

2025



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Navigating the Maze of Healthcare Training Programs and Career Pathways

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College Changes Everything
Tinley Park, IL
July 17, 2025

womenemployed.org



MISSION: Since 1973, Women Employed has worked to improve the economic status of women and remove barriers to economic equity.

We seek systemic improvements that touch the lives of women in low-paid jobs and women of color, particularly Black and Latinx women.

HOW WE APPROACH OUR WORK

ENSURE QUALITY JOBS: Ensure appropriate compensation. Paid leave, schedule flexibility, fair workplaces, & enforcement

FORGE PATHWAYS: Forge education and career pathways to economic security, leadership, and wealth

SHIFT ECONOMIC POWER: Shift resource distribution to empower women economically

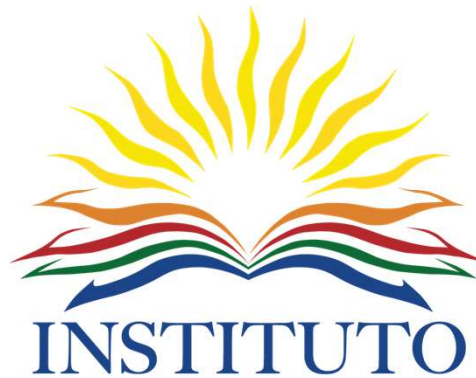


Healthcare Career Pathways Study

- › Background: growing focus on healthcare careers
- › Programs/initiative often focused at getting foot in the door; but what happens to workers after the first job?
- › Women of color overrepresented in entry level healthcare jobs
- › Goal: to find keys to career pathway successes
- › Findings relevant to training providers, workforce development specialists, employers (hospitals and clinics), and healthcare workers themselves

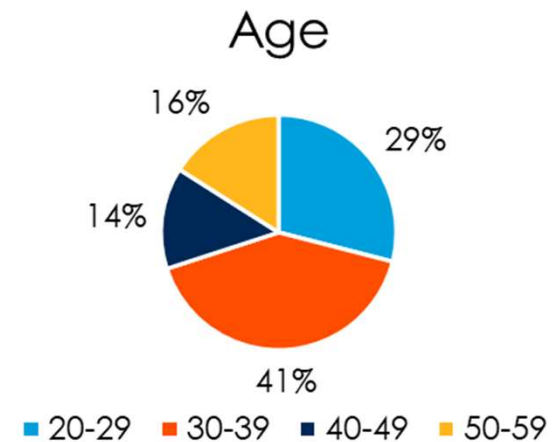
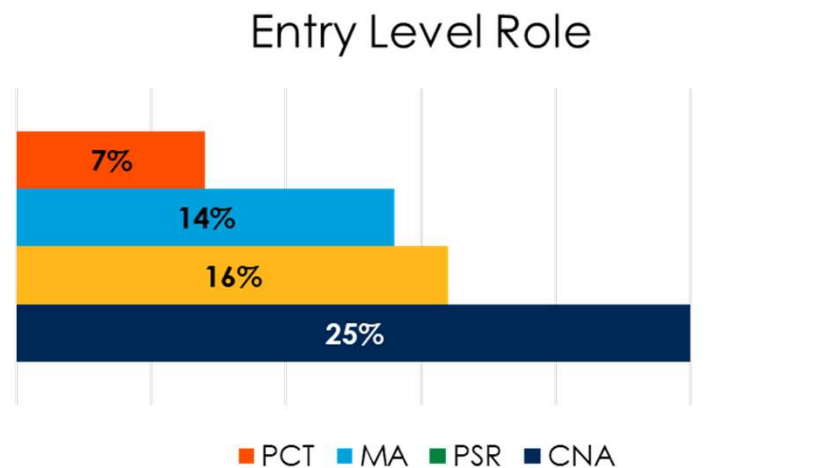


Partners



Participants

- › Interviews with 44 women in healthcare roles in Chicago hospitals and clinics who started at entry level
- › Regular meetings with subject matter experts in workforce development, education and training, and labor



Key Findings

- › Healthcare education and career pathways can be **meandering, unintentional, and a confusing maze** of endless options.
- › There is a **misalignment** between workers', training providers', and employers' expectations.
- › Workers expressed a **need for mentorship**.
- › Workers experienced **racial bias and discrimination** in hiring and promotion, especially for Black women.



