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Review

# Facilitating student retention in online graduate nursing education programs: A review of the literature

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SUMMARY

Online education, a form of distance education, provides students with opportunities to engage in lifelong learning without the restrictions of time and space. However, while this approach meets the needs of employed nursing professionals, it poses some challenges for educators. Student retention is one such challenge. Student retention rates serve as measures of program quality and are reported to accrediting bodies. Therefore, it is imperative that administrators and program faculty implement comprehensive programs to ensure student retention. This review of the literature was designed to identify strategies to improve student retention in online graduate nursing education programs. The review includes 23 articles that address models, research, and best practices supported in nursing and higher education. The findings indicate that student retention in online programs is a multidimensional problem requiring a multifaceted approach. Recommendations for facilitating retention in online nursing programs include ensuring social presence and program and course quality, and attentiveness to individual student characteristics.

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## Introduction

Online education, a form of distance education, provides opportunities for students to engage in lifelong learning without the restrictions of space and time. A 2012 survey of Chief Academic Officers by Allen and Seaman (2013) indicated that total enrollment in online education grew from slightly more than 1.6 million in Fall 2002 to over 6.7 million in Fall 2011. The number of students enrolled in higher education who were taking at least one online course had increased by 570,000 in the previous year. As the number of students taking online courses grows, concerns about student retention have also grown. Indeed, lower retention rates were identified by 73.5% of respondents to the Allen and Seamen survey as an important or very important barrier to growth.

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2011), in 2011, 298 of 361 (82.5%) master of science in nursing programs (MSN) were delivered using some form of distance education, including online education. This percentage grew to 85.5% in 2013 (AACN, 2013). In 2011, 70% of research-focused (PhD) doctoral programs in nursing included some form of distance education (AACN, 2011), and this percentage increased to 71% in 2013 (AACN, 2013). The number of doctor of nursing practice (DNP) programs delivered using some degree of distance education was stable at 90% in 2011 and 2013 (AACN, 2011, 2013).

Online students in higher education can engage in learning from any location where a personal computer with internet access is available. However, while this approach to learning meets the needs of many nursing professionals, it poses unique challenges. One challenge is student retention, or continued enrollment in an online program from admission through program completion. This article is a review of the literature, including research and best practices, aimed at facilitating student retention in online graduate nursing programs and recommends evidence-based strategies for improving student retention. Retention rates for nursing programs delivered via distance education are not available in the published literature, making it difficult to compare rates in graduate nursing programs with those of higher education overall. However graduation rates, an indicator of retention, are assessed as part of the program accreditation process for all levels of nursing education in the United States (Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, 2009; National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, 2013).

## Methods

The question that guided the inquiry was, *What strategies have been effective in facilitating retention of nursing students enrolled in online graduate nursing education programs?* Key concepts used to conduct the search included *online education, distance education, student retention, graduate education, nursing education, and persistence*. Academic Search Premier, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), and Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), and bibliographies of retrieved articles were used in the search process.

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The initial search was restricted to the nursing literature and to graduate level nursing education. However, because of the limited research-based results found, the scope was expanded to include studies involving mixed graduate and undergraduate samples, literature reviews, the general higher education literature, and best practices in both nursing and higher education. A total of 48 articles were retrieved. Only those articles that described research or best practices supported by research were included. Studies and best practices that focused only on undergraduates or community colleges were excluded. Twenty-three articles meeting the inclusion criteria, published since 2006, and written in English were included in the review.

## Results

### *Models*

Rovai (2003) used models of persistence to develop the Composite Persistence Model (CPM) to predict persistence in online education outside of nursing. Rovai noted the lower persistence of non-traditional students and its implications for distance education. He also noted that other models, specifically those developed by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985), were largely based on psychology and minimally explored the notion of student fit within a specific learning environment. The CPM included assessment of student skills and attributes prior to admission, and internal and external factors after admission. This model has been used not only to predict persistence in higher education, but also to direct teaching strategies and promote program attributes for persistence.

Another model was developed to predict retention in online education by Holley and Oliver (2010), who studied diverse, nontraditional students in the United Kingdom to gain insight into the students' experiences with higher education in classroom, online, and blended formats. Student life experiences, educational experiences, control of technology, and view of space (private or social) all contributed to students' attitudes towards online learning. The model can be used to predict retention based on student experiences.

