

SUMMIT TO ADVANCE PhD NURSING PROGRAMS IN LATIN AMERICA & THE CARIBBEAN



Summit to Advance PhD Nursing Programs in Latin America & the Caribbean

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Doctoral education is important for any profession to advance science, support evidence-based practice, advocate for evidence-based policies, and prepare the next generation of leaders within the profession and greater society. Yet doctoral education in nursing in the region of the Americas has been slow to advance. As of 2017, there were a total of 51 doctoral programs in 11 countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2019). Brazil has the majority of programs (n=37) while three countries (Argentina, Columbia, Chile, Mexico) each have two programs, and six countries (Cuba, Jamaica, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, Venezuela) have only one program. The majority of doctoral programs have only been established within the past 15 years.

A comprehensive report *Formación doctoral en enfermería en América Latina y el Caribe* (Doctoral Training in Nursing Latin America and the Caribbean) was developed by PAHO (2017), to facilitate the advancement of doctoral education in nursing in the region. This report provides a detailed report of programs within countries resulting from a detailed survey that assessed type of institution, types of programs, delivery format, curriculum details, programs of research, institutional support for the program and students, and requirements and profiles of students (national and international). Based on survey findings, four strategic areas to strengthen doctoral education in nursing with specific action areas at the local, country, and regional (PAHO) area were proposed. These 4 areas included: 1) cooperation and internationalization; 2) academic training congruent with the context and needs of country/region; 3) generation of knowledge transferable to practice and 4) program sustainability.

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In addition to the Doctoral Formation report, a key policy instrument of relevance to PhD education was promulgated in 2018: The Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas 2018-2030 (SHAA2030) was adopted by the PAHO/WHO and Secretaries of Health of the countries of the Region of the Americas (SHRA), as a strategic policy instrument that provides direction and political vision for health development in the Region for the next 13 years. Doctoral programs play a central role in achieving this vision by aligning education and training that is congruent with the SHAA2030 goals. The SHAA2030 values include attaining a high standard of health, Pan American solidarity, health equity, universality, and social inclusion. The eleven SHAA2030 goals encompass expanding access, strengthening stewardship and governance of national health authorities, strengthening human resources for health, health financing, access to medicines, vaccines, and priority health technologies, information systems, evidence generation and transfer, disaster preparedness, reducing communicable and noncommunicable diseases and health inequities.

To further advance the recommendations of the Doctoral Formation report, and in consideration of the SHAA2030, the World Health Organization Collaborating Center (WHOCC) for Nursing and Midwifery Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing along with PAHO leadership designed a two-day summit on the advancement, re-envisioning, and reaffirmation of doctoral nursing in the Americas. An international gathering of leaders and experts in nursing research and practice, the purpose of this summit was to develop recommendations for the growth and continued success of PhD nursing education throughout the Americas. This summit was part of the Penn Nursing WHOCC Terms of Reference developed with PAHO. This article describes the Summit structure and purpose, summarizes discussion by Summit participants, and proposes further actions to be taken. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic after the summit shifted PhD education to virtual learning platforms. The sudden shift to virtual platforms required by social distancing opened new possibilities for instruction, consultation, and collaboration with experts that were previously not feasible due to geographic distance. The actions identified through this summit to facilitate alignment of PhD programs with PAHO/WHO priorities and to build interinstitutional capabilities and collaborations needed to address these priorities can be facilitated by the widespread implementation of virtual platforms in educational and scientific endeavors.

Methodology

The first day, “Advancing PhD Nursing Education in the Americas,” (Avanzando en la educación de enfermería de doctorado en las Américas) was an opportunity for invited participants from Latin America and the Caribbean including members of the PAHO/WHO Pan American Network of Nursing and Midwifery Collaborating Centers (PANMCC) and other institutions in Latin America with PhD programs to share and discuss innovations and strategies in PhD nursing education in their country and within their universities (see Table 1). The day was structured around advancing the recommendations from the PAHO/WHO report, focusing especially on doctoral nursing education development and advancement. Table 2 displays the Day 1 agenda.

