



# Development of a Department of Nursing Research in a Rural University College of Nursing

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## Article Details

Article Type: Research Article

Received date: 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2018

Accepted date: 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2018

Published date: 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2018

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**Citation:** Nies MA, Weaver MA, Damstrom E (2018) Development of a Department of Nursing Research in a Rural University College of Nursing. J Comp Nurs Res Care 3: 130. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jcnrc1100130>.

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## Abstract

**Aim:** The purpose of this paper is to discuss the development of a research department while growing research in a college of nursing, with undergraduate and graduate programs, in a rural area of southeastern Idaho, United States of America (USA). **Background:** The paper discusses types, functions, staffing, and support of research departments. **Results:** It is hoped that by sharing our journey, other institutions or entities, locally, nationally or globally, may identify some strategies as they consider building their own culture of research and their research departments.

**Keywords:** Research Department, Research Culture, Types of Research Departments

## Introduction

The College of Nursing (CON) at Idaho State University (ISU) is a small college of nursing, with undergraduate and graduate programs, and is located in a rural area of southeastern Idaho USA. The Idaho State University CON, in its most recent strategic plan, included the development of a department of nursing research. This paper will report this team's process in developing a research department while growing a culture of research to support Idaho State University CON's strategic plan. It is hoped that by sharing our journey, other institutions or entities, locally, nationally or globally, may identify some strategies as they consider building their own culture of research and their research departments.

There are a multitude of research departments throughout the nation and the world. Many are focused on areas such as law, business, biology, geology, psychology and other social sciences. Nursing, out of all these disciplines, is one that is not easily associated with research to most people. In fact, in the past, nursing specifically, when compared to the other scientific specialties, has been lacking in the productivity of research [1]. However, nursing research plays a vital role in enhancing patient care nationally and globally [2].

Research in the clinical field is one of the most important factors in furthering the ability to provide effective, high quality healthcare [3]. However, there is a gap in the awareness and need of research to impact patient outcomes. Many healthcare disciplines recognize the critical importance of research due to positive experiential outcomes[3]. However, to develop these attitudes and increase the awareness of research in the healthcare field, and nursing specifically,

it has to begin with faculty placing value on research and understanding the importance of research and scholarship.

The College of Nursing at ISU has made a commitment to the development of a department for nursing research. The formation of an Ad Hoc committee consisting of three faculty members (one experienced research director, one undergraduate faculty and one graduate faculty) was the initial step in this effort in direct response to a CON strategic initiative. There is an abundance of definitions as to what a research department is, how it is structured, whom it is comprised of, and how it works. However, the basic idea is that a research department is a structured entity comprised of faculty that conduct research pertaining to their specific area of inquiry. Faculty also facilitate instruction for that discipline, and its applicability to patient care, knowledge generation, and education for nursing students [4]. It is the duty of every discipline to close knowledge gaps by conducting research within that discipline to further the knowledge and develop an improved application for the clinical and educational world [1].

The Ad Hoc Committee made a concerted effort toward developing a plan to create a research department that was inclusive. Scientific methods which have applicability for undergraduate and graduate faculty and students will be implemented. In terms of research and evidence-based practice, quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, quality improvement, and program evaluation are possible approaches to the conduct of research within the department.

## Types and Functions of Research Departments

Departments come in a variety of types (or structures) depending on the facility in which it is located, whether within a hospital, a small university, or a research-driven, large university affiliated with a tertiary care medical center. Some will be fully structured with a separate space for the research department, while others will have neither a budget nor a dedicated work space. Many departments are funded by the facility to increase the participation of faculty research [4].

