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The Lived Experiences of Thriving Nursing Students

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THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THRIVING NURSING STUDENTS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing Education

Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing
Nova Southeastern University

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2020

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This dissertation, written by Nicole M. Mentag under the direction of her Dissertation Committee, and approved by all of its members, has been presented and accepted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN NURSING EDUCATION

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Avery Grace, who has taught me more than I ever expected. You teach me to be present and cherish every moment in our lives. I am eternally grateful for you as our greatest blessing.

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Abstract

As the demand for qualified nurses increases, nursing education is responsible for preparing students for healthcare challenges. Nursing education focuses on academic success measures, including licensure examination passage, graduation rates, and grade point average. Though these outcomes are important, they fail to capture the complexities of student success. Thriving, the conceptual framework for this study, is a phenomenon within higher education that expands on the traditional measures of success and integrates cognitive and psychological aspects of the college experience. This study utilized interpretive phenomenology to understand the meanings of the lived experiences of thriving undergraduate nursing students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants who were deemed as thriving, according to the Thriving Quotient. These participants were undergraduate students from two baccalaureate nursing programs. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: *professors' investment in students, partnerships with peers, seeing success through hardships, greater purpose,* and *finding a balance.* The study's findings add to the unique understanding of thriving among nursing students. Furthermore, the results support the call for an expansive view of success to prepare students for the nursing profession.

Keywords: nursing student, success, thriving, baccalaureate, undergraduate

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Chapter One

Problem and Domain of Inquiry

During a nursing shortage, student success is a universal focus for academic institutions, nursing education, and the profession. The nursing workforce's future is precarious, threatened by an insufficient number of nurses entering and remaining in the profession. More than 500,000 seasoned registered nurses will likely retire over the next decade, projecting a need for 1.1 million nurses to replace these retirees and prevent a shortage (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2019; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019. Enrollment and graduation rates in baccalaureate programs are growing gradually, with an average enrollment increase of 7,569 and an average increase of 2,091 graduates per year (AACN, 2019). If these numbers remain robust, Auerbach et al. (2015) suggest that the future nursing workforce may fulfill the profession's demands. However, nursing programs currently do not have the resources, including faculty, to support high enrollments. In fact, in 2018, nursing programs turned away 75,029 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate programs due to insufficient resources (AACN, 2019). Despite the increased enrollment and graduation rates, the current state of nursing education is unable to support the profession's demands.

An additional threat complicating enrollment and graduation issues is the RN retention rate. Though there are various reasons for turnover, nearly one-third of nurses with an active RN license is no longer employed in the profession (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2019). With the inability to support and maintain qualified nurses, nursing programs must consider alternative ways to mitigate these threats to the profession. Though there are promising solutions to enrollment, graduation, and retention issues, nursing education can introduce

initiatives to support students' matriculation in nursing programs and, more importantly, equip them for the profession's challenges.

With the threat of the growing shortage and its impact on global health, retention and graduation rates dominate undergraduate nursing programs' success initiatives. When retention rates in a program rise, there is a greater number of potential graduates to enter the workforce. Upon graduation, following successful completion of the National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN) exam, the student transitions into practice as a registered nurse, resulting in additional members of the profession.

While degree completion and licensure passage are integral in nursing education, these outcomes offer minimal insight into student success complexities, minimizing other significant aspects of college (Schreiner et al., 2012). Furthermore, the emphasis on survival to a degree does not fully capture the dimensions of a successful nursing student (Wambuguh et al., 2016), overshadowing the learning experience's quality (Schreiner et al., 2012). Therefore, nursing education must move beyond the current academic success benchmarks to optimize outcomes and facilitate students' persistence to practice. Alternative prospects of student success embrace psychological and motivational factors as students meaningfully engage in their learning experiences (Bean, 2005; Schreiner & Louis, 2011; York et al., 2015). Despite the research on non-academic attributes of success in nursing education, there is a call for an advanced understanding of nursing students' college experience through a psychological lens. Through this understanding, nursing programs can optimize success and prepare students for the complexity of today's health care environment (Ghassemi-Ebrahimi et al., 2019).

Thriving, a leading concept in higher education, describes student success beyond grades, retention, and graduation by integrating cognitive and psychosocial components of the college

experience (Schreiner et al., 2012). This concept expands upon current definitions and research on student success by concentrating on the quality of experiences (Schreiner et al., 2012). Thriving incorporates psychological attributes that predict student persistence and success (Schreiner et al., 2012) while optimizing the college experience (Schreiner, 2010a). Thriving students engage and invest in the learning process, exemplify a positive perspective, integrate socially and academically, value others' differences, and confidently contribute to one's community (Schreiner, 2010a; Schreiner et al., 2012). These attributes are malleable and are open to intervention (Robbins et al., 2004; Schreiner et al., 2013). The array of psychosocial attributes related to thriving contributes to student engagement, which results in an expansive conceptualization of student success.

Degree attainment will likely remain the definitive measurement of success (Schreiner et al., 2012) along with NCLEX-RN outcomes in nursing education. Nonetheless, the current perspective of success inhibits the opportunity to optimize success in nursing students. Furthermore, there is more to an excellent nurse other than graduation and passing the NCLEX-RN. Despite similar entry characteristics and outcomes, student experiences can contrast drastically, including degree and licensure attainment. Some students merely survive nursing school, whereas others thrive as future contributors to quality health care. Therefore, understanding the promising capacity of thriving in nursing education is needed.

Problem Statement

A sufficient number of qualified nurses are needed to overcome the mounting health care demands and lessen the burden of a nursing shortage on public health. To achieve the goal of student retention to graduation, nursing education must explore expanded perspectives of success that support students' academic goals. Current success initiatives are inadequate as they fail to

capture the inclusive nature of student achievement. Nursing programs must move to a broader vision of success, one which understands and optimizes the quality of students' experiences without sacrificing their ability to obtain licensure to practice (Kubec, 2017). Thriving represents a holistic view of college student experiences as they engage intellectually, socially, and emotionally (Schreiner, 2010a). This engagement results in the student's optimal functioning and well-being, leading to success and persistence (Schreiner et al., 2012). This construct is promising in nursing education as understanding successful undergraduate nursing students' experiences could draw a more explicit definition of thriving for nursing education. This understanding could influence the design of initiatives to support a higher percentage of students to flourish in college and beyond in the nursing profession.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the constructed meanings of the lived experiences of thriving undergraduate nursing students. Thriving was generally defined through the lens of positive psychology, underlining positive functioning and well-being among students who are engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in their experiences in the college environment (Schreiner et al., 2012).

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this qualitative study are:

1. What are the lived experiences of thriving nursing students in a baccalaureate nursing program?

2. How do nursing students experience thriving while in the nursing program?

3. What is the meaning of thriving for nursing students in a baccalaureate nursing program?

4. What influences how nursing students experience thriving?

Significance of the Study

Nursing Education

While graduation and NCLEX-RN pass rates will continue to be definitive outcomes of nursing education success, they overlook a missed opportunity to optimize student success. Though students may graduate and pass the NCLEX-RN on the first attempt, the quality of their experiences may be quite diverse from other successful students (Jeffreys, 2015). Academic factors such as grades or grade point average (GPA) account for cognitive evaluations but fail to capture the humanitarian aspect of nursing, including the intrinsic qualities of empathy and caring (Beauvais et al., 2014; Wambuguh et al., 2016). A student may marginally pass their nursing courses, graduate, and succeed on the NCLEX-RN without deeply forming the innate qualities of a nurse. The profession's evolving complexity requires diverse attributes to persevere through practice challenges (Mthimunye & Daniels, 2019). Nursing education has an ethical and professional responsibility to identify success and prepare students to deliver comprehensive care proficiently.

There is value in understanding the nature of a thriving student's college experience (Schreiner et al., 2012). Through this knowledge, higher education can tailor interventions to facilitate specific attributes that are predictive of success. Nurturing their strengths, rather than remediating their deficiencies, can foster success not only in college but in professional practice (Schreiner et al., 2012). As students use these strategies to navigate college challenges, they are better equipped to face the workplace's difficulties. Through a greater understanding of success, the faculty, program, and institution can develop success initiatives. By investing in the student experience, nursing education can foster a more significant number of students to go beyond merely surviving college to thriving during their pursuit.

Nursing Practice

Optimizing success in nursing education influences the competence of nurses as they meet the health needs of society. The 21st-century health care system's demands continue to rise with the aging baby boomer generation and the incidence of chronic diseases, raising the complexity and intensity of nursing care (Buerhaus et al., 2017). As care transitions out of acute care settings, it is expected that nurses practice in a variety of settings, including primary and ambulatory care. Emerging nursing responsibilities include managing and coordinating chronic disease patients (Lamb et al., 2015; Pittman & Forrest, 2015). Nurses must also be prepared to address a broad continuum of care, involving health promotion and disease prevention (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

Nurses must enter the workforce with the required knowledge and attributes to meet current and future health care demands. Additionally, nurses must be prepared to face the workforce's multifaceted challenges (Ghassemi-Ebrahimi et al., 2019). Therefore, this study's findings contribute to recognizing more prepared nurses and identifying specific attributes that foster success in nursing school. There will be more qualified nurses entering the workforce to alleviate the shortage, effectively withstand the challenges, and, most importantly, optimize patient care outcomes.

Nursing Research

The findings of this study generate a need for continued inquiry as it relates to thriving in nursing students. Given the value of thriving among the general college student population, this study stimulated the need for research into this untapped nursing education area. This expanded vision of success serves as a basis for success initiatives to facilitate developing malleable

attributes of thriving among nursing students. Academic institutions, nursing programs, and faculty can implement identified interventions to foster a supportive environment for success.

Public Policy

This study aligned with the goals of the American Nurses Association (ANA, 2017), which prioritizes nurse and student wellness. The nurses' well-being influences the care they provide patients, impacting public health (ANA, 2017). Nursing programs must incorporate strategies to foster the well-being of nursing students. Thriving college students experience optimal functioning, including psychological well-being, contributing to their success (Schreiner et al., 2012; Schreiner, Pothoven et al., 2009). This comprehensive vision of student success informs programming initiatives to foster the well-being of nursing students. Therefore, as nursing students thrive in their college experiences, this optimal functioning and well-being can contribute to their professional practice.

In addition to the optimal preparation of nurses for the profession, there is a push for more nurses to be prepared at the baccalaureate level (Aiken et al., 2017; Alden, 2008; IOM, 2011). The future of health care is dependent on competent nurses with the capabilities to manage care on a continuum in diverse settings (Alden, 2008; Jones et al., 2019). The critical need for baccalaureate-prepared nurses urges nursing education to facilitate the capacity of students for the profession. Attrition in nursing education affects the institution and negatively impacts the public's health, due to an insufficient number of nurses for the profession (Farahani et al., 2017; Olsen, 2017). Without qualified nurses, there is a threat to public health. Therefore, nursing programs must reform student success strategies to foster student abilities. With improved initiatives to facilitate thriving among nursing students, a more significant number of

successful students will contribute to the public's health need for more diverse, baccalaureate-educated nurses.

Philosophical Underpinnings

The philosophical worldview of constructivism guided the interpretation of thriving in nursing education. The constructivist paradigm assumes that the conception of multiple, diverse realities occurs within the context of those experiencing them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2017). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), each person constructs meaning from their experiences as they engage in the world they are interpreting. Using an inductive process, the researcher explores the complexity of these constructed meanings from the participant's realities, using their voices to understand the phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2017). Constructivism underlays the assumption of the thriving student's construction of meanings during their nursing school experiences. Understanding these multiple views of reality contributed to an enhanced interpretation of the conceptualization of thriving through the lens of undergraduate nursing students.

Research Tradition

Phenomenology, an inductive qualitative research tradition, was established in the philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Reiners, 2012). Phenomenology evolved through the naturalistic paradigm, acknowledging that reality is based on personal and subjective realities (Reiners, 2012). This contrasts with the positivist paradigm, which asserts that reality is objective and logical (Crotty, 1998; Polit & Beck, 2017). Phenomenology explores the essence or true meanings of the lived experience, contributing to an enriched understanding of phenomena through the participants' lens (Creswell, 2013; Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Richards & Morse, 2013). The participant must have experienced the

phenomenon at hand, making them the expert (Crotty, 1998). The researcher then attempts to grasp the essence of how people attend to the world (Richards & Morse, 2013), giving meaning to their perception of the phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2017).

The primary approaches of phenomenology are descriptive and interpretive. Descriptive phenomenology, developed by Husserl, focuses on describing the phenomena and establishing the experience with the central question of, "What do we know as persons?" (Polit & Beck, 2017, p.471). Husserl believed that perceptions of experiences from human consciousness are valuable (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Common aspects of those who have lived the same experience can be generalized to represent the phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004). To fully understand these experiences, researchers must bracket or set aside prior knowledge and biases to prevent influence on the study's outcomes (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Polit & Beck, 2017).

Heidegger shifted from the traditional notion of phenomenology and introduced interpretive phenomenology or hermeneutics (Polit & Beck, 2017). While interpretive phenomenology is similar to Husserl's definition with an emphasis on understanding the lived experience (Laverty, 2003), the exploration to achieve this understanding differs from Heidegger's approach with the primary question of, "What is being?" (Polit & Beck, 2017, p. 472). Interpretive phenomenology focuses on interpreting and understanding the human experience (Polit & Beck, 2017). According to Heidegger, each person possesses traits that influence the experiences as it is lived. The realities and understanding of these experiences rely on the world in which they live (Lopez & Willis, 2004). However, the meaning of these experiences may not be evident to human beings, but through the researcher's engaging role, the meanings are brought to life (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012). Rather than bracketing

previous assumptions and biases, the researcher merges their expert knowledge with the participant's experiences to generate valuable knowledge regarding the study's phenomenon.

This research study was guided by Interpretive Phenomenology as the intention was to understand how nursing students, through their narratives, interpreted thriving in their life situation. It was also essential to discern the tradition or perspective in which they construe their experiences (Cohen et al., 2000). The researcher and students co-constructed the meanings of the interpretation of thriving experiences to generate a definition, as this phenomenon lacked conceptualization in nursing education. As the participants constructed the realities of their thriving experiences in nursing school, the researcher made sense of these new understandings for applicability to nursing education.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of thriving guided this study, expanding upon student success and embracing well-being and positive functioning with a psychological lens. The multi-faceted construct of thriving represents positive psychology concepts to student success in higher education (Schreiner et al., 2012). The construct of human flourishing emerged from the positive psychology movement by describing optimal well-being and positive emotions among adults (Keyes, 2002; McIntosh & Colver, 2018). Human flourishing is theoretically linked to Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college student retention. This model of retention integrates psychological processes related to academic outcomes and student behaviors that contribute to persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2000). The intersection of these concepts and processes establishes the groundwork for thriving in higher education.

Positive Psychology

The movement of positive psychology advanced previous conceptions of wellness to a focus on optimal functioning and development. Since World War II, psychology possessed a fixed mindset on the disease model, focusing on the deficits related to psychological impairments (Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, 2000). Despite this model's contributions to societal health, this reductionist approach focused exclusively on people's weaknesses rather than a proactive approach to optimal functioning (Pluskota, 2014; Terjesen et al., 2004). Positive psychology proposes a different view on living a successful life by developing strengths rather than weaknesses (Seligman et al., 2005). Positive psychology characteristics include positive emotions, human strengths and virtues, and positive communities (Miller, 2019; Seligman et al., 2005). Fostering these psychological strengths enhances resilience and coping (Terjesen et al., 2004), which leads to well-being, productivity, optimal functioning, and the realization of one's full potential (Seligman et al., 2005).

Human Flourishing

Flourishing, a fundamental concept of positive psychology, is defined as positive functioning manifested in healthy relationships, resilience to adversity, and engagement with the world (Keyes, 2002). Flourishing exemplifies mental health by integrating positive feelings and optimal functioning (Keyes, 2002). With enthusiasm, flourishing adults live life to the fullest by pursuing goals, optimistic perspectives, and emotional connections with others (Keyes, 2002; McIntosh & Colver, 2018), thereby generating a sense of meaning and purpose to life (Schreiner et al., 2013).

Thriving expands upon human flourishing by focusing on student psychological well-being in the college environment. Thriving embraces well-being components of student success,

such as engagement, goal setting, self-regulated learning, optimism, openness to diversity, and citizenship (Schreiner, McIntosh et al., 2009). Similar to flourishing adults, thriving students are engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally which contributes to their optimal functioning in college and persistence to graduation (Schreiner, 2010a; Schreiner, Pothoven et al.,2009).

