

# How Does Depth & Timing of Relationship-Based Outreach Influence College Enrollment Decisions Amongst Students from Rural Nebraska?

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## Introduction

Students from rural Nebraska face multiple challenges when it comes to accessing higher education. Not only are they often far from BSN-level programs, but they also may not know much about careers in health professions or have people in their lives who can help them navigate the journey both to and through college.

These barriers can make it harder for students to dream about becoming a nurse or to believe that it's even possible. At the same time, rural Nebraska needs more nurses.

While the literature on college access is well-developed, less is known about how the depth and timing of institution-initiated, relationship-based outreach influences enrollment decisions particularly for rural students in health professions programs.

## Theoretical Framework

### Social Capital Theory

*Coleman (1988); Behrens (2014)*

Recruiters function as bridging agents who transfer social capital that rural students lack in their existing networks.

### Human Capital Theory

*Coleman (1988); Perna (2006)*

Education is a long-term investment. Rural students undervalue a BSN degree when they lack proximate professional examples.

### Expectancy-Value Theory

*Perna (2000); Turley-Ames (2023)*

Enrollment requires belief in success (expectancy) and a compelling reason to pursue a BSN (value). Rural Students often carry deficits in both.

### Tinto's Model/Bean & Metzner

*Bean & Metzner (1985)*

Environmental pull factors (family obligation, geographic dislocation, financial pressure) drive attrition. Pre-enrollment integration is a retention investment.

## Literature Review

**Five key themes consistently emerged across the literature:**

### Theme One: Where you live shapes opportunity before you even make a choice

Hillman's (2016) "education dessert" framework reminds us that geography just isn't a backdrop as it can fundamentally limit which students even get the chance to consider college. Wells (2021) builds on this this by showing rural enrollment gaps persist regardless of socioeconomic status.

### Theme Two: Social capital as the enrollment bridge

Coleman (1988) shows that who you know and what support they offer can be just as important as what you know. Behrens (2014) found that for first-generation students, feeling connected to a college community made them more likely to enroll. Turley-Ames (2023) highlights how, especially for rural students, consistent and trust-based relationships with recruiters can fill that same supportive role for students.

### Theme Three: Timing matters when it comes to outreach

Perna's (2000, 2006) phased model (predisposition, search, choice) shows that interventions need to meet students where they are in their journey. For rural students, making a real impact means reaching out sooner than the usual recruitment timelines would suggest.

### Theme Four: Expectancy and value gaps are major barriers

Perna (2006) and Turley-Ames (2023) point out two big barriers: rural students underestimate their likelihood of academic success, and they may not see the true value of a nursing degree for their own futures. If messaging doesn't speak to these local realities; it misses the mark.

### Theme Five: Feeling a sense of belonging before enrollment predicts whether students stick with college

Bean & Metzner's (1985) revision of Tinto's model shows how outside factors, such as family or community obligations, can be the biggest reasons students leave college. The way a student is welcomed into the college community can make all the difference in whether they finish their degree.

## Next Steps

- **CRM analysis** Take a close look at when UNMC College of Nursing first reached out to rural Nebraska students, how often they connected, what types of contact were used and whether students built real relationships with recruiters. Then, see how these connections influenced students' decisions to enroll over a certain period.
- **Enrollment outcome data** Compare where enrolled students come from with the history of outreach they received to spot any patterns. Does deeper or earlier contact lead to more students enrolling?
- **Student survey** Ask current students from rural backgrounds about their experiences. How strong were their relationships with recruiters? When did they first feel truly connected? What mattered most in their enrollment decision?
- **Recruiter interviews** Have in-depth conversations with recruitment staff about how they build relationships with students, what outreach strategies work, and what challenges they face in keeping rural students engaged.

## References

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- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*, S95–S120.
- Hillman, N. W. (2016). Geography of college opportunity: The case of education deserts. *American Educational Research Journal, 53*(4), 987–1021.
- Perna, L. W. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *Journal of Higher Education, 71*(2), 117–141.
- Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 21). Springer.
- Turley-Ames, K. (2023). Recruiting rural students by building relationships. *Journal of Rural Education, 44*(1), 1–10.
- Wells, R. (2021). Reconsidering rural-nonrural college enrollment gaps: The role of socioeconomic status in geographies of opportunity. *American Educational Research Journal, 58*(1), 1–20.

