

# The New Mexico Nursing Education Consortium

## Fostering Innovative Education to Promote Health Equity

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With shortfalls of thousands of nurses throughout the United States, the need for nursing students to graduate and enter the workforce was critical even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Innovative nursing education models are needed to mitigate the staggering shortfall. For over 10 years, the New Mexico Nursing Education Consortium (NMNEC) has been recognized as a successful pathway for students to achieve nursing degrees. The NMNEC is a collaborative partnership between university and community college nursing programs who offer a common curriculum and share common academic policies. Students in the community college setting choose an associate degree program or a co-enrolled associate degree/bachelor of science in nursing program. The NMNEC currently includes 16 nursing program sites throughout the state. The development of the NMNEC including its infrastructure, leadership council, committees, and involvement of program directors has contributed to the strength. The outcomes of NMNEC's nursing graduates have been exceptional with strong progression and NCLEX pass percentages. Since NMNEC's inception, diversity and health equity have been strong components of the NMNEC model and curriculum. The NMNEC model provides equity to students at rural community colleges to achieve a bachelor of science degree while remaining in their home settings. **Key words:** *collaborative nursing education model, community college and university partnership model, health equity*

**T**HE FUTURE of Nursing 2020-2030: Charting a Pathway to Achieve Health Equity<sup>1</sup> emphasizes the importance of nurs-

ing's strong role in educating nurses who understand and advocate for health equity, social justice, and antiracism. Creative educational pathways and options for students are encouraged, along with partnerships between schools, to promote ease of degree obtainment. The New Mexico Nursing Education Consortium (NMNEC) is one partnership that is highlighted in the Future of Nursing 2020-2030 report: "a model of this type of partnership can be found in the New Mexico Nursing Education Consortium, which coordinates nursing curricula in 16 locations at state, tribal, and community colleges."<sup>1</sup>(p227) The following includes a description of NMNEC's development and commitment to health equity. The goal of this article is for other nursing programs to use ideas to form partnerships that ultimately impact the creation of a dynamic diverse nursing workforce.

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## DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY OF THE NMNEC

The NMNEC is a consortium of 12 state-funded prelicensure nursing programs in 16 locations throughout New Mexico.<sup>2</sup> The initial spark for the NMNEC originated with Nancy Ridenour, PhD, APRN, BC, RN, FAAN, then Dean of the University of New Mexico. Born out of the goal to increase bachelor of science in nursing (BSN)-prepared nurses to 80% by 2020,<sup>3</sup> New Mexico university and community college nursing educators collaborated for over 2 years to establish a concept-based curriculum used by all NMNEC schools, to establish common policies and procedures, common course numbering, and an infrastructure to support faculty development. Support for the development of the NMNEC was attained from the New Mexico legislature, from New Mexico's Higher Education Department, and from the New Mexico Board of Nursing, as well as from each NMNEC community college or university. The NMNEC supports 3 pathways to a registered nurse (RN): an associate degree on community college campuses, a BSN on university campuses, and a unique associate degree in nursing (ADN)/BSN co-enrollment delivered on community college campuses. The co-enrolled pathway includes a partnership between a university and a community college. Currently, 6 co-enrolled partnerships are present throughout New Mexico. Associate degree students and ADN/BSN co-enrolled students sit side-by-side in the same classes; the co-enrolled students have completed required prerequisite courses and take an additional 6 BSN courses to complete the BSN degree. This is not an RN-BSN program nor a 2-plus-2 articulation program, where students complete 2 years at a community college and then transition the last 2 years at a university, as many have confused the NMNEC as being. The co-enrolled students graduate simultaneously with their ADN and BSN degrees in 5 consecutive terms, identical to the university-based BSN students, and then sit for the NCLEX. NMNEC's model also supports

a licensed practical nurse (LPN) pathway into nursing with encouragement and incentive to continue toward higher degrees and encouragement for ADN and BSN graduates to seek graduate degrees (Figure).

