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Challenges in Pursuing Nursing Education at the Graduate Level: Motivators, Barriers, and Persistence

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As the United States [U.S.] nursing shortage continues, the need for a highly educated work force grows. Although, the Carnegie Report^[1] advocated for a Bachelor of Science in Nursing [BSN] degree as entry into practice with a required Master of Science in Nursing [MSN] earned within 10 years, the necessity to pursue a graduate degree in nursing has not been as widely encouraged as the baccalaureate degree. Master's prepared nurses are essential across a variety of health care settings to serve in leadership, management, and advanced primary provider positions, as well as in academic settings as faculty members and researchers. In 2017, approximately 17% of the nursing workforce held a master's degree. This was up from 13.8% in 2013^[2]. While the percentage of nurses earning a master's degree has risen gradually, the need for additional highly educated nurses persists as rapid advancements in health care technology, including telehealth and informatics, occur.

During 2016 and 2017, the nursing program at the authors' institution tasked the recruitment and retention committee with increasing enrollment in the graduate nursing program. The committees stated goal was increasing enrollment in all role specializations (nurse practitioner, education, and management). The committee identified two areas of particular concern: the need for family nurse practitioners in the nearby rural communities and a shortage of nursing faculty in the area as these areas had become challenging. Although the nursing program had been successful at retaining a majority of its students, recruitment of new students was challenging and thus became the key focus.

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Background

There is a well-documented shortage of all types of nurses. One reason for this shortage is a lack of sufficient qualified nursing faculty requiring nursing programs to turn away many qualified applicants. While a master's degree is an entry requirement for most faculty positions, there are other more competitive positions available for nurses earning a master's degree – further complicating recruitment and adding to the nursing shortage [3].

Despite the recognition that greater numbers of graduate level nurses are needed, there is a dearth of research concerning what motivates nurses to return to graduate school and what barriers stand in the way of returning to school and earning a master's degree. There is substantial research about associate and diploma degree nurses returning to school to earn a bachelor's degree. The commonly reported barriers for these nurses include educational expenses, family and work demands, and a lack of time to devote to studies [4, 5, 6]. Megginson [7] also identified a lack of recognition for past education accomplishments, equal treatment of RN's regardless of degree, and negative experiences in an earlier nursing program as reported barriers.

Personal satisfaction, promotion and obtaining another position, receiving encouragement by co-workers and family, and improved financial compensation were reported as motivating factors [4, 7, 5, 6]. According to the 2017 National Workforce Survey, nurses with graduate level degrees show large increases in median salaries over those without [2]. While nurses report that financial support including paid sabbaticals and tuition reimbursement, positively affects their decision to return to school [8], hospitals and health care systems indicate that insufficient

financial resources often restrict their ability to provide such support [9].

The past decade has seen steady growth in the number of online nursing programs, including at the graduate level. Online graduate nursing programs provide students with the opportunity to enroll in courses and complete their degree without the challenges of work and school schedule juggling and issues related to proximity to graduate level programs. However, this does not alleviate complications of managing family, childcare, and other responsibilities. In their study of nurses who return to school to pursue an online graduate degree, Cipher et al. [10] reported that most are likely to be working, female, and taking courses on a part-time basis. Carpenter [11] reported that a significant deterrent to selecting an online graduate program was lack of computer literacy skill. In their study of student retention in an online nurse practitioner program, Knestrick et al. [12] found that students over 40 were nearly twice as likely than younger students to leave the program prior to completion.

Along with time constraints, Harris et al. [13] identified that employer discouragement had a negative effect on nurses' intent to return to school regardless of motivation. This discouragement included a lack of recognition for the effort needed to earn degree, little or no leave for study provided by the employer, inability to transfer learning from the class to the workplace, and an absence of financial support from the workplace. On the other hand, Orsolini-Hain [14] recounted that not returning to school for a formal degree was sometimes related to higher compensation and financial reward for informal education and work experience over enrollment in formal nursing education programs.

