The Experience of Completing an Undergraduate Nursing Honors Research Project on the First Professional Nursing Position

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate research experiences have become a hallmark of excellence in degree programs in the science, technology, engineering and math fields, with indications that these experiences lay important groundwork for graduate education and practice in the field. In nursing, several schools offer undergraduate nursing research experiences, though there is scant research related to outcomes among nurses at the baccalaureate level. Since evidence-based practice (EBP) is becoming increasingly important in health care, the use of research-related skill sets has become more critical for practicing nurses. The benefits of undergraduate research experience have been inadequately studied and there have been no nursing studies on the impact of undergraduate nursing research experience on the practicing registered nurse. At a research intensive public university, a robust honors program exposes students to research throughout the baccalaureate degree, with student engagement in every step of the research process alongside faculty research mentors. The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the experiences and outcomes of participation in a significant undergraduate research project on the first few years of nursing practice as an RN. Data analysis was conducted using an open coding method to analyze the responses of the participants and aid in the process of identifying major themes that express the phenomenon. Through this approach a descriptive analysis of the experience of completing an undergraduate research project was completed, including the impact on the nursing practice and development of the participants in their early careers. The results suggest that extensive exposure to research in undergraduate schooling increases the level of self-confidence in the first nursing position. Participants also felt that they stood out from their peers. Other benefits include expanding knowledge regarding the research process, improving writing and public speaking skills, and advancing personal and professional development.

KEYWORDS: undergraduate research, curriculum development, nursing, Honors Program

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of undergraduate students enroll in baccalaureate nursing programs each year. According to a recent survey by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the total enrollment in all programs leading to the BSN degree is nearly 260,000. In 2012 alone, the survey found that a little over 80,000 students graduated from BSN programs (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2012). Of the statistics reported by professional nursing associations, none include information about the availability of undergraduate nursing honors programs. Undergraduate nursing honors programs traditionally incorporate research into the early years of the nursing curriculum and have been shown to increase the application of nursing research content and methods in the students' nursing practice (Inouye, 1995). Given the increasing focus on evidenced-based practice (EBP) in the rapidly advancing health care world, factors that enable these

skill sets among BSN prepared graduates are essential. In the Institute of Medicine's landmark report "The Future of Nursing", great emphasis was placed on the nurse role to work to the fullest extent of their license, which incorporates EBP (Lopatto, 2007).

Evidence-based practice has become increasingly important in the health care world. It stresses change in students' education by moving toward research that is relevant to practice and developing closer working relationships between clinicians and researchers. EBP also provides opportunities for nursing care to be more individualized, justified, and efficient. When evidence is used to define best practices, nursing care is able to take advantage of new knowledge and keep up with the latest technology (Youngblut & Brooten, 2001). The integration of EBP into nursing makes undergraduate research a vital skill to learn. The nursing honors program at Indiana University (IU) exposes undergraduate

students to research earlier and at a greater depth than what occurs in the traditional BSN program, which may better prepare students for EBP during their nursing career and may foster readiness for graduate study.

Little information about the benefits of general undergraduate research experiences was available until early 2000 (Lopatto, 2004). With this new information available, we are now able to see the numerous benefits of participating in undergraduate research. Lopatto noted that “the number of students engaged in some type of research had risen by 70% in a decade” (Lopatto, 2007). Participants reported that learning to work independently, understanding the research process, ability to analyze data, tolerance for obstacles, increased self-confidence, improved communication skills, enhanced career/graduate school preparation, and applying knowledge to a real situation are all benefits of undergraduate research (Institute of Medicine, 2011; Lopatto, 2003; Stanford & Shattell, 2010). Lopatto (2007) and Seymour et al. (2004) showed these benefits to be transferable into both personal and professional aspects of life. As stated by Seymour et al. (2004), “91% of students’ evaluative statements describe specific benefits lends substantial support to the proposition that undergraduate research is an educational and personal-growth experience with many transferable benefits”. Most studies agreed on the positive influence of undergraduate research experiences on student learning, however, they differed slightly on the influence of the faculty mentor or supervisor on students’ experiences.

