The Graduate Nursing Student Academy: Fostering Student Connections and Community

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Graduate-level education in nursing marks the beginning of significant personal and professional identity development for students as they prepare to advance into various new roles (Douglass et al., 2024). This evolving identity is deeply intertwined with both a sense of belonging and self-efficacy as graduate nursing students, ultimately impacting professional satisfaction and the quality of clinical or research outcomes due to increasing competence, confidence, and collaboration (Muñoz, 2021; Patel et al., 2024). In addition to doctoral or traditional master's programs, similar life changes are likely present for individuals entering second-degree master's programs in nursing as they shift from one professional space to another (Jones et al., 2023).

As such, the characteristics of support required for nursing students (e.g., teaching, mentorship, or financial resources) are likely to change significantly when students enter graduate school. Graduate programs, in general, have evolved significantly over the past several decades from the expansion of nursing research and PhD training to the development of the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) (Tobell, 2022). The implementation of these programs continues to evolve with the growing demand for high-quality nurse practitioners. Since the establishment of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) in 1969, academic nursing has worked to align on common issues, such as the standardization of advanced nursing programs and the science of nursing

As nursing schools struggle to meet their mission and support graduate nursing students, many institutions are leveraging the infrastructure and programmatic reach of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing's Graduate Nursing Student Academy (GNSA). A national graduate student-led organization, the GNSA provides a wide array of resources and programming to support the needs of graduate nursing students and their respective institutions.

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(Tobell, 2022). This process has not been without its challenges – the implementation of the DNP role across settings continues to encounter significant barriers (McCauley et al., 2020), and DNP programs often face high faculty workload to support DNP project completion while also maintaining the quality of training (Cleary et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2021; Waldrop & Broome, 2024). PhD programs have experienced cycles of low enrollment and faculty shortages, which, in turn, can make it harder to expand training at all levels or to provide these programs in the first place (AACN, 2024; Lee et al., 2023). In addition, nursing schools tasked with meeting student needs across graduate programs often must expend significant resources to maintain entry pipelines into nursing as they combat the nursing shortage (Tamata & Mohammadnezhad, 2023).

Students themselves are likely to be impacted by many of these challenges. As we observe the proliferation of online graduate programs (which, in addition to other benefits, may significantly reduce the resources required), students may

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face greater isolation related to online education (Haanes et al., 2024). Further, if schools are not able to provide inclusive and equitable institutional support, many graduate students from marginalized populations may experience thwarted belonging, ultimately placing their success at risk and potentially even shaping population health outcomes through excessively homogenous cohorts of new graduate nurses (Hamzavi & Brown, 2023; Patel et al., 2024). Further, significant advanced practice preceptor shortages make it difficult for some graduate programs to achieve high-quality and accessible education (Henry-Okafor et al., 2023).

Limited resources and rapidly changing needs have created a moving target for nursing schools when it comes to supporting graduate nursing students while also meeting the demand for well-educated nurses and nurse practitioners. Many leaders within academic nursing who seek to actualize their hopes for equitable and effective graduate education may be daunted by the challenges of identifying and preparing nurse leaders for the future. While institutions with these programs take on the obligation of supporting their graduate students, this does not need to be faced alone. Just as the AACN has been a unifying force for deans and faculty, there is a need to meaningfully connect graduate students nationwide. In 2012, AACN established the Graduate Nursing Student Academy (GNSA) to build the infrastructure needed to create a national community of nursing students in master's and doctoral programs (Altdoerffer et al., 2015; AACN, 2022). Today, the GNSA has grown to more than 13,000 members strong and is on a trajectory to create more impact than ever.

Why Connect Your Graduate Students With the GNSA?

