



Challenges Experienced by Nursing Students Overcoming One Course Failure: A Phenomenological Research Study

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ABSTRACT

Retention of nursing students is important. A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of 11 successful returner nursing students from 1 associate degree program in the southeastern United States. Two themes directly related to the challenges faced by participants: (a) dealing with uncertainty, shock, and sadness and (b) returning after a failure. Findings related to challenges highlight the importance of facilitating integration and ensuring clear communication with nursing students.

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Introduction

Student retention rates have a national focus and influence in both policy and funding decisions. Postsecondary graduation rates in the United States range from 27% to 59% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This reported range shows a need for research and insight regarding retention of postsecondary students. Approximately 31 million Americans have obtained some college credit; however, they have not completed a degree (Complete College America, 2017). Nursing education also has a focus on retention and success of students. Nursing student success relates directly to financial, educational, and national health outcome variables. Successful completion of a nursing program is an extremely challenging journey for many students. Nurse educators are also challenged by the struggles of their students (McEnroe-Petitte, 2011). One population of nursing students who faced a specific challenge includes those who failed one nursing course within an associate degree nursing program, returned, and completed the program successfully. An exploration of the lived experiences of these successful “returner” nursing students offers nurse educators some perspective about the journey to completion following an academic failure in nursing school.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of nursing students who were successful upon return to an associate degree nursing program at an institution locat-

ed in the southeastern United States after an academic failure of one nursing course. Because no research on successful returner nursing students had been published, this was a place to build upon. The central question used to guide this inquiry was as follows: How do successful returner nursing students describe their experiences of success after returning to nursing school following one academic failure in the nursing program? Through verbalization of their lived experiences of failure, return, and successful completion in nursing school, an insight was gained that adds to the literature on nursing student retention. This publication will focus on the unique challenges faced by participants.

Background

Retention of nursing students is important not only to individual students and institutions but also to our nation. Nursing is the largest profession in health care, and by the year 2024, over 1 million additional job openings for nurses are predicted in the United States labor force (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2017). Published attrition rates for nursing students in the United States range from 15% to 29% and, in some instances, higher (Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, 2016; National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, Inc, 2011). Students with a previous academic failure are categorized as at high risk for attrition (Jeffreys, 2012; Shelton, 2012). In addition, students within the community college or associate degree program setting are considered at higher risk for attrition when compared with 4-year students (Tinto, 2012).

Previous research related to nursing student retention and attrition has focused on student characteristics. Academic variables

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correlated with success include the following: higher reading comprehension, higher entrance examination scores, higher science grade point averages (GPAs), higher GPAs in prerequisite college courses, higher high school GPAs, higher level of previous education, higher nursing course grades, less transfer credits, no failures or withdrawals in a nursing course, and higher standardized test scores (Abele, Penprase, & Ternes, 2011; Campbell & Dickson, 1996; Donnell, 2015; Johnson, Johnson, Kim, & Mckee, 2009; McLaughlin, 2008; Pitt, Powis, Levett-Jones, & Hunter, 2012; Prymachuk, Easton, & Littlewood, 2008; Shelton, 2012; Walker et al., 2011). Research has also shown that successful students perceive higher levels of faculty support, have more financial resources, have greater self-efficacy, and work outside of school less (Bryer, Peterson-Graziose, & Nikolaidou, 2015; McLaughlin, 2008; Pitt et al., 2012; Shelton, 2012; Walker et al., 2011).

Opposite of the successful student profile, many characteristics of the at-risk nursing student have also been identified. The “at-risk” student is one with a higher probability of not completing a program of study. At-risk students are more likely to have lower GPAs, lower prerequisite and pregraduation assessment scores, more withdrawals and failures in the past, fewer financial resources, less perceived and actual support, lower levels of self-efficacy, and higher numbers of outside work hours (Abele et al., 2011; Harris, Rosenberg, & O'Rourke, 2014; Jeffreys, 2012; Pitt et al., 2012; Shelton, 2012; Walker et al., 2011). Identifying the at-risk population of nursing students is just a beginning step.

