

2014

Challenges of Experienced Nurses in a Full-Time Online RN-BS Nursing Program

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Walden University

College of Education

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Diana Goldammer

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Walden University
2014

Abstract

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by

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MA, Jones International University, 2002

BA, Augustana College (SD), 1991

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

December 2014

Abstract

Practicing nurses need to be qualified at the baccalaureate level at a rate of 80% by 2020 to meet the needs of the increasingly demanding healthcare industry. Designed to meet this need, the online RN-BS (registered nurses earning a Bachelor of Science) nursing program at a local university has a declining completion rate that needs to be addressed and increased. The conceptual framework for this project was a qualitative program evaluation with a case study design; the project was designed to determine if the structure of the program was limiting student success or if factors experienced by full-time working RNs in the program were impacting success. E-mail interviews were conducted with 29 students in the online RN-BS nursing program who were selected through purposeful sampling. Research questions for this study examined the barriers faced by experienced nurses when they studied in the online RN-BS nursing program while maintaining their work schedule as RNs. Predetermined, open-ended, semistructured questions produced data that were analyzed through coding and theme identification. Themes were validated through member checking and use of an external auditor. Data revealed that students preferred the online format of the program to a face-to-face program, and they felt the local university nursing faculty was responsive and supportive. Challenges the students faced were primarily time management, cost of the program, information technology issues including learning the learning management system, group projects, and study skills. Based on the findings, an orientation program was developed that will affect social change by helping the local university nursing students complete the baccalaureate preparation they need to comply with the increasing industry demands.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) partnered with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2008 to “respond to the need to assess and transform the nursing profession” (IOM, 2010, p. xii). The result of the partnership was the report, *The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health*, which supported a goal of 80% of the nursing workforce being baccalaureate prepared by 2020. It also suggested that baccalaureate programs use technology to augment instruction, such as online programs as opposed to the traditional face-to-face programs (IOM, 2010).

The report went on to challenge nurses to continue their education beyond even the Bachelor of Science. Nurse educators were charged with implementing nurse residency programs, doubling the number of nurses with a doctorate by 2020 and encouraging nurses to engage in lifelong learning (IOM, 2010). As practicing nurses (RNs) return to school in an attempt to comply with these recommendations, nurse educators and higher education leadership must acknowledge the challenges they face and create support systems to help them achieve their objectives.

Definition of the Problem

Adult learners who come back to school often do so without reducing the hours they work or any of the other demands on their time. Soares (2013) stated that “they have little scheduling flexibility because of work and family obligations” (p. 8). As many more students begin to enroll in online programs (6.7 million students took at least one course online in 2011) (Allen & Seamen, 2013), leaders in higher education need to

acknowledge the challenges those students face so student affairs professionals are better prepared to offer the needed support (Allen & Seamen, 2013). Students in distance education programs have distinct needs, expectations, and priorities (Allen & Seamen, 2013), and these need to be addressed if those students are going to be successful.

Past research has indicated a recurring pattern of adult learners finding that there are challenges hampering their efforts to continue and to complete their education. What has not been specifically studied, however, is what the exact challenges are of the nurse who currently holds a diploma or associate degree and is working as an RN while returning to school to complete a baccalaureate degree. The online RN-BS nursing program is a relatively new type of program given recent demands for RNs to hold a BS nursing degree, and thus there is not sufficient existing research to define the challenges of the adult learner in the online RN-BS nursing program. Once those challenges are identified, they can be addressed by nursing faculty and student affairs professionals.

The purpose of this project study, then, is to gather information for the purposes of program evaluation and to improve program completion rates in an online RN-BS nursing program at a small, rural, private, liberal arts institution in the Midwest, Local University (LU), with a secondary purpose of being to determine the role of student affairs professionals in supporting online students. Based on conversations with the LU nursing department leadership and faculty, a review of the LU online RN-BS nursing program will be implemented. After completing a comprehensive literature review, I designed a qualitative program evaluation and qualitative case study using email interviewing to answer the research questions concerning barriers faced by experienced

nurses in the online RN-BS nursing program leading to possible programmatic recommendations for improvement. The literature review topics included the expectations of online learners and of adult learners, retention in higher education and nursing programs, barriers faced by students in higher education and in nursing programs, and the benefits students see in online education.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

Data from the South Dakota Center for Nursing Workforce, *2013 Report of nursing workforce supply in South Dakota*, indicated that 51% of the RN nursing workforce is prepared at the baccalaureate level or higher, with 38% at the associate degree (ADN) level, and the remaining 11% at the diploma level. There is a need to increase that number to 80% of nurses being prepared to reach the recommended baccalaureate level in the IOM report. Magnet hospitals and larger hospitals are seeking BS prepared nurses, and the ADN nurses will be less marketable as those facilities seek to meet the recommendations in the IOM (2010) report.

The LU nursing program, up until 2007, was an ADN nursing program only. The university did not offer a BS nursing degree, either face-to-face or online. Beginning in 2007, LU began an online RN to BS in nursing program designed as an upward mobility program for the working RN who graduated from an accredited associate degree or diploma nursing program to work toward a BS degree. The difference in LU's online RN-BS program from a typical 4-year BS program is the emphasis on leadership, health

promotion and wellness, application of research, and enhancement of higher level thinking skills (IOM, 2010).

According to data provided by the department of nursing at LU in Table 1, the cohort size from 2007 to 2012 has ranged from 8 to 16 students, and the 2-year completion rates in those years have ranged from 55.56% to 90.9%. In cohort sizes that are extremely small, every student who does not complete the program causes a significant impact in the data. The rates of completion are decreasing from a high of 90.9% in 2009, and the nursing department has insufficient data articulating the challenges that prevent students from completing the program.

Table 1

<i>BS Program Completion Rates</i>		
Cohort	Completed/entered	Completed
2007	13/16	81.25%
2008	5/9	55.56%
2009	10/11	90.9%
2010	7/8	87.5%
2011	6/8	75%
2012	10/12	83.3%
2013	8/42	19%

Note. Data for 2013 is based on 14-month completion rate; students are allowed 28 months to complete the program. 2012 and prior years were based on a 24-month program.

The significance of the data is that in the cohort of 42 students, the largest cohort to date, a large number of students may be lost if retention is not increased. The nursing department acted to change the program from a 24-month to a 28-month program to better accommodate working nurses. The nursing department also changed their policy on the acceptance of transfer credits; they now accept more credits than they did at the inception of the program. Finally, they have begun contacting students whose grades in a

particular class are low to see if they would be interested in withdrawing from the class and restarting when their life circumstances are more conducive to successful course completion. Students are offered a leave of absence of up to 1 year. Data are yet unavailable to determine if those changes will significantly increase retention and completion in the program.

If LU's nursing program is to be instrumental and serve a significant role in achieving the IOM (2010) report's recommendation of 80% of nurses attaining baccalaureate preparation by 2020, the institution needs to reverse the trend of the declining retention rate. Each student is significant in a small cohort, and the research and evaluation information produced by this study will help the LU Nursing Department, the Student Affairs Department as well as the institution understand the issues related to the retention of these adult learners, thus allowing LU leadership to address these issues in this program.

Evidence of the Problem From the Professional Literature

Cross (1981) identified challenges for adult learners as situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational challenges include factors such as lack of time, lack of money, lack of child care, or lack of access due to geographic isolation or physical challenge. Institutional challenges include scheduling issues or locations and cost of education. Dispositional challenges are related to attitudes and self-perceptions, such as feelings that they were too old to learn or that they lacked confidence in the classroom environment.

While Tinto (1993) found that students were better retained if they were socially and academically integrated into the institution, Bean and Eaton (2002) found it successful to combine academic and social activities to achieve the goals of developing coping skills (self-efficacy), positive feelings toward the institution, and the feeling that they were in control of their lives (internal locus of control). They also found it important for students to experience success in both academic and social integration in order to stay at the institution (Bean & Eaton, 2002).

Finally, a meta-analysis of the literature on psychosocial and study skill factors indicated relationships between retention and academic goals, academic self-efficacy, and academic related skills (Robbins, Lauver, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). Measuring student satisfaction and priorities can also predict retention and persistence (Shreiner, 2009). Factors that influence student satisfaction in online students include the availability of time and a place to study; a good reason for continuing their education; support from family, friends, and employers; confidence in their academic skills; and a current life situation that supports feelings of success and satisfaction with online learning (Adkins & Bryant, 2011). Interestingly, they also found that technology competency did not influence their satisfaction level (Adkins & Bryant, 2011). In other studies of online education, feelings of incompetence or fear of technology was considered a barrier to online learners (Chyung, 2007; Müller, 2008). Student learning styles were not a factor in satisfaction levels or considered a barrier (Adkins & Bryant, 2011; Pettigrew, Dienger, & O'Brien-King, 2011; Smith, 2010).

There is reason to believe that Cross's (1981) barriers still exist today even with some of them being negated or modified by the online learning environment. I believe the situational barriers, such as lack of time, child care, and money still exist, while those of geographic isolation and physical challenge are modified or eliminated by having access to classes online. The institutional barriers of scheduling and location of classes have been eliminated, but the cost of tuition is still relevant. Finally, the dispositional barriers related to attitudes and self-perceptions are still basically the same, although the classroom has changed from traditional to online.

Tinto (2007), after looking back on decades of work on student retention and attrition, stated that there is still much we do not know about student persistence and graduation. He asserted that "it is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed" (Tinto, 2007, p. 6). To make students more successful in online programs, researchers have suggested further study to understand the needs and preferences of today's nursing students (Pettigrew et al., 2011). With those charges, it is relevant to study the barriers students face and ask, specifically, what can be done collaboratively by student affairs professionals and nursing faculty to help them be successful in attaining their degree.

Definitions

Associate Degree Nurse (ADN): A nurse who has completed coursework, typically a 2-year program, designed to prepare the student to pass the national licensure exam and be qualified as a registered nurse (ANA, 2014).

Bachelor of Science (BS): A baccalaureate degree typically requiring 4 years of coursework to complete (ANA, 2014).

Institute of Medicine (IOM): This “serves as an adviser to the nation to improve health. Established in 1970 under the charter of the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Medicine provides independent, objective, evidence-based advice to policy makers, health professionals, the private sector, and the public” (IOM, 2010).

Online learning: The learning environment is an online classroom in which students participate and complete coursework using Internet connections and web-based tools. The instructors and students are not in the same place at the same time (Allen & Seamen, 2013).

Registered Nurse (RN): A nurse who has completed the required coursework and passed the national licensure exam (ANA, 2014).

RN-BS nursing program: A program designed to allow an RN to continue taking classes toward a BS while working as an RN (Undergraduate Catalog, 2013).

Student affairs professionals: Members of the Student Life department staff, including the director of student affairs, talent advisor, student support services staff, and trained peer tutors (Undergraduate Catalog, 2013).

Traditional learning: The learning environment is a face-to-face classroom in which the instructor and students meet at a designated time and for a specific period of time (Allen & Seamen, 2013).

Significance

The report, *The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health*, which supports a goal of 80% of the nursing workforce being baccalaureate prepared by 2020, also suggested that baccalaureate programs use technology to augment instruction (IOM, 2010). In addition to the report, “a significant body of research shows that nurses with baccalaureate level preparation are linked to better patient outcomes, including lower mortality and failure-to-rescue rates” (“Employment of new nurse graduates,” 2012). Preparing nurses at the BS level has become a national priority (“Employment of new nurse graduates,” 2012).

As a national priority, nurse education programs need to identify the barriers that prevent RNs from completing BS programs and seek to implement effective services for them. The intent of this program evaluation and study was to create a support program that could be used by LU and other small, private, liberal arts institutions to support their online BS nursing students. The program is collaborative in nature, using resources from the nursing and the student affairs departments.

Guiding/Research Question

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative research and program evaluation to determine what challenges experienced, working nurses who are full-time students in the LU online RN-BS nursing program face. Thus, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of the challenges of experienced, working nurses taking full-time coursework in the online RN-BS nursing program at LU?

2. How effective is the structure of the online RN-BS nursing program in light of institutional and IOM goals, and how effectively does the LU Nursing Department support online students as perceived by the online students?
3. Which of these challenges and issues of program effectiveness hold the potential for positive collaborative intervention by the Nursing Department and the Student Affairs Department at LU?

