Social Responsibility: Conceptualization and Embodiment in a School of Nursing

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Social Responsibility: Conceptualization and Embodiment in a School of Nursing*

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Abstract

This paper describes how a school of nursing has conceptualized and embodied social responsibility in its core values, curricular design, admission standards, clinical practice, and service learning opportunities. The school’s engagement in the process of practicing social responsibility and clarifying its meaning and application has made apparent the natural linkage between social responsibility and professionalism and the deep and complex relationship between social responsibility and nursing itself. It has also revealed how a commitment to social responsibility impacts and determines for whom nurses care. Claiming social responsibility as a core value and working to refine its meaning and place has increased the school’s commitment to it, concomitantly impacting education, practice, and recruitment and evaluation of faculty and students. The school views the conceptualization of social responsibility as a deepening and unfolding evolution, rather than as a formulaic understanding, and expects that its ongoing work of claiming social responsibility as a core value will continue to be enriching.

KEYWORDS: social responsibility, nursing, social justice, service learning, community engagement, human rights

*The authors wish to thank Dr. Kenneth W. Hepburn for his assistance with this article.
A rich phenomenon with inherent ambiguities calls for a characterization that preserves those shady edges, rather than being drowned in the pretense that there is a formulaic and sharp delineation waiting to be unearthed that will exactly separate out all the sheep from all the goats. (Sen, 2005, p. xiv).

The concept of social responsibility is closely connected with many professions, providing an important construct for guiding the overall development of these professions and their members. In this paper, described is how one school of nursing has approached the conceptualization and embodiment of the framework of social responsibility in its core values, curricular design, admission standards, clinical practice, student and faculty evaluation, and service learning opportunities. As the school engaged in an iterative process of practicing social responsibility and clarifying its meaning and application, it has become increasingly apparent that, over and above the natural linkage between social responsibility and professionalism, there is a deep and complex relationship between social responsibility and nursing itself.

Social responsibility is closely related to a number of humanistic constructs, including human rights, social justice, and community engagement. References to human rights date back to 2050 BC (Wikipedia, 2008a) and have evolved into international laws and agreements, forming a fundamental moral basis for regulating geopolitical order. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a contemporary statement on human rights, recognizes the dignity of all people and certain inherent rights, including life, liberty, security of person, and a standard of living adequate for health and well-being (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1948). Meanwhile, social justice has developed into a distinct, though inexact concept over the last two centuries. Social justice carries with it the belief that all members of society should have basic human rights and equal access to the benefits of their society. Linked to the ethical construct of distributive justice (Braveman & Gruskin, 2003), social justice is largely based on social contract theories, which hold that since governments are instituted for the benefit of their members, they must see to the welfare of their citizens (Levy & Sidel, 2006). Social justice establishes an ethical framework for human rights and provides a link to the term ‘responsibility’ within the notion of social responsibility.

The concept of community engagement is embraced by a wide range of professions and institutions, including nursing, public health, education, sociology, political science, government, and theology. Paraphrasing a definition developed in an educational context, community engagement can be understood...
as collaboration between an institution and its larger community for mutually beneficial exchange in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Carnegie Foundation, 2007). Thus community engagement, while socially motivated, appears a less obligatory concept than social responsibility. The interrelatedness of these concepts raises a number of questions as one attempts to understand and operationalize the meaning of social responsibility in relation to nursing: "How is social responsibility related to human rights and social justice?" "How is corporate social responsibility or social responsibility in education, different from social responsibility in nursing?" "Is social responsibility measurable?"

In describing this school’s journey toward embodying the value of social responsibility, three areas will be addressed: 1) the broader framework of social responsibility, including its definition in nursing and various professions; 2) the process of enacting social responsibility within the school through organizational and curricular innovations and learning, and leadership opportunities in professional and political action; and 3) plans for strategically advancing and enacting social responsibility within the school.

**SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AMONG THE PROFESSIONS**

Social responsibility does not lend itself well to definition. Leading English language dictionaries, for example, do not provide definitions, however, two popular on-line resources provide some orientation. The Visual Thesaurus (n.d.) defines responsibility as “the social force that binds you to your obligations and the course of action demanded by that force”. Wikipedia (2008b) provides the somewhat circular definition that social responsibility is “an ethical or ideological theory that an entity whether it is state, government, corporation, organization or individual has a responsibility to society”. The Board of Trustees of Pitzer College includes social responsibility as a core value, defining it as “awareness, knowledge, and behavior based upon a commitment to the values of equity, access and justice; a dedication to civic involvement and environmental sustainability; and a respect for diversity, pluralism, and freedom of expression” (Pitzer College, 2007). These definitions suggest that obligation and actions based on commitment, civic or social engagement, and values are all part of and germane to social responsibility. Interestingly, however, this term is not defined in nursing’s literature, despite apparent overall congruence with the profession’s values.

A number of overlapping themes emerge from the education and business literature related to social responsibility, including notions of obligation, behavior based on commitment, civic or social engagement, and values-based action.
Social responsibility has been identified as both a value and framework for conduct within elementary, high school and university communities. The education literature reports numerous curricular projects and instruments developed to measure implementation and impact of social responsibility. In a study of the effects of service learning on middle school students, the construct of social responsibility was measured by students’ concern for the welfare of others, felt duty to help others, and perceived efficacy in doing so (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2007) has embarked on a Core Commitments Initiative, including developing an instrument to measure the impact of college on personal and social responsibility. This instrument characterizes personal and social responsibility as “striving for excellence, cultivating personal and academic integrity, contributing to a larger community, taking seriously the perspective of others, and developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning” (AACU). Both studies characterize social responsibility as behavior that is based on service to the community and concern for others. This is also consistent with the general definitions and characterizations described in other fields.

The business world is actively engaged in considering its role in corporate social responsibility (CSR), although no single view prevails. The Kennedy School of Government portrays CSR as the way in which “companies manage their economic, social, and environmental impacts, as well as their relationships in all key spheres of influence: the workplace, the marketplace, the supply chain, the community, and the public policy realm” (Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2007). Beardsley, Bonini, Mendonca, and Oppenheim (2007) describe CSR as an approach in which sociopolitical issues are incorporated into a business’s strategic decision-making processes. The authors argue that social and political forces can impact an industry’s reputation, and conversely that socially engaged companies can benefit from understanding unmet market needs, which in turn can positively impact success. In The Economist (2006), Robert Reich conceptualizes ‘Supercapitalism’ as the counterproductive aspect of CSR and warns that the downside of CSR is that governments abdicate their responsibilities of addressing social problems and caring for the common good. A more middle of the road view argues that we need the combined impact of companies and governments working together to benefit all members of society. Themes such as unmet marketing potential, corporate success, and enhanced reputation seem to be emphasized more in discussions of CSR than in discussions of social responsibility in other professional literature.
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND RELATED CONCEPTS IN NURSING

The concept of social responsibility is strongly linked to the values of professions in general and nursing in particular. Perhaps for these reasons this term does not surface as such in the nursing literature. Rather, the underlying constructs of social responsibility are woven into the fabric of nursing’s history and its codes of ethics and practice. Nurses stand at a privileged intersection in which they simultaneously provide care to patients and witness the larger societal forces that either impede or enhance the attainment of the patient’s health. Consequently, if nurses are to fulfill their professional responsibilities, they are obligated to attend to social structures that affect patients’ health. This obligation is deeply rooted in nursing’s identity as a profession and its contract with society through which the profession is accorded trust in exchange for its work on behalf of society’s well-being.

