Exploring the Wage Disparity Between Nurse Educators and Clinical Nurses

David Armstrong, PhD, Jinman Pang, PhD, Sage Shirey, MA

Health Workforce Technical Assistance Center • Center for Health Workforce Studies • College of Integrated Health Sciences • University at Albany

> Addressing the earnings disparity between nurse educators and clinical nurses is critical to mitigating the recruitment and retention difficulties faced by nursing education programs.

BACKGROUND

Nursing education programs face persistent difficulties in the recruitment and retention of qualified faculty. A recent study found that almost 60% of nursing education programs in the US had full-time faculty vacancies during the 2024-2025 academic year.[1]

The most frequently cited barrier to attracting and retaining nurse educators is low compensation. Most nurse educators can earn more money working in clinical settings. However, no study to date has systematically documented these differences.

STUDY OBJECTIVE

To analyze and compare salaries between nurse educators and their counterparts in clinical practice positions and other roles.

METHODS

This study utilized data from the 2022 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses (NSSRN). The study included nurses who were employed full time in December 2021 (n = 33,342).

Nurse educators were identified as those who reported their job title as an "Academic Educator, Professor, or Instructor in a School of Nursing."

For the analysis, 95% confidence intervals were calculated for annual earnings by nursing job title. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were employed to examine differences in demographic and professional characteristics between nurse educators and nurses in other roles.

Additionally, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model was used to compare the annual earnings of nurse educators to nurses in other positions. The model controlled for a variety of factors including sex, race/ethnicity, age, highest nursing degree, advanced practice registered nurse status, work experience, employment setting, rural location, health professional shortage area, clinical specialty, marital and children status, census division of residence, and hours worked per year.

RESULTS

Distribution of Full-Time Nursing Positions

As of December 2021, an estimated 2,869,603 nurses were employed in full-time nursing positions in the US. Most non-advanced practice registered nurses served as staff nurses (46%), charge nurses (9.5%), and front-line managers (4.9%). In contrast, only a small fraction of nurses (1.6%) reported working as nurse educators.

Annual Income Comparison

Nurse educators, on average, earned less than nurses in other full-time positions.

The mean annual income for nurse educators was $81,617. By comparison, staff nurses earned an average of $83,250, charge nurses earned $87,067, and front-line managers earned $98,546. Among these groups, only front-line managers had a statistically significant higher income than nurse educators.

School nurses were the only group with significantly lower earnings than nurse educators.