Review of the Literature

In the following literature review, I sought to be exhaustive in the search for scholarly research using keywords and phrases such as *online learners*, *adult learners*, *nontraditional learners*, *mature students*, *barriers to success*, *expectations*, *retention*, *persistence*, *nurse education*, *(online) RN-BS programs*, *student support*, and *higher education*. I used Walden library databases (ERIC, Education Research Complete, Education from SAGE, ProQuest Central, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, and Ovid Nursing Journals Full Text) and Google Scholar to locate timely, scholarly research. I provide a working definition of various types of challenges and provide myself, the program evaluator and email interviewer, a starting point to begin discussion of how these factors resonate or do not resonate with the online RN-BS nursing students.

Retention and Adult Learners in Higher Education

Cross (1981) identified challenges to retention for adult learners as situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational challenges include factors such as lack of time, lack of money, lack of child care, or lack of access due to geographic isolation or physical challenge. Institutional challenges include scheduling issues or locations and

cost of education. Dispositional challenges are related to attitudes and self-perceptions. Cross found that adult learners faced feelings that they were too old to learn or that they lacked confidence in the classroom environment.

Knowles (1978) found that adult learners are more self-directed and goal-oriented than traditional (18-24 year old) learners. Therefore, he recommended that for them to be successful, learners need to see the purpose in their coursework rather than seeing it as busywork. Tinto (1993) studied adult learners in a traditional environment and found that students persist at a higher level if they are socially and academically integrated into the institution. Müller (2008) reviewed more recent work on online learners and retention strategies and concluded that more research is needed to understand the factors that help or hinder women's completion of online courses (his study was conducted with women only). Having been a pioneer in the field of retention, Tinto (2007) looked back on the research that has been done and concluded, too, that much work still needs to be done.

As a result of reviewing the body of research into student retention in higher education, Tinto (2007) proposed that researchers focus on institutional action (understanding what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed), program implementation (implementing programs that effectively increase retention over time), and promoting the success of low-income students (graduation rates of lower-income students still lags behind those with more resources). His initial work with social and academic integration is still pivotal, although much has been added to it as institutions now work with students in online and hybrid environments in addition to the traditional face-to-face environment. Even the way researchers refer to students is being evaluated;

the definition of a nontraditional student is changing as the 18- to 24-year-old student becomes the nontraditional student and, instead, the 25+ year old student becomes the norm, the traditional student (Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, & Gansneder, 2010).

The concept of identifying students as “students who work” (students who saw themselves as just working to pay their bills before leaving college) versus “employees who study” (members of the workforce who have gone back to school to improve themselves) adds dimension to identifying expectations and barriers (Berker, Carroll, & Horn, 2003). Employees who study tend to be older, have family responsibilities, work more, and attend school less. They are more likely to be considered moderately or highly nontraditional, and are almost 50% less likely to complete their programs after 6 years versus students who work (Berker et al., 2003). Online RN-BS nursing students fall into the category of employees who work, and thus are at risk for not completing their program.

Adult Learners’ and Online Students’ Needs and Expectations

Current research on what students expect from educators is helpful in determining how to provide student services in adult learners and nursing students. In a study of graduate female students, there was a need to feel supported by faculty (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Online nursing students discussed a possible need for online support groups or networking opportunities (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012). Nursing students in a traditional classroom wanted nurse-educators who can help students develop coping strategies, especially those that support self-efficacy, control, and peer support (Gibbons, 2010) and stress reduction (Reeve, Shumaker, Yearwood, Crowell, & Riley,

2013). A study of nursing students in a traditional delivery system has also indicated a need to provide the tools to enhance students' "hardy" personality (defined as robust and capable of enduring difficult conditions) to lessen stress in nurses (Garrosa, Moreno-Jimenezs, Liang, & Gonzalez, 2008).

In terms of what students want in an academic program to help them be successful, student expectations in a traditional delivery system include the ability to earn high GPAs and complete their degree in a short time (Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010). That same study showed that full-time students are more satisfied with the degree program than part-time students (Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010). Students in a traditional classroom indicated support for web-based supplemental materials to support their coursework (Koch, Andrew, Salamonson, Everett, & Davidson, 2009).

In online programs, student expectations include instructor feedback (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Palmer & Holt, 2008), communication with the professor, and challenging courses (Mupinga et al., 2006). The needs of online students were identified as technical help, flexible and understanding instructors, advanced course information, and sample assignments (Mupinga et al., 2006). Similarly, students in a traditional classroom indicated that course satisfaction of adult learners is increased when students have clear expectations and an acceptable perceived workload (Howell & Buck, 2011).

Mounsey, Vendehey, and Diekhoff (2013) recommended support structures for students who struggle to attend class and study, although attending class may not be an issue with online students. Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, and Gansneder (2010) noted that working students in a traditional delivery system described being a student as a

“stamina marathon.” The organization of working students often involves “tightly packed intervals of structured study,” which would make it helpful for students to receive time management training prior to the beginning of their education (Mounsey et al., 2013; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Ziskin, Torres, Hossler, & Gross, 2010). Edwards, Burnard, Bennett, and Hebden (2009) suggested a need to investigate student stress and effective stress interventions in student nurses.

Challenges for Online Students and Adult Learners

Reviewing studies of challenges faced by online students and adult learners, students do have a challenge making the adjustment to being an online learner (Killion, Reilly, & Gallagher-Lepak, 2011). Challenges with self-efficacy with technology, however, improve throughout the course (Chyung, 2007). Multiple studies addressed the challenges faced by nontraditional nursing students as well as adult learners in general, including balancing the demands of school, family, and financial obligations (Hunte, 2012; Mounsey, Vandehey, & Diekhoff, 2013; Pettigrew, Dienger, & King, 2011; Place, MacLeod, John, Adamack, & Lindsey, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, & Gansneder, 2010; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Smith, 2010; Wells, 2007). Students who work more also spend less time socializing (Lang, 2012; Mounsey et al., 2013). Additionally, working more hours leads to feelings of pressure and being overwhelmed, and increased anxiety, stress, and fewer buffers from the pressure of balancing everything (Mounsey et al., 2013).

Additional barriers were documented in a study of RNs in rural Canada. Challenges included isolation, insufficient computer skills, reliable Internet access from

home, time management (work and family), peer support, and university support in terms of technology, library, and advisor (Place, MacLeod, John, Adamack, & Lindsey, 2012). They also experienced challenges from getting time off from work and the guilt from asking for someone to cover for them while they received the training. Deggs (2011), in a study of students in an accelerated undergraduate degree program, found the challenges were intrapersonal, career and job-related, and academic-related. Barriers for women who persisted in graduate studies revolved around family, financial, and work (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). In a study of women in online degree-completion programs, the barriers to persistence were most prominently multiple responsibilities, insufficient interaction with faculty, technology, and coursework (Müller, 2008).

In a study of online nursing students, Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) found that discussions of academic success were sorted into three categories: structural (course design, instructor's style, teaching strategies, teamwork, and technology), processual (actions or mechanisms which promoted confidence, motivation, and learning), and emotional factors (anonymity, aloneness, trepidations, and nonverbal communications). These findings agree with those of other studies of adult learners (Chyung, 2007; Deggs, 2011; Müller, 2008; Place et al., 2012) and point to the complexities of issues students face when returning to school.

Economic factors also play a role in the success of a working adult student. Ziskin, Torres, Hossler, and Gross (2010) cited in a study of students in a metropolitan community college that students from a higher socioeconomic background can recover more quickly from a setback like a sick child who cannot go to daycare or a car that

broke down. Community college students might also not work as many hours and therefore not contend with the stress of balancing commitments. The study also pointed out that students from a lower socioeconomic background may feel academically underprepared and have a lesser feeling that they belong at the institution. As such, these students deal with fighting the expectation of being judged for not belonging in college.

Reasons for Choosing an Online Program

Despite the barriers and challenges, the reasons students opt for and persist in online education include the strong motivation to complete degrees, engagement in the learning community, and appreciate for the convenience and flexibility of an online degree option (Müller, 2008; Smith 2010). Smith (2010) identified stressful work and family schedules as a reason for students choosing an online nursing program. In the study, “88% of nurses felt that that online program met their needs” (p. 53). Researchers have questioned the needs of nontraditional students and whether nontraditional students use the services provided for them (Keith, 2007). Keith (2007) also suggested that the needs of nontraditional students may be met outside of formal services provided by the institution.

Implications

Having reviewed the literature, I found that many of the challenges described by Cross (1981) are still relevant, although some of the barriers may have evolved or been otherwise modified due to the use of technology and online classes. My goal was to define the challenges faced by full-time online BS nursing students who are also working as RNs. I also hoped to discover what the data might find in relation to student affairs

practices. My project includes a set of recommendations that address ways student affairs professionals and nursing faculty can support students in completing their BS degrees.

As mentioned earlier in the study, the IOM has issued a directive that has been taken up as a challenge for nurse educators as well as nurses working as healthcare professionals who currently hold a diploma or ADN with their RN licensure. The information this study produced will help working nurses who go back to school to overcome their barriers and earn their RN-BS nursing degree in an online program, thereby serving the national need. Online programs need to be effective and able to support their students so they will persist in the program and graduate. If employers, nurse educators, and student affairs professionals can collaborate to support online RN-BS nursing students, the recommendation of 80% of nurses being baccalaureate prepared by 2020 will be accomplished.

Summary

The IOM (2010) report reflects a critical need to prepare AD and diploma nurses at the BS level. It is imperative to learn how to support online learners in the online RN-BS nursing program at Local University, a Midwestern, rural, liberal arts, private university. It will be important to be able to provide effective online RN-BS nursing program support so that students who maintain work schedules and multiple responsibilities while completing coursework will be able to complete their RN-BS nursing degrees. Retention rates must be as high as possible, and at the very least, they cannot fall. Retention of RN-BS nursing students is important so that students can

complete the degree and contribute to the attainment of the IOM (2010) report's recommendations.

In Section 2, I will discuss the qualitative research design used for this study, including the rationale for the chosen design and my role. The ethical treatment of participants, data collection and management procedures, and theme analysis will also be discussed. Section 3 will discuss the limited program evaluation and the orientation program that result from this study. Section 4 will conclude with reflections on the entire process of this project study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The primary purpose of this project study was to gather information for the purposes of program evaluation and to improve program completion rates in the online RN-BS nursing program at a small, rural, private, liberal arts institution in the Midwest, LU, with the secondary purpose to determine the role of student affairs professionals in supporting online students. Based on conversations with the LU nursing department leadership and faculty, a brief review of the LU online RN-BS nursing program was implemented as part of the study. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the qualitative research design that was used for the study and program evaluation, including the rationale for the design, my role as researcher, setting and sample, ethical treatment of participants, data collection and management procedures, and analysis of themes.

Research Questions

The qualitative evaluation and research study addressed online learners in a BS nursing program and asked the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of the challenges of experienced, working nurses taking full-time coursework in the online RN-BS nursing program at LU?
2. How effective is the structure of the online RN-BS nursing program in light of institutional and IOM goals, and how effectively does the LU Nursing Department support online students as perceived by the online students?

3. Which of these challenges and issues of program effectiveness hold the potential for positive collaborative intervention by the Nursing Department and the Student Affairs Department at LU?

Research Design

The focus of this study was to provide LU with a program evaluation and data that explain key challenges faced by adult learners in an online RN-BS nursing program. I chose a qualitative program evaluation and qualitative case study method to address the research questions because of the need of the LU Nursing Department, and I want to have a stronger understanding of the perceived challenges faced as well as the students' suggestions than can be gathered with a quantitative instrument. Qualitative research is designed to focus on only a few people to gain in-depth detail, as opposed to a larger group, with which it is likely to gain less detail (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). With this methodology, rich data can be gathered on the challenges faced by the adult learners as well as their suggestions for how nursing program faculty and student affairs professionals can collaborate to help support them and address their perceived challenges to completing the online RN-BS nursing program at LU.

Knowles (1978) cited Kirkpatrick's work of 1971 in which a reaction evaluation was necessary to obtain data from participants as they experienced the program. The reaction evaluation is the first step of a program evaluation that would ultimately evaluate a learning situation. For this study, the reaction evaluation is the key element, as it allows me to evaluate only the perceptions of the participants about the barriers they face rather than an entire program evaluation (as described by Knowles) that would include the

additional steps of learning, behavior, and results evaluations. Stake (2010) coined and advocated for a responsive qualitative approach, and in this study, it could be considered a responsive thematic qualitative approach. This study was a limited program evaluation study from the perspective of the participants.

The class size at LU is relatively small, with 42 students enrolled in the 2013-14 cohort. With that small number of students, quantitative research is not possible. In May 2014, a new term began and the total number of students in the program was 46. Of those students, 17 were considered “pipeline” students, those who stayed in the LU program immediately after becoming an RN. The other 29 were RNs who came back to school as adult learners to complete the BS in nursing. My goal was to invite all 29 adult learners, and to have a participation rate of 60% (a majority of the class, 18 of 29) to provide representation of the larger group. In response to my email invitation, 16 students chose to participate, which was slightly below my goal at 55%.