The Day 1 morning sessions were designed to set the stage for afternoon groupwork. In the opening session, the director of the secretariat of the global network of WHOCCs provided remarks on universal health priorities and PhD nursing education. Next, the PAHO/WHO Regional Advisor on Nursing and Allied Health Personnel, Dr. Silvia Cassiani, presented on advancing nursing through doctoral education. Then, a panel from five Latin American and Caribbean countries and two North American countries then presented challenges and opportunities for doctoral nursing education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

An early afternoon 45-minute roundtable session was held focusing on the alignment of doctoral programs with health priorities and PAHO/WHO priorities. Four tables convened assigned participants and a moderator to discuss questions in small groups (see Table 2). Each group compiled notes on flipcharts. Following the session, a staggered lunch hour was held to have participants visit tables they had not attended to review notes and provide input.

The afternoon began with a one-hour panel session on interprofessional collaborations and integration in doctoral programs. The three panelists were doctoral nursing coordinators from Latin and South American doctoral programs. A second one-hour panel was held on interinstitutional collaboration to advance PhD education in the PAHO region. The three panelists represented doctoral programs in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Bogota, Colombia, and Birmingham, Alabama (i.e., UAB).

A second 45-minute roundtable was held focusing on needs and opportunities for interinstitutional collaboration regarding PhD education and research. Discussion focused on how to establish a network of support within the context of challenges and opportunities discussed in previous panel sessions and the strategies outlined in the PAHO report. Four tables convened assigned participants and a moderator to discuss the questions in small groups (See Table 2). Once again, participants were invited to visit tables they had not attended to review and contribute to notes.

The agenda for the second day, was combined with a concurrent Summit for PhD deans and leaders in the United States, “Re-Envisioning PhD Programs of the Future”. In this Summit, invited participants from the top research-intensive universities across the United States examined recent advances in PhD education, discussed lessons learned and the competencies that new nurse scientists should gain through a research-intensive PhD program, and identified types of infrastructures and resources that were needed in the discipline, Schools of Nursing, and universities to advance PhD programs to support discovery and innovation. A comprehensive reporting of this second day is reported in a special issue of the Journal of Professional Nursing (Fairman et. al 2021).

Participants from the PAHO region participated in the plenary and panel presentations, and held concurrent discussions about the implications of presentations within the context of their countries and region. Both days combined panel talks and interactive roundtable discussions to generate actionable ideas and recommendations for participants’ respective regions of focus, culminating in a truly Pan-American effort to strengthen doctoral nursing education.

Results

The following are summaries of roundtable discussions.

Alignment of doctoral programs with health and PAHO/WHO priorities

Strategies to align PhD programs with PAHO/WHO priorities within institutions and countries

Several strategies were discussed in this roundtable. First, the need for integrating population health and WHO priorities into curriculum, dissertations, and a graduate competency profile were identified. Participants discussed not re-inventing the wheel or duplicating efforts, understanding that embedding these priorities across curricula might need further adaptation to reflect regional or institutional differences. Second, developing collaboration with international partners within the context of scientific mentorship was noted. Summit participants overwhelmingly discussed the importance of mentorship to ultimately increase an international scientific workforce that is prepared to address the most critical PAHO/WHO priorities. A third strategy was the mapping of existing faculty research that reflects PAHO priorities, which would also highlight any gaps. Fourth, the need for strategies to prepare students for interprofessional and international collaboration was seen as a priority and given the great exemplars that may already be in place, the need to spread and scale opportunities were discussed. And fifth, a need was identified to increase articulation of nursing research with health and social sectors in the local, regional, and national contexts.

Strategies to engage PhD students in areas aligned with PAHO/WHO priorities
Participants identified a need for increased funding opportunities for students to engage in PAHO/WHO research priorities. Along with a need for more funding, investments in human resources in clinical and research training of a competent workforce were viewed as essential to the formation of future generations of clinicians and scholars.

Participants identified a confluence of interests and priorities for individual institutions, countries, and the region that support alignment with PAHO/WHO priorities. First, there is a growing interest at the country level in improving the quality and rigor of training programs. Second, because of a rising common interest, participants of this workshop identified themselves as a resource and avenue for developing regional collaboration in training and development. Third, participants identified the importance of recognizing and leveraging the Year of the Nurse as a unifying call for nurse training and development globally to prioritize alignment with PAHO/WHO priorities.

Participants recommended updating and promoting the use of PAHO directories. These can be linked to institutional websites and can be used to demonstrate the alignment of faculty, visiting scholars, including dissertation committee members, to PAHO/WHO priorities. As a result, some faculty might be identified to teach concentrated courses or to lead to curriculum building and sharing. Overall, these strategies were described as opportunities to build or strengthen relations across institutions to achieve mutual research priority areas or to address common priority areas.