What is the most popular healthcare career pathway?

- A. Certified/Basic Nursing Assistant to Registered Nurse
- B. Patient Care Representative to Clinic Manager
- C. Medical Assistant to Physician's Assistant
- D. Receptionist to Laboratory Tech



Meandering Healthcare Career Pathways

- › Extremely **confusing system** of schools, employers, and bureaucratic processes make **career pathways murky** and difficult, if not impossible, to navigate.
 - A lack of alignment between credentials earned, hiring criteria, wages, years of experience, and promotional opportunities
 - Unclear employer search and hiring practices
 - A plethora of job titles for the same (or similar) work



List of Job Titles

Director of Clinical Professional
 Direct Support Specialist Patient Transportation
Health Support Worker Charge Nurse (RN)
 Regional RN Educator Case Manager Community Health Worker
Assistant Director of Clinical Operations
 Patient Care Navigator Senior Administrative Coordinator
Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Registered Nurse (RN)
 Lead Medical Assistant Bilingual Patient Service Representative (PSR)
 IT Technical Associate Emergency Room Technician (ER Tech)
Clinic Operations Director Patient Care Technician (PCT)
 Associate VP, Operations Clinic Manager
Emergency Room Coordinator
 Patient Service Representative (PSR)
 Clinic Operations Assistant
Phlebotomy Supervisor
 Clinical Supervisor
Hospice Aide (CNA)
 Patient Care Information Assistant (PCIA)
Medical Assistant (MA)
 Research Assistant Nurse Aid (CNA)
 Pharmacy Technician Program Manager
Risk Quality Management Coordinator Patient Support Specialist
 Universal Reproductive Healthcare Assistant **Manager of Patient Access**
 Health Care Center Manager Reproductive Health Assistant (RHA)
 Pharmacy Billing Supervisor School Based Manager Phlebotomist Technician
 Senior Manager Integrated Health **Radiology Clerk**
 Senior Director of Quality Nurse Practitioner Phlebotomist
 Chief Nursing Officer Care Coordinator
 Psychiatric Care Coordinator
 Preanalytical Technician
 RN Clinical Nurse Educator
 Magnet Program Director Site Manager
 Population Health Manager Midwife (RN)
Outreach Care Coordinator
Laboratory Technician
 Clinic Operations Manager
 Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)
 Development
 Patient Support Team Manager
 Fundraising Engagement Supervisor
 Associate Chief Nursing Officer
 Healthcare Technician