In a study conducted by Evans, Dienemann, and Dahlen [4], five different types of university research centers were identified and described. Two of the five described work solely on focused research programs, (standard and adaptive), and would most likely be situated in larger, singularly-focused research-driven universities. A shadow type of research center performs varied tasks with no budget or funding, often looked upon as a paper research department simply

because it is not in a concrete place where the research is conducted [4]. The bureau type of research center is one that receives funding normally through both internal and external sources. The last type is a disciplinary research center, where the department serves as a guide to faculty and possibly graduate students in conducting research [4]. Another study categorized types according to a few different aspects such as: 1) if they were able to house resources; 2) how specific their procedures were; 3) the consistency in their goals; and 4) the stability of the resources that would be available to reach their research aims [5].

Independent of the type of research department, another important component of nursing research is recognizing the places within the field where research should be conducted. It is vital, in the field of nursing, the research being explored is closing a gap in knowledge and/or making a contribution to advancing nursing practice within the field [6]. How different departments function to conduct nursing research is varied.

Evans and colleagues [4] explain the functions of a nursing research center as: 1) use of resources; 2) development of faculty; 3) student teaching; and 4) research dissemination. Each of these components building on one another is essential to be able to conduct research. One example given to illustrate available resources at research centers was a reference library which housed instruments, references, and manuals for funding sources.

Other components include strategic statements that consist of the plan and assessment of the research needs for that discipline [7]. Next, determining the research atmosphere at the specific university is essential to determining the type of research department that would be a good fit for the discipline and the university. While the type of research department depends on how research driven the university is; it is also dependent on funding and available space (if any) for the department, and staff [5].

The Idaho State University CON research department, in its infancy, can be seen as a disciplinary type of department with a focus on building a culture of research and motivating faculty and students. The ISU College of Nursing Department of Research has begun formalizing through a series of meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee creating a strategic plan, followed by presentations to all faculty for feedback during each step of the process. The department has a designated director who serves as an active, funded researcher, a reviewer, and a mentor. To start building a culture of research, the director has coordinated and hosted Research Brown-bag Sessions. These events, which have been scheduled conveniently at lunch time, before a mandatory faculty council meeting, have been well attended. The director sought faculty input on topics they wish to have presenters discuss during the brown bag sessions. Depending on the topic, the director will secure an expert or will address the session content. An advantageous outcome of the brown bag sessions is collaboration between researchers within and outside of nursing. A goal for the department is to expand space and personnel over the next five years.

### Staffing

As in any department there must be a lead or director. The same goes for a department of nursing research. The first member of the staff will be the department lead. Often this is the founder of the center or department, or someone with the drive and skillset to lead nursing research within a department or institution, as is the case for the Idaho State University CON research department. This director will take on many roles within the department, such as being the liaison between the department and higher administration, other departments, faculty, and any other entities that may meet with the research facility [5]. Depending on the type of research department, the role of the leader may vary slightly. In smaller centers, such as shadow centers, the department lead may have slightly different

responsibilities than large centers [5]. While a director of a nursing research department is important, faculty within the discipline of nursing are also very valuable. Without faculty involvement, most, if not all, of the research simply could not happen. Moreover, depending on the type of research department, the staff of this department could include other professionals such as a grant writer, biostatisticians, scientific editors and research associates [4], as well as support staff. Generally, the adaptive or shadow centers will not have a full-time staff supporting the director or faculty.

The professional staff are only a small piece of a research department. A huge driving force for a successful department is the participation of undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students. Any of these students could be assisting faculty with their research or benefit from faculty mentorship for their own research projects. Before recently, undergraduate research was not a significant part of the undergraduate curriculum, however times have changed, and undergraduates are expected to take part in research sometime during their educational career [8].

In the past, having a faculty mentor work with a student on their research question, was only accomplished with graduate students. Now this process of research mentoring is important for undergraduate students to explore as well. This inclusion in a research department could be done in many ways, depending on the university. For some universities, it could be an internship for undergraduate students where these students assist their mentor with the research they may be working on [8]. Our fledging department has incorporated this inclusive piece into its overall strategic plan, encouraging faculty to “find a place” for undergraduate students, throughout the research process, which includes dissemination. For example, undergraduate students work with faculty on their research projects and then develop and exhibit posters presenting the research project in which they participated. Currently, at our institution, undergraduate nursing students are required to take an evidence-based practice course wherein they apply the PICO (Problem/Intervention/Comparison/Outcome) Framework [9] to address issues identified in their clinical experiences. The local Sigma Theta Tau chapter sponsors a “Research Day”, focusing on undergraduate and graduate student presentations.

