



## The Incidence of Student Repeaters in Pre-Licensure Nursing Programs in North Carolina<sup>1,2</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

When nursing students fail and are required to repeat a course in a pre-licensure nursing program, they are at risk for attrition from the nursing program. While nursing student attrition is a problem with recognized consequences to student, school and profession, the incidence of nursing student “repeaters” has had little attention. This survey study aimed to describe the incidence of nursing students repeating courses in pre-licensure nursing programs in North Carolina.

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### Introduction

Nursing student attrition is an important issue in nursing education, resulting in negative effects on the student, the school, and the profession (Hadenfeldt, 2012). In the United States, as many as 50% of nursing students leave school before completing their studies (Abele, Penprase, & Ternes, 2013; Beauvais, Stewart, DeNisco, & Beauvais, 2014). Community college nursing programs, which traditionally admit more students at risk for attrition, are particularly prone to this problem (Harris, Rosenberg, & Grace O'Rourke, 2014). In spite of the attention given to this issue, researchers have not typically differentiated the reasons for nursing student attrition.

One group of nursing students at risk for attrition are those who have failed and need to repeat a required nursing course. Depending upon institutional policy, students in this situation may risk dismissal from their program or they may voluntarily leave. This group, described as nursing student “repeaters”, has rarely been described in the literature.

It is possible that there is so little attention given to nursing student repeaters because this population is not specifically identified for reported nursing education outcomes.

Governing organizations, such as state boards of nursing and accrediting agencies, collect outcomes including gender and ethnicity of nursing students and number of graduates passing the licensure exam on the first attempt (North Carolina Board of Nursing, 2017). The number of nursing students who fail and repeat a course is not reported and the only statistic that may suggest the prevalence of this problem is the on-time completion rate. In the academic year 2015–2016, the on-time completion rate for pre-licensure nursing students in North Carolina averaged 70% (North Carolina Board of Nursing, 2017). However, the on-time completion rate is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2015) as 150% of the “normal” time frame in which a student should complete the academic program. The on-time completion rate statistic does not include explanations for the extended time frame, so students who took leaves of absence or matriculated through the program on a less than full time basis as well as nursing student repeaters are encompassed in this number. The goal of this study was to start to identify the incidence of nursing students who extend their time to graduation because they were required to repeat. While national data is desirable, the researchers began by studying this population in the state of North Carolina.

### Literature Review

Nursing students who fail and are required to repeat a required course are at high risk for attrition (Harding, Bailey, & Stefk, 2017). While some students leave nursing school because they realize that the profession is not a good fit, others leave for reasons that could

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potentially be addressed (Schrum, 2015). Nursing student attrition is a complex experience, often with multifactorial causes.

A significant reason for many nursing student failures is the difficult transition to the different and challenging academic work of nursing courses (Karsten & DiCicco-Bloom, 2014). In addition to the academic challenge, many nursing students have work or family responsibilities outside of school. Financial challenges or personal factors, such as health, may also contribute to their academic failure and potential attrition from nursing school (Kukkonen, Suhonen, & Salminen, 2016).

When a nursing student experiences academic failure and the need to repeat, consequences are both practical and emotional (Lewis, 2018). Nursing student repeaters extend their time in school, incur additional tuition costs, and delay the start of paid work as a professional nurse. In addition to economic stresses, the psychological impact of failing at something so highly desired is a painful and challenging experience (Lewis, 2018).

Nursing student attrition impacts nursing schools due to the limited capacity of programs and the cohort model of education. A recent survey of over 655 nursing schools in the United States found that approximately one third of qualified applicants were turned away due to lack of capacity (National League for Nursing, 2017). Due to the cohort model of nursing education, a student who leaves a nursing program prior to graduation vacates a spot that is unlikely to be filled by another student (Edmonds, 2013).

While nursing shortages wax and wane with the economy and generational population changes, there is a continuous need for new nurses. Recent literature has predicted another imminent nursing shortage in the United States (Snavey, 2016). When students do not graduate from a nursing school, there is a loss to the nursing profession and to the community. The nursing student retention literature has consistently addressed the problem of attrition without separating out voluntary from involuntary attrition and without focusing on the impact of academic failure (Jeffreys, 2012). In order to consider interventions to retain nursing student repeaters, it is necessary to highlight the incidence of this population. This study begins the process of describing the extent of the nursing student repeater population.

## Method

### Design

In this study, we aimed to describe the incidence of nursing students repeating a required nursing course in pre-licensure nursing programs in North Carolina. While community college nursing programs were of particular interest, all schools in North Carolina were invited to participate in the survey so that comparisons could be made among program types. This survey study was designed to be quantitative, descriptive research and was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board of the second author's college. Questions that guided the creation of the survey tool were:

1. How many nursing students are repeating a required nursing course in pre-licensure nursing programs in North Carolina in a given academic year?
2. How high are the stakes for these students, as described by the policies of the schools regarding repeating?
3. Does the incidence of nursing student repeaters vary from one type of program to another (e.g. public or private, associate degree or baccalaureate)?

An invitation to participate in the online survey was distributed to directors of all 85 pre-licensure registered nursing programs in North Carolina. The survey was administered via Qualtrics® (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>), an online survey platform.

**Table A**

Survey questions.

1. What best describes the type of nursing program you are affiliated with?  
Public ADN  
Private ADN  
Diploma  
Public BSN  
Private BSN  
Public ABSN  
Private ABSN
2. How many cohorts of nursing students are admitted to your program per year?
3. What is the average number of students per cohort?
4. What is your policy for students who fail a mandatory clinical nursing course?  
Students are not allowed to repeat a course or must reapply to the program  
Students are allowed to repeat a mandatory nursing course(s)  
Other
5. Specify the number of courses allowed to repeat  
One  
Two  
More than two
6. Please note the specifics of your policy for students allowed to repeat mandatory course(s) – narrative response
7. In the past year, how many student repeated a mandatory clinical nursing course in your program?
8. In the past year, were there any students who were eligible to repeat a course who did not do so?  
Yes  
No
9. Please estimate the number of students in the past year who were eligible to repeat a course and did not do so.
10. Is your course repeat policy ever waived or subject to appeal?  
Yes  
No
11. Estimate how often the course repeat policy was waived.
12. Provide additional comments (optional) – narrative response

Informed consent was accomplished by a disclosure statement and opportunity for the potential participant to opt out of the research in the invitation email; participants were required to agree to consent prior to being directed to the Qualtrics® survey. The survey did not collect any personal or individual information, and participants who wished to enter an incentive drawing for a gift card were required to follow an additional link to enter their name and email address.

### Measures

The survey questions required participants to select among categories or give a numeric response to provide information about program type, enrollment, and institutional progression policy (Table A). Additional qualitative data could be offered by participants in space allotted for text answers elaborating on their responses. Invitational emails were sent to the directors of the 85 pre-licensure registered nurse programs in North Carolina, followed by reminder emails to non-respondents two weeks and four weeks after the initial invitation.

### Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 48 responses were received out of the 85 invitations to participate, and 40 of those responses were analyzed. Eight responses

**Table B**

Comparison of Study Respondents to Programs in N.C. by Percent

Type of program	North Carolina	Study Respondents
Public A.D.N.	63%	60%
Private A.D.N.	6%	10%
Public B.S.N.	14%	12.5%
Private B.S.N.	18%	17.5%

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