Nursing student retention in an associate degree nursing program utilizing a retention specialist[1]

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Abstract
Personal, academic, and environmental factors related to associate degree nursing student attrition and retention were analyzed in association with the use of a retention specialist for individual and group tutoring. Statistically significant relationships were found between higher course grades and higher graduation grade point average with the use of the retention specialist with individual and group tutoring. A retention specialist may support academic factors impacting nursing student attrition and retention to graduation.
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1. Introduction

Nursing student retention continues to pose a major challenge for nursing education programs and nurse educators (Wells, 2003; Wray, Barrett, Aspland, & Gardiner, 2012). Academic demands of nursing school are rigorous, and supplemental instruction to enhance knowledge and critical thinking skills may improve student retention rates (Harding, 2012; Jeffreys, 2007). The continued evaluation and implementation of innovative strategies, such as the employment of a retention specialist to improve student retention, may enhance nursing student success and improve graduation rates. The nursing profession is adversely affected when students do not graduate from their educational program and enter the workforce (Gardner, 2005; Manifold & Rambur, 2001; Wells, 2003).

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Supplemental instruction is beneficial in both the nontraditional and diverse nursing student populations for decreasing attrition rates, improving study and critical thinking skills, and enhancing retention (Jeffreys, 2007; Ramsburg, 2007; Robinson & Niemer, 2010; Sutherland, Hamilton, & Goodman, 2007). Although several theories have attempted to explain student retention, the nursing undergraduate retention and success (NURS) model developed by Jeffreys (2004) uses a pragmatic approach to studying nursing student attrition and retention. The NURS (2004) model is based on traditional retention theories and presents an organizing framework that examines the "multidimensional factors that affect nursing student retention and success in order to identify at-risk students, develop diagnostic-prescriptive strategies to facilitate success, guide innovations in teaching and educational research, and evaluate strategy effectiveness" (p.11). Jeffreys' (2004) model has identified personal, academic, and environmental factors that have impacted nursing student retention and focuses not only on retention but also on the promotion and success of undergraduate nursing students by utilizing

innovative, adaptive methodologies to counter factors that impact retention (Jeffreys, 2004).

Supplemental instruction is a viable intervention to improve nursing student retention (Harding, 2012; Jeffreys, 2012), and retention specialists are hired by schools of nursing to provide this instruction. These retention specialists are employed as an increasing number of nontraditional students are being admitted to associate degree nursing (ADN) programs. These students tend to be older, with increased family responsibilities, and employed full or part time, with time lapses in their educational experience that may render them academically unprepared (Harding, 2012; Jeffreys, 2007). Supporting this population of students through supplemental instruction may improve retention and graduation rates. Approximately two thirds of all nurses were educated in community college ADN programs (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010).

In light of the escalating nursing shortage, a priority for nursing education programs is how to improve academic success and decrease attrition (Harding, 2012; Harris, Rosenberg, & O' Rourke, 2014). A number of variables have been examined in relation to nursing student success. Many of these variables have been combined to determine specific predictors for improving retention rates in nursing programs. The most common variables examined include grades in prerequisite science courses, grade point average (GPA), and tutoring or mentoring services.

By understanding the magnitude of nursing student attrition on both institutions of higher learning and the health care industry and by reviewing data on previous strategies, nurse educators may gain insight into effective methodologies to improve retention. Jeffreys' (2004) model provides the theoretical framework for this descriptive, correlational study conducted in an ADN program that evaluated the effects of a retention specialist on nursing student retention and graduation. The purpose of this descriptive, correlational study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a retention specialist on nursing student retention, attrition, and graduation from an ADN program. The research questions include the following:

1. Are there differences in personal characteristics between students who do and do not utilize a retention specialist?
2. Are there differences in academic characteristics between students who do and do not utilize a retention specialist?
3. Are there differences in environmental characteristics between students who do and do not utilize a retention specialist?
4. Are there differences in first and second year attrition rates between students who do and do not utilize a retention specialist?
5. Are there differences in first and second year retention rates between students who do and do not utilize a retention specialist?
6. Are there differences in graduation trends between students who do and do not utilize a retention specialist?

1.2. Literature Review

The development of innovative approaches for improving student retention is an ongoing process that may include course structuring, assessment testing throughout the program, and obtaining grant funding for a faculty position whose primary role is tutoring (Higgins, 2004). Supplemental instruction and tutoring are two strategies proven to improve nursing student retention.

The results of a study completed by Harding (2012) supported the premise that participating in supplemental instruction improved academic success for a cohort of at-risk students. The findings correlate with previous reports that although there were no significant statistical differences in student grades, the stratagems provided by the supplemental course positively affected student success (Gallagher, Bomba, & Crane, 2001; Sutherland et al., 2007). Students' persistence combined with faculty interventions are two interpretive pedagogies that have also been evaluated to address attrition and retention in nursing students (Williams, 2010).

Several of the research summary findings by Dorsey and Baker (2004) and Dennison (2010) regarding undergraduate mentoring yielded positive findings from the mentees' perspectives. Robinson and Niemer (2010) completed a study that showed peer mentoring to result in higher examination scores and GPAs for the mentees. According to a study by Higgins (2004), providing peer tutoring to at-risk students resulted in a decreased attrition rate in a medical–surgical nursing course. The effects of peer mentoring on a group of university undergraduates were studied by Rodger and Tremblay (2003). The results showed peer mentoring to result in higher course grades for students who were dedicated to the program and a decreased attrition rate.

Jeffreys NURS model identifies specific personal, academic, and environmental factors and outcomes that have impacted nursing student retention. These factors have been supported by additional researchers as influential to the retention of nursing students.

1.2.1. Personal Factors

Many nursing researchers have conducted studies to identify specific predictors and inhibitors of academic success in nursing education programs in an effort to improve teaching and retention strategies (Jeffreys, 2004; Salamonson et al., 2011; Shelton, 2012). More specifically, selected researchers have focused their attention on the particular needs of minority students to improve the retention rates of those students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Duerksen, 2013; Harris et al., 2014; Veal, Bull, & Miller, 2012). As a group, minority students experience higher attrition rates in college, including the nursing discipline (Gilchrist & Rector, 2007; Harris et al., 2014; Manifold & Rambur, 2001).

Gender proved to be a significant factor for student attrition in two longitudinal studies performed by Mulholland, Anionwu, Atkins, Tappern, and Franks (2008) and McLaughlin, Muldoon, and Moutray (2010). The studies concluded that male students