The research design was a program evaluation with a case study comprised of an in-depth analysis of a bounded group, conducted with email interviews of students in an online RN-BS nursing program (Merriam, 2009). The email interviewing method is “online, asynchronous, in-depth interviewing” (Meho, 2006, p. 1285) that unlike email surveys, is “semistructured in nature and involves multiple e-mail exchanges between the interviewer and interviewee” (Meho, 2006, p. 1285). Furthermore, Meho (2006) stated that “e-mail interviewing has become a viable tool for qualitative research” (p. 1285). As technology and social media evolve, researchers will be expected to use social media, such as email, to gather research (Aborisade, 2013). Email offers a familiar platform for

participants (due to their use of the medium to complete coursework and correspond with faculty) as well as a confidential system of storing responses and identities due to security of the LU information technology system. With only 29 students eligible for this study and a target of 18 participants, it was imperative to choose a research method participants would be likely to feel comfortable with and find easy to use; email was the most likely choice as it is asynchronous (requiring no scheduling) and it is a mandatory tool for online students so they are already familiar with it and routinely use it. In the email introduction, however, I used the term “email survey” rather than “email interview” to eliminate any confusion that this would be a verbal process (normally associated with interviewing) rather than an email process.

Goals of the Evaluative Study

The goals of the study were determined by working with the LU Nursing Department.

1. Identify the perceptions of the challenges of experienced, working nurses taking full-time coursework in the online RN-BS nursing program at LU.
2. Determine the effectiveness of the structure of the online RN-BS nursing program in light of institutional and IOM goals, and the effectiveness of the LU Nursing Department of their support of online students as perceived by the online students.
3. Create a collaborative intervention by the Nursing Department and the Student Affairs Department at LU to address the challenges and issues of program effectiveness.

Participants

I was granted IRB approval from LU as well as Walden University. Walden University's approval number for this study is 06-17-14-0315821 and it expires on June 16, 2015. With the assistance of the registrar at LU, I invited all 29 experienced nurses who are adult learners in the program to participate. This is an example of homogeneous and convenience sampling, as all participants were students in the same online RN-BS nursing program (Creswell, 2012). The number of participants should be kept small as it is typical to study a small number of participants in qualitative research; the details of the study are dependent on obtaining rich details from each participant, and the complexity of the data can be diminished if too many participants are studied (Creswell, 2012).

By using the email interviewing method, a number of research protocols were covered in the initial email itself that also contains the interview questions. This procedure likely saved time for the participants and increased the rate of participation because it is easy to learn everything about the study, the process, and the questions quickly, and it was convenient and easy to participate. This method negated the need for a separate document.

The email message also established the reason for the email and a brief description of the study with an offer of a PDF summary document of the finished study as compensation for participation. I sent an email to all potential participants with the following information embedded in it (as opposed to an attachment) to increase the likelihood of participation (Meho, 2006): a copy of the ethical treatment of participants, a description of the study, assurance that participants may discontinue participation at any

time, assurance of confidentiality of all transcripts unless they choose otherwise, and assurance that their identities will be kept confidential in all reporting of study results (Creswell, 2012). Data will be stored and kept for 5 years in a locked file cabinet in my office on the campus of LU.

Data Collection

The email to participants began with my introduction as a researcher to help establish trust (Meho, 2006). I then offered, as an incentive, the opportunity to receive a PDF summary document of the completed research results to all who participated in the study. Participants indicated their informed consent by responding to the email with answers to the interview questions, as explained in the email invitation. Instructions, interview questions, and suggested timeline (deadlines) were in the email as well (Meho, 2006).

Given that these are online students who are familiar with email and online communication, the asynchronous nature of an email interview encouraged participation while allowing participants to formulate thoughtful responses (Meho, 2006). I was cognizant of avoiding leading questions or letting my own experiences influence follow-up questions to avoid biasing the study (Yin, 2011). In a case study, the researcher is particularistic (focuses on a particular program), highly descriptive, and heuristic (illuminates the phenomenon under study; Merriam, 2009). The program evaluation and case study describe the challenges of online RN-BS nursing students from the perspective of the students and answer the research questions.

Prior to beginning the study, I reviewed the participant email (Appendix C) to make sure all steps were covered and to lend structure to the interviews (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2011). I asked the initial interview questions based on the research questions for this program evaluation case study and was then prepared to probe to get further details about participants' answers (Creswell, 2012; Meho, 2006; Yin, 2011). In the email interview setting, all questions were provided at the beginning, and the participant had the option to answer at his or her own pace after considering his or her answers. As opposed to a verbal interview, the participants had time to formulate their thoughts before submitting their responses, so all interview questions had the opportunity to be well-thought out before the initial reply was sent. When initial emails came back from participants, I sought to clarify any responses that seemed ambiguous or did not clearly articulate the participant's answer. I used the literature review to create initial themes and sought to determine if answers were consistent with those themes and at that point asked any necessary clarifying questions.

Names of the participants were replaced by Student 1, Student 2, and so on to protect the identity of the participants. I identified them only for email contact in the data collection stage, but in the reporting phase, their identities were kept confidential by using the pseudonyms.

Examples of challenges were provided despite the potential to limit the results; it was a compromise in design necessitated by the need to assist the participants in thinking broadly about the challenges they have faced. Interviewing practices that I needed to be cognizant of were being inquisitive and distinguishing between firsthand, secondhand,

and third hand evidence (Yin, 2011). I also needed to be cognizant of my personal biases and reading anything into responses without asking for further clarification when necessary, which was also a benefit of the email interview technique (Meho, 2006). I was prepared to seek clarity in questions and avoid unfamiliar terminology or slang while using vocabulary that the participants were familiar with, although in the responses I received, I did not need to use any slang or industry terms to build rapport, as their responses were nontechnical in nature.

Before beginning the study, I asked the LU nursing department chair to review the email invitation. By doing this, I determined that no interview questions needed to be revised before asking them of actual online RN-BS nursing students. In particular, I asked the department chair to be ready to assist me in understanding the vocabulary of nurse education in order to better understand the “meanings of the participants’ words and phrases,” but that need did not arise in practice (Yin, 2011, p. 135). At the conclusion of the email review, I asked the department chair to offer any suggestions for improving the email, but she had nothing to add.

Data Analysis

Participants were given an opportunity to review their emails to check accuracy and provide any clarification or addition to comments they made. Emails were then coded to determine common themes among the primary challenges the online RN-BS nursing students face. Triangulation was used at this time to check the initial themes against the themes in the literature review. No discrepant data were found in the data; all coded themes were evident in the literature review (Sorenson, n.d.).

I began the process with open coding (using six different colored highlighters) to determine patterns to begin to construct categories (Merriam, 2009). I wrote notes in the margins of the documents to draw attention to the themes that were emerging. Following that initial process, I sorted and named the categories to assist in finding answers to the research questions. Categories/themes/findings must be sensitive to the data, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009).

As the categories were developed, I worked to make the data were understandable and useful in developing the project to address the challenges. I created a Word document that contained a table with headings that correlated to each of the research questions and interview questions (Appendix D). Each row contained data from an individual student, and across the rows, I entered themes from the students' interviews under each heading. I then created a second analysis document in Word in which I determined themes and grouped like comments into a table that would provide a better visual of the frequency of similar answers (Appendix E).

As part of the data analysis process, I provided evidence of quality. In addition to triangulation, I used member checking to allow students to review my findings and check to be sure my interpretation of their responses was accurate (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). I also had an external auditor, a doctoral level faculty member from another Midwestern university's nursing program, review the data analysis (no student names or identification available) for appropriateness of themes, researcher bias, and findings based on the data (Creswell, 2012). This auditor provided additional credibility to the study and agreed with my findings.

After reviewing my process, analysis of the interviews, and the themes I had identified, the auditor confirmed that she agreed with the primary themes from Research Question 1. She acknowledged that the participants did not answer Research Question 2 in the way it was intended, although data were still gathered from the responses to that question. Participants tended to skirt the question as it was asked, but they still responded with responses that were relevant to the study. She concluded that the theme analysis from Research Questions 3 and 4 were accurate; students did prefer the LU online program to face-to-face programs, and the nursing faculty at LU were supportive of them.

Once email responses are removed from the secure system at Walden University following the defense of this study, data management will take place by being stored on a flash drive that is password-protected in my locked office on the LU campus. It will be stored in a locked safe off site after the completion of the study and at which time it is not necessary for me to easily access the data. After 5 years, the flash drive will be destroyed.

Role of the Researcher

As a student affairs officer with the university, I have access to student records, although the students in the online RN-BS nursing program seldom, if ever, use services provided to on-campus students. Therefore, I have no personal knowledge of the online students at this time; no preexisting relationship exists with them. As such, I was an unknown entity to them and was able to conduct interviews in a manner that was as unbiased as possible.

As an online student myself, I worked to avoid bias and leading questions that would influence the data coding or interpretation of results. While I needed to ask

probing questions, I was cognizant of using participants' own words to ask further questions rather than my own possibly biased vocabulary.

Research Findings

The responses to my emails were concise and to the point. Given that the participants were students managing multiple demands on their time, succinct answers were typical, with little descriptive language. Few participants used more than one paragraph to answer any question, and many answered in one sentence or less. Some others, however, took the opportunity to explain in great detail their frustrations and triumphs.

Challenges of Being a Student in an Online RN-BS Nursing Program

Themes that emerged from this question were consistent with the literature in that time management was the most frequently cited challenge, followed by the cost of the program, technology challenges, completing group projects in an online environment, and lack of study skills.

As these participants are working professionals, employees who study (Berker et al., 2003), comments they made about managing both family responsibilities and work were frequent. Student 1 said, "Time is definitely a huge challenge for me. I am a mom of 2 very active boys and I work full time. I am also expecting baby #3 so this has me feeling a lot of anxiety to my time management." Student 5 added, "I find it difficult to work ahead because I have a busy enough life with 3 kids, a husband, working full time, ambulance call full time and full time school. I do not want to go part time with school."

Student 10, however, said that, “My biggest challenge up to this point has been learning how to manage my time for study and work it into my life.” When I probed about what kind of support LU could provide for that challenge, the student replied that, “As far as LU helping with time management skills, I feel that is something that is up to me as an individual.” That comment made me think about teaching students about prioritizing and using technology as a scheduling tool so that while we cannot manage time for our students, we can teach them to analyze what they have going on in their life, prioritize, and teach them to use their tools (online calendars, for example) to help them on a daily basis.

Cost was the second most frequently mentioned challenge. As LU is a private institution, tuition is not subsidized by the state and students are then also challenged to navigate the financial aid process, seek scholarships, or look to their employers for support. Student 4 said, “The cost of the courses were very expensive and I am paying as I go so I do not have any student loans to pay back when I am done,” while Student 1 said

Cost of education is a big part for me too. Obtaining my BS degree is costing a lot of money. We were finally making a debt in our current student loans only to add more to them. I am hoping to receive more financial assistance from the hospital I work for along with a pay raise in the future.

Despite no mention of the technology issues of earlier online students of even 10 years ago such as Internet access, computer functionality, or choices of online programs, today’s students indicate an expectation of access to 24/7 support with their technology

and coursework challenges due to the demands on their time and the reality of needing the technology to function and requiring answers to their content questions when they have set aside time to work on their coursework. While students can now have email pushed directly to their cell phones, getting that set up can be a challenge for them. Student 5 said, “If I was more tech savvy, I could connect my smart phone to my campus email and would be able to be notified of the response sooner, but I don’t know how to do that.” As the online platform and online library services are integral to doing coursework, when students cannot get passwords or access to work, they quickly become frustrated. Student 9 seemed to encompass the sentiment of a number of participants with this comment:

I realize that there is a lot of potential for issues with systems, ... If I were to contact staff, it would be helpful to have the issue resolved immediately. I usually block off times in between shifts to work on my homework, and it would be frustrating to be shut down due to a technicality when I already have limited free time to do my school work.

Student 18 added, “Getting more familiar with my computer, downloading program, working with ‘Word’ and other computer programs is also a challenge, but not as hard as I had anticipated.” Students seem prepared to learn the new technologies and are only initially daunted, and then they figure it out and move on to the actual coursework itself. Student 18 went on to say, “I feel a lot of the computer stuff, is a ‘learn as you go’ and I wouldn’t be able to just ‘learn it’ in a orientation class... And its

unbelievable how much I have learned just in the last couple months about online course work, etc.!”

