

VIEWPOINT**Nursing & Health Sciences Research Journal**Journal Access: <https://scholarlycommons.baptisthealth.net/nhsrj/>**Overcoming Undergraduate Nursing Education Challenges During the Pandemic**

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ABSTRACT

Despite the challenges encountered throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, undergraduate nursing education was able to pivot and prevent cessation as faculty and students utilized various virtual platforms to provide didactic, skills lab, and clinical exposure without delaying graduation for many students. Although nothing could replace the hands-on human interaction a clinical rotation provided, virtual experiences aligned with the course content helped students reinforce the concepts taught in the corresponding didactic portion proving this to be beneficial in its own way. As faculty, we rose to the challenge in fostering a supportive environment to keep students motivated to learn and engaged in coursework.

INTRODUCTION

The abrupt arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused numerous shifts in operations across disciplines and organizations. Undergraduate nursing education was no exception as academia pivoted from the traditional face-to-face format into an online environment for didactic and virtual clinicals, posing challenges for faculty and students. Additionally, many hospital organizations restricted visitor access and ceased clinical rotations for student learner groups, further strengthening the need for virtual clinical experiences and alternate learning options. The goal of this paper is to reflect on challenges encountered by faculty and students in undergraduate nursing education programs during the pandemic and to provide recommendations for the future of undergraduate nursing education.

CHALLENGES FACED

Several challenges were encountered in the undergraduate nursing education programs as the shift from face-to-face to virtual learning ensued. Faculty and students navigated through the challenges throughout the pandemic to promote learning and completion of programs. The

challenges encountered included online education, clinical and skills lab, and preparation for practice.

Online Education

The transition to online education encompasses challenges such as technology, exam integrity, and student engagement. Teaching behind a computer screen was not only a physical change, but also required the training and use of new instructional modalities. Students and faculty were required to have access to internet, a computer, tablet, or laptop, a quiet workspace, and online tools used to deliver content. Information technology departments worked quickly to ensure coursework transitioned to online platforms simultaneously while guaranteeing faculty and students obtained necessary access to various platforms (Almost, 2020). Additionally, the new platform, Learning Management System (LMS), required faculty to attend several trainings to learn and navigate creating online assignments, online group work, and online testing. Research indicated similar challenges as course instructors deliberated the best strategy to deliver content for course completion (Almost, 2020). Faculty implemented exam software to provide remote proctoring during the pandemic to uphold

academic integrity. The use of exam remote proctoring added another layer to faculty workload as any video flagged needed to be reviewed for break in exam integrity. Unfortunately, many students had limited access to the necessary tools, especially internet and a quiet workspace.

During the first few weeks of remote instruction, challenges encountered included student professional behaviors, distractions, netiquette, and instructing the students about the importance of their environment while in class and while taking exams. Students experienced reduced social interactions while attending online programs which negatively impacted their learning processes (Langegård et al., 2021). Students surveyed reported their minds wandering with a decreased focus on their studies attributing to lower academic performance (Fitzgerald & Konrad, 2021). Faculty experienced challenges in promoting and maintaining student engagement within the virtual learning environment and implemented various tools to aid teaching pedagogy.

Skills Lab

Students also faced a considerable amount of difficulty when it came to completing skills lab requirements. Instead of using a real stethoscope and auscultating a live patient, students were required to use virtual simulation as their source of practice. During the virtual skills lecture, faculty were tasked to explain many of the fundamental skills they are used to demonstrating in person. The expectation was for the students to practice in their home environment which resulted in logistical obstacles such as lack of a quiet environment, supplies, time, and hands on guidance. In addition, academic institutions mandated student video submission of the skill learned each week along with a virtual competency, which required time in recording and uploading to the LMS. Students encountered many technical issues when uploading such large files. This created an additional layer of stress and anxiety for them. Faculty challenges included ensuring academic honesty and having to grade multiple submissions. Additionally, faculty provided individual feedback for learning enhancement, taking additional time within the workload.

