

Thriving Online: Retention Factors for Students in a Graduate Online Nursing Program



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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between retention and student satisfaction within a graduate nursing program offered fully online by a large, private university in the northeast region of the United States. Relying primarily on the persistence framework developed by Braxton, et al. (2014), this study generates insights about the student experience within this program, particularly through the lenses of cultural capital, communal potential, psychological engagement, social integration, student-faculty engagement, and the role of institutional integrity and perceived commitment to student welfare. Situating my work within emerging research on the importance of building a sense of community and online retention (Byrom & Bingham, 2001; Hart, 2012; Rovai, 2002; Wighting, Lue & Rovai, 2008; Tinto, 2012), qualitative interviews led to specific insights from which six findings emerged and ten actionable strategies identified to sustainably improve student retention. This study reinforces that a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing retention issues is unlikely to be effective across institutions or programs. The broader access afforded through fully online programs means blanket policies and interventions may continue to fall short and supporting students within an online academic program requires a more tailored and responsive approach based on unique student needs.

Keywords: online graduate degree, retention, student persistence, student satisfaction, communal potential, institutional identity, social integration, student engagement

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Executive Summary

Improving student satisfaction and retention is an imperative for any institution regardless of degree program delivery format. Online program retention has been identified as a concern within the United States and internationally (Hart, 2012). While technology advancements have enabled the development of improvements, online learning environments continue to present unique social and cultural capital challenges. Creating productive and collaborative learning environments within an online instructional space is a great start to healthy student satisfaction and retention; however, it is only one piece of the puzzle and varies widely depending on institution and programmatic context. My partner organization is a large, private university located in the northeast region of the United States that has offered a fully online graduate nursing degree program for nearly a decade. The program has historically enjoyed a strong reputation and steady growth, but recently experienced a loss in revenue as a result of a retention rate drop.

This worrisome dip in retention led the University to partner with consultants to conduct quantitative research exploring the relationship between student satisfaction and retention as measured by Net Promoter Score. Guided by the consultant's findings and relying primarily on the persistence framework found in *Rethinking College Student Retention (2014)*, which was developed by Braxton, et al., this study generates insights about the student experience in this program. Through qualitative interviews, actionable strategies are identified to sustainably improve student retention. Situating my work within emerging research on the importance of building a sense of community and online retention, I pose the following study questions:

1. From the perspective of students, faculty, and staff, what is the relationship between accommodations needed for online students and their persistence?
2. How is the value of peer interaction--online and offline--within the student experience perceived?
3. From the perspective of interviewees, what most influences identification with the program and University?

Technology has enabled increased access to a wider student population, many of whom bring distinct and specific pedagogical, technological, and support needs. Adapting to these needs requires added flexibility for online programs to successfully retain and graduate students. The Braxton, et al. (2014) model has proven to be both applicable and adaptable across a wide range of programs offered by differing institutions in a variety of delivery formats (Coyne & Stokes, 2017). A number of studies demonstrate the importance of social integration as a predictor of student retention (Braxton, et al., 2014; Byrom & Bingham, 2001; Hart, 2012; Rovai, 2002; Wighting, Lue & Rovai, 2008; Tinto, 2012). This study analyzes online program retention through the variables identified in Braxton, et al.'s (2014) model, particularly through the lenses of cultural capital, communal potential, psychological engagement, social integration, student-faculty engagement, and the role of institutional integrity and perceived commitment to student welfare. The qualitative interviews generated specific insights from which the following findings emerged:

1. Burnout Experienced by Students Mid-Way;

2. Unsustainable Sacrifice Required;
3. Impact of Financial Burden;
4. Significance of Support Staff Relationships;
5. Clinical Placement Anxieties; and,
6. Interactive Learning Frustrations.

Drawing upon these findings, I provide actionable recommendations to improve and sustain student retention within this online graduate nursing program. My recommendations include:

1. Build a Culture of Coaching;
2. Expand Existing Tool into a “Success Roadmap” for Students;
3. Create Personalized Goal Planning Tool for At-Risk Students;
4. Reframe Clinical Placement Messaging;
5. Extend Technology Skill Development Opportunities to all Populations;
6. Improve Student Identity with Program and University;
7. Strengthen and Broaden Student Support Mid-Way;
8. Develop *Shared* Early Alert Tool;
9. Leverage Newly Formed Student Advisory Group; and,
10. Establish Iterative Intervention Evaluation Tool.

The sub-populations identified in the consultant’s quantitative analysis informed this study’s analysis of inconsistent student experiences: students with responsibility for children under the age of twelve; and, non-white students. Two additional distinct groups emerged during the qualitative interview process: 1) students mid-way through the program, and 2) students unable to be employed during the program. Analysis of these four sub-populations support a substantial and generalizable finding. A one-size-fits-all approach to addressing retention issues is unlikely to be effective across institutions or even across programs offered at the same institution. The broader access afforded through fully online programs means that blanket policies and intervention attempts may continue to fall short in addressing the needs of at-risk populations. Supporting these populations within an online academic program requires a more tailored and responsive approach based on unique student needs.

Context and Problem

A. Institutional Context

The partner organization in this study is a large, private university located in the northeast region of the United States and accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), according to the institution's website. Through its School of Nursing, the University has been educating health care professionals since 1902. The School of Nursing programs are accredited through the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) with nationally recognized faculty members. The institution's website boasts a fifteen-to-one student-faculty ratio and a ninety-six percent board passage rate, which is well above the national average. The program advertises online programming advantages of 24/7 access to coursework, dedicated admissions and student support services, an alumni network of more than 50,000, and a placement team to help students secure clinical site placements near their local community.

According to the University's website, their online Master of Science in Nursing – Family Nurse Practitioner (MSN-FNP) program is designed to prepare Registered Nurses (RNs) to meet today's emerging health care needs through its academically rigorous, interdisciplinary curriculum. RNs are looking to develop their skills, comprehension, and clinical expertise to further their careers and seek greater responsibility in a primary health care provider role. Family Nurse Practitioners can provide a broad spectrum of care including the assessment of patients, ordering and interpreting diagnostic tests, as well as making diagnoses, creating and managing treatment plans, and even the prescribing of medications for treatment.

The University's MSN marketing materials present prospective students with critical information to help them make a decision about pursuing their degree through this institution's online program option. Students can start the program having already obtained a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) or take advantage of the institution's RN-MSN option. This option bridges the gap between an associate degreed RN and a BSN degree for students who have not obtained their BSN. Students who have already obtained their BSN complete 48 course credit hours and a minimum of 672 clinical hours. To try to accommodate the needs of students juggling the demands of both professional and personal responsibilities while working toward their degree, students can choose from three paces – full-time, part-time, or extended. Students who choose the full-time option are on track to complete the program in six terms or twenty-four months. Students who choose the part-time option can complete the program in seven terms or twenty-eight months. Students who choose the extended pace option are on track to complete the program in eight terms or thirty-two months.

Students pursuing the RN-MSN program option complete 68 course credit hours and a minimum of 836 clinical hours. Mindful of the personal and professional demands students are juggling, the University offers the same full-time, part-time, or extended pace options from which students may choose depending on what works best for them. Students attending full-time can complete the program in eight terms or thirty-two months. Students choosing a part-time pace can complete the program in ten terms or forty months. While students opting for the extended pace can attain the degree in eleven terms or forty-four months.

MSN marketing materials also stress what core competencies students coming into the program should have to be successful. These competencies include prior experience and knowledge in the subject areas of microbiology, biology, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, arithmetic, statistics, interpreting quantitative research, fundamentals of nursing, human health and function, patient assessment, time management, organization, self-discipline, and self-motivation. The program's curriculum breaks down into three areas of focus: foundational courses, a research project, and clinical practice. True to the name, foundational courses include pharmacology, pathophysiology, and physical assessment. Using case study analysis throughout these courses, challenges students to think critically like advanced practice nurses are required to do. According to the University's website, students build upon this foundational knowledge with a scholarly research project, designed to further hone critical thinking skills through the critique of qualitative and quantitative interdisciplinary studies. While the research project encourages students to collaborate closely with faculty and classmates, the on-campus immersion weekend is an important networking opportunity for students to form lasting bonds with classmates and University faculty. The program curriculum culminates with students putting into action what they have learned during clinical courses and site rotations.

The University offers this fully online program through its partnership with a large online program management (OPM) company. The OPM company manages the learning management system used to deliver all coursework to students in this program. It also provides students with additional services like technology, admissions, student success, and clinical placement support on behalf of the University in exchange for a share of the tuition revenue generated by the program. The advanced technology tools and supports offered by the OPM allows the University to offer its MSN program online while meeting the same standards of its on-campus MSN program. This partnership enables the University to provide recorded lectures from full-time University professional faculty delivered within the same platform students use to post discussion responses, submit assignments, and receive grades. Students are also able to attend weekly synchronous (live) sessions. In live sessions, students can see one another's faces, as well as the course instructor, and interact in real-time. The synchronous component is one of several enhanced learning opportunities not typically found within online MSN programs offered by other universities. Cumulatively, these offerings help to create an interactive online learning community that fosters engagement and collaboration within the educational experience. According to the OPM's website, the University signed on as one of its first large institutions in a partnership that has lasted nearly a decade. The online MSN was the first program launched through this partnership. They have launched several additional programs with the OPM since then.

B. Definition of Problem

The online MSN program has performed strongly as a source of net tuition revenue for the institution. However, institutional retention data revealed a troubling downward trend first noted in third-year retention statistics for the cohort that started in September 2016. This downward trend ultimately represented a loss of revenue for the University's 2020 fiscal year, prompting the institution to hire a large, nationally recognized analytics and advisory company, identified going forward as AAC, to help investigate the drop in retention by conducting a survey and through data analysis. Ultimately, the AAC was engaged to analyze both undergraduate and graduate programs delivered on-campus and online. While this study will occasionally refer to

the AAC’s analysis of the overall University, these references are intended to improve understanding of the AAC’s study design and provide additional context and meaning to the findings particular to the MSN program. To provide clarity, I have identified throughout references specific to the online MSN program. The purpose of the AAC’s work was to help the University better understand and manage the overall retention issues it faced by exploring the relationship between net promoter score (NPS) and retention through the analysis of the University’s NPS, as determined by survey results, and four years of available data provided by the University and, when available, the OPM.

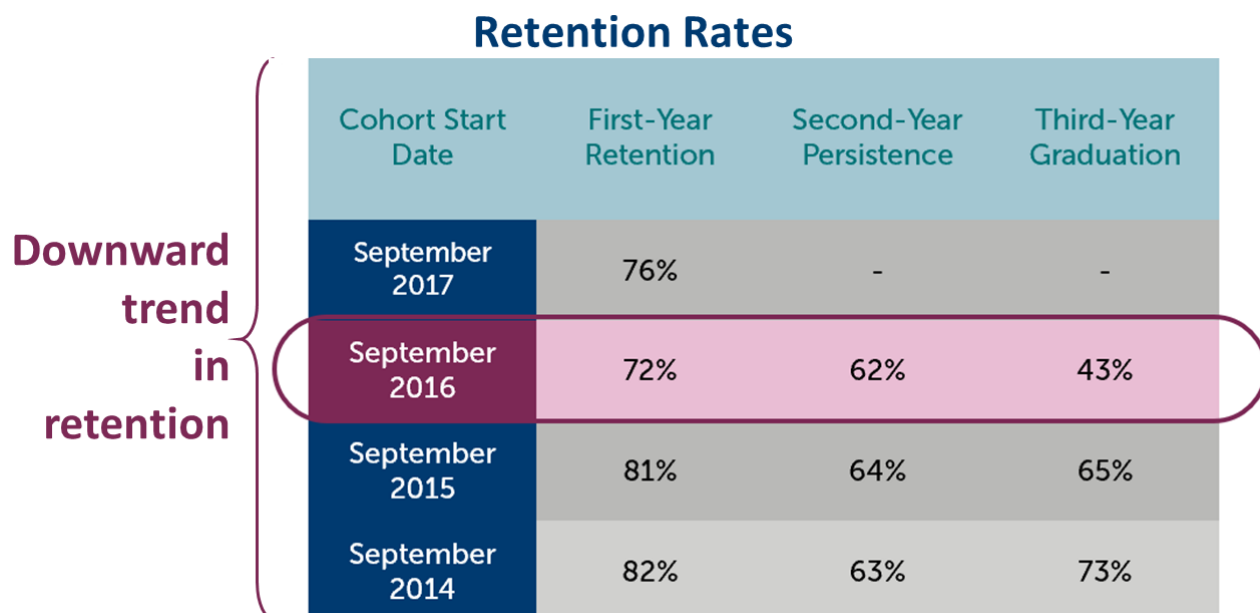


Figure 1. Source: University. (2019). *Student Retention Program*.

Figure 1 provides a helpful visualization to understand the impact of the MSN program’s dip in retention, but a few key takeaways are:

- Forty-three percent of students starting in September 2016 graduated after nine terms.
- This means these students were taking 150% longer than the expected time advertised in program marketing materials.
- This period also saw a higher rate of leaves of absence requests, implying students may not just take longer to graduate, but their risk of not returning is higher.

The University established key objectives upon embarking on this analysis process. Assuming net promoter score was determined to be linked to retention, the University wanted to understand if tracking and managing to this measurement could ultimately increase retention across all its programs. Past establishing a correlation between NPS and retention, the University sought to identify the influencers of NPS and increase retention by developing short- and long-term actions based upon those influencing factors. Further, the University wanted to guide strategy through the insights generated about the student experience and NPS. Finally, they hoped to pinpoint possible methods that would enable them to build upon the resulting research to make future research even more robust.

With the downward trend in retention negatively impacting the University's 2020 revenue, the need for swift action was clear. The University established principles to help guide their decision making. With a goal of keeping the student's voice at the center of improvement efforts, student survey results, the AAC's data analysis of those results, and the student experience continue to inform the University's strategy and the strategy developed must lead to action that will be part of a continuous improvement process. This represents a new approach to retention for the University that looks at the full scope of the student experience to develop strategic initiatives. By relying on both quantitative and qualitative data, the University can better identify its unique NPS influencers and their performance for each of those factors to develop retention-focused initiatives based on the University's needs and customized to meet their goals.

Research Questions

From the perspective of students, faculty, and staff, what is the relationship between accommodations needed for online students and their persistence? The University would like to address barriers to retention for this population with more specificity than the quantitative survey information from the large consulting firm (AAC) provided. How is the value of peer interaction--online and offline--within the student experience perceived? From interviewee perspectives, what are the things that most influence identification with the University?

Situating this study within emerging research on the importance of building a sense of community and online retention, this study explores retention barriers experienced by students balancing professional and familial obligations enrolled in the graduate nursing program delivered online by the University. In addition to identifying barriers to retention, this study uses research focusing on ways in which a sense of belonging positively contributes to program satisfaction to develop potential interventions to improve retention.

Conceptual Framework

Program retention is an issue faced by every higher education institution, and a sizeable body of research documents retention barriers across diverse programs and populations (Russel, 2011; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012). Technology has significantly improved student access and opportunities within higher education, and scholars have begun exploring barriers to retention unique to this modality (Rovai, 2002; Wighting, Liu, & Rovai, 2008). Tracking and improving student satisfaction and retention is an imperative for any institution regardless of delivery format, but online programs face unique new challenges. Hart (2019) argues, “Lack of persistence in online education and its consequence of attrition is an identified problem within the United States and internationally” (p. 19).

With increased access comes the introduction of student populations who have distinct and specific needs for which program pedagogy, technology, and student support must adapt to retain and successfully graduate students. Online programs enable students from any location to participate in a program, which means students are not only differentiated by proximity to campus and its inherent resources, but students previously hindered by scheduling constraints now have the flexibility that comes from not having to be physically present. Students who are already balancing both a professional career and familial obligations often turn to online programs. For many institutions, addressing the unique needs of these students requires a significant program structure shift. Engagement experiences that are available in residential programs are not available to distance learners. Embedding opportunities to enhance engagement and build supportive learning communities for students presents a new set of challenges and potential barriers to retention for online programs (Byrom & Bingham, 2001; Hart, 2012; Wighting, Liu & Rovai, 2008).

Though research regarding the importance of learning communities or support systems within online programs is limited, numerous studies indicate that creating a sense of belonging and community in any learning setting increases student’s identity with the program or group, positively impacting satisfaction and thereby retention (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam,

2009; Leach, et al, 2008; Rovai & Jordan, 2004). In a study conducted by Hara and Kling (2001) regarding the cause of higher attrition rates in what was then a still very new online learning environment, students expressed feelings of isolation as one important stress factor they experienced. Further, research indicates that a strong identity with the program or school improves student satisfaction and therefore retention (Voelkl, 1997). Social identity theory, primarily developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1985), will serve as a supporting theoretical framework, but the persistence model seen in Figure 2, which was developed by Braxton, et al. (2014), will serve as the primary conceptual framework for this capstone. The model specifically addresses dimensions relevant to higher education persistence and retention, particularly with regard to the role of social integration (Braxton, et al., 2014).

The University possesses significant quantitative data that point to several populations prone to low retention, including those students balancing professional, familial, and program obligations. This data captures much of the student characteristics found in the upper half of the Braxton, et al (2014) persistence model and informs the research questions. The qualitative interviews proposed by this study pertain to the social integration factors shown below in the lower of the Braxton, et al (2014) persistence model.

Conceptual Framework

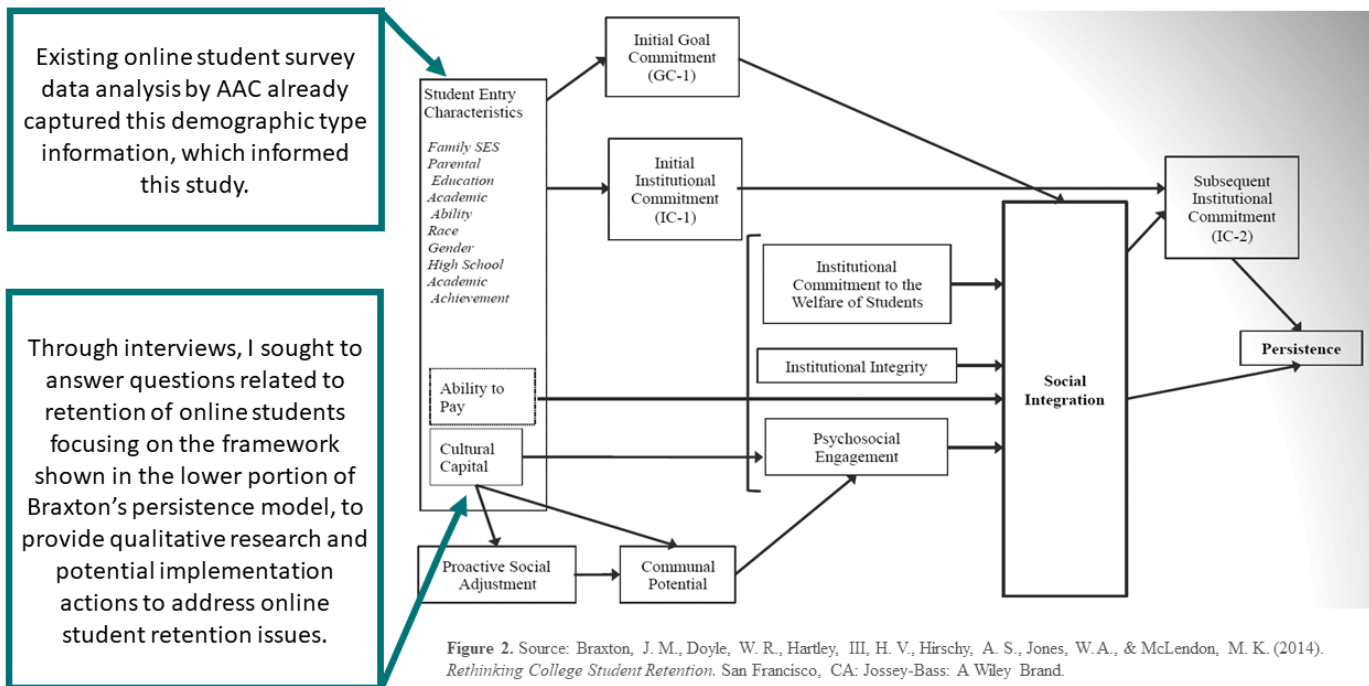


Figure 2. Source: Braxton, J. M., Doyle, W. R., Hartley, III, H. V., Hirschy, A. S., Jones, W.A., & McLendon, M. K. (2014). *Rethinking College Student Retention*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass: A Wiley Brand.

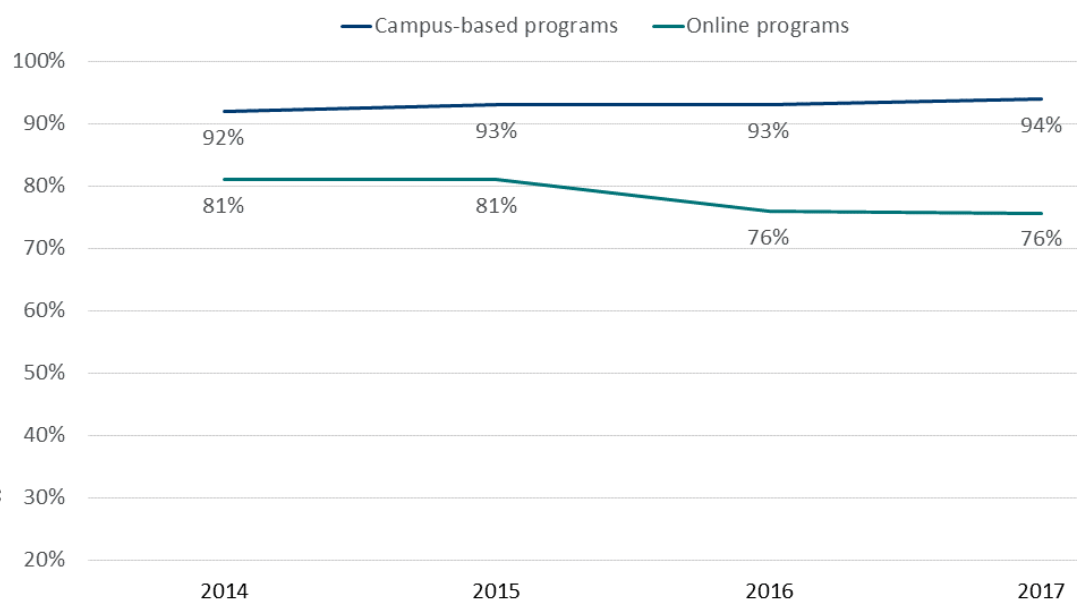
Study Design

A. AAC's Study Design.

To better understand the data and analysis provided by the AAC, it is important to clearly define and situate key components of their overall analysis. Definitions for retention can vary from one institution to another and these nuances can make the data difficult to interpret. For the sake of consistency, this study's definition of retention matches the definition provided by the AAC. First-year retention is defined as the percentage of students still enrolled one year after their first term of enrollment. Figure 3 provides a retention rate comparison between all on-campus programs and all online programs offered by the University.

As a comparison tool, other universities who also partner with the same OPM generally have a first-year retention rate of eighty-six percent or better for their online MSN program. A leading online MSN program at another institution sets an aspirational ninety-two percent retention rate. Even those Universities offering an online MSN with less selective and more diverse populations, like the University's, have a rate of seventy-nine percent. Finally, the University's average retention rate between 2013-2018 for its on-campus MSN is ninety-five percent. While the University accepts that it should expect differences between on-campus and online programs, such a wide gap in retention rates between the two indicates that there is room for improvement.

1-Year Retention Rates for Campus-Based and Online Programs*



*Retention rates for campus-programs include all campus-based programs. Retention rates for online programs include MSW and MSN programs

Figure 3. Source: AAC. (2019). *Trends in On-Campus Retention*. AAC.

The AAC's report identified the overall primary objective of determining if a link existed between students recommending the University, i.e., its net promoter score, and the likelihood of students remaining enrolled in their program. Understanding the net promoter score (NPS) as a measure and tool adds context and meaning to the methodology and findings of the AAC. According to their report, net promoter score is used across a wide variety of industries to measure client satisfaction or loyalty. This provides a means of quantitative measurement for analysis and comparison. To determine NPS, respondents are asked to rank a single question on

a 0-10 point scale, “How likely would you be to recommend [insert organization] to your friends or colleagues?” While NPS has only recently come into use within the higher education industry, it represents an effective tool for measuring overall satisfaction. For context, an NPS of 60 is considered excellent and an NPS of 50 is considered good.

In addition to the single ranking question to identify NPS, the AAC included additional questions for participants to answer to gain even deeper understanding regarding what individual reasons and considerations most influence the likelihood of students retaining. Individual factors that best predict retention were identified using regression analysis. The importance of each identified factor as a predictor was also determined using regression analysis. The survey results were used to measure the University’s performance on the identified factors. Using the importance of the identified factors and the University’s performance for each of them, the AAC was able to plot the two dimensions into one of four quadrants based on the level of importance assigned to each factor and the University’s performance measurement on that factor. This method enabled the development of a matrix that allowed for the quick identification of specific areas at both the program-level and course-level. These areas represent the best opportunities for the University to focus its energies and resources to improve retention rates.

AAC’s Quantitative Survey Design. Major metrics of the survey conducted by the AAC included NPS, satisfaction, emotional attachment, as well as program and course specific metrics for the program, overall University, faculty, and course. The AAC chose emotional attachment and satisfaction because they each provide a different measure of total student experience and, when combined, provide a more holistic perspective on the true student experience and how the student feels about the program overall. Once created, all program students received the online survey at the end of term. Data could be linked to retention for 1,318 students, 33 of which had withdrawn and 153 of which had graduated. For the purposes of analysis, the University provided retention related administrative data like graduation and withdrawal status, in addition to grade point average (GPA), start date, and similar demographics. The AAC indicated it was able to glean sufficient information from the available data and conduct analysis that was both meaningful and robust.

AAC’s Quantitative Study Limitations. Of note, unique student identifiers were only available for quarter four of 2017 and 2018 and for earlier data at the program-level only. The OPM was prohibited from using unique student identifiers for the MSN course surveys, meaning those responses to course surveys could not be linked directly to retention. In addition, gender was not available for most students, so it was not used in the AAC’s analysis. Finally, students’ pre-enrollment academic profile data was not consistently available, so they were not used by the AAC in their analysis.

B. Qualitative Methodology

By using the quantitative findings resulting from the AAC’s analysis, this study uses a mixed methods approach. Qualitative data can inform and add depth to quantitative research. A mixed methods design promotes openness and the use of multiple ways of sense-making (Patton, 2015). Viewing online program retention through the fresh perspective of social identity and social capital theories, this study informs student retention through these lenses to help the organization better understand and overcome these challenges. The quantitative data previously

collected by the AAC via multiple surveys of graduate nursing students informed the conceptual framework and provided background for voluntary qualitative interviews conducted with students enrolled in the program, as well as program faculty and staff. These interviews enabled a richer understanding of how students' experiences affect their attitudes about the program and their identification with the school.

