

## EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

# Strategies for success that led to 99.98% school of nursing retention

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### ABSTRACT

Internationally, every year, thousands of students begin their journey in higher education by enrolling in pre-licensure and advanced nursing programs. However, not all students successfully complete their degrees to fruition. According to the National League for Nursing (NLN), the average national dropout rate for nursing programs in the United States is 20%-25%; this high attrition rate is considered problematic. The purpose of this presentation is to present the successes of a School of Nursing within Mississippi that has led to a 0.02% attrition/99.98% retention rate of students within programs. Some strategies proven to be successful in retaining students are: student support services, technical/tech support programs, online and face-to-face orientations, and student connection sessions set up for building peer relationships. Faculty and students are often unaware of the services provided by the institution and their department/school; dissemination of these services is pivotal to facilitating student success. The World Health Organization has predicted a shortage of over 18 million healthcare professionals by 2030, with half of those individuals representing the nursing profession. It is imperative to understand the attrition and retention of nursing students to prevent further loss of the future healthcare workforce. University of Mississippi Medical Center School of Nursing focuses on various processes that contribute to its success for the retention of nursing students at all levels. Percentile of attrition from Summer and Fall 2022 semester enrollment, metrics revolving around student leave, and demographics of the school's programs/state of Mississippi are reviewed in this paper. The success of the SON program in gaining high retention is multifactorial. A detailed outline of how academic affairs, student affairs, and administration work together to achieve a culture of success for students within the School of nursing is presented in this manuscript.

**Key Words:** Nursing, Retention, Attrition, School, Higher education, Strategies for success

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nationally, every year thousands of students begin their journey in higher education by enrolling in pre-licensure and advanced nursing programs. However, not all students successfully complete their degrees to fruition.<sup>[1]</sup> According to the National League for Nursing (NLN), the average national dropout rate for nursing programs in the United States is 20%-25%; this high attrition rate is considered problematic.<sup>[2,3]</sup> The National League for Nursing Commission for

Nursing Accreditation has set the desirable benchmark retention rate at 80%. Overall, the national attrition rate for nursing programs is excessive, with as much as 50% in some baccalaureate nursing programs.<sup>[2]</sup> Some strategies that have been successful in retaining students are student support services, technical/tech support programs, online and face-to-face orientations, and student connection sessions set up for building peer relationships.<sup>[3]</sup> Faculty and students are often unaware of the services provided by the institution and

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their department/school; dissemination of these services is pivotal to facilitating student success.<sup>[4]</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) has predicted a shortage of over 18 million healthcare professionals by 2030, with half of those individuals representing the nursing profession.<sup>[5]</sup> This shortage will result in an increase in demand for population health services, due mainly to two phenomena: an increasing number of people living with chronic conditions and an aging population, coupled with a shrinking workforce of nurses retiring from the profession and others leaving as a result of difficult working conditions.<sup>[6]</sup> It is as imperative as ever to understand the attrition and retention of nursing students to prevent further loss of the future healthcare workforce. The purpose of this manuscript is to present the successes of a School of Nursing within Mississippi that has led to a 0.02% attrition/99.98% retention rate of students within programs offered.

Meeting the healthcare needs of communities across the country will require ongoing efforts from every division. To meet the growing demand for entry into practice trained registered nurses and advanced practice nurses, programs must present a special mix of ingredients to achieve continued success. By focusing on recruitment and employer partnerships in rural and underserved parts of the state, the intended outcome is to see many newly trained nurses return to their communities to be part of the nursing workforce shortage solution.

## 2. RETENTION AND ATTRITION

The National League for Nursing states that the national attrition rate for nursing programs in the United States is 20%, with as much as 50% in several baccalaureate nursing programs which they consider to be problematic.<sup>[7]</sup> Recent studies have started to focus on the prevalence of attrition in nursing students, and efforts have been made to define risk factors in relation to attrition as well as preventive strategies.<sup>[8]</sup> Bakker's work with students who withdraw from programs found "Two core themes were identified: ending up in a downward spiral of physical, psychological and social problems and experiencing an increasing mismatch between expectations and reality".<sup>[8]</sup> Reasons for late dropout from nursing education are interwoven and diverse. Academic difficulties did not play a major role in late dropouts, contrary to early studies. In both groups, negative experiences led to dropouts during clinical placements. Clinical placements in one group lacked a safe learning environment, study coaching and psychological support.<sup>[8]</sup> College and University attrition continues to challenge specific areas such as the financial impact of students who do not complete the degree.<sup>[9-11]</sup> Students not completing the nursing degree have a

financial impact that is felt personally and professionally by spending money on a degree that is not seen to completion of a professional career in nursing. Lastly, an already burdened healthcare system is impacted by attrition which can lead to a decrease in the quality of care. The withdrawal rate in undergraduate students is influenced by several factors, such as poor time management, bad study habits, ignoring self-care, feeling overwhelmed, family responsibility, and the conversion of information learned into problem-solving.<sup>[12]</sup> A decreased number of students completing degrees in nursing translates into a decrease in nursing workforce which impacts the quality of care at the bedside.

