Early Identification and Intervention of At-Risk Nursing Students

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The Delaware Technical Community College associate degree in nursing program (ADN) is based on the principle of mastery learning. In this model, students must rely on previous knowledge with the expectation that they have mastered that content. Just as the foundation of a house is essential for a stable structure, mastering fundamental concepts is critical, as each nursing course builds upon prior knowledge. Students who fail courses often exhibit early warning signs well before the final exam, and those who pass with marginal grades are at a significantly higher risk of failure in subsequent courses. Faculty members have observed a consistent pattern that highlights the importance of early intervention but lacked a strategy for capturing these at-risk students before they reach this critical point. Recognizing that students often hesitate to seek faculty support (Merritt, 2021), a task force was formed to identify at-risk students early, providing an opportunity to proactively intervene before they fail.

The Importance of Early Identification

Typically, students take their first exam within the first two weeks of a nursing course. Students who score below the passing grade of 70% are immediately flagged as at-risk. Every flagged student then receives an email with an invitation to review their exam and meet with their course lead to discuss strategies for improvement. Research has shown that building a positive relationship with faculty plays a crucial role in improving student success (Merritt, 2021). This invitation is an essential step in fostering a trusting relationship between the instructor and the student.

Overcoming Student Hesitations

Some students may dismiss the need for a meeting after a single poor exam grade, believing it to be an isolated incident and feeling confident they can succeed on future exams. However, sending an email keeps the lines of communication open by not only informing the student of their standing but also serves as a gentle reminder that support is available to them when and if they choose to accept it. Students are more comfortable accepting help when it is offered, rather than seeking it out for themselves (Merritt, 2021). If a student accepts this initial invitation, the faculty arrange a one-on-one meeting with the student. During this meeting, they explore potential academic or personal barriers to success.

Addressing Academic Barriers

Academic barriers are typically easy to identify during a meeting with the student. These barriers could include poor study habits, lack of class preparation, lack of/or irregular attendance, or poor test-taking skills. One of the most common academic barriers that can lead to program failure is a poor understanding of basic material and a lack of reading comprehension (Walker et al., 2011). When faculty meet one-on-one with a student, they can go over individual exam questions. This may be enough to clarify and deepen a student's understanding of the course material.

Students may also be referred to a student success coordinator for an individualized study approach. The student success coordinator can work with the student to develop personalized study strategies, offer guidance on time management, and, most importantly, ensure students understand how to access their resources to improve their academic performance.

Addressing Non-Academic Barriers

While academic barriers are often the most easily recognized, personal challenges frequently play a significant role in a student's academic performance. Many students, particularly non-traditional students in community colleges, face a variety of external pressures, including economic and personal challenges, as they move through the nursing program. Some leading obstacles to student success include a lack of support systems, financial strains, excessive work hours, and family obligations (Williams & Dahan, 2022). These types of challenges may not be evident in a classroom setting with multiple students, and students who are struggling with personal challenges may be reluctant to share this with their instructor.

Creating rapport and building trust with students is essential for these types of personal barriers to be uncovered. Faculty should be prepared to listen with empathy and sensitivity so students do not feel judged and can openly share their struggles. For example, a student may have difficulty juggling a full-time job and study commitments, leading to poor time management and incomplete assignments. Another student may experience heightened anxiety related to the demands of the nursing program or may be coping with a personal crisis, such as illness or family issues. Refraining from judgment and actively listening is key to developing a strategy that is personalized to the student and will lead to their success.

Connecting Students with Resources

Faculty have been given a list of available resources to support students, which can include referrals to the college wellness center, financial aid office, childcare services, textbook reading strategies, math support,

and study- and test-taking strategies, to name a few.

Sustaining Support for Continued Success

While one meeting may be enough to set a student on a successful path, faculty recognize that some students will require additional support. If a student has a failing course grade after the second exam, they receive an email kindly requesting (rather than recommending) a one-on-one meeting with either the course lead or the student success coordinator. This email is also sent if the student has a failing grade after the third exam.

A critical aspect of the ADN program's at-risk algorithm is identifying students who are marginally successful in a course. The program follows a mastery learning model, and courses increase in rigor each semester by 10-20%. A poor academic history places a student at risk for future failure (Merritt,

2021), so these students may face heightened challenges without early intervention. The faculty recognize the need to identify potential future barriers as early as possible (Merritt, 2021). Therefore, after completing the course, these students receive an email asking them to meet with their program advisor before the next semester begins. The advisor provides individualized assistance by identifying barriers and academic gaps, allowing for targeted support moving forward (Merritt, 2021).

The Long-Term Impact of Early Intervention

Faculty are optimistic that with sustained support for the at-risk students, there will be a reduction in attrition, enhanced understanding, increased confidence, and improved first-time pass rates on the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX)— the ultimate goal for every student and nurs-

ing program. ◼

References

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