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Perceptions of Nontraditional African American Baccalaureate Nursing Students of Their Persistence in or Departure From An Urban Nursing Program

Linda S. Rodebaugh

Abstract: The literature reflects that although more people of color are enrolling in higher education, graduation rates remain dismal. The purpose of this naturalistic qualitative inquiry was to determine perceptions of experiences of nontraditional African American nursing students regarding their persistence in or departure from a baccalaureate degree nursing program.

Introduction

The United States is quickly becoming the most demographically diverse nation in the world. According to the 1990 census profile from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, population shifts are occurring which are altering the ratio between persons of color and White groups in America. These projections have implications that impact higher education. Although the increase in college participation rates of minority groups is encouraging, many students of color fail to persist to graduation. As noted by Fitzsimons and Kelley (1996, p. 1), "Minority students gain admission and enroll, but are the least successful in graduating." Given that the total percentage of ethnic groups in the United States population continues to grow, nurse educators must meet the responsibility of preparing a culturally competent workforce (AACN, 1993; Buckley, 1980; Fernandez-Santiago, 1994).

Statement of the Problem

When evaluating the data from several studies, Tucker-Allen (1989) noted the existence of several patterns regarding minority students enrolled in schools of nursing. First, minority students are not being admitted to schools of nursing in proportional numbers to the general population. Of those who are admitted, a substantial number fail to enroll in the nursing program. Lastly, of those who do enroll, a significant number fail to graduate. Tucker-Allen (1994) noted that while schools of nursing may be admitting more minority students, the graduation rate for this population has remained flat.

The larger social issue addressed in this study was that African Americans are not proportionately represented in nursing education or the nursing profession. The need exists for African Americans to practice in the profession of nursing in order to meet the health care needs of an increasingly diverse population. The problem addressed in this study examined how experiences influence the perceptions of nontraditional African American baccalaureate nursing students and affect their persistence or departure.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the theories of Tinto (1975, 1993) prominent in the field of higher education; and McClusky (1963) from the field of adult education. Tinto (1993) proposed a complex longitudinal, theoretical model of persistence/departure behavior that results from a process of interaction between the individual and the institution. The student's background and experiences within the institutional environment result in varying levels of academic and social integration. These various levels of integration form the core concept of Tinto's model that regard both persistence and departure as resulting from the individual student's integration with the social and academic systems of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

McClusky's (1963) Power/Load/Margin Theory stated that the key factors in an adult's life are the load the individual must carry in the process of living, and the power that is available to

the individual to carry the load. Margin is a function of the relationship of load to power (margin equals surplus power).

Methodology

Qualitative naturalistic inquiry was the appropriate methodology for this study in order to illuminate the local social context. Convenience sampling was used to identify participants who were assigned to separate focus groups. One group was composed of participants who were departers due to academic dismissal (departers group, n = 3). The second group was composed of participants who persisted and were either currently enrolled or had graduated (persisters group, n = 4). All participants were female, nontraditional, African American students who were presently or had previously been enrolled in the baccalaureate nursing program. All of the students had matriculated from a co-institutional agreement between two universities. Interview guides were developed and participants were interviewed in a focus group setting, followed by individual interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and all data were subjected to analytic procedures commonly accepted for use in qualitative methodology.

Findings

Data were analyzed using a process of identifying emerging themes, and developing subcategories and categories. Three overall final categories evolved out of the subcategories.

Educational Climate. The first category was educational climate and included concepts and themes related to the subcategories of atmosphere, oppression, and social integration. The educational climate included the participants' perceptions of both the formal and informal environments of the two campuses (predominantly Black and predominantly White institutions) and the larger picture related to educational opportunities in general.

The institution that the participants had matriculated from was a predominantly Black institution (PBI) and was assigned the pseudonym of Middle College. The receiving

institution, a predominantly White institution (PWI), was assigned the pseudonym Urban University. A basic premise of adult education is that returning nontraditional students must feel a certain degree of comfort in order to return and succeed. Although none of the departers group participants stated that the educational climate directly caused their academic dismissal, they all cited numerous examples that could be grouped together under this heading as they related their experiences of what it was like to be an African American student attending a PWI.

