Nursing Student Satisfaction with an Associate Nursing Program

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Abstract

PURPOSE The purpose of this study was to conduct a nationwide survey to understand the satisfaction of associate of science in nursing (ASN) students with a nursing program as a whole.

BACKGROUND Student satisfaction is viewed as an indicator of program success. Yet, nursing student satisfaction has not been sufficiently studied in the United States.

METHOD The Curriculum, Faculty, Social Interaction, and Environment model was used to support this nationwide study. Stratified random sampling was used to recruit 56 ASN programs from 31 US states for participation.

RESULTS The students rated their satisfaction with the nursing program as close to "satisfied." The faculty, curriculum, and social interaction significantly and positively predicted overall student satisfaction with a nursing program.

CONCLUSION A nursing program can evaluate students' satisfaction periodically to determine the impact of the educational experience on the program's performance.

Nursing education has engaged in numerous quality-outcome and program-evaluation activities designed to demonstrate that their educational offerings benchmark with regional and national educational standards and state boards of nursing requirements (Brown & Marshall, 2008; Story et al., 2010). Accreditation by the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC; since 2013, the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing [ACEN]) and the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) is an essential indicator that the nursing program offers high quality outcomes that meet standards for higher education in a specific discipline (Brown & Marshall, 2008). Measures of quality outcomes proposed by the ACEN and CCNE include student satisfaction, graduation rates, attrition, passing rate on the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN®), employment rate after graduation, and employer and alumni perceptions.

Research indicates there is evidence linking student satisfaction evaluations with increased student engagement and retention in higher education (Noel-Levitz, 2005-2006). The inclusion of student satisfaction measures in a comprehensive program evaluation may provide insights into the total educational experience for students and an understanding of student expectations for program development and enhancement (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Brown & Marshall, 2008). To our knowledge, no national studies have comprehensively investigated student satisfaction with the associate of science in nursing (ASN) or associate degree in nursing (ADN) programs in the United States.

The aim of this study was to provide evidence of ASN or ADN program satisfaction among nursing students using a standardized measurement in order to identify areas needed for improvement in general. Thus, the purpose of this study was to conduct a national survey to describe the level of ASN or ADN student satisfaction with the nursing program and to identify which areas of curriculum, faculty, social interaction, and environment relate to overall nursing student satisfaction.

BACKGROUND

Student Satisfaction with the Nursing Program

In higher education, student satisfaction has been viewed as an indicator of program success, and students with higher satisfaction levels progress well in their intellectual and social development (Brown & Marshall, 2008). The use of standardized questionnaires to measure student satisfaction with a nursing program as a whole has allowed the identification of program features and facilities that are necessary to enhance program success and where change is needed (Richardson, 2005).

Although accrediting bodies have proposed that student satisfaction be viewed as one of the program outcomes (CCNE,

2008; NLNAC, 2008), nursing student satisfaction has not been sufficiently studied in the United States. Identifying which factors affect student satisfaction and expectations is valuable to educators seeking to improve the quality of program outcomes (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006).

A variety of factors influencing student satisfaction have been identified in the literature, such as student educational experiences, student age, instructor teaching style, and the quality of the instruction. Two studies conducted by Ansari (2002a, 2002b) examined the effects of academic background and demographics on student satisfaction at a university. The findings suggested that participants with a diploma in nursing had higher satisfaction levels than the participants with a baccalaureate degree in nursing (BSN). In addition, the older participants had higher satisfaction levels than the traditional students who were less than 21 years old.

Student evaluations of curriculum design and teaching effectiveness have been viewed as a major source of information for faculty development and for promoting positive changes in learning outcomes (Hessler & Humphreys, 2008; Salamonson, Halcomb, Andrew, Peters, & Jackson, 2010). Technology-driven and learner-centered curricula can enhance students' professional practice (Floyd, Lewis, & Walker, 2010; Fountain & Alfred, 2009), and students are more satisfied with courses incorporating web-enhanced teaching strategies to facilitate their learning (Salyers, 2005). Students perceive a learning environment to be effective when faculty develop and promote a climate of mutual respect and trust, collaboration, positive affect, and supportiveness (Ojeda, Flores, & Navarro, 2011; Rowbotham, 2010). Students feel more satisfied with the program when the aesthetic aspects of the physical infrastructure are considered (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker, & Grogaard, 2002).

