

The Impact of Current Nursing Admission and Enrollment Trends on the Quality of Graduates

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Higher education has seen a significant drop in enrollment nationwide since the 2020 pandemic. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2023), postsecondary enrollments are down 1.16 million undergraduates as compared to spring 2020. This indicates a 4.7% decline since the pandemic (June 2022; National Student Clearinghouse, 2023). Additionally, only 31% of two-year graduates move on to attain their baccalaureate degree. This places additional pressure on institutions that offer baccalaureate and graduate degree programs to improve the credit transfer process with community colleges to help the consumer easily transition into these programs (Selingo, 2022). Although there has been a substantial drop in post-secondary education related to consumers rethinking college options and second career applicants, programs that offer skills and work-focused training opportunities remain in high demand (Gallup and the Carnegie Corporation as cited in Selingo, 2022).

Nursing Enrollment Data and Trends

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) report on *2021-2022 Enrollment and Graduations in Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in*

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Higher education has seen a drop in enrollment nationwide since the pandemic. Results of students learning online for up to two years affect the applicant pool and quality of students applying for entry to nursing schools. Currently, there is an increase in second-career adults changing professions into nursing and students from high school whose parents support a two-year technical degree. Despite a slight decrease in admission during the pandemic, nursing school application numbers remain strong. However, enrollment growth is stunted by barriers, including a need for more faculty, clinical placements, and needed technology. Therefore, nursing schools are unable to admit thousands of students across the country into these programs. State and federal policies provide additional funds to support students through scholarships, training, and lab improvements. Addressing these issues is necessary to be certain that adequate training and quality nursing education will remain the goal for newly graduated nurses.

Keywords: Enrollment, admission, school of nursing, nursing faculty, graduate trends

Nursing, U.S. nursing schools denied admission to 91,938 qualified applications from pre-licensure programs in 2021 due to an insufficient number of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, and clinical preceptors, and budget constraints (AACN, 2023a). According to the 2020 National Nursing Workforce Survey conducted by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, the

average age for a registered nurse (RN) is 52 years, which may signal a large wave of retirement over the next 15 years (AACN, 2023b). Moreover, according to a *Health Affairs* blog posted in May 2017, Dr. Peter Buerhaus and colleagues project more than 1 million registered nurses will retire from the workforce by 2030 (Auerbach et al. 2022). The nursing shortage is the driving force to explore

the process of admission and enrollment factors for nursing education and to understand the barriers students face.

Types of Nursing Students Today

Online learning that occurred during the pandemic affected nursing and science programs. Campuses switched their instruction to online learning in 2020, increasing the number of online students to 45.6% in 2021. In 2022, it dropped to 30.4% of learners taught online; now, online nursing has returned to pre-pandemic numbers at approximately 15.7% (Perez, 2023). Although Millennial and Generation Z students are used to navigating digital technology, the online learning environment may have effects on the qualified applicants and enrollments. This environment allowed students to experience classroom learning without having to be physically present on campus. Because training for nurses is technical, students must be prepared to attend school in person and apply the pre-nursing science coursework in their learning.

Students who obtained essential prerequisite courses for their respective programs had to meet outcomes to ensure they were prepared. One research study evaluated the differences in student outcomes between online and in-person labs and determined that the online environment was better for visual learners, while the in-person environment is more conducive for tactile learners. Furthermore, students believed that although online labs were more convenient with schedules and eliminated travel time, they preferred a blended or hybrid component to ensure outcomes were met (Brockman et al., 2020). Due to the ease of online learning, students experienced greater flexibility and adaptation to the learning environment, and several advantages such as being present at home for their family and saving money on commuting costs (Pfeifer, 2022). Notable disadvantages included students entering nursing education having obtained the most important prerequisite courses to prepare them for their future profession online.

