

Strengthening the Licensed Practical Nurse Pipeline in Massachusetts: Equitable and Supportive Recommendations

February 13, 2025

Submitted by the Student Pipeline Committee, as part of the Nursing Council of Workforce Sustainability

Executive Summary

To effectively address the ongoing healthcare staffing shortages, especially within long-term care and home health settings, it is crucial to invest in and support the development of the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) pipeline. This report outlines essential recommendations for strengthening the LPN pipeline through targeted investments in wraparound support services aimed at increasing LPN graduation rates and fostering a more diverse healthcare workforce.

The primary objective is to substantially increase the number of LPNs and provide comprehensive support for LPNs pursuing advanced education, including transitioning to Registered Nurse (RN) roles or other advanced healthcare careers. It is crucial to understand that, to diversify the workforce, clearly identified stages of career development are necessary to offer pathways that enable individuals to grow skills in a phased approach, leading to increased salaries while considering socioeconomic realities and needs.

Introduction

The healthcare system in Massachusetts is currently facing a confluence of challenges, including persistent staffing shortages, increasing patient demands, and evolving care needs. Within this complex landscape, LPNs play a vital role, particularly in providing essential care in long-term care and home health environments (CHIA Massachusetts Health Care Workforce Survey, 2023). This report builds upon earlier work, specifically referencing the "LPN Structural Barriers Recommendation" (NCWS, 2025). While this previous work focused on structural changes, this report will focus primarily on the support services necessary to help students successfully complete LPN training. Together, these reports seek to create a more comprehensive approach to developing the LPN workforce.

Understanding Cultural Integration Constraints

Several key issues significantly impact the success of LPN students and the overall strength of the LPN pipeline.

Cultural barriers are a major concern, as students may face challenges related to language differences, varying perceptions of authority, religious obligations, and family responsibilities. (Markey et al., 2023). Students from diverse cultural backgrounds may feel uncomfortable questioning authority or advocating for themselves, which can affect their participation and engagement in the classroom. Hesitancy to ask questions can result in poor comprehension of content and reduced skill and knowledge development.

Cultural differences may also impact students' perceptions of time and punctuality, creating challenges with meeting deadlines and attendance requirements (Market et al., 2023). In addition, there may be varying expectations around professional conduct. These differences may create significant challenges for students without an aligned expectation regarding time and punctuality, which extends more seriously to the workplace. Lack of assessment of these differences, and a proactive plan to mitigate these issues, may contribute to learning challenges that impact knowledge, retention, and the ability of the student to successfully complete the program and transition into practice.

In addition, many students experience a cultural stigma around healthcare careers, as some cultures may not view nursing as a desirable profession, especially for men (Teresa-Morales et al., 2022). It is important to acknowledge these cultural differences to promote equity in access to education.

Discrimination and bias represent another significant barrier for LPN students. Students may face instances of implicit bias and outright discrimination in both classroom and clinical settings, leading to feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging (Hu et al., 2024). These experiences can create “imposter syndrome,” which can lead to students feeling as if they don't belong in predominantly white environments. This demonstrates the necessity of creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for LPN students.

Structured Mentorship and Support

There is a general need for formalized mentorship support for LPN students. Recognizing the need for student support, not just at the LPN level, several colleges and universities throughout the commonwealth have developed student support programs. These programs can provide a framework so that efforts may be duplicated on larger scale.

Simmons University offers 24/7 student assistance for guidance and emotional support (Simmons University, 2024), The school also established a robust program for students that strives to meet physical needs such as clothing, food, and housing access, among others. UMass Boston established the Clinical Leadership Collaborative for Diversity in Nursing which provides hands-on training for participants as well as career opportunities (Mass General Brigham, 2023).

These programs can provide guidance and support, particularly in navigating cultural and academic challenges. LPN students have complicated needs given their profiles and targeted

support is needed for both the students and the faculties. Mentors should be able to guide students through the challenges specific to the background of the LPN students, ranging from academic support to navigating cultural barriers. Additionally, it is important to support the faculties and train them to provide better advice and guidance to LPN students facing those challenges. Furthermore, mentorship and support services must be expanded and funded to more appropriately address the expanded needs of the student population.

