



## **Leadership Experiences in Undergraduate Nursing Education:**

### **A Student Perspective**

By Paisly Symenuk<sup>1</sup>, BScN Hon., RN, MSN/MPH student  
([paisly.symenuk@ubc.ca](mailto:paisly.symenuk@ubc.ca)), & Saige Godberson<sup>2</sup>, BScN Hon., RN,  
<sup>1</sup>University of British Columbia, School of  
Nursing/School of Population and Public Health  
Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T 2B5, Canada

<sup>1</sup>This paper was completed in December 2017 as part of a senior undergraduate course NURS 490 by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> authors at the University of Alberta. For this manuscript, significant changes were made after the course was completed to focus the writing on nursing organizational leadership and research.

<sup>2</sup>University of Alberta, Faculty of Nursing

### **Abstract**

Registered nursing is a profession which recognizes that all nurses should demonstrate leadership skills within their various roles. Leadership is vital at all levels of health organizations to provide positive outcomes for not only clients, but also to achieve positive results for interdisciplinary teams, and larger societal systems to which health care is intricately connected. Nursing leadership and management are two distinct concepts that are often misunderstood by undergraduate nursing students. The purpose of our paper is to emphasize that leadership in nursing must be fostered beginning at the undergraduate level. In addition to providing leadership education in the clinical realm, it is also important for nursing professors to provide the undergraduate students with learning experiences on this topic outside of their formalized studies, by facilitating their involvement in leadership activities associated with nursing organizations and research.

**Keywords:** nursing leadership, nursing education, student engagement, student leadership

---

## Introduction

Registered nursing is a profession that recognizes every nurse should be a leader in their respective areas of practice, clinical specializations, and work environments. The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) (2009) supports this notion stating, “nurses can be and must be leaders” in their position statement on nursing leadership (p. 1). This does not necessarily mean every nurse should occupy administrator roles; rather it challenges every nurse to “lead where they land” (Fugate Woods, 2003, p. 256). From undergraduate nursing students to nurse administrators with decades of experience, all nurses must be active leaders in the roles they occupy. Leadership is vital at all levels of health organizations to provide positive outcomes for not only patients, who are central to nursing practice, but also positive results for health care teams, healthcare organizations, and the larger systems that health is embedded within. Scully (2015) described why nursing leadership is essential throughout a health organization, expressing that leaders in both clinical nursing and hospital administrator roles, produce good positive patient outcomes; similarly, nursing leadership is inherently important in other settings where nurses practice including policy and academic domains. Likewise, the CNA (2009) supports the belief that registered nurses need to be involved at every level of health organizations to create vibrant, safe, and innovative practice settings, citing the imperativeness of nurses sitting at decision-making tables within organizations. Nursing leadership at all levels of health organization is required to achieve the best individual, community, and systems outcomes possible.

### Nursing Leadership versus Management

A common misconception for undergraduate students is that nursing management or administration and nursing leadership describe the same idea. While leadership varies greatly depending on the environment, role, and philosophy, it can be described as a “process that involves influencing the thinking and actions of others with respect to achieving a goal” (Cox, 2016, p. 155). Effective leaders must display qualities of adaptability and encouragement, while focusing on the process, attributes, and behaviors involved in succeeding a common goal (Cox, 2016). On the other hand, management can be understood as “a process of coordination, actions, and allocating resources to achieve organizational goals” (Kelly & Quesnelle, 2016, p. 185). Typically, managers accomplish goals through employees, and more specifically, nursing managers must ensure patient safety through supervising, educating, and collaborating with staff members within health care institutions (Cox, 2016).

Although some may use the terms “leadership” and “management” interchangeably, Scully (2015) further outlined the multitude of differences between these concepts including how people are appointed to these positions, origin of collective goals, and intentions. Leaders are selected by a group of “followers”, in comparison to management, in which an individual is appointed by someone in a role with higher power (Scully, 2015). Regarding the collective goals, the visions of leaders typically develop from personal interests and passions, whereas the vision of managers is often proposed from an organizational level (Scully, 2015). Lastly, leadership and management have different target focuses; leaders have a focus on people, compared to management that has a focus on structure and systems (Scully, 2015). Although leadership and management differ in their meanings and foci, these concepts may work simultaneously to achieve mutual goals. Being able to actively distinguish the differences

between these two concepts must be understood by undergraduate nursing students to identify and develop nurse leaders presently, and for the future of our profession (Scully, 2015).

