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## Reflection on Retention: An Evaluation Study on Minority Students' Success in an Online Nursing Program

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## **Reflection on Retention: An Evaluation Study on Minority Students' Success in an Online Nursing Program**

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### **Abstract**

The United States nursing workforce faces a health care challenge for providing culturally competent care to the growing number of racial and ethnic minority groups. Research has shown that patients receive a higher level of culturally competent care from nurses who are from their own cultural background. Administrators and faculty working in Schools of Nursing must recognize this important fact and take action to ensure the admission, progression, and graduation of minority students meets the needs of the population demographics of the community, resulting in better promotion of cultural competency in the healthcare system. Diverse students have different learning needs and barriers; therefore, policies and support services must be in place for these individuals to progress and graduate. Key strategies, according to research performed, will be discussed regarding how faculty and administrators can best support the needs for diverse students to ensure progression and graduation in an online RN-BSN program.

There is a substantial increase in the racial and ethnic minority demographics in the United States; however, there continues to be a shortage of diverse nurses prepared at the baccalaureate level. Although RN to BSN programs increased by 12.4% nationwide, nurses from minority backgrounds only represent 19% of the registered nurse (RN) workforce and men only represent 9.6% of all RN's (American Association of College of Nursing [AACNb]), 2014; U.S. Census Bureau,

2012). As the diverse population increases and health disparities multiply, it is imperative that recruitment and retention of a diverse nursing workforce become priority. The RN-BSN faculty was awarded a grant to investigate the difficulties associated with being a minority nursing student and ways to improve retention for this population in an online, higher learning environment; at a four-year university. The researchers attempted to determine what minority students perceive as barriers to success and

determine ways to improve retention and graduation in this population.

The goal of the School of Nursing (SON) is to continue to increase class size, while embracing diversity, without adversely affecting retention. In order to fulfill this goal, the RN-BSN program analyzed current progression numbers. In the summer of 2014, a program evaluation with a two-wave email survey was conducted of all RN-BSN students from the beginning of the program in Fall-2010 to Spring 2014. Demographic information for class enrollment, race, sex, grade point average, retention rates, and graduation rates for the RN-BSN program were collected.

In compiling this information, the researchers were interested particularly in comparing the retention rates for minorities versus the white population of students. During a recent survey of the nursing workforce in the region, it was revealed that percentages of white compared to minorities were extremely disproportionate. This finding prompted the RN-BSN faculty to investigate minority issues that may be affecting retention and progression of online students. The project site has two hospitals that serve the region. Columbus Regional Healthcare System, which is the largest healthcare facility in the area, had a ratio of white female RNs to African American female RNs of 72.49% to 21.15%; the ratio of white male RNs to African American male RNs was 67.94% to 18.66%. St. Francis Hospital, the second largest hospital in the area, had a ratio of white female RNs to African American female RNs of 67.18% to 26.42%; the ratio of white male RNs to African American male RNs was 82.14% to 7.31%. The need is clear that in order to meet the population demographics of the community and region more minority RNs need to be incorporated into the nursing workforce. Increasing diversity in the local

nursing workforce will increase the level of culturally competent care provided in this region, thus improving patient outcomes. The need is apparent that in order to meet the population demographics of the community, more minorities should be entering into the nursing workforce, and this goal can be accomplished by increasing the number of minority nursing students.

### **Literature Review**

The United States is projected to become a minority nation by 2043 (Phillips & Malone, 2014). With health disparities at a premium, increasing the number of minority nurses is essential to improve culturally competent care. The literature reveals persistent disparities in health status in the nation, which is occurring as a result of increasing diversity in our society. This phenomenon has prompted a growing concern regarding the lack of racial and ethnic minority health professionals. Studies have consistently shown that nurses from underrepresented minority groups tend to provide more culturally competent care to minorities (Jackson & Garcia, 2014).

The Institute of Medicine (2004) recommends increasing the number of minority health professionals as a key strategy to eliminating health disparities. People often seek health care from providers of their own race or ethnicity; by increasing the minority population of nurses, improvement in health care access and quality among minorities will occur (Dapremont, 2014).

