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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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Graduate nursing students' writing proficiency: Survey of faculty perspectives and academic active inertia

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ABSTRACT

Background and objectives: In the last two decades, enrollment in doctoral programs in nursing has increased dramatically. Completion of these advanced degrees is being hampered by prevailing weaknesses in a key competency that is critical to graduate nurses' ability to successfully complete their graduate program: academic writing proficiency. These weaknesses endanger the success of graduate nursing programs and the nursing profession's ability to meet its primary professional obligation: advancement of scientific knowledge through professional publications, policy briefs, business cases, and innovative, evidence-based projects. This research aimed to determine the national nursing faculty's perceptions of graduate nurses' writing skills and techniques used to improve their writing proficiency.
Methods: The authors employed a descriptive online survey design to examine perspectives on the state of writing proficiency in graduate nursing programs in a nationwide sample of 2,234 faculty members. Statistical analyses included the calculation of percentages for all categorical variables and means, standard deviations, and ranges for continuous variables.
Results: The survey results describe a myriad of pervasive weaknesses in graduate nurses' writing and the limited effectiveness of techniques used to improve writing skills.
Conclusions: The article concludes with an association between writing problems in nursing and the concept of active inertia in academia and suggestions for advancing this growing concern to the top of nursing's agenda and training nursing faculty.

Key Words: Graduate nurses, Writing proficiency, Active inertia

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Enrollment in doctoral programs in nursing has increased dramatically in the last two decades. Completion of these advanced degrees is being hampered by prevailing weaknesses in a key competency that is critical to graduate nurses' ability to complete their graduate program: academic writing proficiency. These weaknesses endanger the success of graduate nursing programs and the nursing profession's ability to meet its primary professional obligation: advancement of scientific knowledge through professional publications, policy briefs, business cases, and innovative, evidence-based projects. This article describes the results of a national survey sent to over 2,000 graduate nursing faculty nationwide and their perspectives on the state of writing proficiency in graduate nursing programs.

In response to the calls from the Institute of Medicine (IOM)

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(2011) and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2017)[1] for more nurses with advanced expertise, enrollment in doctoral programs in nursing has increased dramatically in the last two decades. By 2018, AACN reported that there were more than 300 DNP programs in the United States and almost 30,000 DNP students.[2]

In 2020, 9,158 nurses earned DNP degrees, and 759 nurses earned Ph.D. degrees – both made possible by the growth of doctoral programs, which now include 357 for the DNP degree and 80 for the Ph.D. degree.[3] The increased enrollment in graduate studies has stressed the nation's nursing faculty, who now guide large numbers of nursing students through advanced graduate studies that culminate in either the Ph.D. or DNP degree. Both degrees require graduates with advanced doctoral degrees to complete graduate dissertation research or scholarly papers and to contribute to nursing science through publications, presentations, etc.[4] These contributions to science by graduate nurses are significant and unique because, as suggested by Roush in 2017, they are developed from both scientific evidence and clinical practice.[5, 6] However, knowledge dissemination in nursing is challenged by poor writing proficiency, evidenced early in graduate education.

The experiences of graduate program faculty with students' weak writing skills mirror findings in the literature that have highlighted an ongoing problem in nursing.[7–9] This weakness is experienced by nursing graduate students on a daily basis and evidenced by the very time-consuming, frustrating process of repeated review and rewriting of multiple draft documents – largely without appreciable progress – and with significant delays and failure to meet critical requirements and timelines. Complaints from graduate program faculty nationwide suggest that poor writing skills account for many nursing students struggling and/or failing in courses that require significant writing.[10] The end result translates into limited success in publishing research and evidence-based practice findings,[11] prompting Naber and Wyatt (2014)[12] to recommend that writing needed to be included in all nursing programs. Even the WHO (2016)[13] identified communication as a key nursing competence and, similar to recommendations by Oermann et al. (2015)[14] and McQuerry (2017),[15] emphasized the need for dissemination of clinical practice initiatives to the profession and other stakeholders.

