

BENEDICTINE UNIVERSITY

PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION NURSING STUDENTS: A  
QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS RELATED TO  
THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE IN NURSING

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IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents for all the sacrifices they made in their lives to give their children a better life. For my mom who dared to dream a great education for her son and my dad who never left my side and gave me the strength to do anything.

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“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths.” King Solomon also wrote in Proverbs that blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom so I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to my God and my Lord Jesus Christ who made this doctoral degree and everything else in my life possible. I can say with conviction that I will not be where I am now without the grace and love of God.

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## ABSTRACT

First-generation students comprised 61% of all community college students. However, first-generation students have the highest drop-out rate from college compared to all other student populations. Many first-generation students are from low-income families, immigrants, adults, single parents, working, not prepared academically, and feel less socially and academically connected to campus. Numerous studies focused almost exclusively on their demographics, challenges, experiences, and background. Little data exist on the experiences of first-generation students in a professional undergraduate program such as nursing. The purpose of this study was to gain insight on the experiences of first-generation nursing students. Specifically, this inquiry explored the needs and support services a first-generation student needed to graduate from a rigorous undergraduate professional program such as nursing. Five strong themes with some sub-themes were identified from the participant's responses: 1) Strong personal drive, 2) Cost, work, and financial aid, 3) Support of family and friends, 4) Academic activities, 5) Social activities. The current study determined that Tinto's theory on academic and social activities played a role in the retention and graduation of first-generation students in the nursing program at Midwestern community college.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In a global competitive market, higher education institutions face many challenges to ensure excellence in their academic curriculum and to provide support services to students that will enable them to persist from one semester to the next. Educating students to lead successful lives and to become productive members of society is one of the fundamental goals of colleges and universities since the establishment of higher educational institutions four centuries ago (Altbach, 2005). Higher education institutions were once places where only the elite and the privileged attended but now host students from very diverse backgrounds; many of them are classified as at-risk. Colleges and universities must hold themselves accountable for the success of their students by providing resources, developing relevant programs, preparing students for future job markets, retaining students from one semester to the next, providing them with the necessary support services to complete their course of study, and successfully graduate.

The American population is becoming increasingly diverse and with such changes, an increasing number of students from different ethnicities and backgrounds are attending local colleges (Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2011). With the growing demographic diversity of the student body in recent years, colleges and universities are experiencing an increase in the number of first-generation students attending college. A

first-generation student is defined as any student whose parents did not attend college (Shirlin, 2002; Duggan, 2001; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). Choy (2001) points out in 1996 that 34% of the enrollment at the nation's four-year institutions and 53% of students starting at two-year colleges were first-generation students (Pascarella, et.al, 2004). In 2005, 61% of all community college students were first-generation students (Calkins, 2005). First-generation students dream of attending college and getting a degree to gain skills that will one day provide them with better opportunities to succeed in life. However, when many first-generation, low-income students finally get to college, the experience is a lot more confusing than magical (Jehangir, 2008). These students who do not have an experienced parent tend to face higher challenges accessing useful information, taking advantage of university resources, navigating financial aid, having an academic plan, interfacing with technology, and understanding the overall functions of college (Inman & Mayes, 1999). First-generation college students are usually on their own to learn about college life and the necessary skills and knowledge needed for successful transition into a college environment (Mowbray, 2008).

Since college graduates earn significantly more income, on average, than high school graduates (Duggan, 2001; Hossler et al., 1999), it is vital for higher education institutions to provide services that will support graduation. The need for support services is evident, especially for those students who are enrolled in challenging academic programs. Among the many programs at a community college, the nursing program is one that has a rigorous curriculum and requires students to be completely committed if they want to succeed. A nursing degree can prepare students for better opportunities in life by providing them with high demand skills and enabling them to

attain employment with an above average salary. Registered nurses constitute the largest occupation in the healthcare field and the opportunities for employment are expected to rise by 2018 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). While overall retention is a significant issue at community colleges, the retention of first-generation and other under-represented students can be a daunting task (Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2011).

