Standardizing Doctor of Nursing Practice Project Development: Implementation of a Wildcat Den

The Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree requires completion of an evidence-based practice (EBP) scholarly project. However, DNP projects vary among colleges and universities (Dols, Hernández, & Miles, 2017). Full-time DNP faculty at our private, nonprofit university in the mid-Atlantic region identified marked variability in DNP projects, including confusion between EBP and original research, as well as identifying a viable EBP project. Historically, students would complete core coursework, encompassing the eight American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2006) *Essentials of Doctoral Education for Advanced Nursing Practice*, and then progress to DNP project courses. During the first project course, students often struggled in narrowing their topics and completing project planning assignments.

To standardize DNP project development, a Wildcat Den was established. The DNP program chair conceptualized the Wildcat Den after watching the television show *Shark Tank* (Burnett, 2018) and observing the valuable feedback provided by experts to entrepreneurs. The title *Wildcat Den* was selected based on the television show and represents the mascot of the university. Objectives of the Wildcat Den are for students to (a) systematically plan an EBP/DNP project, (b) present a DNP project proposal, and (c) engage in scholarly dialogue with DNP faculty regarding an EBP/DNP project proposal.

During the final DNP core course, Applied Evidence Based Practice, students develop a PICOT (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, and Time) question and further narrow their DNP project focus. Then, prior to beginning the first DNP project course, students present their DNP project idea to the DNP faculty team. The DNP faculty team consists of three full-time professors with varied clinical and administrative experience, as well as five core DNP adjunct faculty who serve as DNP project chairs.

The Wildcat Den is embedded in the Applied Evidence Based Practice course.

Each student is allotted 30 minutes to present a PowerPoint® of their DNP project topic virtually via GoToMeeting™. Presentation dates and times are advertised at least 3 months in advance and take place over one to two 8-hour days, depending on the cohort size. Day and evening appointments are available to accommodate students who are working professionals.

Students present individually and answer the following questions:
- What is your PICOT question?
- What is your intervention?
- What is your comparison? Current practice? Benchmark data?
- What evidence are you translating to practice?
- How will your project be sustained after your project is completed?
- Have you obtained organizational support?
- How will you evaluate your clinical practice change?

Students and faculty then engage in a dialogue regarding the project, with faculty providing feedback for PICOT questions, intervention, comparison, and outcome refinement. Faculty also provide insight regarding anticipated barriers, as well as plans for securing organizational support and project sustainability. Faculty provide individualized feedback in real time, as well as through the university's learning management system. Each presentation is evaluated as pass or fail.

Students are expected to critically reflect on the feedback provided in order to refine their DNP project topics before their DNP project the following semester. Project modifications from DNP faculty are required unless there is literary evidence to support an alternate approach. Students who require additional project refinement receive one-to-one coaching from the full-time DNP faculty team. DNP project quality has been enhanced—all DNP projects are now aligned with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2015) clarifying recommendations and reflect well-developed EBP changes.

The Wildcat Den is a formative assessment and is mandatory to successfully complete the Applied Evidence Based Practice course. To date, 64 DNP students have participated and have provided overwhelmingly positive feedback through an anonymous evaluation. There have been no negative comments. Open-ended responses reflect three primary themes: Valuable Experience, Positive Faculty Interaction, and Enhanced Preparation.

Multiple barriers have been eliminated. During the first Wildcat Den session, faculty were not provided with student presentations in advance. This process was modified to require students to submit their presentation 1 week in advance, allowing adequate time for faculty review. Additionally, variability in student presentations was eliminated by providing students with an exemplar.

Recognizing the variability among DNP projects across the United States, this innovative learning activity has been a welcomed addition to the DNP program curriculum. DNP project topics are now well defined, and DNP students are better prepared to develop, implement, and evaluate an EBP project. Potential DNP project barriers have been eliminated or mitigated early. DNP faculty should consider the implementation of a Wildcat Den, or similar activity, to standardize and enhance DNP project development.

References

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