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A Framework of Academic Persistence and Success for Ethnically Diverse Graduate Nursing Students

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A Framework of Academic Persistence *and* Success for ETHNICALLY DIVERSE GRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS

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LESS THAN 21 PERCENT OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS AND APPROXIMATELY 17 PERCENT OF REGISTERED NURSES IN THE UNITED STATES REPRESENT DIVERSE RACIAL AND ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS (HEALTH RESOURCES AND SERVICES ADMINISTRATION, 2010; SULLIVAN COMMISSION, 2004). Of nurses enrolled in research doctoral programs, only 22 percent can be described as ethnically diverse. Similarly, 24 percent of nurses in master's programs (American Association of College of Nursing, 2009) and 27 percent of students enrolled in baccalaureate programs in nursing (National League for Nursing, 2012) are ethnically diverse. High attrition rates among minority nursing students further exacerbate the problem of underrepresentation (Seago & Spetz, 2005). While minority nurses are more likely than others to serve ethnically diverse populations and exhibit culturally sensitive behaviors, supply has not kept pace with growth trends in minority populations (Sullivan Commission, 2004). Effective strategies to recruit and retain minorities are essential to better meet the health care needs of diverse populations.

The aims of this qualitative study were to: a) elicit the experiences of ethnically diverse graduate nursing students, b) examine how these students persisted with academic studies, and c) identify the facilitators and barriers to academic success. To develop culturally sensitive and supportive educational environments, it is vital that nurse educators understand the needs of ethnically diverse graduate nursing students.

Literature Review Previous research on facilitators and barriers to academic success among minority nursing students focused primarily on recruitment and retention in associate degree and baccalaureate nursing programs. Undergraduate students consistently noted that financial resources for tuition, books, and living expenses were critical for recruitment and retention (Amaro, Abriam-Yago & Yoder, 2006; Bond et al., 2008; Brown & Marshall, 2008; Coleman, 2008). Obstacles to retention included a nonsupportive campus climate, lack of faculty involvement/mentoring, feelings of isolation, alienation, marginalization, and powerlessness, and perceived discrimination (Anders, Edmonds, Monreal, & Galvan, 2007; Bond et al.; Childs, Jones, Nugent, & Cook, 2004; Coleman; Mingo, 2008). In these studies, academic climate encompassed faculty-student interactions, peer support, and social integration (Coleman; Price, Forgeron, & MacConnell, 2008; Tinto, 1993).

Interactions that conveyed personal interest and caring about students' well-being had a positive influence on retention. An optimal climate was characterized by cultural awareness among faculty, students, and administrators and recognition of cultural variances among students (Leiper, Van Horn, Hu, & Upadhyaya, 2008). In addition, emotional and moral support from other students, family, and friends helped diverse undergraduate students persist with their academic endeavors (Amaro et al., 2006; Bond et al., 2008; Price et al., 2008; Taxis, 2006).

The literature on undergraduate nursing students highlights the importance of social integration, defined as "informal or non-classroom interaction of the students with faculty and peers, involve-

RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

Aim. The goal of this qualitative study was to examine how ethnically diverse graduate nursing students persisted with academic studies.

Background. Ethnically diverse nurses are vastly underrepresented in the workforce. This problem is accentuated by high attrition rates in academic programs.

Method. A grounded theory approach was used. Five focus groups were conducted with 16 ethnically diverse graduate students in nursing and interviews were conducted with two diversity advisers.

Results. Analysis of the data indicated that the process of learning to balance stressors with moderators was key to academic persistence and retention. A conceptual framework emerged from the data that provides a guide for academic institutions seeking to implement strategies to promote retention and graduation of diverse graduate nursing students.

Conclusion. Recommendations are offered to address faculty development, administrative action, and student resources.

ment in the school's extracurricular social activities, and the extent that these activities influence the student's growth, values, attitudes, career goals, and intellectual growth" (Zeitlin-Ophir, Melitz, Miller, Podoshin, & Mesh, 2004, p. 327). African American nursing students attending four-year colleges reported fewer interactions with faculty and negative perceptions of their academic institutions (Wong, Seago, Keane, & Grumbach, 2008). Limited interactions decreased intercultural communication (Xu & Davidhizar, 2005) and ultimately led to negative perceptions. For Hispanic students, social integration with peers had only a moderately significant influence on retention; sense of belonging and socializing with peers were not significant (Vaquera, 2007).

