ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The lived experience of a nursing course failure

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ABSTRACT

Background and objective: Nursing remains one of the fastest growing occupations according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Factors contributing to the ongoing nursing shortage including too few nursing faculty, limited clinical space, and sluggish growth in nursing program enrollment/capacity. Although most nursing programs are under pressure to accept as many qualified applicants as possible, as recently as 2019, U.S. nursing programs reported turning away over 91,000 qualified applicants due to insufficient faculty and classroom and clinical space. Because each spot in the program is valuable - the ability to help all students from admission through to graduation is critical. The purpose of this study was to identify the lived experience of students who had failed a nursing course. The information gathered from this group of students will enable nursing faculty to develop methods to help decrease failure for future students.

Methods: This qualitative descriptive study utilized a phenomenological framework to determine the lived experience of baccalaureate nursing students who failed a nursing course. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2021.

Results: Literature reports numerous challenges of nursing school including difficulty maintaining a balance between life and studies. The findings reveal students may need additional help from faculty while navigating that balance. The findings of this study revealed four themes: student academic challenges, personal life events, testing difficulties, and coping with the aftermath of a course failure.

Conclusions: Early identification of students at-risk for a nursing course failure and implementation of success strategies may decrease the incidence of nursing course failure. Recommendations are included.

Key Words: At risk students, Course failure, Nursing education

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For decades we have faced a nursing shortage. This shortage is in large measure related to an aging population and the resulting demand for higher levels of health care.[1] While nursing remains one of the fastest growing occupations according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics,[2] additional factors contributing to the nursing shortage include too few nursing faculty, limited clinical space, and sluggish growth in nursing program enrollment/capacity.[1] Although most nursing programs are under pressure to accept as many qualified applicants as possible, as recently as 2022, U.S. nursing programs reported turning away over 91,000 qualified applicants due to insufficient space.[1] Because every spot in a nursing program is valuable, the need to ensure all admitted students progress from admission through graduation is critical.

In a study of associate degree nursing students who failed a single nursing course then successfully returned to the nursing program, Handwerker[3] reported students were shocked by the challenges they faced in nursing school. They described themselves as being academically strong with high

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grade point averages when initially admitted to the nursing program, only to quickly find themselves struggling and unable to pass. Although eventually successful, these returning students reported experiencing uncertainty and sadness.

Through a scoping review, Lewis[4] identified that academic failure and course repetitions have far-reaching consequences for students including emotional, social, and financial. Additionally, early course failures are correlated with subsequent course failures and attrition from nursing programs. Nursing research is primarily focused on predicting academic failure with less attention on developing interventions to help prevent failure or to strengthen students post failure.[5]

Nursing students are often limited on the number of course failures they are allowed while remaining eligible to progress in the nursing program. Generally, such progression policies are constructed in an effort to reduce first time failure rates on the NCLEX-RN exam as weaker students are anecdotally thought to fail in greater numbers.[6] The first-time NCLEX-RN pass rate is widely considered the foremost indicator of nursing program quality by boards of nursing, pre-licensure program accreditors, program stakeholders, and the public. Consequently, in an effort to prevent poor NCLEX-RN outcomes, many pre-licensure programs implement a variety of interventions including stricter progression policies related to course failures.[7]

Unintended consequences of efforts to preserve acceptable first-time NCLEX pass rates include declining completion rates.[7] Too often, the necessity to preserve an acceptable pass rate while maintaining a satisfactory program completion rate are at odds. First-time pass rate driven program policies can hamper progression, and reduce the number of eligible graduates thus reducing the contribution to the ongoing nationwide nursing shortage.[7, 8] Domiano[9] identified that failing and repeating nursing courses was significantly related to overall program failure as well as NCLEX failure. According to Cipher & Urban[10] failing a nursing course is considered a high-stakes issue and decreases the likelihood of program completion. Clearly, the expectation is once qualified students are admitted, they will successfully complete the program without failure.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of baccalaureate level nursing students who experienced a nursing course failure. By understanding the challenges these students have endured, nurse educators may be better prepared to guide future students struggling in nursing courses. Additionally, exploration of the issue from a student's perspective

is necessary in an effort to identify interventions that may prevent course failures. Furthermore, while there is an abundance of literature over efforts to retain nursing students and early identification of at-risk students, there is scant literature specifically from the perspective of nursing students with course failures.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design

This qualitative descriptive study utilized a phenomenological framework to determine the lived experience of baccalaureate nursing students who failed a nursing course. Approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2021.

