

# Examining Perceptions of Care Efficacy Among Nursing and Social Work Students

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## Abstract

In health care, interprofessional team work and collaboration among health professionals can improve patient outcomes, increase job satisfaction among professionals, and decrease cost of healthcare. Global organizations call on health professional programs to provide Interprofessional Education (IPE) within curricula to prepare students to work effectively and efficiently within interprofessional teams, yet minimal pedagogical research has been conducted in this area. Social work and nursing students, the two disciplines who spend the most contact hours with patients, can benefit significantly from IPE because the activities can lead to an increase in student confidence and prepare them to provide collaborative care within interprofessional teams. Further inquiry into student perceptions of IPE and collaboration can be beneficial to pedagogical advancement and enhancement of educational experiences in the future. This study of IPE pedagogy incorporated a mixed methods approach to understand nursing and social work students' perceptions of interprofessional collaboration. Items from the Interprofessional Collaboration Scale and open-ended questions were used to gather data via a Qualtrics XM Platform™ survey. Quantitative findings noted similarities between nursing and social work students regarding perceptions of communication and differences about roles and responsibilities of disciplines within an interprofessional team. Qualitative analysis revealed the following themes: *communication*, *advocacy*, and *role definition*. Implications from this study can inform future educational objectives and gaps in learning for social work and nursing students by providing insights into similarities and differences in perception to guide future IPE pedagogy. Continuous studying of social work and nursing interprofessional collaboration may benefit a student's potential for professional practice as well as promote positive patient outcomes and efficient collaborative care environments.

## Introduction

Preparing future health professionals for interprofes-

sional collaborative practice is critical and can lead to improvement in patient outcomes, increase in overall satisfaction for health care professionals, and decrease in health care costs (Institute of Medicine, 2015). Interprofessional Education (IPE), which prepares students for interprofessional collaborative practice, aims to increase students' understanding of the roles and responsibilities of various members of the healthcare team while providing an opportunity for students to learn how their discipline of study interacts as a member of a multifaceted care team (Interprofessional Education Collaborative, 2016). Establishing strong skills in areas such as teamwork and communication, central aspects of IPE, is critical in health professions education to prepare students for practice (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2021). Incorporating critical competencies of interprofessional practice into educational curriculum better prepares students for professional practice and increases the efficiency of their work when they begin to practice at the professional level (Hermann et al., 2016). Yet, providing meaningful experiences for health professional students can be challenging (NASEM, 2021), and limited research has focused on IPE pedagogy.

Nursing and social work students must develop strong interprofessional collaboration skills prior to professional practice. Social workers and nurses spend the most time with clients and can greatly impact patient outcomes. Thus, preparing them for practice is essential work for programs. Sims (2011) outlined the benefits and increased efficiency related to role classification and greater understanding of scope of practice through thoroughly defining professional roles. In the case of nursing and social work students, assessing for role definition prior to professional practice can provide information about possible gaps in understanding and allow for educational interventions. Similarly, in a study by Clark et al. (2015), increased understanding of scope of practice results from embedding IPE in curriculum, especially for nursing and social work students. This

study further emphasizes the importance of integrating student perceptions of interprofessional collaboration into educational curricula and notes the importance of greater understanding of individual and interacting scopes of practice (Clark et. al., 2015).

While understanding individual scope of practice and roles is important to professional practice, joint training between nursing and social work disciplines is important to prepare students for practice. Overall, assessment of student perceptions of interprofessional collaboration and personal understanding of professional scope of practice is imperative both to educational outcomes and success in future professional practice. Thus, the purpose of this mixed methods study was to evaluate role perceptions between social work and nursing students to help inform educational curriculum for future interprofessional practice.

## Methods

This study incorporated a mixed methods design to understand perceptions of interprofessional collaboration among undergraduate nursing and social work students. A non-experimental, descriptive design was used for the quantitative component of the study and a descriptive phenomenological approach was used for the qualitative component. Prior to the collection of data, IRB approval was obtained to ensure protection of human subjects and research. The sample population included nursing and social work students enrolled in baccalaureate programs at a large, public academic institution in the southeastern United States. Participants were recruited from two cohorts of senior-level nursing students and two cohorts of senior-level social work students via an email that contained an informational letter. Participation was voluntary. Students must have completed IPE activities within their program's curriculum to be eligible to participate in this study.

Data were gathered via a Qualtrics XM Platform™ survey consisting of 13 Likert-like scale items and five open-ended questions. The 13 Likert-like scale items were adapted from the Interprofessional Collaboration Scale (ICS) tool (Kenaszchuk et al., 2010). Items from the ICS, a valid and reliable tool, were used to understand perceptions of collaborating with team members during IPE-related activities, as well as how they perceived collaboration in professional settings. A 4-point

agreement scale for each item ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Two examples of questions on the tool were: "I feel that patient treatment and care are not adequately discussed between and among team members" and "Team members would be willing to cooperate with new, agreed upon practices." Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze data collected via the ICS.

