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The students are our future: growing the next generation of paramedic researchers in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

As the paramedic discipline globally moves towards professionalization through professional registration, higher education, and role diversification within the health service, the importance of the paramedic body of knowledge becomes more apparent. This new knowledge, which is owned and directed by paramedics, helps to distinguish the paramedic profession in its own right.(1) The role of paramedics as researchers and inquiring in question of the nature of paramedic practice is essential to the development of the profession.(2)

Today's students are our future paramedic leaders, educators and researchers (3), and scholarly output by these students will contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this field. (4) Several initiatives to encourage student-led research can be identified internationally, and locally at Fanshawe College, Ontario, Canada. 2. Monash University, Victoria, Australia. 3. CQUniversity, Queensland, Australia. 4. McNally Project for Paramedic Research, Ontario, Canada. 5. Institute of British Columbia, B.C., Canada. 6. Ottawa Paramedic Service, Ontario, Canada. Since 2017 first-year PCP students at Fanshawe College undertake a 15-week (3 hours per-week contact time) ‘Introduction to Research Principles’ course in their second semester. Several hours of self-directed learning activities are also provided. The course is designed to provide exposure to 13 NOCPs at PCP level, and is aligned to a number of key objectives. These are related to research principles and theories, quantitative and qualitative approaches, literature search and review, statistical analyses, evidence appraisal, delivery of effective presentations, and other issues related to research and scholarly activity. This course is evaluated through the completion of an ethics training (TCPN-2 CORE), an article critique, a critically appraised topic (CAT), and the submission of a group research proposal and ethics application.

ACP students also complete research education, and are exposed to literature search and review, statistical analyses, and evidence appraisal, which is evaluated through the submission of a group critically appraised topic and public presentation. ACP students are provided with academic oversight and support is provided through this semester. All projects are student led, from identification of the research question, conduct of the literature search and review, and identification of appropriate methods to collect data, to submission of ethics application, data collection and analysis, preparation of abstracts and manuscripts for submission. Student groups are provided with academic oversight by several of the authors to varying extents. Preliminary findings are presented at a research presentation at the end of semester 3, and a draft manuscript is submitted. Over the duration of the final semester (semester 4) students finalize data collection and analysis, and their manuscripts. The semester culminates in the presentation of research projects at the program research day in April of each year. This event is open to the public, streamed live online, and advertised across the region. Student groups can then liaise with faculty regarding manuscript preparation and editing if they intend to pursue publication.

Through the promotion of scholarly activity related to “real-world” practice, students undertake research and scholarly activity that is central to professional practice. This can stimulate important conversations about the importance of professional practice that is based on research. The skills acquired by students can not only improve their ability to appraise evidence, which can potentially lead to improved patient care.

EDUCATION

Research education in our programs is delivered by academics with a background in paramedicine. This is not only a way of ensuring that research is relevant to our students, but also an opportunity for students to reflect on their practice, and to develop a critically appraised topic; a critically appraised topic (CAT), and the submission of a group research proposal and ethics application. ACP students also complete research education, and are exposed to literature search and review, statistical analyses, and evidence appraisal, which is evaluated through the submission of a group critically appraised topic and public presentation. ACP students are provided with academic oversight and support is provided through this semester. All projects are student led, from identification of the research question, conduct of the literature search and review, and identification of appropriate methods to collect data, to submission of ethics application, data collection and analysis, preparation of abstracts and manuscripts for submission. Student groups are provided with academic oversight by several of the authors to varying extents. Preliminary findings are presented at a research presentation at the end of semester 3, and a draft manuscript is submitted. Over the duration of the final semester (semester 4) students finalize data collection and analysis, and their manuscripts. The semester culminates in the presentation of research projects at the program research day in April of each year. This event is open to the public, streamed live online, and advertised across the region. Student groups can then liaise with faculty regarding manuscript preparation and editing if they intend to pursue publication.

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ACHIEVEMENTS

Since 2017 total of 186 students (PCP and ACP) have received formal research methods education. To date 62 paramedic student-led primary research studies, literature reviews, and CATs have been completed. Students and faculty have been involved in scholarly activity and primary research on topics related to paramedicine including paramedic education, empathy, patient safety, reflective practice, wellbeing, mental health, vulnerable populations, gender equity, and clinical topics including trauma management, and neurological emergencies. These topics have been presented at conferences across Canada, Ireland, the UK, the USA, and Australia, by both students and faculty. A total of 34 students have authored or co-authored articles that have been published in both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed venues. In 2019, we were honored to host two paramedic student groups from Georgian College as they presented their primary research findings at our program research day.

RATIONAL

Glenn et al. previously discussed the concept of “hooking” first year paramedic students with research (17), through early involvement with research, and encouraging students to discover that research is a core aspect of evidence-based practice. Our approach to research education in this program aims to achieve this “hook”, in particular through the design of the research course. This course is based on three core principles (18):

1. Learning is a social and interactive undertaking;
2. Learning is maximized when situated in a real and authentic context;
3. There should be meaningful applications of what has been learned.

