

Lessons Learned from the Evaluation of a National Scholarship Program for Traditionally Underrepresented Students in an Accelerated Baccalaureate Nursing Program

“Evidence indicates that diversity is associated with improved access to care for racial and ethnic minority patients, greater patient choice and satisfaction, and better educational experiences for health professions students, among many other benefits.” Institute of Medicine (2004)¹

Overview: New Careers in Nursing

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) New Careers in Nursing (NCIN) scholarship program is a national program of RWJF and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) designed to help alleviate the national nursing shortage, increase the diversity of nursing professionals, expand capacity in baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs, and enhance the pipeline of potential nurse faculty. Started in 2008 and currently in its final years of programming, the NCIN program is not awarding new scholarships, and similar scholarships are not available through any other funding source. The legacy of the NCIN program remains in the critical support that it provided for accelerated nursing students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds and the opportunities that it provided for schools of nursing to learn more about how to support traditionally underrepresented Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (ABSN) students. The following brief is based on the result of evaluations conducted by both Educational Testing Services (ETS) and AACN.

Jumpstarting a Nursing Career: Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (ABSN) Degree Programs

ABSN programs offer the quickest route to licensure as a registered nurse (RN) for adults who have already completed a bachelor's degree in a non-nursing discipline. Many programs can be completed in 11 to 18 months and are growing both in terms of number of programs and student participation.²

- From 2000 to 2013, 223 new programs were launched – a 319% increase.³
- Student enrollment increased from 4,794 in 2003 to 16,935 in 2014—a 253% increase.³
- Over eight times as many students graduated from ABSN programs in 2014 compared to 2003 (11,080 versus 1,352).³
- As of March 2015, ABSN programs were offered in 46 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.²

Easing the Funding Burden & Developing the Nursing Professional: NCIN Program Model

The New Careers in Nursing program provided \$10,000 scholarships for over 2,700 ABSN students from groups underrepresented in nursing or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds at 105 schools of nursing across the U.S. The demographic profile of these scholarship recipients is different from that of the greater nursing profession in several key ways:⁴

- About 38% are male, compared to 14% of BSN students nationally
- Another 55% are underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities, compared to 33% of BSN students nationally
- 64% are under 30 years of age, compared with 84% of BSN students nationally

Another aspect of student diversity in ABSN programs is the range of fields of their first degree, from traditional fields such as biology to music or business or education. In addition to the financial support provided by NCIN, students participated in programming focused on providing mentoring support and developing their leadership potential.

NCIN Key Evaluation Findings

- **97.3% of scholarship recipients have either graduated or are still enrolled** in their nursing program. Nationally, the retention rate for traditional RN programs is 89.4%.⁵
- Enrollments of underrepresented minorities, men and second-degree nursing students from disadvantaged backgrounds increased in many of these institutions.
- Nursing faculty reported that the increased student diversity led to classroom lessons and discussions on how to address the needs of patients from various cultural backgrounds.
- In interviews, scholarship recipients repeatedly cited the important impacts the program had on their lives and careers. In many cases the scholarships made the difference between them enrolling and not enrolling in the degree program that would make their nursing dream a reality. For others, the scholarship enabled them to complete their programs.

- The flexibility to choose how to use the funds (e.g. pay tuition, pay for living expenses or pay for childcare) helped students focus on the heavy demands of their accelerated nursing programs, enabling them to concentrate on the requirements of their programs.
- Scholarship recipients reported benefitting from the mentoring and leadership skill development programming.
- Many schools of nursing extended student support programming to include all accelerated nursing students or even all nursing students. This expansion of students served brought orientation, mentoring, and leadership skills supports to thousands of future nurses.

Financial Needs: The Remaining Gap

- With few exceptions, the students still found it difficult to finance their degrees despite receiving the scholarship funds.
- Many students reported struggling to cover unexpected expenses such as the cost of transportation to their clinical placements.
- Some students found it necessary to live with family members or to borrow money from family and friends to help cover the cost of the program.
- Many students took out sizeable student loans to cover the cost of their accelerated nursing degree, and many were still paying off loans from their prior degrees. A large number had even reached their federal undergraduate borrowing limits. Sometimes students found after enrolling in the program that their only options were private loans for which it was hard to qualify.

