



The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholars Program: An opportunity for junior nurse faculty

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ABSTRACT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholars program provides promising junior faculty extramural funding, expert mentoring, and the training needed to be successful in the academic role. The Nurse Faculty Scholars program, which admitted its first cohort in 2008, is designed to address the nursing faculty shortage by enhancing leadership, educational, and research skills in junior nursing faculty. This article provides an overview of the program, its purpose, and its eligibility requirements. The authors give strategies for selecting mentors, developing the written application, and preparing for an oral interview. Finally, the authors provide an analysis of funded institutions, research design and methods from current and recently funded projects, and rank and positions held by nursing mentors.

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Introduction

Nurses who accept tenure-track positions in research-focused academic settings are required to seek extramural funding, publish regularly in high-quality journals, master teaching skills, and engage in purposeful and meaningful service (Boyer, 1990). Nurse faculty working in academic settings must demonstrate a high level of competence and apply for permanent tenure within approximately five to six years. Because nursing is a practice discipline, nurses must often balance these expectations while also maintaining clinical expertise. Finding the time and training to

develop in the faculty role is essential for success. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Nurse Faculty Scholars (NFS) program provides promising junior faculty extramural funding, expert mentoring, and the training needed to be successful in the academic role.

Overview

The purpose of the RWJF NFS program is to develop the next generation of academic nursing leaders (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholars Program, n. d.). During the three years of the

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Table 1 – Description of Selected Aspects of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholars Program

Program Area	Description
Program Goal	To develop the next generation of national leaders in academic nursing.
Individual Applicant	Junior faculty member with at least 2 and no more than 5 years of experience in the faculty role at the start of the program who are working full time in an accredited school of nursing in an academic position that could lead to tenure. Applicants must be citizens or permanent residents of the United States or its territories.
Mobility	Scholars remain at their home institution.
Mentoring	Applicant must identify a primary nursing mentor and a research mentor. At the start of the program, the scholar is paired with a national nursing mentor.
Institution	An accredited school of nursing. One candidate from each school of nursing can apply each year. Each school of nursing can have no more than 2 active scholars in the program at any one time.
Teaching	Scholars are required to teach and develop teaching skills throughout program.
Networking	Facilitated by national program meetings and other opportunities.
Time	Three years. Program support begins on September 1.
Percent effort	60%
Allowable costs	Up to \$350,000 over three years to cover salary support (60% FTE), plus fringe benefits corresponding to the level of salary support. The remaining grant funds may be used to support research related expenses, research personnel, training workshops, and travel to professional meetings.
Indirect costs	Waiver requested by the foundation. Indirect costs are capped at 12%.

program, scholars receive protected time, funding to carry out a research project, intense mentoring, and leadership training; this support is provided at a critical time in career development (Conn, Porter, McDaniel, Rantz, & Maas, 2005; Perry, Clifton, Menec, Struthers, & Mengas, 2000). With the funding RWJF provides, nurses working in academic institutions can launch a research program, broaden research skills, and gain new research insights. In addition to carrying out a substantive research project, RWJF funds can cover the cost of professional and research training, expert grant and manuscript reviews, consultant services, and travel to professional meetings.

A national nursing mentor is assigned to each scholar at the beginning of the program. This mentor is from a different university and provides expertise and a national perspective on the scholar's research and career development. For nursing faculty who are in non-research-intensive schools but who nevertheless have a goal of establishing a productive program of research, the external mentor offers a tremendous benefit (Bryne & Keefe, 2002). In addition to supporting the development of an externally funded program of research, mentors are expected to facilitate academic leadership, professional growth, and networking.

One of the most important benefits is networking with other scholars, nursing mentors, and National Advisory Committee members at national and program meetings. Scholars may also have opportunities to meet and work with current or recent scholars in related RWJF programs including Physician Faculty Scholars, Clinical Scholars, Health Policy Fellows, and Executive Nurse Fellows. After the funding period is over, scholars are invited to attend NFS national program meetings, gather at professional conferences, join the RWJF Alumni Network, and participate in alumni events. Even after completing the program, each cohort of scholars continues to seek each other

out to develop joint grant proposals, seek advice on career development, provide support during job transitions, and maintain friendship. An overview of the NFS program is presented in Table 1.

