

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Nursing faculty perceptions of student faculty interactions

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Student-faculty interaction outside the classroom in higher education is a well-studied phenomenon and is linked directly to office hours. Research has shown the significance of these interactions on student success; however, underuse of office hours remains a problem. Historical research has examined perceptions of students while fewer address faculty. There is limited investigation into nursing, where students must be successful on high stakes NCLEX testing after graduation. This study investigated nursing faculty perceptions of student-faculty interaction outside the classroom in relation to office hours.

Methods: A qualitative design elicited responses from full time nursing faculty at one university school of nursing in the southeastern United States. Ten participants were interviewed using a semi-structured script. Data analysis revealed nursing faculty perceptions in relation to office hours.

Results: The following themes emerged in relation to office hours and nursing faculty perceptions: (a) "At any point my door is always open", (b) "I like having that flexibility, it does help", and (c) "I'm basically 24/7. I really am". Technology was embedded throughout the themes. Some limitations existed, such as reflexivity of the researchers, small sample size, and final sample bias.

Conclusions: Findings from the study can guide policies in higher education, specifically the way office hour mandates are implemented. Increasing student-faculty interaction outside the classroom is a worthwhile goal that is important in schools of nursing where success on high stakes NCLEX testing reflects the integrity of the school.

Key Words: Office hours, Student faculty interaction, Faculty perceptions, Faculty student communication, Nursing faculty

1. INTRODUCTION

Student faculty interaction (SFI) includes any type of contact between faculty and students, regardless of how in-depth the interaction may be, such as casual conversations in the hallways. Cox describes five categories of interaction between students and faculty, spanning from disengagement, a complete lack of interaction outside of classroom instruction, to functional interaction, which is more formal, such as office hours, to mentoring.^[1] SFI outside the classroom increases learning and overall student academic experiences

and success; however, there is still a deficit of contact taking place.^[1-6] While SFI can occur using any method of communication, including face-to-face or digital, it is often synonymous with faculty office hours. Although unchanged for decades, university administrators mandate office hours as a commitment to increasing SFI outside the classroom.^[3,6] Office hours remain the prevailing model for SFI despite being poorly attended by students.^[2]

The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) 2019 report examined trends in first-year SFI from 2004-2019 and

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found a 10% increase in three areas of interaction, including career planning, discussion of course topics outside of the classroom environment, and working with faculty on projects such as research.^[7] While the increase in SFI is promising, there is room for improvement. Nursing students, in particular, must be adequately prepared by faculty to ensure success on regulatory exams, such as the National Council Licensure Exam (NCLEX). Increasing SFI and improving student satisfaction of interactions with faculty in schools of nursing could increase student retention, increase enrollment, and promote success on the NCLEX post-graduation.^[2,3,6,8-10]

According to The Digest of Education Statistics, the annual cost of tuition, fees, room, and board at a 4-year public university for a full-time student in 2020-2021 was in excess of \$21,000.^[11] Students believe that paying large sums of money for tuition entitles them to accessible, approachable, and available faculty, yet faculty perceive themselves as more approachable than students perceive them.^[12,13] During the weekday, students expect faculty to be available via email around the clock and have high expectations for meeting face-to-face in faculty offices.^[14] This train of thought defines student expectations regarding faculty availability and approachability. Misunderstanding the importance of being approachable to students, not being perceived as approachable, and not encouraging SFI outside of the classroom can all contribute to a student underutilizing faculty contact regardless of whether it is face-to-face or otherwise.^[13,15] Al-Hussami et.al. found that nursing students who engage in SFI outside the classroom have higher grade point averages and suggest that students are more likely to have these interactions if the faculty is “approachable, caring, and respectful”.^[8]

Due to SFI being a well-studied phenomenon for over 60 years, it is prudent to explore older studies. Social Psychological accessibility was defined by Wilson et al. as a faculty member’s in-class behaviors that signal to students the out-of-class openness of the faculty member in order to promote more SFI.^[16] Bippus et al. tested student perceptions of instructor accessibility as well as the value a student puts on SFI outside the classroom and found there was a positive association but that faculty approachability had more to do with a direct invitation by faculty to students for engagement.^[17] Cox et al. tested the actual concept of psychosocial approachability related to in-class pedagogical practice but found it less likely to predict SFI than, perhaps, inherent instructor characteristics such as tone of voice or body language.^[18] Newer literature finds that faculty approachability, accessibility, and responsiveness may not be as valued by students^[6,19] while others see specific qualities of the faculty, such as nurturing, as being pertinent to student success^[20] or student willingness to attend office hours.^[21] Findings

amongst older studies and newer ones suggest that there is no consensus among scholars about the influence of faculty approachability on cultivating SFI.^[6]

