

## Original Article

# Caring in Action: Student-Centered Strategies to Foster Success and Program Completion

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### Abstract

#### Background

The State of Georgia in the United States has the country's third-lowest nurse-to-population ratio. Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC) has been ranked as the most ethnically diverse college in the southern region of the United States. Over 40% of these students are first-time college students.

**Problem:** First-generation college students come from underrepresented groups and may experience uncertainty related to the rigors of college and the nursing school experience, leading to anxiety that is not conducive to learning.

**Methodology:** We provide practical examples of how administrators, educators, and staff intentionally implement consistent student-centered practices of caring, combined with an interactive curriculum, to reduce students' uncertainty and achieve success.

**Results:** This program has maintained a retention rate >90% with an above-average NCLEX pass rate in 2024.

**Conclusion:** An intentional student-centered caring culture can significantly transform students' educational experiences, enabling them to achieve graduation. Students graduate as caring, competent nurses, filling the nursing shortage within their immediate community, the state of Georgia, and beyond.

**Keywords:** Nursing, Students, Uncertainty, Anxiety, Diversity, Multigenerational, Caring.

### Introduction

Located in the southern state of Georgia, our baccalaureate nursing program was founded with a singular mission: to educate and empower a richly multicultural community of future nurses through a caring-centered approach. For eleven consecutive years, our college has been recognized by U.S. News & World Report as the most ethnically diverse institution in the southern region and third among regional colleges nationwide. This

richly textured global community of learners is not just a statistic; it is the soul of our campus.

Our students come from low-income families, are often the first in their families to attend college, and many speak English as a second language. Some are new immigrants building new lives in the United States, while others are adults returning to fulfill a long-held dream of becoming nurses. Together, these learners, whom we will refer to as our students in this paper, bring extraordinary resilience, purpose,

and cultural richness to the classroom and campus.

To nurture their success, the Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC) nursing program was intentionally built upon Boykin and Schoenhofer's (1993) Theory of Nursing as Caring, which asserts that caring is the essence of nursing and that all humans are inherently caring beings. This theoretical foundation serves as both a philosophical compass and a practical guide for faculty, shaping how we teach, support, and relate to students. The purpose of this paper is to describe how intentional, operationalized caring strategies, based on this theory, are woven throughout every stage of the program, from admission to graduation. This caring environment enhances retention, strengthens learning, and influences the professional longevity of our graduates (McEachern, 2021; Watson et al., 2025).

### **Case Study of an Undergraduate Nursing Program**

Georgia faces a critical nursing workforce shortage, ranking third lowest in nurse-to-population ratio, with only 7.6 nurses per 1,000 persons. By 2030, the state will need to replace an estimated 13,260 retiring nurses. In response to this growing demand, Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC) launched a new baccalaureate nursing program twelve years ago in northeast Georgia, guided by a vision of access, excellence, and caring-centered education.

Situated in one of the most diverse counties in Georgia, GGC reflects the global tapestry of its surrounding community. Nearly 30% of the local population is foreign-born, more than double the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). A majority, 76% of GGC's student body mirrors this multicultural composition (GGC Demographics, 2025). Students represent 113 countries, with 34% identifying as African American/Black, 29% as Latino/Hispanic, and 20% as White. Forty percent are first-generation college students, and 88% receive financial aid (GGC Demographics, 2025).

This rich diversity brings both strength and complexity to the learning environment. Students arrive with varied cultural norms,

linguistic backgrounds, learning styles, and educational experiences, while also managing socioeconomic stressors, family responsibilities, and the emotional challenges of adaptation and belonging (Pratt et al., 2019; Weisen et al., 2024). These realities prompted nursing leadership to design an undergraduate program grounded in the principles of caring, one that honors students' humanity, affirms their worth, and equips them to thrive academically, personally, and professionally (Boykin & Schoenhofer, 1993).

Creating an intentional student-centered approach, as outlined in the latter part of the paper, has resulted in successful program outcomes with reduced emotional strain and an authentic, caring teaching and learning environment (Sitzman, 2010; 2017). The current retention rate is > 90%. The initial program completion rate based on students who complete the program within its designated four semesters is 87%. The completion rate representing students who complete the program within eight semesters is 97%. These numbers exceed the 80% desirable retention rate set by the National League of Nursing (Elkins, 2019). The National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) pass rate for 2024 was 100% and the 4-year average of 95% far exceeded our state and the national average of 88%. The following are key, caring yet actionable strategies that help our retention, satisfaction, progression, and graduation rates.

