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Full Length Article

## Staffing and faculty compensation in associate degree nursing education programs



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## ABSTRACT

The nursing shortage is exacerbated by challenges in nursing education programs, notably a lack of faculty. Associate degree programs are crucial in mitigating this shortage, yet their staffing and compensation remains understudied. A national survey reported a growing faculty shortage, impacted by retirements and compensation disparities. Recommendations to address the workforce include equitable salaries, supportive work environments, and workload balance.

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## Introduction

International attention has been drawn to the nursing shortage, which has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and its continued effects on the healthcare workforce. A report by the World Health Organization estimated the world may be short 5.7 million nurses by 2030 (Turale & Meechamnan, 2022). Nursing education is called to aid in the solution, but colleges and universities turn away tens of thousands of qualified applicants each year due to insufficient faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, and budget constraints. Data collected from universities with baccalaureate and masters' programs demonstrate a lack of qualified nursing faculty as a major contributing factor (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2020), however, there is a dearth of data related to the supply and/or demand for nursing faculty in associate degree nursing programs in the United States.

Currently, 48% of the new nursing workforce enters the profession at the associate degree level (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2022) and the need exists to better understand the driving factors within these institutions that prepare such a large proportion of the nursing workforce. Student populations, faculty workload, and the experience of teaching pre-licensure nursing education in community colleges differ drastically from

those in the university setting. As an example, the mission of most community colleges is grounded in open access to affordable, high-quality education, and faculty development focuses on the scholarship of teaching rather than the pursuit of research activities and policies that reflect these priorities (CT General Assembly, 2011). More often than not, community college faculty who are committed to research cannot rely on any release from a full teaching load to pursue related activities (Gerrity, 2019). This blatant difference between the responsibilities of faculty teaching in community colleges and those who teach in a university setting makes it difficult to align the unique experiences of both groups.

In response to the need for information about faculty who teach in associate degree nursing programs, a survey was conducted of 1106 associate degree programs across the nation to gather input to better understand the challenges related to growing the associate degree nursing faculty pipeline, and ultimately, the nursing workforce. Based on the data collected, recommendations to begin to address the nursing faculty shortage is presented to guide discussions with educational leaders, policymakers, and potential healthcare industry partners in an effort to support the growth of the nursing faculty workforce.

## Review of Literature

A review of the literature related to nursing faculty staffing revealed that recent research has been primarily centered within

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institutions granting baccalaureate and higher degrees and focused on job satisfaction and retention (Chung & Kowalski, 2012; Christian, 2021; Frisbee et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017). Two studies incorporated associate degree nursing faculty among those teaching at four-year colleges and universities (Candela et al., 2015; Evans, 2013). A single study strictly investigated associate degree nursing faculty but was limited to one state (Darnell et al., 2020).

Many of the papers reviewed were based upon research occurring in the pre-pandemic period, which may or may not continue to be as valid and reliable in the current, drastic nursing shortages we are experiencing in the post-pandemic world. Despite this limitation, the articles reviewed revealed alarming trends related to nursing faculty retention. Most papers underscored the concern that compensation inequities between practice and academe is a main contributor to the faculty shortage and threaten the future of the nursing profession (Christian, 2021; Chung & Kowalski, 2012; Darnell et al., 2020; Evans, 2013; Frisbee et al., 2019). Student incivility towards faculty was ranked highest as compared to leadership and peers and appears to be impacting faculty retention (Frisbee et al., 2019). With respect to nursing faculty retention, one study revealed that close to half of nursing faculty responding to a national survey intended to leave their position in less than 5 years (Frisbee et al., 2019).

The review of the literature revealed a dearth of information about faculty who teach in associate degree nursing programs and the issues impacting their retention. Awareness of the unique trends and issues impacting associate degree nursing programs is essential to assure their continued capacity to support the growth of the nursing workforce (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2022).

## Methods

This study was undertaken by the Research Committee of the Organization for Associate Degree Nursing (OADN). A small group of volunteers worked together to answer the overarching research question “How are associate degree nursing education programs staffed?” To address this question, the research team sought to quantify the challenges associated with staffing, such as vacant positions and anticipated retirements. The research team sought to explore the workload and compensation patterns of associate degree nursing education programs.

