Academic Progression in Nursing Education
A Living Document from the National League for Nursing

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INTRODUCTION

Nurses throughout the world are called to work in a health care environment that is undergoing reform as never before imagined. Patient needs have become more complicated; nurses must implement requisite competencies in leadership, health policy, system improvement, research, evidence-based practice, and teamwork and collaboration in order to deliver high-quality care. Nurses are called upon to broaden their scope of practice and to master technological tools and information management systems while coordinating care across teams of health professionals. As nursing education is charged with the responsibility to prepare nurses to enter a workforce that is complex, uncertain, and constantly evolving, the National League for Nursing recognizes that a critical goal for the future is to endorse academic progression options for all nurses.

This call to promote academic progression within nursing is consistent with the NLN's mission and with its core values of caring, integrity, diversity, and excellence. The League recognizes that the diversity offered by multiple points of entry into the nursing profession and the variety of progression options available provide an environment for enrichment and professional growth. Innovative educational programs are vital to provide opportunities for lifelong learning and academic progression. To prepare a more educated and diverse workforce, nurse educators and clinical practice partners must work together to create new models of academic progression that move graduates to advanced degrees more efficiently and with less cost.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Historically, in institutions of higher learning, the term "academic progression" referred to articulation models that promoted lifelong learning through the addition of academic credentials. In today's health care environment, all nurses must be engaged in lifelong learning to maintain clinical competencies and meet the demands of a reformed health care system. At this crucial time for the nursing profession, immediate action is needed to establish strategies to build a stronger, more diverse nursing workforce and to support academic progression within the nursing profession.

In September 2007, the NLN published "Academic/Professional Progression in Nursing," a Reflection & Dialogue reiterating support of multiple entry points as a way to promote diversity of the nursing workforce, provide increased access to nursing, and contain the cost of educating health care professionals. The NLN called on nursing education to provide pathways for academic progression that are seamless, where students are not required to take additional prerequisites, where courses build on competencies students have already achieved, and where agreements between schools of nursing provide courses that are accessible and flexible and allow for uninterrupted, individualized learning. Further, the NLN recommended that health care entities provide support to encourage nurses to pursue lifelong learning.

In 2010 the concept of academic progression was embraced by various influential groups.

- The Tri-Council for Nursing acknowledged the need for a more educated nursing workforce and supported advancing the educational preparation of nurses as they enter the profession through multiple access points. ("Educational Advancement of Registered Nurses: A Consensus Position)"; Tri-Council called for system-wide changes in nursing practice as well as in nursing education, with increased emphasis on individual responsibilities of nurses to access advanced education, and support of state and federal policy initiatives that promote academic progression.

- *Educating Nurses: A Call for Radical Transformation,* issued by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in early 2010, recommended the development of local articulation programs to ensure a smooth, timely transition from the associate degree to the baccalaureate degree, and an increase in RN-MSN programs.

- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded Institute of Medicine report, "The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health," clearly states that in order to respond to increasing demands, nurses must achieve higher levels of education and training through an innovative education system that promotes seamless academic progression. Five key directives call on the nursing community to transform the current health care system: 1) nurses should practice to the full extent of their education and training; 2) nurses should achieve higher levels of education and training through an improved education system that promotes seamless academic progression; 3) nurses should be full partners with all health professionals to redesign health care in the US; 4) there is a need for better data collection and an improved information infrastructure to effectively plan nursing workforce requirements; and 5) greater emphasis on interprofessional education must be a part of nursing education curricula.

  Noting that nurses who enter the profession with either an associate or baccalaureate degree, on average, seek one more degree over the course of their careers and that approximately 60 percent of new nurses are associate degree graduates, the report warns that, having sufficient qualified faculty and advanced practice nurses to manage new emerging environments of care in a variety settings will be unattainable with current articulation agreements. New models of academic progression that move graduates to advanced degrees more efficiently and with less cost are urgently needed.

THE NLN's RESPONSE

Recognizing the necessity for an inclusive education competencies model that reflects practice, embodies all types of nursing programs, and fosters academic progression for all nurses, in 2008 the NLN established a group of educators and practice partners to address this need. The resulting NLN Education Competencies Model (ECM, 2010) is the first-ever comprehensive national model for nursing education. It has been designed to advance nursing practice to meet the nursing needs of the nation, deliver effective and safe care, and answer the call of current health care reform initiatives. It articulates what graduates of each program should be able to do upon completion of that program and ensures that all graduates are well prepared to meet workforce needs and the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

Seven core values – caring, diversity, ethics, excellence, holism, integrity, patient-centeredness – support and infuse the model's six integrating concepts. These concepts – context and environment, knowledge and science, personal and professional development, quality and safety, relationship-centered care; and teamwork – lead to the four program outcomes of human flourishing, nursing judgment, professional identity, and spirit of inquiry that are articulated in competencies that embody nursing practice (NLN, 2010). The model provides a framework for a seamless integrated approach to the development of nursing competencies and outcomes and supports collaboration of education and practice in creating accessible and affordable methods for nurses to progress in the profession.

CONCLUSION

Transformation of nursing practice for our ever-changing and dynamic health system requires a fundamental re-conceptualization of nursing education. We must forge new partnerships among nurse educators, practice colleagues, and students to provide opportunities for a seamless transition to higher degree programs and lifelong learning. The design and implementation of seamless models that promote academic progression is vital to meet this national call for a highly educated and competent nursing workforce. Predicated on the belief that learning is a lifelong continuum, the NLN Education Competencies Model provides a mechanism through which nurse educators and practice partners can align goals and bridge gaps to foster academic progression and develop a competent nursing workforce committed to advancing the health of the nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Nursing Education Community

- Facilitate discussions among faculty, students, practice partners, and other stakeholders across the nursing education and health profession communities regarding curriculum reform and promotion of academic progression.
- Partner with practice colleagues to design creative collaborative initiatives to assure that graduates are prepared to practice in current and future practice environments and to progress in their nursing education.
- Implement innovative curricula using the ECM (2010) to promote academic progression.
- Engage faculty, practice partners, and students in using the ECM to guide students to assume new roles through academic progression.

For Practice Partners

- Develop programs and initiatives that support the ongoing academic progression of staff, enabling them to expand their competencies and implement new roles.
- Support partnerships with nurse educators to design and/or revise curriculum models that incorporate a seamless approach (similar to the ECM) that will enable and encourage graduates to progress academically.

For the National League for Nursing

- Provide faculty development opportunities that are designed to help faculty in all types of programs create new academic progression curriculum models.
- Create partnerships with colleagues in education and practice to advocate for new curriculum models that will enable graduates to progress academically.
- Develop public policy initiatives in concert with national organizations and government agencies to encourage development of alternate pathways for academic progression.
- Champion multi-site, pedagogical research initiatives designed to test and evaluate the ECM, specifically its use in fostering academic progression for students in all types of nursing education programs.
- Engage with our practice partners and the nursing education community to seek broad bases of funding to facilitate academic progression.

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