



Navigating the path of academic progression: A qualitative descriptive study of associate degree nursing faculty, public health nurses, and school nurses

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KEYWORDS:

Academic progression;
Associate degree nursing;
Future of nursing report;
Public health nursing;
School nursing

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore impressions about academic progression among faculty teaching in associate degree nursing programs, public health, and school nurses. *Navigating the path of academic progression* is the overarching theme that describes the common factors identified by study participants as important for nurses who might consider academic progression. Empowering registered nurses to continue their education requires guidance, flexibility, and resources from academic institutions and health care organizations to facilitate seamless, efficient, and achievable academic progression.

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Introduction

In 2011, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) published the *Future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health (FoN)* report. The purpose of this landmark report was to outline how the nursing profession can help meet the complex health care needs of our citizens, with attention to nursing's role in providing safe, high-quality care for all. A major recommendation of the report was to increase the proportion of nurses with a baccalaureate (BSN) nursing degree to 80% by the year 2020, known also as the *80/20 goal* (IOM, 2011). In a recent descriptive study about the registered nurse (RN) workforce in

a midwestern state, researchers found that while only 46% of licensed practicing RNs were BSN prepared at time of initial licensure, 60% were now BSN prepared (Shen, Peltzer, Teel, & Pierce, 2015). In comparison, in other midwestern states, between 45 and 58% of nurses are BSN prepared. Despite the progress that is being made toward the 80/20 goal in this midwestern state and across the nation, challenges persist for associate degree (AD)-prepared nurses who are considering pursuit of a BSN degree.

Pathways for seamless academic progression are needed to support educational advancement at all levels of the nursing workforce. In particular, BSN-prepared nurses are needed for roles in many acute care, school, and population health settings. A BSN degree also is required for admission to most graduate nursing programs, where nurses receive the education needed to prepare for more advanced roles, for example, advanced practice, faculty, or research. This

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midwestern state is primarily rural and has many counties that are medically underserved designated areas, with shortages of primary care and psychiatric/mental health providers. Academic progression across all academic levels is vital to ensuring a sufficient numbers of advanced practice nurses prepared to provide comprehensive care in medically underserved areas and nursing faculty prepared to educate students at all levels of nursing programs.

Organizations that support the roles of public health and school nurses recommend that nurses have BSN-level nursing education for entry into these specialized roles (Quad Council of Public Health Nursing, 2011; Sheets, Teskey, & Yow, 2012). Perspectives about academic progression of RNs working in public health and school settings, especially those in rural sectors, are of particular interest because of the autonomous nature of their roles and the potentially limited education opportunities for rural nurses in these specialty areas. AD-prepared RNs can earn a BSN degree through an RN-BSN program, many of which are available on-line. The availability of on-line educational options is critical for nurses who may not have access to face-to-face educational programs, which is a common obstacle for nurses in rural communities.

Identifying perceptions about academic progression among nurses who work in public health and school health can provide stakeholders greater understanding of the support and resources necessary to encourage these specialized groups of nurses, particularly in rural settings, to pursue additional education. In addition, the perceptions of faculty teaching in Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) programs regarding academic progression have not been extensively explored. Understanding faculty perspectives is critical because ADN faculty provide key messaging about academic progression to ADN students, and these messages can influence nurse behavior after program completion.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was twofold; first, to explore impressions about academic progression among ADN faculty from a rural, community college nursing program and, second, to explore impressions about academic progression among RNs serving in public health departments and schools in a midwestern state.

Review of the Literature

In reviewing recent literature (2004–2014), several studies have been completed regarding perceptions about academic progression in nursing. Barriers for AD-prepared nurses to pursue a BSN degree have been identified, with the most commonly reported barriers being lack of time, lack of financial resources, and multiple role demands (Delaney & Piscopo, 2004; Megginson, 2008; Munkvold, Tanner, & Herinckx, 2012; Schwarz & Leibold, 2014; Spencer, 2008).

Spencer (2008) also found that redundancy in curricular content and lack of compensation or recognition for degree completion were disincentives to advancing education among the study participants. In addition, Megginson (2008) identified fear of returning to school and fear of technology, that is, use of computer technology in academic setting, lack of recognition for previous educational accomplishments, lack of role differentiation post-BSN completion, and lack of academic support in previous educational experiences were obstacles to academic progression from an ADN-to-BSN degree.

The benefits of and facilitators to academic progression were discussed in several studies (Delaney & Piscopo, 2004; Duffy et al., 2014; Megginson, 2008; Munkvold et al., 2012). Salary compensation for additional education was noted as a potential incentive (Duffy et al., 2014; Munkvold et al., 2012). Other incentives included funding or financial support by employer through increased tuition benefits or bonus for BSN completion (Duffy et al., 2014) and intrinsic desire to advance one's education (Schwarz & Leibold, 2014).

Community/Public health nursing in both the school and public health settings has been overlooked in studies about academic progression. These domains are not housed in the American Nurses Credentialing Center Magnet status designation currently sought by many hospitals. Broussard and White (2014) suggested that Magnet designation and increased complexity of inpatient care needs influenced a significant increase in BSN-prepared RNs in the acute care setting. Similarly, there has been an increased shift in the complexity of children and adolescent health care needs in the school setting. While the school nurse must maintain expert understanding of community health nursing skills and resources, many ADN programs provide curriculum centralized toward the role of direct care provider with little content covering leadership, evidenced-based practice, or community/population health (Broussard & White, 2014; Kumm et al., 2014). Without incentives or employer support to pursue BSN completion, school nurses often perceive educational advancement as an unattainable endeavor. In an area of nursing that primarily practices independently from other health care professionals, school nurses often are unaware of the educational and practice resources available (Broussard & White, 2014). The National Association of School Nurses maintains that every school-aged child deserves a BSN-prepared nurse. Interestingly, many schools do not require the BSN for school nurses, although the degree is the minimum educational requirement for educators.

The summation of research addressing perceptions toward academic progression indicates the significance in assessing perceptions of both perceived incentives and barriers. Numerous factors influence a nurse's resolution to further his or her nursing education. Given the distinctiveness of public health and school nursing practice, understanding these nurses' perceptions of academic progression is necessary to determine if there are unique factors that help or hinder the decision to pursue additional nursing education. In addition, there is little research about perceptions of academic progression among faculty teaching in ADN programs.

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