Actionable Methods for Educators and Employers to Address Nursing Workforce Challenges

Educators and employers need innovative ways to reach every potential registered nurse student, including those already working in healthcare careers, to prevent bottlenecks in the pipeline of registered nurses reaching the workforce.

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PATHWAYS TO NURSING EDUCATION

There are many traditional and nontraditional pathways to nursing school. Some applicants have just finished high school and are beginning their **journey to professional life** while some are transitioning to a second, or third, career. Students applying to nursing programs are working toward achieving personal and professional goals. Pursuing a career as a **registered nurse (RN)** begins with the daunting task of admission.

However, schools of nursing often have more applicants than they can enroll and waiting lists for programs are common. Many students apply and do not get in for several semesters. They may apply and are not accepted for many reasons, such as applicants not meeting program requirements or schools not having availability. Additionally, students that are accepted into RN programs are not always successful due to a myriad of reasons.

While many of these students are waiting to enroll in nursing programs, they could enroll in other nursing pathways or allied health fields and begin contributing to healthcare delivery, rather than waiting indefinitely for placement. Students who are not qualified for the RN program can be a **valuable resource** and should be **engaged** and **redirected** to **alternate health care programs**. With a healthcare delivery system that is complex and frenetic, healthcare educators and employers should tap every ounce of potential to make valuable contributions.

Helping these students to pursue alternate pathways also brings them closer to their own **professional goals** and provides them valuable experience within health care to make them stronger practitioners in the future. Once students are in these alternate pathways, educators and employers should continuously engage them to eventually bridge them back to RN programs should they desire to do so.

02

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

Across the country, schools of nursing turn away **tens of thousands** of qualified applicants **every year**, largely because of **lack of faculty and clinical sites** as well as **lack of financial resources**. All of these factors prevent expanding enrollment. Within the healthcare workforce, **recruitment** and **retention** are two of the biggest challenges the healthcare delivery system in America faces today. To provide quality health care, our healthcare system needs an adequate supply chain of talent.

Research shows that shortages within the nursing profession will persist for multiple reasons, including a **lack of potential educators**. The resulting bottleneck constrains educators' ability to support the health care industry's growing demand for nurses. The Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action reports there were 161,817 new registered nurse graduates in 2019 (2021). However, that number falls short of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projections, which estimates 175,900 openings for registered nurses each year, on average, over the course of this decade (2020). Additionally, nurse employment opportunities are projected to grow at 15% — faster than all other occupations from 2016 through 2026 (Nursing Shortage, 2020, Haddad, et al).

The nationwide nursing shortage was an issue prior to the COVID-19 pandemic with a 2017 study indicating that by 2030, the United States would be **short by 510,394 registered nurses** (Zhang, et al.).

The pandemic has exacerbated the issue. A February 2021 COVID Impact Assessment of **more than 20,000 nurses** reported by the American Nurses Association revealed about **40%** were **considering leaving their current job** and **15%** were **considering leaving the profession**.

It is not only registered nurses that are in short supply and high demand. **Nursing assistants** and **home health** and **personal care aides** are **vital to healthcare delivery** and demand is expected to **increase by 25%** during the next decade. The Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook projects **increasing need** from 2019–2029 for **numerous other vital health professions**. The demands for **licensed practical nurses**, **surgical technicians**, **respiratory therapists**, **medical assistants**, and **dental assistants** are expected to **grow faster** or **much faster than the average** for all occupations (2021).

In addition to a supply and demand imbalance, the healthcare industry has a significant turnover problem. The industry **turnover rate** stands at **19.5%**, as reported by the 2021 NSI National Health Care Retention & RN Staffing Report, and the average **time to hire** is **89 days**.

Thus, educators and employers need to tap the potential of every person pursuing a healthcare career in order to build a robust supply chain of talent and maintain adequate progression of that talent. Educators and employers are in a unique position to have a **positive impact** on healthcare delivery by **helping students navigate healthcare career pathways**.

03

LACK OF CLARITY IN PATHWAY GUIDANCE

Several barriers prevent seamless progression **to and through professional life** for students attempting to complete an RN program—whether those students are completely new to healthcare or already work in a healthcare role.

