



Published: April 30, 2024

Citation: McCormick M and Sinutko J, 2024. Building the Blueprint: Developing New Prelicensure Nursing Programs, Medical Research Archives, [online] 12(4). <https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v12i4.5324>

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v12i4.5324>

ISSN: 2375-1924

CASE REPORT

Building the Blueprint: Developing New Prelicensure Nursing Programs

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the process of developing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing program, providing insight into the key elements that need to be considered. The demand for skilled nurses is increasing, and institutions need to create responsive and innovative pre-licensure nursing programs to meet this demand. The article emphasizes the importance of evaluating the feasibility of such a program and identifying the resources required for successful implementation. It highlights the need for securing approval from both internal and external stakeholders, as well as funding for critical aspects such as faculty recruitment and clinical skills and simulation labs. The authors draw on their experience in conceptualizing and implementing pre-licensure nursing programs to provide valuable guidance and insights. Overall, the article offers a comprehensive review of the initial steps and crucial considerations for institutions aiming to establish robust educational pathways such as pre-licensure nursing programs.

Introduction

There are 844 Colleges and Universities in the United States (U.S.) offering a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program¹. “In 2022, a total of 78,191 qualified applications (not applicants) were not accepted at schools of nursing nationwide. Within this total, applications turned away included 66,261 from entry-level baccalaureate”¹. Thus, there is a need for more nursing programs along with conversations about how to increase enrollment at current programs. “The Registered Nursing (RN) workforce is expected to grow by 6% over the next decade. The RN workforce is expected to grow to 3.3 million in 2031, an increase of 195,400 nurses. The Bureau also projects 203,200 new openings for RNs each year through 2031 when nurse retirements and workforce exits are factored into the number of nurses needed in the U.S.”². Overall, the article offers a comprehensive review of the initial steps and crucial considerations for institutions aiming to launch a new academic offering, such as a pre-licensure nursing program.

The demand for skilled nurses continues to rise globally, emphasizing the critical need for innovative and responsive prelicensure nursing programs. There is a documented critical shortage of Bachelor of Science prepared RNs in the workforce, there are simply not enough to meet the current and future demand³. Developing such new programs requires a comprehensive approach that involves engaging with various stakeholders, securing necessary resources, navigating institutional structures, and securing required internal and external approvals.

While there exists a plethora of resources aimed at supporting the development of new academic programs, such as conferences, external program development consultant companies, and institution-specific guidelines for program development, it is crucial to recognize that not all of these address the nuanced requirements inherent in crafting a pre-licensure program. Such programs require meticulous attention to detail, particularly in navigating the intricacies of securing both internal institutional and external board of nursing approvals, along with ensuring alignment with national accreditors. Given the rigorous regulatory requirements and standards associated with pre-licensure programs, specialized guidance, and tailored resources are indispensable for institutions aiming to establish robust educational pathways such as pre-licensure nursing programs. Literature was reviewed on several health databases over several different searches. There is an identified gap related to the development of pre-licensure programs, including nursing.

Given the depth of investment to develop and launch a pre-licensure nursing program, having a clear understanding of the process is imperative. This article aims to provide a comprehensive review delineating the process for effective development and implementation of a pre-licensure nursing program. We provide a discussion and analysis of the process and consideration to inform institutions or stakeholders who are considering developing a pre-licensure nursing program. As consultants who have successfully launched over 11 programs in various institutions and locations, we provide an overview of the initial steps and crucial considerations that an institution must consider when developing a pre-licensure BSN based on our collective experience providing expert consultation services to institutions during this process. The information provided in this article can provide institutions or key stakeholders with invaluable insights and guidance for program development. The authors do not have any conflicts of interest or funding for this manuscript to disclose and do not have experience starting new nursing programs outside of the U.S.

Establishing a Streamlined Process

A strong and thorough SWOT analysis (defined as a formal review of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) is critical in the very early stages, as this analysis involves gathering input from relevant stakeholders, alumni, employees, healthcare facilities, and accreditors to identify the specific needs and challenges of the new nursing program⁴. By addressing the uniqueness of the institution with a plan for longevity, the program will be tailored to meet the requirements of accreditation and student success.

Developing a new prelicensure nursing program is a complex process that requires careful planning, coordination, communication, and execution. To ensure success, the development team should create, communicate, and adhere to a well-defined timeline. The first step in streamlining the development process is to communicate and re-communicate the comprehensive feasibility assessment. This is discussed further under institutional feasibility.

Once the specific needs and challenges are identified, clear goals and objectives should be mutually established that align with the institution's mission and vision. By setting realistic and measurable goals, the development team can stay focused and ensure that the program meets the necessary standards for accreditation and student success. Lastly, a detailed timeline should be created and widely communicated to all team

members. This plan should outline all the tasks, responsibilities, and timelines associated with the program's development, from curriculum design to securing necessary resources and approvals.