English Speakers of Other Languages

Many LPN students face a range of complex challenges as English speakers of other languages (ESOL). The specialized nature of academic and medical terminology can be difficult to translate, and many programs may not be familiar with effective models of language acquisition. Current curriculums often do not adequately incorporate language development principles and are not routinely evaluated to consider ways to integrate language development as part of the content. A specific requirement for curriculums to consider culturally sensitive content is not standard for nursing programs. Furthermore, faculty may lack the necessary training to support ESOL students and create curriculums that incorporate language development and culturally sensitive content. For example, the use of case studies may focus on situations or concepts that may or may not be used or demonstrated in another culture, i.e., the use of slipping on a “throw rug” or identification of family relationships that may look different from one culture to another.

ESOL students may encounter difficulties with test-taking, highlighting the need for accommodations like bilingual dictionaries. A student's self-efficacy regarding their English language skills is not typically assessed, and programs should develop methods to enhance self-efficacy through evidence-based frameworks. Finally, translation tools are often lacking in classroom settings and real-time learning situations and may not be encouraged as part of the learning experience.

Digital Literacy

Another significant concern is the varying levels of digital literacy among LPN students. Many lack the core skills needed to navigate, evaluate, and communicate information effectively using digital technologies, especially in the context of academic digital skills, such as using learning platforms, hyperlinks, and sharing files. Non-traditional learners often face challenges with the technological approach to education, lacking adequate equipment and consistent access to the internet. Gaps in assessment and support further compound these challenges, as digital literacy is not evaluated during the application process, and expectations for digital literacy skills are not clearly communicated. The absence of specified digital literacy competencies and support during pre-admission also contributes to the issue.

Limited Sources of Income During Studies

LPN students often face significant financial obstacles, especially caregivers who cannot afford to lose income while pursuing their education. This is exacerbated when the student is the sole earner of the household. Learn and Earn Programs are important but not prevalent. These valuable programs allow employees to reduce their work hours without sacrificing their income

and health insurance. Despite strong support for these programs, funding remains a major challenge. Expanding structured apprenticeship programs and Learn-and-Earn opportunities—where students receive tuition coverage and a living stipend—can significantly enhance the appeal of the LPN pathway, attracting more individuals into the nursing workforce.

Social Drivers of Academic Success

Finally, social drivers of academic success (SDAS) present interconnected challenges that must be addressed. Structural barriers, like limited program seats, insufficient faculty compensation, and limited access to vocational programs, must be addressed alongside support programs that target SDOH.

The ***high cost of living and housing insecurity*** in Massachusetts (MA) creates substantial obstacles, with many LPN students at risk of eviction. MA is one of the most expensive states to live in and housing is a main driver of the high cost of living, with a lack of affordable housing options for students. According to the MA State of Affordable Housing Dashboard 2023, affordable rental units only cover 13% of the demand for those with an income of less than \$40K per year, plus availability is a challenge. Only 59 out of 2,297 (2.6%) affordable housing properties in MA have availability or a short waitlist. This underscores the necessity for housing navigators to assist students with securing housing.

Childcare also poses a considerable challenge, given the non-traditional schedules of many LPN programs and the lack of affordable childcare options during those hours. Approximately 60% of MA residents live in a childcare desert (>3 children per licensed childcare slot) and even if there are childcare facilities nearby, they likely do not offer extended hours and transportation solutions to and from the facilities. If you are lucky enough to find a facility, another mounting challenge is the cost. The average annual cost for childcare programs is \$15-20K—far exceeding what is able to be covered by an LPN salary. Although MA offers childcare subsidies for low-income families, waitlists for these programs range from several months to over a year. Subsidies are often limited to individuals who meet specific income thresholds, which may exclude some LPN students who work part-time or at lower wages but do not qualify for assistance. Many students, especially from immigrant communities, are often unaware of available support resources.

Reliable and affordable transportation is also an important factor affecting students. Approximately 47% of people in Massachusetts rely on some form of public transportation, one of the highest percentages in the country (Lisinski, 2024). Public transportation has been such a challenge in Massachusetts, especially in major metropolitan areas, that Governor Maura Healey assembled a Transportation Finance Task Force to address mounting concerns as well as address the realities of significant transportation gaps and challenges (Dimino, 2024).

