



Uncovering the Layers: Addressing Ageism and Conflict Among Non-Traditional Nursing Students

Kathleen Apollon-Ferron MSN RN CCRN

AACN Diversity Leadership Institute (DLI) Poster Project

Project Purpose

To proactively support accelerated nursing students—many of whom are non-traditional learners balancing age, work, and caregiving roles—by addressing how implicit bias, generational tension, and ageism contribute to academic disengagement and interpersonal conflict.



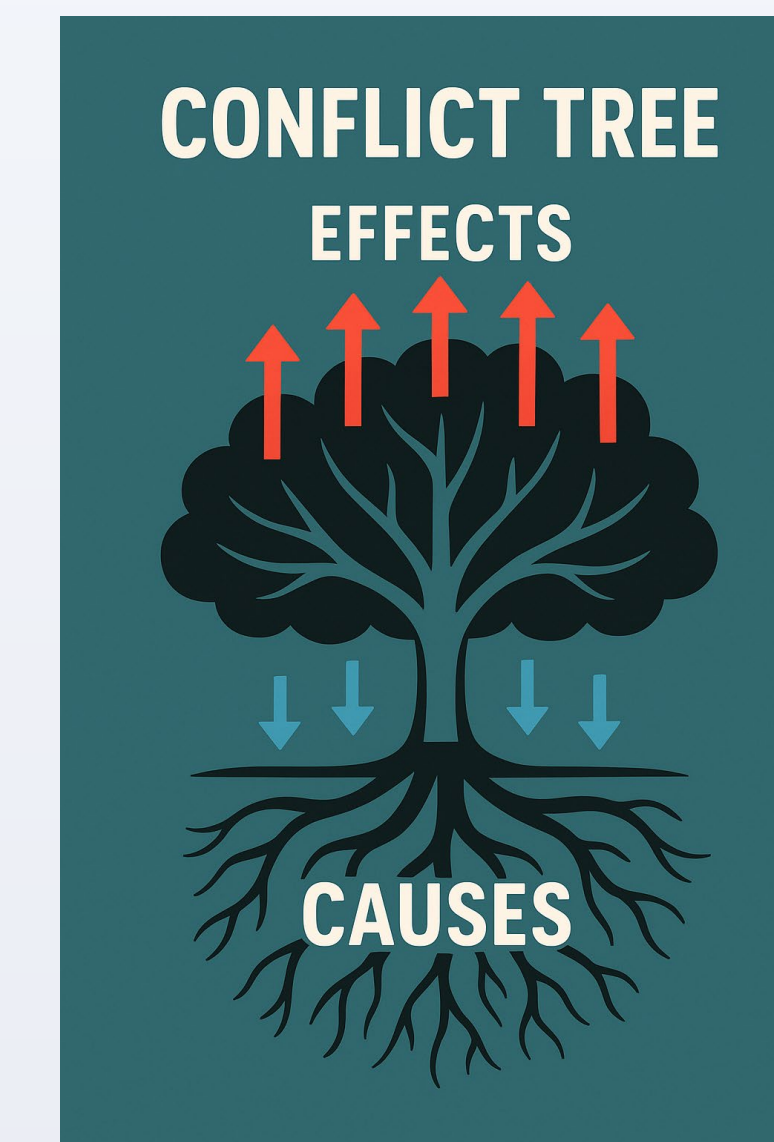
Non-traditional students in nursing programs often experience:

- Dismissive attitudes based on age or life stage
- Conflict regarding group work, clinical assumptions, or performance expectations
- Limited support for work-life balance or caregiving needs

This project uses three conflict-resolution models to facilitate inclusive learning environments, reduce ageism, and increase engagement.



Interventions: Planned Components (Summer 2025)



Student Engagement Survey

- Administer baseline survey on belonging, age-related bias, and support
- Use results to inform workshop content and policy discussions

Conflict Tree & Iceberg Reflection Tools

- Distribute printable and digital tools to help students explore root causes of academic and interpersonal strain
- Incorporate into peer support and one-on-one coaching

Difficult Conversations Student Workshop

- Facilitate a structured, interactive session using:
 - Role-play scenarios
 - Peer debriefs
 - Identity exploration activities



Inclusive Curriculum Review

- Work with faculty to review syllabi and assignments for:
 - Age-diverse patient cases
 - Inclusive discussion prompts
 - Opportunities for lived-experience reflection

Faculty-Student Mentorship (Tentative)

Project Frameworks

1. Difficult Conversations Framework (Stone, Patton, & Heen)-*What Happened, Feelings, Identity* lenses applied in workshops and student self-reflection.