Another aspect of a nursing research department is faculty participation in interdisciplinary research. This could allow the individual to make their way into research scholarship even when it seems like nursing research is limited [10]. If a nursing research department exists on campus, this may not be an issue. However, even if nursing research is not necessarily limited, it can be invaluable to reach out to other disciplines to enhance the overall research project, not just nursing specifically [10]. Again, we have incorporated the interdisciplinary aspect of research into our strategic plan, encouraging faculty to “reach out” to other disciplines on campus as well as other institutions for collaborative efforts that will contribute to closing gaps in health-related knowledge.

Our experienced researcher has secured funding for a large, multi-year project working with refugees, as well as funding for work with a Latino/a population and prediabetes. Two faculty have been writing grants to try to secure funding for their research. We also have two faculty who have recently become members of an interdisciplinary research team at ISU that includes pharmacy, health economics, health informatics, anthropology, community/public health and nursing, focusing on rural health issues in our state. Besides partnering as a team for “local” projects the group is developing a collaboration with a major health foundation which will allow for broader research support and funding.

### Support for a Department of Nursing Research

Another important component is support. Questions about political, administrative, and financial support as well as grant-writing and

grant distribution are concerns for the growth of any research department. Infrastructure, innovation, and project support are needed as well. Each of these categories are essential to developing a flourishing nursing research department [7]. The director of the ISU College of Nursing research department position is funded by the CON. Dedicated office space within the CON makes for easy assistance and collaboration. One small office space is designated for a student intern for 20 hours per week. Assistance with grant writing is provided by the Division in which the CON is housed.

An additional component to developing a nursing research department is development of community partnerships in some form. It has been shown that community research capacity is one of the most important aspects of increasing research participation. Community capacity itself can be defined as the values, framework, and ways that a community identifies and copes with public health issues [11]. Bringing in community partners within a research department can help to increase that community capacity, and overall health of a community.

### Strategic Plan

No matter the type of research department, the development of strategic statements for the department is informed by the mission and strategic plan of the college of nursing, as well as the university. For the successful development of a department of nursing research, the strategic plan or initiatives are the most important. This one element of a research department encompasses the ability to adapt to the changing environment, ask new questions, and focus the research on the questions pertaining to that discipline that will be the most influential in that area, at that point in time [5,7].

At the Idaho State University CON the initiation of the process for formalizing a department of nursing research is well underway. Although we have had the presence of an experienced researcher designated as a director for nursing research for several years, our “department” has basically been a one-woman operation, until now. With the ISU College of Nursing’s most recent strategic plan the development of a department of nursing research was mandated. The Ad Hoc Committee began with addressing key strategic statements that are linked to the CON strategic plan. The faculty had an opportunity to provide input as to what they thought the department should do. This feedback was compiled into “themes” which informed the development of nursing research department-specific strategic statements. These statements were presented to the faculty who were given a feedback and comment period. It was determined by the College of Nursing Department of Research (CoNDoR) that the name of our department would be represented by a rising sun and condor logo (Table 1).

This was met with enthusiasm by the faculty. The next phase was formulating a five-year strategic plan/business plan which allows for growth, change, evaluation and future planning (Table 2). This plan was also presented to the faculty who were given a feedback and comment period.

