Health Policy Institute (HPI): Capitol Hill Experiential Learning to Gain Political Astuteness

Melody K. Eaton, PhD, MBA, BSN, RN, CNE  
Nursing, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA
Linda J. Hulton, PhD, RN  
School of Nursing, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA

Abstract

Introduction and Background:

It is imperative that nursing graduates understand, and can collaboratively advocate for health policy that benefits patients, families, and communities. Evidence suggests a historical disparity between health care providers’ attitudes and experiences with health policy advocacy. Physicians’ perceptions of the importance of their role in political advocacy indicates that though 91.6% specified that political involvement was important, only 25% were politically active (Gruen, Campbell, & Blumenthal, 2006). Among nutritionists only seven percent reported being highly active in the policymaking process, while 44% declared no involvement (Boardley, Fox, & Robinson, 1999).

Nurses also 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 Registered Nurses who had received health policy education, 66.7% rated it as poor (Salvador, 2010). 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’ political astuteness, an adapted Clark’s (1984) Political Astuteness Inventory (PAI) was employed in a health policy course, as well as among students attending a state legislative day. Both studies found significant improvement in political astuteness scores following experiential learning events focused on health policy advocacy (Primomo, 2007; Primomo & Bjorling, 2013).

Capitol Hill 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., and in May, 2017, seven DNP students attended the second HPI on Capitol Hill, spending one intensive interprofessional 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 Act, AHCA), 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 College of Nursing (AACN) Essentials. During the 2016 HPI One student assigned to work with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) on Title VIII funding reported, “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.” Another student expressed, “this was the most beneficial and life changing experience….the highlight of my entire DNP program”. One 2017 HPI student really summed up the experience, “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. Additionally, policymaker feedback related to the students’ level of participation was positive.

Meeting AACN Essentials (AACN, 2006):

Analyze the environment and process of policy making at the federal level within the context of health policy.

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 policy makers through active participation at the federal level to improve health care delivery and outcomes.

Educate others, including policy makers at all levels, regarding nursing, health policy, and patient care outcomes

Conclusion and Implications:

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.

Title:
Health Policy Institute (HPI): Capitol Hill Experiential Learning to Gain Political Astuteness

Keywords:
Experiential Learning, Health Policy and Political Astuteness

References:


**Abstract Summary:**
The Health Policy Institute provides an immersive experience working and living on Capitol Hill. DNP student participants’ self-reflections indicate an increase in political astuteness.

**Content Outline:**

1. **Introduction and Background:**
   a. Education on health policy advocacy to date. Where we have been and where we need to head.
   b. Political Astuteness Meaning.
   c. Current Political Environment
2. **Health Policy Institute Experiential Learning:**
   a. Capitol Hill emersion
   b. Health Policymaker Mentor Criteria
   c. Project and Assignments
   d. Group and Individual Experiences
   e. Reflective Narratives
3. **Student Outcomes:**
   a. Meeting American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Essentials
   b. Student Reflections
   c. Mentor Feedback
4. **Conclusions//Implications for Nursing Education and Practice**

**First Primary Presenting Author**

**Primary Presenting Author**
Melody K. Eaton, PhD, MBA, BSN, RN, CNE
James Madison University
Nursing
Professor and Program Director
Department of Nursing
James Madison University
Harrisonburg VA
USA

**Professional Experience:** Dr. Eaton has studied the effectiveness of home health care related to a
change in health policy, and is published on this related topic in The Journal of Nursing Administration, and Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice. Her most recent political astuteness research is accepted for publication in Nurse Educator. Dr. Eaton served in the role of Chair for the Legislative Coalition of Virginia Nurses for two terms, focusing on grassroots lobbying for nursing education funding and her advocacy work is also published in Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice. Her interest in health policy stems from work with health care reimbursement in different delivery systems and recognizing the drivers for health policy cost, quality and access to care. She recognizes the fact that our legislators need our assistance in understanding what health policy changes mean to practice and patient care.

**Author Summary:** Dr. Eaton served in the role of Chair for the Legislative Coalition of Virginia Nurses for two terms, and her advocacy work, along with research on rural health policy, is published in Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice. Her most recent political astuteness research is accepted for publication in Nurse Educator. Dr. Eaton’s vision is to bring students, faculty, and the greater community (all stakeholders) together to guide health policy decisions.

Second Secondary Presenting Author

**Corresponding Secondary Presenting Author**

Linda J. Hulton, PhD, RN
James Madison University
School of Nursing
Professor
Harrisonburg VA
USA

**Professional Experience:** Dr. Hulton has 20 years of nursing higher education experience. She has authored multiple grants and publications related to rural underserved communities and interprofessional (IPE) graduate nursing education. Most recently, she served as Doctor of Nursing Practice Coordinator with James Madison University and has played a key role in the development and implementation of the Health Policy Institute.

**Author Summary:** Dr. Linda Hulton received her BSN in Nursing from Roberts Wesleyan College and her Ph.D in Nursing from the University of Virginia. Her evaluation research focus is on Healthcare for the Homeless Programs, and Interprofessional Care. Past awards include the CISAT Distinguished Teacher from JMU, Alger Family Endowment Award for Community Outreach, and Provost Award for Excellence in Graduate Advising. In 2016, she was awarded the Virginia Nurses Foundation Leadership Award for Nursing Research.