Triangulation is often used in qualitative studies to aid in the development of more comprehensive understandings of phenomena (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). This study satisfies three of Denzin's (1978) four types of triangulation, which serve to add breadth to phenomena of interest and can confirm findings. This research satisfies the first type, method triangulation, through the use of multiple methods of data collection (Polit & Beck, 2012). The use of different theories to analyze and interpret data satisfies the second type of triangulation, and collecting data from faculty, staff, and students at both the University and OPM satisfies the third type of triangulation, collecting data from different sources and types of sources (Denzin, 1978).

The quantitative data previously collected by the AAC via multiple surveys of the University's graduate nursing students informed, found in Appendix A, informed the voluntary qualitative interviews conducted with students enrolled in the program, as well as program faculty and staff. Supporting analysis in this way gained a richer understanding of how students' experiences impact their attitudes about the program and their identification with the school. Using these same quantitative results provided by the AAC and conducting qualitative interviews allowed the identification of ways to improve retention via specific intervention(s) founded in scholarly research, and the added provision of an evaluation tool to measure the success of interventions individually and cumulatively.

While this study's research was minimally intrusive, gaining access to program faculty, staff, and willing students was necessary to learn more about students' feelings of belonging, identity, and satisfaction. Interviews were all conducted via video conference. University academic advising staff recruited interview volunteers by sending an email to the online graduate nursing student population. The institution had agreed to follow up with calls, if the email did not secure sufficient volunteers; however, sufficient volunteers agreed to participate. Participation at any level was entirely voluntary, and volunteers were not compensated. Communication with any member of the community only occurred after a participant first indicated interest in doing so, and interviews were not conducted until volunteers completed the online informed consent, seen in Appendix B, provided to them.

The interviews supported the project by focusing on the individual student experience of 18 graduate nursing program students, all of whom balanced personal and professional obligations with those of the program. The design and methodology were developed with a focus on determining what methods of both accommodations and engagement are currently taking place within the learning environment, as well as stakeholders' assessments of these existing methods. Further, it sought to ascertain what constituents considered effective vehicles for student engagement in an online program and, within the context of the online MSN program, what they would consider a successful outcome. Identifying what forms of engagement are widely accepted will help to build this sub-population of students' identification with the institution at large.

C. Qualitative Data Analysis

Following each interview, I conducted a close review analysis of the interview transcript, cleaning up any transcription errors made by the transcription software, Otter.ai, which was used to record each interview. I also compiled my thoughts and impressions into an analytic memo, using the handwritten notes taken during each interview and the notes from the close review. Then, I uploaded each interview transcript into the qualitative data software tool, NVivo. This tool aided data organization and my analysis. I employed an iterative coding process based on the three-stage approach to qualitative analysis suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and outlined in the Figure 4 diagram. Initially, my coding analysis, guided by the AAC's findings, sought to identify broad concepts and themes for categorization (Williams & Moser, 2019). By first identifying broad categories and with the AAC's findings as a guide, emerging themes were then refined further and aligned (Cho & Lee, 2014). As broad categories and themes emerged, axial coding helped identify patterns within the broader themes and categories for model development, and selective coding then enabled me to integrate categories and organize the data to illuminate richer meaning and begin to tell the story of the student experience within this program (Williams & Moser, 2019). This software enabled me to identify patterns that I had not anticipated, as well as to develop an interview coding matrix, seen in Appendix D, centered on the core themes emerging from the interviews. The creation of a framework matrix helps summarize qualitative analysis around patterns emerging from the coding to illuminate themes and identify appropriate quotations from each interview conducted (NatCen Social Research, 2019).

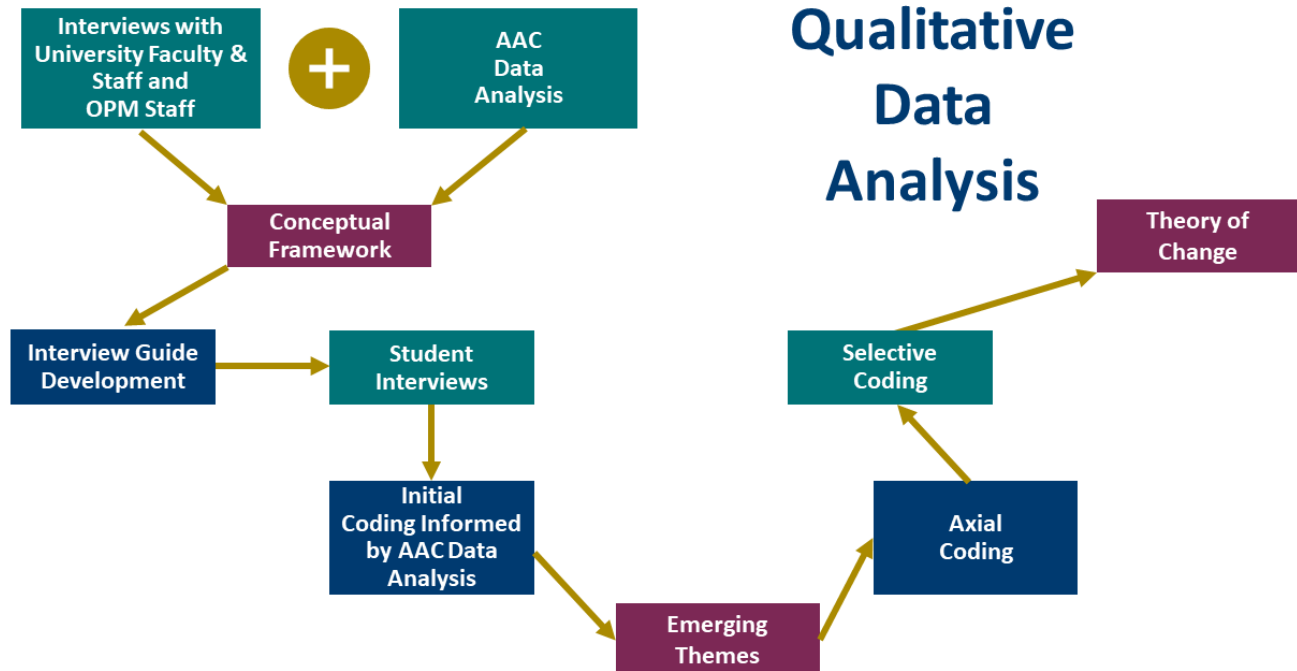
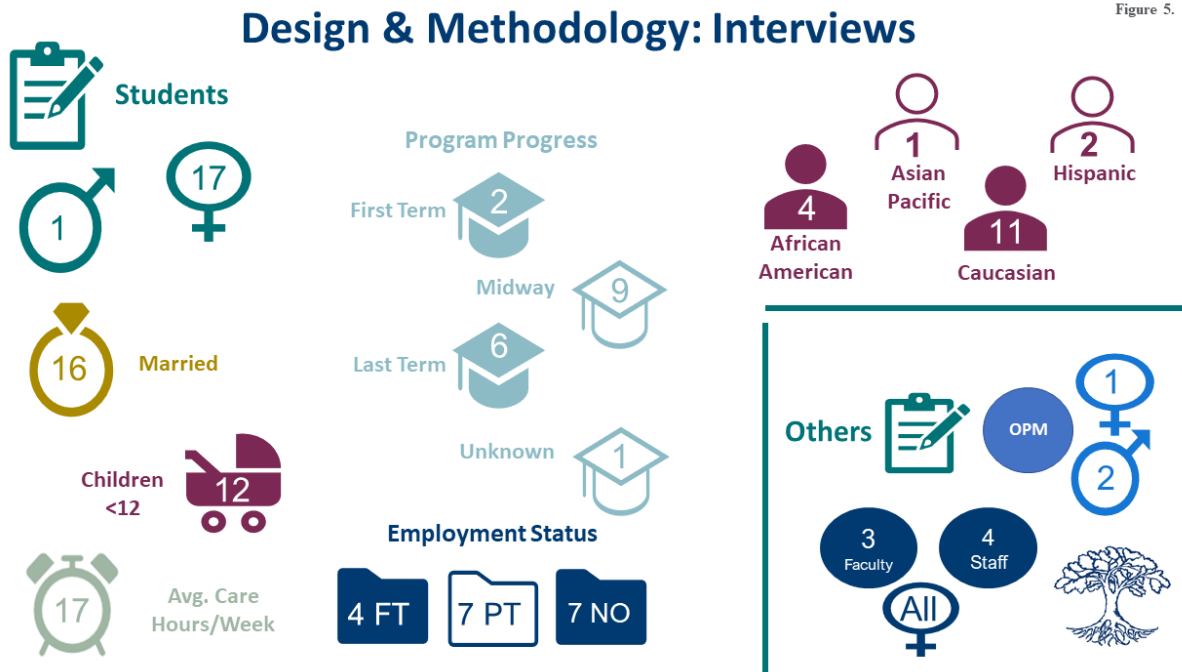


Figure 4.

A total of 18 students volunteered to participate and followed through with their interview, which was sufficient for patterns within the data to emerge. Figure 5 shows important

demographic details for all interview participants. Of note, only one male graduate nursing student was among the volunteers. Of the eighteen students, sixteen were married and twelve had children under the age of twelve living in their home. On average, students indicated that they spent a minimum of seventeen hours per week tending to familial obligations and responsibilities. Half of the interview participants were about midway through the program, six were in their last term and two were in their first. Several races/ethnicities were represented, with four participants who identified as African American, one as Asian Pacific, two as Hispanic, and the remaining eleven identified as Caucasian. Only four of the eighteen participants were maintaining full-time employment during the program. Seven either were working part-time when they started the program or had transitioned to part-time employment since starting the program. Significantly, seven were either not employed at all when they started the program or had terminated their employment since starting the program. The University provided access to several faculty and staff for the purposes of this study. I conducted interviews with three faculty members and four staff members, all of whom were females. This study benefited further from the participation of three staff members from the OPM – two male, one female.

Figure 5.



D. Interview Guide Development

I interviewed students, faculty, and staff using a standardized interview protocol to enable a fuller and richer understanding of the student experience and retention in the online MSN program. I asked volunteers open-ended questions, which were informed by the outcomes of the AAC’s quantitative study and the Braxton’s, et al. (2014) conceptual framework seen in Figure 2. The questions included in the interview guide were intended to help me identify how psychological engagement helped students integrate socially within this program, supporting persistence and retention. Taking this exploration further to gain a better understanding of what role cultural capital played in student’s proactive social adjustment, communal potential, and psychological engagement will help the University identify ways that they can nurture student’s social integration in support of retention. The need for authentic community and ties binding

learners, teachers, and schools is supported by numerous studies (Hart, 2012; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

Braxton's, et al. (2014) persistence model also points to ways institutional integrity and commitment to the welfare of students supports social integration and therefore persistence and retention. Identification with academic programs and/or universities has been noted in other studies as having the potential to positively impact a student's sense of belonging and increase the student's commitment to persist (Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Voelkl, 1997). The interview guide included questions to learn more about students' overall perception of the University, the MSN program, administrative leadership, faculty, and staff. Establishing a clearer understanding of how students are or are not identifying with the University and/or program provides the context needed to determine if there is room for improvement, and, if so, what activities or changes would have the most impact.

Analysis and Findings

A. AAC's Key Quantitative Data Findings.

The AAC's analysis results provided enough compelling evidence that net promoter score (NPS) serves as a predictor of retention for the University to decide to use this measurement tool going forward. Significantly, the MSN's net promoter score is well below their goal and may indicate that the downward retention trend will continue without any intervention or change in course. Key NPS influencers for the MSN program were identified as technology and community but these are lagging indicators, meaning factors associated with these two areas confirm the downward trend but do not predict it, making understanding what will improve performance on these factors and measuring the impact of future interventions addressing these factors challenging. Both asynchronous materials and professors were identified as key influencers for MSN course satisfaction, but those are also lagging indicators.

Another important takeaway that emerged from the AAC's overall analysis points to an inconsistent student experience for MSN students. Student experience inconsistencies appear to exist based on race, age, and lifestyle. Full demographic, withdrawal, and other factors were not available to the AAC due to restrictions placed on availability of this data from the OPM. However, some of this information was available for analysis from the University's existing student database of 5,745 students since 2013. Including this information in the analysis revealed higher withdrawal rates among students who are older, non-white, and/or did not receive scholarship assistance in comparison to withdrawal rates for younger students, Caucasian students, and/or scholarship recipient students. Applying this information to the analysis enabled the AAC to confidently identify these factors as important to predicting retention.

Inconsistent Experience by Age

NPS is low for students with children in the home

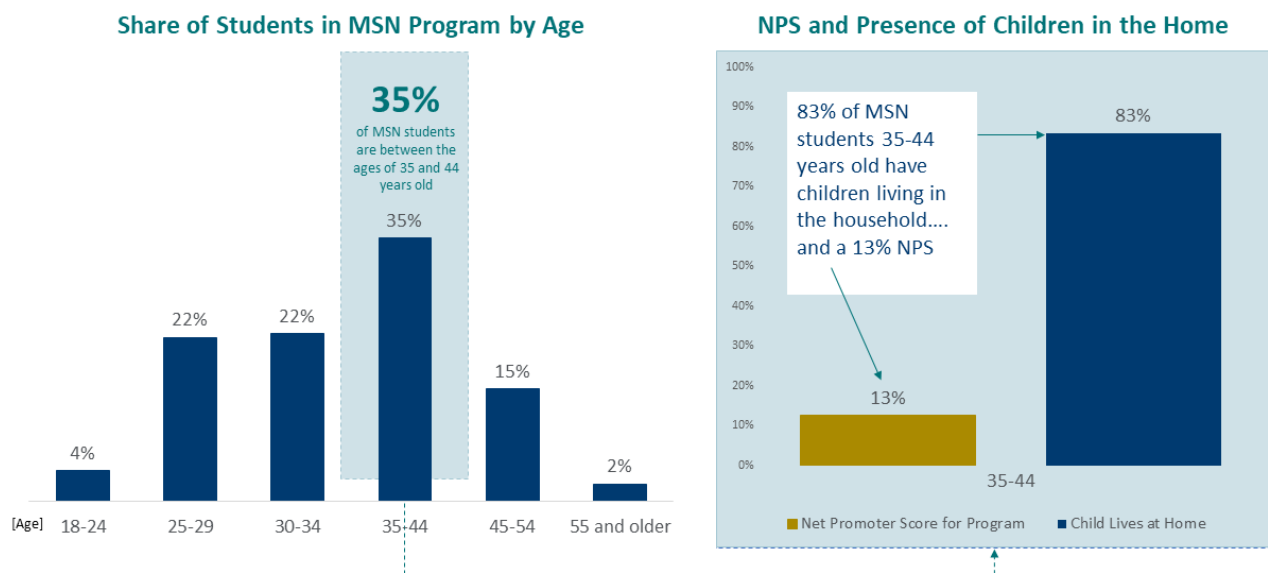


Figure 6. Source: University. (2019). *Student Retention Program*.

Inconsistent experience by age. The AAC’s analysis of the MSN program revealed inconsistent student experience by age where performance could bear improving. As seen in Figure 6, students in the age range of 35-44 account for over twenty-five percent of the program’s population and eighty percent of students in this same age range have children in the home. The analysis indicated that the increased presence of children decreased NPS scores. Parker and Patten (2013) of the Pew Research Center dubbed this uniquely identified age range segment as the sandwich generation. The sandwich generation is characterized as having both younger children in the home and aging parents. Juggling multi-generational responsibilities adds additional burden for students belonging to the sandwich generation who are working towards their graduate degree online (Parker & Patten, 2013). The particular barriers faced by this sub-population add a level of complexity, presenting the University with an opportunity to explore ways to provide these students with improved support. The University sought to explore what this told them about their program, specifically regarding its flexibility, even questioning the timing of when live sessions are offered. Interestingly, despite this sub-population’s low NPS, their likelihood to recommend the University was not impacted by children at home, which the AAC noted as indicative of strong adaptability.

The University’s overall net promoter score, including all undergraduate and graduate programs delivered on-campus and online, was lower than their goal. Significantly, the MSN program’s individual net promoter score was only half of the University’s overall NPS. Understanding why this gap is so large may help the University address this program’s downward retention trend. In comparison to another online graduate program offered by the University also included in the AAC’s analysis, the MSN curriculum scores were significantly lower than the other program’s curriculum. However, the MSN’s technology score is considerably higher. While the MSN’s student support score is analogous to the other program’s score and its section instructor rating is higher, the program’s asynchronous material and overall course evaluation score is lower in comparison.

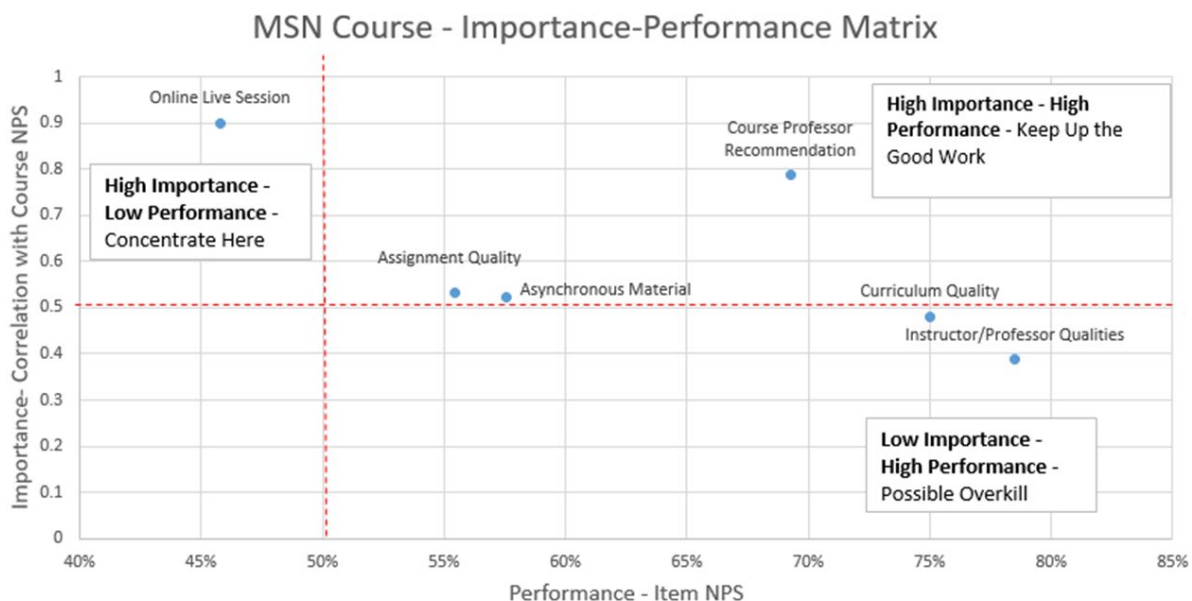


Figure 7. Source: AAC. (2019). *What's driving success: Student Evaluations of Online Nursing and Social Work Graduate Programs*. AAC.

MSN Course – Importance-Performance Matrix. As seen in Figure 7, online live streaming was identified as an area of high importance, but low performance at the course-level, which means it is an area ripe for improvements. The AAC’s study also brought to the forefront the important role professors play in the student experience not just instructionally, but also how they interact with students, ways they work to generate excitement about their subject area, and the level of caring they express about students as individual. Essentially, being a subject-matter expert is only a part of the student satisfaction equation for today’s online learners. They seek both knowledge and a relationship. This desire held true for student interaction with any staff they interact with, as well.

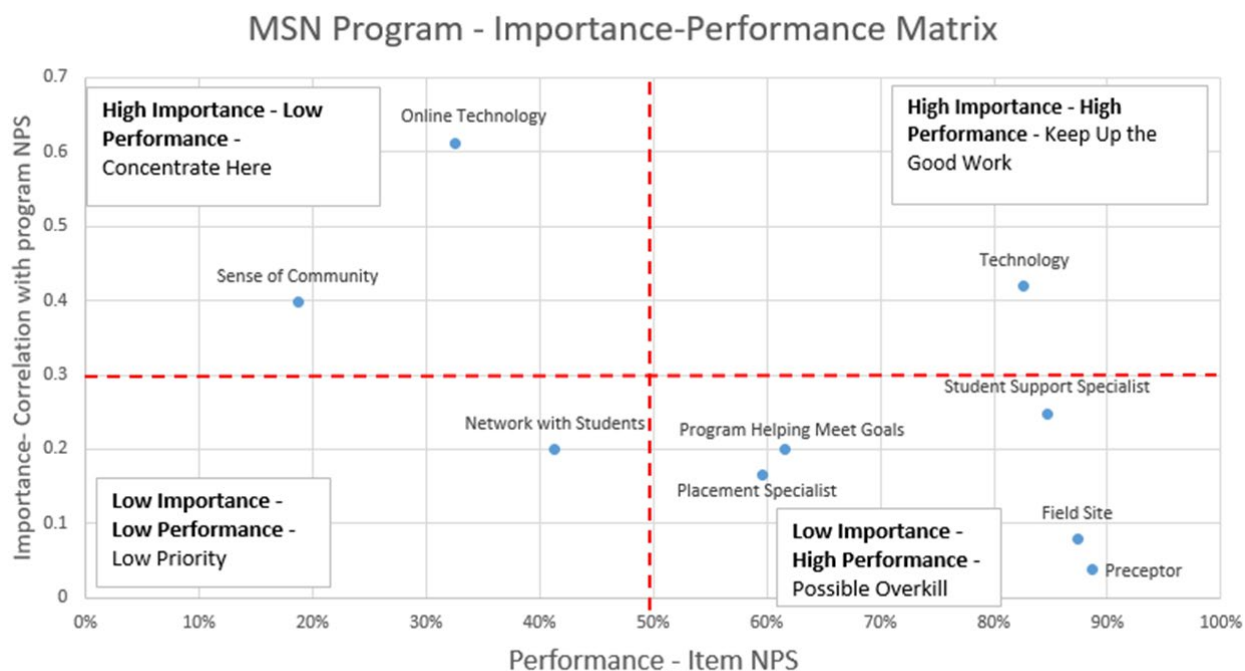


Figure 8. Source: AAC. (2019). *What's driving success: Student Evaluations of Online Nursing and Social Work Graduate Programs*. AAC.

MSN Program – Importance-Performance Matrix. Sense of community and online technology emerged as influencers at the MSN program-level on which the University should focus its efforts to improve its NPS, as seen in Figure 8. While the AAC’s analysis identified quality of the technology interface and asynchronous materials, this study will focus largely upon the influence of and considerations stemming from sense of community. The AAC has conducted research with numerous universities that demonstrates the importance of both advising and mentorship on student success. The AAC identified the following sense of community related items unique to the University, which fall in the top 10 of its low performers: I feel like a member of my University community; I have an inspiring mentor at the University; I network with fellow students; and professors care about me as a person.

Key Opportunities Identified by the AAC. The University should strive to leverage their current efforts and consider implementing similar communication modeled by their other online graduate degree program, which have proven successful in developing a sense of community. As

with any organization facing a significant imperative to improve, the University also has the opportunity to innovate in the areas identified as likely to improve NPS and retention, even to establish the University as a leader in this new holistic approach to retention. Specifically, the AAC stressed that the University should look to develop innovative ways to foster a sense of community within the online learning environment and think creatively about ways to better accommodate the program's older students. The AAC also noted that improving onboarding, coaching, mentoring, and training of faculty and developing stronger oversight might serve to promote a more consistent student experience.

Though the University is facing an uphill battle, they have an opportunity to build upon the existing research both they and the OPM have, as well as the AAC's analysis to deepen their understanding of the MSN program's unique retention barriers while prioritizing strategies. This study is to support the University's efforts to gather more robust qualitative data about the student experience so that the institution can gain a better understanding of key retention influencers and even explore other potential considerations. By conducting qualitative research, the University may stimulate innovation, creative solutions, and potentially find new ways to differentiate the institution through its focus on improving retention. Further, the AAC suggested the University continue to identify best practices within the University's individual programs that have potential to apply more broadly. To improve subsequent research, the AAC suggested that a more comprehensive research design might include more data on University brand perceptions in an effort to establish if there is a connection between retention, NPS, brand, and any other measures. Additional goals for subsequent research noted by the AAC include the improvement of data collection and management and ensuring that unique student identifiers tie to data, which will enable an aggregate analysis of findings.

B. Key Qualitative Findings.

**University
Faculty &
Staff and
OPM Staff
Coding
Nodes**

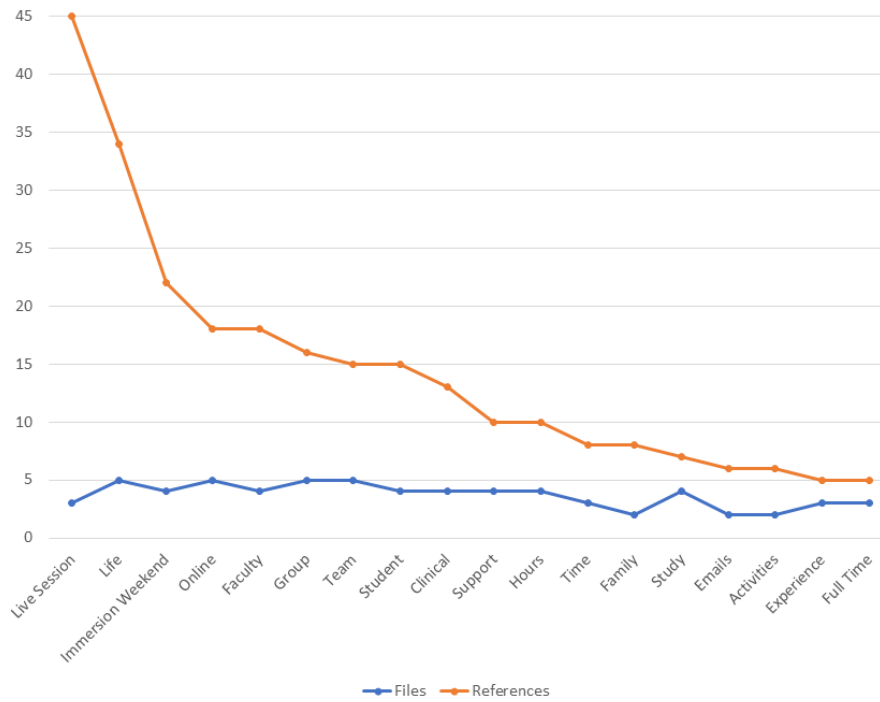


Figure 9.

