

# THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF RE-ENTRY WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL BACCALAUREATE NURSING EDUCATION

Pamela G. Harrison

## Abstract

The critical shortage of nurses has resulted in the recruitment of an increased number of nontraditional students who frequently fill multiple roles in life. Limited research has been conducted with this population enrolled in a college environment designed for traditional students.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience and margin-in-life of re-entry women enrolled in two traditional baccalaureate nursing programs in central Indiana. The theoretical framework for the study was McClusky's Power Load Margin Theory and the population consisted of ten re-entry nursing students who volunteered for participation.

Simultaneous triangulation was employed applying quantitative and qualitative methods at the same time in order to enhance the understanding of the lived experience of the participants. Participants completed Stevenson's Margin-in-Life Scale and demonstrated an average margin of 0.60492. Systematic phenomenological analysis inspired by the work of Max van Manen (1990) revealed five main themes entitled success, support, transitions, challenges, and relationships. In an attempt to present a visual image of the interaction between the five themes and the margin-in-life, the researcher conceptualized a model entitled the Margin-in-Life Model. Multiple recommendations for further research and for nursing education were identified focusing on the five themes identified.

## Introduction

The presence of adult, nontraditional students in higher education has been a concern of educators since the late 1960s (Padula, 1994). This research study was designed to investigate the lived experience of re-entry women enrolled in two traditional, baccalaureate nursing programs in central Indiana. The enrollment of females age 25 years and older, known as re-entry women (Reisinger, 1999), has increased in recent years in nursing programs throughout the United States (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2002) and is expected to continue to rise in the next decade (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). This increase has resulted from recruitment efforts designed to stem the mounting shortage of registered nurses (RNs) and avoid a nationwide health care crisis (Streubert-Speziale, H. J., & Jacobson, L., 2004).

Traditional students begin their nursing education immediately following high school graduation and are commonly full time students with few responsibilities outside of their nursing education (Zorn, 1980). Baccalaureate nursing programs in colleges and universities are designed around the needs of the traditional students who comprise the majority of the student population. Nontraditional students are 25 years of age or older (Urban-Troy, 1984; Siedl, 1990) and frequently bring an assortment of life experiences and multiple roles to their college experience (Gigliotti, 1999; Home, 1997; Sedlak, 2003). This study was designed to employ simultaneous triangulation (LoBiondo-Wood and Haber, 1998) to gain an understanding of the reality of the lived experience of nontraditional re-entry women negotiating traditional baccalaureate nursing

education programs. Phenomenological research was used to illuminate themes that provide insightful descriptions (Van Manen, 1990) of the lived experience of the participants. An assessment of the margin available to participants to manage their multiple roles and responsibilities was conducted using Stevenson's (1982) Margin-in-Life Scale.

Few studies were noted in the literature that focused on re-entry women as nursing students in baccalaureate nursing program. No research was found which sought to gain an understanding of the lived experience of this growing student population. As the presence of re-entry women in baccalaureate nursing program increases, it is important for nurse educators to have an understanding of the complexity of the lives of these students.

### Methodology

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the chairs of the nursing department chairs. Appropriate procedures were followed for human participant protection and permission was obtained to conduct research prior to identifying participants for research.

Lists of potential re-entry women participants were obtained from the nursing programs and letters were sent to all potential students. The first five students at each university who indicated a desire to volunteer, met the criteria for participation, and were willing to commit to completion of the research project were selected for participation.

A brief demographic data sheet was constructed to gather information about the re-entry women participants. A quick review of the demographic data sheet was conducted prior to the interview to insure that each participant met the criteria for participation in the study.

Interviews were conducted with each participant, which lasted from 50 to 85 minutes and every attempt was made to conduct the interviews in complete privacy and in a distraction free environment. The interviews were tape recorded in entirety and retained for transcription.

The interviews were semi-structured and the general questions were utilized to stimulate narration such as:

1. What can you tell me that would help me to understand what it is like to be a re-entry student in your nursing program?
2. How did you come to be enrolled in nursing school at this university at this time in your life?
3. What can you tell me that would help me to understand what it was like to return to the educational setting after being away from it for quite some time?

For some of the participants, the first question was presented and the narration began and proceeded without any further questions. For others it was necessary to use the additional questions to encourage narration. The narration of each participant was audio taped and digitally taped in entirety and the taping continued until each participant indicated that she was finished or had nothing else to say.

The tapes of each interview were listened to several times and each tape was carefully transcribed as accurately as possible for systematic analysis. The analysis of the data actually began with listening to the interviews repeatedly during the transcription process. Transcripts were read multiple times, and subjected to the hermeneutical phenomenology method of

investigation in an attempt to identify the phenomena and essence of the lived experience of the re-entry participants.