Bean and Eaton's Psychological Model of Student Retention

An additional theoretical foundation that informed the evolution of thriving was Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college student retention. While various frameworks for student success address factors that influence persistence and degree completion, Bean and Eaton's model focuses on retention decisions' psychological processes (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Schreiner et al., 2012). This model postulates that persistence is related to psychological processes, including students' personalities, attitudes, beliefs, and motivation, combined with coping skills, self-efficacy, and attribution (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Schreiner, Pothoven et al., 2009). As students enter higher education, combining these psychological attributes predisposes them to persistence or departure from the institution (Schreiner et al., 2012). This predisposition, along with student attributes, influences their interactions with others and the academic community. Students develop connections with their college experiences, encouraging social and academic integration, promoting an institutional fit, and a higher likelihood for persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Schreiner et al., 2012).

Domains of Thriving

Through the connection of well-being derived from flourishing and Bean and Eaton's psychological model of student retention, the concept of thriving is defined as the optimal functioning of students in the academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal realms of the college experience (Schreiner et al., 2012). These three identified areas include five composite measures:

engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship (Schreiner, 2010a). Psychological qualities that can be developed in college students are included within each domain. that can be developed with college students.

Academic Thriving

Academic thriving represents the components of engaged learning and academic determination. Engaged learning is defined as the investment of energy into one's education, as evidenced by meaningful processing and focused attention (Schreiner & Louis, 2006). Students psychologically cogitate the learning process (Miller, 2019), promoting deep learning beyond a course or examination (Tagg, 2003).

Academic determination reflects students' attitudes and behaviors to persist toward educational goals (Schreiner, 2010b). Thriving students invest in their effort towards the learning process, including goal achievement (Schreiner, 2010b). As active participants in their learning, students regulate their education and are intrinsically motivated to overcome challenges within the college environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Khalaila, 2015). These students appreciate these challenges and focus on success rather than failure.

Intrapersonal Thriving

Positive perspective represents intrapersonal thriving and includes the optimism and psychological well-being of college students, shaping the learning process. Thriving students possess positive emotions, contributing to their ability to overcome challenges (Pluskota, 2014). Students are confident in their abilities to confront adversity and achieve their goals. This positive perspective on the learning process results in higher satisfaction in college and well-being, in addition to an increased connection with others (Schreiner et al., 2012).

Interpersonal Thriving

The facets of social connectedness and diverse citizenship reflect the interpersonal thriving of college students. These variables involve students' supportive relationships with others in the college community (Schreiner, 2010a). As thriving students cultivate healthy relationships, this social connectedness contributes to a sense of belonging (Schreiner, 2010c), which fosters satisfaction, psychological well-being, happiness, and persistence to graduation (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Robbins et al., 2004; Schreiner, 2010c).

As students maintain positive social connections, they value others' differences and recognize their positive impact on others and society (Schreiner, 2010c; Schreiner, 2013; Schreiner, Pothoven et al., 2009, 2009). Thriving students value diversity, especially those with varying backgrounds than themselves (Schreiner, 2010c; Shim & Perez, 2018). These students invest in others and the well-being of their communities.

Definition of Terms

This study included a variety of terms to describe thriving among students as it relates to success. The following terms were defined: thriving, persistence, and attrition. While thriving is defined based on current higher education research, it was specifically explored in nursing students in this study.

Thriving

Thriving is defined as achieving optimal functioning as students engage intellectually, socially, and emotionally in their college experiences (Schreiner, 2010a). As a higher-order construct, thriving consists of five latent variables: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship. Engaged learning measures the extent to which students invest in their cognitive development through meaningful processing

(Schreiner & Louis, 2006). Academic determination is a measure of students' motivation and effort to succeed, guided by their goals (Schreiner, 2010b). Positive perspective measures students' level of optimism and its role in learning (Schreiner & Louis, 2006). Social connectedness measures the extent to which students engage in meaningful relationships of mutual support with those on or off-campus (Schreiner, 2010c). Diverse citizenship measures the extent to which students value their influence on others and their community, along with the openness to diversity (Schreiner, 2010c). The Thriving Quotient (TQ) measures a student's thriving level and these latent variables. The 24-item instrument measures the extent to which students are gaining optimal benefits from their college experience (Schreiner, 2010a).

Persistence

Student persistence, a key variable for success, is a student's ability to achieve a goal (Kennel & Ward-Smith, 2017). Rather than an institutional measure such as retention, persistence is a distinct phenomenon in which students possess the aptitude, motivation, self-regulation, and commitment in their academic goals (Kennel & Ward-Smith, 2017; Reason, 2009). Despite difficulties, students continue to progress toward academic achievement.

Attrition

Attrition is the number of students who enroll in a nursing program cohort but do not finish in the same nursing program cohort (Glossop, 2002; Kukkonen et al., 2016). Attrition includes program withdrawal or the inability to complete the program. There are numerous reasons behind attrition rates (Kukkonen et al., 2016); however, the relevance to the profession of nursing is the loss of potential members for the nursing workforce.

Chapter Summary

With the demand for qualified nurses, nursing education is responsible for preparing successful nurses for the profession. Given these demands, nursing programs focus heavily on graduation rates and licensure passage to produce enough nurses. However, this fails to capture the quality of the learning experience. Therefore, a more comprehensive view of success, including thriving, was needed in nursing education. Further knowledge of how thriving is defined among undergraduate nursing students will contribute to future interventions to promote achievement and sufficient professional practice preparation. Through the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism in this interpretive phenomenological study, the conceptualization of thriving was derived from the constructed meanings of nursing students' lived experiences in the college environment.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

This study intended to (a) identify thriving undergraduate nursing students; (b) obtain the narratives of the students' experiences as they thrive in nursing school, and (c) understand the meanings of these thriving experiences while in nursing school. Whereas thriving is defined in the general college student population, there was a lack of research specific to undergraduate nursing students. Thus, an enhanced understanding of how thriving is manifested in nursing students was crucial.

Chapter two begins with a review of the theoretical frameworks of student success in higher education. Student success in nursing education was explored, including the academic and non-academic factors of success. Finally, the concept of thriving in higher education was examined.

Student Success

The definition of student success in higher education is convoluted with disparate perspectives. It is most commonly defined as access to education, persistence, and degree completion (Kuh et al., 2006; McIntosh & Colver, 2018). While the majority agree with these aspects of success in higher education, this limited definition overlooks the potential depth of the concept by concentrating on outcomes of academic performance such as cognitive measures or degree attainment (Kuh et al., 2006; Richardson et al., 2012; Robbins et al., 2004). Despite the validity and reliability of these predictors of success, these traditional measures fail to capture the complex nature of student success. While these measures are crucial, an expanded definition should include other outcomes, including the quality of the college experience (Schreiner et al.,

2012). An enhanced definition that improves upon the traditional, academic benchmarks of student success is desperately needed to nurture student development.

Theoretical Background

A focus on the cognitive factors of success and retention and graduation rates influenced early student success theories (Schreiner et al., 2012). Though there has always been widespread concern about student success, theoretical models were not developed until the 1970s (Berger et al., 2012) when student dropout concerns intensified (Aljohani, 2016; Schreiner et al., 2012). As higher education institutions focused on retaining and graduating qualified students, specifically the influential aspects of persistence, various retention perspectives developed (Schreiner et al., 2012). Sociological, economic, organizational, and psychological frameworks demonstrate conflicting views on the factors of students leaving the institution for various reasons (Schreiner et al., 2012), resulting in a convoluted definition of student success. Despite the diverging explanations, these frameworks provide a greater understanding of the fundamental factors that shape a student's college experience. Diverse perspectives address student success complexities, providing a coherent grasp of higher education success (Schreiner et al., 2012).

Sociological Perspectives

The sociological view of retention encompasses the behaviors of students as they assimilate into the higher education environment. Most sociological models are rooted in Durkheim's Suicide Theory (1951), in which suicide goes beyond psychological or emotional factors and is attributed to the lack of social and intellectual assimilation into society. Despite distinct differences between suicide and student attrition, Durkheim's (1951) work outlines the value of integration. Tinto's (1993) Interactionalist Theory, the predominant sociological perspective, expands on Durkheim's emphasis on assimilation on student attrition and retention.

Tinto (1993) postulates that students transition from previous environments and adopt the higher education community's new values and norms. This transition leads to social and academic integration. Academic integration includes adaption to higher education norms, including the institution's values (Tinto, 1993). Social integration represents the extent that the student is involved in the institution's social environment, including interactions with peers, faculty members, and campus services (Tinto, 1993). Increased integration levels encourage commitment to the institution, a sense of belonging, and persistence (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1993). When students fail to integrate into the academic environment, they experience a decreased sense of belonging and an increased likelihood of dropping out of college (Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1993).

Economic Perspectives

From an economic viewpoint, college costs and benefits contribute to a student's decision to remain within the institution and invest in their education (Kuh et al., 2006). If a student perceives that the cost of staying in college outweighs the educational benefits or return on investment, they will leave college early. This investment involves time and energy, including financial aspects, commitments to the college, academic achievement such as knowledge development, and degree attainment benefits (Aljohani, 2016; Kuh et al., 2006). Students will weigh the costs and benefits of their college experience. If this investment is deemed worthwhile, they will remain engaged in their college experiences, contributing to their persistence, retention, and degree attainment.

Organizational Perspectives

The organizational viewpoint demonstrates the association between students in the academic setting and employees of an organization related to retention. Organizational

determinants, such as institutional processes and structures, impact the academic performance and persistence of students (Daily et al., 2013; Kuh et al., 2006). Examples of these determinants in higher education include a lack of campus and faculty support services, cultivating a collaborative, accommodating, yet challenging environment (Daily et al., 2013; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Additional determinants include the fairness of institutional policies and leadership decision-making approaches (Kuh et al., 2006). These organizational characteristics and practices influence student experiences and perceptions of the institution, contributing to their sense of belonging (Kuh et al., 2006). When students determine institutional fit, they remained committed to the institution. The institution's investment impacts student performance, reduces organizational turnover, and supports retention (Daily et al., 2013; Price & Mueller, 1981). When students determine institutional fit, they remained committed to the institution.

Psychological Perspectives

The final aspect of success and retention stems from a psychological perspective that emphasizes student characteristics in college (Kuh et al., 2006). From a psychological lens, student success and retention are influenced by students' attributes, experiences, beliefs, coping skills, motivation, and involvement with others (Schreiner et al., 2012). Though there are various psychological theories, central concepts of student characteristics include motivation, attribution, and self-efficacy (Kuh et al., 2006; Schreiner et al., 2012).

Bean and Eaton's (2000) model of college student retention provides an inclusive vision of student persistence, incorporating motivation, attribution, and self-efficacy. This model proposes that students join an institution with psychosocial attributes, influenced by previous experiences, abilities, and self-assessments (Bean & Eaton, 2001). As students begin the integration process, their psychological attributes shape their self-assessments, resulting in a

sense of belonging in an institution (Bean & Eaton, 2001). These self-assessments include their level of self-efficacy, coping skills, and internal locus of control (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Students with high self-efficacy, or the perception of one's abilities to succeed (Bandura, 1997), are not only confident in their abilities, especially in challenging situations but understand outcomes are under their control. While some outcomes may be negative, students with an internal locus of control attribute their failures to their lack of effort rather than chance (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Schreiner et al., 2012). As they adapt to new college experiences, motivation levels are high, challenging students to expand their learning through a growth mindset (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Dweck, 2000). These experiences lead to greater academic and social integration, resulting in success and persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Student Success in Nursing Education

Student success is the cornerstone of nursing education. Nursing programs are accountable for sufficiently preparing students for the workforce. As the health care environment evolves in complexity, students must be ready for the profession's challenges with the competence to deliver safe, quality care. Despite this general understanding of the students' preparation, success in nursing education remains elusive as it is frequently defined in various manners (Jeffreys, 2015). Nevertheless, nursing education agrees upon the notion that the optimal functioning of students is paramount. Maximizing a student's aptitude for nursing school achievement can contribute to their lasting success as a nurse.

Significance

The complex changes in the health care system dramatically shape the nursing profession. The patient population is aging, increasingly diverse, and has a multitude of chronic diseases (IOM, 2010; Ward et al., 2014). As care moves from the hospital and into the home and

community settings, nurses are expected to practice in diverse settings with expanded health promotion competencies and disease prevention activities (IOM, 2011; Jones et al., 2019). Technology continues to advance in inpatient care settings, adding to the new health care paradigm's complexity. Furthermore, more Americans have increased access to health care coverage due to the Affordable Care Act (Mason et al., 2016). With an increased number of those seeking care, magnified by the growing complexity in varied care settings, quality healthcare demands intensify.

As the largest and most trusted segment of the health care workforce (Gallup, 2018), nurses have the power to contribute to the new paradigm, which includes high-quality, safer, more affordable, and more accessible care (IOM, 2011). However, the current education system is unequipped to meet existing and future health care needs as nurses need to be educated at a higher-level to address the complexities (IOM, 2011). Nurses must effectively manage care on a continuum with their unique set of skills to meet the growing challenges in health care (Alden, 2008; Jones et al., 2019). An improved system is necessary to assure future nurses can deliver quality care in various contexts (Giddens et al., 2015; IOM, 2011). This enhanced system includes the push for bachelor's prepared nurses. This educational level is linked to improved health care outcomes (Aiken, 2014; Aiken et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2015; IOM, 2011). Bachelor-prepared nurses are equipped with inclusive competencies necessary for the 21st century (IOM, 2011). This superior, professional education contributes to optimal health care outcomes and changes the delivery of care.

Whereas the demand for quality education rises, the looming nursing shortage persists and is projected to worsen. Employment opportunities for registered nurses (RNs) are expected to grow at 12% between 2018 and 2019, faster than the average rate for all other occupations

(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The number of baby boomer registered nurses (RNs) retiring from the workforce is rising steadily, from 40,000 in 2010 to 80,000 in 2020 (Auerbach et al., 2015). More than 500,000 seasoned registered nurses are expected to retire, projecting a need for 1.1 million nurses to replace these retirees and prevent a shortage (AACN, 2019; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). An additional 203,700 new RNs are needed each year until 2026 to replace retirees and fill new positions in healthcare (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Nursing faculty are expected to retire in the U.S. over the next decade, with one-third of the total faculty population retiring by 2025 (AACN, 2019; Fang & Kesten, 2017). This wave of retirements will significantly impact nursing education if the system remains unchanged. In 2018, programs denied 75,029 prospective students from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs due to insufficient faculty numbers (AACN, 2019). As senior-ranked faculty retire, nursing programs will continue to turn away qualified students due to inadequate resources, compounding the projected nursing shortage.

The shortage also complicates the health care system, as there is an insufficient number of nurses to support patient needs. The new paradigm demands that nurses possess foundational knowledge to practice across settings, provide care to diverse populations, minimize health disparities, integrate technologies into care, and adapt to the changing needs of health care (AACN, 2019). Yet, with an inadequate number of nursing faculty, programs cannot expand, resulting in fewer students in the program. With fewer students, the nursing shortage is exacerbated, directly affecting the health of global communities. Therefore, it is critical to retain and graduate qualified students for the profession.

Academic Factors of Success

Though student success is a widespread construct in nursing education, conceptual clarity

is necessary as there are divergent definitions (Jeffreys, 2015). Additionally, there is variance

among outcomes and determinants of success as these concepts are used interchangeably in the

research (Robbins et al., 2004). Nursing education research considers three primary outcomes of

success: NCLEX-RN pass rates, graduation and retention rates, and GPA (Beauvais et al., 2014;

Bennett et al., 2016; Campbell & Dickson, 1996; Denham et al., 2018; Peruski, 2019; Timer &

Clauson, 2011; Wambuguh et al., 2016). Though predictors of student success vary in the

research, most are associated with one or more of these primary nursing education outcomes.

National Council Licensure Examination

Despite the complexity of student success, most nursing education research focuses on

the NCLEX-RN pass rate as the chief outcome measure (E.M.T. Smith, 2017). Regulated by the

National Council of State Boards of Nursing, the NCLEX-RN is a "legally defensible,

psychometrically sound examination to measure student readiness for entry-to-practice" (Spector

et al., 2018, p. 27). This exam demonstrates the entry-level ability to practice safely as a

registered nurse (RN) (Quinn et al., 2018). A condition in every state of the United States,

graduates must pass this exam to obtain licensure for independent practice.

