

## **Failure to Complete BSN Nursing Programs: Students' Views**

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### **Abstract**

This phenomenological research study investigated the lived experiences of students who did not succeed in completing a 4-year baccalaureate nursing school (BSN) program. The sample for this study included students who failed to complete baccalaureate nursing programs within the last ten years. The geographical area of the sample included students who attended schools in the central and south-western Appalachian counties of the state of West Virginia and the bordering counties in Ohio, Kentucky, and Virginia. A total of 18 participants were interviewed and the interviews were recorded so the data would be collected in a systematic way to facilitate data analysis. There is little empirical data regarding retention in a BSN program and students' views as to why they were unable to complete their BSN program. Further research is needed to understand nursing student attrition, especially students' perceptions, which would help nurse educators identify nursing students' needs, review program's policies, and possible curriculum changes needed to help students successfully complete their nursing program.

**Keywords: Nursing Education, Persistence, Student Perceptions and Motivations**

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### **Introduction**

A nursing shortage has been predicted in the United States due to the aging nursing workforce and the future needs of the baby-boomers as they age. The Government Affairs Committee of the American Nurses Association (ANA) predict that by 2022 that the United States will need to produce more than one million additional nurses to fill both new nursing jobs and replace the wave of retiring nurses. The premise of this study is that if we better understood why students fail nursing schools, faculty could support program or policy changes, or initiate admission procedures that would better predict student success in baccalaureate nursing programs; thereby, the predicted nursing shortage could be mitigated.

According to the National League for Nursing, the national dropout rate for nursing programs in the United States is 20%, and this high attrition rate is considered problematic. The National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission set the desirable retention rate at 80%. The national attrition rate for nursing programs are too high, with as much as 50% in some baccalaureate nursing programs (Merkley, 2016). Most studies have shown that most of these nursing students leave in the first semester of the nursing program. The nursing shortage supports the need to improve the NCLEX-RN pass rates and to decrease the attrition rates of nursing students. Attrition of nursing students is a concern for nursing educators because it is a significant problem affecting nursing programs throughout the United States and is associated with the critical nursing shortage. The shortage of trained nursing faculty has also been identified as a primary factor in the nursing shortage, with more than 75,000 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2018 (AACN, 2019). This nursing faculty shortage has an impact by limiting the number of students that are admitted to nursing programs, which also impacts the nursing shortage.

Due to the current U.S. nursing shortage, and an admission waiting list of candidates in

pre-nursing courses, nursing programs are challenged to produce more graduates who can pass the NCLEX-RN on their first attempt and start their practice as a nurse. The problem of nursing student attrition for BSN nursing programs is that it affects the nursing students and faculty, the reputation of the nursing program, and the approval of the nursing program by state boards of nursing, as well as the national accrediting organizations, such as the National League for Nursing Accreditation Commission (NLNAC) and the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE). Finding a way to decrease the attrition rate would help meet the students' goal of becoming registered nurses and the nursing program's goal of preparing students for providing competent care as registered nurses.

### **Methodology**

This is an exploratory descriptive study of qualitative approach, and the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding why students fail to complete nursing programs to assist nursing faculty to implement changes that would help prevent attrition in baccalaureate nursing programs. Because it is a qualitative research, the number of participants was defined during the data collection, which was concluded when the researcher could understand the experience lived by the former BSN nursing students. Minimal research has been done on this topic, and this researcher could not identify any research that had asked the students themselves why they failed or did not complete their program.

The sample consisted of 18 participants who volunteered to participate and there were no known risks for participation. A Realistic CTR-51 cassette recorder along with a digital back-up recorder was used to record the 18 participants' interviews so that the interviews could be literally transcribed. There was a compensation of \$50.00 for participation in the approximate 45-minute interview. The semi-structured interview was conducted using eight open ended questions related to nursing students' experiences in relation to their experience in their BSN program.

This study is based on these eight research questions listed below:

1. What were your years in nursing school like?
2. Describe the parts of nursing school that you enjoyed the most.
3. Describe the parts of nursing school that you disliked the most.
4. What were the reasons that caused you to be unable to complete nursing school?
5. What would you do differently if you had another chance to attend nursing school?
6. What criteria do you think faculty should consider when admitting students in the BSN programs?
7. Was nursing school different than what you expected it to be?
8. What would your advice be to students who are currently entering nursing school?

### **Findings**

The key themes this researcher identified are presented below:

#### **Early Intervention Is Important**

Early intervention and good support from faculty are important for nursing students successfully completing their BSN program. It is important for faculty to demonstrate a supportive and caring role in advising students and referring them for tutoring or help. The following are quotes provided by participants.

*I didn't realize I was failing until it was too late. I waited too long to say anything. It might*

*be helpful to have someone watching closely and meet with students before they get low grades.*

*It might be helpful to have one of the faculty watching closely and meet with students before they get low grades.*

*I would get a tutor on day one!" stated one participant when asked what you would do differently if you had another chance to attending nursing school. Another participant stated, "I was very shy my whole life, but I would try to get to know the professors and where their career interests lie, as many of them were still practicing nurses. Maybe if they would have got to know me on a more personal level and maybe care more about my success.*

*I failed the pharmacology nursing course by .04. I looked at my options and I found it would be quicker to change my majors, complete my degree, and then go into an accelerated nursing program, than to just wait to repeat the course and still keep going.*

*Nursing school is tough, and it needs to be tough. School is tough, but the nursing field is tougher.*

*I had never failed a class before. Failing out was depressing, and embarrassing. I think it was just a bunch of things that caused it.*

*The first semester wasn't easy, but it was doable. I had just come out of high school and never really had to try [study] in high school. In the second semester [of sophomore year] everything was different and by the time I realized that I had to study, it was too late.*

### **Family and Work Played a Role in their Success or Failure**

Participants reported that lack of family support was a negative factor as students attempted to complete their nursing programs. In addition, work factored as a negative support for nursing program success.