Little attention has been given to academic climate and social integration and their influence on the educational experience for minority graduate students in nursing programs. Doctoral students from disciplines other than nursing, which had higher levels of academic and social integration, were more likely to complete their programs (Lovitts, 2001). Graduate women of color enrolled in doctoral study identified racism as a harmful influence that was overwhelmingly invisible to students with European backgrounds and to faculty (Hassouneh-Phillips & Beckett, 2003). Childs et al. (2004) reported that students' perceptions that faculty were discriminating against them on the basis of race (intentionally or not) provided an impetus to withdraw from the program.

To understand retention issues among Mexican American doctoral students, Valverde and Rodriguez (2002) developed the Model of Institutional Support, which describes financial support, emotional and moral support, technical support, and mentorship as facilitators of degree completion. Bond and colleagues (2008) adapted the model, adding academic advisement and professional socialization as facilitators for Hispanic student degree completion. This model describes facilitators of degree completion, but does not posit relationships among the factors or explain how these factors lead to academic persistence.

The literature on the nature of the experiences of ethnically diverse graduate nursing students remains sparse and different lenses are needed to understand the facilitators and barriers to academic success. This study addresses one aspect of understanding the process of persistence in doctoral nursing education and is designed to help nurse educators promote academic success.

Method DESIGN/SAMPLE/SETTING A descriptive, qualitative focus group design was used to elicit the experiences of ethnically diverse graduate nursing students; this was not a grounded theory study, but the coding and analysis principles were based on grounded theory. Interview and focus group data were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Accuracy of the transcription was verified by listening to tapes and reviewing transcripts. Conceptual categories that reflected the participants' statements were generated

from the data (Polit & Beck, 2008). Data were analyzed by three researchers for repetition of information until no new categories emerged and saturation was reached. Constant comparison was used in analyzing similarities and differences in categories that emerged across focus groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Relationships among categories were examined to generate the conceptual framework.

Focus groups allowed multiple students to interact in a non-threatening environment. Through the use of query and interaction, with students providing examples of their experiences, multiple voices collectively create a narrative. Two diversity advisers, who provided support to diverse students in the graduate program, led the focus groups and were later interviewed to provide breadth and depth to the information gathered.

The research was conducted at a midwestern university with 11 percent minority graduate enrollment in the college of nursing (CON). Thirty-six racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse graduate students were enrolled; all were invited via email to participate in the study. With the exception of direct-entry students (students with degrees in other disciplines pursuing an MSN), all participants were licensed RNs who had a minimum of a bachelor's degree in nursing. A total of 16 students, all women ranging in age from 23 to 49 years, participated in five focus groups during a yearlong period; participants were African American ($n = 8$), Asian ($n = 2$), Latina ($n = 2$), biracial ($n = 3$), and East Indian ($n = 1$). Twelve participants were employed full-time; 10 were married. Five students were pursuing doctoral degrees, four students were in the master's program, and seven were in the direct-entry master's program for non-nurses; all maintained the required grade point average of 3.00. The 20 students who did not participate in the study cited work, family, or school obligations as reasons for not participating.

PROCEDURE The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research and all participants gave informed consent. Two diversity advisers conducted the focus groups at times that were convenient for the participants; the groups took place in a location where privacy was ensured. Although participants had the option of taking part in more than one focus group (indicated in the consent form), none did so. The focus groups had from three to five participants at any one session.

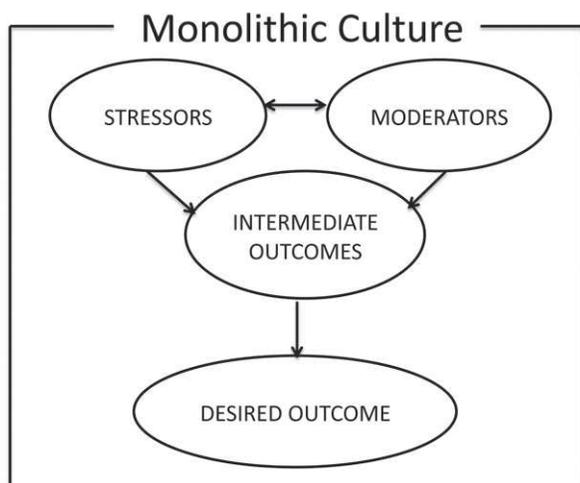
Focus group participants were asked to respond to questions such as: What led you to choose this graduate program? What have been your experiences since enrolling? What has gone well for you? What things have been impediments? To what extent have your experiences matched your expectations? The first questions were used as icebreakers. The diversity advisers who led the focus groups, both African American women, were later interviewed by the project director and asked to respond to the following ques-

