

From Access to Impact: Using Holistic Nursing Admissions to Drive Health Outcomes



01. Introduction & Problem Statement

Direct Admission (DA) is a pathway of direct entry to a nursing program from high school. Applicants are accepted as Freshman and complete pre-nursing curriculum and university requirements their first two-years, and then progress to the upper division nursing curriculum during for their last two-years. The DA was first introduced in 2016 with an academics-only metric, and evolved to a holistic admissions approach in 2022.

Holistic Admissions “assesses an applicant’s unique experiences alongside traditional measures of academic achievement...Many colleges and universities have employed a holistic admissions process to assemble a diverse class of students with background, qualities, and skills needed for success in the profession” (AACN, 2020).

- **The E-A-M Model** (AACN, 2020; Wros & Noone, 2018)
 - **Experiences:** community service, leadership, volunteerism, life experiences, etc.
 - **Attributes:** empathy, commitment to service, passion, resilience, etc.
 - **Metrics:** GPA, course-specific grades, course rigor, etc.

Despite calls to diversify the healthcare workforce (NASEM, 2021) nursing programs have traditionally relied on GPA, course grades and rigor, and test scores for their admissions reviews (AACN, 2020). Although important, this criteria often disadvantages underrepresented and nontraditional students, and limits access for applicants who possess characteristics such as empathy, leadership, life experience, and cultural insight (Jung, Latham, Fortes, & Schwartz, 2021). When the racial and ethnic makeup of the US population is actively shifting to a more diverse landscape, it becomes more important that ever to make intentional efforts to increase the racial and ethnic representation of the nursing workforce.

In 2022, a public university School of Nursing in the Northeast adopted holistic admissions for its Direct Admit (DA) cohort, aiming to expand access to nursing education and align the nursing workforce more closely with the diversity of the community its nurses serves.

02. Objectives

- To evaluate changes in diversity and academic retention in an undergraduate program before and after the implementation of holistic admissions
- To assess the implications of holistic admissions on workforce readiness and alignment with population health needs
- To provide recommendations for a holistic admissions review in second-degree and graduate nursing programs

03. Review of the Literature

- Holistic Admissions
- Holistic admissions considers non-cognitive attributes such as leadership, resilience, and community engagement (Murray & Noone, 2022; AACN, 2020).
 - Leads to a more representative student body without compromising academic success (Hampton & Apen, 2022).
 - Use of holistic admissions will help to increase the education of nursing students who are equipped to provide care with diverse populations they will serve (Jung et al., 2021).

- Impact of Representation in the Nursing Workforce
- Fifty-eight percent of the U.S. population identifies as White non-Hispanic (US Census Bureau, 2020) while 67% of Registered Nurses in the workforce identifies as White non-Hispanic (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).
 - U.S. population is projected to becoming more racially and ethnically diverse by 2045 (Vespa, Armstrong, & Medina, 2020).
 - Racial/ethnic and gender representation in the nursing workforce significantly improves patience care and contributed to advancing health equity (NASEM, 2021):
 - Enhances cultural relevance and trust in care
 - Reduces health disparities
 - Improves quality and safety
 - Builds more equitable healthcare system
 - A lack of diversity within a healthcare workforce can have detrimental effects on patient outcomes, access to care, and patient trust (Rotenstein, 2021).

04. Methodology

Design and Setting

- Retrospective descriptive design to examine trends in diversity, retention, and attrition among undergraduate nursing students enrolled in the Direct Admissions (DA) pathway at a public university in the Northeast.

