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Project AGE: Accessing Gerontological Education

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ABSTRACT

With only 2.6% of Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) certified in geriatrics, the supply of Gerontological Nurse Practitioners (GNP) is seriously inadequate to meet the rapidly growing needs of the aging population. Only two GNP programs are currently online requiring few campus visits and 13 states do not have a GNP program at all. With only 182 new GNPs certified in 2007, there is a desperate need to change how GNPs are recruited and educated.

The aim of the proposal, titled Project AGE (Accessing Gerontological Education), is to increase the number and minority/ethnic representation of advanced gerontological nurses in the workforce prepared to meet the needs of older adults in rural, underserved, and culturally diverse populations. By moving the GNP program at Rush University into a fully online format, gerontological graduate education becomes available to students in rural and remote areas and removes the barriers of distance and travel for a quality education.

The plan involves 1) vigorous recruitment efforts to attract nurses, especially underrepresented minority/ethnic and disadvantaged nurses, and potential preceptors working in rural and remote clinical sites to the highly rated Rush University GNP program; 2) launching a comprehensive and unique online Competency Development System (CDS) with activities and simulations to supervise and promote gerontological, rural, cultural, and interdisciplinary competency development of GNP students; and 3) disseminating the results of Project AGE to further increase and educate the workforce caring for older adults. These objectives meet the four National Bureau of Health Professions and the two Healthy People 2010 goals.

Project AGE includes taking an established and successful online approach and process model of learning developed at Rush University for the Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner program and adapting and enhancing the program for the GNP program. A virtual environment called The Neighborhood is the framework and setting for activities and simulations where students learn and apply specialty based content from their courses. The CDS tracks and evaluates competency development. These innovative learning strategies engage students to think critically, apply their knowledge, and develop skills and competencies to care for diverse older adults in a variety of settings and situations.

The GNP program is a part-time program of study that takes three years to complete. Part-time study is an advantage for many students due to the need to work and meet personal and family commitments. One goal is to enroll an average of nine students a year into the GNP online program with at least two students each from disadvantaged and minority/ethnic underrepresented groups. A second goal is to have at least 50% of the students intend to work in rural or underserved areas after graduation.

A Statutory Funding Preference is requested on the basis that our project substantially benefits rural and underserved populations. It reduces health disparities and barriers and improves access to care by increasing the GNP workforce to care for older adults in rural and underserved areas (**National Goal 1, HP 2010, Goal 2**), resulting in increased health and quality of life for older adults (**HP 2010, Goal 1**).