

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FACULTY PRESENCE AND CARING IN ACCELERATED ONLINE COURSES

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INTRODUCTION

In 2000 Garrison, Anderson, and Archer presented a groundbreaking framework for online education as the “community of inquiry.” The “community of inquiry” framework is built upon the dimensions of cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Current research in online pedagogy reveals that students persist and are more successful when faculty exhibit caring behaviors and demonstrate social presence (Gazza & Hunker, 2014). Faculty presence and caring behaviors pose a challenge in online educational settings due to lack of face to face interaction; faculty teaching accelerated online courses of 8 weeks or less may face additional obstacles due to the shortened time frame. This article presents findings of post licensure nursing students’ perceptions of faculty presence and caring behaviors in accelerated online nursing courses. The study findings informed the establishment of recommendations with strategies for implementation to enhance

online faculty social presence and caring behaviors for instructors who teach in accelerated online courses.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Social presence in the form of faculty presence and student interactions is established as key to quality online education and is purported to be a factor in online students’ persistence and success (Casey & Kroth, 2013; Cobb, 2009; Garrison et al., 2000; Gazza & Hunker, 2014). The concepts of caring and presence are inherent in the profession of nursing and therefore are a priority in online nursing education curricula. Several qualitative studies highlight faculty presence and caring behaviors by both students and faculty as important for student success in post licensure nursing online programs (Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006; Smith & Crowe, 2017; Smith et al., 2015). For example, studies in both RN-BSN

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 21(2), 2020, pp. 67–78

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ISSN 1528-3518

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and graduate nursing programs bring together “concepts of caring and best practices in online education” (Leners & Sitzman, 2006, p. 318; Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006) for online courses offered in the traditional semester length format. During qualitative interviews, online nursing faculty valued a community of caring with emphasis on student success, positive affirmations, and caring feedback (Smith et al., 2015).

Accelerated online programs offer students flexibility of shortened terms to fit their schedules, multiple start dates, and expedited program completion. Students in an accelerated master’s in education program perceived that emotional expression, group cohesion and open communication are vital to online the teaching and learning process (Soles & Maduli-Williams, 2019). Online faculty caring behaviors should be intentional with thoughtful use of words and actions (Sitzman & Watson, 2017). Nursing faculty who teach in accelerated online postlicensure programs in a Midwest university including registered nurse to bachelor of science in nursing (RN to BSN), master of science in nursing (MSN), and doctor of nursing practice (DNP) programs have only seven weeks to establish a meaningful online social and caring presence. Quantitative and qualitative literature in the areas of online faculty caring and presence exist; however, there is no known research that interlinks both concepts (Plante & Asselin, 2014) with an accelerated learning environment. A gap in the literature exists for best practices in the establishment of caring faculty presence for shortened online nursing courses of seven or eight weeks.

Why This Project

This project aligns with the National League of Nursing’s scope of practice for academic nurse educators that outlines responsibilities for which nurse educators are accountable. These responsibilities are associated with the National League of Nursing and the World Health Organizations Core Competencies of Nurse Educators. For example, National League of Nursing Competency 1 is to facilitate learning. The competency reads

Nurse Educators are responsible for creating an environment in classroom, laboratory, and clinical settings that facilitates student learning and the achievement of desired cognitive, affective, and psychomotor outcomes. To facilitate learning effectively, the nurse educator: ... uses personal attributes (e.g., caring, confidence, patience, integrity, and flexibility) that facilitate learning. (National League of Nursing, 2012, p. 16)

The World Health Organization’s Nurse Educator Core Competencies, Domain 5: Communication, Collaboration, and Partnership, Core Competency 5 affective domain criteria reads “Demonstrates caring, confidence, patience, integrity, and flexibility to facilitate learning” (World Health Organization, 2016, p. 14).