Two figures from nursing’s past, Florence Nightingale and Lillian Wald, establish nursing’s roots in social responsibility. Nightingale was the first to ‘stake out’ nurses’ responsibility to address the relationship between society and health. Her ability to connect illness and death with social conditions, and to advocate change at societal levels, set the stage for integration of social responsibility into the education and practice of nurses. Her example gave rise to nurses subsequently playing leadership roles in social movements throughout the 20th century as a “voice for those without a voice” (Lucey, 2007, p. 40). Lillian Wald, regarded as the mother of both American public health nursing and social work, lived out social responsibility through her leadership across a number of social movements in the United States. According to Lucey, Wald recognized that in order to improve health, broader social structures such as “housing, sanitation, education and even recreation” (p. 40) needed to be improved. Smith (2002) describes the vision of Lavinia Lloyd Dock, another disciple of Nightingale’s, as one that encouraged nurses to work toward a new ideal of society which embodied social responsibility and the welfare of others.

Although few articles specifically address social responsibility in nursing, a substantial recent body of literature calls for nurses to reinvest in social justice, social activism, sustainability and empowerment (Barnes, 2005; Bathum, 2007; Belknap, 2008; Boutain, 2005a; Boutain 2005b; Drevdahl, Kneipp, Canales, & Dorcy, 2001; Falk-Rafael, 2005; Falk-Rafael, 2006; Redman & Clark, 2002; Reimer-Kirkham, Van Hofwegen, & Hoe-Hardwood, 2005). Falk Rafael (2005), for example, argues that nursing has a responsibility to care for humanity and the environment. The author urges nurses to return to Nightingale’s vision of social responsibility. She believes Nightingale’s vision was marginalized as the
profession focused on advancing nursing science, improving working conditions and addressing other professional issues.

Reimer-Kirkham et al.'s (2005) research used a qualitative approach to describe one school of nursing’s efforts to incorporate social justice content through student clinical experiences in correctional facilities, aboriginal communities, and other vulnerable population settings. These experiences were described by students as transformative; helping them envision new possibilities, gain deeper understanding of social issues, and struggle with moral issues as they witnessed power inequality, poverty and marginalization. In analyzing student narratives, the authors found that students typically moved through an initial phase of dissonance, then disorientation and new awareness; followed by reflection, soul searching and engagement; and then to a desire, even a sense of urgency, to be agents of change for those they serve and the nursing profession. Students’ engagement with social justice issues helped them experience, act and understand the world in new ways.

According to Redman and Clark (2002), student learning experiences that include social justice and civic engagement help them carry a sense of social responsibility into their professional careers. Further, it serves as a counterbalancing antidote to passivity and learned helplessness that can arise when exploring issues of social injustice. Nokes, Nickitas, Keida, and Neville (2005) state that students who participate in service learning improve their civic engagement scores, build social capital and strengthen a sense of community among nurses.

Drawing from some of the above work and a framework of critical theory and feminist pedagogy, Chinn and Kramer (2008), have proposed an emancipatory pattern of knowing, which addresses the social and political context of nursing knowledge. It calls for a capacity to notice injustices in a social order, critically examine them, and identify social and structural changes that are required to ‘right the wrongs’ that exist. Praxis, described as engagement in thoughtful reflection and action, is the process by which emancipatory knowing is authenticated. An example of this process is described by Bathum (2007), who uses a critical perspective in designing and implementing research with Peruvian women healers. Through her praxis with these women, she and they began to outline issues and ideas that could lead directly to community change.

In addition to individual nurse scholars, professional nursing organizations have directly and indirectly addressed how social responsibility is embedded in nursing. The American Nurses Association (ANA) Social Policy Statement
(2003) reflects the belief that there is a social contract between society and the nursing profession. This social contract includes rights and responsibilities, public accountability, partnership between nurse and patient, respect for the values and beliefs of the patient and the nurse, and the understanding that public policy, and the system in which it occurs, influence the health and well-being of society and professional nursing. The ANA Code of Ethics (2001) and that of the International Council of Nurses (2006), likewise encompass notions of social responsibility and calls on nursing to address the barriers to health, including poverty, unsafe living conditions, abuse, violence and lack of access to care, as part of its ethical responsibilities.

