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Barriers to Student Success in Bronson School of Nursing Program

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Abstract

Aside from the rigorous coursework of nursing school, nursing students experience various barriers that impact their academic success. Barriers to successful completion of traditional Bachelor of Science of Nursing (BSN) programs include isolation, lack of peer connections, lack of faculty connections, lack of family support, lack of financial support, and mental health struggles (Shaw, 2015) (Seal & Woods, 2021). This research will aim at assessing and exploring these barriers students are facing, along with the additional or exacerbated barriers the COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced.

This study will expand on the research conducted by Shaw (2015), in which she examined the barriers that students in the Bronson School of Nursing (BSON) program, at Western Michigan University (WMU) were facing. Furthermore, this research will help determine if the recommendations derived from Shaw (2015), such as peer-mentoring programs, have been implemented. An additional lens brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic is necessary to integrate into this research, due to current experiences and limited research regarding the association of the pandemic with the challenges of nursing school. Research on this subject will assist in better preparation for future nursing students and faculty.

In short, this research will assess the challenges BSON students are facing during completion of the program and the additional barriers the pandemic has contributed. The study will examine whether solutions to previously identified barriers have been implemented and what impact these solutions are yielding. The survey administered will be geared towards students enrolled in the nursing program at WMU, with anonymity preserved at all times. Participants will be recruited via email with informed consent included. There are limited risks associated with the study. After data collection and analysis has been performed, a discussion of

findings will be posed and further recommendations will be made. This research will assist in cultivating ideas of future solutions for current issues.

Keywords: nursing, student, academic, success, COVID-19

Barriers to Student Success in Bronson School of Nursing Program

Background of Literature

Nursing programs are environments of high-stress and intense academic coursework, and it is important for students to feel supported during their academic time. However, different factors contribute to multi-faceted challenges students experience throughout the completion of their programs. Nursing students have experienced a lack of faculty support and mentorship (Shaw, 2015) (Onovo, 2019), lack of peer support (Shaw, 2015), struggles balancing school and work, poor retention with minimal faculty intervention (Mooring, 2016), difficulty with teaching and learning styles (Onovo, 2019), living situations not conducive for learning (Mthimunye & Daniels, 2020), financial struggles, lack of awareness of resources (Seal & Woods, 2021), and negative interactions associated with a lack of diversity of faculty and peers (Diefenbeck, Michalec, & Alexander, 2016). These factors can be difficult to navigate and have all impacted students' academic success within nursing school. Underrepresented minorities encounter multiple additional barriers that must be considered, as well (Williams, Bourgault, Valenti, Howie, & Mathur, 2018)

Considering these challenges, a crucial aspect of student life in the past year has been the addition of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted studies. A large barrier arising out of the pandemic involves creating a safe environment for students. Nursing students, in particular, have been affected by a disruption in clinical experiences, whereas many clinical sites have been unable to accommodate students and their learning needs (Drenkard, Sakallaris, Deyo, Abdillahi, & Hahn, 2021). Fear of the virus, isolation, and mental health struggles have also played a role in student success (Hamadeh Kerbage, Garvey, Willetts, & Olasoji, 2021). Navigating uncertainty

has been a previously identified struggle throughout nursing programs (Handwerker, 2018), and with the added uncertainty of the pandemic, it is necessary to explore how students are coping.

This research is specifically targeted towards the sample population of WMU BSON students. The goal of this study is to examine the barriers BSON students are experiencing throughout their completion of the program. According to Shaw (2015), BSON students struggled with lacking peer, faculty, and family support, along with isolation. Shaw recommended peer-mentoring programs and resources to assist students in mitigating these barriers. This current research proposal will examine whether current BSON students are experiencing the same difficulties and whether recommendations have been integrated into the program. Expanding on past research and re-examining similar themes in the future is crucial for progress. There is limited research regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted BSON students and nursing students, in general, so we must consider this factor, as well. With the pandemic continuing to run its course, compiled with a current nursing shortage, it is important to explore how WMU nursing students are coping. The information gained from this research can enhance faculty knowledge on student needs and contribute to formulating recommendations for student support in the future.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research is to gain insight of the barriers surrounding successful completion of the traditional BSON program at WMU. Conducting this research will allow nursing faculty to cultivate a better knowledge base of how successfully students are navigating the nursing program and what challenges are impeding student success. The survey may also assist students in self-reflection of whether or not their academic and social needs are met. The

results of the survey may assist faculty and students to work together to break down the barriers of completion of the BSON program.

