

Journey to Care: Insights from Second Degree Nursing Graduates

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As a graduate from a second-degree nursing program, I am a firm believer that accelerated nursing programs offer a unique opportunity for individuals to embark on a rewarding career in nursing. Designed for students with diverse educational backgrounds and a prior degree, applicants must complete anatomy, physiology, chemistry, and microbiology prerequisites (American Association of College of Nursing, 2024). The accelerated nature of this type of nursing program allows students to bypass the general courses of a 4-year degree and focus on the essential classes necessary for successful nursing practice and passage of the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX). This fast-tracked approach enables the completion of nursing education in a shorter time frame, typically 12 to 24 months (American Association of College of Nursing, 2024). While the accelerated path has advantages, the transition into an accelerated nursing program can have challenges.

To further gauge this unique perspective, I interviewed five new graduate nurses from accelerated entry to nursing programs, which include Bachelor's of Science in Nursing (BSN) and Master's of Nursing (MN) programs. They offered valuable insights and lessons learned from their journeys. During our discussion, we identified four common themes that highlight the complexities of navigating an accelerated nursing program and how these challenges have influenced their feelings about becoming new nurses, ultimately shaping their overall job satisfaction as they continue to work in the field. The sentences at the beginning of each theme in italics with quotation marks are direct quotes from the students.

Theme 1: The accelerated nursing program is about balancing life in an unbalanced program.

"You must mentally prepare for it. I thought

I could do anything for 16 months, and I did do it, but those 16 months were hard."

Many of the graduates felt that the fast pace of their studies was incredibly stressful. Kinyon et al. (2021) stated, "The implementation of clinical judgement is made more difficult due to the ever-increasing amount of information nurses must absorb. It has been estimated that nursing knowledge doubles every six years" (p. 600). There was a consensus among the graduates that the rapid succession of coursework often became overwhelming, particularly for those juggling academic responsibilities alongside home life. Many participants had families to care for and bills to pay, which added significant pressure to their demanding schedules. The graduates also expressed that this intense pace made retaining the information learned in classes challenging, as they frequently had to move on to new material before fully mastering the previous content. While these nurses reported being able to grasp practical skills through repetition, many felt that their critical thinking and clinical judgment suffered as a result.

According to a survey performed by Kinyon et al. (2021) "65 to 76 percent were unable to meet entry-level clinical judgment skills, and the majority had difficulty translating knowledge and theory into practice" (p. 600), supporting the participants' comments.

Theme 2: Support is necessary to survive in this career.

"I had some great preceptors. I found my people amongst my peers in the program."

Conversations with the graduates revealed that being part of such a diverse cohort was a significant advantage. Students came from various backgrounds, some with healthcare experience, while others held degrees in fields like music, business, or construction. These graduates emphasized the value of collabo-

rating with peers who had healthcare experience, as they served as valuable resources for mastering nursing skills and discussing clinical challenges. The importance of support from floor nurses during clinical rotations was frequently mentioned; these nurses could greatly influence a student's overall experience and sense of belonging in the nursing field. Having a great preceptor made asking questions and making mistakes less daunting, allowing graduates to build confidence in their new roles.

In a scoping review of success factors in newly graduated nurses, Baharum et al. (2023) found that "Social support is an important aspect in creating a sense of relaxation and security and increasing morale and belonging, which facilitated newly graduated nurses' adaptation" (p. 5). Conversations with the graduates supported this finding and revealed that being part of a diverse accelerated nursing cohort was a significant advantage. Classmates within the interviewee's cohorts came from various backgrounds, some with healthcare experience, while others held degrees in fields like music, business, or construction. These graduates emphasized the value of collaborating with peers who had healthcare experience, as they served as valuable resources for mastering nursing skills and discussing clinical challenges. Baharum et al. (2023), findings also emphasize the importance of support among colleagues, stating that "Providing support will enable nurses to build effective relationships with supervisors and colleagues." (p. 5)

Theme 3: More clinical experiences create an easier transition.

