

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# The Academic Nurse Educator Shortage: A Qualitative Study and a Call for Collaboration with Professional Nursing Organizations

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## Abstract

**Background:** The academic nurse educator shortage has limited schools of nursing in accepting a steady pool of students interested in becoming nurses. **Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to identify strategies that professional nursing organizations can implement in order to address the nurse educator shortage. Professional organizations include specialty groups, nurse educators, accrediting bodies, and regulatory agencies, etc. **Methods:** A qualitative, modified nominal group technique was utilized. Nurse educators acting as participatory action researchers took part in the study. Stakeholders were identified and subgroups were formed to develop stakeholder specific courses of action. **Findings:** The professional nursing organizations subgroup identified four overarching themes. Through intentional collaboration, professional organizations can support increased compensation, recognition of nursing education as a specialty, and the need for specialized training. **Conclusion:** The synergistic effect of different professional organizations collaborating to promote the direction of nursing, including academic nurse education, is imperative. Professional nursing organizations are well-positioned as subject matter experts to address barriers that impede the educational preparation, recruitment, and retention of nurse faculty. The recommendations of this research serve as a foundation for future nurse educators to collectively advocate for the enhancement of the academic nurse educator role.

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## The Academic Nurse Educator Shortage: A Qualitative Study and a Call for Collaboration with Professional Nursing Organizations

### Introduction

Schools of nursing are turning prospective students away in record numbers and this is largely due to the lack of qualified nurse educators (Bakewell-Sachs et al., 2022). This is a concern that is only going to get worse, as it is anticipated that one-third of nurse educators employed in 2017 will retire by 2025 (Fang & Kesten, 2017). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN] (2023) stated a decline in the nurse educator pipeline. Addressing the nurse educator shortage is an essential component of a multi-tiered approach to preparing adequate numbers of practicing nurses (Noguchi, 2021).

Efforts to resolve the nursing faculty shortage will require the engagement of all stakeholders of the nursing profession and healthcare system. It is necessary for these entities to recognize how the nurse educator shortage is perpetuating the nurse practice shortage and to prioritize finding collaborative solutions to increase interest in and the retention of academic nurse educators (ANEs). Professional nursing organizations are one entity that have a unique opportunity to lead nursing forward during this crisis. These organizations include the following but are not limited to specialty groups, nurse educators, accrediting bodies, and regulatory agencies, etc. Professional nursing organizations can provide guidance for increasing compensation, enhancing diversity, and clarifying role expectations, including fair calculation of workload and providing adequate support to educators, all in an effort to recruit and retain qualified nurses in these roles (Bittner & Bechtel, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to bring together a diverse group of nurse educators to explore and recommend solutions for the nurse educator shortage. These solutions aim to leverage five relevant stakeholders, including educational institutions, healthcare organizations, professional nursing organizations, policymakers, and the public and business sectors. This paper specifically proposes strategies for professional nursing organizations to address the issue that is plaguing nursing academia and the nursing profession.

### Background

A persistent shortage of qualified ANEs has limited the capacity of schools of nursing to admit nursing students and prepare the nursing workforce (Gazza, 2019; National Advisory Council on Nursing Education and Practice [NACNEP], 2021). Though there are many factors that contribute to the current ANE shortage, four were identified as essential and require targeted action to address the issue. These four factors include varying qualification standards, inadequate preparation for teaching, lack of recognition as a specialized area of nursing, and significant wage gaps.

### Varying Qualification Standards

The first attempt at formalizing educational requirements for the nurse educator was an evidence-based approach to delineate the role of the nurse educator with the development of nurse education

