



Recommendations for Articulation Agreements between Educational Institutions for Nursing Students in the Commonwealth

Prepared by the NCWS Student Pipeline Committee

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Executive Summary

The current state of healthcare in Massachusetts highlights the critical need for a robust and readily available nursing workforce. This demand is driven by various factors, including an aging population, increasing chronic health conditions, and the need for comprehensive care across diverse settings. Consequently, nursing schools are under significant pressure to produce well-prepared graduates who can effectively contribute to the healthcare system immediately upon entering the workforce.

To ensure the nursing educational pipeline is free from unnecessary administrative burdens, there must be seamless educational mobility for students. Nursing students should be able to attain higher levels of nursing education without undue financial burden or repetitive coursework. Additionally, any nursing student or practicing nurse should have the opportunity to advance their education to the highest level desired.

Since the rise of junior colleges in the 1900s, academia has adopted transfer agreements. These agreements, later known as articulation agreements, aided students who wished to complete their bachelor's degree or advance their education in a particular field. Such articulation agreements have been a part of the academic fabric of Massachusetts since the late 1970's.

With the increasing healthcare workforce crisis and a renewed focus on the nursing pipeline, the Student Pipeline Committee of the Nursing Council on Workforce Sustainability, was tasked with reviewing the landscape of articulation agreements related to nursing education within Massachusetts. Additionally, the committee was tasked with considering if a mandated or statewide articulation agreement could increase academic mobility for students seeking to further their nursing education.

The committee's work was exhaustive and relied upon academic experts and institutions across the commonwealth. The committee focused its work solely on nursing education and did not consider any other disciplines or degree pathways.

During the committee's research, it was apparent that articulation had long been considered valuable within the commonwealth as evidenced by significant work done in the past to ensure seamless articulation. As with any review, several opportunities for improvement were observed. In the opinion of the committee, these improvements, when combined with the previous groundwork for educational articulation within the commonwealth, have the potential to further enhance nursing education across the state and empower students to pursue advanced nursing education.

Background

The committee aimed to comprehensively understand educational mobility and articulation and their impact on nursing. Additionally, the committee expanded its focus beyond registered nurses alone to include licensed practical nurses. While much of the existing articulation documentation emphasizes the transition from associate's to bachelor's degree education, the committee also incorporated diploma and vocational education to create a more inclusive overview that equally considers all components of the nursing workforce.

Mobility Agreements Vs. Articulation Agreements

In January 1997, the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Nursing (MA BORN) approved an update to their 1989 [Position Statement: Educational Mobility for Nurses](#).

Through this position statement, the MA BORN codified their support of the development of relationships that support efficient educational advancement across the multiple levels of nursing education in the Commonwealth.

Complementary to this position statement is the regulatory requirement that MA BORN approved requiring nursing education programs to have a *policy* for educational mobility as described in 244 CMR 6.06(3)(b). The Educational Mobility Statement is only a position statement and therefore makes no allowances for any articulation nor transfer of credit. Rather, there are factual statements with the recommendation for policies regarding mobility being developed at each school of nursing education.

Mobility between colleges and universities of nursing education has traditionally been accomplished through articulation agreements. Although beneficial to some students, articulation agreements do have some limitations. For example:

- Articulation agreements exist between individual institutions with the intent to make the transfer between institutions efficient.
- Articulation agreements do not guarantee that any student seeking transfer will be admitted, only that credits will transfer once admitted.
- An articulation agreement may stipulate that a certain number of credits will be awarded for prior coursework if the course was completed with a certain grade.
- The articulation agreement generally does not exempt the student seeking to transfer from certain other requirements; for example, requiring a licensed practical nurse to demonstrate the ability to perform basic nursing skills for admission to an associate's degree registered nurse program.

- Some articulation agreements do have clauses that give preferential consideration for admission, but these are also limited by class space and other factors.

Types of Articulation Agreements

Articulation agreements facilitate enhanced access to baccalaureate nursing education by promoting educational mobility and seamless credit transfer, particularly between associate and baccalaureate programs. Essentially, articulation agreements prevent the loss of student credit with transfer from one institution to another. In the United States, articulation agreements generally fit into three categories: statewide, mandated, and individual.