Preparation for Practice

The need for quality nursing workforce that will meet the current and future healthcare needs of society is central to nursing education. The

decrease in hands-on experience is translatable to practice upon graduation. Interactions within the remote environment may not be suitable for learning and may be plagued with disruptions (Hayter & Jackson, 2020). As new graduated nurses enter the workforce, residency programs must be prepared for competencies that are underdeveloped due to the pandemic. Most studies found deficiencies in the development of technical skills as well as critical thinking and communication skills. The loss of competencies is attributed to the loss of interactions, which occurs between educators and students (Wyatt et al., 2020). The deficiencies in effective communication skills and clinical experiences may affect both the graduate and the recruiters into the residency programs. Many studies show the enormous impact in the disruptions caused to faculty and students teaching and learning process, leaving the students less prepared for the transition from student to professional nurse (Hayter & Jackson, 2020). The demands of both educational and home responsibilities during virtual instructions meant little time for in-depth-learning activities (Wyatt et al., 2020).

WHAT WE LEARNED AS FACULTY

Faculty learned to work out of their comfort zone of traditional in-person instruction by implementing various learning platforms and modalities such as asynchronous learning, blended courses, and flipped classrooms. They also utilized more active learning exercises such as polls, Kahoot, Nearpod, and case studies. Once the learning curve was hurdled, these modalities proved to be very beneficial in engaging student learning. Another positive aspect that arose from the virtual clinical experience during the pandemic was the alignment of case studies and virtual simulation to mirror didactic lecture content. As faculty, we rose to the challenge in fostering a supportive environment to keep students motivated to learn and engaged in coursework including one-on-one meetings with students to discuss their progress and address their concerns.

Even through uncertain times, faculty needed to maintain a calm and confident demeanor to send the message that we would get through this. Faculty worked together, utilizing outside resources, to strategize how we could foster an environment so students met course objectives despite remote learning. We also engaged in self-care and reminded one another—peers and

students, that it was important to find the right balance and be aware of our physical and emotional needs. Our academic institutions and corporate organization promoted such things as adequate sleep, engaging in moderate exercise, consuming a balanced diet, cooking, meditation, and spending time with pets, friends, and family. These activities promoted positivity and satisfaction in our lives, which in turn, translated to personal empowerment to achieve our professional and academic purpose.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, nursing education was faced with many challenges, but creative strategies used by the nursing profession to address disruptions can be implemented to promote resilience and learning during a pandemic. Recommendations for future consideration include improved partnerships between nursing schools and hospital organizations, revision of curriculum, and continuation of technology advancement. Radical changes are needed between nursing programs and healthcare organizations through collaboration to adopt innovative strategies for the future of nursing education. Residency programs and nursing practice need to develop a quality trained nursing workforce. The need to further strengthen the academic and practice partnerships to a seamless practice environment with collaborations of nursing education and the residency framework is well overdue.

There is unprecedented opportunity for transforming nursing education (Giordano et al., 2020). Revamping the nursing education curriculum to incorporate the use of advanced technology, such as virtual learning platforms and video conferencing, will promote interaction between students and faculty. The continued use of polls, Kahoot, Nearpod, and case studies as a transition back to in-person learning occurs is recommended to enhance classroom engagement. Case studies should remain aligned with curriculum to promote connection of didactic lectures to case scenarios assigned. In addition to continuation with technological advances, curriculum redesign should focus on competency-based learning guided by organizational and nursing professional practice standards. Nursing leaders are compelled to examine the competency of nurses entering the workforce. After all, nursing education and the

residency programs have the same purpose of producing a high-quality nursing workforce.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges encountered throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, undergraduate nursing education was able to pivot and prevent cessation as faculty and students utilized various virtual platforms to provide didactic, skills lab, and clinical exposure without delaying graduation for many students. Technology issues, student engagement, and student fears were readily addressed, however, knowledge gaps remain as newly licensed registered nurses lack the hands-on experiences typical of undergraduate nursing education. These deficits include proficiency in patient care, critical thinking, and communications skills. As the world starts returning to normal, recommendations for undergraduate nursing education include the evolution to encompass the best of both pre and post pandemic didactic and clinical experiences to better educate future nurses.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

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