Nurse educators regardless of course/curriculum delivery method are accountable to students for learning through personal attributes that manifest a caring presence in the educational environment. Nursing program evaluation of online curricula should consist of a regular review of caring and social presence concepts (Plante & Asselin, 2014). The purpose of this study was to determine how post licensure nursing students perceive faculty presence and identify faculty caring behaviors in accelerated online nursing courses. The goal was to use the study findings to provide recommendations to online faculty who teach in accelerated online courses to enhance online faculty social presence and caring behaviors.

Research Questions

1. How do post licensure nursing students perceive faculty presence in accelerated online nursing courses?
2. What online faculty caring behaviors are deemed important by students in accelerated online nursing programs and how are they ranked?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Logic Model

The logic model developed to guide the project, also served as the framework for project evaluation. A logic model is a schemata, which includes the identified problem, the intervention, the goal, the objectives, and the outcomes. For this study the schemata was deemed the “online caring presence logic model” with the following components:

- Problem: Faculty struggle with creating a presence of caring in accelerated online environments (AOE).
- Intervention: Create a plan to enhance online faculty social presence and caring behaviors in accelerated online nursing courses.
- Goal: Faculty who teach in accelerated online courses demonstrate online faculty social presence and caring behaviors.

Objectives:

1. Identify tools to measure the presence of caring within an accelerated online environment.
2. Administer tools to online post licensure nursing courses students.
3. Make recommendations to enhance caring in the accelerated online environment.

Outcomes:

1. Valid qualitative and quantitative tools to measure caring in the accelerated online environments are identified.
2. Recommendations are developed to enhance caring in the accelerated online environments based on survey findings gathered through project data collection.
3. A plan to integrate caring in the accelerated online environments with a timeline is created.
4. Knowledge gained is disseminated.

Design

A mixed-method design using an online survey was employed. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a convenience sample of 800 students enrolled in accelerated online nursing programs in a Midwest comprehensive university during the fall 2018 semester. Measures were taken to protect the rights of all sample participants. No personal identifiable information was asked in any of the survey comment fields. Students received no negative consequences if they chose not to participate in the study. Completion of the survey constituted consent to participate. There was no direct benefit to any participants of this study. Indirect benefits potentially included enhanced faculty presence in future accelerated online nursing courses. The institutional review board at the study site deemed the project exempt.

Survey

The survey consists of both qualitative and quantitative items. Ten items of the survey are open-ended questions modified with permission from Sitzman and Leners (2006) in their exploration of baccalaureate nursing student perceptions regarding caring in the online environment. In addition, Leners and Sitzman (2006) used the same open-ended questions for graduate nursing students. The quantitative items of the survey are researcher developed. The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education as posed by Chickering and Gamson (Koeckeritz et al., 2002) as well current findings from the literature related to faculty online social presence and caring behaviors provided the basis for developing the quantitative items. To establish face and content validity, the quantitative portion of the survey was shared with four doctorally prepared nursing faculty, two of whom have PhDs, one has a DNP, and one has an EdD. Each were asked to evaluate the items for content and face validity. Comments from the four expert doctorally prepared faculty were used to

revise the items. The final product was deemed the Faculty Caring and Presence Survey (FCPS). The quantitative portion of the survey has high internal validity with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95.

Procedure

All nursing students enrolled in post licensure nursing courses in September 2018 received an email request through their online program organization learning management site to participate in the study. The request included consent information and a link to the Faculty Caring and Presence Survey. If students agreed to participate in the study, they clicked the link to complete the online survey. A reminder email was sent to all students two weeks after the initial request. The survey was open for one month.

Data Analysis

The statistical software Minitab 18 (2019) was used to determine descriptive statistics for frequencies, means, rankings and ranges. Qualitative data was managed using Atlas.ti (2018) and analyzed using content analysis for the emergence of themes.