Given the high-stakes nature of the NCLEX-RN, nursing programs are pressured to

sufficiently prepare students for licensure. Licensure pass rates, specifically first-time test taker

pass rates, are a standard expected outcome for program success (Glasgow et al., 2019; Spector

et al., 2018; Wambuguh et al., 2016). As an indicator of program quality, sufficient pass-rates are

required for certification by state Boards of Nursing and accrediting agencies (Foreman, 2017;

Hinderer et al., 2014; Mathew & Aktan, 2018; Spector et al., 2018). The Commission on

Collegiate Nursing Education and the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing calls for a pass-rate of 80% each year. In contrast, the National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education requires an *average* pass-rate of 80% over a three-year timeframe as its benchmark for accreditation (Spector et al., 2018). Pass rates are commonly used to compare program quality. Therefore, programs focus much of their student success on improving NCLEX-RN outcomes to maintain accreditation and reputation.

In addition to the expectation of boards of nursing and accrediting bodies, high pass-rates denote a program's reputation (Glasgow et al., 2019; Hinderer et al., 2014) with the potential to influence prospective students, employers, and healthcare organizations. With low pass-rates indicative of unsuccessful students, a program's reputation is jeopardized and may result in fewer applicants and decreased numbers of graduates for the profession. While the NCLEX-RN protects the public from unsafe practitioners (Hinderer et al., 2014), and NCLEX-RN passage holds significant value in nursing education.

Graduation Rates

A universal goal of nursing education is to graduate qualified students for the workforce, and admission, attrition, and graduation rates are reported to credentialing organizations (Beauvais et al., 2014). These data are significant for accreditation and are viewed as a standard indicator of program effectiveness. Additionally, assuring students reach degree attainment ensures an increase in the number of nurses entering the professional workforce. Schreiner et al. (2012) contend that degree completion offers minimal insight into student success complexities.

Retention

Nursing student retention is a priority concern among programs (Jeffreys, 2015). It is measured by the number of students that remain within an institution while progressing toward

degree completion (Kennel & Ward-Smith, 2017). This multidimensional phenomenon is influenced by many interacting variables (Jeffreys, 2015; Smith-Wacholz et al., 2019). Nursing programs closely monitor retention rates as this data is reported to accrediting agencies (Bennett et al., 2016). There is a significant loss to the program and profession with a failure to retain students within a program.

Attrition

Attrition is the difference in the number of students beginning each cohort and the number who complete in that cohort (Glossop, 2002; Kukkonen et al., 2016). Nursing student attrition rates are high compared to other higher education undergraduate programs (Boath et al., 2016). Though there is no nationally reported data on attrition, high rates significantly affect the supply of nurses by reducing the number of those entering the workforce (Fagan & Coffey, 2019; Kubec, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019). Attrition perpetuates the nursing shortage, threatening global health. Additionally, these students are affected as they invest time, energy, and finances into their education. When they withdraw from a program, they encounter emotional, social, and financial burdens, which is compounded by those who withdraw later in the program (Bakker et al., 2019). Their academic pursuits are derailed, which influences their well-being and creates doubt in their abilities to achieve degree attainment in the future (Hamshire et al., 2019; Yeom, 2013). This loss is significant for the profession as every qualified student is needed for professional practice. The consequences for the academic institution are related to tuition revenue, resources, and faculty time (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Fagan & Coffey, 2019). While a certain degree of attrition is inevitable, it leaves an extensive impression on the profession. Nursing programs must graduate enrolled students that are qualified for practice.

Nursing students leave an institution for various reasons, illuminating the complexity of attrition (Glossop, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2019). They may voluntarily withdraw, fail to graduate, transfer to another institution, be dismissed from the program, or change their major (Mitchell et al., 2019). Sources of nursing student attrition include personal and family circumstances (Glossop, 2002; Kukkonen et al., 2016; ten Hoeve et al., 2017), financial pressures (Wray et al., 2014), and wrong career choice (Kukkonen et al., 2016). Academic sources include the learning environment (Farahani et al., 2017; Merkley, 2016), availability and quality of clinical placements (Chan et al., 2019; Farahani et al., 2017; Merkley, 2016; ten Hoeve et al., 2017), and lack of preparation and expectations of program demands (Bakker et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2019, ten Hoeve et al., 2017). These causes are often interrelated, with various factors contributing to student attrition.

Grade Point Average

GPA is a standard outcome in nursing programs and is often studied as a predictor of program success. GPA and course grades summarize content knowledge, demonstrating academic achievement (York et al., 2015). These data are readily accessible and a quantifiable measure of success (Mould & DeLoach, 2017; York et al., 2015). Nonetheless, this construct is a narrow assessment of success and does not accurately measure learning or growth among students (York et al., 2015). Despite its consideration in student success, GPA fails to capture the comprehensive nature of student success in nursing, and additional measures should be considered.

Predictors of Success

Nursing education seeks to identify accurate and reliable predictors to promote success. The standard determinants of success are categorized into two groups: academic and non-

academic capacities. Nursing education heavily relies on academic predictors of student success that are frequently associated with outcomes such as the NCLEX-RN, graduation rates, and GPA. These measures include preadmission variables, cumulative GPA, science and prerequisite course grades, and standardized exams. Despite conflicting research, academic factors are traditional measures in higher education, demonstrating predictability in student success and continue to have a presence in nursing education.

There are various academic predictors that determine a student's aptitude for a nursing program (Kubec, 2017). Several researchers offer empirical evidence to support these factors' role in the complex decision for program admission. Based on the association between nursing and science, researchers found that science GPA predicted student success in nursing programs (Alden, 2008; Bennett et al., 2016; Mthimunye & Daniels, 2019; Olsen, 2017; Wambuguh et al., 2016). In addition, a student's preadmission cumulative GPA predicts success (Bennett et al., 2016; Mthimunye & Daniels, 2019) along with prerequisite grades (Olsen, 2017). Additional cognitive measures included standardized examination scores (Olsen, 2017), including the Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS) and Health Education Systems Incorporated (HESI) admission test (Hinderer et al., 2014). While other variables may be involved, these cognitive predictors of success are commonly integrated into nursing program admissions and have demonstrated validity and reliability.

Non-Academic Factors of Success

Though there is value in academic factors, they fail to fully capture the dimensions of a successful nursing student (Alden, 2008; Richardson & Abraham, 2012; Wambuguh et al., 2016). Non-academic aspects are valuable in nursing education as nurses are expected to possess qualities that extend beyond their academic capabilities. They represent new dimensions of

success and account for the nursing profession's more personal and emotional aspects (Beauvais et al., 2014). These factors measure the psychosocial aspects of achievement, including student behaviors, skills, and attitudes (Robbins et al., 2004; Tepper & Yourstone, 2017). As an alternative predictor of success, non-academic factors go beyond traditional academic standards and represent an expanded vision of student success. Robbins et al. (2004) determined that they possessed predictive value even after additional traditional measures are controlled, including demographics, high school GPA, or standardized exams. Moreover, these factors accounted for 25% of the variance in academic performance and 9% of the variance in retention (Robbins et al., 2004). This research demonstrates the necessity to consider the purpose of non-academic measures as they complement the traditional academic factors in nursing education. These non-academic factors enrich the understanding of success and optimize student outcomes in nursing education.

Similar to the traditional academic measures, non-academic factors commonly predict success using the primary nursing outcomes such as NCLEX-RN passage, graduation rates, and GPA. However, these variables are also predictive of student persistence. Persistence is a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of personal, academic, and environmental factors that influence a student's ability to persist in college (Jeffreys, 2002; Kennel & Ward-Smith, 2017 Kuh et al., 2006). As an outcome for success, persistence differs from retention in that it corresponds to a student's continued progression in the program to degree attainment (York et al., 2015). Furthermore, it captures the progress that students need to achieve their goals (York et al., 2015). Students who persist are psychologically motivated to be successful, thriving in their college experiences (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Schreiner, 2010a). It is crucial to consider the impact

of non-academic factors as they predict success among nursing students, specifically, their persistence to degree achievement.

The nursing education literature on the non-academic measures of student success emphasizes an inclusive, more in-depth vision of achievement. This perspective reflects the nursing profession, which requires an ongoing commitment to self-development (Jeffreys, 2015). It is insufficient for nursing students to merely pass examinations, attain a degree, and pass the NCLEX-RN. There is more to success than traditional measures, just as there is more to a nurse than delivering protocol-based care. The more meaningful measures of success include affective, academic, and environmental variables (Jeffreys, 2015).

Affective Factors

Student affective factors include the motivational aspects of success. Academic motivation among nursing students is defined by Rafil et al. (2019) as

> "an inner process, purposeful, unique, and variable and it is affected by internal personal factors like interests, values, and beliefs and external factors like social, family, academic, and nursing professional factors so that it triggers and steers educational performance and endeavor of the students toward better learning performance and goals and higher educational achievements" (p. 320).

Motivation drives educational efforts and is an essential variable for learning (Hassankhani et al., 2015; Khalaila, 2015; Rafil et al., 2019). It is associated with academic success and persistence, including the traditional measures of GPA and NCLEX-RN passage (Balogun et al., 2017; Rafil et al., 2019; Rogers, 2017; Salnger et al., 2015; Silvestri et al., 2013; Wu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). Furthermore, high levels of intrinsic motivation, or personal rewards, are associated with academic achievement (Fagan & Coffey, 2019; Khalaila, 2015).

As nursing students are motivated in their studies, their confidence in their abilities to succeed evolves. Self-efficacy, or the perception of one's capabilities to execute an established course of action (Bandura, 1997), is enhanced with high motivation levels (Hassankhani et al., 2015). The degree of self-efficacy determines an individual's behaviors, the expenditure of effort in a task, perseverance, and resilience to overcome a challenge, and ability to cope with the demands of the chosen course of action (Chemers et al., 2001). In nursing education, self-efficacy affects students' cognitive and affective behaviors and outcomes (Robb, 2012; Rowbotham & Owen, 2015). Self-efficacy has been correlated with academic performance and NCLEX-RN success. Nursing students with higher levels of self-efficacy set more elevated and more complicated goals (Robb, 2012) and are more academically motivated to achieve their goals and succeed (Hassankhani et al., 2015; Rogers, 2017; Zhang et al., 2015). These students were also more successful on the NCLEX-RN (Silvestri et al., 2013). When faced with challenging situations, they employ problem-solving behaviors, especially in difficult clinical situations (Bodys-Cupak et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2015), mitigating the adverse effects of stress (Rayan, 2019). The value of self-efficacy is compelling in nursing education. Understanding the perceived capabilities of students and their influence on academic performance can shape the outcomes of success.

Academic Factors

Competent nursing care requires reflection and reasoning through clinical decisions. Nurses monitor, judge, reflect, and revise their patient care approaches daily (Kuiper, 2005). This ongoing process deepens learning and prepares nurses for lifelong development (DeLanie, 2018). Initially, students employ simple learning techniques and depend on external factors, such as instructor support, to guide their development (Briscoe & Brown, 2019). As they advance, they

identify, direct, and evaluate their learning approaches (DeLanie, 2018; Keçeci, 2017). This process, or self-regulated learning, involves active participation in the learning process as one adapts to achieve successful outcomes (Zimmerman, 1989). Additionally, the investment of effort as they direct their learning contributes to their success and persistence (Ghasemi et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2006).

As students participate and regulate their learning, it promotes clinical decision making and competence (Kuiper, 2005). Nursing students engaged in self-regulated learning experience increased self-efficacy (Kuiper et al., 2010; Robb, 2016; Salamonson et al., 2016), well-being (Park et al., 2012), academic achievement (Dörrenbächer & Perels, 2016; Long & Aleven, 2017; Salamonson et al., 2016), a sense of coherence (Salamonson et al., 2016), motivation (Chen et al., 2019), and overall GPA (Robb, 2016). Despite moderate levels of self-regulated learning among nursing students (Chen et al., 2019), faculty support is needed to optimize their learning processes and foster autonomy as they emerge into the nursing profession. Those students who are in control of their learning will be better prepared for the healthcare environment's challenges.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors, or those external aspects that influence a student's success and persistence, include support, integration, and community involvement (Jeffreys, 2015). Social and academic support include peers, family, faculty, and campus services. This support is significant for students and is associated with persistence (Chan et al., 2019; Fagan & Coffey, 2019; Jeffreys, 2015; Priode et al., 2020; L. D. Smith, 2013;). Through this support, connections are developed, and students may be more likely to experience social and academic integration

into the educational environment (Bean & Eaton, 2001), leading to enhanced success outcomes such as self-efficacy and growth mindset (Mitchell et al., 2019; Zander et al., 2018).

The nursing profession consists of human connections and requires adept nurses to coordinate patient-centered care. Nurses must connect with patients and families in challenging situations. To prepare students, they must be integrated and socialized into the nursing profession (Jeffreys, 2015). Successful integration is associated with professional commitment, persistence, and retention of traditional and nontraditional students (Jeffreys, 2004; Jeffreys, 2015). These opportunities foster positive psychological outcomes by providing opportunities to enhance self-efficacy and motivation, promoting professional integration (Jeffreys, 2012).

Thriving

The construct of thriving reflects an expanded vision of student success in higher education. Rather than merely surviving college, thriving students are intellectually, socially, and emotionally invested in their experiences (Schreiner, 2010a). Students engage in the learning process, establish goals, and meaningfully contribute to the community. Moreover, they possess a positive perspective on their college experiences, which encourages optimism and resilience, despite challenges (Schreiner, 2010a). Overall, thriving students experience optimal functioning in college, which fosters psychological well-being, adding to success and persistence (Schreiner, 2010a; Schreiner et al., 2012; Schreiner, Pothoven et al., 2009). This comprehensive view of success demonstrates the value of looking beyond cognitive measures of success and focusing on students' quality of college experiences.

Foundations of Thriving

Thriving is derived from positive psychology principles and student retention models. Positive psychology provides a framework for thriving, classifying optimal functioning among

college students (Schreiner, 2010a), rather than the conventional approach of focusing on students' weaknesses. Flourishing, a positive psychology concept, is positive functioning and feeling along with optimal well-being (Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002). Flourishing adults possess complete mental health with high levels of well-being, specifically psychological, emotional, and social (Keyes, 2002; Schreiner, 2013). As they engage in their work and the community, flourishing adults find meaning in life, living life to the fullest rather than existing in society (McIntosh & Colver, 2018). They possess excellent mental and physical health, with resilience to life difficulties (Bergsma et al., 2011; Kobau et al., 2011; Veenhoven, 2008). Those with incomplete mental health, or languishers, have low levels of well-being, with symptoms of emptiness, stagnation, despair, and void, which is associated with significant psychosocial impairment (Keyes, 2002). Adults with less-than-optimal mental health are more likely to suffer from disability and impairment (Keyes, 2007). The continuum of mental health demonstrates a holistic view of well-being and contributes to the concept of thriving. Though flourishing is studied among adults, its positive functioning components, including well-being, are relevant in college students (Schreiner et al., 2012).

Thriving is also linked to student retention models centered on psychological perspectives. Bean and Eaton's (2001) conceptualization of student retention expands upon traditional perspectives and emphasizes the psychosocial nature of success. This model was developed on the premise that psychological processes impact student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2001). As students engage in their college experiences, they form meaningful connections with others and the campus environment. These connections cultivate a sense of academic and social integration, strengthening student psychological factors and their level of commitment and goals (Aljohan, 2016; Bean & Eaton, 2001). Additionally, their previous experiences, self-assessments,

and abilities as they experience integration create a predisposition to remain or leave the institution (Schreiner et al., 2012). Combined with the concept of flourishing from positive psychology, Bean and Eaton's retention model serve as a thriving framework in higher education.

Domains of Thriving

Based on the association between positive psychology and Bean and Eaton's theory on student retention, thriving is conceptualized as optimal functioning in three realms: academic thriving, intrapersonal thriving, and interpersonal thriving. Each facet and its specific components represent various psychological constructs that contribute to an optimally functioning college student (Schreiner, Pothoven et al., 2009).

Academic Thriving

The academic components of thriving include engaged learning and academic determination. Each component is represented in the *Thriving Quotient* (TQ) instrument and is present among thriving college students (Schreiner et al., 2012). Engaged learning expands on the standard definition of student engagement by including the psychological engagement aspect of the learning process (Schreiner & Louis, 2006). As a multidimensional concept, engaged learning is defined as a student's investment in their education, demonstrated by meaningful and mindful processing during learning (Schreiner & Louis, 2006). Thriving students are psychologically engaged as they invest mental energy into the learning process (Schreiner & Louis, 2006). This investment goes beyond the scope of an assignment or course, promoting purposeful learning as students strive to understand more. Through this understanding, students are energized by their knowledge, and meaningfully apply this content to other aspects of their lives (Schreiner, 2013). Student behavior without the commitment of psychological energy fails

to capture the multifaceted concept of engagement. Students may exhibit engaged behaviors, such as participation in campus activities, but without the investment of psychological energy, these behaviors are meaningless in the learning process (Bean, 2005). Therefore, engaged learning offers a comprehensive approach to students' participation in their education, promoting quality learning (Tagg, 2003).