FIGURE 1. Annual Income by Nursing Position (95% Confidence Intervals)
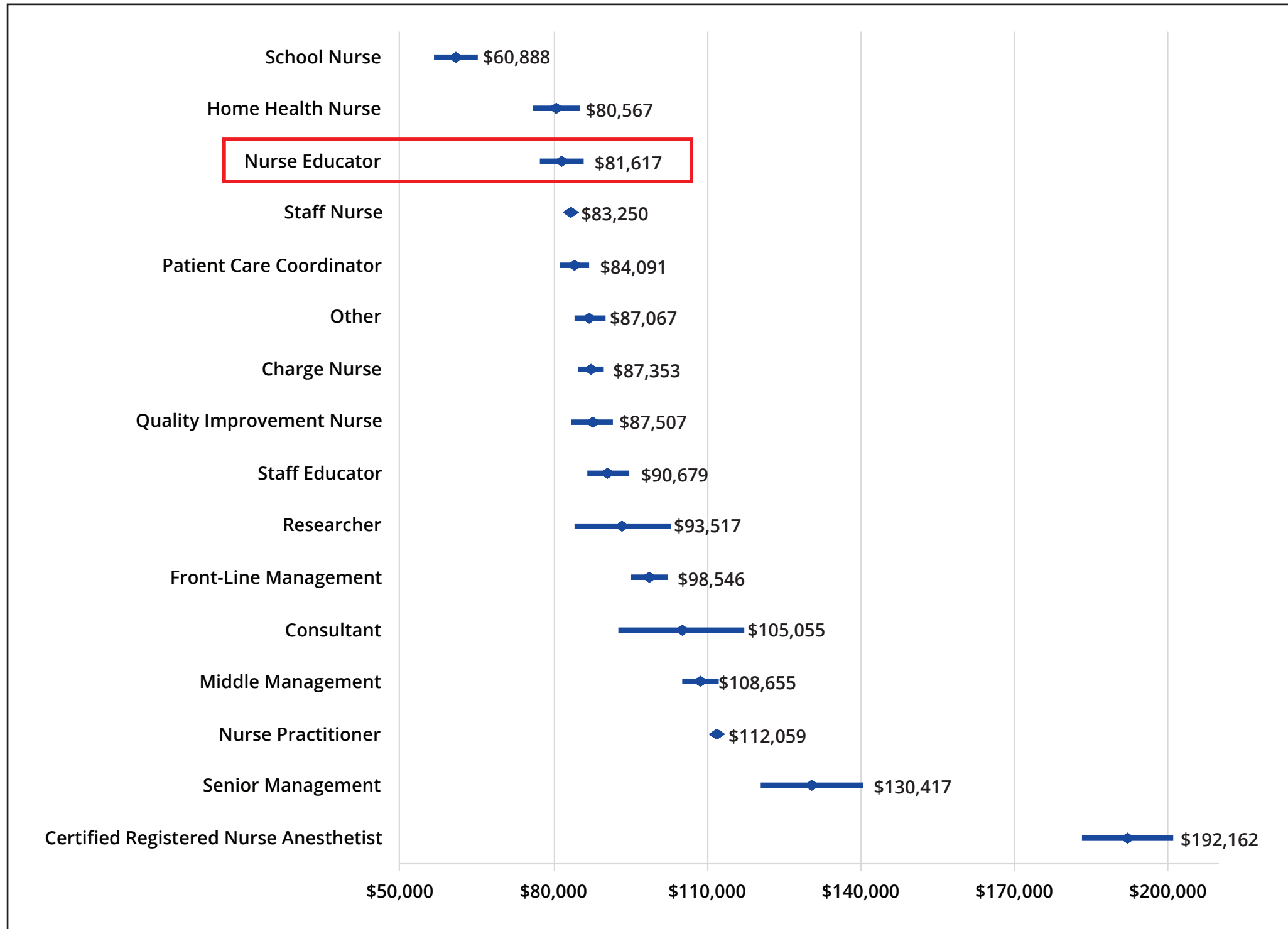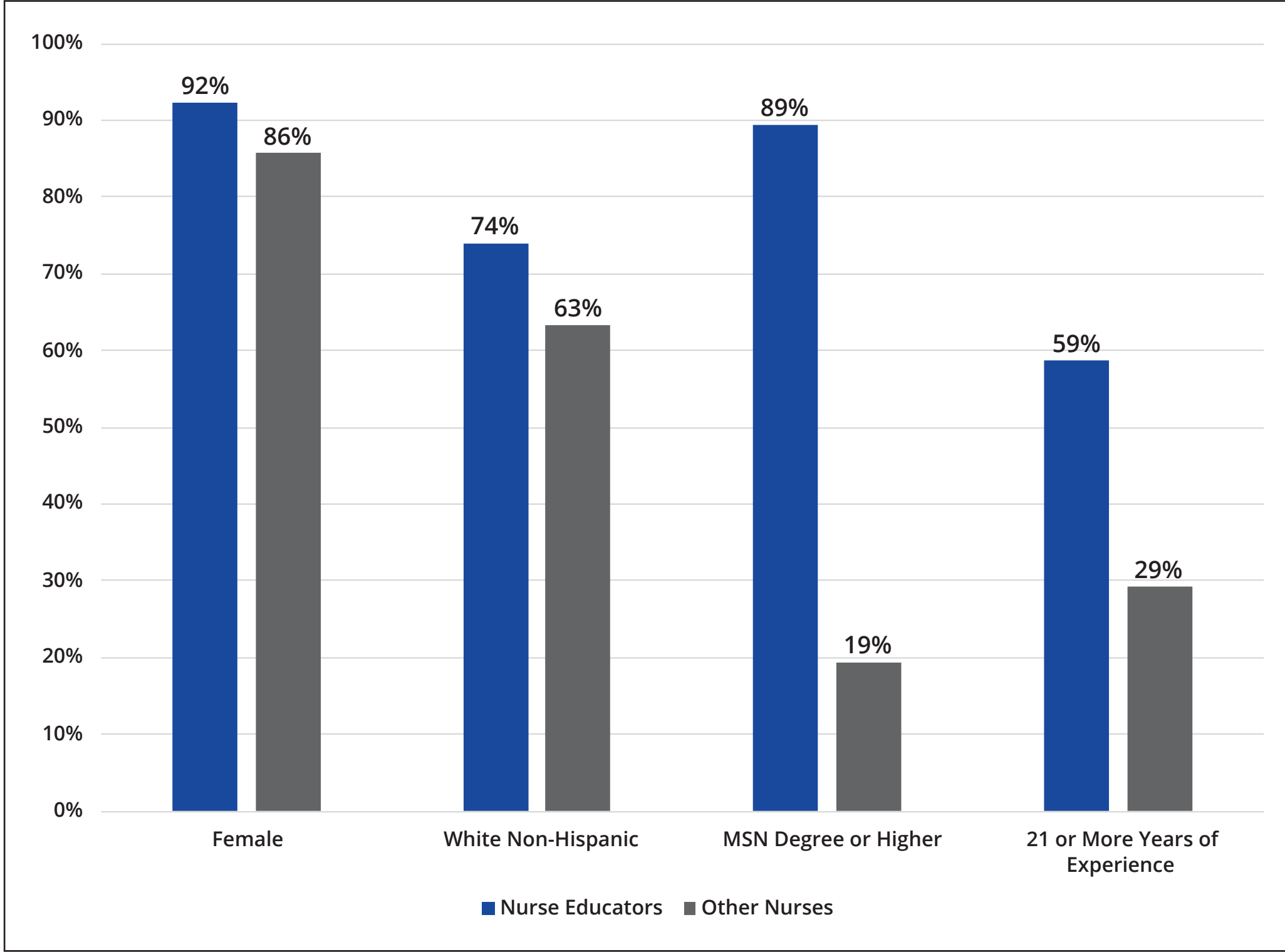