RESULTS

Demographic

One hundred thirty-eight surveys were returned from the 808 participant pool. Ninety-nine surveys were complete out of the 138 returned. Data are reported from the completed surveys (Table 1). Nineteen of the respondents were in the DNP program, 53 in the MSN program, 3 in a post MSN certificate program, and 24 in the RN/BSN program. All but 41 of those who completed the survey had taken at least three online courses and nine of the respondents taught at least one online course in the past. Ninety-three of the respondents were between ages 30 and 50 with 22 under 30 and four were 60 or over. One hundred nine of the respondents identified as female and 12 male. One hundred eleven of the respondents identified as White, 7 identified as Black, 1 as America Native/Alaska Native, 1 more than one race, and 1 unknown.

Quantitative

Ninety-nine of the respondents believed it was possible for an instructor to convey a sense of caring in an online classroom setting. Ninety-one believed the presence or absence of caring on the part of the online instructor

TABLE 1
Demographics

<i>Program</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
DNP	19	<30	18
MSN/PMC	56	30–60	78
RN-BSN	24	>60	3
<i>Race Ethnicity</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Experience in Teaching Online</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
White	91	Yes	8
Other	8	No	91
<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Number of Courses Taken Online</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Male	10	<2	36
Female	89	3–5	10

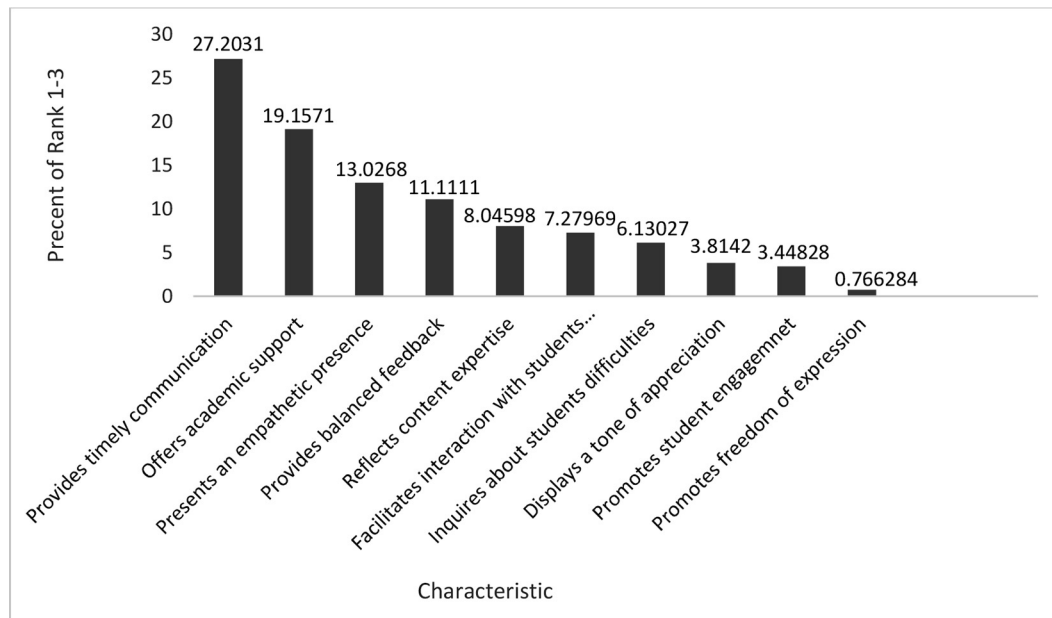


FIGURE 1
Ranked in the Top Three

influenced success in the course. In rating the respondent's most recent experiences in an accelerated online course, the majority of respondents agreed with the following statements:

1. My instructor encourages student-faculty contact. (91%)
2. My instructor encourages cooperation among students. (93%)
3. My instructor encourages active learning. (92)%
4. My instructor gives prompt feedback. (68%)
5. My instructor emphasizes time on task. (82%)
6. My instructor communicates high expectations. 88%
7. My instructor respects diverse talents and ways of knowing. (80%)
8. My instructor creates a feeling of caring within the course. (72%)
9. I feel cared about by my instructor. (71%)

10. I feel the "presence" of my instructor within the course. (67%)

The respondents ranked in order the 10 phrases associated with faculty characteristics in an online environment. As noted in Figure 1, the three characteristics that respondents ranked the highest are: provides timely communication, offers academic support, and presents an empathetic presence.

