



Essentials Ready: New Nursing Survey Questions to Align with AACN's *Essentials*

Benchworks Research Note
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Introduction

Since 1969, the [American Association of Colleges of Nursing \(AACN\)](#) has served as the national voice for academic nursing education. As part of its mission, AACN has regularly published the Essentials, a series of frameworks that outline key expectations for nursing curriculum design and nurse preparation. This framework ensures that educational programs equip nurses with the competencies necessary to meet the evolving demands of healthcare.

In spring 2021, AACN's membership approved [The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education](#). This latest iteration of AACN's *Essentials* marks a significant shift by introducing a competency-based framework organized around 10 high-level domains and integrating a unified set of key concepts. The revised *Essentials* provide a comprehensive framework that spans entry to advanced levels of nursing education, aligning with contemporary healthcare demands and incorporating essential concepts across various spheres of care.

As a longtime partner of AACN, Benchworks is dedicated to supporting nursing education programs in their assessment and continuous improvement efforts, including collecting data to help programs evaluate their implementation of *The Essentials* and assist with accreditation. During the 2023-2024 academic year, Benchworks piloted new questions for nursing assessments to better capture data relevant to AACN's updated *Essentials*. The pilot focused on testing and validating new survey questions and factors that align more closely with the domains, and competencies in the *Essentials*.

This research note features results from some of the new questions validated during the pilot process and incorporated into the AACN/Benchworks Undergraduate Nursing Exit Assessment starting with the 2024-2025 academic year. Specifically, it includes results from questions aligned with four of the domains in AACN's updated *Essentials*:

- Patient-Centered Care
- Population Health
- Scholarship
- Professionalism



Person-Centered Care

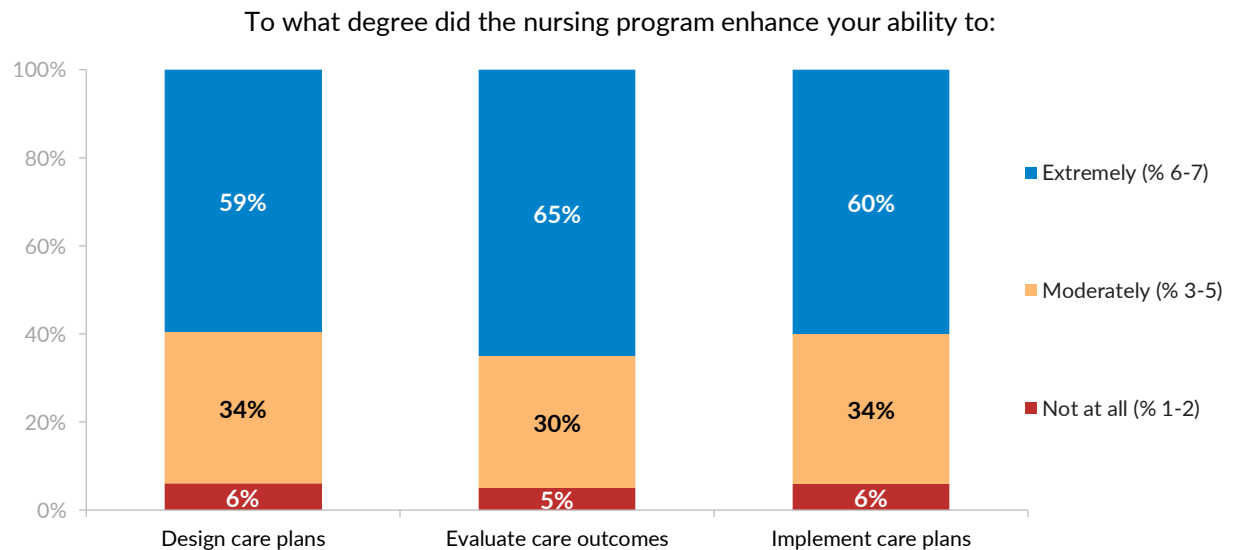
Nursing education plays a key role in preparing students to provide top-notch patient care. A major focus is on developing skills related to care plans, which are crucial for effective nursing practice. Care plans help nurses address a patient's needs comprehensively, from designing and evaluating to implementing the plan. Excelling in these skills ensures that care is both personalized and effective.

Figure 1 displays results to three of the new survey questions assessing students' perceptions of how well their nursing programs enhanced their abilities on learning outcomes mapped to the person-centered care domain of AACN's *Essentials*.

