

# GRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF NURSING FACULTY IMMEDIACY: CARING ACTIONS FOR ACCELERATED ONLINE COURSES

Teresa H. Huber, Northern Kentucky University  
Lynne Zajac, Northern Kentucky University  
Karen O'Connell, Northern Kentucky University  
Denise Robinson, Northern Kentucky University  
Adrienne Lane, Northern Kentucky University

---

## ABSTRACT

*This mixed method study utilized the Online Faculty Caring, Presence, and Immediacy Behaviors Survey and explored 142 graduate nursing students' perceptions of faculty immediacy in accelerated online courses. Students ranked online faculty immediacy characteristics and determined level of agreement with faculty actions. The quantitative findings were compared to determine differences between students who perceived that online faculty utilized immediacy behaviors versus students who perceived that faculty did not use immediacy behaviors. Five themes emerged from the qualitative results that reflect faculty presence, communication, support, and feedback, which emerged from the open-ended survey questions and support the quantitative results. The study findings informed the creation of specific strategies for online faculty who teach accelerated courses.*

**Keywords:** *faculty immediacy, learning engagement, graduate online education, caring behaviors*

## INTRODUCTION

Immediacy behaviors are human communication modalities of eye contact, vocal variety and modulation, facial expressions, and gestures, which humanize faculty in the work of teaching and implementing curricula. The idea of seeing these modalities as teaching strategies first emerged in face-to-face educational environments and are noted in early research to facilitate student learning (Anderson, 1979). Subsequent studies specifically addressed the relationship between faculty immediacy and student motivation, in addition to learning (Christophel, 1990; Jaasma & Koper, 1999). More recently, the use of out-of-class communication and verbal immediacy as specific faculty immediacy strategies have had a positive impact on student learning for traditional in-person classes (Faranda, 2015; Furlich, 2016).

In the online classroom, timely and frequent feedback as well as faculty inquiries into student wellbeing are highly valued faculty actions. Online students perceive the use of faculty verbal and written communication with positive emotional tones as desired immediacy behaviors; however, most studies are situated in traditional, semester-length courses (DellAntonio, 2017; Ge et al., 2019; Schutt, et al. 2009).

Online student enrollment continues to rise across all academic nursing programs (American Association Colleges of Nursing, 2021), and online academic curricula provide working students with flexibility and convenience of learning. Shortened accelerated online courses of eight weeks or fewer in graduate health education programs are increasing in popularity (McDonald, et al., 2018). Accelerated online programing allows the student

to take multiple shortened courses every five, seven, or eight weeks during the year and finish their degree earlier than a program using traditional 15- or 16-week semesters. The use of faculty immediacy behaviors in accelerated online nursing courses may be challenging due to the condensed period of eight weeks or fewer. Accelerated online courses are content laden with a shortened amount of time for faculty to get acquainted with students in an environment that already lacks face-to-face interaction. Consequently, students in accelerated online courses may have a very different human experience from students in a traditional face-to-face classroom or in a semester-long online class.

This article explores the results of a mixed methods study that identified graduate nursing students' perception of faculty immediacy behaviors in 7-week online courses. The results informed the creation of specific strategies to address the benefits of the immediacy behaviors as well as the challenges associated with incorporating faculty immediacy into accelerated graduate nursing courses. Two research questions directed the mixed method study:

1. How do graduate nursing students perceive faculty immediacy behaviors and caring in accelerated online nursing courses?
2. What online faculty immediacy and caring behaviors are deemed important by students in accelerated online nursing programs and how are they ranked?

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### *Online Presence and Caring*

Faculty presence in the online learning environment is critical to excellence in education for postsecondary institutions and is key to student retention and achievement (Casey & Kroth, 2013; Cobb, 2009; Garrison et al., 1999; Gazza & Hunker, 2014). Several qualitative studies comprised of online nursing students noted the importance of faculty caring behavior and presence (Sitzman, 2010 & 2016; Smith & Crowe, 2017; Zajac & Lane, 2020).

In a mixed method study 99 online nursing students ranked timely communication, academic support, and empathetic presence as top behaviors of faculty online presence and caring; even so, up to one-third of students disagreed that faculty exhibit

these behaviors (Zajac & Lane, 2020). Qualitative findings revealed that online students value authentic and empathetic communication, timely and respectful feedback, faculty interaction, and investment in student success as important faculty actions in the virtual learning environment (2020).

### *Immediacy Behaviors*

Faculty immediacy is key to student perceptions of faculty social presence and engagement. Recent research focuses on teacher immediacy and presence in online courses and includes work by Bialowas and Steimel (2019), who introduced short video announcements in an online environment to increase a sense of immediacy and presence in an online course. Qualitative feedback supported the notion of increased instructor immediacy through video interaction. Students also identified timely feedback as another critical factor in instructor immediacy (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019; Walkem, 2014). In addition, positive email tone enhanced students' perception of faculty immediacy (Dickinson, 2017).