Computer technology in higher education includes computers, cellphones, or other digital devices, as well as electronic communication methods such as email, text, discussion forums, social media, or video conferencing platforms. Overall, technology has a significant impact on SFI and creates an easy path for communication to occur,^[6] as well as learning enhancement for nursing students in particular.^[22,23] Students of today include Millennials and Gen Z, referred to as digital natives, who expect quick, individualized feedback from instructors 24/7,^[6,14,24] even though this may represent an unrealistic expectation for faculty.^[3,14] Smart devices blur the lines between work and personal time for faculty, causing high burnout levels and a feeling of constant connection to the workplace.^[25] Feelings of burnout can be minimized if healthy boundaries are utilized for smart device use. There needs to be a balance between student expectations of 24/7 access to faculty members and faculty need to disconnect from continuous communication with students.

Understanding faculty perceptions of SFI outside the classroom is needed to promote an increase in this occurrence while maintaining a healthy balance for faculty. The literature addresses SFI outside the classroom, sometimes in relation to office hours. Many studies focus on students and student perceptions;^[6,8,14,15,19-23,26] some address both student and faculty perspectives^[2,13,27] and fewer delve into faculty perceptions.^[18,25,28,29] While qualitative and mixed-method studies have been conducted, most literature has been quantitative. Even fewer studies address nursing students or nursing faculty,^[8] an area where high stakes NCLEX testing is involved.

The purpose of this study was to investigate nursing faculty perceptions of SFI outside the classroom. Faculty perceptions regarding use, preference, and satisfaction with SFI outside the classroom were explored, as well as influences of computer technology. The questions addressed were:

- 1) What are faculty perceptions regarding use and preference for student-faculty interaction outside the classroom?
- 2) What are faculty perceptions regarding satisfaction with student-faculty interaction outside the classroom?
- 3) What are faculty perceptions of computer technology in relation to office hours?

2. METHODS

2.1 Design

The research study used a qualitative phenomenology design based on Heidegger’s existential approach. Phenomenology

is the study of lived experiences in the participants' natural setting.^[30,31] Data were collected using semi-structured interviews to provide descriptions of the faculty's perceptions and for any emerging themes. The aim was to discover meaning rather than generalize a population.

2.2 Setting and sample

The study took place in the southeastern region of the United States at one public university. This institution offers degrees in arts, humanities, and social sciences; business; education; nursing and health sciences; and science and technology. The focus of this study was on the school of nursing, which offers the following degrees: bachelor of science in nursing (BSN), master of science in nursing (MSN), and doctor of nursing practice (DNP). The BSN program contains four tracks: a traditional option, an accelerated option for students with a previous bachelor's degree, an LPN to RN track, and RN to BSN. All participants taught within one of the BSN tracks. Participants were primarily recruited using purposive sampling, while snowballing allowed for a broader overall sample of participants.

Inclusion in this study was limited to nursing faculty who were full-time with a current teaching role of undergraduate nursing students. Exclusion criteria for faculty participants included any faculty member who worked in a strictly administrative capacity, those with no current teaching role, and faculty who taught only graduate-level courses. There were 10 participants: 9 female, one male, and all were Caucasian. This was reflective of the faculty demographics in the school of nursing sampled. All faculty taught undergraduate students at the time of the interview, with one participant who also taught both undergraduate and graduate students. One participant identified as the RN to BSN Coordinator, which has a direct teaching role for registered nurses who are seeking a BSN degree. Six participants had a masters degree and four had a doctorate. The course formats included online, in-person lectures, labs, and clinicals. Three participants had tenure status, while seven were non-tenure. Experience in nursing education ranged from 1 year to 29 years with an average of 11.5 years.

2.3 Ethical considerations

The researchers obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the participating university. Interview questions concerned standard educational practices, and no vulnerable groups were included in the study. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning random names to participants. No significant foreseeable physical, psychological, or social risks were involved in this research study. Participants did

not receive compensation.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

The primary researcher created an interview script with four demographic questions and 13 open-ended questions. A mock interview was conducted with one faculty member who met inclusion criteria to determine time frame and practice for the interview process. Data obtained from the mock interview were not included in the study.