Academic determination integrates the behavioral and psychological aspects of knowledge, which support goal achievement and persistence (Schreiner, 2010b). This facet of thriving is characterized by the investment of effort, ability to regulate and control learning, and goal-directed thinking (Schreiner, 2010b). Thriving students are motivated to succeed and are willing to invest the necessary time to achieve their goals. Self-efficacy, a student's perceptions of their abilities (Bandura, 1997), influences the investment of effort in the learning process (Chemers et al., 2001). If a student believes in their abilities to succeed and understands their accountability to success, they will invest the necessary time and effort to accomplish their goals (Pintrich, 2004; Schreiner, 2010b; Zimmerman 1989).

Furthermore, students attribute their effort to the growth of their intellectual capabilities (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Failures are a result of the lack of effort and are viewed as opportunities for growth. This mindset inspires students to gain knowledge, cultivating academic success (Dweck, 2006; Romero et al., 2014). This mindset encourages students to be active participants as they regulate their learning. Thriving students are intrinsically motivated as they engage in educational tasks of personal value (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Salamonson et al., 2016; Wu, 2019). The underlying motivational processes among these students embrace the will or energy to achieve the goal and a pathway for that goal (C. R. Snyder, 1995; C.R. Snyder et al., 2002). This academic hope encourages academic determination and supports students as they persist

through challenges (Khalaila, 2015). Additionally, this goal-directed thinking motivates students to succeed, resulting in positive educational outcomes, including higher cumulative GPAs, increased likelihood to graduate, and lower risk for academic dismissal due to grades (Handsen et al., 2015; B. L. Snyder et al., 2002; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015).

Intrapersonal Thriving

A positive outlook shapes the overall learning process among students. Intrapersonal thriving is reflected in the positive perspective element of the TQ. In this perspective, thriving students possess positive or optimistic attitudes toward self and learning (Schreiner et al., 2012; Schreiner, Pothoven et al., 2009). Optimism is the general expectancy that one will experience positive outcomes, despite adversity (Gómez-Molinero et al., 2019; Scheier & Carver, 1985). This perspective allows students to reframe the negative experience, resulting in effectively coping with challenges, including stress (Pluskota, 2014). They believe in their abilities to manage difficult situations and are resilient to adversity (Chemers et al., 2001; Gómez-Molinero et al., 2019; Schreiner, 2010a). This proactive, problem-focused coping encourages successful adjustment (Chemers et al., 2001). Students remain confident in their abilities to effectively manage and persist in the face of challenges (Schreiner, 2010a).

In addition to proactive coping, thriving students are also characterized by the ability to envision their future and generate goals (Schreiner, 2010a). This positive perspective is central to motivation, specifically intrinsic in which a student is driven by internal rewards (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Reinninger & Hihi, 2016). Thriving students are more likely to be motivated in their studies, employ effective studying strategies, self-regulated learning, and achieve academic success (Anderson et al., 2018; Ionescu, 2018; Pekrun et al., 2002; Postareff et al., 2017). This

positive state encourages persistence and contributes to psychological well-being among students (Burris et al., 2009; Gómez-Molinero et al., 2019; Ionescu, 2018)

Interpersonal Thriving

The interpersonal facets of thriving include social connectedness and diverse citizenship, which are measured in the TQ. These components involve significant relationships in positive life outcomes and contribute to a student's overall success in college (Schreiner, 2010a; Schreiner et al., 2012). These relationships can occur in the social realm with peers or the academic realm with faculty members, advisors, or campus staff (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Though this construct does not typically predict student success, it is significantly correlated with satisfaction and persistence (Berger, 1997; Schreiner, 2010c). Therefore, it is a crucial component of thriving.

Social connectedness involves positive and meaningful interpersonal relationships and connections to the institution through feelings of belonging and acceptance (Schreiner, 2010c). These social connections serve as a resource for college students, fostering satisfaction, well-being, happiness, and persistence (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Robbins et al., 2004; Schreiner, 2010c). Positive, healthy relationships sustain a student through difficult situations, fostering a sense of belonging and trust (Schreiner, 2010c). Furthermore, they influence overall academic development, learning, and problem-solving skills (Kuh, 1995). Through these connections, students begin to develop a sense of community beyond the typical feelings of belonging. When students possess a sense of community, they are contributing members of the campus community. Students perceive they play a role in the community, recognize the value of their voice, engage in positive relationships, take pride in the institution,

and cherish that they are a part of a broader community (Brown & Burdsal, 2012; Schreiner, 2014).

In addition to the development of social connections, thriving students also value their impact on others and their contributions to society (Schreiner, 2010c; Schreiner et al., 2013). They recognize their responsibility to positively influencing the community and society (Schreiner, Pothoven et al., 2009). Moreover, thriving students embrace the commonality and diversity among the campus community. Through this awareness, they not only accept but seek out those with varying backgrounds or perspectives (Schreiner, 2010c). Collaborating with those of differing social identities fosters a student's openness to diversity (Shim & Perez, 2018), which results in enhanced critical thinking skills, engaged learning, confidence, and a sense of belonging (Schreiner, 2010c; Ryder et al., 2015). As students recognize their contributions to the community and society, they understand their value, which is an essential aspect of mental health and life satisfaction (Keyes, 2002).

Thriving Quotient

Grounded in the perspectives of student success and psychological well-being, the TQ conceptualizes college student thriving (Schreiner et al., 2012). The TQ represents optimal functioning by measuring the malleable psychosocial aspects predictive of success, including students' academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors (Schreiner et al., 2012). The TQ's five scales include engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspectives, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship. Each of these factors represents an element among the academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal thriving (Schreiner, 2010a), which are indicative of success and persistence, based on the review of the literature (Schreiner, McIntosh et al., 2009).

This comprehensive tool holistically captures academic and psychosocial facets of success, providing an overall path of the student's college experience (Schreiner, McIntosh et al., 2009).

The 24-item TQ has demonstrated reliability and validity among undergraduates and graduates in various contexts, including community, private, and public universities (Dy, 2017; Petridis, 2015; Strain, 2017). It has been studied in specific populations such as transfer students, students of color, high-risk students, and faculty members (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Kelly et al., 2017; Romero, 2016; Sparks, 2017; Tharp, 2017). Schreiner, McIntosh et al. (2009) determined that the TQ significantly predicted the expected outcomes of success in higher education, including GPA, intent to persist, institutional fit, perception of tuition worth, and self-reported learning. More importantly, student characteristics, race, and ethnicity did not possess predictive value to student success after accounting for thriving levels (Schreiner, 2013; Schreiner, McIntosh et al., 2009). Nonetheless, the pathways to thriving can vary among students, including differences in individual variables (Schreiner, 2013). Fortunately, the TQ captures these variances and provides a holistic view of student experiences. With this expanded vision, faculty can better support student success and persistence.

Chapter Summary

Despite variable definitions, student success is a significant priority in nursing education. Nursing education is accountable for the generation of qualified, competent nurses. Programs focus on improving student success, increasing retention and graduation rates, reducing attrition rates, and facilitating academic progression and entry into practice (Jeffreys, 2012). Though the minimum benchmarks of success are essential, there is more to the competent nurse than grades, degree attainment, and NCLEX-RN passage. While current academic approaches to success are satisfactory, there is an opportunity for a broader vision to optimize outcomes, which ultimately

benefits the profession, health care, and society (Jeffreys, 2015). Thriving, a concept from higher education, accentuates optimal functioning and well-being among college students, building on success's traditional benchmarks (Schreiner et al., 2012). Grounded in positive psychology and psychological theories of retention, thriving involves the psychological factors of success, providing a meaningful understanding of the underlying reasons for success and persistence.

The comprehensive approach of thriving is promising in nursing education. However, it is unknown if the current definition adequately describes optimal success among nursing students. The nursing student experience differs from the general college student population. The expectations and responsibilities of nurses contrast from other professions. Nurses facilitate health in humans, delivering comprehensive, patient-centered care in diverse contexts. This wide-range, complementary approach integrates the science and art of nursing. Nursing students and nurses must be prepared for this standard of professional care through a culture of lifelong learning and development. The concept of lifelong learning must be instilled early to encourage quality nursing care. Therefore, the preparation of nurses varies dramatically from other professions. While thriving indicates optimal functioning and well-being among college students, its conceptual definition may be insufficient for nursing education. Therefore, an understanding of thriving in nursing students can generate an integrated approach to success, enhancing the profession's quality of care provided.

Chapter Three

Methods

Research Design

Interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology, the approach for this qualitative study, is the discovery of the meaning of phenomena through the interpretation of experiences (Creswell, 2013). This approach, developed by Martin Heidegger, emphasizes meanings rather than the descriptions of experiences (Creswell, 2013; Reiners, 2012). The world is viewed as an essential part of being, and these realities are influenced by the world in which people live, or their lifeworld as Heidegger defined it (Converse, 2012; Miles et al., 2013). Though these meanings are not always apparent, the understandings of these meanings evolve through the interpretive process (Crowther et al., 2017; Richards & Morse, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

In interpretive phenomenology, the researcher is part of the interpretive process, reflecting the participants' constructed realities (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The researcher's preconceptions and experiences regarding the phenomenon are integrated into the interpretive process (Bynum & Varpio, 2017), resulting in a blending of meanings between the participants and researcher (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The hermeneutic circle, as described by Heidegger, guides the inquiry of the phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2000). This circle begins when the researcher has baseline knowledge of the meaning of the phenomenon. This process's product is an evolving understanding of the interpretations of a phenomenon illuminating the meanings behind the lived experiences (Bynum & Varpio, 2017).

Research Assumptions

There are significant assumptions that underlie phenomenological research, specifically the interpretive approach. Humans exist in a world where they make sense and interpret their

experiences to reach an understanding (Converse, 2012). As multiple realities are constructed, this inductive process leads to emerging insights grounded in their experiences (Polit & Beck, 2017). However, this understanding of their experiences can only occur within their contexts as people cannot be separated from their world (Converse, 2012; Lopez & Willis, 2004). While humans are free to make choices, it is bound by specific contexts within their lives (Lopez & Willis, 2004), demonstrating the connection between humans and their worlds. Therefore, the inductive process must be studied within the context of the subject as they make sense of their lives.

In addition to subjects, interpretive phenomenology acknowledges the value of the researcher in interpretation. Despite the researcher's openness, their presuppositions and experiences cannot be separated from data interpretation, similar to the assumptions of humans that cannot exist without their worlds (Laverty, 2003; Reiners, 2012). The researcher's knowledge base directs the initial inquiry, and through the co-construction of interpretations, it will result in the illumination of the meanings of lived experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Setting

The setting for this study included three undergraduate baccalaureate nursing programs. Enrollment demographics were collected (Appendix A). One site was a public institution in the Midwest consisting of a regional community-based campus. Undergraduate enrollment in the spring 2020 semester was 129 students. The majority of students were in the 17 to 26 age range (*M*=24), female, and identified as white. (X. Shan, personal communication, April 29, 2020). The second site was a private university in Florida with undergraduate nursing students on three campuses. In the spring 2020 semester, there was a total of 952 undergraduate nursing students. The majority of students were in the 17 to 26 age range (*M*=24), female, and identified as

Hispanic (J. Kleier, personal communication, April 10, 2020). The third site was a private women's university in the Midwest. In the spring 2020 semester, there were 99 undergraduate nursing students. All students except one were in the 17 to 26 age range, female, with the majority identifying as white (J. Sisco, personal communication, June 4, 2020).

<div align="center">**Sampling Plan**</div>

Sampling Strategy

In qualitative research, participant selection is based on the experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) and the ability to provide detailed, generalizable information (Palinkas et al., 2015). A precept of interpretive phenomenology is to identify informants that can offer a view on "what it is like to be themselves as they make sense of an experience" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 50). Purposive criterion sampling is recommended for phenomenological studies (Moser & Korstjens, 2018) and was utilized. This approach involved selecting participants that meet a predetermined criterion of importance (Polit & Beck, 2017).

The TQ was administered to undergraduate nursing students who met the initial inclusion criteria. Data were analyzed to identify thriving nursing students as potential participants for the interview phase of the study. As determined by the TQ, to be classified as thriving, the respondent must have scored above the mean of the sample population (E. McIntosh, personal communication, December 3, 2019). Students with a thriving level above the mean were invited to participate in the study's primary phase.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of criterion sampling included identifying those participants with experiences of thriving in nursing school to contribute to exploring the phenomenon. As Polit and Beck (2017) noted, these types of cases are "fertile with experiential information on the

phenomenon of interest" (p. 495). Weaknesses of criterion sampling include the limitation of the range of variation within the sample (Palinkas et al., 2015). Though thriving students were selected as participants based on the TQ measure, their variation in thriving level was unknown at the outset of the study. A potential limitation of the sampling plan was that selecting participants based on the definition of thriving in the general college student population may fail to capture the experiences specific to thriving nursing students.

Sample Size

A pre-screening group (N=47) completed the TQ. Participants in the pre-screening group were represented across the three research sites. Though sample size recommendations vary in phenomenology, participants must have experienced the phenomenon and be willing and able to articulate their experiences (Creswell, 2013). More often, the sample size depends on informational needs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The general aim of qualitative research is to gain an understanding, depth, and variation of a phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2017). Data saturation, or the ability to achieve informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), occurs when no new patterns, categories, or dimensions of the phenomenon are revealed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2017). For this study, data saturation was reached at eight participants.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria included undergraduate nursing students enrolled in a baccalaureate nursing program who had completed at least one semester of clinical courses. It also included those deemed as thriving according to the overall measure of thriving in the sample, which was a score on the TQ of above the total sample mean.

Exclusion Criteria

Those respondents who scored below the total sample mean on the TQ were classified as not thriving and excluded. Students of the researcher were also excluded. There were no further exclusion criteria as interpretive phenomenology seeks to identify participants, not in terms of individual characteristics but rather informants who share a way of talking about the experience (Cohen et al., 2000).

Recruitment

Following a successful proposal defense and IRB approval from Nova Southeastern University, the recruitment strategies met ethical guidelines to ensure fair and equitable selection of participants. Initial recruitment strategies for the pre-screening group consisted of email invitations from the Program Directors for two research sites. The nursing advisor from the other research site was the main contact for the initial email. Potential participants were identified based on the provided inclusion and exclusion criteria. All enrolled undergraduate nursing students who completed at least one semester of clinical courses and were not current students of the primary researcher received the recruitment email. The Program Directors and nursing advisor from the sites obtained the school email addresses of these potential participants and invited them to participate in the initial phase of the study using the provided script. The email invitation included the study's purpose and summary, eligibility criteria, study location, the researcher's contact information, participant letter, recruitment flyer, and a link to the TQ survey. Prospective participants were notified that the study concentrated on the experiences in nursing school, specifically as students navigated the way to success. Additionally, they were informed that a subset of students would be chosen based on the results of the TQ.

As stated, the recruitment flyers were included in the initial email invitation from the Program Directors and nursing advisor. The flyers specified the study's purpose and summary, eligibility criteria, study location, the timing of the interviews, and the researcher's contact information. For the first research site, flyers were posted in approved areas by the school of nursing. These areas included campus information message boards, the school of nursing's learning management system, and social media pages. However, the flyers were not posted in the other two research sites due to the pandemic restrictions.

Primary recruitment strategies involved selecting participants for the second phase of this study, which consisted of an interview. The analysis of the data from the TQ questionnaire identified those students who were thriving or not thriving. The primary group, or those who were considered thriving, were contacted by the primary researcher via email to invite them to participate in the second phase of the study. This email included a description of the study, eligibility criteria, location of the study, notification of survey results, student support services, and the researcher's contact information. A waiver of documentation of informed consent form was attached for the student to review.

Twenty-four students were identified as thriving following TQ data analysis. Out of this total, eight students noted on the survey that they were not interested in the primary portion of this study. Therefore, sixteen students across the three research sites were invited to participate in the interviews. Out of the sixteen, eight students responded to the email invitation and were included

Potential participants who did not meet inclusion criteria were excluded and were contacted individually by the primary researcher. The email contained the student's score on the

TQ and suggested areas for consideration that might enhance the student's nursing school experience. Campus support services for each research site were included.