Interactive video communication versus text-based feedback provided a greater sense of teaching, social, and cognitive presence in an undergraduate online nursing course (Seckman, 2018). Schutt et al. (2009) also found that high immediacy behaviors of faculty using audio and video with text chat versus low immediacy behaviors of audio only with text chat contributed to a higher perception of instructor immediacy and social presence for an undergraduate psychology course.

For online instruction, students benefit from viewing both instructional content and faculty immediacy behaviors (Ramlatchan & Watson, 2020). If the students are not able to see the instructor, this appears to have a negative effect on faculty immediacy. Faculty immediacy can decrease the perception of physical distance in an online course. In addition, faculty credibility related to the instructional content is tied to faculty immediacy; therefore, a balance of both credibility and immediacy is necessary (2020).

### *Challenges*

Faculty may face challenges to incorporate these beneficial immediacy behaviors into online courses due to the condensed class format. Student and faculty introductions in the accelerated online environment occur the same week as a significant

Table 1. Logic Model

Problem	Goal	Objectives	Outcomes
Faculty struggle to create faculty immediacy presence and caring in graduate accelerated online environments (AOEs).	Faculty who teach in accelerated graduate online courses demonstrate online faculty immediacy and caring behaviors as perceived by graduate nursing students	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Adapt the Faculty Caring and Presence Survey (Zajac and Lane, 2020) to include the concept of faculty immediacy.</li> <li>2. Administer tools to students in accelerated online graduate nursing courses.</li> <li>3. Make recommendations to enhance caring and faculty immediacy behaviors in the accelerated graduate online environment.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Valid qualitative and quantitative tools to measure faculty immediacy and caring behaviors in the AOE are identified.</li> <li>2. Recommendations are developed to enhance faculty immediacy and caring behaviors in the AOE based on findings gathered through project data collection.</li> <li>3. A plan to integrate faculty immediacy and caring behaviors in the AOE with a timeline is created.</li> <li>4. The knowledge gained is disseminated.</li> </ol>

portion of the course content. Student assignments and submission times are compressed; therefore, faculty grading-periods and feedback are on a compacted schedule. While a lack of research studies exist about the challenges associated with delivering condensed online courses, a few of them are mentioned here. Students have a better sense of community in longer-term courses (Epp et al., 2017); however, in a shortened course there is less time for faculty and students to interact and get acquainted. Obtaining the learner readiness and time management skills needed for online learning are challenging factors in a shortened course (Comer et al., 2015) that could influence student perceptions of faculty immediacy in the course.

This article adds to the current minimal information that exists for best practices in the use of faculty immediacy presence for accelerated online graduate nursing courses occurring for eight weeks or fewer.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Participants*

A convenience sample of 2,043 online graduate students from the Master of Science Nursing (MSN) Degree, Certificate Programs, and the postmaster's Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program at a comprehensive regional university were invited to participate in the study. The MSN and post master's DNP programs are fully online with asynchronous course delivery. We recruited student participants via a scripted announcement on the graduate program sites within Canvas, the university's web-based learning system. Faculty researchers who were not currently teaching in the programs also posted the recruitment announcements. Two hundred and twenty-six students

responded to the survey for a response rate of 9%, and 142 students completed the survey. Only the completed surveys were used in the data analysis.

### *Procedures and Tool*

Five doctorally prepared graduate nurse faculty implemented the research study. Four of the researchers had previous quantitative research experience. Three of the researchers had engaged in previous mixed method studies, and one of the researchers had experience with several qualitative research methods. The online faculty immediacy and caring logic model (see Table 1) identifies the problem, goals, objectives, and outcomes, that informed the study.

The 30-item Online Faculty Caring, Presence, and Immediacy Behaviors Survey (OFCPIBS) was adapted from a previous mixed method study (Zajac & Lane, 2020) with original qualitative questions with permission from Sitzman and Leners (2006). The survey portion of the OFCPIBS tool has a high level of internal consistency as noted by a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.94. The open-ended questions focused on students' definitions of online faculty caring, factors that support students feeling cared for, the value of hearing the faculty, and if the presence or absence of online faculty caring supports student success. Two additional questions asked participants to offer guidance to online faculty about how to convey a sense of caring and presence and several questions covered the specific topic of faculty immediacy in the online environment for this current study.

The University's Institutional Review Board deemed the study as exempt. Students clicked on a link to the study description and consent information from the recruitment announcement and

then clicked on another to link to the survey. Participation in the survey signified consent and students responded to the open-ended questions via online Qualtrics survey that were part of the larger, four-part OFCPIBS tool.

