

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Minority nursing students' perception of their baccalaureate program

Marian Tabi, Kathy Thornton, Melissa Garno, Alison Rushing

Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia

**Correspondence:** Marian M. Tabi, PhD, MPH, RN. Address: Georgia Southern University, School of Nursing, P. O. Box 8158, Statesboro, Georgia 30460. Email: mtabi@georgiasouthern.edu.

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## Abstract

**Background:** Review of the literature indicates that a number of barriers affect the success of minority nursing students and contribute to the high attrition rate. Identified barriers include feeling of loneliness, alienation, isolation, as well as academic and financial difficulties. To increase minority representation in the nursing work force and retention in nursing schools require understanding of perceived educational experience.

**Methods:** The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived educational experience of minority nursing students at a southeast rural regional university in Georgia. These students were also enrolled in a comprehensive nursing workforce diversity project called SCRUBS Program, a comprehensive retention program designed to support minority nursing students' academic achievement. Data were collected from forty-six participants of which 90% were African American; 5% Hispanic and 5% other. Of the 46 participants, 85% were female and 15% male.

**Results:** Participants perceived their educational experience as "good, challenging, stressful, but overall positive and worth it." Though participants noted that the nursing program curriculum was rigorous and overwhelming, available resources including mentoring, tutoring, peer socialization, and resources from the SCRUBS Program enhanced their educational experience.

**Conclusions:** These findings have implications for retention of minority students in nursing education. The need to create a supportive and an inclusive cultural climate is essential for minorities' academic success in nursing programs.

## Key words

Minorities, Nursing education, Retention, Mentoring

## 1 Introduction

The underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in the nursing profession is well documented <sup>[1, 6, 25, 26]</sup>. Nursing students from minority backgrounds represented 26.8% of students in entry-level baccalaureate programs, 26.1% of master's students, and 23.3% of students in research-focused doctoral programs <sup>[1]</sup>. Most of the national nursing organizations, the federal Division of Nursing, hospital associations, nursing philanthropies, and other stakeholders within the health care community agree that recruitment of underrepresented groups into nursing is a priority for the nursing profession in the U.S <sup>[1, 6, 25, 26]</sup>. A recent report on the U.S. Nursing Workforce indicates that the proportion of non-white

RNs increased from 20 to 25 percent in the past decade <sup>[27]</sup>. Among the identified factors contributing to the lack of diversity in the nursing workforce include recruitment and retention of minorities, lack of diverse faculty and students, feelings of exclusion and alienation, academic and financial difficulties, and lack of adequate social support. Review of the literature indicates that these factors affect the success of minority nursing students and contribute to the high attrition rate <sup>[3, 4, 8, 12, 15]</sup>.

Nursing workforce diversity projects have identified some of the creative ways in achieving successful retention and graduation rates among racial and ethnic minorities. One such program was the SCRUBS Program, a nursing workforce diversity project funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This three year project was a comprehensive program of recruitment and retention aimed at supporting minority nursing students at a rural southeast regional university in the state of Georgia. The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain understanding of the perceived experiences, needs, and challenges of minority students enrolled in the nursing program. These preliminary findings will help identify areas that can be strengthened to enhance successful academic experience for minorities in the program.

## 1.1 Research questions

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of minority nursing students at this rural southeast university's school of nursing program. The specific research questions addressed were:

- 1) What are the perceived educational experiences of minority nursing students in the BSN program?
- 2) What experiences do students perceive as positive in the educational experience?
- 3) What are the perceived barriers or challenges to their academic success in the nursing program?

## 1.2 Literature review

Racial and ethnic health care disparities continue to exist in the United States, causing a great amount of personal and societal burden on individuals. A more culturally diverse nursing work force can increase health care access and quality in ethnically diverse populations <sup>[2-5]</sup>. The National Advisory Council on Nurse Education and Practice (NACNEP) convened the Expert Workgroup on Diversity to advise the NACNEP on development of a national agenda for increasing workforce diversity. The Council highlighted the issues related to the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in nursing education and practice. Some of the recommended specific goals are: (1) Increase the number of minority faculty in nursing programs; (2) Improve the evaluation and accountability for the outcomes of programs funded to increase diversity in nursing; (3) Reduce social isolation of minority nurse leaders by increasing opportunities for professional development activities focusing on development of support systems. The report also mentions that little research has been conducted regarding the barriers affecting minority nurse graduation rates <sup>[6]</sup>.

