



Past Event: 2026 NCSBN Scientific Symposium - The First National Study of Nursing Education Consultants: A Narrative Inquiry Into Fostering Readiness for Practice in Prelicensure Nursing Programs Video Transcript

Event

2026 NCSBN Scientific Symposium

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Presenter

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- [Dr. Duke] Good morning, and thank you for joining me today. My name is Dr. Alexandra Duke, and my presentation is entitled "The First National Study of Nursing Education Consultants: A Narrative Inquiry into Fostering Readiness for Practice in Pre-licensure Nursing Education Programs."

As a former NEC and a creditor, I became interested in understanding how regulators determine whether pre-licensure nursing programs are preparing graduates who are truly ready for practice. This study explores that question through the perspectives of nursing education consultants or NECs across the United States.

The ongoing debate about fitness for practice of new graduate nurses has a long history, much of which is based on arguments from service, academia, and regulatory stakeholders who argue that we are failing to produce practice-ready nurses. For this study, I used Dr. Benton's definition of fitness for practice, which he defines as a minimum guarantee of safety, regardless of the setting where the new graduate nurse will practice.

Recent national discussions among nursing education, practice, regulation, and accreditation stakeholders continue to focus on readiness for practice and public protection. These are conversations that have provided the foundation for this particular study. Just a bit of background regarding professional nursing regulation. Professional nursing regulation, it is an emerging science that really focuses on public protection.

One important component of regulation is nursing program approval. In many jurisdictions, nursing education consultants evaluate nursing programs, and they also make recommendations regarding approval status. Despite this important role, there is little that is known about how NECs determine whether programs are preparing graduates who are fit for practice.

And while nursing enrollment and graduation rates have continued to increase nationally, there are concerns about readiness for practice that currently exist. Research suggests that many new graduates are struggling with clinical judgment. They also struggle with decision-making and reasoning skills that are required for entry-level practice.

And because these gaps have significant implications for patient safety and also public protection, understanding how NECs evaluate readiness is increasingly important. The literature review focused on two primary areas. First, nursing program approval and regulatory oversight.

And second, the role of the nursing education consultant. And while prior studies have identified quality indicators associated with program approval, no studies were found that specifically examined how NECs evaluate fitness for practice, fitness for purpose, and fitness for award. And that gap led directly to this particular study.

Three concepts guided this study. Fitness for award refers to meeting the academic requirements for graduation. Fitness for practice refers to the ability to practice safely as an entry-level nurse. And fitness for purpose refers to meeting the broader needs of healthcare systems and society. These definitions became important throughout both phases of the study.

This study had two primary aims. First, to describe the characteristics, preparation, responsibilities, and perceived readiness of nursing education consultants. The second aim was to explore how nursing education consultants derive meaning from their roles and how they support fitness for award, fitness for practice, and fitness for purpose.

Six research questions guided this study. These questions explored NEC's perspectives regarding fitness, how they support nursing students in programs, and how they stay current in their field. These questions also explored how they evaluate readiness for practice and factors that influence their decisions.

A two-phase design was used for this study. Phase one consisted of a national descriptive study, and phase two utilized qualitative narrative inquiry through in-depth interviews. And together, both of these approaches provided both breadth and depth regarding the NEC role. All 55 nursing regulatory boards and territories were invited to participate in this study, 46 NECs from 25 geographically diverse jurisdictions completed the survey, and 19 went on to then complete the qualitative interview process.

Participants represented a wide range of regulatory environments across the United States. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are included here on this particular slide. This map illustrates the geographic representation of participants that were included in this study. The final sample represented 25 states and geographic regions, which provided a diverse perspective from all NECs across the United States.

My survey collected information about demographics. It also collected information about educational preparation, training, workload, responsibilities, and perceptions regarding the NEC role. And the interview questions in the qualitative portion of the study really explored how NECs conceptualize fitness for practice and how they evaluate program readiness.