2.2 Setting & sample

The setting for this study was a nursing department in a university located in the Texas Panhandle. Relevant to this research setting is the policy of allowing only a single course failure. Students who fail a second course are ineligible to progress in the nursing program. Additionally, progression in this program requires students to earn a C (74%) or higher in each course.

The researchers utilized purposive sampling to recruit nursing students who failed at least one nursing course. The researchers set a time frame of no more than two semesters since the failure to ensure potential participants would be able to accurately recall their experience. No other criteria were required for inclusion in this study. Initially, 14 students were contacted. Thirteen responded and were willing to participate. Special attention was given to prevent the students from feeling compelled to participate in this study. They were invited only once to participate. Of the 13 students who participated, one student was unsuccessful in two courses and unable to progress in the program. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to beginning the interviews.

2.3 Procedure

The primary investigator contacted 14 students via phone or text, and 13 agreed to participate. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (P1-P13). Data collection was accomplished through semi-structured interviews via phone. The interviews ranged from 20 to 45 minutes. A verbatim transcription was prepared from the audio recorded interviews. A commercial transcription service was utilized and all identifying references were removed from each interview transcript to decrease the risk of connecting personal information and statements to any single participant. To ensure

accuracy and enhance reliability, the researchers reviewed each transcript.

The semi-structured interview was well suited for data collection in the project as it allowed for clarification of answers and comments and probing for additional information as required. A broad open-ended question was utilized to begin each interview, "Can you tell us about your experience of failing a nursing course?" After responding, the participants were encouraged to explore the following areas, if not already discussed: description of what they believed might have helped them be successful; changes they might have made to prevent the course failure; and challenges and complications they faced because of the course failure. Data collection was halted after the initial 13 interviews when researchers determined that data saturation had been reached as no new information was being gathered.

2.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was completed after all transcriptions were uploaded into ATLAS.ti 9. Repeated exploration and examination of the data allowed the researchers to become familiar with the data and identify commonalities and differences in the students' experiences as the themes were analyzed.[11] To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, each of the thirteen transcripts was read independently by the researchers and initial codes were developed. The development of codes required exhaustive reading and re-reading of each transcript which allowed for prolonged engagement with the data. Finally, these codes were clustered into themes. The project researchers discussed each of the themes in-depth until consensus was reached on the findings.

2.5 Limitations

There are limitations to be considered regarding our findings. This was a small study where the participants were recruited from a single university setting suggesting caution in the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Because this sample was relatively homogeneous, dissimilar findings may have been revealed with a more diverse group of participants.

3. FINDINGS

The lived experience of these students varied somewhat depending on the individual's circumstance; however, common experiences were shared in this study. The findings of this study revealed the following themes: 1) academic challenges, 2) life issues encountered while in the program, 3) testing difficulties, and 4) coping with the aftermath of a course failure. The participants in this study honestly shared their experiences. All of them described struggling with matters in more than one of the theme areas, and some struggled with

all. It is difficult to fully convey the range and intensity of the participants' emotions as they shared their experiences with the researchers. More than a few of the students related their sense of sadness, embarrassment, and/or anger over their course failure during the interviews. The following describes the findings of our study.

