

**Proposal to Establish a New Nursing Education Program
Aspen University in Austin, Texas
Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program**

Summary of Request:

Consider the Aspen University proposal to establish a new Baccalaureate Degree Nursing (BSN) Education Program in Austin, Texas. The final proposal was provided electronically to members of the Texas Board of Nursing (Board).

Historical Perspective:

- Aspen University has its origins in the International Academy, created in the 1960s to improve the way education was provided. The International Academy evolved into ISIM University, with a primary focus on technology and business education. In the late 1980s, operations moved to Colorado and in 1993, the university was successful in acquiring national accreditation with the Distance Education and Training Council, now the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC). In 2003, the university underwent a change in ownership, a name change to Aspen University, and a successful re-accreditation review.
- In 2011, the University underwent a second change of ownership and Michael Mathews, Chairman of the Board of Aspen Group, Inc. (AGI), was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Aspen University. Mr. Mathews' concerns about the financial challenges of students seeking higher education opportunities aligns with the mission of the university to help students achieve upward mobility and long-term economic success through superior education, financial prudence, and career advancement. AGI is an education technology holding company that leverages its infrastructure and expertise to allow its two universities, Aspen University and United States University, to deliver on the vision of making college affordable again.
- Today, Aspen University, with a total student body population of 10,039, offers online certificates, and online associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees in four schools: School of Business and Technology, School of Education, School of Arts and Sciences, and School of Nursing and Health Sciences.
- Aspen's School of Nursing currently offers BSN degrees (an RN-to-BSN and a pre-licensure BSN), and master's degrees and a nursing practice doctorate. All of these programs are accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE);

the BSN degree through December 31, 2029. The pre-licensure BSN Program was included in the most recent CCNE visit. The nursing programs are also accredited by DEAC, Aspen's national accreditor, through 2024.

- The current pre-licensure BSN Program is located in the Phoenix, Arizona, metropolitan area with a total of 428 students on its two campuses, and has provisional approval by the Arizona Board of Nursing. The first cohort is scheduled to graduate in July 2020. Currently, the average GPA of the 1,243 Pre-Professional Nursing (pre-nursing) is 3.08; the average GPA of the 428 Nursing Core students (those admitted to the nursing major) is 3.62. From July 2018 through September 2019, the Nursing Core experienced a 93% retention rate and 7% attrition rate.
- Aspen University was granted an exemption by the Texas Workforce Commission to operate an educational facility in Texas on March 10, 2020, and was awarded a Certificate of Authorization to award degrees in Texas by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board on April 20, 2020.
- A first draft of the proposal was received in the Board office on January 27, 2020, and reviewed by Board Staff. Following Board Staff's recommendations, a revised version was received March 30, 2020. The proposal was deemed complete for Board presentation in May 2020.

Summary of Proposal:

Overview of the Proposal:

- Aspen proposes to establish a new pre-licensure nursing education program at the BSN level in Austin, Texas. The proposal requests enrollment of two daytime and two evening cohorts of 30 students each for a total of 120 students in a calendar year. If approved by the Board in July 2020, the first day cohort will begin in September 2020 while the first evening cohort will begin in December 2020.
- Since National American University (NAU) is in the process of teaching out its last BSN cohort by February 2021, Aspen has collaborated with NAU to assume the NAU lease at 1015 W. University Ave., Suite 700, Georgetown, Texas. This available space that is equipped for BSN education will provide adequate offices, classrooms, labs, etc., while a larger facility located at 101 West Louis Henna Blvd., Austin, TX 78728, is undergoing preparation to permanently house the Aspen BSN Program.
- The curriculum is comprised of online didactic courses, face-to-face seminars and simulation lab experiences, and direct patient care clinical learning experiences. The enrollment pattern is designed to support both working and non-working students as day and evening classes will be offered on weekdays and clinical rotations will be provided weekdays and weekends.

