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GRADUATING ASSOCIATE DEGREE NURSING STUDENTS:
KEEPING STUDENTS ON TRACK

By

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Graduating Associate Degree Nursing Students: Keeping Students on Track

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband for his unwavering support throughout my educational journey. Darrell has always been there to pick up the pieces when deadlines and classes were taking more and more of my time and for that I am forever grateful. To my daughter, Elizabeth, for her patience as I balanced watching her grow up and trying to achieve my own goals to be an example for her in the future. And to my step daughter Emily, a "daughter" in so many ways, who has set her own goals and continues to reach for the stars.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Deborah West, for her support and patience throughout this journey. I also would like to thank Dr. James Bliss, Dr. Charles Hausman and Dr. Nancy Owens for serving on my dissertation committee. The support I have received from each of these mentors contributed to the completion of this dissertation.

ABSTRACT

The national job outlook for registered nurses, according to a News Release for Employment Projections 2012-2022 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), will continue to increase in job growth from 2012 to 2022 by 19.4%. This increase will result in an additional 526,800 registered nursing positions that will be available nationwide by 2022. This qualitative dissertation investigated associate degree nursing students and the strategies they employed to be successful and graduate from their respective nursing program. According to a report entitled *The Registered Nurse Population* by the US Department of Health and Human Services (2008), associate degree nursing programs graduate 45.4% of all nursing students who were entering the workforce at that time completed a 2-year program. This qualitative study design consisted of interviewing participants who were in the last semester of an associate degree program within a month of graduation. The participants were recruited from a community college in rural Southeastern Kentucky and shared valuable insight through their lived experiences as a nursing student. This information shared by the participants may be useful to future associate degree nursing students in achieving the goal of becoming a registered nurse.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	INTRODUCTION	1
	Nursing Shortage and Educational Programs	3
	The Development of the Study	5
	Problem Statement	6
	Research Questions	9
	Significance of the study	10
	Summary	11
II	REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	13
	Introduction	13
	Historical Context of Nursing Programs	13
	Historical Review of Rural Appalachian Culture and Economics	16
	Nursing Shortage in the United States	17
	Need for Associate Degree Programs in a Rural Area	19
	Nursing Student Retention	20
	Nursing Student Stress	23
	Personality Characteristics of Nursing Students	27
	Research Review Summary	30
III.	METHODOLOGY	32
	Introduction	32
	Qualitative Research Design	33
	Data Collection	34
	Research Methodology and Data Analysis	37
	Themes	38
	Qualitative Research Design	40
	Population/Sample	41
	Researcher Positionality/Subjectivity	42
	Summary of Methods	43
IV.	INTERVIEW RESULTS	46

Introduction....46
Theme 1: Resources....46
Theme 2: Challenges....51
Theme 3: Strategies....57
Theme 4: Identity....60
Conclusion....64
V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS....66
Introduction....66
Interpretation of the Findings....67
Limitations of the Study....76
Recommendations....77
Implications....78
Conclusion....79

REFERENCES....81
APPENDIXES....87
A: Interview Questions....88
B: Script to Solicit Volunteers for Study....90
C: Consent to Participate in a Research Study....92
VITA....97

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

1. Participant Information....35
2. Emergent Themes....38
3. Resources....51
4. Challenges....57
5. Strategies....60
6. Identity....63

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The roots of modern rural healthcare in the mountains of Southeastern Kentucky can notably be attributed to the dedication of Mary Breckinridge to the region. Breckinridge (1881-1965) was the daughter of a wealthy family born in the United States and later educated at a private school in Switzerland (Goan, 2008). After the death of her first husband Breckinridge became a nurse enrolled and graduated from nursing school in 1910. Subsequently she remarried and had two children, a son and daughter. Tragically Breckinridge endured deaths of both children-- and her daughter died shortly after birth in 1916 and her son died in 1918 at 4 years of age. In 1920 she moved to Washington, D.C. to work in public health as a nurse and she and her second divorced. (Shampo, 2000)

In 1923 Breckinridge returned to Europe and attended a midwifery program in England at The British Hospital for Mothers and Babies and was awarded a midwifery certificate in 1924. (Goan, 2008) During the time while she worked as a public health nurse in Washington, D.C. she learned of the high maternal and infant death rates that were occurring in rural America and when she returned from England she settled in the city of Hyden located in Leslie County, Kentucky (Shampo, 2000), a county is situated in the heart of rural Southeastern Kentucky. As a result of her dedication to the appalling rate of maternal-child death in this region, Breckinridge was instrumental in bringing midwifes and eventually a hospital to this remote rural community.

The topography of this region presented many difficulties for residents receiving any type of formal healthcare when Breckinridge first arrived in this rural area of Appalachia. Transportation was by horseback on rocky paths and roads and home visits were made to the women and children requiring assistance with healthcare. If a physician was needed to care for a sick child midwives would transport sick babies in saddlebags to the clinic for treatment. The mountainous terrain and harsh winters with heavy snows and spring floods presented many challenges for Breckinridge and her team of midwives to deliver the nursing care to the region that was *so* desperately needed. In 1928 as a result of the work by Breckinridge, the first hospital, *The Hyden Hospital and Health Center*, opened to serve the residents of this region. The doors of the hospital remain open today which is now known as *The Mary Breckinridge Hospital*, was renamed shortly after her death in 1965 as a tribute to Breckinridge. This tireless dedication to bring better healthcare to the region, by 1965 the Frontier Nursing Service midwives had delivered over 14,000 babies and had seen more than 58,000 patients with only 11 maternal deaths (Goan, 2008).

This unprecedented movement of nurses, trained as midwives, into the Appalachian community changed the landscape of healthcare for this medically underserved population. Breckinridge founded the Frontier Nursing Service in Hyden, Kentucky in 1939 and it is now known as *Frontier Nursing University* (Goan, 2008). The main campus of the university is located in Hyden, Kentucky where it was founded many years ago. The legacy of Mary Breckinridge and her lifelong passion to serve mothers and babies, and to educate nurses from across the United States and beyond, continues to this day.

This brief introduction to Mary Breckinridge and the struggles of those living in rural Appalachia provides a snapshot of life as it was many years ago for those living in this region. Sadly, although many years have passed since the time of pioneers such as Breckinridge that settled in this region of Southeastern Kentucky, the area remains underserved in regards to healthcare and education. Further steps are critical to increase qualified healthcare personnel who call this region home. The need for continued education in the mountains of rural Appalachia was one of the main factors that lead me to pursue this dissertation study topic. Increasing the graduation rate for associate degree nursing students may provide the additional nurses necessary to ease the looming nationwide and statewide shortages of registered nurses.

Nursing Shortage and Educational Programs

The nursing shortage nationwide has contributed to the critical need for students to enter their prospective nursing degree programs before graduating and entering the workforce. This shortage is attributed to schools of nursing which are experiencing faculty shortages, as well as caring for an increased population as the baby boomers reach retirement age--as reported in the *Nursing Workforce: Emerging Nurse Shortages Due to Multiple Factors* (2001). The increase in chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity has also contributed to a larger patient population. Registered nurses will experience an increase in job growth from 2012 to 2022 by 19.4% reported in a News Release for Employment Projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), This increase will result in an additional 526,800 registered nursing positions that will be available nationwide by 2022 and registered nurses must have an entry level education of an

associate's degree to practice nursing (The Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2014). The outlook for nursing positions is growing faster than the average job with a 19% growth rate. Furthermore, Juraschek, Zhang, Ranganathan, and Lin (2012), a report card compiled of regions of the United States and projected each state's shortfall for registered nurses by 2030. The largest shortfall of registered nurses is in the southern U.S., including Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia (p. 245). Kentucky's registered nurse shortage is estimated to increase to approximately 3,244 open positions by 2030 (Juraschek et al., 2012, p. 245). One can only imagine that this shortage will increase in the coming years.

The occurrence of nursing student retention was described by Jeffreys (2012) as "the most persistent trend in student persistence is that student attrition persists" (p. 3). Jeffreys further explains, "Older students have been linked to additional role responsibilities that challenge persistence and retention; therefore, higher attrition rates have been reported for these non-traditional students" (p. 27). The average age of a community college student is 29 years old, and approximately two-thirds of all students attend college part-time (AACC, 2014). I have 12 years of experience as a nurse educator, primarily at the associate degree level. As a result of my experience I have grown concerned and thus developed a research interest in understanding student retention and attrition--the focus of this dissertation study.

Associate degree nursing programs graduate 45.4% of all nursing students entering the workforce. Additionally, the report reflected that 20.4% of nursing students

were from diploma (3 year) programs, and only 34.2% were from a bachelor degree (4 year) or graduate degree nursing program. This reported data indicates that the majority of nurses entering into practice have an associate degree (*The Registered Nurse Population* by the US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

The Development of the Study

This qualitative study investigated how associate degree nursing students describe their programs. This inquiry will help nursing educators understand:

- strategies that associate degree nursing students from rural Appalachia utilize to manage their multiple challenges that affect their progression in their program;
- those factors that encourage the success of associate degree nursing students in their programs; and
- how associate degree nursing students find support.

The central interest for this study has developed throughout my 14 years of experience as a nurse educator. I entered nursing practice through an associate degree in nursing. Many years and several degrees later, I hold a master's of science in nursing with an area of concentration in nursing education. The years I have spent in nursing education include a local community college in a rural Appalachian area. The primary region that I have practiced as a nurse and nurse educator has been in the southeastern Kentucky region. Providing healthcare and educating the residents of this area gives me a great sense of pride.

This investigation gave careful consideration in understanding why our best and brightest students, admitted to our nursing programs, ultimately fail to graduate. This

academic failure of high achieving students sparked my interest in conducting this study. Interviewing nursing students from rural Appalachia to understand how they navigate their nursing programs can provide educators an understanding of student challenges and support.

This qualitative study provides students with a voice of in-depth understanding to add to the current literature regarding nursing retention. The context of "exploring the complexity of factors that contribute to student retention could reveal facets of the process beyond those studied by quantitative methodology" (Shelton, 2012, p. 14). Shelton advocates that a qualitative study can add valuable findings toward nursing student retention—reinforcing that this type of research is worth pursuing.

Problem Statement

Numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of nursing retention without finding specific causes to the retention phenomenon. Peterson-Graziose, Bryer, and Nikolaidou (2013) recommend that nursing schools "have a clear understanding of the variables associated with student attrition" (p. 353). The multiple factors that can contribute to a student's success in nursing programs have been studied from several different perspectives. In a study conducted at a community college, Fontaine (2014) found that there was no single intervention that impacted student retention. Various strategies were employed such as community nurse mentoring, career counseling, peer tutoring, orientation, learning communities, counseling, and an individualized academic plan. None of these factors were shown to directly impact nursing student retention.

Fontaine (2014) concluded that "merely adding services or modifying some of the factors within the nursing program's control may not solve retention problems" (p. 98).

Similarly a nursing student retention study by Montgomery, Tansey, and Roe (2009) utilized a questionnaire to sample 239 first-year nursing students concerning problems experienced while in their program and how these issues influenced their decision to stay with the current course of study. Topics identified as problematic to students were: financial concerns, family commitments, and childcare issues. Of those students in this study, 53% reported that financial issues impact their progression, however as low as 28% indicated that work commitments impacted school.

In a related study regarding the phenomenon of nursing student retention across numerous types of educational institutions and degree programs, Glogowska, Young and Lockyer (2007) reported that "there is increased urgency for improvements in retention on health professional courses" (p. 64). The researchers, with regard to student retention, also noted that "further research into students' reasons for their actions is required" (p. 64). This study reported solidifies the importance of this qualitative study of nursing students who can describe information such as considerations for leaving their programs or factors that keep students on track to graduation. Furthermore, Harris, Rosenberg, and O'Rourke (2013) believe that to understand nursing retention issues better, nurse educators should begin by "tackling the complex and multifactorial problem of student attrition in a planned, meaningful way will help to address an imminent nursing workforce challenge" (p. 36).

The purpose of this inquiry is to understand nursing students' perspectives about their associate degree program. Participants were selected from an associate degree

nursing program in rural Appalachia within Southeastern Kentucky. In this rural Appalachian college studied for this dissertation inquiry, the admissions criterion for those who apply to the associate degree nursing program bases acceptance solely on previous student academic performance. The college consists of five locations, two full service campuses and three educational centers, throughout the region. The total number of applicants to the program average between 100-130 students--who applying for one of 25 available seats in the nursing program. The selection criteria is based upon a points system that assigns a given number of points in a variety of categories such as: ACT score, grades in science and math courses, and grades in the required general education courses. However, this process typically does not identify specific strategies for success that could be identified to assist the students in graduating from the program.