FIGURE 1.

Person-Centered Care Learning Questions

Results from learning questions mapped to the person-centered care domain of AACN's *Essentials*



For further thought: The data reveals important insights into students' perceptions of how well their nursing programs have supported their overall development in care plan competencies. These perceptions highlight both the successes and potential areas for growth in preparing students for future nursing roles. By analyzing these insights, educational programs can identify opportunities to better align with evolving healthcare needs and prepare graduates for advanced competencies. This reflection can drive enhancements in curriculum design, ensuring that future nursing professionals are well-equipped to meet the challenges and demands of an evolving healthcare landscape.



Population Health

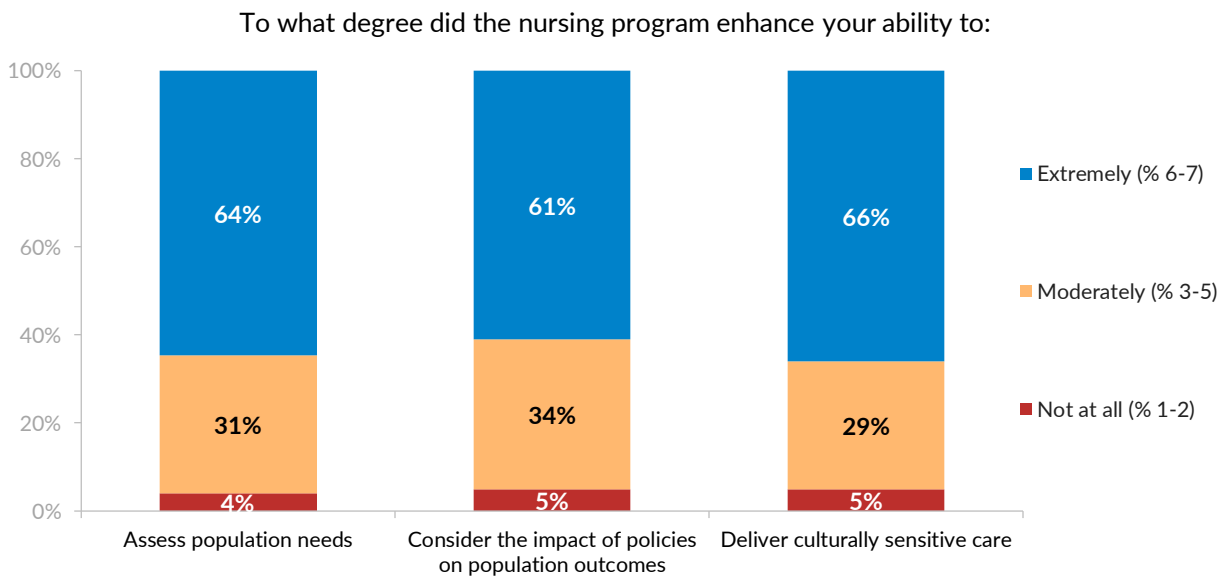
Understanding community health needs is crucial for effective nursing care. This requires assessing health challenges faced by different populations based on factors like age, environment, and social conditions. This understanding enables the development of targeted health programs and policies that address these challenges, improve health outcomes, and ensure culturally sensitive care. By implementing strategies tailored to these needs, nurses can enhance public health initiatives and promote community well-being.

Figure 2 displays results to three of the new survey questions assessing students' perceptions of how well their nursing programs enhanced their abilities on learning outcomes mapped to the population health domain of AACN's *Essentials*.

FIGURE 2.

Population Health Learning Questions

Results from learning questions mapped to the population health domain of AACN's *Essentials*



For further thought: Consider how well nursing programs are preparing students for the complexities of population health management. What strategies can be implemented to address gaps identified in the data and better equip students for diverse public health challenges? As healthcare continues to evolve, how can nursing education stay ahead of emerging trends in population health? Reflecting on these questions can guide future improvements in curriculum and training, ensuring that nursing graduates are prepared to tackle pressing health issues at the population level.



