

**Report of An Abrupt Program Closure and  
Current Situation for Students  
Aspen University in Austin, Texas  
Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program**

**Summary of Request:**

Consider this report of the September 20, 2022, abrupt closure of the Aspen University Baccalaureate Degree Nursing (BSN) Education Program in Austin, Texas, and the current situation for students.

**Historical Perspective:**

- Aspen had its origins in the International Academy in the 1960s and evolved into ISIM University with a primary focus on technology and business education. In the late 1980s, operations moved to Colorado and in 1983, Aspen acquired 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, Aspen 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. AGI is an education technology holding company with two universities, Aspen University and United States University.
- Aspen was initially approved by the Texas Board of Nursing (Board) in July 2020 to offer a prelicensure BSN Program. At that time, Aspen's nursing programs, comprised of prelicensure BSN, RN-to-BSN, master's degrees, and a nursing practice doctorate, were accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE). The pre-licensure BSN Program was included in the most recent CCNE visit and accredited through December 31, 2029. The nursing programs were also accredited by DEAC, Aspen's national accreditor, through 2024.
- Aspen operated prelicensure nursing education programs in Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia, at the time of approval in Texas.
- The BSN Program was 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 was 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 had 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 allowed BSN students a wide variety of acute, post-acute, chronic, critical care, medical-surgical, and community health settings and services.

- Gabriel Oluwakotanmi, DNP, MSN, RN, CNS, was the Director of the Aspen BSN Nursing Program at the time of the closure and had served in the position since August 17, 2022. Prior to Dr. Oluwakotanmi's appointment and approval, the founding Program Director who authored the initial proposal for consideration served in the leadership role.
- No graduates have completed the Aspen BSN Program since it began operation in 2020; therefore, no NCLEX-RN pass rates are available. The Board Order of July 23, 2020, granting Initial Approval, allowed admission of no more than one day cohort of 30 students in September 2020, and one evening cohort of thirty 30 students in December 2020, with a continuing admission of 30 students in four admission cohorts per year. In 2021, two of the day cohorts of 30 students each would begin in February and October and two evening cohorts of 30 students each would enroll in April and December.

**Notification of Closure:**

- On September 20, 2022, Board Staff received a letter from Dr. Joanne Weiss, Provost, to inform the Board that Aspen University entered into a Consent Agreement with the Arizona State Board of Nursing (BON) on that date, under which Aspen agreed to voluntarily surrender the program approval for its pre-licensure registered nursing program in Phoenix, Arizona, after completing a teach-out (See Attachment #1).
- On September 21, 2022, Aspen sent all enrolled students an e-mail notification informing them that Aspen has suspended admission to the prelicensure BSN Program but would continue the Nursing Core Component for all current students until the students have either completed the program or ceased enrollment. Dr. Weiss notified students that an articulation agreement is in place with Chamberlain University (locations in Texas, Florida, and Georgia) and Arizona College of Nursing (locations in Texas and Florida) and recommended students contact the programs directly to discuss transfer options.
- Further, Dr. Weiss informed students that if their nursing courses do not transfer to one of the identified schools, Chamberlain University or Arizona College of Nursing, the students could submit a financial appeal and would be reimbursed for the courses. Town Hall meetings were planned for the week of September 26, 2022.
- The agreement directly impacts Texas students as the accreditation Aspen received from its institutional accreditor, DEAC, is based on the maintenance of the Arizona nursing program approval by the Arizona BON. To maintain Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) approval, Aspen must have ongoing DEAC accreditation.
- Dr. Weiss notified the Board, at the time of closure, a total of 216 students were enrolled in the Aspen BSN program. Of these, 67 students were enrolled in the Core Component and 149 students were enrolled in the PPN component.
- Board Staff has communicated with THECB Staff since mid-summer 2022 to discuss concerns about the Arizona BON approval of Aspen. According to THECB Staff, DEAC

accredits Aspen University in Arizona and does not consider locations in other states to be separate from the Arizona accreditation, thus all students in a pre-licensure program are affected by the Arizona BON consent agreement.