competencies (Halstead, 2018). In 2008, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) determined that the minimum standard for ANEs for a registered nurse (RN) program should be a master's or doctoral degree, preparation in a clinical specialty area of nursing practice, and graduate coursework in the science of teaching and learning. In practical nursing (PN) programs, a nurse with a BSN may participate and assist on a teaching team. The AACN uses similar language as the NCSBN, adding that "pedagogy, curriculum development, and student assessment" are recommended to "provide evidence-based teaching [to] better convey their clinical mastery to students" (Bakewell-Sachs, 2022, pp. 12-13). Compounding the differences in requirements are the individual state boards, which have created additional state requirements for nurse educators (NACNEP, 2021). The National League for Nursing (NLN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) established nurse educator competencies and the NLN also developed board certification programs to facilitate training and career development for nurse educators (NLN, 2022; WHO, 2016). However, in a review of 529 schools with MSN in nursing education or post-master's certificate in nursing education, the full set of nurse educator competencies were not present in the course descriptions and there was great variability in the credits and practice hours to achieve the graduate coursework in teaching and learning (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Although the schools in this study were accredited by nursing accreditation bodies, these programs inconsistently used the nurse educator competencies for teaching nursing educators. The lack of agreed upon standards for the science of teaching and learning contributes to the inadequate number of qualified nurse educators and recognition as a valued nursing specialty.

### Inadequate Preparation

In 2007, Bartels described the need for ANEs to have a graduate level understanding of the nursing role as well as the formal preparation to create learner-centered environments and employ a solid understanding of the science of teaching. Thus, the ANE must have expertise as a nurse as well as teaching preparation. The shortage of nursing educators has compelled many schools to hire experienced clinicians who lack formal training or experience with the skills and techniques required for teaching nursing students (King et al., 2020). King et al. (2020) further argue that nurses who desire a career in nursing education do not have an appropriate selection of graduate degree programs that offer both the nursing focus and sufficient preparation for nursing education. Without a defined educational pathway and clear standards for the nurse educator role, it can be reasoned that nurses are less likely to seek out an advanced degree that leads to a teaching role.

Inadequately prepared nurse educators have a direct impact on nurse educator retention and possibly the quality of future generations of nurses. Nurse educators without sufficient support or formal education in teaching have been found to become frustrated and are more likely to leave academia within five years (Summers, 2017). Additionally, a national Delphi study identified

consistent and competent ANEs as a quality indicator for pre-licensure nursing programs (Spector, 2020). Underperforming nursing programs in Texas, observed that ongoing nurse educator development that focused on teaching strategies and item writing were found effective at contributing to improved student performance (Hooper & Ayars, 2017). The lack of a standardized core nurse educator curriculum to prepare nurses for teaching results in a wide variation in preparation.

Presently, many schools of nursing hire DNP (Doctor of Nursing Practice), PhD, and MSN prepared nurses with less than 7.1 % of nursing educators having an EdD (King et al., 2020). While the EdD in nursing education has a strong emphasis on administration, leadership, research, and pedagogy, those with the degree may not be hired because of a lack of graduate nursing focus (King et al., 2020). Overlooking the EdD prepared nurse may further result in a nurse educator base that lacks the competencies needed to provide quality, learner-centered education. The lack of pedagogical knowledge, teaching experience, and support in many schools of nursing can make teaching a disappointing and frustrating experience, leading to nurse educators leaving the educational field. Students may encounter educators who are unfamiliar with academic responsibilities and teaching modalities creating a poor student learning experience. This may also send the message to nurses just entering their career that academia is not a viable career option in the future.

### **Lack of Role Recognition**

The role descriptions, positions, and titles used for nurse educators can vary widely according to their function, purpose and setting, leading to potential confusion among employers, nurses, and the public. Hospital based clinical educators may primarily serve to support nursing practice of staff nurses at the bedside, serve in a preceptor role to facilitate transition of new nurses, or may serve as nursing staff professional development educators (Jean & White, 2019). Nurse educators serving in academic roles within nursing education institutions prepare prelicensure, advanced practice, and research nurses for professional roles in healthcare. Although these roles may appear different, there are commonalities in the special knowledge and skills required to assess learning needs, design, and deliver evidence-informed curriculum, and evaluate program and learner outcomes.

The unique knowledge and skill set required to be an effective nurse educator is often overlooked, as the role lacks recognition as an advanced practice specialty and lacks consistent educational requirements. Additionally, nurses experience perceived barriers to entering an academic nurse educator role and often lack clarity of role expectations. Bagley et al. (2018) explored the perceptions of nursing clinicians considering becoming nurse educators and found that nurses were interested in sharing their experience, shaping new nurses, and watching the professional growth inherent in a teaching role. However, nursing clinicians perceived barriers related to the extended time needed to obtain the necessary degree, financial costs of further education, and uncertainty over making a career change. Furthermore, the widespread agreement among nursing education stakeholders that there is a need for

increasing diversity of the nursing workforce needs to be taken into consideration (Rosseter, 2023). Increasing diversity of nurse educators across a broad base of experiences, culture, education, and worldview can create stronger nursing programs and facilitate diversity and cultural humility in nursing students. The Bagley et al. (2018) study and the importance of diversifying the nurse educator workforce further supports the need for collaborative engagement among professional nursing organizations to address the barriers to equitable, inclusive, and accessible nurse educator preparation.