Summit participants discussed engaging PhD students through the United States National Institutes of Health research that aligns with PAHO/WHO priorities. This can help generate knowledge through nursing faculty globally. These collaborations may be enhanced with PAHO serving as facilitator and influencer with country ministries of health.

Interinstitutional collaboration regarding PhD education and research

Interprofessional opportunities for PhD students/research to collaborate and lead in addressing PAHO/WHO priorities

Forming interdisciplinary research collaborations is necessary to addressing PAHO/WHO priorities. This can also help position the nurse as participants and leaders in interdisciplinary teams. Important factors to consider were described as financial, aligning priorities with funding organizations and the need for developing strategies according to context. A consistent theme across discussions focused on building from current resources or financial opportunities that already exist across international, institutional and governmental entities. Participants emphasized the need for efficiency through international agreements and networks.

Building interinstitutional capabilities and collaborations

For doctoral programs in Latin America to align their education and training to reflect SHRA 2030 goals, interinstitutional capabilities and collaborations are a necessity. To work towards this vision, PAHO 2019 doctoral summit attendees identified two main areas of interinstitutional capacity building. The first was a focus on effective strategies for supporting interinstitutional programs of research and interinstitutional training of PhD students. The second area was creation of synergies to describe the impact of nursing research in specific areas or within countries.

Participants identified specific areas that are necessary to strengthen specific interinstitutional priorities related to both research collaboration and training of PhD students. Table 3 summarizes the strategic areas and interinstitutional priorities for research and training within each strategic area identified by participants. The strategic areas to strengthen interinstitutional collaboration are funding, training and research, mentorship and partnerships, and implementation strategies.

Funding was perhaps the most crucial strategic area identified to strengthen interinstitutional research and training of PhD students that aligns with PAHO/WHO priorities. Participants highlighted a need for scholars and institutions to seek and share information on national and local funding sources (e.g., governments and private funders at the local level), as well as international funding sources (e.g., foreign country funding focused on the Latin American region as well as private international institutions) more actively.

Similar to the funding priorities for research, funding the interinstitutional training of PhD students requires that institutions and program actively engage with existing international training opportunities such as the Fogarty or Fulbright programs and promote these opportunities among students. Funding for exchange programs is also essential to achieve an interinstitutional collaboration in training of PhD students within countries and across the region.

Training and research are essential aspects of an interinstitutional agenda. Participants agreed on the need to identify common research areas for collaboration and scholarship development. In a collaborative research and training environment, participants suggested that institutions clarify and share the mission of their programs to build capacity in interinstitutional training. Beyond complementary programs and training, interinstitutional training would benefit from the establishment of discussion forums, regular meetings, network building, and the promotion of sub-groups within and across institutions for students to work together.

During the roundtable discussions, participants emphasized the importance of forming and promoting research mentorship relationships between institutions. Partnerships between more established institutions with programs of research, and newer institutions/programs can be a way to strengthen capacity of researchers and scholarly production for both. In terms of interinstitutional training, participants identified the importance of optimizing and sharing existing infrastructure and research resources to improve training of PhD students. Developing a “sponsorship” model between institutions to provide training support was suggested as a means for more established institutions to help guide upcoming ones.

A final strategic area of interinstitutional research is building capacity for implementation. Replicating and expanding successful interventions aligned with PAHO/WHO priorities were seen as a means to grow scholarship and strengthen evidence-based practices in the region. Participants suggested that implementation capacity for training can be strengthened through existing experiences and networks of program faculty. Faculty networks offer an opportunity for students to be exposed to new scholarship and practice outside of their institution or program. Similarly, participants identified a need for expanding opportunities for interinstitutional faculty and student development through visiting professorships, internships, or summer programs across countries and institutions.

Participants identified synergies (Table 4) that can be developed around strategic areas to shine a light on the impact of nursing research within countries and across the Latin American region. Synergies within research included interinstitutional collaboration across countries to identify and propose unified research priorities that can be advanced and supported by PAHO. Another identified synergy focused on strengthening research training standards within countries that would in turn establish quality metrics such as Human Resources in Health training for research. Participants identified synergies between strengthening scientific collaboration within countries and across Latin America. Measures such as developing country level listservs of scientific topics of interest and promotion of regional research interest groups were suggested as means to improve scientific collaboration.

Finally, participants spoke to the centrality of dissemination and resource sharing to highlight the impact of nursing research. Group discussions centered on the importance of “telling our story” of the contributions of nursing research for itself and other disciplines/audiences. Participants noted that the experiences of nurses should be centered as uniquely informative to the process of scholarship development and training. Participants also suggested that the creation of a central repository of research products and information for the region could be vital to disseminating the impact of nursing research.