Understanding the needs of first-generation students can help colleges provide services that are essential for their success in a selective program like nursing. Educational programs need to be aware of the needs of the non-traditional student and provide opportunities to ensure their success (Olson, 2010).

### Background

The students who attend higher education institutions in the United States have changed radically since the first universities, Harvard University, Yale University, and College of William and Mary first opened their doors with the purpose of providing instruction for monks (Altbach, 2005; Rhodes, 2001). In the 1960s and 1970s, accessibility to colleges and universities changed dramatically when financial aid from the federal government provided unprecedented opportunities for students from different background and socio-economic status to attain degrees. A college degree increases an individual's chances of obtaining a job (Duggan, 2001) and can thus enable them to become productive members of society. Today's college and university students have changed significantly from the early years when only society's elite went to college (Altbach, 2005).

Higher education is recognized as an engine of economic growth and advanced education is considered to be the driving force of maintaining America's economic position in the competitive global economy (Altbach, 2005). According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), America's colleges will welcome record numbers of students as the population increases and high enrollment rates continue (2011). An NCES report to the Congressional office shows that education levels are one of the major factors determining earnings; over one's lifetime, educational attainment is a key indicator for career options, job levels, salary, and employment versus unemployment (NCES, 2011; Howe, 1988; Rosenbaum, 2001).

The aspiration to attend college is high among American youth yet the fulfillment of such desires is much more limited (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006). Community colleges, with an open door admission policy, have been the gateway for the traditionally underserved student populations to have an opportunity to go to college. Many of the students attending local community colleges are minority students, older, part-time, immigrants, low-income, first-generation, underprepared for college-level work, employed, commuters and may have multi-dimensional familial and other external obligations (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006; Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011).

First-generation students fall into the category of students that are considered underserved or at-risk student populations. At-risk and underserved categories include academically underprepared students such as students of color, low-income students, students who are first in their families to attend college (DiMaria, 2006; Green, 2006). In 2005, first-generation students comprised 61% of all community college students in U.S.

higher education and were the largest segment of student populations at community colleges (Calkins, 2005). First-generation students were at the highest risk of departing during the second year and were 51% less likely to graduate within four years than students with college-educated parents (Ishitani, 2006).

Even though first-generation students can be of any ethnic origin including Caucasian (Stuber, 2011), a large number of first-generation students are minorities (Horwedel, 2008). With the growing population of Hispanics in the United States, higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, have seen an increase in their first-generation student enrollments (Horwedel, 2008). The successful trend of an increase in the number of first-generation students starting college is overshadowed by the fact that this student population is 71% more likely to drop out from college before attaining a degree (Ishitani, 2006). Colleges are faced with a big challenge of retaining first-generation students because there are many obstacles that prevents them from staying in school.

To address retention issues, community colleges are beginning to shift their focus from recruitment to graduation. Even though there has been more access to post-secondary education than in the past, successful completion and graduation of students at community colleges are traditionally very low (NCES, 2011). Results of a recent Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) data indicate that only 28% of the students nationally at community colleges prepare for classes such as studying, reading, writing, doing homework or other activities related to their program (CCSSE, 2012). The United States' supremacy for generations in college degree completion rates has now slipped to 16<sup>th</sup> in the world (AACCC, 2012). President Obama's

American Graduate Initiative (AGI), with a goal to create stronger American skills through community colleges, is beckoning the nation's higher education community to answer the current problems of the country. By asking every American to commit to at least one year of higher education or career training, President Obama has set a new national goal for America to have by 2020 an additional five million graduates where 60% of the United States adults will have some form of a college degree (Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011; Stuart, 2010; White House, 2009). Kotamraju & Blackman (2011) further stressed the need for retention initiatives at community colleges by stating that in order to achieve the American Graduation Initiative (AGI) goals set by President Obama, an additional 50% of all anticipated additional degrees will have to come from community colleges. By establishing the goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, the President has placed a national spotlight on community colleges and making the provision of resources to them a priority in his effort to reform the economy (White House, 2009).