Scholarship

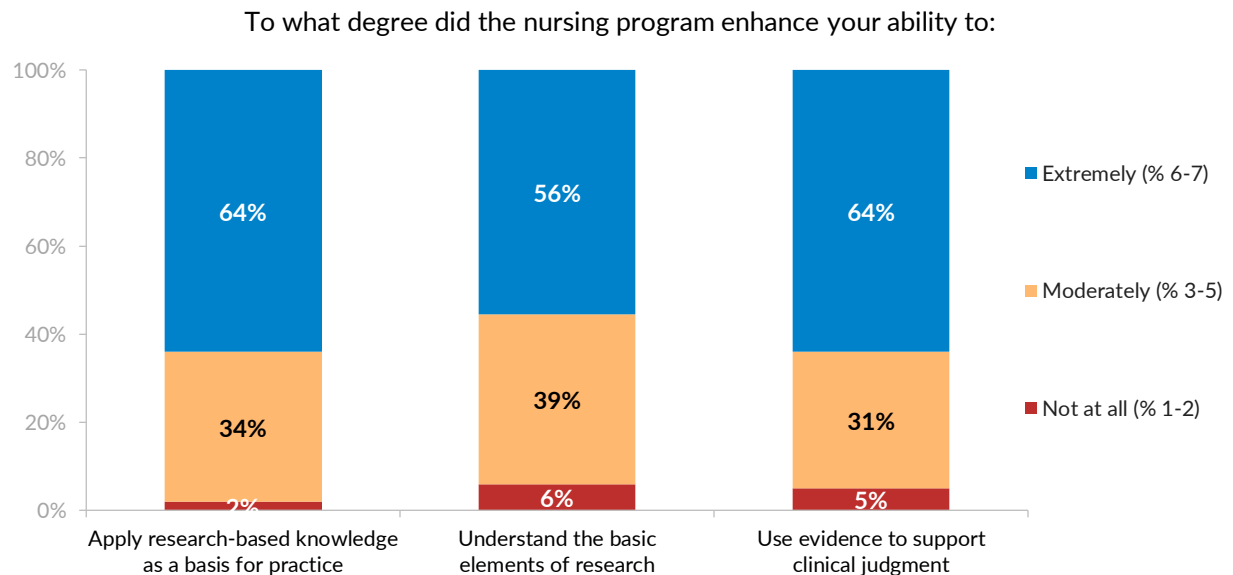
To prepare nursing students effectively for evidence-based practice, it is critical to assess their development in key scholarly competencies. This involves evaluating the program's success in enhancing students' abilities to apply research-based knowledge, grasp fundamental research concepts, and utilize evidence in clinical judgment. Such an evaluation offers critical insights into the program's impact and highlights areas for potential improvement.

Figure 3 displays results to three of the new survey questions assessing students' perceptions of how well their nursing programs enhanced their abilities on learning outcomes mapped to the scholarship domain of AACN's *Essentials*.

FIGURE 3.

Scholarship Learning Questions

Results from learning questions mapped to the scholarship domain of AACN's *Essentials*



For further thought: How effectively do current nursing programs integrate research-based knowledge into their curriculum, and how does this influence clinical practice outcomes? What strategies can be implemented to strengthen nursing students' understanding of fundamental research concepts? In what ways can nursing programs better support the development of evidence-based clinical judgment? How do students' perceptions of their scholarly development align with actual outcomes in their professional practice? What improvements can be made to ensure that nursing graduates are fully equipped to apply research and evidence in their clinical decision-making processes?



