

ASSOCIATE DEGREE NURSING STUDENTS:
A STUDY OF RETENTION IN NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A Dissertation

by

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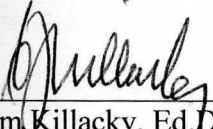
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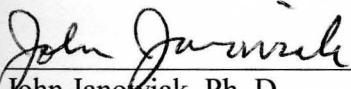
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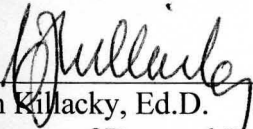
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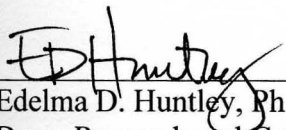
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ABSTRACT

ASSOCIATE DEGREE NURSING STUDENTS: A STUDY OF RETENTION IN NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAMS (May, 2009)

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Student retention has been a concern at least since the early 20th century. Research that addresses this problem can be found as far back as the early 1900s. A review of the literature reveals that this topic became more prominent in literature in the late 1960s, most likely fueled by the Higher Education Act (1965) which helped finance first-generation college students and students from low socioeconomic groups to attend universities. Many such students have entered institutions of higher education academically underprepared for this challenge, thus becoming “low achievers” with reduced retention rates (Morning, 1991).

Due to the current nursing shortage in the United States, nursing programs are particularly concerned with the issue of retention; programs are being pressured by the education as well as the health care systems to produce more graduates to alleviate the shortage. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing predicts that by 2015 there will be 114,000 unfilled nursing positions in the U.S. (Wittman-Price & Kuplun, 2003). The North Carolina Institute of Medicine has predicted a statewide shortage of

9,000 nurses by 2015 and 18,000 by 2020; therefore, they developed a task force in 2004 to study how to ease this issue (North Carolina Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Concerns from the education community and society at large regarding retention in higher education have prompted extensive research and development of theories to explain early departure. Unfortunately, very little of this research has focused on nursing program retention/attrition or even on components that would result in successful retention of nursing students (Seago & Spetz, 2003).

The current and predicted shortage of licensed nurses, together with the lack of research regarding the retention of nursing students in higher education reveal the need for further study of the topic. After reviewing many theories of student retention, I chose Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition to use as a guide for my study of student retention in associate degree nursing programs in North Carolina Community Colleges. I used a mixed methods research design approach to study a small sample of students who had exited from associate degree programs prior to graduation, a larger sample of current second-year associate degree nursing students, and a sample of directors of nursing programs from associate degree nursing (ADN) programs.

The interview guide and the surveys used in this study were constructed to address the four sets of variables used in Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory. These sets include: (a) environmental variables, which Bean and Metzner assert are the most important in attrition/retention; (b) background and defining variables; (c) academic variables; and (d) social variables. The challenge was to use these variables to identify what factors increase nursing student retention. Personal interviews were conducted with

volunteer students who had exited nursing programs prior to graduation. The interview was designed to provide insight on issues that may have attributed to these students' lack of success. In addition to the interviews, surveys were distributed to 362 students currently enrolled in a nursing program and 37 directors of nursing programs.

The analysis of the data collected for this study provided an understanding of what students view as the important factors that contributed to their retention and what selection criteria for entrance into associate degree nursing programs in North Carolina are associated with higher retention rates. The results of this study may be used to assist associate degree nursing programs in forming plans and implementing actions that assist students to better manage the factors which affect their retention. In addition, the results of the director survey point out the need for nursing programs to reevaluate their admission criteria and its relationship with student persistence.