Eligibility

In the NFS program, a new cohort of scholars is selected annually. The first cohort of scholars was chosen in Spring 2008. During participation in the program, scholars (a) develop their program of research by conducting a major research project; (b) engage in national and institutional mentoring, leadership training, and scholarly networks; and (c) have salary support to gain the skills needed to be successful in an academic setting. To be eligible, applicants must be junior faculty, who are usually assistant professors with at least two but no more than five years in a full-time faculty position that can lead to tenure (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholars Program, 2012). Individuals who are former or current principal investigators on a National Institutes of Health R01 research project or the equivalent have demonstrated research expertise and are not eligible.

Applicants must be registered nurses with a research doctorate in nursing or a similar discipline. Individuals who have earned a practice doctorate such as the Doctorate of Nursing Practice are not eligible. The program seeks scholars from groups who are underrepresented in nursing, who articulate an emphasis on cultural diversity in nursing, and who represent diverse academic settings. In the first four cohorts of scholars, more than one third of the scholars who were selected for the program were either male or represented a minority racial/ethnic group (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholars

Program, n. d.). Applicants may have to compete within their universities to be eligible to apply; however, the percentage of applicants who were funded has been approximately 20% to 30%.

Application Preparation

A potential applicant should begin by meeting with the dean or director of the college or school of nursing to discuss the program and the importance of institutional support. It is important that the applicant understand the objectives of the NFS program and have clear research and leadership goals. Only one applicant from an institution can apply for the NFS program each year and each university can have up to two scholars in the program simultaneously (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholars Program, 2012). Often, there are several eligible and interested junior faculty, and schools must develop their own procedures for selecting applicants internally.

If the dean is supportive of the application, the next step is selection of internal mentors. The importance of formal mentorship—the pairing of junior faculty with established mentors—is widely recognized in academic research and often leads to improved research productivity (Bryne & Keefe, 2002; Cohen et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2006). The NFS program is unique, however, in its strong emphasis on mentoring and leadership development in the academic role. Applicants identify two senior faculty to serve as mentors—one as a nursing mentor and one as a research mentor. These mentors should be available for guidance and direction but do not manage the applicant's NFS project or budget. Mentors can be compensated financially by including them as consultants in the NFS research project budget and they can co-author manuscripts and conference presentations.

Selection of Mentors

Applicants are instructed to select mentors in their institution who are willing to serve and who share common or complementary research interests. The nursing mentor need not be an expert in the applicant's field; however, this person should be a senior faculty member in the school or department of nursing who is a nurse and has demonstrated the ability to mentor. The research mentor should be selected based on common research interests or research methods and should be from a discipline other than nursing. According to the NFS guidelines, the research mentor should have an externally funded program of research. If there are few research mentor options, the scholar can select a nursing mentor with research experience and an external mentor who can facilitate research and professional connections. The applicant should

consider (a) availability of potential mentors for meetings during the award period, (b) physical proximity of mentors to the applicant, (c) knowledge of resources and the working environment in the school of nursing and the university, and (d) the mentor's ability to help the applicant learn and develop. Because of the importance of having strong mentors to work with, the applicant should start the selection process as early as possible.

In addition to public health and medicine, applicants should consider research mentors from a variety of disciplines, including education, communication, liberal arts and sciences, business, economics, engineering, and psychology. Individuals who are not in fields directly related to health care can offer new perspectives and knowledge of relevant methods and can facilitate interdisciplinary research (McBride, 2010). The applicant needs to review each potential mentor's curriculum vitae, history of research funding, and experience in the mentor role. The applicant should also explore potential nursing and research mentors' interdisciplinary experiences and ability to network with others.

Finally, applicants should interview potential nursing and research mentors to explain the NFS program and describe their specific goals. Both mentors should be able to articulate how they will develop the applicant as a scholar, collaborate with an interdisciplinary team, and work with the applicant during and beyond the funding period. After pondering possible pairs and their fit with the applicant's goals and needs, two mentors are chosen. The applicant should then work closely with both mentors to articulate the role of each in the NFS proposal and letters of commitment.