Student 21 summed up the frustration of students who struggled with technology by stating

I have found that my IT skills has been the most frustrating part of the online classes. I'm sure there are resources out there that I haven't utilized. That takes time and I only have so much time between work and family. I'm not a very patient person and when I sit down to my work I want everything to work right now. That doesn't happen with the computer sometimes.

LU does offer a help desk service, but it is during the 8-5 business day and not available outside of those hours; online students often work around the clock to complete their coursework.

The final two themes in this area that emerged as challenges were difficulty completing group projects in the online environment, and various study skills. In these themes, comments varied from learning how to learn in the online environment, learning teachers' expectations, challenges of APA writing style which they were formerly unfamiliar with, taking a statistics class online and feeling lost, and keeping distant group members accountable. All of these comments were consistent with those in the literature.

Challenges that did not appear in my study as opposed to studies conducted by previous researchers were access to online programs, access to computers or Internet connections, or access to campus (due to this being an online program). The convenience of online classes has negated the challenges of travel time, transportation, and fears of

finding one's way around campus; and the increase in online programs geared to the nontraditional student has eliminated any insecurity about fitting in with traditional-age students. Students also see technology as just another tool rather than something to be feared. As access has improved in today's culture overall, adult learners, too, are more confident in their ability to work with and learn the new technologies.

Potential Areas for Collaborative Intervention by Nursing Faculty and Student Affairs

The responses to this question did not garner the kinds of responses I was seeking. Where I had hoped for students to suggest things like an orientation program or a tutoring program, what they wished they would have had, they discussed what had been helpful to them. To gain insights to this question, I reviewed the entire interviews looking for things they mentioned under other questions. This approach did lead me to some potential areas of collaborative intervention.

Based on student responses, many of them were taking a statistics course during this term. Multiple participants expressed frustration at feeling lost without a teacher in the classroom, frustrated at not having classmates to work with, and wondering if they should have sought a tutor. After the class was over, Student 6 said, however, "In stats, I did receive an "A" in the class. I probably should have had a tutor to fully understand the concepts." While in the class, the stress took its toll on Student 16.

I think it would be very helpful to have a tutor for stats. I am currently taking the class right now and regret that I signed up for this! I am so lost with this class! I would probably be even willing to pay for a tutor if it was a reasonable rate. I'm

not sure what can be done different to make this class better, maybe videos would help. It just seems when everyone is confused on how to do the problems, it takes awhile to figure out how to get it done you have to keep posting questions/answers online.

A number of students echoed Student 16's frustrations and mentioned the idea of a tutor for stats. This is a potential area where student affairs and the nursing faculty could work together to support student success. Less-mentioned areas for intervention were learning to write in APA style, study skills as they related to the online learning environment, time management (mentioned frequently in the challenges section), and the initial anxiety of beginning a degree program.

Effectiveness of the LU Online RN-BS Nursing Program

The responses to the question of whether students preferred online to face-to-face programs and whether they would choose the LU program again were overwhelmingly positive. The nursing faculty members themselves were a tremendous asset to the program, according to participants. Students felt supported when faculty responded within 24 hours, and they found the online program virtually the only way they would be able to complete such a program. Student 3 was representative of the participants with these comments.

I do like traditional but for adult learners it is not practical. I could not be happier to be back with LU even if it is online. Why do I like online? Doing the work on my own schedule is optimal. As an adult with so many other obligations this program has made going back to school easy. The nursing faculty has made my

transition back to school, after 30 years, an easy change. They have answered questions in a timely manner and guided me through.

Other participants echoed the concept of the nursing faculty guiding them, responding in a timely manner, and just generally helping them every step of the way.

Student 4 said

I received my AD in nursing from LU in 1992. I feel that the professors have been very willing to assist students with their homework questions. You are not just a number at LU, they really care about you being successful. Yes I would choose this program again.

Limited Program Evaluation

As a limited program evaluation resulting from a qualitative survey of adult learners in the online RN-BS nursing program, the research analysis produced data that were highly favorable to the LU nursing program and its faculty.

- Nursing faculty are highly supportive as evidenced by their passion for nursing, fast response times to students' questions (in less than 24 hours), guiding them through the course, ability to problem solve in real time, and advising them as they progress through the program.
- Students prefer the online program to a face-to-face program for a variety of reasons, primarily flexibility, family and work commitments. They also commented favorably on the 8-week term rather than the previous 16-week terms.

- Students appreciated consistency from the nursing faculty in policies, deadlines, and faculty expectations. Students found it slightly challenging to work with faculty and coursework outside of nursing due to differing expectations and policies.
- The admissions staff, business office, and financial aid office were all noted as helpful and easy to work with.
- Shortcomings of the program included the following points:
 - Information technology – login issues, software and hardware challenges;
 - Teaching methods – understanding how to use the tools the faculty will use in class;
 - Writing assistance, especially how to write in APA style;
 - Helping students communicate with their family, friends and employers regarding the challenges of simultaneously being a student, parent, friend, and employee; and
 - Helping students understand how to make the best use of their time (time management, maximizing productivity tools such as cell phones).

A complete listing is available in Appendix E. The nursing faculty will be able to use this data as feedback on what they currently do and data to advise future decisions.

Conclusion

When the results of the data are considered in terms of how to best address the challenges faced by adult students in the online RN-BS nursing program, it appears logical that an online orientation program for those students could address all of these

issues and better prepare them for success in the online RN-BS nursing program. By developing the orientation based on themes in the data analysis, I used a responsive thematic qualitative approach (Stake, 2010). The rich data from this study will inform the creation of a collaboratively-developed orientation program for students and a set of recommendations (limited program evaluation) to help student affairs professionals and nurse educators better jointly support online RN-BS nursing students and thereby increase the completion rate at LU. It is my goal to use the data from the research along with the research in the literature on adult learners, online learners, and nurse education to provide a valuable resource for nursing faculty as well as student affairs professionals. While the research is being done at a small, private, liberal arts institution in the Midwest, the results of the study will hopefully inform other institutions or researchers on creating a program to assist their students in persisting and attaining their baccalaureate preparation.

Based on the literature review and the study findings, Section 3 will outline an orientation program for experienced nurses, who are also nontraditional students, who are beginning an online RN-BS nursing program to address the retention and completion rates in the LU online RN-BS nursing program. Finally, Section 4 will include reflections on the entire process of this project.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purposes of this project study were to determine the challenges of the experienced nurses who were students in the online RN-BS nursing program at LU and conduct a limited program evaluation of the LU online RN-BS nursing program. By determining the challenges, the ultimate goal was to create a project to address the challenges those students face to help increase their retention and completion rates. This project will help address the completion rate by helping students start the program better equipped to handle common challenges of time management, the learning management platform, and study skills that may be unfamiliar to online, adult learners.

Project Description and Goals

The goal of the project is to address the problem of completion rates of students in the online RN-BS nursing program at LU who are working to attain their baccalaureate degree, which in turn will help institutions like LU who are complying with the IOM (2010) report that challenged 80% of RNs to have baccalaureate preparation by 2020. In my research, students most frequently mentioned time management as a challenge to successful completion of their BS program. While time management is an imprecise art, students can learn tools to help them manage their time (and their multiple priorities) in an orientation program that addresses that along with other frequently mentioned challenges to completion.

My project will provide a plan to collaboratively create an orientation to the online RN-BS nursing program that will ask the adult learners to self-assess and

determine their ability and comfort level in a variety of frequently mentioned areas of challenge for them. Based on individual determinations, students will be able to opt into segments of the orientation or into the program as a whole and gain skills and confidence in areas they believe they need additional support from LU before or during the program. By allowing students to self-assess, the orientation will not force all students through all modules, but rather provide a customized experience available to the students on demand. Ideally, the student will progress through the orientation modules prior to beginning coursework but would be able to go back at any time and complete a module, or section of the module, if the student found him or herself unfamiliar with or struggling with an element of the program (i.e., IT, APA writing style, or time management).

Rationale

The LU nursing faculty expressed concern that their completion rates were not as high as they wanted them to be. In compliance with the IOM (2010) report, nursing departments at institutions everywhere are striving to attain the goal of 80% of nurses having baccalaureate preparation by 2020. The LU completion rates, at the beginning of this study, indicated a decreasing rate of completion, and the nursing faculty wanted to know how they could increase the completion rates in their online RN-BS nursing program. As a member of the student services staff myself, I also had an interest in determining if there was a role that student services could play in assisting that department with their completion rates.

The student services department conducts orientation programs for new students (freshmen and transfer students) but does not currently assist with the online student

orientation. The nursing faculty currently conduct their own orientation in cooperation with the dean of adult learning at LU. That orientation program is geared primarily at orienting students to the online learning management platform/system (LMS). After that brief orientation, students begin classes. It should be noted that this orientation is the same orientation provided for students in any online course using that LMS, which currently includes an MBA program and an upcoming degree completion program.

Having completed my research with adult learners in the online RN-BS nursing program, I believe that providing an orientation designed to specifically address the needs of working nurses who are coming back to school will help those students deal more effectively with the challenges inherent to the many demands of an adult learner: a working professional with current demands (i.e., family or community) who is now also a student in higher education.

Review of the Literature

To research the project portion of this study, a focused search of the literature was performed to gather data to support the creation of an orientation for students that would support the results of my research. I used the terms *program planning*, *project management*, *program implementation*, *project implementation*, *orientation program*, *orientation planning*, *collaborative orientation*, *collaborative planning*, and *nursing orientation* while searching the databases at Walden. The specific databases I searched were Education Complete, CINAHL with Full Text, ERIC, and ProQuest Central.

Project Management

Project management is essential to the collaborative orientation program because without successful management, the project will never become a reality. In a project, there are usually multiple stakeholders, multiple priorities, and differing opinions as to how to proceed, and it is necessary to be cognizant of and attend to both the learning loop and the performance loop (Thiry, 2010). The learning loop is the decision making process, which I can advise using the data from my research, and the performance loop is the implementation process, which is the result of this project study.

Finally, the last loop is the evaluation step, in which regular evaluation of project outcomes is conducted to allow for modifications in the program based on current needs and expectations. Given the multiple steps in project management, a roadmap of the project will help all project contributors as well as me, the project manager, to stay organized and cognizant of the project progress (Feeney & Sult, 2011). The roadmap for this project will look like a loop, in that evaluation and modifications based on those evaluations are built into the process each semester.

My role as project manager would be to facilitate the entire process and keep the essential element of communication a top priority, because “as much as 90% of a project manager’s time may be spent on communication flow” (Marill & Leshner, 2006, p. 322). It is also my role to determine the initial project partners. I needed to think broadly about who the project impacts or who might have an interest in the project in order to include all stakeholders (Wamsley, 2009). Considering all stakeholders and facilitating communication as the project develops will be key factors in the success of the project.

Effectiveness of an Orientation Program

Orientation programs have been found to be effective in increasing retention and graduation rates in multiple studies. Orientation programs help students understand the requirements of the programs and the tools they need to be successful, and they often introduce students to the faculty and support services they will be working with as students (Gardner et al., 2007; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Stewart, 2005; Symes et al., 2005; Wells, 2003).

In an online program specifically, students may require additional support to be successful, and an orientation program is one way to provide that additional support (Adkins & Bryant, 2011; Allen & Seamen, 2013; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Hunte, 2012). Miller (as cited in Gilmore and Lyons, 2012) provided a list of successful practices for online instructors including “having students practice using technologies before critical assignments are due; allowing time for social communication within the technological environment; and offering a required activity, with a low point value, early in the course to ensure participation” (p. 45). An orientation program can also address “gaps in preparedness” that include “lack of understanding course delivery, accessing resources remotely, participating in asynchronous activities, and use of emerging health care technologies” (Carruth, Broussard, Waldmeier, Gauthier, & Mixon, 2010, p. 687). This type of orientation allows faculty to focus on coursework during class rather than the orienting activities.

Needs of an Adult Learner That Can Be Addressed in an Online Orientation

Program

Students who come back to school after joining the workforce often lack preparedness in technological, virtual environments (Carruth et al., 2010). Orientation programs can assist students in understanding how those environments work so they can focus on coursework rather than learning the learning management system. Orientation programs can also help students transition from “bewilderment and anxiety to competence, confidence, and proficiency” in the online environment (Carruth et al., 2010, p. 687).

As employees who study (Berker et al., 2003), students in the LU program need a baseline of basic skills to provide the self-efficacy they need to be successful (Gibbons, 2010). Students need to be able to handle login issues, Internet access, and hardware and software issues so that when a help desk is not available, they can fix the issue and move on to coursework. An orientation program could include these issues and provide students those essential tools for success. Students also need to learn early in their program to ask for help prior to deadlines (Mupinga et al., 2006). Furthermore, an orientation program could model and teach this essential skill. Stewart (2005) added a family component to the orientation program so that families would better understand the new demands being placed on the student and be better able to support the student in the new role.