#### DATA ANALYSIS—QUANTITATIVE

The statistical software Minitab 18 (2010) was used to determine descriptive statistics. Comparative analysis was conducted on the survey quantitative data. This included Frequencies, Means, and Ranges. Chi Square was used to compare responses by program and by perceptions of immediacy. The significance level was set at 0.05. For the analyses a sample size of at least 50 was needed to assure a power of at least 0.80 at  $p < 0.05$ . All analyses were informed by the Logic Model.

#### DATA ANALYSIS—QUALITATIVE

Qualitative data were plentiful from both the MSN and DNP program participants; however, the larger MSN group provided a greater number of responses per open-ended question. We used the qualitative management software Atlas.ti 8 for Windows (atlasti.com) to organize the expansive data. Three doctorally prepared researchers used content analysis to interpret the data (Polit &

Beck, 2017). We independently read the abundant responses, reduced the data to smaller components or codes, and then met regularly to discuss the development of categories or themes. Differences were addressed and discussed until we all agreed. Specifically, we drew upon the work of Graneheim and Lundman (2004) and Graneheim et al. (2017) to inductively reduce the large amounts of data into meaning units that reflected the students' lived experience with faculty online caring and presence as well as the use of immediacy behaviors and the lack there of. We read the responses and applied meaning units or codes to the participants' expansive responses. The meaning units were grouped together according to common threads and then collapsed; from the groupings, we identified major themes/categories. Data saturation was reached and noted in frequency of similar responses. We counted the number of times a response similar to the exemplar response appeared in the data. Table 2 illustrates an example of the process results.

#### RESULTS

##### *Demographics*

Of the 142 graduate nursing student participants, 18 of the respondents were DNP students,

Table 2. Example of Process for Theme One Development

Response	Code	Theme	Response Frequency, <i>n</i>
"The one thing I really liked was an instructor who did videos each week to interact, she would do the zoom type meetings and if you couldn't participate during you could watch later and it just felt more like we could interact and share what's actually happening and have real discussions."	Both audio and visual	The High Value of Audio and Visual Cues (Use of zoom, faculty videos, and voice-over PowerPoint)	87
"I appreciate the reminder that there is an actual, caring, breathing person 'on the other end' of my online experience. It's somehow a bit of an anchor to have a face to go along with a name, and it helps me to know somehow that the content I struggle through isn't randomly generated, but rather carefully curated by the person I see in an effort to make me a better practitioner."	Both audio and visual cues humanizing		24
" . . . . encourage communication AND more importantly provide some kind of personal instruction such as voice over PowerPoint or something that shows they took time to create content for the course."	High value in hearing Other meaning units collapsed into this code: Good value in hearing Hearing for learning Hearing is humanizing Hearing what is important Audio cues		12  5 9 7 4 13

and 124 of the respondents were MSN and post-MSN Certificate program students. One hundred and twenty-five were female, 15 identified as male, and two chose not to answer. The mean age of respondents was 41 years.

Students self-identified their ethnicity as White (n = 116), Black (n = 14), and Other (American Native, Hispanic, More than One Race, or Prefer Not to Answer) (N = 12). In addition, the majority of students responded that they had completed online courses before. Of the total responses, 10 completed two or fewer online courses, 13 had completed three to five online courses, and 118 students had completed more than five online courses. Lastly, 18 graduate students responded that they had previously taught online courses as well.

### Quantitative Results

Responses were greater from the MSN student population as compared to the DNP student population, which is appropriate as there are more enrolled students in the MSN program. In Part 1 of the survey, participants were asked to think about their most recent term of online graduate nursing courses and respond *yes* or *no* to the question,

“were faculty immediacy behaviors used? Faculty immediacy behaviors mean that voice, gesture, facial expressions, are apparent.” Of the 142 participants that completed Part 1, 67 reported that immediacy behaviors were used and 75 reported that immediacy behaviors were not used.

The findings were compared to determine differences between participants who perceived that faculty utilized immediacy behaviors versus participants who perceived that faculty did not use immediacy behaviors. Part 3 of the OFCPIBS contained a series of 12 statements that referred to the faculty that the participant had most recently experienced in an accelerated online course. The participants indicated their belief about the statements using a scale of 1 for *strongly disagree*, 2 for *disagree*, 3 for *agree*, and 4 for *strongly agree*. The 12 statements were adapted from the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education by Chickering and Gamson (1987), and from current findings from the literature about faculty online social presence and caring behaviors (Koeckeritz et al., 2002). We also incorporated additional questions specific to immediacy. For 10

Table 3. Perceived Differences between Participants Who Believed Faculty Did and Did Not Use Immediacy Behaviors

