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Perceived Sources of Academic Stress in the Nursing Program

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Abstract

University students in health disciplines face many different sources of stress and challenges during their experience in their individual programs. However, a study shows that baccalaureate nursing students experience higher levels of stress as well as higher levels of physiological and psychological symptoms than students in other health-related disciplines (Beck et al., 1997). In order to create interventions to improve student performance and self-efficacy in the nursing program, both the professors and students in the program must understand the most significant stressors that can negatively impact the overall performance of the nursing students. A survey was conducted to identify the main sources of stress for senior nursing students (n=45) in a baccalaureate nursing program. Data was collected by means of a survey questionnaire using SurveyMonkey. The goal of this study was to determine what the biggest sources of stress are in the nursing program and identify what factors in the students' lives may affect academic achievement and self-efficacy.

Keywords: academic stress, nursing, self-efficacy

Perceived Sources of Academic Stress in the Nursing Program

Nursing school is a time consuming and stressful major that requires many hours of studying, clinical work, and other various assignments. The workload for both classes and clinical can often be extensive, and at times, may seem almost impossible to accomplish in real time. This frequently leaves students feeling extremely stressed and anxious. Stress levels and the different sources of stress in nursing programs as well as in the field of nursing have been explored in multiple sites by different researchers. Every program, however, has their variances and this may lead to a difference in the prevalence of stressors.

The purpose of this study is to identify the most prevalent sources of stress among students who are completing their last year in a nursing program at Western Michigan University. By providing this information, educators can use this data in order to establish interventions to reduce those specific stressors and improve student performance. Future students may also use this information in order to better understand what may impact their overall performance and come up with strategies ahead of time to overcome these obstacles.

Literature Review

Multiple researchers have explored stress levels and the sources of stress among nurses in both the university and hospital setting. Some have also included interventions on how to relieve those stressors during their study. Lees and Ellis (1990) focused on the stress levels and the management of those stressors for nursing students and trained nursing staff. The purpose of the study was to provide information needed to assist in the design of a stress-management program for student nurses (Lees and Ellis, 1990). Data for the study was collected via an open-ended interview and a personality questionnaire. It was found that the most common cited sources of stress were dealing with death and dying, relationships with patients and other nurses, work

overload, lack of confidence, and worries about incompetence. With the results, Lees and Ellis (1990) concluded that on-going discussions between groups of nursing students, assertiveness training, and progressive muscle relaxation will be most beneficial in stress management among nursing personnel.

A more recent study, conducted by Shudifat and Al-Husban (2015), was done to identify and determine the most prevalence sources of stress among students who are in their first year of a nursing program. The purpose of the study was to provide information for educators in order to establish strategies to reduce those specific sources of stress (Shudifat & Al-Husban, 2015). The participants in this study were female nursing students between the age of 18 and 22 in their first year of a nursing program. Similar to Lees and Ellis (1990), data for the study was collected via a survey with the questions focused on assessing the different stressors and their relative importance. According to Shudifat and Al-Husban (2015), the top three sources of stress starting at the source associated with the highest stress includes increased class workload, change in living environment, and change in social activities.

Unlike the studies by Lees and Ellis (1990) and Shudifat and Al-Husban (2015), another study, conducted by Van der Riet et al. (2015), was done as a longitudinal experimental design. Van der Riet et al. (2015) wanted to explore the effects of stress management and mindfulness in relation to reducing the stress in students in a nursing and midwifery program. The intervention for the study involved a stress management and mindfulness program that lasted for seven weeks and involved 14 participants. An hour long mindfulness session was held at the same time once a week and students were also encouraged to practice the exercises at home between the sessions. Results showed that the intervention provided new skills that benefited both personal

and professional self-care. Students also reported positive impacts on their personal, academic, and professional functioning (Van der Riet et al., 2015).

Study Design and Method

The study is of a mixed-method descriptive survey research design. The method of data collection was through the use of SurveyMonkey, a free online survey software and questionnaire tool. This platform allowed participants to have the opportunity to be part of the research and fill out the survey questionnaire anonymously. Before conducting any portion of the study, approval for the research was obtained from WMU's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Ninety-seven senior nursing students from Western Michigan University's Bronson School of Nursing were invited to participate in the study.

