Charting a Course Toward a Culture of Education Progression:

Recommendations to Employers to Support the Educational Progression of Working Nurses

Background

Beginning in 2019, the Incumbent RN Specialized Interest Group (SIG) of NEPIN sought to better understand the factors that are most likely to motivate or inhibit working RNs’ pursuit of educational progression. Though time and money have been consistently identified as the factors that are most likely to influence incumbent RNs’ decision to pursue post-licensure education, the SIG’s exploratory, qualitative investigation identified several other factors that impact nurses’ return to school. This set of recommendations reflects the broad range of influences that impact working RNs’ motivation and ability to pursue educational advancement.

In general, we recommend that employers work to develop a culture of educational progression within their organizations by:

- developing a community of learners within their organizations,
- providing opportunities for nurses to connect their educational pursuits directly to their practice,
- forming and leveraging partnerships with academic institutions, and
- focusing incentives for returning to school on what nurses value most.

Recommendation 1: Develop a Community of Learners within Your Organization

- Establish the expectation of educational attainment from the point of hire. New graduate nurse residency programs should include the expectation that diploma- and ADN-prepared residents develop a plan for pursuing a BSN within a specified time frame. Members of a new graduate residency cohort can support and encourage each other’s active pursuit of academic goals.

- Encourage the formation of cohorts of nurses to enroll in degree programs together. Work with schools to facilitate the admission of entire cohorts. By enrolling as part of a cohort of peers from work, nurses will obtain emotional and instrumental support from others who have a unique understanding of their experience.

Recommendation 2: Provide Opportunities for Nurses to Connect their Educational Pursuits Directly to their Practice

- Health systems can provide clinical experiences in a variety of settings including acute care, ambulatory care, rehabilitation, and home health. Open clinical experiences outside of their typical work settings to facilitate nurses’ completion of their clinical education requirements. By opening the full range of clinical settings to your nurses, you demonstrate their commitment to fostering a culture supportive of educational progression while exposing your employees to a deeper and broader understanding of your organization.

- Encourage nurses who are enrolled in degree-leading programs to complete their degree capstone projects at work. By completing capstone projects at their place of employment, nurses can see the direct relationship between their academic pursuits and improvements in the practice setting. Additionally, by encouraging nurses to complete their culminating projects in the workplace, nurses’ educational accomplishments, improved competence, and practice improvements are on display which may encourage other nurses’ return to school.
• Empower and encourage your nurse managers and nurse educators to ask staff nurses questions like “what are you interested in?” and “where do you want to make a difference?” and then counsel nurses on how educational attainment can support nurses’ professional aspirations.

Recommendation 3: Form and Leverage Partnerships with Academic Institutions

• Develop agreements with schools of nursing to help make education more affordable for nurses. Partnerships can include tuition reduction programs, fee waivers, group discounts for cohorts, and other cost saving mechanisms that benefit the school, employer, and individual nurse.

• Coordinate with schools of nursing to offer courses relevant to nursing practice (e.g., evidence-based practice or clinical research) that do not require enrollment in a degree program. Schools can develop curriculum while employers may provide students, funding, faculty, etc. to make the course logistically viable. Nurses who attend can receive the benefit of additional education and professional development without making the large commitment of time and money required by degree-leading programs. If designed well, completion of individual courses may eventually be counted toward the credits necessary to complete a degree-leading program at that school.

• Collaborate with schools of nursing to develop a consistent, coherent message on how to describe the value and relevance of the BSN. The description should be composed in language that reflects how nurses describe their own practice rather than the language of academia or nursing regulation. This can reduce confusion about the value of the BSN while focusing on what is important to nurses about their own practice and professional goals.

• Encourage staff nurses, nurse managers, nurse educators, or nurse administrators to sit on advisory boards of schools of nursing. Working nurses provide real-world insight to schools that can help schools maximize the congruence between academic program curricula and actual practice. As a result, schools’ curricula will keep pace with continual changes in nursing practice, employers will cultivate a nursing workforce that can respond to an ever-changing practice environment, and nurses will become more competent professionals.

Recommendation 4: Focus Incentives for Returning to School on What Nurses Value Most

• Discuss return on investment on the core values that motivated many nurses to enter the profession: a desire to care for people and to continually improve the quality of that care; a desire to elevate and advance the entire profession of nursing; and to become advocates and agents of change within their organization, profession, and community.

• Acknowledge and celebrate the educational accomplishments of nurses. Nurses want their academic achievements to be visible at work. Suggestions for increasing the visibility of nurses’ education progression include adding degree credentials to name badges, posting the names of enrolled or recently graduated nurses on a bulletin board on the unit, or making graduation announcements via newsletter or intranet.

• Whenever possible, provide nurses with additional financial compensation commensurate with educational achievement. Tiered incentive programs award points and financial bonuses for certain professional development activities including taking classes or completing a degree. Such incentive programs provide nurses with a tangible financial benefit which helps to justify and offset the cost of their education.

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