Assigning clear roles and responsibilities to each team member is necessary to ensure that the consultants do not complete all these requirements in a silo, without the support, understanding, and investment of the institutional stakeholders. Regular communication should be established to track milestones and address any potential roadblocks swiftly. By proactively managing the timeline and progress, the team can ensure that the program stays on schedule and avoids unnecessary delays. In conclusion, the successful development of a new prelicensure nursing program relies on streamlining the process and keeping the team on a defined timeline. By following a comprehensive assessment, setting clear goals and objectives, and creating a detailed timeline, the development team can ensure the program's success.

Internal Feasibility and Engagement

INSTITUTIONAL FEASIBILITY: IDENTIFYING NEEDED RESOURCES

When an academic institution decides to pursue the development of a pre-licensure BSN program, it must first assess the feasibility of such a program, as well as the necessary resources required for its successful implementation. To create a pre-licensure nursing program, the institution must access adequate financial, human, and physical resources⁵. Securing funding for key aspects, such as faculty recruitment, curriculum development, clinical simulation labs, and technology infrastructure, is of utmost importance. To achieve this, collaborating with institutional finance departments, seeking grants to offset start-up costs, and exploring partnerships with healthcare organizations to acquire clinical and financial resources should be considered.

It is not uncommon for institutions to consider the development of a pre-licensure BSN program as a means of increasing enrollment and tuition revenue, especially during times of financial strain or declining enrollment. Moreover, a pre-licensure BSN program can serve as the foundation for the development of other nursing programs and contribute to increased enrollment. However, it is important to note that the development of new academic programs requires a significant financial commitment⁵. As such, institutions must be aware of the need to identify and allocate funds for capital projects, hiring, and recruiting students well before program approvals and, possibly, years before tuition revenue is generated.

The resources noted above must be identified and articulated to several key stakeholders before seeking external approval. These stakeholders include institutional leadership, including the board of trustees and the executive administrative team, faculty, and clinical partners. Strategies and considerations for engaging these stakeholders are discussed further.

ENGAGING WITH INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Obtaining internal buy-in and approval is a critical step before seeking external approvals for any new academic program. Internal buy-in refers to the support and agreement from key stakeholders such as senior leadership, department heads, the Board of Trustees, and other relevant decision-makers.

The Board of Trustees, as the governing body, brings strategic oversight and financial stewardship to the table. Their input ensures alignment with the institution's mission, vision, and strategic goals, while also considering the long-term sustainability of the proposed program. Additionally, their approval is often necessary for major decisions and resource allocation⁶. On the other hand, university administration, including key leaders such as the president, provost, and relevant department heads, offer invaluable insights into the operational aspects of program development details. Their expertise can help assess the program's feasibility in terms of faculty and staff resources, infrastructure needs, and potential impact on existing programs⁶. Collaborating closely with both entities ensures a comprehensive approach that balances strategic vision with practical considerations, laying a solid foundation for the successful launch of the new academic program.

Crafting the appropriate size of stakeholder input is vital as too many voices can overload and slow down the progress⁷. This starts with building trust and open communication to best understand their needs, concerns, past experiences, and future goals. The need for effective communication cannot be underestimated as managing the unknown and unexpected is crucial⁶. Building internal relationships offers access to institutional history, strengths, and weaknesses. Oftentimes, these early conversations are focused on funding conversations and exploring the political environment. A culminating activity from these discussions that facilitates a clear, concise understanding of the impact of bringing a pre-licensure program to the institution, is a comprehensive SWOT analysis⁴ and a five to seven-year budget.

When the SWOT analysis and projected budget for the pre-licensure BSN program are presented to executive leadership, it facilitates clear communication and provides an opportunity for recommendations to guide any needed revisions⁴. This will help in moving forward with a formal vote to continue the internal approval process for the proposed program. Once the approval process is complete, the curriculum development and approval process can begin with faculty engagement while the clinical partner engagement will establish critical components of the program. After all these internal processes are completed successfully, the completed program proposal will be presented to the executive leadership for a final vote of approval.

ENGAGING FACULTY AND INCREASING BUY-IN

According to Cipriano (2020), faculty-shared governance plays a critical role in the academic processes of higher education. As the stakeholders at the front line of the educational experience, faculty involvement in the pre-licensure BSN program proposal and curriculum development process is crucial to increase morale, buy-in, and shared expertise⁸. Faculty members who teach in the general education and science prerequisite and corequisite courses can provide valuable insight into non-nursing curriculum content and how it supports and augments the nursing content in meeting end-of-program learning outcomes⁸. Moreover, experienced faculty can review and guide to ensure that the nursing mission, vision, and/or values and end-of-program outcomes align with the institution.

Many institutions have internal curriculum approval processes that may include curriculum committees or faculty governance structures such as a faculty senate. Internal approval must occur before external approval can start, so consultants or nursing administrators developing the program must have knowledge and connection to this process. Additionally, professional development opportunities, such as workshops and training sessions, can be offered to faculty to equip them with the necessary knowledge to critically review the proposed program and effectively deliver the pre-requisite courses that prepare students for their pre-licensure nursing-specific courses.