Developing the Written Proposal

The application template outlines specific font, margin, page number, and spacing requirements, and following the guidelines is important. Applications who do not follow technical instructions, exceed page limits, add extra letters of support, or fail to include required information are generally not reviewed. To avoid application pitfalls, the applicant should thoroughly review the NFS website for additional guidance, contact the program office if clarifications are needed, participate in applicant webinars, and have mentors or the research office review the application. Because writing the proposal and obtaining feedback are both time consuming and critical, it is important to start the written proposal in advance. Registering with the RWJF web portal ensures adequate notification of the call for proposals. The application deadline is usually in early February.

Although the requirements for the written proposal may vary, the applicant must be able to describe the research project, identify the mentors' roles in the

project, provide evidence of leadership potential, address how scholarship will translate into teaching and service, and outline professional goals for the program and beyond. The required research proposal includes background and aims, previous studies and preparation for conducting the proposed research, research methods, data analysis, limitations, a timeline, and summary. The applicant should seek feedback from mentors and others to ensure a clear, well-written, and organized proposal with rigorous research methods and a substantive, innovative research study (Tornquist & Funk, 1990). The study should lead to improvement in "health and health care for Americans" (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2012).

The proposal must include a clear and concise executive summary of the proposed research and goals. Biosketches of the applicant and both mentors are also required. Research measures, permissions, and letters of support from study sites and other collaborators are not allowed, so applicants must use the proposal to assure reviewers that they are capable of conducting the proposed research. The study should fit within a three-year time frame. Proposed project costs should be approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000 annually. The portion of the budget dedicated to research covers the costs of a substantive study, is considerably more than a pilot study, and is comparable with an R21 or K award in National Institutes of Health equivalencies.

Commitment letters are required from the university provost, the school of nursing dean, the nursing mentor, and the research mentor. An additional letter is written by a faculty member or colleague who can attest to the applicant's strengths. These letters are an important part of the proposal, and the applicant should provide ample guidance to mentors and others who are writing letters. Each of the mentors' letters should demonstrate great familiarity with the applicant's research, teaching, leadership, and service qualifications and may elaborate on key elements of the proposal. The additional letter can be written by a previous mentor who can discuss the applicant's development and ability to be mentored. Applications should be submitted early to avoid technical issues with RWJF's "Grantmaking Online" application system. Both the applicant and research office should verify that the proposal has uploaded correctly and is complete before sending.

Preparing for the Interview

Applicants who are selected as semifinalists are given detailed information regarding preparing the project budget and are invited to participate in a panel interview with members of the National Advisory Committee. For the interview, semifinalists are instructed to prepare a brief presentation regarding their research project and professional goals. Strategies for a successful interview include understanding the funding source, knowing

who the interviewers are, preparing a comprehensive yet succinct presentation, and practicing delivery skills (Natalle & Bodenheimer, 2003).

To prepare for the interview, semifinalists should also review the RWJF's website to become familiar with their history, philosophy, and mission. Because the members of the National Advisory Committee conduct the interviews, the names and biographies of current committee members listed on the NFS website should be reviewed. Semifinalists should expect questions from National Advisory Committee members with common areas of expertise and should become familiar with their current and former projects. Additional bibliographic and research information may be available through Internet searches, literature searches, or at committee members' employers' websites.

Guidelines on how to prepare for the interview are sent to semifinalists and must be followed carefully. Semifinalists develop a presentation that includes a mentoring plan related to development as a nurse educator, leader, and researcher. The research proposal is presented including specific aims, design, methods, and limitations. Finally, semifinalists should tell the National Advisory Committee how they will benefit from the program, describe the relationship between the NFS program and career development, and describe career advancement opportunities provided by the NFS program.

Use of a mock interview has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve performance. The mock interview provides an opportunity to experiment with different delivery styles and vocal expression and receive feedback. Because mentors are most familiar with the proposal, they should be present for the mock interview. However, it is helpful to also include other faculty, researchers, and statisticians who are less familiar with the proposal, because they may provide insight and ask challenging questions about methods and analysis. It is important to ask for and accept advice from those attending the mock interview, including feedback on the use of nonverbal communications and distracting mannerisms, repetitious words, pitch, tone, and rhythm of speech. Obtaining guidance from someone who has participated in the NFS or a similar panel interview may be helpful.