In endeavoring to promote culturally diverse nursing workforce in education and practice, several efforts have been implemented. Sutherland et al. <sup>[4]</sup> supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Basic Nurse Education and Practice Program grant developed a program 'Affirming At-Risk Minorities for Success' (ARMS) to facilitate academic success through maintaining contact and direct communication with minority students. Results indicated that ARMS positively affected graduation rates and eliminated the effects of ethnicity on National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) success <sup>[4]</sup>.

Wroten & Waite (2009) recommended that the presence of minority faculty as role models and mentors can have a positive effect on minority students' academic success as well as recruitment, retention, and graduation. Though, the presence of minority faculty alone cannot guarantee academic success, minority faculty can relate to the educational experience of minority students to provide the emotional support and mentoring to achieve success <sup>[7]</sup>. Early identification of at-risk students for tutoring as well as interventions focusing on study skills, communication, critical thinking, and socialization can help students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed in their nursing education <sup>[8]</sup>.

Despite the interventions and programs to increase recruitment and retention of minority students in nursing programs, there exists a lack of diversity in the nursing workforce. Significant gains in racial/ethnic minority representation among RNs have been made over time. The population of RNs from minority racial/ethnic groups increased from 333,368 in 2000 to 513,860 in 2008, with the growth occurring primarily among recently graduated RNs. However, the racial and ethnic distribution of the RN population is substantially different from that of the U.S. population. Approximately 65 percent of the U.S. population is White, non-Hispanic, while 83.2 percent of RNs are White, non-Hispanic<sup>[9]</sup>. Increasing retention and graduation rate of minority nursing students is important to increase diversity in nursing workforce and improve quality of health care. Patients from minority groups frequently seek medical care with providers who are of the same race or ethnicity.

Past studies have identified the barriers that affect undergraduate nursing students' success in nursing school. These barriers include communication gap<sup>[10,11]</sup>, family and financial difficulties<sup>[12-14]</sup>, loneliness and isolation<sup>[15,16]</sup>, discrimination<sup>[17-19]</sup>, and academics<sup>[18]</sup>. Missing in the literature is qualitative research to gain understanding of the perceived educational experience for minority students in nursing education.

### 1.3 SCRUBS program

The SCRUBS Program at this regional university is located in rural, southeast Georgia. Twenty-one counties with the classification of "rural persistent poverty" fall within southeast Georgia. The majority of counties surrounding the University are classified as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Georgia County Guide 2010 Model-Based Estimates of poverty characteristics by Georgia county indicate that 19.1% of Georgians live in poverty<sup>[20]</sup>. Great disparities exist by race and ethnicity: 14% of whites, compared to 27.9% of Blacks and 33.6% of Hispanics live in poverty statewide<sup>[20]</sup>.

The above indicators reveal that many students come from poor families with few resources. Demographic profile of currently enrolled students at the University's School of Nursing indicates that 93% of students receive some form of financial aid and 23% of students are first generation college students. Although minorities are disproportionately more likely to come from poor and educationally disadvantaged families, in southeast Georgia many non-minority rural students also face these same economic and educational disparities. Ninety-five percent of the University's students in Fall 2011 were from the state of Georgia<sup>[21]</sup>. While the university draws many students from the metro Atlanta area, approximately 31% of its in-state resident enrollment is from southeast Georgia. In 2011, 65.5% of the university's enrollment was white, 25% was Black and 9.5% was other races/ethnicities<sup>[21]</sup>.

Admission to the University's nursing program is highly competitive and only admits 50 students twice a year in the fall and spring. Average cumulative grade point is 3.8 for admitted incoming students. Students have to complete two years of general core pre-requisites to apply into the program. Due to the competitiveness of the program, students with cumulative grade point average (GPA) of less than 3.5 rarely are admitted into the program. Prior to the implementation of the SCRUBS Program in 2006; the retention rate for minority nursing students was 69% compared to 83% for non-minority students; NCLEX pass rate for minorities was 84% compared to 93% non-minority students. The goal of the SCRUBS Program was to improve retention, graduation, and NCLEX-RN pass rates; and increase the number of minorities in the nursing profession in rural, southeast Georgia. In 2011-2012, NCLEX pass rate for minorities was 100% compared to overall aggregate of 91.5% for the School of Nursing. The retention rate averaged 95% for all groups of students in the nursing program.

