Transformation Catalyst: The Lived Experiences of Undergraduate Nursing Student Research Assistants

Lara Jeletzky, BA, BScN Student[2]; Khawab Arora, RPN, BScN Student[1]; Raaghavi Pushpanathan, BSc, BScN Student[1]; Megan Somerville, BScN Student[2]; Ashley Wood, BScN Student[2]; Heidi Siu, RN, BScN, MScN, PhD[1]; Caroline Variath, RN, PhD[2]; and Desiree Sorrentino, RN, BScN, HBSc[1]

Affiliations: [1]Humber Polytechnic; [2]Vancouver Island University

Background

- According to the International Council of Nurses (ICN), a key role of nurses is engaging in research to improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities (2021).
- Nursing research participation enhances clinical outcomes, improves retention, and prevents burnout (Mitchell et al., 2020; Smiley et al., 2023).
- Exposure to diverse nursing roles builds resilience (Dames, 2020).
- Undergraduate nursing student involvement in research is not well understood
- Nursing research assistant (RA) roles are often reserved for graduate students; pathways for undergraduate students are unclear

Purpose

To explore the lived experiences of undergraduate nursing student RAs and examine how RA roles contribute to learning, professional identity, and future engagement in nursing scholarship.
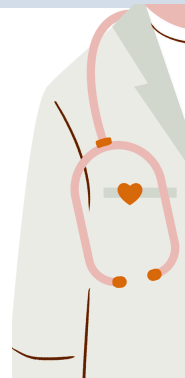
Contact

For questions or feedback, please don't hesitate to get in touch at: desiree.sorrentino@humber.ca and lara.jeletzky@gmail.com

Methodology

Design: Exploratory self-study with qualitative descriptive analysis.
Sites: Humber Polytechnic (Toronto, ON) and Vancouver Island University (Nanaimo, BC).
Framework: Gibbs Reflective Cycle guided the creation of team-developed reflection prompts.
Data Collection: Reflective journaling and team discussions.
Analysis: Reflexive and interactive, allowing interpretation to evolve as new insights emerged. Emphasized critical self-reflection, co-construction of meaning, and interaction among peers.
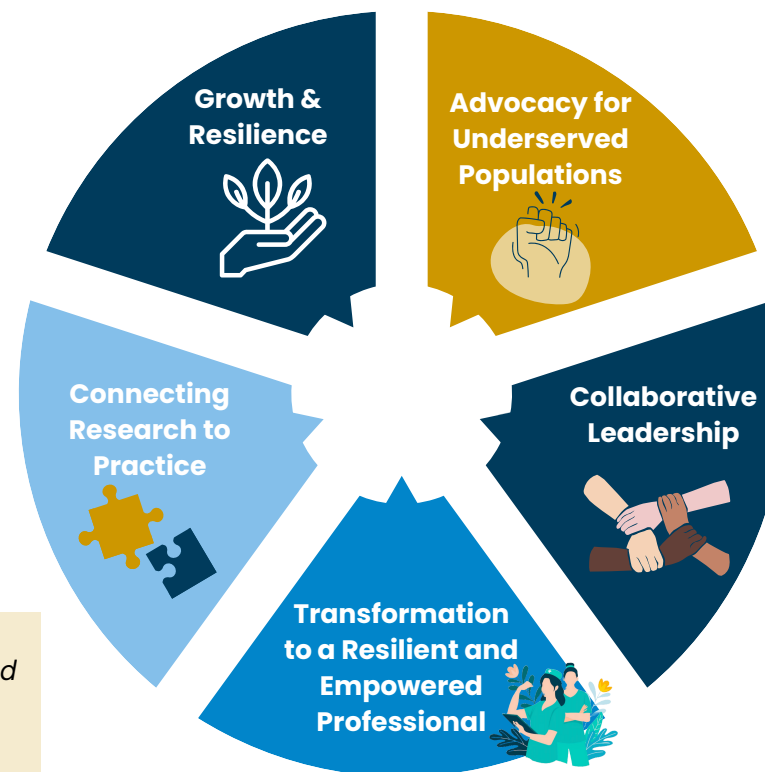
Thematic Results

- RA experiences enhanced student learning and professional development.
- Students gained confidence in research skills, policy relevance, and evidence-informed practice.
- Figure 1 identifies the five emerging themes.
- These experiences have enhanced the RAs ability to navigate clinical practice, collaborate effectively within team environments, and deepen their passion for the nursing profession.

Quote:
"I was encouraged to take a lead author role and supported in presenting at professional conferences, both of which solidified my passion and dedication for research." –LJ

Figure 1
Thematic coding analysis of emerging themes

Growth & Resilience | Advocacy for Underserved Populations | Connecting Research to Practice | Collaborative Leadership | Transformation to a Resilient and Empowered Professional

Conclusion

- RA roles bridge **theory & practice** early in training.
- Build capacity for:
  - Inquiry
  - Leadership
  - Evidence-informed practice
- Support retention, motivation, and professional identity formation.
- Help students see themselves as **clinicians, scholars, and change-makers.**

Recommendations

Expand Opportunities: Integrate structured RA roles into undergraduate nursing programs.
Promote Research Culture:
- Strengthen mentorship between faculty and students.
- Encourage inquiry and curiosity as foundational nursing skills.
- Foster long-term interest in academic, leadership, and evidence-based roles.

Limitations: Self-study approach has inherent potential for bias therefore future research to use de-identified and anonymous data collection to reduce bias.
Next Steps: Conduct a scoping review and broader study to examine the roles, impacts, and experiences of undergraduate nursing student RAs across diverse contexts.

References

Dames, S. (2020). Why are you thriving when I'm barely surviving?: An exploration of personal resiliency factors that enable novice nurses to thrive. *Emerging Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Graduate Research in Education and Psychology, 4 (2),* 16-35.https://doi.org/10.25316/IR-15199

International Council of Nurses. (2021). *The ICN code of ethics for nurses.* https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/2023-06/ICN_Code-of-Ethics_EN_Web.pdf

Mitchell, K., Rekiere, J., & Grassley, J. S. (2020). The influence of undergraduate research assistant experiences on future nursing roles. *Journal of Professional Nursing, 36*(3), 128-133. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2019.09.006

Smiley, R. A., Allgeyer, R. L., Shobo, Y., Lyons, K. C., Letourneau, R., Zhong, E., Kaminski-Ozturk, N., & Alexander, M. (2023). The 2022 National Nursing Workforce Survey. *Journal of Nursing Regulation, 14*(1), S1–S90. https://doi.org/10.1016/s2155-8256(23)00047-9

HUMBER POLYTECHNIC

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

RNAO