# This will be the title for the scientific poster. It should be brief and impactful.

Author 1, Author 2, Author 3, and any additional Authors,  
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## Background / Introduction

- What do we know about the topic?
- Include only the most pertinent, relevant information
- Why is this work important?
- Hypothesis

### Poster tips 1 - Preparation

- Follow UNMC branding requirements
  - Templates: [brandwise.unmc.edu/unmc/templates](https://brandwise.unmc.edu/unmc/templates)
- Follow conference guidelines for posters
- Set poster size: Design → Slide Size → Custom Slide Size

## Objective / Purpose

- “The purpose of this project is....”
- Goals / aims for the project
- Make sure poster addresses these objectives

## Methods

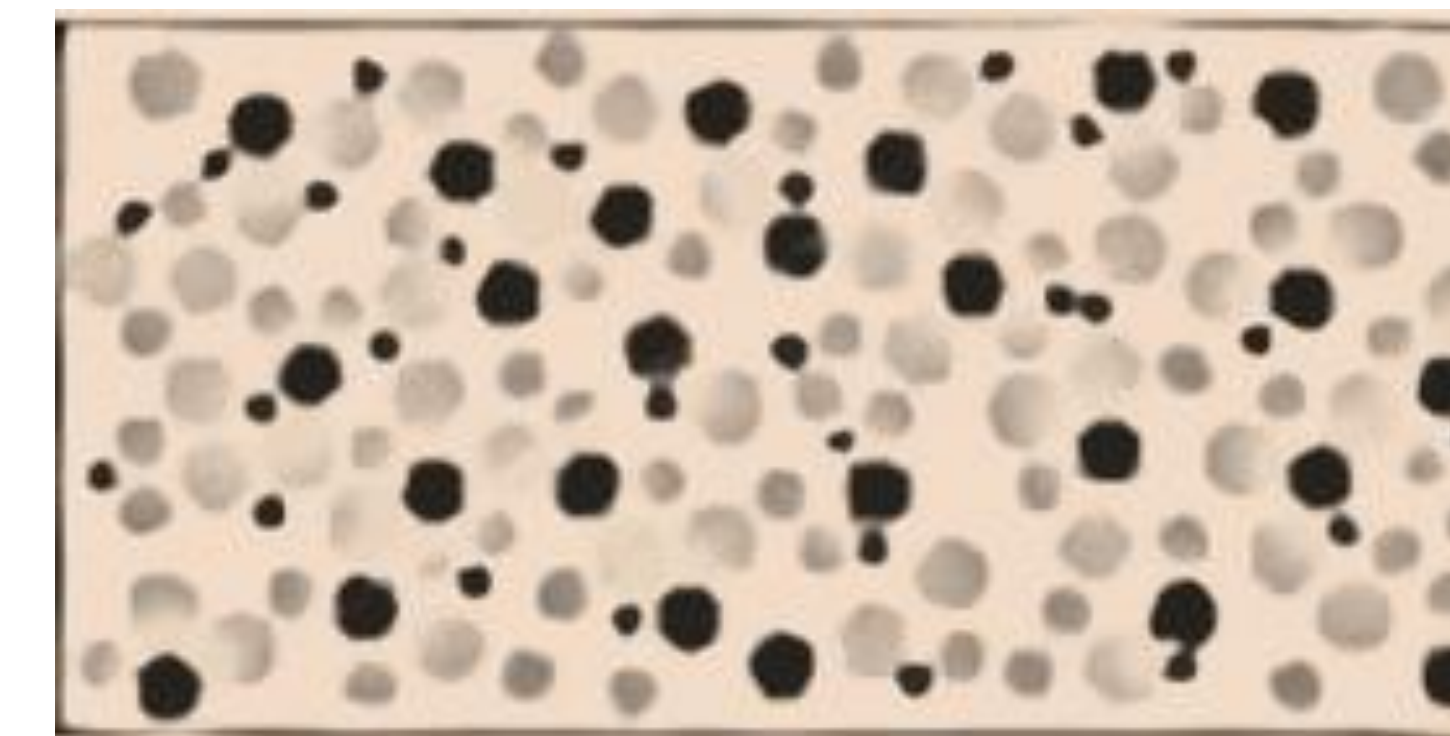
- Brief description of research methods
- Sample / subject selection
- Study design
- Instruments / Tools / Materials / Measures used
- Data analysis methods
- Consider diagrams / flow charts

