

# The Role of the Evidence-Based Practice Project in Building Transformational Leadership Skills in Nursing

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## Abstract

Evidence-based practice in nursing assures patient safety and improved patient outcomes as they transition their role in nursing, master's-prepared nurses are expected utilize evidence to integrate theory and improve clinical practice, as well as continue to advance knowledge [1]. Within the graduate nursing curriculum, a final evidence-based practice project (EBPP) can provide students with the opportunity to gain experience and develop the needed leadership skill set to promote the evidence that leads to best practice within multiple settings. The knowledge and experiences gained also support the emergence of transformational leadership. The following article will examine the EBPP specifics at one academic institution, and its correlation with transformational leadership.

## Introduction

Transformational leadership, has been described as inspirational and is synonymous with high-performing teams [2]. Within the graduate nursing curriculum, a final evidence-based practice project (EBPP) can provide students with the opportunity to gain experience and develop the needed leadership skill set to promote the evidence that leads to best practice within multiple settings. Evidence-based practice in nursing assures patient safety and improved patient outcomes. As they transition their role in nursing, master's-prepared nurses are expected utilize evidence to integrate theory and improve clinical practice, as well as continue to advance knowledge [1]. The knowledge and experiences gained through the three semester sequence of the EBPP can support the emergence of transformational leadership as graduate students transition from the role of novice to advanced beginner and beyond in their clinical practice.

## Evidence-Based Practice Project

The EBPP for the nursing program at a public college in the north-east utilizes three sequential semesters of evidence-based practice coursework to provide the foundation for the students in the graduate programs. The culminating project not only provided insight into the EBP process but also provided the student with the opportunity to transition into the leadership capacity as project champion, coordinator or leader. This process was facilitated through faculty led lecture, class discussion, and on-line learning modules.

In addition, students completed writing assignments and engaged in peer review. The preceptor guided exploration of topics and planning of the project in the first semester. In the next semester the student's mentor guided implementation and evaluation. Finally in the third semester both the mentor and student directed their efforts at project dissemination.

Settings for the projects varied, as students were able to identify areas for change or improvement in many areas. Sites included primary and ambulatory care practices, federally qualified health centers, long term care facilities, family practice and pediatric offices as well as student health centers. Some students implemented practice changes at community and senior centers. Nursing academia was also considered with several projects implemented in both undergraduate and graduate programs, targeting didactic and simulation content.

The students in the program chose an evidence-based practice model, which was used to incorporate evidence and provided framework for the project. The model also provided support for problem-solving and a clinical decision-making tool. One option was the Johns Hopkins Nursing Evidence-Based practice model. This model was designed specifically for nurses and uses a three-step process called PET: practice question, evidence, and translation (Center for Evidence-Based Practice, n.d.). Another was the Iowa Model of Evidence-based Practice to Promote Quality Care

(Iowa Model). This process involves multiple phases for inquiry, critique of the current process, implementation of a process change, and evaluating the results [3]. The final model was the Evidence-based Process by Melnyk and Fineout-Overholt (2015) [4]. They created a seven-step progression for exploring a burning question, searching and critiquing the available evidence, integrating the evidence into practice, and finally evaluating and disseminating the outcomes.

### Project and Transformational Leadership

Students utilized leadership skills throughout the EBPP process as they evaluated their settings and stakeholders, adopted the role of a change agent and influenced outcomes at a systems level. These practices are supported by the Master's Essentials of Nursing, specifically in essentials II, III, IV and IX [1]. These skills are further developed beyond the scope of the project and support the transition to and development of transformational leadership. The theory of transformational leadership was first described by Burns in 1978 [5]. He differentiated leadership styles as transformational, which encouraged higher-level motivation and morality to improve, or transactional, which is reward-based compliance in a more rigid and structured setting. Transformational leadership can be considered as the most effective leadership style, as it extends beyond rewards-based compliance to engage the follower emotionally and intellectually [6]. Burns' theory was further explored by Bass (1995) and subdivided into four components, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration [7].

By engaging in assessing an area of need, implementing a process of change, and evaluating and presenting the results the students grew and transitioned their leadership skills. Students had to consider the needs of their organizations and build the trust and confidence of those involved, which helps to create idealized influence. Inspirational motivation was undertaken by engaging coworkers and other staff to consider the mission of the organization and involving leaders to participate in the suggested change. By challenging the current beliefs and suggesting innovation, the students encouraged intellectual stimulation. By showing care and concern for the organization and those involved, and empowering change, individualized consideration is fostered.

### Conclusion

The entire process to create, implement and evaluate the EBPP supports the development of leadership qualities in the graduate nursing students, specifically helping to create transformational leaders. Evaluation of the EBPP upon completion revealed that students did not immediately recognize their own growth in the process, and how their projects had inspired positive changes. In subsequent student cohorts it may be beneficial to discuss the progression in leadership skills to facilitate increased awareness and further engagement in development.

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