#### Statement of the Problem

According to the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Commission report on the future of community colleges, *Reclaiming the Dream*, by American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), community colleges are inadequately supported to the work that is asked of them and thus these institutions must not only take into consideration how much money they have but how they use them (AACC, 2012). With limited resources and lack of funding from the government, colleges are increasingly relying on enrollment and tuition to generate revenue to sustain their operational needs. In addition to increasing

enrollment of new students, colleges are beginning to understand the value of retaining their current students. Besides the monetary benefits, retention is also gaining national attention due to the increase in the number of student drop-outs in colleges, primarily among first-generation students in community colleges (Ishitani, 2006). Administrators at higher education institutions are tasked with doing more with less while responding to the increasing degrees of accountability by adopting a culture of evidence. Decisions to set aside resources to support services for first-generation students should be supported by research to establish a culture of evidence.

First-generation students are more likely than their traditional counterparts to be of color, minorities, immigrants, student-parents, low-income, over the age of 24, and working while in school (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Many first-generation students tend to enter college with less academic preparation and have limited access to information about college or assistance to prepare for the experience (Thayer, 2000). These students have a higher risk of failure in post-secondary education when combined with other at-risk factors such as low-income (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation, low-income college students experience isolation and marginalization, especially during their first year of college, which impacts their long-term persistence (Jehangir, 2008). With expectations to work and help support families, many first-generation students do not get the same support from their families as second-generation students to attain educational goals. Family support is critical to a student's access and persistence in higher education but first-generation students consistently reports a lack of such support (Calkins, 2005). Since many first-generation students live at home, work part-time or full-time during college, and have additional family responsibilities (Chen,

2005; Hsiao, 1992; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), they tend to feel less socially and academically connected to campus (Jehangir, Williams & Pete, 2011). First-generation students are less likely to complete any degree, even when controlling for age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Numerous studies have been done on the experiences of incoming first-generation college students (Mowbray, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Ishitani, 2006; Chen, 2005; Calkins, 2005; DeLong, 2003; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). However, there is little research on the experiences of first-generation students in a professional program (Coll & Stewart, 2008). Nursing is a professional career that is considered to be a top choice for students due to the excellent career opportunities for employment after graduation. The benefits of obtaining a nursing degree include job security, high income, flexible hours, health benefits, and the prestige of having a rewarding career in healthcare. Even in the current state of the United States economy where jobs have been scarce, the nursing profession has not been affected by the recession due to the significant shortage of registered nurses in the health care industry (Ukpabi, 2008). The demand for nurses is expected to grow significantly in the next decade because due to the aging baby boomer population and an aging nursing workforce (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Statistics show that there will be an increase in demand for nurses in the future and there are opportunities for students to gain well-paying employment after graduation. Expectations to be successful in a nursing curriculum contrast significantly with what a first-generation student normally experiences in their lives. Educators need to be aware of the needs and challenges of first-generation nursing students to be able to provide support and mentoring that will

enable them to be successful in a nursing program. Providing first-generation students with support and skills they need to succeed would lead to greater retention rates and increased success for students to achieve their career goals (Olson, 2010).

Student persistence models show the importance of family relationships, family stability, meaningful friendships, understanding the self, and having a desire for college success (Stieha, 2010). The theories for student intervention and college outcomes describe a relationship between student engagement and successful completion. In his model of student engagement, Tinto suggests that the more students are involved in the college environment, the more positive their experiences will be (Crawford, 1999). Institutions should actively engage at-risk students and provide resources and services that will help them succeed. Tinto (1998) believed that academic and social involvement appears differently in different educational setting and thus influence students in different ways. Services such as mentoring, counseling, campus activities, clubs and organizations, tutoring, study skills, financial aid opportunities, and one-on-one programs like TRIO may prove to be successful in retaining a high percentage of students that are considered at-risk. These intervention programs and services can help students to attain better grades resulting in higher grade point average (GPA) which can lead to self-confidence and persistence. Even though a student's first-generation status can reduce the probability of persistence, cumulative grade point average was a statistically significant predictor of persistence (Mihok, 2005). First-generation students can benefit from these activities because the institution will be able to provide them with the services they need to succeed in classes and the support they need that they don't get from home.