- The Education Team has been in communication representatives from the Arizona Board of Private Postsecondary Education as well as with colleagues at the Arizona BON to ensure accurate and complete information is shared.
- Board Staff conducted a telephone conference with Dr. Oluwakotanmi on September 22, 2022, to discuss plans for students. Dr. Oluwakotanmi informed the Education Team he held a Town Hall meeting on Tuesday, September 21, 2022, to notify students about the changes in the program's approval status in Arizona. He shared with the consultants he fully explained the situation to the Town Hall attendees and addressed multiple student questions. Dr. Oluwakotanmi has met individually with all students who requested to do so. He plans to focus on NCLEX-RN review for the students to ensure successful outcomes. In his previous leadership position at another Texas prelicensure BSN Program, Dr. Oluwakotanmi demonstrated success with his NCLEX-RN reviews.
- Dr. Oluwakotanmi stated he will oversee the Aspen BSN Teach-out. Several students who enrolled in August 2022 have dropped from the program, but the majority in this admission cohort stated they plan to remain in the program. All faculty members indicated they will continue their service at Aspen during the Teach-out; no faculty have resigned due to the planned closure. Dr. Oluwakotanmi spoke with the clinical affiliates, and they will all honor their contractual obligations with no changes to the students' clinical learning experiences.
- All classes and clinicals will continue as scheduled. The first of eight graduating cohorts will complete in February 2023. The last cohort will graduate in September 2024. The enrollment is approximately 67 students in the total eight cohorts.
- Although invited to submit a narrative response to this Board report, Dr. Oluwakotanmi declined to do so.
- Dr. Oluwakotanmi has continued to be readily available to the Education Team to address questions and concerns since the school's September 20, 2022, closure.

#### **Details of the Teach-Out Program:**

- On September 30, 2022, Dr. Oluwakotanmi submitted via e-mail communication the Board Notification Form, *Closing a Nursing Education Program or an Extension Site/Campus*. The Teach-out began September 20, 2022, and will continue through September 2024 when the last cohort is scheduled to graduate (See Attachment #2).
- The document sets forth that Aspen will continue to offer all didactic, clinical, laboratory, and simulation activities, with no expected disruptions. Further, Dr. Oluwakotanmi stated that Aspen's leadership and faculty are committed to providing instruction to all students to allow students to complete the program of study. Teaching standards will be maintained and improved when necessary.

- The Notification Form clarified that the contracted clinical learning affiliates for direct patient care experiences as well as financial resources to support office and simulation supplies will continue.

**Staff Recommendation:**

Accept the report of the abrupt program closure and the current situation for students following the September 20, 2022, closure of the Aspen University Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, as noted in the attached letter and Board Order (See Attachment #3).



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Phoenix, AZ 85040  
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September 20, 2022

**Via email**

Virginia D. Ayars, EdD, MS, RN, CNE  
Nursing Consultant for Education  
Texas Board of Nursing  
333 Guadalupe, Suite 3-460  
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Dr. Ayars,

I write to inform you that on September 20, 2022, Aspen University entered into a Consent Agreement with the Arizona State Board of Nursing, under which Aspen agreed to voluntarily surrender the program approval for its pre-licensure registered nursing program in Phoenix, Arizona after completing a teach-out. Under the terms of the agreement, Aspen may not admit any new students but may complete instruction of the program for its current Core students for up to two years. This agreement has implications for Aspen's nursing program in Texas because the accreditation Aspen has received from its institutional accreditor, the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, is based on the maintenance of its Arizona program approval.

As a result, and with great regret and heartache, Aspen must also suspend enrollment and complete a teach-out of its program for current Core students in Texas. Aspen currently has 67 students enrolled in the Core and 149 enrolled students in the pre-professional nursing component of the program. The emails to these student groups are below; students will be receiving them on September 21, 2022.

If you have any questions about this decision, please let me know at [joanne.weiss@aspen.edu](mailto:joanne.weiss@aspen.edu).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joanne Weiss".

Joanne Weiss, EdD  
Provost

Cc: Dr. Janice Hooper  
Dr. Gabriel Oluwakotanmi, Program Director  
Dr. Jenny Erckfitz, Dean



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## Current Core Students: TX

Dear BSNPL Nursing Core Students:

We write to provide you with important information about your BSN Pre-licensure program. Aspen University is based in Phoenix, Arizona. It has been accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) and has been approved by your State Board of Nursing and your State's authorizing agency. Aspen's DEAC accreditation requires it to maintain a program in Arizona. On September 20, 2022, Aspen entered into a Consent Agreement with the Arizona Board of Nursing (AZBN), under which Aspen agreed to voluntarily surrender the program approval for its pre-licensure nursing program in Phoenix, Arizona, after a teach-out of students over the next two years. Aspen made that decision after concluding that it could not comply with a previous consent agreement's requirement that it have at least an 80% NCLEX passage rate for the calendar year 2022, and that entering into the Consent Agreement was in the best interests of its Arizona students.

Because Aspen's DEAC accreditation is dependent on maintaining Arizona program approval, Aspen must take similar steps in your state. **That does not mean you will not be able to continue your nursing studies.** The university has suspended admission to the pre-licensure program but will continue the Core program for all current students until they have either completed the program or ceased enrollment. Your program leadership and esteemed faculty will continue to provide instruction and learning opportunities as you complete your course of study and are ready to take your NCLEX as your program concludes over the next two years.

