

AAHN

POSITION PAPER – NURSING HISTORY IN THE CURRICULUM

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The American Association for the History of Nursing (AAHN) continues to advocate for the inclusion of nursing history in the curricula of all undergraduate and graduate nursing programs. Doing so would serve as pedagogy, evidence, and explanation of the significant impact nursing history has had on contemporary education, practice, and scholarship. At the doctoral level, a history course based on the advanced scholarship of historians of nursing and healthcare, as well as introducing sound historical research methods, should also be required. This position is based on the following rationale:

*“The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education” published by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2021) set expectations for nurse educators to incorporate nursing history content into curricula without offering specific guidance. Building on the concepts of pedagogy, evidence, and explanation as described by Dr. Sonya Grypma in her invited presentation, “Why History Matters” at the 2013 AAHN annual meeting, contemporary nurse educators are challenged to consider the power of teaching nursing history. Nursing history can be useful across multiple competencies and sub-competencies within the new *Essentials*, enhancing students’ understanding and broadening their perspectives. Nursing history not only helps to explain the professional foundations of contemporary nursing, but also connects history to current student experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 1918-1919 Influenza pandemic. Below we further expound on the power of nursing history to serve as pedagogy, evidence, and explanation in order to enhance the education of all levels of nursing students.*

HISTORY AS PEDAGOGY

Nursing history serves as pedagogy by forging identity and shaping thinking while providing a safe space to explore sensitive topics. Exploration of nursing history encourages a sense of unity and continuity that promotes a purposeful, professional nurse identity in the student (Church, 1987 & 1994). Understanding a collective past provides a sense of connectedness that engages the student with the profession’s continued development (Church, 1987; Nowak, 1983). Exposure to nursing history provides students with a consciousness of the profession’s heritage and subsequently introduces, orients, and socializes the student to the profession (Keeling & Ramos, 1995; Madsen, 2007). Studying nursing history affords students an appreciation of nursing’s past so that they know where nursing has been, and where they fit as a nurse today (Madsen, 2007).

Integration of nursing history into their nursing curriculum encourages the students’ historical thinking, which in turn will shape students’ critical thinking and clinical judgment. Through historical thinking, a student’s sensitivity to contextual variables will increase (Keeling & Ramos, 1995), and the student will learn to critically consider, interpret, evaluate, and question sources, evidence, and perspectives (Olwell, 2002). Historical thinking will enable students to explore multiple perspectives and situate nursing within a larger context (Toman & Thifault, 2012). Exposing students to complex problems from the past may build critical thinking skills and help students understand that there are not always easy, straight-forward answers (Olwell, 2002).

Through the study of nursing history, students will examine both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ as well as the difficult people and situations that populate our past (Duffin, 2021). Such exposure

introduces students to obstacles, both inside and outside of nursing, that continue to persist in our profession and society (Church, 1987). Studying history provides a 'distanced' place and space for students to explore sensitive, passionate, or inflammatory topics such as discrimination, bias, prejudice, neglect, or abuse (Madsen, 2007). Integration of nursing history supports the academic freedom of faculty by providing content and structure to explore such sometimes difficult topics (Duffin, 2021).

HISTORY AS EVIDENCE

History as evidence bears witness, gives voice, and provides light to dispel myths. Historical evidence bears witness to the experiences of caregivers and patients throughout time; thus, such evidence helps students reinterpret the evidence using different frameworks such as race, class, labor forces, and economics, to provide a more nuanced record of the profession. Indeed, students of all levels would benefit from learning about nurses who have provided care to diverse populations, armed with limited resources and within fragmented systems in their clinical practice, education, research, policy making, and leadership activities (D' Antonio, 2010; D' Antonio & Lewenson, 2011; Keeling, et al., 2018).

Historical evidence gives voice to underrepresented or overlooked members of society. The study of nursing history provides an opportunity to hear, and add to, patients' and caregivers' experiences and perspectives. Giving voice through historical evidence helps students to "[place] nurses and nursing at the center of longstanding debates about health services delivery, knowledge formation, patient safety, technology, and education for practice" (D' Antonio & Fairman, 2010, p. 114).

Historical evidence "attests to the legacy of nurses in being able to provide competent and compassionate care to the sick; and it charts their essential role in the health care system" (Brodie, 2011, p. xiv). The care provided by nurses has been influenced by gender, racial, ethnic, and religious issues at specific moments in history; their navigation of these complex issues can give light and provide guidance for the contemporary nurse. Also, of importance is to remember that no understanding of history can be labeled as definitive as new sources become available and scholars interpret those from different perspectives (Grypma, 2017). Thus a 'fresh eyes' approach to nursing history by contemporary nursing students provides an opportunity for rich exploration.

HISTORY AS EXPLANATION

History as explanation provides context, explains the present, and provides a vantage point from which to see into the future. Studying history provides students with an understanding of the social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental context "to better understand the societies we work and live in" and to "[provide] insight into the past and explanation of the present" (Grypma, 2017, p. 7). When students understand history, they may be better able to contextualize current issues.

History helps explain the present by informing us of the events in the past, and how the actions and beliefs of those involved, affected the events both positively and negatively. Through

studying nursing history, students will have a basis for an informed and critical understanding of our present society, a sharper reflection of the current system in which they work, and a clearer understanding of critical stakeholders (Davey, 2012; Tosh, 2008). Buoyed by the steady flow of new knowledge, such new evidence tends to diminish the importance of history as explanation. However, history has a way of defending itself by reminding us of the facts that continue to explain the present. Moreover, historians continue to reevaluate history by emphasizing the analysis of competing historical narratives. As an example, nursing students may be unaware of the diverse and sometimes conflicting views of the treatment of minorities within the healthcare system, which echo in the modern-day concerns regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (Byrd & Clayton, 2001).

Lastly, and of great importance, history as explanation provides students a lens with which to view the future of the profession. Understanding the challenges and changes throughout history, nurses can anticipate those same challenges in the future of nursing and retain the proven practices of the past, while embracing emerging ones (Nelson, 2009).

HISTORY AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In addition to the merits of integrating history into the undergraduate and graduate curricula, historical research methodology should also be taught given its benefit for the graduate level student. Historical research methodology, like qualitative and quantitative methodologies, allows graduate students to gather evidence and make sound arguments to answer historical questions (Lewenson & Herrmann, 2008). Historical research, including the appraisal and use of primary source documents, is an important methodology that meets the rigorous standards for nursing research. Historical research methodology requires strong writing skills and the ability to think critically. Integrating historical research at the master's and doctoral levels not only allows nurses to write nursing history but prepares these students to be accomplished and experienced researchers.

CONCLUSION

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, nursing students were introduced to nursing history as part of their enculturation to the profession. Over time, history was removed from the curriculum. Recently, our peers in the AACN urged through the new *Essentials* for schools of nursing to again include history in their curricula. Nursing history informs and engages all those in the profession and should not be available to only a handful of scholars. Undergraduate and graduate nursing students' future practice will be richer and more nuanced if they are afforded a critical understanding of the profession's history. Integration of nursing history as pedagogy, evidence, and explanation in the undergraduate and graduate curricula can enhance students' understanding of nursing's past and present as well as provide them an informed perspective of nursing's future.

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