

Student retention and success: Optimizing outcomes through HOLISTIC COMPETENCE and proactive inclusive enrichment



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Abstract

Nursing student retention and success is a complex, multidimensional process that demands prioritized attention and requires a shifted focus from remediation to enrichment and optimization. Through the HOLISTIC COMPETENCE acronym description, educators will discover essential elements for proactive inclusive enrichment and reasons for avoiding exclusive remediation. Guided by Jeffreys' Nursing Undergraduate Retention and Success model, this article provides a beginning repertoire of ideas to enrich the nursing student experience and optimize outcomes.

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Implementing creative, evidence-based educational activities that promote student retention and successful outcomes for culturally, academically, linguistically, and generationally diverse students continues to be a challenge. Frequently, the definition of success in undergraduate programs emphasizes minimal measures: (a) passing a course; (b) passing the registered nurse (RN) licensing examination; and (c) graduation. Postgraduation employment as a registered nurse and/or enrollment in a bachelor of science in nursing (RN-BSN) program have also been included as desired minimum outcome measures. A new challenge is to reach beyond minimal expectations toward optimizing outcomes.

The future demands creative, innovative nurses. Goals aimed at the minimal level do not prepare nurses to meet the yet unimagined challenges and changes of a future caught up in a whirlwind of rapidly moving people, technology, and global change. To prepare nurses for the future, nurse

educators must aim for optimizing outcomes and motivating learners to discover and unleash their yet untapped potential. This is best achieved via a holistic approach utilizing proactive inclusive enrichment (PIE) rather than by exclusive remediation (ER). Simply put, PIE recognizes that the “enrichment experience expedites enhanced excellence for everyone” (Jeffreys, 2012a, p. 283) by encouraging everyone to “reach for the stars and be the best you can be, preventing problems, building upon strengths, urging realistic self-appraisal and help-seeking behaviors especially at key transition points, empowerment, and promoting skills for success. In contrast, the ER approach generally isolates students by only including weak, borderline, or failing students; utilizes strategies aimed at remedying problems and “just passing,” hence promoting a “reach for the life preserver when you’re drowning” approach. The PIE approach has been used and advocated in the conceptual, empirical, nursing, and higher education literature.

One aim of this article is to encourage educators to shift focus from a narrow dichotomous definition of success

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(e.g., retention vs. attrition or pass vs. fail) to a more comprehensive definition whereby success includes retention but optimizes outcomes through PIE. A second aim is to spark new insights, inquiry, and ideas that will lead to the design, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of empirically and conceptually supported strategies. Guided by the empirically supported Nursing Undergraduate Retention and Success (NURS) model (Jeffreys, 2012a, 2012b), the strategies mentioned here provide a beginning repertoire of ideas to enrich the nursing student experience and optimize outcomes for a more comprehensively conceptualized “success.” It is beyond the scope of this article to detail strategies; however, the HOLISTIC COMPETENCE acronym is introduced to assist deans, directors, and faculty in remembering essential elements for PIE. HOLISTIC refers to: human connectedness, optimization, learner centered, individualized, scientifically based, teamwork, integrated, and creative. COMPETENCE refers to: caring, ongoing, multidimensional, proactive, ethics, trust, education, networks, confidence, and evaluation (Jeffreys, 2012a, p. 128). Each element will be briefly presented.

1. Human connectedness

“Human-connectedness between faculty and students makes a powerful difference in retention and success” (Jeffreys, 2012a, p. 128). Nurse educators must be active promoters of human connectedness. Creating caring communities of learners is essential for optimizing student success and retention. It is not a unidirectional experience, rather multidirectional involving ongoing engagement and dialog. This means substantial, quality, and frequent, ongoing interaction between faculty and student and student to student via a traditional (face-to-face) setting or an on-line or other distance education modality. Accrediting agencies in nursing and higher education advocate substantive and ongoing faculty interaction and peer interaction requiring concerted efforts at enhancing socialization in the on-line or other distance education modalities (Frith & Clark, 2013).

Virtual meetings through technology or narrated PowerPoint provide some connectedness, but spontaneity, professional integration and socialization, ability to network, and role modeling are limited. Partnering technology with opportunities for human connectedness prior to the start of a nursing program and strategically timed throughout the program yield the best possibilities for success. Examples include concentrated on-campus orientation and class sessions; in-person and/or on-line peer mentor tutoring; coordinated opportunities for student participation in professional events; and student clubs. Human connectedness facilitates professional integration and socialization and includes such components as culturally congruent nursing faculty advisement and helpfulness; professional event participation; professional memberships; encouragement by

friends in class; peer mentoring–tutoring; and faculty–student interactive enrichment program (Jeffreys, 2012a).

2. Optimization

“Optimization focuses on enrichment for everyone that begins with PIE and avoids an ER approach” (Jeffreys, 2012a, p. 128). (Table 1 compares the PIE and ER approach and expands upon the earlier introduction in this article.) In addition to publicizing the most recent licensing examination pass rates, programs should publicize alumni outcomes beyond the minimum expectations. Visits from alumni, showcasing how and why it is beneficial to try ones’ best and aim for optimization, makes a difference. Featuring inspirational stories on the nursing program’s Web site, interviewing an alumni or nurse leader, and/or reading a book on mentoring portray that optimization does not happen alone. Stories that demonstrate resilience, persistence despite obstacles and hardships, overcoming adversities, and realistic self-appraisal of limits and strengths will leave lasting impressions. Realistic self-appraisal and knowing when to start, pause, and change directions are parts of optimization. A preprogram orientation, newsletter, video-clip, or series of questions may help students appraise their current situation to see if it is the right time to begin (or continue with) a new academic and career endeavor. Tailoring a series of questions to assist students determines readiness for on-line learning, or other program requirements assist students at any level. Nursing program Web site links to other reliable Web sites is a cost-effective way to expose prospective and current students to the realities, opportunities, and resources within nursing.

Table 1 A dozen differences between PIE and ER

PIE	ER
1. “Reach for the stars!”	1. “Reach for the life preserver”
2. Includes everyone	2. Includes weak, borderline, or failing students
3. Prevent problems	3. Remedy problems
4. Optimum performance (“Be the best you can be”)	4. Minimum standards (pass–fail) focus
5. Skills for success	5. Skills for passing
6. Mild to moderate stress	6. High stress (student borderline or failing)
7. Focus on building strengths	7. Focus on fixing weaknesses
8. Enhances realistic confidence appraisal	8. Enters remediation with low confidence
9. Promotes professional integration and socialization (“Enrichment is for everyone”)	9. At risk for professional isolation and stigma (“I am weak because I am here”)
10. Builds bridges between student groups	10. Increases gaps between student groups
11. Focus on promoting retention and success (Why do students stay?)	11. Focus on preventing attrition and dropout (Why do students leave?)
12. Facilitates empowerment	12. Fosters dependency

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