How do these transportation challenges affect students? Students living outside of urban areas may have little to no access to public transportation. Private transportation comes at an additional and higher cost that many students likely struggle to pay. Additionally, the committee spoke to several nursing school instructors who noted how important it was to place nursing students in clinical settings that can be accessed via public transportation. This can be a limiting

factor in education. Another challenge is the availability of clinical placement spots in non-urban areas.

Addressing these SDAS is critical to ensuring equitable access to LPN education. These challenges affect not only LPNs but can also impact nursing as a whole, as a lack of diversity in the nursing workforce have been seen to contribute to higher morbidity and mortality rates among underrepresented minority groups (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2023).

Recommendations For Potential Solutions

1. Addressing Cultural Integration Constraints (Barriers)

Lack of effective cultural integration into a program can significantly impact the academic and professional progression of LPN students. Factors such as language differences, unfamiliar educational norms, and cultural stigmas about healthcare careers create barriers to success. To address these issues, we recommend using a framework to determine the appropriate level of support the LPN programs can provide to help the students overcome such cultural barriers.

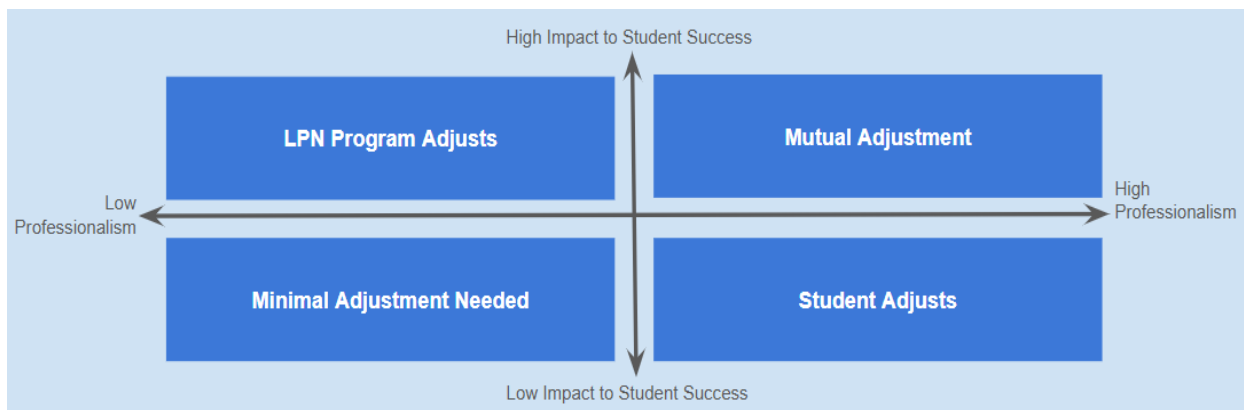


Figure 1: Cultural barrier response framework

The cultural barrier response framework is a 2x2 grid displaying the degree of professionalism and the degree of impact on student success for each cultural barrier. Depending on which quadrant the cultural barrier falls on the grid, the team provided guidelines on recommended adjustments to support the students best. Based on the nature of the specific cultural barrier, the best way to overcome it sometimes would require effort from both the LPN programs and the students themselves. However, sometimes it might require more accommodation from the LPN programs to cater to the needs of the students, and sometimes it might require the students to make changes in their behavior for their benefit.

Figure 2 plots the most common cultural barriers on the framework to illustrate the exercise each LPN program can perform for their students' most prevalent cultural barriers. Based on where each cultural barrier fell on the framework, the LPN programs can brainstorm the best solutions they can provide to address those barriers. To target solutions based on each quadrant, support resources need to be provided at the organizational level, as well as at the regional/state and national levels.