The invitation to participate was sent through an email containing a link to the informed consent page of the survey. Once the email was sent out, the senior nursing students had 14 days to complete the questionnaire. One reminder email was sent out after 7 days to those who have not yet completed the survey. After reading the informed consent page and agreeing to participate, the students were taken to the rest of the survey which contained 31 questions of various types (multiple choice, rating, and written answers). A total of 47 students (48% of those invited) completed the survey and were deemed as official participants of this study.

The questions for the survey were focused on identifying factors that would affect the nursing student's academic achievement and self-efficacy. Employment, hours of sleep, academic status, specific sources of stress, support systems, and stress relievers were topics that were concentrated on throughout the questionnaire. Possible interventions for the program to improve stressors for nursing students were also explored.

Results

Academic Status

A total of 47 senior nursing students fully completed the survey. Eleven participants (23.4%) were male, 34 participants (72.34%) were female, and 2 participants (4.26%) chose not to disclose their gender. This is an expected percentage for males compared to females who are enrolled in the Bronson School of Nursing. Nine out of the 47 participants (19.15%) stated that they have a minor in addition to their nursing major, which would lead to a higher workload. Forty-two participants (89.36%) are full-time students compared to 5 participants (10.64%) who are part-time.

Employment and Sleep

As for employment, 41 out of the 47 participants (89.13%) state that they are currently employed. Twelve work hours per week was the hypothesized average for the participants who were employed. However, results show that the average hours at work per week for these individuals was higher at 18.75 hours (minimum of 5 hours/week and maximum of 36 hours/week as shown in Appendix A). With working high hours per week along with school, sleep will be affected. On average, most participants stated they slept about 5-7 hours per night. However, 29 participants (64.44%) also stated that they have stayed up all night at least once while being enrolled in the program to finish school work. When asked how many times they have stayed up, most of the participants who answered yes to the previous question stated that they have done so more than 10 times during their enrollment in the nursing program.

Self-Efficacy

Participants were also asked to rank their self-efficacy and how challenging they believe the program was on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). The majority of the participants

(81.39%) stated that they would rate their self-efficacy and capability of becoming a successful nurse as an 8 or higher (as shown on Appendix B). The lowest rating was a 4 out of 10 from one participant (2.33%). However, 41 participants (89.13%) stated that their current level of stress affects the way they perceive their self-efficacy. The majority of the participants (65.21%) also rated their belief of how challenging the nursing program was as an 8 or higher on a scale of 1 to 10 (as shown on Appendix C). The lowest rating for this question was from one participant (2.17%) at a 3 out of 10.

Sources of Stress

When asked to indicate what the participants feel have been their sources of stress in the nursing program, there were seven specific stressors that the majority of participants (at least 50%) have chosen (as shown on Appendix D). These top indicated stressors were exams (100% of participants), clinical paperwork (84%), lower grade than anticipated (82%), work overload (80%), finals week (71%), lack of money/cost of tuition (64%), clinical time (58%), and lack of program organization (53%). A high number of participants (48%) reported that the most stressful time of the semester for them is the middle of the semester. About 35% felt that the beginning of the semester was the most stressful and 17% felt the most stress during the end of the semester.

Methods of Stress Relief

As for stress relievers, 36 participants (80%) that they practice holistic techniques—such as exercise, music, deep breathing, yoga, and meditation—to relieve stress. Exercise was the highest stated technique for stress relief (21 participants) followed by music (18 participants) and deep breathing (8 participants). Additionally, 80% of the participants stated that they found support in family, friends, and other nursing students during stressful situations. Those who did

not use any methods of stress relief felt that lack of time in finding the right techniques that work for them was the issue.

