

Growing Future Nurse Executives: *An Innovative Pathway*

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By 2020, the United States will need an additional 67,200 nurse leaders.¹ This need is fueled by a combination of the growth in health care services that is creating new positions

and by the increasing vacancies in existing positions. Buerhaus² attributes the increasing vacancies to an accelerating rate of retirements, job stress, and new career opportunities for nurse leaders.

The traditional path to executive nurse leadership has been to move from a clinical role through various management and leadership roles with increasing levels of responsibility. Advanced education is usually concurrent with this expanding experience. The traditional path, although highly variable, produces nurse executives with a deep knowledge of operations. This path is also very flexible, able to speed up or slow down in response to demand.

The current shortage of nursing leaders is compounded by a longer education horizon and a desire to maintain operational expertise. Health care organizations are struggling to fill nurse leadership positions in this rapidly evolving environment. The Executive Nurse Leader Residency program offers a potential solution.

EXECUTIVE NURSE LEADER RESIDENCY PROGRAM

Nurses are most interested in leadership early in their career. Using 5 career stages, Bulmer³ identified “nurses in the exploration (2 years or less) and establishment (2 years or more, but less than 5) stages displayed significantly higher leadership aspiration scores compared with those in the late career stage.” Aspiration to be a leader declines with each career stage. By the time the nurses reach 25 years or more experience, there is a significant drop in aspiration to be a leader.³ Therefore, early recruitment of potential nurse leaders is important and a key driver in growing the supply of nurse leaders. Importantly, Bulmer³ also suggests that organizations should question the required number of years of experience often mandated for nurse leaders.

The *Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* report recommends that the profession prepare nurses to lead and that by 2020 the number of nurses with doctorates should double.⁴ Doctoral programs across the United States have stepped up to this challenge as evidenced by the rapid expansion of both programs and enrollments. As of June 2017, there are 303 doctor of nursing practice programs currently enrolling students nationwide, with an additional 124 new programs in the planning stages.⁵

Despite the rigor of a doctoral program, these graduates will need additional training and experience in order to rapidly assume their roles as nurse leaders. An executive nurse leader residency employment experience, combined with a doctoral education program, could expedite the nurse executive career pathway. The Executive Nurse Leader Residency program is designed to supplement doctoral education with executive leadership experience and expedite the career trajectory for students who do not have the depth of operational experience that was historically gained through the traditional path of progressive management experience. The program combines doctoral study with planned executive experiences and mentorship to provide a learning laboratory and accelerate career progression.

SETTING

HCA Healthcare is a national health care provider headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. HCA consists of 172 hospitals and 116 freestanding surgery centers in 20 states and the

United Kingdom. HCA employs approximately 80,000 registered nurses who help provide approximately 5% of all US hospital services—27.1 million patient encounters per year. Developing nurse leaders is a strategic imperative for HCA Healthcare. The company has a long-standing chief nursing officer (CNO) development program that graduates 20 to 30 new nurse executives each year. Additionally, HCA has growing director development and charge nurse certificate programs to begin identifying nursing leadership talent earlier in the career life cycle. These programs, however, were proving inadequate to respond to the growing need for nursing leadership talent across the organization. Like most major health care organizations, HCA is facing a wave of retirements of both director- and executive-level positions in the next 5 years. Based on internal company records, most HCA nurse directors are between the ages of 40 and 59 years of age. The average age of HCA CNOs is 53.4 years, and less than 10% of HCA CNOs are between the ages of 30 and 40.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Candidates for the Executive Nurse Leader Residency program are selected from doctoral students who have a focus in nursing leadership. The stated goals of the program are:

1. To develop nurse executive competencies
2. To provide participants a laboratory for applying nurse executive competencies
3. To prepare the resident to enter a variety of nurse executive roles

Students must have completed master's level administration courses and have a grade point average of 3.6 or higher and are screened by the College of Nursing prior to applying. Applicants submit an essay describing their goals and learning objectives for entering the Executive Nurse Leader Residency. Final applicants interview with the designated HCA program coordinator.

Once selected for the residency program, the resident establishes a learning plan and key deliverables with an HCA executive mentor, focusing on the topics of leadership, informatics, analytics, and patient safety. Residents are expected to work at HCA Healthcare as an executive nurse leader resident for a minimum of 20 hours per week for 12 months. Each resident is employed by HCA through a temporary staffing agency.

PRELIMINARY PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Chisa Huffman was chosen as the inaugural executive nurse leader resident. Ms. Huffman is an example of a new nurse who is intentionally choosing a career path in leadership in the first few years of being a nurse. Ms. Huffman obtained an associate degree in nursing from Pellissippi State Community College in 2014. She began working at an area hospital upon obtaining her RN license and simultaneously entered the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's RN to BSN program. Ms. Huffman earned her BSN (summa cum laude) in 2015, and her MSN—Nursing Administration in 2016. She is currently enrolled in the University of Tennessee Knoxville College of Nursing DNP program with a project focus in executive practice.

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