This region of southeastern Kentucky is a high poverty area according to the data from the U.S. Census Bureau of the American Community Survey (2013). This survey of the congressional district in Kentucky reports a poverty rate of 26.7%, while the statewide rate is 18.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The retention of the nursing students admitted to programs in a rural Appalachian area could have a significant impact on the local economy by benefiting health care agencies/employers and city/county tax districts. These associate degree nursing students have the potential to move into full-time employment after graduation as opposed to working part-time or not working at all while they were in the nursing program.

Through the exploration of this qualitative study—what worked and did not work—could be valuable for incoming associate degree students. The major struggle for nursing students is the outside of classroom study time expected for a full course load –

especially theory courses where three of hours of outside study time is expected for each hour of classroom time is required. The students often misunderstand the time involved in the nursing program until they have been accepted and begin the first nursing course. The organizational skills necessary to balance family, work, and other commitments along with classroom (theory) instruction, nursing laboratory hours, and then clinical hours at the healthcare facilities can be very stressful to the students.

In this inquiry a qualitative study was conducted that allowed the students the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions and hear their voices as they described their experiences. Casey (1995) described the benefits of a qualitative research approach in this way: "Participant structured conversations have become an imperative addition to the research repertoire" (p. 239). This narrative type methodology would allow for further investigation of identifying common characteristics as voiced by the participants. The importance of qualitative research and the incorporation of both the participant and the researcher was described by Lichtman (2010) as "dual voices: the voice of the writer and the voice of those studied" (p. 209).

Research Questions

RQ1. What challenges do nursing students in rural Appalachia say affects their program completion?

RQ2. How do nursing students in rural Appalachia manage their personal and school obstacles?

RQ3. What are the factors that help nursing students in rural Appalachia complete their program?

Significance of the Study

Since there have been numerous studies on nursing retention (Jeffreys, 2012; Juraschek, et al., 2012 and Shelton, 2012) participants in this study identified common strategies for success in the associate degree nursing program in rural Appalachia. The college where this study was conducted as previously stated, has an admissions criterion entirely based upon previous academic performance of the students who apply to the associate degree nursing program. Currently, interviews are not conducted as a part of the admissions process, so the first time the nursing faculty meet the students is only after the students have been selected and attend an on-campus nursing orientation session. Therefore, understanding and identifying strategies for success utilized by nursing students who graduate from associate degree programs could play a vital role in the nursing program admissions process for colleges and universities. This study is significant because as a nursing educator, student retention and attrition are always at the forefront of concern for faculty and administration alike. It will only be through those of us that are exploring the context of qualitative research that the available literature on the subject can be strengthened.

Exploring strategies described by these nursing students in this qualitative inquiry can reveal real world applications for student retention in the nursing program. This study discovered a multitude of strategies that students disclosed -- these findings are informative and worth sharing with the nursing education community. One can only wonder if the findings of these student strategies will increase nursing student retention in rural Appalachia.

Summary

Reflecting back upon the work of Mary Breckinridge in Southeastern Kentucky presents a reminder of how some things change over time while others remain the same. Access to care and transportation in this specific region of Kentucky continues to present many challenges for those residents. Providing nursing students with the knowledge that could greatly impact their ability to maintain progression in an associate degree program is vital in graduating nursing students, particularly in a rural Appalachian area. I feel that my background in nursing education, especially at the associate degree level, offers specific insight to conducting this type of study. By means of using qualitative methodology as a guide for this study design an opportunity to explore the participant's views and personal stories, related to their nursing program, could be assessed. Understanding the student's perspectives and finding out more about how they handled the struggles of attending college, working, family, financial responsibilities were important to this study.

The critical nursing shortage that is ahead of the nation in the upcoming years and the positive job growth for the registered nursing profession were strong indicators that drew my interest in conducting this type of study. The region where the study took place, in Southeastern Kentucky, experiences a poverty rate of 26.7% compared to 18.6% which is for the rest of the state. The recruitment of nursing students, in the midst of the national and state nursing shortage projections, is only one factor that is involved with the issue of retention. The continued retention of those qualified students admitted to nursing programs and their subsequent graduation will help with this projected shortfall. Community colleges play a vital role in educating rural students, and by providing degree

programs such as nursing, the students can receive an education in a career field that is in demand. Graduates from the various rural nursing programs support their local economies and over time will eventually ease the anticipated lack of registered nurses in Kentucky and across the United States.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Multiple factors can be attributed to the shortage of nurses, particularly the retention of nursing students once they have been admitted to their program. The issue regarding the retention of nursing students is the focus of this dissertation. The purpose of this literature review is to explore the current associate degree nursing literature and related contexts impacting the students' ability to successfully complete their nursing programs through graduation. This chapter includes:

- Historical context regarding the development of associate nursing programs
- Nursing shortage in the US
- Nursing programs in rural Appalachia
- Historical review of rural Appalachian culture and economics
- Nursing student retention
- Nursing student stress
- Personality characteristics of nursing students
- Research review summary

Historical Context of Nursing Programs

Montag (1951) is credited with the concept of the development of associate degree nursing programs, instead of four year programs, (in the author's dissertation entitled *The Education of Nursing Technicians).* This proposal created conversations of

concern within the nursing education community--some of which was criticism--that other nursing degree programs, such as diploma and baccalaureate would no longer have a purpose. In response, there was a concern of nursing faculty members regarding the potential that the associate degree nursing programs would attract more students--since the graduates would be eligible to take the examination to become a registered nurse without the additional educational preparation. The entry point for nursing practice changed at this time and the concern was that potential nursing students would desire to pursue an associate degree since there would be less time and money involved. The fear was that these diploma and baccalaureate programs would no longer be in existence after the associate degree programs were launched. Montag stated,

> It was for the preparation of a nursing technician that the associate degree program was initiated. Its placement in the community/junior college was deliberate. It was believed that education for nursing should be geared into the system of higher education of the country. The community junior-colleges have had considerable experience with the preparation of technical workers in many occupations. Furthermore, the junior-college is a 2-year institution. The program in nursing was projected as a 2-year program with the belief that if it were indeed education-centered it could be accomplished in 2 years. The rapid growth of the community college as an educational institution and its accessibility to students were additional factors in placing this new nursing program in the community college. (p. 101)

Montag (1963) also identified the characteristics that would make the associate degree nursing program unique from the diploma and baccalaureate:

- The curriculum includes general, supporting, and specialized (nursing) courses. The nursing courses constitute about one half of the curriculum.
- The specialized or nursing courses have been designed and planned in a sequence different from those in more traditional programs. The content is grouped into broad areas.
- Many facilities are used to provide the learning experience. No single hospital or health agency is sufficient.
- The learning experiences in the hospital or other agency are developed as laboratory experiences. The college facility is responsible for developing the curriculum and for teaching the students. The nursing faculty is employed by the college and with the same privileges and obligations as other faculty members.
- The program is two years in length. Some programs are two academic years, while others use one or two summer semesters as well.
- The student meets college admission and graduation requirements. He or she enjoys all student privileges and meets all student obligations.
- The college finances the entire program. Tuition and fees are the same for nursing students as for all others in the college.
- The associate degree is granted.
- The graduate is eligible for the licensing examination of the state in which the college is located. (pp. 101-102)

In a related article, Lewis (1964) noted the associate degree program "represents a highly structured and concentrated curriculum. It is anything but a *snap*, and the student

will be called upon to do some intensive studying during her 2 years" (p. 81). This ideation remains true to this day; as a nursing educator, I have seen firsthand the struggles that associate degree students face upon admission to the program. The context of the associate degree nursing program described as a prerequisite to the baccalaureate program was a misconception by those that did not understand the origins. It was not designed as a part of a transition to a diploma or baccalaureate program; the associate degree program was developed to graduate students to be ready to work in direct patient care situations.

The descriptions from Montag (1963) and Lewis (1964) are still applicable to today's associate degree nursing programs. Remarkably, nearly 50 years later, Mahaffey (2002) stated that over time, "associate degree nursing education has had a significant impact on the registered nursing population in the United States" (para 1). The rigor of the associate degree programs can be seen through the current statistics demonstrating that these degree programs graduate 45.4% of all nursing students that were entering the workforce (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

Historical Review of Rural Appalachian Culture and Economics

Crookston and Hooks (2012) reported that rural Appalachian areas benefit from having a community college, stating that "rural counties housing community colleges may enjoy significant employment gains" (p. 367). Similarly, other findings (Miller & Kissinger, 2007) describe a rural community's survival as having a "social engine that drives the community's economy…. social engines can be businesses, offices, agencies, schools or traditions that bring a community together and provide the locus for group

identity formation" (p. 27). Arfstrom (2001) stated that "families who live in small, rural communities expect to receive the same (or at the minimum) or very similar education as their suburban counterparts" (p. 40). According to an American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013) the 5th district of Kentucky, which is the rural region where the college utilized for this study is located, the total population of those residents 25 years and older is 493,996. However, the total number of college degrees held by individuals in this region remains low, as indicated below:

- 29,392 persons have earned an associate degree.
- 35,982 persons have earned a bachelor's degree.
- 30,030 persons have earned a graduate degree or higher.

The issue of education and youth in Appalachia was the focus of a study by Ali and Saunders (2006) who examined the college expectations of these individuals. The researchers stated that "the low percentage of adults holding college degrees mean that Appalachian youth are exposed to fewer role models with postsecondary education" (p. 39). The need for community colleges to provide higher education for rural communities—such as associate degree nursing programs—is being met with community institutions in rural Appalachian areas. This results in these rural community colleges continually trying to meet the projected shortages in the overall number of registered nurses in the Appalachian region.

Nursing Shortage in the United States

As outlined in Chapter I, the nursing shortage nationwide has contributed to the critical need for students in addition to not only enter into their prospective nursing

degree programs they should ultimately graduate and enter the workforce. According to a news release for employment projections 2012-2022 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), registered nurses will experience an increase in job growth from 2012 to 2022 by 19.4%. This increase will result in an additional 526,800 registered nursing positions that will be available nationwide by 2022. The Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook (2014) stated that registered nurses must have an entry level education of an associate's degree. The nursing job outlook is growing faster than the average job outlook with a 19% growth rate. This report estimates that there will be a demand for 525,000 nurses in the United States to replace those that are retiring or leaving the workforce or just due to growth. There will be 1.05 million nursing positions open by 2022. The continued need for nurses, especially due to retirement, was asserted by Buerhaus (2009) as "Over the next 20 years, the average age of the RN will increase and the size of the workforce will plateau as large numbers of RNs retire….demand for RNs is expected to increase during this time…..a large and prolonged shortage of nurses is expected to hit the US in the latter half of the next decade." The National Council of State Boards of Nursing and The Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers (2013) reported survey results that found 55% of the RN workforce in the United States as age 50 or older. These findings related to the shortage of registered nurses support the belief that there is no relief in sight to this national crisis.

Another important factor related to the nursing shortage is the national shortage of nurse educators. A survey conducted by the AACN reported an estimated 79,659 qualified applicants that were turned away from nursing programs. There were several contributing factors to this phenomenon by the responded schools such as: lack of

nursing faculty; clinical space; classroom space; budget restraints; and qualified clinical preceptors. The survey response that had the greatest significance indicated that approximately two thirds of the responding nursing schools reported faculty shortages as the reason for not accepting all of the qualified applicants into their respective programs. The AACN also projected that the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010) into law that an estimated 32 million Americans will receive access to healthcare services. This influx of patients into the healthcare system will only increase the need for registered nurses and therefore the projected shortage of nurses will continue to worsen.

Need for Associate Degree Programs in a Rural Area

The need for associate degree programs to remain in rural areas is supported through the work of Juraschek et al. (2012) on the specific regions of the United States that projected each state's shortfall for registered nurses by 2030. The report identified that the largest shortfall of registered nurses is in the southern region, including: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia (Juraschek et al., 2012, p. 245). Kentucky's registered nurse shortage is estimated to increase to approximately 3,244 open positions by 2030 (p. 245). The associate degree nursing program continues to be a vital part of a rural community; I have experienced many conversations with associate degree students that due to travel time and limited financial resources, the local community college was the only option for them to receive a nursing degree of any type.

This continued need for nurses in a rural area was the topic of a study by Dotson, Dave and Cazier (2012) which supports the work of Juraschek (2012) through identifying the variances found in rural nurses versus urban nurses. The differences outlined in their study found that rural nurses were older, have been working as a nurse longer and many of these nurses an associate degree in nursing versus a baccalaureate or master's degree (Dotson, et al., 2012). There is also an important financial attraction for urban nurses to relocate to rural areas because of the loan repayment programs that will repay student loans if the nurse move to rural areas (Daniels, et al., 2007).