In the case of pre-licensure education, schools often encourage their students to engage with the National Student Nurses Association (NSNA), including their committees and annual convention. Connecting your graduate students (and institution) with an organization like the GNSA fills a similar and significant gap for students farther along the educational continuum. The GNSA can greatly enhance the graduate nursing student experience by mitigating personal challenges while providing opportunities for community and professional development. Through connection and engagement, needs assessment, prob-

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of the Graduate Nursing Student Academy (GNSA) Process for Supporting Graduate Nursing Students
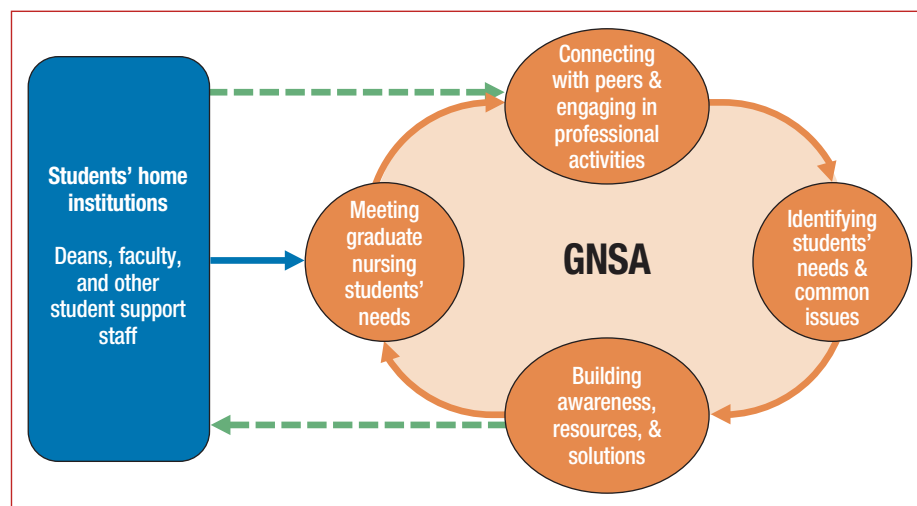
lem-solving, and resource building, the GNSA works to augment programs and services available at students' home institutions by creating a national network of peers focused on student success and professional identity formation. Muñoz (2021) identified how self-efficacy among graduate nursing students exists in a positive feedback loop beginning with experiences that build student competence and confidence. In a model that echoes this conceptualization, Figure 1 depicts how the GNSA operates to meet student needs by starting with connection and engagement. When common issues are identified and resolved together, students whose needs have been met will be better able to connect and engage. Those students are more likely to contribute or 'give back' to nursing through greater professional involvement or simply because they are more likely to be retained and graduate from their programs.

This feedback loop, the GNSA believes, has the capacity to create transformative leaders. This model depicts how the GNSA's work can directly supplement the support efforts provided by graduate schools of nursing. With numerous resources and a vast community of academic nursing leaders, the GNSA works diligently to provide students with the interpersonal means and scholarly support to address barriers to professional advancement and program completion. This approach to elevating student support and connection requires buy-in from schools to help link students with these resources. Here, we share some key programs to illustrate how the

GNSA can support students and their institutions to build a bridge between the current state of graduate nursing education and the future we aspire to achieve.

Connecting Students, Identifying Needs, and Building Solutions

Generating a wider GNSA community for all graduate nursing students is a key priority of the organization. The challenges associated with graduate-level education are often daunting for any student. By engaging with a community of peers from various programs and organizations nationwide, GNSA members can mitigate these challenges since the organization provides a protected space for students to voice concerns that may impede their academic or professional success. By sharing solutions to issues other members are experiencing, collaboration ensures that each school and student does not need to 'reinvent the wheel.' Further, this sort of community can reduce student feelings of isolation. Through numerous workgroups, virtual town hall meetings, and innovative programming, the GNSA ensures members feel supported, heard, and valued during their academic journey.

One such ongoing GNSA activity is the Preceptor Workgroup. Various student leaders and GNSA members are working with AACN staff to identify the challenges many graduate nursing students face surrounding clinical or preceptor placement. This collective provides a forum for students struggling with these obstacles to voice their frustrations while assembling resources for students expe-

riencing similar strife. These resources will soon be published by the GNSA and made available to any graduate nursing student — or institution — who may benefit from this guidance.

Efforts of GNSA also focus explicitly on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. A recently developed initiative based on student concerns is the GNSA Neurodiversity Group. This group collaborates to promote policies, practices, and partnerships that increase awareness of and support neurodiversity (e.g., attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, dyslexia) in academic nursing. The group aims to support students and faculty through community building, resource generation, education, and advocacy.