Although research on undergraduate honors experiences is growing fast, few have studied the unique attributes and benefits of research experiences within an undergraduate nursing honors program. Honors programs are a fairly new addition to undergraduate nursing education and not offered by every college or university. The benefits of such an honors program have been inadequately studied and there is no information on the transformation into professional nursing practice. Students who participate in undergraduate honors programs are highly motivated and exhibit self-confidence in their accomplishments (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). This confidence helps drives students

to accomplish more and to reach further every day in the health care field. In 2012, nursing was found to be one of the fastest growing professions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). It had an estimated increase of 26% expected over the next ten years, which is faster than average. With this increase in the need for nurses, there is also a growing need to enable BSN undergraduate students to engage in EBP so they are prepared to transfer their learned skills into practice. Stanford & Shattell (2010) described outcomes of undergraduate honors nursing programs, which included marked professional and personal growth and enrichment. They also explained that honors programs attracted academically strong, motivated students who seek the challenges of a rigorous program of study and are striving to maximize their potential (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). The benefits of undergraduate honors nursing programs are tremendous and help students develop a skill set that can be utilized in practice.

Inouye (1995) explains that nursing students taking one research course towards the end of the program was not sufficient to promote scientific inquiry. Nurses practicing to the fullest extent of their license means being able to incorporate experience, evidence, and knowledge into patient care. Students who participate in a research project in the earlier years of their undergraduate degree have been shown to value EBP and involvement in research productivity. Eleven Honors programs in undergraduate nursing education often incorporate research in the first year or two of the curriculum. The early and extensive introduction to research can assist in promoting and encouraging an appreciation for the discovery of new knowledge and application to practice. The undergraduate honors nursing program at IU exposes students to research within the first year and throughout the duration of the program.

METHODS

Study Design

The design of our study is qualitative because we wish to explore broader and deeper insight into complex human behaviors associated with participation in undergraduate nursing research projects. This process

aids in the development for building on nursing knowledge and discovering the meaning of a human experience through dialogue. In this study we are using a phenomenological approach, which according to Spiegelberg, is used to capture the lived experiences of our participants (Vessey & DeMarco, 2008). We conducted interviews with each participant following a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. Each participant's experience is unique and will help us to interpret the meaning of a shared process.

Sample

Our study consisted of 12 participants who graduated from either IUPUI or IUB School of Nursing within the past five years and completed the honors program. We excluded any individual who did not graduate within the past five years, who did not graduate from IUPUI or IUB School of Nursing, and those who did not complete the undergraduate honors nursing program. We used convenience sampling methods to seek out these individuals and invite them to participate in this study. We sent emails to all IU honors graduates from the Indianapolis and Bloomington campuses from the past five years. Those who were interested in participating were then interviewed over the phone or in person.

Data Analysis

Three researchers listened to the audiotapes several times; each was transcribed word-for-word. Each of the three researchers individually read all the interviews and extracted significant statements and organized them into categories. The researchers met together and reviewed their categories to identify commonalities in their work. The individual categories were then further organized into related clusters, and finally, common trends in these clusters were identified.

RESULTS

Our sample consisted of 12 participants, ten females and two males. The majority of the sample group was between the ages of 20 and 35. Over 90% of the participants had begun their nursing career within a year from graduating, with most participants getting hired within a few months after graduation. The majority of participants were currently working in a health care setting. The health care settings ranged from inpatient nursing to army nursing and were located in

many different states.

Undergraduate research projects require much effort and time in order to collect data, analyze outcomes, and discover new meanings. Each of our twelve participants completed an honors research project prior to graduating nursing school. Many of these projects took years to complete from start to finish. All participants worked with a faculty mentor who was there to guide them and assist in their research. Many students worked independently with their mentor but some worked with fellow classmates in a small group format. The research projects that they completed were all different from each other, including qualitative studies, quantitative studies, and meta-analyses. Four participants had published or were in the process of publishing their research.

Many benefits were identified by participants from completing an undergraduate honors research project. One major benefit identified by participants was increased confidence going into their first nursing position. Having confidence in yourself leads to better outcomes and our study suggests that completing an undergraduate honors program leads to increased confidence levels. One participant when asked about self-confidence stated, "I knew what I was doing and I could hold my own in the workplace." Another said, "I definitely would say going into my first interview, I had a certain confidence because I knew I had something that stuck out to employers." Other benefits include expanding knowledge regarding the research process, improving writing and public speaking skills, and advancing personal and professional development. One participant said, "Doing a research project you develop those skills [public speaking and writing] and you know what you are talking about and what kinds of facts you need to support."

Many participants felt that they were a step ahead of their peers in terms of professional and personal development. One participant stated, "It [the honors program] has definitely pushed me to continue to grow professionally, to not take the easy way out, and helped me to be a better nurse in general." The majority of participants felt that completion of their projects gave them further insight into research than their fellow peers who did not complete projects. One participant said, "I would totally advise anybody that is even kind of

thinking they may be interested in doing the program because it sets you up for success.”