Qualitative data gathering began with a series of interviews conducted with members of the University’s faculty and staff, as well as OPM staff members assigned to the partner University. Figure 9 shows the results of the open coding completed by NVivo, which was refined further through axial and selective coding. This process included the exemption of overly general codes like class, course, program, nursing, etc. The top ten most frequently referenced codes across all faculty and staff interviewed included live session, life, immersion weekend, faculty, group/team, clinical, and support. With every faculty interview, issues related to the live or synchronous class session were a topic of discussion. Faculty voiced a strong commitment to delivering an engaged learning experience in live sessions, and program leadership have been working on ways to help faculty excel in the online learning environment. One faculty member asked a meaningful question related to how the impact of the training opportunities being offered will be measured. How can program leadership gain a clearer understanding of what skills are gained during offered professional development, if those skills are being employed in synchronous class session, and what impact these new skills are making on the learning experience for students?

University faculty and staff expressed frustration linked to aspects of the clinical placement process beyond their control for various reasons and how best to explain to students why so many insurmountable challenges exist and what proactive steps students should take to help ensure they find placement sites.

Student Interview Coding Nodes

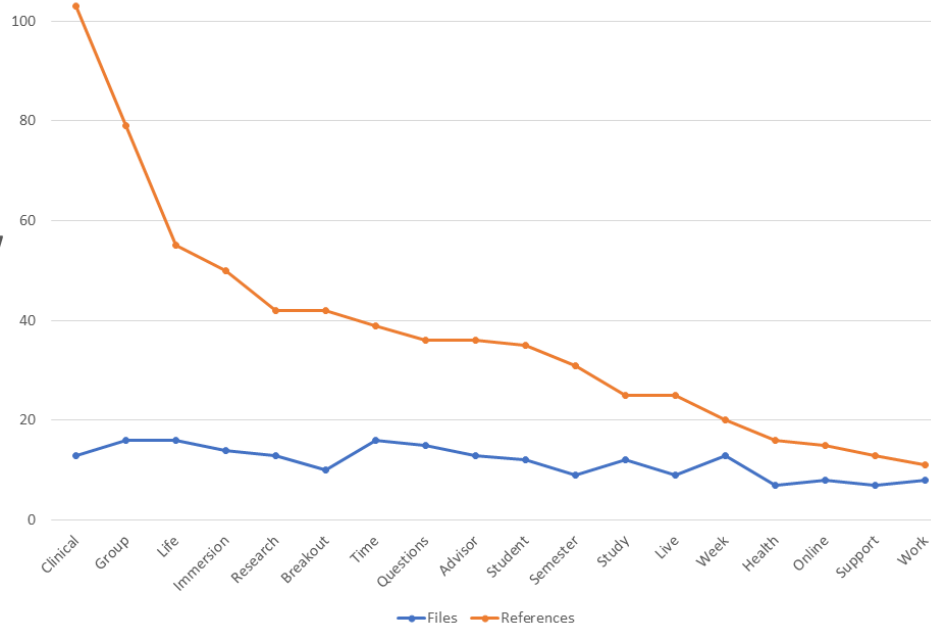


Figure 10.

Once interviews with University faculty and staff and OPM staff were completed, qualitative data gathering continued with voluntary student interviews. Figure 10 shows the results of the open coding completed by NVivo, which was refined further through axial and selective coding. This process included the exemption of overly general codes like class, course, program, nursing, etc. Overall, the ten most frequently referenced codes across all students interviewed included clinical, group, life, immersion, breakout, time, and advisor.

Students frequently expressed frustrations centered on curriculum and the classroom experience in live session. Students also noted the inconsistency of quality instruction experienced from one professor to another within synchronous class sessions. While ten of the eighteen students cited frustrations with the use of breakout sessions, over half of them also indicated that time spent in breakout sessions played a role in their identification of desirable members for study group formation.

Existing group formations were solidified by students' experiences at immersion weekend. For students who had already attended immersion, the excitement they felt at being able to meet their cohort members, especially those with whom they had bonded, was palpable. While suggestions on ways the weekend activities could be improved upon were made, program leadership has already made significant progress in redesigning the immersion experience since the time of my interviews. One concern that was expressed signals the sensitive balance leadership must strike between ensuring enough opportunities for students to network and relationship-build while also providing ample opportunities for students to take advantage of this one-time only in-person instruction time for hands-on learning experiences.

Another significant finding emerging from the qualitative interviews relates to the relationships students built with their student support advisors.

Over two-thirds of interview participants shared that their experience within the program led them to believe the University has little understanding of how to address the unique needs of online learners. The sentiments expressed indicate that students do not feel this lack of understanding is willful or malicious, but that it stems from the prevalent culture of residential undergraduate norms deeply entrenched within higher education. Despite having offered this program for so long and its obvious successes, students in the program continue to feel a disconnect they attribute to the University’s failing to completely shift out of the traditional model paradigm and fully embrace the dynamic and diverse needs of online learners. This sentiment is not unique to students in this program. The struggles experienced by colleges and universities in making such a significant shift has been the subject of many studies (Hara & Kling, 2001; Hart, 2012; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Wighting, Liu, & Rovai, 2008).

As I conducted student interviews, common patterns began to emerge within two distinct categories: 1) students who are mid-way through the program (i.e., in term three or four); and, 2) students who are unemployed while pursuing this degree. Based on the AAC’s quantitative findings, I also explored common themes among non-white student interview participants and those participants with children under the age of twelve for whom they are responsible. Finding details for each of the four sub-sections analysed are listed below.

Recurring Themes: Students Mid-Way through Program

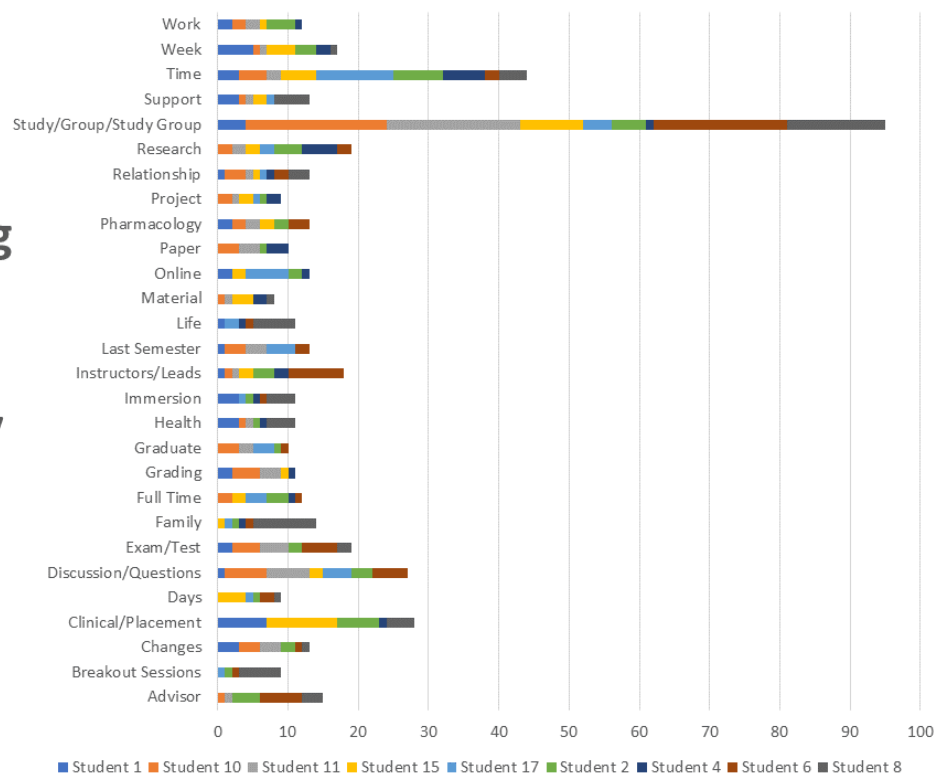


Figure 11.

Interestingly, students in the first term and final terms expressed greater overall satisfaction with the University, the program, and their decision to pursue their degree at the institution. In comparison, those mid-way through the program expressed quite the opposite. Given the universally held negative sentiment so strongly expressed among students mid-way through the program, I analyzed this sub-section of interview participants for any commonalities and

patterns. Terms falling into the same overall coding category were grouped together, and the same generalized terms were removed as were in the previous overall population analyses. As seen in Figure 11, the four most common themes emerging among students mid-way through the program in order of frequency strength were related to study/group/study group, time, clinical/placement, and discussions/questions. Among students mid-way through the program, study group related references were made by each student and with more frequency than any other coding node by a margin of over sixty.

Recurring Themes: Students with Children Under Age of 12

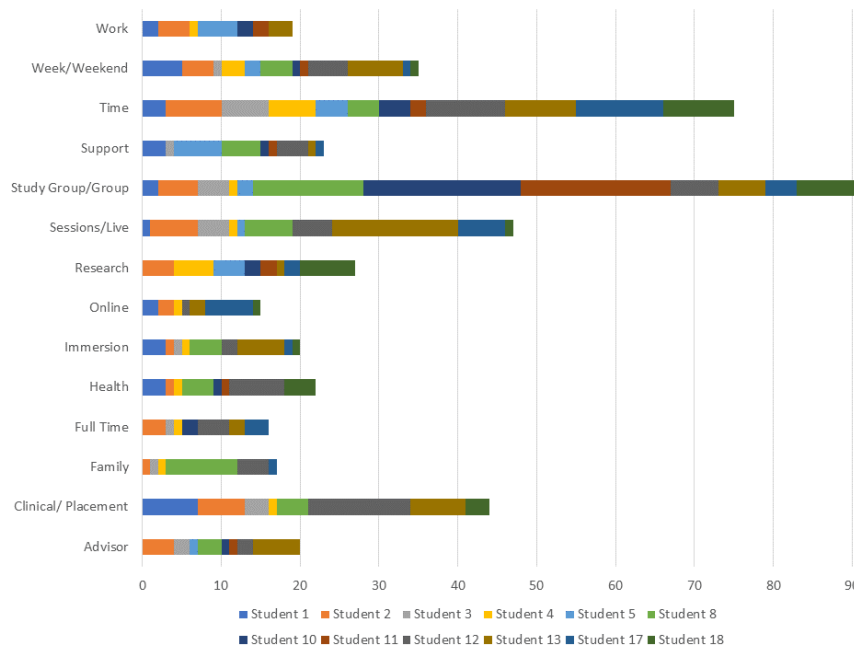


Figure 12.

Inconsistent student experience for those with family responsibilities was a retention factor identified by the AAC’s study. I examined the sub-section of interview participants who are responsible for children under the age of twelve for any commonalities and patterns. Terms falling into the same overall coding category were grouped together, and the same generalized terms were removed as in previous analyses. As seen in Figure 12, the four most common themes emerging among this sub-section in order of frequency strength were related to study group/group, time, sessions/live, and clinical/placement with week/weekend close behind. Among students with responsibility for children under the age of twelve, study group related references were made by each student and with more frequency, and references related to time closely followed with a margin of less than twenty.

**Recurring Themes:
Students Not Working**

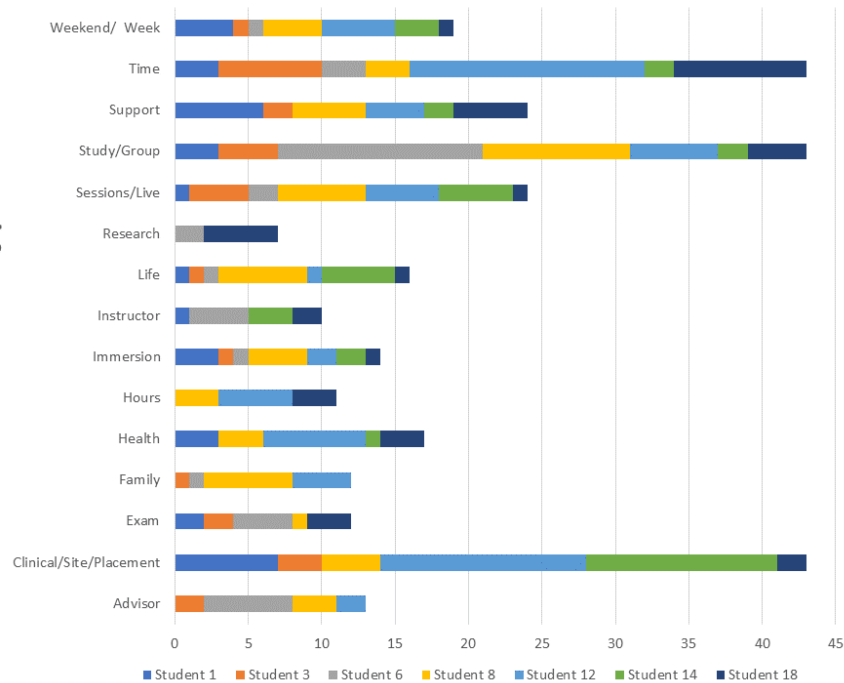


Figure 13.

The number of students who had shifted from full-time to part-time employment or who were unable to work at all came as a surprise during student interviews. I examined the sub-section of interview participants who either chose to or were unable to be employed while they worked toward completing this program for any commonalities and patterns. Terms falling into the same overall coding category were grouped together, and the same generalized terms were removed as in previous analyses. As seen in Figure 13, references related to time, study/group, and clinical/site/placement matched in rate of recurrence and with more frequency than any other coding node by a margin of nineteen. Support and sessions/live matched and followed in rate of recurrence.

Recurring Themes for Non-White Students

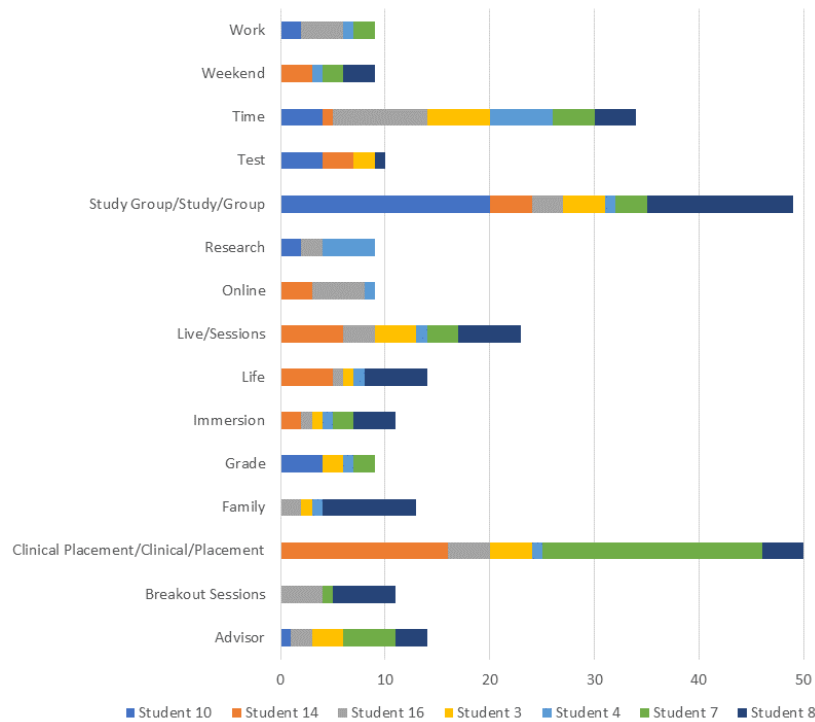


Figure 14.

Inconsistency in student experience for non-white students emerged as a finding in the AAC’s study, so I examined this sub-section of interview participants for any commonalities and patterns. Terms falling into the same overall coding category were grouped together, and the same generalized terms were removed as in previous analyses. As seen in Figure 14, the most common theme emerging among this sub-section related to clinical placement/clinical/placement and study group/study/group occurred second most frequently by a narrow margin of 1. Time and sessions/live followed, with life and advisor tied for fifth most commonly referenced coding node.

Discussion of Findings

1. Burnout Experienced by Students Mid-Way.

Finding one relates to the anxieties and overall feeling of burnout consistently expressed by students who are about mid-way through the program. It is important to note that students mid-way through the program at the time interviews were

“I ended up **quitting my nursing job**...really **limiting** the amount of **time** I spent **with family**. I was **focused** solely **on school**, and I ended up **not being able to pass**, even with that.”

- Student mid-way in program with 2 dependents employed part-time

conducted had also experienced the introduction of a number of change measurements during their time in the program thus far. The appearance of the change node among this sub-population's top twenty most frequently recurring and its lack of appearance in any other sub-populations top twenty bears out the realities of how these change measurements have impacted this group's program experience.

2. Unsustainable Sacrifice Required.

“This is a graduate program. You're going to get students who have children and responsibilities, have a spouse. They **have other things to do** and I think that **they didn't factor that in**...my classmates and I are literally picking and choosing what assignment we feel like is more important and more points and what's going to affect our grade more.”

- Student in final term with 3 dependents, unemployed

Students expressed feeling as though the University oftentimes did not recognize that they are serving a vastly different population than on-ground students. The feasibility of sustaining the required balancing act and level of performance simply was not doable for many students. Particularly, students with children under the age of twelve shared stories about feeling like they were not being a good parent, spouse, employee, or student.

Married students who really took care to involve their spouse in the decision to pursue this degree and created at least a loose plan around what it would look like and mean for their families prior to enrolling indicated less dissatisfaction than those who casually discussed it without planning more specifically. Regardless of planning, the strain of one spouse

essentially becoming a single parent for so many months took its toll on relationships and family dynamics.

“Then it got to the point where I sat down with my husband. I'm like, ‘You know what? I am **not being a good mom**. I'm not being a good employee. I'm not being a good student. **I'm not giving anything 100%**. I'm stretched too thin.’”

- Student in final term, with 2 dependents, employed part-time

3. Impact of Financial Burden.

Anxieties regarding the financial burden the program placed on them were expressed by fifteen of the eighteen students interviewed. Nearly half of those interviewed were not employed at all and four of those interviewed had shifted from full-time to part-time employment during the program due to the amount of time the program required of them to be successful. Six students made other huge financial sacrifices like downsizing their home, foregoing travel of any kind, selling valuable possessions, limiting costly extra-curricular activities for their children, etc.

While only 7 participants represent diverse races or ethnicity, truly harrowing tales stood out to me, which two of the four African American participants shared. Both students had at least three children under the age of twelve, for different reasons both were single parents.

One student had recently married, but their spouse lives in another country. Only months after her wedding and early during her program, this student suffered a life-threatening miscarriage that required surgery. Subsequent complications required a lengthy hospital stay all while being a single parent to her three young children and pursuing this degree. To further complicate matters, her one adult child was imprisoned and facing serious charges that required costly legal expenses. Unsurprisingly, this student had to take a leave of absence from the program but had managed to restart and continue toward meeting her goals.

“One of my classmates is literally **selling her house** to downsize because it’s [the program] **expensive and she has a young family.**”

- Student mid-way in program, with no dependents, employed full-time

The other student had recently given birth to her fifth child, which took place while she was in the program. A month after the birth, her husband abandoned the family with no warning. Subsequently, she lost her home and her vehicle was repossessed. Her job did not make enough money to cover childcare expenses for three small children and balancing work and parenting with this program proved too difficult. She and her children ultimately moved into a small apartment and she decided not to work while in the program. Regardless of race or ethnicity, these experiences served as poignant reminders of the need for higher education institutions to always be cognizant of the wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds making up their student populations. Further, both students were managing to persevere and continue in the program despite serious challenges that would have understandably stopped other students. Exploring factors contributing to these students’ remarkable resiliency and commitment to goals may prove worth further study as the University works to develop goal planning tools to aid in retention. Deeper exploration into the socioeconomic differences that may place Caucasian students on better footing to succeed in comparison to non-white students could also make for meaningful further study.

4. Significance of Support Staff Relationships.

Student Support/Success Advisors

“I talk to my student advisor quite a bit...he’s just kind of like **my go to person** who kind of says, okay, you know, this is where you go, or this or you know he gives me information.”

- Student mid-way through program, no dependents, unemployed

sorts in their providing an ear to listen, making it hard to underestimate the value of those who fulfill this role.

The fourth finding highlighted just how important support is to program satisfaction. Over half of student participants raved about the relationship that they formed with their student support/success advisor. These support persons are seen as not only the “go-to” person when a student had questions, but also as a lifeline of

Significantly less interaction took place between students and their academic advisors. At the time I conducted interviews, University academic advising indicated that contact with each student was made at least twice per term, usually via email. While students acknowledged or recalled having received an email, a lack of engagement and relationship development with their academic advisors was clear based on their responses. With around 1,700 students in the program and two academic advisors employed by the University at the time of my interviews, resource constraints on relationship building are understandably significant.

Academic Advisors

"I hadn't really heard from my academic advisor."

- Student in final term who has 3 dependents and is unemployed

"I've had, like, three or four academic advisors in this program. I don't even know who my academic advisor is at this point."

- Student in final term who has 2 dependents and unemployed

My interviews with University academic advisors and OPM student success advisors revealed a significant barrier to communication regarding at-risk students. While the University and OPM have shared access to general student information. The University's early alert tool, Starfish, that helps University faculty and staff communicate regarding at-risk students, is not accessible by the OPM, whose student success advisors were identified by students as their primary resource for information and the first person they discuss concerns or issues they are facing both in the program and in their personal lives. Without a shared access communication tool, guaranteeing that University faculty and staff are fully aware of individual concerns facing at-risk students is left up to other methods of sharing this information. While student success advisors know to communicate concerns to appropriate University personnel and regular meetings of both stakeholder groups are scheduled regularly, the role of student success advisor at the OPM has a relatively high turnover rate. This means relying on less process-oriented means of communications, allowing ample opportunity for helpful information regarding at-risk students to not be shared with appropriate University personnel in time for the University to provide needed support or accommodation to the student.

5. Clinical Placement Trepidations.

Finding five focuses on concerns expressed regarding the clinical placement process. Students felt that the reality of the clinical placement support experience versus what was advertised was stark. Concerns regarding the feasibility and impact on their family life as it related to two specific clinical placement policies were recurring themes expressed.

The challenge many students felt due to the 99-mile, one-way radius policy was significant. Essentially, this policy stipulates that the clinical placement team can secure a placement site for students as far as 99-miles, one-way from that student's home address. While not every student ultimately ends up having to experience a 99-mile, one-way drive several times a week, just knowing it is a possibility creates anxiety for most students. For those who did end up with long commutes, it was at this point those who had been employed could no longer continue to hold down a paying job. In addition to the financial burden this loss of income created, the commute presented serious challenges for those students also juggling responsibilities for

"I know people that have had to drive about two hours one way to our clinical site...Just driving and that doesn't count towards your clinical hours."

- Student in last term with no dependents, who is employed part-time

children under twelve. Similarly, two students shared struggles they endured due to the late timing of when clinical site placement information was released to them. Clinical sites often have specific schedule requirements and releasing this information too close to the clinical start date left these parents without enough time to adjust their schedules and responsibilities accordingly.

6. Interactive Learning Frustrations.

The sixth and final finding highlights the significance a sense of belonging played in students' experiences and identification with the program and University. Apprehension about the online learning environment meant that students are more likely to need support to overcome online barriers to relationship building and networking.

In-Class Interactions

"...Students basically were like 'no, it's a **waste of time**,' because again it would be...students answering questions where they may have the wrong answer."

"Breakout groups are a **waste of time**, and it really makes students feel that they are **cheated** and paying for nothing."

Group formations often stemmed from small group projects that spun off and organically evolved from there. The groups formed have established their own sub-group communication methods and norms. However, breakout sessions during live sessions are not viewed as meaningful, unless instructors make them highly structured. Instructors do not often

offer other in-class interaction opportunities. Casual ice breakers and polls were well received for those given an opportunity to participate in such.

Immersion Weekend represented a major opportunity for students to connect with fellow students, the University, faculty, and staff. However, several students expressed frustration with the added level of anxiety they felt by having to complete their head-to-toe examination during that weekend. One student shared wishing the weekend could have been timed in a way to optimize both in-person networking time and instructional time, time using the tools expressly purchased for the skills training scheduled during Immersion Weekend. However, overall, students really looked forward to this one-time opportunity to meet their faculty and classmates in-person. Many students noted leaving the experience feeling like the bonds they had created during synchronous sessions and group study opportunities had been solidified and strengthened by the opportunity.

Immersion Weekend

"We were like, oh my gosh, look at you in real life. I mean, these are the people you've been in classes with for two years, and **you get to see them** in real life."

These findings indicate the University needs to focus on creating a consistent and positive student experience, building a sense of belonging within the learning community, and strengthening student's identity with the program and institution as core elements of healthy retention and persistence. In the following section, I propose specific action steps the University can make to improve retention, as well as opportunities for the University and OPM to collaborate.

Recommendations

1. Build a Culture of Coaching.

Balancing the workload in this graduate program was a universal concern among interview participants. The University has already implemented measures in acknowledgement of the hardship balancing coursework with their professional and familial responsibilities is for students. The AAC's study determined that students taking a leave of absence were at a much higher risk of not persisting. Determining the best course of action was not to alter the leave of absence policy, but the University offered some variations on their part-time track to completion to provide students with more options on how best to manage their course loads. Further, program leaders conducted a curriculum audit and developed a new curriculum. This new curriculum was developed with a focus on ensuring it aligned with the academic rigor and quality the program is known for, while keeping the student experience and work-life balance needs in mind.

I recommend that the institution strive to create a culture of coaching. Creating a culture of coaching can help the University build upon the relationships students develop with their admissions representative and student success advisor (Drawdy, 2020). Such a culture could also help lessen the apprehension students feel regarding the many barriers each of them are working to overcome so they can achieve this graduate degree. While calling, texting, and emailing remain viable forms of communication, they are also very transactional interactions. For example, the financial burden of going back to school was a common theme among students. Most universities send an email or letter to students notifying them of what financial aid options are available to them, which is helpful but also very transactional in nature. A culture of coaching might take this interaction a step further by providing students fifteen to thirty-minute meeting opportunities with financial aid to discuss their options in more detail (Drawdy, 2020). Taking this another step closer to transformational instead of transactional, the conversation regarding the financial realities of embarking upon a graduate program and how students and their families can best plan for managing these challenges could become a topic students are encouraged to discuss with their student success advisor. After all, students referred frequently to how their relationship with the student success advisors went beyond addressing everyday concerns about their progress in the program. In fact, nearly half of interview participants indicate their student success advisor knew a lot about their personal life and the challenges they face outside of their program.

2. Expand Existing Tool into a “Success Roadmap” for Students.

The University provides students with the layout of their entire program curriculum. In support of a culture of coaching, there is an opportunity to build upon the tool already in use through the development of a more detailed and robust strategic roadmap to success. Like the information already in use, students should receive this expanded success roadmap as soon as they enroll in the program. This roadmap would not only lay out program courses, important dates, deadlines, and expectations regarding the amount of time they should anticipate dedicating to their studies in order to succeed, but it would also suggest how students should allot time for the various aspects of their coursework, such as watching lectures, completing a case study, preparing for weekly quizzes, etc. The University can take this tool to the next level with the inclusion of self-care tips and reminders and suggested talking points for how students and their

partners can create a plan for how responsibilities and needs will shift while the student is in the program. Perhaps the university should consider also including ideas for how students talk to their children about what “Mom” or “Dad” going back to school will look like for their lives, why it is important, and ways their children can support mom and dad.