To further support academic success, GNSA writing and study groups allow students to connect with others virtually to foster a sense of community and accountability while getting work done, such as preparing for an exam or writing a paper. Other efforts include our recently developed podcast *Level Up: Graduate Nursing Unplugged*, for students and nursing leaders to share graduate experiences, providing further mentoring opportunities to students, faculty, and academic administrators nationwide.

In addition, networking events have been invaluable to GNSA members, generating strong participation from students throughout the United States. One of the most anticipated forums for networking and community is the annual GNSA Conference in the nation's capital. This event brings graduate nursing scholars together to gain experience presenting novel research, engaging with esteemed presenters, and connecting with peers. Overall, opportunities for engagement and peer-to-peer collaboration are paramount to the development of graduate student nurses as they can begin to affiliate with a nationwide community of nurse leaders — a key element of their evolving self-efficacy and professional identity (Douglass et al., 2024; Muñoz, 2021).

Opportunities for Growth and Leadership

Once students have more support needs met, their confidence and capacity to engage at a higher level may also increase (Shellenbarger & Hoffman, 2016). The GNSA provides ample opportunities for graduate students to develop their leadership and advocacy acumen and academic skillset.

First, the GNSA Liaisons are student members who apply and are selected to promote the GNSA's initiatives and ongoing projects at their respective institutions. Within the GNSA, these individuals serve as the voice of their programs and peers. Liaisons are also crucial to gauging graduate nursing students' needs, the culture of academic nursing, and the areas in which the GNSA's efforts would be most beneficial. The organization relies on its Liaisons to provide feedback on current efforts, advocate for needed policies, and make recommendations to improve the academic nursing experience for all students. In turn, the GNSA provides its Liaisons with invaluable experiences to hone unique leadership skills that they may not otherwise emphasize within the scope of their programs. They can impact their respective institutions and fellow students in a tangible, meaningful manner while being fervently supported by their peers and AACN staff.

Another group of highly engaged students, the GNSA Advocacy Leaders, works to explore academic nursing legislation at the local, state, and national levels. The Advocacy Leaders receive comprehensive training on approaches to advocacy and the generation or revision of national policies surrounding academic nursing at the graduate level. These efforts also align with the annual AACN Student Policy Summit, where students interested in health policy visit and advocate directly with congressional representatives and their staff.

For graduate students with a greater interest in the operational scope of the GNSA, the Leadership Council provides a unique opportunity for leadership development. This diverse group of ten graduate nursing students, selected through a nationwide application process, steers the organization's objectives and aims to promote the well-being, development, and success of all GNSA members. These members are selected for a two-year term. Annually, the group meets to determine strategic priorities for the organization and works to ensure that programming meets student needs.

Finally, to recognize the accomplishments and impact of students across the spectrum of graduate programs, the GNSA offers an opportunity for meaningful recognition through the Emerging Leaders program. Each month, individual students are selected to be featured in the *GNSA Bulletin* based on their significant community impact, research, or contributions to healthcare. These individuals serve as role models and exemplars for the larger community of graduate students to learn from and celebrate.

Conclusion

The GNSA is thriving and committed to supplementing the support services and programs provided by graduate nursing institutions across the United States. Student members receive additional academic support, career development, leadership development, advocacy skills, and mentoring opportunities not available in other forums. By encouraging your graduate students to be involved, perhaps by becoming a Liaison or simply becoming a member (GNSA membership is free), you can maximize the benefits the GNSA offers to graduate nursing students across program types. Where the NSNA has provided the foundation for community among undergraduate/pre-licensure nursing students, the GNSA continues that sense of belonging as students progress through their graduate education.

As the GNSA continues to grow, program leaders are innovating to improve the graduate nursing student experience and raise members' engagement within professional nursing workforce. One such initiative is the GNSA Career Hub, which aids GNSA members in meeting their professional aspirations and securing employment after graduation. The GNSA is always reevaluating its priorities and developing new initiatives based on the changing needs of graduate students. The continuous growth and relevance of the GNSA, however, rests with direct collaboration and engagement with institutions offering graduate nursing programs. By strengthening inter-institutional connections and mobilizing student participation in the GNSA, academic nursing will be better positioned to prepare a fully engaged graduate nursing workforce able to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for the profession. **DN**

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