In his study of graduate nursing persistence, Dean [15] reported that students who did not

persist through their graduate program to graduation, on average, completed fewer than half the required courses. Additionally, graduate program completers were, on average, 3.2 years younger than non-completers were. This is consistent with the Shen et. al.,^[16] findings that RN's under 40 years old were more likely to seek an advanced degree than those over 40.

While we presume that most working RN's face similar motivations and barriers when deciding whether to return to school, there is still scant literature confirming this for MSN students.

Purpose

Having a greater understanding of the motivators to return to school, barriers preventing return, and factors that enable students to persist in a graduate level program will inform the efforts of nursing programs to recruit qualified students and to meet the needs of current and future students. While there is an abundance of literature reporting on these factors for RN-BSN students, there is a dearth of information on the similar considerations for MSN students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to ascertain what the motivators, barriers, and persistence factors are for nurses seeking to earn a graduate nursing degree.

Methods

Design

This study utilized a cross-sectional descriptive survey of graduate level nursing students to determine what factors motivated them to return to school, the barriers they had overcome, and what elements allowed them to persist in their studies.

Sample and Setting

The sample included graduate nursing students at the end of their third semester in an MSN program. Students were enrolled in at least two courses. All courses in the first three semesters are taught online. Data collection occurred over

four semesters and during that time 131 students were invited to participate in this Qualtrics-based survey.

Instrument

Because no instrument could be located related to the study of MSN students, the data were collected utilizing a faculty constructed instrument. With input from recent graduates, a review of published RN-BSN motivator and barrier survey instruments and findings, and a thorough review of the literature, faculty investigators constructed a three-section questionnaire^[5, 6, 17]. These sections included (8) demographic items, (30) quantitative items measuring motivation, barriers, and persistence factors, and (3) open-ended questions inviting respondents to share their experiences and opinions in their own words. The 30 quantitative items utilized a 5-point Likert scale.

Prior to administration of the questionnaire, the survey was pilot tested with a group of nursing faculty for ease of completion and identification of any necessary corrections. This process resulted in minor refinement of several items for clarity. Additionally, feedback on items was solicited to determine face validity.

Procedure

This survey was conducted during fall 2017 and throughout 2018. The students were introduced to the study by one of the faculty members teaching in the MSN program. Invitations to participate were sent through course emails to students toward the end of their third semester in the graduate program. A link to the survey was included in the email invitation. A single reminder email was sent. Prior to administration of the survey, institutional review board approval was sought and granted.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics, including mean, range, and standard

deviation. The analysis was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 24. A thematic analysis of the open-ended items was achieved by careful reading of each response, development of categories, and formation of the themes by one of the researchers with previous experience in qualitative data analysis. The remaining researchers evaluated the data and after discussion, consensus was reached on each of the themes.

Findings

Of the 131 students invited to participate, 119 completed the survey for a response rate of 91%.

Participant Characteristics:

The age range of student participants was 23-63 years with a mean age of 38.4 years. Females made up 90% of the respondents. The overwhelming majority of these students were white (72.7%) with Hispanic students making up the second largest group (15.7%). Ninety-six of the participants worked in a hospital setting and five reported being unemployed. The mean number of hours worked per week was 34.97 with a range of 0-55 hours. This group reported having been registered nurses from one to 44 years, with an average length of 11.15 years of experience. Finally, when asked how many years had elapsed between when they first considered enrolling in an MSN program and actual enrollment in a course, they reported a range of 0-30 years with a mean of 3.76 years.

Quantitative Data:

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 30 quantitative items. The items measured motivators, barriers, and persisters utilizing a 5-point Likert scale. The students were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 indicating the highest level of

agreement, to what extent they agreed with the statements. See Table 1.

Motivators:

The highest levels of agreement for motivating factors included: finding personal and professional satisfaction in earning an MSN ($M = 4.76$), a desire to increase nursing knowledge and expertise ($M = 4.31$), a belief that nurses with an MSN earn more respect from colleagues ($M = 3.76$), as well as increasing confidence in the workplace ($M = 3.61$). Having been offered financial support to return to school was the lowest scored motivating factor ($M = 1.92$) followed by earning an MSN as a path to a terminal degree ($M = 2.32$). Encouragement to return to school by managers or coworkers ($M = 2.40$) and family members ($M = 2.77$) was not as influential as interest in securing a position with more convenient hours ($M = 3.29$), requirement for a sought-after position ($M = 3.27$), and to secure a promotion ($M = 3.49$).