We will schedule meetings to answer questions you may have about this process. Please watch for invitations and choose what is convenient for you to attend. In the meantime, please direct any questions to your Program Director.

Sincerely,

Joanne Weiss, EdD  
Provost

## Current PPN Students

Dear BSN Pre-licensure Pre-professional Nursing Students:

Please consider this letter as an update to one you received in February 2022. Today, with considerable regret and heartache, we want to share that we have signed a Consent Agreement with the Arizona Board of Nursing (AZBN) under which our approved pre-licensure nursing program will end after the current Nursing Core students have completed their studies. Because it will no longer be able to offer a Nursing Core program, Aspen will end the pre-professional nursing (PPN) component of the program as well. As a result, you will be unable to begin any future courses in the BSN Pre-licensure program. Aspen regrets that it will not be able to continue the PPN component of the program and wishes to assist you in your transition to another program.

As an Arizona pre-professional nursing student, there are three options available to you at this time:

- Aspen has secured articulation agreements with Chamberlain University College of Nursing, Arizona College of Nursing, and Northern Arizona University. The agreements are designed to facilitate the transfer of the accepted PPN credits to these institutions smoothly. However, if there are courses that do not transfer to one of these articulated schools, you can submit a financial appeal and you will be reimbursed for them. Please discuss with your Academic Advisor and then reach out to the schools of your choice.
- If you would like to pursue a non-nursing bachelor's degree but still in health care, you can block transfer your credits into Aspen's Bachelor of Science in Health Care Administration or Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Addiction Studies programs. There are also other bachelor's degree programs to choose from. To do so, please discuss with your Academic Advisor and complete the Program Change Request form that you will receive from them.
- If you choose to transfer to another institution with whom Aspen does not have an articulation agreement, please let us know and we will help you facilitate that. Please discuss these steps with your Academic Advisor. Please note

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# Reaching Higher Ground



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that, while we will do everything we can to facilitate the transfer of credits, it is up to the receiving institution to follow its own policies regarding acceptance. Transcripts can be requested through the National Student Clearinghouse: <https://tsorder.studentclearinghouse.org/school/ficcode/04080300>.

To move forward with any of these options, please contact [pl.advising@aspen.edu](mailto:pl.advising@aspen.edu) or contact your Academic Advisor directly.

In light of this AZBN Consent Agreement, Aspen will no longer accept pre-licensure nursing students for its programs in Texas, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia. Chamberlain has locations in Texas, Florida, and Georgia that the current articulation agreement may cover (<https://www.chamberlain.edu/nursing-school>) and Arizona College of Nursing has locations in Texas and Florida (<https://www.arizonacollege.edu/#>). Please don't hesitate to check these out. Where the locations are not convenient for you, please know that we are diligently working on additional potential articulation agreements that mirror those we already have. More information will be forthcoming on those. Again, if there are courses that do not transfer to one of the articulated schools indicated above, you can submit a financial appeal and you will be reimbursed for them.

We will be setting up Town Halls to discuss this further in the coming week. Please watch for invitations and choose what is convenient for you to attend.

Sincerely,

Joanne Weiss, EdD  
Provost

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**Reaching Higher Ground**

<b>TEXAS BOARD OF NURSING NOTIFICATION FORM CLOSING A NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAM OR AN EXTENSION SITE/CAMPUS</b>	
NAME OF NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAM	ASPEN UNIVERSITY  Program Code: 27- 511500
TYPE OF PROGRAM	Pre-licensure Bachelor of Science in Nursing Programs
NAME OF DEAN/DIRECTOR	Dr. Gabriel Oluwakotanmi  Phone No: (737) 268-0495  Email: Gabriel.Oluwakotanmi@aspen.edu
LOCATION OF NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAM OR EXTENSION SITE/CAMPUS	101 W Louis Henna Blvd Suite 100, Austin, TX 78728
REASON FOR CLOSURE	<b>BRIEFLY DESCRIBE:</b> The Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) requires Aspen University to maintain a program in Arizona. On September 20, 2022, Aspen entered into a Consent Agreement with the Arizona Board of Nursing (AZBN), under which Aspen agreed to voluntarily surrender the program approval for its pre-licensure nursing program in Phoenix, Arizona, after a teach-out of students over the next two years. Aspen made that decision after concluding that it could not comply with a previous consent agreement's requirement that it have at least an 80% NCLEX passage rate for the calendar year 2022, and that entering into the Consent Agreement was in the best interests of its Arizona students. Because Aspen's DEAC accreditation is dependent on maintaining Arizona program approval, Aspen must take similar steps in Texas.
DATE OF CLOSURE	September 20, 2022- Begins teach-out through September 2024 when the last cohort graduates.
ACADEMIC PROVISIONS FOR CURRENT STUDENTS OF NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAM OR EXTENSION PROGRAM	<b>BRIEFLY DESCRIBE:</b> All the didactic, clinical, laboratory, and simulation activities will continue as planned with no expected disruptions. Aspen University is committed to the teach-out plan until the last student graduates. We will continue with the same passion and vigor we have from the beginning of this program until our last cohort graduates. Aspen University's leadership and esteemed faculty will continue to provide quality instruction and learning opportunities to all students to complete their course of study and readiness to take the NCLEX as the program concludes over the next two years.



