

Perceptions of Liberal Education of Two Types of Nursing Graduates: The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice

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The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 1998), which defines the expectations of a new baccalaureate-prepared nurse, includes a liberal education as a desired outcome for bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) graduates. A liberal education is thought to provide the professional nurse with the skills needed to practice nursing, including critical thinking, effective communication, collaboration with others, appreciation of diversity, and integration of knowledge from science and humanities in order to solve problems. According to the AACN, a liberal education prepares nurses to broaden their scope of practice by providing them “with a better understanding of the cultural, political, economic, and social issues that affect patients and influence health care delivery” (2003, para. 4). Additionally, a liberal education helps current students make connections between prior learning and new clinical situations (AACN, 1998). In short, a liberal education enhances professional practice.

Although a liberal education is thought to enhance practice, we know very little about how it enhances practice or how BSN graduates perceive the relationship between their liberal education experiences in college and their nursing practice. This question is complicated by the fact that the BSN may be achieved in two ways. A BSN may be earned in totality through a baccalaureate-granting

college or university, or the BSN may be earned through a registered nurse/bachelor of science in nursing (RN-BSN) program, also known as an RN completion program. RN-BSN programs enable the licensed registered nurse with a diploma or associate's degree to complete a baccalaureate degree in nursing. Both types of program include a liberal education component; however, the pursuit of liberal education occurs differently in the two programs. In the BSN program, liberal education is integrated with nursing education throughout the degree program, while in the RN-BSN program the courses are completed in a somewhat disconnected way. That is, RN-BSN students typically enter the BSN program having completed most of their nursing course work. The focus at the baccalaureate-granting institution, therefore, is on meeting the liberal education requirements for the BSN. This difference in the liberal education experience suggests that differences may exist in the ways that RN-BSN students and BSN students draw on their liberal education backgrounds in their nursing practices.

Research has shown that there are numerous misconceptions of the meaning of a liberal education. Hersh (1997) found in a survey that most high school students (86 percent) and most parents of future college students (73 percent) could not define a liberal education. Hagerty and Early (1993) found that RN-BSN students had difficulty defining the term as well. In nursing education, in particular, there has historically been disagreement on how to define the term (Hagerty & Early, 1993; Zaborowska, 1995). However, a report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2002) attempts to clarify the meaning of a liberal education by providing the definition as follows: "A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility" (p. 43). The report concludes that a liberal education is the appropriate way to prepare learners for the challenges that will be faced in the twenty-first century because it is this type of education that teaches students to communicate, interpret research, be creative, handle change, appreciate diversity, and work collaboratively.

A large cooperative study by leaders in higher education describes the following outcomes as a necessary part of a college education for *all* undergraduate majors: knowledge of human culture and the natural world, including sciences, mathematics, humanities, and arts; intellectual and practical skills, including written and oral communication; critical and creative thinking, quantitative and informative literacy, teamwork, and integration of learning; and individual and social responsibility, including civic engagement, ethical reasoning, intercultural knowledge and actions, and an inclination toward lifelong learning (AAC&U, 2005). These outcomes are thought to be necessary for college graduates to live and work in a world that is changing rapidly. Yet these outcomes are difficult to measure in the present system of higher education.

A liberal education is said to be an essential component of the preparation of professional nurses (AACN, 1998). *The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice* (AACN, 1998), which defines the expectations of a new baccalaureate-prepared nurse, states that a liberal education provides “a solid foundation” for nursing practice (p. 7). *The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice* defines liberal education as “an integrated educational experience, recognized and valued as an ongoing, life-long process. Courses in the arts, sciences, and humanities provide a forum for the study of values, ethical principles, and the physical world as well as opportunities to reflect and apply knowledge gained to professional practice” (p. 7). While specific course requirements vary, the AACN asserts that nursing students benefit from the general education core adopted by most colleges and universities and considers the interactions and collaboration with students and faculty in other disciplines as a beneficial aspect of liberal learning.

