

THREE-PARTNER COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION OF STUDENT TRANSITION, PERFORMANCE, EXPERIENCE, AND OUTCOMES IN PRACTICAL NURSING (PN) - NURSING DEGREE (BScN) BRIDGING EDUCATION

Phase 1, 2 and 3 Reports

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1. Outline of the Study

This study of Practical Nursing Diploma graduate transfer student performance, experience, and outcomes in Nursing Degree (BScN) completion has focused on 5 key areas of inquiry:

- Understanding the transfer student population,
- Tracking the student experience through the degree completion process,
- Identifying facilitators and barriers to success,
- Assessing the use and effectiveness of student supports and services, and
- Investigating student perceptions of changes in 'self' and professional roles.

The focus of this study is the PN-BScN pathway to the UOIT BScN offered on both the UOIT/Durham and Georgian campuses. The programs offered at both campuses include a common Nursing/ Science/ English Bridge program, provide a common curriculum, pursue the same learning outcomes and employ consistent block credit practice (with 59% of diploma graduates receiving the basic 30 – 33 block transfer credits and 41% receiving additional transfer credits). While all students are completing the same degree, the Phase 1 Report outlines some significant differences in the student experience including:

- a full-time 8 consecutive semester option,
- a part-time 12 non-consecutive semester alternative,
- a variety of bridging, technology use, and integration strategies, and
- different campus support services.

The UOIT, Durham and Georgian data referenced in this study is drawn from the academic history, registration, grade level, and graduation information for 432 students admitted between 2005 and 2012¹. Critical and complementary to institutional data are written and telephone survey results capturing a range of student and graduate demographic, perception and satisfaction information. In addition, employer agencies were polled regarding their experiences with their RPN employee participation in the program and the support offered to them. (Phase 3 Report, p. 3)

The findings of the study's three separate phases are integrated and summarized below.

¹ Data collection for the Collaborative BScN began as early as 2003 (Phase 1 Report, p.14)

2. Findings

The reports note significant and even dramatic differences between student survey responses by campus. Some of these differences are attributed to “program type” (Phase 2 Report, p. 47) and others to the nature of on-campus services and regional resources. This summary reports aggregate data except where differences are particularly instructive to the broader understanding of the transfer process.

2.1 The Student Population

Based on survey responses, students in the PN-BScN program range in age from 18 to 58 with a mean age of 32 years, median of 33 and mode of 22. Forty two percent are enrolled at the Georgian campus and 58% at Oshawa’s UOIT/Durham. Male students are in the minority (8%). Close to one-third entered the program from full-time employment and most have never attended university. Over half (57.1%) describe their current specialization as “hospital based care”; 29.3% as long term care/gerontology; 7.6% as community-based care; and 6% as rehabilitation. (Phase 2 Report, p. 24) The overall admission average is 80.9% ranging from 65% to 98%. (Phase 3 Report, pp. 30 – 31)

A large proportion of these students have external stresses and obligations. Their commute time to campus is between $\frac{3}{4}$ and just over an hour. Over half are married; an equal proportion have dependent care responsibilities; close to one-third work full-time; and another 45% work part-time – most in nursing. Beyond their studies, they report working an average of 27.5 hours per week. The mean and mode of family income fall within the \$30,000 to \$50,000 range and close to one-quarter average less than \$30,000 (Phase 2 Report, p.3). 82% of the students anticipate graduating with student debt and, on average, anticipate that this will approach \$20,000. Financial pressures are significant. Students are typically balancing full-time employment, studying full-time and often caring for multiple dependents (Phase 2 Report, p. 49).

Despite external stresses and obligations, these students see their program in a very positive light.

2.2 Transfer Student Experience and Success

The analysis of entrance and ongoing program GPAs for 7 years beginning in 2005 found that “the PN-BScN bridging students perform not only at a comparable level [to those in the collaborative program], but in almost all cases at a significantly superior level”. (Phase 1 Report, p. 15) There is a flattening of this trend in Ethics and Leadership courses: this raises questions of not only learning new material but ‘unlearning old ideas’.