All items were analyzed per demographic variable. Differences among the variables were found only for the variable of program, that is, DNP, MSN/PMC, and RN/BSN. Here are the key findings as noted in Figure 2. Specific to the item, "My instructor gives prompt feedback," 94% of DNP students agreed; 62% of MSN/PMC agreed; and 59% of RN/BSN agreed. For another item, "My instructor creates a feeling of caring within the course," 94% of DNP students agreed, 68% of MSN/PMC students agreed, and 64% of RN/BSN agreed. Again, for another item, the DNP participants ranking was much higher: "I feel

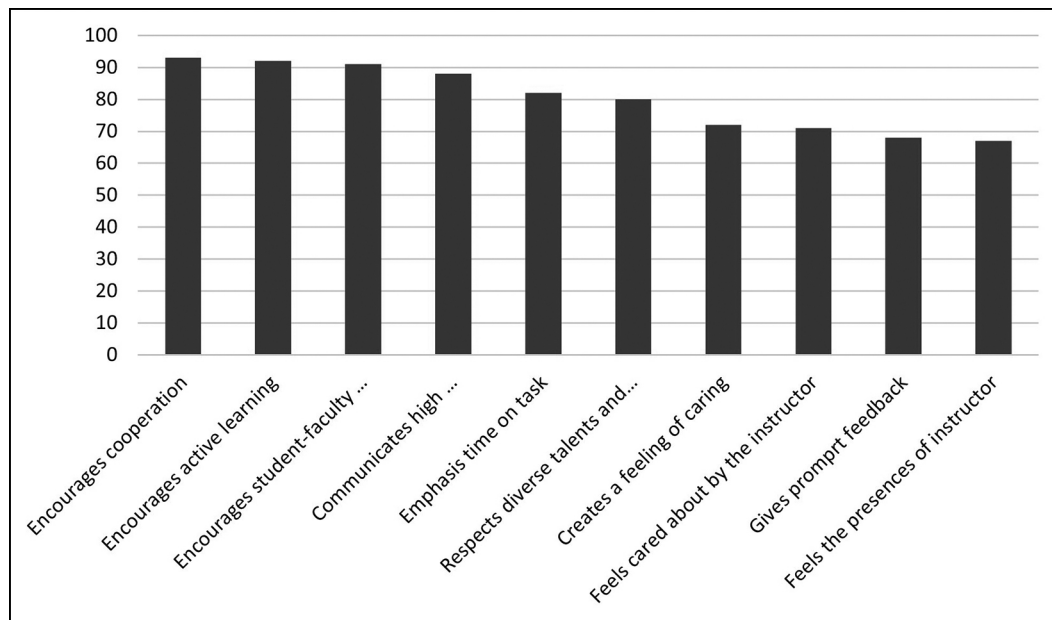


FIGURE 2
Student Beliefs About Online Instructors

cared about by my instructor,” 94% of DNP students agreed, 68% of MSN/PMC students agreed, and 64% of RN/BSN agreed. One last example in which the DNP participants were clearly more satisfied is with the item “I feel the presence of my instructor within the course,” 94% of DNP students agreed, 64% of MSN/PMC students agreed, and 50% of RN/BSN agreed.

Qualitative

The qualitative data were abundant and distributed over all the three post licensure programs. The respondents in the MSN and the Post MSN certificate programs provided the majority of the written comments in response to the open-ended questions about caring. The comments were negative and positive. All comments were read using content analysis by the two researchers. The process of content analysis involves the breakdown of qualitative data into smaller units (Merriam, 2001; Polit & Beck, 2017). These smaller units of text are

coded, and from the related codes, themes emerge. Examples from the analysis are provided in Table 2. The comments were analyzed and themes emerged from the respondents’ words. Expansive qualitative themes were identified as authentic and empathetic communication, timely and respectful feedback, faculty interaction and investment in student success. The themes are supported in the qualitative literature about faculty caring and presence in online education.