Because their liberal education and professional courses are not completed in an integrated fashion, it may be difficult for RN-BSN students to draw meaningful connections between the learning achieved through liberal education and their clinical experiences. The lack of integration may also make it difficult for RN-BSN students to understand the meaning of liberal education courses, which may affect their involvement and effort, diminishing liberal education gains. These RN-BSN and prelicensure BSN graduates may differ in the meanings they assign to a liberal education.

Given the association between a liberal education and professional nursing, it is critical to understand the similarities and differences in how RN-BSN and BSN graduates draw on their liberal education backgrounds to solve problems in nursing practice. This study therefore examined (a) how BSN graduates perceive the relationship between their liberal education experiences in college and nursing practice, (b) how RN-BSN graduates and prelicensure BSN graduates differ in these perceptions, (c) what meanings practicing BSN nurses assign to their liberal education experiences in college, and (d) how RN-BSN and prelicensure BSN graduates differ in the meanings they assign to liberal education.

Methodology

Critical Incident Technique

The critical incident technique and open-ended written interviews were used to collect data for this study. First described by Flanagan in 1954, critical incident technique has its roots in research studies that were conducted with the armed forces during World War II. The technique has become more widely used since

the 1980s, when qualitative methods regained popularity in the social sciences (Norman, Redfern, Tomalin, & Oliver, 1992). Flanagan (1954) describes the critical incident technique as a “flexible set of principles” rather than a “rigid set of rules” (p. 335). Following this approach, this study used a modified form of critical incident technique in combination with other data-collection methods.

Participants

The participants for the study were baccalaureate graduates from a large school of nursing in the southeastern United States. At the time of the study, the university enrolled approximately seventeen thousand students and was classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a comprehensive doctoral institution with high research activity. The school of nursing at the university has both undergraduate and graduate programs, offering the BSN, master’s in nursing, and Ph.D. in nursing. The BSN program includes both a prelicensure and RN-BSN program. The prelicensure program has approximately 1,971 students enrolled, while the RN-BSN program has 190 students. The RN-BSN program is offered on campus, as well as at two outreach locations. Participants were selected from this school because it uses a nursing curriculum for the RN-BSN program that is different from the prelicensure BSN program curriculum.

Criteria for inclusion in this study, in addition to having a baccalaureate degree, included having a current valid license to practice as a registered nurse in a U.S. state, having graduated between the years 2002 and 2006, and having at least six months of experience as a registered nurse. Graduates of multiple class years were included in order to provide a better representation of the program and account for any curricular changes that might have occurred in the school and the university. Graduates who were licensed practical nurses prior to degree completion were excluded from the study because of the effects that their earlier educational preparation and work experiences might have had on the findings.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the university’s Office of Alumni Affairs, which sent 535 recruitment letters via e-mail to all members of the graduating classes from the years 2002–6 for whom valid e-mail addresses were available. The recruitment letters invited the graduates to complete an electronic questionnaire by accessing a secure Web site. The link to the Web site was provided in the e-mail. The letters also included the purpose and overview of the study, as well as necessary contact information should the participants have questions. Institutional Review Board approval was received for the study. Participants were informed in the e-mail of their rights as research subjects, including confidentiality and the right to discontinue the questionnaire at any time.

Data Collection

The electronic questionnaires included demographic items, such as program type, years of practice as a registered nurse, practice setting, gender, and approximate age. The questionnaire, using semistructured questions, also asked participants to reflect upon their nonnursing courses taken in college. Questionnaire items included positive and negative aspects of nonnursing courses taken while in college. Finally, the electronic questionnaire asked participants to describe a specific event in practice in which they solved a problem utilizing their liberal education background. The questionnaire was developed with the assistance of a qualitative researcher who had experience with the critical incident technique and a nurse educator who was familiar with the curriculum of the program the participants attended.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of content analysis, which involved using a set of codes to determine similarities and differences in the data collected (Morgan, 1993). The actual words of the participants (Creswell, 2005) were used to create the coding scheme. Contrary evidence, or text segments that were in opposition to other data (Creswell, 2005), was included in the coding in order to understand both the positive and the negative perspectives of the participants.