Identify specific technical assistance needed to address PAHO/WHO priorities across institutions.

In terms of technical or non-financial assistance needed, participants discussed facilitating the mobility of research experts, including interdisciplinary experts that may be shared across institutions. There was great enthusiasm related to the idea of forming mutual collaborations using a hybrid approach to offer research internships (*pasantia*). Some suggested starting with a list of institutions that are willing to collaborate, establishing a peer-to-peer buddy system and building a network of mentees that ultimately become mentors.

Some practical strategies discussed were the creation of a clearing house of materials, such as lectures on systematic reviews, access to libraries, and encouraging publications in open access to decrease actual costs for research. Some participants discussed reaching out to editors (e.g., the International Academy of Nursing Editors) for access to specific articles for methodologies, including conducting systematic reviews. Existing organizations that could provide assistance were identified. For example, Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI) was suggested as a potential organization and site that can serve as a repository for published and unpublished reports. They would be able to share metrics around access and use over time to track success. Other participants recommended that PAHO could bring groups together to describe the necessary core competencies for doctoral education and research. Participants agreed that it would be important to align technical assistance strategies to PAHO priorities.

Proposed Actions

Participants identified a number of actions to facilitate alignment of PhD programs PAHO/WHO priorities and build interinstitutional capabilities and collaborations needed to address PAHO/WHO priorities. These actions are presented below and organized by action at the program, country, and regional levels.

Program

- Integrate population health and PAHO/WHO priorities into curriculum, dissertation topics, and a graduate competency profile.
- Develop collaborations with international partners.
- Develop mentoring relationships among senior faculty within and across institutions.
- Map existing faculty research to PAHO/WHO priorities and identify gaps.
- Develop a graduate competency profile that includes knowledge of population health, PAHO/WHO priorities, SHAA2030 goals, and interprofessional and international collaboration skills
- Articulate with health and social sectors in the local, regional, and national contexts to advance and support research.
- Provide funding for PhD research that addresses PAHO/WHO/SHAA2030 priorities.
- Invite visiting scholars to provide expertise in curriculum development or to teach concentration courses
- Establish or join interdisciplinary teams to provide nursing expertise in research addressing PAHO/WHO/SHAA2030 priorities.
- Build from current institutional/national/international resources
- Seek efficiency through international agreements and networks.
- Describe the impact of nursing research on topics or within countries/regions.
- Promote international training opportunities such as Fulbright or Fogarty.
- Encourage and support PhD students and faculty to attend or offer summer programs, visiting professor opportunities, or internships.

Country

- Leverage PAHO support to develop research contacts within ministries of health.
- Strengthen interinstitutional collaboration via funding, training and research, mentorship and partnerships, and implementation strategies
- Compile and disseminate national and local funding opportunities.
- Facilitate partnerships or sponsorships between institutions that do not have established programs of research and a record of past extramural funding with institutions that do.
- Strengthen PhD training standards.
- Develop country-level listservs of scientific topics of interest
- Create a repository of research products and information through the chief nurse office.
- Develop lists of institutions and scholars willing to collaborate across institutions
- Utilize the research resources provided by STTI.

Region

- Develop regional collaborations in PhD training and development
- Utilize PAHO directories for collaboration opportunities or visiting scholar prospects.
- Establish and fund PhD training exchange programs
- Establish networks, discussion forums, and meetings for PhD students to meet and work together.
- Create/promote a clearinghouse of resources, such as lectures on research methodology
- Replicate and expand successful interventions aligned with PAHO/WHO priorities to grow scholarship and strengthen evidence-based practices in the region.
- Promote regional research interest groups.

Conclusions

Summit participants were enthusiastic about the potential for PhD programs in the Latin American region to better align their curricula, graduate competencies, and PhD research to address PAHO/WHO priorities. Interinstitutional collaboration was viewed as a key to advancing PhD education, increasing research productivity, and demonstrating the impact of nursing research on health in the region. The proposed actions at the program, country, and region levels are concrete steps that can be taken to pursue these worthy objectives. As noted, the unprecedented shift to virtual platforms for education and research required by the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to accelerate the implementation of the recommended actions, thus advancing the contributions of PhD programs in Latin America to fulfillment of PAHO/WHO priorities.

References can be found on page 51-55