Clinical experiences for nursing students are central and significant to the learning of professionalism. The social context of

the clinical practice and the professional interaction among nursing students, faculty, and staff nurses impact the student learning process (Zafrir & Nissim, 2011). Spiritual health has been identified as associated with clinical practice stress in nursing students (Gibbons, Dempster, & Moutray, 2011; Hsiao, Chien, Wu, Chiang, & Huang, 2010).

Three studies (Espeland & Indrehus, 2003; Happell, 2008a, 2008b) had limited recruitment of student participants from three university colleges and one university. These studies indicated there was a need to improve the quality of clinical practice. In other studies (Hendricks, Wallace, Narwold, Guy, & Wallace, 2013; Jokelainen, Turunen, Tossavainen, Jamookeeah, & Coco, 2011; Shelton, 2003), students who viewed faculty as providing direct help and facilitating learning as well as providing the caring atmosphere of a mentoring relationship were more likely to be satisfied with a program and to be successful academically.

Evidence over the past decade has shown the need for evaluating students' perceptions and expectations regarding their education for greater program accountability (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Brown & Marshall, 2008; Story et al., 2010). However, within the United States, no nationwide studies have been conducted regarding ASN student satisfaction with the nursing program as a whole in the areas of curriculum, faculty, social interaction, and environment. Most schools have conducted internal evaluations of student satisfaction with their nursing programs using independently developed tools. These studies may have focused on evaluating needs specific to the program.

Instruments for Measuring Student Satisfaction Levels

A literature review was undertaken to identify existing instruments for measuring student satisfaction in order to judge the need for developing a tool based on a comprehensive conceptual model for measuring student satisfaction with

nursing programs. Marsh's (1982) Students' Evaluations of Educational Quality (SEEQ) and Ramsden's (1991) Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) were developed for examining student perceptions of the quality of teaching and curriculum. The SEEQ measures nine aspects of effective teaching. The CEQ focuses on evaluating five course experiences, such as good teaching and appropriate workload. Both the SEEQ and the CEQ were developed for a general student population and may not measure elements related to clinical practice that are critical for satisfaction among nursing students.

Liegler (1997) developed a path model consisting of the factors of external influences, college facilities and services, academic integration, and social integration to predict nursing students' overall satisfaction levels. The tool used to test the causal model was developed based on two instruments, the Social Integration with Peers Scale and the Social Integration with Faculty Scale, developed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980). These two instruments, originally developed in the late 1970s, may not accurately measure satisfaction in today's nursing students.

While instruments have been utilized to assess students' satisfaction with a particular course, there was little evidence of methods for evaluating students' experience of the program as a whole (Richardson, 2005). Moreover, there was a lack of consistency in research on the evaluation of the psychometric properties of the instrument used for measuring nursing student satisfaction, as well as a lack of a supportive model or a theory of student satisfaction specifically developed for nursing education. Some of the instruments found in the literature were outdated and focused only on curriculum and teaching; they therefore may not reflect the complexities of measuring and understanding the factors that influence satisfaction in today's nursing students.

Conceptual Framework

After a series of discussions and literature reviews regarding a comprehensive student

satisfaction appraisal, a conceptual model of Curriculum, Faculty, Social Interaction, and Environment (CFSE) developed by Chen, Farmer, Barber, and Wayman (2012) was used to support the factors in measuring nursing student satisfaction in this study (see *Figure*). The CFSE model was synthesized according to several concepts from literature reviews (Ansari, 2002a, 2002b; Baykal, Sokmen, Korkmaz, & Akgun, 2005; Floyd et al., 2010; Liegler, 1997; NLNAC, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2008; Ramsden, 1991; Richardson, 2005). Central to the CFSE model is the belief that student satisfaction evolves in a dynamic process that is influenced by the interaction between the student and faculty and the teaching and learning environments.

