

Nursing Students' Perceptions of Academic and Social Support Services

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Abstract— Higher education has responded to the nursing shortage by adopting academic and social support services that have increased student retention and higher graduation rates. This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of experiences that led nontraditional former Bachelor of Science in Nursing students at a career college to switch from their nursing program to another program within the first two years of college, contributing to the nursing shortage. This study also explored the participants' perceptions about the influences that academic and social support services at the College had on students' decisions to switch programs. Tinto's student integration model of academic and social integration was used as a lens to explore the participants' views. Data was collected from semistructured interviews with eight nontraditional former nursing students. The analysis included open coding. Codes were categorized from which nine themes emerged: (a) participants expressed feeling overwhelmed, (b) lack of career pathway assessments, (c) intrusive advisor, (d) family support and encouragement, (e) an effective academic coach, (f) financial resources, (g) coping strategies and studying skills, (h) not participating in nursing program events, and (i) reliable vehicle. The study's findings revealed that nontraditional former BSN students' needs differ from traditional students.

Keywords— Nursing Education, Nontraditional Students, Higher Education Academic Support Services, Social Support, Nursing Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Few occupations are more beneficial to the health and welfare of society than professional nursing, which includes licensed practical nurses, registered nurses (RN), nurse practicals, and nurse practitioners. However, healthcare researchers and stakeholders in the United States have reported periodic nursing staff shortages (Flynn & Ironside, 2018; Gellasch, 2015; Snavely, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this shortage has affected the quality of health care for acute and chronic medical treatment (Garfin et al., 2020; Snavely, 2016). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) employment projections for 2014 to 2024 listed RNs as a high-demand occupation; subsequently, job creation for RNs has been higher than all other healthcare occupations and the second-highest among the main employment categories (Snavely, 2016; Spurlock, 2020). Researchers have suggested that the greatest need for RNs is in the southern and western regions of the United States compared with the northeastern and midwestern areas (Spurlock, 2020).

In addition to increased demand, there are other reasons for a future RN shortage. Approximately 1 million RNs will retire over the next decade, as many of these nurses were born during the 1946-1964 baby boom generation (Buerhaus et al., 2017; McIntosh & Thomas, 2018). In the meantime, the number of RNs in the workforce below the age of 35 years is steadily increasing, and many enter the profession with baccalaureate degrees rather than associate degrees (Buerhaus et al., 2017; McIntosh & Thomas, 2018); however, there are not enough nursing students graduating from nursing programs to meet the future demand for RNs (Kennedy, 2018). Therefore, this study addressed a gap in the knowledge in this area by exploring the retention of nontraditional former Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students who switched from their program of study within their first two years of college.

The problem the study addressed is that nontraditional BSN students frequently switch programs within the first two years at Massani Career College (WMCC; a pseudonym). In this qualitative study, the perceptions of former BSN students who switched from the nursing program, which has led to a decrease in the nursing degree graduation rate and has contributed to the nursing shortage, was explored. Also explored was if their decision to switch from the BSN program resulted from the influence of WMCC's academic and social support services. This qualitative research is vital as it may help WMCC's administrators better understand the reasons for low BSN retention rates, which contributes to a lack of nurses. In addition, the social implications of this study include the potential for modification of academic and social support services to increase graduation rates, thus helping to meet the demand for qualified nurses in the United States.

II. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of experiences that led nontraditional former BSN students to switch from their nursing program to another program within the first two years of college. Also, this study explored the perceptions of former BSN students at WMCC about the influences, if any, that academic and social support services at WMCC had on students' decisions to switch programs. The findings in this study could be valuable to nursing school managers and educators responsible for developing and implementing plans for revising academic and social support

programs to retain students, increase graduation rates, and address the nursing shortage.

Belser et al. (2017) stated that nearly 40% of adult learners drop out, withdraw, or switch from nursing majors to non-nursing majors during their time in higher education. Despite higher education administrations' implementing retention practices, including integrating academic and social support services into nursing programs, students in their first and second years of college continue to switch from nursing to another degree program (Aruguete & Mwaikinda, 2016). Arifin (2018) stated that nursing students' consistent interaction with academic and social support services positively affected the number of nurses who graduated, which helped remedy the nursing shortage.

