

ASCEND: Enhancing Nurse Workforce Diversity Through a Nurse Technician Internship Program



American Organization
for Nursing Leadership

Lisa Aurilio, MSN, MBA, RN, NEA-BC,
Nancy Mosca, PhD, RN-BC, PNP-BC, PHCNS-BC, and
Megan Dorrington, MSN, MBA, RN-BC, CPN

Akron Children's Hospital in Ohio is dedicated to advancing nursing workforce diversity through the creation of a recruitment and retention program called Assuring Success with a Commitment to Enhance Nurse Diversity (ASCEND). The hospital was recognized for this effort as a recipient of American Organization for Nursing Leadership's (AONL) 2019 Prism Diversity Award. This article describes how the ASCEND program provides a mechanism for strategic recruitment of racial, ethnic, and gender diverse nurses.

I ncreasing racial and ethnic diversity of the nursing workforce is essential for adequate provision of culturally competent care to address the growing diverse US population. A diverse nursing workforce will improve patient-provider communication, tolerance, trust, and decision making, leading to expanded health care access for the underserved and improved quality outcomes.¹ An effort to increase enrollment and successfully graduate minority nursing students is a priority, as nursing leaders recognize the connection between a culturally diverse nursing workforce and the ability to provide quality, culturally competent patient care.² Despite modest gains in ethnic and minority representation in nursing, in many practice settings the current workforce does not mirror community populations.³ AONL's *Guiding Principles for Diversity in Health Care Organizations* stresses that creating healthy work environments through a commitment to inclusivity, tolerance, and governance structures is essential to improving the health of patients and communities served.⁴ Health care organizations face the challenge of establishing effective recruitment programs to increase nursing workforce diversity while fostering an inclusive and welcoming culture.

In northeast Ohio, the population served by Akron Children's Hospital is 74% white, whereas the racial distribution of Akron Children's nursing workforce is 97% white, with African American registered nurses (RNs) being the next largest racial group, representing 1.3% of the RN workforce. Statewide, Ohio's nursing

workforce is 90% white and 6% African American, and nationally, the RN workforce is 75% white and 10% African American.^{5,6} Gender diversity at the hospital also fell short of reflecting the state and national RN workforce, with men representing just under 4% of Akron Children's workforce compared with 9% statewide and 9% nationally.⁶

CNO VISION

Guided by a single operational tenet of the hospital's strategic plan, to "recruit and retain a highly competent, diverse, and engaged work force," the chief nursing officer (CNO) commissioned a workgroup to explore nursing workforce diversity and make recommendations for an action plan. Using a shared governance platform, the workgroup was chaired by the professional development council's quality advisor and had representation from nursing and human resources. A summary of nurse workforce diversity at the hospital and recommendations for an action plan were delivered to the core council, a governing council composed of all shared governance council leaders and the CNO. One short term strategy presented was a recommendation to restructure the current nurse technician program, targeting ethnic and racially diverse student nurse candidates. With approval from the core council, a new nurse technician program was formed, renamed Assuring Success with a Commitment to Enhance Nurse Diversity (ASCEND).

Before the program's initiation, the CNO embarked on a plan to address a culture change for

Table 1. Nurse Technician and ASCEND Program Expense Comparison

Expenses		Nurse Technician Program Expenses		ASCEND Program Budgeted Expenses
<i>Student nurse ASCEND intern summer stipend</i>			24 interns × \$5,000	\$120,000
<i>Nurse technician wages</i>	30 techs per year	\$269,120	24 techs (post ASCEND) per year	\$96,000
<i>Nurse diversity project/program coordinator</i>			135 Nurse Hours	\$4,220
<i>Total staff/people expense</i>		\$269,120		\$220,220
<i>Recruitment expense-initial</i>		\$0		\$6,000
<i>Onboarding</i>	30 techs	\$1,880	24 techs (post ASCEND)	\$1,440
<i>Education supplies</i>		\$0		\$8,000
<i>Apparel</i>		\$0		\$1,000
<i>Award ceremony</i>		\$0		\$2,500
<i>Total supplies expense</i>		\$1,880		\$18,940
<i>Grand total</i>		\$271,000		\$239,160

nurse leaders in recruiting nursing students for nurse tech positions. Cultural competence training and education for nurse leaders and shared governance councils ensued. In an effort to gain acceptance and program success, open forums with nurse leaders and similar dialogs at unit staff meetings preceded the summer 2015 launch of ASCEND.

