From Whispering to RoARing
Engaging Undergraduate Nursing Students in Research

During my time as a baccalaureate-level nursing student, the professors I had also happened to be some of the preeminent nurse researchers of the 1980s and '90s. Oddly enough, I had no idea that this was the case, and it did not come to my attention until years later when I read their articles as a graduate student. How could it be that I had received clinical and didactic instruction from some of the top names in the field, without having realized that some of the most important knowledge they were conveying had been generated from their own research programs? In discussing this phenomenon with colleagues, I have learned that my experience was not unique. Rather, many faculty members have stories of how they discovered the research impact of their instructors through a backdoor or after-the-fact mechanism.

A vast array of factors is likely to explain this phenomenon. My focus here is on one such factor: the relative lack of opportunities for nursing faculty to truly engage undergraduate students in their research. Although recent calls for teaching evidence-based nursing may be yielding modest increases in the quality of interaction between students and research faculty, it is my observation that, on the whole, current approaches to teaching evidence-based nursing practice are passive. Strategies such as assigning research articles for reading, using textbooks that incorporate nursing research, or citing publications within our PowerPoint® slides do little to impress on students the exciting and care-transforming nature of nursing research. Even courses specifically dedicated to evidence-based practice can fail to connect students to their faculty member’s research in a meaningful way (Mansour & Porter, 2008). This is problematic because missing opportunities to make research relevant to BSN students can limit progress toward the ultimate goal of cultivating the next generation of consumers and implementers of nursing research.

If, as educators, researchers, and clinicians, we take seriously the notion of evidence-based care, we need a much more active and personalized approach to teaching undergraduate students when and how to apply research findings in clinical settings. Along with other gerontological nursing research faculty members at the University of Pittsburgh, I have led an effort to pilot one such approach through an initiative called Nursing RoARs (Research on Aging Roundtables). RoARs, named in honor of the University’s mascot, the panther, provides a forum for baccalaureate nursing (BSN) students to interact with gerontological nursing researchers in an informal roundtable setting over pizza. Each roundtable session features one to two faculty members or graduate students and is attended by four to eight BSN students. Featured researchers are given an open-ended instruction to tell the students about their gerontological research and/or their personal journey to becoming a gerontological nurse researcher.

The relatively casual setting of RoARs sessions serves to demystify the research process for students and calls on faculty to speak frankly about the real-world implications of their research. For example, discussions have explored the tension that undergraduate nursing students experience when trying to reconcile theory with practice, particularly as they witness discrepancies between the two in clinical settings. Being comfortable with—and articulate during—such discussions is a necessary skill for students who aim to ground their future practices in nursing science (Ciliska, 2005). Thus, a major goal of RoARs is to generate dialogue around the sometimes complicated intersection of research and practice. A secondary goal of RoARs is related to link-
ing BSN students who are interested in aging-related research with enthusiastic and nurturing faculty mentors. This January we celebrated the 3-year anniversary of RoARs, and early indicators point to the program’s potential for stimulating meaningful interaction between BSN students and research faculty. Several participating students and faculty have used RoARs as a springboard for developing mentoring relationships, and six of those mentorship pairings have led to student-authored research presentations or manuscripts. What is our next challenge? To maintain our momentum and keep our BSN students truly engaged in gerontological nursing research. As we work to meet this challenge, we are eager to hear the ideas, experiences, and success stories of others.

REFERENCES

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