

Factors Contributing to the Inequity and Access of Diverse Nursing Applicants

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The nursing shortage in the United States has reached critical levels, exacerbating challenges in providing quality health care to a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse population. Compounding this issue is the lack of diversity within the nursing workforce, which does not adequately reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of current patient populations. Addressing the nursing shortage and prioritizing workforce diversification is crucial to enhancing health care equity, improving patient outcomes, and fostering a more inclusive health care environment

Diversification of the nursing workforce is a goal for many academic institutions. This begins with the recruitment and marketing process, followed by the admissions and enrollment phase to ensure that the applicant pool for nursing education is diverse. A holistic admission process allows nursing programs to select their applicant pool based on a minimum grade point average requirement and other components beyond traditional test scores. To support students who are diverse or foreign-born, understanding the student's needs, barriers, and the resources to aid in their success is important for higher education administration. Nursing students who are English language learners must learn the dynamic health care environment and overcome communication barriers to safely care for patients. Nursing faculty must collaborate to support students throughout their academic journey, ensuring they develop a comprehensive understanding of the health care system. This is essential for successfully transitioning from the academic setting to professional nursing practice upon graduation. Ultimately, the goal is to diversify the nursing workforce while meeting the global nursing shortage.

Keywords: Nursing enrollment, nursing school admissions, nursing workforce diversity, access to nursing school.

(National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, 2022).

Importance of Diversifying the Nursing Workforce

The registered nurse (RN) workforce's racial composition reported 81% of nurses being white/Caucasian and 7.2% Asian, representing the largest non-white/Caucasian racial group in the nursing workforce. The Black/African American nurse population accounted for only 6.7% of the workforce. The Hispanic/Latino report was 5.6%. Native/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander accounted for 2.1% and 0.5% for American Indian/Alaskan (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Center for Health Workforce Analysis 2019). Diversifying the RN workforce can ensure patients have nurses better equipped to care for their unique needs. Recruiting and educating a richly diverse nursing pool is essen-

tial to populate not only the nation, but also globally with a diverse workforce.

Diverse Student Enrollment

While the research cites the shortage as a global issue, US enrollment statistics confirm that students attempting to access nursing school find it challenging. Nursing school programs generally have a competitive admission process, with 66,262 qualified applicants being denied admission for reasons including limited spots due to a lack of clinical and practicum placements, faculty vacancies, and the inability to support students who do not meet the admission criteria set (AACN 2023b).

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The Need for Holistic Admissions

The admissions process plays an important role in selecting diverse students who may not traditionally have the profile to stand out from others in the competitive selection criteria for nursing school. A potential solution to address the lack of diversity in nursing is a shift toward holistic admission, whereby students are assessed based on a broad range of factors beyond academic credentials, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (Rosenberg, 2019). Holistic admission is “a flexible, individualized way of assessing an applicant’s capabilities by which balanced consideration is given to experiences, attributes, and academic standards” (Addams et al., 2010, p. 10). While many universities rely on a metrics-based system, a holistic admission process utilizes an inclusive method of evaluating applicants to recruit, admit, and retain more diverse students (Azul et al., 2022). The importance of recruitment strategies aimed at targeting diverse students must be “driven by the mission of the educational institution” (DeWitty & Byrd, 2021, p.41). The academic dean and marketing team must work together to assess and evaluate the institution’s mission to increase diversity.

Holistic admission criteria allow applicants to be assessed based on their unique qualities, attributes, and traditional metrics, including work history, science scores, grade point average (GPA), and admission testing (Spencer, 2020). The goal is to create a seamless process that reflects fluidity between institutional goals and admission requirements. Assessing students through a broader lens can result in a more diverse cohort (Davis et al., 2020).

Challenges of Nursing Students

Addressing the admission process is necessary for developing a more diverse student cohort. However, these students are often identified as ‘at-risk’, facing many challenges during their nursing program. Students are placed in several categories, one of which is first-generation “students who can be challenged with financial issues, inadequate academic preparation before enrollment into nursing school, lack of support from family, few role models or mentors, and experiences with discrimination” (DeWitty & Byrd, 2021, p.42). Another is low socioeconomic status in which diverse students struggle with the financial burden of higher education. These

students can struggle to stay enrolled in their programs due to funding constraints.

