REFEREED ARTICLE

Addressing Student Attrition in Nursing Education Programs

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Abstract

With the current global nursing shortage expected to continue and even deepen, it is essential that nursing programs consider the influencing factors which are affecting student retention and attrition rates. These factors include both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, student supports within the university and community, the level of faculty involvement, and the opportunity for students to complete remediation. As well, universities need to address the constraints such as faculty shortages and the effects of the current pandemic in addressing student attrition rates within nursing programs.

In the current health care landscape, graduating competent nurses is important to fill the current staffing shortages and prepare for the future needs of the health care system. Over the last number of years, nursing programs have had a drastic increase in student attrition rates (Jeffreys, 2007), particularly in the second year of nursing programs during which attrition rates tend to be highest (Jakubec et al., 2020). Given the important role nurses play in providing safe care to patients and families (McLaughlin et al., 2008) and in consideration of the global nursing shortage (Emerson, 2015), addressing attrition rates in nursing education programs is of paramount concern. Furthermore, it is anticipated that nursing shortages will only become more acute given the COVID-19 pandemic (Fenn, 2021).

With the increased demand for nurses to graduate, the government has encouraged nursing programs to increase the number of admission seats (Hadenfelt, 2015); however, increased attrition rates create empty seats within nursing programs and result in lost revenue for nursing programs (McLaughlin et al., 2008). Most nursing programs in North America are government-subsidized and there is significant financial loss for both the government and students when failure occurs. Many contributing factors influence attrition rates in nursing programs: intrinsic and extrinsic factors, supports, faculty involvement, and the opportunity for remediation.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors

Student attrition rates can be related to both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. These factors can affect student motivation and academic achievement (Emerson, 2015). Globally, students are often unprepared for the demands of post-secondary education; often they are unable to write, have limited math skills, and have not developed critical thinking skills (Daniels & Mthimunye, 2019). Having lower entrance Grade Point Averages (GPA) can influence academic success in nursing programs, because students are academically unprepared for the academic and clinical demands of a professional nursing program (Rolf et al., 2019). At-risk students have identified feeling overwhelmed with the demands of a full-time, fast-paced nursing program and often struggle in developing effective study habits (Williams, 2010).

Difficulties in fitting in amongst peers and faculty has been noted as a contributing factor for success within nursing programs (Hadenfelt, 2015). International students and older students over the age of 24 have voiced problems related to fitting in with the rest of their cohort. This is due to language and cultural differences, as well as differences in life experiences in comparison to their classmates (Rolf et al., 2019). Students who have experienced academic failure reported having low self-confidence in their ability to apply theory and clinical abilities (Custer, 2016). Hesitance to ask for help from faculty members, based on fear of knowledge

deficits, language barriers, and the stigma of asking for help, contribute to academic failure (Daniels & Mthimunye, 2019).

Unfortunately, students may experience academic failure based on external logistical factors (Gaberson et al., 2015). Factors such as finding childcare, the financial need for employment while going to school, the geographical location of the university or clinical sites, and organizing transportation can all impact the success of students (Daniels & Mthimunye, 2019). Unreliable internet access has also been identified as a barrier to student academic success in nursing programs (Rolf et al., 2019). Due to influence of various intrinsic and extrinsic factors, student supports are imperative for academic success within nursing programs.

Supports

Students are often more motivated to succeed academically when they are a part of a community, either online or in person (Emerson, 2015), because supports to assist students in post-secondary education are paramount for success (Litchfield, 2001). Some students are the first in their family to attend post-secondary education and therefore do not have familial understanding of the demands of their nursing education (Hadenfelt, 2015). Having student service supports within the university setting can assist students academically, financially, and emotionally (Gaberson et al., 2015).

During the current pandemic, the access to supports has been a challenge. Students have been expected to resume the same course workloads using remote learning (Solution Path, 2021). Many students struggle to access supports, having never met the academic faculty in person or been on campus (Custer, 2016). Faculty involvement has a crucial role in supporting students getting connected with community within the university setting and supporting students to achieve academic goals.

Faculty Involvement

The level of faculty involvement is key in supporting nursing students. Encouraging student engagement in the classroom and clinical setting creates a positive learning environment where students can feel supported by faculty (Sportsman, 2020). By creating a trusting relationship with students, constructive feedback is more likely to be received in a meaningful way, in order to develop professional and personal growth for the student (McLaughlin et al., 2008). However, both the increase in the number of students admitted to nursing education programs and nursing faculty shortages are factors in improving faculty involvement, because high student-to-faculty ratios create difficulty in forming meaningful connections with students in both the classroom environment and the clinical setting (Palese et al., 2020).

