

Issues Related to the Bachelor of Science in Respiratory Therapy Degree in Florida:

An Executive Summary

The Bachelor of Science in Respiratory Therapy Florida Working Group

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Introduction

The respiratory therapy profession is the youngest of the allied health professions^{1,2}. What began as an on-the-job technical position has developed into a profession. Developments in biomedical engineering and healthcare require formal and continuing education of respiratory therapists³.

Professional evolution within the field demanded updating the educational curricula to enhance the soft skills of future respiratory therapists, including critical thinking and the ability to engage in problem-based protocols^{4,5}. Currently, and consistent with other healthcare positions, some states are looking at the possibility of changing the degree for entry into the profession from the associate degree (ASRT) to the baccalaureate degree (BSRT). Nationwide the number of programs offering degrees in respiratory therapy or cardiopulmonary science include 340 entry-level associate degrees, 76 entry-level bachelor's degrees, 29 baccalaureate degree advancement programs, seven entry-level masters' programs, four-degree advancement master's programs, and one Advanced Practice Respiratory Therapist (APRT) program (Courtesy of Dr. Tom Smalling, CoARC executive director, August 2022). Nelson explained that changes in healthcare warranted more education from industry professionals. Those changes included: demands for healthcare reform, focus on clinical outcomes, payment systems, medical records, evidence-based care, ever-changing medical advances, and a better-educated patient population⁶.

Many states allow colleges to award bachelor's degrees, and Florida ranks among states whose community colleges award bachelor's degrees⁷. Nationwide respiratory therapists, department directors, and healthcare consumers require a knowledgeable respiratory therapy workforce to meet current demands in patient care. A survey conducted in New York State among respiratory therapists proved that respiratory therapists want more visibility and respect in the healthcare

profession and the ability to grow within the profession⁸. In a similar survey, Louisiana respiratory therapists added room to expand and increase the scope of practice⁹. Sixty-four percent of respiratory therapists surveyed in New York State acknowledge that the academic standard for a respiratory therapist is a bachelor's degree⁸. Seventy percent of respiratory therapists surveyed in Louisiana agreed with their New York colleagues⁹. In Pennsylvania, 50% of 101 respiratory therapy department directors/managers surveyed stated that they preferred professionals with a bachelor's degree, and 77.3% favored hiring registered respiratory therapists¹⁰.

In summary, the unmet needs of patients with complex cardiopulmonary impairment or disease have led to an increasing need to deliver specialized care through a broadened scope of practice that demands high-level assessment, critical thinking and decision-making skills, and competency in the delivery of care via multiple modalities. In turn, the professional entry-level requirements for the education and training of respiratory therapists have evolved from on-the-job training and hospital-based certificate programs to community college-based associate degree programs to university-level baccalaureate and master's degree educational programs.

Complex biomedical developments and higher skills requirements from healthcare team members, including strong critical thinking skills, have left the profession struggling to find workable solutions to advance the educational standards of the profession. Since the challenges and opportunities to advance the respiratory baccalaureate differ from state to state, it may be helpful for states to initiate open and ongoing discussions regarding options that meet the specific needs of that state.

The FL BSRT Working Group

Toward that end, in 2019, a small and informal group of RT managers and educators from throughout Florida initially met to discuss options for moving to the RRT as the entry-level credential required for practice in Florida and advancing the RT baccalaureate within the state. Unfortunately, these efforts were tabled due to logistical issues brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, with the assistance and support of the Florida Society of Respiratory Care (FSRC), a new working group consisting of bedside clinicians, RT students, RT managers, RT educators, and physicians from throughout the State of Florida was formed. This group has become known as the BSRT Florida Working Group.

The mission of the group is as follows:

- To educate Respiratory Care Practitioners (RCPs) about national and local issues affecting the Respiratory Care baccalaureate.
- To seek input from all respiratory therapy communities of interest in Florida regarding issues that should be addressed in any proposal to promote the RT baccalaureate in Florida.
- To provide information on various models for advancing the respiratory baccalaureate in Florida to the communities of interest via presentations and a white paper.

