

**ORIGINAL PAPER**

**Engendering Empathy in Baccalaureate Nursing Students**

**Caryn A. Sheehan, DNP, APRN-BC, CNE**

Associate Professor, Nursing, Saint Anselm College, Manchester, NH, USA

**Kathleen O. Perrin, PhD, RN, CCRN**

Professor, Nursing, Saint Anselm College, Manchester, NH, USA

**Mertie L. Potter, DNP, PMHNP-BC, PMHCNS-BC**

Clinical Professor, Nursing, Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions, Boston, MA, USA

**Mary K. Kazanowski, PhD, APRN-BC, CHPN**

Nurse Practitioner, Palliative Care Team at Concord Hospital, Concord, NH, USA  
Nurse, VNA Hospice of Manchester and Southern NH, USA

**Laurie A. Bennett, MSN, RN**

Instructor, Nursing Saint Anselm College, Manchester, NH, USA

**Correspondence:** Sheehan, Caryn A., Saint Anselm College, 100 Saint Anselm Drive, Box # 1745, Manchester, NH, 03102-1310, USA E-mail: Csheehan@anselm.edu

**Study was conducted in Manchester, NH 03102-1310, USA**

**Abstract**

**Background:** Recent nursing research suggests that empathy in nursing students actually declines as students progress through their nursing program of study; with the lowest levels of empathy observed in nursing students with the most clinical experience.

**Objective:** This study explored the effect of an elective nursing course about the many dimensions of human suffering on empathy in baccalaureate nursing students.

**Methods:** The pre-test/posttest design was repeated five times over five years.

**Results:** Despite previous evidence that suggests that empathy declines during nursing education, in this study undergraduate nursing students scored higher on the Jefferson Scale of Empathy, Nursing Student Version R after completing the course. In addition these positive findings were replicated consistently over a five year period. Collectively students scored about seven points higher after completing the course ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusions:** In an era when communication is technologically driven, nursing curricula requirements abound, and nursing students are focused on high stakes testing, the need for nurse educators to focus on engendering empathy may be more important than ever. Excerpts and exercises from the course that may have contributed to the study findings are included.

**Keywords:** Empathy, suffering, nursing education, nursing students, caring, human interactions