### **Understanding Student Challenges**

The program was created to meet the needs of our students, who are made up of first-generation students, students who do not speak English as their first language, financially disadvantaged students, immigrants, and older students. These students often face a unique constellation of academic, emotional, and social challenges, including higher academic anxiety compared to their peers. (LeBouef & Sieving, 2025; Kim et al, 2021). They report anxiety and stress, particularly in high-stakes environments such as clinical practicums and standardized testing (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Without family knowledge of how higher education systems work, these students may struggle with navigating institutional processes, balancing

family responsibilities, and managing high self-imposed expectations (LeBouef & Sieving, 2025). Imposter syndrome, limited access to mentorship, and a lack of familiarity with the academic language and culture of higher education may compound these students' anxiety. (El-Ashry et al., 2024; Kamalumpundi et al., 2024). Our students often face greater challenges on their path to graduation, like those experienced by immigrant learners, including cultural adjustment, language barriers, and limited academic support (Cheng et al., 2025; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kim et al., 202). These overlapping stressors can significantly influence academic engagement and success (Ono, 2019; Wagner et al., 2020).

However, our college's holistic, strong, and structured support systems affirm students' individual identities and potential, while mitigating potential psychological barriers to success (Kamalumpundi et al., 2024). The following student-centered strategies are intentionally carried out by all faculty, staff, and administration as daily micropractices of caring can reduce one's anxiety levels (Valluri & Gorton, 2022).

### **Foundation for a Student-Centered Learning Environment**

To support our students with global perspectives and rich lived experiences, Boykin and Schoenhofer's (1993) **Theory of Nursing as Caring** was adopted as the foundational framework of our program. This theory calls us to see each person as a whole and unique in every moment of living and caring. Through acts of kindness, authentic presence, and meaningful connection, our shared humanity continually unfolds, reminding us to celebrate nursing as both a sacred calling and a profession grounded in compassion and growth. Boykin and Schoenhofer (1993) further emphasize that every aspect of nursing education should reflect "the domain of nurturing persons living, caring, and growing in caring" (p. 41).

In addition to promoting scholastic success, we aim to cultivate caring as a way of being, preparing students to embody compassion and professionalism in their future nursing roles (Wei, Henderson, et al., 2021; Sitzman, 2017).

From orientation to graduation, faculty, staff, and administrators demonstrate caring, consistency, and clarity to help students feel supported, valued, and comfortable seeking guidance (Sitzman, 2010). Guided by these aims, below we examine caring strategies, within and beyond the classroom, that bring Boykin and Schoenhofer's theory to life and promote the success of every student.

### **Belonging: What is in a Name**

In the classic American television show "Cheers," a gathering place was portrayed where individuals felt recognized, accepted, and valued each other. The theme song was called "Everybody Knows Your Name" (Portnoy & Angelo, 1982). This sense of belonging inspired a meaningful yet straightforward initiative within our nursing program. Upon entry, staff create a photo roster featuring each student's photograph (with permission) and both their given and preferred names. The roster is shared with all faculty and staff at the beginning of the semester, allowing accurate recognition and the correct use of names from the first week. As students progress through the cohort-based curriculum, faculty regularly update and maintain the roster to foster familiarity and connection. Research by Cooper et al. (2017) found that students reported it was important for instructors to know their names, which made them feel valued, increased engagement, and greater comfort in seeking help. Pronouncing someone's name accurately reflects cultural responsiveness and signals respect for students' identities (Marrun, 2018; Bagar-Fraley, 2020). This intentional approach, though small in scale, strengthens students' sense of belonging and inclusion in a program rich in cultural and linguistic diversity (Pedler et al., 2022).

### **Public Recognition Ceremonies for Transitions and Achievements**

In addition to orientation and commencement ceremonies common across U.S. nursing programs, our program has intentionally integrated three public ceremonies that honor students' growth, belonging, and perseverance throughout their nursing journey.

The **Dedication Ceremony**, held during the first semester before students begin their

clinical rotations, marks the transition from student to student-nurse. Family and friends are invited to witness this symbolic moment that celebrates caring, commitment, and community. This event embraces recommendations from a systematic review emphasizing the importance of commemorating first-generation students' strengths, such as perseverance, resilience, and accountability, while affirming their support networks (Rockwell & Kimel, 2025). Rooted in Boykin and Schoenhofer's (1993) circle of caring, the ceremony brings together faculty, peers, family, and staff who collectively pledge to support and nurture the students' learning journey. Faculty recommit each semester to foster success through partnership and mentorship. In contrast, loved ones are encouraged to provide tangible support, such as preparing meals, offering childcare, or serving as practice patients. This ceremony reinforces GGC's caring-centered philosophy and builds an enduring sense of community.