Population & Sample

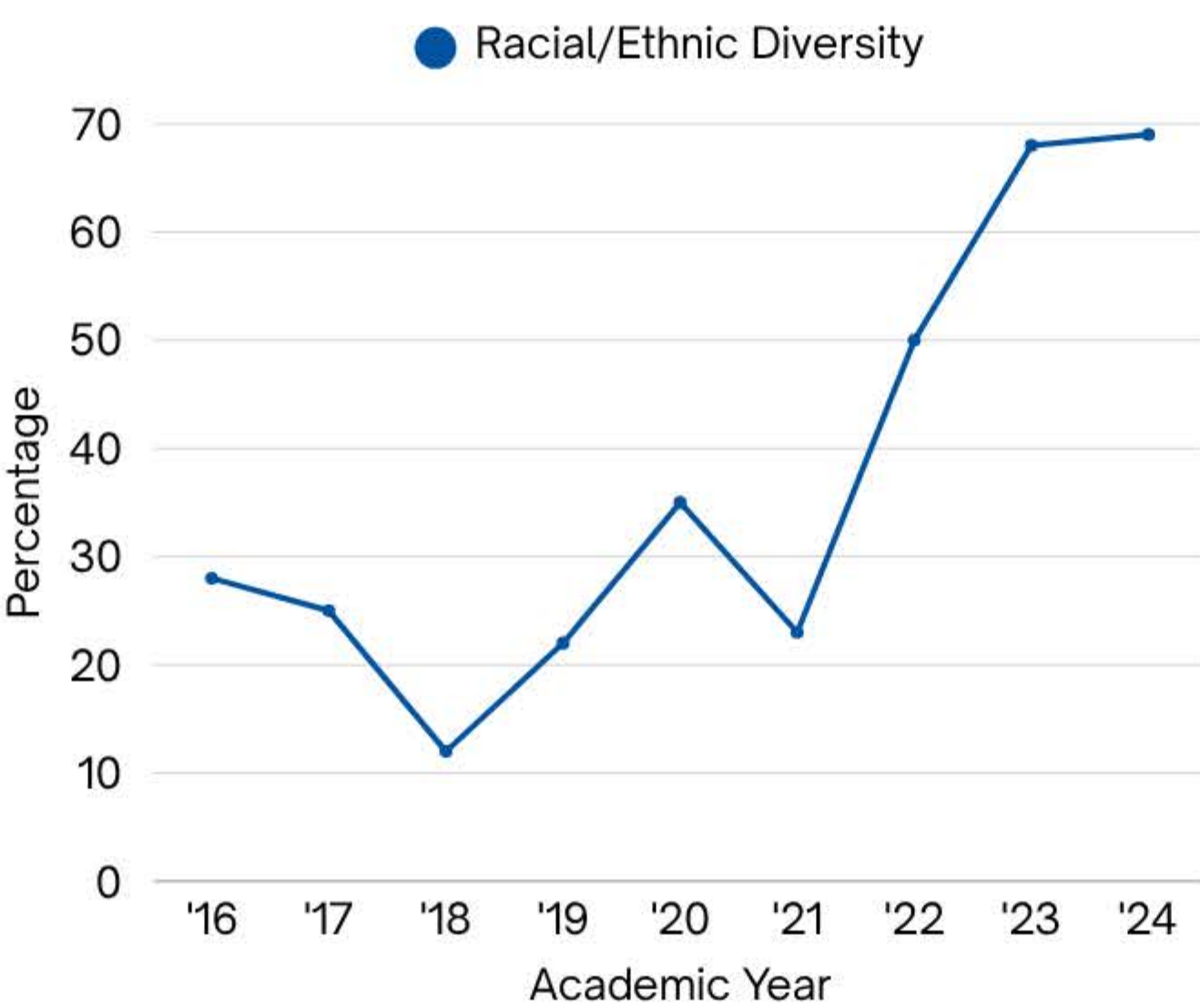
- Population included all students admitted through the DA pathway from 2016 to 2024, n = 411 students
 - Cohorts 2016-2021 (n = 269): Accepted using traditional metrics (GPA 3.6+, course-specific grades, & academic rigor)
 - Cohorts 2022-2024 (n = 142): Accepted using holistic admissions

