



Consistent scholarship standards among DNP-prepared faculty needed: Actionable insights

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Doctor of nursing practice
Clinical faculty
Promotion
Scholarship standards
Best practices

ABSTRACT

DNP-prepared faculty report challenges and barriers to achieving success in academic roles when criteria for promotion includes scholarship. The purpose of this evidence-based initiative was to explore thoughtful scholarship standards for DNP-prepared faculty which can be adapted and transferred across academic institutions with the goal of elevating faculty scholarship. Given a paucity of available research evidence, a review and synthesis of non-research evidence was conducted. DNP scholarship standards from high-ranking intuitions were critically appraised, and this evidence, along with the diverse and collective expertise of the authors, was translated into recommendations for an inclusive model of rigor for DNP-prepared faculty scholarship. A template for appraising the scholarship of DNP-prepared faculty based on strategic evaluation of impact is included. Academic institutions may use this work to expand the fundamental level of evolving scholarship, determine parameters, and provide clarity and support to DNP-prepared faculty as they seek to progress in rank.

Introduction

Nurses who have earned the doctor of nursing practice degree (DNP) are increasingly being hired into ranked faculty positions (primarily at the assistant professor level) due to the nurse faculty shortage (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2022). In most universities and college institutions, such faculty are ineligible for tenure and placed into a non-tenure track with the primary responsibility of teaching (Agger et al., 2014; Oermann et al., 2016); however, as members of academia, they are required to provide service, produce scholarship, and (if they teach nurse practitioner students) maintain a clinical practice (Gonzales et al., 2022). Many of these non-tenure track faculty teach in DNP programs. If promotion is available to them, the standards applied are often adapted from tenure-track criteria, although typically with a lesser focus on obtaining funding.

Background

DNP-prepared faculty have reported challenges and barriers to

achieving success in academic roles that require scholarship for promotion (Oermann et al., 2016; Smeltzer et al., 2015). In 2012, Nicholes and Dyer surveyed randomly chosen PhD-trained faculty and deans of DNP programs on the perceived feasibility of granting tenure eligibility to nurses with DNP degrees; the consensus of those surveyed was that DNP-prepared faculty would need to meet criteria similar to that required of PhD-trained faculty (Nicholes and Dyer, 2012). This attitude continues to be pervasive in academia and has led to burnout and disillusion among nurses with the DNP degree, who often receive unequal support and resources to achieve these criteria (Fang & Bednash, 2017). Of particular concern, some DNP-prepared nurses have reported encountering a lack of respect and feeling marginalized and undervalued as they attempt to integrate into the culture of academia (Bice et al., 2019; Englund & Lancaster, 2021).

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), the DNP degree program offers “an alternative to research-focused doctoral programs. DNP-prepared nurses are well-equipped to fully implement the science developed by nurse researchers prepared to PhD and research-focused nursing doctorates” (AACN, 2023). The work

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2024.01.009>

Received 3 April 2023; Received in revised form 15 January 2024; Accepted 25 January 2024

Available online 2 March 2024

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of faculty prepared with the DNP degree should be devoted to practice scholarship, including evidence-based practice and evidence-based practice quality improvement (Waldrop, Dunlap, 2024a).

There has been considerable confusion surrounding the differentiation of DNP and PhD scholarship (Jenkins et al., 2021). The AACN describes scholarship for the nursing profession as the communication of knowledge that informs clinical practice, nursing education, policy, and healthcare delivery, with the hallmark attribute of scholarship being the cumulative impact of the scholar's work on the field of nursing and health care (AACN, 2018). This broadly inclusive description has raised concerns that it could support a diminished quality of contributions; it has been noted, for example, that precepting students or developing evidence-based teaching strategies could constitute scholarship (Hartjes, 2018; Ramirez et al., 2022).

This article (a) explores current standards for DNP-prepared faculty scholarship, and (b) provides suggestions, transferable across academic institutions, aimed at elevating this scholarship to increase its positive impact on academia and healthcare systems.

Methods

Following the steps of evidence-based practice (Melnyk et al., 2014), we identified the problem and developed the following question with which to search the evidence: For nurse faculty prepared with the DNP degree, what practices demonstrate impact and clear criteria for scholarship? (Waldrop, Dunlap, 2024b). A search of the evidence, including both research evidence and other evidence, such as guidelines, was conducted. Results were synthesized and combined with the authors' expertise to develop recommendations for practice changes that support DNP-prepared faculty scholarship standards and clarify their impact.