Discussion of the Three Themes

Theme 1: Authentic and Empathetic Communication. The student respondents described faculty actions that reflect respectful, genuine, concerned, thoughtful, and sensitive exchanges. Exchanges could be communication via email, in an assignment or discussion board feedback or via phone. Examples include seeing and hearing the faculty as well as the reading written word.

TABLE 2
Example of Theme Emergence

<i>Response</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Theme</i>
• “Caring in the context of a student-instructor relationship means that the instructor is well engaged in the course, very responsive to inquiries and needs as indicated by the students, and is cognizant of the fact that online learning has its own challenges and difficulties not faced in a classroom setting.” MSN student • “Showing genuine interest in student success responding in a timely manner, making time available to student, being personable, encouraging students.” DNP Student • Negative example “no video or voice of instructor so far, little feeling of interaction or relationship building with the instructor.” MSN student	Engagement	Faculty interaction
• “Caring in the intentional attention to make a connection with a student.” DNP student • “Thorough responses and recommendations, instruction, show signs of caring by helping student in their progression of learning.” RN-BSN student	Connection	

“The student should feel that the instructor is there for more than just grading assignments. This could be indicated by guidance prior to assignments, postings by the instructor to clarify the material, and frequent feedback. The student should feel the instructor is “on their side.”

“Humanizing the instructor is very helpful. Use of pictures and videos with voiceover is helpful rather than using purely written communication, which can feel flat or devoid of emotion.”

“Life is full of put-downs and when that is what you hear, you tend to forget your true value. A kind word of encouragement from an instructor can make students feel valued and inspired. Some of the most memorable moments in my educational process are of teachers who were supportive and encouraging. I remember their names and their words.”

Effective online communication as essential to student success and engagement is supported in several qualitative studies in the literature. Casey and Kroth (2013) noted attention to communication is vital for faculty to promote

student engagement and confidence. Leners and Sitzman (2006) found that graduate nursing students identified tone of appreciation communicated by online faculty as important.

Theme 2: Timely and Respectful Feedback. In some comments, the participants shared the importance of caring and timely feedback. Student participants commented that their time is valuable and that quick turnaround on assignment grades and swift responses to student email by faculty denotes respect and caring.

“Instructors who exhibit a caring attitude encourage students to put forth their best efforts. I think that when the professor exhibits a caring attitude, it makes me care more about the class. When I receive timely, genuine responses to questions or assignments, it makes me feel as if my participation in the class is actual worth the professor’s time.”

“Providing positive and negative feedback in a constructive manner that can be applied in the future.”

“Caring is demonstrated by faculty responding to student questions in a timely manner,

grading assignments within a week of submission so that students know where they stand.”

“In a fast paced class such as the MSN classes, that lasts only 7 weeks, timely responses are imperative to student success. When I ask a question in the morning, I can’t wait until the next day to get a response.”

Responses from the participants are similar to student responses the literature. In a qualitative study about student preferences for online faculty caring, nursing students discussed the significance of timeliness of responses for emails and assignment feedback (Sitzman, 2010). Soles and Maduli-Williams (2019) used a social presence model to elicit students perceptions about teaching and learning in accelerated online program; open communication was found to be a fundamental factor.

Theme 3: Faculty Interactions. The participants’ responses indicate their desire for faculty engagement and commitment in the students’ educational experiences. Although the students are adult learners, their responses indicate the need for faculty caring through interaction and presence. Statements that support the importance of faculty interaction are listed here.

“Caring in the context of a student-instructor relationship means that the instructor is well engaged in the course, very responsive to inquiries and needs as indicated by the students, and is cognizant of the fact that online learning has its own challenges and difficulties not faced in a classroom setting.”