The BSRT Florida Working Group remains open to all interested parties and encourages all RCPs in the State to join these critical discussions. Transparency is a core value of the group, and through the kind support of the Florida Society of Respiratory Care (FSRC), recordings and minutes of all meetings, as well as all committee documents, are available to the public at <https://www.fsrc.org/bsrt-florida>.

Current challenges to advancing the BSRT in Florida

This working group identified the following challenges to advancing the respiratory baccalaureate in Florida:

- Requiring the BSRT as entry-level could create an unacceptable gap between the student's clinical rotations and their baccalaureate completion. The latter may cause students to get "rusty" clinically and make their transition to bedside from the classroom more difficult.
- AS-level RT programs rely heavily on federal Perkins programs' funding. Perkins funds are only available to AS programs. Currently, Perkins funds are not available for BSRT programs.
- To qualify to manage an ABG lab, a baccalaureate degree with extensive coursework in sciences is required by the College of American Pathologists (CAP). Facilities have trouble meeting CAP/CLIA requirements for Blood Gas Labs due to a lack of BSRTs. Many current degree completion programs do not include enough science credits to meet this requirement. It may be possible to meet this need with additional technical certificates.
- The Florida Department of Education does not currently allow an AS program to go to a BS program but will allow for adding a BS degree advancement (DA) program.
- Florida Universities within the State University System (SUS) typically do not create BSRT programs because of the high enrollment required for such programs to remain economically viable. Since such schools still need to receive Perkins funding to offset program costs, maintaining financial viability in these schools can be incredibly challenging.

- Upper-level administrative support for hiring BSRTs varies from facility to facility.
- According to the AARC, 25% of RRTs nationwide currently hold a baccalaureate. The exact number of Florida practitioners holding a baccalaureate is still being determined. This small percentage makes it challenging to consider a BSRT as entry-level currently.
- Job descriptions are often the same for AS-level RT and the BSRT, although some facilities or systems are moving to change this.
- A current shortage in RTs across the state makes it challenging to hire BSRTs only.
- Students using RT as a "stepping stone" into another profession may cause issues with the most qualified RCPs leaving for other professions.
- The position of the State Board of Respiratory Care on the respiratory baccalaureate is not fully known at this time.

Current Advantages to Advancing the Baccalaureate in Florida

- The State College system allows community colleges to offer BS degrees. In Florida, the following institutions offer a BSRT or a BSRT-DA: Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Florida National University, Florida Southwestern State College, Nova Southeastern University, Palm Beach State College, St. Leo's University, and Valencia College. Daytona State College and St Petersburg College have applied for additional BSRT completion programs. There are enough programs to meet future demands for BSRT and BSRT DA programs within the state.
- Many Respiratory Care employers in the state provide tuition reimbursement to absorb the costs of degree completion baccalaureate programs.
- The Florida Society of Respiratory Care has issued a position statement supporting the BSRT.

- The state has well-developed networks of managers (the Florida Respiratory Leadership Network, or FRLN) and Respiratory Care Educators (the Florida Respiratory Educator's network, of FREN) that allow for discussing proposed solutions. In addition, there is a high degree of overlap between the two networks, facilitating an open and productive dialogue.
- There is a high degree of support for the RT baccalaureate within the state.

During the BSRT Florida Working group public meetings, diverse options for advancing the Respiratory baccalaureate were debated, and the specific advantages of each proposal were discussed. The options discussed included, but were not limited to, allowing market driven forces to drive the transition to the baccalaureate, moving directly to the BSRT as the entry level degree for licensure in Florida, and tiered licensure, which would involve creating an additional level of licensure for those therapists with a baccalaureate degree in Cardiopulmonary Sciences. After considerable discussion, no specific recommendation was agreed upon at this time, however the tiered licensure option outlined below was determined to be the option most worthy of further discussion.