### **Wage Gap**

Another factor leading to the shortage of nurse educators relates to wages earned. Nurses with advanced practice certification who work in the clinical setting are paid higher salaries than most nurse educators. AACN reports the average salary across the country for a master-prepared professor in schools of nursing at \$87,325, while the average salary for advanced practice registered nurse roles is \$120,000 (Rosseter, 2022). Existing ANEs are assigned greater workloads to mitigate the loss of educators through retirement, including those returning to the clinical practice environment. This encourages nurse educators to turn away from teaching and remain or return to clinical practice where there is higher compensation. Some states have addressed this by implementing innovative ideas, such as providing tax deductions as an incentive for clinical nurse educators (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2021). Professional nursing organizations need to advocate to reduce the financial burden of entering the role as a nurse educator.

Professional organizations that set standards and support nursing education recognize the impact of nurse educator shortages and have worked in different ways to address the recruitment and funding of nurses interested in nursing education; however, more action is needed. Bakewell-Sachs et al. (2022) describe the importance of academic practice partnerships, and the need for a revised paradigm in exploring avenues for relieving the nurse educator shortage. Professional nursing organizations are well positioned to combine resources and leverage their strengths to develop consistent standards for the nurse educator role, advocate for funding of programs, and study ways to bring legitimacy to the nurse educator role as a valued nursing specialty. Strategic collaboration is necessary for designing a multi-modal solution that will combine efforts to bring clarity to the role of the nurse educator, delineate nurse educator qualifications, and reduce the barriers to recruitment and retention of nurses interested in a career as a nurse educator.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify ways that nursing organizations can address this issue by answering the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How can professional nursing organizations support the specialty of nursing education?

RQ2: What strategies can professional nursing organizations implement to address the ANE shortage?

**Methods**

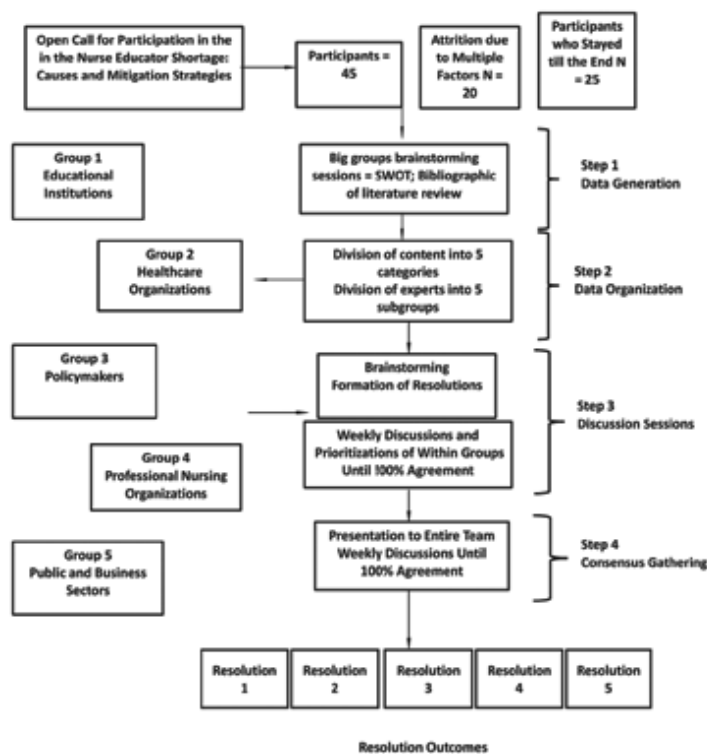
**Design**

This research used a qualitative design to gather evidence to answer the two stated RQs. A modified nominal group technique (NGT) was used to guide data generation, organization, and consensus. The NGT is a formal approach often used when conducting research among health and consumer groups to gather ideas and arrive at a consensus (Allen et al., 2013; Manera et al. 2019; Mullen et al., 2021; Olsen, 2019). There are many variations in the steps used in the NGT; however, for this research, data generation, data organization, discussion and prioritization, and consensus were the four steps implemented. (Atkins et al., 2023; Mullen et al., 2021; Manera et al., 2019; Olsen, 2019; Allen et al., 2013). IRB approval was obtained from Adelphi University under exempt status.