Guided by the search question, the search strategy was developed in collaboration with a health sciences librarian. Search terms included the following: (dnp OR "doctor of nursing practice"), (scholarship OR "practice scholarship"), (faculty OR "assistant professor" OR "associate professor" OR professor OR professorate), (dnp-prepared OR "doctorally prepared"), "faculty development", (clinical or "clinical track"), nurs*, career, rank, promotion, hiring, (standards OR criteria). PubMed, CINAHL Complete, Nursing and Allied Health Premium, ScienceDirect, Academic Search Complete Professional Development Collection, ERIC databases were searched for the years 2000–2023. Literature mapping and snowballing search methods were used to identify additional literature within Scopus and Google Scholar. The literature search occurred from December 4, 2022, to January 13, 2023, and employed the use of MeSH terms, CINAHL headings, keywords, synonyms, and gray literature searching. The concept of *Doctor of Nursing Practice* does not exist as a MeSH term or in CINAHL headings. When searching "DNP," we used a phrase search and the acronym. The concept of *scholarship* in the literature was also difficult to parse out as it was primarily defined as financial incentives rather than academic output or achievement. To be included, a report must have included an objective assessment or evaluation of standards of faculty scholarship for nurses in non-tenure track roles who have earned the DNP degree. Reports were excluded if they addressed tenure track criteria for promotion or faculty prepared with the PhD degree. Titles and abstracts of a total of 139 articles were reviewed; of these, 80 were excluded, and 59 were fully read and reviewed (Table 1).

Evidence synthesis

The full text review of the 59 reports revealed a lack of defined standards for DNP-prepared faculty scholarship. Many articles addressed the problem and barriers to scholarship as described in the Background Section, but no reports on standards for scholarship or its use in promotion for DNP-prepared or other non-tenure track nursing faculty were found in the literature. Based on evidence-based practice methods, we next searched non-research and other types of evidence.

Table 1
Search documentation table

Database	Results	Included	Excluded
PubMed	11	1	10
CINAHL Complete	13	4	9
Nursing & Allied Health Collection (ProQuest)	26	1	25
Academic Search Complete (EBSCOhost)	6	0	6
ScienceDirect	23	0	23
Professional Development Collection (EBSCOhost)	0	0	0
ERIC (EBSCOhost)	7	0	7
Google Scholar (Search Engine)	10	10	0
Internet Searches (Gray Lit)	14	14	0
Literature Mapping			
PubMed	27 (no keyword searching)	27	0
Scopus	2 (no keyword searching)	2	0
		citation counting	
Total	139	59	80

Universities have varied tracks for DNP-prepared faculty, including clinical and tenure positions; therefore, we determined that a sampling of exemplar schools' appointment and promotion guidelines might provide some evidence of current standards for scholarship. The top MSN and DNP programs listed by *US News and World Report* (2023) were used as a starting point. Geographically dispersed programs whose DNP faculty's appointment and promotion guidelines for clinical track faculty were easily accessible online were collected for a purposive sample. It is important to note that scholarship expectations flow from the multifactorial mission of the parent university and of the college or department in which the nursing program is housed.

A review of these appointment and promotion documents revealed marked similarity to traditional criteria for promotion for tenure in all areas except external funding (e.g., NIH or NINR grants) (see Table 2). Boyer's model of scholarship is the evident framework in these documents: the categories of teaching, scholarship, and service are emphasized, with the occasional option for practice, and progressive accomplishment is expected.

In general, at the assistant professor level, (a) the faculty member demonstrates competence or effectiveness with the potential for or promise of excellence in all areas, and (b) clinical expertise is highlighted at the local level. Promotion to associate professor requires the faculty member's performance to reach the level of excellence and include leadership activities and a reputation at the regional/national level. To attain the level of full professor, excellence must be sustained, with an increase in (or increased potential for) national/international leadership endeavors. Scholarship can occur in all categories (practice, teaching, and service), but the criteria for scholarship is primarily addressed within the scholarship category.

Discussion

Our literature search for evidence on scholarship criteria for DNP-prepared faculty revealed little; however, our synthesis of clinical track promotion guidelines provides a foundation on which to build. Numerous assumptions serve as the foundational concepts for tiered promotional criteria: First and foremost, there is a strongly held assumption that productivity and quality will increase as one's rank increases; therefore, single statements on expectations should be capable of being tiered to allow specificity. Collegiality is also assumed, as the modern complexity of healthcare delivery requires that nursing faculty work in interprofessional and transdisciplinary teams to answer the greatest challenges (Trautman et al., 2018).