Validity Measures

Measures to ensure validity (Creswell, 2003) included gathering rich, descriptive data (Maxwell, 1996) from a large number of participants, unlike traditional qualitative studies, which tend to have small samples. Further, the fact that the participants wrote their own stories and responses ensured that the data were factual and not transcribed incorrectly.

In addition, as suggested by Flanagan (1954), a second person reviewed all of the data, not just the critical incidents, and gave input into the coding process. When the second reviewer raised questions about the coded text segments, discussion occurred until 100 percent agreement was reached.

Results

Demographics

A total of 128 electronic questionnaires were returned through surveymonkey.com. Of this number, thirty-six were incomplete, three were excluded because the participants had been employed as licensed practical nurses, one was excluded

because the participant had only been a registered nurse for four months, and one was excluded because the participant had not graduated between the years of 2002–6, leaving a total of eighty-seven usable questionnaires. Table 1 shows the demographics for the prelicensure and RN-BSN groups.

TABLE 1 Demographics of Participants

Variable	Type of Graduate	
	Prelicensure	Registered Nurse– Bachelor of Science in Nursing
Total Usable Surveys	35	52
Program Location	n/a	
Campus		30 (58%)
Outreach		20 (39%)
Prior Degree		
Associate’s Degree	1 (3%)	
Bachelor of Science/ Bachelor of Arts	6 (17%)	
Master in Business Administration	1 (3%)	
Associate Degree in Nursing		43 (83%)
Diploma		5 (10%)
Bachelor of Science		1 (1.9%)
Gender		
Female	33 (94%)	50 (96%)
Male	2 (6%)	2 (4%)
Age		
18–25	14 (40%)	1 (1.9%)
26–34	18 (51%)	13 (25%)
35–44	1 (3%)	15 (28.8%)
45–54	2 (6%)	18 (34.6%)
≥55	0	5 (9.6%)
Years of Practice		
Range	1–5.5	2–40
Mode	2.5 (17%)	8/10 (7.7%)
Mean	3	14

(continued)

TABLE I (continued) Demographics of Participants

Variable	Type of Graduate	
	Prelicensure	Registered Nurse– Bachelor of Science in Nursing
Practice Setting		
Hospital	27 (80%)	33 (64%)
Doctor's Office	3 (9%)	3 (6%)
Home Care		3 (6%)
School of Nursing		1 (2%)
Health Department	2 (6%)	
Outpatient Clinic	1 (3%)	3 (6%)
Other	1 (3%)	(15%)
Urgent Care		1
Hospice		1
Case Management		1
School Nurse		2
Early Intervention		1
Occupational Health		1
Disease Management Company		1
Graduate Student		1
Primary Role		
Patient Care	32 (94%)	34 (65%)
Administration		3 (6%)
Education	2 (6%)	11 (21%)
Other		(6%)
Case Management		2
Data Collection		1
Healing Touch Practitioner		1

Prelicensure Graduates' Themes

The responses of the prelicensure graduates were eloquently stated in terms of the perceived benefits of liberal education course work to nursing practice.

Ability to Communicate and Relate to People. The most commonly cited theme, the ability to communicate and relate to people, was evident in a variety of

situations, with co-workers, patients, families, and other disciplines. One respondent said: “I can relate with people better. I have something that I can put patients and family at ease with. We all feel better when we have some connection, some ‘familiarity’ with the people caring for us or our family. Even if my knowledge is rusty or minimal on a topic, it allows people a way to connect and expand a relationship outside of the present situation.”