- All students are assigned a personal Academic Advisor who conducts an individual “walk-to-class,” an opportunity to familiarize them with the online learning management platform and classroom/course set-up as well as general university policies. Additionally, Nursing Core students are assigned BSN pre-licensure specialized Academic Advisors who stay with them throughout their program. They also receive a tour of campus facilities and a cohort orientation led by the Program Director and full-time faculty that establishes important relationships and reviews nursing-specific policies and procedures.
- The BSN Program is comprised of 120 semester credit hours (SCH) and divided into two components: the 41 SCH Pre-Professional Nursing (PPN) curriculum and the 79 SCH Nursing Core curriculum. The program is a hybrid of online general education and nursing didactic/theory courses (83 SCH) and face-to-face nursing labs, clinicals, and seminars (37 SCH).
- Aspen has secured a contract and clinical affiliation agreement with Baylor Scott & White Health, a 46-hospital system with over 800 primary care locations across Central and Northern Texas. This opportunity will allow BSN students a wide variety of acute, post-acute, chronic, critical care, medical-surgical, and community health settings and services.

Rationale and Need for the Program:

- The proposal describes the following four rationales supporting the need for the program:
 - Firstly, supply and demand is expected to grow in Central Texas more than in any other region in Texas. According to the Texas Center for Nursing Workforce Studies, Supply and Demand Projections 2015-2030, Central Texas will experience a deficit of 2,568 RNs by 2022 and 7,459 RNs by 2030. In 2015, there was a supply of 22,516 RNs, but a demand of 25,039. In 2030, Central Texas will experience a supply of 33,572 RNs, but a demand of 41,032. Central Texas will experience a growth in supply of RNs to 49.1%, but a growth in demand to 63.9%. This reflects an unmet demand of between 21% and 29%.
 - Secondly, Baylor Scott & White Health’s growth plan that included the now open medical centers in Austin/Oak Hill and Buda will require more BSN-prepared nurses to help it meet demand in those communities. In her November 2019 attestation letter to the Texas Board of Nursing, Dr. Linda Wolf, Baylor Scott & White Health Vice President, Nursing Practice & Education, indicated that the system was “experiencing a shortage of BSN nurses and welcome[d] a CCNE accredited program to open a campus in the Austin area”.
 - Thirdly, according to the Texas Center for Nursing Workforce Studies, Demographics and Trends Report 2015, an aging RN workforce is a concern in

Texas. In fact, “in 2015, 39.8%...were 50 years or older” and a large proportion is between 50 and 60. As these...nurses retire or age out, there is a danger of a large decrease of the workforce if they are not replaced.

- Finally, Aspen can fill the void that will be left as a result of NAU’s decision to close its pre-licensure nursing program in the Austin area.
- During an online survey that was live for one week in December 2019, 467 Texas residents expressed their interest in attending an Aspen BSN Program that would be offered in the Austin/Waco area. These results led Aspen to conclude that it will have success with continuous enrollment in a program established in the Austin area.

Administration and Organization:

- Aspen University’s mission statement sets forth: *Aspen is dedicated to offering any motivated college-worthy student the opportunity to receive a high quality, responsibly priced distance-learning education for achieving sustainable economic and social benefits for themselves and their families.*
- This institutional mission is in harmony with the mission of the School of Nursing and Health Sciences that states: *The mission of the Aspen University School of Nursing and Health Sciences is to enhance the health and quality of life for individuals, families, and communities at local, state, and national levels through excellence in teaching, scholarship, and practice.*
- To accomplish its mission, the School of Nursing and Health Sciences currently offers baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral degrees in nursing; all programs are CCNE accredited. Aspen’s strength in offering reasonably priced degree programs using a distance learning format, combined with ground facility-based clinical and lab simulation, and seminar experiences in its BSN Program, is appealing to today’s learner and reflective of the institutional mission.
- The proposal includes a statement of support from the AGI Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer Michael Mathews. The letter states that the AGI Board of Directors and AGI Officers approve and support the expansion of the pre-licensure BSN Program into the State of Texas. In addition, Aspen University Provost, Dr. Kevin Thrasher, and Dean of the School of Nursing and Health Sciences, Dr. Nina Beaman, provided letters of support.
- Aspen University’s financial stability was verified by an independent auditor’s report provided in the proposal. Tuition is the primary source of revenue for the first two years of the program’s operation.
- A budget for the first three years of operation for the Aspen BSN Program in Austin was provided in the proposal. The budget includes funds dedicated to Program Director and

