Strategic Modeling of the Pediatric Nurse Practitioner Workforce

Gregory J. Schell, MSE; Mariel S. Lavieri, PhD; Xiang Li, BSE; Alejandro Toriello, PhD; Kristy K. Martyn, RN, PhD; Gary L. Freed, MD

abstract

OBJECTIVE: To assess the current pediatric nurse practitioner (PNP) workforce and to investigate the impact of potential policy changes to address forecasted shortages.

METHODS: We modeled the admission of students into nursing bachelor’s programs and followed them through advanced clinical programs. Prediction models were combined with optimal decision-making to determine best-case scenario admission levels. We computed 2 measures: (1) the absolute shortage and (2) the expected number of years until the PNP workforce will be able to fully satisfy PNP demand (ie, self-sufficiency).

RESULTS: There is a forecasted shortage of PNPs in the workforce over the next 13 years. Under the best-case scenario, it would take at least 13 years for the workforce to fully satisfy demand. Our analysis of potential policy changes revealed that increasing the specialization rate for PNPs by 4% would decrease the number of years required until there are enough PNPs from 13 years to 5 years. Increasing the certification examination passing rate to 96% from the current average of 86.9% would lead to self-sufficiency in 11 years. In addition, increasing the annual growth rate of master’s programs to 36% from the current maximum of 10.7% would result in self-sufficiency in 5 years.

CONCLUSIONS: Current forecasts of demand for PNPs indicate that the current workforce will be incapable of satisfying the growing demand. Policy changes can result in a reduction in the expected shortage and potentially improve access to care for pediatric patients.

WHAT’S KNOWN ON THIS SUBJECT: The number of nurse practitioner graduates in the United States has nearly doubled over the past 2 decades. However, the number of pediatric nurse practitioner (PNP) graduates has remained relatively flat, although the demand for PNPs is expected to increase.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS: This study estimates the best-case shortage of PNPs over the next 25 years. We propose possible policy interventions to address key areas of the PNP workforce system and we compute their impact on the forecasted PNP shortage.
Analysis of the aggregate nurse practitioner (NP) workforce reveals a near doubling in the number of NP graduates in the United States since 1996. However, this supply increase has not been equitable across the NP specialties. Family nurse practitioners (FNPs) have experienced the largest growth in graduates, whereas the number of new pediatric nurse practitioner (PNP) graduates has remained relatively flat. Furthermore, the majority of states currently have fewer than 25 PNPs per 100,000 children. This supply of PNPs will be unable to meet the demonstrated increasing demand in both pediatric primary care practices and subspecialty clinics. In particular, the competition between primary and subspecialty pediatric practices for the limited supply of PNPs will likely lead to difficulties in accessing pediatric subspecialty services. A failure to address these pediatric health workforce concerns will affect pediatric care and will have long-term consequences on the health of the entire population.

It has been hypothesized that the increasing demand for pediatric services is due in part to increased survival rates and disease burden of children with chronic illnesses, including obesity, diabetes, and asthma. In addition, the increased prevalence of delayed childbearing is leading to low birth weights and complications necessitating additional pediatric care. There has also been a significant shift in the proportion of child health visits from family physicians to pediatricians. PNPs are increasingly providing independent care to patients with complex diseases and working collaboratively with attending physicians to manage the increased demand for pediatric service.

Given the increasing demand as well as the key role of PNPs in providing pediatric care, we focused on modeling the workforce system of PNPs. Modeling the aggregate nursing workforce or even the aggregate NP workforce is insufficient for detecting and addressing the challenges faced specifically in the PNP supply. Rather, a systematic framework is needed for modeling the workforce challenges of PNPs to identify beneficial interventions for improving access to care. This need for modeling workforce challenges is mirrored in the Affordable Care Act’s authorization of a National Health Care Workforce commission and a National Center for Workforce Analysis, whose priorities include identifying methods needed to develop accurate predictions of future workforce needs. The necessity for improved workforce planning models and educational changes has also been echoed by George Thibault, president of the Josiah Macy Foundation, and by recent studies, including those by Iglehart and Dall. Our work aims to complement the existing literature on the nursing workforce (eg, Auerbach and Buerhaus et al) by including optimal decision-making with forecasting models of PNP supply and demand.