Question	Test Stat (2)	P-Value	Percent Who Agree or Agree Strongly		
			Immediacy Behavior Used (n=67)	Immediacy Behavior Not Used (n=75)	All (n=142*)
My instructor communicates high expectations.	2.93	0.087	85.1	73.3	78.9
My instructor encourages active learning.	9.23	0.002	86.4	64.0	74.5
My instructor encourages student-faculty contact.	5.07	0.024	82.1	65.3	73.2
My instructor encourages cooperation among students.	5.54	0.019	82.1	64.4	72.9
My instructor emphasizes time on task.	1.94	0.164	76.9	66.2	71.2
My instructor respects diverse talents and ways of knowing.	7.12	0.008	80.3	59.5	69.3
My instructor gives prompt feedback.	5.13	0.024	68.2	49.3	58.2
My instructor creates a feeling of caring within the course.	12.31	0.000	73.1	44.0	57.7
I feel the presence of my instructor within the course.	13.21	0.000	71.6	41.1	55.7
I feel cared about by my instructor.	15.74	0.000	73.1	40.0	55.6
I feel the presence of my instruction through the use of visual presence within the course.	15.98	0.000	70.1	36.5	52.5

Note\* For some of the questions, one or two students did not answer them.

Table 4. Results of Ranked Faculty Online Characteristics Compared between Participants Who Believed Faculty Used Immediacy Behaviors and Who Believed Faculty Did Not Use Immediacy Behaviors

Characteristic	Test Stat (2)	P-Value	Immediacy Behavior Used (n=60)	Immediacy Behavior Not Used (n=72)	All (n=132)
Provides timely communication	0.08	0.779	70.0	72.2	71.2
Offers academic support	0.67	0.413	58.3	65.3	62.1
Presents an empathetic presence	0.18	0.668	38.3	34.7	36.4
Provides balanced feedback	0.11	0.739	33.3	36.1	34.8
Reflects content expertise	0.13	0.719	25.0	27.8	26.5
Inquires about student difficulties	4.07	0.044	33.3	18.1	25.0
Facilitates interaction with students and faculty	2.27	0.132	10.0	19.4	15.2
Displays a tone of appreciation	0.20	0.652	10.0	12.5	11.4
Demonstrates faculty immediacy (voice, gesture, facial expression)	0.11	0.740	10.0	8.3	9.1
Promotes student engagement	0.07	0.790	6.7	5.6	6.1
Promotes freedom of expression	3.68	0.055	5.0	0.0	2.3

out of 12 of the statements, the proportion of participants who *agree* or *strongly agree* was statistically significant for the participants who perceived that the faculty used immediacy behaviors compared to the participants who perceived that their faculty do not use immediacy behaviors (see Table 3).

Part 4 of the OFCPIBS asked participants to rank order of importance 11 phrases associated with faculty characteristics in an online

environment, with 1 being most important and 10 being the least important. One hundred thirty-two participants completed this section of the survey (n = 132). There is a significant difference in the three top ranked faculty behaviors between the students who believed faculty use immediacy behaviors and students who believed immediacy behaviors were not used. As noted in Table 4, the highest ranked behaviors are (1) Provides timely communication

(71.2%), (2) Offers academic support (62.1%), and (3) Presents an empathetic presence (36.4%). However, the data do provide sufficient evidence that the proportion of students who rank the statement “Inquires about student difficulties” as high in importance is different between the students who believed immediacy behaviors were used and the students who believed immediacy behaviors were not used ( $\chi^2 = 4.07$ ; P-value = .044).

### *Qualitative Results*

We identified five themes in the qualitative data, and they are: (1) the high value of audio and visual cues; (2) faculty willingness to communicate; (3) meaningful, timely, and respectful faculty feedback; (4) faculty compassionate support and understanding; and (5) lack of faculty “being there.”

#### *Theme One*

The first theme is the high value of audio and visual cues. Students appreciated personal interaction, which meant seeing and or hearing the online faculty. One student stated, “It was great to hear her voice as she was so kind and helpful at a time when I was so stressed.” Students commented about the benefits of Zoom meetings, faculty videos, and voice-over PowerPoints, which enabled students to associate their faculty name with a face. Students also identified appreciation for live discussions:

*The one thing I really liked was an instructor who did videos each week to interact, she would do the zoom type meetings and if you couldn't participate during you could watch later and it just felt more like we could interact and share what's actually happening and have real discussions.*

Eighty-seven students valued both audio and visual immediacy behaviors in their responses. Twenty-four students described both audio and visual as humanizing qualities of faculty.

*I appreciate the reminder that there is an actual, caring, breathing person on the other end of my online experience. It's somehow a bit of an anchor to have a face to go along with a name, and it helps me to know somehow that the content I struggle through isn't randomly generated, but rather carefully curated by the person I see in an effort to make me a better practitioner.*

Students in this study identified the need to hear and see faculty. Creating a humanized online learning environment through interpersonal relationships enables students to feel a connection with faculty (Weiss, 2000), and if faculty establish a sense of humanity in an online course, students may feel committed to the course (2000).