faculty salaries, library resources, computers, audiovisuals, skills and simulation laboratory needs, consumable supplies, and administrative expenses.

- The proposed BSN Program Director, Rhonda Winegar, DNP, PhDc, APRN, RNP-BC, CCRN, CPN, RN, has been a professional nurse since 1991 and a nurse educator for more than 10 years. Dr. Winegar has served as nursing faculty in associate degree, baccalaureate degree, and nursing graduate degree programs, including an FNP program. She has served as a dean and program director of nursing education programs.

Faculty:

- Eight full-time faculty members need to be hired for the Nursing Core courses over the first 18 months of the program and will be hired on a staggered basis. The primary source for qualified faculty are those who are being displaced by the closing of NAU in Austin. Aspen has been able to secure at least three to fill the first three full-time faculty positions available. The second source for qualified faculty are those within Aspen's School of Nursing and Health Sciences' Master's-prepared adjunct or full-time faculty ranks. The 200+ highly qualified nursing faculty who currently teach for Aspen will be asked if they are interested in teaching as full-time or adjunct faculty for the Nursing Core in the BSN pre-licensure program in Austin. The third source for qualified faculty will be from within the Baylor, Scott & White Health facilities in the Austin area.
- Aspen will ensure sufficient nursing faculty to conduct the nursing courses. One full-time faculty member plus adjuncts are budgeted for the first cohort scheduled to begin in September 2020. The full contingent of eight full-time faculty required to operate the program will be hired by April 2022. Their teaching loads will be maintained as additional adjuncts are hired to reflect enrollment growth.
- Online courses are structured at a ratio of 30 students to one faculty member, while lab courses are staffed with a ratio of 15 students to two faculty members. Seminars, provided face-to-face, are offered at a ratio of 30 students to one faculty member. Clinical courses will have 10 students per faculty member. Simulations are staffed with a ratio of five students to one faculty member.

Students:

- The proposed admission pattern is to annually enroll four cohorts of 30 students each. In 2021, day cohorts will begin in February and October, while evening cohorts will enroll in April and December of that year.
- Based on its experience with existing campuses, as 1,671 pre-licensure students are enrolled in the two Arizona locations, Aspen has opted to have unlimited enrollment to the Pre-Professional Nursing component of the program to accommodate the likelihood of attrition into the Nursing Core. Aspen's current experience with the competitive

admissions process for the Nursing Core indicates that not all those accepted into Pre-Professional Nursing will be eligible for the Nursing Core. Those non-eligible students are provided opportunities to enroll in Aspen's other undergraduate programs that will accept their credits as a block transfer, including a Bachelor of Science in Health Care Administration if they choose to remain within the health care field.

- Aspen recruits through a multi-channel recruitment strategy that blends digital marketing, traditional marketing, and direct student outreach where student recruitment specialists exhibit, present, and are available for Q & A sessions at nursing association meetings, symposiums, conferences, conventions, hospital education fairs, or other face-to-face opportunities. At the ground campuses, interested students are invited to visit and tour the campus and participate in open house "Meet and Greet" activities.