Global Thinking and Well-Rounded Knowledge Base. An overall theme among the prelicensure graduates was that their liberal education made them well rounded and led them to think globally. Participants also said that their liberal education helped them to broaden their horizons and think outside of the box. Participants seemed to support the idea that it is important to have a broad base of knowledge and to understand aspects of the world other than nursing. For example, they said:

It means that I have an understanding of the world I live in and my place in it. It means that I was presented information and ideas that not only helped shape me as a person, but challenged my desire to be a nurse. I chose nursing as I learned about a myriad of topics, most of them very interesting and exciting on some scale. If I had found something that was more enticing, I could have easily changed my goals, my major, my path. I chose nursing even with hundreds of other options.

I think they helped me to think outside of the box, be more open-minded, and see the big picture in my nursing practice.

It helped me to be a more globally knowledgeable person. This helps me gather and apply new information in the ever developing field of nursing.

Academic Growth. Academic growth was another theme among the prelicensure graduates. Many spoke in general of the benefits of liberal education course work to their nursing practice, while others mentioned specific courses and the benefits they provided to them in practice. For example,

They just made me a more educated person. Yes [they were helpful].

Yoga is helpful in nursing because it helps me to remember body mechanics when working 12 hour shifts.

Acceptance of Diversity. Feeling culturally competent in providing care was another common theme among the prelicensure graduates. These participants

noted the importance of understanding other cultural beliefs and practices in order to provide appropriate care. They said,

I think my religion class helps, because I can better understand patients and their beliefs. Their belief system affects their health practices.

I became more culturally competent after completing my BSN. I am more tolerant of others and have more patience.

Allows me to see my patients in a more holistic manner; many classes were not related to nursing specifically however were related to interpersonal activities and understanding cultures beyond my own.

Participants experienced personal changes, stating that they were more tolerant and had a new ability to acknowledge beliefs that might differ from their own.

A Way to Advance and Improve Self. Some of the prelicensure participants recognized that one of the roles of a liberal education is to provide a full educational experience and assist them to have better career opportunities. One participant responded as follows: “Makes me a more well-rounded individual and provides the opportunity to easily continue my education or advance my career.”

Critical Thinking. Some of the prelicensure graduates explicitly stated that critical thinking was necessary to solve problems in their nursing practice, while others simply implied that they used critical-thinking skills acquired in the BSN program. The following response indicates the participants’ use of critical-thinking skills acquired while in their BSN programs: “There has been many many times I have encountered situations that are very tough. I think my education [in college] taught me to think ‘outside the box.’ Recently I had a patient who required a ‘spacer’ in the use of her asthma medications. This plastic devices are very costly and outside this patient[']s means. By thinking ‘outside the box,’ the patient and I constructed one with a toilet paper tube, some flexible plastic and tape. Our home-made spacer wasn’t beautiful, but it got the job done. These types of experiences make me realize that my practice as a nurse is to ‘meet the patient where they are.’”

Contrary Evidence. Contrary findings included the following:

No. I think most of them [liberal education courses] were a waste of time.

Not meaningful

Clearly these participants saw no benefit of their liberal education course work in their nursing practice. However, even those who said that their liberal education course work was not meaningful included positive statements in other questionnaire responses.

RN-BSN Graduates' Themes

The RN-BSN responses were analyzed in the same manner as those of the prelicensure graduates. The categories that emerged were similar to those discovered in the prelicensure responses (see Table 2).

Professional/Personal Growth. Professional and personal growth was the predominant theme among the RN-BSN graduate responses. These graduates spoke to the attributes of the professional nurse, including skills such as relating to other disciplines, organizational skills, and competence with computers. Personal gains were also mentioned by these graduates. For example, they said:

Some of the courses I can relate back to learning but I think it mostly opened different perspectives and ideas to help when relating to other disciplines.

Most helpful. I took a wonderful course related to cinema. Since then I haven't looked at a movie the same.