A survey instrument was developed by the committee to answer the research questions. To address validity, the survey was reviewed by multiple committee members and other members of OADN who have expertise in associate degree nursing programs and represent programs throughout the United States. Additionally, members of the OADN Board of Directors provided their input. Feedback from these experts led to an adjustment of some questions for enhanced readability and accuracy. People from diverse backgrounds in ADN education helped to ensure the face and content validity of the instrument. Institutional review board approval was obtained from Western Governors University.

The survey was distributed via email to the 1106 nurse administrators for US-based associate degree programs that OADN and/or Western Governors University had contact information. The email invitation directed participant to complete the survey via SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com>). The results of the survey was then extracted into a database to produce descriptive statistics.

Additional evidence was obtained during a presentation of preliminary results during the OADN Annual Convention. Participants in the session were invited to share their responses to the information through an interactive platform. These additional data are presented as supplementary context to the original results.

## Results

The survey was returned by 475 nurse administrators, which represented a 43% completion rate. The distribution of the respondents

represented the following regional diversity: Midwest region 25%, Northeast region 13%, South region 41%, and West region 21%. State-level data was not collected. Eighty-eight percent of respondents identified their school as a public institution. Regarding the main campus of the nursing education program, 50% of the respondents identified being situated in a rural setting, 27% within a suburban setting, and 23% located in an urban setting.

Total student enrollment served to group schools related to the size of the program. Programs that reported student enrollment of less than 100 composed 37% of the sample. Programs with 100–250 students represented 40% of the sample. Larger programs with 251–750 students represented 17% of the sample and programs with enrollment greater than 750 represented 1% of the sample. Student enrollment data was not reported in 5% of the surveys.

The current nursing faculty workforce in the associate degree program was described by years of academic nurse educator experience. Of note, 31% of faculty were reported to have less than or equal to three years of experience. The faculty with the most experience, 13 years or more, comprised 26% of the faculty. Regarding the academic qualification of program faculty, 78% of the faculty were described as holding a master’s degree in nursing. A small percentage, 10%, held a BSN as their highest degree. Doctorally-prepared faculty composed 12% of the sample, with 8% having earned a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree and 4% possessing a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), a Doctor of Nursing Science (DNSc), or a Doctor of Education (EdD) degree.

### Faculty Staffing and Compensation

Data collected through the survey addressed current staffing levels, such as how many full-time faculty were actively teaching during the current semester. This was compared to the number of students enrolled (both full- and part-time) to determine the average number of students per full-time faculty member (see Table 1).

In addition to the direct responsibilities to students, full-time nursing faculty take on extra responsibilities. Management of supplies was identified as a full-time faculty responsibility for 25% of the respondents. Laboratory coordination was identified as a responsibility by 48% and simulation support by 52% of full-time faculty. Additionally, coordination of clinical placements was identified as a full-time faculty responsibility by 47% of respondents. It was unclear from the responses how faculty are compensated for these additional duties. Some respondents reported the additional work was built into the faculty workload, while others identified it as unpaid labor. Differences in how faculty workload was described by the respondents make aggregate analysis of compensation for additional responsibilities challenging.

Academic appointment terms varied between institutions. Seventy-five percent of the respondents identified that the majority of their full-time faculty were on 9–10 month per year appointments. The remaining 25% of the sample identified the majority of their faculty serving a 12 month per year appointment. Tenure, continuous contracts, or other equivalencies to tenure were available to 53% of

**Table 1**  
Faculty Size and Ratio to Student Enrollment

Program Size	Average Number of Full-Time Faculty	Average Number of Students per Full-Time Faculty
Small (less than 100 students)	5 (range 1–11)	13 (range 2–51)
Medium (150–249 students)	9 (range 2–24)	19 (range 7–100)
Large (250–750 students)	19 (range 6–40)	19 (range 10–86)
Extra-large (751+ students)	85 (range 35–212)	27 (range 17–50)

**Table 2**  
Average Nursing Faculty Starting Salary by Academic Degree

Starting Salary	Baccalaureate	Master's	Doctorate
\$25,000–\$49,999	33%	16%	10%
\$50,000–\$74,999	63%	69%	62%
\$75,000–\$99,999	5%	12%	26%
\$100,000 or greater	0%	3%	2%

the public institutions versus 10% of the private institutions. Annual health benefits, including dental and vision, were reported to be available by 99% of the respondents. Respondents reported that retirement benefits were offered by the majority of the programs with 49% offering a pension, 76% offering employer contributions to a retirement fund, and 71% offering employee contributions to a retirement fund.

