



Using student satisfaction data to evaluate a new online accelerated nursing education program



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 February 2016

Received in revised form 8 June 2016

Accepted 17 June 2016

Available online 27 June 2016

Keywords:

Student satisfaction

Online education

Program evaluation

Quality

Nursing education

ABSTRACT

As increasing numbers of students enroll in online education, institutions of higher education are responsible for delivering quality online courses and programs. Agencies that accredit institutions and programs require evidence of program quality, including student satisfaction. A large state university in the Southeastern United States transitioned an online nursing education degree completion, or Registered Nurse-to-Bachelor of Science in Nursing, program to an online accelerated format in order to meet the needs of working nurses and ultimately, increase the number of nurses prepared at the baccalaureate level. This article describes a descriptive, cross-sectional study that evaluated the effectiveness of the new online accelerated program using the quality indicator of *student satisfaction*. Ninety-one (32%) of the 284 students who were enrolled or had been enrolled in a course within the online accelerated degree completion program between fall 2013 session 1 and summer 2014 session participated in the study. The electronic Noel-Levitz Priorities Survey for Online LearnersTM was used to measure student satisfaction with the program and associated services. Results provided insight into the students' satisfaction with the new program format and served as the basis for an interdepartmental program enhancement plan aimed at maintaining and enhancing student satisfaction and overall program quality. Findings indicated that measuring and evaluating student satisfaction can provide valuable information about the effectiveness of an online program. Recommendations for using the measurement tool in online program planning and studying student satisfaction in relation to retention and program completion were identified.

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1. Introduction

Allen and Seaman (2014) reported on the status of online education within United States higher education for the past 11 years. Results of their 2013 survey of Chief Academic Officers indicated that 33.5% of higher education students take at least one online course totaling 7.1 million students, an increase of 411,000 in the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2014). This was the highest proportion of students reported over the last 10 years. While enrollment growth in online learning slowed in 2014, it exceeded the growth rate of overall higher education students (Allen & Seaman, 2015). In addition, in the 2014 survey, the proportion of Chief Academic Officers who responded that online education was critical for their institution's long-term strategy reached an all-

time high of 71% (Allen & Seaman, 2015). As online education secures a stable existence in higher education, evaluation of online courses and programs is essential, especially as institutions of higher education work to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders, including funding agencies and accrediting bodies.

Nursing education has embraced online learning as a way to meet the educational needs of registered nurses (RNs). Nursing education in the United States includes three program options that prepare graduates for RN licensure. The three options include completion of a diploma program, commonly associated with a hospital or clinical facility; an associate degree in nursing (ADN) program, which most often is offered as a 2-year program at community and technical colleges; or a 4-year bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) program offered by colleges and universities. Diploma and ADN-prepared RNs can subsequently earn a BSN degree by enrolling in a Registered Nurse-to-Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN-BSN), or degree completion, program. There has been a steady increase in the number of nurses enrolling in RN-BSN programs over the past 12 years (AACN, 2015). In 2012, almost

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100,000 nurses enrolled in RN-BSN programs compared to 35,000 in 2004 (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013). From 2013 to 2014 there was a 10.4% increase in nurses enrolling in RN-BSN programs (AACN, 2015). The increase in enrollment is due to a heightened demand for BSN-prepared nurses.

The nursing profession in the United States has made new efforts to advance the level of education for RNs to the BSN, or baccalaureate degree. These efforts are due in part to research published in the past 15 years that demonstrated improved patient outcomes when the nursing workforce includes a high percentage of BSN-prepared nurses (Blegen, Goode, Park, Vaughn, & Spetz, 2013; Kendall-Gallagher, Aiken, Sloane, & Cimiotti, 2011; Kutney-Lee, Sloane, & Aiken, 2013; and McHugh, Kelly, Smith, Wu, Vanak, & Aiken, 2013). In 2010, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) responded to the research evidence and recommended an increase in the number of BSN-prepared nurses to 80% by the year 2020 (IOM, 2010). Nearly 77% of responding hospitals now require or strongly prefer to hire nurses with a BSN degree (AACN, 2014). The research evidence and the subsequent increased demand for BSN-prepared nurses motivated the supply of diploma- and ADN-prepared RNs to return to school to earn a BSN.