“We all need encouragement in life. We need to feel supported and loved. We need to remember that we can succeed when all we want to do is give up! Life is complicated at this point when we are in school (kids, jobs, families, etc.) We have more responsibilities and more is at stake. We don’t make friends in class or have our parents ask how school was today. Sometimes, the only person we have that encourages us is that instructor.”

Theme 4: Investment in Student Success.

Students indicated that faculty support and involvement in their work is vital to success. This involvement needs to be visible to the student in a fast-paced online environment. One participant stated they wanted greater faculty involvement in the course.

“I feel I have more interest and willingness to give my best when I perceive the instructor is also involved in the daily or weekly class happenings.”

“I am not as anxious to take an online class if I know there is a way to communicate with my instructor especially if the instructor has indicated that they are available and wanting to be helpful.”

“Remember we come from all ages, backgrounds experiences, etc. Our lives are complicated. We want to succeed; we need your encouragement to help us succeed... These online classes are incredibly stressful. Please just be that “hug” to keep us going when we feel like a terrible mom, spouse, student.”

Faculty interaction and investment in student success are highlighted by earlier qualitative studies of online student feelings about faculty caring and presence. Students narrated a desired for full faculty engagement through listening and participating directly to student discussions with attention to individual students as needed (Sitzman, 2010). Qualitative results in a study of online graduate nursing students reflect that “high frequency, constant availability, and immediacy of interaction were very important to feeling cared for online” (Leners & Sitzman, 2006, p. 317).

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The quantitative findings reveal that the majority of the respondents (67%–93%) reported that in their most recent experience in an online course the faculty demonstrated caring behaviors. However, for several of the caring

behavior statements nearly one third of the respondents disagreed. For these particular statements, most DNP students agreed and the MSN/PMC and RN/BSN students comprised the majority of students who disagreed. These findings confirm for the investigators that a need exists for recommendations to enhance the feelings of caring and presence in an accelerated online environment, particularly in the MSN/PMC and RN/BSN programs. Further, the respondents were forthcoming in ranking those behaviors which are most important to them in an online environment. Expansive qualitative themes were identified as authentic and empathetic communication, timely and respectful feedback, faculty interaction, and investment in student success, which do support the quantitative findings. From the data analysis, broad recommendations informed by the findings to enhance faculty online presence and caring behaviors include authentic communication, methods and conveyance of timely feedback, instructor flexibility, and investment in the student.

1. Provide timely communication and communication which is twofold and includes both grading and responding. Faculty should set a timeline for grading and a timeline for responding to correspondence; publish both in the syllabus and communicate often. The methods and conveyance of timely feedback is crucial. Respectful feedback and communication is important.
2. Offer academic support and invest in student success. Faculty should include student academic support initiatives/programs/departments in the syllabus information. In all communications with student, faculty should offer support and provide resources as appropriate. Authentic communication and the communication of investment in the student is necessary. Words of support and praise for accomplishment in emails, assignment feedback, and in discussion board interaction are important to students.

3. Present an empathetic presence with authentic communication. The faculty need to demonstrate that they are actively online and engaged in the course. Faculty should explore various ways to communicate such as using learning management system announcements, adding weekly discussion board wrap-ups, sending encouraging emails, adding resources to conversation in discussion boards when appropriate, and providing stories about one's own professional experiences.
4. Be flexible as an instructor. Faculty should demonstrate authentic communication to and investment in the student in faculty-student interactions. Even though faculty should expect quality and timely work from students, it is important for faculty to provide flexibility with due dates for emergencies and other life challenges.