In this model, Chen et al. (2012) proposed that the level of student satisfaction with a nursing program is directly affected by four major constructs: the content and structure of curriculum, faculty teaching strategies, social interaction among students and faculty, and the learning environment, such as a nursing skills laboratory. (See Chen et al. for definitions of the constructs.) Based on the literature review, the research questions of our study were: 1) What is the level of student satisfaction with ASN or ADN programs in the United States? 2) Are there differences in the level of student satisfaction along demographic lines such as gender or race? 3) While controlling for organizational characteristics and demographics, to what extent does student satisfaction in the areas of curriculum, faculty, social interaction, and environment predict overall student satisfaction with an ASN or ADN program?

METHOD

This cross-sectional nationwide survey was conducted using the Nursing Student Satisfaction Scale (NSSS) to gather data on student satisfaction with ASN programs in the United States during 2008 and 2009. ASN and ADN programs prepare students for practice as RNs and may lead to further nursing education.

Figure: The CFSE Model for Assessing Student Satisfaction: Curriculum, Faculty, Social Interaction, and Environment
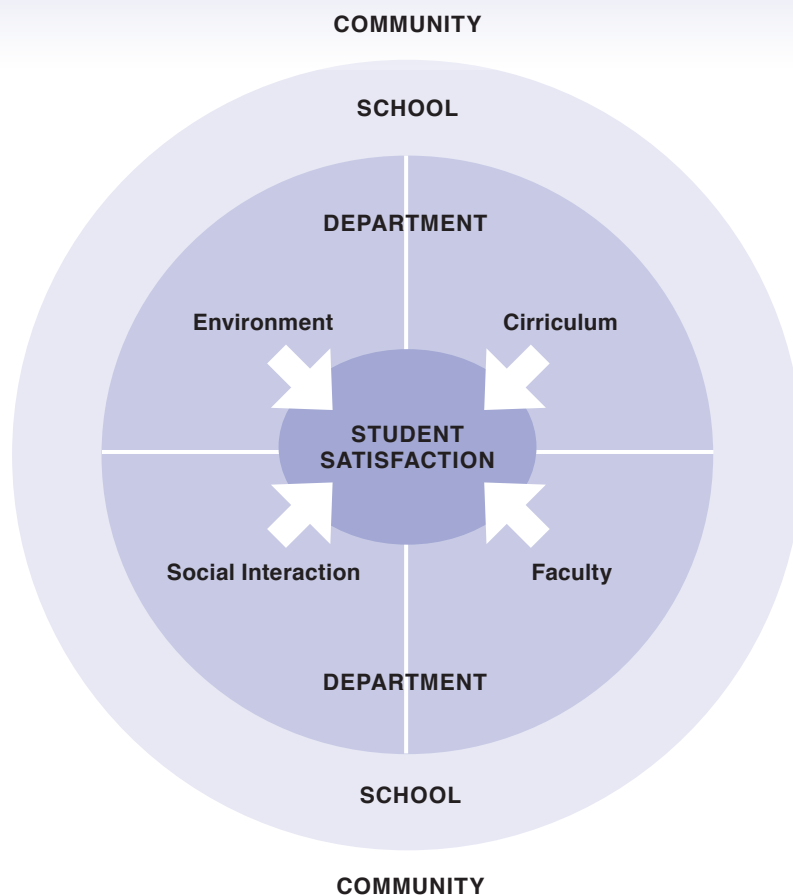
Participants/Population

This study targeted ASN or ADN programs accredited by the ACEN. During the 2006-2007 academic year, 50 states offered 618 ACEN-accredited ASN or ADN programs (NLNAC, 2007). The inclusion criterion for each state's participation was having a minimum of two accredited schools of nursing with an ASN or ADN program; 46 states were eligible for participation.

A method of proportional stratified random sampling was used to ensure representativeness of all states according to the number of ASN or ADN programs in the state. Two nursing programs were randomly selected from each state having 10 or fewer nursing programs offering ASN or ADN programs; four and six nursing programs were randomly selected from states having 11 to 20 programs and one state having 21 or more ASN or ADN programs.