During the interview, National Advisory Committee members are divided into small groups and semifinalists rotate through the groups. Time allotments are specified for the presentation, which is followed by questions. The presentation should be concise, descriptive, and conducted within the specified time frame. The semifinalist should arrive for the first interview at least 15 minutes early and wear appropriate and conservative business attire. Entering the room with confidence, making eye contact with all those present, and shaking hands when appropriate can make an excellent first impression. The semifinalist's presentation can be delivered standing or seated. PowerPoint slides are used as a guide and as notes for reference. Though the presentation should be

well-rehearsed, it should not be read and does not need to be memorized.

After the presentation, the National Advisory Committee members are given time to make comments and ask questions. Emphasis should be placed on the research plan, career trajectory, leadership development, and role of mentors. Semifinalists should be prepared to discuss strengths and weaknesses of their research design, and say what is innovative about their research. Responses should be delivered using concise and concrete examples, without rambling or adding extraneous information. Most important, enthusiasm and expertise should be clearly evident. At the close of the interview, applicants should thank the panel members for their time and express excitement about the possibility of participating in the program. The exit should be positive and genuine—most interviews are remembered for their beginning and end.

Next Steps

The National Advisory Committee makes decisions immediately after the interviews and the new cohort of scholars may be notified within the week; funding begins each September. Although the RWJF does not provide individual feedback, the NFS program office offers a teleconference for applicants who were not successful. As long as the applicant remains eligible, reapplication is encouraged and several scholars have been successfully funded after submitting a second application. If two or more individuals are competing internally for the opportunity to apply, this may not be an option.

Description of Funded Scholars

Institutions from the first four cohorts of scholars (2008-2011) were analyzed using the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education ([Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education](#), n. d.). The 43 universities or institutions that have received funding were predominantly research universities with very high research activity (74%, n = 32) or research universities with high research activity (12%; n = 5). The remaining universities or institutions were either doctoral/research (5%; n = 2) or institutions with a specialty focus on medical or health programs (9%; n = 4). Though 52 scholars have been funded, nine institutions have had two successful scholars.

Research abstracts for current and recently funded scholars were reviewed by the authors and classified based on the research design and methods. The most common design was experimental intervention research (50%), and some studies involved collecting physiologic measures or biomarkers (28%). Other prevalent approaches included mixed qualitative and quantitative methods (37%), analysis of large datasets including Practice-Based Research Networks or

Geographic Information Systems (19%), and use of genomics (15%). Two scholars used community-based participatory research methods and three scholars are analyzing health care systems and policy. More than one third (35%) of the studies focused exclusively on one or more racial/ethnic groups including African Americans, American Indians, or Hispanic/Latinos.

Using bios presented in the national program meeting agenda, the nursing mentor's academic rank and current position were categorized. Because several scholars changed mentors over the course of the program, 58 bios were reviewed. Twelve (21%) of the mentors were deans, presidents, or directors of colleges or schools of nursing, and 17% were associate or assistant deans. The majority of the nursing mentors were full (28%) or endowed professors (24%), one was at the rank of associate professor (2%), and four were professor emeriti (7%). The majority of the nursing mentors were members of the American Academy of Nursing (n = 49; 84%).

Conclusions

The RWJF has a sustained history of supporting nurses and nursing. The NFS program, one of more than 20 RWJF Human Capital programs, is dedicated to training early career nursing scholars, promoting nursing research, providing leadership training, and boosting the diversity of the academic nursing workforce. The NFS program was developed exclusively for junior nursing faculty. In addition to training and research funding, the program provides junior faculty with important benefits. The support and opportunities provided by the program are unparalleled by other research traineeships available to nurses. Although the program is in its early years and outcomes are forthcoming, the NFS program provides the tools and support needed for program alumni to become well-funded researchers, leaders in their fields, future nursing deans, and health policy experts.

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