



Trends in higher education and recommendations for nurse educators



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In my most recent editorial, I discussed the economic trends impacting higher education and the influence of those trends on nursing education (Morton, 2019). In this editorial, I continue the discussion of trends in higher education with a focus on student demographics, mental health issues, enrollment trends, delivery modes of education, lifelong education and stackable credentials, demands for employment ready graduates, higher education workforce issues, and technology. These numerous trends impact not only higher education in general, but also nursing education. As nurse educators, we must be aware of higher education issues so that we can contribute to finding solutions and apply those solutions to nursing education.

Student demographics

Changing demographics of college students have important implications for the strategic plans of colleges and universities. In the past, most students entered colleges and universities directly from high school, attended full time, lived on campus, and worked minimal hours if at all (Jenzabar, 2019). Those patterns are changing dramatically as more older students enter higher education and more students work extensive hours in addition to taking classes (Jenzabar, 2019). Today, about 38% of undergraduate students are older than 25 years of age and the number of students older than 25 years of age is forecast to continue to grow through 2025 (Inside Track, 2019). Currently, about 85% of university students work while attending school and many also have childcare issues or serve as caregivers for aging or sick relatives (Inside Track, 2019).

These changing student demographics are a wake-up call for higher education. Different strategies are needed to recruit students and to ensure their success. Retention strategies, class schedules, and support services need to shift to accommodate older working learners. First-generation students also face unique challenges as they cannot rely on their families to help them navigate the complexities of being a student.

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The time has come to reinvent student services to include assistance with budgeting, childcare, and other services that help students beyond their academic demands (Comevo Communication, 2019; Jenzabar, 2019).

Mental health issues

The need for mental health services for students has become a major issue for college and university campuses. In the past, students with anxiety, depression, or other mental health problems withdrew from colleges or did not even attempt to enroll (Oster, 2019). Such is not the case today. In the spring of 2017, almost 40% of students reported having difficulty in the previous year due to depression and 61% reported overwhelming anxiety (Oster, 2019). As a result, institutions are under huge pressure to provide robust mental health services for students, a challenge that has been difficult to meet. In a recent survey, eight out of 10 college presidents reported that student mental health issues have become more of a priority on their campuses than even three years ago (Chesman & Taylor, 2019). To address the mental health needs of students, the International Association of Counseling Services Inc. (2019) recommends one mental health professional staff for every 1000 to 1500 students. The current ratio is 1 professional to every 1737 students (Oster, 2019). Budget constraints account for the inability to meet the target recommendation.

Enrollment trends

Enrollment in colleges and universities is trending downward. Between 2011 and 2016 enrollment in United States institutions dropped 7.8% and the decline is expected to continue through at least 2030 (Hershan & Lauderdale, 2018). The decrease can be attributed in part to the rising cost for students and families with many potential students electing not to attend post-secondary education (Hershan & Lauderdale, 2018).

High school enrollment also is declining, which has a significant impact on college and university enrollment (Selingo, 2016). The decline in high school enrollment is predicted to be especially acute in the Northeast and Midwest. The Northeast is expected to experience a drop of about 1% each year on average of high school graduates by 2027–2028. The decline in high school enrollments will occur especially at private high schools, which historically have provided well-prepared, high-income students for colleges. The Midwest is forecast to face an even steeper decline. Michigan is projected to have a nearly 30% drop between 2009 and 2028. The high school enrollment in the West is predicted to remain flat. Only the South is expected to see a growth in high school graduates over the next decade. This figure is attributed mainly to Texas (Selingo, 2016).

Enrollment of international students also is decreasing related to the uncertain political climate within our country and immigration regulations (Hanover Research, 2019). The trend of decreased international students is expected to continue through at least 2030 (Hershan & Lauderdale, 2018). In the past, the United States has been a leading destination for international students with over 1 million international students enrolled in United States colleges and universities resulting in \$39 million in revenue (Hanover Research, 2019). Colleges and universities are scrambling to determine how they will make up for the lost enrollment and resulting decreased revenue from the marked decline in the numbers of international students. On a more positive note, enrollment rates for minority students and first-generation college students are growing (Jenzabar, 2019).

Although the enrollments in nursing baccalaureate, nursing master's, and Doctor of Nursing practice programs have been steady, university officials may pressure schools of nursing to admit more students—especially undergraduates—to compensate for the deficits in other parts of the institution. This request may place added pressure on faculty as well as on their ability to secure clinical sites. Nursing PhD programs also may be impacted by enrollment trends, but in a different way. Many nursing PhD programs rely on international students to achieve enrollment targets. With a decline in international students, some nursing PhD programs may struggle to exist.

Strategies to recruit students will need to change dramatically. For example, many institutions are exploring virtual reality and drones to offer students a real-world view of life on campus. These technologies offer potential applicants a unique perspective on campus experiences. Colleges and universities that offer virtual experiences on their websites have seen a 22% increase in applications to the institution (Hanover Research, 2019).