Moore and Fetzner (2009) used the five pillars of the Sloan-C Quality Framework to identify best practices for student retention used by institutions of higher education who achieved above 85% retention rates in 100 and 200 level undergraduate courses and above 90% in graduate courses. The five pillars are access, faculty satisfaction, learning effectiveness, student satisfaction, and scale. Collectively, these best practices have been shown to contribute to student retention in online education.

### *Concepts Directly Linked to Retention*

The higher education literature addressing concepts linked to retention in online education includes both research and literature reviews. Lee and Choi (2011) reviewed the literature to identify factors that influence students to withdraw from online courses, approaches to address these factors, and areas that need further exploration. A total of 69 factors were identified that affected students' decision to drop out from an online course, they included student factors, course/program factors, and environmental factors. Student factors associated with a lower possibility of dropping an online course included greater academic aptitude, more experience with higher education, a history of higher levels of academic performance, previous experience with course content, possession of management and technology skills, an internal locus of control, greater self-efficacy, more satisfaction with the course, and more confidence in computer skills. Interestingly, students with less academic aptitude and poorer academic performance were more likely to enroll in online courses. Course/program factors associated with being less likely to drop out from an online course included a well designed course, the availability of systematic support, faculty-student interactions, and high levels of participation. The possibility of student drop out was greater when environmental factors were involved. Students working full time, feeling pressure to work more hours, and experiencing life challenges and unexpected life events without support were more likely to drop an online course.

Lee and Choi (2013) also used structural equation modeling (SEM) to predict dropout rates for students in online courses. The sample included 282 students; the majority were juniors and seniors enrolled in an online course in an undergraduate education program at Korea National Open University. While it was not clear whether graduate students were included in the study, participants were between 20 and 60 years of age and 49.5% were in their 40s. Results indicated that an internal locus of control, or the belief that one controls events and outcomes, and satisfaction with the online course significantly influenced student retention. These findings align with the factors identified in the literature review published by Lee and Choi in 2011.

In their literature review, Park et al. (2011) examined strategies to minimize attrition among graduate students enrolled in online courses. Their findings were consistent with a review published by Lee and Choi (2011) in terms of student factors and course/program factors, but included several additional factors such as interpersonal relationships. Findings were organized into four groups: course design, course delivery, program organization, and re-integration to ease the return to online education. Matching learning activities with the needs of the student, and including opportunities for students to receive support from peers were course design strategies. Interpersonal interactions associated with lower retention included being mentored by faculty or a professional staff member, receiving progress reports from faculty, having regular student contact to avoid feelings of isolation, experiencing personalized connections between faculty and staff and student, receiving communication about importance, and being notified that they could contact faculty if help was needed. In addition, possessing computer literacy, information literacy, time management skills, reading and writing skills, and the ability to engage in computer-based communication facilitated retention.

Park et al. (2011) also identified program organization strategies to minimize attrition including student participation in a mandatory virtual/multi-media orientation, student access to trained academic advisors and a point person to contact if considering withdrawing from or returning to an online course or program, careful admission screening with attention to academic preparation and attitude towards learning, encouragement of student–university relationships, and attentiveness of all staff to building student relationships.

Herbert (2006) reported that the most important institutional variable associated with student retention was faculty responsiveness to student needs and the least important variable was student-to-student collaboration. Student satisfaction with an online course was associated with faculty responsiveness to student needs during the course. Time commitments were the main reason non-completers gave for dropping a course.

Time commitment also was identified as a factor contributing to online course withdrawals in a study by Willging and Johnson (2009). Their study was designed to determine why and when students enrolled in an online graduate level principal and superintendent certification program dropped out of the program and to identify factors that could predict the likelihood of dropping out. Participants included students who dropped out of the program any time after starting the first course. The authors found that while students dropped out of the online program after the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th course, the largest number left after completing the first course. Reasons for leaving included personal reasons such as too hard to work full-time and be a graduate student; job-related reasons including a change in job responsibilities that eliminated need for the certification; program-related reasons; and technology related reasons. Not being allowed to do coursework at work, falling behind on assignments even though faculty were helpful and encouraging; and feeling information overload were cited as contributing factors.

Using a qualitative case study method, Müller (2008) identified factors that affected women learners' persistence or retention in online

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