Data were collected on the average starting salary for nursing faculty based upon the academic degree held. Of note, the majority of programs reported an average starting salary of \$50,000–\$74,999 for nursing faculty, regardless of the degree held (see Table 2).

Respondents were asked to identify the factors that contribute to the assignment of average starting nurse faculty salary. Academic preparation, teaching experience, clinical experience, and institutional longevity were identified as collectively contributing to the salary of nursing faculty by 54% of the respondents. Additionally, a small number of respondents reported that union contracts dictated salary. Others reported that salaries for all faculty are set by the college, regardless of discipline.

#### Faculty Vacancies

The respondents collectively identified 914 full-time faculty vacancies in their programs. Additionally, 1189 part-time or adjunct positions were identified as vacancies. Several respondents reported that the number of part-time vacancies was variable due to the number of students being served in a particular semester. Greater than half of the programs (59%) reported they were actively recruiting for both full-time and part-time/adjunct positions.

Respondents collectively predicted that 904 of their nursing faculty planned to retire within the next five years. Of those expected retirements, 26% were due to faculty reaching retirement age, 16% were faculty who were returning to clinical practice, and 16% were retiring due to stress and burnout. Over 50 respondents provided additional context through free-text comments that low salaries were contributing to difficulty with retaining faculty. Many reported that nursing faculty could obtain higher-paying positions in clinical practice.

#### Additional Context

Additional data were gathered during the first presentation of this work at the OADN Annual Convention held in November 2022. Fifty-one participants responded to questions within an interactive presentation. The participants represented an almost equal distribution between faculty ( $n = 22$ ) and program administrators/staff members ( $n = 29$ ). The US regional distribution of participants was Midwestern ( $n = 14$ ), Northeastern ( $n = 6$ ), Southern ( $n = 22$ ), and Western ( $n = 4$ ).

The conference was held in the Southern region of the US, which may have contributed to the higher number of participants from that area.

The first question posed to the audience was, “What would motivate you to leave your current position?” where multiple options could be selected. Approaching retirement age was identified by 20 participants. The ability to earn more money outside of academia was identified by 25 participants. A lack of support from the administration was identified by 25 participants. The inability to balance work and personal life was identified by 20 participants. Concerns about workplace violence and incivility in academia was identified by nine participants, while 12 participants identified concerns with student incivility and/or demands. Only 10 participants stated they had not considered leaving their current position.

The second question posed to participants was, “Aside from the salary discrepancies between practice and academia, identify factors that incentivize you to stay in your position” These responses are represented in Table 3.

#### Discussion

The aim of this national study was to gather information about staffing and faculty compensation in associate degree nursing education programs. The data collected demonstrate a current faculty shortage, which will worsen in the future if faculty concerns are not addressed. The following recommendations are situated within the analysis of the current study data and the related literature.

##### Recommendation 1: Investment in Equitable Nursing Faculty Salaries

The majority of the survey respondents reported that the average starting salary for nurse faculty is between \$50,000 and \$74,999. A national salary tracking organization reports that the average new graduate registered nurse salary as of January 2023 ranges from \$60,566 to \$77,184 (Salary.com). Survey respondents also reported that a number of nurse faculty vacancies were created by faculty leaving for higher-paying clinical positions. It is difficult to justify why nursing faculty with years of clinical experience and higher educational preparation are being paid less than new graduate nurses. Some of the challenges in creating pay equity for nurse faculty lie within the academic environment, which does not consistently recognize and reward the clinical experience of nursing faculty. Salary range may also be limited by collective bargaining agreements and/or college policies that establish standard pay rates for all faculty, regardless of discipline.

##### Recommendation 2: Create Supportive Work Environments for Nursing Faculty

Transitioning from the role of a clinical expert to a novice educator can be challenging. Creating a supportive work environment should include elements such as a structured orientation process, mentoring, and support for professional development. As noted in the survey results, 57% of survey respondents shared that the years of experience as faculty held by members of their team was 7 years or less, with nearly one in three faculty having less than three years of teaching experience. Additionally, only 12% of nursing faculty in the surveyed institutions possess a terminal degree in nursing. As noted

**Table 3**  
What Factors Incentivize You to Stay in Your Position?

Flexibility	Quality of Life	Rewards of Teaching	Work/Life Balance	9–10 Month Annual Contract	Autonomy/Academic Freedom	Balance Between Practice and Academic Roles
71%	63%	60%	51%	35%	41%	31%

in the seminal work *From Novice to Expert* (Benner, 1984), it takes approximately five years for nurses to move through the stages from novice to expert in a new role. Providing support to faculty for professional development and educational advancement is imperative to retaining qualified nurses in the academic setting.