Barriers:

Challenging financial circumstances ($M = 3.70$), inflexible work schedules ($M = 3.54$), and family circumstances ($M = 3.20$) were shown to be the main barriers students needed to overcome in order to return to school. Feeling overwhelmed by the length of time since earning a BSN degree ($M = 3.00$), prohibited by personal responsibilities ($M = 3.00$), and being too busy to return to school any sooner ($M = 2.81$) were also significant barriers. Finally, the lowest agreement was with the items referring to a knowledge gap in technology skills required for an online program ($M = 2.07$) and overall lack of confidence in ability to complete an MSN program ($M = 2.27$).

Persisters:

The highest agreement among the factors that allowed students to persist in the MSN program included the following: personal reasons

motivate me to persist (M = 4.82), confidence in my ability to complete the program (M = 4.45), I have the necessary family encouragement and support to complete the program (M = 4.45), and I have the necessary faculty encouragement and support to complete the program (M = 4.18). Although not as highly scored but still identified as influential were the following factors: I am satisfied with my academic performance (M = 3.87), I have the necessary employer encouragement and support (M = 3.63) and flexible scheduling of courses allows me to balance home, work, and school life (M = 3.39). The lowest scoring factors include those regarding financial issues: I am able to continue because I receive tuition reimbursement from my employer (M = 1.66), I am able to continue because I will qualify for student loan reimbursement (M = 1.61), and I am able to continue because I receive a stipend or release time from my employer (M = 1.19).

Qualitative Data:

Our participants responded to three open-ended questions. The following themes were identified:

Motivating Themes:

Of the 119 respondents, 75 responded to the open-ended question that allowed them to share additional thoughts about factors that motivated them to return to school that they had not already shared. While many disclosed that they wanted to make a career move to a position that required an MSN for a variety of personal, professional, or financial reasons, two frequent motivating themes emerged: (1) aging; and (2) sole provider for a family.

Motivating Theme 1 – Aging

Several respondents described feeling the need to move into a nursing position that was less physically strenuous as they age. One commented, “Unfortunately being a nurse who is 45+ years of age and the ICU population being

morbidly obese ...it is too great for me to handle.” Another reported, “I don’t want to work 12 hour shifts when I am 60 years old.” Finally, “I knew I could not sustain the life of an ER nurse the older I got so I chose a higher education to reduce my workload...”

Motivating Theme 2 – Sole provider

Many respondents reported that they were motivated to return to school to secure a position that would enable them to earn more money. However, several reported specifically being the sole provider for their families and children as a major motivating factor. Comments included, “I returned to school to be able to provide for my daughter” and “I am a single mother and I want to support my daughter without any financial barriers while performing the job of my dreams.” Another declared, “I needed to find a better way to provide for my family.” Lastly, one respondent commented, “As a single mother, I would like to increase my income to better provide for four children.”

Barrier Themes

We received 50 responses to the open-ended item asking for comments about barriers students had overcome to return to school. For the most part, their comments confirmed what had been identified in the quantitative items. Specifically, comments regarding financial challenges, personal and family responsibilities, and work schedule issues.

Barrier Theme 1 – Financial Burdens

Comments received regarding financial burdens included the following examples, “Working out the financial burdens it will place on my family when I am no longer in a management position ...because I stepped down to make more time.” and “I am overcoming barriers as they arise – going part time officially at first of year and applying for student loans.” Another respondent reported, “the cost of school was a barrier since

I am still paying back student loans from my first degree.”

Barrier Theme 2 – Personal and Family Responsibilities

One student reported, “It has definitely been a VERY trying program for me. Mainly due to personal family matters, parent illness and need for 24 hour care, children moving back home with their children ??? and a work schedule that was only able to allow me certain work hours.” Another reported, “I still have barriers in regards to work, school and family life, but I have to be dedicated to my goals and my dreams if I want to be successful – a single mom with a full time job is hard.”