In related study centered on rural communities and access to education found that if the education opportunities are brought to students in a rural setting that it will "tap into a large, new workforce who cannot easily leave the area……keeping them there while benefiting rural communities on multiple levels" (Dotson, et al., 2007) This is another key outcome documented in the literature that there is an important role that rural community colleges and associate degree nursing programs can provide to this population of rural students seeking an education. A defining statement relating to the need for associate degree programs in rural settings according to in the conclusion of the summary of their study is that if there is education available in a rural setting then the people who are already residing in the rural area would most likely stay in the area after graduation.

Nursing Student Retention

Nursing student retention is something that nurse educators have dealt with for many years. A model by Shelton (2012) depicts the various factors that play a role in a

student's decision to stay in a nursing program or leave the program before graduating, either by choice or failure. Figure 1 below examines the outcomes that affect student retention by either persistence to stay in the program and successful academic performance that lead to graduation from the nursing program.

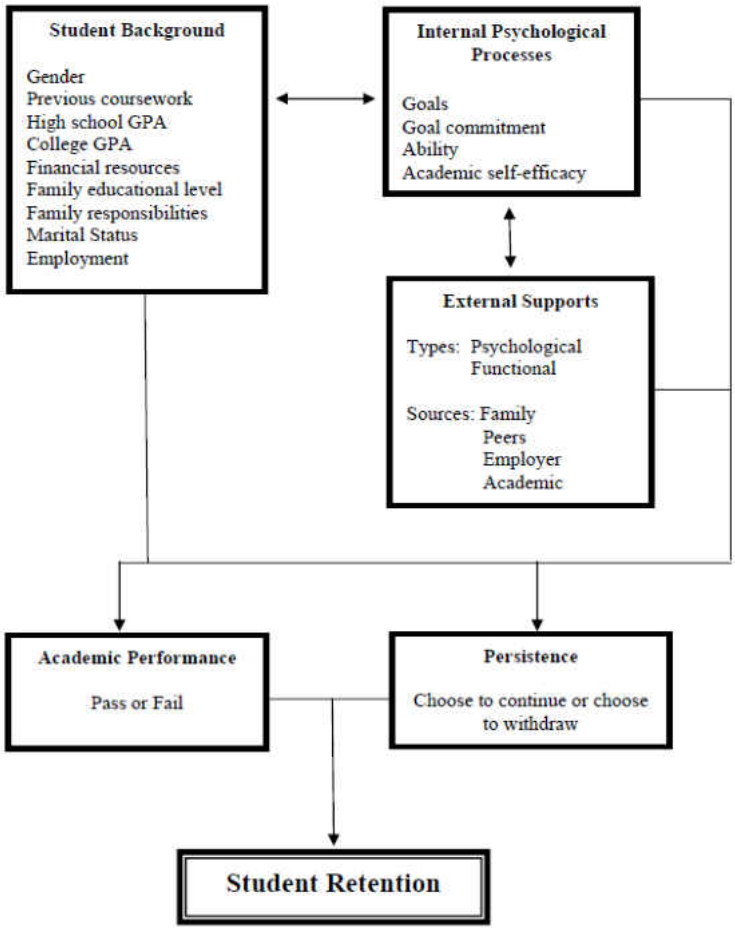

Figure 1 Source: Shelton, E. (2012). A model of nursing student retention. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, *9*(1), 6. doi:10.1515/1548-923X.2334

However, the opposing outcome occurs if the student either chooses to withdraw from the program on their own or the student does meet the standards set forth by the program and academically unsuccessful. The model developed by Shelton (2012) presents the following categories as factors in nursing student retention:

- Student background

- Internal psychological stressors
- External supports
- Academic performance
- Persistence

Shelton's study indicated a positive correlation could be determined to exist between two factors: academic outcome expectations and perceived faculty support. In addition, Shelton also noted that students who were academically successful reported greater faculty support.

This study on nursing student retention (Shelton 2012) referenced above indicated that seeking assistance could be attributed to the fact that those nursing students who achieve higher academically are more likely to contact faculty members for support. In comparison, nursing students who may be struggling academically may not seek out support from faculty or other avenues of academic support that might be available to them. Shelton recommends that not only should the students make contact with the faculty but that the faculty should make contact with the students, and do so through various modes of communication such as: email; social networking; and face-to-face meetings as needed. These steps of communicating are important to consider since nursing students, especially in associate degree programs, have many more responsibilities and are employed, have family obligations, and are possibly less academically prepared than previous students who have been out of school for a number of years (Jeffreys, 2007).

In the course of continuing with the theme regarding the role of nursing faculty and the impact on nursing student retention, Williams (2010) recommended the following ways that faculty can engage students:

- Encourage students to create a story of becoming a nurse; having a goal.
- Form a learning community bring together students from all levels.
- Faculty advising should incorporate a career plan and assist the student with time management and map out future courses to evaluate any challenges that exist.

Nursing Student Stress

The academic workload along with the clinical component consumes a large amount of the student's available time to devote to other activities such as working, family, and other outside commitments (Galbraith & Brown, 2011). The nursing students try to manage all of these additional responsibilities that are not related to their nursing program and at times the amount of commitment is just too much for the student to handle (Mirzaei, Oskouie & Rafii, 2011). The issue of stress was the focus of one study by Gibbons, Dempster and Moutray (2009) who employed a survey tool to measure stress in nursing students known as the *Index of Sources of Stress in Nursing* (ISSN). The ISSN is a 29-item questionnaire that measures the respondent's sources of stress (See figure 2 below). The respondents are asked to rate each question twice according to either a "distress or hassle and once again as a source of eustress or uplift" (Gibbons et al., 2009, p. 1097).

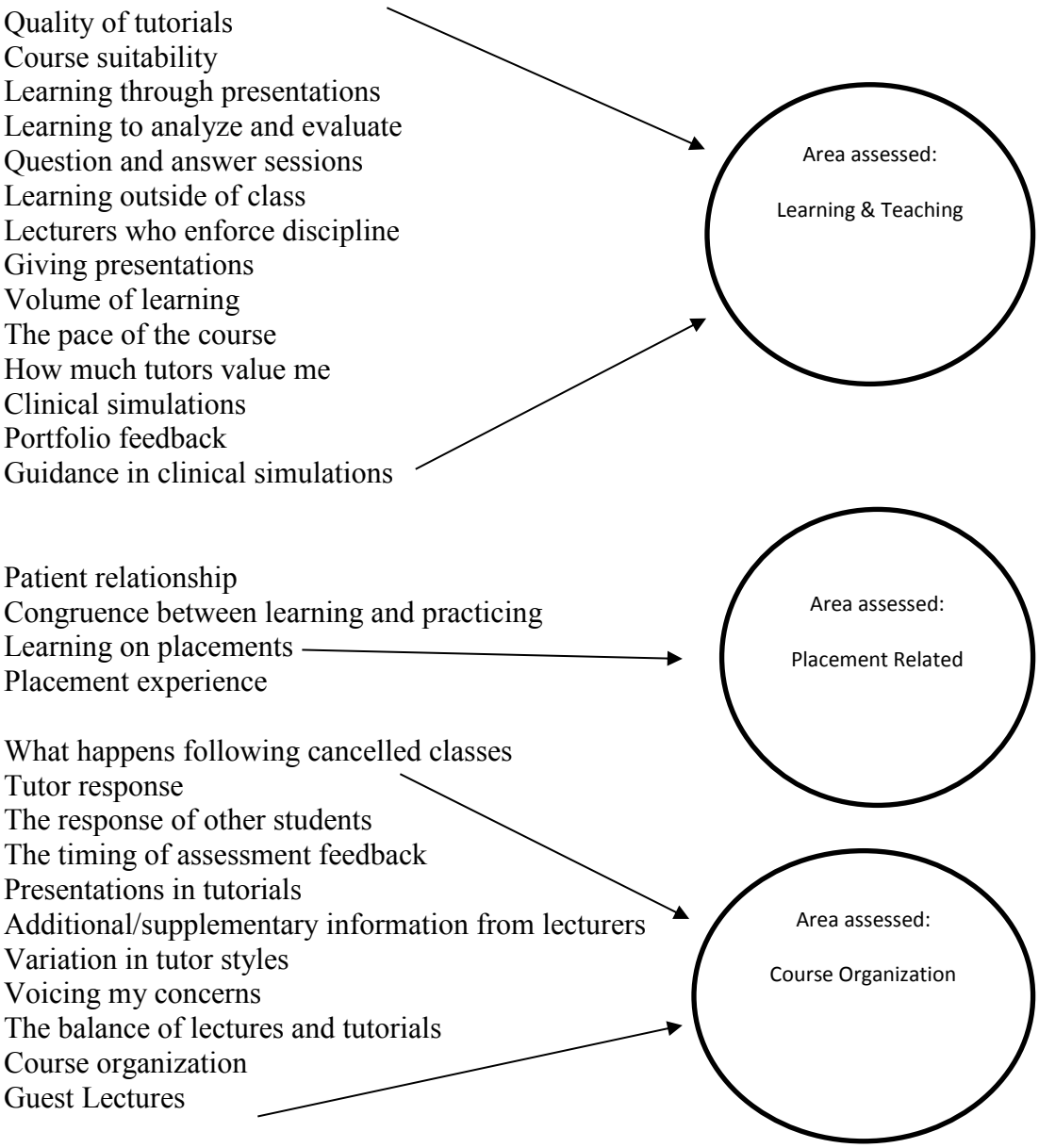

Figure 2 Source: Index of Sources of Stress in Nursing Questionnaire (Gibbons et al., 2009 p. 1098).

The findings from this study (Gibbons, et al., 2011) concluded that stress perceived by nursing students' results in either negative or positive reaction from the student and that this information can play a vital role for the nurse educator. The nurse educator can affect a nursing student's perceived stress by identifying and initiating

activities early in the program on various coping resources which could help alleviate the student's stress and could lead to eustress for the student. In addition, one limitation is that the students surveyed were in their final year of the nursing program. The nursing students in their final year would have had more time and experience to draw upon when responding to the questions. The faculty in a nursing program can play a large role in the student's ability to cope and ultimately identify various effective components that can enhance learning in nursing education. Conducting further research that evaluated first-year students is necessary to accurately assess the students at different points in the nursing program.

Stress levels in nursing students were examined through a longitudinal study (Lo, 2002) where the participants were enrolled in a 3-year nursing program. This study on nursing student stress found that students in their second year of the program had a higher degree of transient stress than those students in the first year of the program. This was in part thought to be a relationship between the amount of responsibility and clinical requirements experienced by second year students managing their clinical practice in the health care facilities. As indicated by Lo (2002) and Gibbons et al. (2011) nurse educators could assist students in reducing stress, such as providing training and orientation programs. These targeted programs could play a significant role to help the students understand the requirements expected of them during the nursing program and, by doing so, reduce the amount of stress experienced. Lo (2002) indicated that in the specific university where this study was conducted that there is a course offered as an elective to help students learn ways to reduce stress. The students who have taken this

course reported that it was very helpful, not only in their academic pursuits, but also beneficial to them in their personal lives as well.

Nursing students from a 3-year diploma program as a part of a cross-sectional study examining stress and health in both novice and experienced nursing students surveyed those students from each year of the program students (Jimenez, Navia-Orsorio, and Diaz, 2010). The study found that second-year students were more vulnerable to anxiety and physical symptoms than students in the first and third years of the program. The researchers continued to describe that students at some point during the 3 years of the program experience stressors, and found that experienced students reported a greater increase in academic stressors than the novice students (Jimenez et al., 2010). These findings concur with Lo (2002), who also found a correlation between second-year students and stress levels.

Continued advancement in a nursing program and the subsequent stress levels both academically and physically could also be linked to the issue of retention and attrition in nursing programs. As the nursing program curriculum increases with responsibility and academic difficulty each year, students are faced with new challenges and stressors in which they are unfamiliar with and lack the knowledge to find resources to assist them. Nurse educators do not exclusively provide lecture and clinical instruction but also play a vital role in the reduction of stress and/or perceived stress by incorporating strategies to orient the student to the curriculum and the demands facing them throughout the program (Jimenez, et al., 2010 & Lo, 2002).

Personality Characteristics of Nursing Students

This section of the literature review examines the current research that has been conducted that evaluates the relationship of personality characteristics and nursing students. These findings provide a better understanding of the current state of nursing student retention and the multiple factors that can contribute to student success. In a study conducted by Eley, Eley, Bertello, and Rogers-Clark (2012) examined the association between personality traits and the reasons individuals decide to enter the nursing profession. Their inquiry used a mixed-methods approach asking "Are the reasons individuals enter nursing congruent with their general personality profile?" (Eley et al., 2012, p. 1547). Upon review of the background development of the study, the authors followed an approach of a psychobiological model of personality based upon a model developed by Cloninger (1987). The findings of this study established that there are a variety of different personalities that are attracted to nursing and that "it is unlikely that a distinct personality profile will typify a nurse" (Eley et al., 2012, p.1553). Additional research was recommended to identify specific traits that may be found to be more prevalent in those individuals who are considering nursing as a career.