ENACTING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY WITHIN A SCHOOL OF NURSING

Social responsibility is embodied in the school through a number of strategies. These include claiming it as a core value, making social responsibility central to faculty and student recruitment, enhancing the curricular focus on it, offering opportunities for service learning, community engagement and professional and political leadership development, focusing on environmental initiatives, and engaging in socially responsible practice, collaborations and partnerships. A first and central strategy for the school was declaring social responsibility to be a core value. Doing so initiated an ongoing discourse among students and faculty that continues to refine its meaning and definition in the school (see Appendix).

The school's recruitment materials emphasize its core values. This commitment attracts students and faculty to the school who share its vision. For example, a recent informal poll conducted during orientation, indicated that 50% of incoming students came to the school, in part, because social responsibility was a core value. Significant funding has been awarded to the school to establish a Fellowship program focused on leadership and social responsibility. The Fellowships are competitively granted to students with prior degrees who have demonstrated leadership in the area of social responsibility. Each year four new Fellows are admitted, contributing to a core of 12-16 Fellows in school at any given time. In addition, alumnae Fellows continue to focus on social responsibility as practicing professionals.

The school's commitment to social responsibility is also seen in a variety of curricular initiatives. Engagement with social responsibility begins with students’ first undergraduate professional nursing course and continues throughout their education. During their first few weeks in school, student/faculty
mentor groups (ten students and one faculty mentor) work with an underserved population in a variety of community-based clinical settings as a strategy to engage students with issues related to social responsibility. During their senior year, all students are enrolled in the community/public health nursing course during which they care for a variety of underserved populations. Students have additional curricular and extracurricular opportunities for engagement with social responsibility throughout their time at the school. Through journaling, debriefing and reflection on their learning experiences, students critically examine their actions and the larger social issues related to inequality, lack of appropriate health care, poverty, human rights, and social justice.

These experiences are designed to meet identified needs of the partners and populations served, and foster and deepen understanding of social responsibility. Engagement in this work allows students to “learn social responsibility as professionals” (Callister & Hobbins-Garbett, 2000, p. 177), develop as “both agents for social change and citizens of the world” (Boutain, 2005b, p. 404), and increase their social consciousness, engagement and commitment to transformational change (Reimer-Kirkham et al., 2005). During these educational experiences, students are challenged and encouraged to work as change agents, to reshape structures and to become stronger advocates for patients and thus agents of transformation. This activity is integrated into the academic curriculum, enhancing the students’ understanding of the course content and appreciation of the nursing discipline. Examples of opportunities for engagement with social responsibility throughout the course of study are briefly summarized in this paper (see Table).

It is expected that engagement in these community-based learning initiatives will increase nursing student effectiveness in providing health promotion and disease prevention services; enhance their competencies in providing clinical services to rural and underserved populations; heighten their awareness of the role of the nurse in faith-based organizations; increase their knowledge about addiction and recovery services; and enhance their interest in serving diverse populations in the United States and globally. For faculty, it is expected that their participation will further increase their awareness of vulnerable populations, allow them to contribute to strengthening the professional development of nurses, and enhance their expertise in global health.
## Table