Tiered Licensure

Under the tiered licensure proposal, an additional level of licensure would be created for Respiratory Care Practitioners (RCPs) in Florida, allowing three levels of licensure. These three levels would include the following:

- **Certified Respiratory Therapists (CRTs)**, as currently structured.
- **Registered Respiratory Therapists (RRTs or ASRRTs)**, as currently structured.
- **Bachelor of Science Registered Respiratory Therapists (BSRRT)**, as a new third level of licensure.

The requirements for obtaining this third level of licensure would be the successful completion of the Bachelor of Science in Cardiopulmonary Science (BSCS) degree (CIPS code 51.0908) or its equivalent and achievement of the RRT (Registered Respiratory Therapist) “high cut” score on the National Board of Respiratory Care (NBRC) Therapist Multiple Choice Exam (TMC). The NBRC is scheduled to eliminate the Clinical Simulation Exam (CSE) exam in January of 2027.

Under this proposal, no therapist would be required to move up a level to remain licensed.

However, employers may require a certain level of licensure at their discretion.

Since this is a tiered option, therapists would be able to enter the field through the successful completion of an Associate of Science (AS) degree or Applied Associate of Sciences (AAS) degree in Respiratory Care from a Commission on Accreditation for Respiratory Care (CoARC) approved program, achieving the appropriate scores on the NBRC exam(s), and obtaining the RRT licensure through the Florida Department of Health. The BSRRT could then be obtained through the completion of an appropriate degree advancement program which leads to the BSCS. No additional credentialing exams would be required.

RCPs transferring in from other states with the equivalent of the BSCS degree could apply for BSRRT licensure without obtaining RRT licensure through the Florida Department of Health.

As mentioned earlier, there are currently an adequate number of BSCS degree programs available in the state, and more are expected to become available shortly.

Employers would be encouraged to incentivize the BSRRT financially and allow for a greater scope of practice for therapists with the BSRRT credential.

Advantages of Tiered Licensure

- Current RCPs with AS degrees would be able to continue to work and not be forced to obtain their baccalaureates.
- Associate-level RT programs could continue uninterrupted.
- The flow of available AS-level RT graduates would not be interrupted.
- AS programs could continue to receive vital Perkins funding.
- There would not be a gap between a student's clinical education and entry to clinical practice.
- RTs with bachelor's degrees in other disciplines could obtain the required credentials via short, inexpensive technical certificates.

Facilities could initiate "BSRRT preferred hiring" by offering higher pay scales and clinical ladders to incentivize the BSRT.

Disadvantages of tiered licensure

- It may prove confusing to practitioners and the public.
- This change would perpetuate a tiered system. If the state moves to the RRT as entry-level, the profession could move to a single license. Tiered licensure would force the state to maintain multiple levels of licensure. Should Florida move to the RRT credential as entry level for licensure, as other states have done, it is likely that the CRT licensure would eventually be eliminated after existing CRTs "retire out" of the system.
- Therapists with Master's degrees would be placed in the same group as those with BSRT degrees.
- Advanced Technical Certificates would have to be used to accommodate those who have degrees in other disciplines.

Summary

During the BSRT Florida Working group public meetings, diverse options for advancing the Respiratory baccalaureate were debated, and the specific advantages of each proposal were discussed. The options discussed included, but were not limited to, allowing market driven forces to drive the transition to the baccalaureate, moving directly to the BSRT as the entry level degree for licensure in Florida, and tiered licensure, which would involve creating an additional level of licensure for those therapists with a baccalaureate degree in Cardiopulmonary Sciences. After considerable discussion, no specific recommendation was agreed upon at this time, however the tiered licensure option outlined below was determined to be the option most worthy of further discussion and research.

It is important that the respiratory care community in the state continue the robust discussion of this vital topic and continue to examine the most viable options to move toward the baccalaureate.

Special Thanks

The working group would like to acknowledge the members of the subcommittee who authored this executive summary:

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