#### *Theme Two*

The second theme is faculty willingness to communicate. This theme contains the students' perceptions towards caring as well as the willingness of faculty to communicate. Forty-six students appreciated caring written communication, while others appreciated faculty willingness to communicate. A respondent stated that “Communicating with respect and genuine desire to help the student understand material” was important. Students identified ways that faculty initiated communication using zoom, email, and phone calls. Students also recognized a need for a check-in or for established office hours for online faculty:

*Sending an individual email to just say hi in the middle of the class and check in to see how things are going and remind students that questions are welcome or students can voice concerns or request help. Taking time out of a busy schedule to do Zoom meetings that act as office hours.*

Students placed value on faculty who take initiative to communicate and expressed a need for a connection with their instructors, such as this example from a student who stated, “Encouraging emails or phone calls, returning emails or call quickly, actually answering the questions you are asked.” Collins et al. (2019) suggest that the importance of communication does not necessarily rely on the method used, but rather the content of the information given in addition to a sense of faculty presence.

#### *Theme Three*

The third theme is meaningful, timely, and respectful faculty feedback. This theme consists of student perceptions of clear expectations and meaningful feedback from the instructor. One hundred three students stated that “Timely response on questions” and “Clear answers to questions” were important. One student stated, “Check in, make sure your syllabus is clear and concise prior to sending it out and check in weekly to ensure those

instructions are being understood.” Sixty-eight students felt feedback was important: “Professors [should] reply to emails or comments on papers promptly, and provide feedback on assignments to help with future courses/assignments.” One respondent felt that quick responses with both negative and positive feedback was necessary, caring, and beneficial to student learning:

*Caring is clearly defining assignments, giving extra examples of what is required, giving assignment choices (such as pick two of the three questions to answer), quick responses, truly reviewing the assignment and giving positive as well as negative feedback, and providing personal attention when needed.*

The students’ need for prompt detailed feedback from faculty is supported in the literature. Walkem (2014) identified several subthemes regarding feedback, including the provision of prompt feedback on completed assignments. Students expressed insecurities as to whether they were completing assignments and tasks correctly and appreciated feedback, especially prior to the submission of the final assignment.

#### *Theme Four*

The fourth theme is faculty compassionate support and understanding. Thirty of the students felt motivated for success and cared about when faculty appeared invested in them. Students who deemed faculty as approachable also perceived them as invested in the student’s success. Students described faculty immediacy behaviors of support as caring communication and presence through email, text, or video. For example, one participant stated, “A good presence of faculty made it less intimidating to ask questions on assignments and course content.” Students also identified immediacy behaviors and noted the importance of tone and compassion. Another student suggested, “Make sure to speak openly to your class, explain things thoroughly, tell students that you care and listen to their issues. Speak with empathy.” When faculty were visible and actively communicated caring statements, students felt motivated and supported. Two students explained:

*I feel more motivated to try harder in the class, even when feeling burnt out. I was*

*on the fence about dropping class and decided against it since the lead faculty was scheduling Zoom meetings for everyone to ask questions and being transparent about the challenges of tweaking the curriculum to benefit students and set us up for success for boards and practice.*

*Most students are working and possibly taking care of their families. Sometimes, you need that extra push from faculty to make it across the finish line. Just knowing that some cares and that someone is going to check on you if you fall short gives the student the drive to make the professor proud or not let the professor down.*

Students appreciate supportive caring gestures in written communication, spoken verbally, or in video. The online education literature highlights the value of faculty who demonstrate caring behaviors and authentic presence. In fact, email tone is important to establish faculty rapport and authentic presence for online students (Dickinson, 2017). Sitzman and Watson (2017) use the phrase “cybercaring” and cite the importance of caring for individual needs in a virtual environment, especially in a world of increased technology and decreased face-to-face communication.

#### *Theme Five*

The fifth and final theme is the lack of faculty “being there.” Several meaning units or codes describe this theme and include phrases such as “nonresponsiveness is noncaring,” “noncaring responses by faculty,” “faculty indifference,” “absence of caring is disrespectful,” and “absence of caring is nonmotivating.” Participants were verbose in their descriptions of lack of faculty presence. In addition, 55 participants spoke about their experiences with faculty indifference. Students provided examples of lack of faculty interaction, connection, and lack of communication. One student described faculty indifference as:

*When there is not a teacher present. The courses thus far I have had [faculty] at [XXX] just post assignments and there is no instructor. Sometimes I never talk to a professor or instructor the whole course. They don’t know who I am and they don’t know anything about me.*



Thirteen students commented on how lack of faculty presence relates to lack of motivation. A student described the difficulties in online classroom with disengaged faculty and stated that “Online classrooms make you feel like you’re the only one there. This reduces my engagement and motivation. I’m just going through the motions waiting to be done.”