The literature review served as a backbone to the development of interview questions, including computer technology and faculty approachability. Other guidelines were obtained from Creswell, which included recommendations to use open-ended questions to elicit a robust response, a generic introduction to create consistency between participants, and probing questions in the event more elaboration is needed from responses.^[30] Finally, the Duke Initiative on Survey Methodology, written by Scott Clifford and shared on Duke University's website, served as a resource that addressed matters such as avoiding yes-no questions, how to ask probing questions, and reframing questions.^[32]

Three content experts reviewed the interview script for validity. One expert is a nurse with 20 years of experience in academia, five of which have been as department head at a school of nursing. This expert has conducted and published multiple qualitative research studies. Another expert is a director in a College of Education with 10 years of experience in academia. This education expert was chosen to provide a different perspective which is outside the field of nursing yet still in the university setting. A third expert has 5 years in academia, is a certified clinical research associate who monitors clinical trials and is a certified Joanna Briggs Institute Reviewer. Furthermore, this expert serves as a faculty guide to Doctor of Nursing Science students who utilize mixed-method research designs. Content experts were provided a copy of the interview script with no changes to the final script suggested.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant over a 6-week period between January through May of 2017. No post-interview follow-ups were conducted. Audio recordings of all interviews were transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher and imported into ©QRS NVivo 11 Starter within 1 week of the interview to ensure timeliness. Recordings were reviewed, along with written transcripts and field notes, to validate the quality, consistency, and accuracy of the information. A third review occurred during coding.

Thematic coding was completed by each researcher individually. Each researcher created a summary of the transcripts to obtain a general understanding. Working as a team the

researchers discussed summaries and reached a consensus. Transcripts were continually used during discussion for verification. An inductive analysis led to organizing patterns into emerging themes. Organization and categorization of data into themes using deductive data analysis was done. Subsequently, coding was then confirmed by all researchers for comparison.

2.5 Trustworthiness

Amankwaa's protocol suggestions were followed to address trustworthiness.^[33] To ensure credibility, the ability to believe the participants' truth is represented by the findings, the primary researcher worked closely with three peers. These three peers have knowledge and previous experience with qualitative research methods and conducted independent data analysis on all transcripts. Feedback and consensus decisions were made regarding themes, patterns, and meanings. Additionally, a journal was kept of the primary researcher's thoughts and ideas. Transferability, or how well the findings can be applied to other settings and populations, was addressed before the research began with peers who were experts in question development reviewing the interview guide questions to ensure open-ended questions that elicited in depth responses from participants. Those thick responses using the participants' own words are represented here along with a detailed description of the participants. The dependability, ability to repeat these findings, is enhanced using an audit trail in which all decisions related to data analysis and findings were documented along with a detailed outline of the research process. Confirmability is related to the ability of the researcher to reduce bias and present the findings from the participant viewpoint. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in the participants' own words. To increase objectivity, NVivo, a software package for qualitative researchers, was used to identify initial word and sentence patterns. Triangulation during data analysis, peer debriefing, and journaling all contributed to reducing researcher bias for credible and confirmable findings.

3. RESULTS

From the ten participants, data saturation occurred during the sixth interview. However, interviews continued for the researchers to achieve diversity of thought and add to the richness of the data.

Three major themes were identified through the coding process in relation to the research questions: use/preference/satisfaction with SFI outside the classroom, technology, and office hours. These themes were: (a) "At any point my door is always open", (b) "I like having that flexibility, it does help", and (c) "I'm basically 24/7. I really

am."

3.1 "At any point my door is always open"

Faculty seek to be caring and welcoming in their communication with students. Faculty do and will meet outside of office hours to engage in SFI to meet the needs of students. More than one participant expressed the sentiment that staying late or making an appointment outside of office hours is perfectly acceptable. Some disregarded the confines of office hours altogether: "I find my role as a teacher is not limited to office hours or a lecture class." Another participant further discussed openness by stating, "They have my cell phone, and can call me at any time they have problems. I don't have any restrictions." Every faculty member reported feeling available and approachable to students. Being available and accessible contributed to approachability. A study participant shows the importance of these values by saying:

At any point my door is always open. I think approachability isn't just accessibility, but also letting your students know that you do care about their performance and that the interactions you have with them are meaningful.