### Poster tips 2 – Content

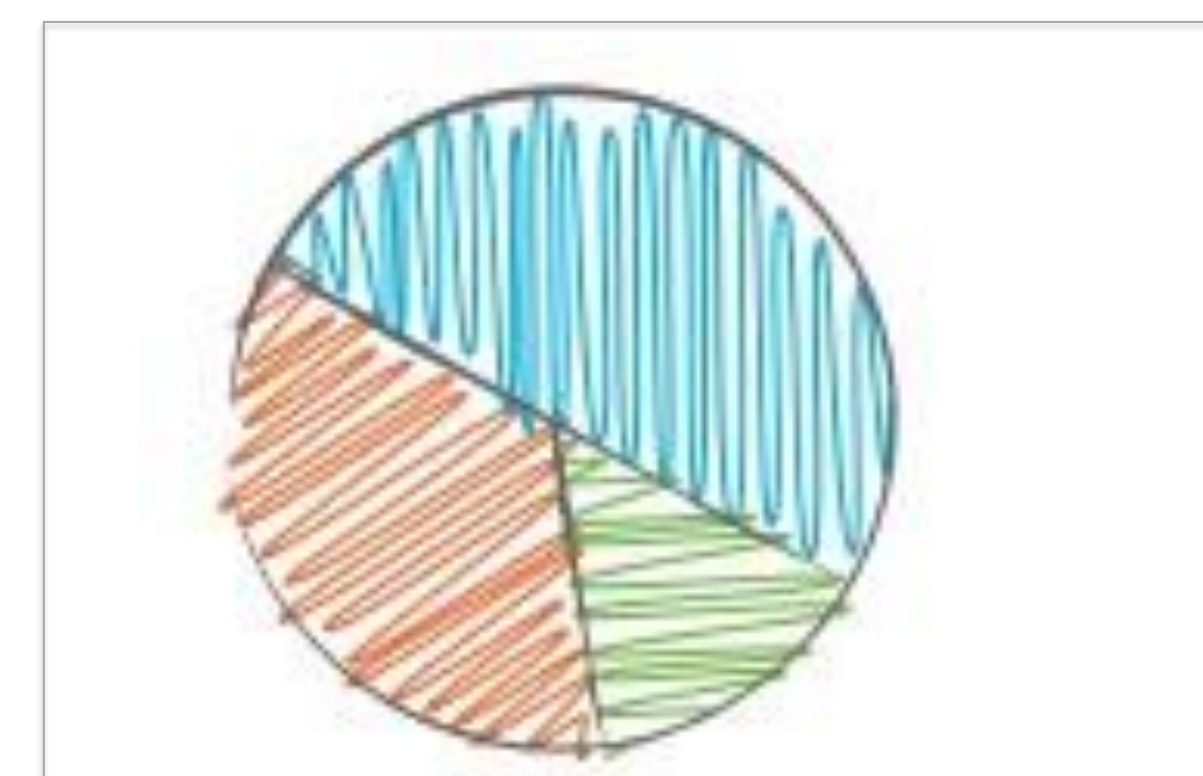
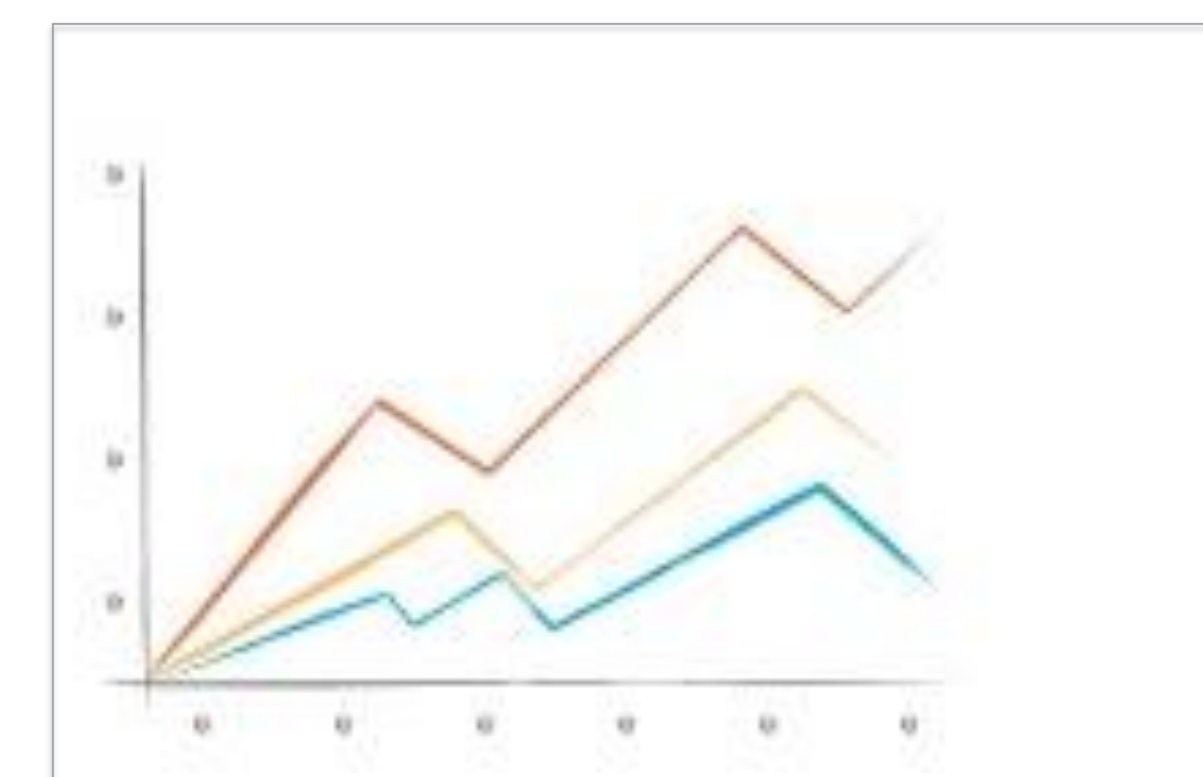
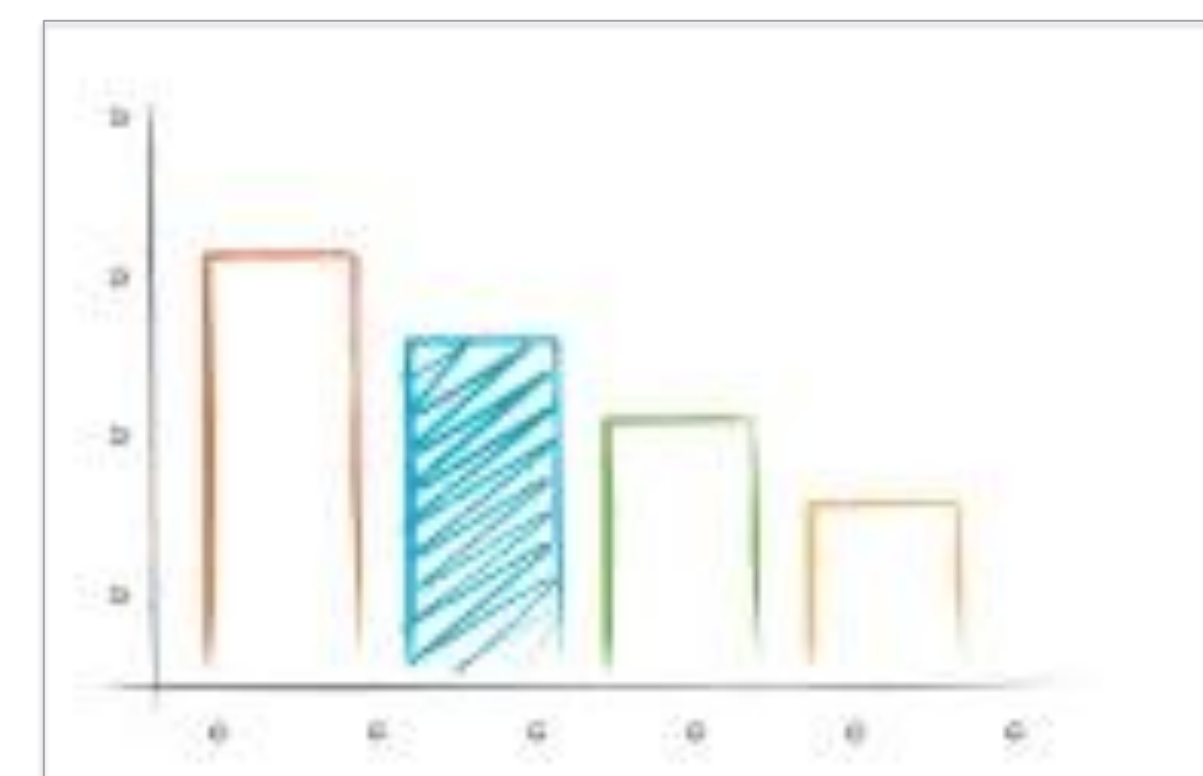
- Your poster is an “illustrated abstract” or a storyboard of your project
- It should be attractive / eye-catching
- Select 1-2 take-home points – it is not a mini-manuscript
- Use bullet points and sentence fragments
- White space helps with readability
- Can be read in 3-5 minutes

