Title: Does Utilizing Nursing Graduate Assistants Boost Retention Rates Across Nursing Programs?

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Abstract Describes: Ongoing Work/Project

Applicable Category: Academic, Students, Leaders

Keywords: Graduate Assistants, Quality improvement of academic programming; and Student retention and success

Abstract Summary:
Innovative strategies developed and implemented by Doctorate of Nursing Practice Graduate Assistants were employed over 1 academic year to improve retention and reduce attrition in undergraduate, RN to BSN and MSN nursing programs.

References:
Abstract Text:

**Purpose:**
College attrition rates remain steady across the United States at nearly 45% since the 1960’s (Xu, 2017)). The College of Health and Wellness in a small private university in Southwestern Pennsylvania identified similar trends in attrition across all levels of nursing programs. In particular, it was identified that the School of Nursing undergraduate program did not achieve the 70% program completion as defined by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) benchmark that is required for program accreditation (CCNE, 2018). In alignment with the University Strategic Plan and in order to improve retention, CHW Faculty from undergraduate and graduate nursing programs, along with student representatives examined evidence-based practice initiatives aimed toward improving nursing program quality, student satisfaction and student retention. One of the most highly reported factors in retaining students was engagement with the academic setting (Xu, 2017). Therefore, strategies to improve the quality of student engagement were implemented. Graduate assistants (GAs) were employed to design, develop, and implement innovative best practices depending on program need. Because funding for graduate assistants was already established as an opportunity for DNP students, it was determined that DNP students who served as graduate assistants could serve in this role.

**Methods:** The traditional role of the GA has focused on providing clinical teaching to undergraduate nursing students in clinical settings; to serve as teaching assistants in didactic clinical courses and/or to serve as research assistants to academic faculty (Pressler & Kenner, 2014). Enhancing the duties and responsibilities of the GA beyond the conventional role was posited to contribute to favorable outcomes for this institution and the GA-student alike. In this case, the GAs were matched with expert faculty mentors in each program. As recommended, each GA was assigned to fill a role for which she had expertise and experience (Kajfez & Matusovich, 2017).

The distribution of GA work crossed all levels of programming within the College of Health and Wellness, including undergraduate baccalaureate nursing, RN-BSN, Second-Degree BSN, Master’s in Leadership and Education, Family Nurse Practitioner, and Healthcare Data Analytics. GAs and faculty mentors strategized to design and implement innovative approaches toward curriculum development, student onboarding, academic success for at-risk students, and teaching assistance.

**Results:** Results are pending as this is a work in progress. Evaluation of outcomes will compare fall 2019 to fall 2018 student retention data in each of the programs impacted by GA interventions. Additionally, satisfaction survey feedback from graduate assistants and faculty mentors to be assessed fall 2019 (Reeves, 2016).

**Conclusion:** Student attrition is of concern. Innovative approaches and collaboration using graduate assistants benefits the institution, the programs, the GA, and the students. These processes inform future programming and will be evaluated for effect on retention in the next academic year.