Academic persistence among nursing students: A concept analysis

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Received: April 20, 2017 Accepted: June 7, 2017 Online Published: June 21, 2017 DOI: 10.5430/jnep.v7n11p62 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v7n11p62

ABSTRACT

Background: Persistence, in academic settings, has been identified as a critical variable for success. Different than retention and attrition, persistence, as a personal characteristic, describes the student who progresses, despite opposition or importunity.

Methods: The Walker and Avant framework was used to guide the analysis of the concept of academic persistence, specifically as it applies to nursing education.

Results: Barriers to persisting, among nursing students, include academic and personal variables. As faculty, we are concerned with and responsible to provide interventions that address academic barriers to persistence; there is little we can, or should do with personal barriers.

Conclusions: Being able to identify the difference between academic and personal variables is the initial step in providing appropriate, and valued interventions.

Key Words: Persistence, Academic success, Nursing student

1. INTRODUCTION

Persistence, because of its link to academic success, has long been a focus area of higher education research. Within published research, persistence and retention are frequently used interchangeable. Retention, as an organizational phenomenon, is measured by the number of students returning and progressing toward degree completion. Retention strategies are organization-specific, guided by the demographics of the student population, and demonstrate an institutional commitment to the students. Students who continue to enroll are described as academically retained and reported as a primary indicator of institutional performance.

As an individual phenomenon, persistence describes the ability of a student to achieve their academic goal. Within academia, persistence is defined as a complex, multidimensional phenomena influenced by an interaction of personal, academic, and environmental factors. Persistence may be unrelated to actual knowledge acquisition. According to Ishler and associates preparation, ability, and motivation are constructs required for academic persistence. Strategies to affect each of these variables need to be individualized and specific to the challenge and the demographic characteristic of the student.

Bronstein describes retention as an institutional measure and persistence as a student trait. The ability to separate these terms, and clearly define academic persistence within nursing education will allow nursing faculty to develop and provide interventions that are appropriately targeted, and aimed at improving academic persistence. Separating persistence from retention assures that the individualized intervention is de-
Nursing student academic success has been linked to persistence. Despite the myriad of academic support programs, strategies, practices and interventions designed to enhance success as measured by persistence remains a challenge. Due to the ongoing nursing shortage and societal changes faculty need to examine how nursing students persist and what can be done to enhance their persistence. The study of persistence has been an ongoing problem in nursing and in earlier years was attributed to the problems of individual students. Outcomes associated with the inability to persist include personal (attrition), organizational (retention), societal (graduate), and financial (debt). Reason’s College Experience Persistence Model, depicted in Figure 1, displays the influences which impacted student learning and persistence during the college experience. The model includes students’ precollege characteristics and experiences including sociodemographic traits, academic preparation and performance and student dispositions. These are what the student brings as they enter the institution of higher learning. As the student becomes a part of the institution the model indicates how, individual student experiences can be classified into three distinct categories; classroom experiences: out-of-class experiences: and curricular experiences. Thus, for this concept analysis, these constructs which pertain to what happens to a student within a program of nursing will be used to define academic persistence for the nursing student.

Figure 1. Reason’s college experience persistence model

2. METHODS

Purpose of a concept analysis

Concept analyses are undertaken to examine the meaning and structure of a concept. This activity clarifies the defining characteristics of the concept, and allows for operational definitions to be devised. Walker and Avant provide a seven-step process for conducting a concept analysis. These steps include (1) selecting the concept, (2) determining the purpose of the analysis, (3) identifying all uses of the concept, (4) defining the attributes, (5) identifying a model case, (6) identifying consequences of the concept, and (7) defining empirical references of the concept. This framework was used to examine the concept. The purpose of using Walker and Avant’s framework for concept analysis was to identify as many possible uses of the concept of academic persistence and to provide insight into the current issue of retention in programs of nursing.

The impetus for selection of the concept of persistence is due to the rigorous nature of nursing programs that require early assessment and intervention to enhance students’ chances of achieving success in the nursing program, completing the program on schedule, and going on to pass the NCLEX-RN so that they may enter the nursing workforce. The concept under analysis is persistence, and the purpose of the analysis is to operationalize persistence among nursing students and to separate academic from personal persistence.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Identifying the uses of the concept

To identify all uses of the concept, as required in step three, a literature search was conducted. Using the search engines of CINAHL, PubMed, ProQuest, Science Direct, Google Scholar, Psych Articles and Education Full Text and the keyword persistence numerous articles were identified. Adding
nursing student, academic success, and student success as keywords, as well as focusing on research published in peer-reviewed indexed journals, writing in English, readily available, and published between 2000 and 2015 resulted in 1,789 articles. Limiting the articles to those focusing on student persistence and the study population limited to those presently enrolled in higher educational programs resulted in 20 articles. These articles encompassed the literature review utilized for this concept analysis (see Table 1).