In total, 138 ASN or ADN programs from 46 states were selected for participation; 31 states producing 56 ASN or ADN programs agreed to participate in this study. Nursing students who were in their last semester in either fall 2008 or spring 2009 were invited to participate in this nationwide survey. There were no requirements regarding students' race, gender, age, or ethnicity.

Data Collection

Before conducting this study, approval was granted by the universities' institutional review boards. The chairs of the selected ASN or ADN programs and the principal investigators ensured that each student was

Table 1: The Highest and Lowest Item Means for Student Satisfaction with Nursing Programs (*n* = 1,854)

Subscale/Item	Rank	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*
Highest					
Nursing faculty:					
Were knowledgeable in their field	1	2.00	6.00	5.24	0.78
Nursing curriculum:					
Was relevant to current nursing practice	2	2.00	6.00	5.16	0.78
Social interaction:					
The nursing faculty encouraged my learning	3	1.00	6.00	5.15	0.86
Lowest					
Environment:					
The equipment in the nursing lab was up-to-date	1	1.00	6.00	4.44	1.22
There was sufficient equipment in the nursing lab	2	1.00	6.00	4.55	1.19
The equipment in the nursing lab was in good repair	3	1.00	6.00	4.63	1.16

was computed to separate the effects of the organizational and the demographic variables on the overall student satisfaction in order to examine how well satisfaction with the curriculum, faculty, social interaction, and environment contributed to students' overall satisfaction level. The rationale for using the hierarchical multiple regression was the consideration of variation among schools' organizational characteristics and students' background.

The organizational and demographic variables were grouped as separate units in order to examine their effect on student satisfaction levels. By entering variables as units in a sequential way, the optimal unit of predictors could be determined and the change in predictability associated with the four subscales could be identified (Petrocelli, 2003). An alpha level of .05 was set for statistical tests.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Fifty-six ASN or ADN programs from 31 US states completed this study. Three follow-up emails sent to inform the chair of the department about the deadline for completing the questionnaires contributed to the average 76 percent response rate for this study. Most of the 2,020 participating students were white and non-Hispanic (*n* = 1,590, 79.1 percent); 88.8 percent (*n* = 1,791) were females. Student ages ranged from 18 to 63 years old, with the average age being 31. Many were married (*n* = 921, 45.8 percent) and the majority were employed (*n* = 1,417, 70.5 percent).

Student Satisfaction with the Nursing Program

Regarding the level of student satisfaction with the ASN or ADN program for research question 1, item means for each subscale were: Curriculum, 5.01 (*SD* = 0.69); Faculty, 4.97 (*SD* = 0.72); Social Interaction, 4.98 (*SD* = 0.79); and Environment, 4.67 (*SD* = 0.88). The overall student satisfaction level was 4.95 (*SD* = 0.97). The results indicated that the nursing students experienced higher levels of satisfaction with nursing curriculum items;

fully aware of the objective of the study and participated voluntarily. A cover letter and an invitation were emailed to all of the chairs of the selected nursing programs to explain the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation. After a program had obtained permission to participate, a numerically coded questionnaire packet including the NSSS, a self-addressed and stamped return envelope, and a cover letter were mailed to the chair. Questionnaires were answered anonymously one time during a regularly scheduled nursing class. The chair was responsible for returning all completed questionnaires by mail without identifying the students.

Instrument

The NSSS, developed by Chen et al. (2012), was used to identify the extent to which nursing students were satisfied with the nursing program. The 30-item tool uses a six-point Likert scale scored from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 6 (very satisfied). It consists of four subscales based on the CSFE model: Curriculum (9 items), Faculty (8 items), Social Interaction (6 items), and Learning Environment (7 items). An additional item

asks about overall student satisfaction.