IMPLEMENTATION

ASCEND provides clinical internship and professional development to rising senior baccalaureate nursing students who belong to underrepresented groups in the nursing profession. These groups include African American, Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Indian, mixed heritage, men, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities.

Eligible students complete an application that includes writing a personal statement describing health care topics of interest, career goals, and any involvement in special projects or experiences. A second essay is required describing the student's biggest challenge or barrier encountered while in nursing school. Students submit 2 letters of recommendation, 1 from a clinical instructor addressing clinical performance and skills, and the other from a nonrelative (mentor, pastor, employer, etc.) addressing the student's character and work ethic. Students also submit official transcripts to be considered for the program.

Applications are first reviewed by academic faculty. Candidates submitted by the schools are then interviewed by the ASCEND program coordinator and others for final selection in the program.

Selected ASCEND candidates, who receive a stipend, complete a 10-week internship, working full-time hours paired with a mentor on a clinical unit and attend sessions focusing on professional development. Session topics include professionalism, pediatric and health care nurse role exploration, communication skills, teamwork, clinical practice policies, family-centered care delivery model, cultural competence, interview skills, and resume development. ASCEND interns also connect with current middle and high school students during a community outreach project, focusing on the program's long-term initiative to attract diverse health care workers.

The ASCEND program focuses on teamwork, communication skills, therapeutic relationship skills, family-centered care, and professional development. Nurse mentors expose interns to the unit culture, providing a welcoming environment to ask questions. They also support interns' development of clinical reasoning and critical thinking skills. The 10-week internship allows students to experience the organization while being evaluated for potential future employment. ASCEND interns receive evaluation on demonstrated characteristics and qualities valued by

Table 2. ASCEND Program Outcomes

	No. of ASCEND Interns	No. of Nurse Techs Hired	No. of RNs Hired	Overall RN Retention Rate as of August 26, 2019
2015	19	15	10	70%
2016	21	17	13	85%
2017	20	20	15	100%
2018	24 ^a	23	18 ^b	100%
2019	24	23	TBD	TBD
Overall	108	75	56 ^b	91%

^aOne intern unable to complete the program.

^bDelayed graduation, additional potential hires in 2020.

the organization for its employees, such as a positive attitude, willingness to learn, and ability to provide safe patient care.

Interns who successfully demonstrate those qualities and characteristics are offered employment as nurse technicians during their senior year of nursing school. The program coordinator stays connected with nurse technicians during that time period through rounding opportunities on patient care units. Licensure exam study tips and transition to practice information are provided at key points during the students' senior year.

FUNDING

Before fiscal year 2015, organizational costs for nurse technician program averaged \$271,000 annually. The proposed restructuring of the nurse technician program to the ASCEND program needed to be fiscally neutral for the organization. When comparing organizational costs of the former nurse technician program, the proposed 2015 ASCEND budget of \$239,160 projected a cost savings of approximately \$31,840. Actual 2015 program expenses equaled \$168,600, leading to an organizational savings of approximately \$102,400. Some of this can be attributed to the actual versus projected enrollment numbers. Specific expense breakdown information is further detailed in [Table 1](#).

ASCEND program benefits include intern enculturation and inclusion as members of the care team provide patient and family-centered care. Former ASCEND interns complete nurse technician orientation in less time than previous new hires. Internal evaluation and hiring processes have been developed to support future placement of ASCEND interns as RNs. Nursing leaders complete evaluation processes during the ASCEND internship while nursing students work as nurse technicians. These evaluation processes provide rationale to support or deny future employment

within the organization leading to a potential decrease in future RN voluntary or involuntary terminations.

OUTCOMES

Since 2015, 108 nursing students have completed the ASCEND program. Fifty-six ASCEND interns from the first four cohorts have been hired as RNs with a 91% retention rate. Additional interns from the fourth cohort will be hired upon graduation from nursing school. One hundred percent of the 2017 (third) and 2018 (fourth) cohorts were retained as nurse technicians after completion of the summer internship.

The 2019 (fifth) cohort graduated 24 interns from the ASCEND program with a 96% recruitment rate as nurse technicians. Evaluation of these new employees will occur throughout their senior year of nursing school and potential RN positions will be offered to those exhibiting characteristics looked for in future nurse employees. See outcomes in [Table 2](#).