Barrier Theme 3 – Working Schedule

One respondent reported, “I changed jobs... This was the only way in which school was possible. I couldn't keep the full time job 5 days and still do my clinical dates.” Another described, “And then it was about finding a work schedule that allowed for studying and clinical hours which wasn't easy to do.” Another reported, “My work is not very supportive. They always ask me to work overtime, I have a schedule that is always moved around.”

Persisting Themes

We received the fewest comments when we asked about what the participants would like to share with us regarding the reasons they persist in the program. Persisting themes included a desire to not quit and external help from friends and coworkers.

Persisting Theme 1 - “I am not a quitter”

A theme of determination to complete resonated through comments about “not quitting”. The comments included, “I just do not quit what I start unless it is a dire circumstance.” and “I see the light at the end of the tunnel now! I also have to mention that although I am a chicken at heart, I am not a quitter.” Another student simply

reported, “I am not a quitter.” We also received the comment, “Quitting or postponing isn't really an option in my mind.” Finally, we received the following comments regarding reasons for persistence, “I have made some friends and they wouldn't let me quit if I wanted to” and “I won't say it's been easy and I spend a ton more time on school than I thought I would need but I am going to keep working hard.”

Persisting Theme 2 – Friends and Coworkers

Friends and coworkers provide the inspiration to persist for some students as illustrated by the following comments. First, “I was reluctant in the beginning about believing I was going to be able to keep up with this, but two of my good friends have been ahead of me and been very inspiring and encouraging to me.” Additionally, “I have good family support but I am in this with a coworker who is also a friend. She helps me when I am overwhelmed and I try to help her likewise. I might not be able to keep it up like I am if not for this.”

Discussion

The results of this study provide insight into the complex matters in recruitment and retention of students in MSN programs. It is clear that there is an assortment of issues that students will face when making a decision about whether or not to begin graduate studies suggesting that it would be wise for recruitment and retention committees to anticipate these topics. Not surprisingly, students report being motivated to enroll in a graduate program through encouragement by family members and co-workers. They are also motivated by their desire to obtain a new position with an MSN as a requirement, the desire for a promotion, and need for a position with more convenient hours. These are quite likely related in that family and friends are encouraging students to enroll with the goal of a promotion or new position in mind. However, the findings of

this study demonstrate that students are most highly motivated by internal factors including seeking personal and professional satisfaction along with a desire to increase their nursing knowledge and expertise.

Table 1		
On a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 indicating the highest level of agreement, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?		
<i>I am motivated to earn an MSN degree:</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation
To secure a promotion.	3.49	1.425
Because it is a requirement for a nursing position I am seeking.	3.27	1.735
Because it is required for a terminal degree I am seeking (PhD, DNP, etc.).	2.34	1.452
Because my manager or co-workers have encouraged me to do so.	2.40	1.514
Because my family encouraged me to do so.	2.77	1.526
As a way to increase my nursing knowledge and expertise.	4.31	.909
To increase my self-confidence in the workplace.	3.61	1.354
With an MSN degree, I will earn more respect from colleagues.	3.76	1.133
It will be personally and professionally satisfying.	4.76	.596
To secure a position with more convenient hours.	3.29	1.486
Because I was offered financial support to do so.	1.92	1.459
<i>I have overcome the following barriers to return to school:</i>		
An inflexible work schedule.	3.54	1.299
Challenging financial circumstances.	3.70	1.239
Challenging family circumstances.	3.20	1.499
Feeling overwhelmed due to the length of time since earning my BSN.	3.00	1.518
A knowledge gap regarding computers and technology required for online program.	2.07	1.533
Personal responsibilities have prohibited me from returning to school.	3.00	1.513
I was too busy to return to school any sooner than I did.	2.81	1.400
I lacked confidence in my ability to complete the MSN program.	2.27	1.326
<i>I persist in the MSN program because:</i>		
I am confident in my ability to complete the MSN program.	4.45	.744
I have the necessary family encouragement and support.	4.45	1.006
I have the necessary faculty encouragement and support.	4.18	.991
I have the necessary employer encouragement and support.	3.63	1.346
I am receiving a stipend or release time from my employer.	1.19	.740
I am receiving tuition reimbursement from my employer.	1.66	1.305
I will qualify for a student loan repayment program.	1.61	1.316
I am motivated to complete the program for personal reasons.	4.82	.444
I am too close to graduation to quit.	3.50	1.666
The flexibility regarding scheduling of my courses allows me to balance home, work, and school life.	3.39	1.256
I am satisfied with my academic performance.	3.87	1.008