TABLE 2 Comparison of Themes for the Two Groups of Graduates

Theme	Prelicensure	Registered Nurse– Bachelor of Science in Nursing
A Way to Advance and Improve Self	X	X
Ability to Communicate and Relate to People (Patients, Co-workers, and Others)	X	X
Academic Growth	X	X
Acceptance of Diversity	X	X
Critical Thinking	X	
Global Thinking and Well-Rounded Knowledge Base	X	X
Professional Decision Making/Critical Thinking		X
Professional/Personal Growth		X

Ability to Communicate and Relate to People (Patients, Co-workers, and Others). The RN-BSN graduates cited improved communication with patients and co-workers as a benefit of the BSN degree, for example:

I am able to be conversant on a number of subjects, which often is helpful in making a connection with patients and their families.

You are able to relate to others better and understand others better.

These responses seem to reflect a deeper type of communication than simply speaking or writing in an articulate way. The graduates used phrases like “relate to” and “connect with” to describe how they used their new communication skills. These participants also acknowledged that an aspect of communication is understanding differing perspectives.

Acceptance of Diversity. Being more accepting of diversity and increasing their cultural competence also appeared to be deeper for RN-BSN participants than merely being knowledgeable of other cultures. These responses indicate that the RN-BSNs experienced a change in their attitudes and feelings about diverse cultural groups and were not just knowledgeable but more accepting:

My Non Western Religion course is helpful when I have taken care of persons of non Christian faiths. I feel I have a better understanding of the whole person and the family.

I took American History—20th century. I am more knowledgeable about how the events of that time frame affect our lives today. I am also better able to relate to patients/families from earlier generations because I am more familiar with the culture and events that they have experienced.

Academic Growth. Academic growth was another theme that emerged among the RN-BSN graduates. These participants provided specific courses that had been beneficial to them in practice, including

Foreign language, Religion

Ethics, computers

Introductory Statistics

Because more information was not provided, it is not possible to conclude how these courses were beneficial to practice; however, it is worth noting which courses were perceived as most helpful.

Global Thinking and Well-Rounded Knowledge Base. Global thinking and a well-rounded knowledge base were also perceived by the RN-BSN graduates as being useful to their nursing practice. Using words like *broader outlook* and *well-rounded*, these participants perceived that their liberal education helped them see things in a holistic way. For example,

Helpful in the aspect that I am a more rounded person as a result.

Helped to broaden my mind and stir up other interests.

Nursing draws from many areas. The liberal courses helped me to develop a more global view of life. Cultural competency is a word I see frequently. Without our liberal courses I feel that it is easy to develop a skewed view of life.

An appreciation for the diversity in the world, especially as it relates to health care. Health care encompasses much more than the physical body. It is about the whole person and the environment in which the person is involved. Having a liberal education opens your eyes to a broader world.

A Way to Advance and Improve Self. The idea that earning a bachelor's degree will open doors and provide more choices is historically thought of as a motivator for RNs to return to school. It appears that is still true, as shown by the responses of RN-BSN graduates:

Better employment opportunities, good role model for my children

More career mobility and marketability as well as personal fulfillment.

Professional Decision Making/Critical Thinking. RN-BSN graduates provided critical incidents that reflected an increased ability to think critically and make professional decisions. For example, "To support the need for a new medical office I took the lead to convince others through a proposal based on my knowledge as the subject matter expert. My nursing practice is now housed in

a very spacious modern setting with 2 treatment rooms and an office. Perhaps I did benefit from that Philosophy class after all. I think Deming helped me out on this one.”

Contrary Evidence. Like the prelicensure participants, few RN-BSN participants negatively assessed their liberal education, as demonstrated by the few negative responses. Specific negative responses were these:

Interesting—do not think it makes me a better nurse

Not much. I deal with the public and many different cultural sets but this has not made my job easier.

The contrary statements were very few, and most of the participants who gave them also gave positive statements elsewhere in the questionnaire.

