Motivating Executives, Leaders, and Policy-Makers to Address the Nursing Shortage
Charting Nursing’s Future Policy Brief Series

SUMMARY

From 2003 to 2013, Pittsburgh-based Spann Communications produced Charting Nursing’s Future, a series of policy briefs designed to inform and motivate hospital executives, nurse leaders, educators, and policy-makers to address the nursing shortage and other critical issues facing the field of nursing. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Program Officer Maryjoan D. Ladden, PhD, RN, FAAN, stressed the solutions-oriented focus of the briefs, noting that in order to reach broad audiences they are located at the “intersection of journalism and research.”

Key Results

Project Director Jeri Spann, MPH, MFA, cited the following results in reports to RWJF and in a 2013 interview for this report:

- **Spann Communications conceptualized, researched, and produced 19 eight-page briefs between 2005 and 2013.** In addition to informing policy related to issues such as the nursing shortage, the briefs provided information to improve practice in specific areas, such as using health information technology and retaining older nurses. For titles, dates, and links to all the issues published under these grants, see the Bibliography. RWJF also maintains an online archive that adds more recent issues.

- **Readership grew from 5,000 for the first issue in January 2005 to 15,000 by 2010.** To build an audience, the project team purchased mailing lists to target local, state, and national policy-makers and their staffs; leaders of health-related professional associations; academics in the health field, including deans of all nursing schools, nurse educators, and nurse researchers; hospital CEOs, human resource professionals, chief nursing officers, and others who help shape nursing policy and practice. In 2011, the project switched from paper to electronic publication, and lost readership.

- **The project team learned from focus groups that readers—policy-makers, administrators, and nursing educators—were using the briefs to inform state and federal policy.** Nursing educators also used them in classes and administrators used them to strengthen their case for funding nursing-related initiatives.
For example, one administrator used a brief to prepare a presentation for the board of governors on nursing workforce recruitment and retention that resulted in a budget increase. That was “a huge outcome, for recruitment,” the administrator noted. In another case, an administrator used the briefs to inform the budget proposal process and “got an additional couple hundred thousand dollars” for a state center for nursing.

**Funding**

RWJF supported this project through four grants\(^1\) totaling $1,631,365.

**Afterward**

In 2012, RWJF selected George Washington University School of Nursing, in Washington to continue the series.\(^2\) George Washington produced two briefs in 2013 and has received funding to produce three more by the end of October 2014.\(^3\)

**CONTEXT**

Nursing plays an essential role in ensuring progress toward the nation’s public health goals, including providing better and safer health care, reversing the obesity epidemic, strengthening public health infrastructure, and reaching underserved vulnerable populations. However, the profession faces a number of challenges in the coming decades that threaten to undermine its critical role in the nation’s health and health care systems.

Among the challenges is an unprecedented shortage of registered nurses (RNs) that is projected to grow to 260,000 by 2025—twice as large as any nursing shortage experienced in the United States since the mid-1960s.\(^4\) An urgent problem in itself, the shortage is also symptomatic of multiple underlying problems related to unaddressed policy and practice issues. These include:

- Nursing's lack of status among prospective college applicants
- A high turnover rate among certified and practicing nurses
- Severe underrepresentation among men and people of color
- Practice and education models that are no longer suitable

\(^1\) The four grants were: ID# 49624 ($104,771, October 1, 2003 to February 28, 2006); ID# 53203 ($676,784, July 1, 2005 to December 31, 2009); ID# 61751 ($652,181, April 1, 2008 to September 30, 2012); ID# 67434, ($197,629, July 15, 2010 to March 31, 2013).

\(^2\) ID# 70222 ($200,000, July 15, 2012 to October 31, 2013).

\(^3\) ID# 71332 ($224,995, November 1, 2013 to October 31, 2014).

● Inadequate application of technology to nursing practice
● Projected shortfalls in the number of nursing educators
● Gaps in public funding of nursing practice and workforce development

These barriers to a strong nurse workforce are especially alarming considering the demographic trends that predict a growing need for nursing care in multiple settings. By 2030, the number of elderly Americans will nearly double from the 2010 level. At the same time, the workforce is aging—in 2010, 40 percent of the American workforce was over age 50.

Hospital executives, nurse leaders and educators, and others who are working to build the nursing workforce need authoritative research, data, and expert commentary to make the case for reforming policy and practice. Information must also be presented in a concise format that is easy to read, use, and pass on. Without such tools to help catalyze change, the nation’s health care goals will be harder to achieve.

**RWJF’s Interest in This Area**

RWJF is committed to expanding the number of nurses, building their leadership capacity, sharpening their skills and the skills of their educators, and building awareness of the urgent need to address the projected nursing shortage.

From its inception in 1972 through 2012, RWJF has invested more than $580 million in nursing programs—supporting programs that address critical issues related to the nursing shortage and the nursing profession, while consistently focusing on improving the quality of patient care. Key goals of the Foundation’s programs can be found on the [RWJF website](#).

