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High Failure Rates Among Nursing Students Indicates Need for a Cure

Beginning in the late 1990s, Florida, along with the rest of the nation, began to feel the effects of an unprecedented shortage of nurses.¹ Everyone felt the crunch; hospital executives grappled with recruitment and retention problems, employed nurses commonly worked long hours to meet care demands, and patient safety was negatively impacted due to a lack of staff.^{2,3} In 2001, the Florida Legislature responded by establishing and funding the Florida Center for Nursing (FCN). The FCN's mission is to quantify Florida's growing scarcity and craft recommendations to increase the quantity and quality of Florida's nursing workforce.⁴

By 2007, FCN estimated a shortage of 16,500 registered nurses (RNs) and warned that "the supply of RNs must increase more rapidly to fill existing vacancies and keep pace with new job growth."⁵ Concurrently, nursing schools reported turning away a large number of applicants due to lack of faculty and clinical practice sites. The University of Florida's School of Nursing rejected at least two qualified students for every student accepted while Pasco-Hernando Community College warned some students that they may need to wait up to 4 years for a seat in their program.^{6,7}

In 2009, the Legislature responded by modifying the nursing education approval process. Previously, Florida's Board of Nursing (BON) had full authority to sanction new nursing schools. The legislative changes codified and shortened the process, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of nursing programs. From 2009 to 2016, the number of programs doubled and there are currently 350 active nursing education programs in Florida. Since the rule change, only 20 prospective nursing programs have been rejected.⁸ While the legislation was successful, there were unintended consequences.

1 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2014). Motivating executives, leaders, and policy-makers to address the nursing shortage (Charting Nursing's Future Policy Brief Series). Hamilton Township, NJ: Author.

2 Sochalski, J. (2004). Is more better? The relationship between nurse staffing and the quality of nursing care in hospitals." *Medical Care* 42): 67-73.

3 Gay-Stolberg, Sheryl. (2002) . "Patient Deaths Tied to Lack of Nurses." *New York Times*, August 08, 2002.

4 FCN (2017). Our history. <https://www.flcenterfornursing.org/AboutUs/OurHistory.aspx>. Accessed March 14, 2017

5 Florida Center for Nursing (2007). Statewide Vacancies and Job Growth Expectations in Nursing-Intensive Healthcare Settings.

6 "Nursing battles a double deficit." (2007, January 22). *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida).

7 "Nursing Applicants Backed Up For PHCC." (2005, March 13). *The Tampa Tribune* (Florida).

8 OPPAGA (2017). Review of Florida's nursing education programs.

WHAT IS AILING NURSING EDUCATION?

All graduating students must pass the National Council Licensure Exam (NCLEX) to obtain a license to practice nursing. The NCLEX is a variable length, computerized, adaptive test “designed to test knowledge, skills and abilities essential to the safe and effective practice of nursing at the entry level.”⁹ Students may take the test multiple times but failure to pass the NCLEX renders nursing education useless as the graduate cannot obtain employment as a nurse without a license.

NCLEX results are also used by the BON to track nursing school performance. Florida law requires nursing schools with an NCLEX pass rate 10 percent below the national average for two consecutive years to be placed on probation. If the school’s pass rate does not improve above the standard within two years, the program is terminated.¹⁰

In 2015, approximately 42 percent of Florida’s nursing programs had NCLEX pass rates lower than 10 percent below the national NCLEX pass rate. Of programs not meeting criteria, 78.7 percent were programs initiated since the 2009 legislation.¹¹

Table 1 presents information on the total number of programs, the number of programs with passage rates below standards, and the number of programs established before and since the 2009 legislative change.¹²

Table 1 – Nursing Programs Above/Below NCLEX Standards

Program Type	Total Programs	Total Above Standard	Total Below Standard	Programs Established Before 2009		Programs Established After 2009	
				Percent Above Standard	Percent Below Standard	Percent Above Standard	Percent Below Standard
Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)	117	83	34	73.5%	35.3%	26.5%	64.7%
Associate Degree Nurse (ADN)	147	67	80	59.7%	13.8%	40.3%	86.3%
Bachelor of Science Nurse (BSN)	40	27	13	81.5%	30.8%	18.5%	69.2%
Totals	304	177	127	69.5%	21.3%	30.5%	78.7%

Though many students from newer programs are failing the NCLEX test, some new schools have proven successful. For new LPN programs, 26.5 percent of schools had pass rates above the Florida standard while 40.3 percent and 18.5 percent of new ADN and BSN programs, respectively, had pass rates above the standard average.

9 NCSBN (2013). NCLEX-RN examination. https://www.ncsbn.org/2013_NCLEX_RN_Test_Plan.pdf

10 464.019 (5)(a)(3), F.S.

11 Florida TaxWatch analysis of programs listed in: OPPAGA (2016). Report 16-05. *Approximately 42% of nursing programs had licensure exam passage rates below the required legislative standard in 2015.*

12 OPPAGA (2016). *Approximately 42% of nursing programs had licensure exam passage rates below the required legislative standard in 2015.*

A CURE?

In an effort to “weed out” programs, the Florida Legislature revised the law in 2014 to require that all programs receive accreditation by a national nursing education accreditation body within five years of first enrolling students. Accreditation is a step in the right direction as accredited programs must meet and maintain standards for curriculum and faculty credentials, allowing for easier transfer of credits among accredited programs.

Governor Scott signed CS/CS/HB543 into law on Friday, June 23, 2017. The law mandates that nursing programs placed on probation must provide students and program applicants with a written disclosure of their probationary status, including an explanation of how probationary status may impact their employment and matriculation opportunities. These bills also specify that programs that have been terminated must wait at least three years to apply for approval to reopen. Finally, the bills provide the BON with more oversight authority related to nursing curriculum and program implementation plans and turns over the data collection and monitoring of nursing programs to the FCN.^{13,14}

CONCLUSION

In the late 1990’s, Florida began to experience a shortage of nurses. Despite this shortage, nursing schools were forced to turn away qualified applicants due to a lack of faculty and space at clinical sites. In an effort to increase the number of nursing programs, a law was passed in 2009 to relax requirements for the establishment of new programs. The legislation was successful; the number of nursing schools doubled, but there were unintended consequences. While some of the newly established programs successfully trained nurses, helping to alleviate the shortage, many nurses completing these programs are unable to pass the mandatory NCLEX exam, greatly diminishing the value of their educational investment, and failing to address the state’s nursing shortage.

All prospective students should cautiously evaluate nursing programs before registering for classes. Likewise, legislators should continue to look for ways to improve the transparency and quality of nursing programs via program oversight.

A CONTINUING ISSUE

Even with successful reforms, we must not lose sight of the fact that continued lack of nursing school faculty is a root cause of the shortage and without measures to correct this issue, a sustainable increase in nurses for our state is unachievable. While strengthening the quality of Florida’s nursing schools is of paramount importance, Florida schools cannot produce more nurses without an increase in nursing faculty. Currently, nursing faculty often make less money teaching than in nursing practice, making it difficult for nursing programs to fill vacant positions, limiting growth.¹⁵ The Legislators must look for ways to incentivize faculty.

13 SB 328: Regulation of Nursing. <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2017/0328/ByVersion>. Accessed March 14, 2017

14 CS/HB 543: Regulation of Nursing. <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2017/00543>. Accessed March 14, 2017.

15 WFSU (2016). Florida’s Nursing Shortage Critical. <https://www.wuft.org/news/2016/06/24/floridas-nursing-shortage-critical/>

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