To address the worsening scarcity of PNPs and the expanding demand for their professional services, we developed a novel framework for analyzing the PNP workforce in the United States and present the impact of a variety of policy options that will affect the pipeline of registered nurses (RNs) and nursing school students who enter PNP training programs. Using the proposed framework, we provide policy suggestions for addressing the disparity between supply and demand of PNPs. Our work offers insight into the benefit of policy interventions and contributes toward improved workforce planning models.

**METHODS**

We modeled the admission of students into nursing bachelor’s programs and followed them through advanced clinical programs in PNP education (master’s programs) or entrance into the RN workforce (see Fig 1). Baccalaureate students were categorized as traditional part-time students, traditional full-time students, part-time RN-to-baccalaureate students, and full-time RN-to-baccalaureate students with 5, 4, 2, or 1 years required to complete their degree upon admission, respectively. Upon graduation from the nursing baccalaureate program,
the graduated student either entered the RN workforce after passing the RN examination or enrolled in an NP master’s program. Our modeling also allowed employed RNs to exit the workforce and enroll in an NP master’s program, while ensuring a minimum number of RNs remain in the workforce. Of those who enrolled in an NP master’s program in a given year, the PNP specialization rate defined the percentage of enrolled NP master’s students who selected PNP as their specialty and hence became PNP master’s students. PNP master’s students were categorized as either full-time or part-time students. Full-time master’s students completed their degree in 2 years, whereas part-time students completed their degree in 3 to 5 years. Upon graduation from the PNP master’s program, the graduated student entered the workforce after passing the national PNP certification examination.

Furthermore, at each education and professional category (eg, third-year bachelor’s student), enrolled students and employed RNs and PNPs were allowed to exit the education or workforce system (ie, we modeled both education and workforce attrition). Attrition rates for each category were computed as the percentage of students/nurses who would leave the education/workforce system each year.

We used data and categories from Enrollment and Graduations in Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Nursing by the American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) to compute initial population sizes, attrition rates, and graduation rates for baccalaureate and master’s nursing students. From the AACN, we also computed the rate of students entering nursing master’s programs who specialize in NP and the rate of NP students specializing in PNP. The attrition rate of PNPs from the workforce was computed by using recertification rates between 2011 and 2013 from the Pediatric Nursing Certification Board.

Attrition rate of RNs from the workforce were calculated from the National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses. RN and PNP examination passing rates were calculated from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing and the Pediatric Nursing Certification Board, respectively. Data for the initial workforce levels of RNs and PNPs came from the AACN Nursing Shortage Fact Sheet and the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners 2013 State Map, respectively. Payroll costs for RNs, FPNs, and PNPs came from the US Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics. Annual demand growth for PNPs in the workforce (5%) was computed as the average annual change in the number of PNPs in the United States from 2009 to 2013.

We used linear programming to determine optimal admission decisions every year of the planning horizon (25 years) that would lead to satisfying the demand for PNPs. The approach used to model the PNP workforce and to derive optimal decisions is described in Lavieri and Puterman. The optimal admission decisions for a particular year are the number of students admitted to nursing baccalaureate programs, the number of bachelor’s students admitted to NP master’s programs immediately after graduation, and the number of employed RNs admitted to NP master’s programs. The linear programming approach combines forecasts of workforce needs with the system’s dynamics to determine optimal admission decisions and to identify policy interventions that would improve system performance.

We computed two performance measures to assess the quality of the linear programming model’s decisions. Our first performance measure was the absolute PNP shortage in the United States over the 25-year horizon. We defined shortage as the positive absolute difference between the demand for PNPs (calculated on the basis of an assumed 5% annual demand growth with respect to the current workforce) in a given year and the supply of PNPs in that year; therefore, no shortage occurs whenever the supply of PNPs in a year is equal to or exceeds the demand for PNPs in that year. We assumed that demand for PNPs can only be satisfied by PNPs. We also calculated the expected number of years until the PNP workforce system would be able to fully satisfy demand. This performance measure captured how long the system needed to become self-sufficient (ie, no PNP shortages).

We defined the best-case scenario as the result of following the model’s optimal admission decisions under the modeled system’s current variables. We use the best-case scenario as the basis for our analysis, because it highlights the limitations of the current education and workforce system even when viewed conservatively. When not following optimal admission decisions, the forecasted shortages will be magnified.