Discussion

Perceived Stressors and Interventions

The top seven perceived sources of stress (exams, clinical paperwork, lower grade than anticipated, work overload, finals week, lack of money/cost of tuition, clinical time, and lack of program organization) correlate with the multiple factors of the students' lives that were explored. For example, the majority of participants state that they are employed. This relates to the perceived stressors of money and tuition cost along with work overload. When participants were asked what can be done to relieve these stressors, a suggestion was to have the nursing program offer more scholarships for their students as well as focusing more on quality work instead of quantity ("busy work"). Moreover, the majority of employed participants work at least 20 hours a week as well as being enrolled full-time in school. Since 64.44% of the participants stated that they have stayed up at least once during the semester to finish their school work, more quality assignments and less "busy work" may affect the amount sleep nursing students receive as well.

Since all participants agreed that exams are the highest source of stress, there were many suggested interventions for the program to implement. One intervention would be more staff collaboration, meaning that professors would better communicate with each other in order for exams to not be scheduled on the same week, leading to a decrease in stress related to studying for two or more exams at the same time. It was also suggested that professors should provide practice questions before exams. This is so that students have a better understanding on how to study and how that specific professor prefers to word his/her exams.

Another suggested intervention was to create a study zone with tutors for nursing students. Currently, the Bronson School of Nursing does not have a study zone. Since the majority of the participants find support in other nursing students, a common place to work together during the most stressful times of the semester may help in decreasing the perceived stressors of clinical paperwork, lower grade than anticipated, work overload, exams, and finals week.

Most of the participants performed holistic techniques to help relieve their stresses. Those who do not practice holistic techniques feel that they do not have time to learn new stress relievers that work for them because of their job and schoolwork. When asked what interventions can be done to improve this, some participants felt that learning holistic modalities earlier on in the program (before the most stressful semesters) would lead to an increase in the use for stress relief. Learning or performing a holistic modality at the beginning of class (such as deep breathing or guided imagery for the first few minutes) was also a suggestion to increase the use of these techniques for stress relief.

Study Limitations

A limitation for this study involves how the data was gathered. Since this research relied on self-reporting, the data cannot be independently verified and must be taken at face value. Furthermore, self-reported data can contain potential sources of bias (such as exaggeration, attribution, and selective memory). Each of these biases can be noted as their own limitations and can become more apparent when compared with data from other sources.

Another limitation to the study relates to the sample. The reported sources of stress is specifically from participants enrolled in one specific traditional undergraduate Bachelor of

Science in Nursing (BSN) curriculum. The results found for this study may or may not be significant for other nursing programs such as LPN, RN-to-BSN, or MSN curricula.

Moreover, the detail in the questions would be a limitation to this study. When the participants were asked to for a rating (with self-efficacy and their belief on how challenging the program was), an additional question could have been placed afterwards to ask for an explanation on why they chose that specific rating. Additional questions could have also been placed to ask the participants what is their singular top perceived source of stress in the program and why. Future studies may conduct research to find these missing details.