Scholarly outcomes represent the endeavors of faculty which have

Table 2
Promotion criteria for scholarship – non-tenure track

University	Rank		
	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor
Duke University (2023)	Potential for scholarship with a publication record	Excellence in scholarship and leadership of others	Sustained record of leadership and scholarship
Emory University (2020)	Emerging trajectory of academic scholarship	Evidence of scholarship in area of focus	Scholarship in focused field
Rush University (2023)	Clinical focused expertise	Recognition beyond college for clinical expertise	Regional / national/ international recognition
Johns Hopkins University (n.d.)	Develops independent focused area of scholarship; state/regional level	Establishes and is recognized nationally for independent focused area of scholarship; national level	Recognized nationally and internationally for leadership in focused area of scholarship; provides leadership in defining, promoting, and disseminating scholarly work at a national/international level
New York University (2019)	Effective clinical practice/teaching	Excellent contributions with a local/regional reputation of scholarship	Leadership and a strong national reputation of scholarship
University of Iowa (n.d.)	Promise of productivity; Clinical expert	Progress toward a record of productivity beyond clinical service	Established record of productivity
University of Maryland (2020)	Potential for excellence with demonstrated competence in a focused area of practice knowledge. Recognized as an expert in the region.	Demonstrated excellence in practice scholarship productivity; PI or C–I on competitive external funding; publications and national recognition	Sustained excellence and substantial contribution with competitive funding, publications, and leadership on national/international level. Mentors.
University of Michigan (2020)	Clinical focused expertise	Sustained scholarship	National recognized scholarship
University of Washington (2021)	Knowledge of clinical area	Competence in scholarship	Recognized expertise in focused area
Vanderbilt University (n.d.)	Competence in practice focus	Leadership activities	Transformation of practice
The Ohio State University (2019)	Evidence of developing area of scholarship including examples of evidence-based practice or quality improvement	Convincing evidence of excellence and impact of high-quality scholarship program	Sustained, convincing records of national or international scholarship excellence

been disseminated, such as policy papers, clinical guidelines, and publications that advance nursing knowledge, practice, education, or integration. Dissemination should be broad, far-reaching, relevant, and have an impact. Dissemination in the form of presentations is scalable in terms of the audience reached: local, state, regional, national, and international. Peer review adds a measure of rigor. Presentations should move beyond opinion and be evidence-based. As one rises in rank, the level of dissemination should rise accordingly.

Impact must be measured through a variety of metrics. Quality should be assessed over quantity. Each university outlines various levels of impact given its resources, mission, institution type (e.g., academic medical center, small liberal arts college) or, possibly, Carnegie Classification. Impact increases with each rank as more time is devoted to scholarship, for which increased administrative support is essential. For example, the ability to attend professional meetings to give presentations and dialogue with national leaders is critical to impact, as is freedom within one’s workload to engage on national committees, serve in leadership positions, and lead evidence-based practice and evidence-based quality improvement initiatives. There is an assumption embedded in the framework for scholarship productivity that the culture and administration within the college will support the faculty’s scholarly activities, including by providing time in their workload. Fig. 1 illustrates the importance of variables (i.e., rigor, dissemination, quality, leadership, and increasing expectations for rank) that support impact as a central tenet; the rising star symbolizes the emergence of DNP scholars in the arena of higher education and the growing impact (in areas of education, service/policy, clinical practice, population health, or policy outcomes) of their valuable contributions through scholarship.

Recommendations

The recommendations offered herein, which may be used to evaluate the demonstration of impact of DNP-prepared faculty scholarship, are founded on the limited evidence base and our experiences as seasoned



Fig. 1. Foundational Criteria for Scholarship Impact.

faculty of nursing with much experience teaching in and leading DNP programs. Given the current wide variance in promotion guidelines and lack of specific standards in academia for DNP-prepared faculty, we sought to present our recommendations in a modifiable framework generic enough to be used to evaluate DNP-prepared faculty on clinical or tenure track lines. Given that institutional and nursing program missions and resources differ considerably, institution-specific modifications across universities or programs of nursing will likely be required.

We recommend aspiring to move the evaluation of faculty scholarship away from a count of products and toward a consideration of the impact of the work (e.g., improvement of population health outcomes, policy change). It must be remembered that DNP-prepared individuals should be expert at translating research evidence into clinical practice to improve outcomes. Although h-index or impact factors are additional metrics that can be used for publication impact (Broome et al., 2019), a more holistic evaluation of the diversity of scholarly products developed by the engagement of DNP-prepared faculty in all areas of scholarship is optimal. Innovation also should be recognized but is rarely built into promotion criteria.

