



Recruitment, advising, and retention programs – Challenges and solutions to the international problem of poor nursing student retention: A narrative literature review



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of this literature review was to identify emerging themes in current research to identify challenges to nursing student retention internationally, as well as strategies to improve persistence.

Design: A narrative literature review was conducted.

Data Sources: Using CINAHL and HealthSource databases, journal articles were reviewed and evaluated for emerging themes related to the causes of high nursing student attrition rates and strategies to overcome this issue.

Review Methods: A five-step approach was used to complete the narrative review, beginning with problem identification, followed by the literature search, data analysis, theme emergence and synthesis of the information.

Results: The literature review supports the idea that poor retention is related not only to student ability, but also to a lack of necessary intervention by faculty beginning with the admission process and continuing throughout the curriculum. Alterations should be made in the recruitment and student selection process. Aggressive academic advising strategies should be implemented, and retention programs should be interwoven in to the nursing curriculum.

Conclusion: Student retention is a multifaceted issue that requires a multi-modal approach. Changes in recruitment, implementation of academic advising, and curriculum integration have the potential to help correct the problem.

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1. Introduction

The current nursing shortage, predicted to worsen in the near future, requires an increase in the number of qualified nurses graduating from accredited nursing schools (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008; Croxon and Maginnis, 2006). Nursing schools, however, have persistently high attrition rates, creating the need for immediate action to retain students through graduation. Poor student retention is a worldwide problem. In Australia, about 10% to 40% of students leave nursing education (Turner et al., 2006). The attrition rate in the United Kingdom is roughly 27% to 40%, and in Canada about 28% of students do not persist (Buchanan and Seccombe, 2010; Canadian Nurses Association, 2009). In the United States, nearly 50% of students leave the nursing program prior to graduation (Fraher et al., 2010). While no single intervention will correct the attrition problem, research suggests that alterations to recruitment and retention practices, innovative

academic advising strategies, and curriculum changes may evoke positive change if implemented correctly.

A five-step approach was used to complete the narrative review, beginning with problem identification, and followed by a literature search, data analysis, theme emergence, and synthesis of the results. The problem identified was high attrition rates in nursing programs internationally. Using CINAHL and HealthSource databases, a search with keywords “student retention” and “nursing education” was conducted. Inclusion criteria were English-language papers written after 2000. Exceptions were made for the works of Tinto and Benda, as their theoretical frameworks are considered seminal research on the subject of post-secondary student retention and provide a theoretical basis for current practices. Many articles were rejected as they focused on retention of practicing nurses in their selected area of employment, rather than on student nurse retention. Because the impact of academic advising on nursing education specifically has not been thoroughly researched, articles outside the field of nursing were included in the literature review. Each article was critically evaluated, and the following themes emerged: student retention theory, causes of attrition, recruitment changes, aggressive academic advising, and curriculum integration. What follows is a synthesis of the literature.

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1.1. Student Retention Theories

Tinto's model describes student attrition as a construct of environmental and social factors that integrate students into the academic environment, exploring why certain behaviors occur and how those behaviors affect persistence (Tinto, 1998). This model suggests that as students are integrated into the learning environment, their commitment to education and persistence is likely to increase. Integration may include inclusion in on-campus clubs and activities, peer tutoring groups, and orientation to on-campus resources and services, among other things. Tinto focuses on the students' pre-entry attributes, or background (Tinto, 1998; Tinto, 2006–2007).

Benda (1991) and Jeffreys (2014) apply Tinto's theory specifically to nursing students, finding that pre-entry requirements had a significant effect on retention and departure in nursing education and identifying persistence as a multi-factorial phenomenon. Jeffreys' Nursing Undergraduate Retention Model explains that students face both internal and external stressors in education and in their personal lives that will affect retention (Jeffreys, 2014). Students with unstable home lives, financial strains, or inadequate educational preparation are less likely to be successful in college. Faculty can impact social and academic integration and improve the chances for students to persist through graduation if personal stressors are identified and effectively addressed. Nursing students who are unable to find childcare, for instance, will be unable to fully immerse themselves into the educational community because their personal needs are not met. While faculty may not have the ability to provide childcare, providing a list of community resources could empower students to find their own solution.