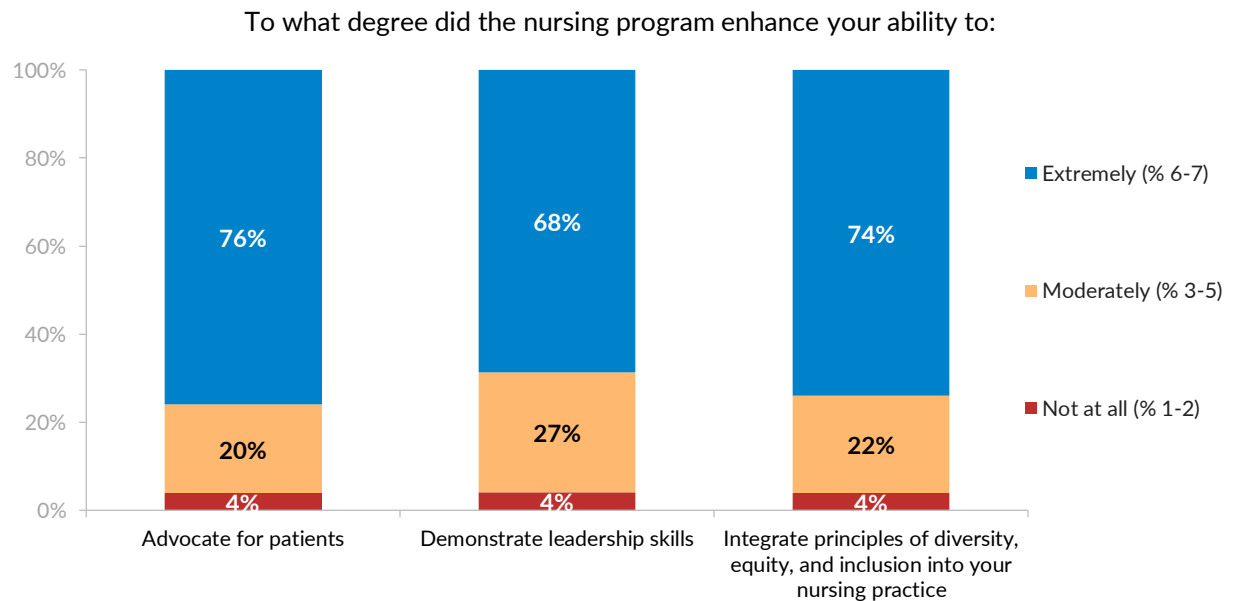
Professionalism

Professionalism is central to nursing, encompassing the skills and qualities necessary for excellent patient care and effective healthcare system support. Nursing education must not only impart technical skills but also foster abilities in patient advocacy, leadership, and the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles. These aspects are crucial for preparing nurses to address the complexities of clinical work and contribute to a fairer healthcare environment.

Figure 4 displays results to three of the new survey questions assessing students' perceptions of how well their nursing programs enhanced their abilities on learning outcomes mapped to the professionalism domain of AACN's *Essentials*.

FIGURE 4.
Professionalism Learning Questions

Results from learning questions mapped to the professionalism domain of AACN's *Essentials*



For further thought: Reflect on how nursing education can keep pace with the growing emphasis on professionalism within the healthcare field. Explore innovative approaches to enhance students' skills in advocacy, leadership, and DEI integration. Strengthening these competencies is vital for preparing nurses to navigate complex healthcare environments and lead effectively. Regular feedback and updates to the curriculum will be essential to meet the evolving demands of the profession and ensure graduates provide compassionate, equitable care.



Conclusion

AACN's *Essentials* represents a forward-thinking development in nursing education, outlining the key skills and knowledge required for today's healthcare environment. Benchworks recently completed a multi-year project to update our exit, alumni, and employer surveys across our BSN, MSN and DNP degree-level offerings to help provide nursing programs with reliable and valid data they can use to identify gaps, monitor their implementation of the *Essentials* and compliment other data sources as they engage in program improvement and accreditation processes.

These findings encourage critical reflection on the direction of nursing education. As the healthcare landscape evolves, it is important that nursing programs address diverse student needs and anticipate future challenges. By acting on these insights, meaningful enhancements can be made to ensure nursing education remains relevant and effective in shaping tomorrow's healthcare leaders.



Methods

Survey

The AACN/Benchworks Undergraduate Nursing Exit Assessment provides nursing programs with valuable insights into the experiences of nursing students and overall program outcomes. Designed in partnership with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), the survey addresses satisfaction with various components of the nursing program, including instruction, faculty, course interactions, facilities, and services. The survey also measures how well nursing students believe their program contributed to a broad range of nursing-specific learning outcomes, including core competencies, core knowledge, role development, professional values, and technical skills. The assessment's results are mapped to AACN's *Essentials*.

Dataset

The findings in this research note are based on aggregate analysis from the 2023-2024 academic year administration of the AACN/Benchworks Undergraduate Nursing Exit Assessment. For this research note, the focus was on a subset of nursing programs that elected to participate in a pilot for the 2023-2024 academic year. Pilot participants opted in to testing a new set of questions related to learning that were developed during 2023 and more closely aligned with AACN's *Essentials*. The results in this research note include survey responses from 13,435 students from 156 undergraduate nursing programs in the United States.

Analysis

The findings in this research note are presented as descriptive analysis, specifically percentages. All figures reflect the number of responses to a question and do not include missing data. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole percent; therefore, some totals may not exactly equal 100.



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What Benchworks Can Do For You

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