Innovatively Operationalizing a Doctor of Nursing Practice Group or Team Project

In 2015, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) recommended group or team projects as another option for students to meet the final scholarly project requirement in a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program (AACN, 2015). As an additional bonus, group DNP projects prepare graduates to function in interprofessional teams and can be implemented by faculty for new project advisement models to improve efficiencies.

The published literature is lacking practical information on how to operationalize DNP group projects. The AACN outlined expectations that each student take part in the project planning, implementation, and evaluation; has a leadership role; and produces a deliverable such as a manuscript for a peer-reviewed or nonrefereed journal (AACN, 2015). This article describes a DNP group project from our post-master’s DNP program.

Expectations in the Planning Phase

In this phase, two students worked with the same DNP project team that consisted of the faculty lead and practice mentor to identify gaps in practice that were considered a priority in their health system. In this case, the 30-day readmissions for heart failure patients were too high, so students completed one process map on the care of patients with heart failure from admission to postdischarge and identified potential gaps in care. One student’s project focused on inconsistent scheduling of 7-day postdischarge follow-up appointments. The other student selected inconsistent 48-hour postdischarge follow-up telephone calls. The students each completed individual evidence reviews and synthesis tables. Working with DNP faculty and their practice mentor, students reviewed and provided feedback on each other’s evidence summaries and made recommendations (e.g., 7-day appointment made before discharge and reminder card, dedicated RN for scripted 48-hour telephone calls) to address their practice gap. Students developed individual implementation and evaluation plans for these recommendations. Each student submitted individual written project proposals for their practice gap, and together the students presented the evidence synthesis, recommendations, and project plan to the project team. These deliverables were graded by the DNP project lead and practice mentor using a faculty-developed rubric that included quality definitions and criteria for each project phase.

Expectations in the Implementation Phase

Each student was responsible for being the project manager for their piece of the project. This role involved: (a) team leadership; (b) collecting baseline data and preparing patients, staff, clinicians, and materials; (c) implementing the change and promoting adoption; and (d) conducting audits. Each student was required to give an update on their piece of the project at the bimonthly team meetings that occurred throughout the 12-week phase, where team members gave the students feedback on their performance.

Expectations in the Evaluation Phase

Each student collected postimplementation data for their piece of the project, and both students worked with their health system’s quality improvement director and DNP project lead to evaluate and effectively display these data. Together the students presented the results to the project team in the practice setting, and staff, clinicians, and administrators were invited. Students completed individual electronic posters that they presented to their peers and the nursing faculty. Deliverables on each student’s aspect of the project included a one-page executive summary for the health system administrators and a summary of the project formatted for publication. Although submission of a manuscript to a professional journal was not a requirement for graduation, both manuscripts were submitted and subsequently accepted (Ruggiri, Milner, & Buonocore, 2019; Soltis, Milner, & Buonocore, 2018).

Student and Faculty Feedback

Students said:
- [I am] so glad to have the support of another student when my project lead and practice team are not there.
- It is more realistic of what I will have to do in practice as a DNP.

Faculty stated:
- I like being able to combine meetings and feedback to students and work with the same team from the practice setting.
- This model has saved me some time.
- I can envision working with the same practice team on future projects.
- I found that the students capitalized on each other’s strengths and learned from one another.

Conclusion

Implementing DNP group projects has ensured projects that address the AACN final scholarly project expectations and the DNP essentials, has improved efficiency, and has been well received by students and faculty. The evaluation process for DNP group projects can be challenging but not insurmountable. Evaluation criteria was revised to include performance, fairness, equity, and measurable final outcomes. Our next steps will focus on professional development to facilitate group projects as an option for all our faculty who advise DNP projects.

References


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