- Twenty-four states have statewide articulation agreements in place. Statewide agreements are in place for all public and some private institutions. Typically, statewide articulation agreements apply to all programs within a state's university and community college system, not just for nursing education¹.
- Only eight states have mandated articulation agreements. In these states, state laws regulate the transfer of credit between public institutions².
- Eighteen states have individual articulation agreements. These agreements are completed on a school-to-school basis where no blanket agreements exist².

Currently, in Massachusetts, individual articulation agreements are crafted between colleges and universities. Each educational institution typically maintains multiple such agreements with various other schools. This allows the host school to tailor each agreement to meet specific needs, especially along specific learning pathways or to meet needs among a population of students.

Individual articulation agreements lack uniformity across the commonwealth. Moreover, it's challenging to ascertain whether there are any instances of inequity related to articulation or its absence. For example, in a time of geographical mobility, a student from the western part of the commonwealth transferring to a university in the northeastern part of the commonwealth could face a situation where two schools, due to distance, may not have an articulation agreement in place.

Increasing Equity in Higher Education

There is a need to increase diversity both in the nursing workforce as well as in higher education. Community colleges and vocational and technical schools make nursing education more accessible to a diverse population by offering open enrollment, convenient locations, affordable tuition, financial aid, and student services. The community college system in Massachusetts serves the highest percentage of low-income students in higher education, as 28% of all Pell grant recipients in Massachusetts attend community colleges. Combined, these students receive more than \$90 million in Pell grant aid².

The community college and vocational and technical schools in Massachusetts serve more than 110,510 students across 15 institutions, with 92,210 students in credit courses². Students

¹ Source: <https://www.aacnnursing.org/news-data/fact-sheets/articulation-agreements>

² Source: <https://masscc.org/fast-facts/>

attending community colleges in Massachusetts accounted for 46% of undergraduate credit enrollments in FY22 and represented 38% of the students in the Massachusetts public higher education system in FY22². Since community college often serves as the first stop in the educational pipeline for nurses and other healthcare providers in the commonwealth, it is essential that healthcare and educational leaders across the state work together to make this process as seamless and equitable for the students wishing to continue working to an advanced degree.

Nursing Education Transfer Compact

To bolster the ranks of bachelor-prepared registered nurses (BSN) in Massachusetts, the Board of Higher Education adopted the Nursing Education Transfer Compact (NETC) in 2014. The NETC was designed to establish a seamless, cost-effective pathway for associate degree-prepared registered nurses (ADN) to attain their BSN. This initiative aimed to ensure credit transfer without duplication, optimizing the timeframe for completion.

The cornerstone components of the compact included unrestricted credit transfer and prioritized admissions to BSN programs at state universities and the University of Massachusetts (UMass) for Massachusetts ADN graduates. The comprehensive framework of the NETC was detailed in a ten-page document published in January 2014³.

MassTransfer

In the fall of 2014, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts initiated the development of MassTransfer agreements, establishing pathways from ADN to BSN for registered nurses in Massachusetts. These collaborative agreements encompassed community colleges, state universities, and UMass programs. These pathways were then integrated into the MassTransfer website.

The MassTransfer program was launched in 2009 as a website to help guide students through the process of transferring to a four-year college or university from a two-year institution or after completion of an associate degree. Through the MassTransfer platform, students can navigate the degree pathways leading to various universities from the community college where they completed their coursework.

Aiming to evaluate the efficacy of MassTransfer a decade after its launch, the NCWS Student Pipeline Committee sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of MassTransfer's functionality, highlighting its impact on nursing education. Under the guise of an ADN nurse searching to complete their BSN, the committee utilized the MassTransfer site to understand the various options available. Accessing the content was effortless, and the website's user-friendly interface provided valuable and easily comprehensible information.

Additionally, the committee spoke to MassTransfer staff to gain an understanding of the advantages as well as any challenges faced related to the NETC and the MassTransfer

³ Source: https://www.mass.edu/bhe/lib/documents/AAC/AAC14-27_Attachment_NursingEducationTransferCompact_FinalMotionandAttachment.pdf

process. The staff articulated the origins of the NETC and MassTransfer partnership, providing important details on the process behind the development.