Increasing minority nurses' presence is a particularly important topic; nursing is based on human relationships, and meeting patients' cultural needs is an extension of relationship building. Furthermore, there has been a continued demand for an increase in diversity among nurses to help strengthen the nation's workforce by improving cultural

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competency and increasing diversity (Institute of Medicine, 2010; Jackson & Garcia, 2014). The increase in the number of underrepresented minorities in nursing programs may be attributed to many factors. Complex reasons exist for a lack of diversity in nursing, such as past discriminations of ethnic minorities; financial barriers; feelings of isolation loneliness, frustration, and prejudice; problems related to academic and social adjustments; lack of academic preparedness; socio-political, economic, and personal factors; fewer mentors or role models; lack of peer groups; rigid educational policies; and language difficulties (Ackerman-Barger, 2010; Arieli & Hirschfeld, 2013; Beacham, Askew, & Williams, 2009; Loftin, Newman, Dumas, Gilden, & Bond, 2012). Diverse men are underrepresented in nursing because of feelings of inadequacy, role strain, economic barriers, and fear of gender stereotyping; therefore, recruitment and retention of a diverse male population has many barriers that effectively impact successful program completion for underrepresented minority nursing students (AACNa, 2014; Loftin et al., 2012).

To ensure minority academic success, a campus wide commitment for retention must be established. Early referral to campus resources is imperative. Professional advising and mentoring will help build professional relationships and streamline concerns early in the program. These relationships over time will help strengthen professional leadership skill development. A well-structured online program will help students with organization and time management. Promoting students to establish a daily routine for studying and reading assignments, along with joining a peer study group for support and learning, are well-documented strategies for student success (Ackerman-Barger, 2010;

Dapremont, 2014; Payton, Howe, Timmons & Richardson, 2013).

### **Purpose**

The goal of the RN to BSN survey was to explore student attitudes about programmatic and institutional factors that could impact retention, progression, and graduation of students. A particular emphasis was placed on exploring the needs of minority, male, and first-time speakers of English.

### **Methods**

#### **Research Design**

The RN to BSN Program was evaluated using a two-wave email survey of 138 potential students who are currently enrolled in the program. Responses from 25 students provided information related to barriers to success in an online program. Survey results were representative on all major demo-graphic and social criteria.

#### **Participants**

Following approval from the University's Institutional Review Board, random sampling in a two-wave email survey was conducted with 25 students, with a mean age of 37.9 years, enrolled in the online nursing program. The sample consisted of 21 females and 4 males, 4% of which stated they were non-native English speakers. Thirty-seven percent identified themselves as a minority. All participants gave informed consent to be included in the study.

#### **Data Collection**

There were 15 structured Likert scale survey questions that were reviewed and revised by the research team. The questions were devised to elicit responses related to students' perceptions of barriers to success in an online nursing program. Data collection lasted for 4 weeks.

Data collected from the surveys provided an excellent mirror for the larger RN to BSN program. Table 1 shows that the sample slightly over-represented minority students, male students, and non-native speakers of English. The characteristics of this sample provide an excellent representation of the students found in this program. Analysis of the survey information was compiled by the staff of the University's Social Research Center.

Table 1  
*RN to BSN Demographics*

	Sample	Population
<b>Race</b>		
White	63%	65%
Minority	37%	35%
<b>Age</b>		
Mean Age	37.9	36.1
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	16%	11%
Female	84%	89%
<b>ESOL Students</b>		
Native English Speakers	96%	97%
Non-Native English Speakers	4%	3%

**Results**

The results from the survey indicate high levels of student satisfaction regarding university support services and student support services that were used. The discussion of these results will focus on aggregate results as there were no substantial

deviations when the data were disaggregated by group.

Students report that use of student support services at the University was uneven. Ninety-five percent of all RN to BSN students reported using library resources while at the University. The computer help desk and the Writing Center were used at 32% and 27% respectively. All other forms of student support, including the Counseling Center, the Math and Science Learning Center, and the Academic Center for Excellence were all used by less than 10% of respondents. This finding indicates a lack of utilization for tutorial services in key core curriculum courses and with regard to counseling services. Efforts should be made to increase student support utilization by reaching out to the directors of these particular offices to determine what degree of online support they are providing for students. Table 2 displays the percentage of participants who utilized each support service.

