



## Factors related to academic success among nursing students: A descriptive correlational research study



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** The current rise in employment is improving forecasts for the future supply of registered nurses; however sizeable shortages are still projected. With the intention of improving academic success in nursing students, related factors need to be better understood.

**Objectives:** The purpose of the correlational study was to describe the relationship between emotional intelligence, psychological empowerment, resilience, spiritual well-being, and academic success in undergraduate and graduate nursing students.

**Design/setting:** A descriptive correlational design was utilized. The study was set in a private Catholic university.

**Participants:** There were 124 participants. There were 59% undergraduate and 41% graduate students.

**Methods:** Background data, in addition to the Spreitzer Psychological Empowerment Scale, the Wagnild and Young Resilience Scale, and the Spiritual Well-Being Scale and the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, was collected from students who met study criteria.

**Results:** In a combined sample, academic success was correlated with overall spiritual well-being, empowerment and resilience. Although academic success was not correlated with overall emotional intelligence, it was correlated with the emotional intelligence branch four (managing emotions) score. When undergraduate and graduate students were considered separately, only one correlation was found to be significantly related to academic success in the undergraduate sample, namely, emotional intelligence branch one (perceiving emotions). When examining the data from just graduate level nurses, significant relationships were found between total emotional intelligence with academic success, resilience with academic success, and psychological empowerment with academic success.

**Conclusion:** The significant relationship between psychological empowerment, resilience, spiritual well-being and academic success in this study supports the statements in the literature that these concepts may play an important role in persistence through the challenges of nursing education. Research is needed to examine if strategies to enhance empowerment, resilience, and spiritual well-being can increase academic success in a test–retest design.

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### Introduction

The current rise in employment is improving forecasts for the future supply of registered nurses; however sizeable shortages are still projected for the following decade in the United States as well as in other countries such as China (Buerhaus et al., 2009; Leong, 2012). A recent study by Buerhaus et al. (2009) predicts that by 2025 the United States will have

a nursing shortage twice as large as the shortfall in the middle 1960s. In order to alleviate the shortage, nursing programs will need to increase the supply of qualified nurses. Although college enrollments continue to grow, the attrition rate from nursing programs nationwide hovers around 50% (Newton and Moore, 2009). Both nationally and internationally (Gillen, 2012; O'Donnell, 2012), attrition rates in nursing programs are of concern as they reduce the supply of nurses.

Additionally, the nursing profession should be concerned about attrition rates for masters and doctoral nursing students as well. Attrition rates for master's programs range from 10 to 75% (Croxtton, 2013) and rates for doctoral programs range from 40 to 70% (Berman and Radda, 2012). Given the growing shortage of nursing faculty and family physicians, the above statistics are of concern. Graduate prepared nurses will be needed to replace the large number of retiring faculty in Canada and the United States (Cathro, 2011). In additions, nurse

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practitioners are needed to help alleviate the family physician shortage. By 2020, the United States is projected to confront a shortage of 91,500 doctors (Arvantes, 2012).

In an effort to address the shortages of nurses with undergraduate and graduate nursing degrees, nursing programs have been measuring student retention, attrition, and graduation rates. Nursing programs are not the only ones taking note of such measures. External credentialing organizations such as the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education mandates the calculation of graduation rates for all nursing programs (Robertson et al., 2010). The presumption is that measures such as graduation rates will help to guide nursing programs in monitoring how successful their curriculums are and to provide feedback on improving or maintaining strategies that facilitate student success (Robertson et al., 2010). Nurse educators need to examine ways to promote student success by improving our current methodologies and practices. In order to do so, the factors that influence nursing academic success need to be better understood.

## Background/Literature

Many university's admission departments dedicate substantial time and money for the recruitment and admission of nursing students (Shelton, 2012). Furthermore, admission staff are tasked with the ever more difficult charge of distinguishing applicants who can be successful (Bauchmoyer et al., 2004; Hopkins, 2008). Traditionally, a student's high school grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test® (ACT) have been identified as predictors of academic success (Noble and Sawyer, 2004; Sparkman et al., 2012; Timer and Clauson, 2011). In addition, the literature review indicates that science knowledge is a predictor of nursing program success (Byrd et al., 1999; Lewis and Lewis, 2000; Phillips et al., 2002; Potolsky et al., 2003; Wong and Wong, 1999; Wolkowitz and Kelley, 2010). Hence, the above data are frequently utilized to help recruit qualified applicants.