The data collected will additionally serve as a continuation of Shaw's (2015) research, exploring whether or not Shaw's recommendations to the BSON program have been met, specifically peer-mentoring. The research will evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic has played a role in student success. The data may also serve as a topic of continued collaboration with Public Health faculty, in providing students with accessible resources geared toward student health and wellness.

Method and Design

In order to collect data for this topic of research, an anonymous survey was created with the sample population of current nursing students in the BSON program at WMU in mind. This research surrounds student experiences, so it was crucial to hear from students themselves. Before nursing students were invited to participate in the research, Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) approval was obtained, due to the inclusion of human subjects in the research procedure. All current BSON students were recruited to participate via email, whereas the research process was outlined, informed consent was provided, and researcher contact information was given, should any concerns arise. Students were required to be enrolled in the BSON program at WMU and at least eighteen years of age, in order to participate. Subjects were made aware that participation is voluntary, and responses would remain completely anonymous with no identifiers attached. Subjects were also informed that they may end participation at any time, and completing and submitting the survey served as implied consent.

The electronic survey was administered over a two-week duration, beginning with the date of the introductory email. A follow-up email was sent to participants after the first week, to

remind them of when the survey will close. The survey consisted of a series of questions including multiple choice, Likert scale, and short answer responses regarding their experiences and barriers involving successful completion of the BSON program. The survey can be found in Appendix A. Data collection was conducted utilizing an anonymous software called Qualtrics, provided by WMU resources. The research procedure utilized a descriptive design, and the data obtained was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The findings were then integrated and disseminated to BSON faculty, the director of the BSON program, and the dean of the Honors College via a power point presentation.

Results

The survey received a total of 114 respondents. Of the sample size (n=114), results indicated that the majority of students live with their friends and live in a positive/neutral living environment. In regards to student lifestyle, 75% (n=86) of students work throughout their completion of the program. Of that 75%, most students (n=75) spend 9+ hours a week working, with 38 students spending 9-16 hours, 25 students spending 17-24 hours, and 12 students spending 24+ hours. The survey revealed that the primary reason students work is to pay for food and/or gas, followed by living expenses. Aside from work, 67% (n=76) of nursing students spend 11+ hours a week studying and the majority get 5-7 hours of sleep each night. When participants were asked to rate their stress level during the nursing semester, 63% (n=71) of students rated their stress to be high, while 31% (n=35) experience moderate stress.

In terms of support, survey results determined that support from family was highest, followed by peers, then faculty. Students feel most supported by their family and least supported by faculty. Most students, 82% (n=92), feel generally supported by BSON faculty during their

academic careers, yet 18% (n=22) disagreed with that statement. A graph depicting the types of support student feel they receive from faculty members is located in Appendix B.

Some major influences on academic success that was derived from the survey results included lack of sleep, difficulty balancing work, school, and social commitments, financial struggles, and mental health struggles. The percentage of agreement in which respondents felt these factors impacted their academic success is depicted in Appendix C.

A lens of the COVID-19 pandemic was necessary to integrate into the research, and results indicated that COVID-19 yielded some additional impacts on student experiences and overall academic success. Nearly half of respondents have had to quarantine due to COVID-19, and subsequently miss class. Nearly one third of students have worried about passing the semester, all together, due to quarantining from COVID-19. Some other noteworthy factors this virus has contributed to student experiences include the struggle with transitioning to online learning, feeling isolated during online learning, altering the perspective of becoming a nurse, and raising concerns about mental health. The percentage of agreement in which respondents felt these areas influenced their student experience during the pandemic can be found in Appendix D.

Of the 63% of respondents that agreed to feeling concerned about their mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 43% have sought professional help, leaving 57% of students who have not. After performing a thematic analysis of the responses, it was derived that the most frequently occurring reasons why students were not seeking professional help for their mental health concerns were barriers of time, money, stigma/fear, lack of resources, and a virtual format. Many students prioritized school and work over their mental health concerns, with one student writing, "I'm having a difficult time finding time. It is a priority, but school and work come first" and another responding, "I barely have enough time to get my daily necessities done,

let alone seek professional advice on how to handle my stress”. Perhaps the most striking response a participant wrote to the question of the reasons for not seeking professional help was, “I feel that there’s nothing anyone can say or do to change how worried I am about becoming a nurse during this pandemic/staffing shortage”.

