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Online Orientation and Reference Course for Online Master of Science in Nursing Program

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Preloading student satisfaction and success into an online program orientation course can strengthen the potential for student retention and success. This can be crucial to educational institutions that receive performance-based funding. For students, early access to peer support, faculty advisors, and university resources can provide support and a sense of community and belonging. Students experiencing frustrations with technology, communication difficulties, work-related pressure or any perceived lack of university support can provide the tipping point in students' decisions to withdraw. Success in online graduate nursing education requires students to maintain their motivation to ensure that barriers do not become insurmountable.

This is a case review of an online orientation developed for an online Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) Program. The Orientation and Reference Course uses the same learning management system (LMS) as the program of study courses to acquaint new students with the nuances of the system while focusing content on graduate study requirements, program structures, and expectations within the MSN program.

Background

Healthcare efficiency and transformation to meet the needs of an aging population and the requirements of healthcare reform demand a more educated and prepared nursing workforce (Institute of Medicine, 2010; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). More and more nurses are interested in answering this need and advancing their education by earning an MSN degree. Nurses have found online graduate programs attractive pathways to earning the MSN because of the increased accessibility to university programs and services without the necessity of being physically present on campus. The ability to access online education from home or work, day or night, is an enticing and compelling way to balance work, life, and school. These two major forces within nursing, the need for efficiency in higher education combined with a trend toward performance-based funding, requires nursing programs to increase their focus on retention and graduation rates while maintaining or growing program enrollments (Miao, 2012).

Innovation and practices which meet student needs and ultimately serve the nursing profession and the public are required by the accrediting bodies of nursing programs, i.e., The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) and the Accrediting Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN). Both organizations support continuous improvements in student support systems (Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, 2009; National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, Inc., 2013a, 2013b).

Problem

Retention rates in online graduate education vary widely, but are typically poorer than in face-to-face programs (Barry & Mathies, 2011; Lynch, 2001; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Rovai, 2003). Cameron (in press) compared the performance and success of online MSN students with those in a face-to-face MSN program at the same university. It was found that those students who stayed in the online program had equivalent ending grade point averages to those in the face-to-face program and that the Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) concentration graduates showed equivalent FNP certification examination pass rates as the face-to-face graduates. Nursing educators must focus on ways to better meet student needs in online programs and thus improve program retention.

Much of the information found in nursing literature on retention is focused on the undergraduate student in a face-to-face classroom setting. Less literature can be found on graduate level education retention. The body of knowledge regarding graduate online education and retention is even more limited (Perry, Boman, Care, Edwards, & Park, 2008).

A review of the relevant nursing literature revealed several fundamental student needs and major components of student-reported reasons for withdrawal from higher education. Tinto's (1997) theories on retention and student "fit" with academia as contributors to retention and completion of undergraduate programs have been widely used as a foundation for retention characteristics in higher education. Tinto found that student-program "fit" was a function of academic and social experiences. Clearly explained and understood policies and procedures and positive interactions with peers and faculty were vital. Metzner and Bean (1987) identified that institutional commitment to students through advisement and resource availability improved student satisfaction and led to greater student retention. Carruth, Brossard, Waldmejer, Gauthier, and Mixon (2010) and Hansen, Clark, McCleish, and Hogan (2009) identified students' lack of understanding about course delivery, resource access, asynchronous participation, and requirements of e-learning and graduate education as primary barriers to successful completion of an online degree program. Perry et al. (2008) identified two major components of withdrawal from universities: personal reasons (related to personal or family health priorities, work requirements and commitments, financial pressure, and work-life balance issues) and support systems (a perceived lack of support from the university and a differential between the student's anticipatory expectations and the realities of the educational program).

Students may experience one or more personal problems (financial, work, family, or health issues) and feel the need to withdraw from their educational program. Often these issues are out of the university's direct control. University student support services, such as counseling staff, financial aid officers, or school success specialists may assist students in finding solutions or developing coping mechanisms.