The **Senior Sendoff Ceremony**, which is conducted at the end of the program, offers a student-led celebration of resilience and achievement. Organized by the student nursing association, the event allows first- and second-year students to celebrate graduating seniors as they walk through a "gauntlet" of applause, balloons, and cheer. Lighthearted peer-nominated awards, such as Most Organized or Always Prepared, add a joyful dimension. Faculty serve only as facilitators, empowering students to lead the celebration and honor one another's journeys. Students also bring their traditional foods to share with everyone, making this a true feast for everyone.

The culminating event, the **Nursing Pinning Ceremony**, remains a cherished tradition in the profession. What distinguishes GGC's ceremony is the inclusion of a linguistics professor who ensures each graduate's name is pronounced accurately and respectfully. In a program characterized by rich linguistic and cultural diversity, this detail symbolizes deep respect for individual identity and global representation.

Collectively, these ceremonies create meaningful milestones that strengthen belonging, celebrate resilience, and affirm the

dignity of every learner. Anecdotal feedback from students and families consistently highlights the profound emotional and motivational impact of these experiences, which extend far beyond graduation and into professional identity formation.

### **Caring in the Classroom**

Nursing leadership and faculty intentionally adopted a **Flipped Classroom** model to promote engagement, collaboration, and shared responsibility for learning. This approach reflects the program's caring philosophy by emphasizing pre-class homework through recorded lectures, readings, and presentations, allowing in-class time for higher-order thinking, clinical reasoning, and problem-solving activities (Young et al., 2014). Our students read and understand the materials at their own pace, and textbooks can translate the texts into students' native language, making the content easier to comprehend. Research supports the idea that a flipped classroom enhances academic performance, satisfaction, and self-efficacy in nursing and health sciences (Banks & Kay, 2022).

To complement this model, our classrooms were intentionally configured with **seating arrangements** that foster teamwork, featuring small tables of four to five students for collaboration through case studies and decision-making exercises (Ma & Zhou, 2022). This arrangement cultivates community and critical thinking while reducing performance anxiety, particularly for first-generation students (Rockwell & Kimel, 2025). Cooperative activities such as "Build-a-Patient," peer teaching, skits, debates, and unfolding case studies in this seating configuration encourage shared learning, accountability, and mutual support, thus creating a nurturing, student-centered environment that emphasizes that each student takes responsibility for their education (Table 1).

Faculty intentionally use **inclusive language**, such as "we" and "us," to promote unity and share responsibility. They use course materials and case studies that reflect diverse cultural perspectives, ensuring relevance and equity. Faculty also employ strength-based language—using terms like "unsuccessful" or "academic

challenges,” which reinforces caring communication, to influence students’ intent to graduate (Henderson, Sewell, & Wei, 2020).

Nursing students commonly experience significant academic stress and anxiety, which may be amplified among first-generation and immigrant learners (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Manasingh et al., 2019). To **reduce testing anxiety and stress**, we use simple relaxation low-cost techniques such as coloring, eating

hard candy, chewing gum, solving puzzles, that can effectively reduce anxiety related to examinations (Ashdown et al., 2018; Chmiel & Malinowska, 2025; Manasingh et al., 2019; Yaman et al., 2019). These practices decrease stress and contribute to students’ intention to persist in their nursing program by promoting emotional regulation and confidence in a caring academic environment.

**Table 1: Strategies for a Caring Student-Centered Program**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Grizzly Orientation (GO)</b>	Faculty actively guide incoming students through registration and onboarding processes, reducing anxiety and promoting early connection and belonging.
<b>Dedication Ceremony</b>	A formal event marking students’ transition to clinical practice; it reinforces commitment to compassionate care and shared responsibility for success.
<b>Senior Student Send-Off</b>	Peer-organized celebration fostering inter-cohort community, symbolic reflection, and mentorship among students.
<b>Pinning Ceremony</b>	Culminating recognition of academic and professional achievement, emphasizing cultural and linguistic respect through accurate name pronunciation.
<b>Classroom Configuration</b>	Collaborative classroom design supports small-group engagement, adaptability, and active learning.
<b>Flipped Classroom Model</b>	Pre-class preparation enhances in-class critical thinking, discussion, and faculty–student interaction.
<b>Technology Support</b>	On-site and loaner technology services ensure equitable access and timely problem resolution.
<b>Cohort Representation</b>	Student-elected representatives facilitate structured communication between cohorts and faculty, promoting transparency and inclusion.