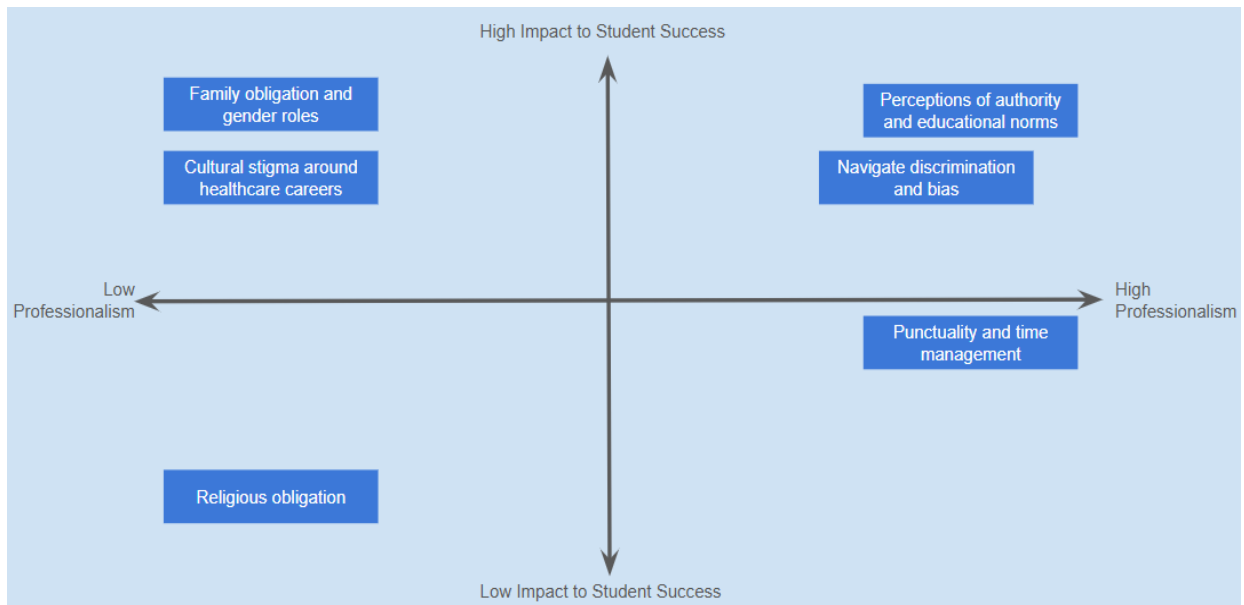


Figure 2: Most common cultural barriers LPN students encounter

There are countless approaches to addressing cultural barriers that may exist for students in LPN programs across the commonwealth. If the cultural barriers need mutual adjustments from both the LPN programs and the students, some opportunities for expanded cultural integration may include:

1. Instituting faculty training and education.
2. Pairing students with culturally aware mentors to provide guidance, foster belonging, and build resilience.
3. Implementing organizational policies to address bias and discrimination in academic and clinical settings, ensuring accountability.
4. Enacting mandatory cultural competence training to ensure educators understand the diverse needs of LPN students and foster inclusivity.
5. Evaluating and supporting professional behavior needs (e.g., interview) for equity.
6. Offering preceptor training and education on the different culture's perceptions of authority and the various cultural norms of each culture.
7. Providing receptor mentoring and coaching to enable preceptors to continuously improve their interactions with the students.
8. On a national level, advocating for the inclusion of professional expectations of an LPN, not only for skill competency but also for educational norms and anti-discrimination.

If the cultural barriers need primarily adjustments from the students, LPN programs should consider:

1. Utilizing academic coaches to educate students on the expectations of their behavior.
2. Providing external resources and support to educate the students on behavioral change.
3. Phasing deadlines into staged milestones, if applicable, and tracking the student's progress throughout the timeline from assignment to submission.
4. Developing or enforcing organizational policies to mitigate with clear implications if violated.

Finally, if the cultural barriers need primarily adjustments from the LPN programs, the following strategies may be effective:

1. Targeting outreach and messaging to directly address student concerns around culture stigma, family obligation, income expectation, etc.
2. Implementing diverse hiring practices to ensure a more representative faculty, providing leadership role models, fostering inclusivity, and addressing cultural stigmas that may impact students' perceptions of nursing as a career.
3. Providing mentorship and guidance to new students to combat cultural stigma.
4. Creating and maintaining a culture of acceptance and a welcoming environment.
5. Creating guidelines and structures on the program set up to increase the pipeline of diverse instructors.
6. Allocating funding to support the development of diverse instructor pipelines.

2. English Speakers of Other Languages and Digital Literacy

Many LPN students face challenges with ESOL and digital literacy, which require specific interventions. Language and learning models are crucial, as medical terminology and academic concepts may not be easily translated. Faculty and staff need training to effectively support ESOL students and integrate language development into the curriculum. Curricula should be evaluated to consider ways to include language development, and translation tools should be readily available. Assessing and supporting students' self-efficacy with the English language is also important. Additionally, programs must address digital literacy challenges by providing orientation to academic technology and ensuring access to equipment and the internet.