### Summary

Nursing is a blend of art and science. There is a plethora of literature about the art of nursing which includes concepts such as caring, compassion, and empathy, to name a few. As the science of nursing has developed we recognized the importance of the art of nursing being evidence-based. The opportunity to develop a formalized



<b>Department of Nursing Research</b> College of Nursing Idaho State University
<b>“Combining the art and science of nursing”</b>
<b>Mission:</b> to prepare nurse leaders who integrate research and practice to enhance the quality of life for rural and diverse populations.
<b>Vision:</b> to be a distinguished Department of Nursing Research committed to blending research and practice with scientific inquiry and innovation.
<b>Strategic Statements</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Department of Nursing Research strives to develop a robust research program that serves to enhance the quality of life for rural and diverse populations.</li> <li>• The Department of Nursing Research supports the development of researchers at all levels within the College of Nursing from students to expert faculty.</li> <li>• The Department of Nursing Research includes interdisciplinary research opportunities that focus on a holistic approach for diverse populations.</li> <li>• The Department of Nursing Research fosters leadership in on-going research development at local, state, national and global levels.</li> </ul>
Ad Hoc Committee: Elizabeth Damstrom, UG representative; Mary Nies, Director of Nursing Research; Melody Weaver, Graduate representative
Meeting Dates: 2017-10/4; 11/1; 11/6; presented to Faculty Council 11/27/2017
CoNDoR  

Table 1. Describes the College of Nursing, Department of Nursing Research Mission, Vision and Strategy.

department of nursing research is an exciting one. As we have taken this journey we have learned many things about building the culture; different types and functions of departments large and small, visible and invisible; staffing variability; support; and even the process of writing strategic statements and a strategic plan, seeking full faculty support at each step of the process. It is our hope in sharing our

journey that others who are contemplating taking the first step toward a formalized process of contributing to the science of nursing will be guided in some way and encouraged to do so. There is no one-way or right way to create or develop your own research department. What is most important is having the passion to do so and proceeding in a manner of inclusivity. Success is on the horizon.

YEAR	STAFF/ DIRECTOR	STAKEHOLDERS/ CUSTOMERS/ COMMUNITY PARTNERS	ACTION ITEMS
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director</li> <li>• CPI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undergraduate and Graduate Faculty at Idaho State University College of Nursing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research Brown Bags</li> <li>• Mentoring by Director of Nursing Research</li> <li>• Information on grant opportunities</li> <li>• Use of Division grant writer</li> <li>• Use of College Statistician</li> <li>• Number of grants submitted/received database</li> <li>• Evaluate end of year 1</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director</li> <li>• CPI for Research</li> <li>• Administrative Assistant (If funding available)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graduate Students</li> <li>• Undergraduate Students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue above</li> <li>• Increase undergraduate and graduate involvement in research projects</li> <li>• Database for submitted and funded grants for faculty and PhD/DNP students</li> <li>• Consider R15 grants</li> <li>• Evaluate end of year 2</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director</li> <li>• CPI for Research</li> <li>• Administrative Assistance (If funding available)</li> <li>• Post-Doctoral Scholar (If funding available)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idaho State University interdisciplinary partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue above</li> <li>• Explore partnering opportunities</li> <li>• Explore fundraising opportunities for CONDOR</li> <li>• Evaluate end of year 3</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director</li> <li>• CPI for Research</li> <li>• Administrative Assistant (if funding available)</li> <li>• Post-Doctoral Scholar (if funding available)</li> <li>• Community Stake holder(s)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Stake holder(s) at the Local, State, and National levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue above</li> <li>• Explore community stake-holder partnerships</li> <li>• Dissemination of research</li> <li>• Evaluate end of year 4</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director</li> <li>• Maintain staffing levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue above</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability and continuing to increase grant funding</li> <li>• Plans for the next 5 years</li> </ul>

Table 2. Strategic Plan: describes the five-year strategic/business plan for the College of Nursing Department of Nursing Research. Lays out the corresponding information for staffing, community partners, and action items per year.

Ad Hoc Committee: Elizabeth Damstrom, UG representative; Mary Nies, Director of Nursing Research; Melody Weaver, Graduate representative

Meeting Dates: 2018 – 1/6; 1/22; 2/16 Presented to Faculty Council 2/26/2018

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