



Innovation Without Walls: Transforming Rural Nursing Education Through Partnership

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Academic-practice partnerships (APPs) have long been recognized as a powerful means of connecting higher education with the evolving needs of health care systems. These partnerships enable the co-creation of educational models that directly address workforce shortages, promote practice readiness and support evidence-based patient care. Guided by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Guiding Principles for Academic-Practice Partnerships (2019), we sought to implement an innovative prelicensure BSN program within a rural, medically underserved region. This school-in-a-box (SIB) model — executed through a partnership between Unitek Learning and Sierra View Medical Center (SVMC) based in Portersville, Calif. — was designed to meet this challenge through a shared investment, shared governance and shared outcomes approach. This article describes the development, implementation and evaluation of the SIB model.

The AACN defines APPs as formalized relationships built on mutual respect, shared vision and joint accountability for outcomes. These partnerships unite academic institutions and health care organizations in the joint mission to advance nursing education and improve

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public health (AACN, 2019). The benefits of such collaboration are well-documented. Moss et al. (2023) note that APPs enhance student learning outcomes, support faculty practice integration, and expand organizational capacity to implement and evaluate programs. Likewise, Gustin et al. (2024) demonstrates that well-structured APPs improve both educational and clinical outcomes when grounded in the Interprofessional Education Collaborative (IPEC) competencies: teams and teamwork, values and ethics, roles and responsibilities, and interprofessional communication.

Polancich et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of evaluation and continuous quality improvement in maintaining partnership vitality. They recommend systematic appraisal using organizational pillars such as engagement, quality, finance and advancement of knowledge. Collectively, these frameworks affirm that effective APPs are not transactional agreements but dynamic, evolving collaborations that build practice capacity and address population health needs. Our goal in developing the SIB model was to apply these national standards in a way that would bring a full BSN program to a rural community lacking direct access to nursing education.

School-in-a-box model

The SIB initiative was conceptualized in 2019 to address a critical nursing shortage in California's San Joaquin Valley. Visalia and Tulare counties had been designated as RN shortage areas by the California Workforce Policy Commission (2020). SVMC, a regional hospital serving these counties, was spending more than \$9 million annually on travel nurses to fill vacancies. At the same time, the area had limited opportunities for residents to pursue nursing degrees locally.

Recognizing these barriers, leaders from Unitek College (owned by Unitek Learning) and SVMC established an innovative partnership enabling employees and community members to learn and work where they lived. The result was an embedded academic-practice partnership in which Unitek College provided the accredited hybrid BSN curriculum, faculty oversight and student support, while SVMC contributed clinical space, simulation resources and financial sponsorships. This initiative was supported by the Retaining Through Teaching Apprenticeship program, a model used in several states, which hires nurses as adjunct faculty to expand instructional capacity.

Design and implementation

The partnership was formalized through a letter of commitment in 2021 and a seven-year agreement signed in 2022. Unitek College, based in Newport Beach, Calif., prepared and secured regulatory approvals from the California Board of Registered Nursing, the

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Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges, and the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education. The first cohort of 15 students, all of whom were SVMC employees, began classes in March 2023. Among the students were SVMC nursing assistants, dietary techs and pharmacy techs. As of mid-2025, 45 students have enrolled through the partnership, and more than \$330,000 in employer sponsorship has been awarded to support learners in need (Unitek Learning internal data, 2025).

The SIB model's design reflects multiple Operational Model for Academic-Practice Partnerships (OMAP) strategies identified by Moss et al. (2023): innovation, embedded faculty and clinical site development. Courses are delivered in a flexible hybrid format combining online didactic instruction with on-site laboratory and clinical experiences housed within the hospital's education center. Caring Science principles are woven throughout the curriculum, emphasizing humanistic practice, resilience and self-care core tenets essential for workforce sustainability.

Roles and responsibilities

Unitek College assumed responsibility for the academic framework, curriculum delivery, faculty hiring and student services. SVMC contributed classroom and simulation spaces, administrative coordination and clinical placement access. Both organizations shared accountability for student outcomes, program evaluation and continuous improvement. This joint governance structure ensured that decisions were co-developed and co-implemented rather than delegated unilaterally.

A dedicated project manager and an interdisciplinary steering committee — composed of academic administrators, hospital nursing leadership and community representatives — met regularly to monitor progress. This collaborative oversight mirrored the Interprofessional Education Collaborative (IPEC) competencies outlined by Gustin et al. (2024), ensuring open communication, mutual respect and defined roles among stakeholders.

Outcomes

Early outcomes demonstrate meaningful progress toward partnership goals. Students in the first two cohorts maintained high retention and academic success rates. Clinical preceptors reported participants demonstrated strong practice readiness and seamless transition into RN roles. SVMC, in turn, reported decreased dependence on travel nurses, improved continuity of care and enhanced staff morale.