Extensive literature on first-generation students focuses almost exclusively on their demographics, challenges, experiences, and background. However, little data exist on the live experiences of first-generation students in a nursing program. Overall, first-generation students have the highest drop-out rate from college compared to all other student populations because they are 71% more likely to drop out than non first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006). Since they represent the largest segment of the student population at a community college (Calkins, 2005), it becomes vital for institutions to support retention initiatives that will help first-generation students persist in programs like nursing. In order for community colleges to provide the necessary services and resources to help first-generation students complete their nursing program, it is important to learn more about their needs, understand their background, and give a voice to their experiences.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation nursing students. Specifically, this inquiry will explore the needs and support services a first-generation nursing student will need to graduate from a nursing program at a community college.

### Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to frame this study on individuals who are first-generation students and successfully completed a nursing program at a community college:

1. What are the experiences of first-generation nursing students that helped them to successfully graduate?
2. What role did academic activities play in supporting first-generation students to succeed in the nursing program?
3. What role did social activities play in supporting first-generation students to succeed in a nursing program?
4. What can community colleges do to help support first-generation nursing students to be successful?

### Significance of the Study

Extensive research has been done on the demographics, definitions, and characteristics of first-generation students. Studies show there are correlations between the many factors impacting the persistence of first-generation students at a higher education institution (Mihok, 2005; Olson, 2010; Mowbray, 2008; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Ishitani, 2006; Jehangir, Williams & Pete, 2011; Chen, 2005; Delong, 2003). However, minimal research has been done on first-generation students in a professional undergraduate program such as nursing. Assumptions can be made as to whether academic and social integration theories that indicate an increase in the overall first-generation student graduation rates could also be applied to first-generation nursing students to succeed. However, insufficient data has been gathered to capture exactly how these individuals succeed in a nursing program and what those aspiring to pursue a career in nursing can learn from their experiences. The qualitative nature of this research will provide additional information on the experiences of first-generation students in an

undergraduate professional program. This study will investigate specifically at the experiences of first-generation nursing students at a community college to learn about successful traits that helped them to overcome the challenges of a rigorous and challenging nursing curriculum. Thus, the results of this study will contribute to the literature on the successful pathways of first-generation nursing students and to learn if academic and social activities played any role in supporting their success.

The significance of this study is two-fold. First, results of this study will increase awareness of the challenges first-generation students face in successfully graduating from a nursing program at a community college. Future first-generation students who desire to enroll and graduate from a nursing program at a community college can better understand the rigorous expectations of the nursing program. Second, the study may have significance for community colleges administrators, faculty, and staff to determine persistence factors that can help with retention of first-generation nursing students. The information obtained from this study will inform community college administrators for support services, resources, and essential tools to help first-generation students succeed in their nursing program. As a result, this study will provide data on the background and experiences of first-generation students who have successfully graduated from a nursing program and delineate how they navigated their college pathway.

### Definition of Terms

*Academic Integration:* Academic integration refers to the academic activities at an institution that students can engage in to support learning and may lead to retention of students at a college or university.

*At-Risk Student:* At-risk students are defined as those students who are low-income, minority, immigrant, non-traditional, single parent, and first-generation students who are the first in their families to attend college (DiMaria, 2006).

*Community College:* A local postsecondary institution specializing in career and technical education (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006), preparing students for college, to transfer to other colleges and universities, and offer primarily associates degrees and certificates for jobs that demand high skills (Illinois Community College Board, 2012). According to Illinois Community College Board (2012), community colleges also provide adult, literacy, and continuing education courses and services.