Publishers and editors have also noted nurses' weak writing skills and have reported being exasperated when reviewing articles submitted for publication by nurses. Unpublishable articles appear to be a trend across the entire nursing publication industry, suggested Kennedy (2014).[16] These writing deficiencies appear to reflect Lea and Street's (2006)[17] early

research on graduate student writing, which noted the lack of clarity and logical flow, faulty organization, spelling and word usage errors, and generally poor construction of the narrative. These writing shortfalls continue today when graduate school faculty generally find themselves failing to make any significant progress in improving student writing performance.[18]

In the past, faculty have voiced concerns that the intense writing requirements in graduate nursing programs cause significant student stress and discouragement among students.[19] Such distress can cause viable candidates to drop out of their graduate programs because of their poor writing proficiency. Cone and Van Dover (2012)[19] suggested that these students may not have received the appropriate support or instruction to write well, or they may lack the interest and willingness to do so. They also noted that few nursing graduate programs required students to complete a writing course prior to or during their academic journey. More recently, Hampton et al. (2022) suggested that "screening applicants for writing ability at entry could result in an unnecessary exclusion of qualified applicants whose writing, in need of development, is consistent with students nationally" (p. 7).

Other factors affect graduate nursing students' success in graduate school. One is the challenge faced by many adult students whose life commitments include a myriad of family, financial, and work responsibilities.[20] While the faculty may consider poor writing skills an important problem, Seurkamp (2007)[21] reported that some graduate students believed that their busy schedules did not allow for time to continually revise written assignments and that faculty expectations for repeated revisions surprised them. Thus, in academic institutions today, writing deficiency is no less than a major issue.[22] This study aimed to describe nursing faculty perspectives on the state of writing proficiency in graduate nursing programs. Understanding the magnitude of this issue as perceived by graduate nursing faculty may generate an academic call-to-action.

2. METHODS

A standardized online survey was designed to elicit nursing faculty perceptions of the technical writing proficiency of graduate nursing students. Powered by SurveyMonkey, the online survey included 26 questions that collected sociodemographic data and perceptions of nursing students' writing ability. SurveyMonkey securely transmits collected data over a Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure (HTTPS) connection; user logins are protected via Transport Layer Security (TLS).[23] Demographic data included items such as academic faculty rank, years of experience as an academician, type of program format experience (online vs. on-campus),

and dissertation/evidence-based practice (EBP) project chair or reader experience. The remaining 18 questions elicited perceptions of graduate students' writing skills, faculty expectations, and approaches for enhancing students' writing proficiency. These items were developed by the authors. As newly-developed items, the authors elicited the assistance of six graduate faculty experts for validation of the items. The faculty reviewed the items for representation of items related to graduate nursing student writing proficiency, relevance and clarity. Based on feedback regarding the review, items were revised and reforwarded to the faculty to validate appropriate revisions and establishment of survey content validity.

The survey required approximately 7 minutes to complete; participant access to the survey constituted participant informed consent. There were no expected risks or discomforts (physical, psychological, emotional, or economic) from completing the survey. Survey responses were anonymous. No personal identifiable information (PII) was collected, and only aggregate results were reported. The survey was approved by The Catholic University of America Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The survey included the following operational definitions:
1) Student technical writing ability – the ability or proficiency to convey information clearly and concisely defined by using higher order thinking, grammatical correctness, logical flow, and correct adherence to required style guidelines such as APA, MLA, and Vancouver.
2) Student ability to convey content clearly and concisely and to demonstrate higher order thinking – defined as the ability to demonstrate critical analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
3) Writing proficiency requirements – defined as the ability to consistently submit course assignments at the level of writing proficiency expected by the course professor.
4) Faculty-developed curricula specific to technical writing improvement – defined as lectures, PowerPoint slides, videos, assignments, and related testing designed to enable students to convey information clearly, and concisely and use higher-order thinking, grammatical correctness, logical flow, and adherence to required style guidelines.

The survey was distributed online via email using Survey-Monkey to 2,234 nursing faculty who teach in nursing doctoral programs. This email list was obtained by randomly sourcing graduate nursing program faculty from universities nationwide.

Following survey completion, data were reviewed for accuracy and completeness. Since less than 1% (0.86%) of the data was missing, the authors did not implement a missing data management strategy. Frequencies were completed to identify errors, and all errors were corrected prior to the descriptive analysis. Analyses included the calculation of percentages for all categorical variables and means, standard deviations, and ranges for continuous variables.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Sociodemographic data
A total of 170 faculty members of a nursing program responded to the survey; approximately 70% of the respondents held the rank of associate (40%) or full professor (30%). Years of academic faculty experience ranged from 3.5 to 44 years, with the experience of those at the associate or full professor rank ranging from 13 to 44 years. The majority of respondents (68%) taught in DNP programs, while 37% taught in Ph.D. programs, with a significant portion (63%) also teaching in MSN programs. The majority of faculty who taught in the MSN programs taught between 1–6 graduate-level courses per academic year. A total of 53% used both online and in-classroom formats; 37% taught courses online, and only 10% taught courses on campus. The number of faculty who have served as Chair or Reader for dissertations and/or EBP projects varied according to the years of service, with the associate and full professor groups being the majority. The number of faculty publications, which ranged from 18 to 100, mirrored the years of service, with most publications credited to the associate and full professors.