**Sample**

A professional online community platform for nurse educators was used to recruit participants from across the United States. Participants were all nurse educators, many of whom either hold current or previous administrative roles in healthcare or educational organizations, and many of whom continue to work clinically while holding positions as ANEs. Implied consent was based on attendance in all of the meetings and completion of the research. Twenty-five participants met all inclusion criteria.

**Figure 1**  
*Schematic Representation of the Nominal Group Technique Method Used*



**Procedures**

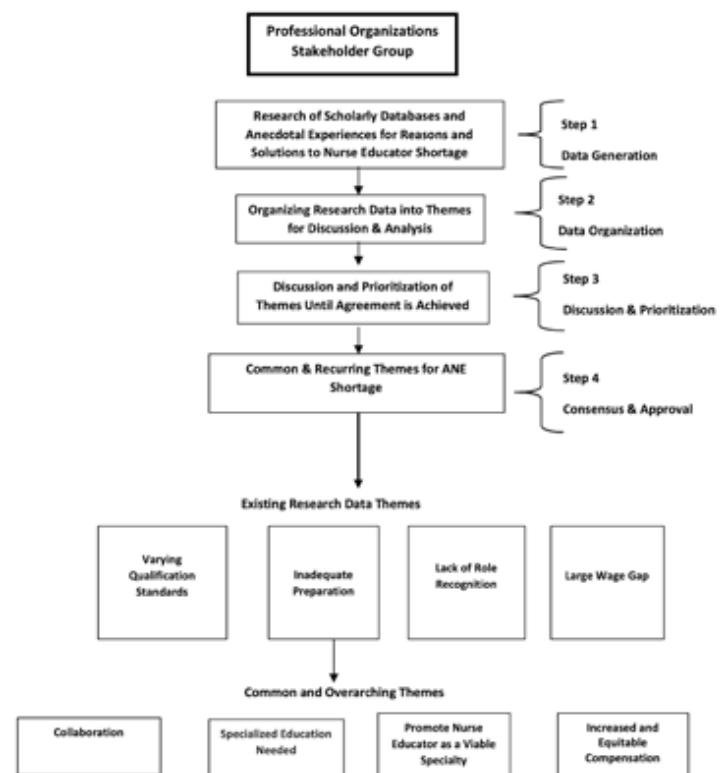
The four steps of the modified NGT were completed over the course of multiple meetings held via Zoom. The data generation phase consisted of a thorough review of the literature using scholarly databases. A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis and an annotated bibliography were created to organize the research data generated during step one. The relevance of five stakeholder groups mentioned in the introduction of this current research became evident.

The subgroup on professional nursing organizations discussed and analyzed research data pertinent to this stakeholder group. Once this was completed, the group discussed and analyzed the data again until each member of the entire group was in 100% agreement about the themes that emerged. The members of this subcommittee met each week virtually and worked collaboratively using Google Docs throughout the month of June 2023.

**Results**

To answer the two proposed research questions, the professional organization subgroup applied the modified NGT to generate four overarching themes. These themes include collaboration with healthcare agencies, public entities, and federal and state agencies, recognition that ANEs require specialized training, promotion of the nurse educator as a viable specialty within the nursing profession and lobbying for increased compensation. Professional nursing organizations can work collaboratively to alleviate the nurse educator shortage in multifaceted ways to address the lack of academic nurse educators.

**Figure 2**  
*Process of Generating Common Themes Used by the Professional Organizations Stakeholder Group*



## Discussion

Research outcomes demonstrate that professional nursing organizations should establish a collaborative taskforce to identify coordinated strategies at the national, state, and local levels (NACNEP, 2021; National Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers, 2022). Richter et al. (2020) and Satoh et al. (2020) strongly promote the ANE role as a nursing specialty. Bakewell-Sachs et al. (2022) recognize the specialized education needed for an ANE. Byrne et al. (2022) prioritized lobbying for increased financial compensation for academic nurse educators.

