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Implementing Quality Improvement Projects in Health Department Settings:
A Promising Opportunity for Academic-Health Department Partnerships
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There are numerous examples of promising academic-practice partnerships in baccalaureate nursing education, as well as examples of academic-service partnerships and resulting best practices. However, few documented examples involving Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) education exist. DNP students at the University of Maryland are required to complete culminating projects focused on quality improvement in practice settings. During the last four semesters students develop, plan, implement and evaluate their projects. Our first cohort of nearly 90 DNP students began their projects in 2017 and included 13 Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) students. The FNP program's emphasis on primary care, health promotion, disease prevention and care of vulnerable populations coupled with the DNP project focus on quality improvement represents a compelling opportunity for FNP students to complete projects in public health settings. In this cohort, 4 of the 13 FNP students completed projects at health departments. Project topics included a statewide early infant hearing program, county level opioid screenings for incarcerated individuals, ADHD treatment guidelines for mental health clinics, and HIV linkage to care initiatives. Lessons learned indicate that innovative academic-health department partnerships can realize significant benefits. Successful projects are dependent on strong partnerships involving buy-in from leadership at both institutions, clearly defined expectations, data sharing agreements, ongoing communication, flexibility, and willingness to tackle projects of value to health department programming. Recommendations for future DNP projects conducted in partnership with health departments are relevant as the number of students working toward a DNP in the FNP specialty increases and healthcare emphasizes population-based care.