Critical Incidents

To gather critical incident data from the participants, the following item was included: “Tell me about a specific time that you were able to solve a problem in nursing practice using knowledge and skill gained through your BSN degree. Why do you think this knowledge helped you solve this problem? How did you feel about this incident and what it meant about your nursing practice?” However, nineteen of the eighty-eight participants skipped this item, and for the sixty-nine who did answer it, very few provided an actual incident. The majority (forty-nine) answered with a broad comment such as: “I feel that I answer questions everyday with the knowledge that I gained through my BSN. I believe the program taught me how to critically think and I am able to look at the whole picture and not at just parts.” However, those participants who did share a critical incident (twenty) were able to recall a memorable event in their nursing practice. These incidents were categorized by program type and then analyzed for emergent themes.

Comparing the Two Groups of Graduates

Comparing the themes that emerged for both groups of graduates resulted in surprising similarities. A comparison of themes can be found in Table 2.

Miscellaneous Findings

The electronic questionnaire asked participants to tell about a nonnursing course that had been helpful to nursing practice, as well as one that was not helpful to nursing practice. Some participants simply gave the name of a course without elaboration. Surprisingly, however, many of the courses that were listed as not helpful were found to be helpful by others. Table 3 demonstrates these findings.

TABLE 3 Comparison of Courses Found to be Helpful and Those Found not to be Helpful

Course	Helpful	Not Helpful
Anthropology		X
Art		X
Art History	X	
Astronomy		X
Chemistry	X	X
Child Development		X
Communications/Speech	X	
Computers	X	
Dance		X
Drama		X
English	X	
Ethics	X	
Foreign Language	X	
History	X	X
Introduction to Film		X
Music		X
Mythology		X
Non-Western Studies		X
Philosophy	X	X
Physics	X	
Psychology	X	
Religion	X	X
Research	X	

(continued)

TABLE 3 (continued) Comparison of Courses Found to be Helpful and Those Found not to be Helpful

Course	Helpful	Not Helpful
Sociology	X	
Statistics	X	X
Western Civilization	X	X
Women's Studies	X	

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Perceptions and Meanings of Liberal Education

Both groups of participants had positive perceptions of the utility of their liberal education in nursing practice, as indicated by the themes revealed.

Ability to Communicate and Relate to People (Patients, Co-workers, and Others). Both the prelicensure and the RN-BSN graduates in this study overwhelmingly stated that their liberal educations made them better communicators with patients, families, co-workers, and other members of the health care team. Communication occurred in multiple forms, including spoken and written communication, and even an increase in comprehension. In their study of liberal education outcomes and nurses, Hagerty and Early (1993) also found that communication and ability to relate was an emergent theme. Furthermore, effective communication through both written and spoken means is consistently described as an attribute of liberal education (AACN, 1998; Boyer, 1990; Conant, 1945; Gaff, 1995).

Global Thinking and Well-Rounded Knowledge Base. Global thinking and having a well-rounded knowledge base also reflect current trends in society (Boyer, 1990). Having a global knowledge base allows the learner to integrate varying perspectives into professional situations (AACN, 1998). The participants in this study defined global thinking as having a broad, holistic viewpoint. Participants credited their well-roundedness with giving them the ability to approach situations from more than one perspective and to creatively solve problems. Similarly, Hagerty and Early (1993) found that a liberal education broadened the horizons of the participants in their study.

Academic Growth. Academic growth was an emergent theme for both the prelicensure graduates and the RN-BSN graduates. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) also found that one of the positive effects of college on learners is an increase in

intellectual and psychological growth. The participants in this study spoke of the benefit of specific liberal education courses to their professional and personal lives. Some were able to recall examples of how an individual course taken in college had contributed to their professional and personal lives, while others simply provided the name of a course perceived to be helpful.

Acceptance of Diversity. Having an understanding of cultural diversity has been identified as a desired outcome of a liberal education (AAC&U, 2007; AACN, 1998; Boyer, 1990; Gaff, 1995). Becoming more aware and accepting of diverse cultures is a response to the changing demographics occurring in the United States (Boyer, 1990; Gaff, 1995), and this was demonstrated by the participants in the study.