Time management in nursing education may incorporate the use of cell phones as a tool to manage deadlines, track projects, handle multiple priorities, and complete health

care tasks in a clinical setting (Smith-Stoner, 2012). Helping students understand how to use their cell phone as a productivity tool, rather than simply a communication device, will assist students in tasks ranging from keeping current with coursework to managing multiple priorities to working directly with patients. As students face more and more demands on their time, they need to understand how to prioritize their demands and create a realistic plan for getting the most important things done to alleviate stress as well as be as productive as possible (Müller, 2008).

Implementation

I will work collaboratively with representatives from a number of campus departments to complete this orientation successfully. The team will need to include an online nursing student advisory panel; the dean of digital learning to represent the online learning management system; the director of information technology to provide resources for technological troubleshooting whether during or after service hours, hardware and software; a representative of the nursing faculty to provide activities to simulate a nursing class and associated activities they would be asked to complete; a member of the English department faculty to provide a segment on APA writing style and a writing refresher for work expected at the baccalaureate level; and finally, members of the student affairs department to work on a program for families and the segment on time management.

Once the program is designed, it will be helpful to treat each new cohort as a pilot group, expecting that modifications will need to be made, and each group will have valuable insights for how to make the orientation more valuable. By treating each new group as a pilot, I will also set the expectation for change; there will never be a time

when we can cease improving the program, and no program should be used twice as is without evaluation. As technology changes, the segment will need to be updated. As the nursing program teaching methods change, the content of that segment will need to be revised. As cell phone technology and applications evolve, that segment will need to be updated to reflect current capabilities. The one certainty of the orientation program is that it will need to be evaluated after every cohort, and the collaborative team will need to revise each section to reflect current needs, capabilities, and expectations.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

As a collaborative effort, I will reach out to the proposed team members and create a team of people who are dedicated to the success of the nursing students and their completion of the online RN-BS nursing program, including the online nursing students themselves. The campus is small, and staff and faculty currently work closely together to achieve student success. This effort will be focused specifically on the online RN-BS nursing program, but it can be modified by other online programs using their teaching methods in the appropriate segments.

Part of the success of the program will be encouraging students to provide input on the effectiveness and value (or not) of the program. In the course of my research, I found nursing students eager to evaluate and contribute to my research, with one participant even specifically commenting that she appreciated being asked about the online RN-BS nursing program because it showed LU's interest in student input and in improving the program. I believe that informal requests to plan and evaluate the

orientation program would elicit similar responses and in turn, valuable input. A student's advisory team will be involved from planning to evaluation.

Potential Barriers

My goal is to set an expectation at the beginning of the project so that all entities will know the expectations of the team members. They will then be able to integrate this project into their own preexisting work/project schedules and plan for the implementation and subsequent revisions each term, thereby allowing for minimal barriers. Time, however, is always a barrier, with everyone on campus being asked to do more and more with each new priority that arises. Staffing is another potential barrier, as this will add another task to already heavily taxed departments. Additionally, as new projects such as this are added to job descriptions, staff and faculty are often forced to relegate something else to a lesser priority, and that could become a problem. Finally, funding could become an issue if additional staffing were required to implement this project effectively and in a timely manner.

In discussing barriers with the LU Nursing Department chair, it also became evident that a potential barrier is LU's partner, Online Services (OS). The partnership agreement with OS included a cost/payment structure that subsidized the startup costs and staffing (other than faculty) of the online RN-BS nursing program while LU garnered only a fraction of the initial profits; the agreement gradually shifts profits to LU as OS recovers the initial startup costs it incurred. Implementation of the orientation could be an issue due to timing of the orientation as it relates to the beginning of the term (should it be scheduled prior to the beginning of the term or as the term begins), if the orientation

would be offered for free or for an additional fee, and who (LU or OS) would be responsible for designing and paying for the course to be put online. OS is a potential barrier due to bringing an additional collaborative partner to the project whose primary interest is financial gain, although ultimately it will benefit OS as well to retain students who pay tuition. This will need to be negotiated between LU's Dean of Digital Learning and representatives of LU before the project can begin.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

I plan to begin the collaborative efforts in January 2015 and have the orientation ready to launch with the new cohort in January 2016. I can use the time in the spring semester to consult with all entities and gain their support for the program. This orientation will need to have support from multiple entities, and the best way to do that is to meet personally with each one and help them understand the vision for the project before beginning. I would first gain support of the administration, then the nursing department, and then move on to the additional departments that would provide resources and support. It is conceivable to begin the orientation with the January 2016 cohort of students. Table 2 details a feasible timeline for the project.

Table 2

Implementation Timeline

Semester	Objective
Spring 2015 (Jan.-April)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain approval from LU administration and the Nursing Department. • Consult personally with each stakeholder and gain support for the orientation program. Stakeholders include the Dean of Digital Learning, Director of IT, online nursing faculty, English department faculty, student affairs representative, and the online nursing students advisory team.
Summer-Fall 2015 (May-Dec.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold regular meetings with individual stakeholders to monitor progress. • Bring all stakeholders together at midterm to assess progress and make any necessary program modifications.
Spring 2016 (Jan.-April)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch initial pilot of the program with the Spring 2016 cohort of online RN-BS nursing program students. • Evaluate at midterm of first 8-week term. Assess usage data from the learning management system (quantitative data), and gather qualitative data from the online nursing students advisory team on the effectiveness and value of the orientation program. • Evaluate at end of first 8-week term. Assess usage data from the learning management system (quantitative data), and gather qualitative data from the online nursing students advisory team on the effectiveness and value of the orientation program. Make and implement changes, and have the revised program ready for Spring 2016 term.
Summer 2016 (May-Dec.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch orientation with new cohort of online RN-BS nursing program students. • Continue cycle of evaluating at 4 weeks (midterm) and at the end of the first 8-week term of the semester to assure relevance, accuracy, and inclusion of technology updates.

Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Project Team

My role in this project is to bring the project team together and unite them behind the mission of increasing the completion rate of students in the online RN-BS nursing program by implementing an orientation program that addresses current challenges of

working nurses who are adult learners. I will manage the project by bringing the project team together, working with them to set deadlines, and supporting the effort to implement the orientation with a focus on communication. After the initial implementation, I will schedule the usage data analysis and gather student feedback, and work with the project team to address the findings and the potential modifications to their segments.

The information technology (IT) department will contribute to the project by creating training for students to troubleshoot their hardware and software issues along with common learning management system issues such as login, email, library access, and features of the course within the learning management system. IT will help students learn what to look for, how to diagnose, and how to fix common issues they might face, thereby allowing them to move on to coursework rather than having to wait for IT to assist them with basic issues.

The dean of digital learning will contribute to the project by being the liaison to the company who hosts our learning management system for adult learners. He and his staff will help modify the existing orientation to address the teaching methods used by the nursing faculty as well as the login issues and library resources with which IT may need to work.

Nursing faculty will need to contribute to the project by helping students test out technologies and teaching methods they will be asked to use in the classroom, including group projects. If a faculty will be using a tool, an application, or an emerging technology, the students will need to try it out and become familiar with it in the orientation so that when it comes time to use it in class, they are not hindered by learning

the teaching method (Caruth et al., 2010). Students will be given an opportunity to discuss how to do group work and how to be accountable to their assigned group, as that was a theme that emerged from my research.

English department faculty will work with nursing faculty to learn their expectations of student writing, and then provide a refresher course and resources for students as they adapt to writing in APA style and writing at the baccalaureate level. They will learn the basic expectations of the nursing faculty who will be grading their papers, as well as where to access tools they can use on demand after the orientation is over. Writing in APA style was a theme (challenge) in my research as well.

The online nursing students' advisory team will be made up of students who volunteer to serve in this capacity and they will advise the process from their unique perspective as the students we are serving. They will be asked to contribute their input on issues of relevance, timeliness, ease of use, implementation strategy, etc. These students will serve as our connection to the entire population of students in this program.

Finally, student affairs (SA) staff (myself along with others in my department including the counselor, pastor, and talent advisor) will develop resources for families (spouses, children, dependent parents) so that they will understand the new demands that their student is facing and understand how to support them as they complete their degree. SA will also create a resource for employers that outlines some new realities for their employee who studies so that they, too, can support the new student (Appendix B). Finally, SA will create a segment on managing priorities (time management) so that students can learn to use their cell phones and other tools to remind them of deadlines,

track projects, attend important family events, and help them reduce the stress of having many demands on their time.

Project Evaluation

The evaluation plan for this project is goal-based as well as outcomes based. The goal-based evaluation is that LU supports students in completing their degree at a rate consistent with the completion percentage goal set by the LU nursing department per their accreditation. The outcomes based evaluation is that students in a post-orientation survey would indicate an increased comfort level and competency with IT issues, the nursing faculty teaching methods, the learning management system used by LU, and writing skills; they would feel more confident about their ability to manage multiple priorities (time management); and they would feel like their families and employers were more able to effectively support them as they complete their baccalaureate degree.

Each term, the orientation program will be evaluated by students so that modifications can be made based on emerging technologies and changing teaching methods. As technology improves, IT professionals will need to help students understand how to use their new hardware as well as software. They will need to update procedures as updates are installed. This is a project that will be reevaluated before each new cohort begins and modified accordingly. Each group will act as a pilot group, with the expectations that there will be modifications to each segment of the orientation.

The success of this project will also be evaluated by the retention and graduation rates of students in the LU online RN-BS nursing program. As stated in the purpose section of this study, the LU nursing department is charged by the IOM (2010) report to

increase the rates of nurses at the baccalaureate level. If this program is successful, the LU retention and graduation rates will stabilize or increase, but not decrease.

This project is also a limited program evaluation. As such, the LU nursing faculty will have the opportunity to review the conclusions from the data and use them to reflect on their areas of successes and challenges as they move forward in developing the RN-BS nursing program for future cohorts. The data was very favorable to the LU nursing department and LU as an institution. Students were overwhelmingly satisfied with the LU support services (business office, financial aid, admissions) and the nursing faculty themselves.

The key stakeholders in this project are the students themselves, the nursing faculty, the student affairs staff, and the institution as a whole. As competition increases for adult learners, institutions need to understand how to support them and increase their completion rates. A project like this can provide a model for all of the institution's online programs and thereby support enrollment efforts, graduation rates, and the overall institution.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

This project has the ability to increase completion rates of online students and serve as a model for other online programs at LU as well as other small institutions who seek to increase their graduation rates. As institutions race to meet the IOM (2010) guidelines, students need to be directly supported by multiple entities on campus. Students who are supported by their families and employers will have a stronger

likelihood of completing their baccalaureate degree, and possibly even moving on to the next recommendation of attaining masters and doctoral level preparation (IOM, 2010).

Instructors will be impacted by this project by working with students who know the basic skills for success in the program. They will be familiar with teaching methods, the learning management system, and course navigation. Students will be comfortable with their IT ability, able to fix basic login issues, hardware and software issues, and diagnose Internet connection challenges. Students will use their cell phones as productivity tools that allow them mobile access to coursework as well as personal productivity support.

Administrators will benefit from increased completion rates when it comes time for accreditation, recruiting new cohorts of students, and forming new community partnerships. Community partners will benefit from knowing that LU supports students to degree completion and is a solid resource for providing higher education to their current nursing staff as well as other adults who might want to return to school for further education.

Finally, this project could benefit the entire region by supplying additional registered nurses who understand rural health care and are able to support residents of local Native American reservations and other residents of rural South Dakota. Registered nurses are in demand in rural healthcare facilities, and they are being actively recruited, even offered financial incentives, by the state of South Dakota (South Dakota Department of Health, 2012).

Far-Reaching

As institutions and programs become more effective, they need to continue to evaluate every aspect of their program. When they reach the point of being able to look for the finer points of polishing their programs, a project like this will provide some often overlooked elements faced by students returning to school, especially online students who do not have the immediate resources of staff on site. My project will help other nursing faculty with fledgling programs to be able to support students in a highly effective manner that starts with the orientation to the program itself along with the support skills necessary for success. Students who have a foundation in IT skills, teaching methods being used by their own faculty, and personal life support such as family support and managing multiple priorities will be more successful and more able to complete the program in as little time possible. They will be able to increase their earning potential and devote more time to their families and other priorities after successfully completing a baccalaureate degree in as short amount of time as possible due to the foundation provided by a deliberately planned orientation program.