A further review that associated personality characteristics and nursing students (Baldacchino & Galea 2012) focused on personality traits upon entrance to a nursing program. This study was conducted in the United Kingdom, and the population sampled were diploma (3-year) and baccalaureate (4-year) students. Although the focus of this study is associate degree nursing students one can only wonder if these findings could be generalizable to a variety of nursing students. The recommendation by the researchers related to nursing students and their potential for success was described as "assessment of

students' personality on entry of the course program could potentially assess the individual's aptitude to the nursing profession" (p. 530). The focus of analyzing a nursing student's personality is not considered a part of this study, but these findings provide more evidence that there are several variables when it comes to nursing student retention.

A questionnaire to sample first-year nursing students (Montgomery, Tansey, and Roe, 2009) about problems they experienced while in the program and if these issues influence their decision to stay with the current course of study. The study was comprised of 239 respondents. The following topics were identified as problems that affected the students study: financial concerns; family commitments; and childcare issues. In the conceptual framework for this project, two of those issues were indicated as having a direct relationship on graduation. This article supported those issues as having some effect on students' study and progression in the program. The researchers found that students have a variety of outside stressors beyond the classroom. One stressor reported was that 53% of the respondents indicated financial concerns, while, interestingly only 28% indicated that work commitments caused any difficulty progression in the program.

To examine the attrition rates of nursing an occupational and self-efficacy scale was used initially to examine the attrition rates of nursing students (McLaughlin, Mountray, Muldoon (2008). Through this approach, the researchers were trying to identify certain traits that would lead to attrition. At the conclusion of the study, the researchers acknowledged that by exploring the concepts of self-efficacy, attrition rates could be affected by adding testing that covers occupational self-efficacy. The

researchers suggested that the process of adding testing for self-efficacy to preadmission procedures may assist with the process of selecting nursing students that could be more successful in the program. This study also investigated the phenomenon of nursing retention issues and by the completion of the study the researchers suggested that utilizing a questionnaire related to personality and self-efficacy might be useful in the nursing admissions process.

Furthermore, this literature review of personality characteristics and nursing students generated a very small number of related studies. The fundamental lack of related literature adds to the value of this dissertation study to better understand retention in associate nursing programs to provide researchers and educators another option when examining the admissions processes for associate degree nursing students. This literature review revealed various issues faced by both prospective nursing students and the schools of nursing to which the students apply:

- Do the students possess certain personality traits that can make them more successful in an associate nursing program?
- How would nursing schools measure this aptitude of applicants, and what legal obligations might there be in denying a student based upon personality characteristics?

These are questions that this researcher and other nursing educators have concerning the perspective of using personality inventories to determine admission to nursing programs. Through my experience as a nurse educator incoming classes of nursing students feature many types of personalities. The focus for this study centered on

discovering the strategies that students utilized to overcome the challenges of the nursing program to ultimately graduate not on specific personality traits.

Research Review Summary

Throughout this review of literature various retention factors were examined that are unique to associate degree nursing students. Researching the history of the development of the associate degree programs from the point of conception to the recent studies describing issues with retention is critical. This continued need to increase retention in these rural Appalachian associate degree programs is necessary to help ease the projected shortfall of registered nurses on the nationwide and local level alike. Research has been conducted on several of the major issues affecting nursing students such as nursing student stress and the various personality characteristics of these individuals. There is a correlation documented between the amount of stress incurred by the nursing students while in the nursing program and the direct related effects. However, these studies have consistently illustrated that the best strategy for associate degree students to be successful by graduating from their respective program is truly left open for debate. This gap in the literature provided inspiration for the development of this study. There is evidence by other researchers that there is a problem with retention of nursing students and a profound need for them to graduate and enter the workforce.

The local community college located in a rural area plays a vital role in the education of an Appalachian college student without question. When students examine factors such as distance to travel to school and the lack of financial resources that a majority of these students face, the rural community college remains to be a pivotal first

point of entry for these students to get access to a college education. The success of these students, during their associate degree program, enables these individuals to gain employment as a registered nurse and at the same time remain close to their families.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the study design and how a qualitative research approach was selected for this project. The decision to pursue this type of study is supported by excerpts from qualitative researchers, which have been included in this chapter to describe and define the significance of utilizing this type of study. The population and location of this study are identified in this section. The qualitative approach employed for this study worked well and defined the overall purpose which was to listen to the students. Through the process of listening to the nursing students that participated in this study their voices allowed for the identification of common themes that kept the students on track to graduate from their respective nursing program.

This exploratory qualitative research was designed to explore the perspectives of nursing students about their respective associate degree programs. The following three research questions guide the study:

RQ1. What challenges do nursing students in rural Appalachia say affects their program completion?

RQ2. How do nursing students in rural Appalachia manage their personal and school obstacles?

RQ3. What are the factors that help nursing students in rural Appalachia complete their program?

This chapter starts with a review of the role of the researcher in the study, describing the background interest in the subject and experience relevant to the research

process. This is followed by a description of the sample, followed by a review of the methodological approach and analysis taken in the study, including how coding was used to develop themes. The next section describes the identified themes with illustrative quotations and short frequency charts to indicate prevalence followed by a synthesis of findings as they relate to the research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings and introduces the final chapter of the dissertation.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative studies are recognized to "provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience" (Lichtman, 2010, p. 12). In this dissertation study, through interviews with open ended questions, the challenges faced by the nursing students were explored throughout their respective nursing program. Nursing students likely face challenges, yet many discover strategies that permit them to successfully move forward to complete their program. These insights enhance their ability to overcome their challenges and remain focused.

Qualitative researchers are described by Creswell and Miller (1997) as individuals who "place a substantial emphasis on how participants in a study make sense or meaning of a situation" (p.37). That is, to discover the *how's* and *why's* behind a student's success in reaching graduation. There may be other similar comparison studies to nursing students in the literature. However, this research interest was specifically related around how these rural Appalachian associate nursing students employ strategies to reach graduation. Just as Creswell (2014) described, a qualitative research approach is "an

approach for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4)--the purpose of this study.

Data Collection

This qualitative dissertation study includes a purposive sample. The participants were ten nursing students nearing graduation from an associate degree nursing program in rural Appalachia in Southeastern Kentucky in 2015. Participants were recruited from a community college located within a rural area of southeastern Kentucky in the Appalachian region. Basic demographic data was collected, which included age, gender, marital status, number of children, years attending the college and if they were a full-time or part-time student. Demographic information for participants is presented in table 1.

Table 1

Participant Information

ID	Age	Marital Status	Children	Years at Community College	Full or Part-Time
Sherry	33	Married	Yes	3	full-time
Karen	24	Single	No	8	part-time
Rhonda	36	Single	Yes	4.5	both
Kimberly	28	Single	No	5	part-time
Melinda	30	Single	Yes	3.5	part-time
Elizabeth	25	Single	Yes	4	both
Suzanne	23	Divorced	No	3	both
Deborah	29	Single	No	6	both
Teresa	39	Married	Yes	4	part-time
Kathy	27	Single	Yes	3	both

Pseudonyms were used for this study.

The interviews were scheduled from 1-2 hours using audio recordings, as well as field notes, taken during each session. The location of the interviews were held in a public location, either on campus at the college or at a local restaurant. The goal was to have the students in a comfortable setting and willing to share their experiences with this researcher.

After obtaining permission from the instructor in the community college I solicited students who were in their final nursing course on a voluntary basis. Students who demonstrated interest in participating in this study shared their contact information, and subsequently, each student was contacted to schedule an interview.

After first evaluating the diverse methods in which to conduct a qualitative study, such as focus groups, I decided that interviewing the participants privately allowed for more in-depth perspectives and descriptions to provide better accuracy for this inquiry. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) stated

> Rigor [accuracy], in qualitative terms, and reliability/validity, in quantitative terms, are ways to establish trust or confidence in the findings or results of a research study. Rigor is useful for establishing consistency of the study methods over time and provides an accurate representation of the population studied. (p. 151)

Participants were asked to discuss the contributing factors that lead to their graduation, such as: financial; family; travel; work commitments; and sufficient study time.

Interviews were then transcribed by this researcher, then read several times to create an opportunity for themes to emerge. Once participant quotes were transcribed I copied and pasted the quotes under themes. The audio recordings and field notes, including the participant-signed consent forms and confidentiality statements, will be kept locked in a locked cabinet at this researcher's home office.

Once all transcriptions were read and categorized by theme, I focused on the quotes for each theme to create meaning. Finally, those vignettes that were used in my results chapter are those that: represented many participants; were outlier quotes; or interesting or surprising or added additional information to the findings of this study. In addition some phenomenon were included to further understand how nursing students overcome challenges and remain focused in their program to completion. Glogowska, Young and Lockyer (2007) recommend that further research is needed and that qualitative research "listens to the student voice and incorporates student perspectives" (p. 75).

Research Methodology and Data Analysis

Exploratory qualitative inquiry enables the researcher to explore the perspective of nursing students with an emphasis on the meanings participants attach to events and processes. Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand the problem in terms of the accounts of participants (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research uses inductive analysis, where the researcher starts from participant accounts and develops categories and themes (Thomas, 2006). The current study used applied thematic analysis, a method for identifying and analyzing patterns in qualitative data (Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2015; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011).

Applied thematic analysis involves a six phases: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, (f) writing up (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Thematic analysis requires researchers to familiarize themselves with the data and look for key words and ideas before analyzing through software (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consequently, hard copies of the interviews were read several times. Notes were added and ideas for codes were added in colored pens. Given the small dataset, it was decided to use all of the data during the initial coding, rather than a sample. The interview material was coded several times. Coding started with an emphasis on descriptive codes. As the material was reviewed, codes were rationalized by eliminating redundant codes and combining others. Research questions were reviewed and more conceptual codes were added. The transcripts were read several times to search for the prevalence of particular words associated with themes to provide more instances. Following Braun and Clarke's advice, themes were reviewed in the light of the research questions and compared to codes and to the original data set. Finally, the

themes were elaborated in the process of writing up, constructing frequency tables, and adding a diagram of themes.

Themes

This section described the thematic categories that emerged in the process of coding. The four major themes were resources, challenges, strategies, and identity. Emergent themes are described below in table 2.

Table 2

Emergent Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Total # of References
Resources	Nursing Program Factors Support Vocation	74
Challenges	Stress Time Finance Family Personal Health Course Relationships	59
Strategies	Pedagogical Time Management Self-Management	49
Identity	Student Identity Gender and Family	32

Qualitative research was determined to be most appropriate due to my background in nursing, especially since utilizing communication skills and listening are key to a nurse's role. When conducting qualitative research, "we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals, share their stories, hear their voices"

(Creswell, 2007, p. 40). This interaction between the researcher and the participants with open-ended questions provide the ability for the expansion of the answers given for any particular question; this is where descriptive themes can emerge. Furthermore, a qualitative methodological approach afforded the study participants an opportunity to clarify and expand on the participant's perspectives of their nursing program experiences. A questionnaire survey would have been restrictive and ultimately prevented an option for expansion or clarification of critical descriptions of the nursing program experiences of students.

As a part of my further understanding and conducting qualitative research I found the work by Creswell (2007) provided meaning to my research. A pivotal moment for me was when I read the following statement "we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and participant in a study" (p. 40). The work of Creswell provided me with the foundation of how to conduct and move forward with this research study. Below are common themes recommended that were used as a guide that describes the process of conducting and analyzing qualitative research (Creswell, 2007, p. 37-38).

- Natural setting
- Researcher as key instrument
- Multiple sources of data
- Inductive data analysis
- Participants' meanings
- Emergent design

- Theoretical lens
- Interpretive inquiry
- Holistic account

These steps guided me as I worked through the data analysis after the study was completed. In his book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches,* Creswell (2007) suggests that there are specific characteristics to a qualitative researcher and the methods of the research described "as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing the data" (p. 19). In addition, Creswell cautions that in qualitative studies "sometimes the research questions change in the middle of the study to reflect better the types of questions needed…" (p. 19). This change is an exciting feature in the research process that the unexpected should be expected during interviews. This was another factor that was considered and as a researcher those unexpected new questions or themes that may arise with personal interaction just enhanced this study beyond measure.