Conclusion

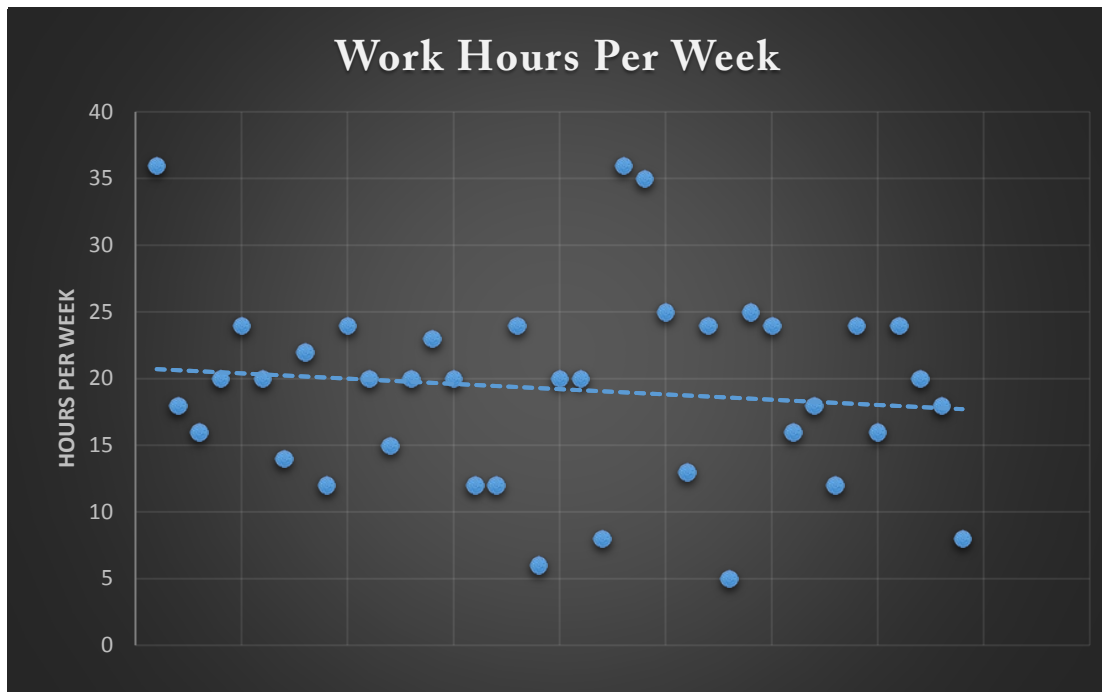
The purpose of this study was to identify the most prevalent perceived sources of stress in a baccalaureate nursing curriculum. Results from the survey questionnaire were able to determine that the top perceived sources of stress in the Bronson School of Nursing are exams, clinical paperwork, lower grade than anticipated, work overload, finals week, lack of money/cost of tuition, clinical time, and lack of program organization. Multiple interventions that can be done by the nursing program were suggested by the participants. Future research can determine if these interventions are effective in lowering stressors for undergraduate nursing students in a traditional baccalaureate curriculum.

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doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2014.05.003.

Appendix A

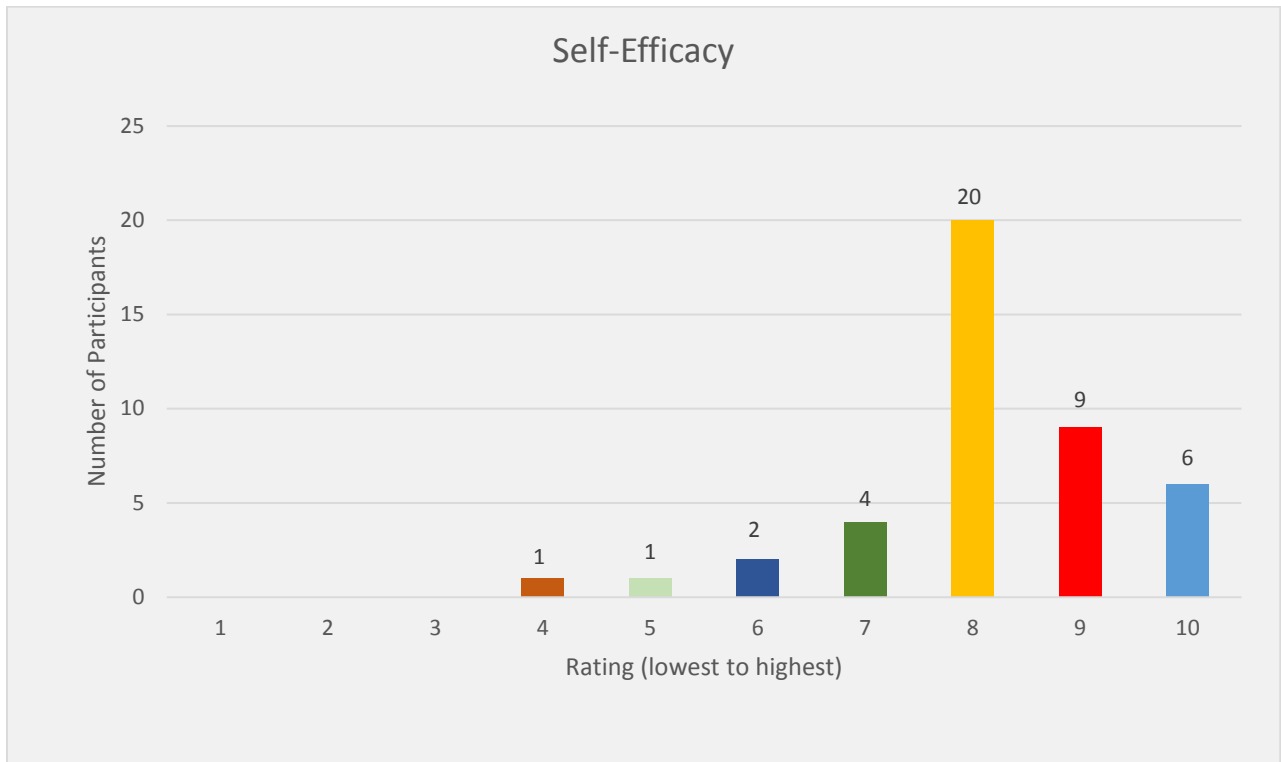
Work Hours Per Week For Employed Participants