Online education makes RN-BSN programs accessible to practicing nurses who work shifts and weekend hours. The AACN (2015) reported that more than 400 of the 679 RN-BSN programs currently available nationwide were delivered at least partially online. Given the number of students choosing online education and the increased demand for nurses to advance their education to the BSN degree, there is a clear demand for online programs in nursing.

The need for accessible, quality programs for working nurses that could be completed in a timely manner prompted one university to transition their RN-BSN online program to an online accelerated RN-BSN program. The purpose of this article is to present results of a study that evaluated the effectiveness of the new online accelerated program format using the quality indicator of *student satisfaction*. While not the sole indicator of program quality, student satisfaction serves as one program quality indicator in both nursing education program accreditation and online education (CCNE, 2013; OLC, 2016).

2. Program format

2.1. Overview of the original online program format

A university in the Southeastern United States had an established online RN-BSN program since 2001. The program included general studies and nursing courses delivered over a traditional 15-week semester. Nursing courses were delivered online by nursing faculty who were responsible for all facets of teaching and learning. Class size was limited to 25 students, who entered at the start of the fall, spring, or summer semester and completed nursing courses in a predetermined sequence. Each nursing course was offered once per semester. Many general studies courses, such as chemistry, psychology, and microbiology, had to be completed prior to admission to the nursing program and were delivered in traditional classroom and laboratory settings. Recruitment and student advising were managed within the School of Nursing by the program coordinator and nursing faculty.

2.2. Overview of the new online accelerated program format

In response to the increased demand for BSN-prepared RNs and the increase in RNs returning to school to earn a BSN degree, faculty and administrators at the university revised the RN-BSN program and made it an online accelerated program. The goals were to make the program more accessible and appealing to practicing nurses by decreasing the course length in terms of

number of weeks needed to complete a 3-credit course, and offering a flexible sequence for the program of study. In the new program, the first online accelerated program offered at the university, each academic semester consists of two sessions. Courses are 7.5 weeks in length and are delivered fully online in each session during the fall, spring, and summer semesters. New students enter the program at the start of any of the six 7.5-week sessions. Except for the first and last courses, students can complete the nursing courses in any sequence. Nursing faculty members teach the nursing courses, while masters-prepared nurse educators, referred to as teaching associates, assist. Faculty teach more students per class session than in the original program. General studies courses can be completed once accepted into the RN-BSN program and all are delivered fully online in 7.5 week sessions. Students are recruited with the assistance of a university partner and advised by university staff.

3. Plan to evaluate program quality

The changes in format and delivery of the RN-BSN program impacted multiple service departments on campus. For example, nursing faculty had to adopt new teaching and course management strategies in order to facilitate learning in courses with higher enrollments that were delivered over fewer weeks. Also, because new students entered the program every 7.5 weeks throughout the year and were not required to travel to campus in order to complete degree requirements, departments such as admissions, recruitment/enrollment management, registration, billing/accounts receivable, and the bookstore had to restructure services that were originally geared towards 15-week, on-ground courses and programs. Therefore, it was imperative to ensure the new program was a quality online program.

The quality or effectiveness of programs in nursing education is often demonstrated through program accreditation. Earning and maintaining accreditation from an external entity indicates the program has demonstrated specific quality indicators. Student satisfaction is one of many quality indicators included in the accreditation standards of the CCNE (2013), a major accrediting agency of nursing education programs. Specific to online education, student satisfaction is one of the OLC's (n. d.) *Five Pillars of Quality Online Education*. The other four pillars include learning effectiveness, scale or cost effectiveness and commitment, access, and faculty satisfaction (OLC, 2016). Because of the major focus on student satisfaction by these leading organizations, the faculty in the RN-BSN program selected *student satisfaction* as one quality indicator for the new program. They evaluated student satisfaction with the program one year after implementation of the new online accelerated format.

4. Methods

4.1. Design

The setting for the study was the large state university in Southeastern United States offering the online accelerated program described above. The Institutional Review Board at the university approved the study. A descriptive, cross-sectional design was used to evaluate effectiveness of the new program using the quality indicator of student satisfaction. The research question for the study was, *To what extent are students satisfied with the newly implemented accelerated online RN-BSN program?*

4.2. Recruitment

All 284 students who were enrolled or had been enrolled in a course within the new program between fall 2013 session 1 and

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