Conclusion

In Section 3, I provided an overall description with goals and project outcomes for the orientation project. I also provided rationale with supporting literature for an orientation program along with an implementation plan, and I identified potential project partners. Finally, I proposed an evaluation plan and identified key stakeholders. In Section 4, I will provide reflections on the project, scholarship, importance of the project, recommendations, and implications for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this project study was to determine the perceived challenges of adult learners in an online RN-BS nursing program. My goal was to determine what the challenges actually are so that they can be resolved. Earlier literature addressed concerns that I believed to have been outdated and changed as technology evolved and programs became more sophisticated. Adult learners and online programs have evolved, and I wanted to see if adult learners in online programs were still experiencing the challenges faced by students like themselves even 10 to 20 years ago.

I suspected that evolving technologies and an increase in the sophistication of online programs would have alleviated or eliminated some of the issues identified in earlier literature, and my suspicions were proven correct. While students used to have serious technology issues ranging from hardware to software to Internet access, and their choices of online programs were limited, now they have a multitude of programs from which to select and a much higher comfort level with the technology. Today Internet access is virtually universally available, so the issue has now become the speed of connection and capability of the tools to maximize the capabilities.

I designed Section 4 to discuss the project's strengths and limitations, and I will present personal reflections about the research process and doctoral study experience. I will conclude with how this project can impact social change and suggest implications for future research.

Project Strengths

My research focused on determining the challenges faced by adult learners who were attempting to work as RNs while earning their baccalaureate degree in an online program. The strength of my project is that it is collaborative and invites people with a wide variety of expertise to contribute to supporting students. As a student affairs professional, I know that when professionals from across campus are invited to participate in a valuable project, they often do so with enthusiasm and dedication to student success. This project is data driven and addresses actual challenges of current students. I believe that data driven, collaborative projects have a strong likelihood of success.

The research on helping adult learners complete their degrees indicated that an orientation program could help students in an online program be successful (Adkins & Bryant, 2011; Allen & Seamen, 2013; Carruth et al., 2010; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Hunte, 2012). That research, along with the findings of my case study, indicate that this is a strong project and will likely help increase the retention and graduation rates of working nurses as they finish their baccalaureate degrees, which will help attain the goal of the IOM (2010).

Project Limitations and Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

A major limitation of this project is that the research was conducted at a small institution, and the results may not be transferable to institutions in larger population centers or to locations with reduced Internet access, for example. The results of my research are specific to students with fairly easy access to Internet access who are

enrolled in a small nursing program with faculty who are able to devote time to individual attention and support. In a larger program, for instance, students might not have access to faculty that LU's students have.

Additionally, the research pool was small. Of the 42 students, only 29 were experienced nurses. In that small number of students, a high percentage of participation was required to have enough data to create a valid analysis. In my study, I was fortunate that I had enough participation for meaningful analysis.

The final limitation and potential challenge of this project is the same as what makes it strong. Bringing in multiple collaborators is the goal, but it also means that on the part of the project manager (in this case, me) there is constant need for follow-up and status checks to make sure that this project stays at the top of the priority list in multiple departments and does not become relegated to a lower priority and therefore not completed on time.

I will mitigate this concern by creating support for the project in advance, creating clear expectations, and confirming fixed timelines. There is usually some flexibility, but if everyone on the collaborative team is invested from the beginning, they will be more likely to sustain their interest and commitment for the long term. The team will also need to know that decisions for modifications will require their input and their expertise as well as that of the students so that every decision is made with all stakeholders in mind and that our students are at the center of all decisions. We will have created a student-centered program: created for students, advised by students, and delivered for students. If successfully executed, all stakeholders will benefit.

Scholarship

Prior to this doctoral program I was distrustful of data, believing that researchers could make numbers say anything they wanted. What I learned is that credible studies mitigate the risks and take intentional steps to create valid, reliable studies. How those numbers are interpreted by outside agencies can be the weak link.

As I progressed through my doctoral studies, I began to learn how practice is informed by research, and although sometimes seemingly tedious, when major systems are involved, it is highly beneficial to slow down, review the literature, do the research, and conduct an objective analysis of the data. By nature, I am an activator—I get an idea and I act on it, sometimes to great benefit, but other times to an opportunity to go back and do it again in a more thoughtful manner.

My staff sometimes finds me hard to work for, as I struggle to focus on one initiative at a time, often overcommitting my resources and underdelivering results. The process of scholarly research has made me a more effective leader, because I will now more often think like a scholar and consider the research and the existing data before moving forward. I have even said to my team, “See what kind of research you can find to support this idea.” Those are words I had never previously spoken.

I have greatly benefited from the scholarship factor of this program. From this point on, I will consider statistics and research with a much more critical eye. I will evaluate research from a scholarly perspective rather than taking others’ evaluations at face value. I will also allow myself to trust data more, and be skeptical when appropriate,

now that I know and understand how to evaluate the research methods, the analysis tools, and the overall research process.

Project Development and Evaluation

From my entire doctoral program, I learned that collaboration is critical. When I began to develop the orientation program, I immediately thought about who could collaborate with me to make this the strongest program possible. I wanted to keep it student centered, so I continually considered who would be of most benefit to students rather than who has the time or who might want to participate.

With a student centered, collaborative approach, I was able to create what I believe will be a valuable program for students and support them so they can graduate. However, it is also one that will help nursing faculty by providing more prepared students who can focus on the content they are learning. It will help the IT staff by generating fewer calls that students could have solved themselves. It will help the staff on the learning management system side be more responsive to student needs, make them more proactive, and help them retain institutional clients. It will help community healthcare partners who will benefit from students who, as they transform into graduates, learn to communicate more effectively in their writing due to the rigorous nature of APA style and baccalaureate writing expectations.

By treating every cohort as a pilot group, I will help the cross-disciplinary team who will be collaborating on this project see the orientation as a work in progress rather than a finished project to be modified when there is time. If we can retain the focus on continual evolution, the orientation will continue to be relevant and valuable to students

and stakeholders. Having students on this team will be the most certain way to guarantee that this project is valuable to students.

Leadership and Change

As this project study developed and took shape, I learned that leaders always need to have an eye to the future, watching trends, seeking patterns, and getting input from stakeholders. I wanted to be able to affect change quickly, and what I learned instead is that change takes time, and sometimes the numbers change while working on a plan, so it is necessary to course-correct and keep moving.

I also learned that collaboration is crucial. Without the support of nursing faculty who suggested the research topic, who provided me with extensive data and reports they had generated themselves for accreditation, who discussed literature with me, and who suggested that time management be a part of my project, I would not have finished with a project like this that I believe will make a difference for our adult learners. Leadership does not mean doing everything alone, but rather finding the people who want to help in the success, providing reciprocal support to them, and maintaining dedication to a project even when it takes far longer to complete than originally anticipated. It is having the dedication to keep going even when initial enthusiasm wanes because the project is worthy of time and effort and it will benefit the greater good—in my case, the nursing students and all of their associated stakeholders. Leadership is a journey supported by countless people who play various roles in your shared success.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

This doctoral program has shown me that I am more dedicated than I thought, and that I can write better than I thought, and that despite living in a rural, small town, I can contribute to discussions with people with far grander titles and far larger paychecks. I learned that I can find research to support my opinions, that I can affect change, and that I can make a difference in the lives of others.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a student affairs professional whose previous degrees were English (B.A.) and business communications (M.A.), I felt insecure about my ability to lead a department of people who had jobs I had never held, who had training in specific fields that I did not, and who could not come to me for answers about their technical questions. What I did learn is that I can lead from a different vantage point, one of global perspective, collaboration, social change, and student-centeredness. I had never heard the term “student centered” before beginning this program, and now I base my entire perspective on it. As a practitioner in student affairs, I now believe I am qualified to lead the department, and I am qualified to make recommendations to administration about what needs to be done on behalf of our students.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Through developing this project, I learned that I am highly collaborative. Rather than creating a project for which I will take sole credit, I created a project that requires collaboration from partners across campus, including students, because it is the best way to serve students and be sure that students have access to all the experts first-hand rather

than one person trying to gather information and relay it second hand. I believe people want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and this project invites direct participation, direct contact with students, and it will directly serve students and indirectly serve a host of stakeholders.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

In my research on nursing education and in my discussions with the nursing faculty at LU, I gained extensive insight into the future of healthcare, and more specifically, the future of nursing in the United States. As a result of changing legislation and increasing costs, the role of nurses is changing from one of basic nursing to more specialized nursing and patient education. Nurses are training patients themselves or family members to care for the patients after they leave the hospital. Hospital stays are becoming shorter due to the same factors. As a result, patients who do have longer hospital stays are in need of more specialized, critical nursing care. Because of this, nurses are required to be more specialized to accommodate those patients. In brief, those are the factors that the nursing industry is facing. Nurse educators, then, are now required to educate more nurses to the BS level as opposed to the AD level, and more of the BS nurses are highly encouraged to go on to masters and doctoral level work. The changing face of healthcare and nursing is creating social change and nurse educators are at the forefront. Because of that, my project is timely and will contribute to the social change efforts of the LU nursing department

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

From my research, I learned that the issues that plagued nursing students 15 to 20 years ago have changed greatly. Adult learners still struggle with managing their multiple priorities and the many demands on their time, but the issues challenging them have changed. Online education has changed the challenges yet again. When adult learners first began going back to school, they had to be near a physical campus, they had to conform to traditional class schedules, they sat next to 18-22 year old students, and many of them had to quit their jobs to make that all work.

Today, students are able to enroll in one of many online programs with other adult learners that allow them to be on campus whenever they have an Internet connection. They can retain their full-time jobs while attending class when it is convenient for them. The online programs, once hard to find and challenging to navigate, have become more plentiful, sophisticated, and user-friendly, too.

Today's main challenges center around how to manage everything that an adult learner has to get done in a day. Students report being parents of multiple children and wanting to attend their activities, holding down a full-time, demanding job, and then trying to add doing coursework on top of it all. In my research, not one student indicated that they had reduced their workload or family commitments when they enrolled in school. Therefore, what many people consider a full schedule is now full time plus the work of earning a baccalaureate degree.

Future research could look at the importance of advising for adult learners. In talking with the chair of the nursing department, she indicated that she is, for all practical

purposes, personally advising each student in the online RN-BS nursing program. As courses are offered, she checks their transcripts to see what they brought in as transfer credits, and what they still need versus what is being offered. She watches their grades and contacts them when they begin to struggle to see what is happening. She then asks if they want to withdraw from the course to save their GPA and financial aid “successfully completed” status, retain their confidence, and then restart the program when their life circumstances stabilize. She personally watches each student all semester. By doing that, she now has students who are different stages of their degree completion, and they will graduate on their timeline as opposed to the official 28-month program. While it makes the lines blur on defining the cohorts, it helps the students immensely and they are retaining in the program, albeit on their own timeline. The orientation program project I have designed will be a wonderful benefit and have great impact, although I think what she is doing for students is helping them even more.

Conclusion

This project was designed to determine the challenges faced by adult learners in an online RN-BS nursing program. The themes that emerged from the research were time management, cost, IT, group projects, and study skills. The orientation program project I designed addressed all of those themes except the cost of the program. The project includes a limited program evaluation of the LU online RN-BS nursing program. Students were overwhelmingly in support of the online format, they strongly admire and appreciate the nursing faculty, and they support the 8-week course format as they find it more manageable than the 16-week format.

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Appendix A: Limited Program Evaluation

The research analysis produced data that were highly favorable to the LU nursing program and its faculty. The following five points summarize the findings of the study as they relate to the LU nursing program.

- Nursing faculty are highly supportive as evidenced by their passion for nursing, fast response times to students' questions (in less than 24 hours), guiding them through the course, ability to problem solve in real time, and advising them as they progress through the program.
- Students prefer the online program to a face-to-face program for a variety of reasons, primarily flexibility, family and work commitments. They also commented favorably on the 8-week term rather than the previous 16-week terms.
- Students appreciated consistency from the nursing faculty in policies, deadlines, and faculty expectations. Students found it slightly challenging to work with faculty and coursework outside of nursing due to differing expectations and policies.
- The admissions staff, business office, and financial aid office were all noted as helpful and easy to work with.
- Students preferred online to face-to-face programs, and they would overwhelmingly choose the LU program again.
- Shortcomings of the program included the following points:

- Information technology – login issues, software and hardware challenges
- Teaching methods – understanding how to use the tools the faculty will use in class
- Writing assistance, especially how to write in APA style
- Helping students communicate with their family, friends and employers regarding the challenges of simultaneously being a student, parent, friend, and employee
- Helping students understand how to make the best use of their time (time management, maximizing productivity tools such as cell phones)

The data from the study regarding challenges faced by adult learners in an online RN-BS nursing program revealed challenges that can be addressed by collaboratively creating an online orientation program for students to use both at the beginning of their coursework and during it, serving at that time as a reference resource. With the knowledge that the LU students evaluate LU and its nursing program favorably, the orientation program will address the areas that students do find challenging: information technology, teaching methods, writing at the baccalaureate level, and garnering support from family and employers. The entire plan for that orientation website is detailed in Appendix B.