Paramedic students are our future paramedic leaders, educators and researchers, and scholarly output by these students will contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this field. Several initiatives to encourage student-led research can be identified internationally, and locally at Fanshawe College, Ontario, Canada. Since 2017 first-year PCP students at Fanshawe College undertake a 15-week (3 hours per-week contact time) ‘Introduction to Research Principles’ course in their second semester. Several hours of self-directed learning activities are also provided. The course is designed to provide exposure to 13 NOCPs at PCP level, and is aligned to a number of key objectives. These are related to research principles and theories, quantitative and qualitative approaches, literature search and review, statistical analyses, evidence appraisal, delivery of effective presentations, and other issues related to research and scholarly activity. This course is evaluated through the completion of an ethics training (TCPN-2 CORE), an article critique, a critically appraised topic (CAT), and the submission of a group research proposal and ethics application. ACP students also complete research education, and are exposed to literature search and review, statistical analyses, and evidence appraisal, which is evaluated through the submission of a group critically appraised topic and public presentation. ACP students are provided with academic oversight and support is provided through this semester. All projects are student led, from identification of the research question, conduct of the literature search and review, and identification of appropriate methods to collect data, to submission of ethics application, data collection and analysis, preparation of abstracts and manuscripts for submission. Student groups are provided with academic oversight by several of the authors to varying extents. Preliminary findings are presented at a research presentation at the end of semester 3, and a draft manuscript is submitted. Over the duration of the final semester (semester 4) students finalize data collection and analysis, and their manuscripts. The semester culminates in the presentation of research projects at the program research day in April of each year. This event is open to the public, streamed live online, and advertised across the region. Student groups can then liaise with faculty regarding manuscript preparation and editing if they intend to pursue publication.

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EXPERIENCE

During the first semester of their second year (semester 3), PCP student groups begin the conduct of their approved primary research studies. Continued research support is provided through this semester. All projects are student led, from identification of the research question, conduct of the literature search and review, and identification of appropriate methods to collect data, to submission of ethics application, data collection and analysis, preparation of abstracts and manuscripts for submission. Student groups are provided with academic oversight by several of the authors to varying extents. Preliminary findings are presented at a research presentation at the end of semester 3, and a draft manuscript is submitted. Over the duration of the final semester (semester 4) students finalize data collection and analysis, and their manuscripts. The semester culminates in the presentation of research projects at the program research day in April of each year. This event is open to the public, streamed live online, and advertised across the region. Student groups can then liaise with faculty regarding manuscript preparation and editing if they intend to pursue publication.

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CHALLENGES

Engaging students in a vocational, diploma-level education program with research is not without its challenges. Studies to date have been largely quantitative in nature, which has resulted in a potentially fatigued target popula-
THE STUDENTS ARE OUR FUTURE: GROWING THE NEXT GENERATION OF PARAMEDIC RESEARCHERS IN CANADA

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The role of paramedic students’ research and inquiry in question- ing and challenging the nature of paramedic practice is essential to the development of the profession.(2) Today’s students are our future paramedic leaders, educators and researchers (3), and scholarly output by these students will contribute to the growing body of knowledge.(4)

Several initiatives to encourage student-led research can be identified internationally, and locally at Fanshawe College (5), Georgian College (6), and others. These initiatives remove the barriers to functioning as members of a research team. The provision of education, mentorship, protected time, and funding have all been previously outlined as essential to the success of paramedic researchers(2,7–9), and research education is an essential component in the development of paramedics who are capable of leading research studies.(10–13)

Grant-Wakefield, describing her experience as a paramedic student undertaking research states her concern of being a “burden to the research academic-led research.(10–13).” Other paramedic student researchers describe similar experiences.(15,16) Central to the success of these student researchers is the provision of ongoing research education and support to the opportunities presented by research and has the potential to influence the course of their profession.(2)

Acquiring research skills in education exposes students to the opportunities presented by research and has the potential to influence the course of their professional careers. These opportunities allow paramedics and paramedic students to develop contemporary opinions of the options that are available outside of (or in addition to) the traditionally linear career progression of a paramedic in Canada. Research also provides alternative avenues to create a direct impact on patient’s lives outside of front line work.

Since 2017 first-year PCP students at Fanshawe College undertake a 15-week (3 hours per-week contact time) 1. Introduction to Research Principles’ course in their second semester. Several hours of self-directed learning activities are also provided. The course is designed to provide exposure to 13 NOCPs at PCP level, and is aligned to a number of key objectives. These are related to research principles and theories, quantitative and qualitative approaches, literature search and review, statistical analyses, evidence appraisal, delivery of effective presentations, and other issues related to research and scholarly activity. This course is evaluated through the completion of a research project (TCP2-2 CORE), an article critique, a critically appraised topic and public presentation.

In their second year, students finalize data collection and analysis, and their manuscripts are submitted for consideration for presentation at the end of semester 3, and a draft manuscript is submitted. Over the duration of the final semester (semester 4) students finalize data collection and analysis, and their manuscripts are submitted for consideration for presentation at the end of the project, not merely a grade on a transcript, gives meaning to the entire research process. A draft manuscript is submitted for consideration in the final semester, giving students the opportunity to present their findings at our program research day.