It is not uncommon for diverse students to come from low-income households that have a higher poverty rate as compared to their white/Caucasian counterparts. The financial burden of the student is an added pressure to the student’s success because many have received financial support from their family to come to the United States to pursue a higher education. Further compounding the issue are those students from immigrant families who are unable to work due to their VISA status, resulting in difficulty meeting their financial needs during the program.

Language, Culture, and Communication Issues

Communication and language barriers, including written and oral expression and comprehension, are often cited in the nursing literature. Assessing this issue is a dual challenge, whereby the student must learn foundational nursing concepts and do so in another language. In nursing school, there are many nuances, acronyms, culturally biased phrases and words, and cultural concepts that students who have not grown up in the United States may not understand, much less align with their life experiences. The student encounters a major learning curve, including a new language and culture of the nursing profession and ways to communicate effectively in an unfamiliar language and culture.

Learning medical terminology within the health care context and the nurse’s role in patient care can be challenging for English Language Learners (ELL) students to understand. It is important that students understand the nursing knowledge and skills necessary to care for the needs of patients. Communication concerns arise from effectively working with the patients in clinical settings so that they can provide safe, competent care and accurately report assessment findings of their patients. If English is not the student’s native language, additional resources are needed to ensure they provide care safely.

Adaptation of English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELL) students may not be able to advance in their college courses or their preferred nursing major. As a result, community colleges have developed curricula for students pur-

suing higher education through language literacy acquisition. This is much more than just learning to speak English; it also includes grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, and reading. Instructional records identified by researchers Bunch and Kibler (2015) noted that the integration of ELL learning interventions in the context of the student’s preferred discipline of study (such as nursing, business, or health) improved the students’ knowledge acquisition and skill development. The advantage of adding ELL intervention strategies is that they create a smoother transition as they work through the competitive process of nursing school admission. Providing support strategies such as transfer and articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions allows students to begin at a community college while continuing to work on meeting admission criteria through remedial coursework for English proficiency (DeWitty & Byrd, 2021).

Benefits of Diverse Nursing Education Environment

Diverse nursing students can obtain scholarships, grants, and financial aid tailored to their unique population. Although these students often pay for school without governmental assistance, there are loan forgiveness programs for the nursing major to relieve the financial burden of school loans and debt (DeWitty & Byrd, 2021).

Recruitment of ELL students can aid in the diversification of nursing school applicants. Advocates for diversity contend that higher educational institutions must prioritize diversity to produce health care professionals who can effectively serve a diverse patient population; this approach is a strategy for achieving favorable patient outcomes nationwide (Spencer, 2020).

Future Implications for Administrators

Implementing *Culturally Responsive Education* helps foster a safe environment for students from diverse backgrounds. This curricular shift increases inclusivity in the classroom and school environments. One suggestion includes translating materials into the foreign-born student’s language. If this is not possible, encouraging the students to learn in their native language outside the classroom and studying is necessary (Manspile et al., 2021). This strategy takes more time, but it can be effective in learning material.

Because clinical training is an integral part of nursing education, providing nurse educators with teaching strategies to support ELL students is imperative. Students should be provided resources in clinical practice to overcome language barriers and enculturation in the health care environment. Providing additional time for preparing care plans and reading the patient's health history are methods to help students translate medical terminology and jargon into their native language. Training nursing faculty and clinical educators on strategies to support diverse learners is important for both the student learning experience and the safety of care given during clinical rotations.

Financial support, including tuition aid, money for resource materials and books, uniforms, housing, and transportation to clinical sites, is another area that can relieve stress for ELL students. Funding through grant programs to support diverse students through academic tutoring and mentoring can increase student success. Additionally, funds can be used to provide professional development and curricular materials to further support educators in teaching ELL students (Manspile et al., 2021).

Conclusion

As the nursing shortage continues, it is imperative that schools of nursing ensure all students are fairly evaluated regardless of their diverse backgrounds. Although it can be challenging, a holistic admissions process can ensure an equitable opportunity to gain access to nursing school. Deans and Directors are positioned to support the ELL applicant, creating a diversified nursing workforce. **DN**

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Volume 46, No. 2 • November 2024

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DEAN's Notes is indexed in Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature.

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