1.2. Persistence vs. Retention vs. Attrition

Previous research has used the terms “low attrition” and “high persistence” interchangeably (Park et al., 2008). Persistence, a student's conscious choice to remain in school or accomplish academic goals, has been identified as an important measure of educational program success (Park et al., 2008). Students' abilities to remain in their selected educational program are affected by several factors, all of which require faculty understanding and support. Research suggests the need for creativity and innovation in the development of persistence enhancement programs specifically designed to meet the needs of students and improve student success (Freed & McLaughlin, 2013; Mastekaasa & Smeby, 2006; Veal, Bull, & Miller, 2012; Williams, 2010).

Conversely, attrition is a student's choice to withdraw from a program or departure from the program due to an inability to meet program standards. Park et al. (2008) urged postsecondary educators to consider the reasons behind attrition before labeling the program as ineffective or unsuccessful. Student withdrawal is not always a direct reflection of program failure, but rather an amalgamation of several other factors.

Many students leave nursing education because they can no longer afford tuition, because of personal stressors – particularly childcare – or because they realize that the program is no longer their goal (Bowden, 2008; Deary et al., 2003; Watson et al., 2009). In some cases students recognize they are unprepared for the level of difficulty. In the case of the online learner, for example, high attrition can reveal a lack of preparation for the rigors of self-paced, self-directed learning. Similarly, the difficulty level of the nursing curriculum may identify students who do not truly have a passion to make nursing a career. Conversely, one British study examined the reason that students persist in nursing education, finding that a personal commitment to achievement, as well as a good support system, are essential to student success (Cameron et al., 2011).

1.3. Persistence and Nontraditional Students

It is important to explore persistence in relation to specific student populations. Research suggests that nontraditional students are less likely to persist than traditional students (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Nontraditional students have more at stake, more personal responsibilities, and as such may have a more vested interest in their own educational journey, but they also have more barriers to program completion (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013; Mastekaasa & Smeby, 2006; Park et al., 2008; Veal et al., 2012). Increasing numbers of older students, second career seekers, minorities, and men are entering nursing education. For that reason, nurse educators should identify strategies to help these specific students to persist through graduation.

Many nontraditional students enter nursing programs as transfer students, having been previously enrolled in other programs. These students bring with them preconceived ideas of what nursing education is, how postsecondary education works, and perceptions of their own abilities (DiMaria, 2008; Jinkens, 2009). Previous negative educational experiences, coupled with the rigor of the nursing curriculum, may create difficulty retaining both nontraditional and transfer students. It is important for faculty to develop programs geared toward successful development of effective coping strategies, improved self-esteem and academic confidence, as well as a positive perception of the faculty, the nursing program, and the college or university (Hinsliff-Smith et al., 2012; Newton, 2008; Park et al., 2008).

1.4. Persistence and Ethnically Diverse Students

Traditionally, ethnic minorities have had higher attrition rates related to difficulty balancing personal and academic stressors, as well as poor preparation for postsecondary education. Research suggests that minority students may lack coping mechanisms and supportive resources to overcome the challenges of nursing education (Nndeu, 2009; Veal et al., 2012). Additionally, cultural differences between the student and the majority of faculty members make communication and the development of meaningful relationships difficult, leaving the student feeling disconnected from the school and create barriers to success (Baker, 2010; Miller, 2012; Nndeu, 2009; Veal et al., 2012). To improve persistence for these students, faculty must identify and implement supportive services and assist with social integration. Minority students want to see faculty who look like them, who have had similar experiences, and who can relate to them on a personal level (Baker, 2010; Bond & Cason, 2014; Igbo et al., 2011).

Minority students may lack sufficient preparation for the rigors of nursing education. Poor study skills, ineffective coping strategies, as well as a lack of familiarity with medical terminology are all barriers to retention (Igbo et al., 2011). In order to overcome these barriers, faculty should ensure critical thinking strategies are integrated into the curriculum. (Fettig & Friersen, 2014) Writing workshops that promote verbal and nonverbal communication, career coaching, clear educational expectations, as well as emotional support for the lifestyle changes necessary to succeed in nursing school can help better prepare minority students and help them to persist from enrollment through graduation (Baker, 2010; Bond & Cason, 2014).

2. Recruitment Practices and Admission Criteria

Recruitment of more qualified applicants is one strategy to combat attrition. Entrance exams, increased GPA requirements, as well as increasing minimum math and science scores have been explored as a means of increasing the quality of students. Studies from the UK and New Zealand found that prior education and age were significant predictors for academic achievement (van Rooyen et al., 2006). More mature students and those with higher entrance grades performed well on educational assessments. Another study, from the University

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