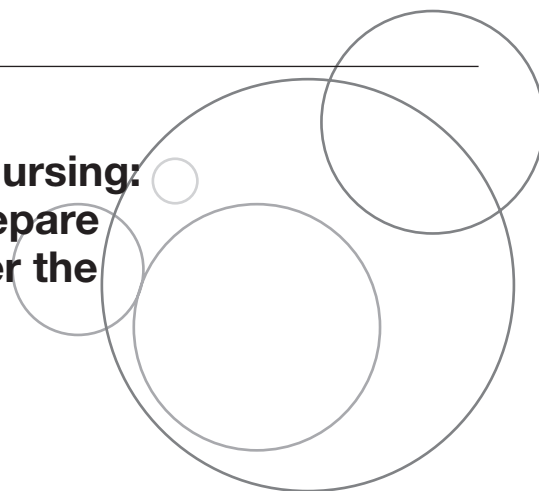


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## New Paths to Professional Nursing: Using Encouragement to Prepare a Minority Workforce to Enter the Nursing Profession

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The current professional nursing workforce in the United States is predominantly White and female, even though minorities compose 33% of the national population (Travers, Smaldone, & Cohn, 2015). Minority patients are more effectively cared for when their particular cultural milieu is taken into consideration as part of their health care plan (Sullivan, 2004). According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), health care quality remains suboptimal for diverse populations in the United States because some individuals do not receive quality care or do not believe their values are honored or respected (AHRQ, 2016). Minority professional nurses are necessary to address the racial and ethnic disparities in health care. Robert Wood Johnson Barnabas Health (RWJBH), in collaboration with Rutgers University School of Nursing (RUSON), implemented New Paths to Professional Nursing (NPPN) to increase the number of minority professional nurses in practice at RWJBH. The program provided financial resources as well as infrastructural, group, and personal support for RWJBH minority employees who desired to complete prerequisites to enter RUSON. The academic success of the employees who participated in NPPN was attributed to a unique combination of financial assistance and support and encouragement. The purpose of this article is to describe in detail the development of the program and the effective encouragement strategies that have led to success for NPPN minority student/employees. This article examines, defines, and illustrates particular types of effective encouragement and suggests that this encouragement was the key to success for the NPPN minority students.

**Keywords:** minority nurses; encouragement; paraprofessionals

**T**he New Paths to Professional Nursing (NPPN) program at Robert Wood Johnson Barnabas Health (RWJBH) was initiated to support first line minority health care workers who desired to become nurses and to serve the needs of a growing minority patient population. Although financial support was a beneficial component, the role of encouragement was found to be more valuable than just funding alone.



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## PREPARING MINORITIES FOR NURSING TO SERVE A GROWING MINORITY POPULATION

The number of minority professional nurses has not increased to serve the growing number of minority patients. Registered nurses (RN) who identify themselves as a minority (Blacks, Hispanics, American Indian/Alaska Natives, Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and Asians) currently make up an estimated 16.8% of the workforce. At the same time, minorities nationwide represent over 33% of the U.S. population (Travers et al., 2015). Researchers have found that having a diverse work force can influence the quality of health care of patients (Sullivan, 2004).

Racial and ethnic diversity in the health care workforce has profound implications for the U.S. health care system. Increasing diversity in the health care professions will improve health care access and quality for minority patients and assure a sound health care system for all of our nation's citizens. It will also strengthen health care delivery systems at multiple levels, enhance educational experiences for all health professions students, and promote relevant research and needed changes in health policy (Valentine, Wynn, & McLean, 2016).

Nurses are the largest group of professionals in health care and "... may be in the best position to meet the diverse needs of the patients they serve, thereby contributing to reductions in health disparities" (Travers et al., 2015, p. 115). This suggests that both improved quality of care for minority patients and reduced health disparities for minority patients are correlated with care delivered by minority nurses. Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN)-prepared minority professionals have the potential to improve patient outcomes and, to a larger extent, support overall structural cultural competence within health care organizations (Sullivan, 2004). High-quality health care delivery depends not only on innovative research and exemplary practice but also on continuing diversification of the professional health care work force.