**THE PROJECT**

From 2003 through 2013, with support from four RWJF grants, Spann Communications conceptualized, researched, wrote, designed, and supervised the printing of the *Charting Nursing’s Future* series of policy briefs.

The purpose of the series was to educate and motivate hospital executives, lawmakers, nursing leaders and educators, and other state and federal policy-makers to:

● Work toward ending the nurse and nurse faculty shortages
● Strengthen nursing in different settings
● Improve the quality and safety of patient care
● Use good nursing research to frame policy choices
RWJF Program Officer Michelle Larkin, JD, MS, RN, now an assistant vice president, served as the executive editor for the first eight issues, beginning in January 2005. In that role, she identified each issue’s topics and helped shape content, select interviewees, and edit and choose the key recommendations. In March 2009, RWJF’s Ladden assumed the executive editor role, overseeing the next 11 issues.

For each of the two to three issues published each year, the project team worked collaboratively with RWJF staff—and weighed input from outside experts and focus groups—to select topics that would be of critical importance to the field of nursing.

The project team based the content of the briefs on in-depth interviews with experts, information gathered at major nursing conferences, discussions with experts at RWJF and elsewhere, as well as on the best available research, data, and model program and policy materials. Rigorous document reviews by RWJF staff and national experts helped ensure accuracy and balance. The team then packaged the content in an attractive, condensed format that is easy for busy leaders to read, use, and pass on.

**Evaluative Focus Groups**

The project team contracted with Balch Associates, a qualitative research firm located in Oak Park, Ill., to conduct seven computer-assisted telephone focus groups with geographically diverse readers of the series.

“We funded the focus groups to help us narrow in and identify the issues that policy-makers and practitioners wanted, and how they wanted those issues presented and framed within the publications,” RWJF’s Ladden said. “It was very valuable information.”

- Four focus groups were conducted in June 2007, with a total of 30 participants who explored how they used the briefs and reacted to their content, layout, and length. Nursing leaders comprised two of the groups; individuals who make or help shape nursing policy (e.g., nursing deans and leaders of nursing professional societies) participated in the other two.

- Three focus groups were conducted in March and April 2010, with a total of 23 participants. In these groups, policy leaders from universities, state and federal agencies, and health professional associations helped evaluate the publications and identify new topics for future issues.
RESULTS

Project Director Spann cited the following results in reports to RWJF and in an interview for this report:

- **From 2005 to 2013, the project team developed, published, and distributed 19 eight-page policy briefs in the *Charting Nursing’s Future* series.** Each brief focuses on a topic of timely and critical relevance to policy and practice in the field of nursing. Topics included nursing education, collaboration to ease the nursing shortage, and transformation of the work environment.

  According to the project director, three of the most popular briefs, as gauged by email responses and other reader feedback, were:

  — *Nursing’s Prescription for a Reformed Health System: Use Exemplary Nursing Initiatives to Expand Access, Improve Quality, Reduce Costs, and Promote Prevention.* Published in March 2009, this brief was timed to capitalize on the first inauguration of President Obama. It focused on how nursing expands access to care, promotes population health and prevention, and reduces costs.

  — *Unlocking the Potential of School Nursing: Keeping Children Healthy, In School, and Ready to Learn.* This brief focused on school nursing challenges, staffing and practice, data collection, and other topics.

  — *Addressing the Quality and Safety Gap—Part III: The Impact of the Built Environment on Patient Outcomes and the Role of Nurses in Designing Health Care Facilities.* The brief includes topics such as engaging nurses in evidence-based facility design and educating nurses about facility design, as well as case studies on designing for safety and quality.

  For titles, dates, and links to all 19 briefs published under these grants, see the Bibliography. RWJF also maintains an online archive that adds more recent issues published after the grants covered in this report ended.

- **Between 2005 and 2010, the number of briefs mailed to readers grew from 5,000 to 15,000 per issue.**

  — To build the audience for the briefs, the project team purchased mailing lists to target the following groups:

    - Local, state, and national policy-makers and their staffs
    - Leaders of health-related professional associations
    - Academics in the health field, including deans of all nursing schools, nurse educators, and nurse researchers
    - CEOs, human resource professionals, and chief nursing officers in thousands of American Hospital Association member hospitals
• Funders of nursing-related initiatives

The project team also developed specialized lists for audiences interested in a given issue topic such as safety and quality or health system reform.

— RWJF promoted the series through its contract with the Washington public relations firm PR Solutions, which sent tailored pitch messages to more than 1,000 outlets, attaching and summarizing the brief, offering follow-up interviews with or blog posts by RWJF spokespeople, and providing text for association publications.

— Beginning in November 2011, with issue 17, the briefs were distributed electronically rather than by mail. The decision to switch was consistent with RWJF’s focus on building an online learning community through the use of social media. The project team publicized the switch to electronic publication through announcements in previous hard copy issues, notifications to their mailing lists, and ad placements, but only 3,000 readers signed up for the online version.