Glennon (2006) identified two major themes around program withdrawal from the student's perspective. Students that withdrew from programs reported a "disconnect" between their anticipatory expectations of the program and the realities encountered once they enrolled, perceiving a lack of support while in the program. These major themes match with components of successful program orientation as described by Hansen et al. (2009), who identified three common components of successful program orientation: essential program information, technology instruction and proficiency, and communication among students and faculty.

Action

Nursing program faculty advisors can address program related reasons for withdrawal and foster student success in graduate school. Program reality shock can be minimized and feelings of support can be intensified by managing student expectations prior to the start of the program. The purpose of this work was to develop a structured online orientation and reference course which introduces newly admitted students to the MSN program and online educational requirements. The Orientation and Reference Course is designed to meet student needs as identified in the literature and as shown in Table 1, by aligning student expectations with the realities of graduate study and providing peer and advisor support. Emphasis is placed on the

development of a positive and supportive learning community through the establishment of communication pathways and methods supported by the university. While learning management systems have many common structures some variances exist, even within the same LMS. Students in the Orientation and Reference Course gain knowledge, skill, and competence in the specific university LMS through practice in the course.

Table 1. Graduate Nursing Student Needs

Positive social experiences with students and faculty/advisors
Course delivery (LMS) understanding
Asynchronous participation understanding
Requirements of e-learning
Requirements of graduate and program education
Evidence of institutional commitment
Advisement—essential program information, technology instructions and proficiency, student-student and student-faculty/advisor communication
Resource online availability and access—financial aid, registration, books, library, writing center, and other assistance or counseling for personal concerns

New MSN students are enrolled in the Orientation and Reference Course following admission to the program and an initial conversation with the advisor and before the start of classes. Access to the orientation course is available to students throughout their entire time in the MSN program. This allows students more access to and interactions with fellow students and their advisor and expands their support network.

The course uses Desire2Learn (D2L; Desire2Learn, Inc.) LMS to deliver knowledge-based information, provide technology instruction and practice, and foster communication. Knowledge-based elements are located in the course content and student resources are identified. Communications are facilitated through discussion boards and email. Checklists and quizzes reinforce key procedural and content components of the MSN program. Practice in navigating the LMS and using the tools develops students' technology proficiency prior to beginning classes.

Technology in the course reflects the technology most commonly used in the MSN program and reflects what the student will likely encounter when coursework starts. The course homepage, as shown in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGidIFrmEis&feature=youtu.be>, is what students see as soon as they log into the course. The name of the course and the faculty advisor with contact information are prominent. The welcome message is addressed to each student by name and includes instructions on navigation and how to get started in the course. Navigation tabs are clearly marked above and below the course banner and are consistent throughout the course. Students are encouraged to first explore the navigation tabs to get a general overview of the course and then to more seriously explore the course by going through the course content under the Content tab.

The course content reflects the typical styles used within the program as illustrated by a short video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewJiOYjGatE&feature=youtu.be>. The left-hand

column shows an outline of the course content or modules and highlights the section being viewed in detail in the large box to the right. These tools help students maintain their bearings in relation to the rest of the content. Students are encouraged to first go through the modules in order; then to come back to any of the areas that they wish to review again or to search for specifics.

The first item in the content is an overview of each module to introduce students to the course content. Students need to know that the institution is committed to them and their success. The first module focuses on student help and support. Course faculty information includes a brief introduction, specifics on how to contact the faculty, and when students can expect a response. The course faculty also serves as the faculty advisor for the program. A specific personal message from the faculty advisor follows. The course syllabus is presented in the same style as all syllabi in the MSN program so students become acquainted with the style and common content areas of program syllabi.

The course content is used to answer specific program requirement knowledge needs of students. Explanations of asynchronous format and participation, course expectations, time requirements, characteristics of online graduate study, differences between face-to-face and online classrooms, degree programs and options, grading scheme in graduate studies, email activation and communication, and timelines are provided. Each concentration in the MSN program requires clinical courses; information is provided on how clinical courses are conducted in the program. The role and functions of the preceptor are given. Interaction with the clinical course faculty and the timing and method to secure a clinical site and preceptor are described. Students are given instruction on registering for classes, ordering books, and attending classes.