The findings of this study are not unlike those of previous studies looking at both motivators and barriers for students considering RN-BSN programs especially with regard to the barriers.

Similar to RN-BSN students, financial issues and work schedule challenges remain significant barriers to returning to school for graduate level students [6, 13]. It is a substantial hurdle for students to have to change jobs to arrange a more convenient schedule in order to enroll in classes. Previous RN-BSN studies have indicated that tuition reimbursement and flexible scheduling by employers would encourage nurses to return to school [6, 5]. Undoubtedly, this would be beneficial for nurses returning to earn a graduate degree as well.

Sherman et al. [18] reported on the aging of the nursing workforce and the need to retain older nurses as a means of ensuring nursing knowledge, skill, and expertise is transferred to younger nurses with less experience. The results of this study show that nurses are looking at graduate education as a means of staying active in the workforce as they age. The desire to continue working in a profession with substantial physical requirements and long shift scheduling may well be the driving force for some to seek additional education.–

Findings from this study demonstrate friends and co-workers who are also students can produce a positive effect on persistence. Nikolaidou [19] reported that for RN-BSN students, one of the most supportive variables enhancing retention was encouragement by friends both within the classroom and outside of the classroom. Similarly, Sarver et al. [17] reported that for some students having a co-worker in the same program was crucial to completion. Morgenthaler [20] proposed that finding another nurse who is going to school provides someone to study with and to offer encouragement during difficult coursework.

Limitations

This study utilized a small sample from one university setting and as such the findings are

not generalizable to other settings. The study does however offer a preliminary description of barriers, motivators, and persistence factors for registered nurses enrolled in a graduate level nursing program.

As current students, our respondents had overcome barriers to enrollment. The barriers to returning to school may have been different for nurses unable to overcome them. Likewise, the students responding to our survey were in their third semester. There may have been those who were not able to persist to graduation and dropped out prior to the third semester. If so, we were not able to collect their information.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Recruitment and retention committee members will encounter nurses who at some point have or will consider returning to school to work on an MSN degree. Undoubtedly, these nurses will have a variety of reasons motivating their return as well as barriers preventing their return. Educators can anticipate these barriers and, in some instances, provide the means to overcome them. We suggest the following:

1. Work with employers to encourage tuition reimbursement and loan repayments as incentives. For those who work in facilities already providing such financial support, make sure nurses are aware of the opportunities and informed about the resources through the employer or during recruitment visits. Additionally, begin identifying potential sources of income for scholarships.
2. Discuss student loans and other forms of financial assistance with potential students. Students are not always aware of these sources of assistance.
3. Provide flexibility in course scheduling and discuss scheduling with each student during advising sessions.

4. Be aware of common barriers students may encounter. Ask alumni to discuss how they overcame barriers in a manner that allowed them to complete the MSN program.
5. Utilize student success coordinators to discuss factors that contribute to student success and retention and to develop short and long term plans specifically for each student. Basically, the key is communication early and often in an effort to aid the students with whatever comes their way.
6. Set up opportunities for students to get acquainted with one another. Online courses can make it difficult for students to get to know each other even if they work in the same facility.
7. Finally, develop a comprehensive student orientation program. This allows faculty to get to know students and vice versa.

Overall, a recommendation is made for more robust recruitment, expanded awareness of program and curriculum details for potential students, and encouraging employers to provide assistance to employees who return to school.

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