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A Comparison of Traditional and Non-Traditional Pre-Entry Pathways on Academic Outcomes for Practical Nursing Students

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Students enter nursing programs through a variety of methods. The traditional entry method still exists; however, non-traditional pre-entry pathways are increasing. Little is known about how these students perform once enrolled. This study compares the academic impact of traditional and non-traditional pre-entry pathways for students in a practical nursing program.

Purpose:

A significant lack of research exists on the practical nurse (PN) and PN education. Most of what is known about nursing education has been derived from the experiences of programs preparing students to become Registered Nurses (RN). The pathways by which students enter PN programs has expanded in recent years, yet the academic outcomes of these students have not been studied. Pre-entry pathways are defined as "routes that students take to move between and among levels of education credentials, institutions, types of institutions and programs" (Government of Ontario, 2011). These pre-entry pathways often involve formal articulation agreements and may be traditional or non-traditional routes of entry.

This observational, retrospective, cross-sectional study examined pre-entry pathways into the PN program at one community college in Ontario. This program accepted students through the traditional entry route and three non-traditional entry pathways. The non-traditional pathways focused on increasing access and preparing students who would otherwise be ineligible to enter the program through the traditional route. Three non-traditional pre-entry pathways identified for study included 1) a personal support worker pathway to practical nursing certificate program, 2) pre-health sciences certificate program, and 3) a partnership with adult education centres in the community.

The overall research question that guided this study was "Does the pre-entry pathway affect academic outcomes for students enrolled in the PN program at one community college in Ontario?" The hypothesis for this study was that academic outcomes for students would differ between the traditional and non-traditional entry pathways.

Methods:

Data was gathered from existing records held by the Office of the Registrar for 338 students admitted to the PN program during the 2013-2014 academic year at one Ontario community college. The pre-entry pathways served as the independent variable and the traditional pathway was the control group. Dependent variables included the following academic outcomes: grade point average (GPA), number of course failures, number of semesters enrolled, and program completion status. Additional variables such as demographics, pre-admission score, and Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) completion were collected. Data collection occurred in 2017 in order to ensure adequate time had elapsed to examine program completion. Data analysis using SPSS software was conducted using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), chi-square, and Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA testing. A regression analysis was used to explore relationships between variables

Results:

No difference between pathways was found on completion status and number of failures, thus indicating that academic outcomes did not differ between pathways. Factors influencing program completion were identified and included the number of semesters enrolled and number of course failures.

Limitations:

The retrospective design of this study and reliance on an existing database for data collection was a limiting factor. Additional characteristics and information that may have been desirable for inclusion (i.e. family status) were not available. It is possible that other factors, such as a difference between pathway sites, may have influenced the results. The single site of this study further limits the generalizability of the results.

Recommendations:

Further study of pre-entry programs and PN education is needed. Study of the perception of students on how well the pre-entry pathways prepared them for the PN program would also be valuable. Additional recommendations for the study host site included revision of admission criteria, examination of student success supports strengthening partnerships between pre-entry programs and developing common curricula for pre-entry programs.

Conclusion:

No significant differences or associations for academic outcomes were found between the traditional and non-traditional pathways for PN students. Program completion was significantly associated with the number of semesters enrolled and number of course failures. The lack of differences in academic outcomes suggests that pre-entry pathways can be considered as a novel approach to promoting greater access to nursing education, however, further study of pre-entry pathways and practical nursing education is needed.

Title:

A Comparison of Traditional and Non-Traditional Pre-Entry Pathways on Academic Outcomes for Practical Nursing Students

Keywords:

academic outcomes, nursing education and pre-entry qualifications

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Abstract Summary:

Students enter nursing programs through a variety of methods. The traditional entry method still exists; however, non-traditional pre-entry pathways are increasing. Little is known about how these students perform once enrolled. This study compares the academic impact of traditional and non-traditional pre-entry pathways for students in a practical nursing program.

Content Outline:

Introduction:

1. Students are entering nursing programs through a variety of methods. In addition to the traditional method of entry, many non-traditional pre-entry pathways are emerging.
2. Traditional and non-traditional pre-entry pathways will be defined.
3. A brief summary of the current state of the literature on pre-entry pathways into nursing programs
4. A brief summary of factors influencing academic outcomes found the literature.

Content:

1. Overview of the study
 1. Study objective: To evaluate and compare academic outcomes of traditional and non-traditional pre-entry pathways on students in a practical nursing program
 2. The study conceptual framework will be presented (graphical representation) and used to define study variables.
2. Methods summary:
 1. Design: observational retrospective cross-sectional design
 2. Setting: single site of a large community college in Ontario

3. Sample: 338 full-time students entering the practical nursing program in the 2013-2014 academic year
4. Data extracted from academic records held by the Registrar's Office in 2017
5. IRB approval
6. Data analysis- SPSS software
 1. Univariate analysis for demographics
 2. Hypothesis testing: Chi-Square, ANOVA, Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA and post-hoc testing as appropriate
 3. Regression analysis
3. Study findings
 1. Comparison of traditional and non-traditional pre-entry pathways will be presented for the following:
 1. Demographics: age, gender
 2. Pre-entry academic qualifications: OSSD completion, pre-admission score
 3. Academic outcomes- program completion status (i.e. graduated), GPA, number of semesters enrolled, number of course failures and subject area failures
 2. Hypothesis test findings:
 1. Pathways- no significant differences or associations were found between pathways for program completion, GPA, number of course failures and subject area failures.
 2. Program completion:
 1. Differences were found between those who graduated and those who did not for number of semesters enrolled, number of failures, subject area failures.
 2. No significant association with OSSD completion, gender.
4. Limitations:
 1. Retrospective data
 2. Reliance on existing database
 3. Single site limits generalizability
 4. Factors may influence data beyond those available for study (i.e. family status, employment).
5. Recommendations:
 1. Further study of pre-entry pathways, practical nursing education and practical nursing student characteristics is needed.
 2. Student perceptions on how well the pre-entry pathways prepared them should be studied.
 3. For study host site:
 1. Revisit admission criteria and preadmission scoring formula.
 2. Evaluate current student supports, student success initiative and better tailor to student population (i.e. formalized, structured remediation approach).
 3. Strengthen and promote collaboration between pre-entry pathway site partners and the nursing program to create common courses for pre-entry programs.
 4. Consider development of a pre-nursing pathway.

Conclusion:

1. Academic outcomes did not differ between the traditional and non-traditional pre-entry pathways. No significant associations or differences were found for program completion, number of course failures, GPA and subject area failures.
2. Program completion was influenced by factors such as number of semesters enrolled and number of course failures.
3. Pre-entry pathways can be considered as a novel method of program entry and promote greater access to the nursing education for more diverse learners. Pre-entry pathway programs require strong partnerships and a carefully designed curricula to prepare students for future success in subsequent programs.

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Author Summary: Paula Crawford-Dickinson has been a professor in the Sally Horsfall-Eaton School of Nursing at George Brown College since 2006. She has extensive experience in neuroscience, trauma and critical care nursing through her previous positions as an acute care nurse practitioner, clinical educator and staff nurse. Paula recently completed a Doctorate of Education in Health Policy and Health Education. Her research interests include health policy and related politics, professional issues, and nursing education.