Health Policy Institute (HPI): Capitol Hill Experiential Learning to Gain Political Astuteness
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Background
It is imperative that nursing graduates understand, and can collaboratively advocate for health policy that benefits patients, families, and communities. Evidence suggests a disparity between health care providers' attitudes and experiences with health policy advocacy. Nurses exhibited poor enthusiasm and understanding regarding the political health policymaking process (Boswell, Cannon, & Miller, 2005). Salvador’s (2010) study of 347 Registered Nurses indicated that while 73.5% had participated in up to two health policy-related activities, 26.5% reported no participation at all. More importantly, 68.8% reported receiving no health policy education. Of those who did have health policy education, 66.7% rated it as poor (Salvador, 2010), elucidating a need to strengthen experiences.

Primomo’s (2007) definition of political astuteness is an “awareness and understanding of legislative and policy processes, and political skills” (p. 260). To quantify graduate students’ policy prowess, she utilized an adapted Clark’s (1984) Political Astuteness Inventory (PAI) in a health policy course, as well as among students attending a state legislative day (Primomo & Björnig, 2013). Both studies found significant improvement in political astuteness scores following events focused on health policy advocacy.

Experiential Learning
In August, 2016, five James Madison University Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) students attended the School of Nursing’s first Health Policy Institute (HPI) in Washington D.C. In May, 2017, seven DNP students attended the second HPI on Capitol Hill, spending one intensive week living and working on Capitol Hill as part of their practicum experience. They were each assigned a mentor at the federal policymaking level. Students worked for Senator Kaine’s office, completed assignments for Congresswoman Comstock’s office, worked with the American Nurses Association, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the Institute for Public Health Innovation, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and American Association of Home Health and Hospice public policy divisions. The second HPI occurred during a historical week with students witnessing the passage of the House Health Care Repeal/Replace Plan (American Health Care Plan), Sally Yates’ testimony, and FBI Director Comey’s firing. During both HPIs students met essential health policy components for their doctoral education and provided reflective narratives linked to DNP policy focused American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Essentials.

Assignments
- Students selected a federal health policy issue and analyzed it based upon course objectives/AACN Essentials.
- Students complete a reflective log of their week-long experience. (40-45 hrs).

Outcomes
Student Narratives: 2016 HPI
- “I personally was amazed at the level of recognition and respect that the AACN receives on Capitol Hill. I realize that this is the result of years of hard work and policy promotion, but they have been able to prove through evidence that these workforce development programs have paid off. The public has supported nursing efforts even through budget cuts and other services requesting appropriations.”
- “This was the most beneficial and life changing experience….the highlight of my entire DNP program.”

Student Narratives: 2017 HPI
- “I feel through my work and experiences here at the Health Policy Institute, I have become competent in the process of health care policy and advocating for healthcare on a federal level.”
- “I came into this experience feeling intimidated and unsure, but I am leaving with confidence and the motivation to do more as a nurse to advocate health policy, not only in my local community, but for all Americans.”
- All participating students self-reported an increase in knowledge and comfort level related to healthcare political advocacy.

Meeting AACN DNP Essentials:
- Critically analyze health policy proposals, health policies, and related issues from the perspective of consumers, nursing, other health professions, and other stakeholders in policy and public forums.
- Influence policymakers through participation at the federal level to improve healthcare delivery / outcomes.
- Educate policymakers (all levels), regarding nursing, health policy, and patient care outcomes.
- Demonstrate leadership in the development and implementation of institutional, local, state, federal, and /or international health policy.
- Advocate for the nursing profession with policy and healthcare communities.
- Develop, evaluate, and provide leadership for healthcare policy shaping financing, regulation, and delivery.
- Advocate for social justice, equity, and ethical policies within all healthcare arenas.

Discussion
In a complex health care environment, this interprofessional health policy immersion experience participating directly with policymakers on Capitol Hill enhanced graduate nursing students’ awareness and understanding of political skills and the legislative process. Students reported transformative activities and events. All student policymaker mentors reported providing learning experiences that enhanced student knowledge, skills, and comfort levels with current political environments focused on healthcare. More formalized study would be beneficial to the continued evaluation of the effect of this type of experiential learning to improve political astuteness.

Conclusion
Health care professionals have often lacked the knowledge, experience, and /or underestimated their ability to educate legislators on the value of healthcare, health care professionals, and healthcare-based need for policy change. Implementing interprofessional experiential experiences to improve political astuteness may prove to enhance health care professional’s likelihood of influencing policy change in the future.