## Collaboration

A collaborative task force working together at the national, state, and local levels to address the academic nurse educator shortage is a key component to alleviating the shortage of nurse educators. Nursing schools nationwide are experiencing a shortage of full-time and part-time nurse educators, with a reported 8.8% national nurse faculty vacancy rate (AACN, 2022). *Action Now!* is a notable coalition in Washington state that has been dedicated to addressing the shortage of nurse educators at community and technical colleges (Aragon et al., 2020). This advocacy group consists of members from influential organizations in the nursing field, such as the Washington Center for Nursing, the Washington Board of Nursing, and the Council on Nursing Education in Washington State (Aragon et al., 2020). Through collaboration, these organizations were able to attain a 26.5% increase in nurse educator salaries through designated state funding.

NACNEP has made multiple recommendations to address the nurse educator shortage with the most updated report being in 2017. To tackle the challenges experienced by the nurse education system, these recommendations include creation of a national center to develop and advocate for best practices in nurse educator academic preparation, data collection initiatives to assess current nurse educators, partnerships between academia and practice settings to enhance collaboration and create opportunities, advocate for uniform requirements in becoming a nurse educator, improving the image of the ANE role, and developing distance learning programs to enhance accessibility and flexibility for nurse educators seeking additional training and opportunities (NACNEP, 2021).

## Specialized Education Needed

Overall, nurse educators play a vital role in shaping the future of nursing by preparing competent and skilled nurses who can provide safe and quality care to patients. Their dedication to facilitating learning, embracing leadership roles, and engaging in scholarly activities is essential for the continuous improvement of nursing education (Byrne et al., 2022). Regardless of the educational setting, individuals pursuing full or part-time educator roles in nursing education should have additional preparation in the art and science of teaching and learning. This is even more important in the current changing landscape in nursing education which requires the academic nurse educator to adopt a new paradigm for nursing education (Kavanaugh, 2021). The move to competency-based education with the recently approved AACN Essentials (Giddens et al., 2022) and the next generation NCLEX

with an emphasis on clinical judgment (Sherrill, 2020) are recent changes that require advanced preparation for the nurse educator. This includes acquiring knowledge in pedagogy, curriculum development and its implementation, as well as student assessment (Jackson et al., 2008). According to Jackson et al. (2008), “the science of learning drives teaching-learning methodologies in nursing education” (p. 3). This additional preparation in teaching and learning can be integrated into formal coursework as part of a clinical focused graduate program, or it can be completed separately from a graduate degree (Summers, 2017).

There are multiple routes ANEs may take to pursue their chosen career. They can choose MSN, MSN-ED, EdD, PhD, or DNP; and each route brings value to the practice and science of nursing education (Oermann & Kardong-Edgren, 2018). Not all educational paths, however, provide the pedagogical knowledge required for the role. Dickerson and Durkin (2022) have noted that both the PhD and the DNP do not adequately prepare their graduates for the role of academic nurse educators. Similarly, Byrne et al. (2022) considered the EdD as the path to nursing education. Whatever educational pathway an ANE takes should consistently include pedagogy, research, and practical coursework. Clarity among professional organizations in the corresponding requirements and qualifications will support nursing educational programs to design nursing education curriculum both as a nursing specialty and as a component within graduate program curriculum.

There are specialized competencies that are required of academic nurse educators prior to teaching nursing students. These skills enable the ANE to design curriculum, apply theories of learning, use evidence-informed learning strategies, as well as implement multiple levels and types of learning assessment. In addition to these skills, an advanced understanding of ways to leverage pedagogies prepares nurse graduates to deliver safe, effective, and quality care. With advanced and specialized education, nurse educators can effectively convey theoretical knowledge and clinical expertise to students. This will lead to a learner-centered experience resulting in clinically competent and safer practicing nurses.