It is essential that minorities who show an interest in pursuing a career as professional nurses not only be encouraged to do so but also be given every opportunity to complete their education. Although minorities are represented in health care as paraprofessionals (nursing assistants, laboratory technicians, medical assistants, unit clerks, etc.), they often may not have the resources or the encouragement to obtain a professional nursing degree. A variety of strategies to help recruit and retain minority individuals into the nursing profession are discussed in the literature, such as academic and financial support, community partnerships, and mentorship in the workplace (Dapremont, 2013). Social support from peers has also been found to be highly beneficial for the retention of minority nursing students (Fletcher et al., 2003). Successful recruitment and retention of minority nursing students is also beneficial for minority nursing faculty. Fletcher et al. (2003) found that when enrollment of minority nursing students increased, so did the number of minority nursing faculty.

## CHALLENGES CONFRONTED BY MINORITY STUDENTS

Minorities who wish to obtain a professional degree face unique challenges, because few of them come from families or communities that advocate or support higher education (Sullivan, 2004). The academic needs of minority college students who are first-generation college students are different from the needs of students who come from families who are college educated and are accustomed to hearing stories from parents and grandparents about navigating college life. Without the



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advantage of these early familial exposures, first-generation students typically require more adaptive support (Sullivan, 2004, p. 76).

Minority students may lack funds to pay for their education. They may not know members of their communities who have modeled successful completion of a professional degree. These students must deal with the unfamiliarity of standardized testing, admission committees with little or no minority representation, and daunting institutional climates (Sullivan, 2004). Phillips and Malone (2014) suggested that, similar to the lack of minority nurses in the workforce, the number of minorities that have been enrolling in nursing school is not adequate to meet the needs of the diversifying population.

To address these challenges, New Jersey Health Initiatives (NJHI), in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, funded a program to assist a selected group of minority paraprofessionals employed at RWJBH in completing the prerequisites for a BSN degree from Rutgers University School of Nursing (RUSON). The program developers anticipated that the employees would be unable to draw from traditional sources of funding and emotional motivation, so they built in financial resources and also support through various methods of encouragement. Assistance both measurable (collaboration between RWJBH and RUSON and financial support) and less measurable (support from senior administration, program staff, and personal coaching) was included to aid the employees through this academic experience.

## NEW PATHS TO PROFESSIONAL NURSING

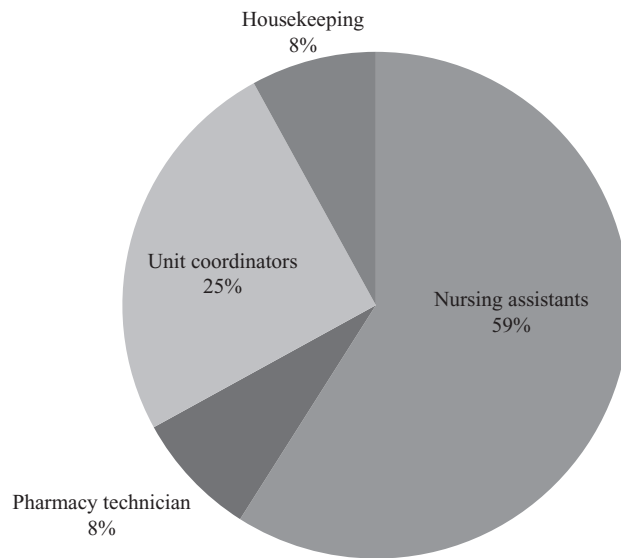
To address the unique needs of the minority RWJBH employees who desired to become professional nurses, a collaborative team from the Center for Professional Development, Innovation and Research at RWJBH and RUSON was established. This group met to discuss ways to enhance minority employees' opportunities to obtain BSN degrees. The team applied for and received a grant from the NJHI to develop and implement a program to empower minority paraprofessional employees to complete their prerequisites for admission to RUSON. The program was called New Paths to Professional Nursing (NPPN).

### Conceptual Framework

To illustrate how encouragement was used in the NPPN program, the conceptual framework of encouragement theory by Wong (2015) was selected. The conceptual model outlined in this theory, known as the tripartite encouragement model (TEM), contains three main facets of encouragement: Facet 1, foci of encouragement; Facet 2, features of effective encouragement; and Facet 3, levels of encouragement (Wong, 2015, p. 191). The TEM provides structure and ventures to quantify the significance of support and demonstrates three levels of support given to each NPPN student: infrastructural support, group support, and personal coaching support.