**Note:** This table contains some strategies that are used in the caring student-centered program

In addition to in-class strategies designed to reduce stress, each student admitted to the nursing program is assigned to a **faculty mentor**. Effective mentoring relationships build confidence among first-generation college students and help them overcome barriers to success (Hagler, 2023). Leadership intentionally selected the title **mentor** rather than **adviser** to reflect a broader, more holistic role. Faculty mentors serve as coaches, advisers, and teachers, offering individualized

academic and personal guidance. They are knowledgeable about course content and institutional resources and proactively connect students with tutoring, mental health support, financial aid, and other campus services. Mentors also draw on their professional experience and community partnerships to assist students in exploring career pathways, creating a seamless bridge between academic, personal, and professional development.

To further promote student success, our leadership established an **Academic Student Success Coach** position, held by an experienced faculty member who collaborates with mentors and instructors to provide early, targeted intervention. The Academic Success Coach supports students in developing effective study habits, prioritizing content, and improving test-taking skills, ensuring that no student falls through the cracks from the first class to the final course.

Beyond the mentoring framework, faculty, administrators, and staff, including the **Dean**, maintain a clear, open-door policy for students seeking immediate assistance. This accessibility reinforces the program’s commitment to removing barriers and fostering student success. Student evaluations consistently highlight the availability and responsiveness of faculty and staff, emphasizing that students feel heard, valued, and supported. This shared responsibility or caring between instructors, mentors, and advisers allows students to be supported without any one faculty feeling burdened (Neff et al., 2022). Such wrap-around support creates “a caring environment that offers the development of potential while allowing the person to choose the best action *for themselves* at a given point in time” (Watson, 2008, p. 75).

**Caring Beyond the Classroom**

Recognizing that learning extends beyond the classroom, GGC provides technology, counseling, and food support. There is a robust Technology Support Center on campus, open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., where students can walk in and ask for help. Knowledgeable, on-site technology staff assist students with problems with their computers, testing

platforms, and digital navigation, while short-term computer loans are available to address financial barriers. This is an essential service, as 88% of students receive financial assistance and may lack access to technological support at home.

Students also have access to free counseling services through a program called **Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)**. This program provides support to students dealing with the daily challenges of their lives in a safe, inclusive, and caring environment. Students also have access to this service twenty-four hours a day through text. This allows students the privacy to contact trained professionals who are invested in their success. In addition, a nursing students organization called the Gwinnett Grizzly Bear Association of Nursing Students (GGBANS) provides daily support and belonging to one another, providing a critical key factor in retention, a sense of community (Mason et al., 2025).

Finally, **GGC Care Pantry** is available to students who have a valid identification. A fall 2020 student survey revealed real challenges: 19% of students knew someone facing food insecurity, 43.6% struggled to meet basic needs, and nearly one in four worried about running out of food (Georgia Gwinnett College). According to GGC’s leadership, “Our food pantry contributes to the holistic success of students and is a welcomed relief for those who desperately need this service,” (Georgia Gwinnett College, 2021, para. 2). Through these college-wide acts of caring, we reaffirm that education is not merely about knowledge acquisition, but about nurturing the whole person: mind, body, and spirit (Table 2).

**Table 2 Faculty-Level Student-Centered Strategies**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Inclusive Use of Language</b>	Faculty employ inclusive, culturally responsive language and examples to promote equity, belonging, and mutual respect.
<b>Testing Practices</b>	Supportive test preparation methods (e.g., “brain dump,” collaborative reviews, calming aids) foster confidence and reduce anxiety.

Strategy	Description
Team Learning Activities	Group-based projects, case studies, and presentations enhance critical thinking and teamwork competencies.
Open-Door Policy	Faculty maintain accessibility for academic and personal support, emphasizing responsiveness and trust within the learning environment.

**Note:** Faculty-level student-centered strategies are used to support students throughout their educational journey.

**Conclusion:** The launch of this program provided an opportunity to design a truly student-centered nursing curriculum grounded in caring and community need. By integrating intentional structures and faculty practices that honor the whole student, we cultivated an environment where learning and caring coexist. These approaches reflect Watson’s (2008) **Caring Science** and Boykin and Schoenhofer’s (1993) **Theory of Nursing as Caring**, both of which emphasize authentic presence, compassion, and relationships that nurture the human potential of our students. Faculty in larger programs could adapt these strategies to transform culture by prioritizing caring relationships that sustain both students and educators. When students feel seen, heard, and valued, they gain confidence to persist through challenges and dare to thrive. With consistent, holistic support, we have achieved sustained success in retention and program completion. More importantly, our students report that this caring foundation extends beyond graduation, nurturing their professional resilience, purpose, and longevity in their profession.

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