Protection of Human Subjects

As a primary concern in research, it is mandatory to abide by the ethical standards of conduct (Emanuel et al., 2008; Richards & Morse, 2013). Researchers must minimize harm while maximizing benefits to the participants and others (Polit & Beck, 2017). Participants have the right to make informed, voluntary decisions with full disclosure of the study, the right to fair treatment, and the right to their privacy (Polit & Beck, 2017). Researchers must consider the means to secure the protection of participants.

Privacy and Confidentiality

In this study's pre-screening phase, the students' level of thriving was measured using the TQ questionnaire. Students were asked to provide their email address on the survey for their results and interest in participating in the second phase of the study. Thriving levels were determined for each student and documented on an excel spreadsheet with the students' email addresses. Thriving levels were attached to the email addresses, and no names were collected on the survey.

To protect participants' privacy and maintain the confidentiality of data, identifying information in data reporting was removed, providing only general descriptions. The participant's a selected pseudonym to be used in the discussion of findings. Additional data, such as demographics, were a part of the TQ instrument and reported as aggregate as another measure of confidentiality.

Informed Consent

The waiver of documentation of informed consent followed ethical guidelines to safeguard the participants' rights throughout the study and was given before the conduction of interviews. The consent outlined the study's description and purpose, participant's role, foreseeable risks and benefits, compensation, privacy and confidentiality, and the researcher's contact information. The consent also included the request for participants to examine and revise their interview transcripts to clarify interpretations. Participants reviewed the document, and their agreement to participate served as their consent.

The waiver of the informed consent form was detailed to assure the participants comprehended the information and possessed the ability to voluntarily consent or decline participation and minimize coercion or undue influence. This comprehensive process was important as students are considered a vulnerable population in research, particularly when they are recruited for their role as a student (Nova Southeastern University, 2018).

Institutional Review Board

In assuring participants' protection, proposed research plans were submitted to the institutional review board (IRB) of each site. IRB approval ensures that research adheres to the highest ethical standards and protects against the violations of human rights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)., IRB approval was obtained from the researcher's degree-granting institution, where the research was deemed exempt from full IRB review. The two other research sites accepted this recommendation. The research plan provided evidence of the measures to ensure participants' protection, specifically students, as they are deemed a vulnerable population. The IRB proposal consisted of the study's description and purpose, participant recruitment, incentive, consent process, measures to protect participants and risks and benefits associated with

participation (Creswell, 2013). Additional documents submitted included the participant letter, the waiver of documentation of informed consent form, TQ instrument, recruitment flyer, scripted emails with the participants, and the interview guide.

Risks and Benefits of Participation

Associated risks of participating in this study included potential psychological discomfort related to discussing experiences or compromised feelings of privacy. Though these risks were mainly due to the interview's nature, they may have also occurred with the TQ questionnaire. While all students may have experienced psychological distress, non-thriving students may be at a higher risk and be protected against this potential harm. The survey results were scripted in a manner to diminish the risk of psychological distress. For those deemed as thriving, the email indicated that their results suggest that they are thriving or doing well in nursing school for those deemed as thriving. For non-thriving students, the email stated that there were areas to improve on to enrich their nursing school experiences. All students were provided with the contact information for the universities' student support services.

Additional risks were minimized by protecting the privacy of participants and maintaining the confidentiality of information. Since an interview's success is associated with trust, every effort was made to ensure participants were at ease and open to discussion without judgment (Polit & Beck, 2017). This required meticulous interviewing skills, including unbiased reactions, creating an atmosphere that fostered trust and openness.

While there were no tangible benefits, the participants may have found value in reflecting on their nursing school thriving experiences. This study was also promising for nursing education and the profession. An enhanced understanding of thriving in nursing education may

lead to increased success among students and professional practice preparation. Moreover, there is potential for a more significant number of competent graduates for the profession.

Data Collection

Before primary data collection, the TQ questionnaire was provided to potential participants as a component of the inclusion criteria. This electronic questionnaire consisted of demographic information, measurements of the five domains of thriving including Engaged learning, Academic determination, Positive Perspective, Social connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship, and additional pathways predictive of student success such as the psychological sense of community, spirituality, level of campus involvement, and student satisfaction (Schreiner et al., 2012). Additionally, five custom questions were included which related to the specific experiences of nursing students. Students were asked to provide an email address if they were interested in their survey results. The survey data was collected and securely stored using Qualtrics. Analysis of the TQ data was carried out using SPSS and students who were thriving, and those who were not thriving were identified.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary source for this interpretive phenomenological study as narratives hold the meanings of the participant's experiences (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell, 2013). From a constructivist view, the interview is led by the participant as the researcher enters the participant's world (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to gain insight into their life situations (Cohen et al., 2000). While the researcher has some knowledge regarding the phenomenon and initially leads the inquiry, the interview resembles conversation as the researcher listens to the participants' narratives (Cohen et al., 2000). The researcher and participant collaborate through discussions during the interview to draw out the phenomenon's interpreted meanings (Lauterbach, 2018).

Since there was no evidence-based definition of thriving in nursing education literature, the interview questions initially used the conceptualization of thriving among the general college student population. The five additional questions were constructed utilizing a nursing education lens. These questions encompassed potential aspects of the success of nursing students: the pursuit of an advanced degree, completion of a previous college degree, and prior experience in healthcare. Additionally, participants were asked to rate their confidence level in the clinical setting and if they saw themselves as a nurse.

A semi-structured interview guide facilitated the process, the dialogue in the expected areas of interest, and the effort to purposefully address the study's research questions (Polit & Beck, 2017; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). More importantly, this semi-structured guide was responsive to the participants' narratives, resulting in an understanding of the thriving nursing students' lived experiences. Also, as J. A. Smith et al. (2009) suggest, the interview guide encouraged the researcher to meaningfully focus on the participant and their words rather than the details of an interview. This provides the opportunity to actively listen to their words and the meanings behind their experiences (Laverty, 2003). Through these actions, the researcher demonstrates commitment, flexibility, and receptiveness to the discussion (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

In this study, the interview guide (see Appendix B) contained information about the interview, including the purpose, expectations, and structure. The opening question was general to promote the participants' ease with the interview and develop rapport (Alase, 2017). Pre-planned content questions, which were based on the conceptualization of thriving among college students, were open-ended, including probes and follow-up questions to elicit stories. The questions maintained the focus on the phenomenon and allowed the participants' responses to

guide the interview. The interview's closing involved clarifications, discussion on the transcript review, assurance of privacy, and confidentiality of data.

Data Management and Organization

The data from the TQ instrument was managed and organized using Qualtrics. During the primary data collection, interviews were recorded and transcribed using a transcription application. The transcriptions were forwarded for analysis to the data management software, NVivo. This data organization contributed to the visualization of the patterns and associations among the participants, leading to themes and sub-themes.

Data Storage

Appropriate storage of data was crucial to safeguarding the privacy of the participants. For the study's pre-screening phase, the students' email addresses and their thriving category were documented on an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet, along with the interview transcription data and audio recordings, was secured on a password-protected computer to prevent breaches of confidentiality or the improper mishandling of data. Field notes were secured in a locked filing cabinet. These measures allowed only the researcher to have access to the data and analyses. The data in the locked filing cabinet and on the password-protected computer, along with the student emails, will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

In the preliminary part of this study, the TQ questionnaire data were analyzed for participant selection. The mean and standard deviation were calculated using SPSS for an overall thriving level within the population. Student scores above the sample mean on the TQ were considered thriving and those below the mean were considered not thriving as suggested by the developers of the instrument (E. McIntosh, personal communication, December 3, 2019). The

overall calculated mean provided the baseline measurement of thriving nursing students in this study's population. There is no standard level of thriving across populations (E. McIntosh, personal communication, December 3, 2019). The level of thriving is specific to individualized cohorts, rather than a national benchmark for college students, as there are different pathways to thriving.

In the primary portion of this study, data analysis in interpretive phenomenology involves an inductive process to reveal the essence of the lived experience (Richards & Morse, 2013), illuminating significant aspects that may otherwise remain beneath the surface (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). This approach embraces the co-construction of data, or fusion of horizons, between the researcher and participants through the hermeneutic circle (Laverty, 2003). As a guide for the inquiry, the hermeneutic circle demonstrates an ongoing process of the relationships between parts of the text to the whole text (Cohen et al., 2000). This process is iterative, as the researcher continuously uncovers deeper meanings through ongoing reflection and writing (Cohen et al., 2000). This process's outcome is the constructions of multiple realities, which involve the blending of meanings articulated by the researcher and participants (Laverty, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004).

For this interpretive phenomenological study, data analysis began during data collection as the researcher actively listened and considered the meaning of the participants' words (Cohen et al., 2000). Through these initial interpretations, the researcher clarified meanings during the interview. Fieldnotes were analyzed for aspects of the interview that were indiscernible on the interview transcripts. Upon completion of data collection, the following valuable analytic steps as defined by Cohen et al. (2000) were utilized:

1. The researcher immersed herself in the data through repetitive reading, resulting in preliminary interpretations (Cohen et al., 2000). While these initial interpretations shaped future coding of data (van Manen, 1994), the researcher maintained a focus on the study's phenomenon (Bynum & Varpio, 2018) and the research questions.

2. Through the ongoing reading of the data, the researcher determined the relevance of specific aspects of the participants' narratives. Once extraneous components were eliminated, the data were entered into line-by-line coding for thematic analysis (Cohen et al., 2000).

3. Once the researcher had a general understanding of the data, thematic analysis proceeded. In the thematic analysis, the researcher scrutinized the transcriptions, labeling, extracting, and comparing themes across the data (Cohen et al., 2000). This multi-stage process was repeated to allow patterns and themes to emerge across all interviews. These themes were then verified with the participants to ensure they aligned with the meaning of their experiences in their lifeworld (Cohen et al., 2000).

The process of writing and rewriting, identifying themes among the transcriptions is crucial to interpretive phenomenology (van Manen, 1994). Moreover, the interpretive process arises from the "dialectical movement between the parts and the whole of the texts of those involved" (Laverty, 2003, p. 21). As the researcher moves about the hermeneutic circle, a merging of meanings articulated by the researcher and participant evolve (Lopez & Willis, 2004), resulting in the construction of multiple realities (Laverty, 2003).

Rigor

The demonstration of rigor in qualitative research is a fundamental concern. Cohen et al. (2000) recommended a critical reflection of the researcher's assumptions and beliefs of the

phenomenon and their influences on the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003). A reflexive journal contributes to the interpretive process (Cohen et al., 2000) and promotes engagement in the hermeneutic circle during data collection and analysis (van Manen, 1994). For this study, a reflexive journal included the researcher's assumptions and biases of thriving and surviving students in higher education. This ongoing reflection contributed to this study's rigor, resulting in valid interpretations of the participants' meanings of their experiences.

In addition to a reflexive journal, qualitative research's integrity is enhanced by the tenets of trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that research findings demonstrate confidence in the truth of the findings, applicability and consistency to other contexts and subjects, and neutrality of the findings, which are unbiased by the researcher. Trustworthiness is established through the elements of credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The quality of research is enhanced through the criteria of trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility is the primary validation criterion, referring to the confidence in the truth of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) regarding the participants and the research context (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017). The researcher must demonstrate an accurate representation of the interpretation of the findings. Member checks solicit the participants' views on the research findings' credibility and subsequent interpretations (Creswell, 2013). As a primary technique for credibility, member checks ensure adequate representation of the participants' constructed realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, member checks occurred throughout the interview process through clarifications and probing to confirm the understanding of the participant's meanings (Polit & Beck, 2017). After data collection, participants were asked to

review interpretations and thematic summaries of the transcripts. This validation strategy

fostered the truth and value of the data Creswell &. Creswell, 2018) assuring an accurate

representation of the participants' experiences.

Additionally, as Sandelowski (1986) suggested, a discussion of the researcher's

experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon establishes the researcher's credibility. This

reflexivity brings awareness to the unique role of the researcher's background, values, and

identity in the research process (Polit & Beck, 2017). In this study, these perspectives and

experiences that may shape the research process were discussed to develop confidence in the

findings and researcher credibility (Creswell, 2013; Polit & Beck, 2017).

Dependability

Closely linked to credibility (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017), dependability is the degree of

consistency and stability of interpretations over time and varying contexts (Baxter & Eyles,

1997; Polit & Beck, 2017). A research study demonstrates dependability when findings are

repeated in subsequent inquiries in identical or similar contexts or subjects (Johnson & Rasulova,

2017). A partial inquiry audit for this study, recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and

Cohen et al. (2000) to enhance dependability, included an examination of a sample of transcripts

and interpretations by external reviewers (Polit & Beck, 2017), specifically the chair of the

researcher's dissertation committee. Additionally, this audit trail documented the decisions made

in the study (Cohen et al., 2000). This careful documentation on the process of inquiry enhanced

the dependability of interpretations.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree of neutrality, or the ability to ensure the research process and

findings are unbiased, including the researcher and the interpretations (Baxter & Eyles, 1997).

While the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research, it is essential to reduce bias (Cohen et al., 2000). The reduction of biases is achieved through a reflexive journal that involves an ongoing reflection on assumptions and biases, especially as they relate to the study's phenomenon. These reflections allowed the researcher to be fully engaged in the lifeworld of the participant. Through these identified presuppositions, the meaning of the lived experiences was brought to life.

An audit trail also supports confirmability and includes a systematic collection of interview transcripts, field notes, thematic analysis, interpretations and inferences, methodological process notes, and reflexive notes from the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2017). The thorough collection of documents in this study demonstrated a transparent description of the research processes to enhance confirmability.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which findings apply to other settings or groups (Polit & Beck, 2017). In this study, a thorough description of the phenomenon allowed the researcher to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions are relevant to other contexts (Amankwa, 2016). Thick description, a technique to assure transferability, includes an extensive account of the research context, participants, and experiences during the inquiry (Amankwa, 2016; Polit & Beck, 2017). Through vivid and contextualized descriptions, the researcher evaluated the likelihood of the transferability of findings to additional settings, experiences, or people (Amankwa, 2016; Cohen et al., 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Authenticity

Authenticity is the extent to which a researcher expresses the ranges in realities, including the diverse feelings, emotions, and values of participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Polit & Beck,

2017; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Through authenticity, the researcher grasps the essence of the participants' experiences, which are representative of their lives (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2017). Authenticity was assured through the rich portrayal of contextual realities. These depictions were confirmed with member checks to ensure authentic representation of realities.

Chapter Summary

Interpretive phenomenology guided the inquiry for this qualitative study, exploring the interpreted meanings of the experiences of thriving nursing students. Through criterion sampling, participant recruitment occurred at three research sites. Participants who were identified as thriving were invited to take part in the interviews, and the participants and the researcher co-created the interpretive meanings of the thriving experiences in nursing school. The interpretive process resulted in a detailed portrayal of the phenomenon of thriving that connects the students to their experiences in nursing school.

Chapter Four

Interpretation of the Findings

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand the meaning of the lived experience of thriving undergraduate nursing students. The participants were individually interviewed using a semi-structured format to explore their thriving experiences. This chapter includes a presentation of the findings and a review of the themes generated during interview data analysis. Quotations from the participants are presented to describe, clarify, and validate the data. Five main themes emerged from the interview data: *professors' investment in students, partnerships with peers, seeing success through hardships, greater purpose,* and *finding a balance.*

Researcher's Reflection on Data

The hermeneutical approach involves the link between the researcher and participants as multiple realities are discovered. Since the realities are situated within an individual's background and experiences, they are embedded in the interpretive process. Thus, as a nursing faculty member and a doctoral student, the researcher's experiences were meaningful in creating and interpreting findings. Though openness was crucial during data collection and analysis, the researcher's personal experiences shaped these interpretations. The researcher has collaborated with many undergraduate nursing students as they worked to succeed in school. Moreover, the researcher has personal experience with success as a doctoral student. Shaping the interpretive process, the researcher's professional role blended with the experiences of the participants. This assimilation of experiences resulted in the co-construction of multiple realities, achieving a sense of understanding as students thrive in nursing school.

Description of Sample

Demographics data for each participant were collected (Appendix C). The sample was comprised of eight undergraduate nursing students from two universities. The six seniors and two juniors represented in the study were each enrolled in a baccalaureate nursing program. The age ranges of the participants were 18 to 20 (n=1), 21 to 23 (n=5), and 27 to 30 (n=2). Seven participants identified as white, while one was African American. There were seven participants who identified as female and one as male. One student held a previous college degree, while three were transfer students from other institutions. Seven participants had jobs while attending nursing school, and the other student was a college athlete.