A success roadmap would serve as a tool to keep the student on track, but it could also serve as a tool to help students celebrate milestones met throughout the program. According to Grant & Shin (2011), expectancy theory proposes effort is a function of the following beliefs: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. Expectancy is the belief that effort will lead to performance (Grant & Shin, 2011), Instrumentality is the belief that performance will lead to outcomes, and valence is belief that those outcomes are important or valued (Grant & Shin, 2011). Giving students an opportunity to track their progress and celebrate achievements may reduce students’ feelings of discouragement that can lead to lack of persistence.

The University could then expand upon the helpful guidance provided on the more robust “success roadmap” by developing a monthly e-newsletter or e-tips series centered on providing students with useful ideas on how to juggle all the competing demands they are facing. If the University has the ability in their CRM to design this recurring series so that it appears to be coming “from” each students assigned academic advisor, it could also prove to be a helpful tool in strengthening students’ relationships with this key role linking the student to the University.

3. Create Personalized Goal Planning Tool for At-Risk Students.

To address lower retention rates, particularly for at-risk students, the University and OPM should consider how to deepen the impact of the work admissions representatives do on the front-end with prospective students. Admission representatives already discuss career plans and goals with students to help them develop personalized career plans prioritized by the students’ intended goals. Each student’s plan could then become a part of that student’s records that are visible to their student success and academic advisors as they progress through the program. These plans can serve as a catalyst for student success and academic advisors to support and encourage at-risk students as they progress through the program. In practice, these plans should be used as “working” documents that are revisited and revised by students and advisors. Doing so supports the creation of a culture of coaching.

Identifying plans and setting goals is a common success factor found among self-directed learners (Rovai, 2002). Completing tasks and meeting deadlines is often self-directed in the online learning environment. Drawdy (2020) points to the critical importance of providing added student support to remove barriers to success. A goal planning tool not only provides an additional layer of support, but also a prioritized action list that can empower students to take their next steps with confidence, secure in the knowledge that their action is the next step toward success. Students with less years of professional experience frequently expressed apprehension during interviews about what acceptable proactive steps they should take. This is another example of how a culture of coaching boosts student satisfaction and persistence. In such a culture, students would feel encouraged and supported in asking the questions they have as they work toward their goals. Celebrating small wins can prove to be a surprisingly powerful influencer of overall feelings of satisfaction (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

4. Reframe Clinical Placement Messaging.

First and foremost, it is critical that the University ensure what is being sold to students regarding the assistance provided in securing clinical placements is what students will actually experience. Clinical placement issues frequently arise. There is no avoiding that reality. Students recognizing the realities of what resources are available to them and standard preceptor placement practices may reduce the clinical placement frustrations expressed so often. The University has reviewed its marketing and recruitment materials to verify they accurately promote this offering and spell out clearly that the clinical placement team assists students in securing placements, but does not go so far as to imply preceptor placement is fully handled by the team or guaranteed. Building upon this key first step, I recommend the program create tips for how students should work with the clinical placement team and communicate with them as they work together to secure sites. Admissions representatives, student success advisors, and academic advisors should make every effort to encourage students to communicate with the placement team, while also being proactive on their own behalf to secure their clinical site placements.

Further exploring the need for strengthened lines of communication, the University and OPM could work together to develop an easy way for the placement team to share with students the status of the medical practices they have contacted. There are several challenges making this difficult to accomplish. The University and OPM have to be careful that, in an attempt to openly communicate with students about the status of their clinical placement, they do not endanger their existing agreements with medical practices who have processes to follow and are not receptive to over-communication from both the institution and student. While it would be convenient for this suggested tool to be created so that it operates within the existing mobile application students are already accustomed to, it is not required. Students simply want to feel like they have a good handle on what it is they need to do to succeed, so this tool does not have to be unnecessarily complicated.

5. Extend Technology Skill Development Opportunities for all Populations.

Interview participants often expressed frustration with live class sessions, particularly the use of breakout sessions. Ensuring learning experiences online are designed to facilitate more than content-learner interaction is key in realizing not just asynchronous (Rovai & Wighting, 2005), but also synchronous learning's full potential. The University should invest more in the preparation of its faculty to teach in the online learning environment through onboarding, coaching, mentoring, and ongoing training opportunities. This type of investment will also serve to improve the consistency of the student learning experience. As this graduate nursing program is one of several offered fully online by the University, starting a teaching forum dedicated to online teaching and learning best practices and emerging technology trends impacting online pedagogy could serve as a beneficial resource for faculty. This forum could host monthly meetings or even drop-in training opportunities throughout each semester. Offering opportunities such as this for faculty to further improve their effectiveness in the online learning environment supports the creation of the culture of coaching recommended above. Faculty adopting the coaching mindset will be key to this culture's adoption and

"The key to making it through is you have got to find yourself a group of study buddies."

- Student in final semester, with no dependents, and unemployed

offering skill enhancement opportunities for faculty will help them feel supported. To broaden technology skill development opportunities to reach students, as well as faculty and staff, the University should consider developing suggestions on how students can effectively network in an online environment, as well as tips on how to form a study group with their peers.

6. Improve Student Identity with Program and University.

The positive effects of commitment to school, when partnered with strong social integration and goal setting, have been the focus of many studies (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Workman & Stenard, 1996). The University should consider developing a communication tool to help students learn more about the University, its history, and its culture. This tool could be used leading up to and following Immersion Weekend. A number of formats might prove effective including a trivia or bingo format, either of which would create additional engagement opportunities. If shared via email, it represents another relationship-building opportunity for students with their academic advisor. If shared via social media, it offers an engagement opportunity for current students in the program with alumni, faculty, and staff. Frequency of these communications could vary depending on needs and engagement levels. If sending the communication via email, I suggest a monthly or quarterly frequency. If shared via social media, more frequent posts may be advisable depending upon engagement levels.

The inclusion of a more interactive opportunity for students to get to know the University during Immersion Weekend should also be considered. One option to consider is having the on-campus tour already offered during that weekend led by another University student or even an administrative leader from another department. Getting to know another University student or leader outside of the School of Nursing might improve student's identification with the University as a whole. The University should also include in its immersion budget a small investment in a few University branded gifts for students to receive upon arriving at Immersion Weekend. Doing so will help to create a sense of belonging and provide them with a tangible way of identifying with the University.

7. Strengthen and Broaden Student Support Mid-Way.

Given this study's finding of program satisfaction expressed being linked to student's program progress, strengthening and even broadening the support offered to students as they progress from term two to term three and even through term four might help students experiencing program burnout feel more supported and possibly improve their satisfaction. The OPM student support model provides the student with opportunities to regularly connect with their student support advisor at the outset of the program, with these points of contact becoming less frequent as the student progresses through the program. However, the student interview findings do not support tapering off outreach efforts. In theory, the OPM model makes sense. Provide a high-level of responsive outreach in the beginning while students get their bearings and then gradually reduce these interactions as the student progresses and gains confidence in their ability to succeed. However, the weight of program demands seem to compound, increasing students' feelings of overwhelm and frustration at the exact same time the one regular point of contact they have with the program is reaching out less. Thus, denying these students the same level of access to support with which they began the program. The burnout and resultant

frustrations expressed by students mid-way through the program indicates that there may be opportunities for the OPM to positively impact program retention not just for this University, but potentially their other partner universities, by strengthening the communication outreach of its student success advisors for students mid-way through the program and building upon that existing relationship. If student loads were to lessen for academic advisors, the University could also consider implementing more student outreach and engagement opportunities as a way to provide added support to students and to strengthen the academic advisor-student relationship.

8. Develop Mutually Accessed Early Alert Tool.

Though the MSN program offered by the University has a strong reputation for excellence and graduating high quality nursing professionals, the program is actually far less selective than several peer institutions. Having modernized early and developed this online program nearly a decade ago, the University prides itself on helping students from all backgrounds achieve their dream degree. However, it naturally follows that remaining committed to this mission, also means the University serves a large student population that is diverse in gender, location, age, education, experience, race/ethnicity, socio-economic background, technology skills, and more. With such a varied population, the University often needs to assess and address at-risk students. According to Rovai & Wighting (2005), there can be success in overcoming both academic preparedness and online student skill deficiencies through early intervention efforts.

Interviews with both University and OPM staff members impressed upon me the earnest desire all parties have to help every student succeed and the sincere effort parties on each side put into communicating to their counterparts. However, these conversations also revealed the systems used that have shared access between the OPM and University are not necessarily the systems used to assess and address at-risk student concerns. While the University uses a dedicated early alert system, only University faculty and staff have access to communicate needs and plans for individual at-risk students. The lack of an early identification mechanism for at risk students that is visible by both the OPM and University staff, as well as University faculty, represents a significant opportunity for the OPM and University to not only make a measurable impact on retention but also to partner and innovate.

Further, identifying the factors which indicate a student may be at risk and ensuring all parties are aware to be on the watch for these factors could enhance efforts to improve retention. For example, spotting potential risk based on financial burdens, time constraints, issues arising from family needs, and even lack of academic preparedness for program rigor are all factors that could warrant identifying a student as being at risk. Without a shared understanding of factors that endanger student persistence and a mechanism for OPM staff and University faculty and staff to provide notification and share potential resolutions, developing cohesive interventions to address student concerns will remain a barrier. There is a significant body of research including tools that could aid the University and OPM in determining the specific mutually agreed upon risk factors they identify (Rovai, 2002).

Creating a shared access mechanism for the early identification of students at risk of not persisting may prove to benefit student retention not only in this MSN program, but has the potential to be a tool supporting retention for all universities that partner with the OPM.

The University and OPM should work together to strengthen and formalize communications between student success advisors, who are employees of the OPM, and academic advisors, who are employees of the University. While regularly scheduled meetings between both staffs currently take place, a more formalized process should be created for how these parties communicate with one another about the assigned students they share, when certain communications should take place, and how are they holding one another accountable these communications. Like the early alert example, the method of communication between the University and OPM would also be strengthened by the added clarity gained through full access and mutually agreed upon processes. For example, what criterion or set of criteria triggers a University faculty or staff member or OPM staff member to formally document a student concern where University counterparts can see it? Is that method of documenting sufficient notification? How is progress tracked? Without a concise and clear, mutually agreed-upon policy, the impact of developing a new shared access tool may not be fully realized. I argue that both are necessary, but at minimum documenting a clear, mutually agreed-upon process is necessary if only to ensure enduring consistency despite the sheer volume of students and natural employee turnover.

During this study's interviews, it became apparent that there is a significant gap between the level of support students experience from their academic advisors versus their student success advisors. Academic advisors can reach out to students only one or two times per semester via email, unless a student has a specific need. During the fall 2019 term, the University employed two full-time academic advisors tasked with managing a student load of 1,700, which a high volume of students. Recognizing this reality, the University has since hired a third full-time academic advisor and can now focus on exploring innovative ways to use these critical staff members to help improve student's identification with the program and the University. However, three academic advisors for approximately 1,700 students is still a high volume. Finding ways to innovate around such large student loads will help the University maximize the efforts of the program's academic advisors. To best capitalize on the program's academic advisors and realize retention gains, the University should consider offering group sessions centered on specific areas of concern among at-risk students. Potential session topics could include how to read research articles, overcoming writer's block, triumphing over math anxieties, pharmacology study tips, and more.

9. Leverage Newly Formed Student Advisory Group.

A broad yet well-defined use of the recently established student advisory group might prove a useful tool. Created in fall 2019, this advisory group holds promise as a useful tool to help the University address its retention issues while maintaining its student focus guiding principle. While the student advisory group had only just formed at the time of my research, members of this student advisory council could provide unique insight into what supports and efforts they find meaningful. As this new group continues to take shape, the University should focus on how best to maximize the benefits of the student experience and stories each member brings to the table. The student advisory group has potential to develop innovative, student-focused ideas to help students gain confidence and poise for networking and forming groups in an online environment.

10. Establish Iterative Intervention Evaluation Tool.

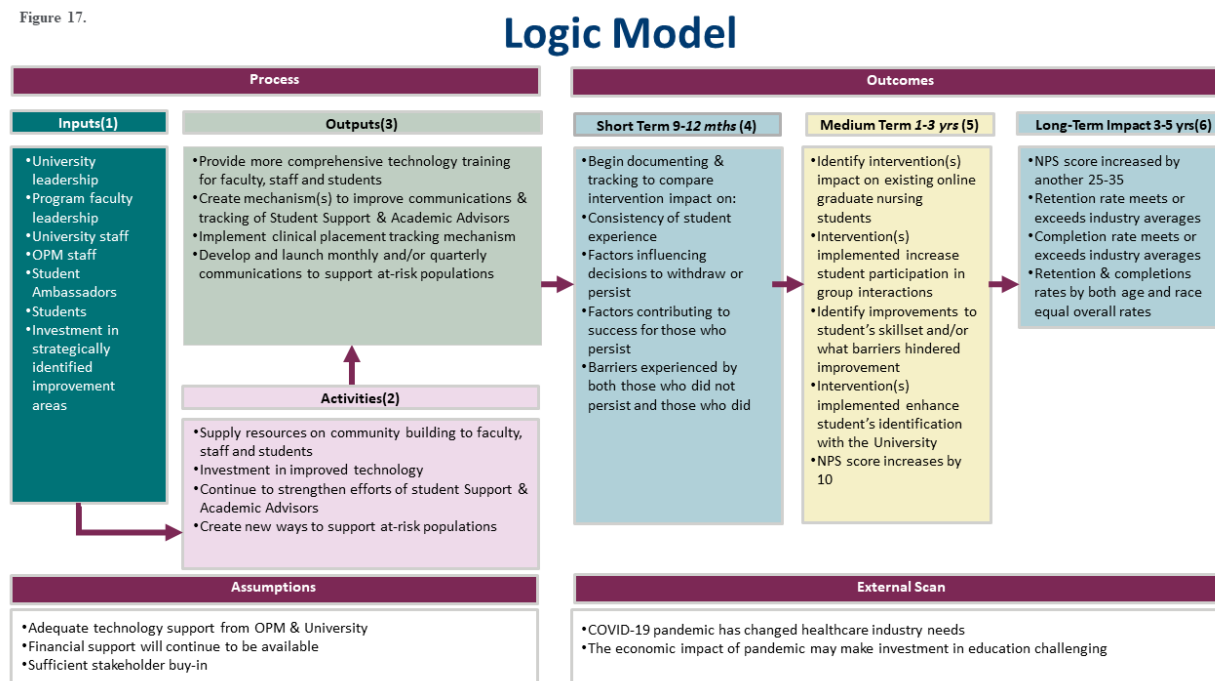
The program's new leadership has worked assiduously to re-vamp the student experience. These improvements include a full revision of the University's curriculum, which will help address both the quality and feasibility curricular concerns most often expressed by student interview participants. Program leadership has also revamped the Immersion Weekend experience to include more opportunities for cohort members to network with one another and University faculty & staff. While the full analysis report for 2020 is not yet ready to share at the time of this study's conclusion, the AAC was able to share that the University's efforts have resulted in a significantly higher net promoter score this year. This is promising news and it means that the University has managed to begin regaining ground in the last eighteen months. To be able to sustain and build upon that success, the University should consider how best to evaluate the impact of their efforts and where to go from here. It is important that the impact of these efforts is measured, so that the University can truly embark upon a continual improvement process. I have outlined below an evaluation plan, which could help guide the University's way as it works toward creating a strong evaluation tool to meet this program's ever-changing needs.

Example Evaluation Plan. The purpose of this evaluation plan is to aid the University in Determining if the intervention(s), if implemented, improve retention for online nursing graduate students. Key evaluation questions are based on short-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes. Short-term outcomes focus on setting the stage for successfully assessing the intervention(s) impact, by beginning to document and track, for future comparison, the intervention(s) impact on consistency of student experience, factors influencing decisions to withdraw or persist, factors contributing to success for those who persist; and barriers experienced by both those who did not persist and those who did. The short-term outcomes objectives are to begin gaining a clearer understanding of what, if any, impact has intervention(s) had on likelihood of student persisting and completing the program, as well as what specific barriers were impacted by intervention(s) implemented. Further, the short-term outcomes hope to identify what factors ultimately influenced existing online graduate nursing student persistence, what factors influenced those who did not persist, what prevented them from doing so or influenced their change in course. Medium-term outcomes should build upon short-term outcomes indicated above, as well as begin to enable the identification of impacts based on aggregate data like by term and by identified targeted sub-populations.

Finally, long-term outcomes should enable the University to determine how effective the implemented intervention(s) were in improving retention and/or recruitment long-term. Identifying the impact over time of each individual intervention implemented based on stakeholder – students, faculty, staff, and the University. Long-term outcomes should determine if intervention(s) implemented increase student participation in group interactions (e.g. study groups, group chats, supporting other students, etc.), and, if so, what were some of the improvements to their skillset, or, if not, what barriers hindered improvement. Finally, this should enable the University to determine if the intervention(s) implemented enhance student's identification with the University. Some key questions in determining the implemented intervention(s) impact center on determining what interventions best support student persistence, were they structured and supported in a way to maximize student completion, was the infrastructure in place sufficient, and what supports or barriers to facilitated or prevented

completion. Finally, establishing individual student factors for those students who did and did not persist will help aggregate the intervention(s) impact for deeper analysis.

Figure 17.



Evaluation Design.

This is an outcome evaluation of how graduate online nursing student retention rates compare pre- and post- intervention(s) implementation institution. As part of the evaluation design, quantitative data on program enrollment; persistence, and completion rates can be accessed through the University's records or the OPM's records. A survey using the questions previously indicated will be sent to all online graduate nursing students, including recent graduates to identify existing or ongoing retention barriers, as well as any new retention barriers. The data from this survey will be used to form pre- and post- intervention(s) implementation comparison groups for interviews and focus groups. Comparison groups will be formed based on identified targeted student sub-populations: (i) those students identified as "at-risk;" (ii) those students easily identified as balancing familial responsibilities; (iii) race; (iv) age; (v) employment status. Then, focus groups and interviews of identified targeted student sub-populations will be conducted, as well as convenience interviews of other non-student stakeholders. Then, triangulate data by comparing completion rates among online graduate nursing students from qualitative study to completion rates in nationwide data. This mixed methods quasi-experimental design will identify linkages between activities (intervention(s) implementation) and outcomes (program completion).

Data Collection Methods.

Enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates will serve as this evaluation's quantitative data, while surveys, interviews, and focus groups will serve as its qualitative data. This structure mirrors the design of this study's combined use of quantitative data from the AAC's report and qualitative data through conducting interviews. Comparison to graduation rates of other

institutions is also possible through national graduate nursing completion rates collected annually by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN). According to their website, the AACN works to establish quality standards for nursing education; assists schools in implementing those standards; influences the nursing profession to improve health care; and promotes public support for professional nursing education, research, and practice. Every year, AACN's Institutional Data Services and Research Center (IDS) issues an annual report of the most current statistics on a number of factors including student enrollment and graduation rates for undergraduate and graduate nursing programs. Accessing this report is easy and affordable. The standard price is \$130, and the member price is \$65. (American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), 2020)

Students will be surveyed to isolate continuing and/or new persistence barriers. Then data will be gathered regarding how, why, and/or why not students persist directly from stakeholders through interviews/focus groups. These stakeholder groups include online graduate nursing students; student support/success advisors; academic advisors; University faculty and staff; and OPM staff. Surveys will be sent to all online graduate nursing students. Purposeful sampling will be used to recruit students to participate in interviews and/or focus groups, selecting students based on set criteria. Convenience sampling will be used for other non-student stakeholders.

Analysis Procedures.

Survey results will be analyzed to identify trends and measure the success of the intervention(s) implemented. Several software options designed to quickly analyze and summarize online survey results are readily available to support this exploration of survey results. Both Qualtrics and SurveyMonkey offer such tools to their users. Coding and analysis of the qualitative data resulting from the interviews and/or focus groups will enable the University to draw inferences that may not have been captured in the survey data analysis. Qualitative data analysis tools like NVivo, which was used for this study, can support coding and analysis efforts and provide visualizations of the qualitative data analysis that help communicate the information uncovered by the qualitative data in a way that is easy to understand.

Practical Significance and Utility.

This evaluation tool is relevant not only to the understanding of the impact made by the intervention(s) suggested in this study that are implemented, but also as an added tool to bolster persistence, which is a strong indicator of the impact and effectiveness of the overall improvement retention efforts. Further, this tool may prove useful in measuring the impact of interventions implemented to improve retention in other programs offered by the University. The magnitude of this evaluation's effect could be broader than this program or the University's other program offerings. Determining the impact of the intervention(s) implemented may ultimately have bearing on how the OPM designs the structure of existing and future online programs with this University and even other partner institutions.

The findings resulting from this evaluation are meaningful in that they will permit key stakeholders to understand which intervention(s) successfully increased the likelihood of persistence. Having a fuller understanding of which intervention(s) supported retention will enable quicker implementation of any further programmatic adjustments so visible improvements are timely. Results of this evaluation have the potential of leading to the

development of a method for tracking a variety of intervention impacts like how to track impact of implementations separate from those launched previously or tracking interventions impact individually. Finally, potential broader implications arising from this evaluation include the confirmation of the linkage between satisfaction as measured by net promoter score and likelihood of a student retaining.

Figure 18.

Evaluation Matrix

Questions			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What, if any, impact has intervention(s) had on likelihood of student persisting and completing the program? •What specific barriers were impacted by intervention(s) implemented? •What factors ultimately influenced existing online graduate nursing student persistence? •What factors influenced those who did not persist? What prevented them from doing so or influenced their change in course? •Did intervention(s) implemented increase student participation in group interactions (e.g. study groups, group chats, supporting other students, etc.)? If so, what were some of the improvements to their skillset? If not, what barriers hindered improvement? •Did intervention(s) implemented enhance student's identification with the University? 			
Indicators	Data Sources	Collection Methods	Analysis Procedures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Provide resources to support small group or community creation, both organically and facilitated by instructors •Technology training investment (both students and instructors) •Reduce barriers experienced in clinical placement process •Create new ways to engage •Improve retention rates of diverse students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews and/or Focus groups •Survey •Nationwide completion rates for graduate nursing programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Conduct individual interviews and/or focus groups sessions; no more than 10 participants per focus group; 60-90 minutes in duration •Online survey using Qualtrics or SurveyMonkey sent to all graduate online nursing students •Obtain AACN's annual Enrollment and Graduation report for competitor comparison 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Use analysis tools in Qualtrics or SurveyMonkey to summarize results & analyze trends •Use qualitative analysis tool, NVivo, for interviews and/or focus group Outputs will include summary dashboard graphs/tables

Study Limitations

The mixed methods approach is a strength of this study's design because it provided the benefits gained from both qualitative and quantitative data, with each offsetting the inherent weakness of the other. Weaknesses arising from this design include the availability and collection of data and barriers to determining causal connection. Access was not granted to former students who left the program prior to completion, and a better understanding of those students' experiences would provide opportunity for the University to more closely examine the specific circumstances that ultimately led to these students' failure to retain. Time and financial resources may present challenges for the University in implementing the interventions proposed. Depending on the adoption of the proposed evaluation tool or something like it, collecting and analyzing the impact of the intervention(s) implemented may prove challenging. Further, reliability of data will remain a concern until sufficient time passes for collection of enough data for the purposes of benchmark comparison. Prior to 2019, the OPM and University were collecting less relevant data than they are collecting now due to the AAC's findings. Further, establishing causal linkages for the intervention(s) impacts will be challenging due to the number and variety of interventions that have been implemented over the last eighteen months in addition to those proposed in this study and the absence of a continuous improvement evaluation plan.

Conclusion

While the retention challenges the University is facing are not unique to this online graduate nursing program, the needs of its students are diverse across distinct sub-populations. The proactive way the University has committed to addressing its retention concerns is to its advantage and indicative of the level of care, engagement, and genuine concern expressed by each member of the University faculty and staff, as well as the OPM staff. In many ways, the ability to open access to a broader range of students as a result of advancing technology is both a blessing and a curse. The University has a history of innovating to meet the demands of traditionally underserved populations and remains committed to maintaining academic rigor despite not being as selective as some of its peer institutions. This commitment requires adopting a student-centered, nimble, and flexible structure.

Study Question 1: From the perspective of students, faculty, and staff, what is the relationship between accommodations needed for online students and their persistence?

The qualitative interviews conducted with representatives of all three of these key stakeholder groups, revealed that the level of importance each places on the relationship between accommodating online students' needs and their persistence is high. While there is value in the greater understanding this study gained regarding faculty and staff perspectives, the students' perspective remained the central focus for the interventions proposed. Students overwhelmingly felt that the University and program continued to lack understanding or acceptance of just how different the online graduate student population is in comparison with traditional, residential populations. Accommodating the vast diversity of student needs and experiences for this program's population is the foundation upon which each recommended intervention in this study is built.

Study Question 2: How do students perceive the value of peer interaction, online and offline, to their experience?

Study group emerged from the student qualitative interviews as the dominant theme. Students placed a high value on having a connection with peers who were also experiencing the same challenges. One student shared, "The people in my study group have become my closest friends. They are the only people in my life who can come close to claiming they understand all the demands and challenges I'm juggling. They are my lifeline." Given the value placed by students who have created peer groups, the University has an opportunity to improve program satisfaction by finding effective ways of encouraging and supporting the development of these beneficial peer groups. Several of this study's recommended interventions directly impact or support this opportunity.

Study Question 3: From the perspective of students, what most influences their identification with the program and University?

Though students placed less value on the importance of identifying with the program or University in comparison to peer interaction, the excitement and feedback they shared regarding the Immersion Weekend experience indicates its potential value. With minimal time on-campus

or in-person, creating a strong tie to the University requires more than employing traditional means. This is one area that the University has an opportunity to distinguish itself among its peers by embracing new ways of creating student identity with the University and program, continuing its established success as educational innovators and early adopters who strive to meet students' needs.

This study identifies ten recommendations for consideration. Acknowledging limited resources, implementing every recommendation is not likely to be an option. The following outlines the top three recommendations and supporting justification based on the potential value each presents. Establishing an iterative evaluation tool, as described in recommendation ten, will have significant and lasting impact on the program. Awareness of each new intervention effort launched by the University in the last twelve months presented challenges for this study. The speed with which the University has implemented so many intervention efforts is impressive, but doing so without an established iterative evaluation tool in place means that understanding the impact of each intervention is impossible. An evaluation tool would allow the University to track the performance and value of subsequent interventions going forward, enabling them to focus their limited resources where they know the most could will result.

The remaining top two recommended interventions have the potential to positively impact both the University and the OPM. Strengthening and broadening the support offered to students mid-way through the program, as described in recommendation seven, could help these frazzled and overwhelmed students feel more satisfied overall with the program than they currently do at this point in their studies. As practiced now, the opposite takes place at the mid-way point in the program just as students' frustrations and exhaustion are mounting. Developing a shared access early alert tool, as described in recommendation eight, holds a lot of potential benefits. Not only would such a tool help this program identify at-risk students and collaborate effectively to meet their unique needs more quickly, but it could bring amazing value to the OPM's current and future University partners.