Following a comprehensive assessment, the committee identified areas for enhancement within both the NETC and the MassTransfer process. When posing as an ADN nurse, it was noted that there were very few options on the MassTransfer website for BSN completion. Additionally, there were no options available at any University of Massachusetts (UMass) institution. This was especially concerning given UMass schools were part of the cornerstone of the NETC and MassTransfer concepts.

The committee also noted that student choices were limited to UMass institutions and state colleges and universities based on the structure and language of the NETC. No private schools were listed on the main MassTransfer website. Private schools in Massachusetts are part of the Massachusetts Guarantee which is like the modeled pathways in MassTransfer. The Massachusetts Guarantee can be accessed via a link on the MassTransfer website. However, students must go to individual school websites for full details. Additionally, the nursing educational pathway on MassTransfer is singular, only offering ADN to BSN options.

NETC and MassTransfer Recommendations

Recognizing the strengths inherent in the NETC and MassTransfer, the committee was enthusiastic about exploring recommendations aimed at further enriching these platforms. After meticulous evaluation and deliberation, the NCWS Student Pipeline Committee presents the following recommendations to enhance the NETC and MassTransfer.

1. Audit of the MassTransfer System

The NETC emphasizes the importance of providing graduates with a clear pathway to earning a BSN at both state universities and UMass schools (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, Nursing Education Transfer Compact, p. 2, 2014). However, the absence of UMass schools in the search results for ADN to BSN fulfillment on MassTransfer is worrisome. Additionally, the committee's searches returned limited results. Furthermore, some schools noted previous engagement with MassTransfer and were unaware that their programs were not being returned in searches.

The committee recommends that the Board of Higher Education conduct an audit of the utilization, membership, and potential opportunities within the MassTransfer website. Additionally, it suggests reviewing compliance with the NETC to determine specific barriers and why some state schools do not participate. The Board should disclose results of these audits to the public and leveraged to encourage broader participation in both the NETC and MassTransfer, particularly among state universities and UMass schools.

Finally, the Board should determine if certain financial incentives under the Commonwealth Commitment could potentially deter full participation in the NETC and MassTransfer.

2. *Expand MassTransfer to Include Private Colleges and Universities*

Since 2018, private colleges and universities in Massachusetts have consistently graduated more nursing students (ADN and BSN) annually compared to their public counterparts. This trend has seen private institutions consistently surpass public ones by several hundred nursing graduates each year.

Considering the present state of nursing workforce shortages, it's imperative to cultivate non-traditional collaborations that maximize workforce efficiency. Moreover, students should have access to all available opportunities, even those offered by private institutions. Expanding MassTransfer to include private institutions and enabling their participation in the NETC could potentially broaden opportunities for students and serve to enhance the nursing workforce.

The committee recommends that the NETC be expanded to include private colleges and universities. Furthermore, the committee recommends including these private institutions within the MassTransfer website. Pathways for nursing students should be mapped state, private, and UMass institutions.

3. *Create Multiple Nursing Pathways within MassTransfer*

Presently, MassTransfer exclusively focuses on facilitating the transition from ADN to BSN for nurses. However, this singular pathway overlooks a significant portion of the nursing workforce, particularly licensed practical nurses (LPNs) who may aspire to advance their education. LPNs constitute a valuable segment of the healthcare workforce and should be afforded the same opportunity with clearly mapped pathways for furthering their nursing education.

To bolster the nursing workforce and rectify disparities stemming from limited pathways, the committee advocates expanding the NETC and MassTransfer to encompass additional nursing routes, such as LPN to ADN and LPN to BSN pathways. This inclusive approach fosters a more equitable nursing environment and fosters greater diversity within the nursing workforce.

Stakeholder Considerations

Students are the primary stakeholders when it comes to articulation agreements. Both the cost and the time it takes to pursue higher education are prohibitive for students. Streamlining unnecessary or redundant courses may reduce both the expense and the amount of time it takes to get a degree. Additionally, it creates pipelines easier to understand and follow across the commonwealth. Hence, appropriate articulation at all levels of nursing education is essential.