Furthermore, we performed sensitivity analysis of the system’s current variables to calculate the effect of changing these variables on the performance measures of the system. This sensitivity analysis provided a robust method for studying the effect of policy changes (eg, increased funding toward the expansion of PNP master’s programs) on the expected number of years until the PNP system is self-sufficient.

**RESULTS**

**Current System**

Table 1 presents the base-case values for inputs to the model. The current nursing education and workforce pipeline for PNPs has 299,118 enrolled baccalaureate students, 2,763,000 working RNs, 2766 enrolled master’s students in
PNP programs, and 16 584 working PNPs. For the estimated annual PNP demand growth of 5%, even under the best-case scenario for the current PNP system, it would take 13 years to achieve self-sufficiency (ie, no PNP shortage). The shortage is a result of increased demand for PNPs in the workforce, a constrained education system, and the attrition of currently employed PNPs.

Figure 2 displays the absolute shortage of PNPs in the workforce over the next 25 years for the current system under 4%, 5%, and 6% annual demand growth. The forecasted shortage depends strongly on the annual demand growth for PNPs. Combining an accurate prediction model with optimal decision-making provides estimates of the value of system changes, such as an increased PNP specialization rate.

Next, we present the sensitivity analyses of 3 potential system changes: increasing the PNP specialization rate, increasing the PNP examination passing rate, and increasing the potential annual enrollment growth rate of PNP master’s programs.

**PNP Specialization Rate**

We started by investigating how making changes to the PNP specialization rate (ranging from 2% to 9%) would affect the number of years required until the system no longer experiences shortages in the best-case scenario. PNP specialization is the percentage of incoming NP master’s students who select pediatrics as their nursing specialty. The number of years required to become self-sufficient is highly dependent on the percentage of students obtaining an NP master’s degree who choose to specialize in pediatrics. As can be seen in Fig 3, increases in PNP specialization would yield a higher supply of NP students pursuing PNP education and a proportionally higher pool of PNPs for satisfying demand. The current PNP specialization rate is 4.9%, with a corresponding 13 years until the system is self-sufficient. We found that the ideal PNP specialization rate is 8.9%. This ideal specialization rate achieves the minimum expected number of years until self-sufficiency of 5 years. However, just as improved specialization rates decrease the number of years until self-sufficiency, if the specialization rate decreases to 3.7%, the PNP shortage is expected to persist for 19 years under the best-case scenario.

**PNP Examination Passing Rate**

We also studied how PNP national certification examination passing rates influence our performance measure of the expected number of years required until the system is self-sufficient. We computed the current PNP examination passing rate nationwide (86.9%) from the Pediatric Nursing Certification Board 2013.22 As shown in Fig 4, increases in the PNP examination passing rate would lead to more graduating PNP students certified to perform pediatric care. We found that by increasing the PNP examination passing rate to 96%, the number of years required until self-sufficiency would decrease from 13 to 11. Similarly, if the examination passing rate decreases to 78%, the number of years required until self-sufficiency would increase from 13 to 15.

**PNP Master’s Program Growth**

Under the best-case scenario, the current system will require a near quadrupling in the number of PNP graduates over the next 25 years to satisfy the assumed 5% annual demand growth. Over the last 5 years, we observed a maximum percentage annual increase in the number of master’s students of 10.7%. Figure 5 shows the effect of adding flexibility in how much master’s programs can grow from year to year. Increasing the potential growth rate of the enrollment size of master’s programs

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**TABLE 1  Base-Case Estimates for the Model Inputs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial number of students enrolled in baccalaureate nursing programs, n</td>
<td>299 118</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial number of students enrolled in PNP master’s programs, n</td>
<td>2765</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial RN workforce size, n</td>
<td>2 763 000</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing shortage fact sheet23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial PNP workforce size, n</td>
<td>16 584</td>
<td>National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RN annual attrition rate, %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNP annual attrition rate, %</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Pediatric Nursing Certification Board recertification data19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of full-time/part-time traditional undergraduate nursing students, %</td>
<td>90.8/9.2</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proportion of full-time/part-time RN-baccalaureate undergraduate nursing students, %</td>
<td>32.7/67.3</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proportion of full-time/part-time PNP master’s students, %</td>
<td>38.2/61.8</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum PNP master’s program enrollment growth rate, %</td>
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<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
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<td>RN examination passing rate, %</td>
<td>92.21</td>
<td>National Council of State Boards of Nursing21</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNP examination passing rate, %</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>Pediatric Nursing Certification Board22</td>
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<tr>
<td>NP specialization rate, %</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNP specialization rate, %</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>American Association of Colleges in Nursing enrollment data18</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNP annual demand growth, %</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners24,26</td>
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</table>
leads to larger student populations who enter the workforce after graduation and certification. The expected number of years until self-sufficiency would be reduced to 5 years if the potential annual growth rate increased to 36%. If the potential annual growth rate of enrollment is restricted to 8%, the expected number of years until self-sufficiency would increase to 22 years.