*Completion and Graduation Rate:* The percentage of students who complete a program or obtain a degree. The terms are used interchangeably.

*First-Generation Student:* A first-generation student is defined as the first to attend college from their family where neither parent had more than a high school education (Shirlin, 2002).

*Nursing Degree:* Nursing degree is an academic concentration where students prepare for a career in the field of nursing. Students who graduate with a nursing degree from a nursing program are eligible to take the board exam for registered nurses (RN).

*Persistence and Retention Rate:* The percentage of students who do not drop out of college from one semester to the next. The terms are used interchangeably.

*Social Integration:* Social integration refers to the social activities at an institution that students can engage in to support learning and may lead to retention of students at a college or university.

### Organization of Study

This study will be organized within five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study, background, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study. A review of relevant literature will be discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology by which the data will be collected, analyzed, and reported as well as a discussion on the limitations of the study. Chapter 4 will report the presentation of the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 will provide the conclusion and discuss implications of the findings for practice, policy, and future research.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The primary purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation nursing students at a community college. Additionally, the aim of this study is to contribute to the literature regarding experiences of first-generation students and how they graduate from a nursing program at a Midwestern community college. The information obtained will provide a better understanding of whether student engagement theories supporting academic and social integration can be applied to first-generation students in an undergraduate professional program such as nursing.

Literature relevant to this study was versatile and comprises of a legion of perspectives in which the first-generation student was viewed through the lens of demographics, influences, challenges, college transition, engagement, attrition, retention and persistence factors. Furthermore, the economical benefits of a nursing degree, the academic rigors of a nursing program, and the challenges nursing students face are discussed. Student engagement theories, supporting the role of student engagement on campus for retention and persistence, were identified and analyzed. Finally, the academic and social experiences of first-generation nursing students were detailed to determine the factors that lead to successful persistence in an academically challenging program.

## Purpose of Higher Education

The purpose of attending a higher education institution has changed since the first universities, Harvard University, Yale University, and College of William and Mary, first opened their doors with the purpose of providing religious instruction for monks (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2005). According to Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport (2005), higher education is recognized as an engine of economic growth and advanced education is considered to be the driving force of maintaining America's economic position in the competitive global economy. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2004) suggested that a number of highly knowledgeable, skilled people in a state's workforce can improve its educational or human capital. Due to the complex nature of modern societies and economies that demand a highly skilled workforce, the role of higher education has become significantly more important in today's world. Colleges and universities have been called to provide the required training necessary to help advance the nation in a competitive global society (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2005).

Duggan (2001) stated that a college degree can increase an individual's chances of obtaining a job. Employment enables people to become productive members of society where they will be able to contribute to the national, state, and local economies (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2005; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004; Ewell, Jones, & Kelly, 2003). In order to achieve economic security in today's knowledge and information society, more students need education beyond a high school degree (Barton, 2008; Holzer & Lerman, 2007). The purpose of higher education and who it benefits was summarized in Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport (2005) when they

described how the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education asserted that benefits from higher education flow to nearly all persons in the United States directly or indirectly. Regardless of recent public opinion changes on the views of whether higher education is a public good or private benefit, Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport (2005) emphasized that higher education supports both public and private benefits in that “higher education provides high economic returns to individuals and at the same time develops a skilled workforce and an educated citizenry among other public benefits” (p. 150).

Altbach, Berdahl & Gumport (2005) explains in detail the unprecedented access to colleges and universities for students from different backgrounds and socio-economic statuses to attain degrees due to factors such as middle class expectations for skills to attain employment and the creation of federal financial aid such as grants, loans, or work study programs. There has been a substantial rise in enrollment numbers across college campuses because of significant increases in aid-to-education programs created by Congress in the late 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s, the federal government had become the largest source of direct assistance to individual students for financing their college expenses (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2005). Today, more than ever, students are taking advantage of opportunities available to get a college degree; according to NCES, America’s college’s enrollments increased 37% between 2000 and 2010 from 15.3 million students to 21.0 million (2012).