Although the benefits were high, there were a few downfalls mentioned by participants regarding the completion of their honors projects. Fewer than half of participants noted that the research process was very time-consuming. One participant when asked about the least beneficial aspects stated, “Getting it approved and making adjustments because it takes a long time.” A few participants said that at times they felt frustrated trying to find participants for their own study. One last downfall we discovered was that the project was difficult and required hard work outside of completing an already challenging nursing degree. Another participant said, “This isn’t really a downfall at all, but it was busy when you’re in school with tests and doing your assignments on top of this, but it was definitely worth it.”

About half of the participants said the transition from school to work was overwhelming and a huge learning curve, while the other half said it was a pleasant experience. One participant when discussing her transition said, “It was a huge learning curve in intensive care and I am sure it is no different in other places.” Most of the students who had a pleasant experience were involved in various forms of new graduate transitioning programs in which they were slowly introduced to the full responsibilities of an RN. One participant said, “I was put into a 6-month clinical nurse transition program for new graduates ... I am really thankful that I had that because at first it can be really overwhelming.” The majority of participants mentioned that the transition from school to work is definitely a learning process.

Many of the participants were involved in EBP in their workplace, either by sitting on a council, collecting data, or presenting their projects to the hospital. Most of the facilities mentioned had EBP committees or councils. The participants believe they are more involved in research and EBP than their coworkers whom did not participate in undergraduate research. “It’s given me more opportunities to be a leader, because most of my peers haven’t completed their own research.” A couple participants had jobs that were part of an evidence-based program. One participant worked in an

area where she was able to use information from her research project to help the patients she currently cares for. One participant stated, “I definitely would say my research project helped me get the job I have.” Another participant said, “Because I went through the program and because I learned and did the research and learned how research is done, I am able to read the current literature and understand what the point is they are trying to make and implement that into the work that I do.”

Most of the participants mentioned career aspirations to further their education and go to graduate school. Earning a doctorate and becoming a nurse practitioner were the most commonly mentioned goals. One participant said, “I don’t think I would have ever considered getting a Ph.D. if I hadn’t done the honors project...I think that getting to know the deans and learning about this process and seeing what the Ph.D. students are doing has made that a realistic option for me.” Another said, “I feel really confident going into grad school. The program helped prepare me with research skills that I am going to need going into the

DISCUSSION

Participating in the nursing honors program has provided many benefits to these undergraduate nurses. Building relationships with mentors, networking with faculty, increasing confidence, developing professional pride, and learning about graduate opportunities are some of the key benefits mentioned by participants. Undergraduate nursing honors programs have been shown to increase the application of nursing research content and methods in the students’ nursing practice. Given the increasing focus on EBP, factors that enable these skill sets amongst BSN prepared graduates are essential. One participant said, “A lot of times there were students and people with Ph.D.s that would come and talk to me about my research and would be surprised that I was an undergraduate.” Another participant said, “Some of the most valuable parts of my nursing school experience were to be part of the honors program.”

Limitations

One limitation to our study is the small sample size. This could potentially not be representative of all the students who were eligible for this study. The sample size

is small; however, given the limited availability of research in this area, this study is an important contribution to the body of knowledge regarding undergraduate nursing research. Our sample is representative of the gender differences in the current female dominated nursing profession. All of our participants were from the same undergraduate program on two campuses, which makes this study not reflective of other school's programs. Lastly, there could potentially be bias during the interview phase because participants knew the interviewers were in the same program. While this is possible, the interviewees expressed a wide range of opinions regarding their experience in the program including multiple pros and cons. This suggests that the interviewees were willing to expose their true feelings.

CONCLUSION

Evidence-based practice has become increasingly important in the health care world. It stresses change in students' education by moving toward research that is relevant to practice and developing closer working relationships between clinicians and researchers. Undergraduate research projects can help better prepare students for their futures in both personal and professional life. Early and extensive introduction to research can assist in promoting and encouraging an appreciation for the discovery of new knowledge and application to practice. Our findings suggest that early exposure to research gives students a valuable experience, high self-confidence levels, and the development of many skills that are needed in nurses today. This confidence helps drive students to accomplish more every day in the health care field. Nurses practicing to the fullest extent of their license means being able to incorporate experience, evidence, and knowledge into patient care. The undergraduate honors nursing program through IU exposes students to research within the first year and throughout the duration of the program. This early and in-depth research exposure is to greater extent than what occurs in the traditional BSN program, which may better prepare students for EBP during their nursing career and foster readiness for graduate study. Our study has discovered many benefits to completing an undergraduate nursing honors project, which can be used to motivate others to participate in

such programs and influence other nursing schools to incorporate research into their curriculum.

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