

The Future of Nursing 2020-2030

Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity

REPORT BRIEF



Transforming Nursing Education

The Challenge

Like the 1918 influenza pandemic and World War I, COVID-19 will forever change how we educate nurses. The pandemic has reinforced that all nurses should possess deep, empathetic, real-world knowledge and understanding of the social, economic, and environmental factors that affect health and well-being. But in the United States, many nurses are still not taught about these issues in their undergraduate or graduate classrooms, including their clinical experiences. Polls show that nurses at all levels think they could have done their jobs better if they had more education and training on these topics.

Most nursing schools cover health equity and the social determinants of health as a siloed topic. This approach does not create a foundational understanding and fails to prepare nurses to work in a wide variety of settings and with people from diverse backgrounds. Whether they are working in a primary care clinic, a hospital, or an elementary school, nurses need the tools to help people and communities navigate and address inequities.

The nursing profession also must reflect the diversity of the country. The United States needs more nurses in clinics and hospitals, communities, and leadership positions who look like the people and families they care for and who can inspire underrepresented students to join the workforce. The educational system can play a key role in making this happen.

About the Report

For too long, the United States has overinvested in treating illness and underinvested in promoting health and well-being and preventing disease. Even before COVID-19 illuminated disparities and exacerbated inequities in the United States, nurses were advocating for better care and access for individuals, families, and communities. At the request of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a National Academy of Medicine committee conducted a study aimed at charting a path forward for the nursing profession to help ensure that all people have what they need to live their healthiest lives. The report was published in May 2021 and builds on progress nurses have made over the past decade.¹

Why Nurses?

Promoting health and well-being has long been an essential role of nurses—they are bridge builders and collaborators who engage and connect with people, communities, and organizations to ensure people from all backgrounds have what they need to be healthy and well. But they need ongoing support from the systems that educate, train, employ, and enable them to fully deploy their expertise and training so they can help advance health equity for all.

¹ <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/12956/the-future-of-nursing-leading-change-advancing-health>

While the nursing workforce has steadily grown more diverse, there are still significant cost, cultural, social, and awareness barriers that prevent people of color, those with low incomes, first-generation college students, and others from pursuing careers in the field—and particularly from pursuing advanced degrees.

Nursing program faculty are also overwhelmingly white and female: As of 2018, only 17.3 percent of full-time faculty in nursing schools were from underrepresented groups. Currently, these faculty are not all prepared to educate students in the social determinants of health and health equity.

There is also a significant shortage of faculty, which played a role in nursing programs turning away more than 80,000 otherwise qualified applicants in the 2019-2020 enrollment cycle.

To advance health equity for all, nursing schools need to expand their capacity to educate, mentor, and support more aspiring nurses from a range of backgrounds.



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80,000+

otherwise qualified applicants in the 2019-2020 enrollment cycle were turned away due to faculty shortages.

The Solution

The committee recommends that nursing education programs, including continuing education, and accreditors and the National Council of State Boards of Nursing ensure nurses are prepared to address social determinants of health and achieve health equity.

Nurses at every level and in every setting are wired to be leaders—of teams, of communities, of systems, and in the mission to advance health equity. Educational institutions and accreditors need to be more intentional about inspiring, empowering, and preparing nurses to promote good health and well-being for all, including by:

- **Integrating content on the social determinants of health and health equity throughout nursing educational programs**, not just in a handful of courses.
- **Extending education and training beyond the classroom and traditional clinical experiences** to experiential learning opportunities in communities.
- **Cultivating inclusive learning environments that acknowledge and challenge racism** in all aspects of nursing education and practice.
- **Intentionally recruiting, supporting, and mentoring faculty and students from diverse backgrounds** to ensure that the next generation of nurses reflects the communities they serve. Nursing accreditors can play a role by requiring standards for student diversity just like other health professions schools.



Read *The Future of Nursing 2020-2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity*



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