3.2 Perspectives on writing
The respondents rated their own writing ability very highly, with 81% ranking their personal writing proficiency as either "exceptional" (23%) or "highly proficient" (58%). In contrast, the faculty offered alarmingly weak ratings for the different dimensions of the graduate nursing students' writing proficiency. Ninety-nine percent of the faculty noted that some or most of the time, graduate student papers contained grammatical errors such as incorrect sentence structure, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, punctuation misuse, and incorrect word selection. Conversely, 91% of the faculty noted that graduate students offered evidence of careful proofreading to eliminate writing errors either "most" or "some" of the time, with 9% of the faculty indicating that students provided no evidence of proofreading before submitting an assignment. Ninety-six percent (96%) of the faculty admit to deducting points "most or some of the time" for technical writing deficiencies in submitted course assignments, while 4% never deduct points. One respondent commented via email about student writing proficiency, stating that she no longer serves as a Chair or Reader for EBP scholarly papers: "I quit being an external reader after being on an EBP defense that was so poorly written and riddled with errors that I decided I could only ethically do this again if I agreed with

the school's (poor) writing standards".

Fifty-one percent of the faculty indicated that student papers demonstrated adherence to the required style guidelines "some of the time," with 46% "all of the time," and 4% indicated "never". Sixty percent of faculty noted that "graduate students overuse weak verbs, i.e., the passive voice or be verbs, as opposed to the active voice or use of strong verbs "most of the time," and 40% of the faculty indicated "some of the time". Most faculty (80%) do not encourage their students to use Microsoft Word's Readability Statistics (MWRS) function as a tool to reduce passive voice use, and verify reading ease at the graduate level or reading grade level prior to submitting an assignment. Only 8% require the use of this tool "most of the time", and 22% suggest its use "some of the time". Of the faculty who require the tool, 82% set no student targets for the three MWRS functions.

Seventy percent of faculty noted that graduate students clearly, concisely, and logically conveyed content in response to assignment questions "some of the time," while only 28% responded "most of the time". A high percentage of the faculty (86%) require graduate students to demonstrate "higher order thinking" skills (critical analysis, synthesis, evaluation) in written assignments, although faculty reported that students fail to demonstrate these skills consistently.

For example, 78% of the faculty stated that graduate students demonstrate these critical skills only "some of the time" when entering their doctoral programs, and only 66% of the faculty indicated doctoral students were able to demonstrate these critical skills "most of the time" at the conclusion of their doctoral program.

3.3 Writing resources

Most of the faculty (85%) reported that their schools provided a standard lecture, written guidelines, or policies/procedures for graduate students on approaches for avoiding plagiarism. Despite this, the faculty respondents stated that only 40% of graduate students fully understand what constitutes plagiarism "most of the time," and another 55% "some of the time".

Almost all (92%) faculty respondents were teaching at schools with a Writing Center that offered support for graduate students who needed to improve their proficiency in writing. Despite this availability, 77% of respondents advise students to secure the assistance of a professional editor either "most" or "some" of the time, and 82% of faculty advise graduate students who speak English as a second language to seek editorial assistance always or some of the time. The faculty also expressed their opinions about requiring admitted students to successfully complete a technical writing course prior to beginning their doctoral program. A majority (67%) believe such a course would be helpful, 25% were unsure of the course's value, and 7% indicated that they had no interest in such a requirement.