Strategies

The researchers have worked with faculty groups across the United States to flesh out strategies and approaches for each of the four identified broad recommendations. Strategies were identified at a micro, mezzo, and macro level. The micro level strategies can be implemented immediately by an individual faculty member in their online course. The mezzo level strategies target onboarding of newer faculty to develop a stronger sense of an online presence and caring behaviors. Lastly, the macro level strategies integrate the feelings of online presence and caring behaviors in an online classroom across the entire academic culture of the courses and the colleges across the entire university. Table 3 lists the microlevel strategies.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include that the survey was developed by the researchers. Additionally, all data was self-reported from the participants. The perceptions of nursing

TABLE 3
Microlevel Strategies to Enhance Faculty Online Presence and Caring Behavior

<i>#1 Provides timely communication. The methods and conveyance of timely, respectful feedback are crucial.</i>	
<i>Recommendation</i>	
Strategies	• Respond to students within 24 hours • Provide personalized and caring feedback • Provide clear response in communication via LMS and syllabus • Grade assignments within 1 week of due date • Respond to all students' first posts/stay engaged • Welcome message describes expected time frames for faculty response • Keep students on track by adding reminders • Address student by name • Use a positive opening sentence for example- "Thank you for your email ..." "Thank you for sharing your concerns ..." "Just checking in ..." "Thank you for your contributions in the course."
<i>#2 Offers academic support and invests in student success.</i>	
<i>Recommendation</i>	
Strategies	• Identify ways to reach professor • Provide tips for success in course • Call and check in twice during course • Complement what resonates and then provide constructive feedback • Provide weekly overview with individual specific feedback • Provide inspirational quotes related to caring and presence and self-care • Identify at risk students early; provide ongoing feedback to students • Provide links to tutor, writing center, research librarian • Offer to read sections of rough draft of assignments; Rewrite a few sentences as examples—provide students with examples • Provide exemplars of completed assignments • Provide detailed rubrics • Provide APA Manual page numbers for specific APA errors • Create a common tips for writing sheet based on common mistakes
<i>#3 Presents an empathetic presence with authentic communication.</i>	
<i>Recommendation</i>	
Strategies	• Avoid generic reply functions to respond • Stick with feedback guidelines and expectations • Find out student's preferred name student and use it • Make video announcements • Give individual feedback so that student knows that faculty read the post • Faculty participate in discussion, try to evolve conversation • Post clarifying announcements • Share personal information • Be flexible in accelerated programs • Be kind in response in communications and announcements • Write generic highlights and wraps ups and then add a few lines to make it specific to the present group of students.
<i>#4 Be flexible as an instructor. Demonstrate authentic communication to and investment in the student throughout faculty-student interactions.</i>	
<i>Recommendation</i>	
Strategies	• Be patient with beginning online students • Be flexible when you (faculty) make a mistake • Provide a welcome letter for students before the course begins and in the course • Be flexible with deadlines • Be authentic and humble • Admit when you have made a mistake; state how you will correct the mistake • If you are delayed in grading—communicate such to the students with a time frame • Late grading should be the exception not the rule

students may not be representative of students in other disciplines. Lastly, the target population was a convenience sample, thus selection bias was a concern.

CONCLUSION

Evaluation using the online caring presence logic model, indicate that the research outcomes were met. Valid qualitative and quantitative tools were identified to measure caring presence in an accelerated online environment, recommendations to enhance caring presence were generated based on the findings, a proposal with timeline to integrate the recommendations in the accelerated online environment was established although not discussed in this paper, and the knowledge gained through the findings was disseminated at various conferences and workshops.

In the future, this study could be replicated with other populations such as diverse students and populations beyond the discipline of nursing to include education, business, organizational development, arts and sciences, and so forth. Further, a study to evaluate the effectiveness of select strategies specific to the key recommendations would contribute to the literature.

Finally, the study findings provided a strong basis for the development of recommendations to enhance the perception of faculty caring and presence in an accelerated online environment. Faculty who are challenged to create an environment of instructor presence and caring in a compressed online learning schedule can easily implement the numerous straightforward strategies suggested from the recommendations. Students in an accelerated online environment deserve the benefit of faculty caring and presence as part of their higher education experience.

Acknowledgment: The authors acknowledge the Burkardt Consulting Center at Northern Kentucky University for assistance with statistics. This work was supported by the

Academic Partnerships Faculty Research Grant Program. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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