Assessing the overall impact of the faculty member’s scholarly contribution is important, and data must be carefully interpreted using thoughtful consideration. Contributions to disseminated evidence-based practice and evidence-based quality improvement initiatives, guidelines, and policies should be noted, as these are the mainstays of scholarship for DNP-prepared faculty. Historically, promotion criteria for DNP-prepared faculty have not considered the integration of disseminated innovation efforts into academic nursing (O’Hara et al., 2022), yet doing so is essential if nursing leaders are to face the challenges of an evolving healthcare landscape.

Journal selection influences overall impact efforts. For example, publication in a practice-focused journal may be the right choice to target a clinically focused audience, yet practice-oriented publications often have low traditional citation counts, which affects the impact even of works that are frequently read and used to inform actual healthcare transformation. Additionally, focused articles, particularly in specialty areas, generally have lower citation rates than review articles, which often establish cost or prevalence insights, making quantification of cumulative impact difficult. For example, the impact factor (representative of number of citations and accessible to faculty on the journal website) of *Nursing Outlook* is currently 3.9 versus the *Journal of Peri-Anesthesia Nursing* which is 0.343 (Clarivate, 2023). In addition to journal impact factor and primary audience, we recommend the inclusion of alternative metrics including reads, downloads, and social media messaging; much of this information can be obtained online from publishers (via PubMed, CINAHL, or SCOPUS databases). Practice journals are often more widely read by practitioners, who collectively publish less often than faculty members.

It is important to note that publication lag for assistant professors who disseminate in the beginning of their appointment may render citation counts alone less meaningful as measures of cumulative impact. Strong citation frequency may be a more reliable indicator of impact measurement for candidates seeking the rank of full professor (Hack et al., 2010). Notation of a mentorship role (now being assumed frequently by DNP graduates) will allow evaluators to recognize

experience and consider impact on the next generation of nurse faculty.

A systematic structure to guide expectations of scholarship for DNP-prepared faculty and their collection of data to support the case for its impact is needed (Stager et al., 2022). We offer Tables 3 and 4 as templates to provide guidance on how DNP-prepared faculty can demonstrate the impact of their scholarship.

Although not included in an example table, scholarship related to book chapters may also be very impactful. A contributed chapter in a textbook can be quantified based on the textbook (e.g., number of copies sold, number of programs using it, awards received). Contribution as an author or editor of a book can be evaluated in a similar way. Books and chapters have citations that are indexed (e.g., in the SCOPUS database).

Descriptions of oral and poster presentations should include the type (e.g., peer-reviewed, invited, keynote), and the hosting organization and its reach (local, state, regional, national, international). When available, a description of the audience and number of attendees may support the strength of dissemination and offer additional insight on impact. Information from presentations is typically available from conference organizers, either automatically or by request. For example, two DNP-prepared faculty authors of this article recently presented a live webinar to attendees from 21 countries. Following the webinar, the presenters received access to additional viewing statistics from the hosting organization via email link, which showed over 300 webinar “visits” within 2 months of the presentation posting. The inclusion of presentation evaluation scores from attendees is another metric of quality, as are any special awards or distinctions that were earned, such as an excellence in scholarship poster award.

Support

All of the above aspirations will come to naught unless DNP-prepared faculty are viewed as valuable by nursing administration and supported accordingly (Kesten et al., 2022). All faculty deserve to be treated with respect and not confronted with unrealistic and unsupported scholarship expectations; doing otherwise contributes to the nurse faculty shortage. In a nationwide Delphi study, requirements for faculty development of scholarship applicable to the DNP-prepared faculty member included having clear expectations, a dedicated leader/organizational support, support services (e.g., statistician, editing), active mentoring, a culture of scholarship, and protected time/workload reduction (McPherson et al., 2021).

We found some programs in the literature which demonstrated support with external funding or for only certain types of faculty (Kleinpell et al., 2021; Meaux et al., 2022; Minnick et al., 2018); Pinto et al., 2021); however, we are advocating for a fundamental change in how DNP-prepared, non-tenure track faculty are supported as scholars with a teaching workload. We recommend the following steps toward effecting equitable administrative support for DNP-prepared faculty scholarship:

1. DNP doctoral programs must have buy-in from the faculty as a whole, and faculty who teach within them should be publishing scholars themselves.