Program of Study:

- The BSN Program is comprised of 41 SCH of general education courses and 79 SCH of nursing courses for a total of 120 SCH. Students may transfer in up to 41 SCH or take the required 41 SCH at Aspen. Since the outcome of the PPN curriculum is to prepare students for admission to the Nursing Core, the PPN curriculum is designed to meet the AACN Baccalaureate Essential #1: Liberal Education for Baccalaureate Generalist Nursing Practice and aligned to Program Learning Goal #1: Generalist Nursing Practice.
- Each term is made up of two sessions. Each session is eight weeks long and each term lasts 16 weeks. Students take a 2-week break between each term. Full-time students who enter the program with no transfer credits and who follow the defined session sequence can complete the program in three years. Full-time students who enter with all of the PPN courses can complete the program in two years.
- Seminars, didactic, and clinical experiences are integral to the Nursing Core curriculum and move students from simple to complex understanding of the BSN prepared nurse role. Students experience learning activities and growth opportunities based on course learning objectives aligned with program learning goals.
- The Seminar is an integral component of Aspen's program as Seminars offer students numerous opportunities to develop interpersonal nurse to patient/family relationship skills. Professional values, ethics, safety, diversity, and confidentiality content are introduced through the Seminar series. Each cohort in its entirety attends Seminar courses which meet face-to-face for three hours, every other week during an 8-week session. During Year 2, Terms 4-6, the initial focus of Seminar is to introduce, reinforce, and master the Differentiated Essential Competencies (DECs) and the *Nurse of the Future Competencies*. Each competency has areas of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. During Year 3, Terms 7-9, Seminar focuses of the NCLEX Test Plan and the AACN Baccalaureate Essentials. Seminar is designed to bridge the competency gap between didactic nursing knowledge, clinical experiences, and the required attitudes and

behaviors for nursing students. The *Nurse of the Future Competencies* guide the Seminar and focus on the expected progression from concepts that are introduced early in the program of study to those that are reinforced, mastered, and applied later. This is the only time in the pre-licensure BSN curriculum when students meet as a full class. Otherwise, they are online or meeting in their lab, clinical, or simulation group.

- In addition to the AACN Baccalaureate Essentials, the Massachusetts Nurse of the Future (NOF) Core Competencies guide the implementation of the Nursing Core curriculum. NOF Competencies provide curriculum blueprints for use in academic and practice settings aimed at critical competencies in knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
- As explained in the proposal, the Aspen School of Nursing and Health Sciences made the intentional decision to use one publisher for all of its textbooks, skills, simulations, and case studies. Aspen contracted with Elsevier Publishers as Elsevier is a mature company with education tools that include a well-established Nursing Entrance Exam, developed by Health Education Services Incorporated (HESI), the HESI A2. Further, the company provides e-books with evidence-based case studies, adaptive quizzing tools, and HESI specialty exams. The contract also includes Sherpath resources that integrate content, assessment, and simulations that can be customized to the Aspen curriculum. The Simulated Learning System covers all patient populations and allows patient-centered care by integrating evidence-based content directly into student care planning and clinical documentation.
- In alignment with Board Rule 215, five content areas are covered within the program of study: medical-surgical, maternal/child health, pediatrics, mental health, and geriatric nursing. In the Pre-Professional Nursing component of the program, students take courses in diversity/culture, human growth and development, and communications. During the Nursing Core, the content learned is integrated into caring for patients and families across the lifespan and from different cultural belief systems. Starting in N320: *Health Assessment* and N320L: *Health Assessment Lab*, students are taught how to approach patients throughout the lifespan. Similarly, in N310: *Fundamentals of Nursing* and N310L: *Fundamentals of Nursing Lab*, students are taught how to approach both young and old and from birth to death. During each clinical course, students are required to participate in Bootcamp which emphasizes specific assessments, skills, and medications.
- Unique to Aspen University, the Course Design Guides (CDG), traditionally called syllabi, are used to ensure that the appropriate course information is available to students within the learning management system, Desire2Learn. All CDGs contain the information that would typically be included in a traditional syllabus, including university mission-based outcomes, program learning goals, course learning objectives, DEC's, professional standards, required textbooks, course/module structure (overview, goals alignment, learning resources, and instructions for activities, discussion questions, and

assessments), and grading for the course. CDGs also include instructional strategies provided through Elsevier publications and tools, as well as integration of program concepts. The signature assignment rubric (SAR) documents include all information pertinent to the signature assignment. The SARs themselves indicate the alignments to program learning goals which are used within Aspen's assessment of student learning system and data dialogue/reporting practices.