The research questions addressed by this study are as follows:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of nontraditional former BSN students at WMCC concerning the experiences that led them to switch from their nursing program to another program within their first two years of college?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of former BSN students at WMCC about the influences that academic and social support services at WMCC have on nontraditional former BSN students' decision to switch from the nursing program to another program within the first two years?

III. METHODOLOGY

Nontraditional former BSN students who switched from the nursing program to another field of study and are currently enrolled at WMCC were the participants in this study. Nontraditional students were selected to participate because the majority of college campuses in America are filled with this growing population (Tinto, 2017). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants to obtain in-depth data that reflected the perspectives of eight nontraditional former nursing students. The criteria used for selecting participants were as follows:

- Nontraditional BSN students (ages 25 to 55).
- Nontraditional students switched from the BSN program to another program within the first two years of enrollment.
- Nontraditional BSN students who utilized academic and social support services provided by WMCC.
- Nontraditional former first-time students at WMCC who were enrolled in the BSN program between 2017 and 2021 and currently pursuing another program at the College.

The exclusion criteria for this study included:

- Traditional nursing students switched from the BSN program within the first two years of enrollment.
- Nontraditional BSN students left the College rather than change to a different program within the College.
- Nontraditional BSN students who were academically dismissed from the nursing program.

The rationale for the small sample size was to understand the participants' perspectives in-depth. Initially, 20 nontraditional former BSN students who switched from the program to participate in the study with a goal of using eight

to 10 students were sought; however, all interested participants to reach saturation was considered in case some were not available to meet via Zoom.

The instrument used in this investigation was a set of interview questions derived from a previous study conducted by Du Plessis et al. (2016). Permission was obtained to modify the open-ended questions located in the interview guide. The guide was used to promote consistency across all interviews as each participant asked the same questions. The interview guide contained 12 questions developed to assist in answering the two guiding RQs.

Data obtained for this qualitative study occurred from semistructured interviews, using open-ended questions and journal notes written during the interviews for data coding and analysis. Upon receiving consent forms from eight participants, interviews were scheduled through Zoom. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, conducting in-person face-to-face interviews was not possible. However, researchers have previously used Zoom to collect data through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in an area free from distractions. At the time of the interview, the participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were audio-recorded, and written field notes were used when analyzing the participants' responses.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this basic qualitative study, data were collected through semistructured interviews and a researcher journal to identify the perceptions of nontraditional former BSN students regarding the experiences that led them to switch from the program. To answer RQ1, the first set of interview questions were designed to elicit responses to obtain in-depth perceptions of the participants' concerning the experiences that led to the switch from the BSN program to another program within their first two years in college. The second set of interview questions prompted the participants to provide their perceptions regarding what influence, if any, academic and social support services at WCCC had on their decision to switch from the BSN program to another program within their first two years aligned with RQ2. A frequency of 33 codes was generated from the interviews arranged from the most recurring to the least. To examine the data to address each RQ, open coding was used to identify patterns, groups, subgroups, themes, and commonalities, allowing the themes to emerge as recommended by Saldaña (2016).

After the interviews with eight nontraditional former BSN students, each interview was transcribed to organize the data, searching for the meaning of words, which was then coded and categorized by similarities and differences. Nine themes emerged from data analysis:

- Theme 1: Participants expressed feeling overwhelmed
- Theme 2: Lack of career pathway assessments
- Theme 3: Intrusive advisor
- Theme 4: Family support and encouragement
- Theme 5: Academic coach
- Theme 6: Financial resources

- Theme 7: Coping strategies and studying skills
- Theme 8: Not participating in nursing program events
- Theme 9: Reliable vehicle

Results Related to RQ 1

RQ1: What are the perceptions of nontraditional former BSN students at WMCC concerning the experiences that led them to switch from their nursing program to another program within their first two years of college?

Former nontraditional BSN students were interviewed to describe their perceptions of experiences that led to their decision to switch from the program. Two themes emerged that applied to RQ1.

Theme 1: Participants Expressed Feeling Overwhelmed

The first theme, the participants expressed feeling overwhelmed, was derived from the group of codes in the category of personal reasoning and was less frequent than other participants' responses. Key phrases included, "I don't want the vaccine," "I don't like online classes," and "I tried every resource offered by the college to stay in the BSN program." Two of the participants, P4 and P8, did not want to take the vaccine. P6 and P7 stated they used all resources offered at WMCC to help them stay in the program. The other participants had other circumstances that led them to switch from the BSN program.