Professors' Investment in Students

The first theme, the professors' investment in students, was noted across all interviews. Participants described professors as influential, stating they were the most significant resource of their success. They felt the professors were understanding and deeply cared about their success. Furthermore, the professors saw the potential in the students, fostering their confidence and engagement in learning. Through their investment in their success, the participants felt more prepared to navigate challenges.

The participants believed professors understood the students since they endured similar experiences, including the inherent struggles of nursing school. This wisdom was especially critical when students faced difficulties. Professors were able to recognize when students were experiencing challenges and provided the necessary support. Bee described how her professor's understanding led to her ability to work through difficult times in nursing school:

I remember going to [my professor's] office, and I was like, "I'm gonna [try] really hard

not to cry." She's like, "I have had people cry in my office before." She's like, "I

understand. It was hard for me when I was in school too." And she was really understanding… but if she had not been understanding, I don't know. I might not have gone back to office hours with her, and I might have given up.

Other participants echoed Bee's experiences with her professors. The participants felt secure with their professors because they experienced comparable situations in nursing school. This understanding fostered openness and trust, strengthening the relationship between the student and the professor.

The professors' understanding was especially timely during the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic. Though the professors also experienced trials, they recognized that students were struggling. Bee relayed:

[My professor] was just like, "I'm here for office hours. I'm still here. I know we can't see each other in person, but I'm still here"… all the professors were so understanding that we were struggling because they were struggling too. They know that it was something we had never seen before, and the professors are there.

Professors identified that the circumstances of a pandemic transformed the nursing school experience. Therefore, they adapted their approaches to better support students. Brittany described her professor's dedication to her ongoing success:

I would call my professor, on the phone, and we would walk through it, and then that way I was walking through the material with her verbally out loud. And that helped a lot…the professors are there for you to do that, and so I think that like makes a world of a difference for me to be able to communicate.

An awareness of the students' experiences, especially the trials of nursing school, nurtured understanding and trust. Students expressed feelings of security with professors. Penelope described the level of comfort with her nursing professor:

> Well, I remember when I was doing this skill, or I remember when I messed up… it's not an authority. It doesn't seem like, "oh, you're the authority and I'm the student, like you're in control." It feels like we're on the same level, and I think that's what makes us so special is that like, we can come to you as a friend, and an instructor and a nurse, and just anything. So that's nice we're on the same level, although we respect you as an authority figure, like we feel like we can come to you versus… in my computing class I would probably never go see my professor because why should I? I don't know, I feel weird.

Participants felt that their nursing professors were approachable because they understood their experiences. Piper added that there was not a hierarchy system in the nursing program. She described professors as "being there for students on their level." Thus, participants felt at ease in communicating with their professors, especially when they needed support.

Professors and students were on the same team, as they both worked to promote learning. Participants noted that professors genuinely cared about their success. Michael described, "they [professors] have always been there to push me and to bring my best part of me… all of them saw potential in me, and through their words, they really motivated me to become that amazing nurse." Michael further illustrated his positive relationships with his professors:

> There was an instance where I lacked assertiveness. Sometimes, I would just wait to be told everything you know, do this, do that. And one professor noticed that, and she came and told me… "you need to be assertive. You need to, to be bold and be confident. Be a nurse and try as much as possible not to be told to do something. Try to initiate

something," and I began doing that. I really appreciated her concern. And when I stopped

doing that, not only did my preceptor appreciate it, but also the other healthcare teams…

I was bold enough to know to communicate with them on my assigned patients, so I

really appreciate that.

Michael and the other participants valued their professors' commitment to their growth. Similar

to others, Sydney explained that a large part of her success was her professors. It was evident

they cared about student success through their approaches with students. Sydney discussed a

situation where a professor acknowledged her performance in clinical:

I grabbed all the things, and I started [the bed bath], and [the professor] pulled me aside,

and she's like, "you did a really great job today, you know, taking charge of your patient

as if you were the nurse… this is your first day on a new floor, and it was crazy, and there

were codes and a lot of people wanted to watch the codes" … that kind of like calmed

me, and I was able to think through, and it wasn't so scary anymore.

Sydney's professor recognized her work ethic, which provided reassurance and encouragement

of her potential. Through the recognition and support of students, professors instilled confidence

in their students, and as Piper mentioned, this was important when she met challenges such as

anxiety or stress. Without the professor's support and belief in their potential, challenges would

have been harder to face. Participants were able to not only overcome these difficulties but felt

more confident in their abilities.

Though professors cared about their students' success, some participants alluded to

deeper investment in their nursing school experiences. Penelope illustrated an encounter with a

professor in which she described feeling equipped to enter the profession as a holistic nurse. The

professor went beyond the standard expectation of teaching through a learning experience about diversity.

>She took out time of her actual class and her lecture, and we went to the museum… she talked about the history…saying, you know, this hasn't always been this diverse and this is how it affects people's health care, and this is why it's important to learn this because you could also have implicit biases. So, it was just really interesting to hear her actually care more about the community itself, and she wanted us to care about the community itself, and she's like… "I want you to be the most well-rounded nurse." Like that's a holistic nurse… we've learned all the rights of nursing and… if you know all the steps like you can be a great nurse… but if you have these implicit biases and you're not culturally aware and you're not willing to speak up for people who you know are not equal and disproportionately being affected with their healthcare. It was just really cool for me to see her want us to learn this way… it really hit home with me for her to like show this… in today's world, like you need to know this.

Professors extensively prepared students for the profession, educating them in a meaningful manner, as Penelope depicted. Their work impacted the overall lives of students. Piper added that professors did more than just help students with their studies. They provided guidance that exceeded the call of duty. Piper stated that her professors facilitated balance in her life, and while they couldn't solve everything, their support was significant. Their work with students surpassed expectations, which prepared them to navigate both nursing school and their life.

Partnerships with Peers

The support from peers was a significant theme across all interviews. Participants viewed peers as a source of learning. Additionally, the participants felt like they had a place within their

cohort and the broader community. These networks, including their personal supporters, upheld the participants in meaningful ways. Through these connections, the participants confronted the challenges of nursing school. Overall, these positive relationships were crucial to the participants' success and well-being.

Social connections in nursing school contributed to the participants' learning. By sharing a common goal for the commitment to success, the participants relied on each other. Through an interchange of knowledge, the students learned from each other, creating a partnership. They recognized that each person possessed strengths, which contributed to the reciprocal nature of their relationships. Penelope discussed the value of her peer, especially when she needed help in nursing school:

It's almost like having a conversation, and you can bounce ideas back and forth. I'd be like, "oh, I didn't look at it like that," or [my peer] would be like, "I'm really struggling with this," and then me talking through it helps me learn it even better. So that definitely helps me get through hard times with clinical, whether it be a topic or a chapter, or just you know an equation… what helps you get through a lot of the things in nursing school is those students.

Penelope and the other participants appreciated the connections within these partnerships. Students offered varying perspectives, which broadened the scope of knowledge for the participants. Each student had different experiences and knowledge levels, which they used to help each other. As a nursing assistant in a hospital, Sydney had experience caring for patients suffering from cardiac abnormalities. These experiences influenced her ability to help her peers.

[I] was able to draw on those experiences when it came to like being in the lecture, and we were going over it, I was like, "oh, I remember this patient" … I found that it helped

me a lot… I was able to help a lot of my friends… especially with heart blocks, "I was like, oh, I've got a poem that they taught me at work," I was able to share, share that as well.

Just as Sydney did with her peers, the participants shared their knowledge with each other. These connections engaged participants in their learning. Through these partnerships, the participants had the confidence to remain committed to their education and nursing school success.

Given the importance of peer relationships with learning, participants were especially challenged during the pandemic and subsequent online platform. While this situation resulted in various adversities for students, there was a notable impact on peer support, despite connections via technology. Sarah described her frustrations with the lack of peer connection during online learning:

It just wasn't the same as just being there in class, and like, "oh, you just said this. I have a question about that," … and so usually in class, someone will ask a question, and I think, "oh, I didn't think of it that way." And so just the back and forth didn't happen between the faculty in the class, and then me, learning from others and the faculty. It's very frustrating."

Though Sarah stated she did her best to work through this situation, the peer connections within the classroom were halted during the pandemic. This missing component reinforced the necessity of peer collaboration for some of the participants, including Sarah. Students depended on each other for support, and without these relationships, it was hard to deal with the difficulties of nursing school, especially with the pandemic's extraordinary circumstances.

In addition to the supportive nature of peer relationships, participants also noted the value of a smaller nursing community, specifically their cohort. They viewed this connection as a sense

of belonging within a community that understands what they are experiencing. Sarah revealed that the close bond with her classmates was a significant part of her success in nursing school. She stated, "we're in this together. We help each other, we support each other, and that's incredible. I've never had that before." Piper also valued the encouragement of her nursing cohort. She elaborated:

> Working as a team, finding that teamwork with your classmates, because we're a bunch of people who may have prerequisites together, but we didn't know each other as well and then when you're in nursing school. You're in this group… of students… you have to find a way to work together and help each other succeed like you can't just hope for one person to fail… working successfully as a group was helpful in like seeing that transition of strangers to friends.

Together, participants supported each other through their experiences in nursing school. As a result of this teamwork and emotional connection with their peers, the participants experienced a sense of community in nursing school, making them feel like they were a part of a dependable network of friends. Through this sense of community, participants described a bond that was only experienced by their cohort. They understood each other because they shared the same experiences in nursing school. This sharing bolstered their connections, especially as others could not understand due to the lack of experience. Penelope described her familial relationships with her cohort:

> Each cohort is different, but our group of students that we have, we are all so close… it's like a bond that you can't have with anyone else. Like you can talk to your family about it, and you can talk to your significant other about it… but when you're talking about nursing to a nursing student, and they're on that same wavelength as you… there's

nothing better than that because they know exactly what you're going through. Like it's because it is scary. So, when I have something like, "oh my gosh tomorrow I have to do this. I'm so nervous like we have a Sims, like what if, what if I mess up?" Like we all know what we're going through, so that's really what's helped me so much throughout the semesters is the students. Like we are, it's almost like a big family. And I did not know that's how it was going to be in nursing.

These bonds were unique to their nursing cohort, fostering belonging within a smaller community, or family as Penelope identified. Students were a part of a unit, invested in each other's success and well-being. The participants were willing to give their time and energy to their peers.

Some participants also experienced a sense of belonging within a larger community. Though participants had different communities, it was evident they experienced a sense of connection within these groups. Piper shared her sense of community within her church. Through her involvement, she found that this connection provided balance in her life. Claire described her campus experiences as, "a sisterhood [where] you can walk around, and like you know everyone…everyone's inviting and welcoming." She further elaborated on this sisterhood on campus during her experiences as a college athlete:

I've made friends that I know will last a lifetime. I've been blessed to play volleyball, going to be all four years, and the coaches are amazing. I love my team, and honestly, [we are] like a group of sisters. We're so close.

Michael expanded on Claire's feelings of belonging by describing his experiences within the broader community of nursing:

I'm surrounded by a lot of my friends who are already nurses, and some of are male nurses. Some of them have even furthered their education to become practitioners, so it seemed very normal to me. I didn't see it as a bother. When I went to class, yes, you know majority of my classmates are ladies, but still, I mean, I didn't get a second thought towards that topic. When I entered the hospital, I think… majority of the floors that I've worked at, there have [been] male nurses around. Some of them have been my preceptors, so it… seemed very normal to me.

While the participants expressed stronger connections within their nursing cohort, the sense of belonging within the larger group was meaningful. It was essential to be a part of a network, whether it be the campus, church, or a group such as men in nursing. Participants felt valued and that they had a place within these networks.

Though the participants appreciated the significance of their nursing cohort and larger networks, they found additional sources of support during school. These sources included the participants' family members, significant others, or co-workers. They frequently depended on them for emotional support. Piper discussed her mother's role in her success:

Whenever I was stressed out about exams, like, "I'm gonna fail. I'm just gonna fail. You got to take this whole semester [again]." And she was like, "no, you're not. You're gonna take some deep breaths. You're gonna be okay…" she would always take me down from that cliff…because I can't talk to her about patient situations due to HIPAA, but I would go be like, "I had a rough day, like my patient died," and leave it at that and she would be like, "I'm so sorry." I feel like I went to my mother a lot for those situations.

Her mother's emotional support helped Piper endure the challenges in nursing school. While her mother may not have been knowledgeable of nursing, she reinforced Piper's strengths. She and

other participants found encouragement within these support systems. Michael's family inspired him, advocating for his success:

> I have amazing, amazing parents who always encouraged me and pushed me forward. My older sister is a nurse, so… she would encourage me to continue... I have a younger sister who is also in nursing, so… [I am] there to help…I will be there for them. So, family contributed to my success because…when I'm studying with them, I am also reviewing, reminding myself what I've learned in my previous semesters.

The support from Michael's family empowered him to remain engaged in his learning. Michael and the other participants were motivated by their personal sources of support. These networks contributed to their well-being, which was crucial to their success in school.

Peer relationships played a significant role in the experiences of nursing school for the participants. They felt emotionally connected with their peers and had people who supported and understood them. They were invested in their peers' success and well-being. Furthermore, they experienced a sense of belonging, whether it be within their nursing cohort or larger community. They found emotional support through other networks, including their personal contacts. The partnerships they developed were a resource that enhanced the engagement and motivation of students throughout nursing school.

Seeing Success Through Hardships

The experiences of success through hardships in nursing school was a theme across all interviews. Each participant acknowledged the prevalent challenges throughout their educational journey. These difficulties had the potential to influence various aspects of their life. However, the participants shared experiences of how they managed these challenges and flourished in the face of adversity.

Participants considered difficulties as opportunities to learn and grow in nursing school. They recognized the importance of hard work if they expected to succeed. Brittany spoke about her experience in a challenging didactic course:

> I had one of the hardest nursing professors… she's just known for like having a hard class and…it was like on the chronic material… I actually ended up doing really, really well in her class, so I think that kind of like solidified like I know what I'm doing and getting there… my best accomplishment would be like doing as well as I did… especially because it was a hard professor.

Brittany knew she had to put forth the effort to learn the material in the class. She was competent, so long as she invested time and energy into her work. This undertaking resulted in her success in this challenging class. Piper described a related position in the clinical setting:

> When [my professor] was asking me… about, um, I think it was a beta blocker. And she was asking me to go through the RAAS system. I didn't have it down yet, and she kind of, like, I don't like people being upset with me. She probably wasn't upset with me, but she was just like, "well you should know this, we talked about it in clinical or lecture," like, and she went through everything that I was supposed to know about it. I was like, "okay, I am not going to forget that now!" So, I got that down.

Piper viewed her lack of knowledge as an opportunity to expand her learning. She made an effort to not only learn this information but to recall it for the future. Participants perceived challenges in both the classroom and clinical setting as opportunities to broaden their knowledge. Their effort, especially with difficulties in nursing school, was worthwhile to accomplish their academic goals.

Overcoming the demands of nursing school was particularly meaningful for some participants. Some endured considerable difficulties, which eventually led to greater satisfaction upon goal achievement. Sarah shared her frustrations of the impact of her illness on her first degree:

> I first started getting sick [in high school] and wasn't diagnosed until [after college]. So, I went all throughout most of high school and all of college, and it was such a struggle… it was very much a struggle to go to class. It was a struggle to learn. It took me five and a half years to get my bachelor's degree… taking one class at a time, just doing how I had to. Finally, this [nursing school] is what I wanted. That helps to knowing how long and hard I have worked for this… I can't believe [it]… I think when I got that letter that I was accepted. Oh my gosh. Wow.

Similar to Sarah's experience, Sydney also struggled before her acceptance into nursing school. She expressed her hardships before beginning the program:

> It was actually a Spanish professor… he was very understanding… if I was having a bad mental health day. I wasn't, he was always making sure that… [it] wasn't going to negatively impact my grade… towards the end of the semester, he voiced his concerns that he wasn't sure if I was going to be able to do well on the final because of how much class that I had missed. And he suggested that I look into taking a medical leave of absence, and other things had kind of accumulated to that point where I was not in a very good place mentally, and it took reading that, that I was like, "wow, yeah, he's kind of right. I'm not in a good place," …my mom came to pick me up… and I was able to be home with my family. Starting school again on a new campus, that was scary, but it was, I was relieved that I was kind of able to start getting into the swing of being the student

that I know that I was capable of being. And so, when I finally applied [to the nursing program] and then I got that letter, like it was all of those things accumulating together that I was like, "wow, I overcame a really hard thing." And my hard work kind of showed for…that… I am capable of doing hard things.