Faculty participants felt that scheduling office hours when students are on campus and available is important. Specifically, most faculty participants stated that having office hours before and after class is a great way to capture SFI outside the classroom. The consensus is that few students will try to engage in SFI unless it can occur at a convenient time. This is what one participant had to say about scheduling office hours around class time from a student's perspective:

If they have class, they will wait for class and right before or after. They're not going to say, 'can I meet you at three o'clock' when you have class at nine in the morning. It's just not effective.

Faculty must have a presence. As reported by all participants, the requirements for office hours at the university is five in-person hours and five online hours per week. Nine participants felt satisfied with mandated faculty office hours. Only one participant stated that faculty should be able to determine what works best for their students without a mandate being in place. One participant stated, "if you have a brick-and-mortar physical facility, I think the faculty need to be there a certain percentage of the time."

Faculty participants reported getting more work done at home and outside of office hours due to distractions in the office. A few participants reported feeling less distracted in the office and can focus better. Faculty participants felt that being on

campus was crucial to faculty collaboration. One participant elaborated on the benefit of being on campus, “I can get suggestions from others, so those office hours aren’t just for students. They give me a chance to collaborate with colleagues and ask questions and get feedback to help me be a better instructor.”

3.2 “I like having that flexibility, it does help”

Faculty value flexibility with mandated office hours. At least half of faculty participants cite flexibility as a major preference in conducting office hours. There is also a feeling that flexibility in meeting students outside of office hours is important to positively impact SFI. Therefore, flexibility refers to the ability of the faculty not only to change office hours should personal issues arise but also to accommodate the needs of the student. Flexibility is evidenced by this statement made by a participant:

I think it’s good that we can have five online office hours if we want so that if we need to flex it wherever I am, I can do that. I don’t have to be physically sitting right here because sometimes I sit physically right here but nobody comes. I like having that flexibility, it does help.

While faculty feel satisfied with university requirements along with flexibility, they all felt that some type of mandatory requirement is needed. One participant stated, “I think it has to be mandated or faculty would not do it at all” and another stated, “There’s going to be some office hours that need to be mandated because a few faculty members won’t be available to students or may only be available during limited times.”

These sentiments reveal a concern that some faculty will not conduct office hours at all, thus not meeting the need for SFI outside the classroom. Conversely, some faculty would go above and beyond reasonable means to meet SFI outside the classroom. Thus, faculty feel a mandate provides guidance.

Faculty participants report that students do not use office hours, which is corroborated by faculty being willing to meet outside of office hours and using email correspondence. Seven out of ten faculty participants reported that students do not seek interaction outside the classroom. One response regarding student underuse was as follows, “Because so far this semester, we’re almost halfway in, and I have had no students come to see me during my posted office hours.”

Every participant through the first six participants mentioned clinical sporadically during the interview process. This prompted the addition of a specific question regarding nursing. All participants that were asked about whether nursing

should be held to the same mandated office hours as the rest of the university responded no, except one. Nursing students are held to a very high standard, and faculty perceive that they spend extensively more face-to-face time with students than other colleagues within the university. Furthermore, clinical time in the hospital dictates that faculty are available to students for up to 8 hours per week. These were some of the reasons cited as to why nursing may have a different impact on office hours. One participant stated, “In nursing, I just think our schedules need to be very flexible. I don’t think we should be held to a certain amount of office hours as far as the student goes.” And yet another participant said this in relation to mandated face-to-face office hours and the amount of time nursing faculty spend with their students per week:

I think the argument could be that we are with students more so we may not really need those five hours face-to-face. If I’m with my students for two different classes, for eight hours a day, and then I’m doing another eight hours in clinical then I’m really with them a substantial amount of time. With that being said, is it really necessary? It may not be.

Overall, faculty were satisfied with time management in relation to office hours. Three felt there was a positive effect where work can be accomplished on campus:

It’s not really a problem as far as time management. You just have to know what you have personally blocked off, whether it’s available online or in the office and have to take into consideration your other commitments before you commit to that office time.