## 3. THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI MEDICAL CENTER SCHOOL OF NURSING (UMMC SON) SUCCESS

UMMC University Hospitals and Health System encompass specialty hospitals and clinical practice sites across the state of Mississippi.<sup>[13]</sup> Located in Jackson, UMMC is the academic health sciences campus of the University of Mississippi, and the state's only academic health science center offering a Level 1 trauma center and Level 4 neonatal intensive care nursery unit.<sup>[13]</sup> Established in 1955, UMMC primarily functions as a semi-autonomous unit funded separately from the University of Mississippi. Within UMMC's 164-acre campus are seven separate schools: nursing, medicine, dentistry, health-related professions, pharmacy, population health, and graduate studies in the health sciences.<sup>[13]</sup> The University of Mississippi SON has a seventy-five-year history of educating nurses and providing nursing care in the State of Mississippi. It is the largest school on the UMMC campus, with 72 full-time faculty, 24 part-time faculty, numerous affiliate faculty, 4 staff nurses, and 32 staff to support faculty and students.

UMMC SON over the past academic year has averaged an attrition rate of 0.02%, which, shows a retention rate of 99.98% of all students remaining within the program. As the state's flagship nursing school, the SON offers a full spectrum of nursing programs. Enrollment in these programs includes 423 bachelor's, 358 master's, 71 doctoral (PhD and DNP), and 17 post-graduate, totaling 872 students.

The SON focuses on various processes that contribute to its success for the retention of nursing students at all levels. Table 1 denotes the most recent percentile of attrition from the Summer and Fall 2022 semester enrollment. The success of the programs is multifactorial. Academic affairs, student affairs, and administration work together to achieve a culture of success for all our students.

**Table 1.** UMMC SON Attrition

Summer 2022		Fall 2022	
BSN (%)	0.01	BSN (%)	0.01
MSN (%)	0.02	MSN (%)	0.03
DNP (%)	-	DNP (%)	0.03
PG (%)	-	PG (%)	-
PhD (%)	-	PhD (%)	-
Overall (%)	0.02	Overall (%)	0.02

**4. LEAVE OF ABSENCE PROGRAM (LOA)**

The first contributing factor to the school’s success is the Leave of Absence Program (LOA).<sup>[13]</sup> The School of Nursing requires all students be enrolled each semester or be on an approved LOA unless there is an intentional pause in the plan of study due to course offerings out of standard progression. Students may be permitted a LOA for a period not to exceed a total of one year for health, personal, military, or other appropriate reasons. LOAs for greater than one year but no more than two years may be granted with special permission by the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs. The SON is liberal with the LOA program, a set culture with the understanding that life/work/family can happen at any time to anyone. The SON works with each student individually to help retain and get the appropriate resources available. The SON has had a stable LOA average for the past year and a half (see Table 2). A significant increase happened in the summer of 2022, the school successfully retained all of the students during that period and the number of students on LOA leveled to the status average ranging from 40-50.

**Table 2.** Leave of Absence (LOA) Students Per Semester

Semester	S21	F21	S22	S22	F22	S23
LOA Total	40	48	51	66	41	50

**5. UMMC SON STUDENT AFFAIRS IMPACT**

The role and responsibility of student affairs is to support faculty and students in their efforts to become nurse leaders.<sup>[13]</sup> The UMMC SON student affairs division comprises a few individuals who are key to student success. The Assistant Dean for Student Affairs’ mission is to support the department’s efforts to maintain and create a supportive and enriching student experience; this adds to student success and the success of the SON mission of creating nurse leaders.<sup>[13]</sup> At the very start, a prospective student starts with the SON project manager for recruitment and admissions to facilitate a smooth and barrier-free admissions process. As a next step, the admission counselor assists prospective students in determining where they stand in preparation for admission and helps them to navigate the application process. This individual serves

as a liaison with the Office of Enrollment Management and the Admission Committees for Undergraduate and Graduate. The School of Nursing Director of Student Life helps to build an enriching environment for students through the coordination of all student organizations and government. The Director of Student Life organizes and carries out all ceremonies and celebratory events and serves as an important resource for student success by helping students to connect services related to academic support, financial aid, scholarships, counseling, and other campus services.<sup>[13]</sup> In addition to offering lectures and activities geared towards student, faculty, and staff well-being, the UMMC SON Self-Care Instructor advances self-care via curricular initiatives and the Sarah E. Allison self-care lab.<sup>[13]</sup> Student affairs education administrators function to assist students in answering inquiries, connecting with the student affairs team, and helping students and prospective students through their work with the student affairs leadership.

**6. FACULTY ENGAGEMENT**

Faculty in all programs at the SON increased efforts since the pandemic to retain students and provide support for success. Office hours for the in-person prelicensure program are offered both virtually and in-person to accommodate the needs of the students. A student success program was implemented in the prelicensure programs that specifically target our at-risk students. This program provides intensive academic remediation to these students for academic and NCLEX success. Positive feedback has been received from students on the faculty’s interest in their success.

