

## Nursing certification as a workforce strategy

By Richard Ridge, RN, CNAA, BC, MBA, PhD

**M**aintaining an effective and engaged nursing workforce is an important priority for nurse executives. Strategic support of nursing specialty certification is a vital element of an effective workforce development program. Nursing specialty certification is well recognized as an important mechanism by which nurses validate their nursing knowledge, skills, and experience within a specific specialty area. At an organizational level, nurse executives who support nursing specialty certification as a deliberate strategy recognize the value that certification adds to the profession, as well as the workforce at the local level.

In this article, strategies for promoting certification within your organization are discussed, including tips on how to identify incentives and allocate resources.

### The increasing popularity of certification

The American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS) was created in 1991 to foster uniformity in nursing certification and increase public awareness of its value. The primary source of information regarding cer-

tifications, ABNS is comprised of 28 nurse certifying organizations, with over 70 certifications at the RN and advanced practice nurse (APN) levels. Its members include several organizations with only one specialty, such as the Orthopaedic Nurses Certification Board, as well as the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), which certifies nurses in 26 specialty areas.

There are approximately 500,000 nationally certified nurses out of a total of 2.9 million.<sup>1</sup> About 15% to 17% of all nurses are certified in at least one specialty; an average 22% of all nurses at ANCC Magnet-designated hospitals are nationally certified.<sup>1</sup> National specialty certification is becoming increasingly sought by nurses for a variety of reasons.

### The value of certification

Most of the available evidence supporting the value of nursing specialty certification has been established through descriptive studies of nurses' and nurse leaders' opinions, ranging from expert opinion and case studies to specialty panels and staff nurse surveys.

In the 2006 ABNS white paper on nursing certification, numerous studies showed that certification is perceived by nurses and the public as influencing accountability, professional accomplishment and growth, and specialized knowledge in a particular specialty.<sup>2</sup> A survey at a national nursing management conference showed that over 85% of managers preferred to hire nation-

ally certified nurses. The same survey also showed that almost 75% of organizations offered at least one incentive for nurses to obtain certification.<sup>3</sup>

Nurses who pursue and obtain national specialty certification perceive themselves as having a high level of commitment to the profession. In a formal comparative descriptive study, evidence suggested that certified nurses have a higher perception of empowerment than noncertified nurses.<sup>4</sup> On an organizational level, a national certification strategy can have significant impact on a wide range of ANCC Magnet forces. At the unit level, certification efforts promote team cohesion, collaboration, and meaningful opportunities to set goals together and celebrate success as a team.

### Key strategies for promoting certification

- ◆ Establish National Nursing Specialty Certification goals and objectives. Determine your current certification rates by specialty and set specific targets for the overall organization and specific specialties.
- ◆ Align certification support with the mission, vision, and values of your organization. For example, if geriatric care is an important strategic component of your organization, establish Geriatric Nurse Certification as the goal and standard. If your organization is marketed as a leader in oncology, establish Oncology Nursing Certification as the expectation for all oncology nurses.



Other specialties will then follow suit.

◆ Identify meaningful staff incentives and support. The primary incentive to become nationally certified must rest with the individual nurse; however, financial incentives are necessary to support an overall organizational initiative. Incentives may include exam reimbursement, shift differential for certified nurses, reimbursement for continuing education required for recertification, and recertification fee reimbursement. Less costly but meaningful incentives include staff recognition at Nurses Week events and promoting certification in your organization's human resource and patient care marketing efforts.

◆ Allocate sufficient resources. An organization-wide national certification program will require financial and educational resources in proportion to your overall goals and objectives. Base your financial investment on the ultimate goal of the number of staff you expect to become certified. Recertification fee reimbursements are slightly less and will be required every 3 to 5 years depending on the specialty.

### Show your support

Nurse executives should consider developing and supporting national certification as an organizational workforce development strategy. Strategic support of nursing specialty certification will result in a positive direct impact on a wide range of nursing workforce outcomes and an indirect positive effect on patient care outcomes. **NM**

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