Technology's role in education is expected to continue to grow. When harnessed effectively, it has the ability to bring educational opportunities to those who would otherwise not experience its advantages. This study's findings provide the University with a clearer understanding of how they can improve engagement and program identity to increase retention across the diverse populations they serve. Technology has happened faster than our ability to harness its value or control its unintended consequences. As the University nears a decade of offering online programming, MSN program leaders have an opportunity to implement changes and build processes that help the University more fully realize the possibilities that technology has provided.

Appendices



Photo by Charles Deluvio on Unsplash

Appendices

- A. University Internal Data Collection:
 - 1) AAC Report
 - 2) Data Presented on June 18, 2019
 - 3) Data Presented on June 24, 2019
 - 4) Data Presented on July 18, 2019
- B. Interview Protocol:
 - 1) Interview Protocol
 - 2) Consent for Participation in Interview Research
 - 3) Student Interview Recruitment Email
- C. IRB Approvals:
 - 1) IRB #192053 Approval Letter from Vanderbilt University, October 14, 2019
 - 2) IRB #192053 Stamped Approval, October 14, 2019
 - 3) Letter of Cooperation from Partner Organization
- D. Interview Coding Framework Matrix

Appendix A

University Internal Data Collection

AAC Report

Qualitative Analysis Report

Summary of Key Findings

In 2019, [REDACTED] and the University collaborated on a qualitative research study to comprehensively evaluate the graduate student experience in online and campus-based programs. This research builds on the graduate student quantitative study conducted in the fall of 2018 that uncovered key drivers of student retention. The 2019 qualitative research study was designed to gather nuanced information about these drivers of retention and identify topics that should be explored and measured quantitatively in future student surveys [REDACTED] will conduct.

The following are key findings from this research. These findings have informed [REDACTED] recommendation to add questions to future graduate and undergraduate student surveys (detailed in the survey section that follows).

- 1 Students in campus-based and online programs operationalized "community" similarly — as inclusive of peer-to-peer interactions *and* interactions with faculty and staff members. Students in online programs had a less significant sense of community than did those in campus-based programs.
- 2 Online students had fewer expectations of a close-knit community — so expectations are important to consider in evaluating and tracking sense of community moving forward quantitatively.
- 3 An ideal professor maintains mastery of their subject, but it's more important to students that professors demonstrate care, compassion, understanding and patience.
- 4 It is critical to students that professors individualize how they prepare and deliver course content and how they interact with students. Having professors who individualize in this way is especially important to students with caregiving, work and family responsibilities outside of school.
- 5 Online students experienced far greater technology challenges than students in campus-based programs. Although each of the online students who reported technology issues reported experiencing them only once or twice, the scope of the errors were significant and had a very negative impact on student experiences.
- 6 Perception of rigor is linked to perception of value for students, and thus must be elevated in areas in which students report coursework is less rigorous. University students note that rigor varies tremendously by individual course and program.
- 7 Asynchronous materials were inconsistently discussed—some felt they were busy work and too tedious and significant, while others described them as complementing coursework and instruction. The type of materials was important to the students' evaluations, with many noting that video instruction was the most valuable.
- 8 Finding school-life balance is very difficult for students. Because students are balancing a variety of responsibilities outside of school, support service needs vary.
- 9 Some students reported feeling that recruiters and online marketing material inaccurately described the requirements necessary to be successful in the program. It is important to assure that prospective students' expectations match — as closely as possible — their reality as a student at the University.

Important Survey Topics for Future Research

The following are a list of topics [REDACTED] recommends adding to future surveys of undergraduate and graduate students taking courses online and on campus at the University. These questions address key experiences University students reported having while attending the institution and will be important to tracking positive change over time, to creating a thriving university experience for future students and improving retention overall.

- 1 Having a best friend at school
- 2 Opportunities to engage with online students in high-quality programming outside of the course setting
- 3 Main reason online students do not engage in programming outside of the course setting
- 4 Belief professors care about students as a people
- 5 Quality of communication and delivery of complex curriculum
- 6 Faculty members' knowledge about their subject matter/field of study
- 7 Availability and responsiveness of faculty and staff members
- 8 Comfort approaching faculty and staff members with questions
- 9 Professors going above and beyond to answer questions and help students navigate the curriculum
- 10 Ease in accessing course materials online
- 11 Frequency of technology challenges when taking exams or quizzes online
- 12 Level of academic challenge
- 13 Who students go to in times of academic challenge
- 14 Helpfulness and amount of asynchronous materials
- 15 University's flexibility in responding to commitments and experiences students have outside of their program
- 16 Level of programmatic support available to students as they navigate commitments outside of their school experience

Detailed Findings

██████ researchers worked collaboratively with the University team to develop a qualitative interview guide that included a series of topics that were identified during the initial quantitative phase as impacting the student experience or were hypothesized as important based on prior research and the literature. These topics included a student's sense of community, technology experiences, academic experiences, school-life balance, overall impressions of the university, and relationships with faculty, staff members and peers.

Sense of Community

Students believed their community to be inclusive of many experiences and interactions — particularly peer-to-peer interactions. Students with a strong sense of community went to other students for help on coursework and other topics. Sometimes these experiences occurred on campus or at their residences, but students also mentioned using social media to interact with one another.

"The sense that people want to work with each other and help each other out with academic stuff even when there's no requirement to do so. People take time out of their day to help each other learn, just because they want everybody to succeed."—Physical therapy, campus-based program graduate student

"We go through everything together because we're in class at least four hours a day every single day together. Having those connections and having that community really helps bring everything together and gives me the motivation to study. Otherwise, if I was just doing this by myself, I don't think I would be nearly as successful."—Physical therapy, campus-based program graduate student

Students in campus-based programs felt a greater sense of community than did students in online programs

Students in campus-based programs overwhelmingly described the University community as close-knit — a place where students, faculty and staff members cared for one another.

"Studying for exams and things like that ... it's usually pretty easy to find a group of people who I can study with ... we talk to each other and get along pretty well and we're all invested in understanding ideas together and sharing our thoughts."—Physical therapy, campus-based program graduate student

Online students were less positive about their sense of community than were students who completed on-campus programs. For online students, creating relationships with peers was more difficult since they lacked in-person interactions to establish a rapport. Some online students reported the immersion weekend was helpful in this regard and allowed them to overcome some of the challenges associated with online learning in allowing them to connect with students prior to the program start. Still, many lacked a sense of belonging in their program. Several of these students reported a desire for more programming that allowed them to connect with one another — although some acknowledged the school offers opportunities they simply did not take advantage of. Students acknowledged that professors *could* play an important role in helping students develop relationships with one another.

"One of the professors in my program ... was incredible at making us feel like a group. And that was the best class experience I've had ... he did a lot of activities and group discussion. A lot of pair discussion and then bring it to the group kind of thing and you shift around every week and so I'm on a first-name basis with my peers, whereas at the beginning of the classes I knew four to five people. And by week two or three I was on a first-name basis with all 14. His use of activities and teaching techniques was just spot on."—Library science, online graduate student

Online students' struggles to connect with peers were similar to their difficulties connecting with other faculty and staff members.

"Well the first time I heard from my counselor was back in September and then I did not hear from him until January ... so there was a big gap in that. And the advice I was getting from the counselor wasn't really helpful. What they recommended when I was running into issues, their advice was basically to cut down on my work which is not really something that I can do. When I asked if it was possible to take on less class they said that [the University] does not allow that. So that was one of the things I don't really feel supported with. Because I mean working is also important, because I need to pay for the college. So their advice was basically cut down on my hours if I was not doing well in class."—Nursing, online graduate student

"I think it would be really nice if professors did more remote conferencing in terms of meetings, like they use to go to meetings usually at the beginning of a semester. It's optional where you can pop in and just introduce yourself. But having something that extends past that introductory period I think would be, very nice to be able to just discuss content and stuff that isn't so restrained by message boards."—Library science, online graduate student

Questions for quantitative exploration

1. Having a best friend at school
2. Opportunities to engage with online students in high-quality programming outside of the course setting
3. Main reason online students do not engage in programming outside of the course setting

The Ideal Professor

█████ asked students to describe their ideal professor. Across online and campus-based programs, students reported similar qualities and characteristics. And while subject-matter expertise was mentioned, it was not a dominant quality of the ideal professor. More commonly — and with far greater detail and passion — students described ideal professors as having:

- 1 | Availability and responsiveness
- 2 | Individualization in their personal interactions with students and instructional approach
- 3 | Care, understanding and patience

Availability and responsiveness were viewed as critical characteristics of a highly effective professor. Students discussed reaching out to professors outside of normal business hours and via multiple methods to ask urgent questions about coursework being done at home.

"If you have a more urgent question or you need help but it's 9:00 at night, but they tell you at the beginning of class, you know, 'Hey, it's OK to contact me.' You know, just contacting them and being able to have that resource when you're trying to write a paper at 9:00 when your kids are in bed ... just having that reliability and availability for their students is important."—Nursing, online graduate student

"Prompt responding is important, especially with online ... it's not like I can drop in for office hours or anything like that so being prompt with responses and clear and having multiple ways to get in touch with them [is important]."—Nutrition, online graduate student

Students noted that talented, effective professors were adept at individualizing their interactions with students — addressing students by name and being aware of their unique qualities, characteristics and backgrounds. Students also described ideal professors as being skillful at adapting the curriculum and instruction to their students' learning styles and baseline knowledge in the subject.

For online students, availability and responsiveness were particularly important because they do not have an opportunity to meet with professors during office hours.

“Understanding where the student is at, understand that you’re one professor that’s teaching one thing, but there’s a hundred students that you’re teaching and not every single student is going to perceive it the same way ... acknowledging that all students learn differently.” –Nutrition, campus-based program graduate student

Students described their ideal professor as empathetic and understanding of the student experience inside and outside of the program. Students described these professors as understanding and having an appreciation for the complexity of the program and curriculum — and delivering it clearly and concisely. They understand how outside pressures and challenges could impact students’ University experience and ability to effectively complete assignments on time.

“Especially in grad school, people have issues, lives, things that are impacting your learning, so having someone who is able to offer support and options [because] whatever kind of life can throw you at the same time as you’re trying to complete ... so just genuinely being respectful of the human experience and what everyone’s issues are.” –Nursing, campus-based program graduate student

The University Professor

Students in campus-based programs were more likely than online students to report deep and meaningful relationships with their professors. Students in campus-based programs said that their professors exhibit deep care in conversations with their students. Professors make themselves available to connect with students outside of normal hours and via multiple methods (i.e., phone, email or text message).

“[When] I walk by them I know that I can have a casual conversation with them — they will stop, smile, say hi, know me by name and won’t just walk past and half smile and go about their day. They always stop, make small talk or even have a follow-up conversation, ask me how I’m doing, ask how things are going, how classes are and how the rotation is.” –Nutrition, campus-based program graduate student

Students in the campus-based programs noted a closeness in the professor-student relationship that they hypothesized was due to the size of the University.

“One thing I really appreciate about the University is the small student-to-teacher ratios. It allows professors to be mentors for so than just presenting information. They’re able to share their own experiences and best practices and help us see how it can translate in the field.” – Social work, campus-based program graduate student

Online students described their relationships with professors in a less effusive manner than did most students from campus-based programs. Online students often referred to feeling satisfied or having adequate relationships with professors, as opposed to deep and meaningful ones. In part, they did not see these surface-level relationships as problematic, as many noted it was consistent with their expectations of an online program at the graduate level. (They viewed themselves as highly independent and not requiring as much support.)

“I’ve been pretty satisfied with my relationships with professors. I guess it’s good for the teachers to kind of have an idea of who you are and where you’re coming from in terms of potentially helping them understand how you think better, because everyone has different learning styles and you know different approaches to projects and what not. So in that regard I suppose [your professors knowing you] could be a benefit. But I wouldn’t say it’s a high priority to me that my teachers know who I am as a person.” –Nursing, online graduate student

“It depends on the professor. For the most part, I think I have a pretty good relationship with most of the professors. I felt comfortable enough where I’ve reached out to most of my professors ... and for those professors ... most of the time some of them were willing to stay with me in a meeting room.” –MBA, online graduate student

Qualitative Analysis Report

A minority of students shared critical feedback about their professors, and although it was episodic in nature, this feedback typically referred to professors' interactions with students.

"Professors should be willing to listen. Willing to take in critical information about the way they're teaching. And give us good, critical feedback on how we're doing. They're helpful and supportive but in terms of the critical part, there's not really good feedback in how I'm doing in one of my classes. For example, when we do the exams, we don't really know what questions we got wrong and we don't really get to know how we can improve." –Nursing, online graduate student

"I probably wouldn't still enroll at the University. [One of the reasons is] I have had zero contact with my adviser. There's no outreach for online students." –Library science, online graduate student

Topics for quantitative exploration

1. Belief professors care about students as a people
2. Quality of communication and delivery of complex curriculum
3. Faculty members' knowledge about their subject matter/field of study
4. Availability and responsiveness of faculty and staff members
5. Comfort approaching faculty and staff members with questions
6. Professors going above and beyond to answer questions and help students navigate the curriculum

Technology

For students enrolled in campus-based programs, technology did not pose a barrier. Most students in these programs described using the Moodle platform, and other basic forms of technology such as video conferences to connect with other students, their professors and in accessing quizzes, exams and course materials.

"The technology is pretty good, and I haven't really had much difficulty." –Education, campus-based program graduate student

"A lot of my classes, we watch videos of different teaching strategies and observe lessons on classrooms so that's been really helpful to actually see the live teaching happening and analyzing the video the strengths and weaknesses. So being able to watch those videos and have something to actually look at has been really helpful in terms of our discourse in the classroom and just improving upon effective teaching strategies." –Education, campus-based program graduate student

Most online students experienced at least some technology challenges, although the extent and frequency did vary with most describing moderate interruption to their education experience that frustrated them. Various technologies were mentioned including the exam software, and the OEP platform. Although all examples were episodic in nature, and none appeared to be occurring a high frequency on an individual student basis, the experiences were very frustrating to students and impacted their academic experience rather significantly.

"I've had issues with [the exam software] where it just literally stops working during the middle of an exam which is extremely frustrating because then you get flagged and you have to say, 'Hey, I'm contacting student support because I'm reaching for my phone.' It interrupts your train of thought when you're taking an exam which is extremely important when you only receive an 83 or better on your exam." –Nursing, online graduate student

"So some of my professors will have their quizzes done in the OEP system, and it's multiple choices and sometimes you'll get errors on OEP when you're submitting your answers. The other day, I had an issue where I did a quiz two times and I filled out the questions and it was multiple choice and it

Qualitative Analysis Report

was 35 questions and then when I submitted it, I got an error. When I went back, all of my answers were gone. So I had to redo the whole thing again and then I submitted it again and then there was an error. Then when I went back, all of my questions were erased. I contacted students support and it was very proactive, and it was a simple fix ... they were like clean your cookies and then it worked which made me mad.”—MBA, online graduate student

Across both the online and campus-based programs, students over the age of 35 reported more difficulty in using technology within their program and attributed that challenge to their age and lack of familiarity with that technology.

“The whole online platform took some getting used to. At this point now I’m used to it because I’m three years into the program, but at the beginning, it was a little overwhelming. I think maybe because I’m kind of an older student. The whole online everything — having all assignments posted online, not finding assignments as easily as some of my classmates, taking online quizzes and tests, submitting assignments online. Just finding what was actually due [was hard].”—Nursing, campus-based program graduate student

“I’ve learned a lot about technology since being an online student. I’m not old but I’m not a millennial either so there have been challenges for me with the technology mainly because I just haven’t had to use it in any other arena to this extent. I do like the technology though. Once I learned it, it was OK. And of course technology’s only good when it’s working, so sometimes there’s glitches and that can be frustrating.”—MBA, online graduate student

Topics for quantitative exploration

1. Ease in accessing course materials online
2. Frequency of technology challenges when taking exams or quizzes online

Academic Challenge

Most students in campus-based programs felt academically challenged and described experiencing tremendous fulfillment in the process. Students described reaching out to their professors and advisers when the challenge was too significant to continue independently.

“This is a very rigorous program. This is the hardest academic thing I’ve ever done. That being said, I really enjoy it. It’s a lot of fun to learn things every single day, but I’ve never put this much work into school before.”—Physical therapy, campus-based program graduate student

“I had a nutrition class that was focused on exercise prescriptions so that was really cool but it was something I had never done before so it was learning a whole new thing so I enjoyed that. Each class has different challenges. I feel I work better when I am challenged so I think I responded well.”—Nutrition, online graduate student

Many students reported that the level of academic challenge varied tremendously by course. And since student perception of academic challenge is related to how students perceive the value of their University education, emphasis must be placed on elevating curriculum in areas that students report are less challenging.

One might hypothesize that graduate-level students — many who are lifelong learners — would experience fulfillment in challenging courses in ways that would not be the same at the undergraduate level. Further quantitative research should examine how students at the undergraduate and graduate level respond to academic challenge and how helpful faculty and staff members are to students in these tenuous times.

Asynchronous Materials

Qualitative Analysis Report

Online students had differing views of the asynchronous materials and the extent to which it was valuable in the learning process. Students with positive evaluations of the asynchronous work felt the materials were relevant to their practice. The YouTube videos and Ted Talks were particularly helpful to students.

"I find it to be engaging, it's challenging. There are some weeks where it'll be a little lighter, there's some weeks where it's a little heavier. But they always, one of the things I like about [the University] is they always sort of keep it fresh. Some weeks they'll have a link for like a YouTube video or a Ted Talk or something and we'll write our thoughts on that. Or there will be a role play that we watch, or several role plays. It's not sort of like the same thing every week. Each week it's like a different, it's sort of a different medium for how people learn, whether you're a like visual or audio learner or something like that." –Social work, online graduate student

Students who were negative about the asynchronous materials thought of them as busy work when they were already having difficulty keeping up with their regular coursework. These students often described the asynchronous materials as repetitive with other coursework and information. One student described the material as being slightly dated.

"It's a lot to have to do. I sometimes wonder if I'm at a disadvantage doing it online because at a seated class you would actually complete the majority of this stuff while in class. Because I work part-time and this course, my experience so far is I have zero time for anything else. I spent huge amounts of time completing this asynchronous stuff. Sometimes I think it's busy work because there's a lot of repetition." –Nursing, online graduate student

"It really depends on the course. I think there's a lot of overlap. I think that we tend to do a lot of the same types of assignments over and over and over again. They seem to have, I don't even know what they're doing, to be honest, it's kind of bizarre. I've taken like two courses that are essentially the same exact thing. So yeah, I don't know. I don't know really how I feel about it, because I don't really know what direction they're trying to take us because it hasn't been very clear." –Library science, online graduate student

"I think it's pretty relevant to practice. However, I will say in some of the courses previously, I felt like it was outdated. You know, for our references that when we write papers and such, we're expected to use references no more than five years old and I have had some classes in [the University] where the information has been more than five years old. So I feel like if we're being required to submit up-to-date information, then we should also be receiving information that's not, you know, six-seven years old." –Nursing, online graduate student

Given the inconsistency in the feedback about asynchronous materials, further research is required to understand how this feedback differs by type of student and type of program.

Topics for quantitative exploration

1. Level of academic challenge
2. Who do students go to in times of academic challenge?
3. Helpfulness and amount of asynchronous materials

Work-Life Balance

Students came from diverse backgrounds and life circumstances. Some described significant challenges balancing their personal life and their education. Some students were employed full time or part time, while others were full-time. Some also described significant care-giving duties that made dedicating time to their graduate program difficult.

"[My life and work] impact my education because of the three — [work, life, education] — education has to come last. Unfortunately, I don't have anyone else paying my bills. Therefore, I must work.

Qualitative Analysis Report

There's no one else raising my children. Therefore, I must do family stuff. If there was any way to somehow put the other stuff on the back burner, and just focus on my education ... but there isn't."
—Nursing, online graduate student

Most students, and particularly those with children or those who were employed while enrolled in their program, reported difficulty balancing school and work responsibilities. For these students, highly engaged faculty and staff members who exhibited care, understanding and compassion for students' busy schedules had the greatest effect. Students also reported that they would prefer the University vary the schedule and offer classes at a range of days and times to accommodate University students with significant responsibilities outside of the classroom.

Despite the obvious challenges students face while working *and* taking courses concurrently, many noted that each facet — coursework and employment — benefitted the other.

"Right now, my work is definitely benefiting or, I mean they both benefit each other currently because the classes I take are helping me become a better teacher." —Education, campus-based program graduate student

Student's diverse circumstances and needs make the University's job in supporting these students difficult. Some cases simply require patience, understanding and care, but other circumstances may require more significant accommodations and support to address a student's unique challenges. According to the Census Current Population Survey (CPS), 78% of part-time and 43% of full-time students were working while enrolled in college in 2015.¹ The Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce also found that, while the number of students who work while earning their degree has remained steady, the number of hours they are working has increased.

The difficulties University students expressed in balancing work and education present a unique opportunity for the University to differentiate itself as a school that understands its students' unique needs and adapts accordingly.

The school that boldly addresses students' concerns about balance and integration will differentiate itself significantly in a market in which outside challenges are more important than ever to the student experience. For the University, its reputation as...one that uniquely understands the stressors placed on caregivers, this value proposition may be even more natural than for others.

Importantly, it's critical that the University is very clear with students at program entry in terms of the graduation requirements and time commitment necessary to be successful. Several students reported their expectations were incorrect upon entry at the University in terms of the level of effort required to be successful in the program.

"When I started the program, I was very clear with my recruiter — I should have had an idea something was wrong when they recruited me so intently and then gave me acceptance and then turned around the next day and gave me a conditional acceptance if I took extraneous courses on top of it. So it was, 'Oh, you're accepted in the program, but they want you to do this and this and this,' and I was like no. This is after they already had my deposit." —Nursing, online graduate student

"I had a professor tell me, 'How can someone possibly do a nurse practitioner program in 18 months?' and I said, 'Well that is what you're marketing to students, so if you're marketing this to them, you probably know how someone can do it. But if you don't, then change it.'" —Nursing, campus-based program graduate student

¹ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_ssa.pdf

The extent to which students' expectations were unmet was not a core area for exploration in this research, but it did emerge as being potentially important. Gallup recommends exploring this topic in the brand identity research the University is considering to determine how retention is related to students' expectations in the recruitment phase compared with their actual experiences as students at the University.

Topics for quantitative exploration

1. The University's flexibility in responding to commitments and experiences students have outside of their program
2. Level of programmatic support available to students as they navigate commitments outside of their school experience

Bonus Findings

At the beginning of the qualitative interview, [REDACTED] researchers asked respondents why they chose the University. The question had a twofold purpose: to gather important background information about these students and to put them at ease in the interview process. While this question was not core to the research objective, responses to it can inform the University's additional work in brand identity research and other research initiatives at the university. The following are students' answers to why they chose the University:

- 1 **Sense of community.** Many students mentioned selecting the University because they sensed, or were told, that it had a strong sense of culture and community. Students who reported anticipating this level of community spirit described how the University delivered on that promise in their student experience.
- 2 **Location.** Many students mentioned the school's location...specifically, and its proximity to major hospitals for nursing students, as significant advantages in the University experience.
- 3 **Clinical placements.** Several students mentioned the clinical opportunities as being important in their decision-making process. One student said that the University's involvement in placing students in these clinicals was a differentiating characteristic of the program — this student was considering several other programs in which students had to find these opportunities on their own and thought the University's involvement in the process was a significant advantage.
- 4 **Scholarship.** Some students mentioned receiving scholarships that ultimately informed their decision to attend the University.
- 5 **Referrals.** Many students received positive evaluations from family members, friends and acquaintances about their experiences at the University or in employing University graduates.
- 6 **Size.** Students spoke about the small, close-knit community culture at the University being a key factor in deciding to enroll.
- 7 **Reputation.** Many students chose the University because of the individual program brands — these students referenced historic certification passage rates among program graduates.
- 8 **Online.** Online students often described the flexibility of the online setting as important to their decision to enroll at the University.

[REDACTED] research and other external research consistently demonstrate a relationship between why students enroll at a university, their related experiences and how likely they are to remain at that university. [REDACTED] recommends conducting an ongoing survey of incoming students to understand, quantitatively, their reasons for selecting the University. These data can be used in future analyses to quantify the extent to which students who select the university with specific expectations retain at the University. This information can inform the University's messaging and recruitment methods in attracting the types of students who will ultimately be successful at the university. Measuring and tracking delivery on this brand promise will be critically important to improving student retention over time at the University.

Methodology

interviewed 40 University graduate students from online and on-campus programs from Feb. 14 to March 1, 2019. Only graduate students who completed at least one full semester in their graduate program were eligible to participate in the study to ensure that graduate students had enough exposure to the University to insightfully speak to their student experience.

All participants were recruited via telephone by experienced recruiters who provided participants with information outlining the purpose of the study. Individuals who agreed to participate in an interview were sent an email to confirm their interview and a consent form for them to review prior to their scheduled interview. At the time of the interview, participants provided verbal consent. All interviews were conducted over the phone. Interviews lasted up to 45 minutes, and participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card for their participation.

Among the 40 interviews that were conducted with graduate students, 20 were with students from online programs, and 20 were with students from on-campus programs. Online and on-campus graduate students were recruited from a diverse range of programs as shown in the table below. The number of participants per graduate program was selected based on the size of the graduate program.²

Program	Online participants	Number of on-campus participants
Behavior analysis	2	2
Children's literature	-	2
Education	-	2
Regular MBA	2	-
Nursing	6	4
Social work	6	4
Nutrition	2	2
Library science	2	2
Physical therapy	-	2
Total	20	20

To further ensure that different perspectives were captured in this study, interviewers recruited participants who were diverse in terms of the length of time in their graduate program, race/ethnicity and age. Participants' length of time in their graduate program ranged from one semester to 12 semesters. Nine online participants and six on-campus participants were nonwhite, and nine online participants and three on-campus participants were 35 years old or older.

² Students from the healthcare MBA and MPH programs were not interviewed because there were less than 50 students in the program.