See Chen et al. (2012) for a description of the development process and an account of a pilot study conducted to evaluate the instrument. For the pilot study, Cronbach's alpha for the total scale of the NSSS was .96; alphas for the subscales were: Curriculum, .92; Faculty, .90; both Social Interaction and Environment, .88.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were made using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS®) for Windows® software version 20.0. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequency counts, and percentages for demographics, were performed according to the data level. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for the levels of student satisfaction. The internal consistency of the NSSS was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Inferential statistics, including one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and *t*-tests, were used to identify the differences in student satisfaction among demographic variables for research question 2. For research question 3, hierarchical multiple regression

Table 2: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Predicting Overall Student Satisfaction with Nursing Program (*n* = 1,873)

Block[a]	Variable entered	Adjusted R²	R square change	F	Standardized coefficient beta	t
1	Source of paying tuition and fees	.005	.008	2.54*	.007	0.52
	Employment				.003	0.26
	Gender				-.019	-1.41
	Age				.011	0.78
	Race				.011	0.84
	Marital status				.005	0.40
2	School type &	.007	.003	2.70**	.019	1.04
	State size				-.021	-1.18
3	Nursing faculty	.623	.614	345.37**	.322	9.48**
4	Nursing curriculum	.656	.032	357.37**	.343	13.67**
5	Social interaction	.667	.011	341.85**	.209	8.04**

Note. [a]Stepwise solution was used.
* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.

they were less satisfied with the environment. Regarding the three highest and lowest item means of student satisfaction with the nursing program, the results indicated that students were most satisfied with faculty being knowledgeable in their field and were less satisfied with equipment in the nursing lab being up-to-date. (See *Table 1*.)

Student Satisfaction Levels Based on Demographic Variables

Results for research question 2, regarding levels of satisfaction along demographic lines, indicated that significant differences were absent in overall student satisfaction for the variables of age, gender, marital status, race, and employment types. Scheffé's method for post hoc testing was used to compare satisfaction among students who were employed full-time, employed part-time, or unemployed. It was found that unemployed students were significantly more satisfied with the nursing program than students employed at part-time jobs (*F* [2, 1991] = 4.73, *p* = .01).

Factors Influencing Overall Student Satisfaction Levels

To determine which areas predicted overall student satisfaction (research question 3), hierarchical multiple regression was used to identify to what extent the four subscales were predictors. The effects of demographic characteristics — gender, age, marital status, race, employment, and tuition and fees — and the organizational characteristics of the school type and state size were grouped as individual units in order to examine which areas nursing students felt were connected to their overall satisfaction levels (see *Table 2*). The results indicated that the nursing faculty, the nursing curriculum, and social interaction significantly and positively predicted the overall level of student satisfaction with the program, after controlling for demographics, school type, and state size (*t* = 9.48, *p* < .01; *t* = 13.67, *p* < .01; *t* = 8.04, *p* < .01, respectively). The subscales of curriculum, faculty, and social interaction contributed 65.5 percent of the variation in the overall student satisfaction level.

DISCUSSION

Student Satisfaction with the ASN or ADN Program

In this study, the students responded with satisfaction levels that were close to "satisfied" (*M* = 5) in areas of curriculum, faculty, social interaction, and environment. In particular, the nursing students were more satisfied in the area of curriculum when it was relevant to current nursing practice and the syllabus clearly described what was expected of them; they were also more satisfied when faculty were knowledgeable in their field and encouraged their learning. The findings are similar to those of Hessler and Humphreys (2008), Salamonson et al. (2010), and Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002), whose studies proposed that there is a significant relationship between student academic development (e.g., through intellectually stimulating courses) and overall satisfaction, and a higher satisfaction level when faculty were perceived as knowledgeable about the subject matter, set clear goals, and offered quality teaching and an appropriate workload. The findings are also supported by Ojeda et al. (2011), Rowbotham (2010), and Zafrir and Nissim (2011), suggesting that social interaction between faculty and students is crucial in developing a positive learning environment, which can also lead to student satisfaction.

Clinical practice is the most essential part of ASN or ADN education (Hendricks,

2013). In our study, students were more satisfied when nursing skills and knowledge provided by nursing faculty were more relevant to current nursing practice. According to the recommendations of Espeland and Indrehus (2003) and Happell (2008a, 2008b), the quality of clinical practice needs improvement. If clinical practice is well structured in the curriculum, the gap between theoretical courses and practice should be minimized.