Appendix B: Orientation Project Website

Introduction

Welcome to the LU orientation page for students in the RN-BS nursing program. This site has been designed to provide quick access to information as you need it. You are encouraged to assess your current comfort level with each content area and determine if this is content you should work through before the semester begins or if you can access the information on-demand as you have questions. The method is up to you. Armed with this information, we hope you can troubleshoot any challenges quickly so that you can return to your coursework during the carefully scheduled time you have allowed for homework.

Student Advisory Panel

This site has been designed with input from students who precede you in the program. They are working, adult learners, just like you. From their experiences, we have learned what information we need to provide you with so that you can be successful in your studies. If there is ever a time you would like to offer feedback, a suggestion for improvement, or ask for additional support, use this form ([link here](#)). You are offered the option to provide your email for follow-up questions, otherwise you can submit feedback anonymously. ([link here](#))

Information Technology

Here is an initial list of modules that will include appropriate materials (video, PDF files, screen shots, etc.) to support you. This topic is monitored by the IT department as well as the Office of Digital Learning and the nursing faculty.

- Login instructions, and how to handle login difficulties
 - LU learning management system
 - Partner learning management system
 - Library
- Software challenges
 - Microsoft products (installation, updating, instructions for common tasks, etc.)
 - Course-specific products (installation, updating, instructions for common tasks, etc.)
 - Email
 - Virus/malware prevention software
 - Virus/malware removal
- Hardware challenges
 - Internet connection
 - Wireless
 - Wired
 - Audio issues
 - Video issues
 - Display issues
 - Keyboard/mouse issues
- Teaching Tools Used by Faculty
 - List updated in cooperation with current teaching faculty

- Any course-specific software tools (i.e. chat rooms, video uploads, group workspace, group document storage space)

Teaching Methods

This section will provide examples for students to try out all the teaching methods that faculty will use in the course.

- File upload
- Video upload
- Asynchronous work space
- Document sharing
- Chat groups
- Email
- Specifics in the learning management system (one bullet for each item)

Writing Assistance

This section will provide students with short tutorials on how to use APA style in their writing. Students will have access to samples of how to cite in text, how to create a reference list, and all other frequently asked topics.

Family and Employer Orientation

This section will provide you with materials you can use to start discussions with your family members and your employer, and maybe even show your friends so that they can support you while you finish your degree.

- Time Commitments of a Baccalaureate Program.
 - Adding coursework to an already busy schedule

- Short Course In Managing Multiple Priorities
Set priorities, evaluate concrete schedule (school, family, work), determine which things will get done when, and which things will need to wait, be delegated, or not get done. Build in more time than anticipated, and plan for emergencies. Be firm once the schedule is set, but be prepared to be flexible if a higher priority emerges.
- How a Family Can Support a Student
 - Coloring sheets for kids – pictures of campus
 - Videos of campus tour
 - Tips for a spouse on helping with family demands
 - Discussion starters on how to ask for help
 - Link to bookstore to order LU gear for the entire family
- How an Employer Can Support a Student
 - Discussion starters on time commitments, schedule conflicts, stressful times of the semester/term, etc.
- How a Friend Can Support a Student
 - Respecting your friend's new priorities, helping with kids, housework, or errands.
- Cell Phones as Productivity Tools
 - Time management (set reminders for all projects, meetings, etc.)
 - Use of phones in class (specific apps for coursework)

- Communicate with classmates and faculty (enter people into contact list)
- Other apps to help with managing multiple priorities (i.e. Dropbox, OneNote, fitness apps, group text messages for family activities)

General Resources

This section will provide links to general resources that can be of assistance to online learners. Reports, software, apps, study aids, and anything else we can find to help your journey go more smoothly, we'll post here. If we think it might be of use to you, we'll post it!

Feedback

Please let us know if there is anything else we can do to make this orientation more helpful to you. Our only job is to serve you and help you be successful in completing your degree. Tell us how we can help you! ([link here](#))

Appendix C: Email to Participants

From: Diana Goldammer, researcher

To: Online RN-BS nursing students at LU

Subject: Invitation to participate in research

Good evening,

I am Diana Goldammer, Director of Student Affairs at LU. I am conducting original research on the challenges faced by online RN-BS nursing students, and adult learners in the online RN-BS nursing program are invited to participate in this study.

Introduction

You are invited to take part in a research study of adult learners who are enrolled in an online RN-BS nursing program. This introductory information is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part. This study is being conducted in my role as a doctoral student at Walden University. I am also the director of student affairs at LU, but this research is separate from that role.

The purpose of this study is for me to learn about the challenges of being an adult learner in the online RN-BS nursing program. There are four questions in this study, and they are at the end of this email.

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether you choose to be in the study. No one at LU will treat you differently if you decide to not be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later.

You may stop at any time. Declining or discontinuing participation in the study will not negatively impact your relationship with me or your access to student support services.

Being in this type of study involves a risk similar to routine computer use. Being in this study would not pose a risk to your safety or wellbeing. The benefit of this study is that the LU nursing faculty and LU student affairs office will be better prepared to support adult learners in the online RN-BS nursing program as a result of understanding the challenges involved in being a student in the program. There is no compensation for participating in this study. As a participant in this study, you will receive a PDF copy of the summary of my findings.

Correspondence Request and Purpose

As part of an email correspondence, I may follow up with you no more than twice to seek clarification to your responses. My goal is to seek comprehensive data that I can use to design a project that will ultimately aid nursing students in attaining their baccalaureate degree in nursing. As this is an email correspondence, please take as much time and space as you want to fully explain your answers. Again, all-inclusive, comprehensive data is the goal.

Research Ethics and Informed Consent

Your identity will be kept confidential at all times, and no one outside of me will ever know who provided what response. You will be identified by a pseudonym in the study. You will be allowed to check my interpretation of your responses before I go forward with the project.

The initial email can be completed in as little as five minutes but can take as long as you want. At the end of the correspondence process, which may include up to two follow-up emails if you choose to respond (requiring 5-10 minutes each time), I will ask that you confirm that I understand everything in the way you meant to say it (requiring 5-10 minutes to read, review, and respond). My hope is that within one week of your initial response I will have all of my questions answered, you will have checked my findings of your data (requiring 5-10 minutes), and this process will not take any more of your time.

If you have any questions about this study, you can reach me at. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Lxxxxx Exxxxx, the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. She can be reached at 612-000-0000 or irb@waldenu.edu. Walden University's approval number for this study is 06-17-14-0315821 and it expires on June 16, 2015.

If you choose to participate in the study, you will have indicated your informed consent by responding to this email. Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Participation Instructions

The questions are below. Please click "Reply" to this message, and then proceed to answer the questions in the space provided following each question. Your answer can be as brief or as extensive as you want. There is no limit to how long your response can be. When you are finished, please click "Send" to submit your responses to me.

Correspondence Questions

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By responding to this email, I consent to participate in this study.

Question 1: Describe the challenges you have experienced while completing your bachelor's degree (e.g. lack of time, lack of dependent care, lack of access, course scheduling issues, structure of the nursing program, cost of education, lack of confidence in academic ability, insecurity in classroom environment as just some examples).

Answer 1:

Question 2: Describe the support services that would be or would have been helpful to you as you complete your bachelor's degree if provided by LU (e.g. dependent care, individual or group counseling, coursework tutoring, using the LU learning management system, general technology issues, study skills training, problem solving resources as just examples).

Answer 2:

Question 3: If you were to do it again, would you choose the LU online RN-BS nursing program over a traditional face-to-face classroom nursing program? Why or why not?

Answer 3:

Question 4: What kind of support has the nursing faculty provided you? What kind of services has the student affairs department provided you? Of these from both areas, which were the most helpful to you in having success in the LU online RN-BS nursing program?

Answer 4:

Thank you for your responses. If I have any questions, I will reply to this email with my clarifying questions. I would invite you to respond to those questions in an attempt to more fully understand your responses and contribute more richly to the research. Again, thank you for your time and contributions to this study.

Sincerely,

Diana Goldammer

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Appendix B illustrates how the research questions correspond to the interview questions. There is no corresponding research question for the final interview question, as that is evaluative.

Research Question	Interview Question
What are the perceptions of experienced, working nurses of the challenges taking full-time coursework in the online RN-BS nursing program at LU?	Describe the challenges have you experienced while completing your bachelor's degree (e.g. lack of time, lack of dependent care, lack of access, course scheduling issues, structure of the nursing program, cost of education, lack of confidence in academic ability, insecurity in classroom environment as just some examples).
Which of these challenges and issues of program effectiveness hold the potential for positive collaborative intervention by the Nursing Department and the Student Affairs Department at LU?	Describe the support services that would be or would have been helpful to you as you complete your bachelor's degree if provided by LU (e.g. dependent care, individual or group counseling, coursework tutoring, using the LU learning management system, general technology issues, study skills training, problem solving resources as just examples).
How effective is the structure of the online RN-BS nursing program in light of institutional and IOM goals, and how effectively does the LU Nursing Department support online students as perceived by the online students?	What kind of support has the nursing faculty provided you? What kind of services has the student affairs department provided you? Of these from both areas, which were the most helpful to you in having success in the LU online RN-BS nursing program?
(no corresponding research question)	If you were to do it again, would you choose the LU online RN-BS program over a traditional face-to-face classroom program? Why or why not?

Appendix E: Data Analysis

Student	Challenges	Helpful	Online v. FTF	Nursing Faculty	Ideas
	Time mgmt Cost Writing Skills	Recruiter Quick responses Straightforward answers Having coworkers in the program	Online – due to life situation		FAQ – about the program, application process, financial aid, scholarships
	WFT & SFT (working full time and school full time)	<i>No need for tech support</i> Faculty Financial aid Business office Recruiter Advisors Virtual campus is easy to use Easy to register for classes Structured affordable	Online – well structured, easy to use, intense	Nursing faculty more supportive than gen ed faculty Gen ed courses more time consuming and difficult than nursing courses	Recommend WPT/SFT or WFT/SPT – not both FT
	PEP tech issues Team projects Booklist for course	Response time – 1-24 hours <i>Not an issue after all – confidence and insecurity about online classes</i> Structure Cost Access to class	Online – practical, work on own schedule, other obligations, going back to school was easy in this format	Made transition to school easy Answered questions in timely manner Guided me through	FAQ page Post grade ranking of students APA training
	Teaching self			Willing to	

Student	Challenges	Helpful	Online v. FTF	Nursing Faculty	Ideas
	v. being in lecture Not knowing how much time coursework would take Team projects and member accountability Cost – paying as I go			assist Really care about you Email response within 24 hours	
	Faculty not coordinating due dates/workload Inconsistent due dates/time Syllabus not addressing late work and grace period or not Not knowing how to set up email on my phone to get email faster Time mgmt. Access to tutoring Access to helpdesk	Questions on virtual campus that have already been answered often apply to my questions Automatic registration	Online – busy life, don't have to worry about childcare, travel, ambulance schedule or time in class	Offered support Good availability Comforting to know they're there	
	Stats tutor Certain assignments Paying back loans	Communication from entire institution Instructors	Online – kids, own pace, can work at home or away (coffee)	Very helpful	Admissions procedures

Student	Challenges	Helpful	Online v. FTF	Nursing Faculty	Ideas
		have been helpful	shop or hotel), works better for non traditional student		
	IT support No challenges after the initial getting used to things Stats – need for tutor PEP relevance/need	Response time no more than 24 hours Personally - readjusting schedule to accommodate school Automatic registration No lack of access Same things available online as there were on campus Timely response to emails	Online – able to WFT & SFT 8 wk classes better than 16 wk	No fluff in answers Helpful Supportive Helped with career path and learning path	
	APA style, and then what the instructor actually wants Time mgmt. Study skills Ordering books	Admissions process Financial aid Instructors – friendly, prompt responses, enjoyable classes Questions that applied to everyone were posted to virtual campus Received phone calls	Online – works around family and job, tech is great, required books are good, instructors excellent		Study skills training video Make ordering books through DWU easier (note to self – autoship books and roll price into tuition)