## Results

- Describe sample
- Analysis results /findings
- Images > Words
  - Graphs / Charts
  - Tables
  - Photos
- Don’t duplicate information – include in images or in text
- Clearly label images



Place descriptions or summary statements near the corresponding image



Place descriptions or summary statements near the corresponding image

### Poster tips 3 – Design

- Sketch layout in advance – logical reading flow, easy to follow
- Font
  - Use Arial
  - Legible from 6-10 feet away
  - Minimum 24 point for body text
- No more than 3 colors
- Images often look better with a border around them
- Consistent formatting across poster
- Align text and boxes
  - Shape Format or Picture Format menu tabs
  - Turn on gridlines and guides (View menu tab)

## Discussion / Conclusion / Future Directions

- Emphasize primary take-home points
- Was hypothesis supported?
- How do findings fit in with existing literature?
- Why are your findings significant / new insights?
- Implications of findings
- What direction should future research take?

### Poster tips 4 – Accessibility for people who have visual disabilities

- No italics
- No red and green together
- Left aligned
- Simple fonts
- No text on top of a photo
- High contrast between text and background

### Poster tips 5 – Conference preparation

- Allow adequate time for printing (at least 1 week)
- Consider handouts of posters or adding a QR code link to poster or other info
- Have business cards / include your contact information on poster
- Prepare 3-5 minute response to “tell me about your poster/project”

## References

- <https://brandwise.unmc.edu/unmc/templates/>
- <https://sites.google.com/ncsu.edu/effective-posters/>
- <https://guides.library.cornell.edu/poster>
- Calbraith, D. (2020). How to develop and present a conference poster. *Nursing Standard*. doi, 10.
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Brandi Sestak

### Biography

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**Brandi J. Koester Sestak is a higher education administrator with more than 20 years of experience in enrollment, student services, and student success. She currently serves as Assistant Director of Enrollment and Community Engagement for the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Nursing in Lincoln, where she oversees enrollment operations, outreach, and onboarding for new students. In this role, she supervises a team of ten professionals, leads process and policy review, and develops partnerships with regional and institutional partners to strengthen recruitment pipelines and support student entry into nursing programs.**

**Prior to her current role, Brandi held multiple positions within UNMC's College of Nursing supporting students from point of interest through enrollment, progression, and commencement, and contributing to the development of new student orientation and targeted academic support programming. Before joining UNMC, she served in senior student affairs leadership roles at Nebraska Wesleyan University, providing strategic oversight for residential education programs and leading major initiatives including gender-inclusive housing implementation, COVID-19 housing operations, and large-scale residence hall renovation projects. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from Augustana University and has completed advanced training in mediation, mindfulness instruction, and evidence-based student wellness and intervention programs.**

### Contact Information

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