Eligible students to participate in the SCRUBS Program and qualify for financial support, must maintain a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher; be a U.S. citizen, national, or permanent resident; provide a written personal statement indicating an interest in pursuing a career in nursing; be first generation college student; and be economically disadvantaged. Eligible students must complete an application form and meet eligibility requirements. Students can enroll at any time in the program. Retention activities offered to students in the SCRUBS Program include faculty mentoring,

peer tutoring and socialization, leadership development, and cultural diversity training. Each qualified SCRUBS nursing student that meets eligibility requirement receives up to \$2,000 per year in scholarships. Students that fail or repeat a course have to successfully earn a grade of B or higher in the failed course(s) in the subsequent semester to be eligible to receive scholarship. Although, the SCRUBS Program was mainly designed to support minority nursing students, the program accepts non-minority nursing students that apply and meet eligibility criteria. In addition, program services such as peer tutoring and mentoring were available to all nursing students that chose to participate. While any student can participate in the program, a cumulative GPA of 3.0 was required to receive scholarships.

At the three year grant period, there were 119 students enrolled in the SCRUBS Program of which 78% were minorities and 28% Caucasians. Minorities comprised of 90% African Americans, 5% Hispanics, and 1% other. Of the ninety-two graduates from the program (2006-2009), eighty-eight had successfully passed the NCLEX-RN (95.6% pass rate) on their first attempt and were practicing as full time registered nurses in their respective communities. The overall aggregate NCLEX pass rate for the School of Nursing for the same reported years was 88.43% respectively <sup>[28]</sup>.

## 2 Methods

A descriptive exploratory design was used to examine minority nursing students' perceptions of their educational experience in the BSN program. The study was approved by the researchers' institutional review board (IRB) prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary and participants had to be 18 years or older, and minority. Questionnaires were distributed to fifty-two eligible minority nursing students in the classrooms and at two SCRUBS meetings held in spring and fall 2010. Informed consent was implied via completion and return of the questionnaire. The study questionnaire (see Table 1) developed by the investigators included five demographic and four open-ended questions. Participants submitted written responses on a provided flash drive that was returned in an 8 × 10 brown manila envelope in a secured dropbox in a designated location that protected participants' anonymity.

**Table 1.** Demographic and Open-ended Questions

Demographics
Age
Cumulative GPA
Gender
Class status
Race/Ethnicity
How would you rate your nursing educational experience in the BSN Program?
Excellent
Good
Fair
Poor
Questions
Why did you choose nursing as a career?
What is it like to be a minority nursing student in the BSN program?
How would you describe your nursing educational experience as a minority student?
What have been the most positive and helpful as a minority student in the nursing program?
What have been the most challenging and the least helpful as a minority in the BSN program?
What would you recommend to improve the nursing educational experience for minority students?

## 3 Results

Demographic responses were analyzed using SPSS. Data were collected from a convenience sample (N=46) of self-identified minority nursing students; 52% African American, 4.3% Asian, 4.3% Hispanic, 26% Other, and 13.4%

International students. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 44 years with a mean of 24.3 and a SD = 5.53, and a cumulative grade point average ranged from 3.0 to 4.0 with a mean of 3.30 and a SD = .56. Seventy percent of the participants rated their BSN program educational experience as good and 30% as excellent on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being excellent. Table 2 provides a detailed description of the characteristics of the sample.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Minority Nursing Students

Variable	Total Sample (N = 46)	
Age, mean $\pm$ SD, range	24.3 $\pm$ 5.53, 19-44 years	
Gender (%)	Female	69.6
	Male	30.4
Race/Ethnicity (%)	African American	52.0
	Asian	4.3
	Hispanic	4.3
	Other	26.0
	International	13.4
Class status (%)	Junior 1	39.1
	Junior 2	13.0
	Senior 1	30.4
	Senior 2	17.4
Nursing program educational experience (%)	Excellent	30
	Good	70
Cumulative grade point average (GPA), mean $\pm$ SD, range	3.30 $\pm$ 0.56, 3.0-4.0	

