



Building Capacity in Nursing Schools

Multistate online nursing education aimed at increasing the number of baccalaureate level graduate nurses

SUMMARY

The nation's nursing shortage is expected to grow to more than one million nurses by 2020.¹ To address a major cause of this shortage—lack of capacity in nursing schools—[Western Governors University](#), a nonprofit online university headquartered in Salt Lake City, in 2009 launched a Baccalaureate of Science in Nursing (BSN) prelicensure program. It offers online courses and clinical experiences to students preparing for initial licensure as registered nurses.

The project team partnered with existing health care organizations to provide students with needed clinical rotation experience. See [Appendix 1](#) for a list of these partnering organizations. It contracted with bricks-and-mortar nursing schools in areas where it operated for needed lab space and instructors.

A governing council and program council oversaw project design—in particular aligning the curriculum with existing state regulations and nursing education requirements. A national advisory committee provided project guidance. See [Appendix 2](#) for rosters of these governing and oversight bodies.

Results

The project team reported the following results to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in 2011:

- The Baccalaureate of Science in Nursing Prelicensure program, which prepares students to earn a bachelor's degree and to sit for the NCLEX-RN (National Council Licensure Examination for registered nurses), now offers the following:
 - *Competency-based learning*, with students earning credits for skills acquired rather than hours spent in class (as in traditional nursing education). Demonstration of competency is required for students to progress through the program's three main phases: didactic learning, clinical learning labs and clinical rotations.

¹ Health Resources and Services Administration, *Nursing Education in Five States*, 2005.

- *A bachelors' level curriculum provided online.* Eight full-time faculty (called mentors at Western Governors University) guide students in the didactic portion of the program. This consists of existing online and other distance-delivered courses acquired for the program. Mentors also facilitate an online learning community by engaging students in chats, blogs and group projects.
- *Clinical learning labs.* These labs focus chiefly on patient care skills using artificial patient simulators as a way of building students' skills and confidence. The program contracts with nursing schools in counties where it operates to use existing simulation labs during weekends. It engaged 20 nursing faculty from these facilities to serve as lab instructors. Success in passing a simulation assessment is required before students can progress to clinical rotations.
- *Clinical rotations* (called clinical intensives in the program). After demonstrating competence in the clinical learning labs students are matched to a clinical coach—a practicing nurse with at least two years of experience. Students then follow the coach's schedule until the clinical rotation competency requirements are achieved. Coaches complete the Western Governors University's coach course of study in order to qualify to work with students.

Masters-prepared clinical instructors supervise up to 10 coach-student teams each, and are responsible for online postclinical conferences, student clinical evaluations and communications with students' academic mentors.

Program staff recruited, trained and deployed 16 clinical instructors and 130 clinical coaches from its partnering health care organizations, as of the end of 2010.

- When the grant closed at the end of 2010, the program had been accredited nationally and in four states. See [Appendix 3](#) for a list of accreditations.
- As of December 31, 2010, the program was operating in three counties in southern California: Los Angeles, Orange and Riverside. In Texas, it was operating in Dallas, Houston and El Paso. It had enrolled seven cohorts with a total of 81 students in California, and six cohorts with a total of 34 students in Texas.
- The project team created a range of promotional videos and websites, along with an article and a white paper. See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

Challenges

The costs associated with providing the voluminous accreditation documentation for each state in which the project operated exceeded half of the value of this grant (or more than \$362,500). Within states, regulations treating each contracted simulation lab as a school site also requiring documentation, posed a further barrier to the economies of scale on which the project depended financially.

Until state nursing boards acknowledge a single national accreditation and develop reasonable mutual recognition programs for a national prelicensure program, expansion of online programs such as this will have a large state-by-state financial burden.

A more general challenge was to establish the credibility of a nursing education obtained from an online university—especially to counter the critique of insufficient clinical experience provided to students. Staff recruited an advisory committee composed of top echelon leaders in the field of nursing to address this issue through their active support.

Lessons Learned

1. Engage stakeholders early on in the process. Project Director Jan Jones-Schenk, RN, MNA, remarked that recruiting leaders from academia, health care institutions, licensure boards, nursing organizations and state agencies to sit on their advisory councils “was critical to the success of this program.”