## Promote Nurse Educator as Viable Specialty

The NLN recognizes the unique expertise of nurse educators through its nurse educator competencies and its three nurse educator certifications (Certified Nurse Educator, Certified Academic Clinical Nurse Educator, and Certified Novice Nurse Educator), which allow the ANE to demonstrate practice excellence (Halstead, 2018). As a professional nursing organization, the NLN acknowledges the ANE role as a nursing specialty that requires specialized knowledge and skills in order to cultivate clinically competent professional nurses. The nurse educator role, however, is often not promoted as a specialty within the nursing profession. To become an ANE, one must earn at least a graduate degree, which is comparable to expectations for advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs); yet certification as an educator is not required to practice as an ANE at most educational institutions (Kilpatrick et al., 2021; Wall, 2006). This fact contributes to the lack of recognition of the role of the ANE as

an advanced specialty practice and often leads to nurses entering the educator role with extensive clinical knowledge but little preparation in pedagogy (Keating et al., 2021; Summers, 2017). The lack of pedagogical knowledge and teaching preparation can lead to challenges with ANE retention and diminished quality in nursing programs (Summers, 2017). The advanced education and specialized skills required to practice in the nurse educator role support the acknowledgement that the nurse educator embodies the concept of advanced practice and should be acknowledged as such. This highlights the importance of nursing professional organizations collaboratively recognizing the ANE role as an advanced practice specialty within nursing and furthermore, promoting the specialty early on in a nurse's career.

The role of the nurse educator is often not visible or understood by the public (Keating et al., 2021). Promoting the role of the nurse educator can be achieved through various venues, including continuing education offerings, educational scholarships, nursing education research grants, and public relations campaigns. Facilitating nursing student attendance at nursing education conferences can expose students to the specialty earlier in their careers. Furthermore, the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) has an opportunity to promote the nurse educator role as a specialty. It is also important to provide ANEs with the skills needed to identify and mentor nursing students who show interest in the educator role. Nurse educators are essential to preparing a competent future nursing workforce, and a collaborative approach to promoting the role of the ANE as a respected nursing specialty will help to address the nurse educator shortage.

### Increased and Equitable Compensation

One challenge faced by academic nurse educators is significantly lower pay when compared to the pay of nurses in practice settings that led to difficulty recruiting and retaining nurse educators (NACNEP, 2021). In the state of Washington, approximately 40% of ANEs are dissatisfied with their pay (Aragon et al., 2020), and "...nurse educator salaries continue to be less than 75% of practice salaries..." (NACNEP, 2021, p. 11). By collaborating and working together, the coalition called *Action Now!* successfully secured additional state funding for nurse educators through legislative efforts aimed at increasing salaries. This achievement has had a positive impact on the remuneration of nurse educators within that state, making the academic career path more attractive and sustainable.

In addition to the immediate gains in salary improvement, the coalition's efforts have resulted in the development of a comprehensive blueprint for future endeavors. *Action Now!* can serve as a guide for policymakers and stakeholders interested in further advancing the nursing education system nationally (Aragon et al., 2020). Current and prospective faculty have stated their discontent about salaries that a win in the state of Washington may be an impetus for increasing the number of academic nurse educators.

### Implications for Nursing

The current recommendations, which expand on previous recommendations made by NACNEP, provide a course of action for professional nursing organizations to address the nurse educator

shortage. Schools of nursing, healthcare agencies, individuals, and other stakeholders must collaborate to establish multi-faceted and coordinated strategies to address the nurse educator shortage. It is essential that professional nursing organizations address the nurse faculty shortage in order to attract nurses with consistent and adequate preparation to the specialty. Doing so will enhance the quality of nursing education and will contribute to the alleviation of the nursing practice workforce shortage.

### Conclusion

The shortage of ANEs is significantly reducing the capacity of nursing programs to admit more nursing applicants. Unresolved, this shortage will continue to worsen the ongoing demand for nurses. The current study recognizes professional nursing organizations as one stakeholder that can provide solutions for the ANE shortage through a collaborative and unified effort. The research sought to answer the questions of how professional nursing organizations can support the specialty of nursing education and identify strategies to address the shortage. Nurse educators are essential in preparing the next generation of nurses. Results of this current research serve as a foundation for nurse educators and leaders to advocate collectively for the enhancement of the academic nurse educator role on the local, state, and national levels.

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