3.1 The academic challenges

All the students in this study reported finding the nursing program to be more academically challenging than they had anticipated it would be, as well as more demanding than their previous course work had been. Challenges included the need to implement strict study habits, combining classroom and clinical studies while having multiple instructors, and trying to adjust to the overall pace and demands of the nursing program. Nearly all of the participants reported finding their study habits to be ineffective. They described previously waiting to study for an exam until a day or two before it was scheduled. This was the manner of studying they relied on in high school and prior to admittance into the nursing program. They considered studying to be something they had not previously worried about. With regard to the need to begin developing effective study habits, Participant 1 reported the challenge of studying to be a major struggle, "I think just learning more how to study because I have always been a good student until nursing school. . . I feel like I have never really necessarily struggled with classes until my nursing school, it's just a whole other thing." [P1] Another participant shared, "I think when I got to nursing school, I didn't realize how much studying it actually required." [P11] Participant 9 echoed a similar sentiment, "the factors that were related to me failing might've been I didn't have the studying techniques down, so I really wasn't familiar with the nursing world. And I was comparing maybe the course to just a regular history or English class, not expecting to put a lot of effort or studying into my classes." [P9]

Participants shared their struggles of getting used to having multiple instructors in a single co-taught course. They reported feeling confused when course instructors had different teaching styles and course expectations for the same class on top of having an additional instructor for the accompanying clinical portion. Participant 1 reported finding one instructor in the course, "very repetitive and kind of boring" while the other was "more interactive and hands on" allowing her to "grasp the concepts a little more". [P1] Another participant shared a similar experience, "Three different instructors, three different teaching styles. . . .it was a lot of information being thrown at us by a lot of different people, and all of them taught differently. So, for me, I stayed confused that whole semester." [P2]

The participants in this study were enrolled during late 2020, when COVID-19 forced some classes to move to an online platform. Several participants reported this being stressful. For example, Participant 2 reported, "That semester was particularly hard. I'm not a good online learner, and when we switched to online, there was nothing anyone could do about that, but that hurt me a lot." [P2] Regarding different platforms, participant 5 reported, "I'm a very hands-on learner, and the pandemic and shutting down the university was very challenging for me." [P5]

Several participants verbalized finding it stressful to adapt to the demands of nursing school. For example, Participant 10 shared, "I don't think I was prepared for the amount of work that was to come. I knew it was going to be hard, but I didn't think it was going to be as hard as it was." [P10] Finally, Participant 5 shared, "This is out of my character. I've never failed a class...There is not enough time in the day to study." [P5]

Finally, an additional issue reported by some to compound stress was the program progression policy. Students described knowing that if they failed a course, they would be required to repeat it, however, it stressful knowing that as a nursing student, they were limited in the number of courses they could fail and continue to progress through the program. After experiencing a failure in a class, participant 12 mentioned, "Yeah, we only get two fails. So, the stress of passing every class from now is pretty much a stressor." [P12] Likewise, P11 reported, "I freaked out a little bit, but I took a step back and realized that I can't fail another course or I'm done."

3.2 Family and work issues

With few exceptions, the participants reported having one or more issues outside of school that had an impact on their success. Several of the students shared that they had personal or family health issues that had an effect on their academic performance. Participant 2 reported, "My son dealt with depression really bad this year...he tried to commit suicide. I was not thinking about nursing school, I was thinking about my family and the hardships that we had dealt with this semester...It was hard." [P2] Another participant shared that when a close family member was diagnosed with a serious illness, "I ended up being forced to move home." This participant described attempting to integrate a balance between school and home "very challenging." [P5] Additionally, participant 7 reported having two devastating life events. The first was a serious health issue, "My step-mom had brain surgery. So, I really helped them with that...they are my support system." In addition, participant 7 reported "My car got stolen the day before the final. And I didn't know at

the time that you could go talk to your instructors 'cause I thought the final was the final, that was it. That was the last day." [P7]

All but a single participant worked at least a few hours each week. While several of the participants reported quitting their job when they began struggling academically, others could not afford to do so. They shared that the time they had to spend at work negatively impacted their performance in class. Participant 3 reported, "Friday, Saturday, Sunday, eight hour shifts and I would have school Monday through Thursday. So, throughout the whole semester, I was very exhausted and trying to motivate myself to have time to study was very exhausting." [P3] Participant 6 shared, "I'm exhausted, I work on the weekends and I feel like maybe if I had more time on the weekends, I could have put aside the weekends to get extra hours to study, it would have helped me." [P6] When reflecting on what would have prevented the course failure, participant 8 reported, "definitely cutting back at work because I was still working full time." [P8] Finally, participant 5 reported, "I know from looking back on it, I was so overwhelmed with the prep work for clinicals... And I worked, at the time, I worked 25 to 30 hours a week." [P5] The negative effect of working on academic success was highlighted by all the participants who worked.