Subjects were then prompted to answer the open-ended question of “What is your biggest concern surrounding nursing school right now?”. After a thematic analysis was performed, the top student concern was determined to be passing, demonstrated by one student’s response of, “Will I pass? Will I not? I’m so tired”. The second leading concern surrounded the NCLEX, the nursing licensure examination, followed by balancing responsibilities, workload/time management, and finally, communication issues. Struggling to balance responsibilities is demonstrated by one student writing, “My biggest concern is balancing needing to make money and needing to study”.

Respondents were then given the opportunity to give their BSON faculty advice that would support their academic success through an open-ended format. The top leading advice for faculty surrounded being more flexible and understanding of students. One student wrote, “Remember that students are humans too and school cannot always be above everything. Life happens and sometimes school cannot come first”, while another added, “Understand that some students NEED to work to support themselves throughout school. Saying that ‘you shouldn’t be working’ offends some people”. The second leading theme for faculty advice involved providing more study resources and opportunities, with one student responding to the prompt with, “...I would love more programs and opportunities for out of class learning examples being organized study groups by professors or TA”. The last three most frequently occurring topics of advice for faculty involved communicating/checking in with students more, prioritizing mental health, and

having greater accountability. Regarding mental health, specifically, one respondent mentioned, “Many professors emphasize the importance of mental health, but then they do not provide opportunities for us to take care of our mental health”. Students also desire more accountability from faculty, with one student suggesting, “The staff should be required to take anti—racist courses to learn about their biases and how those impact their teaching methods and the way they interact with students”.

The last piece of information gained from the survey surrounded BSON student knowledge of and accessibility to resources. Survey results deemed that only 17% (n=19) of students have received a form of peer-mentoring during the academic career. However, of the students that have received peer-mentoring, nearly three quarters of them believed it contributed to their academic success. When subjects were asked if they would take advantage of a peer-mentoring program if it was offered at no cost, 89% (n=100) of students showed interest. In regard to general accessibility to resources, survey results indicated that student knowledge of academic resources such as the Empower Success program and YOU at WMU is lacking, and only 34% (n=37) feel that campus resources are accessible. Graphs representing this data can be found in Appendix E.

Discussion

After survey results were analyzed via qualitative and quantitative approaches, some pertinent findings were drawn regarding factors impacting BSON student academic success during completion of the traditional nursing program at WMU. First and foremost, students are struggling with the balancing act of having many responsibilities on their plate including school, work, extracurriculars, social life, and sleep. Many students feel that there is not enough time in the day to balance all of these commitments, subsequently leading to placing priorities on the

backburner, such as mental and physical well-being. When analyzing changes/trends from Shaw's (2015) research, it was determined that students who worked in 2015 averaged 0-5 hours/week. In 2021, however, working students averaged 9+ hours/week, with some working as many as 24 hours or more. Students are working more than they were in 2015, and this increase in working hours for BSON students is something to consider when thinking about the responsibilities students are grappling with. Other common factors BSON students deemed impacted their academic success were lack of sleep, financial struggles, and mental health struggles. Financial struggles, for example, are out of student control and must be taken into consideration when evaluating student success and how to better support students.

Mental health was a leading concern identified by BSON students, one in which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a large portion of students expressed concern regarding their mental health during the pandemic and 81%, or 91 students, agreed that mental health struggles impact their academic success, BSON students are struggling to seek professional help. Time, money, and stigma/fear were the top three reasons why students neglected to seek professional help for their mental health. These statistics are worrisome and must be addressed.

Although many students feel supported by nursing faculty, there is still room for improvement. Based upon the open-ended responses involving advice to give to faculty to better support academic success, students desire more flexibility and understanding from BSON faculty. Students want faculty to practice humility and recognize that it can be difficult to balance all of the responsibilities of being a student and a human, in general. Students are additionally seeking more resources and opportunities for studying, and would take advantage of these opportunities, in the case that they are provided. Other advice for faculty involves

communicating and checking in more with students, as one student mentioned, “A few weeks of the semester are really tough, and a simple encouraging email from a professor or a check in with a professor would make it a little better”. In regards to mental health, students are seeking opportunities from faculty that would support their mental well-being and encourage faculty to practice accountability. In general, students are seeking increased and strengthened faculty support.