For more on the switch to electronic distribution—and the challenges involved, see Lessons Learned.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Balch Associates summarized focus groups findings in two unpublished reports.5,6

• Charting Nursing’s Future accomplished its main goals of informing policy and practice, primarily at the state and federal level. The 2010 report noted that readers saw the series as “a product that policy-makers and influencers look to and trust when they need credible data and examples on how to craft policy or create programs to improve health care delivery.” Readers valued the series for its “comprehensive coverage of timely, important topics at an optimal level of depth and breadth that informs and inspires them.”

For example, a nursing leader who participated in a 2007 focus group commented on the versatility of the format and content. “I think it provides some evidence when we go before policy-makers or even university administrators, etc. to educate them about the topic. It’s a good source in which to look over some statistics and some evidence and to pull that out and then perhaps in another conversation to bring that up. But I also think it could be used as something to hand over to someone else as well.”

• The series also served to educate students and secure grants. According to the project director, these were benefits “we hadn’t expected.” Focus group participants

indicated “they were using (briefs) in graduate and undergraduate classes where nurses were being prepared and they were using them to strengthen cases to obtain funding for nursing related initiatives, mostly at the state level.”

One educator noted, “I find them invaluable in teaching students in the undergraduate core and master’s core courses that have a strong health policy component. I did distribute these reports in full to the students and they, in turn, have found them very useful.”

Several focus group participants stressed the value of the briefs as a tool for securing funding. A state policy-maker said “We have used them a couple of times. We do this budget proposal process and had one success… where we got an additional couple hundred thousand dollars for our [State] Center for Nursing.”

A chief nursing officer described using the briefs “in preparing a presentation for our Board of Governors on nursing and workforce issues and tying that into recruitment and retention activities—particularly finding some nursing age-specific needs and how we might also look at our benefit package accordingly. . . [As a result] I’ve got an increase in budget, which is a huge outcome for recruitment.”

- **Readers saw a need for both hard copy and electronic versions of the series.**
  Readers appreciated the electronic copies for the ease of sharing them with co-workers, colleagues, and students. However, many preferred reading the hard copy version and found it valuable in sharing it with external audiences, especially high-level policy-makers. They recommended continuing to make the printed version available.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT**

RWJF’s Ladden stressed the practical, solutions-oriented focus of the series. “One of the great things about *Charting Nursing’s Future* is the way it gave policy-makers and practitioners good, on-the-ground ways of doing things. They could see that there were good models out there and they could spread the word about them.”

The series made understanding and responding to the needs of policy-makers, nursing educators, and top-level administrators a priority, Ladden noted. The series stands at “an intersection of journalism and research.” RWJF would “normally contract with an organization to do the research and develop a summary and…global observations and some recommendations.

“But in this series, the grantee did the research, partly through a literature review but also by reaching out to policy-makers and experts in the field, doing telephone interviews to get feedback on their perspective. They asked the experts about what were the key issues and how can those issues best be addressed, whether it be education, practice, research. Then they put it all into a readable, succinct policy brief.”
LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Ask readers what they need and accommodate it.** From the focus groups, the project team learned that policy-makers and the people who influence them have limited time and heavy workloads. They want authoritative facts and practical solutions from reliable sources, and they want it presented in a clear, easy-to-read format. Every detail of such a report—from topic selection down to the colors used on a graph—needs to be geared to that end. (Project Director/Spann; Program Officer/Ladden)

2. **Be prepared to lose readers when you switch from mailed to online distribution.** Because focus groups indicated that many readers preferred the hard copy version of the briefs, both Spann and Ladden were concerned when RWJF shifted to an online-only format at the end of 2011. Those concerns were realized when only 3,000 readers of the printed version signed up to receive an online copy.

   After publishing two online issues, RWJF tried to address the problem by returning to hard copy distribution, mailing out a limited number of copies of the brief published in June 2013. However, Project Director Spann worried that “distributing 3,000 copies instead of 15,000 left a huge number of policy-makers and influencers in the lurch.”

3. **Choose topics whose relevance will peak at the time of publication.** Topic selection “was a moving target; we had to decide what topics would be most important by the time the issue was published and distributed,” notes Ladden. For example, the March 2009 issue—“Nursing’s Prescription for a Reformed Health System”—needed to be synchronized with the new administration’s plans to reform health care. Ladden’s advice is to keep an ear to the ground and query experts in the field.

AFTERWARD

In 2012 RWJF awarded George Washington University School of Nursing a grant to continue producing *Charting Nursing’s Future*. The school published two briefs in 2013:


In November 2013, RWJF awarded the school a second grant to produce an additional three issues in 2014.

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ID# 70222 ($200,000, July 15, 2012 to October 31, 2013).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Report


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