The design of the course includes several discussion boards. Student-student and student-faculty interactions take place here. Students are asked to introduce themselves and to respond to at least two fellow students. A simple introduction is a great ice breaker and establishes a sense of community and support among all participants. Discussion boards are listed by course name or topic and are available for students to provide peer support through sharing “words of wisdom” if they have taken the course or to ask each other about their experiences, fears, or successes. Students are encouraged to seek and develop study groups for additional support through specific discussion boards. General questions discussion boards and one specifically for the faculty advisor are available. Students may also contact each other or the faculty advisor privately through the course email tab. Finally, a student lounge is available for students to gather and talk about topics that are not directly related to the course, school, or MSN program. The lounge provides students an opportunity to relax and socialize, much like visiting a virtual coffee shop. While students are getting acquainted and settling their nerves, they are also learning how to use the discussion boards and gaining proficiency in the course technology.

A well-developed checklist assists students in remembering exactly where they left off and what they need to do next. Students may easily track the work in a single course. Tracking deliverables for multiple courses is more complicated; many students are also balancing home and work in addition to their studies. Checklists help students track and manage all of the demands on their time.

The checklist, as shown in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhUntkmqY9E&feature=youtu.be>, can be used by students in the course to monitor their own progress. Student can open the checklist to find specific actions which must be completed. Once an item has been completed, the student can click the box next to the item listed and "save". The next time the student comes to the checklist, a checkmark will be next to the items they have completed. The checklist supports the students by letting them know exactly what must be done and what they have completed.

Multiple assessment tools are also in the Orientation and Reference Course. Two such tools are quizzes and the dropbox for assignments. The goal of introducing these methods to new students prior to the start of the first term is two-fold. First, the quizzes reiterate and reinforce key knowledge with which new students typically struggle and gives students practice in taking online tests. The quizzes include multiple choice, multiple select, true-false, and matching questions. Secondly, timed exams are a frequently used tool in the MSN program. The quizzes in the orientation course are timed so that students can become comfortable with the clock on the screen and working under the pressure of a timed examination. All quizzes are auto-graded for immediate feedback. Students may take the quizzes as many times as they wish to practice with the tool or improve their subject matter knowledge and skill with the tool.

Students are required to submit two documents through the dropbox. Both documents require that the student download forms, fill them out, scan them into their computer, and upload them into the course. The forms are required to be submitted and approved by the advisor. The faculty advisor reviews the forms and provides feedback to the student through the same tool, just as the instructor does in class. Items are "graded" so the students can view their progress and familiarize themselves with the grading and feedback system within D2L.

Results and Discussion

The online MSN program at East Tennessee State University has four concentrations: Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP), Nursing Education, Nursing Administration, and Nursing Informatics. Twenty-five newly admitted MSN students (20 in FNP, 4 in education, and 1 in administration) for the Spring 2013 semester were offered the opportunity to participate in the Orientation and Reference Course. Five (20%) later withdrew or deferred admission to a later date. Ten did not respond to the invitation but the remaining 10 participated in the course (8 FNP, 1 education, and 1 administration).

A post course phone interview was initiated with each of the ten participants. A survey used a five-level Likert scale (1 was the lowest score and 5 the highest score) to assess students' perceptions of their preparedness for the MSN program after taking the Orientation and Reference Course. Three categories of questions were used to assess the course in terms of adding to the students': a. knowledge regarding graduate online study, resources, and program expectations; b. proficiency with D2L; c. communication access to other students and faculty advisor, and d. access to university resources. A final question regarding students' overall anxiety/comfort level about starting the program was used to gage the overall perceived benefit of the orientation program to students.

