The Impact of COVID-19 on Admissions Testing Policies and Practices

Introduction

The onset of COVID-19 has dramatically impacted the world and how we conduct our daily lives. The healthcare industry has been confronted with many challenges, including how best to prepare nursing students to be safe and effective practitioners considering increased online learning requirements. Another important consideration in this educational process is how the pandemic has affected student admissions and enrollment in nursing programs.

Impact on Nursing Programs

Naturally, nursing programs were initially unsure as to how student admissions and enrollment would be affected by COVID-19. According to a survey conducted during the initial phases of COVID-19, "1 in 6 high school seniors anticipated taking a gap year, and consequently college grant deferrals were expected to increase" (Hoover, 2020). However, an article published by Ilana Kowarski in June 2020 in *U.S. News & World Report* provides a different perspective. According to Kowarski, since the initial COVID-19 outbreak, the number of inquiries and applications from prospective students has increased significantly at some nursing schools.

In an article written by Melissa Wirkus-Hagstrom (2020) entitled, "Nursing Schools Report: How the 2020-2021 Academic Year Is Shaping Up," she provides further evidence that nursing school applications have recently increased. Wirkus-Hagstrom reported that the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) recently hosted a series of discussions on the current state of nursing schools with 377 participating institutions. According to Susan Bakewell-Sachs, the chair of the AACN Board of Directors, "Despite some initial concerns that the pandemic might negatively affect enrollments in our programs across the country, we are hearing that, in general, schools are meeting their enrollment targets for the fall, and demand for nursing education remains strong" (Wirkus-Hagstrom, 2020).

Kowarski (2020) believes that this trend could cause the nursing school admissions process to become more competitive for potential nursing students. According to the AACN, the shortage of spots at U.S. nursing schools for the 2018-2019 school year was so severe that more than 75,000 qualified candidates were denied entry. According to Kowarski (2020), some of the contributing factors were an insufficient number of nursing faculty members, an inadequate amount of classroom space, budgetary limitations, and a lack of clinical sites and clinical preceptors.

Impact on the ATI TEAS Testing Volume

In November 2020, ATI researchers conducted a study to examine the impact of COVID-19 on their admissions testing volume using the Test of Essential Academic Skills (ATI TEAS). The study found that the 2020 ATI TEAS testing volume decreased in comparison with the 2019 ATI TEAS testing volume for the months of March, April, and May (the initial months of COVID-19's impact in the U.S.). However, the ATI TEAS testing volume significantly increased for the 2020 months of June (+54.7%), July (+29.9%), August (+14.4%), September (+29.0%), and October (+10.2%). This finding is consistent across the different nursing program types (e.g., PN and RN [BSN, ADN, and Diploma]) and corresponds with ATI making remote-proctoring solutions available for the ATI TEAS. The results of this research support what nursing programs have been experiencing and reporting in terms of increased student applications for admission.

Considerations for Adapting ATI TEAS Admission Testing Policies and Practices

Given the recent increase in student applicants, some nursing schools are contemplating whether they should increase the rigor of their admission criteria policies. The most common change would involve increasing the difficulty for applicants to meet an admission criterion (e.g., increasing the minimum score on an admissions test needed for acceptance into a program). Before making this decision, nursing programs should consider both the short- and long-term consequences. It will be difficult to predict how long this trend will persist and even harder to imagine the long-term impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the nursing profession. Before making changes to your admission testing policies and practices, ATI recommends that nursing programs consider the following best practices when using the ATI TEAS to make admission decisions.

Best Practices for Using the ATI TEAS

- The impact of COVID-19 on admission application rates likely will fluctuate over the next few years. Numbers may return to a "pre-COVID-19" rate, or they may continue to increase as the public focuses on how nurses are key to addressing the pandemic, motivating people to enter the profession. Institutions adjusting their admissions criteria policies should monitor the impact of these changes annually, if not more often (e.g., quarterly, or twice a year).

- Any admissions decision that will have the potential to impact an applicant should take into consideration not just scores from a single assessment, but other relevant criteria.

- Nursing programs should carefully weigh the impact any ATI TEAS scoring benchmark choice is likely to have on their applicant and student population before a scoring benchmark is implemented.

- Nursing programs may make use of a "wait list" for applicants who meet the institution's ATI TEAS Score criteria but should be clear about how long students remain on the wait list and how or when they may need to reapply. A wait list can be paired with an adjustment to an acceptable ATI TEAS admissions score.

- Nursing programs should be clear with candidates regarding the number of positions available and that it is their prerogative to adjust their ATI TEAS scoring benchmark. In either case, institutions can rank students (or put students on a wait list) who reach the ATI TEAS benchmark.

- Applicants who fail to meet an ATI TEAS scoring benchmark should be allowed to compensate with higher performance on other admission criteria.

- Applicants who fail to meet an ATI TEAS scoring benchmark should be allowed to remediate and re-take the assessment. ATI doesn't provide an official recommendation on the number of ATI TEAS attempts a school should allow because the number of attempts allowed will likely vary based on the nursing program's admission policies. Essentially, it's the school's prerogative to determine the appropriate number of attempts it will allow a candidate to complete. If a retake is offered, candidates should have enough time between retakes to allow for effective remediation to take place. When considering a retake policy, the number of retakes and the number of days between retakes should not be based solely on statistical research but also on the practical considerations at both the candidate and institutional level. ATI's retake or remediation guidelines encourage allowing anywhere from 2 to 4 weeks to allow candidates enough time to adequately review their misconceptions. Allowing less than one week of remediation before retesting does not really allow the candidate enough time to thoroughly remediate; however, requiring more than four weeks of remediation may be prohibitive to the candidate's progression. ATI's recommendations are consistent with guidance provided in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing.

- Scoring benchmarks should be periodically re-examined after ATI TEAS scores from admitted students and details of their subsequent early performance in the program is available (e.g., The Content Mastery Series Fundamentals of Nursing Assessment).

- When schools are evaluating the best admission criteria that lead to student success, an important consideration pertains to whether adding an additional selection criterion into the admission process could improve the prediction accuracy. An article written by Liu, Codd, & Mills (2018), included in the reference section of this paper, addresses this question by demonstrating how to evaluate the incremental effect of added measures to achieve cost-effective, as well as accurate, admission criteria.

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