Data Analysis

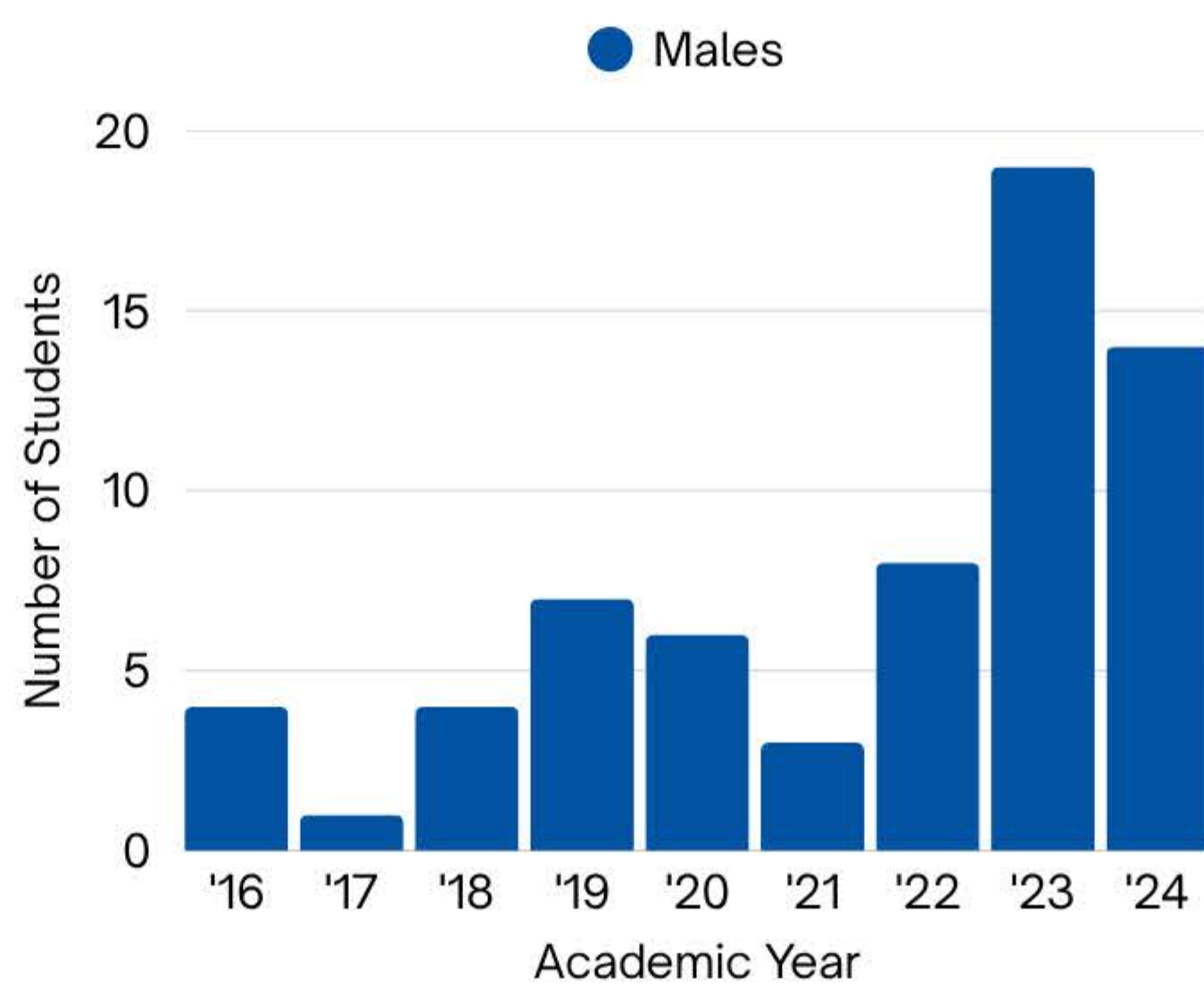
- Descriptive statistics used to summarize demographic characteristics and admission outcomes
 - Racial and ethnic identity and gender were self-reported
 - Diversity rates were compared across the two cohort groups
- Retention and attrition data was compared across the two cohort groups

05. Results/Findings

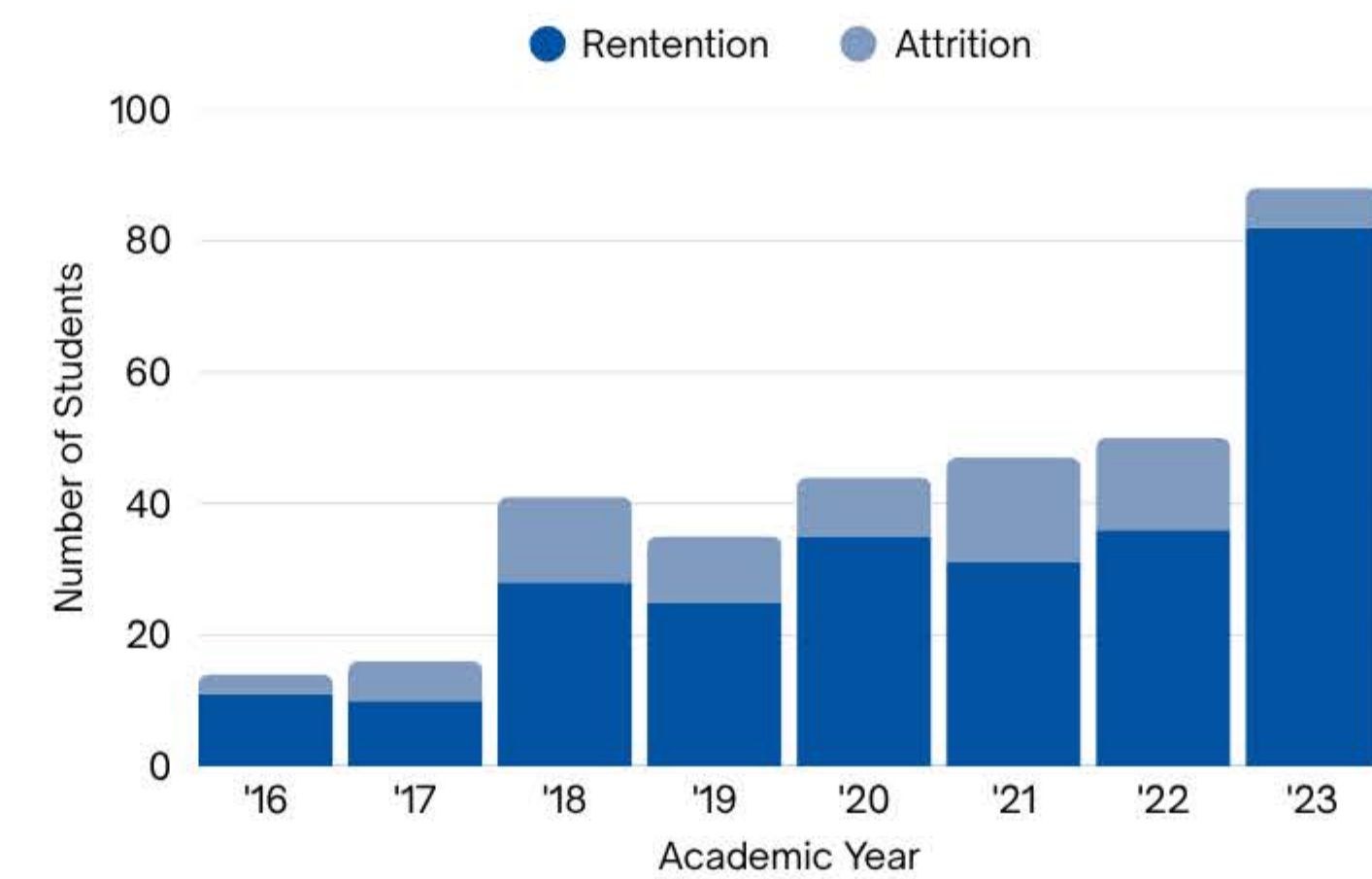
- 2016-2021 saw an average of 24% overall racial/ethnic diversity in the Direct Admit cohorts. Males represented an average of 13.6% of the Direct Admit cohorts.
- With the use of holistic admissions introduced in 2022, racial/ethnic diversity increased to 50% with an upward trend through 2024, and male representation increased to an average of 18.6%.