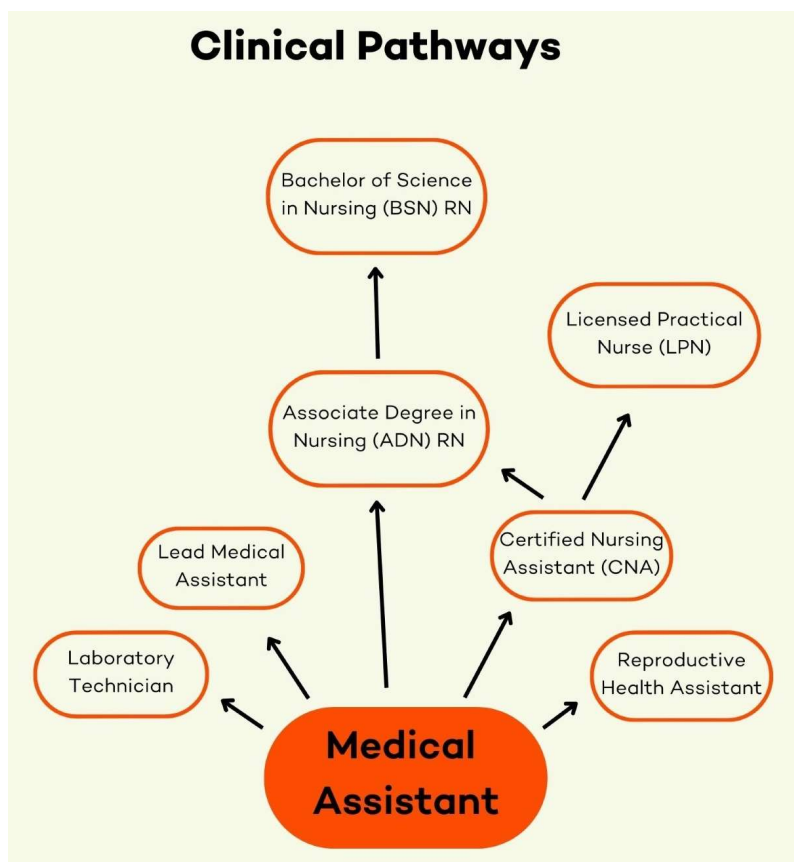
Confusing Credentials, Lack Of Guidance

- › Participants took surprisingly **diverse healthcare career paths**
- › Workers were confused by which credentials were the **best fit** for their desired career paths
- › Earned credentials were **not always in an upward trajectory** (e.g., a CNA after a M.A. or B.A.)
- › The lack of guidance resulted in meandering educational paths which often **took a long time** (with work in between)