### Selection Process

Following notification of the grant award, the program team issued a call for applications from all interested and qualified RWJBH employees. In response, over 90 applications were received. Application review and personal interviews



**Figure 1. Employment positions held by NNP participants.**

narrowed the list to 12 employees selected to participate in the grant program. Because of funding limitations, financial support was provided for eight employees; the other four were placed on a waiting list but were given access to all other resources.

The selected group had a variety of personal and educational backgrounds, academic experience, and work environments (Figure 1). They were employed as clinical care technicians (nursing assistants), housekeepers, pharmacy technicians, and unit coordinators.

Once selected, the NPPN participants signed a document (Figure 2) which outlined an agreement to abide by the guidelines of the program, including completing all prerequisites within two years.

### Infrastructural Support

The NPPN team consisted of representatives from both RWJBH and RUSON. These included nursing leadership, hospital and university administrators, a nursing education director and specialist, a human resources recruiter, a manager of the medical library, and a staff nurse who was also the academic tutor. This latter role proved to be a crucial component of the program.

The initiation of NPPN was met with support from senior nursing administration, RWJBH staff nurses, and RUSON administration and employees. The students met as a group with the RWJBH senior vice president and chief nursing officer and staff from the NJHI and had a chance to verbalize not only their desire to become nurses but also their personal journeys and struggles to achieve this goal. They were assured that both RWJBH and RUSON would provide any assistance available. In addition, each student was assigned a staff nurse who had completed the highest level on the clinical ladder to serve as a mentor. Students who needed their work schedules adjusted to attend classes or NPPN meetings were given flexibility and assistance by their departmental directors. Another method of providing encouragement to each student was showcased by RWJBH through a

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### New Paths to Professional Nursing Program Agreement

Dear Program Participant,

Congratulations! You have been accepted to participate in the New Paths to Professional Nursing (NPPN) program. We look forward to working with you and seeing you develop into expert nurses.

With your commitment to this program you should understand some very important parameters of the NPPN. These requirements are **mandatory**. Please review the following and sign on the line below if you are in agreement to the following:

- Register and attend at least one approved college course each semester during the academic year, toward the fulfillment of prerequisites to enter Rutgers School of Nursing choice beginning Fall 2014.
- Maintain exceptional attendance at all classes and be punctual.
- Maintain active registration in an approved course through July 2016.
- Maintain an overall 3.3 (B) GPA average.
- Submit a copy of your official transcript to the Academic Tutor at the end of each semester.
- Remain a full-time or part-time employee at RWJBH while in the NPPN program.
- Attend all scheduled NPPN monthly meetings. A no call no show will count as an unexcused absence. Attendance is mandatory and punctuality is expected.
- Attend all scheduled 1:1 meetings with the Academic Tutor.
- Communicate regularly with Academic Tutor by either email, text or phone.
- Complete all prerequisites needed by Summer 2016.
- In order to receive reimbursement for approved academic expenses, submit all original receipts of any eligible expenses to the Academic Tutor within 30 days from when they occurred.
- Be willing to apply to Rutgers, School of Nursing for entry into the Fall 2016 semester.

**Failure to comply with any of the above requirements will result in immediate removal from participating in the program.**

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Assistant Vice President: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Tutor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 2. New Paths to Professional Nursing program agreement.**

commitment to employ each student as an RN upon successful completion of their studies and the licensure examination.

Further infrastructural support was provided when RUSON agreed to house the monthly NPPN meetings in the same building the students would be using for nursing courses. RUSON also offered invaluable ongoing assessments of each student's transcripts and provided access to university staff who tracked student transcripts and made certain each student was making satisfactory progress toward the completion of the prerequisites for the BSN program. Both the hospital and the university were invested in the success of the program and sought to provide a strong, effective culture of encouragement as suggested by Wong (2015). The organization-wide support provided encouragement for each student to achieve because they could see that the hospital and the university were rooting for them and were invested in their personal goals and growth.



In addition to encouragement and mentor resources, each of the eight students was reimbursed by RWJBH for tuition costs (\$5,000 per year for full-time employees), and the remaining costs (books, academic fees, supplies, parking, printing, tutoring, and any other costs related to their education) were covered by the NPPN grant. RUSON also purchased an electronic tablet for each of the students to assist them in their studies.