EXPERIENCE

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The semester culminates in the presentation of research projects at the program research day in April of each year. This event is open to the public, streamed live online, and advertised across the region. Student groups can then liaise with faculty regarding manuscript preparation and editing if they intend to pursue publication.

The research education course itself is continually refined through early involvement with research, and encouragement of students to discover that research is a core aspect of evidence-based practice. Our approach to research education in this program aims to achieve this “hook”, in particular through the design of the research course. This course is based on three core principles (18):

1. learning is a social and interactive undertaking;
2. learning is maximized when situated in a real and tangible context;
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Paramedic students participate in scholarly activity related to “real-world” practice, students undertake research and scholarly activity that is central to professional practice. This can stimulate important conversations about the importance of professional practice that is based on research. The skills acquired by students can not only increase their appreciation for research, but also improve their ability to appraise evidence, which can potentially lead to improved patient care.

MENTORING AND ROLE-MODELLING

Research education in our programs is delivered by academics with a background in paramedicine. This is not only one of the key reasons why paramedic students are able to continue as a researcher in the field. Having tangible experience through research, and primary research on topics related to paramedicine research topics on related to paramedicine including paramedic education, empathy, patient safety, reflective practice, wellbeing, mental health, vulnerable populations, gender equity, and clinical topics including trauma management, and neurological emergencies. These topics have been presented at conferences across Canada, Ireland, the UK, the USA, and Australia, by both students and faculty. A total of 34 students have authored or co-authored articles that have been published in both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed venues. In 2019, we were honoured to host two paramedic student groups from Georgian College as they presented their primary research findings at our program research day.

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Paramedic students work in groups, investigate a research topic of interest, design and conduct research projects, and present findings at the end of the project, not merely a grade on a transcript, gives meaning to the entire research process. Student feedback has demonstrated that by the end of the research course, many students at least appreciate the importance of research to their practice, even if they do not intend to continue as a researcher in the field. Having tangible experience through research, and primary research on topics related to paramedicine research topics on related to paramedicine including paramedic education, empathy, patient safety, reflective practice, wellbeing, mental health, vulnerable populations, gender equity, and clinical topics including trauma management, and neurological emergencies. These topics have been presented at conferences across Canada, Ireland, the UK, the USA, and Australia, by both students and faculty. A total of 34 students have authored or co-authored articles that have been published in both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed venues. In 2019, we were honoured to host two paramedic student groups from Georgian College as they presented their primary research findings at our program research day.

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CHALLENGES

Engaging students in a vocational, diploma-level education program with research is not without its challenges. Studies to date have been largely quantitative in nature, which has resulted in a potentially fatigued target popula-
more importantly, we need to support them to generate skills, knowledge and experience to conduct research, but change practice, we need to equip paramedics with the evidence required to support and if needs be, embrace research as an integral component of practice. However, upon qualification, there are limited opportu-

nities to engage with research as a practicing paramedic, with many faculty members facing the same barriers to engagement, from the lack of support such as protected time and funding. Many faculty members face the same barriers to engage with research outlined in the literature, including lack of knowledge, concerns regarding clinical care, and lack of support such as protected time and funding. Paramedicine within Canada as a whole needs to embrace research as an integral component of practice. Engaging students with research is one method to do so. However, upon qualification, there are limited opportu-

nities to engage with research as a practicing paramedic, in particular funded research and education. In order to generate the evidence required to support and if needs be, change practice, we need to equip paramedics with the skills, knowledge and experience to conduct research, but more importantly, we need to support them to generate research “for paramedics, by paramedics”.

CONCLUSION

There is significant future value to be realized from paramedic student research activity, and across our programs we have implemented education and research activity as a means to build research capacity within the system. We posit that paramedic student contributions to the literature are important for both contextualizing and reinforcing research education. Through this practical approach to research education, we hope to encourage students to explore professional issues, develop future research talent within the profession, and signal our future academic leaders.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any employer or organization.

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As faculty members, we too have been challenged, mainly in relation to our role-modelling and mentoring roles. Much of our own research is undertaken voluntarily, and is largely unfunded. This can present significant challenges when trying to balance research activity with other professional commitments such as teaching, and with personal commitments. Recently we have achieved greater success in gaining funding for research activities, from both internal and external funding sources. This is vital in providing support to the entire research program. The limited number of faculty with education and experience in research is also a challenge. In order to ensure continuity of faculty role-models to students, we need to engage our own faculty body in research to a much larger extent. Many faculty members face the same barriers to engagement with research outlined in the literature, including lack of knowledge, concerns regarding clinical care, and lack of support such as protected time and funding.

Paramedicine within Canada as a whole needs to embrace research as an integral component of practice. Engaging students with research is one method to do so. However, upon qualification, there are limited opportunities to engage with research as a practicing paramedic, in particular funded research and education. In order to generate the evidence required to support and if needs be, change practice, we need to equip paramedics with the skills, knowledge and experience to conduct research, but more importantly, we need to support them to generate research “for paramedics, by paramedics”.

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