Students who plan to complete their education at a distance may have little interest in learning about the campus. Instead, these students may base their institution selection from information obtained on the website. Easy to navigate websites are essential for this population of students. Videos showing very engaging faculty explaining the program of study may help in students' decisions.

Delivery modes of education

Online, distance, and hybrid education are becoming more widely accepted and these delivery modes are expected to grow (Dusst & Winthrop, 2019; Inside Track, 2019). Enrollment in online courses has more than quadrupled in the last 15 years in the United States (Dusst & Winthrop, 2019). Colleges and universities are expanding online offerings to access more non-traditional students and to offer more flexibility for all students (Inside Track, 2019; Jenzabar, 2019). To sustain student engagement, hybrid courses that offer a combination of online learning with face-to-face classes also are growing (Jenzabar, 2019). For face-to-face and synchronous distance education, colleges and universities must invest in sophisticated technologies that accommodate more active learning in the physical classroom, to enable project-based interactions at a distance, and to improve remote forms of communication (Ascione, 2019).

Many colleges and universities cannot keep pace with the demands for online, distance, and hybrid education. To address this problem, many institutions are outsourcing the development and delivery of these modes of education (Dusst & Winthrop, 2019). Additionally, consultants are being employed to guide in the selection and installation of needed technology, all at a significant cost to institutions.

Lifelong education and stackable credentials

Learners are shifting towards lifelong education. In the past, college education was viewed as a once in a lifetime, four-year experience. In more recent years, there has been a swing to view higher education institutions as lifelong partners in education. Learners realize that their

careers may change as the economy shifts and that, over time, they will need new and updated skills. To achieve this goal, learners are seeking stackable credentials, certificates, micro-certificates, and badges all in hopes that their credentials will set them apart from competing applicants in the job market (Dusst & Winthrop, 2019; Inside Track, 2019; Selingo, 2016). To meet learner needs, colleges and universities are unbundling their programs to create certificates, micro-certificates, and badges.

Demand for employment ready graduates

Colleges and universities are facing increasing demands from employers and legislators to prepare students with the knowledge and skills needed for success in the workforce. The value of a liberal arts or humanities education is under great scrutiny during this era of pressure for work-ready graduates (Inside Track, 2019; Jenzabar, 2019; Morson & Schapiro, 2015; Unglesbee, 2019).

Employers reported that only half of new hires have the skills needed for their roles (Hanover Research, 2019). Employers expect graduates to not only have the hard skills for job performance, but also cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills such as collaboration, teamwork, creativity, imagination, critical thinking, problem solving, and organization (Comevo Communication, 2019; Hanover Research, 2019; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2010). Yet, employers indicate that only about 50% of new hires meet the skill set needed for their roles (Hanover Research, 2019). Interestingly, 89.4% of new graduates considered themselves proficient in professionalism and work ethic while only 42.5% of employers agreed (Hanover Research, 2019).

To meet the demands for employment-ready graduates, colleges and universities need to partner with employers and other key stakeholders to develop programs that ensure graduates will have the appropriate set of skills (Comevo Communication, 2019; Dusst & Winthrop, 2019; Unglesbee, 2019). Internships with employers during students' program of study may help achieve the goal. Also, hiring adjunct faculty from the workforce could be key in preparing students for the work world they will face.

Higher education workforce issues

Administration

Top administrative positions in colleges and universities are experiencing some of the highest turnover rates in the institution and the trend is expected to continue. The average term for a president dropped from 8.5 years in 2006 to 6.5 years in 2016 (Unglesbee, 2019). Presidents have an 18% turnover rate (Higher Education Publications Inc., 2018). Only deans and provosts have a higher turnover percentage (21% for provosts and 22% for deans; Higher Education Publications Inc., 2018).

Administrators face unprecedented pressures including shrinking budgets, campus protests, free speech battles, demands for fundraising, sexual misconduct scandals, contentious boards, and student safety issues (Unglesbee, 2019). People who accept these administrative positions are frequently not prepared for the challenges they face. Administrators often rose through the academy based on their scholarship productivity and those scholarship skills have little transferability to solve the enormous challenges they face today.

Faculty

Tenure, the sacred cow of academia, is under scrutiny. Educational institutions question the value and cost of tenure while those in the corporate world view tenure with puzzlement and skepticism. The number of tenured faculty is decreasing. In 1975, 57% of all full-time and part-time faculty members were in a tenure system (Morson & Schapiro, 2015). This figure has dropped to below 30% today. Some

predict that within the next 25 years the figure will drop to 15 to 20% as colleges and universities shift to a larger number of non-tenure-track faculty (Morson & Schapiro, 2015; Selingo, 2016).

For the past decade, college and university officials have anticipated a wave of faculty retirements with most of those coming from baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964. This predicted surge in retirements has failed to materialize. The number of professors age 65 and older has more than doubled since 2000. Nearly half of professors are staying by choice and only one third of tenured faculty members over 50 expect to retire by age 67 (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Yakoboski, 2015). Faculty members report that they enjoy their work and find it fulfilling (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Yakoboski, 2015). Yet, according to a 2014 *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2014) survey, 40% of college leaders believe that faculty members stay on the job longer than the institution would prefer. Additionally, they believe that delayed retirements have a negative impact on the recruitment of new faculty. Faculty members reported that if retired they would like to remain engaged with their university through teaching and research and mentorship of younger faculty. However, administrators preferred that retired faculty members engage in activities such as alumni relations, development, and teaching enrichment courses to the wider community (Selingo, 2016).