2. Conflict Tree Model *Leaves = visible conflict, Roots = structural barriers (e.g., ageist assumptions, inflexible schedules).*

3. Iceberg Model of Conflict *What is visible (absenteeism, disengagement) vs. what is hidden (shame, bias, burnout).*

These models will guide **structured peer workshops, faculty training, and reflection activities.**

Negative Impact of Ageism on Nursing Education

Ageism—bias based on age—creates barriers to success for both younger and older nursing students. It reduces academic engagement, limits access to support, fosters faculty and peer bias, and weakens intergenerational collaboration. Without inclusive strategies, ageism leads to isolation, burnout, and higher dropout rates—especially among non-traditional students balancing work, school, and caregiving.

Sample Survey Questions:

- "I feel supported in this program."
- "I feel that my age or life experience is respected by peers."
- "I feel included in class discussions and clinical activities."

Expected Outcomes

Greater student comfort with conflict navigation and identity exploration

Increased awareness of hidden emotional and structural barriers

Better engagement and faculty responsiveness to age-related DEI issues

Institutional model for ongoing mentorship and inclusive curriculum review

AACN DLI Alignment:

Supports DEI competencies in nursing education by:

- Addressing ageism and hidden curriculum
- Enhancing student belonging, inclusion, and resilience
- Establishing a scalable model for inclusive, identity-safe classrooms

References

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Empowering Future Nurses: Designing Inclusive Learning Environments in Medical-Surgical Nursing

Kathleen Apollon-Ferron, MSN RN CCRN

Biography

Kathleen Apollon-Ferron is an experienced nurse educator and academic leader committed to advancing equity in nursing education. She currently serves as the Associate Dean of Nursing at Mercy University, where she leads initiatives in curriculum innovation and student success. With over a decade of clinical experience in critical care and a Master's degree in Nursing Administration, she brings a dual focus on clinical excellence and academic leadership.

For over five years, she has had the pleasure of serving at Mercy University. In her current role as Associate Dean of Nursing (2025), she is actively involved in several institutional projects aimed at enhancing student outcomes and inclusive teaching practices. Her leadership extends across university-wide initiatives, including serving on the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Inclusive Excellence Project Team, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Workgroup, and Mercy University's Title V Grant programs—where she champions student success initiatives for underrepresented, non-traditional, and traditional nursing students alike. She is especially focused on improving outcomes for traditional students who may experience unique or less visible academic, social, or financial barriers.

As an enthusiastic advocate for nursing education, Kathleen is deeply committed to nurturing practice-ready nurses prepared to advance healthcare delivery. She believes in the power of education to equip nurses with the skills necessary to provide equitable and compassionate care, particularly to marginalized groups within our communities. By fostering a diverse and inclusive workforce, she aims to improve care across the board.

Kathleen's scholarly interests include combating ageism, promoting intergenerational collaboration in nursing programs, designing inclusive strategies for non-traditional learners, and developing targeted interventions that promote student success and NCLEX readiness. She has a passion for teaching Medical-Surgical Nursing and leads high-impact Content Mastery Sessions focused on reinforcing clinical reasoning, test-taking strategies, and mastery of complex concepts. Her work includes designing evidence-based academic support structures that enhance clinical judgment and retention among high-risk nursing students.

As a Diversity Leadership Institute (DLI) Fellow through the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), her current work explores institutional solutions to support accelerated nursing students balancing work, caregiving, and academic demands.

She finds immense joy in educating future nurses, empowering them to make substantial, positive impacts on healthcare. Her goal is to inspire the next generation of nurses to lead with empathy, skill, and dedication.

Contact Information



Kathleen Apollon-Ferron, MSN RN CCRN
Associate Dean School of Nursing
Mercy University
kapollonferron@mercy.edu