Qualitative written responses to the four open-ended questions were coded using Microsoft Excel. The four investigators read through all transcribed data and agreed upon the common themes generated from the analysis. Three major themes were identified including reasons for choosing nursing, perceived educational experiences, and perceived positives and challenges to academic success. A core category that best explained minority students' educational experience in nursing was identified as 'perceptions of minority students in nursing school.' Investigator triangulation improved transcription comprehension, accuracy, and limited investigator bias. The credibility of the transcribed data was also strengthened by peer review and external audit. The three main themes that emerged under the core category of 'perceptions of minorities in nursing school' are summarized below.

### 3.1 Perceptions of minority students in nursing school

#### Reasons for choosing nursing

All of the participants indicated their decision to pursue nursing were influenced by the caring aspects of the profession, a rewarding and challenging career, the influence of family members in the profession, and wanting to give back. One student wrote "I chose nursing because it will allow me to be able to have a challenging career that allows me to grow to my maximum potential, while at the same time having an impact on the lives of other people."

Another student wrote "because it's the best service and rewarding career that anyone can ask. In order for me to live here, there have been so many wonderful people that helped me. I want to give back to the community."

#### 3.2 Perceived educational experiences in the nursing program

Participants perceived the nursing program as stressful but do-able. One student stated "Exciting! There is so much interesting information to learn. Clinicals are very exciting also."

Another student stated “It is challenging to be a nursing student in the BSN program, primarily in the area of time management. The first few weeks were the most difficult, but after that initial period I found that the course work was not as overwhelming as the stories that I had heard.” Another student stated “Balancing the nursing curriculum and working full time seems to take constant adjustment. I actually feel like a total minority among the other students in the program due to the way I'm being treated. My experience in the BSN program has been an adventure, stressful, and growing experience.”

Ninety percent or more of the participants described their educational experience as informative, professional, and excellent. Below are some of the responses by participants' and their perceptions' of their educational experience.

*‘It has been a great experience. I have learned a great deal of information about myself as well as the career. ‘It’s been rewarding. I’m glad to learn new things.’*

*‘I feel like I’m in the systematic process of becoming a professional. My mindset in pre-nursing era and now has changed somewhat. ‘It has been long way, I have learned a lot, changed my life for more caring.’*

*‘My nursing educational experience has been excellent, the faculty is very knowledgeable and work together to ensure that the individual classes meet together to form a cohesive foundation for my future nursing practice. The facilities are also very conducive to the educational experience, especially the skills lab which allows learning in a hospital type setting.’*

*‘My education experience has been a great positive experience. The teachers are the best I have ever had. They have been extremely helpful.’*

### **3.3 Perceived positives and challenges to academic success**

All of the students shared the common positive experiences about their nursing education. These positive experiences included support from teachers, peer support, availability of financial assistance, group work, and culturally competent educators. The comment that

*‘It has overall been a very positive experience with a few bumps in the road here and there,’ “making friends, use of external resources and coping mechanisms,” “empathetic and competent nursing educators” were echoed by majority of the participants.*

Fifty percent of the participants identified excessive workload and inadequate time as challenges to their success in the nursing program. Other challenges included procrastination, multiple tests, and financial struggles. One participant stated “The workload has been most challenging. Having so many tests back to back, at times I have to cram to get through all the text content, whether it is retained or not after the tests is the issue.” Another participant stated “The most challenging has been the lack of sleep. It is hard to get the adequate amount of sleep with studying, classes, work and clinicals.” One participant stated “the most challenging has been trying to figure things out by myself maybe because (in my opinion) my instructor makes me feel dumb or worthless.” Most of the participants expressed the sentiment that “a few of the nursing classes could easily be done through internet class instead of attending class.”

## **4 Discussion**

An increased understanding of the perceptions of minority nursing students may help educators to address the needs and problems of these students and improve retention and graduation rates. This will ultimately aid in developing new strategies to increase the number of minority students in the nursing profession <sup>[8, 22]</sup>.