Theme 2: Lack of Career Pathway Assessments

The second theme, lack of career pathway assessments, emerged from the participants' responses to interview questions regarding switching from the BSN program to another program. The codes were grouped into the category: a new degree program. The key phrases were (a) easier than the BSN program, (b) influences to switch programs, and (c) job opportunities. Each participant compared their experience with the BSN program and their current program.

Results Related to RQ 2

RQ2: What are the perceptions of former BSN students at WMCC about the influences that academic and social support services at WMCC have on nontraditional former BSN students' decision to switch from the nursing program to another program within the first two years?

Using Tinto's (1975, 1993) SIM of academic and social integration as a lens, the study results were divided into two subtopics: academic support services and social support services. As a result, seven themes emerged from the data analysis of participants' responses to RQ2. In the following sections, the categories were detailed, and critical phrases were generated for each theme.

Theme 3: Intrusive Advisor

The third theme, intrusive advisor, applies to academic support services and was derived from the data as I analyzed interviewees' responses to communication from the nursing advisor. The key phrases used to group codes into the category of counseling were (a) I was assigned a mentor by the nursing adviser, (b) meeting to discuss class schedule, and (c) meeting to switch programs. All interviewees stated that the nursing

advisor communicated through email regarding their class schedules, mentor programs, and activities. In addition, each participant recalled their interaction with the nursing advisor.

Theme 4: Family Support and Encouragement

The fourth theme, family support and encouragement, emerged from the data as participants' responses were analyzed to family support when they decided to enroll in the BSN program. This theme was associated with the subtopic of family nurturing. The key phrases used to group codes into the (a) family used my notes to quiz me, (b) my children want to see my grades, (c) I have a room in my house to study, and (d) My dad brags to his buddy about me going back to school. Each participant fondly recalled their family memories of their family support.

Theme 5: Academic Coach

The fifth theme, academic coach, developed from the data analyzed of participants' responses to the academic resources they used while enrolled in the BSN program. This theme also fell under the subtopic of academic services. The educational guidance category was derived from the key phrases (a) definitions of terms did not help, the difficulty of understanding the anatomy and physiology concepts, and (b) medical terminology did not help. Several participants (P1-P6) expressed difficulties understanding anatomy and physiology course concepts and spent at least 1 hour per week for 16 weeks receiving help from either a tutor or their professor.

Theme 6: Financial Resources

The sixth theme, the effects of financial resources, emerged from the data analysis of participants' experiences with WMCC financial support services. This theme reflected the subtopic of social support services. The category of effective revenue to cover the cost of tuition included the key phrases: (a) Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), (b) tuition reimbursement, and (c) personal bank loan. The results showed that 87.5% of the participants had obtained financial resources from the federal government to assist them with college tuition. Only one participant did not qualify for financial aid and declined a government student loan to pay tuition.

All participants noted that the financial application process was easy. According to the eight participants, the financial aid process began after being accepted to WMCC. First, each participant met with the advisor of financial assistance, who reiterated the cost of tuition and discussed means for covering the cost through FAFSA. Next, the participants were escorted into a private room with computers to apply for financial assistance on the FAFSA website. Within a week, each was emailed a letter from FAFSA indicating their eligibility to receive financial assistance. One participant, P2, received tuition via employer-sponsored reimbursement. P2 shared, "At the end of each semester, I have to complete a form for tuition reimbursement along with my school's transcript and highlight my grades. I will receive 25% of my tuition and 100% of my school fees."

Theme 7: Coping Strategies and Studying Skills

The seventh theme, coping strategies and studying skills, emerged from data concerning the participants' responses to academic support resources. The key phrases used included in this category had: (a) I graduated from high school ten years or more ago, (b) I need help with studying, and (c) online study sessions. Several participants stated that it had been over ten years since they were last in a formal education setting. Because of this, the participants relied on WMCC's study skills sessions to help them improve in this area. Several of the interviewees had similar experiences adjusting to college.

