



Magnet Status: Reinventing the Nurse Workforce Through Career Development and Tuition Assistance

By Georgio Bantos

The nursing profession is the largest segment of the nation's health care workforce, with approximately three million workers.¹ Often referred to as the lifeblood of health care, nurses work to the fullest extent of licensure in a variety of capacities. Nurses partner with physicians to assess, plan and administer care to patients, families and the community. They serve as clinical managers, researchers, advocates, academic deans and professors, case managers, clinical educators, legislators and more. Consistent preparation and preservation of a healthy nurse workforce is, as we know it, critical.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says employment of registered nurses will continue to grow 19 percent from 2012 to 2022, faster than the average for all occupations.² This growth will be linked to the increased emphasis on preventative care following the enactment of the Affordable Care Act (ACA); growing rates of chronic conditions like diabetes and obesity; and demand for health care services from the baby boomer population as they live longer and have more active lives.

Yet not too long ago, the nation was experiencing a nursing shortage. In the 1980s, in response to the shortage, the American Academy of Nursing conducted a study and identified "Forces of Magnetism," characteristics shared by health care organizations at a time when the profession was still demonstrating an ability to attract and retain nurses in great numbers. Ultimately, the academy used these forces as the basis for the Magnet Recognition Program, which certifies health care organizations for their quality patient care, nursing excellence and ability to innovate. The

designation became a major recruiting and marketing tool for hospitals and other health care organizations.

"Magnet is the ultimate seal of approval in this industry. It says you have a top-notch nursing staff; and to patients, it nearly guarantees that they can receive the best possible care at that facility," said Dionne Dixon, Ph.D., administrative director, Logistics, Process Assurance & Organizational Excellence Programs for Hackensack University Medical Center (HackensackUMC), a teaching and research hospital in New Jersey that was the first in its state and the second in the nation to become a Magnet-designated hospital for nursing excellence. "Like any business, hospitals compete for clientele and employees. Patients today educate themselves when it comes to where to seek care, and Magnet designation fuels their confidence



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In response to the ACA, which required a rethinking of roles for many health care professionals, chief nursing officers among them, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) rolled out an action-oriented blueprint that would transform health care to meet the ACA's provisions. Among its recommendations, the IOM called for nurses to achieve higher levels of education.



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This new call to action around nursing education was driven by the idea, and hard research that shows nurses with Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degrees possess the skills, knowledge and abilities needed to manage the increasing complexity of both patients and the health care system. Nurse researchers have found that every 10 percent increase in the proportion of BSN nurses on the hospital staff is associated with a 4 percent decrease in the risk of death.³

One year later, in 2011, the Magnet program made its own revisions, aligning its criteria with the IOM's recommendations. Perhaps the most significant amendment was a new requirement around nursing education. By 2020, hospitals seeking Magnet designation would, among other conditions, need to ensure 80 percent of its nurses held at least a BSN.

With 10,000 adults expected to turn 65 every day between now and 2030,⁴ and nurse managers simultaneously retiring in droves, a well-educated nurse workforce will have to be in place to fill the large skills gap and attend to the growing number of patients.

But nurses have a lot on their plates. Not just at work, but at home. They have families to care for, among other personal obligations. They may even be putting their own children through college.

According to a study recently published in *The Journal of Nursing Administration*, the four main barriers to pursuing a BSN are financial constraints, competing priorities, having a negative past academic experience and lack of academic support.⁵

For HackensackUMC, almost a fifth of its nursing workforce – roughly 400 nurses – would need to earn a BSN for the hospital to maintain its Magnet designation, and the hospital wasn't naïve to these barriers. Under the leadership of Chief Nursing Officer Dianne Aroh, HackensackUMC made a commitment to support BSN as the entry level for all nurses on staff, as well as nurses hired into the medical center.

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To ensure staff were fully supported in their educational endeavors, Aroh partnered with HackensackUMC's Department of Clinical Education led by Administrative Director Denise Occhiuzzo and with its benefits team led by Director Paulette Wright, to identify ways to remove the aforementioned barriers for nurses. The benefits team subsequently formed a partnership with EdAssist, a Massachusetts-based provider of tuition assistance management services.

EdAssist assessed HackensackUMC's existing tuition assistance program and revised it to ensure its use as a highly strategic tool that would not only support the medical center's mission of having its current nursing staff obtain BSN degrees, but align the academic progression of its adult learners to their current and future skill gaps long-term. They also put measures in place to make pursuing a BSN as seamless a process as possible for all nurses, regardless of their circumstances.

As part of the new strategy, HackensackUMC would only offer assistance to nurses working toward bachelor's degrees. Nurses who were already part of the HackensackUMC family, as of 2012 working on other programs, would be grandfathered in.

"We wanted our tuition assistance program to directly reflect and support HackensackUMC's new nursing education agenda to maintain BSN as our entry level into the practice of nursing at the medical center. By connecting our tuition benefits to becoming BSN-ready, we are setting the bar," said Dixon. "Although we don't directly fund associates and diploma nursing programs, it's important to us that we continue to support nurses already working for us who enrolled in such programs that have clear bridges to a BSN."

HackensackUMC nurses would receive free, one-on-one advising sessions with EdAssist's team of academic advisors who would help them select programs that fit their busy schedules and result in the appropriate accreditations, while finding them tuition discounts where possible through their relationship with various colleges and universities. In addition, HackensackUMC developed a program that gives its nurses the ability to attend classes on-site at the medical center, all paid for by HackensackUMC, raising the convenience factor and reducing costs for nurses.

EdAssist would also help HackensackUMC streamline the administration of its tuition assistance program, improving tracking and compliance, and fulfilling Magnet's requirement (and goals of the ACA and IOM) of enhanced reporting methods by building an infrastructure that would allow for more regular data collection and evaluation.

All of these efforts have led to substantial results to date. Today, HackensackUMC is already 9 percent closer to reaching Magnet's goal, with 71 percent of their nursing staff holding BSNs, although the hospital's goal is to exceed the Magnet requirement and maintain a BSN as its entry-level qualification. They have 177 nurses enrolled in bachelor's programs, 173 nurses enrolled in master's programs and 19 in doctoral programs. The on-site learning opportunity developed for HackensackUMC's nurses has been broadly embraced, with 22 nurses already graduated from one of two on-site programs.

Working on the front lines of patient care, nurses are the most critical stakeholders in delivering on the objectives set forth in ACA legislation. Tuition assistance can and should be central to the talent development strategy for nursing staff, and not just a transactional benefit. Tuition assistance programs that include academic advising and other components meant to support working adult learners help employers strengthen employee loyalty and ultimately improve retention, building not just a highly skilled but a stable workforce. At the same time, these benefits enable staff to continue to expand their knowledge and skills while maintaining a job in the workplace. If used properly and promoted broadly, it can help an organization achieve incredible business objectives that all ladder up to being a premier health care system.

For today's leading hospitals, like HackensackUMC, the goal isn't to be at the minimum benchmark. Their objective isn't 80 percent BSN but 100 percent BSN. For leading hospitals, the vision is fostering ongoing nursing engagement through career development to be a premier health system. They recognize that opportunities to fine-tune and build upon nursing knowledge and skills are

infinite and must be taken advantage of for the benefit of the health care system, its patients and its nurses. ■

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