Beyond direct staffing benefits, the initiative fostered professional growth for current employees who became adjunct faculty or pursued graduate education. The presence of MSN-prepared nurses in the community increased leadership capacity and contributed to a sustainable pipeline for future nursing educators and managers. Collectively, these outcomes validate the partnership's dual mission of expanding access to education and stabilizing the regional workforce.

Integrating national frameworks

The SIB model exemplifies the AACN (2019) principles of shared vision, mutual respect and joint accountability. The partnership was founded on a clearly articulated mission to expand access to BSN education and strengthen the nursing workforce. Both organizations invested resources, defined measurable outcomes and maintained transparency in governance. This shared responsibility ensured that the program's benefits extended to students, the health care system and the surrounding community.

Following Gustin et al. (2024), we integrated the four IPEC competencies throughout the program. Teams and teamwork were demonstrated through cross-organizational collaboration; values and ethics were embedded in the Caring Science pedagogy; roles and responsibilities were clarified through formal agreements; and interprofessional communication was cultivated via weekly meetings and joint student-faculty-staff debriefings. This alignment created a learning environment that prepared students for the collaborative realities of modern health care.

Moss et al. (2023) emphasize that successful APPs require operational frameworks that delineate strategy and accountability. Our application of the OMAP model provided structure for planning and scalability, ensuring that innovation remained tied to measurable outcomes. Likewise, we adopted the evaluation blueprint proposed by Polancich et al. (2021) to assess effectiveness across the four organizational pillars of engagement, quality, finance and advancement of knowledge.

- **Engagement:** Faculty, staff and students participated in regular feedback cycles and joint committees, fostering ownership and continuous improvement.
- **Quality:** Course outcomes and clinical performance data were benchmarked against program standards and state board requirements.
- **Finance:** Employer sponsorships and reduced tuition options demonstrated fiscal sustainability for both partners.

- **Advancement of Knowledge:** Shared research and dissemination opportunities allowed faculty and staff to contribute to nursing scholarship and present outcomes at regional conferences.

Scalability and sustainability

The program's infrastructure was deliberately designed for replication. The modular SIB concept allows academic content, regulatory templates and implementation timelines to be adapted for other health care facilities seeking similar partnerships. The model's success depends on ongoing evaluation, faculty development and reinvestment of resources — elements consistent with AACN's call for continuous quality improvement. As Unitek College and SVMC expand enrollment capacity, new partner sites are being explored across multiple states, each following the same operational blueprint and shared governance philosophy.

According to the AONL Compendium 2.0: Building Sustainable Academic–Practice Partnerships for Nursing Excellence, establishing enduring academic–practice collaborations require strategic alignment of key resources. This includes assessing population needs, defining essential roles and interdepartmental engagement, in addition to developing comprehensive financial plans to address staffing, scalability and operational sustainability. Furthermore, active engagement of media and communications teams is essential to effectively disseminate partnership goals and outcomes across internal and external audiences. Unitek Learning and Sierra View Medical Center have implemented these best practices.

Implications for practice

The outcomes of this partnership extend beyond educational attainment to broader workforce and community benefits. By removing geographic and financial barriers, the SIB model has created a sustainable pipeline of locally educated nurses committed to serving their home communities. This approach promotes health equity by increasing workforce diversity and aligning nursing education with regional population needs.

For academic leaders, the model illustrates how flexibility and innovation can coexist with regulatory rigor. For health care executives, it provides a replicable framework for cultivating talent internally rather than relying on external recruitment. Importantly, the program reinforces the value of faculty–practice integration: nurses who teach within their organizations not only enhance student learning, but also elevate bedside practice through modeling evidence-based care.

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The SIB model also demonstrates that meaningful partnerships require a culture of trust and long-term commitment. Shared leadership, consistent communication and transparent outcome measures fostered mutual confidence between partners and ensured alignment with both academic and clinical priorities. These lessons can inform future collaborations across diverse health care settings.

Through the SIB model, we have demonstrated that academic-practice partnerships can be both innovative and sustainable when grounded in shared vision and structured evaluation. The collaboration between Unitek College and Sierra View Medical Center addressed a regional nursing shortage, provided accessible BSN education to underserved populations and strengthened the local health care workforce. By aligning with national frameworks, including the AACN Guiding Principles, the OMAP operational model and the IPEC competencies, this initiative bridges education and practice.

As nursing education continues to evolve in response to societal needs, the SIB serves as a replicable model for transforming workforce pipelines, advancing health equity and promoting excellence in professional nursing practice.

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