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and interview data were analyzed using a thematic analysis that was informed by Braum and Clarke, and also Creswell as well. Trustworthiness was strengthened throughout the transcript verification. We conducted pilot interviews, and we also ensured that we reviewed the findings with some expert qualitative researchers throughout the process.

And let's go on to discuss the demographic survey findings. Survey findings indicated that NECs are highly experienced nurses. More than 80% had over 10 years of nursing experience, and nearly a third have reported more than 40 years of experience as a registered nurse. The majority of the participants in this study identified as female and Caucasian, although participants represented diverse professional backgrounds throughout the study.

Most NECs held doctoral degrees and nearly all reported previous academic teaching experience. These findings suggest that NECs often enter regulatory roles with extensive educational and academic expertise.

A notable finding was the variability in the training of NECs. And so, their levels of preparation varied across jurisdictions, which highlights opportunities for more standardized onboarding and professional development. Approximately 50% reported that they received employer-only training. 5% reported receiving national agency-only training, and 22% reported no formal training.

And of those who completed job-specific training or orientation on their own, approximately 78.4% reported feeling prepared or supported to enter the NEC role. Perceived preparedness also varied with 36.1% of the sample describing themselves as well-prepared, 25% describing themselves as prepared, and 30.6% as somewhat prepared, and finally 5.6% of the participant population who felt that the employer-provided training did not prepare them for their role.

Participants described responsibilities that included site visits. They also described responsibilities that included curriculum review, NCLEX monitoring, program approval, and consultation with nursing programs. Many viewed themselves not only as regulators, but also as resources and advisors to nursing programs, as evidenced by the quotes on this particular slide.

NECs also reported multifaceted responsibilities in nursing program oversight. Nearly all respondents reported conducting site visits. Most of them reported monitoring NCLEX outcomes. Also, the majority of them reported reviewing new program applications. And these findings reinforce the complexity and the breadth and depth of the NEC role.

Let's move on to discussing the qualitative findings of this particular study. There were five themes that emerged from this study from the interviews that I conducted. Those five themes were conceptualizations of fitness, supporting students and bridging education to practice, continuous learning and evidence-based practice, evaluating program effectiveness, and contextual challenges influencing practice readiness.

And I will briefly review each theme in the next few slides. So theme one collates all participants' viewpoints on the concepts of fitness for award, fitness for practice, and fitness for purpose. Students articulated this nuanced conceptualization of fitness as a triad of interrelated dimensions that they felt were necessary for competent new-graduate practice.

They also really emphasized that all three dimensions were necessary to prepare graduates who are ready to enter the workforce safely and efficiently. My second qualitative research question asks how NECs perceive their role in supporting nursing students' practice of nursing.

And while NECs do not typically teach students directly in the classroom or clinical setting, my participants saw themselves as key supporters and facilitators of student success by virtue of their work in nursing programs. And many described serving as a bridge between education, regulation, and

practice. Theme three was a prominent theme that was related to research question three, and it is the commitment of the NEC to stay current with the latest evidence in nursing education and to also integrate this knowledge into their work.

And so the participants emphasized the importance of lifelong learning and reported attending conferences, reading current literature, participating in professional organizations, and pursuing ongoing education to remain effective in this role. And here are some of the quotes that some of the NECs indicated during the interviews. And core to the NEC role and aligned with research question number four is the process of determining whether nursing programs are producing graduates who are, indeed, fit for practice.

And so, when evaluating readiness for practice, NECs rely on multiple sources of evidence. These include site visits, program outcomes, NCLEX performance, curriculum review, faculty qualifications, and just some of their observations that they make during their initial or ongoing program evaluation visits.

The final major theme addresses research question five by examining the factors that influence how NECs evaluate and perceive fitness for practice. And participants identified several factors, including differences among states. They also identified faculty shortages, some clinical placement challenges, resource limitations, political pressures, and also different types of stakeholder expectations as well.

