

Apprenticeship in Nursing Today

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From birth to end-of-life care, Americans depend on nurses at many points in their lives. To prepare for their careers and function effectively in their many roles, nurses must navigate a complex infrastructure of higher education programs, continuing education, and licensure. For many aspiring nurses, this infrastructure works well, providing pathways to associate or bachelor's degrees and well-paid jobs as registered nurses. For others, however, the idealized health care career pathway can turn out to be a dead end.

High college costs, time constraints, and an overall lack of access to training opportunities prevent many otherwise qualified individuals from moving up the nursing career ladder through higher education. These barriers have significant equity and quality of care implications for patients and health systems across the country. To address them, the American nursing education system would benefit from more affordable options that can both upskill and diversify the nursing workforce. Apprenticeship, though still relatively uncommon in nursing, could be one such option.

What is Apprenticeship?

Apprenticeship is a proven education and workforce strategy combining paid, structured, on-the-job learning with related classroom instruction. The national system of Registered Apprenticeship in the United States was established in 1937 and

has been successfully facilitating entry into a variety of careers ever since. While traditionally associated with the building trades, apprenticeship is spreading into industries like health care, IT, advanced manufacturing, and business services. In nursing, too, a new wave of modern apprenticeship programs is emerging.

Though the particular characteristics of each Registered Apprenticeship can vary by program, all programs have five key elements that ensure their educational quality and help meet the needs of both apprentices and employers:

- Paid, structured on-the-job learning
- Related classroom instruction
- Ongoing assessment against established skills and competency standards
- Wage increases commensurate with demonstrated increases in skills and abilities
- Portable, industry-recognized credential at program end

Registered Apprenticeships are built on partnerships between employers and educators, often a community college or joint training fund, who collaborate on the development of curricula and competency standards. A growing number of programs

are integrated with college degree programs. These degree apprenticeships are an especially promising development for the nursing workforce.

