At no time in recent history has there been a greater need for research on nursing education. As health care reform progresses, basic and advanced nursing practices are being defined by new competencies...yet virtually no evidence exists to support the teaching approaches used (Institute of Medicine, 2010, p. 198).

The Institute of Medicine’s landmark report The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health (2010) underscores the urgent need for research focused on nursing education. Nursing faculty, administrators, regulators, and students understand that transforming nursing education to meet the public’s demands for care requires evidence. Such evidence is needed to inform the adoption of innovative strategies and curricular models, to analyze student and faculty outcomes over time, to benchmark innovation and outcomes against those of similar schools, and to inform continuous quality improvement efforts. In all too many cases, little evidence is available—and the little evidence that does exist is hampered by small sample sizes, single-site designs, and data collection tools that are not well developed. But, of course, overcoming these obstacles and producing a rigorous base of evidence requires funding—and funding is in short supply!

Over the past decade, nursing faculty, schools, and organizations have responded seriously to the need to advance a robust science that informs pedagogical decision making. Consequently, more doctoral programs are now recognizing the urgent necessity and legitimacy of nursing education research and are allowing students to investigate educational phenomena. Moreover, nursing education journals are publishing more research-focused articles and are requiring that published studies demonstrate higher levels of generalizability. All of these efforts are important and must continue! Yet, there is a limit to what investigators can conduct without adequate funding for nursing education research.

To support and extend these efforts, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has funded the initial development of the National Nursing Education Research Network (NNERN). This network is being designed to develop large, national, longitudinal, uniform faculty and student data sets derived from an annual survey of those individuals, rather than surveys conducted only at the school level. De-identified data will then be made available to member schools and other stakeholders for their own secondary analyses and use. Thus, the NNERN can cost-effectively accelerate the amount, rigor, and generalizability of nursing education research.

Initial Network Survey

The NNERN project team created faculty and student surveys after meetings with nursing faculty, administrators, organizational leaders, and researchers at a variety of national and regional nursing conferences. At these meetings, team members gathered input on priority research questions and survey items. The faculty and student surveys, designed to be completed in 20 minutes or less, focus on faculty members’ and students’ perceptions of the learning environment, the types of educational strategies in use, the organizational and curricular characteristics of their school, and the faculty and student outcomes achieved.

To test our data collection and analytic approaches and to demonstrate the benefits and utility of the data, we have already launched the uniform NNERN surveys to a selected sample of faculty and students. Following institutional review board approval for this effort, we recruited participation from 28 schools representing all regions of the country and all types and levels of nursing education programs. Although data collection is still underway, we have a growing sample of more than 1,000 faculty members and 4,000 students from around the nation. As a result, we are in the process of creating the first large faculty and student data sets of their kind, which can be used to advance nursing education research, inform organizational and curricular decisions, and provide benchmarking opportunities for participating schools.

Benefits of the NNERN

Findings from the current NNERN surveys will be widely disseminated by our team, and de-identified NNERN data will be available to the 28 participating schools so that secondary analyses can be conducted. In addition, these data will not only inform pressing curricular and faculty workforce issues but will also provide a baseline whereby faculty, schools, and researchers can compare their initiatives and outcomes with those of other nationally representative schools.

All schools of nursing within the United States will soon have the op-
opportunity to become NNERN members. Staff of the nonprofit NNERN network will conduct annual faculty and student surveys among member schools, and member schools will have access to the large, de-identified data sets. In addition to secondary analyses and benchmarking purposes, these large, representative NNERN data sets will be specifically helpful for member schools’ new researchers and doctoral students who are seeking to establish themselves as nursing education researchers. For instance, doctoral students are often interested in surveying nursing faculty or students on a specific topic. But, currently, due to lack of funding, the sampling strategy and response rates of these studies may be limited. The ongoing efforts of the NNERN will provide doctoral students with the opportunity to access the entire de-identified data sets, thus, increasing the power of dissertation studies and potentially accelerating the time to degree completion. Similarly, new assistant professors with limited start-up funds can use the NNERN data to answer questions of interest and more quickly generate the publications and presentations needed to launch their journey to promotion. Academic leaders and faculty from member schools can use the NNERN data to inform curricular and organizational decision making and to assess the effects of decisions over time. As an example, NNERN data may be used to investigate the effects of different student-to-faculty ratios on student learning outcomes and student–faculty satisfaction. Longitudinally, NNERN data could be used to explore the influence of a new educational initiative, such as interprofessional education offerings on students’ teamwork competencies. In short, the data gathered through NNERN could help provide the generalizable evidence that is sorely needed for evidence-based decision making within schools of nursing.

Our vision for NNERN’s future extends beyond the collection of uniform survey data we can use to benchmark individual program’s accomplishments. We see that the network also has potential for promoting faculty development in educational research, and for creating collaborative communities of scholars interested in addressing pressing research questions in a rigorous way. In addition, by designing a secure, interactive online portal, the NNERN project has the potential to provide the faculty and administrators of member schools with rapid access to data distributions and variances on key characteristics (e.g., type of school, level of program, and location) so that local conversations about adopting specific innovative strategies or structures can be supported by evidence.

What You Can Do

Continuing the NNERN initiative on a national scale will take a widespread commitment from schools, faculty, and students. It will require that, together, we invest our time, talent, and resources to maintain these databases for the future. The NNERN network will belong to member-schools—the NNERN collective. It will be governed by representatives from member schools in contradistinction to governance via a school or professional organization. Member schools will have unrestricted access to the de-identified data. However, member schools will need to commit financial resources to sustain this effort. The NNERN membership fees are currently being developed and will be tiered by size of school. These fees will soon be published soon on the NNERN Web site (http://www.nnern.org).

If you are a dean, make sure that your school becomes a NNERN member. Likewise, talk to your colleagues, professional organizations, and potential funders about the importance of supporting the NNERN. If you are a doctoral student or faculty member interested in nursing education research, talk to your dean about the need for your school to join the NNERN.

The unique specialty of nursing education desperately needs evidence so that we can make sound, evidence-based decisions about educational strategies and initiatives. We must work together to produce this evidence if we are to heed the clarion call to transform nursing education, the call to prepare a nursing workforce that can competently meet ever-evolving demands for care, and the call to produce nursing leaders and scientists. Let’s work together to make the NNERN on ongoing reality.

For more information on membership opportunities, access http://www.nnern.org or contact Linda Flynn (Linda.Flynn@ucdenver.edu).

Reference


Linda Flynn, PhD, RN, FAAN
NNERN Co-Director
Professor
University of Colorado College of Nursing
Pamela Ironside, PhD, RN, FAAN, ANEF
NNERN Co-Director
Professor and Director
Center for Research in Nursing Education
Indiana University School of Nursing
Michael Yedidia, PhD
Professor
Center for State Health Policy
Rutgers University
Christine A. Tanner, PhD, RN, FAAN
Editor Emeritus
Journal of Nursing Education
Professor Emerita
Oregon Health and Sciences University
Theresa (Terry) Valiga, EdD, RN, CNE, ANEF, FAAN
Professor and Director
Institute for Educational Excellence
Duke University

The authors have disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise. doi:10.3928/01484834-20160615-01