The lack of quality faculty presence is problematic for students in the accelerated online environment. Noted previously, student motivation and success are tied to positive interactions with faculty in the online environment. In a replicated qualitative study, Vallade and Kaufmann (2018) highlighted nine faculty misbehavior categories noted by online students, which included problems with interpersonal communication behaviors, responsiveness, grading, and feedback. The same authors suggest that lack of opportunities for faculty-student connection in the online environment may magnify the communication mistakes made by faculty (2018). Shortened accelerated online courses further amplify the challenges associated with faculty-student interaction.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The qualitative responses provide the answer to the first research question of how graduate nursing students perceive faculty immediacy behaviors and caring in accelerated online nursing courses. These qualitative responses also support the quantitative results of the study. For example, from the quantitative rankings, students rated timely communication and empathic presence in the top three of important online faculty behaviors. Participants who perceived faculty immediacy in their accelerated online course *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with statements such as “my instructor encourages active learning,” “my instructor encourages student-faculty contact,” “my instructor gives prompt feedback,” “my instructor creates a feeling of caring within the course,” “I feel cared about by my instructor,” and “I feel the presence of my instructor within the course.” These standard statements came to life in the qualitative portion of the study, where the students were forthcoming in their descriptions of faculty caring and immediacy behaviors. The in-depth descriptions of faculty caring and noncaring actions were expansive. Students expect that faculty will engage with them

in the online environment, even in the compressed, accelerated courses; they desire that connection with the course faculty. Students want responsive faculty who demonstrate support and concern for them even in the presence of challenges such as decreased faculty time and the lack of opportunities for interaction in the online environment. Meaningful interaction was important to students throughout the seven-week courses whether it be email, faculty videos, voice over presentations, Zoom, or detailed timely assignment feedback. Students provided suggestions to increase faculty immediacy such as paying attention to the tone of emails and feedback, using Zoom for question-and-answer sessions, establishing online office hours, and reaching out via course announcements or email to check in. Schutt et al. (2009) found that high immediacy behaviors directly influence students’ perception of caring in the distance-learning environment. In addition, the quantitative results answer the second research question and provide insight into the online faculty immediacy and caring behaviors that students deemed important in accelerated online nursing programs, including how they are ranked in importance.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Sitzman and Watson (2017) recommend that in the virtual world, caring faculty behaviors need to be practiced and consistent, as well as directed towards the individual’s need for connection. For our study, both the qualitative and quantitative results informed the development of three broad recommendations to enhance faculty immediacy and caring behaviors in the accelerated online environment and link to the students’ need for connection. The recommendations are: (a) enhance online faculty immediacy behaviors through audio and visual actions/cues; (b) provide timely, respectful communication and feedback to students; and (c) integrate caring behaviors into online courses. We created several detailed faculty actions or strategies based on student responses and the literature to support implementation of the broad recommendations of enhancing care and faculty immediacy behaviors in the accelerated graduate online environment. The strategies and actions for these recommendations can be incorporated quickly, most with minimal faculty time involvement. The strategies listed in Table 5 are helpful in

Table 5. Strategies and Actions for Integrating Caring and Immediacy Behaviors into Online Courses

Strategy	Suggested Actions
Offer one-on-one mutually agreed upon meetings via audio and or video means	Set up Zoom meetings or phone calls with students to address questions (Ramlatchan & Watson, 2020). Consider a one-on-one meeting with students as part of a course assignment.
Use a positive tone whether written or verbal	Display emotion, concern, and support when communicating (Sitzman, 2016). Email example—Address students by name, acknowledge concerns, offer solutions and support, and be available (Sitzman, 2016).
Emphasize students' successes	Praise students on assignment feedback (Wang & Lehman, 2021). Send a general announcement if all/most students successfully completed an assignment.
Check on students' wellbeing	Send emails or course announcements to check in; for example "Checking in to see how you are doing with the assignment essay" . . .
Reach out early when academic or other known problems arise	Identify triggers such as lack of student participation in discussion board, quality of work declines, submission of a late assignment, or comments on a question/answer board reflect confusion or frustration. Use written or verbal communication when triggers are identified (Sitzman, 2016).
Acknowledge graduate students' multiple roles—family, work, school, pandemic	Acknowledge stress related to the pandemic or other national or global issues (Nodine et al., 2021). In course/faculty introduction recognize the multiple roles that students have. Build in some flexibility even though the course is shortened (Nodine et al., 2021).
Emphasize the importance of self-care	Include faculty self-care practices during the course/faculty introduction and encourage students to do the same. Include a self-care assignment within the course.
Role model positive caring communication actions	Take opportunities to demonstrate positive communication.
Set timelines for responding to students and grading assignments	Respond to students within 24 hours. Grade assignments within 72 hours or another designated timeframe. Publish timelines in syllabus and on the LMS (Vallade & Kaufmann, 2018).
Be respectful in all communications with students	Use student's first name when communicating with the student on all matters. Take time to thank the student for reaching out and provide specific detailed information in the response to the student. If a matter is not easily resolved via email, offer the student a face to face or Zoom meeting.
Integrate immediacy behaviors into multiple course aspects	Be present. Participate in the discussion board, post weekly announcements, conduct a "course wellness check" on each student at least once per term, demonstrate "presence" in the course at least one per week. Integrate visual and auditory faculty presence within the course. Include live faculty voice-over PowerPoint presentations. Provide zoom meetings for question-and-answer sessions. Record faculty videos for a variety of course aspects including course introduction, module introduction, assignment instruction, assignment feedback, and so forth. In all faculty recordings, pay particular attention to tone of voice, gestures, and facial expression.