Four were neutral and stated they do not mind office hour’s effect on time management, while three faculty participants reported that time management is negatively impacted by mandated office hours. An example of a negative view on time management and office hours was stated as such:

Well, sometimes they are intrusive to your time management. For example, I may begin on my computer at my house before office hours, early in the morning, and I may be working on something but because I’m supposed to physically be here for office hours then I have to stop what I’m doing, close down that computer, come over here and start again.

3.3 “I’m basically 24/7. I really am.”

The sentiment that faculty feel available 24/7 was significant. Faculty prefer to handle work emails immediately, yet five

out of ten voice an actual need to detach from work. Therefore, this finding indicates the paradox between the faculty's need to be available to serve students at all times, as reported by all participants versus the faculty's need to disconnect because they never feel separated from work. Even when faculty attempt to separate, technology can perpetuate the connection with students:

I told them this semester that I don't want to answer texts or emails after 7 o'clock in the evening but I have my email intertwined with my iPhone and it pops up and, um, I answer. I'm basically 24/7. I really am.

Another participant expressed similar sentiments about the need to disconnect:

I mean, I don't think we should be required. It is a job, and we should be available to them during working hours and try to be flexible, but I don't think we should be committed to them 24/7. They're not my children. So, I feel like my response time to them is quick during the week with the technology that I do use. I don't feel like I need to be on and available to them by a mobile device 24/7.

Faculty clearly voiced the need for a break: "You need to have some time where you're not always doing schoolwork." Faculty want the freedom to work 24/7 without student or institutional expectations to do so:

There has to be time for rest and for separation. There has to be. Even though I may choose to do things on my time because it fits better with my schedule and my things, there still needs to be a time that I can say 'no I'm not doing that right now'.

Technological devices/services used by faculty included things such as desktop computers, laptops, jump drives, cellphones, Skype©, LinkedIn©, video conferencing, email, texts, and Facetime. Such advancements play a large role in how faculty perform office hours. A participant reminisced about how things were before advancements in technology and where technology could take SFI in the future:

I don't know how instructors did it back in the day when you were tied to a desk computer at work. That's why I think office hours could be much more flexible because we have so much technology to keep us constantly interlinked with them.

The most impactful device reported was cellphones, while email was the most used technological service. Use of email was reported by all faculty participants, and texting was utilized by all except one participant. Many participants accept communication via technology at times outside of normal business hours and embrace texting: "I'd say probably eighty percent of my student-interaction outside of clinical and class is via cell phone, text, Skype©, facetime." Another stated, "I don't mind them texting me when it's truly an important question that they need answered right then."

Email is the official method of communication for the university, and all participants agreed that expected response times to a student inquiry should be within a 24–48-hour timeframe. This timeframe applied to weekdays and weekends, although weekends were more malleable. The consensus was that students expect a fast turnaround time. One participant stated, "I think a twenty-four-hour turnaround is expected just because they need to finish their homework, they need to finish their paperwork. They have a lot on them."

While technology is almost universally embraced by faculty, it is not without limitations. Here is an example of a limitation as described by a participant:

Via email, text, or phone, I'm always available. Those aren't necessarily off limits, but they do come with a general disclaimer of 'do not disturb me after ten o'clock or on the weekends' unless it's of utmost importance or urgency.

Abuse of texting by students is another limitation: "I don't mind those kinds of texts, . . . but if they start abusing it then I have to say, . . . 'don't text me anymore,' but I'm ok with them texting me."

Many instructors voice that there needs to be a divide between personal and professional life, whereas technology can blur that line. Social media was viewed as crossing the line: "I don't do Facebook©, I don't do Twitter© [and] I don't use any kind of social media with students. Just cause I feel like that's access to my personal life." Yet another participant had this to say about Facebook©:

I will not friend a student on Facebook© until after they graduate. I just feel like there needs to be a level of 'I am the instructor; you are the student.' I do not allow them into my personal life.

Two participants specifically mentioned that face-to-face contact is important for nonverbal communication, although this in no way was reported as a limitation for the use of technology. Faculty expectations are posted in the syllabus or in

the course so that students know the proper time to contact faculty. Even though faculty members want to be available to students, there is a feeling that students have a responsibility as well:

Because there also has to be boundaries. And there has to be ways to promote time management from the student's perspective. And there has to be a level of professionalism from the student's perspective too. Even though they may have the question at three o'clock in the morning, that's OK for them to have a question, it's just not ok for me to answer at three o'clock in the morning.