Figure 1 illustrates key survey findings; Figure 2 highlights sociodemographic data, faculty perspectives on student writing, and academic writing resources.
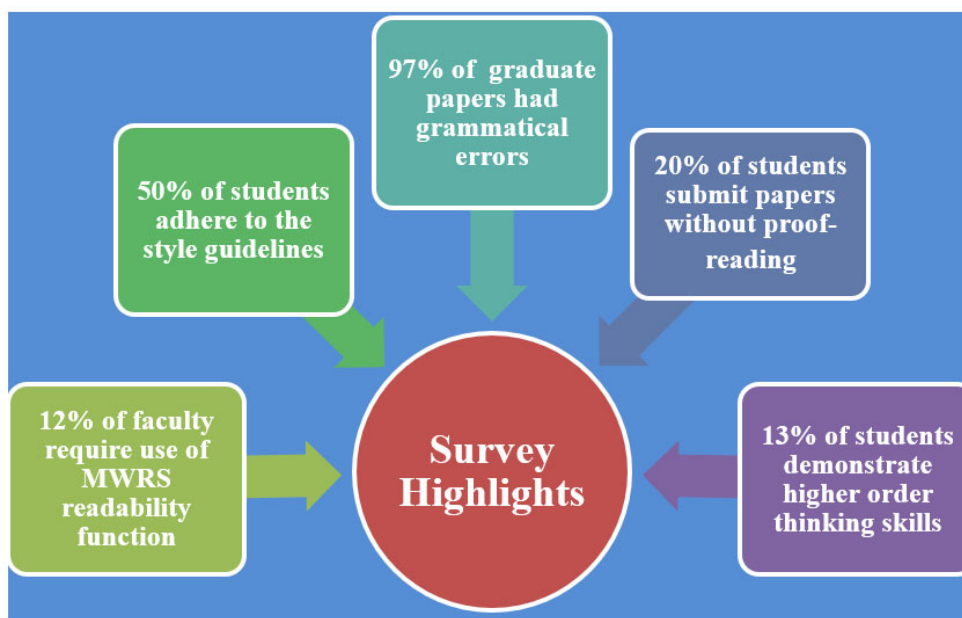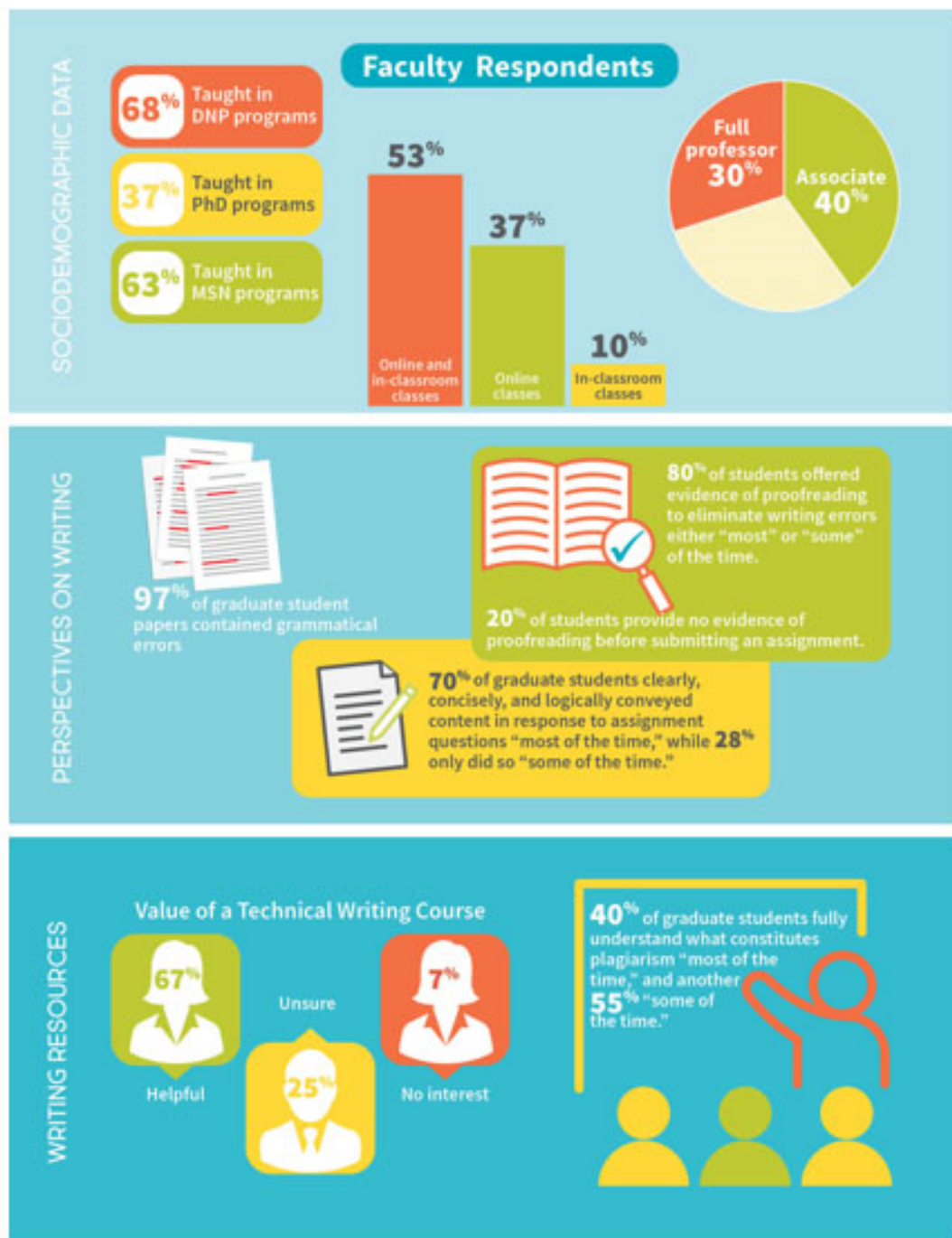

