Executive Summary: The Value of a Clinical Nurse Specialist Internship

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Main Points

- Despite the value of the clinical nurse specialist (CNS) role, the CNS scope of practice is only partially understood in the practice setting (Cannaby et al., 2020; Fischer-Cartlidge et al., 2019).
- Cultivating a CNS team has proven difficult due to a lack of experienced applicants (Negley & Schad, 2024; Rader et al., 2024; Saunders, 2023).
- The proposal for a CNS Intern improved the understanding of the CNS scope of practice among most nurse executives.
- All nurse executives agreed that a CNS Intern role would be a viable way to facilitate the growth of an effective CNS team and strengthen the academic-practice partnership between the project site and its affiliated college of nursing.
- All nurse executives agreed that the CNS is integral to the achievement of the healthcare system's strategic plan.

Background and Purpose

CNSs practice across three spheres of impact: direct patient care and education, nursing practice, and systems innovation (Kilpatrick et al., 2024; NACNS, 2019). Despite the breadth and impact of this role, limited understanding of the CNS scope of practice often results in underutilization within healthcare systems. To address this gap, a project was undertaken to design and propose a CNS Intern role aimed at enhancing role clarity and serving as a pilot for a broader CNS Intern Program.

Project implementation occurred within a large, rural healthcare system consisting of a 1,708-bed academic medical center and eight regional hospitals. This system serves 29 rural counties and provides care to approximately 1.4 million patients annually (ECU Health, 2024; ECU Health, n.d.).

Methodology

To assess current perceptions of the CNS role, data collection began with a survey distributed via email to nurse executives. The goal was to understand their experience with the CNS role and their knowledge of the CNS scope of practice. Survey feedback revealed a limited understanding of the potential benefits of CNS practice, particularly at the regional hospitals.

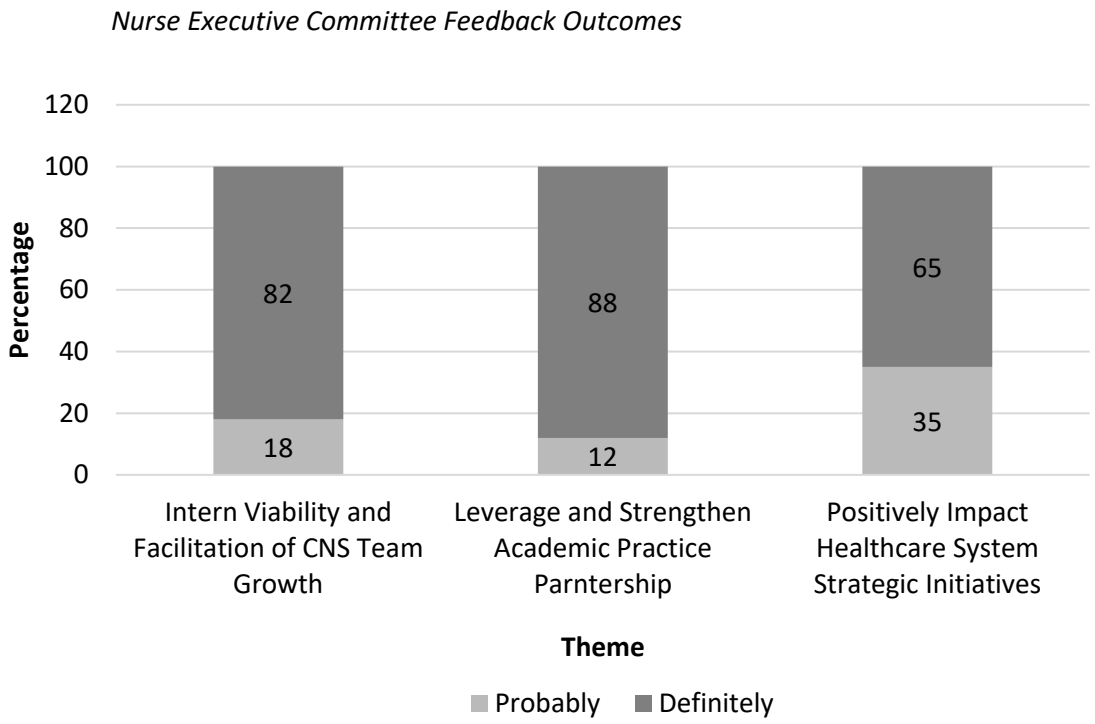
The National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists' Grow Your Own CNS Toolkit was used as a framework to develop a CNS Intern role proposal. This proposal included a comprehensive business plan, a detailed job description, a competency-based orientation, and an executive summary (NACNS, 2024). The proposal was formally presented at a Nurse Executive Committee meeting. Immediate feedback was gathered through a follow-up survey, which attendees accessed via a QR code provided at the conclusion of the presentation.

Results

Initial survey results revealed that while most respondents understood certain aspects of the CNS role, they lacked comprehensive knowledge of the full scope of practice. Feedback from regional hospital respondents varied widely. Some respondents recognized the potential value of a CNS in their settings, while others questioned the relevance and fiscal viability of the role in that context.

Following the presentation of the CNS Intern proposal, final survey responses showed a significant shift in understanding. Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated that the proposal expanded and clarified their knowledge of the CNS scope of practice. All respondents agreed that the CNS Intern position was a viable strategy to support the growth of the CNS team. Additionally, there was unanimous support for the idea that the CNS Intern role could strengthen the academic-practice partnership between the healthcare system and its affiliated college of nursing. Respondents also concurred that the CNS Intern could positively influence the healthcare system’s strategic initiatives. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of responses to these three key survey questions.

Figure 1



Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of the project included the opportunity to increase visibility of the CNS role, improve the clarity of the scope of practice, enhance the academic-practice partnership (Coke, 2022a, 2022b; Dresser et al., 2025), and modernize the CNS Team. Limitations included the lack of experienced CNS applicants, limited allowable scope of CNS practice at the health system, financial constraints related to creating a new role, and time constraints dictated by the project timeline. Additionally, the survey sample population was a convenience sample of nurse executives, so the results may not be generalizable to all nurse leaders in the practice setting.

Conclusions and Implications

The initial survey outcomes supported the theory of limited understanding of the CNS scope of practice among nurse executives in the clinical setting. The CNS Intern proposal successfully enhanced

nurse executives' comprehension of the role and offered a structured approach to developing and sustaining an effective CNS team.

The implications of this initiative are far-reaching. A CNS Intern Program has the potential to support the transition to practice for emerging CNSs (Boss et al., 2024; Bruwer et al., 2020; Fischer-Cartlidge & Short, 2023), strengthen evidence-based practice, and promote translational research (Bobay et al., 2021; Siedlecki, 2023, 2024; Smith & Johnson, 2023). Additionally, an effective CNS Team can improve population access to quality healthcare (U.S. DHHS, n.d.; Martin et al., 2024), reduce the cost of care (Boss et al., 2024), and enhance both patient and team member satisfaction (Bachynsky, 2020). The CNS role is indispensable in advancing strategic initiatives and fulfilling the mission and goals of the healthcare system (Halili et al., 2024).

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