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated nursing faculty perceptions of SFI outside the classroom in relation to office hours. Faculty generally felt that they were available and approachable to students. They valued flexibility while implementing university mandated office hours, as well as assisting students outside of class. Technology had a huge impact on the communication methods used by faculty and the connectivity made them feel available to students 24/7. Nursing curriculum dictates a smaller class size which allows SFI to occur within the classroom and during clinicals. Therefore, traditionally mandated office hours may not be as necessary for nursing faculty.

In the past, students typically contacted faculty around class times,^[26] but students' schedules are not always conducive to faculty office hours,^[2,21] thus creating missed opportunities for interaction. Faculty in this study reported being open to meeting the needs of students by showing a willingness to meet outside designated office hours. They also conveyed the sentiment of caring about the students' performance, which is important to nursing students' success, in particular.^[8,20] Even fleeting or incidental contact can be significantly meaningful to the student and further build to more substantive interaction.^[1]

Flexibility was extremely important to faculty in implementing mandated office hours. The ability to accommodate student needs strengthened the faculty perception that being amenable was necessary. Faculty, indeed, felt approachable and accessible to students, given their ability to flex meeting times and communication modalities with students. Technology precipitates the ability to be flexible and allows for convenient communication, thus meeting faculty and student needs. Furthermore, the current generation of students expects to use updated technology in their interactions with faculty.^[3]

While the use of technology allows for the increased possibility of contact between faculty and students, this opens faculty to intrusive interaction with students^[34] that may occur at any hour without consideration. Faculty are often available more than the amount of required office hours given the current technology available. This is confirmed by Leidman and Piwinsky who found faculty were up to 2.5 times more available than required.^[34] Consideration should be given to whether student expectations of faculty availability "promote unsustainable workloads" and limit their ability to find answers independently.^[14] Clearly, faculty struggle with balance. A vicious cycle termed the "24-hour professor syndrome" is a warning that the more faculty are available, the more students expect them to be, resulting in no disconnect time for faculty.^[35] Broeckelman-Post viewed this phenomenon as the chicken or egg question: do students expect email availability from instructors at all times because instructors respond around the clock or do instructors respond this way because students have those expectations?^[14] This is a good question.

Email was the most used technology and cell phones were the most impactful device. Not only was email the official form of communication for the university, but it also remains one of the most popular services utilized by academia in general.^[6,14,17,24] Students who are digital natives likely prefer email communication because they resent the imposition of office hours on their time.^[6] Students are not bound by physical constraints, or a single technology. In fact, nursing practice relies heavily on a plethora of technology to reduce errors, and it is an expectation that nursing graduates display competency in informatics, including for communication purposes.^[16] Not all technology is embraced by faculty. Social media was deemed inappropriate to use as a means of communication with students, though some studies found positive attitudes towards the use of social media for out of class communication and learning^[9,22] and others did not.^[27] Text messaging was universally used by faculty.

Regardless of the ease and availability of technology, students still underutilize office hours, which is supported by current and historical research.^[3,6,17,21,27,29] This may be why faculty will meet outside of office hours and strive to respond to student inquiries within a 24 to 48-hour timeframe. The consensus was that students expect a fast turnaround when reaching out to faculty. Studies show that students expect a 24-hour response^[14] and view faculty as providing a product that should be satisfactory to students.^[13] Advancements in communication technologies certainly impact student expectations.^[6] Educating students on what to expect with response time was noted to be very important and is supported by several studies,^[13,17,25] as well as conveying

the importance of office hours and how to use them.^[3,6]

4.1 Implications and recommendations

The current study revealed valuable information taken from the faculty's perspective. One of the important findings was how willing faculty are to be available and approachable to students. Technology plays a huge role in increasing the accessibility of faculty to students, as well as giving faculty the flexibility they desire. Faculty get most of their work done at home; thus, online office hours provide them a benefit they value.

Nursing faculty spend a substantial amount of time with students in class, labs, and clinical on a weekly basis. Furthermore, class size in labs and clinicals tend to be small, allowing for more personalized interaction between faculty and students. University administrators should consider how much time nursing faculty spend with their students when establishing office hour policies. Perhaps allowing a "floating" office hour policy would be beneficial. These hours could change week to week and offer different modalities of contact depending on faculty/student needs. Clear communication to the students about the weekly office hours and how they work would be necessary.