STUDENTS

As shortages of healthcare professionals persist, it is important to create **efficient pipelines** to healthcare careers and these pipelines should result in value for all participants, including those students who are not enrolling in or graduating from RN programs on their first attempt.

Many students applying to RN programs are not aware that **multiple pathways** to becoming a registered nurse exist or other allied health programs can be viable pathways to a registered nurse or other healthcare career. Currently, many of these students are not engaged to pursue other pathways into health care, either as **pathways to fulfilling careers** in other disciplines or to **gain skills and experience** before reapplying to a RN program. There are very few formal, repeatable, or scalable processes in place for engaging these students who do not get into the RN program or do not complete the program. Oftentimes school counselors and other professionals who may be guiding these students do not understand healthcare program requirements. These students who are not admitted simply become lost in the system.

WORKFORCE

Those who are working in health care in ancillary roles, such as nursing assistants, paramedics, or medical assistants, or even non-clinical roles such as health information technology roles, **can struggle to transition across healthcare careers** because many **pathways are not clearly navigable** (Frogner & Skillman, 2016). This is detrimental at the individual level, but also at the organizational level due to low retention and job satisfaction. **Adoption of career ladders and other programs** to **address progression and upward mobility of staff** have been shown to **decrease turnover** (Barry, et al., 2005) and **increase employee satisfaction** (Bittles, 2017). Those in the workforce who are not provided these opportunities also become lost in the system.

04

HOW EDUCATORS AND EMPLOYERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Educators and employers have the same goal: they both want to **graduate more nurses**. **Education and practice need to work collaboratively** to reach this goal—not in parallel, but in partnership. This partnership needs to be **purposeful** and **planned**. Educators and employers have a greater chance at successfully reaching the goal of developing more RNs in their communities by planning the future workforce together.

There are many challenges that stand in the way of addressing workforce development. Increasing enrollment is complex and very dependent on budgets, faculty, clinical site availability, and classroom space. Attrition from healthcare programs is frequently the result of factors beyond the school's control, such as personal issues or financial pressures (Hamshire, et al., 2018).

However, there are ways to engage students to contribute productively to health care and have positive impacts on the healthcare delivery system through reinforcing alternate pathways.

1. Innovate existing processes to increase engagement with students:

Now is the time to create advocacy for innovation in approaches to nursing education. The pandemic demonstrated that nursing educators, regulatory agencies, and clinical practice can innovate successfully. Leverage that success to drive discussions and grass roots change around "what we can keep" from the pandemic. *The Future of Nursing 2020-2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity* report published by the National Academy of Medicine suggests **transforming** these **short–term innovations into long-term changes** to improve nursing education to be more resilient in the face of future challenges and specifically calls for "a sense of urgency in the development of substantial changes, such as modifications of curriculum and the adoption of new technologies" (2021).

Schools have existing means of communicating with these students that educators can innovate or improve by providing **guidance on alternative pathways** to healthcare careers and **guidance** on how to eventually **bridge back to their RN program**:

• When sending letters notifying students that they do not qualify or have been added to the waitlist, include information in these notices regarding other programs the student might be qualified to pursue. Additionally, many nursing programs offer informational sessions to applicants. Provide information at this time on **alternate pathways** and **their requirements** and **next steps**. If possible, follow up with students who attend these sessions, then do not apply or do not enroll, to provide information on alternate pathways.

- Students who do not graduate should receive counseling on alternatives to remain in health care. Many students may need to withdraw from a nursing program due to personal factors that don't necessarily make the student a poor fit for a healthcare career. Educators should **incorporate steps to guide these students** to other healthcare pathways as part of the exit process. Nursing programs should have a policy in place for students that are unable to progress in the program. This could be simply requiring a signature from the dean or other faculty member which then presents the opportunity for that student to be counseled on the most appropriate path.