We suggest a need to concentrate on the root construct underlying many positive forms of leadership and its development, which is labelled as authentic leadership development. Shamir and Eilam (2005) argue that the leadership development should focus on authentic leadership as being “motivated by personal convictions” (p. xx) and the role of being open to change and development leading that leads to flourishing and prosperous outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Also identified was the importance of relational aspects of authentic leadership, which is a central approach in nursing practice being relational practice (Doane & Varcoe, 2007).

### **Fostering Leadership during Undergraduate Nursing Education**

As students soon to be entering the profession of nursing, we recognize the imperativeness of being engaged leaders as student, graduate, and registered nurses. As we end our journey as students, we strive to be leaders that promote change within organizations and society—to be agents of change. CNA (2009) supports that leadership is not something that we are born with, but rather something that needs active fostering, support, and development.

During undergraduate nursing education, leadership must be held central to all activities that are encouraged and promoted to students. Nursing programs across the world must encourage, recognize, and integrate these leadership learning experiences into undergraduate nursing programs. This should include attending conferences, involvement in professional organizations, participating in formal leadership programs or research engagement. These experiences should be diverse allowing students to be exposed to a wide variety of roles, but also reflective of the interests of the student. This could include professional committee work, curriculum design, policy, advocacy, communications, mentorship, and advocacy. Too often, these opportunities are only reserved for a select few students and are not recognized as curricular requirement. Yet, these experiences are both highly relevant and reflect provincial entry-to-practice requirements set by registered nurse regulators. We describe and reflect two distinct experiences during our undergraduate education that shaped our understanding and continued leadership journeys: nursing organizational involvement and research experience.

### **Nursing Organizational Involvement**

The inclusion of organizational involvement during undergraduate nursing studies is imperative in the development of leadership and management skills. The promotion of student involvement in professional nursing organizations is of great importance to contributing to our success as leaders. There is a huge imperative to foster leadership early in nurses’ careers to ensure strong nursing leadership for generations to come.

Furthermore, we contend by not making space for students into nursing organizations, there is a lack of understanding of what students can contribute. However, space needs to be created intentionally within nursing organizations to include this vital voice, or students will continue to be largely invisible in their contributions with and for nursing organizations. One example of a continued partnership between nursing students and nursing organizations is the relationship between the Canadian Nursing Student Association (CNSA) and the Canadian

Nursing Association (CNA). CNA has affirmed and demonstrated their value in the inclusion of students within their organization by allocating the CNSA five votes at their annual general meeting, having a voting student board member, and classifying CNSA as the voting member comprised of pre-licensure students. The attendance and involvement in these organizations offers early career leaders in nursing the opportunity for mentorship, visioning, and a greater understanding of how nursing organizations are vital to represent nurses locally, regionally, nationally, and around the globe.

One of the ways undergraduate nursing involvement in organizations can be furthered is by promoting the attendance in conferences, workshops, and lectures. Attending conferences, workshops, and lectures can offer limitless opportunities for growth. As nursing students, monetary, programmatic, and administrative support from our faculty to attend these activities was integral, as most of the knowledge sharing events occur during the academic school year. We attended conferences hosted by the Global Association of Student and Novice Nurses (GASNN) (international), Canadian Nursing Students' Association (CNSA) (national), and the Festival of Undergraduate Activities and Creative Works (FURCA) (municipal) to name a few. These types of activities have allowed for leadership development through networking, presenting, and contributing to the organizing of events. The knowledge gained, involvement in organizing, and collaborating with diverse leaders during these opportunities contributed to the development of stronger leadership skills and arguably, greater academic achievement (Casuso-Holgado et al., 2013). There is a substantial opportunity for building capacity as nurse leaders early in one's career through involvement in above mentioned organizational opportunities. Students should be encouraged and given every opportunity to be involved in professional nursing organizations.