NECs also acknowledged that their own professional experiences influence how they interpret program quality. And here are some quotes to support the fifth theme. These quotes highlight the contextual complexities that NECs face when evaluating nursing programs. And so, based on these quotes, we know that participants consistently emphasize the importance of balancing standards with the realities of their local program environments.

Several implications emerged from the study findings. First, the study provides a better understanding of how regulators conceptualize readiness for practice. And this study really also highlights the importance of addressing fitness for award practice and purpose simultaneously.

And in addition, this study also reinforces the value of collaborating with educators, with regulators, and also with practice partners and also with creditors as well. There were some limitations to this study. For example, the study really relied on convenient sampling. We also relied on self-reported data, which could have led to some potential selection bias.

And then we also know that findings do represent participant perceptions and therefore they may not represent all regulatory environments because we know that all regulatory environments are not the same. But despite these limitations, the study does provide the first national examination of the NEC role in depth.

And for future research, we could potentially explore faculty and program administrator perceptions of the NEC and perhaps maybe looking at their experience in site visits. We could also look at program outcomes that are associated with regulatory oversight and also maybe perhaps looking at studying strategies for addressing workforce and educational challenges as it relates from the NEC's perspective.

I would like to acknowledge the support from the Center for Regulatory Excellence that made this research possible. And thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions.

- [Jen] Hi, Alexandra. Thank you for your presentation and for joining us this afternoon.

So to start things off, I'd like to ask you whether you think that or your findings showed that there should be nationally recognized competencies for nursing education consultants.

- I think that that's a great question, Jen. I think that the findings do suggest that there is possibility definitely to explore competencies for nursing education consultants. I think as we saw from the research, there's a lot of variability. And so, the idea of having competencies to standardize the role could work for some jurisdictions. But again, I think that that's further study that we would have to do with the individual boards of nursing and regulatory agencies.

- And then what evidence should boards of nursing use to prepare and support the next generation of nursing education consultants?

- I think that that's another great question. From my perspective and also based on the research and some of the conversations that I've had with the education consultants for this particular study, I think some of the offerings that the ICRS, or the International Center for Regulatory Scholarship, offers for NEC is really great. But I also think that what I found from the research is that every individual board of nursing or regulatory agency has their own specifications for training.

And so I think that a combination of some of the evidence that the NCSBN provides through their ICRS and other programs, in addition to some of the research that we have in the Journal for Nursing Regulation, which is a really great source for nursing education consultants, in combination with what the individual regulatory agency wants for those particular NECs, would be a great combination for the NECs.

- And then one more question that I have for you is that as a recipient of funding through the doctoral student grant program, do you have any words of wisdom for other students who are thinking of research or are starting out in their research journey?

- Yes, that's a really great question. I will say I was a little intimidated about doing a national study, and I was also intimidated by doing... about the topic in and of itself. And so, I would say to future researchers or those who are thinking about pursuing a PhD and with a dissertation topic in regulatory science to just go for it.

I learned so much along the way. Even though I had some experience in the field, I learned a lot through partnerships with the National Council. I was able to get some mentors from the NCSBN to help with the research. So I would say go for it. Don't be afraid. It is an emerging area of science, and we need more research in this area.

So that's one piece of advice. And then I would also say give yourself enough time. I had a very distinct timeline, but as I started to conduct my interviews, I came along a couple of roadblocks along the way. And it took me a bit longer than I had anticipated.

So that's another piece of advice that I would recommend to any student undergoing any kind of research, but particularly with regulatory science is give yourself extra time because you will need that time to prepare your grant application, to go through all of the approvals from the school side and also from the side of the National Council of State Boards of Nursing. But I definitely recommend it for future PhD scholars.

- Thank you so very much. We don't have any questions coming through in the chat. And so with that, that will conclude this Q&A session. Please return to the lobby when the next sessions do begin. Choose the one that you would like to observe, and we will see you next.