3.2 Defining the attributes

A person who persists has been defined as a person who “goes on resolutely or stubbornly despite opposition, importunity, or warning: one who continues firmly or obstinately”.[9] Someone who persists may be described as having grit, determination, or commitment. The antonym for retention is attrition,[10] which is defined as a loss of students from a nursing program resulting in the difference between the numbers of students beginning a program to the numbers of students finishing the program.[10] Thus, these definitions make it easy to differentiate the two terms. Retention is an institutional measure. However, persistence is an individual phenomenon as a student persists to a goal.[7]

The term persistence often evokes the reflection of an adversity that an individual overcomes during the pursuit of a goal or dream.[11] Persistence may be observed as a characteristic that motivates a person; once a task is undertaken, persistence assures that the task will be satisfactorily completed.[12] A student who persists or has the quality of persistence is one who continues to enroll full-time and continuously pursue a degree with expectations of graduation.[5] A persisting student has acquired the characteristics of academic aptitude, readiness, motivation, personality and student development.[9] The outcome of persistence, per Bronstein,[5] is graduation.

Within the profession of nursing, persistence is defined as an ability to overcome obstacles and successfully complete a course or program of study.[13] Academic factors that affected persistence are circumstance-specific and may be either positive or negative.[14] Persistence has also been described to include the student who “stops out”.[15] These students’ complete courses on a flexible timetable. While ultimately these students may complete their degree, persistence, viewed as maintaining enrollment until graduation, is affected.

Persistence was initially identified in 1975 by Tinto[16] as a characteristic absent in students who exited institutions of higher education prior to graduation. Since its initial identification, Bean[17] in 1980 amended the model to focus on attrition. Although both of these models highlight the importance of student experiences on campus[15] this analysis uses Reason’s[7] (2009) framework to clarify the concept of academic persistence. The individual student experiences that affect persistence are conceptualized as influences on student learning and subsequent persistence.[7] Habley and associates[9] described a persistent student as one who has acquired the characteristics of academic aptitude, commitment, readiness, motivation, engagement, and self-regulation. Raman[18] posited that motivation, self-concept, and commitment have a positive effect on persistence. Tinto[1, 16, 19] identified expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning as five conditions that facilitate persistence. Hart[14] posited that that social connectedness, perceived stress and support, self-motivation, and goal attachment as contributers to persistence.

Reviewing the attributes identified in the literature provides the ability to identify personal modifiable attributes, or ones which may be amenable to interventions.[14] Academic aptitude, readiness, self-regulation, and learning are non-modifiable, and thus, while they impact persistence and ultimately academic success, interventions should not be aimed at increasing these characteristics. Thus, these attributes may be beyond the realm of an educational intervention.[20] Student grades correlate to academic self-efficacy, which retain or enhance persistence.[21] In fact, among all academic variables, grade point average (GPA) was determined to be the strongest predictor for student persistence.[22] Persistence, viewed through these paradigms, is an antecedent to academic success. Reason’s[7] College Experience Persistence Model separates students’ precollege characteristics and experiences as personal persistence attributes that cannot be altered by interventions. Characterizing academic persistence into individual student experiences provides opportunities to measure and evaluate persistence interventions in nursing education.

