

**Sigma's 30th International Nursing Research Congress**  
**Strengthening the Rural Nursing Workforce Through Stakeholder Engagement**  
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A significant theory-practice gap exists among newly licensed undergraduate nurses (Leach, 2018; Spector & Silvestre, 2012). This inability to integrate academic learning within the clinical practice setting to support critical thinking and clinical reasoning is even more pronounced in rural settings than in urban settings. Nurses in rural practice have been termed “expert generalists” because patient assignments often include individuals across the lifespan and with divergent health conditions. Managing these patient assignments requires that nurses have a broad set of skills and knowledge (Armitage & McMaster, 2000; Hegney, 1996). However, undergraduate nursing programs do not adequately prepare students for the reality of rural nursing practice (Harmon, 2013; Paliadelis, Parmenter Parker, Giles & Higgins, 2017). Lack of preparation contributes to nurse burn-out, high rates of job turn-over among nurses in their first year of practice and nursing shortages (TCN, 2010). To prevent adverse patient outcomes associated with nursing shortages (Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalski & Silber, 2002) schools of nursing must implement strategies that bridge the theory-practice gap. The purpose of this quality improvement project was to employ a stakeholder engagement process to address the theory-practice gap.

This stakeholder engagement project was a collaborative effort between a school of nursing and a statewide health cooperative. The focus of the project, the theory-practice gap, emerged organically as a shared priority after reviewing salient issues identified by each organization. As the project progressed, existing networks to which the school of nursing and the health cooperative belonged were used to identify additional stakeholders to involve in the process of designing the project. Through consensus, key stakeholders elected to approach the problem of the theory-practice gap by soliciting perceptions about readiness of student nurses and newly licensed nurses for rural nursing practice. To capture specific and relevant information, data were collected using surveys and semi-structured interviews. The sample included senior nursing students, nursing faculty and staff, as well as nursing staff and nursing leaders from the health cooperative member organizations. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative survey data whereas thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative interview data.

The stakeholder engagement approach was well-received by all stakeholders and participants. Given its collaborative nature, the greatest time investment was in planning. Initial discussions began in April 2018 and the project was approved by all stakeholders and initiated in September 2018. Use of existing networks allowed for rapid recruitment of participants, with data collection completed in November 2018. Scheduling individual on-site interviews reduced the burden of participation which was perceived by participants as a gesture of value and respect. In order to obtain specific and rich findings however, data collection was tailored for all groups, requiring that three versions of the survey and interview question guide be made. This only added time for analyzing the survey data as the interview data were analyzed as a whole.

Stakeholder engagement is a powerful method for identifying and addressing shared priorities, like the theory-practice gap, between schools of nursing and healthcare organizations. With thoughtful planning, stakeholder engagement can provide rich, context-specific findings that allow partners to implement realistic and feasible strategies to tackle complex issues that affect patient health outcomes.

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**Title:**

Strengthening the Rural Nursing Workforce Through Stakeholder Engagement

**Keywords:**

Proficiency, Rural nursing workforce and Stakeholder engagement

**References:**

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**Abstract Summary:**

Participants will learn strategies for implementing a stakeholder engagement process designed to strengthen the rural nursing workforce by bridging the theory-practice gap. Strategies for employing existing networks and harnessing local strengths will be emphasized.

**Content Outline:**

Introduction

- Theory-practice gaps among undergraduate nursing students and newly-licensed Registered Nurses are widely reported in the literature
- Gaps are more pronounced in rural settings given need to be "expert generalists"
- Gaps contribute to nursing workforce shortages in rural settings, particularly burn-out within the first year of practice
- Shortages compromise patient safety and health outcomes
- Link between staffing shortages and adverse patient outcomes has been established in the literature

- Stakeholder engagement is a strategy that has been used to address the theory-practice gap in nursing
- Describe stakeholder engagement process that emphasized use of existing networks to address practice-theory gap
  - Focus on undergraduate nursing students
  - Identify strategies to improve confidence and proficiency as an "expert generalist;" the ability to provide care for an assignment of diverse patients with a variety of health conditions

#### Body

- Stakeholder engagement
  - Definition(s)
  - Historical applications in education
  - Applications in nursing education
- Description of process - elaborate with details from this project
  - Clarifying purpose
    - Why you want to engage in stakeholder engagement process versus other method of addressing problems (personal/professional motivation)
    - End-product desired (learn method, produce specific kind of product, etc.)
    - General areas of interest but not a focused question
  - Evaluate timeline and resources
    - If time-bound, is stakeholder engagement feasible or realistic
    - Is travel likely and can this be accommodated
    - Size and composition of investigative team
  - Identify and engage stakeholders
    - Contact key stakeholders in area of interest
    - Early discussions to identify salient issues
    - Identify existing networks
  - Narrow focus and identify question/issue
    - Driven by stakeholders
    - Aligned with mission, vision, values of stakeholders
    - Consensus on question/issue
  - Identify methods for addressing question using stakeholder input
    - Surveys, interviews, existing literature, etc.
    - Identify groups or individuals to recruit based on expertise/experience
    - Determine sample size or procedure for sampling
    - Specify actions/activities (attend board meetings, deliver presentations, etc.) as part of recruitment or data collection
  - Clarify and specify role(s) of stakeholders and investigators in project
    - Develop timeline that includes touch-points
    - Discuss process for revising approach if needed
    - Identify strategies for validating and disseminating findings
    - Develop communication plan among investigators and with key stakeholders
  - Carry out actions/activities
    - Make it convenient for the participants (date, time, location)
    - Revise timeline/approach as needed
    - Keep key stakeholders informed of progress - should be no surprises in findings

- Data analysis and interpretation
  - Use analysis appropriate for the method and type of data collected
  - Use member-checking when appropriate (to clarify and verify)
  - Interpretation must come directly from the data
- Report/Disseminate findings
  - Degree of consistency in message across all stakeholders
  - Tailor specifics to each audience
  - Disseminate findings to all stakeholders in a form that is useful for them
  - Objective, accurate findings delivered with tact
- Process evaluation
  - What went well
  - Lessons learned
- Conclusion
  - Stakeholder engagement can be used to develop relevant and feasible strategies to address the theory-practice gap
  - Use of existing networks promotes dialogue and facilitates individual engagement
  - Employing qualitative and quantitative methods results in rich, actionable findings
  - Careful and deliberate planning is critical to success

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**Author Summary:** Jennifer began studying rural health issues as an undergraduate nursing student. She brought her interest of rural health to nursing education in 2010 and continues to advocate for issues salient to rural populations.