### **Undergraduate Nursing Research Involvement**

With only 3% of nurses with graduate level education in Canada, it is imperative that nurses are engaged in research beginning at the undergraduate level (Canadian Institute of Health Information, 2016). We are not advocating for all nurses to be career researchers, however, exposure and engagement to the development of knowledge, utilization, and translation into evidence-informed practice, is the responsibility of all nurses in all settings.

Implementation of evidence-based practice is essential within nursing practice, although the development of evidence, and awareness of the associated process, is absent from most nurses' practice. In order to enhance evidence-informed practice within the clinical setting, as well as leadership and management, undergraduate nursing research engagement is imperative. By supporting nursing students at the undergraduate level to engage or even lead mentored research that is of interest to them, will inherently provide greater literacy in knowledge production, translation, dissemination throughout any role that they enter post-licensure.

We recognize that there are limitations in the infrastructure of many smaller nursing programs whereby opportunities for research support and resources (human, monetary, and administrative). However, opportunities remain for small scale projects that could introduce students to research and make an impact either in their practice settings, educational programs, or the wider community.

Furthermore, student involvement in research not only promotes a greater understanding of research processes, but curiosity, critical thinking skills, and interest in learning (Greenawald, 2010). While developing an appreciation of nursing research, undergraduate students involved in the process gain in-depth understanding of various philosophical, theoretical, and conceptual models (Greenawald, 2010). Undergraduate nursing programs not only establish a foundation to nursing students to understand the complexities of research, but support their awareness of research conduction (Taber, Taber, Galante, & Sigsby, 2010). The research process and nursing practice can be viewed as being segregated from one another during undergraduate education, we contend that engaging student in research demonstrate the linkages between research, practice, and leadership.

### Conclusion

It is widely called for that registered nurses must be leaders in all levels of health care organizations to contribute to the best patient care. Nurses are at the core of health care around the world and most importantly nurses work with and alongside the experts—the patients themselves. We as a profession must recognize and encourage alternative experiences in leadership for nursing students at the undergraduate level that both meet the requirements of entry-to-practice education, but also expose students to a variety of roles and environments they can practice leadership throughout their careers.

### References

- Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315–338.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001>
- Canadian Institute of Health Information. (2016). Regulated Nurses, 2016: RN/NP Data Tables.
- Canadian Nurses Association. (2009). *Nursing leadership* [Position statement]. Ottawa, Canada.
- Casuso-Holgado, M. J., Cuesta-Vargas, A. I., Moreno-Morales, N., Labajos-Manzanares, M. T., Barón-López, F. J., & Vega-Cuesta, M. (2013). The association between academic engagement and achievement in health sciences students. *BMC Medical Education*, 13(1), 33. doi:10.1186/1472-6920-13-33
- Cox, J. A. (2016). Leadership and management roles: Challenges and success strategies. *AORN Journal*, 104(2), 154-160. doi:10.1016/j.aorn.2016.06.008
- Doane, G. H., & Varcoe, C. (2007). Relational practice and nursing obligations. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 30(3), 192–205. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.ANS.0000286619.31398.fc>
- Fugate Woods, N. (2003). Leadership – not just for a few! *Policy, Politics and Nursing Practice*, 4(4), 255-256.
- Ghasabeh, M. S., Reaiche, C., & Soosay, C. (2015). The emerging role of transformational leadership. *Journal of Developing Areas*. 49(6), 459-467.

Greenawald, D. A. (2010). Faculty involvement in undergraduate research: Considerations for nurse educators. *Nursing education perspectives*, 31(6), 368-371.

Kelly, P., & Quesnelle, H. (2016). *Nursing leadership and management*. Toronto, Canada: Nelson Education.

Scully, N. J. (2015). Leadership in nursing: the importance of recognising inherent values and attributes to secure a positive future for the profession. *Collegian*, 22(4), 439-444.  
doi:10.1016/j.colegn.2014.09.004

Taber, K., Taber, R., Galante, L., & Sigsby, L. M. (2011). Engaging undergraduate nursing students in perioperative research. *Aorn Journal*, 93(2), 249-258.