The NMNEC has always championed the promotion of health equity with its tag line: connecting all New Mexicans with high-quality health care. NMNEC's goals were updated and affirmed in 2021<sup>4</sup> and include:

- Increase the number of nurses with BSN and graduate degrees in New Mexico.
- Improve efficiency, quality, and educational outcomes of nursing education through collaboration among New Mexico public and tribal funded community colleges and universities.
- Promote a culture of inclusion and increase the diversity of the nursing workforce in New Mexico by improving accessibility to nursing education for underrepresented groups.
- Seek ways to continuously sustain the work of the NMNEC.

The NMNEC model has been a powerful mechanism for producing more BSN-prepared nurses for New Mexico and for producing ADN students who are well prepared for RN-BSN programs. Prior to the development of the NMNEC, students could only obtain their BSN at 2 universities in New Mexico. Now, the BSN is offered at 11 sites in all quadrants of the state with the number of BSN graduates more than doubling. Co-enrolled ADN/BSN students who obtain their BSN on community college campuses have an average 50% tuition savings and have a higher likelihood of remaining in their communities to secure employment. Employers understand the preparation of NMNEC graduates, which is helpful as students transition into practice. The impact of the NMNEC in rural New Mexico has been significant. One community college administrator, speaking about the university/community college partnership stated: "NMNEC has created an opportunity at UNM-Gallup for students in a rural area to study and work in their

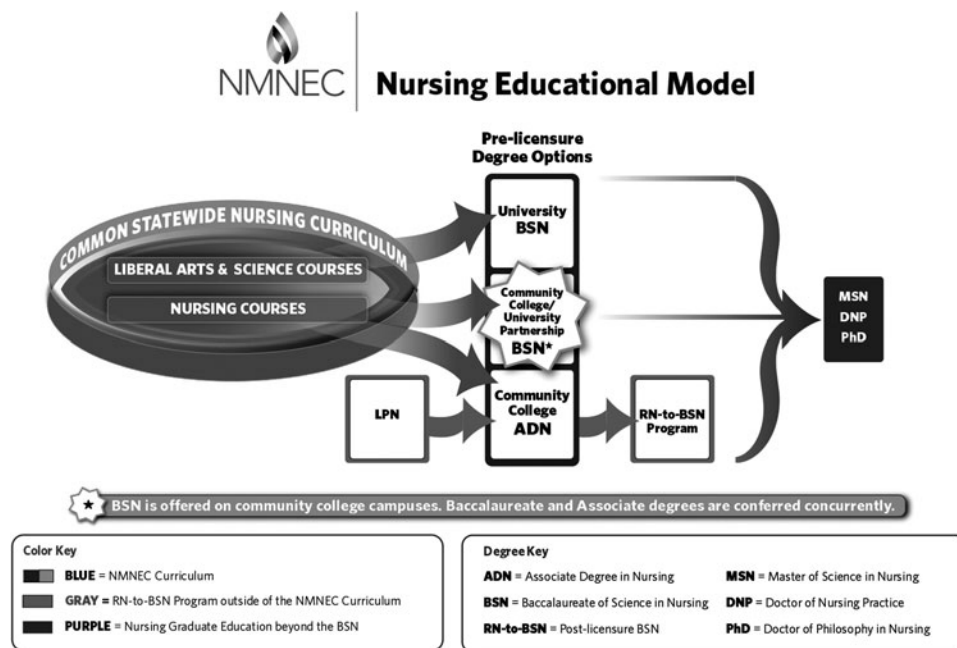


Figure. Nursing educational model.

community, escape poverty, contribute to the wellness of their friends and families, and become positive role models to their children and their peers” (Sabrina Ezzell, EdD, MSN, RN, email communication, January 2022). NMNEC leadership council’s (LC) rural clinical partner, Patricia Maule, also stated: “Prior to NMNEC, local students who wanted to obtain a BSN had to relocate to a more urban area of the state, or outside our state, to complete their studies, and sadly many did not return to our rural community. NMNEC has allowed students to complete their program and then become employed in their home community . . . our patients have benefited from the excellent education that this program has provided” (Patricia Maule, MSN-Ed, RN, NPD-BC, email communication, January 2022).