Data Presented on June 18, 2019

Student Retention Program

Online Graduate Student Retention:
Summer 2019 Workshop #1
June 18, 2019

1

A New Approach to Retention

2

Guiding Principles to Drive Decision Making

- Time matters
- The student voice must be at the center of all that we do
- Data and experience are both critical: data *and* the conversations about the data will inform strategy
- Strategy must lead to actions
- Actions are part of a continuous process of improvement

3

Methodology

Importance and performance is determined based on regression analysis

Importance:
how important an individual factor is to program NPS

Performance:
how well the University performs on a single factor based on the survey data

4

The Imperative to Improve Retention, Nursing

Loss in revenue in FY20:
Downward trend in retention

College/Student Group	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
College of Arts & Sciences	75%	-	-	-
College of Business	72%	62%	63%	63%
College of Education	61%	64%	65%	-
College of Health & Behavioral Science	82%	63%	73%	-

5

What We Learned

Opportunities to improve NPS and Retention

- Inconsistent Experience:**
 - By race, age and life style
 - By program: Nursing
- Technology:**
 - Technology improvement needed in NPS and Social Work
- Faculty/Student Relationship:**
 - Faculty/Student relationship critical in Nursing

6

Room for Improvement in the Student Experience

STUDENTS COMBINED* NURSING & SOCIALWORK: **30**

NURSING STUDENTS: **15**

Overall University NPS: **30**

NPS BENCHMARKS:

- United Health Group: NPS: 49
- Amazon Inc: NPS: 66
- Rite-Carlson: NPS: 75
- National Citizen Service Trust: NPS: 75

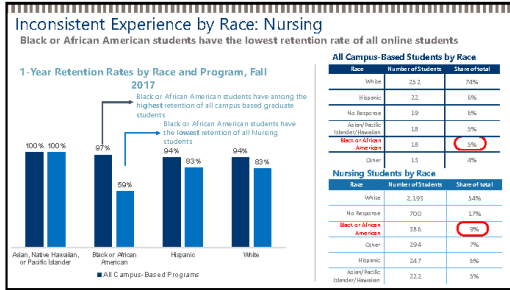
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Inconsistent Student Experience: Nursing

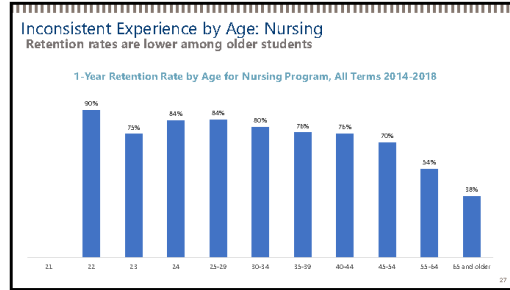
Program NPS for large public, OPM enabled University Programs From 2015-2018: Highest, Lowest and Average Score

Between 2015 and 2018, the average NPS for Nursing was 26. The highest was 49 and the lowest was 10.

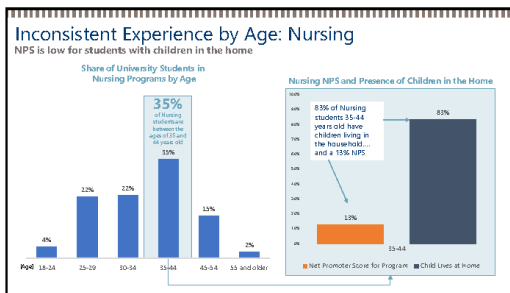
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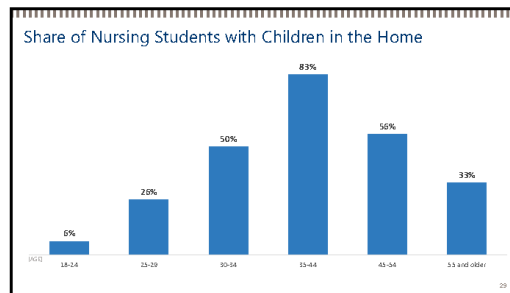
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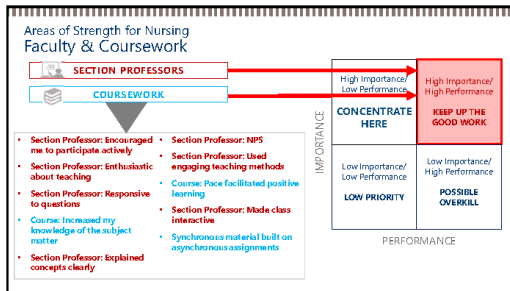
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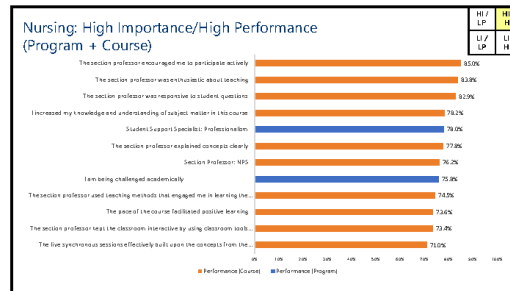
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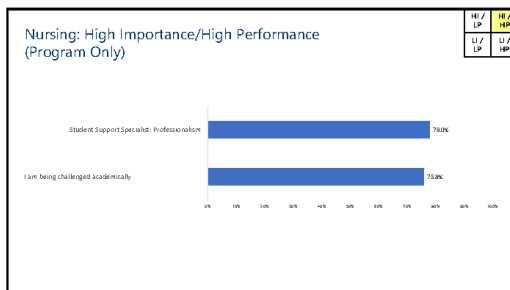
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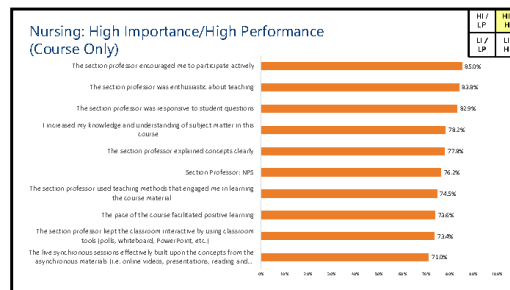
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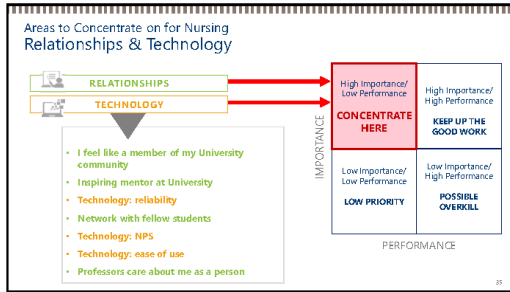
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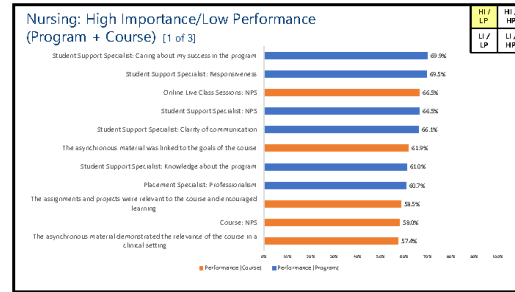
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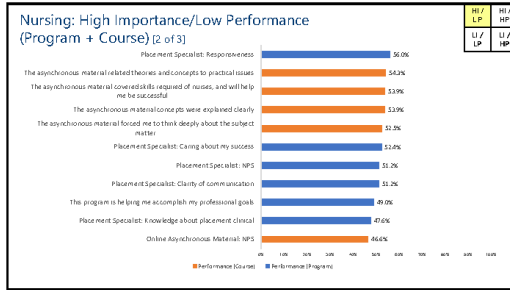
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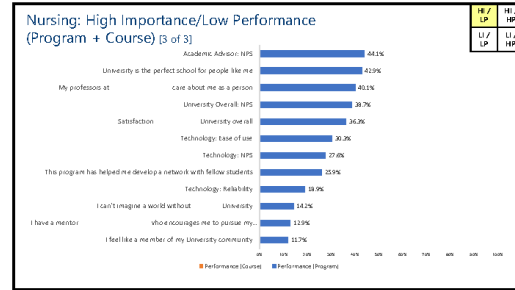
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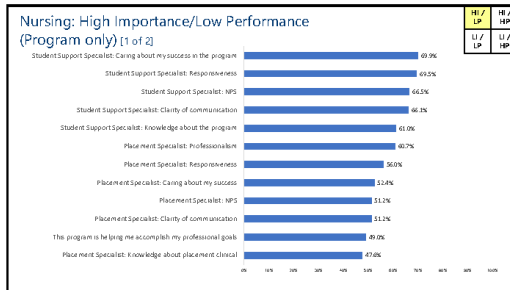
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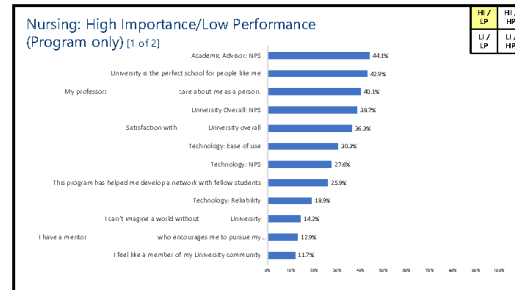
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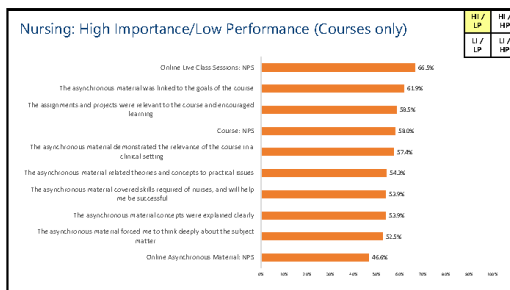
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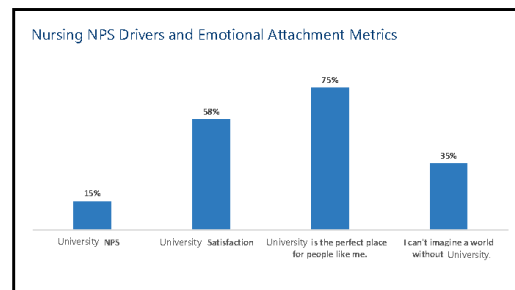
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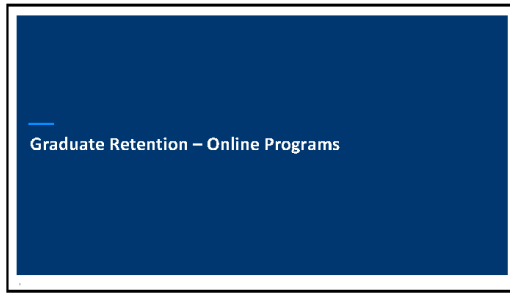


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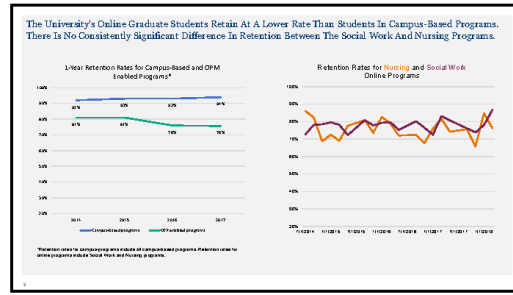


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Data Presented on June 24, 2019



1



2

One Year Retention Rates for OPM-enabled Programs

Retention rates have varied across programs and across years, with lower retention rates appearing in the smaller programs since 2016

Beginning Year	Business Administration	Social Work	MBA	Business Administration
2013	99%	NA	NA	NA
2014	82%	77%	NA	NA
2015	76%	78%	NA	NA
2016	74%	79%	85%	81%
2017	75%	77%	71%	81%
2018	82%	81%	70%	81%

3

One Year Retention Rates for Nursing

Beginning Year	N	One Year Retention	Two-year Persistence	Graduation Rate (Three years)
2013	176	80%	71%	75%
2014	612	82%	61%	72%
2015	756	78%	62%	60%
2016	873	74%	63%	NA
2017	840	75%	NA	NA
2018	170	83%	NA	NA

4

Data Presented on July 18, 2019

Project Objectives

To better understand and manage the University's retention trends, The University engaged Gallup to explore the relationship between NPS and retention. Gallup did this by analyzing the NPS and related data large public OPM company has collected in the four years of the online MSW and MSN programs.

As part of this analysis process, the University established four key objectives:

- Determine if managing to and tracking NPS could improve retention.
- Statistically determine the drivers of NPS to identify short- and long-term actions to improve retention.
- Generate insights about the student experience and NPS to guide strategy.
- Identify possible ways to build on existing research to deepen and broaden future research.

1

Gallup Conducted Analyses on Data Files From the large public OPM company and the University

Despite the lack of unique student identifiers in some cases and small sample sizes due to limited data availability from earlier years, Gallup conducted a robust analysis with statistically significant findings.

OPM	University Files
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program and course data: MSN, MSW, ABA, MPH, MBA Earlier data available at program-level only Unique student identifiers available only for Q4/2017 to Q4/2018 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrative data related to retention including graduation and withdrawal status, GPA, demographics, start data and other characteristics

2

Net Promoter Score – Definition and Use

Net Promoter Score = % Promoters - % Detractors

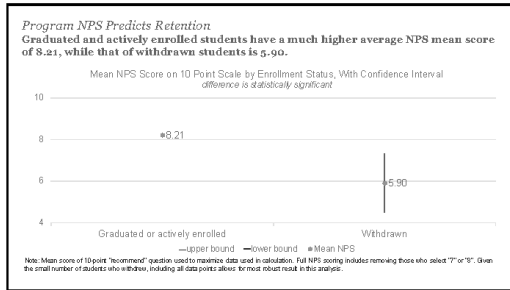
- Measure of client satisfaction/loyalty based on single question: "How likely would you be to recommend X to your friends or colleagues?" — Asked on 0-10 point scale
- Used across a wide variety of industries — only recently employed in in higher education context.

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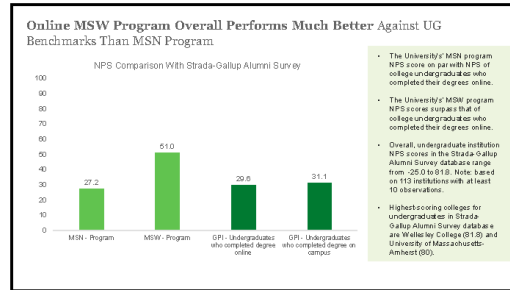
Key Data Takeaways

- Net Promoter Score predicts retention. Students who give higher ratings to their programs and courses are more likely to retain/graduate.
- The online MSW program overall performs much better. MSW has NPS of 61 vs 27 for MSN program (29 is mean UG benchmark).
- Technology and Community are key NPS drivers for both the MSW and MSN programs, but performance against those drivers is lagging.
- Async materials and professors are key NPS drivers for both MSW and MSN courses, but performance against those drivers is lagging.
- Withdrawals are higher among older and non-white students, and those without scholarships.

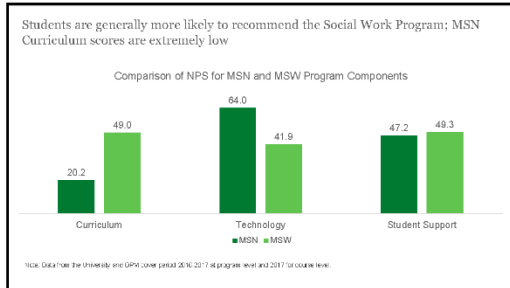
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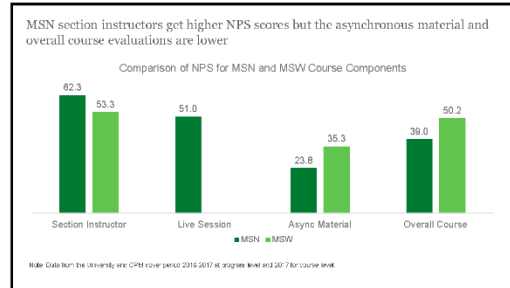
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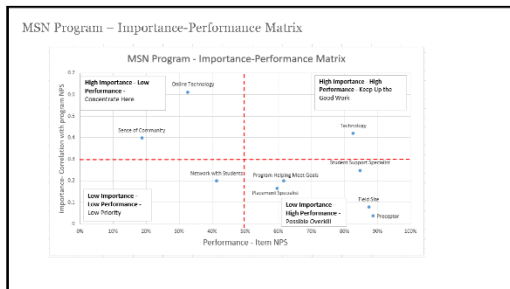
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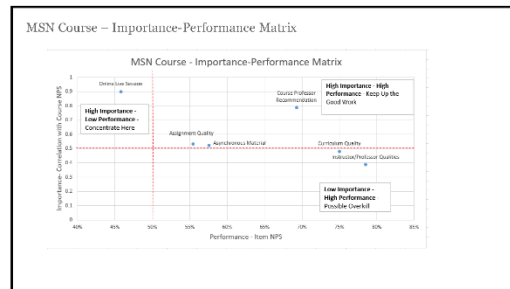
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10

Areas of High Importance and Low Performance – Summary

Areas to Concentrate on – Across Programs	Topics for Discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality teaching/Professor/Placement specialist Quality of technology interface Sense of community Asynchronous material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gallup's study of college students and graduates highlights importance of professors caring about students as individuals and generating excitement about subject matter. Gallup's work in higher education also demonstrates importance of mentorship and advising on student success. Which aspects can Simmons and 2U address individually? Which can they address jointly?

11

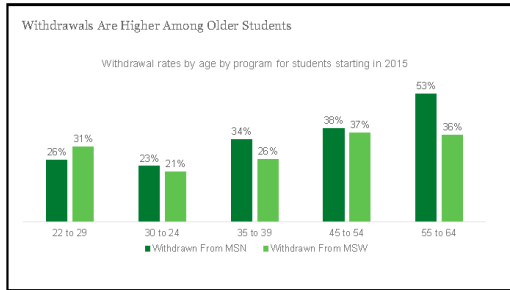
Administrative/Demographic predictors of Retention
MSW, MSN, ABA, MFS and MBA programs

Retention (graduation or active enrollment) rates are significantly higher for:

- 1) Younger students
- 2) White students
- 3) Scholarship recipients

Note: These results are based on regression analysis of the University's database for 62,423 students enrolled starting in 2015. While students, younger students and scholarship recipients are the more likely to stay than other groups, other variables are not significant.

12



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Key Opportunities

The University can begin managing to and tracking NPS to improve retention.

- Accelerate rollout of already planned technology updates (note here from OPM on how the next-gen platform will address ease of use, reliability and other technology factors)
- Efforts to improve communication in MSW program can be modeled in the MSN program to create a sense of community.

The University has an opportunity to innovate in areas that would improve NPS and Retention and help the University establish leadership in these areas.

- Innovate ways to foster a sense of community in the online setting.
- Explore opportunities to accommodate older students in programs.
- Deeper exploration of what is driving satisfaction with asynchronous material with aim of ultimately revamping to improve student satisfaction.
- Better prepare faculty through onboarding, coaching, mentoring and training. Additionally, implement stronger oversight to promote consistency.

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Key Opportunities

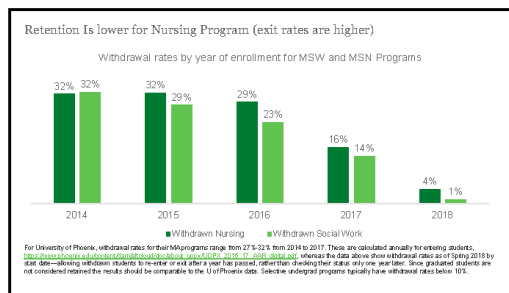
Build on existing research and analysis to deepen understanding of retention and prioritize strategies.

- Collect richer information about the key drivers and test other potential drivers including faculty quality/practices and other student experiences.
- Extend NPS and student experience research to include on-the-ground programs.
- Conduct qualitative work to stimulate innovation and creative solutions in those areas where the University could potentially differentiate, be a trailblazer and improve retention (community, older students, async material).
- Further identify best practices within individual programs that could be applied more broadly.
- Comprehensive research design could include more data on perceptions of the University's brand overall and establish connections between brand, retention, NPS and other student measures.

Improve data collection and management.

- Ensure student unique identifiers can be tied to ratings, courses and professors, which can be used for aggregate analysis.
- Improve documentation of data files.
- Improve organization of data (e.g., structure, labeling, machine-readable coding).

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Methodology

The main goal is to link student recommendations (NPS scores) to probability of remaining in program or graduation (retention).

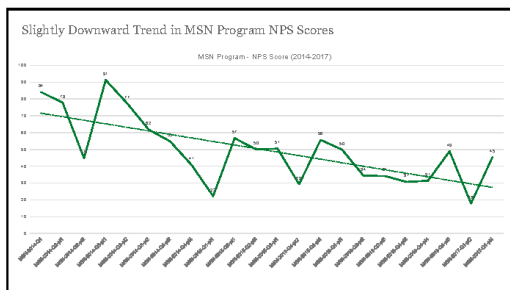
- OPM Data**
 - Student-level records
 - OPM provided program and course survey data for MSN, MSW, ABA, MPH and MBA.
 - Student-level responses to course and program surveys were available from 2017-04 to 2018-04.
 - Earlier data were available at program-level only.
 - Item-course and item-professor records
 - OPM provided these data so that the project team could study individual professors and courses and have summary performance data and correlations between items on the course surveys.
- University data**
 - University provided administrative data about retention (whether a student graduated, withdrew or remained active) and student characteristics, start date and University GPA, as well as demographic data.

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Caveats

- Sample size**
 - Given that the data applied to students enrolled in 2017 and 2018 but not before, data could be linked to retention for 1,318 students, of which 153 had graduated and 33 had withdrawn.
 - The available data provided sufficient information to conduct robust and meaningful analysis.
- Uncollected data**
 - Because OPM was prohibited from using unique student identifiers for the MSN and MSW course surveys, those responses could not be linked to retention.
 - Gender was not available for most students and not used in this analysis.
 - Data on the pre-enrollment academic profile (e.g., high school or college GPA) were also generally unavailable and not used.

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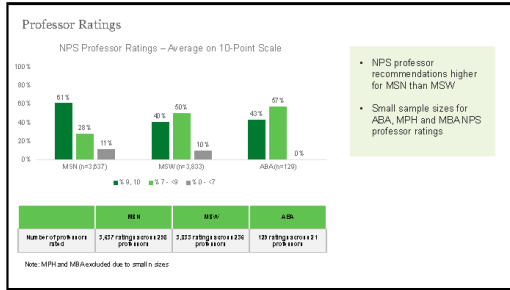
Program NPS Predicts Retention – Higher NPS Scores Predict Greater Likelihood of Retaining

	All Programs	MSN	MSW
Program NPS	0.014**	0.012**	0.010**
Statistically Significant	p<0.01	p<0.01	p<0.01
n size	1,301	403	698

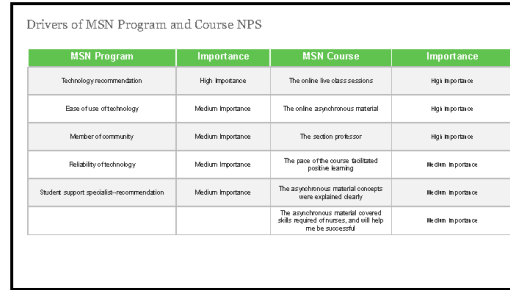
Regression Analysis Controls for:

- Race
- Age
- In-state status
- Merit Scholarship
- Simmons College undergrad status
- High school GPA
- Cumulative Simmons GPA

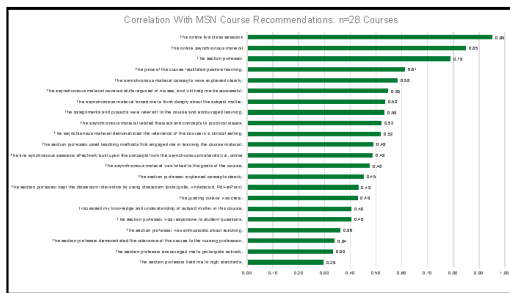
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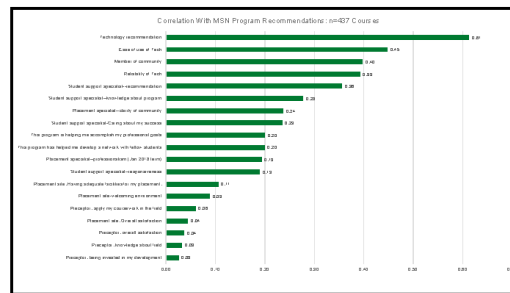
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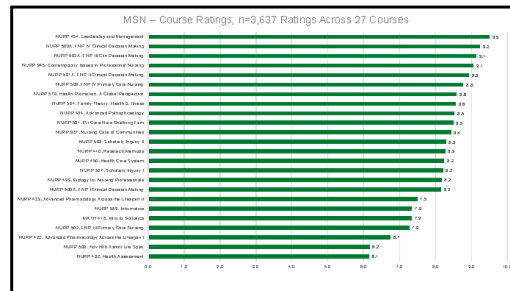
MSN – Program: Multiple Survey Items Predict Retention

Item	Beta (t-Value of Predict with it)
Base of use of tech	0.27
Reliability of tech	0.10
Program recommendation	0.23
Overall program NPS	0.22
This program's rating on accessibility/professor quality	0.26
Member of community	0.26
This program has helped me develop a network with other students	0.28
Student Support Specialist recommendation	0.22
Professor Recommendation/Quality	0.25
Student Support Specialist recommendation	0.27
Member of community recommendation	0.24
Professor (live) teaching style (live or pre-recorded)	0.24
Professor (live) teaching style (live or pre-recorded)	0.22
Member of community recommendation	0.26
Professor (live) teaching style (live or pre-recorded)	0.25
Professor (live) teaching style (live or pre-recorded)	0.26

Regression analysis is reported for: race, age, merit status, merit scholarship, university undergraduate status, high school GPA cumulative University GPA.

- Significant cells are statistically significant
- Behavioral t-test range between 118-405

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University Student Characteristic Data – Race, Age and GPA Predict Higher Retention

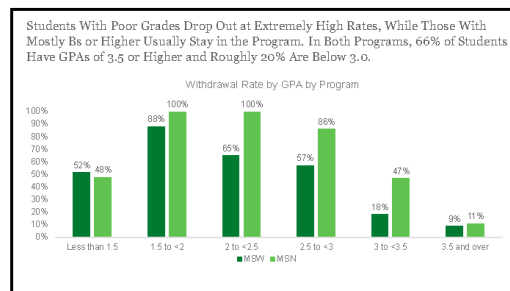
University Student Characteristics	Predict Retention
White	0.0561***
Hispanic	0.0530**
Black	-0.00109
Asian	0.0784***
Age	-0.00024***
In-state status	0.00004
Merit Scholarship	0.0526**
University undergraduate	0.0617
High school GPA	0.0221
Cumulative University GPA	0.122***
Observations from all online graduate courses	5,745
Adjusted R-squared	0.227

Regression Analysis Using University Student Characteristics to Predict Retention:

- People who are "other" or "null" race graduate or remain at lower rates than whites, Hispanics, and Asians
- University GPA is highly predictive of retention
- Age predicts lower retention
- Merit scholarship recipients have higher retention
- Other variables demonstrate no statistically significant effect on retention

***p<0.01, **p<0.05 – Statistically Significant

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Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Student Interview Protocol

Focus: These interviews will support the project by focusing on the individual student experience of 10-12 Nursing graduate program students balancing family obligations with those of the program and full-time employment; what constituents consider effective vehicles for student engagement in an online graduate program; the existing methods of both accommodation and engagement, their assessment of existing methods' success, and what would be considered a successful outcome; and what forms of engagement help to build this sub-population of students' identification with the institution at large.