Cultural knowledge, appreciation of diversity, and the ability to be non-judgmental were themes for both groups of graduates. While both groups attributed their newly acquired cultural competence to their liberal educations, the RN-BSN graduates went even further and made comparisons to their previous nursing educations, noting that cultural competence had been strangely absent. Delaney and Piscopo (2007) and Zuzelo (2001) also found enhanced cultural knowledge as an emergent theme.

Critical Thinking and Professional Decision Making. The prelicensure graduates were more likely than the RN-BSN graduates to explicitly state that their critical-thinking skills had improved as a result of their liberal educations. The following demonstrates this finding: “I cannot think of a particular situation, however, I have noticed that my critical thinking skills are sometimes stronger than those of my ADN [associate degree in nursing] peers. I believe the BSN program effectively taught us how to critically think.” The RN-BSN graduates were more likely to use a critical incident to give an example of critical thinking. The RN-BSN graduates seemed to credit their liberal educations for their ability to think critically and make professional decisions, rather than patient care decisions, although some patient care examples were included in their responses. An example of this is: “To support the need for a new medical office I took the lead to convince others through a proposal based on my knowledge as the subject matter expert. My nursing practice is now housed in a very spacious modern setting with 2 treatment rooms and an office. Perhaps I did benefit from that Philosophy class after all.” Brown, Alverson, and Pepa (2001) and Delaney and Piscopo (2007) also found that RN-BSN graduates perceived an increase in critical thinking after completing the BSN degree.

Professional and Personal Growth. Achieving professional and personal growth was a theme that emerged for the RN-BSN graduates, who spoke to the use of professional skills in their interactions with colleagues. Delaney and

Piscopo (2007) and Zuzelo (2001) also found that professional growth was important to participants in their studies of RN-BSN graduates.

Personal gains such as career advancement, increased self-confidence, and learning for the sake of learning were also findings that emerged among the RN-BSN graduates. Prior research suggests that most RN-BSN students return to school to advance their careers (MacLean, Knoll, & Kinney, 1985; Thurber, 1988). However, the participants in this study did not overwhelmingly report personal gains as a benefit, and when they did, career advancement and monetary gain were rarely cited.

A Way to Advance and Improve Self. The theme of advancing and improving self was very similar to the theme of professional and personal growth. Professional and personal growth was also a common theme in prior nursing studies (Delaney & Piscopo, 2007; Zuzelo, 2001). However, the findings can go further to support the outcomes of liberal education as well, in particular, the outcome of lifelong learning (AAC&U, 2007; AACN, 1998; Hersh, 1997). A commitment to lifelong learning is a desired outcome of liberal education. With the rapid changes occurring today in technology and other aspects of society, learners must have the ability to continue learning throughout their lifetimes. Through the responses, participants relayed that they have become lifelong learners by stating that they had returned to graduate school, or by comments that they were able to engage in conversation on topics other than nursing, or by indicating that new interests had developed as a result of the degree.

Comparison of Themes for Two Types of Graduates

Surprisingly, the responses for both groups of graduates were similar. The differences between the prelicensure graduates and the RN-BSN graduates in the acquisition of a liberal education might be expected to result in differences between the two groups in the use of this knowledge in practice. Prelicensure students take their liberal education courses prior to their nursing courses, whereas RN-BSN students take their liberal education courses after completing their basic nursing courses. In addition, prelicensure students adhere to a prescribed curriculum that mandates which liberal education courses must be taken. RN-BSN students are allowed to choose their courses within the general education framework established by the university.

The finding of similarities in the responses of the two groups of graduates is a new contribution to the literature. Further, the responses of both the prelicensure graduates and the RN-BSN graduates were positive and quite

complimentary of the curricula they had completed. Even the participants who had negative comments still made at least one positive comment about their educational experiences. This is in contrast to the findings of MacLean et al. (1985) and Zuzelo (2001), who found not only negativity but anger in the graduates they studied. In both of these prior studies, RN-BSN graduates expressed anger because they believed that their prior educations had prepared them with the necessary skills to become nurses and that the BSN was not necessary to their nursing practice.