### Themes and Sub-Themes Identified

Systematic analysis of transcribed interviews resulted in the identification of five main themes with related sub-themes that are presented in Figure 1.

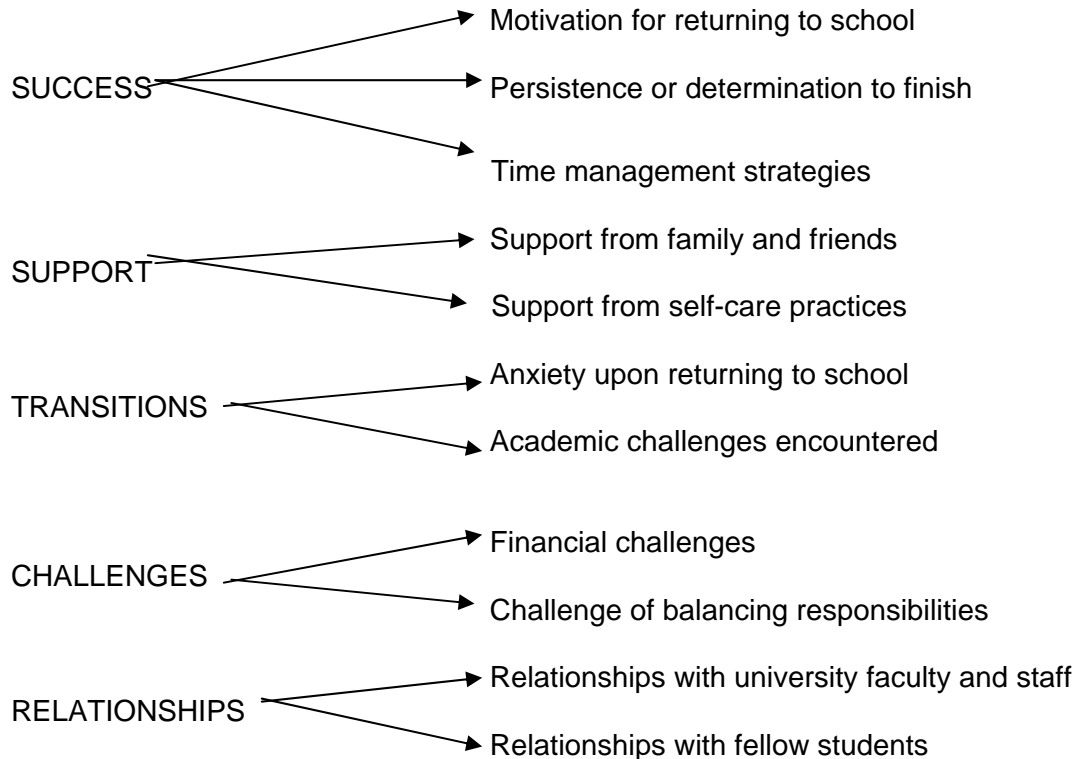


Figure 1. Themes and Sub-Themes.

All participants are progressing through their programs of study and the first theme called success emerged from the interviews reflecting elements that have contributed to their success in school. Success was comprised of three sub-themes including motivation for returning to school at this time in life, persistence or determination to complete the program of study, and time management strategies the women use to successfully manage multiple roles and responsibilities and progress successfully through their course of study.

In systematic analysis of the data, the second theme that emerged was support. The re-entry participants perceived and reflected support they have experienced as they returned to school. Two sub-themes of support were identified including the support that came from friends and family members in the lives of the re-entry women and the support that came from their individual programs of self-care. Participants frequently verbalized how they valued the support they found from other people and their own self-care practices.

The third theme, identified as transitions, emerged as the participants discussed adjustments and experiences they encountered upon returning to the academic environment after an absence of several years. A variety of topics were identified and two sub-themes that emerged

were anxiety experienced upon returning to the college and academic challenges that were encountered.

In reviewing the interviews and analyzing the data therein, a fourth theme entitled challenges emerged. The re-entry women discussed specific challenges they experienced when they returned to pursue a degree in nursing. This theme was comprised of two sub-themes including financial challenges and the challenges of balancing family and academic responsibilities.

