries. Current students and recent graduates of both degree programs discussed gaining knowledge and their emergence as content experts in their respective areas.

They reported confidence in their ability to conduct research and enact evidence-based practices. One PhD student reflected on specific changes, "Now I incorporate research into the concepts I am teaching, and I try to bring in peer-reviewed research studies to support practice. I also talk about theory more... I have a different appreciation than I did at the master's level." Other participants agreed with this assessment, including a DNP student who stated, "I see the world differently... it affects your practice," while a PhD student said, "I am a better teacher for my students" and "value research more."

Specifically, PhD students and graduates expected to have a research career, but shared concerns that it may not materialize. As a student stated:

The thinking from my program was that we would go on and do research only or that we would go to a research-intensive university. But there aren't that many research-intensive universities and not that many job openings, so the likelihood is that you are going to go and teach—and even at research intensive universities you have to teach. [Teaching] was one area that I felt a little less prepared when I finished [my degree].

Moreover, new PhD graduates were also acutely aware of their limited research skills. One said:

I don't want to say that it's being unprepared, but, *it is* being unprepared. It is just like anybody who has their first job with no experience to draw on and no instruction to follow. The big lofty goals that they set for you, getting NIH funding or writing grants, and that's the clear objective, but on the day-to-day, how do you do that? I think that's the challenge.

This participant went on to say,

The teaching part is another challenge in terms of just the sheer magnitude of getting up in front of 120 undergraduates and convincing them that you know what you're talking about and convincing yourself you know how to do it. Even though I was a new professor, I was also a new nurse, so I was

still learning nursing while I was teaching it. That is a barrier that you don't realize until you are into it, and you have to face all that you don't know.

Another PhD student shared thoughts about expectations stating,

I know I'm supposed to publish. I know I'm supposed to write grants. I've been taught how to do both of those, but where do I start? Then there is the teaching and all that goes with that role. How does it all work together?

Similarly, another PhD graduate discussed perceptions of both met and unmet expectations and the concept of ethics:

It is unethical that we pay great money and time and effort in doctoral programs, and we are not prepared for the job we are supposed to take when we are done. For example, what do new PhD faculty without courses and experience in nursing education know about teaching? Not enough to teach either. It really is unethical to think nurses can be educators just because they are a nurse.

Equivocal Preparation for Teaching

While a few interviewees reported their doctoral curriculum included 1 or 2 nursing education courses, most did not receive formal/standardized instruction related to the practice of teaching and learning, yet they anticipated they would learn this content during their programs. As a DNP student explained,

Most of what I know about teaching comes from 3 sources: my own experience as a student, my mentor, and whatever book or article I can find on my own. We would *never* let a nursing graduate into clinical [practice] with such poor preparation today.

Almost all participants explicitly shared that their doctoral program did not prepare them to teach. Several shared plans to address the issue, and many voiced concerns that lack of preparation would adversely impact their success in academia. Those who felt prepared had concentrated on nursing education in their program or developed a strategy to gain the needed skills and knowledge. For example, a PhD graduate, whose program focused on nursing education and nursing education research, commented,

I would say it's prepared me very well. Both the core courses, the philosophy of nursing and of teaching, the research preparation, and that sort of thing and especially the electives on top of that are literally in my area of focus on nursing education—so I think it went quite well.

When courses related to pedagogy were not part of their prescribed curricula, they required additional time and cost to gain. A DNP student described a plan for completing a teaching certificate program stating,

My DNP program does not have any teaching courses in it. I can do a teaching certificate when my DNP is done, and the loan will pay for it. I will graduate with my DNP in December and *then* have 2 more semesters of teaching classes.

Most participants, both DNP and PhD, recognized they were not studying the teaching aspect of the faculty role. As a DNP student stated, "Pretty much everyone in my classes is already teaching or planning to teach after they get their DNP, so it would be a good idea to have more information [about

how to do this].” Similarly, a new DNP graduate in a faculty role answered the interview question of “How did you know how to teach?” by sharing:

I didn’t! I was such an impostor! I know my specialty—that was not the issue. I just had no idea how to prepare a lecture or create an assignment. The students suffered for that—it makes my heart sink to think about it. They did not get the content in the logical order because they had a professor who did not know how to teach. How unfair is that?