### NMNEC’S INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATION APPROACHES

NMNEC’s infrastructure consists of 2 full-time positions, a staff Program Manager

position, and a faculty Program Outreach Manager position. The Program Manager assists with day-to-day operations including coordinating meetings, minute taking, and maintaining NMNEC’s website. The faculty position was added in 2015 when the need was recognized for an individual experienced with teaching and curriculum to provide faculty development for new as well as seasoned faculty and to assist schools who were onboarding the NMNEC curriculum. The NMNEC is overseen by an elected volunteer Leadership Council (LC) that consists of faculty representing NMNEC universities and community colleges. The LC is also composed of a nurse from a rural clinical partner, a nurse from an urban clinical partner, a faculty member representing RN-BSN programs, and a faculty member representing LPN programs. The LC meets bimonthly. Issues such as curricular or policy changes are brought to the LC and are then sent to each school’s program director for discussion, consensus building, and voting. To assure equality of each school, no matter the size of the school, each school receives 1 vote. Financial support

for the development and infrastructure of the NMNEC has been diverse including grants from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, and the New Mexico Board of Nursing. After years of effort by NMNEC administrators and faculty to educate and advocate, the New Mexico legislature awarded supportive funding to the NMNEC in 2019.

Communication with all 16 NMNEC schools and stakeholders is of utmost importance and is accomplished through email blasts to faculty and administrators, by quarterly newsletters, through NMNEC's website and Facebook page, and with biannual NMNEC statewide meetings. The statewide meetings are daylong events with updates from the LC and NMNEC committees along with presentations on topics relevant for faculty development. For example, recent topics included how to develop clinical reasoning test questions and discussion on upcoming proposed changes to the curriculum. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the meetings are held by Zoom with excellent attendance and the opportunity for faculty to network together as well as to acquire continuing education credits.

### **NMNEC COMMITTEES**

Faculty from all NMNEC schools also volunteer for NMNEC committees including curriculum, program evaluation, accreditation, and diversity committees. The Diversity Committee was reinvigorated in 2020 with the mission of valuing and recognizing diversity with the NMNEC<sup>5</sup> (<https://www.nmneec.org?s=Diversity+Committee>). The committee goal is to evaluate curriculum, policies and procedures, and teaching strategies to assure justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in NMNEC nursing schools. Students in all NMNEC programs complete NMNEC student surveys; one question was added spring 2021: What suggestions do you have for the NMNEC on how to do better about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the curriculum? Responses were overall positive but continue to be

analyzed. The committee recognized the need to provide a brief definition of DEI for the students to provide context to the question. A question was also added to the NMNEC faculty course reports regarding suggestions on how to do better with DEI in each specific course. The responses are also being analyzed. The Diversity Committee developed a Faculty Tool Box on Diversity and Inclusion that is found on NMNEC's website <https://www.nmneec.org/nmneec-faculty-tool-box-on-diversity-inclusion-resources-google-site/>. The tool box contains information on upcoming DEI conferences, journal articles, teaching strategies, and other ideas for faculty on teaching DEI and health equity in their courses.

The Program Evaluation Committee (PEC) deploys a comprehensive annual survey to all participating NMNEC schools. Knowing that patient outcomes are improved when patients receive care from a nurse with the same ethnicity,<sup>6</sup> the NMNEC is committed to creating a diverse nursing workforce to foster health equity in New Mexico's population. New Mexico is a majority/minority state with NMNEC schools reflecting the state's diverse population with the exception of the American Indian (AI) population; 11% report as AI in New Mexico with NMNEC schools having only 6% of students reporting as AI. Strategies such as recruitment at high schools with high percentages of AI students or creating pathway programs to introduce AI students to the nursing profession are being discussed. The PEC also tracks reasons for students voluntarily leaving NMNEC nursing programs to assess for inequities of program support for students. The top reasons for 2020-2021 included failing, not a good career fit, and COVID-19-related issues. Nursing programs have the opportunity to assist students with progression by examining these reasons.

