

# Research into online students' stress, sense of belonging



Nursing students at UT Arlington take classes online and in traditional class settings.

**As a nursing professor assigned to one of UT Arlington's first online master's degree courses, Ronda Mintz-Binder had a stake in learning to motivate students online. Now, she's building on her experience with a research project that will help other professors.**

Mintz-Binder, who holds a master's degree in psychiatric/mental health nursing and a doctorate in nursing educational leadership, received two grants from the Dallas-based education company Academic Partnerships to initiate a multi-year study comparing the experiences of on-campus and online master's degree students. She'll present the first results from her study Thursday at a multidisciplinary conference for the International Journal of Arts and Sciences on the Harvard Medical School campus in Boston.

"With their classes condensed from the traditional 15-week schedule to a five-week schedule, online students have very intense expectations to meet and there isn't really a lot of research data out there that measures their experience over time. We're trying to understand what we can do to help them stay in the program once they have committed," said Mintz-Binder, an assistant professor in the University of Texas at Arlington College of Nursing.

Health care experts, such as the National Academies' Institute of Medicine, have called on nurses nationwide to continue their education through lifelong learning to elevate patient care and community health. Nursing schools across the country also turn away thousands of applicants each year because they lack capacity. More graduate-level nurses also are needed to teach a new generation.

The participants in Mintz-Binder's study – 38 students in the online courses and 21 in the on campus courses – took an online survey focused mainly on stress levels and their sense of belonging or feeling connected. Some of the findings she observed already:

Both groups experienced what Mintz-Binder saw as a satisfactory level of feeling that they belonged to a community or were connected, scoring an average of about 60 on a test with an 80-point scale. Online students scored slightly higher on the measure. All but five of the online students made contact with academic coaches who supplement instruction in the online classes. For those students, more contact with the online coach translated into a stronger sense of belonging. Both groups indicated similar levels of stress. For the online students, Mintz-Binder observed a stronger relationship between their grade in the course and their stress. Not surprisingly, lower grades were linked to more stress.

"Throughout the country, nurses are being encouraged and supported, sometimes financially, by their

employers to seek a graduate degree and expand their roles," said Jennifer Gray, interim dean of the UT Arlington College of Nursing. "Online education has become an extremely viable tool for helping them accomplish those goals, but little is known about the best ways to help working nurses be successful as students.

"To get the best return on the investments of students, employers, and nursing program, we must do everything we can to guarantee success. Dr. Mintz-Binder's research results will help with that endeavor," Gray said.

This summer, Mintz-Binder will begin the second phase of her study. She will take the same measurements from participants a year from the first surveys. She also hopes to gather information about life changes, such as a change in job status or home life, that may have affected their persistence in school.

"All those little things should help us paint a picture of what we can do to help these students, to give them the support they need in this very intense program," she said.

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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