Qualitative Research Design

The participants included nursing students who are nearing graduation from an associate degree program in rural Appalachia in Kentucky. After obtaining permission from the instructor in a community college I approached who were in their final nursing course where I solicited their participation. Students who demonstrated interest in participating in this study shared their contact information. Subsequently, each student was contacted to schedule an interview. Specifically, an objective of this study was to identify those unsuspecting factors that impact a student's success. Interviews were then

transcribed by this researcher then read several times to create an opportunity for themes to emerge. Once participant quotes were then copied and pasted under each theme. Once all transcriptions were read and categorized by theme I focused on the quotes for each theme to create meaning. Finally, quotes that were used in my results chapter are those that represented many participants, were outliers from what other participant's perspectives, or were interesting or surprising. Some phenomenon were included to further understand how nursing students overcome challenges and remain focused in their program to completion. The concept of student experiences and the use of a qualitative approach in future studies on this topic was included in a study by Glogowska, Young and Lockyer (2007) on student retention. The researchers recommended that further research is needed and that the researcher "listens to the student voice and incorporates student perspectives" (p. 75).

Population/Sample

These interviews were conducted individually with the students selected and who agree to participate in the study. After evaluating the diverse methods to conduct a qualitative study, such as focus groups, it was decided that interviewing the graduates privately to prevent the students from repeating similar responses or by responding that they agree with other participants in the study. These one-on-one interviews allowed for more unique responses from the graduates and provide better rigor for the study. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) described rigor in qualitative research as "Rigor, in qualitative terms, and reliability/validity, in quantitative terms, are ways to establish trust or confidence in the findings or results of a research study. Rigor is useful for establishing consistency of

the study methods over time and provides an accurate representation of the population studied" (p.151).

Researcher Positionality/Subjectivity

There is a strong degree of subjectivity since I have been a nurse educator for many years as it relates to this qualitative research study. The phenomenon of the best students admitted based on academics to the nursing program and in the end many students don't make it to graduation--either by failure of a nursing course or withdrawal—is a concern for me as a nurse educator. That concern has developed into the initial idea to conduct a study with the focus on nursing students and the challenges they face during the nursing program and how they overcome those obstacles.

The fact that I am a registered nurse, as well as a nurse educator, and that my background includes teaching in associate degree programs, is something I plan to use to my benefit. In spite of this I also am reminded that positionality could play a significant part in this research process. Bourke (2014) described the impact of positionality in qualitative research by "both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process" (p.1). Bourke (2014) also noted that "through recognition of our biases, we presume to gain insights into how we might approach a research setting…and how we might seek to engage with participants" (p. 1).

In fact my role as a nurse educator affords me a great deal of contextual understanding and expertise that provides a foundation for relating to students. I have attempted to adopt the role of the non-judgmental, sympathetic listener (Weiss, 1994) when talking to students. Though it is recognized that research interviews are not free

dialogs between equals (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), attempts have been made to ensure participants were given the opportunity to express their views openly by asking broad, open-ended questions and allowing participants an opportunity to speak without interruption.

In this study, I am mindful that I am not attempting to identify a faculty *flaw* or other similar weakness that could cause concern for my colleagues. Therefore, since the focus of this study is the nursing student, not the faculty, I am removed from a tendency to *protect* my colleagues. Bradbury-Jones (2007) suggested that researchers "examine their subjectivity irrespective of the particular methodology that they employ, but encourage their cognizance of the particular philosophical position underpinning their research" (p. 291).

Summary of Methods

The primary objective of this research study is to identify the strategies utilized by associate degree nursing students to overcome the challenges they have faced during the nursing program. The qualitative research design has been chosen and the population of students to study have been outlined in this chapter. The various modes of data collection were also described along with the location and the research subjectivity discussed as well. Although this study did not focus on the mere statistics of how many students withdrew from the nursing program versus how many remained until completion, there is justification for why this study was completed. These nursing students had stories to tell, and it was my role to hear their voices, compile the findings, and share them with other nursing educators. The ability to share the nursing phenomenon of nursing student

participant experiences and their resilience to remain in the program is important to our community during difficult economic times. This study provided an opportunity to be a part of experiencing the students' perspectives.

The findings of this study will be shared with the administration of the college and any significant findings will be reviewed for possible incorporation into the nursing admissions process. Later, I would be interested in conducting a pilot admissions cycle to include personal interviews in addition to the other academic criteria currently assessed for admission. The data from this study could be later used to provide further evidence that those themes identified in this study have a direct correlation to the outcomes of nursing students.

The anticipated concern among administration will likely be the time required to perform the interviews as a part of the admission process in my community college. However, I will propose a selection process to isolate a group of finalists using the established admission process. Later, the results of the interviews, as well as the current academic criteria, will be combined to determine the final selection of the students who will be admitted to the nursing program. Through the exploration of the students' responses and the various strategies, what worked and what did not, could be valuable for incoming associate degree students. The major struggle of nursing school is the amount of outside of class time that can be included within one nursing theory course. The nursing students often do not understand the time involved in the program until they have been accepted and begin the first nursing course. The organizational skills needed to balance family, work, and other commitments along with classroom (theory) instruction, nursing laboratory hours, and then clinical hours at the healthcare facilities, can be very

stressful for students. This qualitative methodology allowed for more unique responses from the graduates and provided better rigor for this study. The purpose of collecting the various strategies that students employ during the program for this study ultimately will be to incorporate an additional criterion to the current assessment tool.

CHAPTER IV

INTERVIEW RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter details the individual responses of the participants and provides insight to how they managed the challenges of the associate degree program in a rural Appalachian community. The organization of this chapter is broken down into themes that emerged as the interviews were transcribed and read several times to analyze the various responses of the participants. The findings described represent the participant's responses from the interviews as they relate to the research questions for this study. The use of in-depth interviews were imperative to understanding their personal experiences that aided to this research. As a result of the themes that developed during the analysis stage of my research, it was apparent that all of the themes are interrelated to the participant's success.

Theme 1: Resources

The first theme covers resources that students are able to draw on to assist them in completing the nursing program. These include aspects related to the course including the student's commitment, support from peers, instructors, and family, and students' ambitions and sense of vocation.

Program Organization

Responses to the actual nursing program were positive with the exception of individual comments about instructors described in the subsection on program

relationships in this chapter. The structure of the program is popular with the participants; there were no negative comments about the program organization as one participant Karen described:

> It was a very well structured program and I really enjoyed the way all of the classes seemed to build upon another as we went along. I really loved the environments created by the faculty and it really had a sense of family and that they [faculty] cared about our success. I never felt like anyone was out to fail us [nursing students] out of the program.

There were 10 references to participants "loving" a particular feature of the course or the instructors. The favorite part mentioned by virtually all participants was clinical experience. Six participants described "loving clinical." One participant, Sherry, expressed her enthusiasm for clinical experiences:

> Hands on, the environment definitely works better for me [than at other nursing programs] making the connection of content between the classroom and the clinical setting [makes the content more applicable to nursing]. I didn't think I would like it as much as I did. I first felt like it was just free labor for the hospitals, but I soon realized that it was a very important part of the nursing program. It gave me the opportunity to see what it was really going to be like working as a nurse, and I just loved it!

This view was articulated by several participants. The "hands on" aspect was mentioned by three other participants to describe the value of learning in the real world setting that clinical experience provides. Kathy described the clinical experience as:

> The [clinical experience is the] best way for me to connect theory and the skills together and I also found the simulations to be very important. These simulations that the faculty made us go through provided a real world experience in a safe environment. I never felt pressured or like I was going to be failed—the simulations gave me the chance to learn more about what it was going to be like practicing on my own.

Several students liked the rotation built into the organization of the program where they got the opportunity to experience different departments. One participant, Kimberly, said the rotation allowed for meeting different people with different strengths. Another participant, Deborah, thought the rotation gave a better perspective of how each [hospital] unit worked.

A further feature of the nursing program valued by participants was the small class sizes. Another participant, Teresa, compared the community college favorably with large universities in terms of class size, stated:

> At the community college, there is a better student teacher ratio and I really feel like it was much more personalized–the faculty really cared about your success. I attended a larger university when I first graduated from high school and it didn't turn out well for me. The enormous classes with 200 students just made me feel like I didn't exist to the instructor. It's definitely not that way in this nursing program—I feel like the faculty really get to know me and I think it's all because of the small class size we have in our program.

This connection between class size and individualized learning and attention from faculty was made by several participants and is considered in the next section under support.

Support

The positive experience of the nursing program extends to relationships of support students are able to access. Other sources of support, most importantly family support, are also described in this section.

Nursing program relationships between students formed a source of support for participants in the context of the personalized learning facilitated by small groups. Two participants, Karen and Rhonda, referred to instructors being "encouraging" or that the faculty "cared about your success" was added by participant Teresa. In addition, two of the participants, Elizabeth and Kathy, said they "loved" the instructors. Participants were particularly aware of the potential for collaborative learning as stated by participant Elizabeth:

> I realized[now] that it's not a competition…knowing from talking with the other students that it is difficult and that everyone is working very hard. It was so competitive to get into the program that it did take me a while to realize that I didn't have to be thinking that way [competitively] anymore. My fellow nursing students, who at one time I viewed as competitors, turned out to be some of my biggest supporters—we really just learned how to support each other. Finding support in my classmates did help me through some very difficult times during the program. And again, realizing that I was not alone in those struggles made the tough times more bearable in my mind.

Participants all articulated the need for support in dealing with the demands of the program. Sometimes, this was generalized references to having someone to talk to or general notions of support as stated by participant Suzanne:

> I had someone to talk me through the stressful times. I did have lots of support and that made a big difference in my progression in the program. My family and friends that had no experience with nursing school, or college in general, could not seem to understand what I was going through.

Those with families mentioned receiving support from the family in general, or their partner. For some participants there was an awareness of how much the stress they were under was expressed in the family environment as stated by participant Teresa:

> I did take stress out on my family from time to time but thank goodness they stayed with me. There were times that I was just basically short and mean with my family—my children especially. My kids just didn't understand the stress I was under with trying to study for exams and all the other college responsibilities and at the same time keep everything going at home.

However, there was a strong appreciation of the benefit of family support as a resource that enabled participants to manage the other stresses of studying.

Vocation

As students near completing the program, their ambition is focused on graduating successfully which provides a resource for continuing to study. All but one student said passing NCLEX-RN (National Council of Licensure Exam for registered nurses) was their current ambition. Most were eager to start working as soon as possible, and one participant Teresa, stated:

> I already have a job offer for full-time employment. I'm really so excited I didn't think that the job offers would start coming so soon before I actually graduated!

> This really gives me that incentive as I head into finals and graduation; just knowing there is something waiting out there for me!

Participants Karen and Melinda also expressed a desire to move into administration or management soon. Three participants articulated a desire to continue in school to acquire a Bachelor of Science nursing degree. One participant, Sherry, has already applied and is waiting to hear if she will be accepted.

The commitment to the profession, through career expectations, further study and the nursing program organization combine to create a strong sense of vocation that provides a resource for continuing with the course. Table 3 below lists the frequency that participants mentioned these sub-themes that they believe helped them through their nursing program.

Table 3

Resources

Sub-theme	Total # of References
The organization of the Program	35
Having Support	18
Acquiring a Nursing Position	21

Theme 2: Challenges

Time

The most recurrent theme expressed by all participants were challenges resulting from pressures of time. In most cases participants had family responsibilities, jobs, and, in some cases, both. The typical day reported by most participants was extremely intensive. Participant descriptions of their activities were prefaced one word exclamations

such as “Horrible” (Karen), “Scary” (Kimberly), and “Hell” (Suzanne). The stress of the program was further described by participant Rhonda as:

> I worked full-time job and went seven days a week. Got up at 6am and then drop off my child at school and then go to class. After class I had a part-time job where I worked a few hours, about 4-5 days per week. When I finally got home I tried to find time to decompress from the work day until 10pm. I studied each day from 10pm until midnight.

Emotional expressions such as “horrible” did not refer to the actual activities but to the extremely long and detailed timetable that had to be adhered to in order to fit study and school with the rest of their family’s schedule. Having children meant being available to drop them off (sometimes at multiple schools), cooking dinner and spending some time with them. For participants without children, working full-time was a source of stress leading to the need to work late. One participant, Teresa, who had a family, stated:

> I did manage to do some studying at work which helped out. If I hadn’t had a job where I could get some extra study time in each day I’m not sure if I would have made it through or not. Not everyone in class that worked had a situation like mine, and I’m just very thankful that I did and that I was allowed to study. I do think in the end it has made a very big impact on my success in this nursing program.

