

Abstract

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When the Pressure is On: Navigating the Finalization Process of Dissertation Topic Selection in Nursing

Prospective doctoral nursing students are often asked to declare a broad topic of interest as a prerequisite for admission into doctoral nursing programs. Yet, it is quite feasible that some students struggle to select and narrow a specific dissertation topic during their first years of doctoral study. Research from outside of nursing, largely in educational psychology, provides some reasons for this struggle, and offers guidance to graduate students on selecting a dissertation topic. As a reflexive project towards finding my own final dissertation topic, I explore the literature in the area of doctoral dissertation topic selection and the current body of literature about nursing dissertations. Using a pragmatic lens, I review the challenges doctoral students may face as they finalize a dissertation topic, reasons these challenges may occur, and opportunities for PhD students to move forward in focusing their dissertation topic despite these challenges. The literature findings suggest there are emotional, practical, and disciplinary aspects of choosing and narrowing a dissertation topic. Distilling from the literature, and my own experiences as a first year PhD nursing student, I share what I find to be the most promising features from the last thirty years of literature for narrowing down a topic for a doctoral dissertation, and briefly share my own ongoing experiential process. Possible alignments and contradictions between the dissertation topic selection literature and contemporary advice about nursing dissertations will be raised for discussion. Participants will also be invited to reflect and share their own doctoral experiences on the subject. By exploring the literature on dissertation topic selection, this presentation will provide timely considerations for current and future doctoral nursing students.