tions: Tell me about your experiences working with our ethnically diverse graduate students. What is your impression of their concerns? These interviews served as a form of validation and helped determine the extent to which issues brought up in the focus groups were concerns of the larger minority student body.

Findings For the participants, stressors and moderators took place within the overarching context of a monolithic culture. These led to intermediate outcomes and eventually to the desired outcome of graduation. (See Figure.) The term *monolithic culture* refers to the values, perspectives, and beliefs that exist in a predominately white educational institution where there is an absence of ethnically diverse students and faculty and an absence of diverse perspectives in the classroom and at social events.

Figure. Conceptual Framework of Factors Affecting Academic Persistence

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Learning to balance stressors with moderators was the core process evident in the data; all participants reported on the need to develop and utilize skills that helped them move between academic, work, and family cultures. Doctoral students credited their previous education and life experiences with helping them learn how to maneuver between cultural groups and balance multiple stressors. Direct-entry master's students struggled to find this balance; they described difficulties within the clinical and classroom setting that often jeopardized their ability to persist academically and experienced confusion regarding the academic rigor of nursing school and the demonstration of clinical proficiency.

Finding a balance between stressors and moderators, or available resources, was critical to persistence. Students learned how to

access resources and progress academically through an iterative process (identifying campus resources, participating in socialization activities, approaching faculty with concerns, and utilizing the services of the diversity advisor as a resource). If balance was not achieved, the potential for anxiety, decreased academic concentration, and limited socialization could lead to academic problems. Diversity advisers noted that students who had difficulty moving between cultures tended to have problems with their studies. One recruiter noted: "Students are good at picking up on environmental cues, and the way in which messages are sent can impede [them]. For instance, if people in the university say one thing, but their body language or tone of voice conveys a different message, students might not feel accepted."

Parallel narrative findings were expressed in all five focus groups. The students saw race as a significant factor that influenced how they were welcomed within the academic and clinical environments. Students felt the need to validate their worthiness to others, based on the fact that others readily recognized their differences as evidenced by skin tone or language. The monolithic culture affects the decisions students make, the resources they choose to use, and their psychological well-being.

STRESSORS The decision to return to graduate study led to multiple stressors, some anticipated but others that arose unexpectedly. Stressors were circumstances or events that caused students to feel anxious, lacking control. These emotions were most evident when students felt isolated or invisible or when their needs were not addressed. Students felt they did not fully commit to their academic studies during these times. Three categories of stressors were apparent: a) not feeling connected to the college of nursing, b) existing within the cultural environment, and c) difficulty with utilizing technology.

Not Feeling Connected Students told of having feelings of isolation and marginalization when the educational environment did not recognize the uniqueness of their cultural identity and its meaning in the context of communication and engaged learning. These feelings were evident in comments such as: "Things are geared towards the majority and so you can find yourself being more isolated." One student stated: "You have to be able to stand on your own and not necessarily need people that look like you."

Participants in four of the five groups spoke of not feeling connected and not feeling a part of the CON; they identified two contributing factors. First, they viewed undergraduates as the dominant voice in the college because they constituted the majority population. Second, the graduate students juggled work, family, and professional obligations, which made it difficult to attend extramural programs held during the day. Missed opportunities to socialize formally and informally outside the academic classroom led to unintentional stress, intensifying feelings of being disconnected from the CON.

Existing Within the Cultural Environment Students perceived that they were physically present in the environment but not socially integrated or fully accepted. Several described feelings of isolation and rejection in previous academic and work environments. It is important to note previous experiences shaped the way these students scanned environments and responded to events that happened during their graduate studies.

The need for validation and acceptance by peers and faculty becomes labor intensive over time. When discussing the clinical dissonance felt in the clinical environment, a student stated: “It is still very difficult to gain the respect of peers that have been nurses for a long time. They think you don’t know anything.” This theme was identified in all five focus groups.