3.3 Model case

According to Walker and Avant,[8] a model case demonstrates the defining attributes of the concept being analyzed and illustrates the use of that concept in a realistic situation. Amy, a junior in a baccalaureate nursing program, is about to start a difficult nursing course that requires substantial class, clinical, and lab requirements. This course has a 30% drop, fail, withdraw (DFW) rate. Amy has heard from friends that this course is really tough. This seven credit hour course is Adult Medical Surgical Nursing and is the first course where she will provide direct patient care. There is course work, high stakes testing and clinical preparation. She has a 3.5/4.0 GPA in science courses and understands the rigor of nursing content.
Table 1. Results of persistence literature review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s), Journal/ Publication Source</th>
<th>Research Method</th>
<th>Population, N, Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Instruction: Supporting Persistence in Barren Courses</td>
<td>Learning Assistance Review. 13(1): 31-45.</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Results indicated that faculty and students perceived SI to be a valuable resource in achieving persistence or academic success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development and Validation of a Motivational Persistence Scale</td>
<td>Constantijn T, Holman A, Hjorthøj AM. (2011) PSEHOLOGIA.</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>N = 318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resiliency, self-efficacy, and persistence of college seniors in higher education</td>
<td>Garza KK, Bain SF, Kapurynsky L. (2008) Research in Higher Education Journal</td>
<td>Quantitative/ Qualitative</td>
<td>Student success factors such as resiliency, self-efficacy, and persistence were similar without significant difference between students with parents who have a college degree and students with parents who do not have a college degree. Both first generation and continued-generation students demonstrated a GPA ranging from 3.0 to 4.0 which could explain the no significance difference in mean score on the scales that measured resiliency, self-efficacy, and persistence. The findings could explain that students who succeed to their senior year in college have learned to adapt and adjust to college life and have developed a high sense of resiliency, self-efficacy, and persistence. Retention factors explored through qualitative interviews found six themes emerging: resilience, family support, university support system, difficulty adjusting to college life, personal traits, and family expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of a Persistence Scale for Online Education in Nursing</td>
<td>Hart C. (2014) Nursing Education Perspectives</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>The Persistence Scale for Online Education (PSOE-N) has the potential to discriminate between nursing students who are persistent and those at risk for dropping an online course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An investigation of hope, academics, environment, and motivation as predictors of persistence in higher education online programs</td>
<td>Horder B. (2007) Internet and Higher Education</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>N = 259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A path-analytic study of some correlates predict persistence and student’s success in distance education in Nigeria</td>
<td>Ojokheta KO. (2010) Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education. 11(1): 181-192.</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Dropout and persistence students showed statistical differences in perceptions of family and organizational support, and satisfaction and relevance. It was also shown that the theoretical framework, which includes family support, organizational support, satisfaction, and relevance in addition to individual characteristics, can predict learners’ decision to drop out or persist. Organizational support and relevance were shown to be particularly predictive. The results imply that lower dropout rates can be achieved if online program developers or instructors find ways to enhance the relevance of the course. It also implies that adult learners need to be supported by their organizations for them to finish online courses that they register for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing student success in an associate degree program</td>
<td>Raman J. (2013) Teaching and Learning in Nursing</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>This study examined factors that influence the academic success of associate degree nursing students. It was found that faculty support, general self-efficacy, affective commitment, and mutual self-constructs played key roles in academic success along with pre-nursing grade point average.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Examination of the Influence of Institutional Context on Student Persistence at 4-year Colleges and Universities: A Multilevel Approach</td>
<td>Tina MA. (2004) Research in Higher Education</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>The findings identify additional situational and institutional barriers to persistence among students in online courses. The findings suggest that strategies to facilitate student persistence in online courses should address online instructional techniques, faculty development, technology development, and program development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence Among Graduate Nursing Students enrolled in an Online Course</td>
<td>Ward-Smith P, Schmer C, Peterson J, et al. (2013) Journal of Nursing Education and Practice</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Persistence Scale for Online Education (PSOE-E) can reliably identify the student at-risk for course incompletion and may be useful in identifying those for whom intervention would be helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictors of Persistence to Graduation: Extending a Model and Data on the Transition to University Model</td>
<td>Winters MG, Bowers CB. (2007) Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Perceptions that influenced students’ persistence in the nursing major were uncovered during interviews: Keeping Up, Not Giving Up, Doing it, and Connecting to the use of resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicting Women’s Persistence in Adult Literacy Classes with Dispositional Variables</td>
<td>Zieglar MJ, Bain SK, Bell SM, et al. (2007) Reading Psychology</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>This statewide adult literacy program took the Adult Education Persistence Scale, a measure of self-efficacy, resilience, attitudes toward school, and attributions, a measure developed to identify dispositional variables that predict persistence. Results indicated that dispositional variables modestly predicted persistence, identifying high and low attendees with 69% accuracy.</td>
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Amy is highly motivated and is committed to a life-long goal of becoming a nurse. She is ready for the challenge and has developed self-regulation by acquiring study skills to be successful. The student is engaged in campus activities including the use of academic support services such as supplemental instruction and individual peer tutoring. She attends all supplemental sessions and utilizes individual tutoring as needed. The student receives constructive feedback from the faculty and utilizes peer learning to clarify content. This active engagement is student centered and is promoted in and out of the classroom. The student persists in the nursing course and the program and achieves the outcome of academic success. This student has many attributes that describe academic persistence.

3.4 Consequences of the concept
Consequences are those events or incidences that occur as a result of the occurrence of the concept, in other words, the outcomes of the concept. Assuming that persistence is partially based on goals and commitments established prior to enrollment in a program of nursing, the link between academic persistence, participation in interventions and a successful academic outcome cannot be understated. While Tinto’s (1975) Theory of Student Departure was developed to guide the study of attrition and retention in higher education, the theory had influence over persistence. In fact, empirical testing demonstrated effectiveness of educational interventions in empirical research and testing. This theory emphasized the role of campus-based interactions and integration on persistence.

3.5 Empirical references of the concept
Using the framework developed by Reason (2009), the empirical references focused on persistence will be separately reviewed, by construct. Thus, the relevant data related to classroom experiences, out-of-class experiences, and curricular experiences will be presented separately.

