



## Peer Tutoring Program for Academic Success of Returning Nursing Students

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### Abstract

High attrition rates among students in associate degree nursing programs are a concern for faculty, administrators, and students. Programs offering academic and emotional support for students at risk for failing a clinical course may decrease attrition rates and improve academic performance. A peer tutoring program was developed for returning nursing students who were unsuccessful in a previous clinical course.

Peer tutors met with returning students weekly to review course work, complete case studies and practice NCLEX questions. Trusting, supportive relationships developed among students and a significant increase in grades was noted at the end of the course for 79% of students. Implementation of peer tutoring was beneficial for returning students, tutors, and the nursing program and may be valuable in other courses where academic achievement is a concern.

High attrition rates are often the result of the rigorous nature of nursing courses. Currently, only 58% of Associate Degree (AD) nursing students entering a nursing program will complete the degree (Fraher, Belsky, Gaul, & Carpenter, 2010). Many AD nursing students are adults working 40 hours per week, married, and have children. These factors may interfere with academic responsibilities which eventually lead to

withdrawal or failure of a nursing course. Glossop (2001) identified academic difficulties as the second most common reason for failure or withdrawal from a nursing course, after personal issues.

Course attrition is a concern for faculty as well as students; therefore providing academic and emotional support to nursing students who are at risk of failure in their programs

may decrease attrition and increase academic achievement. The attrition rate in associate degree nursing courses at a suburban Long Island college ranged from 3 percent to 20 percent. In response to the academic needs of these students, a pilot peer tutoring program was developed for returning nursing students who were unsuccessful in a previous clinical course.

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According to nursing department policy, students who are not successful in completing a clinical nursing course cannot continue in the program, but can request to return the following year to complete the course and continue in the nursing program. Often, students will withdraw from a course if they determine that continuation will ultimately result in a failing grade. Over the course of two years, the associate degree student has to acquire the knowledge needed to pass the licensing exam as well as competently care for complex patients. This requires an extraordinary amount of time and effort devoted to study and clinical practice. The target student population for this pilot peer tutoring program was associate degree nursing students who have either failed or withdrawn from a clinical nursing course.

## Literature review

Previous research results indicate documented success for peer tutoring programs across disciplines (Dorsey & Baker, 2004). Robinson and Niemer (2010) found that peer tutoring was important to the academic success of at-risk students in a baccalaureate nursing program. Higgins (2004) noted that peer tutoring had a significant effect on retention and academic success in nursing students enrolled in a medical-surgical course. A qualitative study of peer tutoring among nursing students found that participants had positive experiences and demonstrated improved reflective and critical thinking ability (Loke & Chow, 2005). Clearly, implementation of a peer tutoring program has the potential to significantly improve retention rates and have a positive impact on student success.

## Objectives and implementation

The objective of the program was to increase nursing student retention rates and enhance the academic performance of returning nursing students. At the completion of the tutoring program, the goal was to have students successfully meet the academic requirements for graduation or progression in the associate degree nursing program. Implementation of the program began with the identification of qualified nursing student tutors based on faculty recommendations. Each potential tutor was interviewed to determine whether he or she had the time, positive attitude, demonstrated academic success in previous nursing courses, and an understanding of confidentiality needed to establish a successful relationship with the returning student. Three students met the criteria to become peer tutors and were selected for the program. A faculty advisor assumed responsibility for training the tutors, organizing materials, and establishing communication between peer tutors and students.

Peer tutors were responsible for approximately 3-4 returning nursing students and were required to sign a confidentiality agreement before beginning any sessions. They were provided with information about campus resources, program objectives, and any necessary program documentation. The documentation included attendance sheets and a weekly summary of tutoring activities. Peer tutors were provided with review textbooks, case studies, and practice NCLEX questions to use during tutoring sessions. All class notes and supplemental information were reviewed weekly with returning students.

Participants for the tutoring program were identified by enrollment in a clinical nursing course created specifically for nursing students returning to the program after withdrawing or failing the previous year. Eleven returning students were enrolled in the program. Information about the tutoring program was provided to these students and they were assigned to a peer tutor registered for the same clinical course. Returning students were provided with the objectives and requirements of the program as well as all support materials. Weekly tutoring sessions took place at a time and location agreed upon by the tutor and returning students. With the additional support provided to returning nursing students by the peer tutoring program, the expected outcome was the successful completion of the clinical nursing course, and achievement of graduation requirements for the AD program.

Student assessment was accomplished by attendance at peer tutoring sessions, scores on unit exams in clinical courses, and course grades at the end of the semester. The peer tutors were contacted three times during the semester to determine returning student participation and progress in the program. In addition, peer tutors were encouraged to contact the faculty advisor at any time during the semester if they had concerns about a particular student in their group. Academic progress of the tutors was also monitored to ensure that participation in the program did not negatively impact their course grades. Based on scores achieved on unit exams, tutoring sessions were revised to provide additional assistance when necessary. The peer tutoring sessions began on the second week of the semester and continued until a few days prior to final exams.

## Results

Data were collected after each unit exam and the final exam to determine the progress of both the returning students and the peer tutors. In addition, scores from the National League for Nursing (NLN) diagnostic exam were obtained for each student. This exam evaluates the abilities and skills required for entry level nursing practice. Results indicated that of the 11 returning students, one withdrew six weeks after the start of the semester, one was a clinical failure and did not complete the semester, one failed the course with a grade less than 75%, and eight successfully completed the course (see Table 1). Additionally, the three tutor's final grades ranged from B to B+. Attendance records indicated that the groups met once a week and increased to twice a week prior to final exams. Most returning students attended every tutoring session except for an occasional absence due to illness. Tutors not only assisted with academic support, but acted as advocates for returning students when issues arose such as conflicts with clinical instructors or disagreements with other students. They offered emotional support before and after exams, and shared the successes and struggles of the returning students throughout the semester. (See Table 1 on next page.)

**Table 1.**

**Average grades for returning students and tutors**

	Grade Exam #1	Grade Exam #2	Grade Exam #3 Exam	NLN Diagnostic	Final Exam	Overall Grade
Tutors	83.75	88.3	79.27	126.66	87	86.96
Returning Students	81.59	78.63	73.8	109.22	81.1	81.16

## Discussion

The purpose of the peer tutoring program was to increase retention and academic performance of returning nursing students. Results indicated overall positive academic results for these students as well as their peer tutors. The present findings are similar to previous research findings (Robinson & Niemer, 2010). Returning students benefited from the program by the academic and emotional support offered by their

tutors. Research indicates that peer tutoring may be more beneficial to some students than faculty tutoring based on the importance of the shared experience of navigating the rigors of a nursing program (Loke & Chow, 2007). In addition to knowledge exchange, students in the peer tutoring program developed a sense of trust in their tutor and were able to share their feelings about the course and faculty issues. Tutors became advocates for the returning students and reported issues of concern to the appropriate support person.

As word of the peer tutoring program success spread throughout the faculty and nursing students, an unexpected benefit emerged. Newly accepted students to the LPN to RN program asked if they could also enroll in the peer tutoring program. Expansion of the program will be considered based on nursing department resources and available tutors; however, this is an opportunity for future research which may benefit an additional population of nursing students. Clearly, peer tutoring has the potential to benefit returning students, tutors, and nursing programs by improving attrition rates and establishing a supportive relationship among nursing students.

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