Even with working an average of 27.5 hours per week, 77% of the graduates complete the program in 3 years. There is evidence that 41% of transfer students receiving more than the minimum transfer credit are more likely to be successful (Phase 1 Report, pp. 16 & 29) with an average bridge grade of 78.23%. (Phase 3 Report, p. 34). Transfer students with “previous university exposure” are more likely to complete the degree (92%) than those with “no previous university exposure” (76%).

Students in this program experience challenges and stress related to managing multiple demands on their time (Phase 2 Report, p. 3). It follows that on average they “demonstrate a higher attrition rate”, most of that being in the bridge term, (Phase 3 Report, p. 4) and require more time to degree completion than those in the collaborative BScN program. The reports on this research frequently return to the observation that a higher proportion of PN-BScN students in ‘good academic standing drop out, ‘stop out’², and/or take longer to complete degree study. They recommend that this significantly different pattern of program completion warrants further research.

All PN-BScN graduates who were interviewed have passed the RN examination, 97% on the first try. (Phase 3 Report, p. 34)

Students report the university learning requirements and expectations as “significantly different” than most students had previously experienced in college. These differences “relate both to level of difficulty, and to the expectations of independence and self-directedness” (Phase 2 Report, p.34). The study notes that this is most strongly felt in the first 2 years and is replaced in year 3 by “feelings of confidence and mastery” (p. 4). The student survey responses also suggest that in years 1 and 2 “resistance to change” is followed by “excitement and encouragement around positive personal and professional change” (p. 32).

2.3 Facilitators and Barriers to Success

This study considered three categories of factors that could facilitate or block success: employment, personal, and academic.

Employment Factors: Possibly reflecting the nature of regional employment opportunities, student perceptions differed significantly by campus. By combining the data, however, the most often cited ‘employment factors that promote success’ are:

- work schedule flexibility (reported by 68% of the respondents),
- work support for continuing education (66.7%),
- job security (62.1%), and
- peer attitude to continuing education (60%).

(Phase 2 Report, p. 36)

Given the time and financial pressures these students are under, it is not surprising that “work schedule flexibility” is the most often cited workplace factor in promoting success and its absence is the most significant barrier. “Other factors promoting success” and facilitating flexibility include: i) access to a vehicle; ii) a stable family income; iii) access to public transit; and iv) child care. (Phase 2 Report, p. 48)

Personal Factors: The study found that the most often cited personal factors that promote success are:

- personal traits such as determination (91.6%),
- technical skills (81.5%),
- family support (81.3%),
- writing skills (77.5%),

² ‘Stop-out’ is used here to describe students in good academic standing who do not enrol in their program for one or several semesters and return later to continue their studies.

- work-life balance (76.1%),
- colleague support (62.8%), and
- employer support (60.2%).

(Phase 2 Report, p.27)

When considering barriers to success, students were most likely to report:

- employer support (21.9%),
- colleague support (14.8%), and
- work-life balance (14.6%).

(Phase 2 Report, p. 39).

Reflecting the “relatively low to moderate income for students, despite their continued employment throughout the program” (Phase 2 Report, p. 26), they most frequently report financial challenges, particularly any instability in family income, as barriers to success. About 2/3 of the students are scholarship and/or grant recipients, largely reflective of the one-time-only Nursing Education Initiative funding of \$1500 provided by the Ministry of health and Longterm Care that is available to nurses seeking ongoing education.

Academic Factors: The report’s data shows dramatic differences by campus but over 60% of students from both campuses identified the following as important academic facilitators of their success:

- the program coordinator,
- online learning and class format,
- face-to-face learning and class format,
- clinical learning,
- overall program of study, and
- scheduling of classes (including day, time and location).

Based on aggregated data, students are most likely to access, and to highly rank the effectiveness of the program coordinator, faculty, and academic advisors.