<p>PROVISIONS FOR ACCESS TO AND SAFE STORAGE OF VITAL SCHOOL RECORDS</p>	<p>BRIEFLY DESCRIBE: Aspen maintains all student records electronically indefinitely. If students need records in addition to those they find directly in their Portal, they make a request the Registrar's Office at <a href="mailto:registrar@aspen.edu">registrar@aspen.edu</a>. Aspen also follows its records policies identified here: <a href="https://aspen.smartcatalogiq.com/en/name/academic-catalog/family-educational-rights-and-privacy-act/">https://aspen.smartcatalogiq.com/en/name/academic-catalog/family-educational-rights-and-privacy-act/</a>. Both BSN Pre-licensure PPN and Core students have a Student Portal in which they have access to their current transcripts and student ledgers. They are available for download at any time, whether they withdraw or graduate. When the BSN Pre-licensure Core students graduate, they automatically receive their diplomas from the Registrar's Office</p>
<p>METHODS TO BE USED TO MAINTAIN REQUIREMENTS AND STANDARDS UNTIL THE PROGRAM CLOSSES</p>	<p>BRIEFLY DESCRIBE: Teaching standards will be maintained and improved upon where necessary. Continuous quality improvement control will not cease. The program continues its use of Elsevier, Kaplan, and EMS, as well as the use of its secure online database, Project Concert for maintaining records of hours. Aspen continues utilizing its clinical affiliates for direct care clinical and financial resources exist to ensure that required office and simulation supplies are available.</p>

COMMENTS:

**\*Please attach additional pages if needed.**

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

Date Presented at Board Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

**DRAFT LETTER**

October 20, 2022

Gabriel Oluwakotanmi, DNP, MSN, RN, CNS, Director of Nursing  
Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program  
Aspen University  
101 W. Louis Henna Blvd., Suite 100  
Austin, Texas 78728

Dear Dr. Oluwakotanmi:

At the October 20, 2022, meeting, the members of the Texas Board of Nursing (Board) considered the report of the September 20, 2022, abrupt closure of the Aspen University BSN Program in Austin, Texas, and the current situation for students.

Based upon the discussion and review of information, it was the decision of the Board to accept the report of the September 20, 2022, abrupt closure of the Aspen University Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, and the current situation for students.

According to Board Rule 215.3. Program Development, Expansion and Closure, Section (d), the Program Director is required to submit academic provisions for students to complete the professional nursing education program and Teach-Out arrangements that have been approved by the appropriate Texas agency. Board Staff wish to thank you for your efforts to comply with this rule and provide a written response to the Board by December 1, 2022.

If you have any questions or if we may offer assistance, please contact Board Staff at [Virginia.ayars@bon.texas.gov](mailto:Virginia.ayars@bon.texas.gov) or (512) 305-7660.

Sincerely,

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

Copy: Dr. Joanne Weiss, Provost  
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board  
Joey Ridenour, RN, MN, FAAN, Arizona Board of Nursing Executive Director  
Distance Education Accrediting Commission

**BEFORE THE TEXAS BOARD**

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**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 October 20, 2022, 333 Guadalupe, Tower II, Room 100, Austin, Texas to consider the voluntary closure of the Aspen University Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, based upon the September 20, 2022, notification from Aspen University of the intent to voluntarily close all Aspen University nursing education programs.

After review and due consideration of the filed materials, and other interested parties, if any, the Board hereby ACCEPTS the voluntary closure of the Aspen University Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Education Program in Austin, Texas, and imposes the following conditions/requirements:

1. The program shall provide a written statement of the academic provisions for students to complete the professional nursing education program and Teach-Out arrangements to the Board by December 1, 2022.
2. The program may not reapply for approval of a new proposal for a nursing education program until at least twelve (12) months from the date of this order have elapsed.

Entered this 20<sup>th</sup> day of October, 2022

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