Many participants further expressed concerns about the potential for achieving success as a faculty member without a teaching skill set. As a current PhD student shared:

There are no required courses to teach you how to be a teacher... so if you come into a doctoral program without prior teaching coursework and experience and then plan to become a faculty after your doctoral degree, then you must live in sheer panic. I have several peers in that predicament right now, and you could not pay me enough to be a new [doctorally prepared] faculty with no prior teaching experience.

Discussion

The expectations of what a doctoral degree prepares a graduate to do varied widely in study participants. Some PhD students and recent graduates anticipated and reported improved knowledge and increased confidence regarding their ability to conduct research and, in a few cases, how to incorporate research concepts into their teaching. The majority, however, did not believe they were equipped with the skill set to teach, despite their expectations that they would be prepared to do so. Their DNP counterparts expressed similar perceptions of realized gains, yet verbalized concerns about the lack of formalized instruction in curriculum and pedagogy and the impact this would have on their success as a faculty member. Correspondingly, current literature describes a dearth of education courses in many DNP and PhD programs that would prepare faculty to engage in curriculum development and evaluation, teaching, and/or assessment of learner outcomes.^{7,18}

Although not all doctorally prepared nurses will pursue an academic career, many are already in a faculty position or plan to seek one in the future.¹⁹⁻²¹ Congruent with current literature, participants in this study endorsed a need for additional academic preparation (extra courses or a post-master’s degree certificate in teaching) to fulfill their teaching role, and a misalignment between the expectations of doctoral education and the professional differences realized upon degree completion.⁷ This may result in faculty members who do not possess the skill set required to successfully meet the full demands of the faculty role and thus leave their academic position.

Interpreting the findings within the broad context of Vroom’s¹⁷ expectancy theory raised additional concerns. Unmet expectations and/or unrealized changes in a person’s professional role/identity may have an unfavorable impact on their experiences, including their level of satisfaction with a career choice. For nurses engaged in, or having completed doctoral education, they had expectations regarding how the terminal degree prepares them to meet the demands of a career. Participants in this study reported tension between doctoral program outcomes and their expectations, needs, motivations, and return on investment with degree completion. Interpreting this finding within the context of the demands associated with a career in academia (eg, long hours, increased teaching

workloads, noncompetitive salaries, requirements to engage in service and produce scholarly works),¹⁴ it is a reasonable position to assert that efforts to increase the number of doctorally prepared faculty and/or retention in academia may be thwarted.¹⁵ Such was the finding of Candela et al,²² who found faculty members' perceived teaching expertise positively predicted their intent to stay in their academic organization. Vroom's¹⁷ theory that places personal value on a particular outcome, such as teaching expertise, also provides support for this position. Until alignment between expectations and outcomes occurs, the academy remains at risk of meeting the IOM challenge³ and the faculty shortage.²

Limitations

There are several limitations to these findings. First, data were obtained from an original mixed-methods study and participants self-selected to be part of the interviewee pool. It is possible that those who chose to be interviewed reflect a group that is inherently biased. Nonetheless, all perspectives are critical to the understandings generated by qualitative research, and the findings are intended to be informative as the interviews came from a pool of participants representing all areas of the United States. Second, because the findings are the result of a secondary analysis, interpretations can only be derived from the available interview narrative.

Conclusion

Considering the current climate of limited resources, the discipline has a responsibility to be good stewards of the time and money required to increase the number of doctorally prepared faculty. Despite increased enrollment numbers, graduates from both degree programs may not be prepared to fulfill all aspects of the faculty role, particularly teaching. Many PhD programs currently neither include courses on teaching (curriculum, evaluation [student, course, program], pedagogy) nor emphasize educational research. DNP programs are inherently not intended to prepare educators nor is it recommended that DNP projects focus on educational issues.

Curriculum revision for both PhD and DNP programs that incorporate preparation for the educator role into existing credits, using documented methods as a guide, should be explored. Although some may argue that this latter proposal dilutes the preparation for research and practice roles, faculty must consider devoting the requisite time and effort to fully prepare graduates for roles they intend to seek and for what the discipline needs. At a minimum, prospective PhD and DNP students should be fully informed about what each doctoral degree program will prepare or not prepare them to do upon graduation.

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