

Reflections From Capitol Challenge: Nursing Student Day at the Capitol—November 21, 2024

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One hundred sixty nursing students participated in Student Day 2024 on advocacy and the Nurse Practice Act from the following New Mexico schools: UNM-Albuquerque, UNM-Rio Rancho, UNM-Taos, Luna Community College-Las Vegas, Santa Fe-Community College, and Western NM University-Silver City. This author transcribed the conversations during lunch. All agreed the day was worth it; some said it was better than last year. When this author asked if COVID-19 affected their choice of a college major, she got questioning looks and negative headshakes. None of the students interviewed felt that COVID-19 had any impact since they were not in a nursing program during the pandemic. Therefore, they were unconcerned about becoming infected or that their clinical experience had to be simulated since hospitals closed their doors to visitors and students.

Regarding why they chose nursing, approximately 10% had a relative who

was a nurse. Two students had a colleague who thought they would make a good nurse, so they kept “hassling them” until they enrolled in their first nursing class and found the colleague was correct. A more common answer was having family members hospitalized and observing caring nurses interact with their loved ones. Practical answers included “knowing I would always have a job,” “always knew I wanted to be in healthcare, just did not want to become a doctor,” and “wanting a better life for me and my children.” Parents (male and female) were also more likely to wish to pursue a career in Pediatrics or Obstetrics. One student is licensed as a lay midwife in New Mexico but felt being a nurse would further her career opportunities. No one mentioned pursuing a nursing career outside of a hospital; perhaps they have not been exposed to school nursing or community health yet. About 10% had a previous healthcare career, such as an LPN or nursing assistant. Everyone

agreed that they had more years of college education ahead of them to achieve their goals in nursing, but no one felt that it was not fair. Some older RNs express frustration at returning to school after years of working on a unit. These students are told from the beginning that obtaining their RN is crucial but just the first step.

The advocacy portion of the day greatly impressed the students. 50% at each table mentioned how they needed to advocate for their patients and work on hospital committees to improve care. They were also impressed by the work the Board of Nursing did on their behalf and the need for patient safety standards. A quarter of the students mentioned the need to “band together in nursing organizations to move the profession along.” There was 100% agreement that the day had been beneficial and opened their eyes to the need to advocate in all areas of their future careers.

Students’ responses were thoughtful and sincere. Several expressed admiration that this author was still involved in nursing after 50 years! I appreciated the opportunity to converse with them. Speaking to the students, my heart is filled with gratitude that such thoughtful nurses will be carrying the profession forward to even greater heights. New Mexico is lucky to have them!

NM Nursing Student Voices

Jan Martin, DNP, BA, RN, PAHM & Dominique Gomez, MSN, RN (DNP student)

One hundred sixty undergraduate nursing students and their faculty from around the state attended the Capitol

Challenge this year. Programs represented at this all-day event in Santa Fe included Western New Mexico University (WNMU), University of New Mexico (UNM)- Taos, Santa Fe Community College (SFCC), UNM- Albuquerque, and UNM- Rio Rancho. It is not unusual to hear thoughts about nursing from practicing nurses; after all, almost every New Mexico community has at least one. But what are our nursing students thinking and saying about what they have seen so far, what concerns them, what they would like to change, what resources are needed to make those changes, and what inspires them? Dominique Gomez, a fellow student early in her career as a Registered Nurse (RN) and currently working on her Doctor of Nursing Practice degree in leadership, asked these four questions.

Issues of concern common across all students, representing six different geographic areas of practice in the state, related principally to safety. This included staffing levels, mistreatment by other nurses and the ongoing culture of “nurses eat their young,” harassment of students by patients and ignored by their co-workers and leadership, and the negative impacts of high healthcare costs on patients and families. Areas of practice safety identified include lack of nurse attention to protocols when wasting high-alert medication (ex., just signing off without watching); turning off bed alarms and removing side rails with increased risk of falls; observations of under/over patient sedation; and rationing of treatment needed for patient care

due to supply shortages.

When asked what one thing they would change, students responded with a desire to change the culture of “nurses eat their young.” Instead, they would develop a culture of awareness and support as co-workers and from leadership on emotional status, especially after traumatic events, rather than an attitude of “just keep moving on.” Several expressed they would create an environment where nurses and students felt heard and safe from repercussions when a concern or complaint is voiced. Others identified a desire to decrease unhealthy relationships and increase respectful interactions between nurse/physician and nurse/nurse. Additional changes would be to create laws governing safe patient ratios and strengthen boundaries/awareness of nurse technicians and RNs’ scopes of practice.

Here is how they answered the third question about what skills/knowledge/resources they would need to work on their change ideas: They need to increase their knowledge of the practice laws in place and have an increased understanding of the available resources, including how to access them. Increased education on the scope of practice is needed. More information and understanding of NMNA, what it does, and what membership offers, including who and how to reach out for support and information. There was also a recommendation to include a class with more content on political processes and business discussions.

The last question asked was for their insights into what qualities or actions in nursing or nurses inspire them. There were four common answers across all programs. These were empathy, advocacy, caring and compassion for strangers, patients, and colleagues, and kindness. Others included making patients laugh, showing gratitude for other nurses, students, and staff, patience for people, and watching other nurses with good social skills interact with patients.

Thank you to all our students and their faculty who traveled to the day’s events and participated in the packed agenda of the day. We heard from our nursing lobbyist, a current Senator, and members of NMNA. Additionally, we visited the Roundhouse and were invited to observe a couple of interim committee hearings to witness our political process. And that was all before lunch! In the afternoon, a special thanks to those of you who also participated as “actors” in the mock hearing of changes we will soon propose to our Nurse Practice Act in the 2025 Legislative Session in January. We value your voices and look forward to the time very soon when you will join the NM nursing workforce as our colleagues. Yours is the voice of our future. ■

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