

The Value Proposition for Graduate Education of Emerging Nurse Leaders: *Immediate Benefit to Organizations*

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The economic impact of higher education on the individual has been widely documented, with benefits measured in terms of lifetime earning power, accumulation of household wealth, lower unemployment, access to healthcare coverage, and overall better health across all ages and income levels.¹⁻⁶ The economic impact within the workplace, to the employer, is less precisely defined. Overall benefits include a better prepared workforce, which can lead to increased economic benefit to the employer and to society as a whole. Specific benefits related to investing in the education of current and future health systems nurse leaders may have an early, as well as a sustained, impact on the organization. Using case studies, this report explores the beneficial economic and quality impact on healthcare agencies and institutions during, as well as after, the completion of degree requirements when emerging nurse leaders pursue graduate education in health systems management.



BACKGROUND

Nurse leaders oversee the work of more than 3 million registered nurses as well as 752,000 licensed practical nurses and assistive personnel at all levels of patient care delivery.⁷ The magnitude of their influence on patient safety, quality, and financial outcomes within the institution is substantial. Registered nurses (RNs) with graduate degrees comprised only 13.2% of all licensed RNs in 2008.⁸ Within the cohort, 375,794 held master's degrees (12.2%) and 28,369 were doctorally prepared. Of those with master's degrees, 77.2% held a master of science in nursing (MSN) (290,084).

Within the total master's degree-prepared cohort, 19.2% of those RNs had graduate degrees with a focus on administration, business, or management. Data were not available to discern which of these RNs pursued their degrees within schools of nursing or in related disciplines. From these data, it is apparent that there are only 72,000 nurses prepared at the graduate level for leadership and management within the US health system. This system is complex and vast—made up of 5,724 hospitals with just under 37 million admissions per year,⁹ 14,500 home care agencies¹⁰ serving 1.5 million patients,¹¹ and 16,100 skilled nursing facilities

with 1.5 million residents.¹² The paucity of well-prepared nurse leaders yields a ratio of 555:1 patients to master's degree-prepared nurse leader—not a desirable situation given the patient safety, quality, and financial challenges inherent throughout the US health system.

Accredited graduate nursing programs offering MS/MSNs in nursing administration, health systems management, or leadership/management are available in both traditional classroom programs as well as online; however, there is some variation in credit hour requirements and curriculum. This article explores the value proposition for graduate education of current and emerging nurse leaders as a key component for leveraging positive changes in patient safety, quality, and financial results within organized healthcare settings, based on data from the Health Systems Management program at Vanderbilt University School of Nursing.

BACKGROUND

There is an abundance of literature on leadership education in nursing; however, there is no consensus on the best preparation methods or models.¹³ This brief review describes some contemporary perspectives on the value of leadership education at the graduate level in nursing and uses the Institute of Medicine report *The Future of Nursing* as the guiding direction on this issue.¹⁴ *The Future of Nursing* report discusses the need to ensure that nurses are educated to assume leadership roles across the system in order to tackle the challenges ahead in redesigning the facets of healthcare delivery. Specifically, the report states:

Strong leadership is critical if the vision of a transformed healthcare system is to be realized....The nursing profession must produce leaders throughout the healthcare system, from the bedside to the boardroom, who can serve as full partners with other health professionals and be accountable for their own contributions to delivering high-quality care while working collaboratively with leaders from other health professions.^{14(p. 7,8)}

Scott and Yoder-Wise¹⁵ support this perspective and add the need to educate more nurse leaders beyond the baccalaureate level in order to continue progress in advancing patient safety and quality, as well as promoting innovative models of care delivery. In addition, they present the challenges related to advancing the education of nurses in management and leadership positions as this is often neglected in favor of advancing education of nurses in clinical specialties. Aiken¹⁶ illustrates this challenge further with data that demonstrate that without significant shifts upward in nursing education-level standards, the current production of nurses at the associate degree level will preclude the generation of enough nurses to accommodate the numbers of leadership and executive roles that require graduate-level education. The continued complexities of healthcare demand nursing leaders to be prepared with advanced skills in leadership, management, and business competencies through well-designed academic programs in order to successfully influence and lead future directions in nursing.^{17,18}

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Vanderbilt School of Nursing opened its nursing administration master's degree program in 1987. The original curriculum was offered until 1996. As more nurses began assuming leadership roles across a variety of healthcare organizations, the title of the program changed to Health Systems Management (HSM) to reflect the shift in focus as it pertained to the role of the nurse leader. Course content and program requirements were expanded as well to reflect the broader focus on the healthcare industry. Since 1987, 333 nurses have graduated from these programs. Graduates of the nursing administration/HSM program have served/are serving as nurse managers, program directors, chief nursing officers, hospital administrators, uniformed services officers, consultants, nursing faculty, and one graduate was the first nurse to serve as the commissioner of health in her state.

The HSM program of study prepares graduates for the advanced role of nursing and healthcare management. This program is designed to prepare nurses at the graduate level to manage the delivery of nursing and healthcare services across the spectrum of healthcare settings. Graduates acquire the breadth of management knowledge and skills to perform effectively and assume leadership positions in healthcare delivery organizations, government, and the broader healthcare industry. As part of this program, students learn to implement processes and programs to achieve continual improvement in care delivery as well as meet financial targets and maintain fiscal accountability; collaborate effectively across disciplines and healthcare settings to enhance integration of services and care delivery; facilitate clear communication of expectations and accountabilities to assigned staff; innovate, implement, and manage change; balance strategic, financial, operational, quality, and interpersonal responsibilities; and participate in research. The curriculum consists of 11 courses of 3 credits each, 1 course of 2 credits, and 1 course of 4 credits, for a total of 39 credits. All courses are offered in an online learning environment. The e-learning format is designed to support flexibility, connection, interaction, and access to state-of-the-art resources and computer support. As part of their learning experience, students are assigned to small groups and participate in a variety of online activities such as discussion boards, blogs, and web-based conference calls. Case studies, based on current and relevant nursing practice, challenge students to critically analyze, evaluate, and develop solutions to issues in nursing and management practice and healthcare. These online learning experiences provide students with the opportunity to interact with one another and share their understanding of the course materials, as well as apply what they have learned to their practice. The program links technology with learning while embracing cultural and academic diversity.

The Vanderbilt HSM curriculum includes a variety of topics to prepare emerging nurse leaders to manage the delivery of nursing and healthcare services in multiple settings and specialties. Topics include leadership, financial management, continuous quality improvement, nursing theory, organizational dynamics, health informatics, and healthcare

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