Nursing School Admission and Enrollment

Enrollment data and nursing trends from the pandemic continue to show an impact on the applicant pool and the quality of applicants. AACN's (2022) annual survey, *2022-2023 Enrollment and Graduations in Baccalaureate and Graduate*

Programs in Nursing, discusses data reported by 974 nursing schools. This report validated a downward trend in the number of qualified applicants applying to nursing school. Most applicants in Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs showed a 1.4% decline since the pandemic. Even with this decline, many qualified applicants to nursing programs still did not obtain admission. The pandemic may have affected BSN enrollments, but the enrollments in Associated Science (AS) or two-year programs preparing for licensure did not show the same decline. There is also the next generation of high school graduates whose parents are not encouraging their children to take on the debt of a four-year baccalaureate education when they can get the technical skills and knowledge needed for RN licensure through a two-year program (Selingo, 2022), making the attraction to an AS program high (Pfeifer, 2022). This is reinforced by the *National Academy Report of Medicine's Future of Nursing Report 2020-2030*, demonstrating an increase in the diverse applicants, especially in the Hispanic-Latino enrollment by 14% (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2021).

Barriers to Acceptance to Nursing School

Need for nurses is noteworthy nationwide (Zhavoronkova et al., 2022). The data show that although there are many qualified applicants, thousands still need to achieve access (AACN, 2022). A known factor impacting nursing school admission rates includes the expected faculty retirements of up to one-third of the current faculty workforce. Additionally, nursing faculty positions are challenged due to low compensation. An average nursing faculty member who is master's prepared earns around \$87,325 annually, compared to \$120,000 or more annually for an average nurse or advanced practice registered nurse (AACN, 2022).

Furthermore, the state boards of nursing require full-time nursing faculty to be minimally qualified. Although there are programs available to prepare nurses with a master's or doctoral degree, enrollment in these programs dropped 3.8% in MSN programs and 13% in doctoral programs following the pandemic (AACN, 2022). Nurses must justify taking on educational debt to attain a higher degree when their yearly compensation is often lower after achieving the advanced degree. On a positive note, the

federal government has recognized this issue as a crisis and now provides access to financial relief through Title VIII funds and Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) grants. Funds are available to qualified applicants via the nursing faculty loan, nurse corps scholarship, and repayment program. These programs agree to pay back a percentage of the loan from graduate program debt for those nurses who transition to the academic world.

In addition to the faculty shortage, the quality of training in the hospital is impacted because of limitations the hospital systems have since the pandemic (Carbajal & Masson, 2021). During the pandemic, nursing schools were denied access to clinical education in hospitals, creating significant challenges as educators and schools of nursing scrambled to adapt their teaching modalities and methodologies (Zhavoronkova et al., 2022). Not only are historical placements for nursing schools being compromised, but the nursing staff in hospitals are filled with inexperienced nurses, new graduates, and travelers, making it nearly impossible to host nursing students. In fact, many clinical partners have decreased the number of students by half in several instances, once allowing eight to ten students, now only allowing four to five (Zhavoronkova et al., 2022; National Advisory Council on Nurse Education and Practice [NACNEP], 2020). This greatly impacts the number of students schools can provide clinical training to. The shortage of clinical placements for students is a significant compounding factor in ensuring that students are given hands-on experience in the practice setting. In response to limited available clinical sites, academic institutions had to find ways to ensure their nursing labs and simulation technology are up to date to replace much of the direct care clinical training in hospitals (Zhavoronkova et al., 2022). Many state-wide boards of nursing support simulation and experiential learning as a way for academic organizations to continue admitting students to prevent a significant decline in the overall enrollments (NACNEP, 2020).

Conclusion

Ultimately, ensuring access to nursing school and allowing applicants who have met admission criteria to attain access is crucial to meeting the workforce needs. It has been a challenge following the COVID-19 pandemic to receive students who have spent most of

their prerequisite nursing courses online instead of in-person. As a result, nursing school students desperately need a curriculum that adequately prepares them by providing quality direct clinical hours, master's prepared faculty, highly technical training devices, and simulation cases. In doing so, students can receive deep, rich nursing training to prepare them to be successful nurses in the workforce (Smith et al., 2021). Alleviating the nursing shortage is imperative; however, producing nursing graduates who have attained kinesthetic and critical thinking skills, and clinical judgment, to navigate the demands of the workforce is crucial. Resolution to the nursing shortage is not to fill holes with new graduates. It is to ensure they are prepared through quality education with clinical experiences, faculty with advanced education and/or certification, and program resources to ensure academic programs produce safe, competent, entry-level nurses. **DN**

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