Sydney and Sarah encountered significant and lengthy setbacks in their educational journeys. Despite these difficulties, the participants were determined to reach their goal of getting into the nursing program. They possessed an overwhelming fortitude to fulfill their dream of becoming a nurse.

Though some experiences throughout school deeply challenged the participants, they also recognized their purpose. Participants realized that they needed to encounter trials before understanding their abilities to succeed. This realization led to the confidence to not only cope with the demands of school but prevail over adversities. Bee accepted the inevitability of hardships in nursing school with this mindset:

It's two o'clock in the morning. You're crying because you just don't know if you can do it anymore. Like all those little, like the things that make you feel like you're defeated and then, like, a little shining light, a little professor is like, "you're gonna get through this. Okay, even if it's hard, you will get there, but it takes a lot of work and a lot of motivation and determination." Because even though it was hard, you get there, and you just don't give up. That's thriving. You had the opportunity to go through those experiences and learn from them. And, like, if you're always on the top all the time you wouldn't really be thriving because you wouldn't be learning anything new. You need to go to those experiences to learn from them. And then you get to your end result, and you're never not learning in nursing. You're always learning.

Bee acknowledged the role that challenges play in her capabilities to succeed. She understood that persistence led to positive outcomes. Michael had a similar attitude:

> Something that betters you, even if it's a transition, just change, even if it's very very hard, just transition. So, I kept on encouraging myself and seeing the positiveness of that route. And it was easier for me now to kind of embrace it fully. Normally you know some people like, "oh, the next semester," but I normally I tell myself it's time for you to grow you know. It's time for you, it's time for you to experience, you know growth in your life. Go, go, go.

The participants knew that enduring hard situations were worth it. Though participants confronted various adversities in nursing school, the clinical setting was notoriously burdensome. Yet, Michael recognized that increased effort in didactic courses contributed to his abilities to succeed in the clinical environment. He shared, "getting to go in and learning, or getting to see what I learned in theory, being put into practice and becoming successful, that gives me such a great satisfaction by the end of the day." Despite the investment of time and energy, overcoming clinical challenges was an achievement, as Michael conveyed. Claire succinctly shared, "when you do something right with a real human being as your patient in front of you like that, that feels great. So, that probably [is] one of my biggest successes." Moreover, Brittany felt that her persistence through clinical challenges solidified her reasons for nursing:

> I think without the clinical, I think it reassures me that, "okay, this is why I'm doing it," because it's hard to get lost like with all the work and everything like that, but then when you go to clinical it reminds, it reminds me that like, "okay, this is why I want to be a nurse because I enjoy every minute of it."

The inherent challenges of nursing school clarified what participants wanted with their goals. Therefore, experiencing trials in nursing school, whether in the class or clinical, highlighted what they genuinely wanted in life. Participants were willing to invest the necessary effort and motivation to reach their goal of becoming a nurse.

The participants recognized that hardships were inevitable in nursing school. Though they experienced failures, these trials were growth opportunities. This development not only involved learning but the determination in their abilities to succeed. More importantly, the participants developed the confidence that they will be a good nurse. Penelope summarized this well when discussing her challenges: "I know I'm going to be a good nurse, and I know I'm going to be able to do it, it might just take a little bit, maybe a little harder for me to get there." Nonetheless, the participants shared that they would reach their goals eventually, through unrelenting effort.

Greater Purpose

Participants perceived success in nursing school beyond traditional measures such as grades. Though achieving a good grade was appreciated, participants experienced other gratifying means, especially in the clinical environment. Accomplishment was defined as the application of knowledge to a real-world setting and the human connection with patients. Therefore, the participants invested effort in nursing school for a greater purpose.

Some participants felt that knowledge application was more important than grades. It was necessary to use what they had learned rather than answer a question correctly on an exam. Bee described her experiences after she recognized the value of learning beyond the exam:

I start getting on that tangent where I'm like, "okay, like, I'm never gonna get into grad school," and you just start like defeating yourself. You start thinking all those negative

thoughts. And then I'm just like, I don't know, I just remind myself that it's gonna be okay. It's not all about the grades. One of the nurses I work with, they'll remind me that too… you need to step back and… realize that sometimes 2% less on an exam is worth going to sleep at night, just so you can be well, because you can't just cram it all into your brain because you need to fully understand it, because you're applying it. You're not just memorizing it. And I think that's another part of nursing school that makes it so hard.

Bee recognized that working hard to study the material in school was not just for exams. This knowledge was applied to the care of her patients. Piper revealed a similar experience:

Being able to connect what I was learning in the classroom into the field. I thought that that was so neat seeing all that and I was actually getting an understanding of what was going on, because like, after the test, I would have been like, yeah I got an A or B or whatever, but I didn't understand it as well until I saw it on the patients which I thought that was pretty, I guess successful. Because the grade thing is just on paper, it's not taking care of the patients like it says like, "oh, you knew this for this time," but like taking care of the patients is more important to me. I mean, you need to know that stuff to take care of the patient. Yeah, I no longer was like, I need to get all A's in my classes. I just need to be able to understand the material. If I understand the material, that's okay.

It was more important for participants to grasp the material and apply it to their nursing practice. Penelope emphasized the value of knowledge application rather than focusing on grades:

I always had to tell myself, like if I missed a question and I changed my answer I'm like, "dang it, I could have got like, you know, 1% better or whatever," but then I have to remind myself I'm like, "okay, at least I know the right answer." Although I missed it on the exam, I knew the right answer, and that's what's gonna matter when I'm in the hospital

working with that patient. It doesn't matter that I got one less point on the exam. I always have to remind myself because I'm such a perfectionist in class… but then it's very comforting to know that I didn't know the right answer in that, in that case I could double-check and ask the question like, "hey, [am] I'm doing this right?" I'm not thinking crazy. I know what I'm doing. So, I do have to remind myself that, that's what I think of like success in nursing.... I don't think that that necessarily equates to how you're going to be as a nurse because I know I know I tell my students, or my fellow students all the time like, "okay you missed a few more questions…but you know the right answer, and that's all that matters because you're going to be able to put that to the test when you actually practice."

Penelope and the other participants recognized that their learning went beyond their exams in class. While they may have hoped for good grades, it was more important to understand the material and apply it in the clinical setting.

In addition to knowledge application, some participants shared their desire to discern why things occurred with their patients. They wanted to explore deeper rather than take something at face value. Understanding the why resulted in greater fulfillment for the participants. Piper shared her satisfaction when she recognized what was going on with her patients:

Understanding why everything in his body was doing what it was doing. I couldn't help him, but understanding that that's what's happening, and I can explain that to family. I thought that that was... I mean, it was horrible for the family. And then there was another patient who hemorrhaged, until like seeing that example, and applying it to the clinical setting, and knowing why it happened. But they're both really sad, and my patients didn't

survive them, but I thought that that was good that I could understand what was going on so that I could provide the care that needed to be done.

She further explained how her understanding of the patient's care was a necessity in her practice:

I'd like to know that stuff… if you don't know that stuff taking care of your patients, you can't take good care of your patient, you're just going to do the skills and, "okay, time to clock out." You can think about what those meds are, actually giving and doing.

Piper and some of the other participants wanted to learn more to understand why things were being done. Their motivation to seek understanding resulted in greater satisfaction and contributed to the achievement of their goals.

While the participants sought to understand the care of their patients, they expressed a more powerful motivator in nursing school: the human connection. They valued opportunities to relate to their patients. As Sarah succinctly stated, she cherished, "the human interaction and taking care of people." These significant relationships inspired the participants to achieve their goals in nursing school. Bee expressed her reasons for wanting to become a nurse:

A lot of people start nursing because they want to help people… all of my advisors asked me this question all the time, and that's why I'm like it's kind of an evolving answer…you have those days where you're like, "why did I do this? I'm so stressed out. I don't know why I'm doing this," and then you like you make those connections with your patients, and you're like, this is why I'm doing this.

She further shared her experiences during the pandemic, and its powerful effect on her connections with patients:

I feel like it's more like the connections you're bringing to people like, especially right now in these COVID times. These people are so lonely. And it's really, it's really great

just to meet those connections with people… I go home crying some days because I feel so bad for these people right now, but it really is like these connections that you're getting to bring to people and helping people.

These deep connections with her patients strengthened Bee's ambitions in nursing school. Brittany offered a specific experience with her patient that gave meaning to the human connection:

[I was] transporting someone the other day, and I just like reached down and grabbed her hand because like she just like looked like, intense. So, I think when you see the emotion, and then someone's grateful. And they don't have to be grateful at all. It's, it means a lot because… I want to help people. I want to make them feel better, and so they kind of reassure you that that's what you're doing.

Claire portrayed a similar experience in which she cherished the opportunity to connect with her patient:

I had one patient who…was battling pancreatic cancer and was probably going to die soon. So, I guess just realizing that like what you learn, and everything like that happens to real people with real families and everything, so being there in the moment and like feeling the pain with them. It's all very real, so that was even like a challenging aspect to, to finally experience as a nursing student because we're just in the classroom…but once you finally see it, [it] hits home, and they're holding your hand. He was crying. I was crying. It was really sad, but he was giving me like life advice, and then we hugged at the end and all…I feel like I just learned so much from him and he was so easy to talk to, and he just loved life…so I really felt like a good connection with him.

Claire and the other participants cherished their meaningful relationships with patients. It was worthwhile to develop these connections as they gave purpose to their role as a future nurse. These connections inspired the participants to put forth the effort to achieve their goals.

The participants shared the meaning of their experiences in nursing school. These experiences, specifically their learning and patient connections, surpassed the goal of obtaining good grades. Participants shared that it was more important to learn the material in a more meaningful manner. Moreover, as they applied this knowledge in the clinical setting, they were able to make meaningful connections with their patients, leading to a greater, more fulfilling purpose in nursing school.

Finding Balance

Though their academic performance was important, several participants identified the need to take care of themselves, especially as they faced the realities of stress in nursing school. The participants sought to find balance in their lives rather than solely focus on their work in school. They valued other aspects of their life, including their mental, physical, and spiritual health. If the participants could maintain a balance of these components, as Sydney explained, they felt more prepared to conquer school difficulties. Michael described his experiences as he adjusted his responsibilities in his life:

> As a working student, getting enough time to study outside class, working full-time, and I'm very much involved with my family. I'm very much involved with church activities. So, trying to combine all that and getting to study by myself was a little bit challenging… what I did was, I just tried as much as possible to create more time.... for me, family and faith is very important. Very, very important. So, I tried as much as possible to maintain family and faith, still creating more time to study. When it comes to the studying, I would

make sure that I create enough time during the day to study outside class as much as possible… and then I would spend my time in prayer early in the morning before I go to my classes… And then when it comes to my social aspect, I created time now from Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for them… and then on Saturday, I will be at home helping my parents in whatever they want me to do…and then Monday to Thursday was just was learning, learning, learning.

Though Michael had many parts in life to manage, he assured time for what was most important to him: his family and spirituality. Other participants also recognized the value of a balanced life, highlighting it above grades. They realized that there was more to life than obtaining high grades, especially if it sacrificed their overall well-being. Brittany recognized the value of this balance in nursing school:

I think like studying is still important, but I'm not going to break my back [to] try and get an A or B, and like lose sleep or lose my mental health because I had a roommate who was like that, and I think seeing her just like [that]. She would like get so, so nervous about studying that she would like constantly study more than I would. It was unhealthy how she was studying because like she wouldn't take any time [for] herself or anything. Um, and so like I'm seeing her do all these not healthy things for just so that she could get an A, and I think like seeing that, I was like wow you know, [I am] totally fine with having my sense and being able to sleep rather than killing myself over an A or B.

Brittany, along with some of the other participants, recognized the need for balance in their lives. Through this realization, they adjusted their time to incorporate wellness practices, such as spirituality or sleep. Their effective time management with their academics and personal life helped maximize their success.

Several of the participants highlighted the role of spirituality in their life, which was a factor of their well-being. Spirituality provided a foundation for their life, which helped them cope with difficult situations in nursing school. Piper elaborated on its role in her experiences:

I like reading my Bible… I feel like it helps me feel closer to God, and then when I'm not exposed to God, I feel like my life is falling apart. And like, I get into that more stress that I can't do this or that, but when I'm spending more time with God, it helps [me] find that balance. It just comes naturally. I don't know, it's I don't even have to try as hard to find that balance because that's like, "I got it! I will find that balance for you." But when you stray from that, it's just like, all over the place.

The spiritual balance that Piper described also influenced the care of her patients. She revealed:

[I] help them find balance in that time as well…if they're [patient's family] is already doing it, then I'd be like, let me pray with you… so, I can bring my balance over to them a little bit. When my patient was passing on Monday, there was a wife and sister there, and they were praying, and I was just praying with them, because it's just like, "that's all I can do for you right now as we watch your husband, your brother pass. I will pray with you. I'll provide some comfort."

Spirituality served as a tool in Piper's ability to provide comfort for the dying patient's family, but also as she personally dealt with this loss. She viewed her faith as an anchor during difficult times. Michael shared similar views as he incorporated his spirituality into patient care. He described its meaning in his nursing practice:

We encourage to care for one another, and not only just to care for one another, [but] to give the best care you can give, because you know you're not only accountable to your boss, you're not only accountable to the patient, but also the one who created, both the

boss and the patient. So, you tend to, you tend to do your very best with a clear heart, with a loving heart, despite how they react…you recognize you are there for them so you can give the best care.

Some of the participants viewed their spirituality as a source of support to not only navigate nursing school but become empathic providers of care. Spirituality provided a sense of stability, and when overlooked, as Piper explained, their balance in life was interrupted. This imbalance resulted in a disruption in their abilities to effectively manage challenges in nursing school. Therefore, the participants concentrated on sustaining their spirituality to promote balance and their well-being.

The participants recognized the impact of their well-being on their success in nursing school. They believed they needed to find balance within their lives rather than solely focus on their academic performance. While doing well in school was important, it was vital to prioritize their well-being, including their mental, physical, and spiritual health.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included a presentation of the findings and an examination of the themes based on data analysis. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of thriving nursing students. The five emergent themes from the interview data clarified the study's purpose. These themes included: *professors' investment in students, partnerships with peers, seeing success through hardships, greater purpose,* and *finding a balance.* The participants believed that professor and peer relationships were significant sources of support throughout nursing school. With their professors' empathy for their experiences and commitment to their success, the participants felt more capable as a future nurse. In addition to the relationships with their professors, they found encouragement through their nursing cohort, larger communities, and

personal sources of support. The participants expressed belonging and emotional support within these networks, contributing to persistence through challenges. Their perseverance was also related to the intrinsic motivators of nursing school, rather than their abilities to obtain good grades. The participants emphasized the significance of applying their knowledge to clinical and developing meaningful connections with their patients. While academic performance was important, they also recognized the need to find balance in nursing school. Participants took the time to care for themselves, including their mental and spiritual well-being. By discovering this balance in their lives, the participants considered themselves as thriving. Chapter 5 includes a more thorough discussion and interpretation of these themes.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Summary

Nursing students possess unique factors that influence their abilities to be successful in their program of study. Their pathways to thriving include professor and peer support, persistence through challenges, the discovery of a greater purpose, and finding a balance in life. In this chapter, the summary of the findings will be discussed, including their potential for integration into existing nursing literature. The limitations of this study will be considered, along with the implications of the findings for the profession.

Summary of Thriving

Existing approaches to student success in college primarily focus on academic achievement measures, including retention and graduation rates (Kuh et al., 2006; McIntosh & Colver, 2018). In addition to other facets of success like persistence and engagement, an exploration of the psychological perspectives of success and student learning is valuable. This perspective is mostly missing in the understanding of student success (Bean, 2005). Therefore, a wider lens of success is crucial if educational attainment is expected.

The concept of thriving, first advanced by Schreiner (2010a), transcends the standard academic view of success. Thriving is a holistic vision of success incorporating college's integral components, including academic performance, engagement in learning, healthy relationships, positivity, commitment to making a difference, and openness to differences (Schreiner, 2010a). This perspective shifts from a reactive, failure prevention stance in academia to a proactive view of success. This expanded vision shapes the way students experience college, leading to enhanced success.

Despite the implication of thriving among the general college student population, nursing education lacks a clear and comprehensive view of success (Jeffreys, 2015). The current approaches in nursing focus heavily on academic measures such as retention, graduation, GPA, and NCLEX-RN pass rates (Beauvais et al., 2014; Bennett et al., 2016; Campbell & Dickson, 1996; Denham et al., 2018; Peruski, 2019; Timer & Clauson, 2011; Wambuguh et al., 2016). While these success factors are important, they diminish the significance of students' psychological preparation for the profession. The key to increasing student success, facilitating retention and combating attrition lie in the students' ability to succeed. Students must be ready for the profession's demands, and this holistic preparation begins in nursing school. Through the concept of thriving, an integrated approach to success in nursing school is generated.