The healthcare system is another key stakeholder. Healthcare needs nursing resources at the bedside caring for patients. This need is inclusive of all levels of nursing care. Additionally, to ensure sustainability in the nursing pipeline, it is essential that pathways for continued nursing education and career growth be unimpeded.

Finally, academic institutions are a key stakeholder and driver of articulation agreements and processes. The input of academic institutions is essential when developing an articulation plan,

whether it be for individual schools or on a larger, statewide basis. All academic institutions have the right to create a nursing degree pathway that adheres to the institution's vision and academic standards. Therefore, some differences in course and educational requirements for students are to be appreciated.

The purpose of articulation agreements is not to minimize the individuality of academic institutions. Rather, these agreements serve to create clear academic pathways and remove redundancies. Academic nursing leaders must be the primary source when considering any type of articulation agreement and will be best suited to advise on opportunities and potential pitfalls. This collaboration, however, must not only occur at the ADN to BSN level, but most more fully embrace every area and discipline of the nursing continuum if it is to be truly effective.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The nursing pipeline must be optimized and freed from any administrative or unnecessary barriers. This must occur at every level of the nursing continuum, including instances where nurses, at any level, wish to further their nursing education.

After exhaustive research, interviews, and discussions, the NCWS Student Pipeline Committee recognizes opportunities to improve articulation throughout the commonwealth. As noted previously, there are opportunities to improve the NETC and MassTransfer. In addition, the committee recommends the following:

1. Review of the Need for a Statewide Articulation Agreement

Articulation agreements alone are not enough to ensure unhindered movement within the nursing education continuum. However, they play a very important role. It is impossible to understand the benefits and challenges of the multiplicity of articulation agreements throughout the commonwealth. Additionally, with the effectiveness of private colleges and universities related to the nursing pipeline demonstrated, it is unclear if current articulation agreements disadvantage these institutions. Furthermore, the scope of articulation agreements focused only on baccalaureate education are limited and must be expanded.

A statewide articulation agreement could provide both uniformity and equity while helping to remove administrative barriers. Additionally, it could be tailored to include a larger portion of the nursing workforce pipeline. However, this committee cannot make this recommendation with full certainty without a larger statewide view of articulation agreements and collaboration with key stakeholders on the benefits of a statewide agreement. It is imperative that beyond having a mandated agreement, the process of articulation works seamlessly. Therefore, the Student Pipeline Committee recommends that the Board of Higher Education review current articulation agreements in effect throughout the commonwealth and evaluate if a statewide articulation agreement would be more beneficial.

2. *Converting Clock Hours to Credit Hours*

As part of the work of this committee, an additional barrier to mobility was uncovered related to licensed practical nurses (LPNs). LPN education is often recorded as clock hours (i.e., time in preparation, class or clinical) instead of credit hours. This most often occurs in vocational programs. However, it does create a barrier to LPN students furthering their nursing education.

Clock hours are unable to be transferred into college credit. While some community colleges have transferred clock hours into credit hours, the process is not fair and equitable. Hence, the committee recommends that vocational programs, or any program educating LPNs in clock hours, convert clock hours to credit hours. This conversion can be successfully implemented internally and does not require any regulatory approval.

Converting clock hours to credit hours will better position LPNs to further their nursing education at both the associate's and bachelor's levels.

Conclusion

Articulation agreements and their importance are nothing new and have been considered essential to advancing education in the commonwealth for years. Additionally, the commonwealth has invested significant time and resources to ease the ability of students to move from one institution to another.

However, with an ever-changing workforce and academic landscape, there is a renewed focus on educational mobility and articulation agreements. The work of the committee has demonstrated some key opportunities within the commonwealth to further improve the articulation process. The committee respectfully submits these recommendations and strongly encourages that they be both renewed and implemented to ensure the viability of the nursing workforce for the coming years.

The *Recommendations for Articulation Agreements between Educational Institutions for Nursing Students in the Commonwealth* were presented at the NCWS meeting on June 28, 2024. The recommendations were voted on and approved by Council members following the meeting.

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