Technology advancements create an environment where faculty are available 24/7 but there is still a need for faculty to disconnect. Therefore, a balance exists between availability and downtime. This balance can be different for each faculty member, thus, again demonstrating the need for flexibility in how office hours are scheduled. Faculty should set boundaries through clear and concise course policies. Likewise, students need to have policies that will help them know what contact is acceptable and what is not. Course syllabi are a great place to convey these guidelines. Occasional class announcements regarding office hours could not only serve to remind students about them but could also signal an invitation to the student, increasing the likelihood of SFI.

This study focused on lived experiences of faculty in relation to office hours. More research looking at other descriptors pertaining to faculty, such as comparing years of experience, tenure status, or even comfort level with technology, could also yield rich findings. Exploring faculty practices that have been successful at increasing SFI outside the classroom would be a promising endeavor. Comparing nursing SFI outside the classroom with other disciplines within the same university or investigating student perceptions on the same topics would allow for a comparison of the current findings. Knowledge gained could guide university administrators in areas of needed education, policy changes, or even practice changes. Deans and directors should allow faculty to be a

part of the policy-making process in relation to office hour mandates. Faculty are closest to the student population and practices that yield the best results for students are important to determine.

SFI decreased as a result of the 2020 pandemic.^[4] While these findings are predictive, lessons learned during this time can be considered a positive way forward when addressing office hour mandates for faculty. For example, the following are ways to improve and encourage SFI outside the pandemic-induced remote classroom: (1) implement mandated time frames for responses to electronic student inquiries,^[24,36] (2) convey to students the importance of contact with faculty, even if it's electronic,^[6] (3) reframe office hours to attract students, such as naming them "coffee time" or "tutoring sessions",^[3,5] (4) consider using social media as a means for communication given the paradigm shift to technology in higher education,^[9,23] and (5) have faculty initiate contact given their higher status on campus.^[23] Since faculty value flexibility in relation to office hours, technology should play a major role. Conversely, faculty must set clear boundaries to avoid being available 24/7.

These findings have significant implications for institutions of higher education. When mandating office hours, particularly those in a nursing program, flexibility appears to be a common thread through all themes. Allowing faculty to practice their own way of communicating with students outside the classroom could lead to tremendous success in keeping both faculty and students satisfied and engaged with one another.

4.2 Limitations

Researcher bias plays a role in the interpretation of participant meanings through reflexivity as the researchers were nurse educators themselves. There was a small sample size ($N = 10$) obtained from faculty at only one nursing school in the southeastern United States. Even though the sample was reflective of the school of nursing, it was not diverse in gender, ethnicity, field of study, or geographical area. Close associates were not interviewed; however, participants may have responded in a socially desirable way. A limitation included that data collection was conducted prior to the pandemic, which could show changes in attitudes regarding communication methods. Generalizability was not sought in this study due to the qualitative design. Final sample bias may have occurred, limiting who participated in the study.

5. CONCLUSION

The faculty participants were universally satisfied with what their institution requires concerning office hours. They were more than willing to be available to students outside of sched-

uled office hours and tried to be approachable to students. Most faculty worked more from home outside of office hours. Some felt they achieved more work on campus during office hours due to fewer distractions, while others felt there were more distractions on campus. Email is the most used form of communication, and faculty are expected to respond to students within 24-48 hours. Most faculty reported that students vastly underuse office hours.

A large reason faculty are satisfied with mandated office hours is the ability for them to be flexible. Faculty accept the five face-to-face office hours required, but the five online office hours are most satisfying. The flexibility of these online office hours is seen as an advantage for working around personal obligations, as well as meeting student needs. Therefore, online office hours yield a positive outcome that is twofold. Even though flexibility is important, faculty still

feel a mandate in relation to office hours is required. Some feel that faculty will take advantage of not having a mandate, while others will overcompensate for the sake of the student. Office hours have a constructive effect on time management.

Computer technology is reported as being extremely important to SFI outside the classroom. Since technology transcends office hours and physicality, faculty feel connected to students 24/7. Even though faculty desire to meet the needs of students, especially in a timely manner, they do feel a need to disconnect from the job. Faculty use email most often and cellphones for connectivity, but social media is limited or completely off-limits. Time constraints on when faculty will respond to students are also valued.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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