**Exemplars of Opportunities for Engagement with Social Responsibility**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project &amp; Site</th>
<th>Learning Objectives</th>
<th>Learning Activities</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Duration of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Café 458 - restaurant for persons who are homeless</td>
<td>Think in new &amp; creative ways about social responsibility &amp; the “context” in which health care is provided.</td>
<td>Population assessment, hands on physical, psych-socio-spiritual care, health education &amp; peer education.</td>
<td>20-30 per year</td>
<td>7 clinical weeks &amp;/or shorter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateway 24 / 7 service center for the homeless</td>
<td>Offer care to clients in a large 300-bed facility with special focus on clients in a 30-bed health respite unit.</td>
<td>Assessing population needs, providing hands on physical, psych-socio-spiritual care &amp; health education.</td>
<td>150 + per year</td>
<td>7 clinical weeks &amp;/or shorter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carver High School</td>
<td>Engage with teens in a school setting to increase health capacity &amp; model health career opportunities.</td>
<td>Health fairs, health education, peer education, working with health academy.</td>
<td>30 +</td>
<td>Service learning &amp;/or longer clinical experience.</td>
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**Table (continued).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project &amp; Site</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm Worker Health; Rural Georgia</td>
<td>Deepen student understanding of health &amp; social issues facing migrant populations within the framework of social responsibility.</td>
<td>Provide physical exams, screenings, treatment &amp; health education for 700-1000 migrant farm workers &amp; their families.</td>
<td>~90 &amp; their faculty</td>
<td>2 weeks immersed in rural community &amp; 3 weeks of classroom learning as part of student senior course work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missionaries of the Poor; Jamaica, West Indies</td>
<td>Understand the power of touch, love, joy &amp; simple care with disabled residents living in a faith-based home for the poor.</td>
<td>Provide activities of daily living for children &amp; adults who are physically &amp; mentally disabled.</td>
<td>12 per year</td>
<td>1 week immersion during spring break.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahamian Ministry of Health</td>
<td>Promotes social responsibility among students &amp; faculty, &amp; sustainability within the local communities.</td>
<td>Provide health education to school aged children &amp; continuing education to island nurses.</td>
<td>12 per year</td>
<td>1 week immersion during spring break.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of these goals are directly related to social responsibility and involve careful consideration of local needs, resources, and culture. Consequently, each year the school reviews objectives and plans with representatives from its governmental and community-based partners to assure program quality, and that
local needs are being met. The school’s goal is to develop long-term, mutually enriching partnerships.

The students’ service learning experiences are facilitated by the school’s Office of Service Learning (OSL). It is the only school or college within the university system (comprising two colleges and seven schools) to have a dedicated OSL. The OSL affords nursing students additional opportunities for community engagement at the local, state and international levels. The OSL provides leadership, coordination and support of service learning initiatives, facilitating and coordinating the school’s conceptualization and embodiment of social responsibility.

Other strategies for embodying social responsibility in the school include opportunities for professional and political action. There are numerous ways for this to occur through organizations such as HealthSTAT (Health Students Taking Action Together [http://www.healthstatgeorgia.org]), national and state student nursing associations, outreach experiences with refugees, and others. The School fosters and supports these opportunities through faculty mentorship, travel support, meeting space and leadership development.

Many individual students have been wonderful exemplars of living social responsibility. One student began by moving to Hyden, Kentucky to work as a volunteer with the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS), assisting nurse-midwives and family nurse practitioners. Later, while working on a local newspaper as a photo-journalist she was invited to join a pediatric health care team on a service trip to Haiti. She taught photography to children in Haiti and later returned to implement a participatory research project with Haitian midwives, the aim of which was to lower rates of prenatal and childhood malnutrition. This student has maintained an on-going relationship with Haiti, and her most recent trips there have related to her honors research efforts focusing on improving prenatal care outcomes.

The current President of HealthSTAT is a nursing student. This interdisciplinary, student-run organization creates a community of health professional students, and engages them in education, activism and service. Another student was recently elected President of the National Student Nurses Association and serves on the national advisory committee of Partners Investing in Nursing’s Future, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Northwest Health Foundation focusing on solutions to nursing workforce issues.
Faculty, staff and students participate in other sustainability efforts such as an aggressive recycling campaign, a stairway initiative to reduce elevator use and increase healthy behaviors, an educational garden designed to foster awareness of native medicinal plants and their uses, and a sustainability group targeted at generating new interdisciplinary initiatives for health sciences.

**FUTURE EFFORTS TO EMBODY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The school is embarking on a number of projects to further embody the core value of social responsibility:

- **The e-portfolio.** This pilot project will implement an electronic co-curricular student portfolio documenting activities related to social responsibility, community engagement and service learning within official student records.

- **Coordinating Social Responsibility Opportunities across the University.** The school is working closely with other university entities to disseminate information to nursing students about opportunities available through the university and to promote information about the school's work in social responsibility to the wider university and beyond.