Clinical Learning Experiences:

- The goal of clinical is the practical application of theory. Both acute care and community based clinical opportunities will be used to meet clinical objectives. All clinical courses have a co-requisite didactic course that has defined course objectives. Specific patient populations include; mental health, population and community nursing, maternal health, child health, adult health and complex care.
- Aspen's nursing leadership secured a clinical affiliation agreement with Baylor Scott & White Health, a 46-hospital system with over 800 primary care locations across Central and Northern Texas. During initial meetings, Baylor Scott & White Health nurse administrators committed to supporting the Aspen BSN Program in consideration of the growth needs of the system and the ongoing demand for BSN-prepared nurses. This support was operationalized through a written clinical affiliation agreement, letters of support, and introductions to the Chief Nursing Officers in the Central Texas district of Baylor Scott & White Health.
- The opportunity to affiliate at the multitude of Baylor Scott & White Health facilities will allow BSN students a variety of acute, post-acute, chronic, critical care, medical-surgical, and community health settings and services. The proposal explains that there will be no impact on other nursing education programs by Aspen University's clinical affiliation at the Baylor Scott & White Health System.

Facilities, Resources, and Services:

- Initially, Aspen's BSN program will be located at 1015 W. University Ave Suite 700, Georgetown, TX 78628, as Aspen is assuming NAU's lease at this Board approved facility, including its inventory. Photographs of the NAU facility indicate the setting is fully equipped for BSN education and more than adequate to house the new Aspen BSN Program. Board Staff will evaluate the site after the Aspen move (see Board Order).
- Eventually, the BSN Program will be housed on the first floor at 101 W. Louis Henna Blvd., Austin, Texas. The 19,888 square feet physical facility will include the following:
 - reception area and lobby;
 - one large storage room;
 - one 6-bed nursing skills lab;
 - one Simulated Home Health apartment with simulated bathroom;
 - five-bed simulated hospital, with a nurse's station and control room;

- three clinic rooms with exam tables;
 - two debrief rooms, each with a large table and seating for 12;
 - three classrooms: two 40-seat rooms and one 32-seat room;
 - one computer lab with 40 seats;
 - one faculty lounge with vending, refrigerator, and microwave;
 - one student lounge with vending, refrigerator, and microwave;
 - eight faculty and Program Director offices;
 - five adjunct faculty cubicles;
 - one simulation/lab coordinator office; and
 - four offices and lounge in the Aspen Center for Enrollment.
- The Virtual Library is headed by Dr. Melody Hainsworth, the Virtual Librarian. It will be accessible to students directly from their online classroom. The 13 library databases relevant to the nursing program are comprised of a health and medicine collection with more than 12,000 full-text e-books and journal databases with more than 5,000 full-text journals. Included in the collection is CINAHL with Full Text, Consumer Health Complete, Academic Search Premier and all EBSCOhost Databases. The Library Team developed and provides synchronous and asynchronous web-based orientations and web-accessible library instructional supports on a 24/7 basis.
 - Support services include academic advisement as well as an Early Alert Process to notify faculty of student academic distress. In addition, students also have access to technology resources, distance education support, and the Writing and Resource Center. A Career Resource Center, accessible from the online classroom, offers students career resources tailored to their specific program of study and related industries.

