

Module 1 Keynote - Defining the Problem

Identify the Practice Gap

Meaningful improvement begins with clearly defining the right problem. Strong DNP projects do not begin with topics of interest. They begin with careful analysis of systems-level problems, population needs, and organizational priorities to address a specific practice gap. The problem is not a topic you decided would be your DNP project; rather, it is a practice gap that exists in the organization, and one that the nursing leadership team identifies as a priority.

To identify a practice problem, begin by asking: *“What problem exists within the system that meaningfully impacts outcomes and warrants change?”*

The DNP Project Begins with a Problem

DNP Projects are designed to:

- Improve patient outcomes
- Improve healthcare processes
- Reduce variation in practice
- Close evidence-to-practice gaps
- Promote system-level change

No clearly defined problem = No meaningful improvement initiative

Spirit of Inquiry

Melnik and colleagues (2009) argue that EBP begins **before** searching the literature. It begins with questioning practice. They describe this as cultivating a spirit of inquiry, an ongoing curiosity about the best evidence to guide care.

DNP students must move beyond a topic to a practice problem.

Students frequently begin with broad clinical topics. However, DNP projects require identification of a specific practice gap. A topic becomes a practice problem when there is evidence of a discrepancy between current performance and desired performance. **A practice gap exists when:**

Current State ≠ Desired State

The practice gap is often the most important concept for DNP students to understand. A practice problem exists when there is a measurable difference between *what is occurring* and *what should be occurring*, according to evidence, standards, benchmarks, or organizational goals.

Where do Practice Problems Come From?

Common sources include:

- Quality dashboards
- Benchmark reports
- Regulatory findings
- Patient safety data
- Incident reports
- Accreditation standards
- Clinical observations
- Staff concerns
- Patient satisfaction data

Applying a Spirit of Inquiry

Questions that help define the problem:

- Why are we doing this practice?
- Is the current process evidence-based?
- What outcomes are we achieving?
- Are outcomes consistent across providers?
- What patient population is affected?
- What is the impact on quality, safety, or cost?

These questions move us from curiosity to investigation. The goal is not simply identifying something we dislike. The goal is identifying a problem with measurable consequences for patients, providers, or healthcare systems.

Reference

Melnik, B. M. , Fineout-Overholt, E. , Stillwell, S. B. & Williamson, K. M. (2009). Evidence-Based Practice: Step by Step: Igniting a Spirit of Inquiry. *AJN, American Journal of Nursing*, 109 (11), 49-52. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NAJ.0000363354.53883.58>.