Table 3
Written Works (Disseminated)

Citation	Authorship	Citation Index	Journal Impact Factor or Book	Altmetrics	Mentorship	Other Evidence
Include full citation listing	Place in authorship order. For example, first author - last author	Number of traditional citations identified in a publication index such as Medline, Google Scholar, or Scopus	Include primary audience	Number(s) of complementary metrics including social media shares and mentions, blogs, mainstream media coverage	Structured or formal mentorship role on written work	List of works disseminated through nontraditional means, including policy or white papers, which provide impact beyond academy in transforming healthcare

Table 4
Presentations and Posters (Disseminated)

Presentation Title/Type	Organization	Reach	Attendance	Peer Evaluation	Special Recognition	Notes
Title of presentation or podium poster; keynote, invited, peer-reviewed; location	AACN, Sigma, NONPF, etc.	Local, State, Regional, National, or International	Number of attendees with specification of type of audience	Audience ranking, numeric scores	Presentation awards or distinctions earned	Additional impact-related information

- Administrators must allow time within the annual workload for scholarship for faculty teaching within DNP programs.
- DNP-prepared faculty should be expected to perform the scholarship of practice rather than original research.

There are several anecdotal examples of equity-informed change respecting DNP-prepared faculty. The Ohio State University College of Nursing provides 20 % FTE for clinical faculty as well as statistical and editorial support for their scholarship (personal communication). At the University of Kentucky, all DNP-prepared faculty teaching at the doctoral level, many of whom are on a special tenure track line, receive time in their workload for scholarship; additionally, a statistician and editor are available to assist them, as are annual writing retreats for manuscript support (personal communication).

Mentorship

Formal mentorship programs have been recommended (Cullen et al., 2017), with special attention paid to novice nurse educators (Calaguas, 2023). Although much has been written about the importance of mentorship for academic faculty, limited literature exists on the outcomes of mentorship for DNP-prepared faculty. One study of an internal 3-year mentorship program for clinical non-tenure track faculty reported improvements in scholarly production, including increases in peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, awards, and grants (Shieh & Cullen, 2019). The Ohio State University College of Nursing has a Teaching Innovation, Excellence, and Scholarship Academy that includes both DNP- and PhD-prepared faculty (personal communication). A newly funded external mentorship program model was recently introduced for DNP faculty at Texas Woman’s University (TWU) with positive initial outcomes (Dunlap et al., 2023); the impact of the TWU model is largely supported by a grant with little institutional financial outlay. Such programs address the need for scholarship mentoring with clear, time-bound goals and active engagement at set intervals.

Limitations

There is a paucity of literature to guide best practices for scholarship evaluation for DNP-prepared faculty in academia. Although we provide some evidence from nursing programs on criteria for non-tenure track (e.g., clinical, education, or practice track) faculty, it may not apply to the vast spectrum of academic institutions, each with its own unique set of standards, or to those institutions with limited emphasis on faculty scholarship. Additionally, this limited evidence is based on documents commonly used to tenure PhD faculty; however, we hope that it can provide a baseline for further development. It should be noted that some DNP-prepared faculty are very productive and contribute much to the collective whole in the scholarly arena; however, as such contributions are often not required for academic appointment, many of the outcomes are not tied back to the institutions.

Conclusions

There are over 407 DNP programs in development or actively enrolling students in the United States, a number that continues to escalate at a phenomenal pace (AACN, 2022). The issues cited in this

article will magnify and expand unless appropriate actions are taken. Considering the rapidly changing practice and higher education landscapes, and the dramatic increase in DNP-prepared faculty in nursing programs, clearer guidelines for scholarship for DNP-prepared faculty are urgently needed.

Teaching-focused institutions must be subject to standards regarding scholarship if they offer doctoral programs. Faculty must be academically and experientially prepared to teach and support students in achieving the competencies within such programs, including clinical scholarship (AACN, 2021). Scholarship differs significantly from the scholarly use of evidence to inform clinical practice (AACN, 2018). The delivery of doctoral-level education requires that institutions with DNP programs commit to the development of their DNP faculty as scholars (Dunlap et al., 2023; Mainous et al., 2023); only this commitment will result in graduates of DNP programs prepared to perform at the level of competence their degree should ensure to produce future clinical scholarship improvements. To realize a discipline-wide movement toward increased scholarship impact and help students to achieve at the expected level, we encourage DNP-prepared nursing faculty to engage in active scholarship and act as role models.

An urgent paradigm shift is needed to recognize and work toward elevation of DNP-prepared faculty scholarship in the current context of nursing education (Butler, 2023). Collaborations in scholarly work will benefit both DNP- and PhD-prepared faculty. We invite nursing administrators, DNP leaders, and nursing faculty to engage in the ongoing work of achieving and exceeding DNP scholarship standards. Application of the framework proposed in this document will differ by institution yet could improve academic outcomes and ultimately influence health systems.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jayne Jennings Dunlap: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Julee Waldrop:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Rosalie Mainous:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Cindy Zellefrow:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Cindy Beckett:** Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Bernadette Mezurek Melnyk:** Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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