3.5.1 Classroom experiences
Classroom experiences have an important role for both student learning and persistence. Tinto initially identified academic integration as an indicator for persistence. When academic integration is absent, disappointment in the academic experience, decreased motivation, or dropping out occurs. Demaris and Krisonis posited that engaging experiences, within the classroom, enhance academic persistence. Active learning course practices may directly influence social integration and indirectly affect subsequent institutional commitment and student departure decisions. Pedagogical practices that provide a cooperative learning environment are linked to persistence decisions. Passive practices of instruction were found to have a negative relationship to persistence.

3.5.2 Out-of-class experiences
Out-of-class experiences, or what happens to a student after arrival on campus were initially identified by Pascarella and Terenzini in 1983 as having a great impact on persistence. This perception was supported in 2013 by Burrus and associates, adding that out-of-class experiences have a greater importance than either the background characteristics, personal commitments, or the goal of graduation. According to Tinto, when experiences integrate the student socially and intellectually into the life of the institution, persistence toward graduation will occur. Out-of-class experiences are those that engage the student to campus life, and include participation in clubs, sports or other on campus activities. Conclusions from a meta-analysis study identified on campus activities and academic organizations as influential to persistence. The results of this work also revealed a correlation between student involvement in on campus activities and graduation. Educationally purposeful out-of-classroom experiences, such service learning and learning communities, have been documented to have a positive effect on persistence when the student is from an ethnically or racially diverse background.

3.5.3 Curricular experiences
Curricular experiences include formal, structured, faculty-directed activities. Mentoring programs, led by faculty members, have been identified as having a positive influence on program completion. Faculty support, encouragement and interaction in the classroom were identified by Fleming as being essential components to nursing student’s persistence even when academic work in the nursing program was difficult. These curricular program interventions may include first year transition programs, academic advising, counseling services, academic support programs, enrichment programs, tutoring and Supplemental Instruction (SI). Evaluating interventions aimed at enhancing persistence have used course grade or course drop rates. Jeffreys study described and evaluated select aspects of an enrichment program (EP) for students who participated in peer/mentor/tutor (PMT) led study groups throughout the semester. Despite the challenges that impact personal persistence, and the demographic variability among the students, those in the EP group had higher pass rates, lower failure rates, and lower withdrawal rates when compared with the control group. Research by Shelton concluded that perceived faculty support correlated to persistence, academic performance, and graduation.
3.6 Assessing persistence
According to Walker and Avant,[8] empirical referents provide a means of measuring the degree of existence of a concept. Empirical referents for the concept persistence as an outcome may include student grades and/or pass/fail. Persistence in higher education or programs of nursing, has also been measured, or self-assessed, using a variety of Likert-type instruments. Constantin and associates[12] developed a motivational persistence scale that evaluated long and short term commitments. Higher education has measured persistence and/or retention with the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Noel Levitz College Student Inventory.[9] Hart[14] measured the self-assessed persistence of online nursing students with a psychometric tool called the Persistence Tool for Online Education. Unfortunately, there is neither agreement on the definition of academic persistence, nor on the method used to assess academic persistence, which varies from study to study. Nursing education has not evaluated persistence within the context of academic support programs.

Other persistence-focused instruments have been developed for specific populations, such as a scale for measuring persistence in children.[31] Persistence has also been measured in psychology research with specific scales or components of multiphasic questionnaires (Temperament and Character Inventory,[32] Self-Control Measure).[33] Other instruments which measure or assess persistence emphasize sustained involvement in an activity,[12] renewal of commitment[18] and intensification of effort when facing obstacles.[31] The Adult Persistence Scale, developed by educators, has demonstrated reliability in predicting persistence in those enrolled in adult literacy courses.[34]

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Summary and next steps
Persistence, as an academic and personal concept, is a phenomenon experiencing international concern among institutions of higher education. Within nursing, student academic persistence has an economic impact for academia, and affects the availability of future nurses.[35] According to Ooms and colleagues,[36] many faculty members view persistence as the responsibility of the learner. Yet data demonstrates that interventions aimed at improving academic persistence are effective. Reinhardt and associates[37] posited that developing and providing academic interventions are specifically important for faculty of nursing programs, which have higher than normal attrition rates due to the rigor of content.

Academic persistence has been described in many ways. Hart[14] and Ward-Smith and colleagues[20] operationally defined persistence as a student characteristic or attitude. Thus, academic persistence can be measured and altered, using interventions aimed at overcoming obstacles or hardships that prevent the student from course completion. Persistence, as a concept, has been used as the variable measured to determine the effect of sustained involvement in a course or program, the renewal of career commitment, and the result of intensification of effort when facing obstacles. Separating academic persistence from personal persistence provides clarity for research, assuring that any intervention and any outcome measures are appropriate.

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

REFERENCES