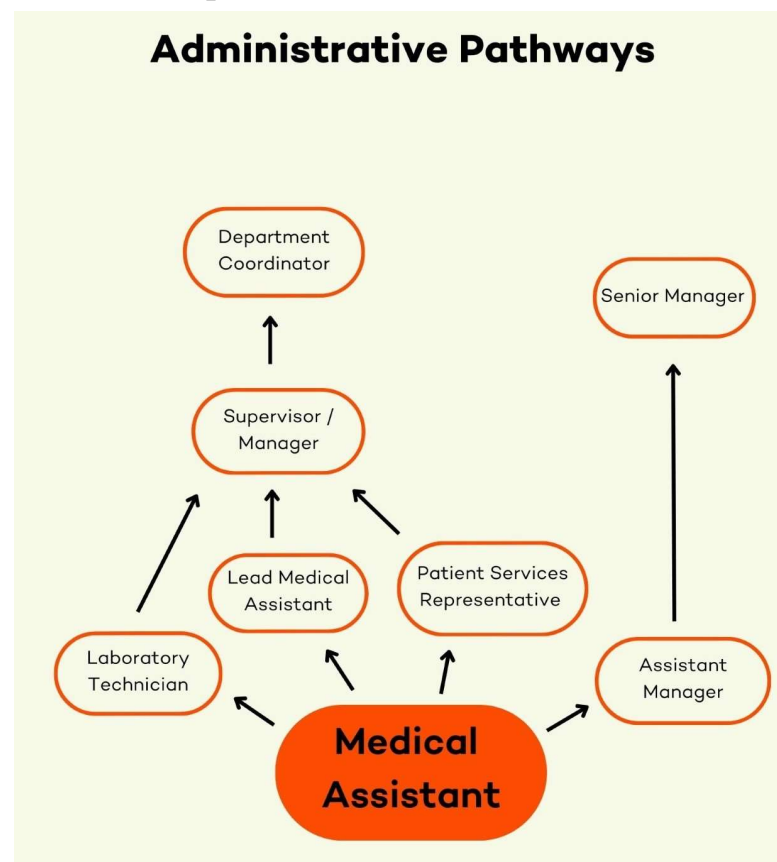


Diverse Pathways

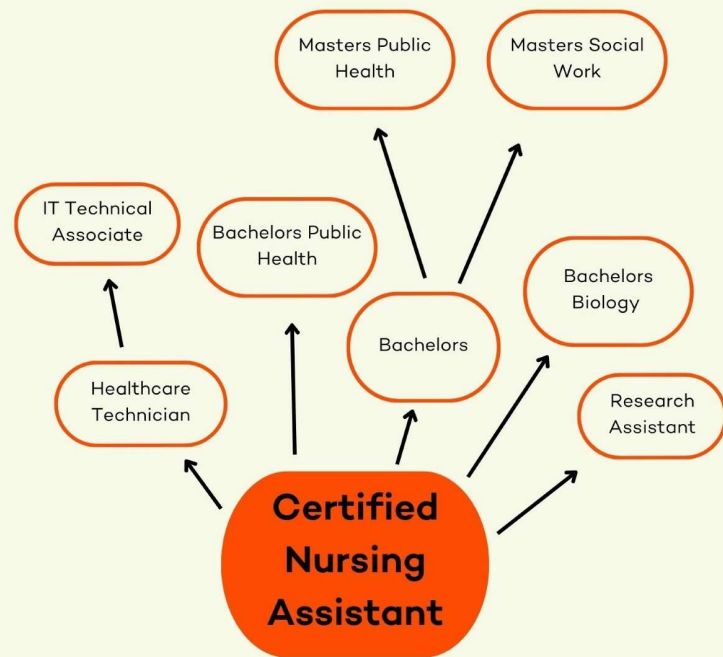
Clinical Pathways



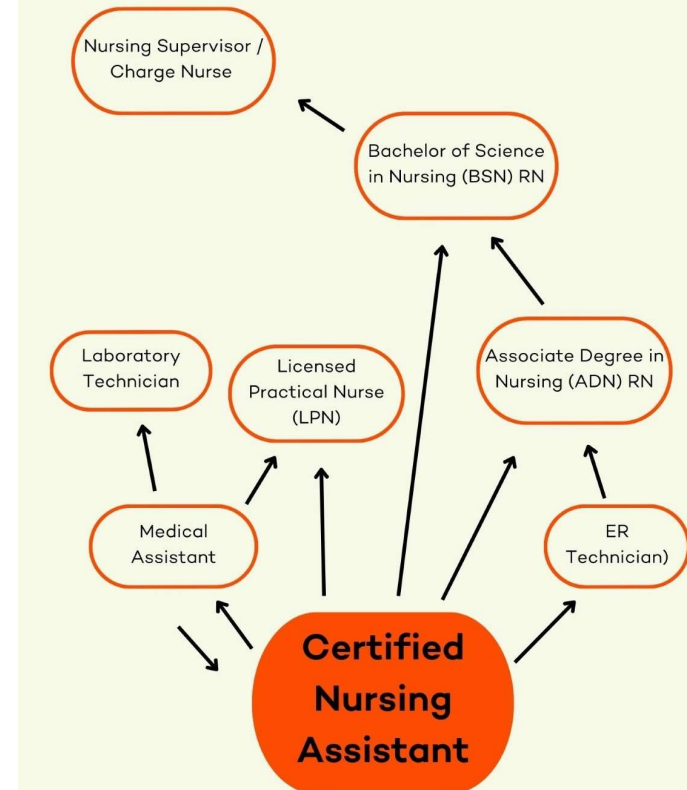
Administrative Pathways



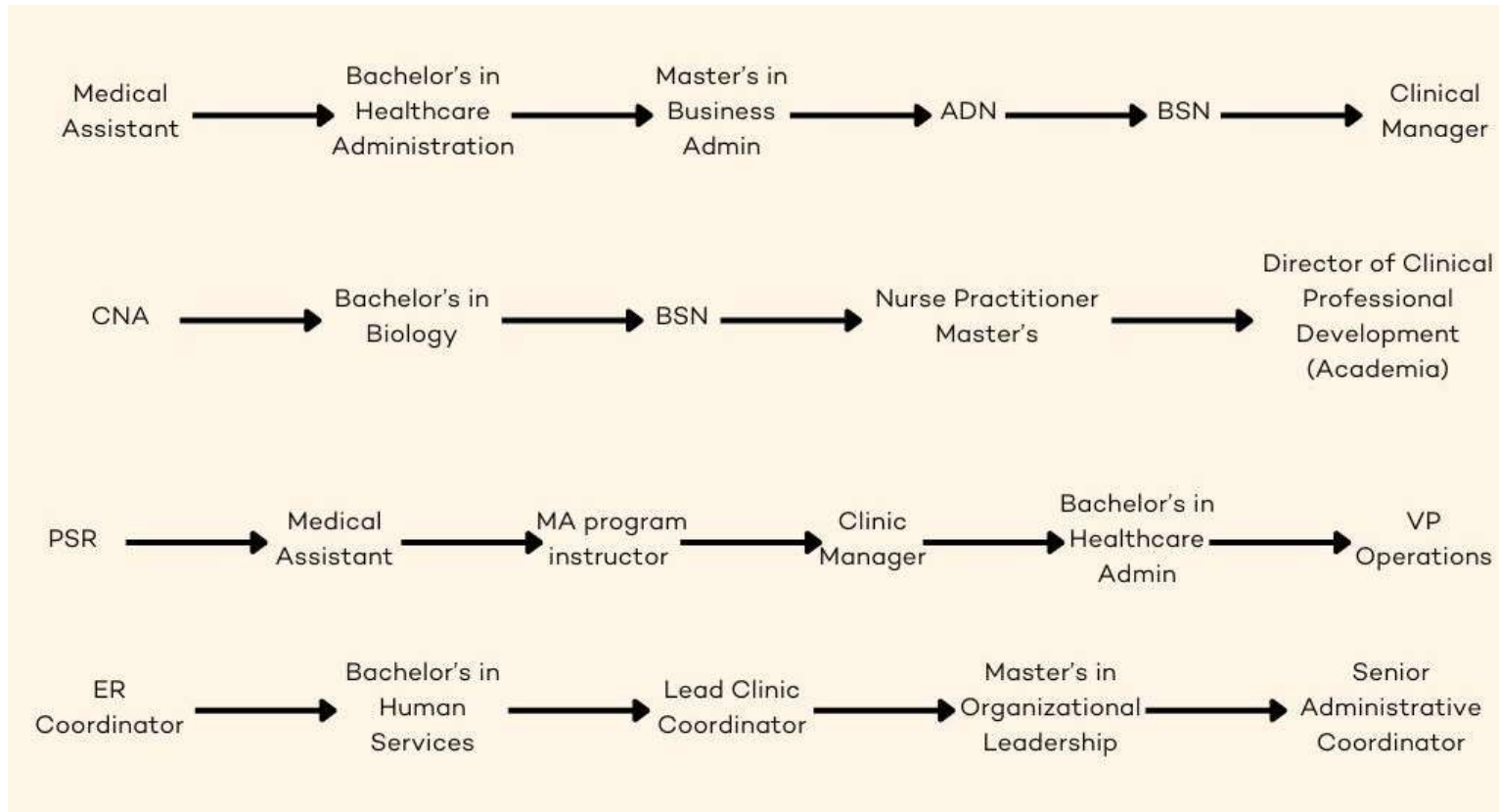
Non-Nursing Pathways



Clinical Pathways



Sample Career Pathways from Study Participants

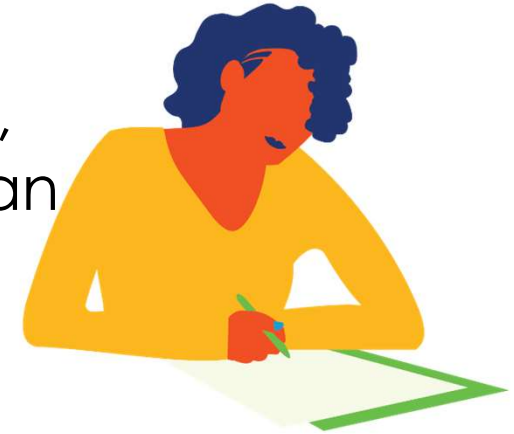


Cumbersome Prerequisites

- › Included: academic courses, entrance tests, certifications
- › Prerequisite requirements **lacked standardization**
- › Some prerequisites **“timed out”** due to breaks in schooling
- › Some confusion over **nursing programs vs. “pre nursing”** status at four-year colleges/universities
- › CNA prerequisite for nursing programs a particular challenge

Moving Between Institutions

- › Several participants attended multiple institutions on their education and career journey
- › Changes in school due to a variety of reasons: personal issues, needing to stop out, financial, moving, etc.
- › Credit transfers not universal across institutions, several expressed losing credits OR choosing an institution due to better transfer policies



“I had to jump so many hoops. I went to [Nursing School A]. They said I didn't need a CNA. I was only there for a year. I was not able to keep up their rigorous program. So there, another year that I lost, because my credits weren't transferable [to another school]. And now I need to look for a different nursing program.”