Figure 1. Key survey highlights

Figure 2. Faculty Respondent Sociodemographic Data, Perspectives on Student Writing, and Academic Writing Resources

4. DISCUSSION

Despite the low response rate of less than 8%, the results of this survey provide fresh insights into the nature and extent of writing problems in graduate nursing students, and the ongoing threat this problem presents for graduate nursing education, as illustrated in Figure 1. This issue and the potential remedies that are readily available are certainly not new. For example, in 2015, Oermann et al. reviewed 80 articles on programs and/or strategies to improve writing in basic and graduate nursing programs.[14] These approaches included teaching strategies, writing courses, and a variety of writing and other learning activities. Oermann et al.'s review highlighted strategies that had the potential to alleviate the challenges of poor student writing skills, such as university writing centers equipped with tutors and writing improvement sessions, collaboration with librarians, peer review during class sessions, faculty feedback on written assignments, and writing workshops and courses. Unfortu-

nately, Oermann et al.[14] found that the learning outcomes of these improvement initiatives often fell short of actually improving the nurses' writing ability. Some outcomes included the number of manuscripts submitted for publication, or the level of student satisfaction with a specific writing intervention, while only one-third of the improvement initiatives specifically evaluated writing skill improvement as a learning outcome. While many students take advantage of the support systems, evidence from the field suggests that few students show the willingness to invest the sweat equity necessary to engage in learning and practice the "messy," challenging process of writing at a scholarly level.[10]

4.1 Active inertia

It is possible that graduate nursing education may be in a quandary that resembles one of the most common business phenomena many successful companies face. As innovative competitive environments change, they frequently fail to respond effectively and find themselves unable to retain market share and outperform competitors. Victims of this phenomenon include Firestone Tire and Rubber and Xerox – even McDonald's and Apple.[34] Firestone notably enjoyed seven decades of continuous growth beginning in the 1970s and finally reached the top of the tire industry in the United States. In their narrow view, they believed that their major challenge related to producing enough tires to satisfy the needs of Detroit automakers. Their success created the "Firestone family" based on company values, solidly loyal managers, and openness to all employees. Despite strong company values and a sense of company unity, everything changed almost overnight. Michelin, a French company, created a more economical and longer-lasting radial tire that dramatically improved safety. While Firestone responded quickly, investing millions (billions in today's dollars), it adhered to its old production processes and delayed factory redesigns. Active inertia had gripped the company, and impending obsolescence lay ahead. Executives and managers forced the competitive market information to fit existing the existing company paradigm, essentially ignoring it entirely.

As the 1970s unfolded, Xerox lumbered down the same path by focusing on two competitors – IBM and Kodak – and negating the Canon and Ricoh upstarts.[34] While small companies demonstrated interest in the novel high-quality compact copiers, Xerox plodded along, solely focusing on its traditional, more significant company business. Once Xerox acknowledged the potential scale of the threat and took evasive action, it was too late. Despite its patented technologies and apparently insurmountable defenses, Xerox could not overtake the successes of Canon and Ricoh, let alone compete in the technology explosion ignited by the market

entrance of the personal computer. Again, active inertia was in play as the new innovative opportunities rested far outside Xerox's strategic portfolio. The company, like Firestone, had developed an infrastructure that worked quite well and locked that process in place, thereby blinding themselves to alternative opportunities. In short, once a process becomes routine, employees at all levels never consider alternative processes and active inertia sets in.[34]

Sometimes market changes are so slight that company leaders hardly notice the changes until it is too late. "Gradualism" sets in, and small changes in a market environment or system gradually add up to a big and sometimes catastrophic impact at a later time. Jaju, for example, cited recent examples in business: individuals who lost millions in the stock market crash (2007–2009) because they missed the early warning signs and the many businesses that missed the signs that competitors had created winning substitute products such as business cards versus LinkedIn.[24] Active inertia had set in.

