

Innovation in Practicum Placements and Site Management

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Background

- Understanding the changing landscape of educational demographics plays a key role in universities' work to mitigate falling student completion rates and enrollment. A recent study claimed that only 45% of students earn a degree or certificate within six years of starting college, while 31% drop out entirely (Cooper, 2017). Non-traditional students now form the majority (72%) of U.S. students in higher education (Baker, 2016). Non-traditional students are parents, professionals, full-time employees, above age 25, or veterans (Achieving Success, 2018). With the rise in non-traditional students, institutions are expected to invest in flexible and accessible programs, tailored to support service growth.
- In keeping with CCNE standards, the University of Maryland School of Nursing's Graduate Program provides its students with practicum and project placements. In an increasingly crowded field (nursing school enrollment continues to rise), competition for securing these sites and placements remains fierce (AANC, 2021). As stated in a previous MDAC abstract, "the primary challenge facing NP education is the limited number of available clinical sites and competent preceptors to complete the clinical hours"—and much the same can be said for practicum/project hours (Akintade et al., 2020).
- The COVID-19 Pandemic accelerated these trends, making non-traditional education the norm, and reducing the number of sites open to hosting students.

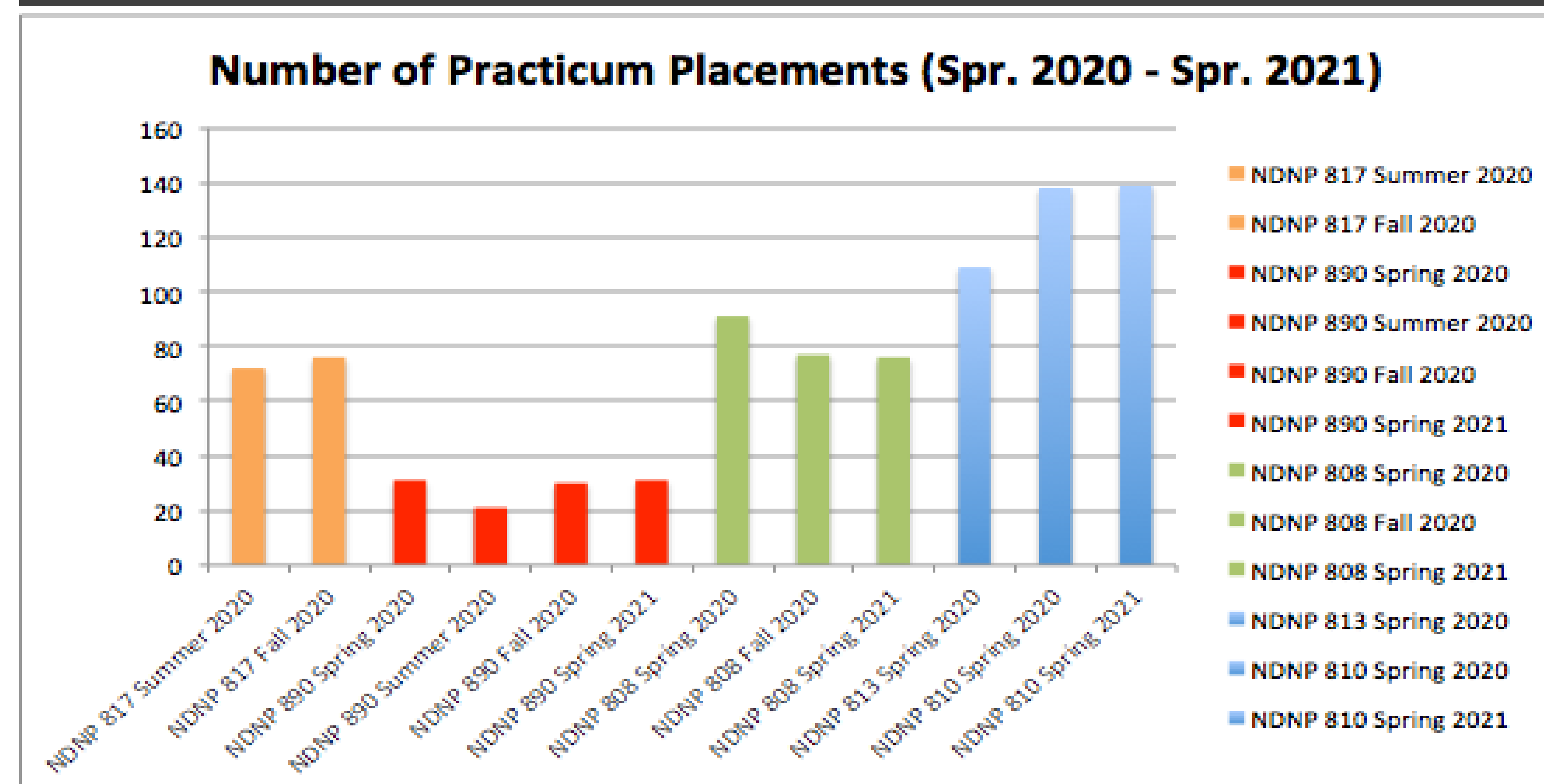
Objectives

- Explore innovative initiatives to further student retention and maintain a competitive program in a field that increasingly caters to non-traditional students.
- Explore innovative initiatives to further site retention, and remain competitive in developing relationships with new sites.

Methods

- During COVID19 Pandemic, practicum students were placed at sites to complete their required semester hours without taking an incomplete or utilizing simulation labs. Through web-based, live-chat information sessions with students and faculty guests, the graduate-level practicum placements process was successful even during this period of crisis. The Office of Registration and Student Placements (ORSP) developed a more organized time-frame (placement and onboarding processes begin earlier than in the past) to ensure a smooth practicum placements process. UMSON itself prompts students with onboarding requirements based on previous exchanges with the site, which alleviates the site's burden as relates to this paperwork. Increased reliance on Exxat/STEPS, UMSON's placement database, has been crucial in this process as well. The platform is