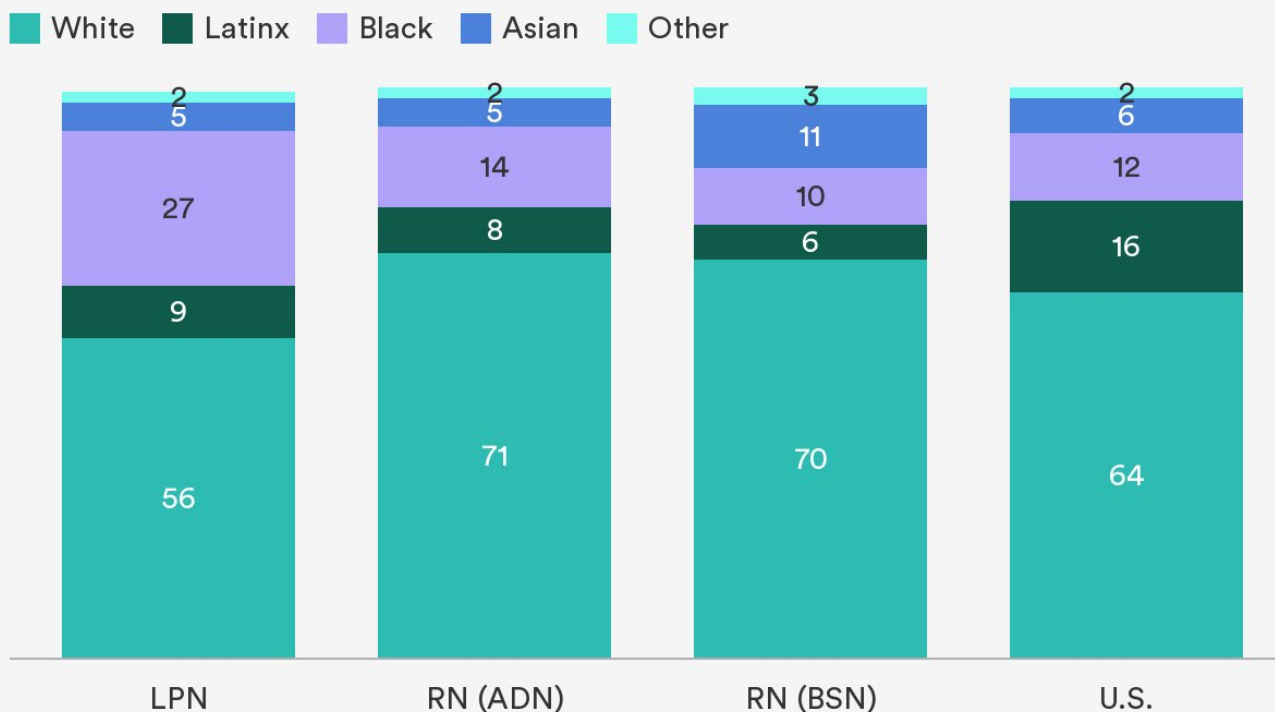
Challenges Facing the Nursing Workforce

Registered and licensed practical (or vocational) nurses make up the largest segment of the health care workforce, and their services are in demand in every health system in the country, regardless of size or location. Highly qualified RNs with college credentials, at either the bachelor's or associate level, are in even higher demand. Still, many parts of the country are experiencing shortages of both RNs and LPNs, and as baby boomers retire and demand for health care grows, these shortages may become even

more severe. According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, an aging nursing workforce, a shortage of college-level nursing educators, and an increased risk of job dissatisfaction and burnout for nurses have created the conditions for intensified workforce shortages. But a simple shortage of nurses is not the only workforce challenge facing the nursing community.

The demographics of RNs who have a bachelor's degree do not mirror the population of the country, with Black and Latinx populations particularly underrepresented. The contribution of social factors such as racism, poverty, and socioeconomic status to health disparities among racial and ethnic groups makes this underrepresentation, shown in Figure 1, especially concerning.

Figure 1: Racial and ethnic diversity among nurses



Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Artem Gulish, *Nursing: Can It Remain a Source of Upward Mobility Amidst Healthcare Turmoil?* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2017), 32–34.

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Americans' growing reliance on nurses is unlikely to slow down as the population ages, as our health care needs expand, and as demographics and health technologies change. With minor adaptations to existing programs and partnerships, however, state policymakers, colleges, and employers can provide earn-and-learn apprenticeship opportunities for building a more diverse nursing workforce.

Apprenticeship as a Nursing Workforce Strategy

In other industry sectors such as finance, information technology, and the building trades, apprenticeship has been used successfully to raise skill levels and improve workforce diversity at the same time. In nursing, too, apprenticeship provides a framework for supporting both the initial training and continuing education of incumbent and aspiring nurses.

Several characteristics of the nursing profession make it well-suited to apprenticeship. First and foremost, nursing has a well-established tradition of applied learning. Many aspiring nurses training for their careers through conventional associate and bachelor's degree programs already engage in significant amounts of on-site learning in the form of clinical experiences and practicums, and recently licensed RNs increasingly take part in residencies as they transition to practice.

The on-the-job component of apprenticeship fits conveniently with these traditions of applied learning in nursing and, crucially, is always paid.