Programs should:

1. Create a statewide task force of ESOL teachers, language development specialists, and nurse faculty to provide written and classroom education for faculty.
2. Develop an inventory of free resources to support ESOL and language development in curriculum for LPN faculty to increase educational competency in these areas.
3. Determine tools for faculty to assess language skills and self-efficacy.
4. Consider opportunities or processes for translation during test-taking.
5. Provide EOSL support classes and resources for students, and toolkits for programs and faculty.
6. Develop regional workshops and web-based resources for faculty development.
7. Form committees to evaluate language development and ESOL principles in the LPN curriculum.
8. Provide in-person application support, digital literacy assessments, and community resources to enhance digital literacy.

3. Learn and Earn Programs

"Learn and Earn" programs are crucial for growing the LPN workforce by providing a pathway for individuals to gain valuable skills and credentials without sacrificing income. They allow prospective LPNs to receive hands-on training and classroom education while maintaining employment in healthcare settings, making education more accessible and attracting a more diverse pool of candidates. These programs, which can include apprenticeships, also enable

students to keep their health insurance as full-time employees. The state should consider increasing funding opportunities to support these initiatives.

Additionally, as previously noted, the committee strongly recommends expanding mentorship and wrap-around support for students. There are several models in the commonwealth that could be replicated on a larger scale and perhaps serve multiple entities.

4. Social Drivers of Academic Success

Addressing the SDAS is essential to support LPN students. Structural barriers, such as the number of seats in nursing programs, compensation for nursing faculty, and access to vocational-technical programs must be addressed. Support programs should address issues such as affordable housing, childcare, and access to reliable and affordable public transportation.

Housing

Housing insecurity is a major concern for LPN students, as Massachusetts is one of the most expensive states to live in. To combat this, the state should offer housing navigators, streamline the housing application process, and prioritize healthcare workers on housing waitlists. Additionally, organizations should provide housing options for staff close to campus.

Childcare

Childcare is another critical issue, as many LPN programs require non-traditional class and clinical hours, and childcare facilities often have limited hours and availability. The cost of childcare can be prohibitive, especially considering the average LPN salary. Many families also face long waitlists for subsidized care, and a lack of awareness about available resources can be a significant barrier. To address these challenges, the state should:

1. Push for LPN didactic hours to be asynchronous online or hybrid.
2. Fund childcare centers on campus.
3. Allow for multiple payees per childcare voucher and for family/friend care.
4. Encourage local long-term care facilities to offer on-site childcare.
5. Reserve childcare spots in advance and institute child watch centers on campus.
6. Create asynchronous learning programs to minimize students' on-campus requirements.
7. Revisit the student deferral policy to account for childcare flexibilities.

Transportation

Transportation is a limiting factor for many students. There are no easy, straightforward solutions to this. The committee strongly supports the initiatives of the Healey to address public transportation concerns as well as increase funding to improve access to public transportation.

It should be noted that the one cost neutral intervention is to include transportation as part of a student's academic planning. Additionally, transportation should be considered as a key factor when assigning nursing students to clinical placements.

Conclusion

The disparity between student needs and available resources continues to widen, particularly in Massachusetts, where only 34% of community college students graduate within six years. For many, the challenge is not academic ability but the struggle to balance education with life's responsibilities, compounded by financial hardships and social barriers (Carapezza, 2025). These challenges are even more pronounced among practical nursing students, who often serve as family caregivers and navigate unique cultural and socioeconomic obstacles.

Structural improvements in Massachusetts' educational system are essential, but without comprehensive support services, these efforts will fall short. Addressing cultural, financial, and social barriers is critical to ensuring that students, especially those in high-demand fields like nursing, have clear, accessible pathways to education and career advancement.

The **Massachusetts Nursing Council on Workforce Sustainability (NCWS)** remains committed to advancing **inclusive, equitable, and sustainable** solutions that strengthen the healthcare workforce. While these recommendations require **significant investment**, NCWS is prepared to collaborate with organizations and agencies to **evaluate programs, identify costs, and explore funding opportunities** to ensure meaningful, long-term impact.

The *Evaluation of Support Services for LPNs Recommendation* proposed by the Student Pipeline Committee was presented at the NCWS meeting on February 13, 2025. The NCWS council members voted to support the recommendation, and it passed.

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