all-inclusive (used by preceptors, staff, faculty, and students) and is a user-friendly tool for organization and outreach. Leadership collaboration, innovation, strategic planning, and flexibility aided in the success of practicum placement. Through the practicum process students gain meaningful learning experience while our site partners are supported by the students' work. Flexibility has been critical to adapting to the current needs of sites and students, and this makes the placement process successful.
- The use of a sales-based approach to site relationship management has been key in adapting to the shrinking pool of placements. Considering sites to be customers, recent UMSON outreach has prioritized principles of modern selling—Customer Retention, Database and Customer Relationship Management, Marketing the Product, and Problem Solving (Jobber and Lancaster, 2015). The careful managing of Exxat provides us with a reliable database for sites, contributing to our strong record of customer retention and relationship management. Preceptorship is incentivized through the opportunity to apply for faculty associate status, thank you letters, and tax credit benefits—all of which are effectively "marketed" through our "Preceptor Fact Sheet." The ORSP team has remained elastic in its approach—demonstrating "Problem Solving" in the face of challenges caused by the Pandemic. Keeping in touch with preceptors and clinical site representatives and following up on their needs, carefully constructed surveys sent to alumni, substantial cold calling of local practices, and use of Exxat tools have all helped ORSP replenish the program's steady diet of external partners. According to Jobber and Lancaster, "modern selling often involves multiple calls, the use of a team-selling approach and considerable analytical skills."

Figures



- 169 different sites were used in graduate practicum and project placements over the above time frame.

Conclusions

Like many other higher education institutions, UMSON has had to reevaluate its practices and innovate to remain a competitive program. Increased flexibility by the ORSP team in its processes and planning has worked to the benefit of the non-traditional student. Innovation and flexibility have also furthered site retention and relationship management, a direct benefit to the student experience. For graduate practicum placements alone, UMSON signed contracts with 36 new sites in 2020 and five new sites in 2021 (so far this year)—an indication that our diversification of outreach strategies and a sales-based approach has helped in this regard.

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Notes

Exxat/STEPS was used to verify the numbers for graduate level practicum and project placements for 2020 and 2021.