The use of adjunct and part-time faculty is another workforce issue for higher education. One strategy colleges and universities have employed to cope with rising costs is to hire more part-time and adjunct faculty. This hiring trend has resulted in a bifurcated faculty comprised of older tenured faculty members and younger part-time and non-tenure-track faculty members (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2014; Frey & Osborne, 2013; Selingo, 2016). Typically, adjunct and part-time faculty have not participated in shared governance and committee work and were reimbursed at a low rate. In more recent years, adjunct faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate assistants are demanding a voice in the organization and more equitable pay.

The shift to adjuncts and part-time faculty coupled with the decline in the numbers of tenured and tenure-track faculty places a huge strain and burden on a small number of faculty to carry the work of the university. Although the increased use of adjunct and part-time faculty has provided budget relief, the future plans for faculty composition is uncertain. New models of faculty composition need to be developed and the workload expectations of all must be re-visited. The time has come to consider nontraditional talent planning and recruitment of faculty and staff with diverse backgrounds and experiences. For example, some colleges and universities are hiring faculty who live in another state and assign these faculty to teach online courses. To recruit and retain faculty, institutions must consider flexible work schedules, options to work from home, job sharing arrangements, and work life balance strategies. Administrators face the challenges of trusting faculty employed in nontraditional work models. Faculty want to be judged on work produced rather than on hours worked (Oster, 2019).

Staff

Higher education also faces challenges with the staff workforce. Currently, staff is comprised of a larger percentage of older (greater than 55) employees than the overall United States workforce. Nearly one third of the higher education staff are 55 years old and older (Pritchard, Li, McChesney, & Bichsel, 2019). In comparison, less than one fourth of the United States workforce is over 55 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). Higher education faces challenges in meeting the needs of an aging workforce and must be attentive to succession planning to pass on the wisdom of this critical group (Pritchard et al., 2019).

Technology

The need for state-of-the-art technology permeates all aspects of higher education. Virtual and augmented reality are creating new opportunities and pressures for how faculty teach, how students learn, and

how research is conducted (Unglesbee, 2019). The future of desktop computers is questionable as students rely more and more on their cell phones for learning, transferring information, and communicating (Inside Track, 2019). A robust technology infrastructure is critical in supporting business operations, tracking key institutional outcomes, and interacting with donors (Jenzabar, 2019).

Data privacy and cyber security must be a top priority for colleges and universities (Comevo Communication, 2019). It is imperative for institutions to have a comprehensive and strategically designed plan to deal with data breaches and cybersecurity issues. They also must develop a cybersecurity incident response plan that can be implemented rapidly (Oster, 2019). Colleges and universities that do not have this infrastructure are vulnerable to hackers who hold institutions hostage for ransom money (Comevo Communication, 2019).

Actions for nurse educators

Nurse educators must be cognizant of these far-reaching trends in higher education. We must seize the opportunity to lead the development of innovative solutions that will reshape higher education and reform nursing education. I suggest we consider the following actions:

- Develop recruitment strategies that target an older student population.
- Offer part-time plans of study to accommodate students' needs to work and care for family members.
- Consider childcare and other family demands when determining class schedules.
- Evaluate student services to ensure they are meeting the needs of a diverse population of students.
- Educate all faculty on how to refer students to the mental health services offered on campus.
- Develop a joint teaching and practice appointment for psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner faculty so they can provide services in the campus counseling center.
- Partner with high school counselors to teach them about nursing education and careers in nursing.
- Engage in careful enrollment planning and realistic projections for numbers of students.
- Develop specific recruitment strategies for nursing PhD programs that include less reliance on international students to meet enrollment targets.
- Focus recruitment in all nursing programs on minority and first-generation college students.
- Create virtual engagement opportunities on the college of nursing's website and videos of faculty promoting their program of research.
- Provide opportunities for the professional development of faculty so that they can become skilled in best practices for online and distance delivered education.
- Consider unbundling programs to offer certificates, micro-certificates, and badges to help nurses who want to expand their careers.
- Form a board of visitors who represent employers and other key stakeholders so they may provide guidance on skills needed of graduates in the workforce.
- Invite representatives from healthcare organizations to serve on curriculum committees of all programs.
- Encourage faculty to participate in professional development programs that focus on preparation for leadership and administrative positions.
- Examine the bylaws of the organization and revise if needed the criteria for governance participation and service especially for part-time and adjunct faculty.
- Survey retired faculty to determine their interest in types of continued service to the college of nursing.
- Investigate key factors that faculty consider for continued employment such as flexible scheduling, working from a distance, and job

sharing.

- Engage in succession planning strategies of staff and faculty administrators.
- Partner with informational technology experts to determine future technology needs and to ensure data security.

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