Funding

RWJF supported the project with a grant of \$725,000. The U.S. Department of Labor provided \$500,000 through a Technology Based Labor Grant, and four states provided funding through monies received through the federal Workforce Investment Act:

- California (\$900,000)
- Indiana (\$500,000)
- Texas (\$500,000)Utah (\$150,000)

Afterward

The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education conducted a focused site visit including onsite reviews of the programs in California and Texas in March 2011 and a positive recommendation for accreditation was moved forward by the commission.

As of June 2011, 70 students in 10 cohorts are enrolled in the program in California, and 30 students in six cohorts in Texas. Nine students from California’s first cohort are expected to take the NCLEX-RN in the summer of 2011, according to Jones-Schenk.

The program received accreditation for Florida in April 2011, and will add Daytona Beach, Fla., as a teaching site in August 2011. Approval from the Indiana Board of Nursing was obtained in August 2011. Though the program has been accredited for Utah and has been approved by the Texas nursing board to open a teaching site in Brownsville, the program is postponing expansion in those states due to a softening of the local labor markets for nurses.

Because of the expense of having to apply to develop individual teaching sites in each state rather than applying to teach statewide, the program has no plans to expand beyond the sites mentioned above unless and until the workforce market demand becomes more compelling and clinical partners push for greater availability of this solution.

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Program Area: Human Capital

APPENDIX 1

Clinical Partners

Cedars-Sinai Hospital
Los Angeles, Calif.

Hospital Corporation of America
Nashville, Tenn.

Tenet Healthcare
Dallas, Texas

Kaiser Permanente
Oakland, Calif.

Catholic Healthcare West
San Francisco, Calif.

National Association of Community Health Centers
Bethesda, Md.

APPENDIX 2

Committee Rosters

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

National Advisory Committee

Kathy Apple, MS, RN, CAE
CEO
National Council of State Boards of Nursing
Chicago, Ill.

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Washington, D.C.

Patricia Benner, RN, PhD, FAAN
Professor and Chair
Carnegie Study on Teaching Nursing
Stanford, Calif.

Brenda Cleary, PhD, RN, FAAN
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Center to Champion Nursing
Washington, D.C.

Beverly Malone, PhD, RN, FAAN
CEO
National League for Nursing
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Margaret McClure, RN, EdD, FAAN
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American Academy of Nursing
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Governing Council

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Ann Hatcher, CCP

Vice President
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HCA Healthcare
Nashville, Tenn.

Anna Kiger

Vice President
Patient Care Services & Corporate Chief
Nursing Officer

Nursing Program Council

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APPENDIX 3

Accreditations

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (before 2008)
- Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (March 2009)
- California Board of Registered Nursing (April 2009)
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (May 2009)
- Texas Board of Nursing (July 2009)
- Utah Board of Nursing (June 2010)
- Florida Board of Nursing (April 2011)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Articles

Stull A and Harper MG. “Building an Educational Model That Promotes Competence Through Innovation.” *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 33(6): 412–415, 2012.

Reports

Jones-Schenk J. *Barriers to Education for Incumbent Nurses and Alternative Clinical Partnership Solutions*. Unpublished. (Available on request from the Project Director.)

Toolkits

Prelicensure BS in Nursing Competencies (Curricula for competency based BS in Nursing Degree). Salt Lake City: Western Governors University, Spring 2009, Revised Fall 2010.

Clinical Coaching for Staff Nurses (Curricula for clinical adjunct faculty). Salt Lake City: Western Governors University, Spring 2009, Revised Fall 2010.

Prelicensure Simulation Curriculum (High Fidelity Simulation Scenarios and Grading Rubric). Salt Lake City: Western Governors University, January 2010, Revised Fall 2010.

Communication or Promotion

www.wgu.edu/about. Videotape of first Western Governors University Nursing Pinning Ceremony, Los Angeles, July 2011 with opening remarks by Linda Burnes Bolton, PhD Salt Lake City: Western Governors University

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftiU_modFvc. Become a Registered Nurse at WGU Video (also posted on the Center to Champion Nursing website). Salt Lake City: Western Governors University.

www.wgu.edu/online_health_professions_degrees/bachelor_science_nursing_licensure#clinical. Web page describing prelicensure program in detail. Salt Lake City: Western Governors University.

www.wgu.edu/online_health_professions_degrees/maprn_coach. Web page created for clinical coach and clinical instructor recruitment. Salt Lake City: Western Governors University.

www.wgu.edu/online_health_professions_degrees/maprn_details#partners. Web page describing prelicensure Program support and experts. Salt Lake City: Western Governors University.