Understanding the Re-Envisioned Essentials: A *RoadMap* for the Transformation of Nursing Education

The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education is a carefully crafted document that was developed following a lengthy, inclusive, and iterative process with input from hundreds of faculty and deans as well as from multiple organizational stakeholders. The Essentials Task Force spent many months engaged in listening, discerning dialogue, and compromise to ensure quality, future-thinking standards for professional nursing education.

A driving context for the Essentials Task Force was differentiating between "change" and "transformation," which are often used interchangeably. Change fixes the past; it modifies behaviors. Transformation creates the future; it modifies values, core beliefs, and desires. The re-envisioned Essentials using a competency-based education model represents *transformation,* a bridge to the future of academic nursing.

The AACN Board has affirmed the importance of the Essentials for advancing professional nursing education by approving this transformational document. The Essentials provides a new model for professional nursing education, which includes a transition to competency-based education. The Board recognizes the enormity and breadth of challenges this presents for many schools. They also recognize that although a positive change for nursing education, the pathway to fully implementing the new Essentials will be an extended process that may take three years or longer. AACN is committed to facilitating this transition and providing support and resources to make the implementation a reality. The Essentials provides a platform for this transition, but the work has just begun, and AACN will continue to engage its members in the implementation every step of the way.

The first step on the RoadMap is to read the Essentials document in its entirety:
- The Introduction provides important context and underlying rationale for the nursing education framework as well as the Domains and competencies which follow. A review of key integrated concepts also is included.
- Each of ten Domains has a descriptor, a contextual statement, overall competencies, and Level 1 and Level 2 sub-competencies that differentiate between entry-level professional nursing education and advanced level nursing education.

What we heard and learned from the process to develop the new Essentials
The insights and perceptions gained from input from those in nursing education and practice accentuated many of the challenges in the profession. Key issues regarding the current state of nursing education that were cited repeatedly include multiple confusing degree pathways, variability across similar degree programs, inconsistency in graduates' knowledge, skills, and competencies, quality concerns, and lack of agreement regarding level of degree preparation for entry into practice and advanced education in nursing. This variation in education has created an inconsistent product/graduate and an inability to articulate what the discipline of nursing is. Practice partners frequently say they do not understand the variation, and thus there are challenges in transitioning graduates into practice environments and optimizing potential contributions by graduates.

Many of these key issues cannot be "fixed" by the new Essentials alone. A transition to competency-based education will address issues related to providing more consistency among graduates; clarity in expectations for program outcomes; preparing graduates with a greater understanding of the discipline of nursing; and a smoother transition from one education program to another as well as from one career path to another.

What will AACN do to support and facilitate the implementation of the Essentials?
- Appoint an advisory group to monitor the process, identify issues that may arise, and develop materials and resources to support the implementation.
- Provide extensive learning opportunities for deans and faculty (e.g. webinars, conference sessions, online resources, and workshops.)
- Continue engagement with practice (American Organization for Nursing Leadership and other practice-based organizations) to create synergistic efforts and a common understanding related to the Essentials.
- Continue ongoing engagement over the next several years with the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education and the Commission on Nurse Certification as each of these autonomous organizations dialogue with their constituents and stakeholders regarding this new model.
- Develop an Essentials Tool Kit to provide current information on competency-based education and assessment, suggested learning resources and content, and assessment exemplars for each of the domains. The template for the toolkit has been developed, and the implementation has already been started based on input received from faculty and others. Various stakeholder groups and specialty organizations have been invited to submit resources and materials for possible inclusion.
- Explore the development of digital tools for programs and students to facilitate documenting, tracking, and reporting curricula and competency attainment.

What can schools/programs begin doing now to implement this transition?
The transition to competency-based education and this new model for nursing education will be a gradual process, possibly taking three years or longer to fully implement. However, there are some steps schools can begin doing now to begin this process. Recommended early steps include:
- Use the new Essentials to crosswalk or map current curricula in individual programs of study (or degree programs) with the Domains, Competencies, and Sub-competencies.
    - As a collective, faculty can use this crosswalk to identify what is missing across the curriculum and where there are content gaps.
    - Identify where in the curriculum learning experiences already address the competencies and how these experiences are integrated across the curriculum.
    - Identify activities that are already included in the curriculum to promote and assess achievement of competencies.
    - Encourage faculty to brainstorm and create ways competencies might be assessed using current or new learning activities/scenarios.

- o Use the crosswalk for faculty generative thinking regarding how degree pathways do or not align with the new model for nursing education.
        - o Continue the generative thinking to develop pathways for how the program(s) may evolve to align with the new model for nursing education.
    - Develop or participate in faculty development sessions or workshops to support this transition.
    - Engage with current and new practice partners to strategize, plan, and implement the new Essentials.

The process for charting the future
The Essentials Task Force, comprised of 36 nursing professionals representing education and practice, emerged from their work of discernment and compromise with an openness to becoming fully informed, to respecting diversity of thought, to accepting new ways of viewing current and future realities, and to giving up some of what they personally valued. They committed to ensuring quality, future-minded direction, and integrity of the profession while addressing the challenges that are seen in current nursing education and practice. Every dean, director, and faculty member from AACN member schools are asked to be open to compromise; to embrace transformation of nursing education; and be willing to begin the journey on this pathway.

Approval of *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education* is only the first step in achieving a transformed future and transitioning to this new model for professional nursing education. By approving this document, you are affirming that a transition to competency-based education is the direction that is needed to:
- Allow a more consistent product in terms of breadth of preparation and quality to reinforce confidence in our graduates by nursing practice colleagues, other health professionals, and consumers; and to honor the trust that defines our profession; and,
- Sustain an enduring mutual respect for the profession of nursing that is inclusive of our academic-practice partnerships, perceptions and realities of education and practice, and commitment to finding one "lens" for the professional identity and competencies of nurses.