Graph 1. Racial and ethnic diversity across Direct Admit cohorts from 2016 to 2024.



Graph 2. Number of male students across Direct Admit cohorts from 2016 to 2024.



Graph 3. Retention & Attrition of students across Direct Admit cohorts from 2016 to 2024.

06. Limitations

- The analysis is limited to one program at a single public university, which may not reflect rends across other nursing schools or institutional types.
- The review focuses exclusively on the Direct Admit pathways, excluding students who entered through college pathway, transfer, and second-degree routes.
- Due to relatively recent implementation of holistic admissions, outcome data for the most recent cohorts is incomplete.
- Retention data may be influenced by variable not captured in the data set, including recourses set in place by the School of Nursing.

07. Conclusion

Holistic admissions does not lower standards, rather it broadens the definition of what it means to be a strong candidate, ensuring that the nursing workforce is prepared to meet the demands of a diverse population health landscape.

Holistic admissions is a strategic investment in the future of nursing and population health. The identified increase in student diversity after its implementation demonstrates the effectiveness of an HA approach. As threats to DEI initiatives grown nationally, this review highlights the need to protect and sustain holistic practices to ensure a nursing workforce that is equipped to meet the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse population.

08. Recommendations & Next Steps

1. Examine correlations between diversity, licensure success, and post-grad employment in underserved communities.
2. Recommend a holistic admissions review approach for graduate nursing, and second-degree nursing admissions. Develop model and rubric that aligns with Graduate Admissions and nursing workforce needs.
3. Provide bias and implicit bias recognition education and training for graduate and second-degree admissions committee faculty and leadership.

09. References

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From Access to Impact: How Holistic Nursing Admissions Can Drive Health Outcomes

Chelsea Ortiz, MPH, CLC

Biography

Chelsea Ortiz has worked in higher education for over a decade with roles in nursing admissions, enrollment management, and student success initiatives. As the Director of Nursing Admissions, Enrollment Management, and Communication at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU), she plays a pivotal role in shaping the academic journeys of both undergraduate and graduate nursing students.

Chelsea's commitment to equity and public health is evident through her active participation in numerous university and professional committees. She also serves on the board of the CT Chapter of the National Association of Hispanic Nurses and serves on the New England Minority Nurse Leadership Collaborative (NEMNLC), and has received multiple recognitions for her contributions to student well-being, leadership, and social justice.

She holds a Master of Public Health from Southern Connecticut State University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from Fairfield University. She is a Certified Lactation Consultant and has received specialized training in trauma-informed student care, resilience, and student mental health. With a bilingual background in English and Spanish, Chelsea brings cultural awareness, compassion, and advocacy to all aspects of her work. Chelsea prides herself on creating inclusive learning environments, advancing healthcare equity, and developing future nurse leaders prepared to serve diverse communities.

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