

Arizona State Board of Nursing Summary of NCLEX® Board Meeting October 3, 2002

Background

The Arizona State Board of Nursing noted that Arizona NCLEX-RN first time pass rates declined below the national average in 2001. This is the first time in the past 9 years that the state first time pass rate dipped below the national rate. In past years, the Arizona first time pass rate was well above the national average. In 2001, several programs posted pass rates below 70%, while some programs increased their pass rates or maintained rates above 90%. The Board expressed concern about the issue and requested that all Arizona nursing programs attend a special Board meeting on October 3, 2002. Before the meeting, the programs were requested to submit a document addressing the following:

1. Five reasons for a lower than 90% pass rate in your program
2. Five strategies your program will implement to increase the pass rate to 90% or higher.
3. A profile of the successful NCLEX candidate.
4. A profile of the unsuccessful candidate.

If a program had attained a 90% pass rate, the questions were modified to address strategies that the program utilized to attain and sustain the pass rate. All but one program sent a written report. All programs delivered an oral report at the meeting.

Overview

It was noted during the introduction of the topic by the Board Consultant that no program achieved a 90% pass rate consistently for the past 9 years. It was also noted that during 2001, over half the programs in the state participated in multi-system curriculum change. Data from National Council of State Boards of Nursing was presented showing that English as a Second Language (ESL) and ethnicity affected pass rates. ESL candidates also took longer per item to test, had lowered pass rates, and answered more items. The ethnic group with the highest pass rate was whites. All other ethnic groups had pass rates at 10% or more below the white group. During the initial part of the session, Dr. Casey Marks, Director of Testing for the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, was present via teleconferencing to answer questions. Dr. Marks informed the group that the Exam Committee was studying the issue of test time allotted to candidates to see if a modification was needed. Dr. Marks also encouraged programs to continue to refine the curriculum to meet the evolving health care needs of clients.

Reasons for decreased pass rate

Academic Preparation

Many programs noted that students are not academically prepared for the rigors of a nursing program. Some programs noted that passing prerequisite courses is not an adequate measure of student competence in the subject area. One program noted that some students who passed college algebra tested at “less than junior high” level in math

on standardized testing. It was noted that the math department in the particular college did not require that students to actually calculate the correct answer to the problem, but gave credit for attempting the problem. Other programs noted that many students passing college level English courses had very low reading comprehension skills. Some programs were able to correlate poor reading comprehension skills to NCLEX failure.

Curriculum

Several programs that experienced curricular change noted that they lost sight of NCLEX in the change and did not map the curricular content to the NCLEX test plan. Faculty involved in constant curricular changes and revisions were noted to have little attention to give to students. Content on the test plan was dropped, inadvertently, by some of these programs.

Student Support

Nearly all programs cited student stress and lack of support as a factor. Many students had to work long hours during the program. Interestingly, many programs did not cite the working itself as a significant factor, but the amount of support the student received from family and friends as crucial. Stressors for students were financial, relationships, and multiple roles they were expected to fulfill.

Faculty

All programs reported difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified faculty. It was noted by several programs that masters nursing education does not prepare graduates for teaching. Many programs have hired faculty prepared as practitioners who lack curricular and teaching theory and practice. The quality and experience of the faculty was cited as crucial to program success. Many programs also reported that faculty were reluctant to fail a student clinically due to a multiplicity of factors which may include lack of knowledge of legal issues, lack of support of administration, too much hassle, and insecurity.

Academic Rigor

Many programs noted that lack of academic rigor contributed to lower pass rates. The tendency to offer extra credit for projects, rounding up of grades, few objective tests, test questions at an inappropriate level and not expecting students to read the materials were a few examples cited. A few programs also reported that overly detailed study guides to teacher-made tests might have encouraged students to study only for the test. Grade inflation, both within the nursing program and across campuses was also identified as a factor that contributed to over-confidence of the student and undermined reliance on pre-requisite courses to ensure a knowledge base.

Teacher-made Tests

Testing of students may not have been at the appropriate level for some programs. Several programs reported that when they examined course tests, many questions were at the knowledge and comprehension level rather than application and analysis level, which is the level of the majority of NCLEX RN questions.

