Identifying Strategies for Addressing Perceived Barriers to Education for Pre-Licensure Male Nursing Students

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**Background/ Significance:** According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), male nursing students comprise approximately 11.7% of pre-licensure nursing students (AACN, 2015). It has long been understood that under-represented students have different lived experiences regarding their education when compared to other nursing student colleagues. Evidence suggests this includes male vs. female nursing students (Carrigan & Brooks, 2016; Sedgwick & Kellett, 2015). Experiential differences most often cited in the literature include an inability to relate to common teaching strategies, exclusion from clinical experiences, gender bias by faculty and instructors, expectations for a specialty selection other than bedside nursing, and a general lack of acceptance by female peers and faculty (Kirk, O’Lynn & Ponton, 2013). In addition, male nursing students have also expressed concerns about the perceived lack of masculinity associate with caring for patients, and a fear of touching patients as barriers not faced by their female counterparts (O’Lynn, 2013). These perceptions of gender-based differences create barriers to a successful educational experience in both the didactic and clinical settings (Hodges, et al, 2017).

In order to create an academic environment that is conducive to the specific educational needs of male nursing students, it is essential to understand gender-based differences of the students’ educational experience. It is also critical to identify strategies to overcome these barriers. Current literature, however, does not suggest strategies to create a more equitable learning environment for male nursing students in a pre-licensure nursing program. These strategies could significantly contribute to the development of a multi-modal approach addressing gender-based educational barriers, ultimately transforming the educational experience (Carnevale & Priode, 2017).

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to identify strategies to enhance the educational experience of male nursing students while in pre-licensure nursing programs, through minimizing gender-based barriers to learning.

**Sample:** Convenience purposive sampling of male nursing students enrolled in an Accelerated Bachelors of Science in Nursing (ABSN) program resulted in eight participants for this study. Inclusion criteria for participants included being a male in nursing academia in the final semester of their program of study and providing informed consent. Exclusion criteria included non-males in the final semester of the ABSN program, and not wanting to participate in the study.

**Methods:** This study utilized a descriptive qualitative methodology (Sandelowski, 2000). Participants were asked to participate in one, two-hour focus group. To facilitate ease in discussing gender-sensitive topics, the session was facilitated by a male principle investigator (PI), who was not involved in the participants’ program of study. After consent was obtained, the participants received an evidence-based list of educational barriers to pre-licensure nursing education, identified in the literature as being specific
to male nursing students. Participants were asked to select the three barriers that had the greatest impact on their education. The participants were then asked to place these three into one of seven categories of barriers most commonly described in the literature. This method offered and opportunity for better engagement with the participants, and allowed for multiple concepts to be broken down into component parts and prioritized according to their relative value to the participants (Last & Shelley, 2017). Structured, predetermined discussion questions were used to guide the conversation and data collection. Supplemental field notes were also taken to capture both verbal and non-verbal responses.

**Analysis:** An audio recording of the focus group was transcribed. The transcript was coded by the four study PIs. These raw units of data were condensed into sub categories and then emerging themes.

**Results:** The 8 participants ranged in age from 22-44. The majority did not identify as Caucasian. All had previous college degrees in other disciplines. Of the possible 24 educational barriers presented by the focus group, collectively the categories of Lack of Role Models/Isolationism, Feminine Nursing Education, and Negative View of Men in Nursing contained the most participant selected barriers.

Five themes emerged from the focus group’s discussion surrounding strategies for minimizing the challenges experienced by pre-licensure male nursing students. These themes were: Increasing male faculty presence, opportunities for male-to-male support, recognition of gender-driven incivility by students, faculty behavior and communication that demonstrate gender inclusivity, and development of a gender-balanced curriculum. Very quickly, a theme began to emerge around the male faculty role. PIs agreed upon seventeen separate points in the focus group where participants mentioned or spoke of the need for more male faculty presence in their program. These discussions lead to a consensus within the focus group that strategies should be put into place to both recruit additional male faculty, and to increase the utilization of existing male faculty and clinical staff in the pre-licensure program. The most surprising finding was the existence of a significant issue surrounding gender associated incivility toward the male students by their female colleagues. On twelve separate occasions, participants referenced the need for faculty to recognize hostile behaviors towards male students by female students, and solutions to address this incivility were described. These included having faculty intervene at the time of hostility, and training for faculty and students around this issue.

**Conclusion:** Pre-licensure nursing programs are challenged to respond to public and government campaigns focused on increasing the diversity of the healthcare workforce. In order for the discipline of nursing to mirror the population at large, it is important to develop strategies to overcome gender-based barriers encountered by male students in nursing education (Campaign for Action, 2017). Targeted and intentional interventions are needed to create formal mentorship opportunities, provide gender sensitivity training for both students and faculty, and facilitate faculty-student discussions around incivility between genders. These strategies could offer timely and critical means to address key issues which negatively affect educational experiences of men in nursing, helping to attract and retain a more diverse nursing workforce.

**Title:**
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**Keywords:**
barriers, male nursing students and strategies

**References:**


**Abstract Summary:**
A focus group was conducted to identify strategies to overcome barriers to male-student education in a pre-licensure nursing program. Five themes emerged: Increasing male faculty presence, opportunities for male-to-male support, recognition of gender-driven incivility by students, faculty behavior and communication that demonstrate gender inclusivity, and development of a gender-balanced curriculum.

**Content Outline:**

1. Introduction:
   a. Background & significance
      i. Learning differences for under-represented student populations
      ii. Barriers to male nursing students
         1. Commonly described barriers
         2. Types of barriers
      iii. Interventions to facilitate learning for male nursing students
   b. Purpose
i. Gain further understanding of specific issues, barriers, and challenges that male nursing student’s experience while enrolled in a pre-licensure education
ii. Identify strategies to enhance the educational experience of male nursing students while in pre-licensure nursing programs, through minimizing gender-based barriers to learning

2. Methods
   a. Sample
   b. Focus group design and implementation
   c. Coding

3. Results
   a. Demographics
   b. Categories of barriers identified by participants
   c. Emerging themes
   d. Specific strategies suggested

4. Discussion
   a. Overview of five themes
      i. Development of themes
      ii. Associated strategies
      iii. Specific interventions
   b. Male faculty role
      i. Development of theme
      ii. Targeted interventions identified in literature
   c. Gender-driven incivility amongst students
      i. Development of theme
      ii. Targeted interventions identified in the literature

5. Conclusion
   a. Pre-licensure nursing programs will need to respond to external pressure to increase diversity of students
   b. It will be important to identify strategies to overcome gender-based barriers encountered by male students in nursing education
   c. These strategies could help to attract and retain a more diverse nursing workforce

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