Financial Impediments May Prevent Prospective Students from Joining the ABSN Pathway

Students who are earning a second bachelor's degree can face unique financial challenges:

Accessing Financial Aid

- **Ineligible for Federal Pell Grants** – second bachelor's degree students do not qualify for the Federal Pell Grant program if they have already earned a bachelor's degree.⁶
- **Prior Educational Debt** – second bachelor's degree students may be carrying debt from their first undergraduate degree program and in some cases they may have reached the \$31,000 subsidized and unsubsidized aggregate loan limit⁷ for dependent⁸ undergraduate students.

Weighing Personal Circumstances

- Students - particularly first-generation college graduates - may come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds without family to turn to for financial support.
- Many students need to provide for spouses and children while they pursue their degree.

ACTION STEPS

- Develop programs to increase the diversity (e.g. age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and sexual orientation) of the nursing field and support improvements in culturally competent⁹ patient care. The NCIN recruitment toolkit is one resource: <http://www.newcareersinnursing.org/resources/recruitment-toolkit> and the AACN provides strategies to support diversity and cultural competence: <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/diversity-in-nursing>.
- Explore ways to raise funds to support the financial, mentoring, and leadership development needs of accelerated nursing students. NCIN provides helpful resources at <http://www.newcareersinnursing.org/category/resource-library-type/toolkits>.
- Advocate for revisions to the federal financial aid rules for second bachelor's degree nursing students.

Why Taking Action Matters:

Advancing ABSN Opportunities May Address Two Concerns about Registered Nurses

- **BSN-prepared Nurses are Critical for Patient Care:** BSN-prepared nurses help the health care field to provide the best patient care at a lower cost.¹⁰
- **Underrepresentation of Nurses from Minority Backgrounds and Gender:** Nurses from minority backgrounds represent 17% of the registered nurse (RN) workforce and men account for 7%.¹¹

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- ¹ Institute of Medicine (2004). In the Nation's Compelling Interest: Ensuring Diversity in the Health Care Workforce. Washington, DC. <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10885/in-the-nations-compelling-interest-ensuring-diversity-in-the-health>
- ² AACN (2015). Fact Sheet: Accelerated Baccalaureate and Master's Degrees in Nursing. Washington, DC. <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/media-relations/AccelProgsGlance.pdf>
- ³ Authors' calculations using 2014 data provided in AACN (2015). Fact Sheet: Accelerated Baccalaureate and Master's Degrees in Nursing. Washington, DC. <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/media-relations/AccelProgsGlance.pdf> and data on prior years, also collected by AACN, provided in Fang, D., Bednash, G.P., & Dewitty, V. (2012). The growth of accelerated BSN and MSN programs in the United States: A national perspective. In Zhan, L. & Finch, L.P. (eds.) *Accelerated Education in Nursing: Challenges Strategies, and Future Directions*. New York, NY: Springer.
- ⁴ National League for Nursing (2013). Annual Survey of Schools of Nursing, Fall 2012. www.nln.org/research/slides/index.htm. http://www.nln.org/docs/default-source/newsroom/nursing-education-statistics/AS1112_F27.pdf-pdf.pdf
- ⁵ Kovner, C.T. & Djukic, M. (2009). The nursing career process from application through the first two years of employment. *Journal of Professional Nursing* (25) 4, 197-203.
- ⁶ <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/grants-scholarships/pell>
- ⁷ <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/loans/subsidized-unsubsidized>
- ⁸ According to the U.S. Department of Education, a dependent student is "a student who does not meet any of the criteria for an independent student. An independent student is one of the following: at least 24 years old, married, a graduate or professional student, a veteran, a member of the armed forces, an orphan, a ward of the court, someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/glossary#letter_d.
- ⁹ AACN has defined cultural competency as the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for providing quality care to diverse populations. AACN (2009). *Establishing a Culturally Competent Master's and Doctorally Prepared Nursing Workforce*. Washington, DC. <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/education-resources/CulturalComp.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Smith, M; R. Saunders, L. Stuckhardt, and J.M. McGinnis, Editors. (2012). *Best Care at Lower Cost: The Path to Continuously Learning Health Care in America*. Washington, DC: Institute of Medicine. http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=13444
- ¹¹ Budden, J.S., Zhong, E.H., Moulton, P., & Cimiotti, J.P. (2013). *Highlights of the National Workforce Survey of Registered Nurses*. *Journal of Nursing Regulation* (4) 2, 5-13. https://www.ncsbn.org/JNR0713_05-14.pdf