Table 2  
*Percentages of Use by Support Service*

Support Service	%
Help Desk	100%
Advising Office	94%
Writing Center	54%
Library Resources	90%
Counseling Center	75%
Financial Aid Office	81%
Transient classes	70%

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Several questions of the survey focused on student assessments of course design, content, and delivery. Respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed, exceeding 90% in each question, when asked about course readings and classroom assignments being relevant to the courses. Similarly, faculty, faculty coaches, and feedback from faculty were also rated above 90% in agree or strongly agree categories. Students also indicated that program policies were clear with a 92% positive response. Finally, all student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their coursework was relevant to their work environment. This finding indicates a high level of satisfaction with RN to BSN coursework and the program overall.

Results from the survey of RN to BSN students provide several clear courses of action. First, the RN to BSN program needs to continue to maintain the high quality of programming it currently delivers. Students indicated extremely high levels of satisfaction with the program, its staff, and the curriculum. The initial results from this survey should be used as baseline data for subsequent programmatic assessments with new cohorts in order to maintain and improve programming.

Second, efforts should be made to reach out to student support and student services offices. Many of these offices have very low rates of student utilization amongst online RN to BSN students, which may be due to lack of online support or scheduling that supports working students. Increasing access to tutorial services for required courses and counseling services for RN to BSN students should be made a priority in order to increase student completion rates. Resources on campus report high utilization, but according to RN to BSN student comments, those students who have not made prior appointments are often turned down.

Emphasis must be placed on time management and organization for the students to benefit from campus resources. Finally, additional effort to increase the effectiveness of the Financial Aid Office and the Writing Center as they relate to RN to BSN students should be taken. These offices had the highest levels of neutral or negative responses regarding student satisfaction. Additional efforts to explore how students are engaging these offices should also be taken in order to have a better understanding of how to best serve the students in the RN to BSN program.

### **Online Survey**

While the demographic data was informative, to establish a deeper understanding of our student population, the students were surveyed. Results regarding student support utilization indicate that RN to BSN students do not utilize many existing services. The campus library, with 92% of respondents, is the most highly utilized form of student support. The computer Help Desk and the Writing Center are the second and third most commonly utilized form of student support, with 32% and 27% of respondents indicating usage. The Math and Science Learning Center, the Counseling Center, and the Academic Center for Excellence all had reported utilization rates of less than 10%. This finding indicates that students in the RN to BSN program are utilizing student support in unequal ways. Similarly, the lack of use of key academic support units for tutorial services may indicate a severe obstacle for retention and progression of students.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

Concerted efforts for improving minority student retention continue to be a complex task for nursing programs. Racial and ethnic minority nurses and nursing faculty should not bear the responsibility for finding solutions to health disparities; this is

a national problem, which requires everyone's input (Phillips & Malone, 2014). Schools of nursing must be committed and implement a variety of measurable strategies to enhance student success for diverse students. According to Baker (2010), faculty and staff's positive interactions with students play a pivotal role in implementing most retention strategies. Mentoring begins with the initial advising session and this can help with expectations of the program and promoting student resources on campus (Igbo et al., 2011; Wilson, Sanner, & McAllister, 2010). All distance education students receive extensive personal orientation and written instruction at the time of entry into the program. Faculty must identify offices, programs, departments, and ethnic organizations on campus that help improve retention through orientations, student and academic support services, study skills workshops, and peer support. According to Dapremont (2014), to ensure minority academic success, early referral to campus resources to help with time management, establishing a daily routine, inclusion in diverse study groups, fully reading course content for all assignments and not just the power points, and making note cards to help with review would be most helpful.

Students should be encouraged to contribute to their success by using multiple student distance learning support services and strategies to contribute to the success of diverse students (Igbo et al., 2011). The ease at which students utilize these strategies will reflect the university and nursing program's commitment to ensuring a diverse student population. These strategies, along with relevant student assigned activities that promote writing, professional portfolios, how to network, and resume preparation to help meet future career goals will help promote retention (Igbo et al., 2011).