Difficulty Utilizing Technology Students spoke of feelings of frustration when they had problems accessing web platforms, the electronic library, and registering for classes. Participants in four of the five focus groups felt that returning to school after a hiatus created many technological challenges that increased their stress levels. One student, a graduate of the undergraduate program, stated: “I was familiar with the school but things changed. For example, library orientation was a bunch of pamphlets and handouts, but if you are more of a hands-on person you need a course to learn Endnote.” Despite advances with computerized clinical documentation, several students had not experienced current web platforms and were not familiar with online course registration. Students reported that university help lines often added to their confusion, particularly when accessed from home.

All returning students may experience similar anxiety, but for this group of students, anxiety compounded feelings of inadequacy and accentuated feelings of isolation. Participants reported that if they told faculty about feeling insecure, class time was allocated for technology demonstrations.

MODERATORS Factors that alleviated stress included institutional and peer support. Participants in all five groups spoke of the need for supportive services and the importance of developing a peer support network. These specific moderators decreased the impact of the stressors and reduced feelings of isolation. The process was dynamic; increasing available resources decreased stress and enabled students to persist academically.

Receiving Supportive Services All participants mentioned financial aid as a key service and consistently stated that the receipt of aid alleviated monetary worries; they did not describe finances as a stressor. Typically, these students were resourceful in finding avenues for financial support. All of the PhD students and one MSN student were employed as teaching assistants or research assistants; both positions carry tuition waivers that offset the expense of graduate school. Students thought having information about the financial aid available prior to enrolling in school was vital. Undoubtedly, had students not been resourceful in obtaining

financial aid, this lack of support would likely have contributed to their stress.

A number of supportive services moderated the students’ level of stress and contributed to retention. These included a diversity adviser who arranged networking activities, such as lunch with the dean and social activities. The advisers also listened to student concerns and brought them to the attention of appropriate persons so that action could be taken. Additional institutional supports included: a) assignment of a faculty mentor on admission to the program, b) monthly doctoral student-faculty forums held during times when students were on campus, and c) assistance in forming a cohesive network that linked students to available resources early in the academic program.

Receiving supportive services contributed to having a holistic perspective of the educational experience. Students appreciated external referrals for support from ethnically diverse professional nursing organizations: “Having professionals here to relate to students of color was supportive and empowering.”

Developing a Support Network Students developed support networks over time as they met other students, became acquainted with faculty mentors, and became aware of the diversity adviser services. They connected through interactions in the classroom environment and by introductions initiated by the diversity adviser. Support networks helped students moderate stress and maintain psychological, social, and academic well-being. Describing support from peers, a student stated: “You need support from those that are like you to keep moving. It brings a certain level of comfort.”

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES Two intermediate outcomes were identified as crucial elements of persistence: social integration and academic progression. Diverse students were more likely to report achieving these outcomes after the first year of graduate study. At this point, peer interactions were judged as genuine, students reported a level of comfort with faculty expectations, and they had evidence of successfully completing courses.

Achieving Social Integration Participants in four of the five groups told of establishing relationships with peers within the same academic program and receiving validation from faculty. Evidence of the nature of peer relationships was apparent: “We’re a really tight-knit cohort. So it’s our strength within ourselves and our own community that has been established.”

Validation within the CON for developing expertise in a specialized field was critical. Social integration was the fabric that held the community of scholars together; it provided a mechanism for attaining a certain level of trustworthiness among peers and between peers and faculty and provided opportunities to appreciate the uniqueness of others.

Academic Progression Academic progression was viewed as acquiring nursing knowledge and achieving a successful grade in the course, signifying that course objectives had been met and the

student could proceed to the next course as planned. Several students spoke of resilience: “You have to get past that part [isolation] and work toward your academic goal.” Participants in all groups told of their desire to achieve or progress academically. Social integration among peers, faculty, and other minority students in cohesive networks was seen as pivotal to achieving the desired final goal of graduation.