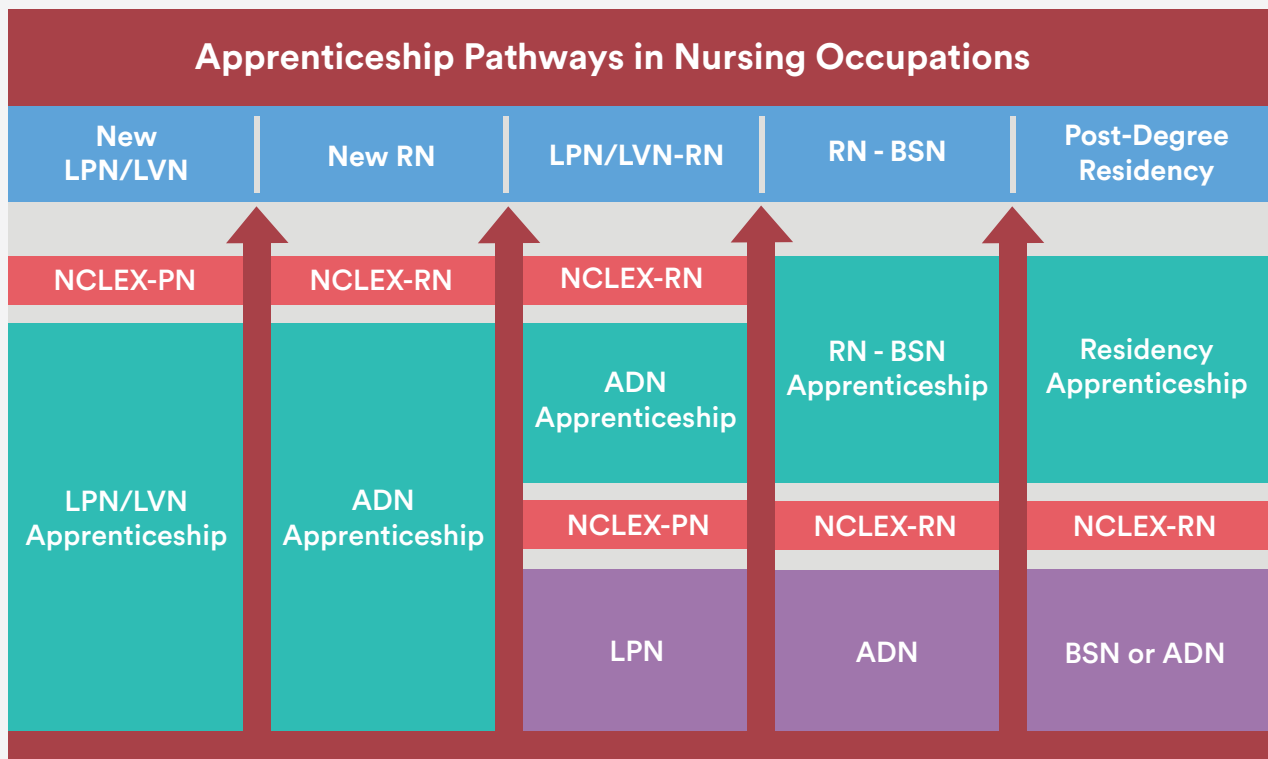
Likewise, apprentices are generally responsible for little to no tuition expenses for the program. A guaranteed wage and low-to-no tuition reduce learners' financial risks in pursuing a higher degree and broadens access for marginalized populations.

Secondly, the multiple entry points into nursing careers, which can be bewildering both to outside observers and learners trying to navigate the system themselves, provide many opportunities for apprenticeship.

Hospital systems considering apprenticeship can base their program's design on the particular needs of their own workforce, whether that means developing programs for LPNs or BSN bridge programs for RNs hoping to upgrade their diploma or associate degree.

Figure 2 shows where apprenticeship can support career pathways when used at different stages in nurses' career development, continually offering opportunity for further education and mentorship.

Figure 2 : Apprenticeship and Nursing Pathways



Note: NCLEX-PN – National Council Licensure Examination – Practical Nurse; NCLEX-RN – National Council Licensure Examination – Registered Nurse

Nursing Apprenticeship in Action

Nursing apprenticeships must always include paid and mentored training in a care setting, a credential of value upon program completion, and integrated on-the-job and classroom learning tied to industry standards. To support apprenticeship's diversity-building capabilities, providers should keep tuition costs to a minimum and engage in culturally responsive teaching methods. Apart from these basics, however, apprenticeship is an eminently flexible educational model. The experiences of existing innovators in nursing apprenticeship show how apprenticeship's fundamental structure can be applied in different contexts:



1. **Brown Medicine (LPN)**—Supported by a startup grant from the Rhode Island Governor's Workforce Board, this partnership with the Community College of Rhode Island allows incumbent medical assistants at Brown Medicine to become LPNs.
2. **Yale New Haven Hospital (RN Residency)**—This one-year program was adapted from an existing nurse residency program that was credited for helping reduce nurse turnover to roughly half the national average.
3. **Fairview Health Services (RN-BSN)**—Building on its RN-BSN bridge apprenticeship, Fairview developed apprenticeship programs for other health care occupations, and now hires apprentice surgical technologists and medical assistants as well.
4. **California Department of Corrections and SEIU Local 1000 (LVN-RN)**—This bridge program allows licensed vocational nurses working at four California correctional facilities to pursue RN licensure and an associate degree.

More nursing apprenticeships may not be enough to avert nurse shortages completely. But as the importance of diversity and advanced training in the nursing workforce grow in tandem, apprenticeship is a sound choice for state policymakers, colleges, and nurse employers looking to address both needs at once

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