“Undergraduate Research in Nursing: Our Path to Success”

Completing nursing school is an accomplishment that every graduate can celebrate. Other than tests, late night study sessions, and ongoing skill assessments, nursing school presents some unique opportunities. Surrounding you are faculty with a wealth of knowledge and experience, motivated students like yourself, and the chance to practice your critical thinking in a safe environment. While some students think of school as just another check-in-the-box on their life’s to-do list, we think differently. By participating in undergraduate research, we took advantage of the opportunities around us. Our names are Emily, Brian, Heather, and Faith. We would like to share how we expanded our nursing school experience, what we gained from it, and what we will ultimately carry with us throughout our professional careers.

Carrying out an undergraduate research project is typically not part of our nursing curriculum, but learning the research process is a core component at our college, Old Dominion University. In fact, our research project actually began like many other class assignments. Tasked with a group project to create a "mock" research proposal, we decided to investigate ways of promoting physical activity among sedentary African American’s. After an extensive review of literature, we found that churches are an excellent point of access to begin an exercise program, but in many cases, programs were unsuccessful because of poor planning or unforeseen barriers. Based on this information, we created a survey using Susan Pender’s Health Promotion Model that helps plan successful physical activity programs in, predominately African-American churches. The survey is inexpensive, feasible, and will be used by church leaders without our assistance. When we handed in our completed assignment to our instructor, she was so impressed with our application of Susan Pender's theory that she offered to assist us in turning our proposal into an actual research project. Upon administration approval, our research proposal entitled, "Faith, Fellowship, & Fitness" evolved into a nursing elective, that we as the developers, will receive college credit for during our senior semester.

Currently, a local church in Norfolk, Virginia, is in the process of implementing our research survey, and we are anxiously awaiting the results. Regardless of the outcome, we have been empowered by not only the research and discovery process, but we have also gained some invaluable tools for success in our future careers. The four of us never imagined that when we started this project, our hard work would be returned to us four-fold. Participating in undergraduate research has prepared us to work as a team, brought us appreciation for the nursing process, fostered leadership skills, and allowed us to network in our community and school.

**Teamwork**

From the beginning, teamwork was an integral part of completing the project. The first challenge was deciding, unanimously, what our topic of research would be. Once we worked through this and discovered each other’s personalities, interests, and work style, the rest was relatively easy. Through teamwork, we used each other as springboards to test our ideas about creating a successful program and using a survey. Later, we each took a semester to lead the project and carry out the tasks that needed to be done. We were responsible for informing our teammates how the project was progressing, what we were doing, and what we wanted them to do. If we had tried to do this individually, we would have been overwhelmed. By uniting and working as a team, we were able to distribute the workload and accomplish the goals. We hope to build on this experience as we transition
into nurses and team leaders. Faced with managing our patient workload, our team building skills and ability to incorporate the ideas of others will make us productive members of the health care team!

**Research Process**

The nursing process and research process are a lot alike, and by carrying out our research project, we have sharpened our nursing skills. Just like we start by assessing our patients’ needs, our first step in our proposal was to conduct a review of literature to recognize an area in need of research. From this, we created research questions and hypotheses in much the same way we make nursing diagnoses and outcomes. Planning came in the form of creating a research design and methodology. In our case, we designed a survey with a theoretical basis that targeted African American churches.

Implementation of our project came in the form of getting approval from the Institutional Review Board, finding a church willing to participate, and providing them with surveys to hand out. Evaluation, an ongoing step in the nursing process, is ongoing in our research project as well. Survey results and recommendations from church leaders will be used to evaluate the survey’s efficacy and make necessary modifications. Each of these steps has to be done systematically, and the steps we use in the nursing process are no different. We have a new respect for the problem solving ability of the nursing process and recognize the importance of carrying this skill with us into our professional careers.

**Leadership**

Taking on a leadership role was imperative to recruiting participants, managing tasks, and gaining recognition for our project. Each member of our team was challenged to act in a leadership capacity as we presented our project at a research symposium and established partnerships with leaders in the area hospitals, nursing parish associations, non-profit organizations, and churches. During these interactions, we had to explain the vision for our study in an attractive and professional manner despite being inexperienced and a bit nervous. By sharing the role of head researcher among the four of us, we became skilled in delegation and management through real-world situations that could never have been achieved in a traditional classroom setting. When we apply for our first nursing jobs, our project will show our ability to lead others and manage an unfamiliar task, giving us that extra edge to help when competing for jobs. In addition to training to be competent nurses, we prepared to be leaders in our profession and work with other disciplines to achieve a common goal.

**Networking**

Stretching our abilities and taking on the challenge of performing a research study as undergraduate students provided the unexpected benefit of networking with faculty, other nursing students, and leaders in our community. Through working on our project, we had to meet with university faculty to receive approval to begin our study and to guide us through the process. This allowed us to take advantage of one-on-one mentoring from our teachers. We also networked with fellow nursing students to identify possible churches in the community and to share our success and promote undergraduate research. We reached out and partnered with our community through pastors, nurse leaders, and African American community leaders to recruit participants for our study. Through pursuing the opportunity to perform research, we have increased our skills and abilities in networking as well as expanded our professional relationships. We now have working relationships with nurses within our local community to call upon throughout our careers. Networking has provided us with additional
sources for support, mentoring, references, and outlets to reach the community while increasing our successes in nursing school and beyond.

As the body of knowledge in nursing expands, the need for evidence-based practice and research will be in greater demand than ever. Nurses at all educational levels will need to recognize areas in need of research and act as data collectors for further studies. In our opinion, by participating in an undergraduate research project, we have not only developed a useful survey for churches, but have advanced individually. We hope we have inspired you to think outside of the box in your own institution, and we encourage you to get the most out of your nursing school experience. You'll be one step ahead when you transition into the professional world of nursing!