In terms of resources, overall student awareness of campus resources that may aid in academic achievement is lacking. The resources are available, however, student familiarity with these campus resources is low. A key recommendation provided by Shaw’s (2015) research, regarding the topic of barriers to BSON student success, was implementing a peer-mentoring program. Shaw believed that peer-mentoring would serve as a means to increase academic success, for tutoring would assist academically and mentorship would assist socially. A peer-mentoring program called Empower Success was, in fact, implemented in the fall of 2017; however, only 29% (n=33) of current BSON students had knowledge of it. Of the students that did receive academic support from the Empower Success program, or another form of peer-mentoring, 74% of them believed it contributed to their academic success. Unfortunately, the Empower Success program was cut in Fall, 2021 due to funding. Despite this, there is still a large interest in peer-mentoring, for 89% (n=100) of BSON students agreed that they would potentially take advantage of such a program, if one was offered.

Recommendations

Based upon these research findings, some recommendations can be made to better support academic success for BSON students in the future and to augment WMU’s BSON program, as a whole. These findings were presented to a portion of BSON faculty and the

director of the BSON program, but they should be further disseminated to all BSON faculty. It is crucial for faculty to be made aware of how their students are doing academically, socially, and mentally, and sharing this research with all BSON faculty members could successfully begin the conversation. Faculty are encouraged to be more open, flexible, and understanding of their students, for students believe these improvements will serve their academic success. Faculty are additionally encouraged to communicate more with their students, whether that may be providing supplemental assignment reminders or weekly check-ins to evaluate how students are coping mentally during the semester. Another recommendation for faculty involves providing more educational/study opportunities and chances to connect with students. Students are seeking supplemental educational support, and this could take place in the form of implementing study groups or opportunities to converse with faculty outside of the classroom. A final recommendation for faculty involves accountability. To foster cultural competence and humility accountability, it is advised that faculty could engage in cultural workshops or anti-racism courses, as an additional means to support their students, holistically.

It is strongly recommended for the BSON program, as a whole, to implement peer-mentoring. This suggestion was brought to light in 2015, and the uptake in peer-mentoring through the Empower Success program deemed to be successful. Now that the Empower Success program was not granted funding for another year, we must get creative in constructing a peer-mentoring program, at no cost, to support students' academic wellness and success. Senior nursing students could provide mentorship to first-year nursing students, as a way to guide new nursing students and provide leadership hours for senior nursing students. Considering the high interest rate of taking advantage of peer-mentoring program, it would be wise to implement one, and the utilization of a program is expected to be high.

Final recommendations include spreading awareness of current campus resources, such as YOU at WMU. YOU is a universal web page that consolidates campus resources into one location for ease of access and usage. However, YOU is still lacking student awareness and familiarity. It is recommended that this resource is shared with BSON students, perhaps at the beginning of each semester. Additional collaboration with Public Health professionals is also recommended, as a way of working together to decipher how to best support students during the transitional times brought about by public health pandemics.

Limitations

In respect to research limitations, this research is limited due to the sample being a convenience sample. Subject recruitment was conveniently obtained by the means of attaining a BSON student email list. Additionally, the sample size of 114 respondents was another limitation, for the sample did not capture the entirety of all BSON student experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research provided an abundance of information surrounding BSON student experiences and barriers to successful completion of the nursing program at WMU. This research served as a continuation of Shaw's (2015) research, and is encouraged to be further replicated in the future. Overall, BSON students are struggling to balance academic, employment, and mental wellness responsibilities and are seeking more understanding and support from faculty. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these struggles and must be considered when preparing for future circumstances. It is with high hope that these recommendations are taken seriously, and additional research is conducted to evaluate if BSON student experiences and barriers to academic success has improved in the future.