*I had a job that did not support me to form a work schedule that supported my attending nursing school.*

*My family was not supportive of me attending nursing school.*

*I had difficulty find a babysitter to attend class and clinicals.*

*I think failing out may have made me more determined in a way. I knew that I really wanted to be a nurse. My parents were never supportive of me becoming a nurse, plus the job I had at the time was not supportive of my school schedule.*

*Make sure your life is very stable and able to accommodate giving your life to the nursing program.*

### **Good Study Habits and Time Management Skills are Key to Success**

Participants noted that a lack of study habits and time management skill were negative support factors for success.

*I don't like to ask for help. I kept telling myself that I could do it, but I couldn't. I was memorizing to get through nursing school. I did okay until it got to the critical thinking and I could no longer succeed by memorizing.*

*You have to have a good understanding of physiology and pre-requisites. The teacher can make the difference in doing well and understanding it.*

*I think that the hardest part were the exams. The application style test questions were very difficult. I had never had those types of NCLEX style test questions before.*

Advice from former students were:

*Find a tutor in the nursing program. Preferably find someone older and who has taken the course.*

*To have your priorities in order. Do not procrastinate.*

**READ YOUR BOOKS!**

*Write out your notes instead of on your computer.*

*I would recommend study groups, flash cards, reading instead of focusing on the power points.*

### **Good Support from Faculty**

Participants commented that having positive support from nursing faculty contributed to nursing course success, however few reported having this support.

*I felt like you were just a number. The teachers weren't really very personal. The faculty were nice and they knew your name, but you felt like they really didn't care about your success.*

*I had gone to my advisor a couple of times, but it wasn't until the end of the semester when she finally offered to say we have tutors that our students who have taken these same classes before." The participant stated, "I wish that my advisor had told me that about a year ago.*

*I felt that the students in the nursing program were not as friendly as I had hoped they would be. A lot of them were already friends so they would just sign up for the same clinical. The faculty did not rotate the clinical groups.*

This participant stated that she was from another state and felt like she was not able to meet other

students because the students in her clinical groups already were friends before college and would register for the same clinical group.

One of the most compelling stories was from a participant, who was a single mom with two special needs children, attending a BSN nursing program. Her parents were passed away and she did not have any family as a support system to help with her childcare while she was attending school. Her mom had been a nurse and she had always wanted to become a nurse also.

*I had to be on site to catch the shuttle to the hospital at 6:30 am and my advisor told me this when I was talking to her about my upcoming clinical schedule. I told her that the earliest that daycares in the area opened was 6:30 to 7 am. I had a 3.76 GPA and had worked hard to get this far. Both of my parents were deceased and had no relatives or friends that I could leave my two special needs kids with and take to daycare. There was no flexibility offered. There were no options that I could take. That was it.*

She had gone to her advisor and the head of her nursing program to see if there was a way that she could make up that extra time (15 minutes for clinical) somehow and was just told no. She had no options but to withdraw from the program and started looking for a nursing program that would be more flexible to work with her in getting her special needs children to day care so she can attend clinical at the hospital. She said that she eventually found a nursing school several states away that was willing to work with her and moved her two children there so she could finish nursing school. At the time of the interview she was close to graduating. Against all odds, she never gave up her dream of becoming a nurse.

*I think a lot of students do not understand what nurses do and what the school consists of. Maybe some sort of introductory course could be provided that would enlighten the students.*

*A class to prepare you for those NCLEX style questions and to prepare you for the BSN nursing program would have been helpful.*

This comment about an introductory course was expressed by several of the participants being interviewed.

As a result of this study, this researcher has made some changes teaching as a nursing faculty. This researcher developed a new course for the freshman and newly admitted sophomore nursing students to help prevent attrition and prepare them for the BSN program at a public university in the eastern part of the United States. The students report feeling better prepared for the nursing program after completing the course and it has received very positive evaluations from the students. Topics covered in this course include the history of nursing, legal issues in nursing, nursing theories, social media and nursing, using APA when writing papers, evidence-based practice research, medical terminology, and using the library and writing center for resources. Guest speakers who work in different nursing careers are also invited to talk to the students to make them aware of the many job opportunities nurses have today.

### **Conclusion**

It is important for faculty to develop a supportive and caring role in advising students and referring them for tutoring or help (Scarborough, 2013). Sometimes it is easy to assume that all

students are aware of these resources. Faculty should try to think outside of the box to find solutions or ways to help students be successful. Being approachable so the student feels comfortable to ask for assistance is important so that early intervention can occur. Showing the student that faculty care about their success is very important also. The findings could be used to help identify possible relationships to retaining nursing students and completing their nursing degree. The findings could also help prevent attrition and be used to support recommendations for program and policy changes.

Leaders in nursing programs throughout the U.S. are concerned about the critical need to improve student retention (Aul, 2017). By analyzing data and identifying problems with BSN nursing student attrition and failure, and allow for interventions to decrease the attrition rate, the goal of improving student success can be met (Zhang, Chernaik & Hallet, 2017). Findings of studies investigating success of baccalaureate student success during the program have not been consistent. Further studies on nursing student attrition, especially students' perceptions, would help nurse educators identify nursing students' needs and possibly make curriculum changes needed to help students become successful in completing their nursing program. Interventions to decrease the attrition rate in BSN nursing programs and other nursing programs throughout the United States will also help to meet the nursing shortage in the future.

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