External Feasibility and Engagement

CLINICAL PARTNERS: ACCESSIBILITY AND ENGAGEMENT

Clinical partner relationships are essential for nursing programs to provide high-quality education and prepare nursing students for successful careers. Collaboration with clinical partners helps ensure that nursing programs remain relevant, effective,

and aligned with the needs of the healthcare industry. Development teams should plan to invite clinical partners to ongoing conversations as part of a nursing advisory board.

Starting a new program will be unique to a clinical partner as most of their work with nursing clinical placements is with long-standing colleges or universities. It is important to remain flexible and open to their changing healthcare needs⁷. The new program can begin conversations by inquiring about employment needs or job readiness skills they wish to see in new nursing graduates. Using the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Essentials as a common resource for defining and capturing the competencies that a pre-licensure program should use as the foundation for the curriculum can facilitate clinical partner conversation. AACN offers resources, such as the What Practice Partners Need to Know About the AACN Essentials Talking Points Document that provides concise but thorough information to educate clinical partners about the AACN Essentials and the rationale behind competency-based education and the strength that this framework brings to transitioning nurses into new practice roles⁹. Combining the shared understanding of the AACN essentials and the shared definition of the competencies that the clinical partners expect in new-grad nurses will provide additional strength to the curriculum and facilitate clinical partner buy-in and support.

It is also important to note that clinical partners exist outside of the hospital or in-patient settings. Meaningful clinical patient care experiences can occur at correctional facilities, shelters, school districts, clinics, health departments, day care organizations, long-term or rehabilitation care centers, telehealth, veterans facilities, or home care/hospice. Clinical can even occur on the college campus. It is important to be creative and consider all the places an RN can be impactful.

STATE AND NATIONAL APPROVAL PROCESSES

After completing the internal approval processes and ensuring the feasibility of obtaining clinical placement opportunities to meet the curriculum needs, the next step is to secure external approvals from both state boards of nursing and the regional national accrediting body. It is important to note that each state board of nursing has unique requirements for the submission of a feasibility and self-study report, and verification of the institution's ability to provide the degree offering¹⁰. Typically, this requires the chief nurse officer to have an RN license in that particular state. This often includes a site visit to verify the presence of physical resources

required for the program (i.e. lab and simulation space, library, classroom space, etc.). Therefore, the development team should be mindful of and involved with the state board of nursing approval process requirements from the start of the internal conversations to ensure that all the necessary components are created or verified.

Additionally, the United States has seven accrediting commissions that operate the six accreditation regions, each with its processes for new program approval¹¹. While some accrediting commissions allow co-concurrent submission of the new program proposal with the state approval process, most require evidence of state approval before initiating their approval process. Therefore, the development team must begin conversations with the accreditation commission liaisons early in the process to facilitate clear communication and complete submission requirements.

Establishing the Foundation for Longevity and Program Success

Nursing leadership, nursing faculty, and student support services are the key components to setting up the program for long-term success. Recruiting a nursing program director and subsequent nursing faculty and staff is crucial in ensuring the program's quality and long-term success. It is important to assess the academic culture and its appeal to both research and practice-focused advanced nursing degree-holding individuals, especially if there is a lack of other pre-professional or STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs at the institution.

In addition to high-quality faculty, student support services are also a key component of contributing to the program's quality. This is particularly important in light of the strict program requirements mandated by nursing accreditors. One such metric that must be kept at the forefront is the national standard of 80% NCLEX-RN® (National Council Licensure Exam for Registered Nurses) pass rate or higher for first-time takers⁵. Failure to meet this standard can result in the loss of program approval or national accreditation, which can have severe

consequences for both the program and the institution as a whole. New programs are under strict observation and must maintain high educational standards. Therefore, ensuring that students have access to academic and non-academic support is vital. This includes support services such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and career services. By providing academic instruction and curriculum development by qualified faculty and holistic student support services, institutions can help students succeed academically and meet the demands of the program, which can ultimately translate to higher NCLEX-RN® pass rates and program success.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, developing new prelicensure nursing programs is no easy task, but with the right approach, it can be done successfully. It requires a multifaceted approach that involves identifying the necessary resources, engaging and gaining support from institutional leadership and faculty, collaborating with clinical partners, and streamlining processes. By fostering collaboration, communication, and stakeholder buy-in, institutions can ensure the successful launch and sustainability of high-quality nursing programs. This is crucial in meeting the evolving needs of the healthcare industry and building a robust pipeline of competent and compassionate nurses. It is important to remember that thoughtful planning and strategic engagement are key to the success of these programs. This includes identifying the resources needed, such as faculty, facilities, and equipment, and ensuring that institutional leadership and faculty are on board and supportive. Engaging with clinical partners is also vital, as it allows for hands-on learning experiences and ensures that students are prepared for the real-world challenges they will face in their nursing careers. In conclusion, developing new prelicensure nursing programs requires a collaborative and strategic approach. By doing so, we can ensure that we are training the next generation of nurses who are ready to meet the demands of the healthcare industry and provide high-quality care to patients.

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