The students were also supported through RWJBH interdepartmental collaboration. For example, when a student did not receive the tuition reimbursement in time to pay her or his term bill, the human resources recruiter was able to intervene and issue an emergency check. The four students on the waiting list were provided all the encouragement and mentor resources but not the extra funding provided through the NPPN grant; they received books from the medical library manager, who ordered them free of charge, and were also able to access texts on a loan basis.

### Group Support

By the fall semester of 2014, the students were taking courses toward completion of the required prerequisites. Each month, they met as a group along with the academic tutor and a staff member of the RUSON Center for Academic Success. During the hour lunch meetings, they were presented with information about strategies for academic success. Topics included:

- Test-taking skills
- Time management
- Taking notes
- Preparing to study
- How to study
- When to ask for help
- Changing expectations
- Rewards for success

Valuable information on navigating academic institutions and maintaining grade point averages was provided. Most important, the students were given emotional support and opportunities to vent and to offer each other peer support. Students shared tips on interacting with professors, study skills, juggling classes and work, family pressures, and shared messages of endurance and resolution. Almost every meeting was highly emotional—tears and hugs were exchanged. The emotional strength and fortitude gained from the group meetings became so essential that some students wanted to continue to meet after the grant had concluded. Students demonstrated what Wong (2015) describes as potential-focused encouragement to each other. It “underscore[d] the notion that encouragement is relevant not only when individuals encounter challenging situations but also when the encourager’s focus is on nurturing the recipient’s personal development” (Wong, 2015, p. 192). The students recognized their shared experience and provided uniquely crafted encouragement to foster advancement. Other group support was evidenced during end-of-semester dinners in which students met to relax, converse, and rejoice in the short-term personal and academic goals they had achieved.

An example of potential-focused encouragement (Wong, 2015) occurred during the dinner held after the end of the first academic year. Students invited

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*Wong's tripartite encouragement model provides structure and ventures to quantify the significance of support and demonstrates three levels of support given to each student: infrastructural support, group support, and personal coaching support.*

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family and friends who had been supportive to them. During the dinner, the students were publically supported by staff and their own family members. They were given a chance to express personal sentiments. Instead of generic or nonspecific praise, they received encouragement that was relevant and personal to them. For example, "I was impressed because no matter how difficult the material and how late the hour, she persisted and attacked the task with same energy and drive that will benefit her when she is a nurse." "He has faced many challenges and has handled each one of them with a quiet strength while maintaining his academic excellence." "She is an inspiration because she overcame past negative influences and every day proves her former high school teacher wrong." For each student, the act of encouragement always had a present or future orientation. Group meetings and dinners provided validation as described by Wong (2015) and benefitted not only the students but also their families and friends.

### Personal Coaching Support

Every month, each student met one-to-one with the academic tutor. These meetings were scheduled around the student's work and academic schedule and often occurred during evening or late night hours. The academic tutor was a staff nurse who drew from past experience as a former nursing student and past familiarity managing small groups to assist the students. She also used her knowledge as a university instructor to provide sound academic advice. The academic tutor was paid an hourly wage for her work with the students.

The most critical factor pertaining to the academic tutor's schedule was that of flexibility. This allowed the students to feel free to call, email, and text at any hour with issues, problems, questions, news, or simply to express frustrations or accomplishments. A social media website was created to post information, pictures, and inspiring posts. It became quite evident that although the financial support was helpful and greatly appreciated, the personal contact and conversations provided the most inspiration and encouragement. During the personal meetings, students expressed self-doubt, fear, frustration, lack of self-worth, despair, and anger at past negative messages. The trusting relationship between the academic tutor and the students flourished. Trust was essential to their success, as the majority of time in personal communication was spent in validating and instilling hope. The development of this connection was a necessary foundation for establishing a trust relationship that enabled the students to be receptive to the academic tutor's encouragement and advice (Wong, 2015). The act of creating a bond or friendship provided encouragement that was perceived as trustworthy and believable. Taking time to grow a relationship allowed the academic tutor to understand each student's self-perceptions and to use that information to carefully calibrate and provide messages of encouragement during the coaching process (Wong, 2015). In a fairly short time, the academic tutor enabled the students to exchange past negative messages with those of joy, self-admiration, independence, fortitude, and a belief in their own abilities to succeed.