RESULTS

Distinctive Characteristics of Nurse Educators Compared to Other Nurses

Nurse educators have notably different demographic and professional characteristics compared to nurses in other roles:

- A significantly higher proportion were female (92% vs 86%) and White non-Hispanic (74% vs 63%)
- Far more likely to hold a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree or higher (89% vs 19%) and to possess 21 or more years of experience in the nursing field (59% vs 29%)

FIGURE 2. Characteristics of Nurse Educators Compared to Nurses in Other Positions


Results From Regression Analysis

After adjusting for a range of factors—including demographics, education, and work experience—nurse educators were found to earn significantly less than nurses in all other positions included in the model, with the exception of school nurses.

When controlling for relevant factors, nurse educators earned $18,346 less annually than staff nurses, $19,863 less than charge nurses, and $27,526 less than front-line managers—the 3 most common nursing positions examined.

RESULTS

FIGURE 3. Adjusted Differences in Annual Income Between Nurse Educators and Other Nursing Positions
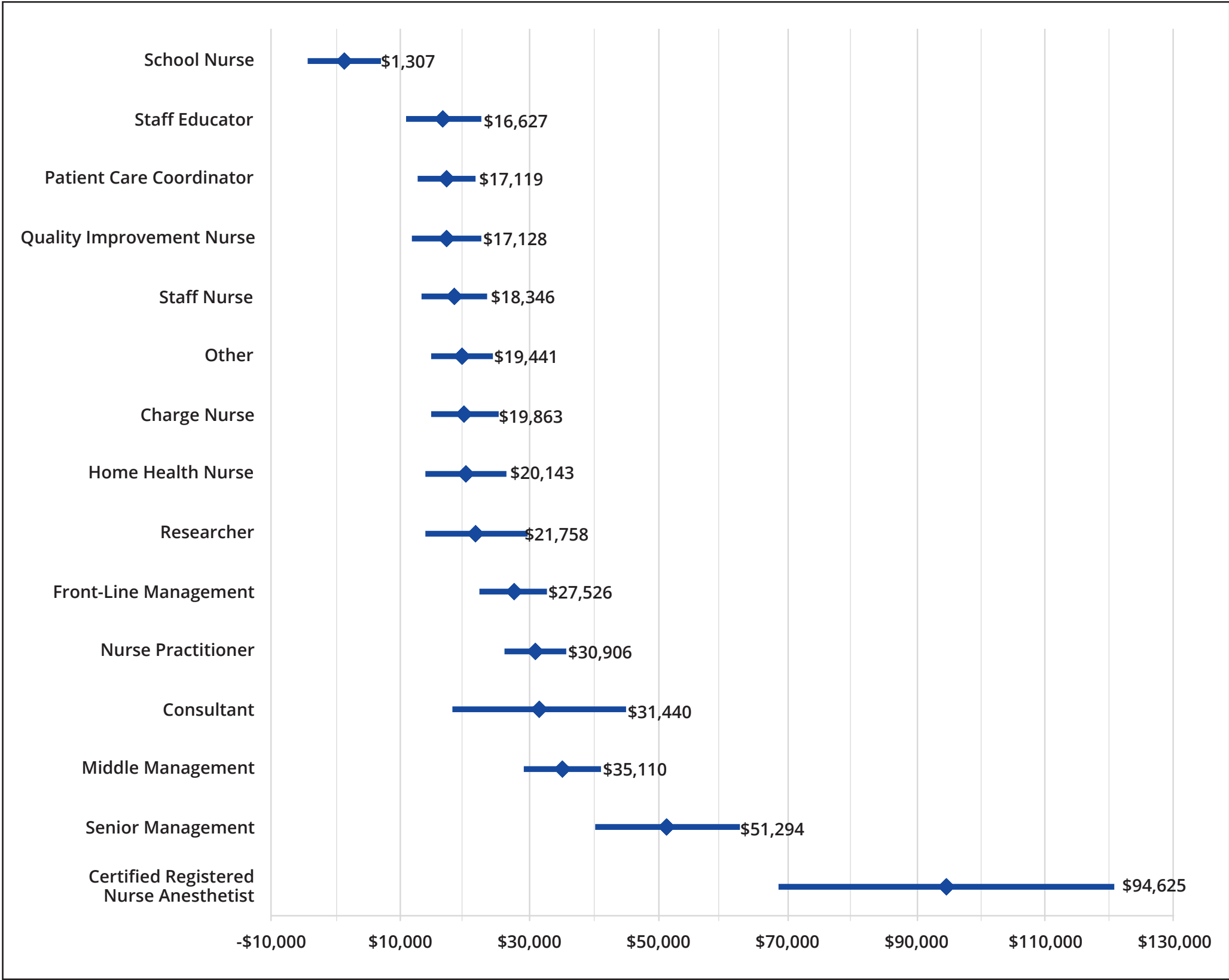
Impact of Professional Characteristics on Income Disparities

While nurse educators earn significantly less than most other clinical nursing professionals, this income gap becomes even more pronounced when their qualifications and experience are considered. On average, nurse educators possess higher levels of education and greater professional experience than their counterparts—attributes that would typically require higher salaries in clinical roles.

For example, when a staff nurse is modeled with the same qualifications and experience as a typical nurse educator, their expected salary increases from $83,250 to $94,132, which is $10,882 more than what the average staff nurse earns. This suggests that nurse educators are forgoing substantially higher earnings by choosing academic positions over clinical practice.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the significant income disparity between nurse educators and other nursing positions—a gap that becomes even more pronounced when factoring in the higher education levels and greater work experience of nurse educators. Many nurses forgo substantial earning potentials in clinical practice and other roles when becoming nurse educators. This compensation gap presents a major barrier for nursing education programs, which continue to face challenges in filling faculty positions. Closing this wage gap is essential to reinforcing the nursing education pipeline. Without targeted efforts to improve compensation and provide incentives for academic nursing careers, programs will struggle to attract and retain the skilled educators necessary to prepare the future nursing workforce.

REFERENCES

1. American Association of Colleges of Nursing. 2024 Faculty Vacancy Survey Report. American Association of Colleges of Nursing; 2024. Accessed April 28, 2025. https://www.aacnnursing.org/Portals/0/PDFs/Reports/Faculty-Vacancy-Report-2024.pdf

Health Workforce Technical Assistance Center
@ The Center for Health Workforce Studies
College of Integrated Health Sciences, University at Albany

www.heathworkforceta.org | info@healthworkforceta.org

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