

Troubling Trend: *Fewer Nurses May Be Seeking Higher Education*

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A disconcerting trend of fewer registered nurses seeking higher education, shown in a recent nurse survey by AMN Healthcare and The Center for the Advancement of Healthcare Professionals, could affect the health care industry-wide goals of maintaining or improving quality in an era of change. If it continues, this trend moves in the opposite direction advocated by the Institute of

Medicine (IOM) 2010 report, *The Future of Nursing—Leading Change, Advancing Health*,¹ which urged nurses to seek higher levels of education and training, practice to the full extent of their education, and seek to become full partners in redesigning health care. This report was lauded as a watershed in the advancement of patient-care quality and value-based medicine in an era of health care reform.

However, the convergence of a nursing shortage and growing demand for health care services—creating a super-heated employment environment—may be driving nurses away from educational attainment rather than toward it. This trend, should it continue, could affect patient-care quality, nurse leadership, and other critical factors related to the profession of nursing.

The IOM report included a section entitled “Transforming Education” that posited Key Message #2: “Nurses should achieve higher levels of education and training through an improved education system that promotes seamless academic progression.”¹ This key message more specifically recommended improving nursing competencies to improve care coordination, handle the increasing chronic care caseload, better navigate increasing regulatory and access challenges, extend care for populations instead of only individuals, prepare for leadership roles, and master technological tools and information technology. The report recommended that 80% of registered nurses (RNs) hold a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) by 2020. When the report was issued in 2010, approximately 50% of RNs held a BSN degree or higher.²

IOM GOAL WON'T BE MET

It does not appear the 2020 goal will be met. In 2012, a study showed that the percentage of nurses earning a 4-year degree had surpassed those earning a 2-year associate degree: 53% to 47%.³ Several states have enacted legislation and programs to encourage nurses toward higher educational attainment. The state of New York recently passed the “BSN in 10” law, which required all registered nurses who received an associate degree to obtain a BSN within 10 years of receiving their initial RN license, though the legislation does not affect nurses already in practice.⁴ A 2017 study that encompassed 377 hospitals found that the proportion of BSN RNs increased by 1.3% annually prior to 2010 and by 1.9% since then. On the basis of that trend, researchers estimated that 64% of hospital-based nurses

would have a BSN by 2020, and only 22% of the 2,126 hospital units studied would have 80%.⁵

Evidence from the AMN Healthcare 2017 Survey of Registered Nurses⁶ suggests that the movement toward more BSN degrees may be regressing. According to the survey of 3,347 RNs from all practice environments, 48% of nurses said they won't pursue further education in the next 3 years, compared with 43% in the same survey taken in 2015 (*Figure 1*). The percentage of nurses who said they would pursue a BSN dropped from 22% in 2015 to 16% in 2017.

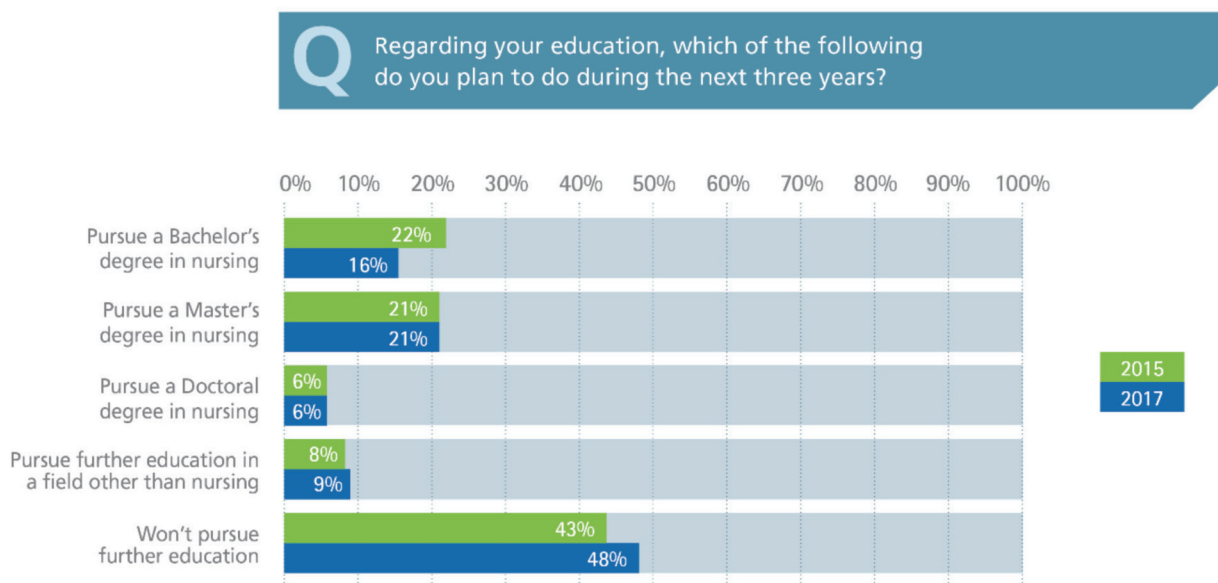
The 2017 survey showed higher percentages of Millennial and Generation X nurses planning to pursue bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees than Baby Boomers, which is not surprising given that older nurses are in the latter stages of their careers (*Figure 2*). The percentage of Millennial nurses who say they won't pursue further education was 23%, less than half the percentage compared with all nurses surveyed.

However, even a small decline in the percentage of nurses seeking higher education is cause for concern, because there are so many positive results related to a BSN-prepared national nurse corps.

WHY NURSES MIGHT FORGO HIGHER EDUCATION

The reasons for this decline may be related to the super-heated nurse employment market: the variety and number of jobs currently available to nurses may be unprecedented. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey,⁷ there were approximately 600,000 health care job hires and 1 million health care job openings in November 2017; that leaves about 400,000 unfilled jobs for the month. Registered nurses are by far the largest occupation in the health care workforce, representing about a quarter of all workers, so they likely represent the single largest occupation among unfilled jobs in this dataset. High demand for registered nurses is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Another BLS survey, Employment Projections,⁸ esti-

Figure 1. Decline in Nurses' Plans for Education



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