Summary of the Integration of Findings

This study sought to understand the experiences of students as they thrive in nursing school. This understanding yielded a more comprehensive vision of success in nursing education. Five themes were discovered, including *professors' investment in students, partnerships with peers, seeing success through hardships, greater purpose,* and *finding a balance.* These themes will inform the nursing literature.

Professors' Investment in Students

The professors' investment in students contributed to the level of thriving among participants. Students reported that there were professors who empathized with the participants' experiences in nursing school. They told the students that they had been there and encountered similar challenges. Professors shared these experiences with the participants, including their vulnerabilities, which helped students recognize their capabilities to withstand challenges. Furthermore, this empathy from the professors fostered trust with the participants. Professors

were approachable, and students revealed their struggles in school and their lives. This attentive approach supported students throughout their experiences in nursing school.

Professors further promoted the success of the thriving participants by going beyond the expectations of teaching. They did more than just teach in the classroom and clinical setting. Professors instilled a sense of confidence in the student's ability to succeed. Seeing potential in their students, professors challenged students to reach a higher level of thinking. Professors believed in their abilities, which enhanced their determination to learn. They genuinely wanted students to be exceptional nurses, and with this investment in their success, the participants thrived.

The importance of relationships between professors and nursing students has been explored in other studies. They found that professors were influential in the participants' ability to thrive in nursing school. The student-educator relationship plays a significant role in achieving positive learning outcomes (Mikkonen et al., 2015), including engagement in learning (Chan et al., 2017) and the overall improvement of academic performance (Torregosa et al., 2016). The professor's approach with the participant shaped this collegial relationship. Behaviors of empathy, positivity, and respect foster confidence and motivation among nursing students (Chan et al., 2017; Mikkonen et al., 2015). When professors share their own experiences with students, it inspires confidence (Fifer, 2019). By divulging their vulnerabilities, mutual respect was formed as the participants perceived compassion and understanding from professors. Through this caring approach, a positive learning environment can be created (Eller et al., 2014), in which students feel understood and challenged yet supported. Through this positive learning climate, professors invested in the participants' success, enriching their nursing school experiences.

Partnerships with Peers

The relationships with peers contributed to the participants' thriving in nursing school. They supported each other, which encouraged engagement in their learning. Furthermore, participants experienced a sense of connectedness through their peer relationships. They fit into a group, feeling accepted and valued by their peers. Being a part of their cohort reassured their confidence to confront challenges because they experienced the same difficulties as their peers.

While the sense of belonging within the nursing cohort was crucial to their success, the participants also felt supported by other communities. These broader networks offered support to the participants in various ways, including emotional support. While these networks may not fully understand nursing school experiences, they were valuable to the students' ability to thrive.

In addition to professor support, peer relationships nurtured thriving among the participants. Participants looked to their peers for knowledge and emotional support within their group. Due to strong peer connections within a social context, learning was enhanced (Jacobs, 2017). Moreover, this socialized learning reinforced these relationships as students share the same experiences in a safe, non-threatening environment (Ravanipour et al., 2015). Within their cohorts, the participants understood each other, which made them feel valued and supported. Additionally, peer connections are strengthened by mutual emotional support (Ravanipour et al., 2015). These deep investments in each other not only enhanced the confidence for nursing practice (Nelwati et al., 2018), but generated a sense of community (Terry et al., 2019). Through the sharing of the same values and experiences, they experienced belonging, which further promoted positive learning experiences. These meaningful connections supported the participants' thriving throughout nursing school.

Seeing Success through Hardships

While nursing school challenges, especially in the clinical setting, were unavoidable, the thriving students felt they were not paralyzing. These difficulties were meaningful, and participants often pursued them rather than avoid them. They normalized challenges, as they were a part of their learning, rather than a lack of their abilities. Participants experienced fulfillment after putting forth the necessary effort to overcome these difficulties. These opportunities to grow were impactful and contributed to their pursuit of being a nurse.

While the participants valued support from their professors and peers, they heavily relied on their capabilities to do well in school. Nursing curricula presents numerous challenges with intense learning and clinical practice. Despite these demands, students who focus on their abilities can persist through challenges. Self-efficacy in nursing school is invaluable as it contributes to decreased stress (Rayan, 2019), enhanced learning motivation (Hassankhani et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2015), and the use of positive coping strategies (Zhao et al., 2015). The participants, who appeared to possess a stronger sense of self-efficacy, viewed challenges as tasks to be mastered regardless of the difficulty. By trusting in their capabilities, students were empowered to overcome adversity. The participants used this resilience as a coping mechanism associated with academic success (Beauvais et al., 2014) and psychological well-being (He et al., 2018; Li & Hasson, 2020). As a coping mechanism, the participants' resilience supported their abilities to adapt to difficulties, maintain optimism and positivity, and support others (He at al., 2018). Though nursing school demands are inevitable, the participants were equipped with the necessary abilities to thrive despite adversities.

Greater Purpose

Perceptions of success went beyond measures such as grades. While the participants felt that these measures were necessary, they were not at the expense of other factors. They concentrated on internal aspects that had lasting effects on their experiences in nursing school. With this intrinsic motivation, the participants evaluated success as their ability to apply knowledge to the clinical setting. This application was more gratifying than achieving a high grade on an exam. Additionally, the relationships with patients were exceptionally meaningful. The participants expressed fulfillment when they connected with their patients on a deeper level. Thriving students possessed a broader worldview, focusing on the greater purpose of their nursing school experiences.

Motivation was another factor necessary for thriving as participants navigated nursing school. Though good grades were important, the participants were intrinsically motivated by applying their knowledge to patient care and their connections with patients in the clinical setting. The participants were motivated to integrate their learning from the classroom to the care of their patients. Though this integration is often challenging, students were determined to deliver optimal care to patients (ten Hoeve et al., 2017). The participants recognized the value of quality, safe patient care. Therefore, despite the challenges of knowledge application, delivering this care was more important. Additionally, the participants were inspired to succeed because of their connections with patients. Students often express gratitude for the opportunity to care for and satisfy their patients' needs (Petges & Sabio, 2020; ten Hoeve et al., 2017). These relationships strengthen the intrinsic motivation for nursing, enhancing students' confidence and self-esteem (Suikkala & Leino-Kilpi, 2005). Therefore, the participants believed that the essence

of nursing originated from applying clinical knowledge and meaningful connections with patients.

Finding a Balance

Participants understood the necessity of taking care of themselves throughout nursing school. Finding a balance of their mental, physical, and spiritual facets of their lives were essential to thrive in school. This balance not only affected the students but enhanced their confidence and empathy with their patients and families. While school was important, the participants prioritized taking care of themselves. By attaining balance in their lives, nursing school was more achievable.

In addition to the intrinsic factors of success, the participants identified the necessity of taking care of themselves while in nursing school. Students encounter intense stress throughout nursing school, affecting their mental well-being (Mitchell, 2018; Subke et al., 2020). It is beneficial for students to take care of themselves by balancing their personal, academic, and professional lives. This balance is necessary to control stress and promote well-being (B. L. Snyder, 2020). The participants acknowledged the importance of obtaining balance to effectively cope and achieve overall thriving. Since self-care practices positively impact nursing students' abilities to cope with stressors (Jenkins et al., 2019), the participants identified ways to replenish their inner sources of strength and persistence, including spirituality (Subke et al., 2020). Since spirituality added balance in their own lives, the participants could effectively meet their patients' spiritual needs, resulting in quality care (Abbasi et al., 2014). Therefore, finding a balance, including their spiritual well-being, impacted their nursing school experiences and personal and professional lives.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study support an expanded perspective on success in nursing school to sufficiently prepare students for the profession. In reflecting on the meaning of the findings, there are implications for nursing education, practice, research, and public policy. Additionally, the conclusions inform future research on the understanding of thriving among nursing students.

Implications for Nursing Education

Despite the standard measures of success in nursing education, thriving provides an opportunity for a more inclusive approach. This approach integrates additional success factors that are often neglected when the focus is on NCLEX-RN pass rates, graduation rates, and GPA. By considering the impact of non-academic factors, nursing education can cultivate thriving among nursing students.

Based on the study's findings, suggested nursing education practice changes include increased professors' support and peer collaboration. Professors need to have an awareness of the context of today's nursing practice. By investing in the students' experiences in nursing school, professors can teach them how to face adversity and grow stronger as a future leader in the profession. The emphasis should be on recognizing and nurturing students' strengths. These learning experiences can include students' active engagement, reflection, and collaborative strategies (Schreiner et al., 2012). Furthermore, the findings suggest that professors should demonstrate an understanding of the students' experiences. It is valuable to permit students to express their difficulties openly. Their ability to face their weaknesses can be supported when professors expose their nursing school experiences' vulnerabilities. Fostering an understanding helps students strengthen their internal attributes to persevere and remain engaged in their learning.

The findings also stimulate the need for peer collaboration and a sense of community within the classroom and clinical setting. Providing opportunities for students to connect is crucial and contributes to their learning engagement (Schreiner et al., 2012). Professors and nursing programs can structure learning experiences that allow students to connect on varying levels. Both structured and unstructured opportunities within the nursing program and campus can engage students, enhancing their sense of belonging within their cohort and college community.

Implications for Nursing Practice

A viable nursing workforce is essential to address the diverse challenges of the health care system. Nurses must be equipped to meet the evolving changes in care delivery and role expectations (Jones et al., 2019). Thriving students possess attributes that contribute to their achievement and well-being in nursing school. These intrinsic and extrinsic factors support their ability to manage the challenges, especially in the clinical setting. Through these learning opportunities in school, thriving students evolve as future nurses, enhancing their readiness for practice. If students are more prepared in nursing school, they may be more likely to thrive as nurses, delivering quality care, resulting in better patient outcomes.

Implications for Nursing Research

Academic factors such as NCLEX-RN pass rates, graduation rates, and GPA are the standard measures of success in nursing programs. These measures are not always accurate, as additional assessments of success are necessary (Denham et al., 2018; York et al., 2015). Therefore, an expanded definition of success beyond these measures incorporates a more holistic view and acknowledgment of additional factors that influence students' college experiences. By broadening the conception of success, thriving can complement traditional academic measures,

leading to a more robust assessment of success. Therefore, the study's findings contribute to the ongoing research of thriving, a comprehensive vision of nursing students' success. Further research on the factors of non-thriving students would also add to a universal understanding of thriving. Additionally, this holistic view could address the academic achievement gaps and identify additional thriving pathways for underrepresented student groups. Finally, it would be valuable to explore thriving students' experiences as they enter into the profession as it may contribute to a more prepared and retained nursing workforce.

Implications for Public Policy

Nursing students and nurses encounter unique challenges that can place their health at risk (ANA, 2017). The current pandemic intensifies these risks, with the probable occurrence of mental stress and psychological trauma. The ANA (2020) anticipates increased burnout rates as nurses face the pandemic's ongoing mental and physical burdens, including moral distress. Therefore, it is even more critical to identify ways to promote nursing students and nurses' wellness and safety. Students need to be sufficiently prepared for the current workplace to counteract the profession's impending burnout. Thriving, a contributory factor to nursing students' well-being, is a means to ready them for practice. Furthermore, this comprehensive vision of success aligns with the ANA's initiative to ensure the health, safety, and wellness of nursing students and nurses. Consequently, this study's findings add to future initiatives in nursing programs that align with public policy's health and wellness goal among nurses.

Due to the demand for more baccalaureate-prepared nurses (IOM, 2011), it is also essential to graduate competent and prepared students for the profession. Qualified nurses are needed as health care delivery and practice roles evolve (Jones et al., 2019). Additionally, nurses should be prepared to support public health during extraordinary challenges such as a pandemic.

Thriving contributes to the students' optimal functioning, enhancing their college success (Schreiner et al., 2012). The study's findings lead to a deeper understanding of how to support success in nursing school. With this knowledge, more qualified and educated students can enter into practice, positively influencing public health.

Limitations

Despite interpretive phenomenology's contribution to the representation of the meanings of participants' lived experiences, there are limitations to the design. The nature of the interview process can influence participant responses. In addition to the researcher's presence, the researcher's position as a nursing faculty member may have inhibited full disclosure. Additionally, participants may not have been consistently articulate and perceptive, limiting the full expression of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In phenomenology, participants must have experienced the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2013). In this study, criterion sampling was utilized to identify participants who were deemed thriving using the TQ questionnaire. This may pose a limitation to the study as there may be additional characteristics of thriving in nursing students that were not represented in the inclusion criteria.

In addition to methodological limitations, participant recruitment and data collection occurred during a pandemic. Recruitment was prolonged and resulted in a decreased number of expected participants in the prescreening group. Nonetheless, data saturation was reached. Additionally, the pandemic was thought to potentially influence the participants' thriving experiences. Yet, only a few participants briefly mentioned it throughout the interviews. The participants sought out resources to overcome any challenges resulting from the pandemic and was not considered as great a limitation as initially anticipated.

Chapter Summary

The current, fragmented approach in nursing education fails to consider the interplay of the various facets of success. Furthermore, the definition of thriving in the general college student population is insufficient as it neglects the nursing profession's unique aspects. The study's findings go beyond the nursing literature's existing definition of success, establishing a thriving pathway for nursing students. As the thriving participants identified, achieving stability in life required internal and external aspects, including professor and peer relationships, success through challenges, greater motivation, and finding a balance in life. This study's conceptualization of thriving generates an in-depth understanding of student success by incorporating these critical psychological factors. This comprehensive vision significantly advances existing knowledge, including nursing education, practice, research, and public policy. Without the study's findings, the current, incompetent approach to success is insufficient in preparing students for the increasingly complex healthcare environment. With this vision of success, future work will underscore the urgency of thriving to help students thrive in school and their nursing practice.

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Appendix A

Enrollment Demographics of Study Sites

Demographic Data	Research Site 1 $N = 129$	Research Site 2 $N = 957$	Research Site 3 $N = 99$
Gender			
Female	114	821	99
Male	15	136	0
Age			
17-26	105	766	98
27-36	17	147	1
37-46	5	61	0
47-53	2	6	0
Race/Ethnicity			
Hispanic/Latino	18	529	6
Black/African American	12	178	0
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	0	0
Asian	4	26	2
White	87	171	90
Two or More Races	1	0	1
Other/Unknown	6	53	0

Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. Basic information about the interview

   a. Informed consent

      i. Confidentiality

      ii. Use of audio recording

   b. Time and date of interview

   c. Setting

   d. Establish a pseudonym

2. Introduction

   a. Purpose of the study

      i. To learn more about the experiences of undergraduate students in nursing school, specifically as students strive to succeed. Understanding how students succeed can help other nursing students

   b. Structure of interview (general format, timing, number of questions)

   c. Initial questions from interviewee

3. Opening questions

   a. What made you want to be a nurse?

4. Content questions

   a. Tell me about your successful experiences in nursing school.

      i. Tell me about the aspects that contributed to your success.

      ii. Can you give an example of the resources you used?

      iii. Can you tell me more about these experiences while in the clinical setting?

   b. Tell me about your challenging experiences in nursing school.

      i. Tell me how you dealt with challenges.

      ii. Can you give an example of the resources you used?

      iii. Can you tell me more about these experiences while in the clinical setting?

   c. Define thriving: getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are engaged in your *learning*, engaged *socially*, and engaged *psychologically*.

   d. Can you tell me about your experiences as they relate to thriving?

        i. What does thriving mean to you?

5. Probes

    a. "When that happened, how did you feel?"

    b. "Could you explain your response more?"

    c. "Tell me more."

    d. "Do you have any examples of this?"

    e. "What did you mean by (term)?" or "What does (term) mean to you?"

6. Closing instructions

    a. "Are there any other questions that you think I should have asked?" or "Is there anything else you would like to share?"

        i. If you think of anything you would like to share or add, feel free to email.

    b. Express gratitude

    c. Follow-up contact information

        i. Will follow-up via email address provided on survey

        ii. You will also be asked to review the main themes of your interview to assure the interpretations are accurate and reflect what you intended to say. This will be emailed to you within one month of your interview. You will be provided two weeks to review and make revisions as necessary.

Appendix C

Sample Demographics

	n=8
Gender	
Female	7
Male	1
Age	
18-20	1
21-23	5
27-30	2
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latino	1
White	7
Student Status	
Junior	2
Senior	6
Other Commitments	1
Work	6
Student Athlete	1