Findings from this research were supported by previous studies that identified similar positive experiences for minority students' success [5, 8, 13, 16]. Furthermore, the minority students stated that the nursing program faculty was very knowledgeable and the facilities were also conducive to the educational experience. Students consistently expressed their perceptions about faculty and staff as very supportive. The data from this study also identified some obstacles in the nursing program. The findings suggest that excessive workload and inadequate coordination with classes, work and clinicals may hinder the success of minority nursing student in learning different subjects of nursing. Preparation in time management, study skills, notes taking, confidence skills building, seeking faculty assistance, and utilizing available resources are essential for academic success. Sherrod et al. identified excessive academic loads, course-specific problems, and faculty inattentiveness as problems of nursing students were consistent with our study [23]. Whenever appropriate, minority students should be supported by providing effective ways to deal with these problems. Improved study habits, evaluation of the coursework for each subject every semester could help to enhance the syllabus by incorporating teaching strategies that are diverse and student-centered to achieve desired learning outcomes. In addition, faculty that teach in program level courses can work together to streamline course content to reduce or eliminate duplicated course activities and assignments perceived as busy work.

Only one participant of the minority students in this study expressed perceived discrimination or unfair treatment by faculty or peers; other students expressed otherwise. Perceived discrimination and unfair treatment can result in loneliness among minority nursing students which, can increase stress levels and affect academic success. The findings of this study were presented to the School of Nursing faculty for two reasons: (1) to increase awareness of the perceived educational experiences of minorities and (2) to create a welcoming culturally-sensitive learning environment that is student-centered for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, cultural, social, educational, or economic background.

While the presence of minority faculty to serve as role models and mentors for minority nursing students cannot be understated, non-minority faculty can be equally effective. A successful relationship between educators and minority students need to be fulfilled to deal with the issues among minority students. Establishing a successful relationship can assist students to communicate their problems with educators effectively and identify appropriate solutions. Educators must connect with their students; be friendly, approachable, accessible, and receptive, so that all students feel comfortable asking for help. According to Crow, minority students tend not to seek help. This may be true for racial and ethnic minorities that may come from educationally and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Lack of trust with faculty, inherent subjective bias, and fear of being perceived as 'unintelligent' or 'academically weak' prevent racial and ethnic minority students from seeking help. So, educators may need to provide significant direction in guiding these students and planning culturally appropriate nursing educational strategies [24]. In addition, academic success for minority nursing students requires focused assessment of their retention rate and perceived educational experiences. To be more inclusive, nurse educators need to promote a positive view of diversity and incorporate pedagogy of reasonableness and tolerance in nursing curricula and programs. This is necessary to help breakdown racial and social boundaries to nurture students to successfully compete in a diverse global world. Nurse educators should provide culturally-sensitive learning environment that seeks to achieve higher retention, graduation, and NCLEX pass rates while maintaining higher academic standards for all student groups regardless of disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 5 Strengths and limitations

Though the findings in this study may represent common experiences shared by minorities in baccalaureate degree nursing programs, the findings are limited only to the minorities in this study and not generalizable to all minorities in nursing education programs. In addition, participants in this study were enrolled in a nursing workforce diversity project that provided additional resources to support their academic success. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other students attending school of nursing at other regions of the country. In addition, the majority of the students were African-American; it is possible that nursing students of other ethnicities may have different perceptions. Transferability of study findings to minorities in other nursing programs should be based on local knowledge of

geographic location, academic institution, culture, and diversity. The strength of the study is the findings may be useful to create a supportive environment to enhance academic success of minority students in nursing programs.

## 6 Conclusions

Participants perceived their educational experience as “good, challenging, stressful, but overall positive and worth it.” Though participants noted that the nursing program curriculum was rigorous and overwhelming, available resources including faculty, staff, peers, and the SCRUBS Program enhanced their educational experience. Without acknowledging perceptions of the minority nursing students, it will be impossible to achieve more caring educational environment for minority students. Further research is needed to improve the educational strategies used to ensure success among minority nursing students by conducting larger studies involving multiple nursing colleges.

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