The results of the survey are shown in Table 2. All 10 students taking the survey rated each question as a 4 or 5. Additional students' comments included statements of being much more confident about their ability to navigate their coursework and feeling more prepared to do well in their studies. Several students commented that their anxiety and nervousness about starting the program was greatly reduced after completing the Orientation and Reference Course. Appreciation was expressed at the opportunities to meet other students in the program.

Table 2. Results of student survey following completion of Orientation and Reference Course

Question Category	Question	Likert Scale				
		5	4	3	2	1
Knowledge-based	How helpful were the following modules?	Very helpful	Helpful	Somewhat helpful	No difference	Not helpful
	1. Getting Started (Resources)	5	5			
	2. What have I gotten myself into? (online graduate study)	10				
	3. Required Paperwork	10				
	4. Academic Requirements of Graduate Studies	10				
Proficiency	5. Getting Ready for Clinicals	5	5			
	Rate your proficiency at the completion of the course, with the following.	Very proficient	Proficient	No difference	Somewhat proficient	Not proficient
	6. Navigation of the course delivery system (D2L)	10				
	7. Discussion boards	10				
	8. Contact with faculty advisor	10				
Communications	9. Quizzes and feedback	8	2			
	10. Dropbox (uploading) and feedback	7	3			
	Rate your comfort level regarding communications	Very comfortable	Comfortable	No difference	Somewhat uncomfortable	Uncomfortable
Institutional Commitment	Access to fellow students	10				
	Access to faculty advisor	10				
	Rate your comfort level regarding access to university resources to assist you in successfully completing this program	Very comfortable	Comfortable	No difference	Somewhat uncomfortable	Uncomfortable
Overall rating	Access to university resources (e.g. library, counselors, financial aid, success specialist)	8	2			
	Rate your overall anxiety level about starting the MSN program since completing the orientation and reference course	Much lower anxiety	Lower anxiety	No difference	Greater anxiety	Much greater anxiety
		7	3			

The purpose of the Orientation and Reference Course to introduce newly admitted students to the MSN program and course requirements was met for those who took the course. All students reported that the related content was helpful to very helpful (scores 4 and 5). One-half of the students who started the program (did not defer or withdraw prior to program start) did not opt to take the course. Refinements to the Orientation and Reference Course should include greater enticements or requirements to take the course to ensure that students receive needed information about graduate study and the MSN program and are made aware of support resources.

Students found that the opportunities to increase proficiency with the D2L LMS were helpful to very helpful. Peer and faculty advisor communication and support were provided and students felt very comfortable accessing fellow students and faculty advisor (score 5). Available student support services were provided in the course and students felt comfortable accessing these resources (scores 4 and 5). A determination as to whether or not the offered support services are indeed the services that students need could not be determined in this work. Future work should explore more specific needs of nursing graduate students compared to available university services. Students reported lower to much lower anxiety about starting the online MSN program after taking the Orientation and Reference Course. As students begin to understand how to navigate the LMS, they become less anxious about the technology and can redirect their energy and focus on the content of the course. Clarity and a thorough understanding of the requirements and expectations of the graduate MSN program helps students reset expectations early and lessen the reality shock that typically hits a few weeks into the course. Future work should include interviews with those students who choose not to participate in the Orientation and Reference course to determine why and what problems they encountered early in the semester.

The limitations of this work include the small number of newly admitted students taking the Orientation and Reference Course. Generalizations to the entire body of graduate nursing students cannot be made. The project may be shared as the concept to develop the Orientation and Reference Course for other online programs. However, program leaders must determine the specific requirements of their programs and the typical needs of their students to determine the type and style of orientation needed. Research is needed to compare the retention rates of those who participated in the online Orientation and Reference course with those who did not.

The future of online graduate nursing education goes far beyond access to courses on the internet. Retention of students in the program is paramount. Retention involves ensuring not only the quality of the program, but setting student expectations and supporting their academic and personal needs starting with admission into the program. The findings of this project support the importance of an orientation program in assisting students to set realistic expectations of graduate school and online education, develop a sense of community and a support/resource system, and gain comfort and proficiency with the LMS.

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