**DISCUSSION**

Our linear programming model combines optimal decision-making with predictions of nationwide PNP demand to evaluate the forecasted shortage of PNPs.

Analysis of the current system reveals that even under the best-case scenario, the existing system will not satisfy demand for PNPs in the workforce for at least 13 years. Satisfying this demand requires following the optimal admission decisions determined by our model; the growing PNP demand will not be satisfied by the current system unless changes are made. The insufficient supply of PNPs may constrain access to pediatric care, which can negatively affect children’s health. Through sensitivity analysis of our model, we have identified 3 system changes that would reduce the forecasted PNP shortage and the expected number of years until the system is self-sufficient: (1) increasing the percentage of NP master’s students choosing pediatrics as their specialty, (2) increasing the PNP certification examination passing rate, and (3) increasing the potential annual growth in enrollment of PNP master’s programs.

**PNP Specialization**

Presently, only 4.9% of NP graduate students choose to specialize in pediatric care. The primary reason NP master’s students specialize in pediatrics is their desire to work with children. The popularity of FNPs (a doubling in the number of FNP graduates between 1996 and 2008) may be due to their perceived job flexibility in being able to work with patients of any age. In fact, the vast majority of FNPs (93%) treat patients between the ages of...
66 and 85 years and 79% of FNPs treat patients older than 85 years. Moreover, one-third of FNPs reported that they did not provide care to children, and for most of those who did report care to children, these children (especially those <8 years old) were a small percentage of their patient populations. Hence, master’s students pursuing FNP education with the intention of caring for children during their career may not provide care to children when they are practicing as FNPs. Attention must be paid to these workforce realities during the course of nursing education to ensure that students make well-informed career choices. Because many NP students perceive FNPs as having higher job availability than PNPs, increasing the PNP specialization rate will require improved marketing of the PNP as a career at all potential points of nursing career decision-making: before Bachelor of Science in Nursing programs, during time as an RN, and upon entrance to advanced education programs. This marketing may take the form of messages from nursing faculty and clinical preceptors to students or through increased media emphasis on the need for PNPs and their unique role in the care of children.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Committee on the Future of Nursing at the Institute of Medicine recommends an increase in scholarships, loan forgiveness, and institutional capacity awards to increase the number and proportion of newly licensed nurses graduating from higher degree programs. Scholarships and loan forgiveness targeted at PNP graduate students will incentivize specialization in PNP.

Although our analysis indicates that an increase in the PNP specialization rate is necessary to meet the demand, more PNPs do not need to come at the expense of other NP specialties. Overall increases in NP enrollment would also satisfy the need for more PNPs without changing the percentage of NPs who choose pediatrics.

**PNP Examination Passing Rate**

The current national PNP examination passing rate for certification is 86.9%, with variation across the United States. Without certification, in most states a student
graduating from a PNP academic program will be unable to practice as a PNP. Thus, although increasing the percentage of NP master’s students who choose to specialize in pediatrics will increase enrollment in PNP master’s programs, a lower certification examination passing rate will reduce gains in the PNP workforce. There is a need for nursing programs to focus on ways to improve national certification examination pass rates to ensure that graduating students are able to join the workforce.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Institute of Medicine Committee recommends the promotion of innovation and the evaluation of novel approaches to improving preparation for the practice of nursing through expanded Title VIII funding. We recommend funding collaborative analysis of educational methods and collaboration of nursing faculty and certification boards to increase the PNP examination passing rate.

**Enrollment Size of PNP Master’s Programs**

There has been an increase in the proportion of NP programs that offer advanced clinical education, but a decrease in the proportion of programs offering PNP education. Furthermore, nursing programs nationwide face a shortage of pediatric faculty members. This reduced exposure to pediatric clinical experience is negatively affecting the nation’s ability to satisfy future demand for PNPs. If the interest in PNP specialization increases, the increased demand for PNP education will ideally lead to increases in the number of PNP master’s programs and/or the enrollment size of existing PNP programs.