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Appendix A

"Barriers of BSON" Informed Consent

The purpose of this research is to explore the barriers nursing students are experiencing navigating the BSON program, to inform faculty and the university of ways they can assist and support students. Subjects must be 18 years of age and enrolled in the BSON program, in order to participate. The survey will be administered online and will take approximately 7-10 minutes to complete. You may exit the survey at any time and are not required to answer every question. If you decide to exit the survey, all previously entered information will be deleted. Your participation will remain completely anonymous and is voluntary. There are no major risks associated with participation; slight psychological discomfort may occur and the study may serve as an inconvenience of time. There is no penalty associated with choosing not to participate. The completion and submission of the survey serves as implied consent.

Should any questions come up regarding this survey, you may contact Pamela Wadsworth, at 269-387-8158 or via email at pamela.j.wadsworth@wmich.edu. If you are unable to give informed consent, and parent/guardian involvement is required, please contact Pamela Wadsworth to provide verbal consent. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President of Research at Western Michigan University, at 269-387-8298.

The de-identified information collected for this research may be used or distributed in the future, without obtaining informed consent from you. This consent has been approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) on October 14, 2021. This survey will close in two weeks, after today.

Thank you,

Pamela Wadsworth, PhD, RN Assistant Professor, Bronson School of Nursing
Karla Kline, Student Nurse, Bronson School of Nursing

Q1 Are you 18 years or older?

- Yes
- No

Q2 Are you enrolled in the Bronson School of Nursing program?

- Yes
- No

Q3 What is your current living arrangement?

- Alone
- Significant other
- Friend/s
- Family
- Other

Q4 How is the environment of your living arrangement?

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

Q5 What is your relationship status?

- Single
- Long-term relationship
- Prefer not to say

Q6 Do you work?

- Yes
- No

Q7 How many hours a week do you work during the nursing semester?

- 0-8
- 9-16
- 17-24
- 24+

Q8 Why do you work? (you may select multiple answers)

- To pay for living expenses
- To pay for food/gas
- To pay for healthcare

- To pay for education
- To support family
- Healthcare experience
- Extra money
- Other

Q9 How do you primarily pay for your education?

- Student loans
- Scholarships
- Family
- Other

Q10 Are you involved in any extracurricular activities, sports, or RSOs?

- Yes
- No

Q11 How many hours a week do you spend with your organization/team?

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16+

Q12 On average, how many hours do you spend a week studying or completing homework?

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16+

Q13 On average, how many hours of sleep do you get each night?

- 0-4
- 5-7
- 7-9
- 10-12

Q14 Rate your stress level during the nursing semester

- High stress
- Moderate stress
- Mild stress
- No stress

Q15 If I receive a passing grade that I'm unhappy about, I would reach out to a professor

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Q16 If I receive a failing grade, I would reach out to a professor

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Q17 I feel supported by faculty members in the nursing program

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Q18 I have at least one faculty member that I feel comfortable reaching out to if I am struggling in school/life

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Q19 I feel that faculty accommodates my learning style and needs

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Q20 I feel supported by peers in the nursing program

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

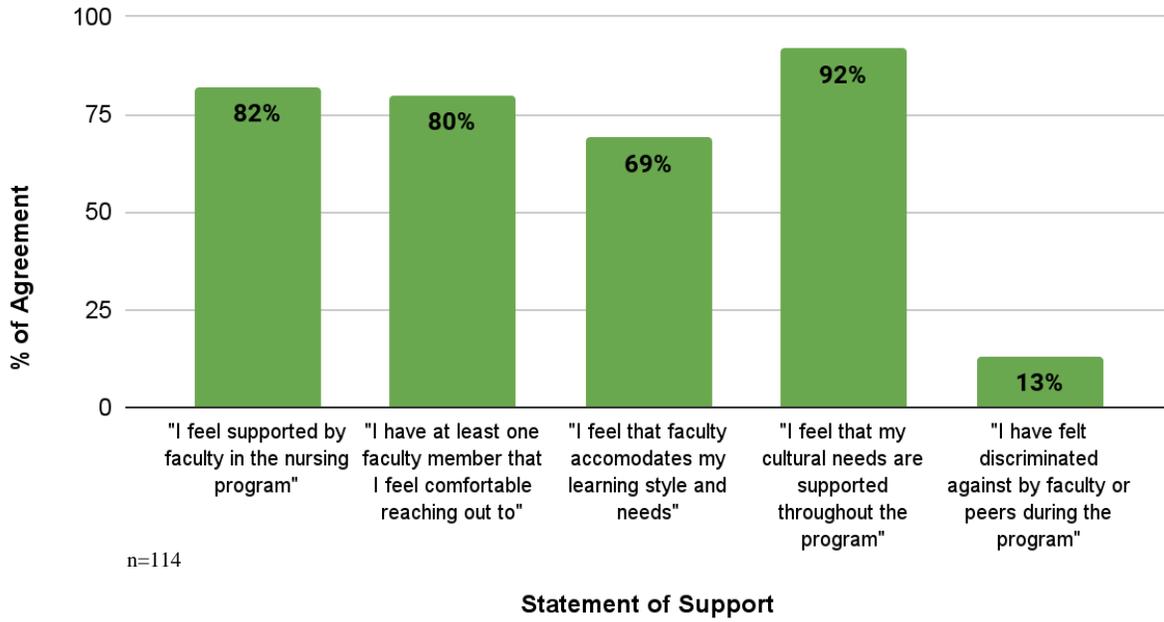
Q21 I feel supported by family throughout the nursing program