- Stackable credentials have been shown to have positive outcomes on the workforce and provide students a way to gain return on the work they've completed in a program as well as act as motivation to stay in a program ([Meyer, et al.,](#) 2020). Educators should consider how to incorporate this concept so struggling students can leave an RN program and **step into a nursing assistant or medical assistant role**. While there are numerous accreditation and state-mandated regulations that would prevent full-scale adoption of a stackable model in many healthcare programs, educators and employers can take steps to address some aspects by working in partnership with regulatory bodies and hospitals to create innovation.

2. Create educational and employment partnerships to engage students in high school:

Healthcare programs and healthcare employers **should make efforts to engage students before they even leave high school**. Engaging with high schools to reach students who intend to pursue healthcare programs will help them to understand the healthcare pathways available to them. It also may be a way to capture the interest of students who had not previously considered healthcare as an option.

- RN programs and healthcare facilities should work with their local high school guidance counselors to **ensure they have accurate information regarding healthcare pathways**. This includes requirements from an education and employment perspective and an understanding of how students can pursue alternate pathways into registered nursing and ultimately become a RN. Additionally, high school guidance counselors should be able to help students navigate the various healthcare careers available so students can meet their personal and professional goals if those goals are not aligned with a registered nurse role.

- Educational and healthcare facilities can work together to **create shadowing**, **internship**, and **other outreach programs** that allow students to learn about healthcare pathways. These programs can form stronger connections between educational institutions and healthcare facilities as well as further opportunities to engage directly with students. The outreach programs should be strongly informed by educators and employers to maximize the impact they have.

- Educational and healthcare facilities should work with [HOSA — Future Health Professionals](#) (formerly known as Health Occupations Students of America) to **develop interest in healthcare professions** and **increase knowledge of pathways** through resources that the organization provides. HOSA — Future Health Professionals has chartered associations in almost every state. Its mission is to promote career opportunities in the healthcare industry and to enhance the delivery of quality healthcare. The organization works with high schools and colleges and can provide much-needed assistance to foster robust partnerships.

3. Form partnerships to engage those already working in allied health roles:

Educators and employers should provide those who are already working as nursing assistants, medical assistants, phlebotomists, paramedics, surgical technicians and other allied health professionals with **quality counseling on their progression opportunities**. Educational institutions can partner with healthcare facilities to **create apprenticeship programs** or **other opportunities** to engage this pool of talent. Healthcare facilities should also consider these roles in **career advancement** and **upskilling initiatives**.

- **Apprenticeship programs** are appropriate ways for healthcare facilities to **tap an existing pool of talent while fostering retention** (Love & Prebil, 2019). While there are additional costs associated with such programs, the benefits gained make this an attractive strategy for nursing programs to consider.

- **Nursing professional development specialists** can assist both nursing professionals and allied health professionals to upskill or progress in their education. Additionally, healthcare facilities can champion programs that support the workforce with **tuition assistance** or **scholarships/grants**.

The suggestions offered above assume that educators and healthcare employers work together in formal, or at least defined, partnerships that involve planning as a first step and a well-developed workforce as an outcome. The ideal is to **work in partnership**, but that is not an excuse to not take action alone—doing nothing is not an option!

05

THE PATH FORWARD

Successful health care delivery is an **interprofessional effort**. Nursing education appeals to more students than it can accommodate and investing in these students' potential is a way to have **positive patient impacts** beyond enrollment and graduation numbers.

Nursing program educators can play an important role in **creating the talent pipeline** for healthcare delivery by directing the wealth of potential amongst the students who are not accepted or do not graduate.

HEALTHCARE EDUCATORS AND EMPLOYERS SHOULD:

- Innovate existing processes to **increase engagement** with students.

- Create educational and employment partnerships to **engage students in high school**.

- **Form partnerships** to engage those already working in allied health roles.

As health care delivery becomes more complex, healthcare employers and educators need to work to **make the nursing workforce pipeline more robust and productive**. While turning away some qualified applicants may be inevitable, educators should make every effort to ensure these applicants become **vital parts of the pipeline** and are **engaged to play vital roles** in positive patient outcomes. By creating emphasis on multiple pathways to registered nursing through entry from allied health disciplines, healthcare educators and employers empower the nursing workforce to become stronger and better prepared to face the everchanging healthcare landscape.

06

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