Recruiting qualified applicants is just the beginning step in fostering program completion (Shelton, 2012). After students are admitted, they ought to be afforded resources that will foster their persistence in the nursing program as well as promote their academic success (Shelton, 2012). Retention as well as attrition of nursing students has been associated with demographic, academic, financial, cognitive, and personality/behavioral factors (Cameron et al., 2011; Jeffreys, 2012; Pitt et al., 2012; Williams, 2010). Historically, many researchers have focused on intelligence quotient (IQ) when examining what promotes academic success (Ahmed et al., 2011). However, more recently scholars have begun to contemplate non-cognitive or psychosocial factors such as emotional intelligence, psychological empowerment, resilience, and spiritual well-being as a way to further academic success (Ahmed et al., 2011; Barchard, 2003; Bemak, 2005; Cleary et al., 2008; Deb, 2012; Kneipp et al., 2009; Sparkman et al., 2012; Suliman, 2010; Young, 2009).

More specifically, researchers found that managing emotions was positively correlated with academic success (Ahmed et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2004). Other scholars have focused on how classroom techniques can promote psychological empowerment thus promoting academic success. Although, to date no research studies were found that examined the relationship between empowerment and academic success. Still other researchers have examined the relationship between academic success and resilience has been which demonstrated a positive correlation between the variables (Deb, 2012). Finally, scholars have linked spiritual well-being to many areas of functioning (Dunn et al., 2007; Kneipp et al., 2009; Paloutzian and Ellison, 1982; Taliaferro et al., 2009; VonDras and Schmitt, 2007) and support the relationship between spiritual well-being and academic success.

Despite these studies and opinions, there is a paucity of research regarding the relationship of emotional intelligence, psychological

empowerment, resilience, spiritual well-being and academic success in the context of nursing students. Given the potential value of such factors in advancing academic success and therefore influencing outcomes such as retention, attrition, and graduation rates, research is warranted as it may provide insight into non-cognitive strategies that could be of potential benefit to this population.

## Methods

### Design and Sample

A descriptive correlational design was utilized. A convenience sample of 244 undergraduate and 272 graduate nursing students in a medium-sized, private, Catholic university in New England were recruited to participate in the study. The undergraduate group consisted of 169 students in a traditional first professional degree program (60 sophomores, 51 juniors, and 58 seniors) and 75 students in a RN to BSN program. The graduate group consisted of 229 students in Master's programs (96 in the Family Nurse Practitioner Program, 60 in the Clinical Nurse Leader Program, 37 in the Patient Care Service Administration Program, and 36 in the Nursing Education Program) and 43 in the Doctor of Nursing Practice Program. All undergraduate and graduate nursing students were included in the study with the following exceptions. Freshman nursing students were excluded as they have not begun their nursing courses. Students less than 18 years of age were excluded as they are unable to provide informed consent given that they are considered minors. A power computation (Cohen, 1992) was completed via gPower 3.0.5 (Faul et al., 2009) and revealed that 109 participants were required established on an alpha equal to 0.05, effect size moderate (0.3), and power equal to 0.09.

### Instruments

The instruments utilized were the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), Spreitzer Psychological Empowerment Scale, Wagnild and Young Resilience Scale, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), as well as a background data sheet. The MSCEIT is an ability-based appraisal of emotional intelligence that is comprised of 141 items designed to assess total emotional intelligence along with the four branches of emotional intelligence: perceiving emotions, using emotions to assist thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions (Mayer et al., 2002, 2003). Face validity is evident in the tasks used by the MSCEIT to evaluate emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2000). Content validity is exhibited by the MSCEIT's thoughtful depiction of the Four Branch Model (Mayer et al., 2000). Discriminant, incremental, and convergent validity of the MSCEIT have been verified (Brackett and Mayer, 2003). The split-half reliability coefficients for the entire test is  $r = .91$  and for the four branches range from  $r = .80$  to  $.91$  (Mayer et al., 2000).

The Spreitzer's Psychological Empowerment Scale was used to measure psychological empowerment. The scale contains 12 seven-point rating scale items (3 items per dimension) ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree) (Spreitzer and Quinn, 2001; Spreitzer, 2007). The instrument contains the following four subscales: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. The overall score for each subscale is divided by 3 to obtain an average score for that subscale. The total score represents the psychological empowerment at that moment in time which will not necessarily be the same at a different point in time (Spreitzer and Quinn, 2001). A second order confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the four subscales are distinct and add to a general sense of empowerment (Spreitzer, 2007). The Cronbach alpha reliability for the overall psychological empowerment ranged from 0.85 to 0.91 (Laschinger et al., 2004).

The Wagnild and Young Resilience Scale was used to measure resilience. The scale contains 14 seven-point rating scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The instrument consists of

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