the accelerated online environment but can be used in any online teaching learning milieu.

Although time is limited in online courses, faculty need to maximize the meaningfulness of each interaction. Sitzman and Watson (2017) offer useful suggestions for phrasing communication in a way that demonstrates caring and presence in a virtual word and provide the following examples.

- I am here to support you.

- I am available to meet virtually during . . . hours.
- I want you to be successful.
- Do you need clarification?
- Is everything ok?
- Is there anything I can do help right now?

(Sitzman & Watson, 2017, pp. 190–191)

The examples demonstrate caring and take

minimal time on the part of faculty. Additional strategies such as humor, faculty self-disclosure, and learner-centered feedback also exemplify faculty caring actions (Dupin-Byrant, 2004).

### **LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS**

Limitations to this study include the specific online setting and participants of nursing graduate courses in a comprehensive regional university. Furthermore, all data were self-reported. The lack of heterogeneity in the sample makes it difficult to draw comparisons about the diversity of students and their responses. The low number of DNP students compared to MSN/post-MSN Certificate students is a limitation of this study. Online experiences may be different for students in smaller graduate programs and with different course lengths. In addition, student responses may be course specific and reflect satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with curriculum rather than faculty immediacy behaviors. The response rate was low perhaps due to timing because the survey was distributed towards the end of a term.

There are several strengths noted for this mixed method study. One strength is that the qualitative findings support the quantitative results. The quantitative portion of the survey tool had strong internal consistency of 0.94. The qualitative data were abundant and participant responses were similar and frequent for specific questions. The sample size of responses is considerable for the qualitative research. In addition, multiple researchers collaborated and verified the qualitative responses and results.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this mixed methods study of graduate nursing student perceptions convey faculty immediacy from a student perspective. The results indicate the need for faculty to employ immediacy behaviors. The logic model outcomes were met with use of the adapted survey tool and with the development of recommendations based on the findings.

Nurse faculty can readily incorporate the suggested immediacy recommendations, strategies, and actions into the accelerated online courses for students. Future studies could be emulated to include other disciplines with consideration of the faculty perspective of immediacy modalities. Finally, the study results provide a strong foundation for future development of additional

immediacy recommendations to augment student perception of caring and presence in the online learning community. Online students in accelerated courses deserve an environment that supports a human experience where faculty demonstrate caring immediacy behaviors.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors acknowledge the Burkardt Consulting Center for assistance with data management and statistics.

### **FUNDING DETAILS**

This work was supported by the Academic Partnerships Faculty Research Grant Program.