Research questions: From the perspective of students, faculty, and staff, what is the relationship between accommodations needed for online students and their persistence? The University would like to address barriers to retention for this population with more specificity than is provided by the quantitative survey information from the advising and analytics company. How do students perceive the value of peer interaction, online and offline to their experience? From their perspectives, what are the things that most influence their identification with the University?

Conceptual frameworks: Persistence theory; community of practice; social identity/social capital theory

Ice Breaker

- How far along are you in the program?
- What has been your favorite part of the program?

Persistence Factors Stemming from Family Obligations

- Do you have children whose care you are responsible for?
- How many children do you have that are still in school? Ages?
- How much time per week do you spend to meet their basic needs? Extra-curricular?
- Do you provide elder care for a member of your family as part of your responsibilities?
- How much time per week do you spend to meet their needs?
- Do you have specific time and place set aside every week in which to complete your asynchronous work? Attend synchronous session? How do you communicate that to those who rely upon you within your family?
- What would you say has been your biggest challenge in balancing all the demands?
- Tell me about a time when something you considered important to your family had to go undone? How did you communicate that to your professor and/or peers? Did you feel able to request a deadline adjustment from your professor? How did you communicate this to your family?
- Can you give me an example of a time when a professor or program leader provided you with an accommodation due to family obligations? Was your request reasonable? Their response reasonable? What was the importance of this accommodation to you and your

family? Do you feel the academic product or result this accommodation was a higher quality or lower quality representation of your efforts?

Communities of Practice

- How would you describe the sense of community with fellow classmates that you feel?
- How do students become a part of the cohort community? (What are the norms that support?)
- What is expected of students in the program? How do new students learn what is expected?
- How would you describe the relationship between University administrators and students?
- How would you describe the relationship between faculty and students?
- What do you like best about those relationships?
- Is there anything about them that you would like to change or improve on?
- What responsibilities do faculty and administrators hold in the program setting?
- What are the responsibilities of students in this setting?
- How do you know/learn what the responsibilities of students are?
- Who decides what the responsibilities of students are in the program setting?
- How do you handle conflicts with program faculty or administration? University?
- Can you provide an example of a time when a conflict was resolved by the program/University to your satisfaction? Can you describe a time when it was not resolved to your satisfaction?
- What is most important to you about your relationships with program and University staff?

Student Engagement

- Have you formed a supportive relationship with fellow classmate(s)?
- What is your role in the context of that/those relationship(s)?
- How do you hear about things that are going on in the program and at the University?
- If you are concerned about something in the program or in a course, what do you do?
- What opportunities exist for students to engage with one another during synchronous live sessions? Group projects? Immersion? Outside of coursework?
 - What do you like most about those opportunities? Least?
- Do you communicate with your Academic Advisor regularly? Student Success Coach?
 - How often?
 - What do you think about your interactions with each? What purpose do they serve? What, if anything, do you learn by communicating with either?
- What (other) engagement opportunities does the program offer for students?
 - What do you like most about those opportunities? Least?
- How do you perceive these opportunities are determined?
- How would you define “student engagement”?
- What would you say are the benefits of student engagement? Are there any downsides?
- Is there any form of engagement *not* offered in the program or at the University that you would like to see implemented?
- Are there any forms of engagement currently offered that you would like to eliminate?

Social Identity/Social Capital

- What has been your experience interacting with other students in the program? University?
- What motivates you to engage in activities with other program or University students?
- What relationships in the program or at the University do you value most?
- Can you give me an example of a student activity you participated in that made you feel part of the program and/or University community?
- How about a time when you felt most connected to other students in the program? At the University? A time when you felt excluded from the program? From the University?

Wrap Up

- Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion?
- May I contact you again if I have any additional questions?

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

The interview consent can be accessed by [clicking here](#).

Once approved, the consent form will be delivered via email to graduate nursing students who have expressed interest in participating in an interview. It will be accessed using a personalized link generated by Qualtrics; only those receiving email invitation to review can access the online consent form and the personalized link will be used to tie consent form to interview participant.

Interview Consent

The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about this interview study and the information given below.

Your participation in this interview study is voluntary. You are also free to withdraw from this interview study at any time. In the event that new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this interview study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision whether or not to continue your participation in this interview study.

1. Purpose of the study:

You are being asked to participate in an interview study in order to help Nursing learn more about the ways in which graduate students balance program, professional and family obligations. This interview will focus on your individual student experience.

2. Procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the interview study:

This interview study will take approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to provide some general information and respond to questions related to your experience in this online program.

3. Expected costs:

Not applicable.

4. Description of the discomforts, inconveniences, and/or risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this interview study:

If at any time after beginning the interview study you do not wish to continue, you may voluntarily withdraw from the interview study. You do not need to give any explanation for why you do not want to participate in or complete this interview study.

If at some point after completing the interview study you feel uncomfortable as a result of being interviewed, you may contact Laralee Harkleroad (423) 612-4328. Laralee Harkleroad will attempt to contact you within 24 hours in order to discuss your concerns.

5. Anticipated benefits from this interview study:

a) The potential benefits to the online graduate Nursing programs that may result from this interview study are a better understanding of the needs and barriers to retention experienced by students balancing program, professional, and familial obligations; and propose potential interventions to improve retention.

b) There are no direct benefits to you from this interview study.

6. Compensation for participation:

There is no compensation for participating in this interview study.

7. What happens if you choose to withdraw from interview study participation:

This interview study is completely voluntary. Withdrawing is not penalized in any way.

8. Contact Information.

If you should have any questions about this interview study or possible injury, please feel free to contact **Laralee Harkleroad** at **(423) 612-4328** or **laralee.f.harkleroad@vanderbilt.edu** or my Faculty Advisor, **Dr. Chris Quinn Trank** at **(806) 787-9781**.

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this interview study, please feel free to contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board Office at (615) 322-2918 or toll free at (866) 224-8273.

9. Confidentiality Statement.

All reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential, but absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your information may be shared with institutional and/or governmental authorities, such as the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board, if you or someone else is in danger, or if we are required to do so by law.

STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the interview study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time and for any reason, you have read this informed consent, any questions have been answered, and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate.

Please note that this online consent form will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.

- I consent to participate in this interview study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Student Interview Recruitment Email

Dear [Name],

Nursing leadership is always exploring ways to improve your student experience. Hearing from our students is important and we invite you to be a participant in an interview study. As a participant, you will be interviewed about your experience in the online graduate Nursing program. We are contacting you for this study because we value the insights you may be able to share as it relates to balancing professional, personal, and program responsibilities and overall engagement in the program.

Should you agree to participate; the researcher will contact you to set up a phone or video conference interview call at a time convenient to you. During the 45-minute call, the researcher will ask you about your engagement and experiences in the program.

We hope you will choose to participate in this important study that will benefit current and future Nursing students. If you are willing, please email back confirmation and the researcher will follow up to schedule a call.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

[Contact Information] –*University Graduate Nursing Student Academic Advisors will be sending this communication*

Vanderbilt University

Appendix C
IRB Approvals

IRB #192053 Approval Letter from Vanderbilt University, October 14, 2019

Human Research Protections Program – HRPP
Supporting the work of the IRB and Providing HRPP Oversight



RE: IRB #192053 "Retention Factors for Students with Family Obligations in a Graduate Nursing Online Program"

Dear Larabee F Harkleroad:

A designee of the Institutional Review Board reviewed the research study identified above. The designee determined the project does not qualify as "research" per 45 CFR §46.102(d).

(d) Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Activities which meet this definition constitute research for purposes of this policy, whether or not they are conducted or supported under a program which is considered research for other purposes.

This quality improvement project will explore retention barriers experienced by students enrolled in a graduate nursing program delivered online by Vanderbilt University and to propose an intervention and create an evaluation tool for this purpose.

As this does not meet the "criteria for research" as described in 45 CFR §46.102(d), IRB approval is not required.

Please note: Any changes to this proposal that may alter its "non-research" status should be presented to the IRB for approval prior to implementation of the changes. In accordance with IRB Policy III.J, amendments will be accepted up to one year from the date of approval. If such changes are requested beyond this time frame, submission of a new proposal is required.

Sincerely,

Tyler M Hubbard MA, CIP
Institutional Review Board
Behavioral Sciences Committee

Electronic Signature: Tyler M Hubbard/VUMC/Vanderbilt: (d225302a5266c5b07fe8e249ec7e32dd)
Signed On: 10/14/2019 6:33:04 PM CDT

IRB #192053 Stamped Approval from Vanderbilt University, October 14, 2019

HARKLELF05182019141906

PI: Harkleroad, Laralee F

Retention Factors for Students with Family Obligations in a Graduate Nursing Online Program

IRB #192053

Last updated: 10/14/2019

Study Type and Performance Site Information

Type of study:

- Standard or Expedited
- Exempt
- Umbrella Review for funds release
- Comparative Effectiveness Research
- Non-Human Subject Determination
- Quality Improvement/Non-Research Determination**
- Request review by another IRB
- Coordinating Center ONLY

Please indicate which Committee is most appropriate to review your project:

- Social and Behavioral Sciences**
- Health Sciences

Are there any international sites involved in this study in which the PI is responsible?

- Yes
- No**

Is this project cancer-related?

- Yes
- No**

Date of IRB Approval: 10/14/2019

Institutional Review Board



1/4

Study Purpose and Description

Provide a brief abstract of the study in lay language. The IRB Committees are comprised of scientists with varied backgrounds, non-scientists, and community members.

Problem of Practice and Framework Summary:

Program retention is an issue faced by every higher education institution, and a sizeable body of research documents retention barriers across diverse programs and populations (Russel, 2011; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012). Technology has significantly improved student access and opportunities within higher education, and scholars have begun exploring barriers to retention unique to this modality (Rovai, 2002; Wighting, Liu, & Rovai, 2008). Tracking and improving student satisfaction and retention is an imperative for any institution regardless of delivery format, but online programs face unique new challenges. Hart (2019, p. 19) argues, "Lack of persistence in online education and its consequence of attrition is an identified problem within the United States and internationally."

With increased access comes the introduction of student populations with distinct and specific needs for which program pedagogy, technology, and student support must adapt in order to retain and successfully graduate students. Online programs enable students from any location to participate in a program, which means students are not only differentiated by proximity to campus and its inherent resources, but students previously hindered by scheduling constraints now have the flexibility that comes with not having to be physically present. Students who are already balancing both a professional career and familial obligations often turn to online programs. For many institutions, addressing the unique needs of these students requires a significant program structure shift. Engagement experiences that are available in residential programs are not available to distance learners. Embedding opportunities to enhance engagement and build supportive learning communities for students presents a new set of challenges and potential barriers to retention for online programs (Byrom & Bingham, 2001; Hart, 2012; Wighting, Liu & Rovai, 2008).

Though research regarding the importance of learning communities or support systems within online programs is limited, numerous studies indicate that creating a sense of belonging and community in any learning setting increases student's identity with the program or group, positively impacting satisfaction and thereby retention (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Leach, et al, 2008; Rovai & Jordan, 2004). In a study conducted by Hara and Kling (2001) regarding the cause of higher attrition rates in what was then a still very new online learning environment, students expressed feelings of isolation as one important stress factor they experienced. Further, research indicates that a strong identity with the program or school improves student satisfaction and therefore retention (Voelkl, 1997). Social identity theory, primarily developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1985), will serve as a supporting theoretical framework, but the persistence model developed by Braxton, et al. (2014) will serve as the primary conceptual framework for this capstone. The model specifically addresses dimensions relevant to higher education persistence and retention, particularly with regard to the role of social integration (Braxton, et al., 2014).

University possesses significant quantitative data that point to several populations prone to low retention, including those students balancing professional, familial, and program obligations. This data captures much of the student characteristics found in the Braxton, et al (2014) persistence model and informs the research questions. The qualitative interviews proposed by this study pertain to the social integration factors shown in the attached Braxton, et al (2014) persistence model.

Research Questions:

From the perspective of students, faculty, and staff, what is the relationship between accommodations needed for online students and their persistence? University would like to address barriers to retention for this sub-population with more specificity than is provided by the quantitative survey information from . How do students perceive the value of peer interaction, online and offline to their experience? From their perspectives, what are the things that most influence their identification with ?

Situating my work within emerging research on the importance of building a sense of community and online retention, I will explore retention barriers experienced by students balancing professional and familial obligations enrolled in a graduate nursing program delivered online by University. In addition to identifying barriers to retention for this sub-population of the program, research focusing on ways in which a sense of belonging positively contribute to program retention will be used to develop a potential intervention to improve retention, as well as an evaluation tool to measure the intervention's impact.

Method:

Date of IRB Approval: 10/14/2019

Institutional Review Board



HARKLELF05182019141906

PI: Harkleroad, Laralee F

Retention Factors for Students with Family Obligations in a Graduate Nursing Online Program

IRB #192053

Last updated: 10/14/2019

I plan to use quantitative data previously collected by _____ via multiple surveys of _____ graduate nursing students to inform voluntary qualitative interviews I will conduct with students enrolled in the program, as well as program faculty and staff, to gain a richer understanding of how their experience affects their attitudes about the program and their identification with the school. Using the results of the quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews conducted as part of this study's research, I will identify ways to improve retention of this sub-population via specific intervention(s) developed based on scholarly research, and will then provide an evaluation tool to measure the intervention's success. The interviews will be conducted via video conference using Zoom or Google Hangouts technology, with willing program students, faculty, and staff to gain additional qualitative insight regarding the retention barriers identified and existing efforts to improve retention. Interview volunteers will be recruited by _____ University academic advising staff. Initially, they will send a call for volunteers email to the online graduate student population, faculty, and staff, following up with calls if the email does not secure sufficient volunteers. The exact number of interviews will be determined by the extent to which additional interviews produce new information and insights for ten to fifteen interviews.

While my research will be minimally intrusive, gaining access to faculty, administration or staff, and willing students of the online program will give me the ability to learn more about their feelings of belonging, identity, and satisfaction; however, participation at any level will be entirely voluntary and communication with any member of the community will only occur if that member first indicates interest in doing so and completes the online informed consent provided to them.

University offers online degrees in Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) through Nursing@_____ in partnership with their learning management system (LMS) provider, _____, Inc. Both programs are accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE). The DNP "integrates evidence-based practice with strong analytical and leadership principles to prepare nurses for the highest level of professional nursing practice" and can be completed in seven terms (Nursing _____, 2019). The MSN boasts a 94.9% board passage rate, which is well above the national average and can be completed in as few as nineteen months or as many as twenty-seven months (Nursing _____, 2019). Both programs advertise online programming advantages of 24/7 access to coursework and the ability to balance personal and educational commitments (Nursing _____, 2019).

Conclusion:

Technology's role in education is expected to continue to grow. When harnessed effectively, it has the ability to bring educational opportunities to those who would otherwise not experience its advantages. Through this research I hope to gain a clearer understanding of the ways in which the institution can improve engagement and program identity to increase retention of students balancing professional, familial, and personal responsibilities.

Is this a quality improvement initiative where the only intent is to: (a) implement a practice to improve the quality of patient care, and/or (b) collect patient or provider data about the implementation of the practice for clinical, practical, or administrative purposes (e.g., measuring or reporting provider performance data)?

Yes

No

Is the intent of the data/specimen collection for the purpose of contributing to generalizable knowledge and of which there is a hypothesis?

Yes

No

Date of IRB Approval: 10/14/2019

Institutional Review Board



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HARKLELF05182019141906

PI: Harkleroad, Laralee F

Retention Factors for Students with Family Obligations in a Graduate Nursing Online Program

IRB #192053

Last updated: 10/14/2019

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

Is there a potential conflict of interest for the Principal Investigator or key personnel? • The PI is responsible for assuring that no arrangement has been entered into where the value of the ownership interests will be affected by the outcome of the research and no arrangement has been entered into where the amount of compensation will be affected by the outcome of the research. • Assessment should include anyone listed as Principal Investigator, or other research personnel on page 1 of this application. Please note that ownership described below apply to the aggregate ownership of an individual investigator, his/her spouse, domestic partner and dependent children). Do not consider the combined ownership of all investigators.

Yes

No

Date of IRB Approval: 10/14/2019

Institutional Review Board



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Letter of Cooperation from Partner Organization

RE: Permission to conduct interviews

Dear Vanderbilt Researchers:

Via this letter, I grant permission for researcher Laralee Harkleroad from Vanderbilt University to conduct interviews via video and teleconference with me and other members of our institution's faculty, staff, administration and students during the fall 2019 and summer 2020 semesters. The purpose of the interviews is to explore retention issues within our graduate online nursing program in order to propose an intervention and a subsequent evaluation tool for the intervention proposed.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Murphy, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives

Print your name and title here



Signature

10/14/19
Date

Appendix D Interview Coding Matrix

	Advisor	Breakout	Clinical	Group
Student 1 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently	"I have a student support person. I have an academic support person. I have a financial aid person."		"And, I do, unfortunately run into that because of being a military spouse moving every three years. It's hard to get that footing and that network of people that can vouch for you." "They used to be able to pick times. I don't know what's going on. I haven't even asked questions about this yet because I got there, I was, like, I don't want to know, I'm not even going to bug myself," but I guess they changed like our clinical placements or our clinical class to be done by regions, as opposed to when we can work, our work schedule and our clinical schedule around the classes available."	"I don't know if it's because I'm more of an introvert, that I don't openly seek study groups or anything like that."
Student 2 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Part-Time	"The one [social media group] I use the most is the one that has the most members because it's a great place to just post a general question if I'm too busy and don't want to reach out to my Student Advisor." "Um, it's typically emails. There's so many emails that go out and it'll be from, like, the student advisor or letters from the dean. I just joined the Student Advisory Council." "They email and I feel like they try. I'm pretty comfortable at this point. I think I had a lot of questions when I first started and so my very first, like, Student Advisor, which I feel like they kind of change pretty frequently too." "Or, if it's [an email] coming from a professor or like our course lead will send out emails before a test, then, and not actually not earlier professors, the lead of the program but anything she sends out, same thing. Like, that's high importance, but think, I don't pay much attention to 'here's your new student advisor, it's your ninth one in a year.'"	"It [breakout sessions] feels very pointless. I try to be very positive, but I just cringe every time, like, I'm gonna put you guys in your breakout sessions,' and I'm like, hating the forced interaction."	"We have, like, a clinical placement specialist who I've been in regular contact with. We email probably three or four times a week because I will start clinical soon." "And, then my clinical placement specialist, anything [email] that has her name I'm reading and rereading."	"So, there are multiple groups for the University. There's like an admitted one that has, you know, thousands including alumni. They're in this like admitted group, or the nursing programs. And, there was going to be one for our like specific cohort, but I don't think anybody ever made one. So, there's not that I know of at this time, like, one just for my classmates that are attending at that same, but there's a pharmacology one that I've heard of." "Yeah, we've actually had, um, it's it's kind of crazy, our little core group has ended up passing through one another's towns on occasion and we always end up meeting up. That's one of the things as like we're nearing the end I'm like, I don't want to lose some of these people."
Program Progress = 6 Semester Children Under 12 = 3 Employment Status = Not Currently	"I hadn't really heard from my advisor, I mean, my academic advisor."		"And, my clinical placement coordinator or specialist, whatever their name is, I'll open those emails, and from my teachers."	
Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Full-Time			"Yeah, and then, you know, they [another institution] took us around different places. You get time to explore. You get time to just be in silence because first of all your cell phone was that working."	
Program Progress = 1 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Full-Time	"I didn't know I had an academic advisor."	"Um, well, the one class that I'm in, my advanced pathophysiology class, we do like those breakout sessions and it's a struggle."		"So, I don't know if you're going to publish this, but I'd be curious to see like what that age group is because I feel like, you know, we do these like breakout groups as a study group."

	Advisor	Breakout	Clinical	Group
Student 1 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"I have a student support person. I have an academic support person. I have a financial aid person."</p>		<p>"And, I do, unfortunately run into that because of being a military spouse moving every three years. It's hard to get that footing and that network of people that can vouch for you."</p> <p>"They used to be able to pick times. I don't know what's going on. I haven't even asked questions about this yet because I got there, I was, like, I don't want to know, I'm not even going to bug myself,' but I guess they changed like our clinical placements or our clinical class to be done by regions, as opposed to when we can work, our work schedule and our clinical schedule around the classes available."</p>	<p>"I don't know if it's because I'm more of an introvert, that I don't openly seek study groups or anything like that."</p>
Student 6 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"I talk to my student success advisor quite a bit."</p> <p>"I don't think I've ever spoken to my academic advisor."</p> <p>"But, my student advisor and I think he's the success advisor, he's just kind of like my go to person who kind of says, you know, this is where you go, or this or, you know, he gives me information."</p>	<p>"They were going to use breakout sessions in pharmacology and the clinical the students basically were like, 'No, it's a waste of time,' because again it would be students answering questions who may have the wrong answer."</p>		<p>"In fact, I was just talking to her. And, then she brought into our little group another girl, who I think I also reached out to her at one point, and there were three of us."</p> <p>"Seriously, we talk three or four times a day, even by Zoom. We do all of our study groups together. We do our projects together."</p> <p>"We do have a group chat."</p> <p>"And, it [orientation] talked about forming study groups."</p> <p>"And, for those looking for a study group, you know like, this girl that reached out to me, I don't really have any place to send her too."</p> <p>"So, I just basically, you know, I told her, I said, 'Hey, we're going to do this separate tutoring group. So, maybe within the tutoring group, she can find her group, right? I don't even know if the student success person would be a resource for her."</p> <p>"There were a couple of, like, little group text groups that were started."</p>
Student 7 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Part-Time	<p>"And, it was it was really, it was rather frustrating because first I thought, 'Okay, do I speak to my student advisor?'"</p> <p>"So, then I was like, 'Well, maybe let me just talk to my student advisor first,' because I got somebody that would just call me out to be like, 'Hey, I'm just checking in on you see how you're doing. How's your semester go?'"</p> <p>"My student advisor, not so much my academic advisor."</p> <p>"My academic advisor, to be honest with you, the only time I ever heard from her, which I think the one I had actually resigned halfway through my program, and then this second one that I have now, I mean, she sent an email just to say, 'I'm your academic advisor. If you need anything, let me know.'"</p> <p>"And, then fast forward to time after that, the only time I heard from my academic advisor was when I got the email saying, 'Oh, by the way, because you failed this assignment, you had a b minus in this class. You're going to be repeating it because, you know, you're pretty much on academic warning.'"</p>	<p>"You come back from breakout session, and then people just read and just read what they just made up, and I'm just like, 'I am paying \$8,000 a term, seriously?'"</p>	<p>"I'm sure it would be a completely different experience if I was an on-campus student and didn't have to work, you know, had everything paid for and all I had to do was wake up, study, and sleep."</p> <p>"Let's just exchange numbers. We can call each other and just talk on the phone once in a while, or text each other if we have questions or concerns, you know like, clinical placements, like any suggestions, if you know anybody locally that you can refer me to, like that."</p> <p>"Yeah, like I can say so many times that we've had a professor who rolls up in class and says, 'Oh, I've had a long day in clinic today. You know, like, I just left clinic, and then I'm here like, okay, two hours for a test.'"</p> <p>"You know, the curriculum is rigorous and intense but you learn a lot. At all the clinical rotations I've been to everyone has basically had nothing but good things to say because of how much knowledge that we were pressed with before we show up to our clinical site. So, I think that goes to say a lot about the curriculum that we have. So, when I hear them, like, yeah I'm proud to be a University student."</p> <p>"It would be really nice for the in like doing the admission process for the admission counselors for the admission department to be straight up about certain things about the program to students, particularly with like, clinical placement."</p> <p>"Yeah, because I know people that have had to drive about two hours one way to our clinical site."</p> <p>"Every time I was doing clinical, I just called my clinical placement coordinator and was like, 'Hey, I've made contact with this person.'"</p> <p>"I feel like they should really invest more resources on having students be the forefront of that because placement coordinators...no offense to them."</p> <p>"I know a student right now who is actually at risk of not graduating with us because she's still lacking women's health clinical hours."</p>	

	Advisor	Breakout	Clinical	Group
Student 1 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently	"I have a student support person. I have an academic support person. I have a financial aid person."		"And, I do, unfortunately run into that because of being a military spouse moving every three years. It's hard to get that footing and that network of people that can vouch for you." "They used to be able to pick times. I don't know what's going on. I haven't even asked questions about this yet because I got there, I was, like, I don't want to know, I'm not even going to bug myself, but I guess they changed like our clinical placements or our clinical class to be done by regions, as opposed to when we can work, our work schedule and our clinical schedule around the classes available."	"I don't know if it's because I'm more of an introvert, that I don't openly seek study groups or anything like that."
Student 8 Program Progress = 4 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Not Currently	"So, that was like the only time I spoke to her, which she is still my current academic advisor." "I was the one who contacted her because I was contemplating on dropping a class for the time being."	"I don't find a breakout session helpful because sometimes when we're being put into groups, we go in there and we're like, 'What are we supposed to do?'" "I'm not a big fan of breakout sessions."	"You know, we really can't be spending a whole lot of time trying to call around just to find preceptor. So, that's something that I, that is what attracted me to the University. Because of the whole preceptor thing, and of course because I got into the program." I had to quit my job because my employers refused to accommodate my schedule. Now that I'm in clinical rotation and sometimes, our researchers, their schedule changes, too. So, I have to accommodate them, right? But, what am I going to tell my job, you know, so it ended up that I have to resign."	"So, I'm more like to myself. Not that I can't socialize, but there are certain things. If I could do something needing concentration, I can't be talking and it gets very distracting but this is why I never do study groups, even though they keep saying that, 'Oh, you know what, studies have shown that it works'. "And, the other thing nobody ever really suggested a study group." "Nobody ever mentioned in the class. So, I don't know if they actually had a study group and I'm not aware of it, or nobody did it." "But, you know, several students have just connected maybe in breakout sessions or whatever and exchange phone numbers and that's turned into a, not just a study group but maybe just a support group."
Student 9 Program Progress = Unassigned Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Part-Time		"And, then I have found that, I would say in my first nursing research class, the instructor there really tried to like make communications with people and she would talk to people and, you know, we would really talk a lot but I don't think that happens in any of my classes right now. Like, nobody really. We all just kind of sit there and like don't say a whole lot, and I do think like, the pharm class has, we do a breakout session every time."	"And, I just think like, you know, that was not quite so clinical based. Whereas, the other one is more clinical based, and I feel like students are more interested and engaged in the clinical classes, than they are in the non clinical type classes." "I don't know like, you know, because we have like have this Facebook page for admitted students at nursing and you'll find that a lot of people will just complain about those non clinical classes."	"I think that too sometimes, you know, because I'm really, I'm not big on to having a ton of people that I have to try to keep in contact with, it's just too much work. But, you know, we do have, like group assignments and things like that." "So, we have really like put the kibosh on all our communications. Like, before our first pharmacology test, she texted me for like a half an hour with like different questions on this and that. And, I was like, just go by the syllabus and what's in the book, and what we learned. It was just, for me, that's just too much. It's overwhelming and, you know, when we first met, I thought, 'Oh, that's great,' you know, There'll be a study partner, a friend but then, then there's that."
Student 10 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Part-Time	"Actually I have probably more interaction with the academic advisor, but I know the student support person is there in case I need it, I guess."	"There's, I wouldn't say opportunities, no, I mean, we do get like some like, I know in my recent Class a lot and then my Patho class, we would go into groups to like discuss things. You could like get to know people there, but it's not really the platform where you reach out."	"I think one of my main concerns for me, and I don't know how other people do, especially for people that have to work full time, is the whole clinical thing. Um, how am I going? That's like a real concern that I think about. If I get to that point, how am I going to manage a job and not get fired and go to clinical. I mean, because I can't do it on the weekends. I mean, I have like one day off during the week. I mean, I guess some other nurses, you know, work three days a week and can do it the other two. But, let's say I'm still in my job, I won't be able to make a job change just because of clinical. I think that's a concern. How is that going to work? And, I'm where I kind of feel like I've heard that people are really cutting down in their hours and even not working. And, I'm just like, I don't know if I'll be able to. That's just a worry."	"I think they said some people have had study groups and had had success, but they didn't say highly recommended, at least for the classes I've taken so far."

