

Research Units: Leadership, Focus, Organization, Metrics

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With the next issue we will begin a series that focuses on nurse-led research units. In each issue one unit will be highlighted and the leader of the unit interviewed about its structure, organization, function and the type of leadership that is in place. These units will span the full spectrum of research foci including clinical, health services and population health research. Why are we doing this? Leadership in nursing is manifest in many organizations and in many ways. Over the last three years we have highlighted a nursing leader from academia, practice or the research community in each issue and we will continue to do this, but not on such a regular basis. However, we have not looked at leadership specifically within research environments. Many, and probably most, researchers work in small teams with stable or somewhat shifting membership, depending on the particular focus of the study being conducted. This approach is driven by the predominant funding model for research

in Canada, which is single study by single study. There are some competitions for group and team funding and, in some provinces, for research unit infrastructure funding. In our series we will explore with the unit leaders why the decision was made to move to develop a research unit and what funding, if any, the unit has to sustain its activities, the source of this funding and from the perspective of the unit leader, what advantages funding brings. We are also interested in what the staffing infrastructure is in units and how these staff members contribute to its success.

We also want to examine what constitutes leadership in research units. Leading a group of researchers is a very different proposition than leading in healthcare organizations, and the product is different. How do research leaders attract researchers to work in their units, particularly under circumstances when the unit does not pay the salaries of the unit members? What is the relationship between leader and unit members? How does the agenda for research get developed, and what is the role of the leader in setting the agenda? Are there some leadership styles that are more effective in research units than others, and how do effective leaders figure this out?

Interdisciplinarity has become the watchword for research funding in Canada; however, it may not be as dominant in other countries. What is the interdisciplinary constitution of research units, how was that reached, and what are the advantages and disadvantages? Is there a difference in attracting nurse researchers and non-nurse researchers to nurse-led research units?

Graduate students are usually an important part of research units. We will be interested in learning about the roles that students play in the units, what they bring to the functioning and culture of the units and what they gain from being part of these organizations. Does the experience of being part of a unit benefit their subsequent career?

We will explore the focus of the research undertaken by unit members and how this fits with the mission, where the funding comes from for the research, their success in grants competitions and to what the leaders attribute their success. Funding is the life blood for research and in many countries, including Canada, the funding environment is more constrained currently than it

has been in the recent past. What pressure does a shifting funding environment put on research unit leaders and members, and what strategies are used to mitigate it? Is fundraising a major part of the leadership role?

Return on investment has become a major interest of every funding organization, largely driven by governments' preoccupation with accountability. The question is: What do funding organizations get in return for their research dollars? What is the view of research unit leaders of the right "metric" in assessing this return on investment? The standard products of research that are identified in annual reports usually are a synopsis of the findings, and publications and presentations of these findings. Knowledge translation or its many associated terms – research transfer, research uptake, knowledge utilization, knowledge exchange – is increasingly viewed as a product, but how do researchers report this? These are some of the challenges that confront leaders in research units as they define and defend the work their units do.

The business of research is a mystery to most people outside the business. However, it is the business that produces the knowledge for the health-care system; it informs its practice and its organization and administration. Research units are just a part of the business, but they provide an opportunity to understand the role they play in producing the evidence needed by the system and the various roles that leaders and leadership play in their success. We are looking forward to learning about nurse-led research units in Canada and internationally.