# References

- American Association Colleges of Nursing [AACN]. (2021, April 1). Student enrollment surged in U.S. schools of nursing in 2020 despite challenges presented by the pandemic [Press release]. <https://www.aacnursing.org/News-Information/Press-Releases/View/ArticleId/24802/2020-survey-data-student-enrollment>
- Anderson, J. F. (1979). Teacher immediacy as a predictor of teaching effectiveness. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 3(1), 543–559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.1979.11923782>
- Bialowas, A., & Steimel, S. (2019). Less is more: Use of video to address the problem of teacher immediacy and presence in online courses. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 31(2), 354–364.
- Casey, R., & Kroth, M. (2013). Learning to develop presence online: Experienced faculty perspectives. *Journal of Adult Education*, 24(2), 104–110.
- Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin*, 1987(March), 1–6. ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED282491.pdf>
- Christophel, D. (1990). The relationship among teacher immediacy behaviors, student motivation, and learning. *Communication Education*, 39(4), 323–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634529009378813>
- Cobb, S. C. (2009). Social presence and online learning: A current view from a research perspective. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 8(3), 241–254.
- Collins, K., Groff, S., Mathena, C., & Kupczynski, L. (2019). Asynchronous video and the development of instructor social presence and student engagement. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 20(1), 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.522378>
- Comer, D. R., Lenaghan, J. A., & Sengupta, K. (2015). Factors that affect students' capacity to fulfill the role of online learner. *Journal of Education for Business*, 90(3), 145–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2015.1007906>
- DellAntonio, J. (2017). Retaining the on-line RN-to-BSN nursing student: Does instructor immediacy matter? *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 12(2), 122–127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.teln.2017.01.003>
- Dickinson, A. (2017). Communicating with the online student: The impact of e-mail tone on student performance and teacher evaluations. *Journal of Educators Online*, 14(2), 10. <https://doi.org/10.9743/jeo.2017.14.2.5>
- Dupin-Bryant, P. (2004). Strategies for teaching in online learning environments: Utilizing instructor immediacy behaviors. *The Journal of Applied Research for Business Instruction*, 2(2), 1–4.
- Epp, C., Phirangee, K., & Hewitt, J. (2017). Student actions and community in online courses: The roles played by course length and facilitation method. *Online Learning*, 21(4), 53–77. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v21i4.1269>
- Faranda, W. (2015). The effects of instructor service performance, immediacy, and trust on student–faculty out-of-class communication. *Marketing Education Review*, 25(2), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2015.1029853>
- Furlich, S. (2016). Understanding instructor nonverbal immediacy, verbal immediacy, and student motivation at a small liberal arts university. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 16(3), 11–22. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v16i3.19284>
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (1999). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87–105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)
- Gazza, E., & Hunker, D. (2014). Facilitating student retention in online graduate nursing education programs: A review of the literature. *Nurse Education Today*, 34(7), 1125–1129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2014.01.010>
- Ge, Z.-G., Zhang, A.-Y., Li, Y.-F., & Su, J. (2019). Exploring the impact of teachers' verbal immediacy as an emotion mediating factor on adult e-learners' language learning. *Educational Technology & Society*, 22 (4), 77–89.
- Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24, 105–112. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.06.002>
- Graneheim, U. H., Lindgren, B. M., & Lundman, B. (2017). Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: A discussion paper. *Nurse Education Today*, 56, 29–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.06.002>
- Jaasma, M. A., & Koper, R. J. (1999). The relationship of student-faculty out-of-class communication to instructor immediacy and trust and to student motivation. *Communication Education*, 48(1), 41–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634529909379151>
- Koeckeritz, J., Malkiewicz, J., & Henderson, A. (2002). The seven principles of good practice: Application for online education in nursing. *Nurse Educator*, 27(6), 283–287. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006223-200211000-00010>
- Sitzman, K. & Leners, D. (2006). Student perceptions of caring in online baccalaureate education. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 27(5), 254–259.

- McDonald P., Harwood, K., Butler, J., Schlumpf, K., Eschmann, C., & Drago, D. (2018). Design for success: Identifying a process for transitioning to an intensive online course delivery model in health professions education. *Medical Education Online*, 23(1), 1415617. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10872981.2017.1415617>
- Nodine, P. M., Arbet, J., Jenkins, P., Rosenthal, L., Carrington, S., Purcell, S. K., Lee, S., & Hoon, S. (2021). Graduate nursing student stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 37(4), 721–728. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2021.04.008>
- Polit, D., & Beck, C. (2017). *Nursing research: Generating and assessing education for nursing practice* (10th ed.). Wolters-Kluwer.
- Ramlatchan, M., & Watson, G., (2020). Enhancing instructor credibility and immediacy in online multimedia designs. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 68, 511–528. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09714-y>
- Schutt, M., Allen, B., & Laumakis, M. (2009). The effects of instructor immediacy behaviors in online learning environments. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 10(2), 135–148.
- Seckman, C. (2018). Impact of interactive video communication versus text based feedback on teaching, social, and cognitive presence in online learning communities. *Nurse Educator*, 43(1), 18–22. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NNE.0000000000000448>
- Sitzman, K. (2010). Student-preferred caring behaviors for online nursing education. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 31(3), 172–178.
- Sitzman, K. (2016). What student cues prompt online instructors to offer caring interventions? *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 37(2), 61–71.
- Sitzman, K., & Watson, J. (2017). *Watson's caring in the digital world: A guide for caring when interacting, teaching, and learning in cyberspace*. Springer.
- Smith, Y., & Crowe, A. (2017). Nurse educator perceptions of the importance of relationship in online teaching and learning. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 33(1), 11–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2016.06.004>
- Vallade, J., & Kaufmann R. (2018). Investigating instructor misbehaviors in the online classroom. *Communication Education*, 67(3), 363–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2018.1467027>
- Walkem, K. (2014). Instructional immediacy in eLearning. *Collegian*, 21, 179–184. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2013.02.004>
- Wang, H., & Lehman, J. (2021). Using achievement goalbased personalized motivational feedback to enhance online learning. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 69, 553–581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-021-09940-3>
- Weiss, R. (2000). Humanizing the online classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2000(84), 47–51. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.847>
- Zajac, L., & Lane, A. (2020). Student perceptions of faculty presence and caring in accelerated online courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 20(2), 67–78.