

Working Together: Building Essential Academic-Practice Partnerships

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Today's unprecedented challenges in nursing and health care make academic-practice partnerships more vital than ever, requiring shared solutions that neither education nor practice can achieve alone. With a workforce shortage, increasing patient complexity, rapid technological advances and persistent health inequities, strong partnerships between schools of nursing and health systems create the foundation for practice-ready graduates, sustainable clinical learning environments and innovations that improve care delivery. AONL and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) emphasize that these partnerships are not optional — they are essential to aligning education with the realities of practice, strengthening the pipeline of nurses, and ensuring the profession is prepared to meet the needs of patients and communities today and in the future.

Strategic collaboration

Since 2010, AONL and AACN have collaborated to advance academic-practice partnerships. The early work, aligned with the first Future of Nursing report (Institute of Medicine, 2011), included creating guiding principles, surveying existing partnerships, and developing toolkits to help schools and health systems collaborate. Joint initiatives also were launched, including the *Partnership Expectation and Outcomes Matrix* (2012), the Exemplary Academic-Practice Partnership Award, and national Days of Dialogue to strengthen collaboration.

This work was guided by a jointly appointed task force, co-chaired by leaders from both organizations, which set strategic priorities to address workforce shortages, develop new models of care and learning, and strengthen partnerships nationwide. The task force led to joint organization meetings, national calls to action, and support of state and local innovations, including Maryland's statewide nurse residency requirement and collaborative workforce initiatives in Virginia and at institutions like Emory University, Atlanta, and Indiana University, Bloomington (Beal & Zimmerman, 2019).

The organizations' deep commitment to advancing academic-practice collaboration also led to the development of the Shared Vision for Integrating Nursing Education and Practice (Figure 1), which highlights five priority areas: transforming health care and achieving health equity; moving to competency-based nursing education; sustaining the supply of highly educated nurses; leading innovation to maximize nursing's impact; and ensuring

the continuous advancement of nursing. The vision was affirmed and endorsed by both AACN and AONL boards, underscoring the collective commitment of academic and practice leaders to align efforts and strengthen the nursing profession across education, practice, policy and research.

In the fall of 2023, the chief executive officers of both organizations reconvened a national dialogue between a new group of invited academic and practice leaders to build a shared understanding of the key challenges facing both settings. Senior leaders identified workforce shortages, faculty limitations, burnout, lack of practice-ready nurses and misaligned curricula as major challenges in practice. At the same time academia struggled with noncompetitive salaries, high faculty workload, limited faculty pools and constraints on curriculum flexibility. Both sectors recognized shared concerns around inclusion, belonging, recruitment, leadership, nursing's image and rapidly evolving technology. A consensus was reached. Despite differences in terminology and context, the challenges in practice and academia are closely aligned, all impacting the nursing workforce and requiring collaborative solutions. Participants further identified four priorities with high-potential opportunities to address the nursing workforce: wellness and well-being, alignment of curriculum with practice, leadership, and inclusion and belonging.

In addition to identifying these priorities, dialogue attendees recommended ongoing collaboration between AACN and AONL to maintain momentum and share best practices. Specifically, they suggested hosting joint webinars and offering sessions at each organization's conferences to highlight innovative academic-practice partnership strategies, disseminate lessons learned and engage a broader audience of leaders across the country. Since that recommendation, AACN and AONL have begun implementing these ideas — hosting three joint webinars and holding academic-practice sessions with leaders from both sectors. These efforts have been critical for sustaining dialogue, promoting cross-sector learning and advancing solutions to the shared challenges facing the nursing workforce.

Building on that momentum, a new AACN-AONL advisory committee was formed in spring 2024, composed of dyads pairing academic and practice leaders. The charge of the AACN/AONL Academic-Practice Advisory Committee is to evaluate emerging challenges impacting the health professions workforce; create a

FIGURE 1: Shared Vision for Integrating Nursing Education and Practice (AACN & AONL, 2021)



comprehensive guidance document outlining the current state of academic-practice partnerships with standout examples of innovation, financial strategies and leadership to inform the profession; and develop two strategic priorities aimed at strengthening academic-practice partnerships.