- **Enhanced Global Clinical Opportunities.** The university’s Global Health Institute is developing international pilot projects that would enable interdisciplinary service learning opportunities abroad.

- **Advancing Scholarship on Social Responsibility in the Health Professions.** Plans are in place to develop protocols and instruments that describe, define, assess, and measure components of social responsibility efforts.

- **Heightening the Focus on "Community" in Social Responsibility Learning Endeavors.** There are plans to strengthen the community assessment and outcome components of the school’s social responsibility endeavors, and convene an Advisory Committee (with representatives from community-based organizations, faculty, students and staff) to address how partners’ needs can best be met.

- **Facilitating Further Student Leadership Development.** The school will broaden its assistance to student governance groups (including the university Student Nurses Association, and junior and senior class officers), as they plan, implement and evaluate their leadership, voluntary and community engagement efforts related to advancing social responsibility.
CONCLUSION

Since social responsibility is so deeply embedded in nursing, it has been an important undertaking to name it, claim it and lift it up for a more thorough examination. This process has enabled the school to more clearly articulate the importance of social responsibility in the work of nursing, and to see how social responsibility impacts the well-being of patients. Claiming social responsibility as a core value and refining its meaning and place in the school, has increased commitment to it across the curriculum, impacting the way faculty members educate, practice and engage in the community. As Chinn and Kramer (2008) suggested through their framework of critical theory and feminist pedagogy, an emancipatory pattern of knowing has evolved at the school, enhancing the capacity to identify injustices, examine them critically, and identify factors that might facilitate change.

The school expects to continue to engage in socially responsible endeavors with local, international and global community-based learning initiatives. This work will improve how nursing graduates and faculty engage with communities, increase skills in health promotion and disease prevention, enhance competencies in providing clinical services to rural, underserved and other high-risk populations, and heighten awareness of the role of the nurse with faith-based organizations, among others. To that end, careful review of objectives and plans with representatives from the partnering governmental and community-based organizations will continue, so as to reflect and enhance how to put social responsibility into practice, in order to strengthen the professional development of nurses, and enhance the way services are delivered.

As stated in the opening quote from Sen (2005), social responsibility is a rich phenomenon with inherent ambiguities. A formulaic understanding has not been arrived at; rather, it is viewed as a deepening and unfolding construct. While there have been the typical strains that come with any new school-wide initiatives, it is gratifying to have embarked on this journey of claiming social responsibility as a core value. The work of reflecting on and putting social responsibility into practice has been enriching. Measuring the outcomes will continue with more rigorous scholarship, but to date, there is the sense that the journey thus far has been fruitful for the school, the partners, the wider university, and the broader nursing profession.
School Statement on Social Responsibility

Social responsibility cannot be removed from the other core values of our school: scholarship and leadership, and should be understood that it is woven into admission standards, curriculum, clinical practice, and student and faculty evaluation.

Social responsibility is the obligation to promote equity, access, and justice. It derives from the social contract between society and nursing and as such is part of nurses’ duty or obligation. Social responsibility involves a dedication to civic involvement and environmental sustainability, and a respect for diversity, pluralism, and freedom of expression in an effort to optimize well-being.

Social responsibility includes promoting positive forces as well as mediating detrimental forces such as insuring safe access to clean water and air, healthcare, housing, family planning, education, literacy, freedom from violence and poverty, and economic equality. It must be understood that social responsibility is conceptually different than volunteerism or service learning and it is not a one time experience. It is working for social justice.

We promote and nurture scholarly engagement in social responsibility so that students might be prepared as nursing leaders to change social structures that impede the attainment of health.

Social responsibility is made manifest in a variety of ways such as:
1. Entrance essays that reflect commitment to the value of social responsibility
2. Orientation sessions that include discussion of social responsibility
3. Inclusion of reflective journaling about social responsibility throughout coursework
4. Role modeling this value by all faculty
5. Evaluation competencies that reflect the value of social responsibility
REFERENCES