Student Attitude

Student attitude was also reported to affect pass rates. All programs agreed that many students major in nursing because it is a relatively high paying job in an uncertain economy. Some students are motivated to study only what will be on the test and are not active participants in learning. Some programs reported that students are over-confident when it comes to taking NCLEX.

Timing of NCLEX

Time elapsed from graduation to testing was cited as a factor for several programs, although one large program did not find it significant.

Strategies to increase NCLEX pass rates.

Admissions

Admission testing was cited as one strategy utilized to ensure students have the abilities to succeed in a nursing program. The most frequently cited test was the Nursing Entrance Test (NET). Cut-off scores were cited as crucial for several programs in selecting likely candidates for admission. Two programs suggested tying the NET reading comprehension score to the level of the nursing textbooks used.

Tests and Grading

Many programs are seriously examining teacher-made tests and constructing test questions and exam plans that are similar to NCLEX. Almost all programs reported utilizing measures that ensure that students meet the minimum passing score on the objective tests. Comprehensive end-of-course exams that were eliminated by some programs in the past are again being given. Programs reported eliminating extra credit assignments, points for attendance, grading of clinical performance, and other measures thought to inflate grades. Several programs are instituting policies where grades are not “rounded up”.

Standardized Testing

Many programs utilize standardized tests of nursing content (HESI, ERI) and NCLEX predictor exams. Programs report utilizing standardized tests in a variety of ways. Some used it to inform students of their strengths and weaknesses and for faculty to refine teaching, while others tie the score to the class grade, progression, or graduation.

Student Support

Early identification of students at risk for failure is used as a strategy by some programs. These programs were also quick to point out that there are occasional surprises where students that appeared very strong in the program fail NCLEX. Some programs are actively engaged in providing services to students such as financial help in the form of scholarships, partnering with health care institutions to offer externships, tutoring, and counseling services. Most programs also offer an NCLEX review course for their graduates. One program offers NCLEX study groups during the curriculum. Another

program institutes an NCLEX success program from the first day the student enters the program. Many programs offer support to the unsuccessful NCLEX candidate.

Faculty Support

One large program has instituted a workshop for new faculty to orient them to clinical teaching and curriculum. Other programs are looking for ways to build strong clinical and didactic faculty. Faculty members are often sent to test construction and curriculum workshops. Many programs are searching for ways to allow faculty more time to prepare for classes and institute innovative teaching. Other activities include mentoring new clinical instructors and developing methods where clinical instructors can connect clinical experience to didactic content.

Curriculum

Many programs are actively engaged in mapping curriculum content to the NCLEX test plan. Stabilizing the curriculum to allow for flexibility to “fine tune” but not completely overhaul the total program, is a reported strategy of programs that participated in multi-system curricular change.

Profile of NCLEX candidate

There was not agreement on the overall characteristics of the candidate who passes NCLEX on the first try. Some common characteristics of successful candidates were:

- * Had a reading comprehension level similar to or higher than the level of nursing textbooks
- * Had a high level of support from family/friends
- * Had high grades in nursing clinical courses
- * Motivated, self-directed learner
- * Took NCLEX within 5 months of completing the program
- * Was predicted to pass NCLEX at 85% or better via standardized testing
- * Took an NCLEX review course
- * Speaks English in the home

Some common characteristics of unsuccessful first time candidates were identified as:

- * Lower grades in some clinical courses
- * May be ethnic minority
- * Studied to pass the course test only
- * Lack of social support
- * English is not spoken in the home
- * Delay in taking the test (not all reported this as significant)
- * Reading comprehension level below the level of nursing textbooks
- * May have multiple repeats of prerequisite courses (not all programs found this).
- * Failed NCLEX-PN

Board Decision

On November 6, 2002 the Arizona Board of Nursing received the above report and determined the following:

1. The goal of every program should be a 90% pass rate.
2. The Education Committee will recommend specific action items for programs.
3. The Education Committee will provide a report to the Board at the January meeting.

The Education Committee recommended:

1. That 90% be retained as an ideal minimum pass rate for programs
2. That programs submit a progress report on their implementation of the actions proposed at this meeting in 18 months.