2.4 Supports and Services

The campus-to-campus comparison of the perceptions and levels of use of supports and services³, highlights a disconnect at one campus between a comparatively low rate of support service access and a high frequency of recommending the provision of additional support services. The report recommends that the underlying cause for this disconnect needs to be addressed. More generally, students at both campuses were most likely to access the faculty, the Program Coordinator and the Academic Advisor. Not surprisingly, “the services that are most utilized are also most highly evaluated” (Phase 2 Report, p. 62).

2.5 Student Experience of “Changes to Self and Professional Role”

First year students particularly noted changes in their perspective (“the development of different ways of looking at issues and adapting to them” (Phase 2 Report, p. 64)) and time management was a theme

³ Those interested in the significantly different student perceptions and levels of use of services and program supports provided at the Georgian and UOIT/Durham campuses should reference the Phase 2 Report.

in responses. Throughout their program, students “describe increasingly positive personal attributes that they see as part of their role and self-identification” as a professional (p. 5); “increased confidence”, “knowledge and critical thinking abilities” (p. 64). There was also an increased focus “on application of theory and research to practice” and a growing “appreciation of the need to make independent decisions about the care they provide” (p. 66). Finally, students found themselves growing as professionals: broadening their focus, “becoming lifelong learners”, “becoming more professional”, and “seeing the potential for career advancement” (p. 66). Enhanced confidence, ability to plan ahead, and capacity for caring was also noted. Particularly in year 3, the issue of stress management became significant.

2012 surveys of recent graduates identified several themes related to their transition from student to professional and from PN to RN. These include:

- the heightened professional expectations of them,
- the greater demand for critical thinking and a broader perspective in their work,
- a stronger focus on inter-professional collaboration,
- a greater requirement to draw upon their leadership knowledge and skills, and
- the challenges of bringing new knowledge into practice in an environment that may not be open to change.

2.6 Employer Perceptions

Employers of the PN-BScN program graduates agree that support for employees to enhance their professional credentials reflects well on the employers. The most frequently mentioned employer supports involve flexible workloads (including educational leaves-of-absence) and financial assistance (including scholarships and bursaries). While these were the two challenges with which employers are able to offer assistance, employer respondents also raised concerns about the difficulty of employee/students in the program maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

2.7 Predictors of Program Success

This study identified significant positive relationships between bridge GPA and both entrance GPA and the additional transfer credit awarded upon admission. (Phase 3 Report, pp. 4 & 41-42) The authors, however, found “no significant difference in mean admission GPA for students who have completed the program versus those who [withdrew]” (Phase 3 Report, p. 4). Their findings support the conclusion that admission GPA is a positive predictor of GPA at graduation but it does not predict persistence in the program.

The study further grouped students by the college from which they earned their PN and compared their admission and bridge program GPAs. In this comparison, student bridge program GPAs range from being 4% higher to 7% lower than their college GPA. (Phase 3 Report, p. 36) On average, however, bridge program GPAs are only several percentage points lower than their PN GPA.

3. Broader Conclusions About Transfer

The authors of this report have refrained from extrapolating their findings in an effort to draw broader conclusions about transfer students in general. The findings, however, highlight the significant financial, academic and life-balance pressures faced by mature students in higher education – particularly by women in professional programs. They include student perceptions of their own challenges and growth through the years of their degree studies in a way that can be used to inform the academic planning of

other transfer pathways. The study further describes student perceptions of success facilitators and barriers and the resources and supports seen to be most needed, accessed and helpful. Concurrently, the study offers an object lesson on the variation of student views, insights into the needs that can be anticipated, a thoughtful analytical methodology, and campus-specific baselines for the study of similar programs. In this, the study better informs both admission decisions and the design of student advisory and support services. It contributes to the “greater evidence-based insight [needed] into students who undertake non-traditional paths to university education ... [who] arrive with both life experience and life demands that play into academic success [and] may be critical to both curricular development and student support”. (Phase 3 Report, p. 44)