### **NMNEC'S COLLABORATIVE OPPORTUNITIES**

The beauty of the NMNEC is in the collaboration that occurs among nursing

programs and the nimbleness that exists to come together when problem-solving is needed. NMNEC nursing program directors recognized the need for support and collaborative decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Biweekly Zoom meetings were initiated to support one another and to assure uniformity in decisions and policy changes that were potentially needed. Innovative outcomes that resulted in these meetings included creation of teaching resources for online pedagogy that were placed on the NMNEC website and the development of a computer-based clinical checklist to assist in tracking virtual clinical activities with consistency between programs.<sup>7</sup> The program director meetings were found to be a valuable support mechanism during the pandemic and have become a permanent fixture of the NMNEC.

The NMNEC curriculum reflects the importance of teaching diversity and health equity with our nursing students. A course, titled Health Care Participant, is taught early in the curriculum and specifically addresses social determinants of health, health disparities globally and in the local community, social justice, and health care equity throughout the lifespan. Social justice is a key concept that is then built upon in other courses and clinical activity. The Future of Nursing 2020-2030 report<sup>1</sup> emphasizes the need for nursing students to be educated regarding emergency preparedness and to particularly mitigate catastrophic effects of disasters in communities with health inequities compounded by poverty, racism, and poor access to health. NMNEC faculty who teach Health Care Participant throughout the state collaborated in spring 2021 to host a 4-hour virtual emergency preparedness event. The topic of COVID-19 was chosen as many rural communities, including the Navajo Nation, were significantly affected by the pandemic. Two hundred and ninety-two students representing 8 NMNEC schools participated on teams replicating Incident Command Centers with students assigned specific roles such as incident commander, public information

officer, or safety officer. Students prepared for the event by completing free Federal Emergency Management Agency online independent study training modules.<sup>8</sup> Both students and faculty found this event to be valuable in increasing knowledge and awareness for emergency preparedness with the event planned again for spring 2022.

### NMNEC'S OUTCOMES

The NMNEC has provided successful outcomes for students. NCLEX pass percentages and retention rates have typically been well-above benchmark for ADN, BSN, and ADN/BSN co-enrolled students. A study funded by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, involving 2 NMNEC universities and 4 community colleges, was conducted to determine whether there are differences in clinical reasoning, professional values, and motivation with the 3 sectors of students.<sup>9</sup> A total of 232 university-based BSN students, 207 ADN students, and 130 co-enrolled ADN/BSN students participated in the study. Results showed similar outcomes for clinical reasoning, professional values, and motivation for all 3 sectors of nursing students.

The NMNEC partnership model has had many successes over the years. A timeline showcasing these successes is found at <https://www.nmneec.org/about-nmneec/history/>. Highlights include attendance of NMNEC's first graduating class of BSN and co-enrolled ADN/BSN students by New Mexico's governor, the NMNEC used as the model for common course numbering by other New Mexico higher learning institutions, the NMNEC recognized nationally as an emerging partnership model to increase BSN-prepared nurses, and New Mexico legislative funding secured for the NMNEC in 2019.

### CONCLUSION

New Mexico is a sparsely populated state with few nursing programs compared with most other states. Nursing educators from

other states have commented that they do not think that anything like the NMNEC could happen in their state. However, other states have developed similar models and the NMNEC model could certainly be replicated on a regional basis. Many individuals were skeptical about nursing programs and nursing faculty agreeing on a common curriculum and common policies. Through dedication, collaboration, consensus building, and part-

nerships, the NMNEC was created to offer opportunity for students throughout the state to achieve the BSN degree, for faculty to develop a dynamic flexible curriculum, and to graduate nurses ready to forge a path to achieve health equity. The NMNEC LC and NMNEC members are committed to telling NMNEC's story for others to use in developing innovative pathways for nursing education.

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