	Advisor	Breakout	Clinical	Group
<p>Student 1 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently</p>	<p>"I have a student support person. I have an academic support person. I have a financial aid person."</p>		<p>"And, I do, unfortunately run into that because of being a military spouse moving every three years. It's hard to get that footing and that network of people that can vouch for you."</p> <p>"They used to be able to pick times. I don't know what's going on. I haven't even asked questions about this yet because I got there, I was, like, I don't want to know, I'm not even going to bug myself, but I guess they changed like our clinical placements or our clinical class to be done by regions, as opposed to when we can work, our work schedule and our clinical schedule around the classes available."</p>	<p>"I don't know if it's because I'm more of an introvert, that I don't openly seek study groups or anything like that."</p>
<p>Student 11 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Part-Time</p>	<p>"And, so, we brought this up to our student advisors. At least, I know me and another girl have and they told us initially that unit courses tend to be lighter in coursework, and we both brought it up to them. We were like, 'Just to let you know, this course has a ton of stuff to do.'"</p>			<p>"And, in conjunction with that, I have created a great study group that I met these girls in my first half of this class."</p> <p>"But, I think with, like, personalities I don't know if they could. I think encouraging study groups is a good way of doing it."</p> <p>"But, I still think on the individual thing that you actually have to find people that you mesh with, because I've had plenty of study groups where if people didn't come prepared, or people had bad personalities, or you know what I mean, it's not conducive to the environment in which you're studying, right?"</p> <p>"Like, our study group literally talks for hours and it has</p>
<p>Student 12 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently</p>	<p>"I've had like three or four academic advisors in this program."</p> <p>"I don't even know who my academic advisor is at this point. I emailed my first academic advisor once."</p>	<p>"And, a lot of the setup for these NP classes are breakout groups, have you heard anybody talk about breakout groups? Okay, breakout groups are a waste of time, and it really makes students feel that they are cheated and paying for nothing."</p> <p>"And, if all you're going to do is breakout groups, then don't have those live sessions because they're a waste of time."</p>	<p>"And, I guess this is a good time to bring up the clinical placement, especially."</p> <p>"I need 112 hours to graduate, like, why would I say that? And, she's like, 'Well, email them back and ask him, you know, I don't really know if you'll be able to get the extension,' and I'm like, 'How do you not know this, like, when you offer this to me as a solution?' And, you know, I kind of laid it out there. Like, this is the difference between having to take out another student loan to repeat this course again and having the whole workload again. Something that I'm going to end up getting an A in all this, I'm going to have to repeat it, I'm, you know, scraping by financially because I can't work because I'm in this full time program. Like, this is a big deal. I just picture these placement specialist up there. They're young and I just don't feel like they get it. Like, I just, it's not just a job. Like, what you're doing is important. It affects people's lives."</p> <p>"I've had three other advisors. I had one who I believe got fired because she was like my placement specialist on Friday and then I get this email on Monday that she's no longer my placement specialist."</p> <p>"Advertise that you assist or that you try or you're there to support, but do not advertise that you find the clinical sites because that to me, after my experience, is false advertising."</p> <p>"And I'm like, 'Well, how about this,' and, you know, I've been calling places every day for three and a half weeks. So, then, it's hard to explain because I don't have the emails to read to you, but she's just kind of resistant. So, finally I emailed all this, and I thought well maybe they will have a solution because they had been emailing whoever is above her and then she finally was like, I don't know."</p> <p>"It's not that I'm wasting time on that because I know that classes are important too, but I am directing so much time towards that when I should be focusing on my clinical experience, you know, like really learning how to be a nurse practitioner, like all that other stuff should be done prior to starting."</p>	<p>"She's my yes to that question, and we've been in it since the beginning and she actually graduates in August. And, you know it starts out you don't talk to anybody, but after like two or three classes you start having, like, group assignments and then you start getting phone numbers so you can ask questions about even individual assignments."</p> <p>"So, we all had a big group chat, but then you start realizing that some people are more invested than others are and some people are just trying to get certain things from people. So, then that's when you really start to downsize your group to the people you can trust and who are actually going to put in the effort like you're putting in the effort."</p>
<p>Student 13 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Part-Time</p>	<p>"My student advisor was Caroline. She has since moved on, climbed the ladder or something, and she was amazing. Like, yeah she was amazing. My academic advisor, I really didn't have to reach out to her often. I did reach out to her during this whole thing because it was good we were going on break, and I needed to be able to sign up for my next classes but I was still having trouble with this exam, it was just such a nightmare."</p>		<p>"My clinical person called me, the clinical advisor person, and said, 'I'm so sorry your clinical site fell through,' which I was supposed to start the next week. I had done like four hours of education because it was through the government so you had to do all this stuff."</p> <p>"And, I said, 'That's not, that's not okay. Like, I'm not postponing my graduation because you can't find me a clinical site, are you crazy?'"</p> <p>"Originally, I was going to let the University do it when they said, 'Oh, no problem. we definitely get your clinical experience,' and then I have a big problem."</p>	<p>"And, I think that what happens is, when you get you know too many people in these study groups, if you wind up like chit chatting too much. And, there's a lot of content, so when we usually sit down we do it every exam week."</p>

	Advisor	Breakout	Clinical	Group
Student 1 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"I have a student support person. I have an academic support person. I have a financial aid person."</p>		<p>"And, I do, unfortunately run into that because of being a military spouse moving every three years. It's hard to get that footing and that network of people that can vouch for you."</p> <p>"They used to be able to pick times. I don't know what's going on. I haven't even asked questions about this yet because I got there, I was, like, I don't want to know, I'm not even going to bug myself," but I guess they changed like our clinical placements or our clinical class to be done by regions, as opposed to when we can work, our work schedule and our clinical schedule around the classes available."</p>	<p>"I don't know if it's because I'm more of an introvert, that I don't openly seek study groups or anything like that."</p>
Student 14 Program Progress = 6 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Not Currently			<p>"My poor placement guy, the poor thing."</p> <p>"No, they won't pay, which makes it a little tough for our placement people to find precepts for us."</p> <p>"I drive two hours to my clinical site, because that's the closest they have."</p> <p>"The University has a 99-mile cut off. So, your placement, your placement coordinator person can find your clinical up to 100 miles away."</p> <p>My preceptor, my clinical placement guy, is awesome. He is very good. He tries but I was going to go to one of the hospitals, the major hospitals here, they wouldn't take me because they weren't going to do the paperwork to get the University into their system."</p> <p>"In all fairness, that was one of the selling points that got me into University is that they find our clinical placement because it's brutal out there trying to find clinical placement."</p> <p>"I kind of did it [chose the University] because there was another University student at the clinical site I was at."</p> <p>"I knew for a fact, I was confident that, if I don't find a clinical site, then it is your job to find it for me."</p>	<p>"So, other than that, it's been very, very challenging, but the key to making it and then if you can put this in your research, the key to making it through is you have got to find yourself a group of study buddies."</p>
Student 15 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Full-Time	<p>"I also let my academic person know."</p>		<p>"My clinical placement person does not respond to my emails."</p> <p>"You [the University] need to hire more clinical placement personnel."</p> <p>"So, that whole process to get it nailed down to, you know, multiple interactions and probably, you know, six to eight weeks before it was finalized for me."</p>	<p>"It [a group] just makes it better. I know that in nursing school [undergraduate], I had that core group. There were four of us and we got through it together."</p> <p>"Yeah, maybe. Like, form a study group. Well, the initial contact I had had with them was for us to be a study group."</p>
Student 16 Program Progress = 1 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Full-Time	<p>"I feel like I was pretty prepared, actually. I talked to my student advisor before I started and asked if it was, like, feasible for me to do full time this semester and he said that it should be fine with the classes I was taking this semester. I only took pathology and research. There's only two classes and my work was flexible enough where I could have two days off. So, it worked out."</p> <p>"Yeah, I even don't think I talked to my academic advisor."</p>	<p>"So, like, I've just heard it through there and things like that, or even when we do, like, breakout sessions, people like have said things like, "No, you know, like I have this issue and make it so we had some time."</p> <p>"So, I didn't feel like I learned some things, depending on, like, what we were doing in the breakout session, but I also felt like it was beneficial, with it being online."</p> <p>"But, I did think like having that breakout session in between really helped because then you have to, like, start communicating and talking, but besides that, I think, like, I was pretty good with the two hours."</p> <p>"Honestly, you just got to show up and have, like, our case studies done and participate in the breakout session and share the answer that we wrote up."</p>	<p>"I don't know. I honestly just like her. That's the only reason, like, why I actually, like, looked into the University because one of my friends was doing a program and she was like, The University actually has like a really good clinical placement setting and stuff, so you should try to go through them."</p> <p>I think Southern prepared us really well to just because I did have those settings where I had to do an assessment in front of professors and we even had like live patients we had to do it on so like I feel like being involved in the clinical world now, and then like having to do it again in front of somebody I don't think I'm so nervous.</p>	<p>"Outside of class, I guess I haven't interacted that much, but we did create, like, a part time group."</p>
Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Part-Time			<p>"Yeah, there's not a sense of community per se, in the breakout session."</p> <p>"Live sessions, they have breakout groups, and you're focused on the questions to get to be able to present and so there's not a lot of personal interaction, per se. There are some but most are very much usually task oriented."</p>	

	Advisor	Breakout	Clinical	Group
Student 1 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently	"I have a student support person. I have an academic support person. I have a financial aid person."		"And, I do, unfortunately run into that because of being a military spouse moving every three years. It's hard to get that footing and that network of people that can vouch for you." "They used to be able to pick times. I don't know what's going on. I haven't even asked questions about this yet because I got there, I was, like, I don't want to know, I'm not even going to bug myself, but I guess they changed like our clinical placements or our clinical class to be done by regions, as opposed to when we can work, our work schedule and our clinical schedule around the classes available."	"I don't know if it's because I'm more of an introvert, that I don't openly seek study groups or anything like that."
Student 18 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently			"And, I'm like, great, you know, I could drop the kids off at the school before clinic. I could pick up up." "And, then finally, I just emailed HR and I'm like, you know, because they have like a student preceptor." "Because at some point, you know, before we started clinicals, we were told, 'If you have leads, and they're not affiliated, we can make it work,' you know, the impression was that will try to make that happen."	"Yes, there's community, but I also feel like maybe it's more just within our own little groups." "There's one group that has like a group text going sometimes." "And, then there's a couple of us that have a little group on Facebook Messenger." "I just, there's so many of us, I feel like in my little group that feel like we're missing out on three things: EKGs, labs, and x-rays."

	Immersion	Life	Online	Support
Student 1 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"You're going to have to do this assessment at health immersion. They were sending all of us that have already completed it, put our time into this, completed everything."</p> <p>"We're trying to find out. Hey, you know, we already did this. Why are we going to have to do it again at immersion week? And, they're like, 'Oh, well, you're going to be on a list. All you got to do is let somebody know.' Okay, well, somebody could say, 'I did this.' Like, how will people, where's, like, what do we do? Now, they've changed it back to everyone's going to be doing it."</p>		<p>"It's hard because it is online. Everything comes through email."</p>	<p>"I have a student support person. I have an academic support person. I have a financial aid person."</p>
Student 2 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Part-Time	<p>"Well, maybe, so every class does like their immersion weekend, or every cohort, where they go on campus. And, they have all this information, all these emails, and we shouldn't be on them. I don't think we were on all of them, but some of the general ones went out to everyone."</p>	<p>"This is an exciting week for pharm, for me. So, it's like all rules kind of go out the window. I mean, I had all my studies stuff out in the living room earlier this morning before they even left for school. And, it was like my younger one kept talking to me and then he is like, I don't know, he asked me something I guess about why I sit there on the phone, very distracting. So, I kind of have a spot, actually where I'm at now. It's like a little couch in our bedroom and I'll like just cover it with my studying stuff and a cup of coffee in the windowsill and we're good to go."</p> <p>"I mean, even working only two days a week. Like, I feel like such a whiner... weeks are not easy. I'll maybe spend like 10 hours a week just doing the asynchronous lectures and that's probably a minimum, I'd say it's about 10 on exam weeks or weeks where I have a big paper. I mean, we're talking 30, 40 hours of school work and studying. So, I have to tell some of my girlfriends who, you know, are like working like some of them aren't working moms or working moms and school. Like, and that's nothing against them, but like I have a good friend who's a stay at home mom and she like does not get it, and I'm like, yeah, but did you hear? Like, I'm putting in enough time to equate a full time job."</p>		
Student 3 Program Progress = 6 Semester Children Under 12 = 3 Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"I felt like, for the amount of money that I'm paying for this program, it should be streamlined, especially the immersion part."</p>			
Student 4 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Full-Time		<p>"They [children] have all their activities out in the living area."</p> <p>"I get just almost cursed out without curse words, just for not being what she [professor] considered philosophy about the family relationship."</p> <p>"But, with this one [second professor] it's kind of like okay, that's just part of your life situation going on."</p>	<p>"And, it was even offered for the online students. So, it was like okay, I have an option to do this. I'm not excluded and I'm not mandated. So, right, just kind of gives you, you know, a good feeling, for me anyway."</p>	
Student 5 Program Progress = 1 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Full-Time		<p>"I feel like it's geared towards working moms."</p> <p>"You know, it was based on like - work-life balance. Like, taking that piece [commuting] out of it. Like, having to drive somewhere and having to drive home."</p>		<p>"And, then they did a student support program orientation."</p>

	Immersion	Life	Online	Support
Student 6 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"I'm like, for instance, when they do immersion weekend where everybody goes to Boston. I'm like really excited about seeing everyone in person. So excited."</p>	<p>"We [study group] know everything about, you know, our family dynamics. And, we've talked even jokingly, because one is in California, one's New Hampshire, and I'm in South Georgia going back to Florida, so we really could not practice together but we would like to."</p> <p>"And, I was able to get to know them before this semester even started, we because I have such a good relationship with them."</p> <p>"So, anyway, back to your original question, I have a really good relationship and I enjoy my relationship with them because we have a good relationship. We're able to say to each other, I think, you know, things that need to be said."</p> <p>"I don't know, but my experience has been, as far as having a grasp on sort of the challenges that each student may be facing within their personal life in addition to the program, that student success person, typically is going to be the one who has the big picture."</p>		
Student 7 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Part-Time	<p>"They're going to be biases. They're going to be differences, but I think what really helped was when I did immersion weekend. It really helps to just see some of your classmates in person."</p> <p>"They [the University] could try and come at it and say, 'Okay, how about we look within each cohort and we categorize and say if students within with like within a specific number of zip codes...and so within that number of zip codes, we can say okay maybe once every three months you guys will have like a location immersion or even just host an event, and just kind of have an opportunity to come in and just, you know, kind of share ideas on how can you improve the program'"</p>	<p>"I don't think it's just happening in each person's personal lives. Like, that I just didn't feel like that was a priority."</p>		
Student 8 Program Progress = 4 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"The thing with the immersion weekend is we did have a class for this to train."</p> <p>"Prior to going to immersion weekend, I knew that we're going to have a class on that and I was pretty excited about it too. I've never sutured before. But, then we didn't even get to it."</p>	<p>"But, I do know that sometimes, you know, the University may have some challenges finding pieces of this, which is understandable because, you know, more than a few of the schools need a preceptor. I live nearby some major universities here and they also have family nurse practitioner program."</p> <p>"And, of course, the majority of us have family's. Family dynamics are a little different for everybody."</p> <p>"So, just working as a family nurse practitioner, that will be like a whole new, like brand new journey that I will be stepping into."</p> <p>"I kind of, you know, expected that grad school was not going to be easy, right, and I think we all should expect that, especially going to a family nurse practitioner program, know that there's gonna be a lot to learn."</p> <p>"Support Specialist. I have developed a very good relationship with Caroline."</p> <p>"The next and next and then they'll start kind of like debating. Then professors will bring in like their real life, like things that happens at their clinic for example, and they'll bring it in as an example, which is super helpful."</p> <p>"And then, when a professor is bringing, like apply real life to what's in a book, it's just bringing in real life examples and sometimes it's the professor's personality."</p>		

	Immersion	Life	Online	Support
<p>Student 9 Program Progress = Unassigned Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Part-Time</p>	<p>"I'm hoping that at the immersion weekend, you know, and getting to meet some people face to face and to talk with them and sit next to them and things like that to kind of build a little bit closer relationships." "I mean, yeah, people keep saying, like you know, it's important to get to know your classmates and they're going to help you out and blah blah blah but I don't know I don't feel that. Like, I haven't."</p>	<p>"I would say, I've got a pretty good relationship with Peggy my research instructor, because I, I really struggle in that class. "And, so we meet like once a week, and she just kind of talked me off my ledge. And, you know, kind of guides me on what's what and what I needed to be thinking about and looking at, and I really liked that and I enjoyed that a lot."</p> <p>"And, granted, it only affects me if I want to, you know? if I want, if I choose to change over. So, it's not like it was a, you know, a terrible life and death thing."</p> <p>"We met like once or twice and we've met a couple times. She's come over here a couple times and I've gone to her house once or twice."</p>	<p>"And, I don't really fully believe that online communication is that relationship building unless you like have a goal and stuff like that. "Like, I feel like a lot of it [Facebook student group] is just people complaining."</p> <p>"For, you know, like just for online media and things like that."</p>	<p>"I think the best experience for a person that's not like a teacher has been Alex, my student support specialist."</p> <p>"I guess if I had to pick one person it would probably be my student support person, just because I don't really feel like I've built any relationships, any strong relationships, with other students or professors."</p> <p>"But, I think as a support person to feel like they're helping me through the program and they, you know, they really care about what's going on, I'd probably choose Alex."</p>
<p>Student 10 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Part-Time</p>		<p>"I guess my life and the job that I was in and everything just didn't, wasn't, conducive to my learning and my studying."</p> <p>"I think what was killer was, for me, the the weekly posts and exams. So, we did a topic each week and had an exam on them, and that was not flexible. That was not conducive to my busy life." "For patho, and I just felt like okay I know it may be a weed out class, but I just felt like that wasn't very conducive to juggling life."</p>	<p>"I feel like there's so many other emails that I get from them that's for more the actual college that they could probably weed out or even just have like a wall of things for specifically the FNP online. Like you know, updates like that. But, I do check my email. I do try to read them all, but I do find that sometimes I do miss some things because I have so many of these emails from the whole university that don't apply to me."</p>	<p>"I think, well, I mean, I think what's really important, which I think like, they really have down pat is like, the support, the student support and the academic advisors. I feel like they're more available than they were in my undergrad, which I think is amazing. And, I think that's awesome. And, that's been really helpful for me."</p>
<p>Student 11 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 1 Employment Status = Part-Time</p>		<p>"I think from class to class, expectations seem to change and what they give you as far as help and assistance in those classes seems to change. And, I think that's what's almost deceiving about the program. Like, in our research class. When we used to get like, what is it like our grading rubric, it very clearly stated what they wanted from us. And, now like our grading rubrics are very generic."</p>	<p>"Everything is everywhere. I'm like, this is crazy. Like, to try to figure out where stuff goes. And, there's not even like, anything that clearly states when assignments are due. Like the assignments don't have due dates on them. So it's like, this is crazy because your syllabus is generic. They don't necessarily have due dates on them either."</p>	<p>"I have created a great support group that I met these girls in my first half of this class. And when I saw them in pharmacology, I ended up messaging one of them"</p> <p>"I wouldn't want my teacher to be like, 'Hey, here's a group!' and then pair you up with someone. But, at least that would be nice if at the beginning of class, maybe they say like, 'Hey, I'm for anyone who's interested in the study group, you can post your name on a wall, put your time zones down or whatever, and then you guys can contact each other,' so at least there's like an interest there."</p>
<p>Student 12 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently</p>	<p>"And, then you all get to meet at immersion weekend. Then it's like, 'Hey, let's all meet back for graduation,' and you just build these relationships with people across the country."</p> <p>"The most connected I've ever felt with the University was immersion weekend. I guess it's because I was there, but it totally changes your mindset, because you're like, there and you can see it and you can feel it. And, you're like, 'Man, this is like huge, what I'm doing.' Like, before that, you're working and you have your regular life and you're doing this school thing, but, like, going to immersion weekend makes it real. And, then you get to connect with that group of people and you know see them in person."</p>	<p>"And, I felt so bad saying that to my kids because they need to learn, like, okay, mom's got to get this done and they pretty much hang out or, you know, they play in the living room, while I'm either sitting in my bedroom or the office like typing out papers or studying for a test or whatever I might be doing. And, sometimes it flows into weekends and I'm like, okay, I know it's Saturday, but today I have to get this done I have to focus on this to be successful."</p> <p>"And so, I've communicated it to my family and my family always complains, which is understandable. But, like, even my extended family, like they don't get it."</p> <p>"Like, I have people wanting to do big family photos and I'm having to tell them no. Like, I had to."</p>		<p>"My student support person just recently left and I emailed her before she left and told her, like, she was my most valuable asset and this entire program. Like, having her to reach out to me and to be able to reach out to her."</p> <p>"She was always there for me. Like, even going through what I'm going through now with my women's health site like, I need her more now than I have through the entire program and she's gone. And, I don't even know, like I thought, 'Well, I can reach out to student support and tell someone else,' and I'm like, 'No. I just don't think they'll get it like she got it,' because we, you know, she just built that relationship with me over time and I really felt like she cared about my success in this."</p> <p>"I almost emailed a guy who's a student support person, as well, and he's over the student ambassadors to explain, you know like, I was going to tell him like I don't know who my student support person is now."</p>
<p>Student 13 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Part-Time</p>	<p>"So, I mean I've certainly become friendly with a lot of people. Then, during immersion weekend, it was so nice to get together with everybody and see face to face."</p> <p>"So, I thoroughly enjoyed immersion weekend."</p> <p>"And, that was it, and then we stayed together at immersion weekend."</p> <p>"When I got to immersion weekend, I found her right away and gave her the biggest hug. I'm like, thank you for like helping me and having my back."</p>	<p>"So, but then it got to the point where I sat down with my husband. I'm like, you know what, I am not being a good mom, I'm not being a good employee, and I'm not being a good student. I'm like, I'm not giving anything 100%. I'm stretched too thin."</p>	<p>"When we study stuff, we do these live sessions and study online."</p>	

	Immersion	Life	Online	Support
Student 14 Program Progress = 6 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"And, you know, we've been in these classes now for two years, and we finally saw each other and realized it was the best. We were like, oh my gosh, look at you in real life! I mean, these are the people you've been in classes with for two years, and you get to see them in real life."</p>	<p>"We're not the traditional University students who live at home with their mom and dad or in the dorms, who don't have kids, don't have lives, don't have mortgages, don't have financial responsibilities, significant others, all these life things, you know?"</p> <p>"So, because of her [chronically absent student] we can have one excused absence from live sessions, one."</p>	<p>"They [the University] have to understand that if they're doing this online thing, they're going to get students that are moms, that have sick kids, that have families. We're not University students in the dorms coming in and just taking classes and going home and living with mom and dad."</p>	
Student 15 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Full-Time		<p>"I don't even know, you know, some of these people I'm in class with...there's one of my colleagues, who is like literally selling her house to downsize because it's expensive, and she has a young family."</p>	<p>"But, I think that some of my friends struggle with the transition to these types of programs, you know? I've done a lot of online education."</p>	<p>"Maybe that, you know, for the same amount of money they can offer tutoring support times."</p>
Student 16 Program Progress = 1 Semester Children Under 12 = Not Applicable Employment Status = Full-Time	<p>"You know, doing a health assessment and it being right during immersion feels like a lot of pressure."</p>	<p>"And, I think it was just like fitting in like a social life, as well is bad because I work weekends. And, then just trying to match up and like having a relationship with my husband. I am married."</p> <p>"I work in a hospital, but I think becoming like a family nurse practitioner, I can't necessarily do any shadowing there."</p>		<p>"I guess I've only really talked to my student support person."</p>
Student 17 Program Progress = 3 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Part-Time	<p>"Everybody that I've talked to has had an absolutely amazing experience at the immersion weekend."</p>	<p>"Because I had to. I ended up quitting my nursing job. I ended up really limiting the amount of time I spent with the family. I was focused solely on school, and I ended up not being able to pass, even with that."</p> <p>"We both talked about the availability, of course. I knew that he would have to take on a lot more responsibility."</p> <p>"You know, you just, you can't plan in graduate school for life events that are thrown to you."</p> <p>"Same for my husband, too. So, we kind of both set aside all the other life events that occur and, you know, he was the single parent while I was in school. And, he was doing a lot of it on his own."</p>	<p>"You know, the difficult part about online courses is that sometimes the timing is later in the evening or, you know, or when other quieter spots have closed."</p> <p>"Being an online student, it's difficult to build those relationships."</p> <p>"But, this new program director is all about humanity, you know. I do feel that she is voicing it and encouraging it and I'm hoping that just from her guidance and leadership that more of the online students will take advantage of that community, you know?"</p> <p>"No, I think being an online student, I think that you do give up that community environment. It's something that you lose by being an online student, you know. But, I do believe that that each online program is seeing the same effects that everybody's working towards, like community. But, it takes the community to want it as well, you know?"</p>	
Student 18 Program Progress = 5 Semester Children Under 12 = 2 Employment Status = Not Currently	<p>"You know, it's funny because supposedly, I don't know, somebody said, 'Hey, don't forget there's we will have some swag for you at the immersion dinner.'"</p>			

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