As a first step, the committee jointly agreed to begin with the creation of a comprehensive guidance document, intentionally centering the content and focus around the five priority areas in the Shared Vision for Integrating Nursing Education and Practice. The document released last year, *The AACN/AONL Academic-Practice Partnership Playbook: From Shared Vision to Action*, is intentionally deemed a playbook as it highlights adaptable frameworks that can serve as models addressing immediate needs while also offering transferable lessons for other regions and institutions.

Strategic imperatives for human-centered collaboration

From the onset, the contributors to the AACN/AONL Playbook present compelling frameworks for academic-practice partnerships that transcend transactional collaboration, positioning relationship-building, cultural integration and systems thinking as foundational

drivers of success. In an era of increasing health care complexity, leaders must cultivate environments where human-centered care is not an initiative but an operational ethos. These partnerships offer a roadmap for aligning nursing education with community health imperatives, honoring the humanity of all key voices — including students, faculty, clinicians and patients alike.

CBE, a scalable model for workforce readiness

As nursing education evolves to meet the demands of modern health care, partnerships grounded in competency-based education (CBE) emerge as a sustainable and scalable model for preparing more practice-ready graduates. The integration of academic and clinical expertise ensures learners attain competencies directly linked to patient outcomes and system performance. Looking ahead, innovations such as AI-supported assessment, micro-credentialing and community-engaged clinical education will amplify the impact of CBE. Academic-practice partnerships must co-lead the design, delivery and evaluation of education that prepares nurses not only to practice but also to lead.

Building pipelines for workforce stability

Jointly designed and funded partnerships create reliable pathways to practice by beginning upstream in academia and extending downstream to hiring units. This end-to-end approach mitigates progression delays, enhances readiness for practice and stabilizes retention. By embedding these pipelines into operational structures, leaders foster continuity and reduce workforce fragmentation.

Accelerating innovation through shared infrastructure

Academic and practice leaders can fast-track innovation by co-designing care models, integrating digital tools across curricula and workflows, and translating evidence into practice. Success requires shared metrics, iterative piloting and embedding initiatives into budgets, memoranda of understanding and routine operations. These infrastructures enable partners to improve care delivery while cultivating a prepared, agile workforce.

Governance, sustainability and adaptive capacity

Sustainable partnerships share core attributes: intentional relationship-building, aligned professional governance and commitment to shared outcomes. Early alignment and sustained commitment are critical. Leaders must assess organizational readiness, negotiate resource commitments and design governance structures to support joint decision-making. Proactive barrier mitigation, addressing faculty workload, clinical placement capacity and funding sustainability are essential to successful programs and care delivery models.

Joint appointment structures, protected coordination time and shared evaluation systems position initiatives for long-term success. Systematic outcome tracking — quantitative (e.g., readiness, retention, quality metrics) and qualitative (e.g., stakeholder satisfaction, partnership durability) — create feedback loops supporting continuous improvement and demonstrate value. The models and exemplars offered in the playbook assist operational and academic leaders in creating such a pathway forward into the future of nursing.

Call to collective action

In the face of unprecedented challenges, workforce shortages, rising patient complexity, technological disruption and persistent health inequities, academic-practice partnerships are no longer aspirational — they are essential. AONL and AACN have long recognized that neither education nor practice can meet these demands alone. Their sustained collaboration underscores a national commitment to shared solutions, grounded in the belief that the future of nursing depends on the power of “We.”

Academic-practice partnerships must be treated as living systems — dynamic, resilient and co-owned. Leaders who invest in early alignment, shared accountability and continuous improvement shape not only the future of nursing education and

practice but also the health of communities nationwide. The longstanding AONL–AACN collaboration exemplifies this ethos. Our work affirms that national progress depends on local action, and that each of us, by recognizing the power of We, contributes to a stronger, more equitable nursing workforce. ♦

References

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