The word "atmosphere" seemed to hold a lot of meaning to the participants in the departers group. When comparing the campus climate of Middle College with Urban University, LaVerne stated the following:

I think me personally, I feel at home there [at Middle]. When I came to [Urban], . . . I felt unwelcome and I felt out of place. . . . and it wasn't really the coursework that bothered me, it was the, it was just the atmosphere. . . . I'm the type of person, that if I don't feel comfortable somewhere then I won't do well there.

Middle College was perceived as supportive by the departers group and participants felt encouraged to succeed, thus increasing their self-esteem. Urban University was found to be more competitive and participants expressed that they felt like there was a weeding out process occurring; one of the participants reported the atmosphere as racist. Examples of oppression were cited by the departers group participants as related to the general educational climate for African Americans.

In the subcategory of social isolation, two of the departers group participants were not actively involved with classroom or campus activities but reported satisfactory interactions with their nursing classmates. One participant was heavily involved, primarily in activities related to the nursing program. While the participants did not express that any one of these specific subcategories or themes that emerged directly caused their academic dismissal, they were identified by them as areas of concern.

Members of the persisters group mentioned the term environment and spent a significant amount of time discussing the concept of prejudice. Eve denied experiencing any problems with prejudice at Urban. However, she had previous experience in higher education at a state PWI where she reported encountering prejudice. She cited one particular example of covert racism as follows: "It was just like a feeling, it's just like when you're trying to, like when you don't want people to know you're prejudiced and you're trying to mask your feelings, but you can tell it's there."

<u>Myth of Homogeneity. The second category is best described by Brown (1994) who used the phrase, the myth of homogeneity, to describe the assumption in American society that what is true for one African American student becomes true for all. Thus, African American students are viewed as a monolithic group, refuting any hope for exhibiting their own unique and individual characteristics. Participants in the departers group recounted numerous instances throughout their educational careers that demonstrated how much these myths continue to be propagated in society today and ultimately erode their ability to succeed. The subcategories of educational preparation and stereotypes were identified based on the concepts and themes that emerged from the data.</u>

Jean, from the departers group mused about educational preparation following a discussion of barriers that African Americans face. "I just wonder if we're prepared the same. You know what I'm saying? I feel that, I don't mean just in college, I mean in grade school, high school, that sort of thing, that progression."

The departers group participants cited several examples of assumptions and stereotypes that they experienced from various sources at the PWI, namely from campus police and their fellow students. All felt that it was assumed by their earlier educational preparation that they would not attend college. They were not given guidance as to college prep course offerings, or how to go about seeking out financial aid. As first generation college students, their families were unable to give them any guidance in this area. In sum, the implication from society and the PWI was that they could not be a part of higher education.

Participants in the persisters group also recounted numerous instances that occurred throughout their educational careers that demonstrated how much the myth of homogeneity continues in American society today. Jerri recounted an experience similar to what members of the departers group had stated regarding lack of guidance in high school relative to attending college. She expressed that when growing up, the emphasis was on working, not on education. The only person who really gave her any direction was her mother and she encouraged her to take secretarial courses. "I kind of wanted to go into nursing but she . . . kept talking about you'll always be able to get a job." Jerri was unaware of any type of college prep track and ". . . took what I thought I was supposed to take. No one said, if you want to go to college, you should take this."

Desire for a Level Playing Field. The final category which emerged from the data was composed of three subcategories that included barriers, uniqueness, and lack of role models. Jennifer, from the departers group, commented that she saw herself acting as a trail blazer and noted that part of her goal was to "make it easier for the next group that goes in". She later stated that "the major barrier for African Americans as a whole is the attitude that we do not belong". She gave an example from a check-off performance during a lab skills practical saying, "I just felt like I had to be even better in order to be accepted. You get that feeling."

In her individual interview as a departer, Jean described her hunger for higher education. She told of a time when she and one other student from Middle visited the campus of Urban prior to the start of the fall semester.