One dot on the graph represents one participant employed. The dashed line indicates the average work hours per week among all participants (about 18.75 hours/week).

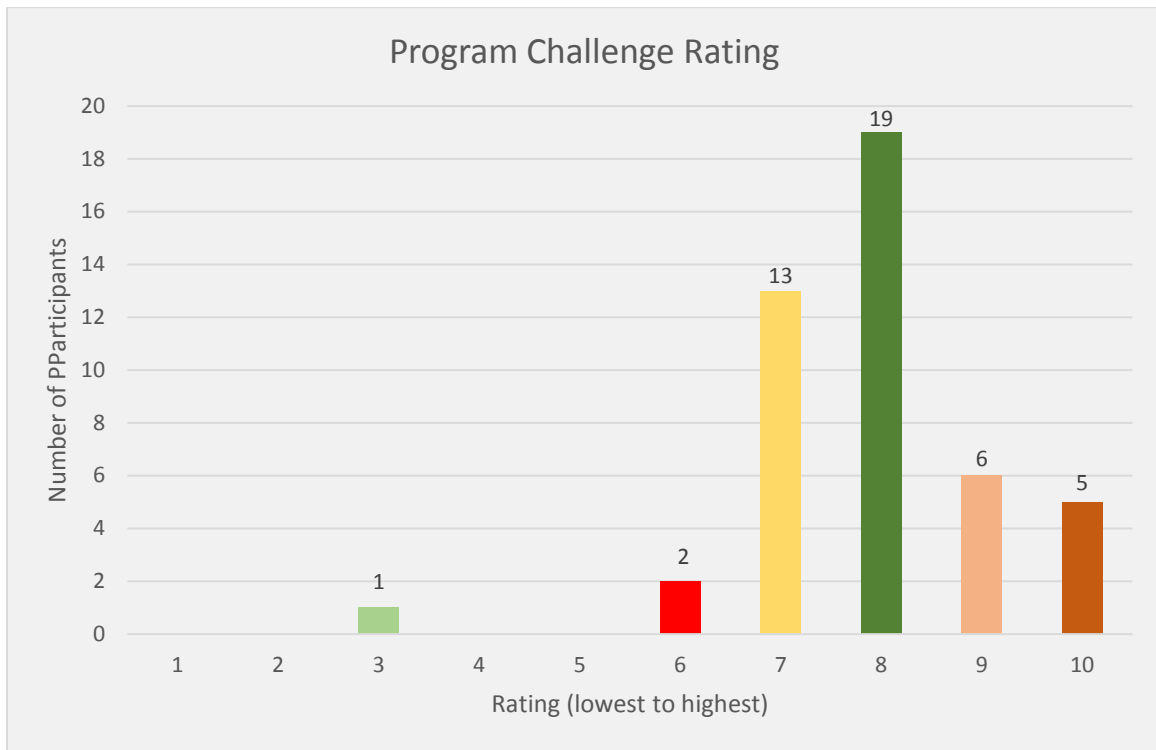
Appendix B

Rating of Perceived Self-Efficacy on Becoming a Successful Nurse



Appendix C

Rating of Perceived Challenge of Nursing Program



Appendix D

Top Sources of Stress in the Nursing Program