3.3 Testing issues

As nursing students are preparing to take a standardized NCLEX-RN exam, much of their testing consists of application based, upper-level question format. Many pre-nursing courses utilize knowledge-based exam questions making this transition difficult for some. Most of the participants in this study reported struggling with this specific issue. Participant 2 reported, "since I've been in the nursing program, I've always had a hard time with testing. I get real bad anxiety, and I get frustrated. But I think that's typical. I think the NCLEX style questions are just hard for everybody. I've just never mastered it." [P2] Another participant shared, "Just trying to learn how to take the tests better...it really shocked me how it was so different from any other tests I took...I didn't know how to take a test. I was coming into the test like, Boom - How do I apply this information to the exam and the scenarios that they're asking of me on the exam." [P12] Additionally, another participant mentioned, "I knew that I wasn't doing great on my exams or in most of my classes. It wasn't necessarily that I didn't know the material, it's just that I struggled understanding what the questions were asking me." [P6] Again, most of the participants of this study shared their issues with test taking.

Participants also reported that they found preparing for exams to be difficult. Participant 9 emphasized this in the

interview, "I want to say the factors that were related to me failing might've been I didn't have the studying techniques down, so I really wasn't familiar with the nursing world... Kind of like cramming my study material the night before." [P9] Additionally, participant 5 added, "I just never felt like I was prepared enough...I worked better alone, but I don't think I had utilized my resources the correct way...I've never failed before until this past semester, but it was just the fact of being under prepared." [P5] Participant 1 also shared similar experiences regarding exam preparation, "I think just learning more how to study because I have always been a good student until nursing school...And so, I really didn't know how to apply certain factors that I needed to. . . I just wish I would have." [P1] Finally, participant 11 shared, "Definitely using my time wisely because I'm also really involved on campus...I try to balance everything, and I know I needed to put nursing school up there instead of leveling it out with everything, and using the spare time that I had to study." [P11] It became evident that the students in this study failed multiple exams, often related to insufficient preparation and/or difficulty with testing.

3.4 Consequences – Coping with the Aftermath

Participants in this study reported multiple consequences as a result of having a course failure. These consequences included embarrassment, lasting emotional issues, and the struggle with the financial and time costs of having to retake a course. Several of the study participants shared the difficulty of not progressing with their original cohort and being assigned to a new cohort. One of the participants shared, "getting dropped into another class is humiliating, because everybody doesn't know you anymore. You walk into a classroom and no one knows you. It's humiliating. It's almost degrading, I felt like, for me, embarrassing." [P9] Another participant also highlighted the struggle of not progressing with their original cohort, "So I don't know. It's devastating that I'm here talking to you but...I think the biggest thing was being forced into a new cohort because I didn't know anyone. I didn't know what they would think of me...it was very challenging to go up to school. I honestly resented and did not want to see my other classmates. I did not want to see those that I should be graduating with, because I didn't want to think about what they thought of me." [P5] Participant 4 also recalled, "I didn't even know who I was going to end up retaking the course with me. And I was so scared. I think that was another thing that was so scary about failing a class was you come into a new class where you don't know anybody." [P4]

Failing a course was cause for participants to question whether they belonged in the nursing program. For example,

participant 8 shared, "It's definitely depressing and it bogs you down. I don't know. I just feel like for me, I almost wanted to give up and thought I don't think this is for me." [P8] Additionally, participant 1 also shared, "It was still just kind of like the stigma of - I am a repeater. Sometimes you just feel like you're not meant for this or you shouldn't be in the nursing program. [P1]

Lastly, participants in this study shared that financial issues weighed heavily on their mind while having to repeat a semester. Participant 4 mentioned, "The biggest one, honestly, for me financially. It was a kicker." [P4] Similarly, participant 2 also shared, "And I guess that would be the other part that I didn't really think of is the money wise, financially for me, but you're just like, "Ugh. Now I have to repay for a whole other semester." [P2] Financial issues were difficult for many of the participants in our study.