#### *Recommendation 3: Pay Attention to Workload*

Nurse administrators should pay careful attention to balancing the workload for nurse faculty. This research illustrates that there is an expansion of workload for nursing faculty, some of which is uncompensated. This can include managing clinical partner relationships, supply management, and lab coordination. Candela et al.'s study (2015) of BSN faculty highlighted the need for faculty to have adequate time to create, implement, and appraise the effectiveness of their teaching and noted that typical workload calculations do not account for this necessary work. Higher job satisfaction and increased faculty retention may be higher when faculty have input into the development of equitable workload formulas (Ludwig-Beymer et al., 2022).

#### *Recommendation 4: Support Nurse Faculty Mentoring Programs*

Nursing literature has extensive examples of how faculty mentoring programs can support the retention of new faculty. Mentoring novice faculty is recommended to help facilitate role transition from clinician to academician by decreasing role ambiguity and role conflict (Grassley et al., 2020; Specht, 2013). Having a structured mentoring program where novice faculty are paired with experienced faculty provides coaching, information, guidance, and encouragement (Roughton, 2013). Part-time clinical faculty need a designated mentor to share guidance on the curriculum, syllabi, and evaluation processes so that they feel supported in their role (McPherson, 2019). While novice faculty can certainly benefit from mentoring programs, there are benefits for the faculty mentor as well. In a study by Swanson et al. (2017), mentors from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Scholars Program reported feeling affirmed in their roles through the joy and meaning found during the experience, the opportunity to network at the national level, and through the knowledge they gained by participating in a structured program.

#### *Recommendation 5: Initiate Measures to Address Incivility and Student Demands*

Attention should be paid to preventing incivility in all relationships, faculty to faculty and student to faculty. A descriptive study by (McGee, 2020) reported that incivility among nursing faculty may be widespread and contributing to an increase in nursing faculty who intend to leave their position. Of note, incivility by program administrators was also identified as a problem; as well as the negative impact of the failure of administrators to address nurse faculty incivility. The role of the academic nurse leader explored by Hudgins et al. (2022) linked negative academic nurse leader behaviors with an increase in nurse faculty intent to leave. Specific behaviors were identified as toxic, such as micromanaging, unequal treatment, and failure to communicate with faculty (Hudgins et al., 2022). Nurse leaders are encouraged to pay special attention to the workplace culture to assess and address incivility between or toward faculty.

Additionally, attention should be paid to perceived incivility from students toward faculty and the impact it has on faculty retention and intent to leave the profession. In a study by Frisbee et al. (2019), nursing faculty responded to a survey utilizing the Workplace Incivility Scale-revised and reported perceived incivility from students higher than incivility from administrators or other faculty. Eighteen percent of the respondents in the live presentation of data reported

that workplace violence and incivility would lead a faculty member to leave the profession, 18% of respondents noted. Concerns related to student incivility and demands in academia were reported by 23.5% of the participants. To address perceived incivility in academia, the literature recommends that organizations develop strategies to foster a culture of civility while supporting nursing faculty in developing skills to diffuse situations (Abedini et al., 2023; Frisbee et al., 2019; Hyun et al., 2022).

#### **Limitations**

The study was limited by the convenience sampling method which may have inadvertently omitted associate degree programs from the population. Another limitation was the variability in how different nursing education programs describe workload.

#### **Conclusion**

This study addresses the gap in research specific to associate degree nursing education programs with respect to faculty and staffing. While this may limit generalizability to all academic settings, there are many common elements within nursing education that may permit the application of these findings across academic settings. Specific recommendations are presented for consideration by those responsible for the administration of nursing education programs.

This research project was determined to be Human Subjects Protection exempt by the Institutional Review Board of Western Governors University.

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This manuscript is not currently under review by another publication, will not be sent to any other publishers while it is under review by JNR, and has not been previously published elsewhere.

#### **Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors do not have any financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence their work.

#### **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Elizabeth Mizerek:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Jennifer Fritzges:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Kimberly Mau:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Linda Perfetto:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

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