DESIRED OUTCOME Participants in three of the five focus groups spoke of the desired outcome of graduation. Overwhelmingly, they voiced the desire to persist in the program and graduate, despite obstacles in the way of this measure of success. Two PhD students who participated in the focus groups were the first ethnically diverse students to graduate from the PhD program, and several direct-entry students completed the first 15 months of study and passed the licensure exam, advancing to their graduate specialty study area. The master’s-level students were progressing with course work and doctoral graduates were beginning the new role of nurse researcher.

Discussion and Recommendations The conceptual framework of factors affecting academic persistence provides a multifaceted guide for meeting the academic and social needs of ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse graduate nursing students. Awareness of stressors that students experience is critical to the promotion of academic progression.

Findings from this study concur with findings in studies of undergraduate students that reported family support, financial aid, and mentorship as critical factors influencing retention of minority students (Brown & Marshall, 2008; Coleman, 2008). Minority students have been shown to struggle with issues of social isolation and the desire for social integration with faculty and peers (Anders et al., 2007; Childs et al., 2004; Coleman; Mingo, 2008). The conceptual framework developed from this study suggests that social integration is an intermediate outcome, one that is necessary for retention and graduation. Awareness of students’ perceptions of the monolithic culture and the environmental scanning in which they engage can help in the development of initiatives that create a welcoming environment for all students. A team approach encompassing faculty development, administrative action, and the development of student-focused resources is recommended.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT Faculty development related to tone, approach, intercultural communication style, and body language may help promote a welcoming climate (Childs et al., 2004; Coleman, 2008). Xu and Davidhizar (2005, p. 215) noted that “personal and group communication patterns and styles are rooted in cultural backgrounds.” Minority students are keen observers of body language; faculty may be unaware of the messages they convey. Body language that appears rushed or a stance in which the instructor does not face the student can be perceived as a distant

and direct message that the faculty member is not interested in the needs of the student (Ackerman-Barger, 2010). Previous experiences in monolithic environments have shaped the mental models that students bring to situations in which they are the minority. Faculty can shape new, positive mental models by demonstrating a welcoming approach toward their students.

The propensity for unrecognized or potential negative bias in the evaluation of student performance is an appropriate topic for faculty development; true cultural awareness training attempts to avoid generalizations. While faculty time is limited, the elements of personality, sincerity, and acknowledging student perseverance are vital to address when a student encounters academic obstacles. By working together with administration and students, faculty have the potential to become instrumental in promoting student success. The potential exists for faculty and student transformation through co-learning about ways in which communication styles enhance messages about the acceptance of others who may be from diverse backgrounds.

Interactions between faculty and students have enduring effects on learning and professional development. It is vital to create a safe learning environment in which students communicate in ways that respect diverse views and are appreciative of students as individuals.

ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIONS In-person orientation to technologies and campus resources is part of creating a hospitable environment. Such orientation provides a way to decrease anxiety and allows students to learn at a comfortable pace. In addition, hiring staff, such as the diversity recruiter-adviser, to promote social integration can be instrumental for student retention. The diversity recruiter-adviser at the study site developed peer-to-peer mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and links between undergraduate and graduate nursing students; disseminated financial aid information specifically designed for diverse students; and provided professional opportunities with ethnic organizations. Graduate students who were not previously introduced to these organizations may underestimate their utility, but the opportunities they provide for mentorship, professional growth, and support can be invaluable.

Role models who can guide and coach students in their professional development and academic survival, early in their academic program, are vital to academic success (Gardner, 2005; Vaquera, 2007). The administration should actively recruit faculty who mirror the ethnic backgrounds of diverse students. Given the faculty shortage, recruitment could center on hiring graduates. Administrators also might seek funding for financial aid for graduate education; specifically targeted scholarships may help attract additional diverse students.

STUDENT RESOURCES Students in this study clearly indicated that having staffed professionals who act as cultural brokers and provide one-on-one time and academic support was important. “Cultural brokers act as mediators between diverse students and the institutional environment” (Evans & Greenberg, 2006, p. 302). If

the diversity recruiter/adviser has a nursing background and clinical expertise there are greater benefits. A multiple role, linking the characteristics of teacher, adviser, friend, mentor, and coach, can be particularly helpful.

Summary Creating and sustaining a welcoming environment are critical for the recruitment of diverse students. A multilevel approach supportive of student needs is necessary to promote retention and academic success among minority students. Building relationships with personnel and ethnic professional nursing communities is important for the sustainability of resources and potential future recruitment purposes. **NLN**

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