The participants were quite articulate in discussing the meaning and value of liberal education. This finding was unexpected because of prior research findings. Hersh (1997) found that 86 percent of high school students and 73 percent of their parents could not define liberal education. Likewise, Hagerty and Early (1993) found that RN-BSN students had difficulty defining the term. Even though there has been difficulty defining the term and understanding liberal education outcomes, these participants did not appear to have any difficulty in doing so.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for nursing faculty who plan and implement various types of nursing curricula, as well as future nursing students, particularly those who hold associate's degrees who may be contemplating a return to school. While not directly assessed, the indirect findings of this study indicate that both prelicensure BSN graduates and RN-BSN graduates are achieving the outcomes intended for a liberal education. Each of the desired liberal education outcomes could be found in the responses given by the participants and in the themes that emerged from both groups of graduates. Table 4 shows liberal education outcomes and the themes that indicate acquisition of these attributes. Overall, the two groups demonstrated equally that the outcomes of a liberal education are being achieved.

Support for the BSN

These findings indicate that the BSN makes a difference in nursing practice, as well as in the personal lives of graduates. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that various routes to the same degree result in similar outcomes. This is an important finding for future RN-BSN students who might be considering earning a BSN. Understanding of the meanings placed on the BSN by other graduates is important to communicate to potential students.

TABLE 4 Prelicensure and Registered Nurse/Bachelor of Science in Nursing Themes Compared to Liberal Education Attributes

Theme	Liberal Education Attributes	
	Prelicensure	Registered Nurse/Bachelor of Science in Nursing
A Way to Advance and Improve Self	Foundation for lifelong learning	Foundation for lifelong learning
Ability to Communicate and Relate to People	Written and oral communication problem solving	Written and oral communication and problem solving Ethical reasoning and action Information literacy
Academic Growth	Quantitative literacy and practical skills Foundation for lifelong learning	Quantitative literacy and practical skills Foundation for lifelong learning
Acceptance of Diversity	Intercultural knowledge and competence of human cultures	Intercultural knowledge and competence of human cultures
Critical Thinking	Ethical reasoning and action Critical and creative thinking	
Global Thinking and Well-Rounded Knowledge Base	Personal and social responsibility—local and global Integrative learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies	Personal and social responsibility—local and global Integrative learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
Professional Decision Making/ Critical Thinking Skills		Critical and creative thinking Intellectual and practical skills
Professional/Personal Growth		Inquiry and analysis Intellectual and practical skills Teamwork and problem solving Foundation for lifelong learning

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the research design and the sampling technique. As noted above, there was a poor response rate on one particular questionnaire item. Second, the use of participants from only one school of nursing was a limitation. Incorporating other schools of nursing would add validity to the findings. However, the nonnursing courses taken by the RN-BSN participants were probably taken at a variety of institutions, including other universities and community colleges.

There is still much to learn about the usefulness of a liberal education for nursing practice. This study was qualitative; outcomes measured quantitatively would support the findings and provide more strength for the argument that a liberal education is beneficial to nursing practice. In addition, further research that examines the differences in learning opportunities while in school between the two types of graduates might offer further insight into how the ideals of liberal education might compare through varying course-delivery methods. Finally, further research to demonstrate the societal benefits of the BSN should survey employers, patients, and others who work with BSN-prepared nurses.

The findings of this study indicate that both prelicensure BSN graduates and RN-BSN graduates are achieving the outcomes intended for a liberal education. The participants of this study were able to state the usefulness of the BSN degree to their nursing practice, as well as the meaning of the degree to them personally. The participants used their liberal educations in their nursing practices and, therefore, had an increase in confidence as nurses. Nurse educators can benefit from these findings, as they plan and implement nursing curricula for the two types of nursing programs: prelicensure BSN and RN-BSN.

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