Additionally, five open-ended questions were provided to further understand perceptions of roles and expectations. These questions were designed to students' understanding of core facets of interprofessional collaboration, including role definition, effective team collaboration, and the impact of collaboration on patient outcomes. The questions were

- 1) Describe how you perceive nursing and social work professionals' roles in healthcare settings.
- 2) What roles do you think overlap between nursing and social work?
- 3) How can nurses and social workers collaborate to improve patient outcomes?
- 4) What roles and responsibilities are specific to your discipline (nursing or social work) and how can your discipline contribute to an interprofessional team?
- 5) What characteristics or tasks are important for effective collaboration between nursing and social work professionals in healthcare?

Responses were coded for common themes and thematic statements identified. Upon completion of data collection, qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately and then compared to understand student perceptions of interprofessional collaboration.

## Results

A total of 14 students, nursing (n=10) and social work (n=4), participated in the study by completing the survey. A Mann-Whitney U statistical analysis was conducted in SPSS® and found no statistically significant difference among the two groups, nursing and social work, for all questions from the ICS. This was not surprising given the small sample size. Through quantitative analysis, nursing and social work students agreed almost unanimously on questions such as "Team members are usually willing to take into account the convenience of individuals when planning their work." Eleven

students agreed with this question and students across both disciplines agreed with this particular question. Additionally, students almost unanimously agreed on questions related to communication; questions related to communication received eight to twelve students' selections of agree. In terms of variance, the question, "Some individuals think their work is more important than the work of others on the team," showed the most variance among the students. Five students disagreed, six students agreed, and two strongly agreed; however, this was equally split between disciplines, and neither nursing or social work fell solely into one category. The most variance in the quantitative section was with questions related to role definition and ability to work within roles to create successful communication.

In terms of qualitative analysis, data collected from the five open-ended questions were used to assess qualitative perceptions of interprofessional collaboration. Through analysis of collected data, the common themes of *communication*, *advocacy*, and *role definition* were noted among both disciplines. Additionally, some differences emerged in themes between nursing and social work students, especially in role definition between the two disciplines.

The most common theme expressed by both nursing and social work students was *communication* and how valuable the attributes of effective communication could be not only to interprofessional collaborative efforts but to their personal disciplines and practice as well. Participants expressed the importance of effective communication between themselves and their patients, as well as the importance of effective communication between nursing and social work disciplines to ensure efficient collaborative care. Both nursing and social work students highlighted the importance of communication in effective interprofessional collaboration and expressed communication as a central theme on effective interprofessional collaboration that could be continually practiced and implemented for successful interactions. Communication related to patient care focused on psychosocial needs and explaining connections between medical and social needs for both groups of students. Both social work and nursing students noted the role of communication in providing competent social or psychosocial interventions in patient care and connected proper communication with improved pa-

tient outcomes and advocacy. When asked to express what attributes nursing and social work share, one nursing student noted, "Communicating effectively and fully with each other and the clients. Respecting each other's abilities and responsibility." A social work participant similarly noted, "Effective communication, getting to know one another on a deeper level, understanding, patience's [sic] and respect" were the most important tasks related to interprofessional collaboration.

Another significant theme to emerge from the qualitative analysis was the theme of *advocacy*. Both disciplines noted advocacy as a key role of their discipline. Advocacy was described by students as providing education and promoting the desires of patients in their healthcare experience. For example, when asked to express what attributes nursing and social work share, one participant noted, "being a good listener, a good patient advocate, and a good role model," while another student similarly noted "patient advocacy, patient safety, therapeutic communication" were similar roles that were shared.

*Role definition* also presented as a shared theme among the two disciplines. Nursing students defined their role as both physical and social components of care, while highlighting the enhanced psychosocial nature of social work. Social work students noted nurses' roles in physical and or medical aspects of care, while defining their own role as providing social support. Differences in role definition account for a significant portion of the qualitative variance between the two disciplines. Both nursing and social work students provided differing qualitative descriptions of their roles and the role of the other discipline. This theme provided information into how students perceived their personal scope of practice and how the scope of practice interacts with the opposite discipline. For example, one nursing student noted, "The way I perceive the nurses role in healthcare settings is to provide medical care but also support and comfort for the patients. Nurses also seem to be focused on the present, as well as medical issues of the past. Social workers look at the issues currently affecting the patient, but also look at the past and future. For example, they could look into why a patient has had anxiety or what resources the patient needs when they go home." Additionally, one social work student noted