The fifth and final theme uncovered in the systematic analysis of the data was entitled relationships. The participants described the experience of relating to individuals around them and the value these relationships held to them in their academic pursuits. This theme included two sub-themes including relationships with university faculty and staff and relationships with fellow traditional and nontraditional students in the nursing program.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The participants in this study were significantly older than traditional students and filled multiple roles in life. They have successfully balanced their multiple roles and responsibilities as demonstrated by their Margin in Life scores and are successfully progressing through their courses of study. High levels of motivation and determination to complete the program are associated with success for the re-entry participants in this study.

The participants in this study had an average grade point average of 3.315 on a 4.0 scale. The time management skills of participants in this study are associated with successful progression through the nursing program and attainment of a high grade point average.

Participants in this study identified self-care practices as important to them but no information was found in the literature that addressed self-care practices in re-entry women as a means of support. The importance of self-care agency in re-entry women has not been investigated but could be a topic of interest to nursing education.

The re-entry women in this study experienced anxiety upon returning to college. An adequate orientation program and information about what they should expect in nursing school could help to decrease the anxiety of the re-entry women. The participants also had specific concerns about assignments such as writing papers, and had concerns about computer use as a result of being away from the academic environment for several years. The re-entry participants in this study may encounter obstacles with writing papers and in using computers and navigating computer assisted learning programs assigned to them as part of their course requirements.

The participants in this research study used the terms balancing and juggling in describing how they manage their many responsibilities which were the same terms used by subjects in research conducted by Siler (1995). Faculty advisors should assist re-entry women in planning academic schedules that take their multiple roles into consideration. A variety of course times and clinical hours and settings must be available to re-entry women who are balancing multiple roles and responsibilities.

Participants in this study reported that they experienced and valued supportive relationships with faculty and staff in nursing programs. To enhance nontraditional nursing student success, nurse educators must recognize the holistic needs of nontraditional students and expand the teaching role into a mentor role to provide necessary support for the nontraditional students. The participants in this study reported positive relationships with faculty members and university

staff members. It is important for faculty in nursing programs to cultivate positive and supportive relationships with re-entry women students.

The margin-in-life documented for the ten participants in this study was all above 0.50 with an average of 0.60492 indicating a margin well within the limits identified as normal by McClusky (1970). McClusky proposed that it was necessary for adults to have a margin of 0.5 or more in order to be able to handle new challenges or deal with emergencies in life. All participants are progressing successfully through their courses of study and managing multiple roles, which is congruent with the margin demonstrated by the Margin-in-Life Scale (Stevenson, 1982). The findings from this study indicate that a margin-in-life of 0.50 or greater may be associated with success for re-entry women nursing students.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

There is a need for further research and exploration of the lived experience of re-entry women. As the number of re-entry students enrolled in baccalaureate nursing program increases to meet the growing shortage of nurses, there is a need to understand the unique experience and needs of this population.

One limitation of this study was the small population of participants. I would recommend that this study be replicated with a larger population of re-entry women. The participants in this study were all located in central Indiana and an investigation should be conducted in different areas of the United States to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of re-entry women nationwide.

The current study focused on re-entry women enrolled in baccalaureate nursing programs, which is another limitation of the research study. Re-entry women are also enrolled in associate degree programs and diploma nursing programs and there is a need to investigate the lived experience of students in all types of nursing programs. The majority of participants in this study were Caucasian and there is a need for research focusing on re-entry women of color to determine the reality of the lived experience of these women.

#### Recommendations for Nursing Education

1. The population was small and additional research is needed to fully describe the lived experience and role of margin in the experience of nontraditional students.
2. Nursing programs should offer an orientation program designed to meet the unique needs of the re-entry students.
3. Nursing programs should develop nontraditional nursing student organizations to provide opportunities for interaction and development of supportive relationships for adult students. These should meet at times that fit into the adult student's schedules.
4. Nursing programs must address the concerns reported by re-entry women about use of computers and academic challenges. Initial testing to assess skills and knowledge should be conducted and instruction and remediation should be provided as needed.
5. Factors identified as being related to determination and persistence in nursing education should be used to identify students at risk and enhance retention of the students at risk of failing or dropping out.

6. There is a need to conduct research comparing re-entry women who are successful with those who fail and drop out in order to identify differences and similarities.
7. Re-entry women should be assigned to advisors who have an understanding of the unique needs of the population. Advisors should be available to meet with the re-entry women routinely to assess progress and provide support.
8. There is a need for research measuring the margin-in-life of students who have been successful and those who have failed or dropped out of school to evaluate the relationship between margin-in-life and persistence and success in a nursing program.

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Pamela Gibler Harrison, Ed. D., R.N., Indiana Wesleyan University Associate Professor of Nursing, [pam.harrison@indwes.edu](mailto:pam.harrison@indwes.edu)

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