Total Program Evaluation Plan:

- Assessment and evaluation practice at Aspen University has four basic components as follow: (1) integral to teaching and learning; (2) faculty driven; (3) meaningful, manageable, simple, systematic, and sustainable, and (4) serves both internal and external purposes. Aspen has adopted an institutional framework for effectiveness, adapted from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's Transparency Framework.
- Aspen's Total Program Evaluation (TPE) will include the following areas for assessment and evaluation: organization and administration of the program (including program policies); philosophy/mission and objectives/outcomes; program of study, curriculum, and instructional techniques; educational facilities, resources, and services; affiliating agencies and clinical learning activities; students' achievement; graduate outcomes; and faculty members' performance.

- The School of Nursing and Health Sciences created a formal Systematic Plan of Evaluation (SPE) and the Leadership Team meets at least annually to consider: (1) data analysis of the program effectiveness measures; (2) a review of program quality, institutional commitment and resources, and curriculum and instructional practices; and (3) any necessary revision to the SPE.

Rationale for Recommendation:

Pros:

- Dr. Rhonda Winegar, the proposed BSN Program Director, meets all requirements of Board Rule 215.6 to assume the leadership position. Dr. Winegar is an experienced and accomplished nurse educator.
- The administration has committed the resources to the implementation and maintenance of the new BSN Program.
- The proposal authors were receptive to Board Staff's recommendations and revised their initial plan for enrollment based on Board Staff's guidance.

Cons:

- The curriculum, although recently implemented in Phoenix, Arizona, is unproven as no graduates have taken the NCLEX-RN.

Staff Recommendation:

Move to grant initial approval to Aspen University to establish a new Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, and impose the conditions/requirements in the attached letter and Board Order (See Attachment #1).

DRAFT LETTER

July 23, 2020

Rhonda Winegar, DNP, PhD(c), RN, FNP-BC , CCRN, CPN
Program Director
Aspen University
1015 W. University Avenue
Georgetown, Texas 78628

Dear Dr. Winegar:

At the July 23, 2020 meeting, members of the Texas Board of Nursing discussed the Aspen University Proposal to Establish a New Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas. The Board wishes to thank you, XXXXXXX for being present to answer questions. Based upon the discussion and review of documents, it was the decision of the Board to grant initial approval to Aspen University to establish a new Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, and impose the conditions and requirements in the attached Board Order.

We wish you success with the program. If you have questions, or if we may be of assistance, please contact Board Staff at virginia.ayars@bon.texas.gov or 512-305-7660.

Sincerely,

Katherine A. Thomas, MN, RN, FAAN
Executive Director

Copy: Dr. Nina Beaman, Aspen University Dean of Nursing and Health Sciences
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
Distance Education Accrediting Commission
Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education

BEFORE THE TEXAS BOARD OF NURSING

ORDER OF THE BOARD

In the Matter of
Aspen University
Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program
In Austin, Texas

A public meeting of the Texas Board of Nursing, hereinafter referred to as the Board, was held on July 23, 2020, 333 Guadalupe, Tower II, Room 225, Austin, Texas, to consider the Aspen University proposal to establish a new Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, based upon the review of the proposal, pursuant to Section 301.157, Texas Occupations Code and 22 Tex. Admin. Code Chapter 215.

After review and due consideration of the filed materials, as well as the presentation by the representatives from Aspen University in Austin, Texas, and other interested parties, if any, the Board hereby grants INITIAL APPROVAL of the Aspen University Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, and imposes the following conditions and requirements:

1. The program shall not admit more than one (1) day cohort of thirty (30) students in September 2020, and one (1) evening cohort of thirty (30) students in December 2020, with a continuing admission of thirty (30) students in four (4) admission cohorts per year. In 2021, two (2) day cohorts of thirty (30) students each will begin in February and October and two (2) evening cohorts of thirty (30) students each will enroll in April and December.
2. Prior to student enrollment at the time of Aspen University's move from the Georgetown campus to the Austin campus, a Board Staff site visit will be conducted at the permanent Austin location at 101 West Louis Henna Blvd., Austin, Texas, 78728.

Entered this 23rd day of July, 2020

Katherine A. Thomas, MN, RN, FAAN
Executive Director
On Behalf of the Texas Board of Nursing