A variety of strategies are noted in the literature to help nursing students succeed. Flexible scheduling of programs and the utilization of various support systems are described (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Harris et al., 2014; Jeffreys, 2012; Knight et al., 2012; Robertson, Canary, Orr, Herberg, & Rutledge, 2010). Family, peer, and nursing faculty support are noted as helping nursing students succeed (Knight et al., 2012; McEnroe-Petitte, 2011; McLaughlin, 2008; Mooring, 2016; Shelton, 2012; Walker et al., 2011; Williams, 2010). Mentoring and coaching from both nursing faculty and peers have been attributed to success. Early intervention and counseling after a test failure are also described as useful (Fontaine, 2014). Although success strategies are noted in the literature, some nursing students still struggle with completion.

Descriptions of nursing student experiences in relation to retention and attrition have also been completed through qualitative inquiry. Results mainly highlighted factors credited for student persistence or reasons for noncompletion. Factors described as assisting with completion included students' affective characteristics of positive mindset and commitment, support from others, and organizational skills (Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor, & Lauder, 2011; Crombie, Brindley, Harris, Marks-Maran, & Thompson, 2013; Hinsliff-Smith, Gates, & Leducq, 2012; Knight et al., 2012; Northall, Ramjan, Everett, & Salamonson, 2016). Variables that were noted to contribute to attrition from nursing school included academic difficulty, differing expectations, and personal issues (Hoeve, Castelen, Jansen, & Roodbol, 2017; Kukkonen, Suhonen, & Salminen, 2016; Mckendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014; O'Donnell, 2011; Robinson & Niemer, 2010). No studies specifically on nursing students who failed, returned, and were successful have been published.

One theory, specifically on student attrition from higher education settings, was developed by educator Vincent Tinto in 1975 and updated in 1993 (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Tinto's *Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure* lays out a framework for studying attrition decisions of college students with a major focus on integration into systems of the institution. Upon entering postsecondary education, students must transition into new and different communities. Tinto's model identifies both academic and social systems as areas for integration to occur. Experiences of integration within each system

influence each student's decision to depart or continue with their college career. Positive experiences foster increased retention, whereas negative experiences promote attrition (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012). Although the student's attributes do influence their individual attrition decisions, Tinto holds that students are not solely responsible for attrition rates. The theory of institutional departure is based on the belief that both students and institutions have a role in departure decisions. Educators and administrators in postsecondary institutions should take attrition seriously and assume responsibility in striving to facilitate integration of students.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of successful returner nursing students. This manuscript presents findings related to challenges faced by this population of nursing students. By better understanding struggles endured by nursing students who failed a course and returned, educators can gain insight. By gaining perspective into returner students' experiences of challenge, nurse educators can be more equipped to prepare and guide other nursing students. One focused question directly explored the challenges faced by this group of students: How do successful returner nursing students describe challenges to their success in nursing school?

Methodology

Design

A qualitative phenomenological methodology was utilized to guide this study on the lived experiences of successful returner nursing students. Phenomenological inquiry is rooted in the lived experiences of humans. Phenomenology guides the researcher to edify the personal insights of humans who are study participants (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology was appropriate for this inquiry because the researcher sought to understand the central phenomenon of return to and successful completion of nursing school after a failure through the perspectives of students who lived this experience.

The institutional setting from which participants successfully graduated included one state college within the southeastern United States. This institution maintains a mission of access and offers mostly associate degree programs. Enrollment at this institution is approximately 3,500 and includes a majority of commuters from a variety of paths, including high school matriculates, general education diploma (GED) recipients, transient students, and transfer students (Spring 2015 Quick Facts, 2015). Participants for this study were selected from graduates of the school of nursing associate degree program, which admits approximately 80 associate degree nursing students biannually. To progress as expected, students must receive the letter grade of a C or higher in each of their nursing courses.

For this study, an *academic failure of a nursing course* was defined as receiving a grade of less than C, thus causing the student to fail a course and repeat the failed course before progressing. *Success* is defined as repeating the failed course and achieving a grade of C or better, progressing through the remainder of the program, and graduating. Inclusion criteria included successful completion of this associate degree nursing program after the failure of one nursing course within the program with a grade of less than a C and willingness to participate in a research study on successful returner nursing students in which individual interviews were conducted.

Access to the student population was gained through a nursing faculty gatekeeper of the institution. Initial contact with students

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