Mental health is one of the fundamental requirements of individuals that starts at the foundation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and is an important aspect of health. As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) constitution, “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.<sup>[5]</sup> Mental health needs for students have been on the rise. Empirical research suggests that nursing students are at a relatively poor level of mental health, which could negatively impact their personal and professional lives.<sup>[14]</sup> This creates a challenge and ever-changing new burdens for faculty when providing academic counseling. UMMC SON Academic Affairs and Student Affairs worked together to bring faculty development offerings on stress management training that discussed both the mental health needs of faculty and students. Another collaborative effort between the Academic Affairs and Student Affairs divisions was developing a standardized electronic student encounter form. This form is utilized by faculty after each student meeting and allows faculty to identify student needs such as financial, study habits, or mental health. A

copy of the form is sent directly to the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, who ensures the proper referrals are made and followed up.

## 7. PROGRAM AND TRACK DIRECTOR SUPPORT

Within Undergraduate and Graduate programs, the UMMC SON employs directors that are managing the needs of each program and track. These employees hold a faculty role within the SON and are given a 35% release of teaching load and a monetary stipend. The Directors' role is to collaborate with their Assistant Dean to prepare program material for annual reports, SON evaluation self-study reports, and other reports; develop policies and standards congruent with institutional educational accreditation and approval requirements; seek opportunities to form contractual partnerships to increase the number of practice/clinical education sites; assist with recruitment and enrollment management activities; collaborate with the Office of Student Affairs in providing needed student services; coordinate all aspects of the program/track, academic and clinical, ensuring patient and student safety; participate in the admissions procedures including recruitment, interviews and selection of students as appropriate; counsel students regarding clinical and academic performance; advise students of any changes in program content and/or operation; and facilitate student retention, progression and success within the program/track in collaboration with their UG/Grad Assistant Dean and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

Using a continuous quality improvement plan is central to the sustainability of certification and licensure pass rates. The SON attrition success program has not negatively impacted the success of its graduates entering the workforce. Table 3 shows the pass rate for certification and licensure for all takers (first-time and repeaters who pass) for the 2022 calendar year.

Remediation of at-risk students is the foundation for student success.<sup>[15]</sup> Various publishers and exam preparation entities provide digital learning materials that students find beneficial as they complete course and program requirements. Online case studies, interactive videos, audio, animations, and activities place students at the center of their learning. Furthermore, mobile applications provide students with access to nursing content, practice quizzes, and examinations. Publishers and product entities also place activities for students on social media. George and Dellasega found social media fosters student problem-solving skills, enhanced networking and collaboration, and engagement in course work.<sup>[16]</sup> Such access helped to build a community of student learners at

UMMC SON.

**Table 3.** Certification and Licensure Percentile Rates 2022

Advanced Practice Certification Rate		
Program/Track	Students	%
FNP	(30/32)	94
AGACNP	(3/3)	100
AGPCNP	(6/7)	86
PNP-AC	(3/3)	100
PNP-P	(3/3)	100
NNP	(3/3)	100
FPMHNP	(20/20)	100
RN Licensure Rate		
BSN	(219/225)	97

## 8. STUDENT SUCCESS SERIES

UMMC Office for Student Success sponsors the Student Success Series (S3), an initiative for providing student success programs and events addressing academic achievement, professionalism, and career preparation to promote excellence for students in the health science professions.<sup>[13]</sup> This initiative creates collaborative communities that enhance interdisciplinary education and learning. Students from the 7 schools (nursing, medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, health related professions, population health, and graduate studies) on campus are invited to participate in this series. Educational components of this series consist of:<sup>[13]</sup>

- APA Formatting
- Individual Learning Strategies
- Curriculum Vitae (CV) and Resume Development
- Mock Group Interview
- Scientific Writing
- Study Skills
- Time Management
- Writing Personal Statements

## 9. CONCLUSION

Mississippi faces major challenges in healthcare delivery and health outcomes. Each year, the United Health Foundation (UHF) releases America's Health Rankings using 35 different measures. In 2022, Mississippi ranked 49th overall and worst in the country for food insecurity, sexually transmitted infections (STI), teen births, premature deaths, and low birth weight.<sup>[17]</sup> Mississippi was also ranked 50th for other health indicators, such as lack of access to high-speed internet, and the Health Rankings data indicate that drug deaths in the state increased by 50% last year. Mississippi's health is filled with unique, diverse struggles and challenges that cannot afford to lose students to the profession of nursing. Nursing

programs must use approaches that are flexible, varied, and student-centered.

The UMMC SON uses many different divisions in order to ensure students are able to navigate challenges that could potentially cause them to withdraw or become academically unsuccessful. Through our quality improvement process, we found not all students are prepared at the same level of educational equity, and other socioeconomic factors can impact their success. Support networks, early process indicators,

and SON personnel are essential to identify potential threats to a student's success. Support for success happens on day 1 of admittance to be successful throughout the program. The implementation of similar success strategies at other schools of nursing could improve the number of students successfully completing nursing programs, thereby increasing the number of nurses entering the workforce.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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