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As educators, we were not surprised by the findings of the study. It is well known that many students are concerned about the impact of a failure on their overall academic progress and ability to graduate. Over the years, we have encountered many students who worked long hours and cared for family members while contending with other personal obligations and struggled to successfully complete the nursing program. It was, however, valuable to hear about the experience from the participant's perspective. The students in the study openly shared personal thoughts and experiences regarding course failures.

Anecdotally, nursing faculty recognize that students who perform poorly on their first exam in a course will likely continue to struggle throughout the semester. Frank[12] confirms that nursing faculty can often identify struggling students early in a course. Additionally, Robinson & Niemer[13] reported that the probability of a course failure was higher for students who had achieved a final course grade of low C in an earlier course. However, the possibility of a course failure is not always evident to students who hold hope they will successfully complete a course regardless of earlier issues, even if advised to drop or withdraw from a course.

Cipher & Urban[10] identified that while RN-BSN were more likely to drop a course than pre-licensure accelerated BSN students, they associated a higher number of dropped courses with program persistence for both groups. Dropping a course for most traditional nursing students requires moving to another cohort of students, expanding the time to graduation, and paying for an additional semester which is something they are often resistant to do. Owen[14] reported that failing students expressed a desire for faculty to reach out and

discuss potential success strategies in an attempt to forgo dropping a course.

The student participants in this study had completed a rigorous application process and were selected for admission to our program over other qualified applicants. However, for some students, the orientation into nursing may not have been adequate regarding the studying requirements necessary for academic success. Similar to the participants in the Veesart & Cannon[15] study who although having met all the admission criterion, reported not knowing how to study for nursing classes and eventually failing out of the nursing program. It is apparent the inability to understand the commitment required for successful completion of a nursing program can lead to course failure. Owen[14] described multiple faculty teaching in a course as problematic for participants in her study of nursing course failure. Not unlike our study participants, students recalled a lack of consistent content delivery resulting in gaps in nursing content and difficulty comprehending the overall course information.

The findings from this study will benefit nursing students and faculty. Nursing faculty are most often the first to identify students in need of additional support. Based on the finding of this study, we recommend the following strategies as priorities for faculty to assist future students throughout their nursing program:

1) Provide accurate and informative advising regarding course expectations and development of time management skills necessary for success in every course. Discuss the challenges of being a nursing student from day one. We know that there is abundant information describing the challenges of nursing school and importance of maintaining a balance between life and studies however, our findings show that students still require assistance with this.

2) Consider part-time schedules for students who are required to work or are sole caregivers for their families and loved ones. There are likely many other circumstances that will make part-time scheduling beneficial to students and faculty should be on the lookout for these.

3) Work with struggling students in a compassionate manner making sure that repeating students are warmly welcomed into the classroom and encouraged and assisted to become connected with the course materials. Keep communication channels open.

4) Faculty in a co-taught class should carefully consider how their teaching styles blend for the benefit of students in their courses. Faculty should be aware of what each is presenting and how to improve the structure and organization of course concepts being taught in each session.

5). Instructions and practice regarding test taking strategies are critical for nursing students. Skillful test taking abilities should be established in pre-nursing courses, and subsequently reinforced in all nursing courses.

6) Long overdue changes in program progression policies related to first-time pass rate issues should be considered by faculty with special attention given to balancing pass rates with program completion rates.

In addition to the aforementioned strategies, we strongly recommend faculty remain vigilant in identifying students at risk of a course failure and in need of academic support and implementation of success strategies.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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