ASCEND interns hired as RNs are from underrepresented groups in nursing, including African American,

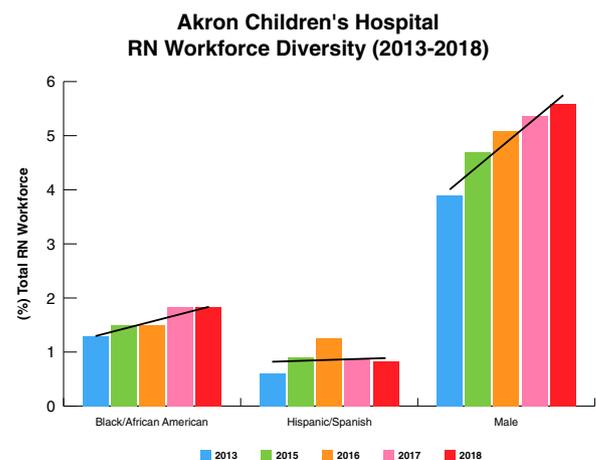


Figure 1. Akron Children's Hospital RN Workforce Diversity.



Theausia Holiday, an ASCEND Intern, gains experiences that will help her springboard into a nursing career.

Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern backgrounds and mixed heritage, male, and first-generation college students. These new hires represent approximately 1% of the total nursing workforce at the hospital, yielding small incremental changes in diversity and gender demographics. Akron Children's largest increase is in the percentage of male nurses, as reflected in [Figure 1](#).

KeyBank Foundation, Cleveland, Ohio, values diversity and inclusion and chooses to support community organizations with similar values. Since the initiation of the ASCEND program in 2015, the Foundation has provided generous financial support totaling over \$1 million in grants designated to support efforts to recruit and retain a multicultural workforce with the ASCEND program through 2022.

Assuring a future pipeline of racially and ethnically diverse nurses is essential to ensure the provision of culturally competent care into the future. The ASCEND program is one example of a hospital's recruitment strategy established to increase nursing workforce diversity while fostering an inclusive, open, and welcoming culture. Developed through reallocation of existing financial resources, the program welcomes and supports diverse nursing students through a

10-week summer internship opportunity. Results of the ASCEND program in increasing workforce diversity are steady and promising. The program's impact on improvements in culturally competent care has yet to be determined.

REFERENCES

1. Williamson SD, Hansen K, Smithey M, et al. Using social determinants of health to link health workforce diversity, care quality and access, and health disparities to achieve health equity in nursing. *Public Health Rep.* 2014;129(Suppl 2):32-26.
2. American Association of Colleges of Nursing. Enhancing diversity in the workforce. <https://www.aacnursing.org/News-Information/Fact-Sheets/Enhancing-Diversity>. Fact sheet. Accessed August 24, 2019.
3. National State Boards of Nursing. Registered nurse results. *Journal of Nursing Regulation.* 2016;7(1):S12-S53.
4. American Organization of Nurse Executives. *Guiding Principles for Diversity in Health Care Organizations*. Chicago: American Organization of Nurse Executives; 2011.
5. Ohio Workforce Data Summary Report. Ohio Board of Nursing. http://www.nursing.ohio.gov/PDFS/Workforce/2017RN/Ohio_2017_RN_Workforce_Data_Summary_Report.pdf. Accessed August 24, 2019.
6. Health Resources and Services Administration Bureau of Health Professions. The U.S. Nursing Workforce: Trends in Supply and Education. <https://bhwh.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bhwh/nchwa/projections/nursingworkforcetrendsoc2013.pdf>. Accessed August 24, 2019.

Lisa Aurilio, MSN, MBA, RN, NEA-BC, is chief operating officer, Akron Children's Hospital, Akron, Ohio. She can be reached at aurilio@akronchildrens.org. Nancy Mosca, PhD, RN-BC, PNP-BC, PHCNS-BC, is nursing director, Center of Nursing Professional Practice, Akron Children's Hospital, Akron, Ohio. Megan Dorrington, MSN, MBA, RN-BC, CPN, is ASCEND program coordinator and education coordinator, Akron Children's Hospital, Akron, Ohio.

1541-4612/2019/\$ See front matter
Copyright 2019 American Organization for Nursing Leadership.
Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2019.10.005>