Stress

Stress was a recurrent theme for all participants throughout the interviews which came about for a range of reasons. The most common was a result of the time considerations expressed above and having to fit a range of responsibilities on a daily basis. This sometimes led to a feeling of being overwhelmed as stated by participant Karen:

> Stress?? I had a lot of stress! I tried to focus on moving forward and there were times that I just didn't know how I was going to get everything done. It just seemed never ending for me, there was something always going on—sometimes I thought that I just couldn't get a break from all kinds of stuff happening in my life! Each and every time some crazy crap would go on in my life….I [when negative events would occur] would think that maybe this will be what ends my time in the program.

However, there were also specific stresses described by the participants, these included life events such as a mother's death (Sherry), losing her home (Kimberly), and being a single parent (Elizabeth). In this context the requirements and time commitments of the course was an additional source of stress to already stressful life situations.

Finance

The most commonly referenced source of stress cited by eight of the ten participants related to financial issues, and seven of these participants said finances was the most important stress source. Participant Kimberly had no transportation, a particular hardship in a rural area with children. Another participant was forced to move and said having enough money was her number one concern. Participants were aware of the

dangers of working too many hours and the affect it might have on their studies. The following is participant Sherry's statement about the need to change her work schedule over the course of the program:

> I worked during the first year of the program, and then I realized that if I was going to be successful, I was going to be unable to do all the things I needed to do to pass the classes. So it was a hard choice but I'm glad I did; I don't think I would end up here near graduation day if I hadn't made those changes [reduction in hours]. It was very difficult for my family but I'm very thankful that I have a supportive husband—unfortunately there are some of my classmates that aren't so lucky to have that kind of support.

However, for participant Teresa, whose husband had lost his job, giving up work was not an option despite knowing what the consequence might be, stated:

> I also had extreme financial struggles and that did place an enormous amount of stress on me–my instructors warned of working too much and that was me for most of the program. The instructors weren't mean about it, but they did make it clear that it would take an enormous amount of organization on my part to make it all work. At the time I didn't really understand or appreciate what they were trying to warn me about—but now at the end of it all, I honestly don't know how I pulled it off. I would caution any student that is beginning a nursing program to think carefully about how much time they expect to or need to work—it's easier said than done. I know that for sure!

Whatever their personal circumstances, most participants describe significant financial difficulties arising from trying to focus more time on studying.

Family

The time constraints by having a family, described in the previous section, were a challenge for participants. Needing to drop children off, cooking meals and taking care of the household were all sources of stress. However, there was also an awareness of the effect of participant stress on family life, as Teresa said:

> I did take stress out on my family from time to time, but thank goodness they stayed with me. Sometimes just the additional family commitments were more than I could deal with on most days. I would never want my family—especially my children—to think I was regretful that they were in my life, but I do know having them in my life while going to college was very difficult to pull off.

For Elizabeth, being a single parent presented particular challenges that was compounded by not having a job and health issues. Family challenges were not restricted to participants with children. Others reported stressful family events such as a spouse being laid off participant as with (Karen) and a participant's mother (Teresa) being diagnosed with cancer. Another participant acted as a caregiver for other family members.

Personal Health

The personal health challenges described by participants were diverse. In addition to finances, time and family, two participants mentioned personal health issues (one of whom was hospitalized) as having an impact on their studies. This significant personal health issue was described by participant Sherry:

> A very scary time for me—I thought I might fail—being in the hospital while my classes and clinical continued on each day without me. I have luck like that--it seems that sometimes I just can't get ahead. I didn't know how or if I could catch

> up or what was in store for me. Thank goodness I wasn't in the hospital that long and I was able to get the study material needed to take the next exam, and I passed! It was a scary time, but it all worked out in the end….gave me the strength that I can do more than I thought I ever could.

Nursing Program Relationships

Participants described difficulties managing work, going to college, and studying. However, the coursework itself was not cited as a source of difficulty other than being overwhelming in the context of the rest of other responsibilities. The only criticisms of the program itself related to schedule changes (Kimberly) and faculty turnover (Karen). Most challenges articulated by participants focused on individual interaction with instructors and other students. For example, participant Elizabeth stated:

> Conflicts within the program with instructors and students has been an ongoing issue around this place. There was always classroom drama—you would think a bunch of adults could act better than they do on most days. It's bad enough that you have to study and retain such critical information, but dealing with people acting like a bunch of children can be overwhelming at times.

Four participants referred to different types of personality politics in classes involving both instructors and students. One mentioned the nursing faculty showing favoritism toward particular students and another suggested that some of the other students, were immature. Table 4 below lists the frequency that participants mentioned these sub-themes that they said caused many challenges throughout their nursing program.

Table 4

Challenges

Sub-theme	Total # of References
Stress	16
Time	14
Finance	8
Family	6
Personal Health	2
Nursing Program Relationships	11

Theme 3: Strategies

Participants described a range of strategies for dealing with stress and succeeding in the course. These fell into three themes: pedagogical, time management, and self-management.

Pedagogical

Study skills were a strategy that helped keep the work manageable. These could be highly specific, such as notecards (Suzanne), and using online resources (Deborah). Pedagogical strategies also included more general approaches such as breaking down the work into smaller steps as described by participant Sherry:

> I took all of the notes we were provided, which were basically just power point slides, and then I went through and made my own notes. I had to take the huge amount of information and then try to get it in my own words and in smaller amounts. Using my textbooks to fill in the gaps from the slides also helped me out a lot. It didn't just work for me to read the textbook and look at the slides—I had to get the information in a form that I could better understand.

Participant Melinda made a comment about study skills and organization of work throughout the program and stated:

> Pulling all the pieces together worked better for me. I just couldn't read [the textbook] and then go take a test. I had to make my own notes.

Participant Sherry added some important study information that worked for her:

> For example, learning how to study and seek assistance when you don't know where to start and focus on your lecture material and readings! That's the key to being successful! I don't think if I hadn't realized early on in the program that I needed some guidance with how to study that I would actually be here today ready to graduate. It's a different place to be when you've always made decent grades in all other college courses, and then you hit nursing—and there's goes your overall GPA!! [Participant laughs]

Another pedagogical theme was an emphasis on organization which several participants saw as vital for success. This included organizing work in such a way as to leave time for study close to exams (Karen), and being organized seemed to provide additional time and learning (Karen, Kimberly).

Time Management

Given how many stresses are the result of the multiple demands on participants' time, it is not surprising that there is an emphasis on time management in their accounts. However, there is a strong contrast between those who emphasize schedules, and those who rely on improvisation in getting study time.

Schedules. Most participants describe managing the demands on their time through having a schedule. Participants describe setting a weekly and/or monthly

schedule. Pre-existing demands such as children's school times and class and work timetables provided a framework for schedules.

Improvise. An alternative strategy adapted by some participants was not to adopt a schedule, but to take any opportunity available to study as Elizabeth described:

> I didn't have a set schedule to study, I just tried to study anytime I could find time. There was no other way that I really could manage setting schedules, just hasn't worked for me in the past. I did the best I could finding any time during the day or evening. I used break times during the class day for study time. Other students went out to eat [off campus] but I stayed in the classroom and studied.

Time needed to be negotiated with other activities, such as family time (Deborah). Another participant referred to "stealing" a few minutes to refer to notes (Kathy).

Self-Management

Participants described several personal strategies for dealing with stress, including prioritizing study over housework, taking a bath, and taking time for a run. Participants stressed physical activities, walking, running and even sleeping which may reflect the health orientation of their program and work. Participants with families used family time as a reward and stress reliever.

Beyond practical stress management solutions there was an emphasis on a self-awareness necessary for being able to study successfully, and tackle stress and anxiety over being able to complete the course. One participant, Teresa, articulated this in the following terms:

> There were times when my own fears and anxiety took over and it almost made me be unsuccessful, but somehow I managed to deal with my feelings.

A range of cognitive and emotional strategies were described by participants to manage their feelings and emotions. These included prioritizing and "letting go" of certain things during the program, as Suzanne explained:

> Choose what you can live with and without while you are in this program. I thought I could take on the world when I started this program! Well I soon learned that if I was going to make it through this 2 year program, some things in my life were going to have to give. I missed family gatherings, friends going out, and lots of other things because I had to have time to study, or I wasn't going to make it.

A related theme was "acceptance" of accepting not being able to achieve everything possible, and of accepting that participants would miss out on things for the duration of the program. Table 5 below lists the frequency that participants describe these sub-themes that were identified as factors affecting their progression in the nursing program.

Table 5

Strategies

Sub-theme	Total # of References
Pedagogical	14
Time Management	11
Self-Management	21

Theme 4: Identity

Throughout the themes described in this section is a concern with identity which forms an overarching meta-theme. The participants' accounts narrate their identity as a

nursing student with several other competing identities, such as spouse, mother and employee (for students who had outside employment).

Gender and Family Identity

The responsibilities outlined in the *time* section are indicative of participants' identity as wives and/or mothers. Those with children describe needing to get them ready for school, prepare meals and spend time with them. This parenting role is an important identity that is the context of student identity. For example, participant Kimberly expressed the need to involve family as:

> I try to involve my children so that they can try to understand the stress that I am under. [I'm] not sure if they understood, but I did take time to explain. This brought a huge amount of guilt on me--I just felt terrible, and it felt like they were struggling with me being in school every day when I left home. Just makes you feel horrible as a parent. I know it will all work out when I start working as a registered nurse and make a good salary—just hard for children to understand.

Other participants describe activities more associated with women who presented challenges for their studies. These include moving as a result of a husband's job (Sherry) and two acted as a caregiver for relatives (Sherry, Karen). These responsibilities contribute to a gendered identity that the student identity has to fit into.

Student Identity

Participants articulate an awareness of being "non-traditional" students. This comparison is made by references to being older than traditional students or having a family as Sherry described:

> I guess you would say I'm a non-traditional student–I have a family and it's not been easy. It would have been nice to be in the situation like some in my class are in, just having to worry about themselves. I don't regret having my family, but it is so much more difficult having to deal with being a wife/mother and a nursing student at the same time.

One participant, Karen, who worked full-time, in addition to studying, admitted to being jealous of those receiving full financial aid. She stated:

> [They] didn't appreciate it for the most part. Don't take me wrong, I'm sure it assisted them greatly, but I would have loved to have received the amount of aid that some of the students said that they received. But at the same time you never know if what they are saying is really the truth, and I just had to move on and not worry about it….just try to take care of myself.

The context of the community college was valued in supporting the identity of non-traditional students. For example, participant Karen had attended a larger university before the community college and made the following comment:

> The community college is geared toward adult students in my opinion. Not very many would fit the traditional college student mold at the campus I had attended. Most of us were older.

Another student, Suzanne, described the community college as being more of a real community.

> I felt like I was more than a number. It is really amazing to run into staff from the admissions office or financial aid, and they know your name….even outside of the campus setting! I would see those individuals around town and they would

> make a point to speak to me. The same goes for my nursing faculty, we all live and work in the same community and it was nice to run into them at the store, restaurant or wherever and have that connection.

The community college was seen as an environment that caters to non-traditional students and provided the organization context from which participants described their interaction with the course, peers and instructors.

The competing demands of being a parent, or working were acknowledged in the self-management theme expressed above. Part of the perception of *acceptance* was an acceptance of not being a star pupil. As one participant, Sherry, commented:

> Learning that average grades are OK was probably the hardest part. When you work really hard in all of the other required classes before you start the program, and you feel confident, and then it hits--the first nursing exam. Wow! That was a wakeup call for me! If I had only known back then, [firmly taps on table with index finger while speaking] [what I now know] maybe I could have been better prepared—I love the context of this study! I hope other students in the future can learn more about being a nursing student *BEFORE* starting the program! Table 6 below describes the frequency that participants mentioned these sub-themes throughout the interviews.

Table 6

Identity

Sub-theme	Total # of References
4.1 Gender and Family Identity	20
4.2 Student Identity	12

Finally, there is a range of personal strategies and an identity as a student that can support success in the nursing program. This involves managing stress on a practical level and being in control of one's learning. It also entails prioritizing different activities and feeling comfortable as a non-traditional student.

Figure 3below shows the relationship between the different themes.