In our study, students were less satisfied with the ASN or ADN programs in the area of environment. Students showed lower satisfaction levels with nursing skills labs, noting that equipment was not always up-to-date, sufficient for their use, and in good repair. This finding is similar to Wiers-Jenssen et al.'s (2002) study, which indicated that physical infrastructure is a critical component for improving student satisfaction. Because information technology has become an integral component of health care, one improvement a nursing program might make would be to update computer-assisted instruction to facilitate learning about the rapidly changing technological equipment used in clinical practice (Floyd et al., 2010; Fountain & Alfred, 2009; Salyers, 2005).

Student Satisfaction Levels Based on Demographic Variables

In our study, there were no significant differences between the variables of age, gender, marital status, race, and employment types and students' overall satisfaction. The result for age is not consistent with Ansari's (2002a) study, which found that older students had higher levels of satisfaction with the nursing program. In terms of employment status, 1,417 students (70.5 percent) were employed, and 79 percent of the employed participants had nursing-related jobs, which may have influenced their perceptions of program satisfaction.

Unemployed nursing students were more satisfied with the ASN or ADN program than students who were employed. Ansari (2002b) found that employed nursing students required more academic help to facilitate

their learning. Potential role conflict between the demands of academic courses and of employment may have impacted these students' satisfaction levels.

Factors Influencing Overall Student Satisfaction Levels

Overall, the nursing faculty, the nursing curriculum, and social interaction are significant factors predicting the level of student satisfaction with an ASN or ADN program. The essential element for nursing student satisfaction is the nursing faculty. The nursing faculty subscale explained 61.4 percent out of the total 65.5 percent variation in student satisfaction. This result is consistent with previous studies (Hessler & Humphreys, 2008; Rowbotham, 2010) that found the best predictors of overall student satisfaction to be faculty, effective teaching, academic development, and social interaction.

The findings in our study are also supported by Hendricks et al. (2013), Jokelainen et al. (2011), and Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002) in holding that the academic and pedagogic quality of the teaching and mentoring are crucial determinants of student satisfaction. It is recommended that nursing programs evaluate their teaching efficiency and have qualified faculty knowledgeable in their fields in order to build a safe, caring, trusting, and respectful learning environment for students.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a detailed evaluation of curriculum, faculty, social interaction, and environment offered by an ASN or ADN program and identifies which areas students were most and least satisfied with in programs in the United States. The study found that a curriculum relevant to clinical practice, with high academic and pedagogic quality in the faculty, and positive psychosocial interaction are essential components in enhancing student satisfaction with their education.

Regarding study limitations, the results may not be generalized to all ASN or ADN programs, or to BSN programs accredited

by the ACEN or to other nursing programs not accredited by the ACEN in the United States. However, the data collected from 56 ASN or ADN programs in 31 states using proportional stratified random sampling might increase the study validity and provide an overall view of student satisfaction with an ASN or ADN program in the United States. The self-report data of students' perceptions and their voluntary participation in this study may have had an impact on the findings for student satisfaction levels. In addition, the study's cross-sectional design may not fully represent the level of student satisfaction with a nursing program, because how student satisfaction is influenced over time may limit the interpretation of the results.

In summary, nursing educators are encouraged to conduct a comprehensive and consistent evaluation to measure student satisfaction and expectations in curriculum, faculty, social interaction, and environment in order to guide decision-making and improve the effectiveness of their educational programs. Although a standardized measure of factors that influence student satisfaction provides faculty with information necessary to enhance students' educational experiences, various measures of quality outcomes, including qualitative and quantitative methods, should be included in program evaluation. It is suggested that the NSSS may expand its applicability to BSN students and evaluate programs not accredited by the ACEN in future studies.

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KEY WORDS

Nursing Student Satisfaction – Psychometric Properties – Nursing Program – Stratified Random Sampling – Program Evaluation

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