“These two professions are very much intertwined in the healthcare setting. Both care very strongly about the shared client and their family, which not only facilitates positive collaboration but also client outcomes.” Both students acknowledge the varying roles each profession played while noting the overlap in roles that social work and nursing professional can experience in professional settings.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings provided insights into student perceptions; however, the qualitative data were more helpful in this small data set for increasing insight into patterns of student perceptions. The ability to thematically analyze qualitative data allowed for better understanding of similarities and difference between both disciplines. While qualitative findings were more specific in this study, quantitative findings provided some information related to perceptions of teamwork. Comparatively, qualitative findings provided more descriptive information, while survey questions provided quantitative measures for comparison between students. Open-ended questions provided the most information and insight into students’ perceptions and gave participants the ability to full express their ideas, while survey questions provided more information about specific aspects of collaboration and teamwork. Due to the small sample size, qualitative data greatly enhanced the quantitative findings in this study and provided supplemental, descriptive understanding of student’s accounts of interprofessional collaboration.

## Discussion and Implications

In terms of central themes and take aways from the data in this study, participants focused on roles related to advocacy, education, and communication as central concepts for collaboration. Thematic analysis of qualitative data throughout this study noted similar themes between both nursing and social work students who participated in this study. In regard to individual disciplines, nursing students perceived themselves as responsible for physical and medical aspects of care but noted the significance of social components of care provided by social work. While nursing students incorporated both social and physical components of care into their definitions of the role of nurses, their definitions were more likely to rely on physical or medical components of care as their primary objective. Social work students noted their role in psychosocial, long-

term patient care and described nursing patient care as physical and short-term focused.

Both disciplines defined their roles in a similar fashion and assessed the impact of differing and similar task oriented jobs on collaborative efforts. Students used similar verbiage to discuss the roles and scope of practice of their personal disciplines; however, social work and nursing students were more likely to focus on either physical or social descriptions of roles instead of integrating physical and social descriptions for both disciplines. This is to say that physical and social aspects of care and their implications on professional practice were not always combined in students’ descriptions of individual scope of practice. For example, when describing social work scope of practice, nursing students were likely to focus on social or psychosocial components of care while social work students might also incorporate physical care into their personal role definition.

Findings from this study can have a myriad of applications, especially for interprofessional education and preparing nursing and social work students for professional practice. Further strengthening communication between these professional disciplines can create significant impacts on patient care outcomes by enhancing efficiency of care from members of the team that spend the most time with patients. Additionally, enhanced interdisciplinary communication and collaboration in health care settings can increase the efficacy of these systems. If practitioners, especially those practitioners spending the most contact hours with patients, are able to collaborate more efficiently, then the quality and efficiency of care given to patients will be improved.

Allowing for more thorough care management and collaboration between these two disciplines may decrease rates of patient recidivism, medication compliance and other patient-related problems. Furthermore, understanding current perceptions of students can inform educational goals and outcomes for future cohorts of students to promote more efficient collaborative practice. Assessing the ways students perceive interprofessional collaboration can allow educators to understand gaps in knowledge or areas in which students may be struggling and provide instances for educational supplementation in these areas. Ultimately, understanding the degree to which students understand the defined

roles of healthcare team members can inform curricular decisions that encourage more time for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Several limitations of this study are noted. First, participants were only recruited from one public institution, limiting the generalizability of results. Additionally, the sample size was small and students from only two disciplines were included, even though three other disciplines participate in IPE activities. However, the findings are important and add to the knowledge of IPE pedagogy, specifically understanding the differences of perceptions of social work and nursing students. Due to the small sample size in this study, very little variance was predicted between the two groups and the data showed students in both disciplines gave similar answers to the array of Likert-likescale questions. This outcome may not be the case with a larger sample size.

## Conclusion

Increased understanding of nursing and social work student's perceptions of interdisciplinary collaboration allows for efficient and comprehensive education and preparation for future professional collaboration. Further assessment of student perceptions can increase understanding of students' educational needs and foster increased pedagogical intervention in healthcare professional programs. Increased implementation of IPE activities in educational settings can greatly benefit student's confidence and ability to replicate interprofessional collaboration skills in future professional practice. Implications from this study can help to inform future educational objectives and gaps in learning for social work and nursing students related to interprofessional collaboration. Continuous studying of social work and nursing interprofessional collaboration may benefit a student's future potential for professional practice as well as promote positive patient outcomes and efficient collaborative care environments.

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## IRB Statement

This project received approval for protection of human subjects and research to conduct the study from Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (#20-568).