"Even though the clinicals were overwhelming at first. I think spending more time in the hospital would have helped prepare me for the career."

There was a collective agreement from the graduates that clinical experiences and time spent in the hospital were the most helpful parts of the program. The graduates shared that having experience as a nursing assistant or nurse technician during their accelerated degree program gave them an advantage when beginning their careers as nurses. In contrast, those who did not have such experi-

ences felt that it would have better prepared them to collaborate with other healthcare professionals and to understand the demands of work-life and hours in the nursing field. An article on the success of new graduates noted that “newly hired nurses who were introduced to their work environment during their preparation stages were more confident and accustomed to the new professional world” (Baharum et al., 2023, p. 19). However, graduates felt it would have been helpful to have more experience in other specialties because the majority of clinical experiences were on medical-surgical units, leaving little opportunity to learn about different areas nurses can practice in. In line with this perspective, in an examination of clinical placements (CP), Edah Anyango et al (2024) stated that:

“Clinical exposure to a specialty improves nursing students' confidence to adapt and work in an area. In contrast, students who do not have a CP in a nursing specialty may feel that they lack the skills to practice in the area and may not be aware of the career opportunities and progression in that specialty” (p. 2).

Theme 4: Nursing is an excellent second career.

“I, at 20, was not the student I was later in life. I was more focused on social aspects of college ... older and wiser, I figured out I wanted it and pursued it, and I'm happy with it.”

While most of these accelerated nurses said they would choose nursing again, few said

they would want this to be their first career. These nurses gravitated towards nursing because they wished for more fulfilling and lucrative work. In a systematic review performed by Macdiarmid et al. (2021) investigating why people are attracted to accelerated nursing programs, the authors found similar themes, noting that the primary motivations for many to enter an accelerated nursing program are the desire to find a satisfying career, finding fulfillment through working with others, increased career options, and achieving satisfaction through helping patients. When talking with the new nurses, most expressed they felt as though they were in professional limbo before deciding to pursue nursing. The personal growth and knowledge that came from their first career were invaluable. A recurring sentiment was that having a prior career helped them develop strong interpersonal skills and effectively manage their time. Macdiarmid et al. (2021) stated similar findings, stressing that the choice to enter an accelerated nursing program correlated with the timing in a person's life and feeling a calling for nursing. During the interview, some of the nurses mentioned that having time when they were younger to focus on their social life, hobbies, and interests gave them the ability to prioritize themselves. Ultimately, these accelerated nurses are happy with their career choices and love the vast future professional possibilities that nursing will allow.

Conclusion

Accelerated nursing programs offer an excellent pathway for those looking to enter a new career field. Before starting this journey, it is crucial to have a solid plan to manage the significant time commitment involved. Adaptability is essential, as the program demands hours of study time and time spent in clinical settings. Balancing this with life expectations can be challenging. Having a strong support system is essential; being surrounded by other students who share this experience creates valuable opportunities for learning and emotional support. Seeking out opportunities to gain more healthcare experience through work or volunteering in hospitals can help build confidence and enhance patient care skills. These accelerated nursing graduates found that their diverse backgrounds and prior life experiences contribute to their effectiveness as well-rounded nurses. Despite the challenges faced, completing my accelerated nursing degree was one of the greatest career decisions I made, solidifying my belief that this was the right path for me, as nursing has truly transformed my life and brought a deep sense of fulfillment. ■

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has frequently made a lasting difference. A publication titled *Ella Care: A Life of Adventure and Discovery in Nursing* (Kick, 2014), written by Ella herself, highlights many of her contributions and continuous service to the profession and patients. Her unique way of incorporating humor is joyful and uplifting.

Ella's latest contribution to nurses in Ohio is allowing ANA-Ohio to announce the creation of our organization's non-profit foundation. Her major gift fulfills part of ANA-Ohio's strategic plan and will be used to support nursing initiatives and scholarships. Perhaps Ella's most significant achievement

is this generous gift to the ANA-Ohio Foundation, which will inspire others to create a future where they, too, can make a lasting difference. ■

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