Resources must be utilized on campuses to help the healthcare workforce develop the skills and knowledge necessary to provide care to an increasingly diverse nation. Potential campus resources can be regular evaluation of the admission process and advising sessions to help customize services to meet the unique needs of this specific population. This task can be easily completed by using surveys. Look for resources on campus that offer classes on test taking strategies, study skills, cultural health care seminars/speakers, Academic Center for Excellence that will provide a tutoring assistance, the Writing Center that will provide writing consultations support to online students and The Center for Career Development - to help with resumes. Computer technical support is available from the Help desk. Another option for adults returning to school after a lengthy absence would be to consider the adult re-entry programs that are designed as a course for adults to refresh their college skills in reading, writing and math. Admission criteria, policies and procedures, and resource centers must reflect the university's commitment to ensuring a diverse student population.

Faculty must employ processes to promptly identify at risk students. Designate faculty to serve as coaches and serve as liaisons between faculty and students. The mentorship program is a strong asset in support of student retention. The intention was that each student would have the opportunity to engage with multiple mentors. Mentors offer academic advice, support and encouragement to students (Escallier & Fullerton, 2009).

Minority nursing faculty underrepresentation is another factor that needs to be considered. There is often a limited number of minority faculty to serve as role models and mentors to

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underrepresented groups (Phillips & Malone, 2014). Few nurses from minority groups with advanced nursing degrees pursue faculty careers. According to 2012 data from AACN's annual survey, only 12.3% of full-time nursing school faculty come from minority backgrounds, and only 5.4% are male (AACN, 2014). Leadership development opportunities in academia must remain a high priority to correct this problem. The need to attract diverse nursing students is paralleled by the need to recruit more faculty from minority populations to circumvent the problem. There is a minority nurse faculty scholars program launched by AACN and the Johnson & Johnson Campaign to help with scholarship funding. Commitment to increase workforce diversity will help ensure access to quality health care and reduce health disparities (Williams, 2014).

Institutional support is extremely important to the success of all students. Having a way to access information and search for help when technology becomes difficult is paramount to student success (Lehman & Conceicao, 2014). Students have readily identified the use of help desk services to be essential when navigating the learning management system and when technical issues cause difficulty with course participation. Students rely on a rapid response to requests for assistance to ease frustration when problems arise. The authors have made a concerted effort to include frequently asked questions (FAQ's) within each course for any questions not related to technical issues. These FAQ's are checked daily in each course and answered within 24 hours during the week and 48 hours on weekends. We offer online office hours and can meet via phone, or some other conferencing software, to guide the students through whatever issue they may be experiencing. This university has a full complement of writing and math resources that can be used by all students when needed.

One problem that has come to light is that students must make appointments with the writing center to have a writing assignment reviewed and this appointment should be made, sometimes, weeks in advance. Many online students do not realize these deadlines are in place and find themselves without the needed support due to poor time management. The faculty have made it a point to let all students know that an appointment is required and to plan ahead to avoid these issues.

### Conclusion

The RN to BSN program has achieved a high level of programmatic success regarding its faculty and curriculum. In order to improve the program, efforts should be made to enhance usage of academic support and student support services for students in the online RN to BSN program. Additional efforts should be made to assess the ongoing implementation of programming in order to maintain the high level of programming currently in place. The main concern is that the literature represents the same evidence based retention strategies that have been discussed for the past decade. The data obtained from this program evaluation resonate with previous research and lends support for early intervention, such as encouraging the utilization of campus resources, use of mentor groups to support learning, and maintaining a professional relationship with advising. To ensure minority academic success, a campus wide commitment for retention must be established. Institutions must commit to a continued acceptance of diversity and equality among students.

As the national population becomes more diverse, pursuing the goal of cultural competence in the workforce and health care system, emerges as a leading strategy in reducing health disparities among minority populations. Progress toward reducing



health disparities will involve support for community based strategies and increasing diversity of the health care workforce. It should be considered a priority that schools of nursing across the country adopt successful strategies to mirror the nations change in demographics. A variety of retention strategies targeted toward helping minority students are already threaded throughout many nursing programs. Analysis of current strategies and incorporating new strategies are imperative to increase the diversity in nursing and reduce health disparities. Early intervention is strongly encouraged for student success. This strong commitment will enhance the diversity in the nursing workforce and help meet the Institute of Medicine's recommendation to strengthen the nation's workforce by improving cultural competency. Through the endorsement of success strategies, participation is instrumental in implementing successful retention strategies in nursing programs.

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