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

- ○ ○ ○
- Q22 I feel that my cultural needs are supported throughout the program
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q23 I have felt discriminated against by faculty or peers during the program
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q24 A language barriers has impacted my academic success
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q25 A lack of sleep regularly impacts my academic success
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q26 I struggle to balance school, work, and social commitments
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q27 Financial struggle impact my academic success
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q28 Home-life struggles impact my academic success
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q29 Mental health struggles impact my academic success
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q30 Have you missed a class due to COVID-19?
 ○ Yes
 ○ No
- Q31 Have you had to quarantine due to COVID-19?
 ○ Yes
 ○ No
- Q32 How many times have you had to quarantine?
 ○ Once
 ○ Twice
 ○ Three times
 ○ More than three times
- Q33 I have worried about passing the semester due to quarantining for COVID-19
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q34 I have felt supported by faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q35 I have felt supported by classmates during the pandemic
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○
- Q36 I have struggled with the transition to online learning
 Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree
 ○ ○ ○ ○

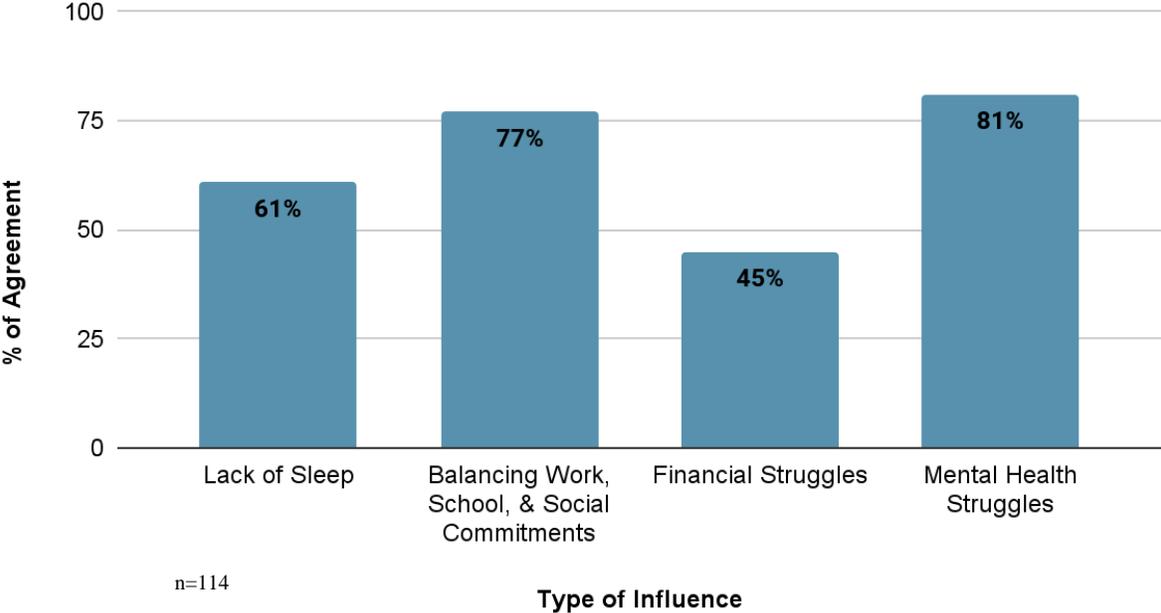
Appendix B

Faculty Support



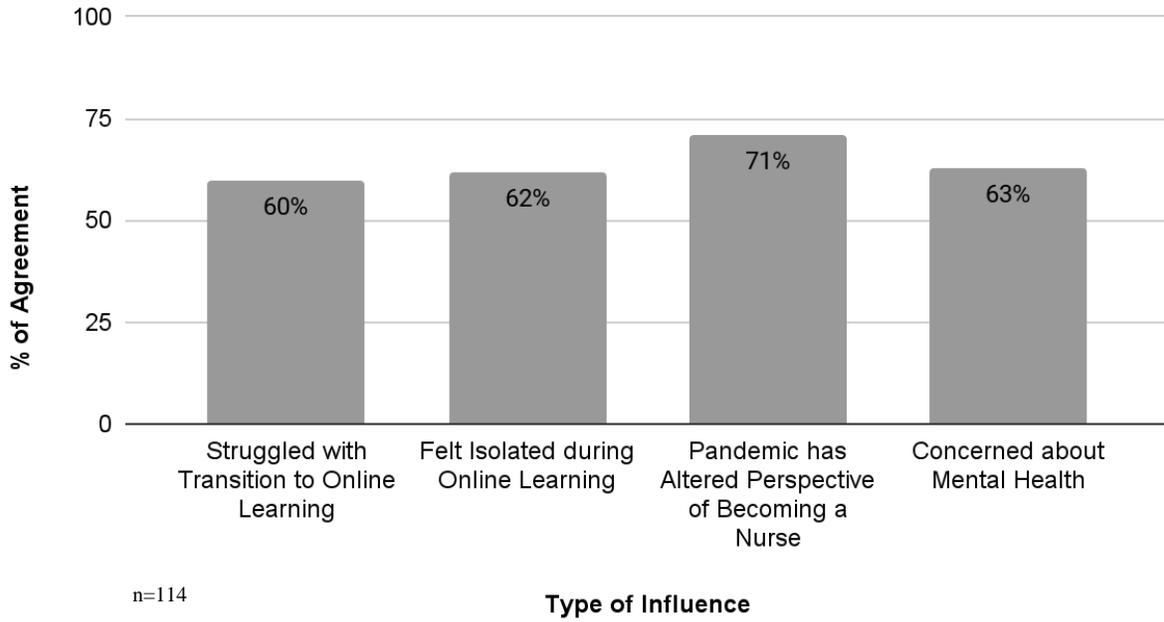
Appendix C

Influences on Student Academic Success



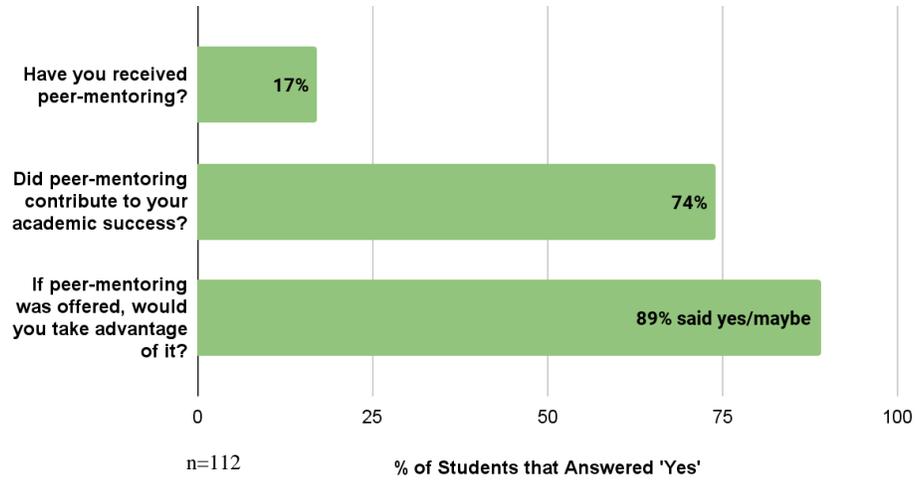
Appendix D

COVID-19 Influences on Student Experiences



Appendix E

Peer-Mentoring



Awareness & Accessibility of Resources