– Nurse (ADN) at Health System Hospital



Financial Considerations

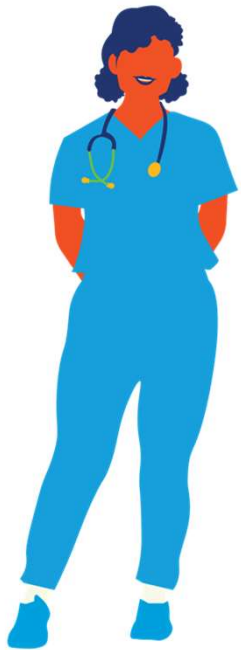


- › Wide range in participants' methods to finance education
- › Employer financial support varied greatly
- › Those already with a bachelor's degree may have exhausted federal aid eligibility
- › Almost all participants worked while going to school

School Supports

- › Wraparound services like childcare, transportation stipends
- › Referrals to other social supports (e.g., WIOA funding, New Moms)
- › Study groups
- › Individualized career guidance and job placement
- › Part-time programs
- › Supportive instructors and advisors





"When I spoke to the counselor at [School B] I said, I have a daughter, and maybe it's not the right thing for me to do. I said everything that I had been told [by School A] and they're like, No, that is not the case. [School B] said, [having a child] should give you motivation to keep going instead of thinking that it's going to hold you back. So that changed my mindset as well."

– Nurse (ADN) at Health System Hospital

Barriers for Students

- › Geographic **location** of schools, clinical/job placements
- › Lack of **childcare** resources
- › Not knowing about available resources
- › Restrictive **tuition reimbursement** policies
- › Lack of flexible **schedules** (school & work)



Need for Mentorship

- › **Mentors were critical** in workers' professional growth and trajectory
- › Yet many workers said they did not have a mentor, and mentioned the **lack of women mentors** specifically.
- › Needed guidance on educational paths, particularly 1st gen college and women of color, to address self-doubt



“The way I got to where I am is just trusting in my mentors and predecessors, who saw things in me that I didn't always recognize in myself. They would tap my shoulder and say, Hey, you'd be great for this opportunity, and I would say sure, and it would open up a plethora of doors.”

– Leadership Role at a Health System

Disparities and Discrimination

- › Women of color seemed to have much **less linear paths to a BSN**, in particular, including more credentials earned, and longer time to completion.
- › Black and Latina women were often outside **professional networks** that facilitated career advancement
- › Many Black and Latina women specifically mentioned wanting to **serve communities of color**

Recommendations: Curriculum and Program Design

- › Offer more part-time training programs.
- › Allow course credit for work experience.
- › Reconsider the CNA prerequisite for ADN program admission.
- › Make an easier path from MA to nursing.
- › Create consistent and transparent transfer agreements.



Recommendations for Student Support

- › Expand intake, advising, and career exploration services
- › Offer healthcare students robust academic support
- › Establish mentoring programs for students
- › Provide know your rights, salary negotiation, and understanding union contracts workshops.
- › Promote a wider range of career opportunities beyond nursing and hospital work



System-Wide Recommendations

- › Create a task force across health systems, accrediting bodies, training providers, governments, and advocacy teams to address systemic issues
- › Results from grant-funded pilot programs should share learnings widely
- › Increase unionization in the healthcare workforce
- › Salary Transparency

Conclusion

- › Healthcare education and career pathways are complicated, varied, and confusing to navigate
- › Better alignment across the healthcare education and workforce is needed
- › Awareness of available resources and options, support services, and mentorship are key



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Questions or comments?

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For more information

- › Report(s) at www.womenemployed.org/HCCP
- › Follow-up meetings with education and workforce development groups
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