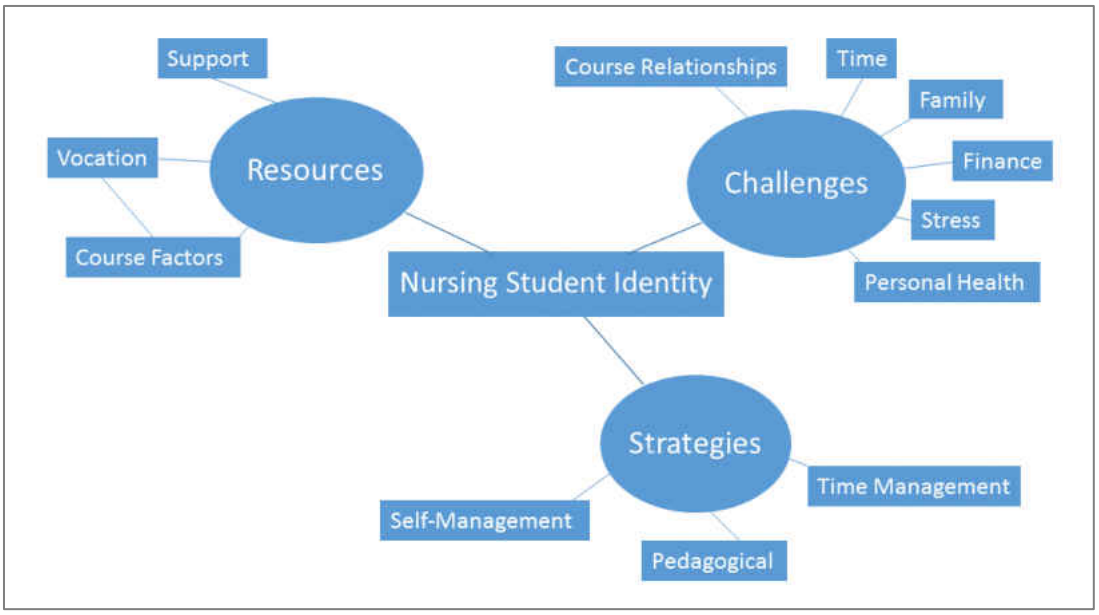

Figure 3. Thematic Analysis of Nursing Student Identity

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of nursing students about their respective associate degree programs. The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the findings that emerged as a result of the participant interviews. Ten nursing students participated in semi-structured interviews. Following the research objective the researcher asked the following research questions: (a) what challenges do nursing students in rural Appalachia say affects their program completion; (b) how do nursing students in rural Appalachia manage their personal and school challenges; and (c)

what are the factors that help nursing students in rural Appalachia complete their program. Applied thematic analysis was used to analyze interviews that generated four themes: resources, challenges, strategies, and, identity. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings in relation to the theoretical approach.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand nursing students' perspectives about their associate degree program in a community college located in rural Kentucky. It was carried out to address the high levels of attrition for students in associate degree nursing programs and the demand for qualitative research into students' reasons for their actions with regard to retention (Glogowska, Young & Lockler, 2007). This need is particularly acute in southern rural areas which have a projected shortfall of registered nurses by 2030 that will affect healthcare delivery in this region (Juraschek et al., 2012). A community college was chosen because of limited opportunities available for nursing education in the area due to travel time and limited financial resources of students. Community colleges provide opportunities to study and prepare for careers that would otherwise be unavailable to rural residents.

This qualitative study consisted of ten semi-structured interviews with female nursing students aged between 24 and 39 in their last semester of an associate nursing degree program. The study location was a community college in a rural area of southeastern Kentucky in the Appalachian region.

This study has two key findings. The first is that all the students are under a great deal of stress that arise primarily from financial issues and the pressure of time. The second is that, in order to be successful, participants have to adopt an identity as a student nurse that fits in with their pre-existing identities such as a parent, spouse or employee.

Interpretation of the Findings

There is a close similarity in the views expressed by participants and the model of student retention developed by Shelton (2012) outlined in chapter 3. Shelton identified five categories as factors in nursing student retention: student background; internal psychological stressors; external supports; academic performance and persistence. All these factors appear in the participant interviews in this study, however, the emphasis and relationships between them differ. Shelton's conceptual approach is used as a basis to discuss the findings before proposing an alternative model.

The analysis identified four major themes: resources, challenges, strategies, and identity. These themes are now synthesized in the context of the study's three research questions.

Research Question 1. What challenges do nursing students in rural Appalachia say affects their program completion?

Theme 2 (Challenges), identifies six factors that affect program completion. Stress is a constant feature of accounts that comes from a number of sources. Most challenges come from the need to combine studying with other duties including work and family issues. The time pressure some students are under, particularly those combining studying with work and family life, is intense. Several participants describe a typical day starting at 6am and finishing with studying until midnight. Needing to drop children off at school and complete other family duties such as housework and cooking, attend classes and, in some cases working provide a level of stress that affect student's ability to complete the nursing program.

Finance also emerges as a major concern that threatens the participant's ability to complete the program. Although, those working fewer hours may experience slightly less time pressure, this increases the overall financial stress that the participant's experience. This is particularly the case for the participants who are single mothers and the participant whose partner had lost their job during the course of the program. A number of participants described significant hardship as a result of studying and seven out of the ten participants identified finance as the most important source of stress during the nursing program.

The nursing program itself was a source of stress mostly in terms of the issue of finding time to study. Apart from individual complaints about inconsistency between instructors, faculty turnover, and changes in the schedule, the program organization or difficulty of the work was not mentioned.

Other sources of stress were specific to individual participants such as family crises related to bereavement, moving or other individual health issues of family members or themselves.

Research Question 2. How do nursing students in rural Appalachia manage their personal and school obstacles?

Strategies for managing stress fell into three related themes: pedagogical, time management, and self-management. Pedagogical strategies were specific study techniques and an awareness of individual learning preferences that worked. It also included organizational strategies for facilitating learning. Time management techniques for managing the nursing program requirements were integrated in their daily lives along

with other responsibilities. The strategies identified were developing and following a schedule, improvising, and taking study opportunities as they arose.

Self-management referred to generalized strategies for dealing with the stress of the nursing program. These ranged from practical activities such as going for a run or taking a bath that had a health and wellbeing emphasis. Participants also described ways to counter act psychological anxiety through prioritizing some activities, letting go of the need to do everything and being content with one's performance.

Research Question 3. What are the factors that help nursing students in rural Appalachia complete their program?

Nursing program influences were important factors for participants. The students described a strong connection to the program, particularly clinical aspects, which provided a positive incentive to stay engaged. Despite the stresses described by participants there is a strong attachment to the nursing program and a commitment to succeeding in a nursing career that combined to create a sense of vocation. This sense of vocation provides a particular source of support.

The organization of the nursing program, particularly the small classes, provides a context for developing individual relationships with students and instructors. There were several references to wanting instructors to feel proud, of feeling valued and of making friendships that is a product of the small classes. These relationships form a source of support.

Participants with families, particularly a spouse or partner, can access another source of support that may contribute to success in the nursing program. In some cases this is financial support that enabled the participant to study without having to worry

about finding time to work. More often the support is psychological with time spent with family seen as a means of relieving the stress of the nursing program.

Student Background

This category includes factors such as gender, financial resources, and marital status. All these measures are quantifiable which enable their use in large scale studies. Although large scale comparison is useful, the measures say little about what the meaning of a category such as marital status means in practice. In this study, "student background" is a dominant factor of all the themes. For example, having children is a source of both stress because of time constraints, and a psychological support. Furthermore, being married has different consequences for the participant whose spouse has lost his job, compared to the participant who is able to give up working and study full-time and rely on her husband's income.

Internal Psychological Processes

Shelton's categories include goals, goal commitment, ability and academic self-efficacy. In the present study, goals and goal commitment were articulated in the resources section under the sub-theme of vocation. Academic self-efficacy featured both in pedagogical strategies and in self-management.

External Supports

Shelton distinguishes between psychological and functional support and lists difference sources of support coming from family, peers, employer and academic. Participants described functional support from the program and psychological support from instructors, peers and family. One participant did describe being able to study at work that may be an instance of functional employer support, but it is not clear whether

the employer facilitated this study time or whether the participant was able to make use of quiet time at work. There were no other mentions of employers providing support for participants and in general employment was seen as being a stressor.

Persistence

The choice of whether to continue or leave the program has already been decided by the participants as they have progressed through the courses to date; despite the difficulties into their last semester. However, it is clear from the participant's accounts that many have come close to leaving the nursing program at several points. In those cases the most likely reason reported by students was financial difficulties. In this study the management of stress through successful strategies defined those able to stay with the nursing program. Because the population in this study have all stayed in the program, their *decision* to stay is an important one to point out given the difficulties, especially finances, described by the participants.

Academic Performance. Shelton's model emphasizes academic success, both in the examinations and in academic performance, over the course of the program including noting that students who achieve higher scores academically are more likely to contact family members for support (Shelton, 2012). The participants in this study all had graduating as a key ambition, however academic performance had few other mentions within the interviews. There are several reasons to account for this omission. No direct questions were asked about academic performance and students did make reference to performance beyond a generalized anxiety expressed by some about passing the nursing program exams. It might be that participants are the *survivors* who have stayed with the nursing program despite the challenges; it could be that they have mastered ways of

overcoming academic difficulties. The suggestion from Jeffreys (2007) that associate degree students may be less academically prepared than students with recent academic experience, is not confirmed within this study. Participants described positive relationships with the nursing faculty and being able to ask for help when required. No responses suggested any anxiety on the part of students to ask for help when it was required.

An Alternative Model: Nursing Student Identity

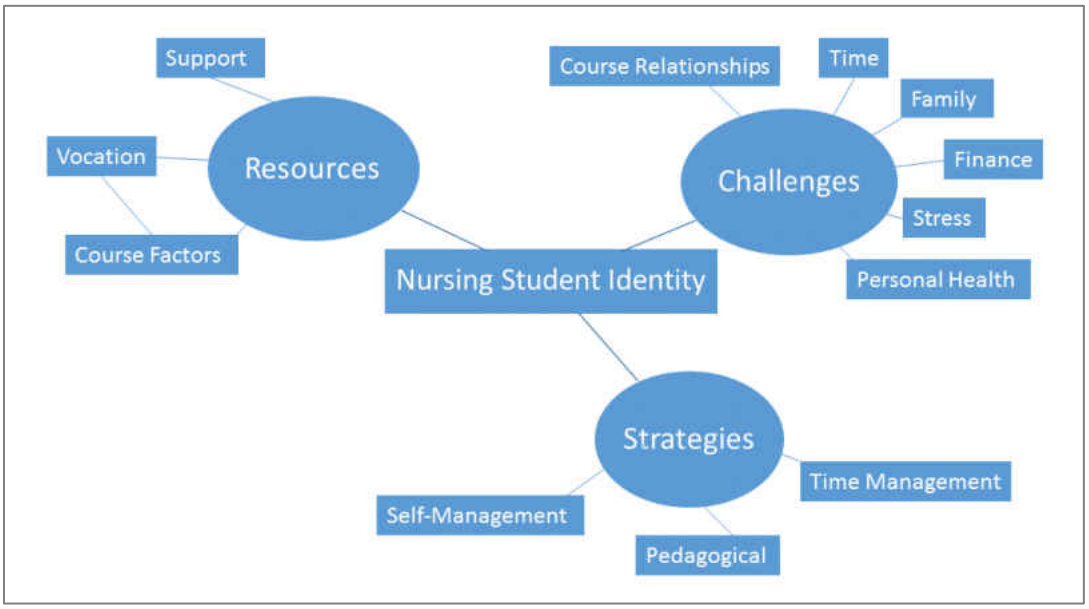

Figure 4. Thematic Analysis of Nursing Student Identity

Figure 4 above summarizes the thematic analysis developed in the previous chapter. It focuses on the resources, challenges, and strategies that contributed to the successful nursing student identity from the perspective of the study participants. Resources cover the program's factors, a sense of vocation, and support. The nursing program factors include small class size, rotating to different departments and clinical experience. Support comes from family, peers and instructors and vocation refers to the

career aims of the students. Challenges are identified in terms of stress and time with specific sources including finance, family factors, personal health issues and program relationships. Finally strategies include pedagogical, time management and self-management.

Resources

This study identified a range of resources available to students that support their studies. A large component of this theme was program factors – elements that students responded to and generated commitment and enthusiasm. The most popular aspect of the program was clinical rotations and several participants felt these clinical rotations combined theory and practice in a way that facilitated learning. Rotating to different departments was also a popular feature enabling participants to learn about how different units operate. The organization of the program overall, particularly the small class size, was identified by participants as being particularly important. The community college was seen as providing an environment where students were known individually and cared for by faculty. Participants who had attended larger institutions compared the community college favorably with the larger, more impersonal environment of previous institutions.

The small class context allowed personal relationships to develop between faculty and students, and between all of the students that provided a significant resource as well. There were no references to participants being unwilling to talk to faculty as described by Shelton (2012). The relationship described as a context for learning indicate that the program organization may form a learning community which is recommended by Williams (2010) as a means of engaging students. The plans of participants are clear and consistent with a career in nursing. Both ambitions and orientation to the program suggest

the sense of a vocation that provides a positive resource to manage the stresses that studying entails. This contributes to the identity of nursing students that is discussed in the final section.