An expansion in the size of PNP graduate education programs will require increased funding for master’s programs. The American Nurses Association urges significant increases in federal funding of the Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development programs administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration of the US Department of Health and Human Services. These programs provide grants to enhance education and practice for master’s nursing students. They also include the Nurse Educational Loan Repayment Program, which supports students enrolled in nursing with the requirement of at least 2 years of full-time employment in a facility designated as having a critical nursing shortage. And although comprehensive geriatric education grants assist in the training of nurses to provide for geriatric care, we have identified a need for a similar grant program for pediatric nurse education.

Implementing policies that yield the desired change in the 3 system variables (PNP specialization rate, examination passing rate, and enrollment sizes) requires significant financial investment in the marketing, recruitment, and education of PNPs. For example, monetary incentives during education (eg, scholarships) may not be sufficient for increasing the PNP specialization rate from 4.9% to 8.9%. Workplace incentives, such as pay increases, may be necessary to draw highly qualified and motivated students into the PNP field. The average annual salary for FNPs is $91,450, whereas the average salary for PNPs is $88,562. Reducing this pay differential could lead to increased specialization in pediatric care. The financial burden of improving the average PNP salary is on employers and the medical system at large, whereas the PNP master’s programs benefit from the increased enrollment at no expense. Similarly, if educational programs offer scholarships to increase the specialization rate, expand their facilities, and hire more faculty members to accommodate more students, employers of those graduating students benefit at no expense. The relationship between the education system and the workplace necessitates a joint effort, with investment from both entities, to effectively resolve the forecasted PNP shortage.

**Study Limitations**

Our estimate of annual demand growth was based on the observed average annual percentage growth in the number of employed PNPs in the United States between 2009 and 2013. We assumed that this percentage growth will be constant in the future and drives when self-sufficiency can be reached. Because of the uncertainty of this demand growth as well as other model variables, we have performed extensive sensitivity analysis around our estimate. Furthermore, we modeled the aggregate PNP workforce in the United States. Additional insights would be gained if specific roles of PNPs were examined or if we considered other health care professionals, such as physician assistants, as possible sources to satisfy PNP demand. Our model also does not consider the particular productivity of PNPs. Future research is needed to study how specific roles and productivity of PNPs would impact the forecasted shortage of PNPs. Our model also assumes that annual attrition rates are equal for all PNPs and RNs, regardless of age. Future research will require expanding the model to include age-based attrition distributions.

Our model assumes that demand for PNPs can only be satisfied by employed PNPs. The majority of PNPs in primary and subspecialty care perform most general practice roles, including the development of treatment plans as well as assessing and diagnosing patients. However, the roles of PNPs may be complemented or substituted by other pediatric health care professionals (eg, pediatric physician assistants). Because of their training and current roles in the hospital setting, NPs and physician assistants...
have both been identified as a potential solution for offsetting the forecasted physician shortage and increasing access to care. Future research shall investigate the interaction between these pediatric health care professionals in satisfying demand for pediatric services. Neonatal NPs are also a concern and will be the focus of a future project. Other factors may also impact the supply of PNPs in the workforce. These include longer education time and substitution of PNPs by physician assistants or pediatricians. Future research will investigate the effects of such system changes on the forecasted PNP shortage.

Conclusions
We have developed a new method for combining optimal admission decisions with forecasts of PNP supply and demand to evaluate the PNP shortage over the next quarter century under the best-case scenario. We found that the best-case scenario for the current system will be incapable of satisfying the growing demand for PNPs. Sensitivity analysis of our model revealed 3 policy interventions to reduce PNP shortages and the expected number of years required until the system is self-sufficient: increases in PNP specialization rates, increases in PNP certification examination passing rates, and increases in the potential annual growth rate of enrollment sizes for PNP master’s programs. Without policy interventions, such as those analyzed in this article, the PNP shortage is expected to remain for the next 13 years in the best-case scenario. However, by improving the PNP education and workforce system, this forecasted shortage can be reduced to 5 years. Given the important role of PNPs in the primary and subspecialty care of pediatric patients, a reduction in the shortage of PNPs can improve access to pediatric care for the growing pediatric population with complex and chronic diseases.

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