



Association for Leadership Science in Nursing

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An Interview With

**Heather Nelson-Brantley, PhD, RN, NEA-BC
Associate Professor, University of Alabama at Birmingham
President-Elect, ALSN**

Tell us a little about your career path, background, and passion for advancing the science of nursing leadership.

Heather Nelson-Brantley, an Associate Professor and Nurse Executive DNP Pathway Director at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, is a second career nurse. She began her career in business and then transitioned to nursing in her mid-30s where she worked in the medical ICU and cardiothoracic progressive care unit. During nursing school, Heather worked as a nurse tech and was asked to help train new nurse aides. It was that experience where she realized how much she loves teaching. She decided to transition to academia after having the opportunity to guest lecture, which filled her with an excited energy. From there, she completed a BSN to PhD program so she could be in academia full-time. Heather believes her business background contributes to her passion for advancing the science of nursing leadership and uses past experiences in the business world to shape her research on the work environment of nurses. She believes that positive work environments start with leaders and effective leadership impacts all areas of nursing. Her research is focused on how to equip nurses to be great leaders and what successful nursing leadership looks like.

How has your involvement in ALSN influenced your career trajectory – what has been most valuable?

Heather is grateful for ALSN and says it has had a huge impact on her career trajectory through attending conferences and making key connections with other nurse leaders. Connecting with other ALSN members during the conferences led to many opportunities to contribute her talents, including serving as the ALSN Perspectives Column Editor for JONA, serving on the research committee, and then as Vice President of Research on the executive board. Through ALSN, Heather has found valuable mentors and been able to connect nationally with others doing leadership research. Heather also received her first external funding from ALSN (CGEAN at that time), which became an important foundation for building a program of nursing leadership research.

What doors have opened to you as a result of your involvement in ALSN?

Heather was invited to write a summary of a panel discussion about Nurses on Boards during the 2014 conference. This opened the door to her serving as column editor for the ALSN Perspectives in JONA. Her success in that role then opened the door to serving on the JONA editorial board. ALSN also has provided a platform for Heather to conduct national research in partnership with other members of the ALSN research committee, including the 2019 Delphi study, the nurses' use of social media and job decision-making study, and care delivery model study in partnership with the AONL Foundation. Heather shared how tremendously honored she is to now serve as President-Elect of ALSN. She feels she is standing on the shoulders of giants and looks forward to continuing to advance the organization and opening the door for others.

What would you say to nurse leaders in academia or practice who are considering joining ALSN right now?

Heather says "Do it! It will be one of the best decisions that you've ever made!" She expands to say she didn't really understand what it was about when she first joined but attended a conference and learned the connections you can make through ALSN. Deans, CNOs, and researchers are all seated together and moving nursing leadership science forward together. There is room for ALSN to grow in academic-practice partnerships, everyone is welcome. Additionally, the member benefits are outstanding, with very affordable membership dues.

How did you become interested in the study of nursing leadership and how has ALSN influenced this interest?

Through her business background, Heather has had a passion for healthy work environments and was able to recognize the need for effective leadership in nursing, and its impact on nurse and patient outcomes. Once she made the career change to nursing and completed her PhD, she noticed the need for more evidence to support nurse leaders. ALSN, as an organization, has affirmed that nursing leadership is worth investigating, and the people she has met along the way validated the value of leadership research. ALSN has provided many innovative ideas to engage in nursing leadership research (and get funding!).

Specific to nursing leadership, how can we create a better balance between academic and practice partners? How can ALSN assist with this partnership?

Heather shared that ALSN's dedication to academic-practice partnerships was a draw for her becoming a member. Like Heather, ALSN understands that without strong academic-practice

partnerships, we risk generating research that is not useful to practice, or engaging in leadership practice that is not grounded in evidence. When we all come together, we can generate research that is meaningful, and the evidence needed to guide and advance nursing leadership practice and education. We create balance when we value what each other brings to the table and see that we do not have to be the expert of all things. ALSN creates a unique and safe space for leaders in practice and research to come together and move the science of nursing leadership forward. Heather highly encourages you to invite your academic or practice partner to ALSN activities. Engage them in the work. She says that, similar to her own experience, she has heard countless people share that when they came to ALSN, they “finally found their people.”

What is the one thing you would like ALSN members to know?

ALSN is here to support you. That’s the message Heather has always gotten from ALSN, and it’s important to her to continue that message. Whatever your career goals are, ALSN can support your growth. Explore what ALSN and its members have to offer and use the resources available through ALSN. There are many skilled individuals throughout the organization who want you to succeed, so take advantage of it!