Outside of the program, some participants were also able to make use of family resources ranging from financial support that meant one participant could study full-time, to psychological support from spouses and children.

Challenges

The study strongly supports the findings of Montgomery, Tansey, and Roe (2009) that students have major stressors affecting study outside the academic context including financial concerns, family commitments and childcare issues. Financial stressors were significant for all those interviewed and were identified as a potential reason for leaving. Family commitments, including caring for children was also featured heavily in accounts by the participants which affected the time available for study. The other major source of stress was the need to work which meant that most participants were managing the nursing program, working (full-time in some cases) and children. This required extremely long work days and studying at times (such as very late into the evening) that may not be conducive to learning. Family commitments, though a resource, were also a source of stress because of having so many responsibilities. Time was a dominant feature of the participant's accounts and the stress and need associated with fitting in the many activities required from studying, working and family commitments.

Strategies

The strategies participants described covered the spectrum from specific pedagogical techniques such as using online textbooks to managing their own anxiety and

stress over the course of their studies. These strategies are very important because many participants have been attending the community college for four years or more. Stress-relieving activities are particularly focused on health and wellbeing which reinforces the vocational aspect of the student's orientation inside the health profession. The management of time was an important strategy that students needed to engage with to succeed in their studies. It is unclear why some participants chose to follow schedules, while others grabbed opportunities when they could to study. This would benefit from further study given how much emphasis on study skills goes into developing schedules. Self-management describes the general strategies that students use to counter their anxieties and stress. These involve accepting that studying means compromises in other areas and an acceptance that not all responsibilities can be carried out all the time. These factors connect with the final, meta-theme of identity.

Identity

Throughout the interviews is an articulation of the participant's identity as nursing students that competes with their other identities as parent, worker, caregiver, spouse etc. Gender is a significant part of this identity as new options of work and study seem to be added to traditional responsibilities associated with women including parenting, cooking, cleaning and acting as a caregiver. This results in participants having to juggle a number of identities and responsibilities. Some interviewees described typical days starting at 6am and ending at midnight. The qualitative nature of the inquiry provides the opportunity to explore how these competing identities interact with one another. For example, guilt was expressed by two of the mothers about the negative effect the stress they experienced had on their children.

As a result, the notion of the non-traditional student is described where compromises have to be made to fulfill expectations from different sources. Part of the compromise described is an academic compromise that it is alright not to get grades of A's in the nursing program. This does not mean that participants do not value academic performance, but rather that they are aware that it is not possible to perform in every area of their lives at the top of the field. The idea can be summarized in the concept of "satisficing" (to accept an available option as satisfactory). Although not focused on academic performance, the student identity articulated contains a commitment to, and enjoyment of, learning. The organization of the nursing program at the community college supports this identity in a very positive way.

Limitations of the Study

The small scale nature of the study and lack of random sample means the results of this study are not generalizable. This is particularly the case given the study was restricted to a single community college. However, it does provide insight into this community college. Initially it had been intended that interviews would be recorded and transcribed. Although participants were comfortable being interviewed, some did not want to be recorded and field notes were the primary source of information for most participants when transcribing for this study. The common response about recording was that they felt more relaxed when speaking about faculty or any negatives associated with the program. They felt strongly that maybe their voice recording could be used negatively against them in the future. Participants were reassured of the confidentiality nature of research studies and I supported their request to provide for a climate of trust to

speak freely about their experiences in the nursing program. The participants were very appreciative and thanked me for my understanding related to audio recordings.

Recommendations

It is recommended that more research be done (both qualitative and quantitative) on comparing the experiences of nursing degree programs in community colleges and other institutions. The small scale environment of the community college was seen as a positive strength by participants and more research is required to establish if this is the case in other community colleges. The use of counseling services at colleges and universities could be utilized by students to assist them with developing coping strategies to deal with the additional stressors experienced while in the nursing program.

This study did not include the perceptions of the faculty because it was felt that, as a nurse educator, the researcher may not have the distance required from the subjects. It would be helpful to include this perspective in future research. Instructors would provide a valuable additional perspective on the organization of the program. Faculty would also be able to provide insights into academic issues that are absent from the current research. Particular factors identified would benefit from further exploration. In addition, faculty could develop mandatory nursing study groups for students who were at risk or open to all students to help them deal with the complexities of studying for nursing exams.

Time management is clearly vital for succeeding in combining study with other responsibilities, however it was unclear why certain participants advocated schedules while others rejected them. Given the high levels of attrition, similar qualitative research

would be helpful for those who drop out of nursing programs at different stages. As with the present research, such an approach could help fill in the blanks about the reasons why students choose to leave.

Finally, more research is required to explore how those enrolled in nursing programs construct their identity as a student, particularly those with other responsibilities, such as parents, and those who work. Qualitative research could develop researchers' understanding of different types of non-traditional students.

Implications

The study has implications for positive social change at the level of the individual and the organizational. Having identified the importance of factors outside the nursing program in causing stress there is a possibility of providing support structures that address the challenges that nursing students (and possibly other students) face during the program.

The study also has implications for research and methods. Research into retention that focuses on stress among nursing students needs to look beyond the immediate nursing context to factors that impact the students' ability to complete their studies. In addition, there is a need to look beyond variables that can be quantified such as marital status in understanding the mechanisms of retention. Qualitative methods have their role to play in exploring the meanings individuals attach to deciding to stay or leave a nursing program.

Recommendations for practice echo the recommendation of Williams (2010) in assisting the student with time management and to evaluate any challenges that exist.

Given how important financial considerations are that require students to work, it is important that they are given practical support in strategies how to balance study, working and family responsibilities. Because students are to be employed in the health care sector such support could be developed to provide a comprehensive guide to working while studying in the area.

Conclusion

The participants of this study are *successes* in terms of retention. They have navigated the different challenges and are likely to graduate. The participant's perceptions are particularly valuable because they have come so far despite considerable challenges. These challenges are characterized by the experience of stress due to financial pressures and the effect of multiple demands on their time. Furthermore, there are individual stressors that make focusing on the program difficult including a spouse losing their job or needing to move to another home due to financial reasons. Nursing program related frustrations were mainly due to annoyances with individual instructors or other students but were not generally characterized as stress. Overall there were very few program related stresses described by participants which goes against some previous research that identifies stresses as coming from the individual program (Gibbons, Dempster & Moutray 2009).

This qualitative research study shows the importance of addressing the issues facing community college students in terms of identity rather than collecting questionnaires of individual option about different topics. Being a nursing student is an important part of their life but it is not the only identity they have to negotiate on a daily

basis. Several of the participants work full-time, meaning that for most of the day they have a different identity and interact within a different set of relationships than what happens as a student at community college. Other roles, such as a parent, by definition, is a full-time role and part of the self-management strategies described by the participants. The issue of coping with so many emotions, which include managing feelings of guilt from not being with their children enough, or being short tempered because of having to study such long hours had a profound impact of the participants.

For all the participants in this study the experience of attending the community college has been broadly positive with enthusiasm described for the program, organization and instructor value. Even though there may not be a strict academic concern with grades, the participants have learned to value learning itself and the popularity of clinical rotations reveals an understanding of the theory/practice relationship that is at the heart of nursing at all levels. This, and the emphasis on interaction and learning with peers and instructors suggests that, at this rural Appalachian community college, a community of learners has been created where the students are valued on an individual basis.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1.) How long have you been a student at Somerset Community College?

2.) What is it like to be a college student? What's a typical day like for you?

3.) What are some of your goals as you near graduation?

4.) Can you tell me about some of the most satisfying aspects about being a nursing student?

5.) What things did you really enjoy about the program?

6.) What obstacles did you face during the nursing program?

7.) What would you consider the most frustrating aspects about the program – if any?

8.) Were there any factors that made it difficult for you to persist and continue your college career to this point?

9.) Did you experience any stress during the program? If so, how do you overcome stress? What are some strategies that you would like to share with prospective nursing students related to stress?

10.) How did you manage the struggles of family, work (if you did during the program) and finding time to study?

11.) Is there anything else you can think of that can think of that would help me understand what it's like to be a nursing student at a community college?

APPENDIX B

Script to Solicit Volunteers for Study

Script to Solicit Volunteers for Study

Hello! I would like to extend my thanks to the faculty for allowing me the opportunity to come and speak with you today! My name is Marisa Greer and I'm a doctoral student at Eastern Kentucky University completing the requirements for my dissertation. My research interest is associate degree nursing students and the persistence to graduate from the nursing program. I'm sure this is a very exciting time for each of you as you are nearing the end of the program and graduation in May.

I am here today to ask for volunteers that would like to participate in this qualitative study in which I will conduct interviews with any students who agree to speak with me about your experience in the program. Through this study I hope to identify some of the strategies you may have employed to be successful and graduate. By discovering some of the strategies that worked for your individual situations that could be shared with other nursing students may give them an insight on how to be as successful as you have been!

Good luck and I wish you much success in the nursing profession! Again, thank you for allowing me to come and speak with your class today!

APPENDIX C

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Associate Degree Nursing Students: Admission to Graduation

Why am I being asked to participate in this research?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about associate degree nursing students. You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are in the final semester and are scheduled to graduate in May 2015. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 10 (ten) people to do so.

Who is doing the study?

The person in charge of this study is Marisa Greer RN, MSN, and Doctoral Student (PI) at Eastern Kentucky University. (If the PI is a student, add the following statement): He/She is being guided in this research by Dr. Deborah West. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

What is the purpose of the study?

Through conducting this study, we hope to learn the various strategies employed by associate degree nursing students that helped them be successful throughout the nursing program. The information collected through a qualitative method may provide important insight for prospective nursing students to learn more about managing study time, family, financial and work commitments during the program.

Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?

The research procedures will be conducted in Somerset, Kentucky. You will need to come to 1 time during the study. Each of those visits will take about 45 minutes. The

total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is 1 visit lasting 45 minutes over the next 4 weeks at a time that is agreed upon by the participant and the principle investigator.

What will I be asked to do?

This study will consist of approximately 10 research questions to find out about your interest in nursing and the strategies the participant used to be successful in the program and complete the program and graduate.

Prepare a time line chart or schema to accompany descriptions of procedures and tests for studies that require more than 1 or 2 steps/visits.

*Not applicable this study only requires 1 visit.

Provide a lay description of the randomization procedures, if applicable, and describe the chances of being assigned to any one group.

If more than 10 student volunteers agree to participate random numbers will be issued for each student and a randomization program will be used to select 10 numbers and those individuals will be notified that they have been selected to participate. Only one group of participants will be selected – there are no control/experimental groups in this study. The final group will consist of 10 nursing students and no other groups will be selected or defined.

Are there reasons why I should not take part in this study?

There are no prerequisites to participating in this study beyond the status of being an associate degree nursing student in the final semester (4th semester) and have a projected graduation date of May 2015.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary.

What are the possible risks and discomforts?

This study is considered minimal risk:

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

Will I benefit from taking part in this study?

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

Do I have to take part in this study?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except to not take part in the study.

What will it cost me to participate?
There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Will I receive any payment or rewards for taking part in the study?

You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study.

Who will see the information I give?
Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about this combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from the information you give, and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

Also, we may be required to show information that identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from Eastern Kentucky University.

Can my taking part in the study end early?
If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to end your participation in the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they

find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

What happens if I get hurt or sick during the study?

If you believe you are hurt or if you get sick because of something that is done during the study, you should call Marisa Greer (PI's name) at 606-304-3655 immediately. It is important for you to understand that Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. That cost will be your responsibility. Also, Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study. **This is a qualitative study and presents less than minimal risk as this study is comprised of interviewing the participants through a series of questions.

What if I have questions?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Marisa Greer at 606-304-3655. If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

What else do I need to know?

You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your condition or influence your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

I have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and agree to participate in this research project.

_____

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____

Date

_____

Printed name of person taking part in the study

_____

Name of person providing information to subject

VITA

Marisa Ellen Greer was born in Maryland and transitioned to Kentucky where she started elementary school. In 1998 she graduated from Eastern Kentucky University with an Associate of Science in Nursing and started practicing as a registered nurse. In 2001 she returned to EKU and started the RN-BSN completion program and graduated in May 2004. During this time while working on her bachelor degree she started working at Southeast Community College as a clinical and nursing laboratory instructor. It was at this time that she developed a passion for nursing education. Several years later in 2007 she once again entered EKU to obtain a master's degree in nursing with an emphasis in nursing education and graduated in August 2011.

Ms. Greer is currently employed as the Dean of Nursing and Health Sciences at Union College in Barbourville, Kentucky.