It was an awesome feeling. When we first arrived, we were so excited just to be on campus. . . . It's just the feeling that this is another, this is a brand new step, a new beginning to what we want to achieve. And we were so glad and proud to be here. And we were going to help each other. And you know, made statements of affirmation.

All of the departers participants, as first generation college students, spoke of serving as role models for their own children. Jean's son was still in high school when she first returned to school at Middle. She said he "hated homework" so part of her goal was "I'm going to show him this is what you have to do. . . . So I would come right home from classes, [and] start in on my homework. . . . and I think it helped him, I hope it helped him."

Several of the persisters group participants mentioned the expectation that they would run into prejudice in the work force, both from staff and patients. Karen said, "[W]e already know we're going to face prejudice anywhere we go. And it's just something that you have to learn to deal with." This feeling was based on reality as they related incidents that had already occurred while they were students. They cited situations of being ignored by staff on the hospital units and having patients refuse their care. These events were not a factor for their White counterparts.

All persister group participants identified barriers that were not atypical of most nontraditional students. They were also able to describe their perceptions of experiences specific to being African American students at a PWI and in American society. As first generation college students, they lacked role models for the higher education experience. Once in nursing education or practicing in the profession, the lack of role models continued to be a factor as they found our first hand how few Black registered nurses were in the field.

Conclusions

Participants in both groups discussed and agreed upon the perceived differences in the atmosphere/environment between a PBI and a PWI. Overall, Middle College was perceived as supportive and nurturing--a climate that served to increase the self-esteem of the participants. Although the literature lends credence to this perception of a PBI (Allen, 1988a, 1988b, Harvey & Williams, 1989), in this study the perception could also be traced to the differences in the mission statements between the two institutions. Middle College's philosophy was based in part on the idea that higher education needed to be available to all persons. A comprehensive university, Urban University was perceived by the participants as more competitive, and the nursing program in particular was perceived as more difficult compared to the core courses offered at Middle College.

McGee (1990) noted that campus climate is more significant to African Americans than most administrators realize. "It stands to reason that human beings will only tolerate unpleasant conditions for a limited amount of time if alternatives are available" (p. 72). As previously stated, three of the four persisters had experience at a state PWI. Descriptions ranged from feelings of prejudice to uncaring. The adage that "students vote with their feet" was apparent here since all left that particular institution and eventually enrolled at the PBI. A similar comparison could be made for members of the departer group in that all three returned to the PBI following dismissal from the nursing program at the PWI.

Researchers identify racism, social isolation, and alienation as the factors most likely to have the greatest negative impact [on retention]" (Rodgers, 1990, p. 38). Racism, prejudice, and oppression were recurrent themes throughout the study for participants in both groups and were found to overlap in the subcategories and final categories. According to Winkler (1991 in Janes, 1993), racism is more prevalent in society today than most White Americans are willing to admit. Winkler's statement could be expanded to include the prevalence of racism in the educational climate, especially as perceived by African Americans at PWIs.

The findings of this study were minimally supportive of McClusky's Power/Load/Margin Theory in offering an interpretation of the phenomenon of an erosion of Margin via the perceptions of nontraditional African American BSN students. Tinto's model was found to be applicable to those nontraditional African American BSN students who left a program of learning due to academic dismissal. As such, this study provides an extention of the application of Tinto's model since many of the same attributes demonstrated by individuals who voluntarily withdraw were found to be relevant to those individuals who leave due to academic dismissal.

Implications for Practice

In addition to local policy changes, a call for larger social change is also apparent as demonstrated by the changing demographics of the United States and subsequent health care needs of society. The nursing profession must become more reflective of the society at large which can only be attained by the profession becoming more inclusive. Thus, more people of color must gain admission to higher education and successfully complete programs of nursing education.

The continued existence and prevalence of racism in society, higher education, and at predominantly White institutions, was a major finding of this study. As demonstrated, the feelings of prejudice and racism that the participants encountered came from a variety of sources: students, faculty, and staff included. If we are to build inclusive communities, then the wider community needs to be educated on issues of racism and cultural diversity.

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