In 2020, Rivera reported on leaders' slow response to disasters and concluded that the leaders may have ignored or missed the cues; underestimated the threat; been unable to identify the root cause; or found it difficult to overcome the gravitational forces that maintain the status quo.[25] In addition, Rivera suggested that leaders may have had both a bias toward short-term solutions and an "illusion of control" (p. 1). Whatever the root causes, the leaders were slow – active inertia – to act in the face of disaster.

Another interesting aspect of active inertia is what scientists call "normalization". In his report on the climate change research conducted by Moore et al. (2019),[26] Dockrill (2019)[27] concluded that "humans are sailing unfazed into a dire-looking future of irreversible climate change", and given "they face unprecedented climate change, we are normalizing the weather temperatures, and not realizing how truly bad things have become", Dockrill said (p. 2).[27] Moore and colleagues found the normalization of worsening weather conditions similar to other reports of deteriorating biodiversity and ecosystem health. Moore et al. suggested that the normalization process can be very subtle and may mask the severity of the change and weaken both the public's concern and any public policy efforts designed to combat the change (p. 4909).[26] Active inertia emerges again.

4.2 Implications for nursing

The findings of this survey of nursing faculty reaffirm that the reported ongoing problems with writing in graduate nursing education[10] continue today. Despite the good news of more resources being available for improving nurses' writing skills,[18, 28, 29] there is an impending threat to the profession.

The weakness in writing, which has become more acute with the rapid growth of doctoral programs in nursing, has the power to endanger the success of graduate nursing programs and the profession's long-term ability to meet its professional obligation to advance scientific knowledge.

At this point, it may be apropos for us to ask if the nursing profession is suffering from normalization. Has weakness in writing become the active inertia in nursing academia? Has the profession accepted poor writing as the norm while it focuses resources and energy on building graduate education programs? If so, beyond doing additional, repetitive surveys about writing, how can we create a sense of urgency that can be a catalyst for policy change in the nursing profession?

For some possible answers, it is helpful to conclude this article by turning to the classic multiple streams framework by Kingdon.[30,31] Kingdon's well-known comparative policy research set forth a fairly simple, practical formula of three "streams" that are synergistic in their collective power to affect policy agendas. There must be a problem that has either caused a crisis or has been highlighted by feedback that has garnered significant attention. In nursing, the survey results presented here, together with the large literature on writing problems in nursing, have provided that type of feedback to the profession's leadership. Weak writing skills are a significant problem in the profession. Stating the obvious – without widespread awareness of a problem, leaders and policy analysts cannot advance a policy agenda.[32]

Kingdon's second stream is the solution stream, in which thought leaders and analysts examine the presenting problem, assess possible remedies, and propose feasible solutions. In nursing, there has been some, albeit limited, root cause analysis of the writing problem. A number of practical solutions have been proposed, such as writing centers, writing workshops, use of professional editors, and peer review – although the impact of these approaches on writing competency has been inconsistent and not well studied.

The third and final stream is the political stream. According to Béland and Howlett, "the political stream comprises factors that influence the body politic, such as swings in national mood, executive or legislative turnover, and interest group advocacy campaigns" (p. 222).[32] Kingdon concluded that "windows of opportunity" for policy changes arise only when "The separate streams of problems, policies, and politics come together at certain critical times. Solutions become joined to problems, and both of them are joined to favorable political forces" (p. 12).[31]

In the years ahead, it is uncertain if the nursing community will view the current situation with chronic writing problems in graduate education as a window of opportunity or as a nagging "normal" problem indicative of active inertia. More than ten years since the Institute of Medicine[33] issued its report The Future of Nursing. Leading Change, Advancing Health, this seminal report, which was expected to usher in "the golden age" of nursing, positioned more than three million nurses as trusted caregivers at the bedside and as front-line activists, change agents, and leaders in the healthcare reform movement. As described in this article, so much progress has been made in graduate education in nursing. But concerns remain. Will nursing act by recognizing that success triggers active inertia and active inertia triggers failure and place writing proficiency at the top of nursing graduate education for the decade that lies ahead?

5. Summary

This article provided an overview of results generated from a national survey regarding graduate nursing student writing proficiency and faculty perspectives on the subject. Discussion regarding the implication of writing proficiency problems in graduate nursing education centered on addressing academic "active inertia", a key challenge in addressing graduate student writing shortfalls. The authors offer suggestions for advancing this growing concern to the top of nursing's academic agenda.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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