The Research-Focused Doctoral Program in Nursing: Pathways to Excellence Position Statement

Executive Summary

With the goal of articulating a preferred vision of PhD education in nursing, the AACN Board of Directors created the Research-Focused Doctoral Program Pathways to Excellence Task Force in March 2020. The Board identified the need to advance strategies for maintaining quality in research-focused doctoral programs, stimulate strong interest among students in the nursing PhD, and support the advancement of nursing science. The task force was charged with revising AACN's 2010 position statement on *The Research-Focused Doctoral Program in Nursing: Pathways to Excellence*. To complete its charge, the task force considered trends in higher education, nursing education, nursing research, other health professions research, and career trajectories for research scientists, faculty, and other leadership roles. The task force also worked to identify criteria for excellence in the research-focused doctoral programs, identified pathways to the PhD, delineated resources needed to sustain quality nursing programs, and outlined expectations for post-doctoral programs.

The work of the task force and its recommendations were guided by a review of the published literature from 2010-2020; surveys of deans with research-focused doctoral programs and PhD students at 147 member schools, and three AACN documents: the *Research-Focused Doctoral Program in Nursing: Pathways to Excellence* position statement (2010), *AACN's Vision for Academic Nursing* white paper (2019), and *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education* (2021).

The new position statement sets forth the expectations and recommendations to meet the growing demand for nurse scientists who can develop the science, steward the profession, and educate new nurse researchers. These overarching recommendations, which build on the previous *Pathways to Excellence* position statement, are grounded in the literature, reflect innovations and emerging areas of science, and are intended to advance research-focused doctoral education in nursing. This position statement is *not* intended to move PhD programs toward accreditation by a national nursing accreditor or serve as an *Essential*s for PhD nursing programs. There also is no intent to establish specific curriculum requirements/design or to advise programs on what faculty should be hired to contribute to the advancement of team science and the preparation of future nurses.

The task force has made recommendations in three focus areas – Students, Faculty, and Curriculum and Evaluation. The student-focused recommendations include strengthening the recruitment and retention of diverse students in PhD in nursing programs; elevating the importance of mentorship, economic support, and counseling for a variety of career paths; and monitoring student progression as tactics to support timely program completion for all PhD in nursing students. As future stewards of the profession, PhD nursing students should be prepared

to analyze and articulate the social and political contexts that shape health inequities and possess the leadership skills needed to lead change. Programs must be intentional about providing the necessary support to ensure student success and retention, including specific strategies to meet the needs of international students.

In addition, faculty are expected to utilize diverse pedagogical activities and translate nursing knowledge across educational degree programs as well as with colleagues in practice. To advance the discipline, it is important to connect and engage both PhD faculty and students, with nurse learners, particularly those in honors programs, across the educational trajectory. Specifically, PhD programs should focus on recruiting students from BSN, MSN, and DNP programs who bring with them a natural sense of curiosity and interest in research to guide them towards a career as a nurse scientist.

The position statement calls for faculty with diverse expertise in their areas of research specialty as well as an active program of research. Faculty should lead by example as they prepare and mentor PhD students. The position emphasizes continued recruitment and retention of diverse nurse scientist faculty, which affirms and expands on recommendations from the *Future of Nursing 2020-2030* report (NASEM, 2021). New recommendations include a biannual assessment of faculty recruitment and retention strategies, and an assessment of the cultural climate in the school/university in which the PhD program resides, as well as dissemination of the assessment outcomes to PhD program faculty.

The final section on curriculum and evaluation provides recommendations for preparing PhD program graduates to engage in the scholarship of discovery and scientific inquiry into clinical and socially relevant phenomena. The position calls for curricula that reflect evolving areas of science and technology, including data science, systems science, implementation science, translational research, and improvement science. The impact of the 2021 AACN *Essentials* on PhD nursing education is considered along with recommendations for successfully transitioning baccalaureate program graduates to PhD study and opportunities for collaboration between PhD and DNP programs. The section culminates with recommendations related to conducting a comprehensive program evaluation and developing a systematic evaluation plan.

The position statement also features an expanded section on post-doctoral education, including the preferred characteristics (institutional, mentor, and fellow) of a robust post-doctoral fellowship program. Recommendations related to core curriculum in post-doctoral programs are featured.

The *Research-Focused Doctoral Program in Nursing: Pathways to Excellence* position statement offers a new vision for the PhD in nursing and program graduates. The task force was committed to incorporating the latest evidence, data, and stakeholder feedback into this statement, which was developed to provide guidance to faculty, deans, programs administrators, and prospective graduate students who will serve as future scientists, faculty, and leaders.