Student	Challenges	Helpful	Online v. FTF	Nursing Faculty	Ideas
		during admissions process			
	Library database access Issue resolution isn't immediate What is need to know vs. nice to know Vague instructions Inconsistent instructor policies	Appreciated being asked to take survey, showed concern for making this a good experience for everyone	Ability to schedule coursework time	Helped with issues and questions Willing to meet Responds in timely manner to email Hands-on involvement Passionate about job	Would prefer video lecture to reinforce reading assignments
	Time mgmt., but that's up to me to do Nervous about online classes but found it user friendly	Registrar and financial aid offices are informative and helpful Virtual campus helps keep you on track because it shows due dates and course schedules Instructors respond in timely manner	Online – have been waiting for a 100% online program to work with family and work demands	Very supportive and helpful	
	Staying on track without the accountability of going to class Cost (if it	It takes a passionate instructor to be an effective online instructor	Online – easier for students' with families	Enthusiastic teachers and knowledgeable about nursing	

Student	Challenges	Helpful	Online v. FTF	Nursing Faculty	Ideas
	were not paid by the military I would have chosen a cheaper program)	Weekly due dates			
	Time Cost Health challenges	Understanding faculty <i>No need for study skills or problem solving</i> Registration process Financial aid dept Nursing faculty	Online – the only way I could manage all my priorities		
	Time mgmt. (work and family)	Support system at home Ability to work at my own pace	Online – can work on school between other demands	Key to my success	
	Not having instant tech support Lack of notifications in virtual campus Completing group projects		Online – able to work while a student Able to work ahead	Supportive, flexible	
	Stress due to no experience with online classes Needed to learn two LMS	8 week class system makes things more manageable	Online – able to manage schedule and commitments	Supportive Gave out contact info Solved problems while they were	Training on LMS systems Time mgmt. and study skills training (staying on track with

Student	Challenges	Helpful	Online v. FTF	Nursing Faculty	Ideas
	platforms Time mgmt. Personal computer and Internet access issues			happening Personal attention	assignments, working on assignments efficiently)
	Time mgmt., managing multiple priorities (work, family, school) No lecture in a challenging class (stats)	Great program to work and earn BSN	Online – able to finish in 1 year, WFT & SFT	Very helpful	FAQ page Online study group
	Time mgmt.	Supportive program, not out to “eat their young” 8 wk classes Financial aid dept helpful Everyone did what they could to help me along	Online – able to overcome hurdles that wouldn’t have been possible in a classroom.	Very helpful Provided advice and shortcuts to make things easier Advice for future career Problem solvers	Mentor program
	Anxiety related to taking online courses, writing papers, stats class lack of confidence in my academic ability (after being out for 14 years) APA format Time mgmt.	Recruiter Financial aid staff Being patient and confident in learning the technology and learning systems as you go – not something that could be learned in an orientation –	Online – flexible, family time doesn’t suffer, can maintain work and family members’ schedules		

Student	Challenges	Helpful	Online v. FTF	Nursing Faculty	Ideas
	Summer child care Financial aid process fears Personal tech ability – downloading and using software	it's more “learn as you go”			
	Time mgmt. Priorities Cost Tutor for stats	IT is easy in this program Recruiter Advisor	Online – need the flexibility		
	Time mgmt. Cost Book ordering		Online – easier to manage busy schedule	Constructive feedback – explain why points deducted Prompt responses	
	Personal IT skills Need for immediate resolution of issues Don't want to spend time figuring things out		Online – logistical issues		
	Time mgmt.	Instructor responds quickly	Online – young children	Supportive Wants us to do well	

Student Affairs –

- 1 comment – appreciated career services provided by student affairs
- 1 comment – too busy to do anything with student affairs
- Any other comments – unaware of what they offer or didn't use any student affairs services

Appendix F: Themes

Challenges

IT	<p>Access to helpdesk Don't want to spend time figuring things out Issue resolution isn't immediate* IT support Library database access Need for immediate resolution of issues No challenges after the initial getting used to things Not having instant tech support Not knowing how to set up email on my phone to get email faster Personal computer and Internet access issues Personal IT skills Personal tech ability – downloading and using software</p>
Tutoring	<p>Access to tutoring Stats – need for tutor Stats tutor stats tutor</p>
Anxiety	<p>Anxiety related to taking online courses, writing papers, stats class lack of confidence in my academic ability (after being out for 14 years) Nervous about online classes but found it user friendly Stress due to no experience with online classes</p>
Writing Skills	<p>APA format APA style, and then what the instructor actually wants Writing Skills</p>
Book ordering	<p>Book ordering Booklist for course Ordering books</p>
Academic	<p>Certain assignments Faculty not coordinating due dates/workload Inconsistent due dates/time Inconsistent instructor policies No lecture in a challenging class (stats) Not knowing how much time coursework would take Syllabus not addressing late work and grace period or not Vague instructions What is need to know vs. nice to know Gen ed courses more time consuming and difficult than nursing courses</p>
Group Projects	<p>Completing group projects</p>

	Team projects Team projects and member accountability
Cost	Cost Cost Cost Cost Cost – paying as I go Cost (if it were not paid by the military I would have chosen a cheaper program) Financial aid process fears Paying back loans
Personal	Health challenges Summer child care
LMS	Lack of notifications in virtual campus Needed to learn two LMS platforms
PEP	PEP relevance/need PEP tech issues
Time Mgmt	Priorities Staying on track without the accountability of going to class Time Time mgmt Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. Time mgmt. (work and family) Time mgmt., but that's up to me to do Time mgmt., managing multiple priorities (work, family, school) WFT & SFT (working full time and school full time)
Study Skills	Study skills Teaching self v. being in lecture

Helpful

Class Calendar	8 week class system makes things more manageable
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	8 wk classes better than 16 wk 8 wk classes Weekly due dates Structure Structured Virtual campus helps keep you on track because it shows due dates and course schedules
Individual Pace	Ability to work at my own pace
Recruiter/Admissions	Admissions process Recruiter Recruiter Recruiter Recruiter Received phone calls during admissions process
Financial Aid	affordable Cost Financial aid Financial aid Financial aid dept Financial aid dept helpful Financial aid staff
Registration	Automatic registration Automatic registration Easy to register for classes Registrar and financial aid offices are informative and helpful Registration process
Advisor/Advising	Advisor Advisors
Response time	Instructor responds quickly Instructors – friendly, prompt responses, enjoyable classes Instructors have been helpful Instructors respond in timely manner Response time – 1-24 hours Response time no more than 24 hours Questions on virtual campus that have already been answered often apply to my questions Questions that applied to everyone were posted to virtual campus Quick responses Timely response to emails
Faculty	It takes a passionate instructor to be an effective online instructor Helpful Faculty

	<p>Everyone did what they could to help me along Nursing faculty Supportive program, not out to “eat their young” Understanding faculty Straightforward answers</p>
IT	<p>IT is easy in this program Being patient and confident in learning the technology and learning systems as you go – not something that could be learned in an orientation – it’s more “learn as you go” Access to class No lack of access Virtual campus is easy to use No need for tech support</p>
Support	<p>Having coworkers in the program Support system at home</p>
General	<p>Appreciated being asked to take survey, showed concern for making this a good experience for everyone Business office Communication from entire institution Great program to work and earn BSN No need for study skills or problem solving Not an issue after all – confidence and insecurity about online classes Personally - readjusting schedule to accommodate school Same things available online as there were on campus</p>

Online v. FTF: ONLINE unanimously

<p>Time Mgmt Flexibility Multiple Priorities Work and Study</p> <p>(many participants gave multiple reasons)</p>	<p>Ability to schedule coursework time Able to work ahead need the flexibility due to life situation practical, work on own schedule, other obligations, going back to school was easy in this format busy life, don’t have to worry about childcare, travel, ambulance schedule or time in class kids, own pace, can work at home or away (coffee shop or hotel), works better for non traditional student works around family and job, tech is great, required books are good, instructors excellent have been waiting for a 100% online program to work with family and work demands easier for students’ with families the only way I could manage all my priorities</p>
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	<p>can work on school between other demands able to manage schedule and commitments able to overcome hurdles that wouldn't have been possible in a classroom. flexible, family time doesn't suffer, can maintain work and family members' schedules easier to manage busy schedule young children logistical issues able to WFT & SFT able to work while a student able to finish in 1 year, WFT & SFT</p>
Course structure	well structured, easy to use, intense

Nursing Faculty

Supportive /Helpful Advisor/Guide	<p>Nursing faculty more supportive than gen ed faculty Willing to assist Really care about you Offered support Very helpful No fluff in answers Helpful Supportive Comforting to know they're there Helped with issues and questions Willing to meet Hands-on involvement Very supportive and helpful Key to my success Supportive, flexible Supportive Gave out contact info Personal attention Very helpful Very helpful Made transition to school easy Guided me through Helped with career path and learning path Provided advice and shortcuts to make things easier Advice for future career Constructive feedback – explain why points deducted Supportive Wants us to do well</p>
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	Solved problems while they were happening Problem solvers
Passionate/Enthusiastic	Passionate about job Enthusiastic teachers and knowledgeable about nursing
Timely Response	Answered questions in timely manner Email response within 24 hours Good availability Responds in timely manner to email Prompt responses

Ideas/Suggestions

FAQ Page	The program, application process, financial aid, scholarships FAQ page FAQ page Admissions procedures
Training Needs prior to beginning the program	Time mgmt. and study skills (staying on track with assignments, working on assignments efficiently) Study skills video APA style LMS systems
Other	Online study group Mentor program Video lecture to reinforce reading assignments Post grade ranking of students Recommend Working PT/School FT or WFT/SPT – not both FT Make ordering books through DWU easier

Curriculum Vitae

Diana Goldammer, Ed.D.
 1621 E 3rd Ave., Mitchell, SD 57301
 605.996.8089, Diana.goldammer@waldenu.edu

SUMMARY OF QUALIFICATIONS

- Proven ability to train adult learners in multiple areas of private industry. Experience teaching students in college and K12 education.
- Demonstrated ability to facilitate successful completion of personal and departmental goals.
- Educational leader who manages team of student life staff, supporting retention and graduation of students, sits on and contributes to leadership committees.

EDUCATION

Doctor of Education in Higher Education Leadership **2014**
 Walden University, Minneapolis, MN

Master of Arts in Business Communications **2002**
 Jones International University, Centennial, CO

Bachelor of Arts in English Education **1991**
 Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD

EXPERIENCE

Director of Student Life **2009-Present**
 Dakota Wesleyan University, Mitchell, SD

- Teach career preparation classes to college juniors and seniors. Serve as Student Association Senate advisor. Advise undecided students. Provide career counseling services, including administering and interpreting the Strong Interest Inventory and Gallup StrengthsFinder. Certified Strong Interest Inventory Provider and Strengths Educator.
- Lead team of Student Life staff: campus pastor, talent advisor, campus nurse, campus counselor, residence life staff, student activities director, food service director, TRIO student support staff
- Serve on campus leadership committees: retention committee chair and special retention projects, strategic planning committee, and deans and directors committee.

Public Relations Specialist **2006-2009**

Dakota Wesleyan University, Mitchell, SD

- Wrote for the Wesleyan Today alumni magazine, wrote press releases for all institutional news, served as campus photographer.

Office Manager **2000-2006**

Hamaker Crop Insurance/Farmers Trading Company/New Leaf BodySpa, Mitchell, SD

- Served multiple, family-owned businesses.
- Office manager, marketing director, technology coordinator, trainer, event planner.

Technical Writer/Trainer/Event Planner **1998-2000**

Martin Group, Mitchell, SD

- Trained clients in Microsoft products and provided new employee orientation
- Planned biannual corporate training meetings
- Edited and formatted software documentation

English Teacher

Mitchell Middle School, Mitchell, SD

1997-1998

Artesian-Letcher High School, Artesian, SD

1994-1997

Haakon County High School, Philip, SD

1991-1993

- Managed classrooms of students, responsible for curriculum development, lesson planning, classroom management, and extracurricular assignments including school newspaper, oral interpretation, one-act play, all-school play, and prom advisor.

Executive Secretary **1993-1994**

South Dakota Jaycees, Mitchell, SD

- Support volunteers across the state of South Dakota as they conducted their local chapters by managing their paperwork and communications.

VOLUNTEER SERVICE**Founder and Program Director** **2002-2009**

Women in Blue Jeans, Mitchell, SD

- Created a nonprofit organization that produced an annual networking and training conference for women in rural America. Wrote multiple successful grants to the National Risk Management Agency (avg. \$25,000), represented WIBJ at national conferences, spoke at national events on the role of women in agriculture. Organized volunteers to produce the annual event; served 125 women annually. The organization is running under new leadership after I stepped away from the organization.