It was clear that each student had struggled with very particular past challenges, and continued to have personal issues that threatened their success and the achievement of their goal. Some had been teenage mothers and still struggled with balancing raising children, working, and academics. Others didn't have children but worked to support their families while attending classes. Some had performed poorly in college as youths. All but two of the students struggled with the 2-year

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*Robert Wood  
Johnson  
Barnabas  
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showcased  
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of the students  
as an RN upon  
successful  
completion of  
their studies and  
the licensure  
examination.*

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time frame for completing the prerequisites. Even though many of them had prior college credits, it was challenging to fit in all the required courses and accommodate work and family schedules. Time and life pressures were intense and proved to be overwhelming for some. Despite the best efforts to inspire and encourage the students to persevere, 5 of the 12 selected students were unable to continue because of undue pressure that arose from the complications of maintaining their obligations.

## STUDENT CHALLENGES AND PERCEPTIONS

By June 2016, at the conclusion of NPPN, seven students were enrolled in the RUSON BSN. Those who were not successful had other demands and pressures that prevented them from completing the program. As a result of this program, RWJBH projects that several new minority nurse professionals will contribute to the minority nurse workforce.

The role of encouragement through infrastructural support, group support, and personal support contributed to the students' success. Many of them had failed during prior attempts at higher education; some had families that were unsupportive of long-term goals such as a college education. Others had been unable to overcome negative messages and experiences from high school or prior college courses. To overcome these emotional barriers and blocks, encouragement was the factor that allowed the students to achieve more than they believed they could accomplish.

The financial support and structure provided by NPPN was helpful. However, beyond the benefits of the financial support, the role of the academic tutor proved to be the most pivotal factor in ensuring student's academic success. If encouragement could be perceived as a bank or a fund, then the students used the entire "bank" of encouragement—whether it was provided in the form of infrastructural support, group support, or personal support.

## INTERVENTIONS AND ADDRESSING STUDENT CHALLENGES

One of the main challenges of the program was the rigid timetable of 24 months to complete the prerequisites. This parameter by itself was a major factor in students' inability to complete the program. On the other hand, two of the students finished the prerequisites in just 12 months. A recommendation would be for a more flexible timetable, perhaps 12–36 months.

By the end of the second semester, it became clear that those students who entered the program with some college experience performed better. Courses such as anatomy and physiology, chemistry, microbiology, and advanced writing were difficult for those who had not taken college courses before. The rigid timetable also made it difficult to spread out these challenging courses for better performance.

Another practice which was found to be helpful was the transcript evaluation by RUSON. This would have also been helpful during the selection process by narrowing the list to those who had already accrued enough college credits to finish the needed courses in 24 months.

Another challenge was the students' limited financial resources. They were required to pay for their academic needs and then submit receipts for reimbursement. The wait time of 3–4 weeks for checks to be issued caused an interruption in their short-term cash flow. A possible solution would be to require each student to obtain a credit card to be used only for academic expenses, which would be paid in full each month as reimbursement checks were issued in 3–4 weeks.

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*Students demonstrated potential-focused encouragement to each other, recognizing their shared experience and providing uniquely crafted encouragement to foster advancement. Taking time to grow a relationship allowed the academic tutor to understand each student's self-perceptions and to use that information to carefully calibrate and provide messages of encouragement during the coaching process.*

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Because of the success of this program, the RWJBH administration has decided to continue a very similar program to support paraprofessionals on their journey to becoming RNs. Despite the grant program ending, the hospital will continue to support the academic tutor's salary. Although financial support for tuition and expenses is helpful, it is critical that employees who wish to improve their quality of life are given the logistical and social support to do so. This program will benefit future students and their families and will have a lasting impact on the lives of future generations.

## OUTCOMES

RWJBH's decision to sustain a program similar to NPPN will allow other minority employees to realize their potential and fulfill their desire to become professional nurses. RWJBH recognizes that the U.S. nursing workforce continues to be predominantly White (Villarruel, Washington, Lecher, & Carver, 2015); the hospital will continue to collaborate with academic partners to address this imbalance and to contribute toward meeting the unique health care needs of the community.

In conclusion, it should be recognized that that the NPPN program could be a prototype for other organizations and companies that would like to provide a way for their employees to pursue higher education, career advancement, and an overall improved quality of life. This program proved that providing financial assistance combined with emotional support and encouragement was of greatest benefit to employees desiring to achieve their dreams of completing their higher educational goals.

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