Promoting a trusting and positive relationship with students is important for faculty to consider (Litchfield, 2001). Clearly explaining expectations at the beginning of the term and revisiting course objectives throughout the year promote trust between faculty and students (Chunta, 2016). Having low-stakes learning environments increases student confidence and creates a positive learning environment (Flott & Linden, 2016). Within the clinical setting, it is imperative that faculty provide students with timely feedback (Jakubec et al., 2020). Early identification of areas requiring improvement is the first step in assisting students in professional growth and improvement of clinical practice (Thilges & Schmer, 2020).

Conducting screening prior to admission into nursing programs identifies students at risk of academic failure (Bulfone et al., 2021). If early identification of at-risk nursing students occurs, faculty members then have the opportunity to address the diverse learning needs of the students, offer supports, and direct students to support services available in the university setting (Jeffreys, 2007). Providing feedback both verbally and in written form promotes student growth and identifying areas that require further development reinforces safe clinical

performance (Chunta, 2016). Therefore, meaningful faculty involvement is important in providing students with an opportunity for remediation.

The Opportunity for Remediation

Within nursing programs, the process of creating and implementing individualized learning plans is known as remediation (Reinhardt, 2015). The remediation process can be used for both theory and clinical performance issues (Thilges & Schmer, 2020). The content covered can be basic skills or bigger concepts, including review of technical skills or application of nursing theories (Custer, 2016). Early faculty intervention and implementation of remediation plans can be very beneficial to students and promotes positive outcomes academically (Sanabria et al., 2020). The ultimate goal of remediation is for students to address theoretical gaps in areas of practice requiring review so as to promote quality care of patients and ensure patient safety in the clinical setting (Reinhardt, 2015).

After detection of knowledge deficits or practice issues, the faculty member must initiate the remediation process based on the university's guiding policies to ensure the correct process (Gaberson et al., 2015). The faculty member and student must then meet to create an individualized learning plan (Corrigan-Magaldi et al., 2014). The individualized learning plan must be student-specific and involve both the student and faculty in identifying the student's strengths and areas requiring continued improvement (Reinhardt, 2015). The process of remediation can include review of technical skills in the laboratory setting and/or can be focused on previously-learned theory, through completion of case studies, presentations, or one-on-one conversations with faculty. At this time, students may be encouraged to seek out supports within the nursing department such as tutoring services, academic advising, or university supports such as counselling services or financial aid programs (Gallant et al., 2006). The remediation process must address the different learning styles of the students (Custer, 2018). Setting deadlines for students to demonstrate clinical competence and theoretical understanding, and for faculty to provide ongoing and timely feedback, must be part of the learning plan (Gallant et al., 2006). The process of remediation increases student confidence with technical skills and application of theoretical knowledge (Jakubec et al., 2020). For success to occur, students must identify areas requiring continued improvement and be committed to professional growth (Williams, 2010).

Limitations to implementation of the remediation process are many. High faculty workload and a lack of experienced clinical faculty are barriers because the remediation process is very time-consuming within busy nursing programs (Gallant et al., 2006). Supporting students one on one is a costly endeavour for a university and is not widely supported at the administrative level for credit allotment to academic or clinical faculty (Sanabria et al., 2020). Due to the nature of fast-paced nursing programs, students may not be able to meet the objectives of the remediation learning plan and may also miss the opportunity to withdraw voluntarily from difficult areas of study without academic penalty (Gallant et al., 2006).

With the rise in student attrition rates, it is important to consider the long-term effects of passing students who should be failing, because there are implications for success with the national licensure exam (Custer, 2016) and upon graduation risks to patient safety (Jakubec et al., 2020). Students should not be passed if there is significant harm to patients or if they are deemed clinically unprepared to care safely for patients and families (Chunta, 2016). Continued remediation until the standard is completely achieved is a better alternative, given the critical stakes.

Conclusion

Adding new nurses to the workforce is paramount for the existing staff needs and for the critical needs of patients (Fenn, 2021). Understanding the reason for high attrition rates, it is

important to consider the intrinsic and extrinsic factors of students who enter nursing programs (Bulfone et al., 2021). Post-secondary programs must do everything possible to ensure that nursing students have support systems in place within the university setting (Gallant et al., 2006). Faculty involvement is key for students to feel involved in their learning journey to become registered nurses (Corrigan-Magaldi et al., 2014). It is important to have early detection of at-risk behaviours that lead to student failure (Solution Path, 2021). Having faculty meet with students who are struggling academically and commence an individualized remediation process is key in decreasing the attrition rates of nursing students (Reinhardt, 2015). Given that nursing shortages that are already extremely challenging and expected to be increased by the pandemic (Fenn, 2021), retaining students who enter nursing programs becomes even more important in addressing future health care needs.

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