Theme 8: Not Participating in Nursing Program Events

The eighth theme, not participating in nursing program events, was derived from the data of interviewees' responses to their involvement in the mentorship program. This theme also applies to the subtopic of social support services. The key phrases were grouped into the mentorship category and included: (a) I did not have time to participate in extracurricular activities, and (b) I attended some of the events. All of the interviewees stated they received an email from the nursing advisor assigning them a mentor in the nursing program. In addition, all interviewees indicated that they received a follow-up email from the mentor to meet for lunch.

Theme 9: Reliable Vehicle

The ninth theme, reliable vehicle, was derived from the interviewees' responses concerning their transportation to the WMCC campus. This theme also applies to the subtopic of social support services. The key phrases were grouped into the category of transportation. During the interviews, all eight participants recalled there was no public transportation to WMCC. Additionally, the participants stated that WMCC was not located in an area where riding a bicycle or walking was feasible for pedestrians; therefore, each of the eight participants described their means of transportation to the WMCC campus. Seven participants used their transportation to commute to campus. One participant stated that her husband brought her to WMCC.

V. DLIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One limitation of this study was that it was conducted at a single site—a private, not-for-profit career college rather than an institution with multiple campuses, such as a public university. A single site location used to conduct research limits the number of participants, extends the time to conduct interviews, and collects data to reach saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For example, this study took three months to recruit, conduct interviews, and reach saturation.

Another limitation of this study was the small sample size of participants. Compared to a state college with multiple locations and a large population of students, WMCC has a small enrollment. However, the small sample size allowed me to concentrate on the depth of the data and complete an exhaustive analysis of the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional former nursing students. Even though a small sample size may be an advantage when using a qualitative approach, there can be disadvantages. If the sample is too small, it will be difficult to find significant relationships from

the data to be considered representative of the groups to whom results will be generalized or transferred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study conducted eight semistructured interviews with nontraditional former BSN students.

It is recommended that additional investigation be conducted as a quantitative or mixed-method approach to help determine why nontraditional former BSN students switched from their program to another program within the first two years of school. It is also recommended that the participants be nontraditional students who have prior knowledge of the healthcare industry or have graduated from high school within ten years. In addition, these studies might provide different findings regarding the participants' experiences with the nursing program's mentorship services, which are designed to motivate and encourage students to remain in this field of study.

The human anatomy and physiology class is generally accepted as a challenging course, often indicated by high dropout rates, withdrawal, and failure (Slominski et al., 2019). This study revealed that nontraditional former BSN students struggled with anatomy and physiology. Participants explained that they sought academic support from their instructor and made weekly appointments with a tutor. The academic support helped the participants to earn a passing grade in the course. Future studies might explore why nontraditional former BSN students switched from the program despite receiving academic support.

VI. CONCLUSION

Few occupations are more beneficial to the health and welfare of society than professional nursing, which includes licensed practical nurses, RN, nurse practical, and nurse practitioners. Higher education is struggling to graduate a sufficient number of BSN students to help balance the number of retiring nurses. Studies have shown a link between positive student retention and academic and social support services. However, a significant number of nontraditional BSN students who utilize academic and social support services continue to switch from the nursing program. This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of experiences that led nontraditional former BSN students to change from their nursing program to another program within the first two years of college. Also, in this study, the perceptions of former BSN students at WMCC about the influences were explored, if any, that academic and social support services at WMCC had on their decisions to switch programs.

The study's findings showed that nontraditional former BSN students expressed feeling overwhelmed, which led them to switch from the nursing program. These experiences included unwillingness to get vaccinated, refusal to attend school online, and exhausting all resources available at WMCC. Also, the results indicated that nontraditional BSN students need to have career counseling to aid in their selection of a degree program that aligns with their educational attributes. The nontraditional former BSN students in this study utilized academic services, including nursing advising and tutoring. Tutoring benefited many of the participants and increased their overall academic performance.

However, many of the participants did not regularly participate in the mentorship program because they were focused on improving their course grades. In addition, students received financial aid or had the resources to cover the cost of tuition, had family support and encouragement, and utilized the coping and study skills strategies available at the school. The findings imply that academic and social support services are not specifically designed for nontraditional student retention. More studies are needed to determine what types of academic and social support resources are required to retain nontraditional students in BSN programs.

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