The growing diversity among undergraduate students in higher education has been well documented by several researchers (Hodgkinson, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Choy, 2001). Horwedel (2008) describes an increase in the Hispanic students overall in both community colleges and universities which is in sync with the population

changes of United States. Over 58% of Hispanic students are enrolled in two-year colleges (Horwedel, 2008). The profiles of students are also changing with an increase in non-traditional students who do not fit the typical model of an 18 to 22 year old student that is enrolled full-time in an undergraduate program (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008). The current and future trends include more students who are female, part-time, older, employed, with one or more dependents, from ethnic minority groups, attending 2-year institutions, and first-generation (Choy, 2001; Altbach, Berdahl & Gumport, 2005; NCES, 2012).

### Community Colleges

Community colleges play an important role in providing open access to college students who may not get accepted to traditional universities. Community colleges are local colleges specializing in career and technical education; prepare students to transfer to other four-year colleges and universities; offer primarily associates degrees and certificates for jobs that demand high skills and provide adult, literacy, and continuing education courses and services (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006; Illinois Community College Board, 2012). Many of the students attending local community colleges are minority students, immigrants, low-income, first-generation, older, part-time, unprepared for college-level work, and commuters who work and may have multi-dimensional familial and other external obligations (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006; Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011). According to the CCSSE, minority students represented 29% of all students enrolled in community colleges (2012) while Kurlaender

(2006) showed that for Latinos, community colleges are the higher education institution of choice.

Chen (2005) and Green (2006) describe community colleges as the institution where underserved students are more likely to start their postsecondary education. Laden (2004) further states that immigrants and minority students are emerging as the majority at two-year institutions. As the demand for college increases, the open access mission of community colleges allows them to be more of a logical and appropriate institution for students from underrepresented populations to obtain a higher education degree (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006). Many students from underrepresented populations are not usually prepared for college work and have family obligations that require them to stay close to home. Community colleges are “democracy’s open door” (Griffith & Connor, 1994) to pursue the American dream regardless of your circumstances and gives someone a chance to succeed in life regardless of their background (Rhoades, 2012). Scheutz (2008) describes how community colleges enroll over half of all beginning postsecondary students including disproportionate numbers of adult, first generation, low income, and other underrepresented subpopulations. Community colleges provide opportunities for those who cannot afford other types of colleges, who may not be qualified for selective institutions, and those who want a second chance at college (Rhoades, 2012; Bissett, 1995).

However, community colleges are facing many roadblocks to successfully educating underserved student populations. Bueschel & Venezia (2006) discussed the challenges community colleges face in providing open access to all students and serve the varied needs of the community. During times of economic instability, when it is in the

best interest of states to improve their human capital by providing education to their citizens that will help develop a knowledgeable and skilled workforce (Green, 2006; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004; Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2005), there has been very little movement in advocating policy change at the state level for areas such as course placement signaling academic expectations and college standards to high school students (Bueschel & Venezia, 2006). However, in Illinois, there have been some recent developments in response to the increase in the number of high school graduates who are not prepared for college level work. In 2012, Lieutenant Governor Sheila Simon visited all 48 community colleges in Illinois to see first-hand the state of the students at these institutions. Based on her observations, she supported the Complete College Illinois reform package that was introduced in the Illinois General Assembly where three key bills would be discussed including Sen. Frerich's bill that would require students to take math during their senior year in high school to better prepare them for college at the high school level and cut down on remediation needs in college (Canton Daily Ledger, 2012). These measures are critical if community colleges are expected to provide the training required to help students succeed at a time when they are enrolling a record number of students from many different backgrounds. NCES projects that community college enrollment in the next decade will rise anywhere from a low 10% to a high of 18% (NCES, 2009).

Greater calls for accountability in higher education are prompted by questions whether colleges and universities are using resources effectively to promote learning for their students (Pike, et al., 2010). Community college administrators are having to do more with less due to the continued decrease in funding from states and lack of resources

to support students who desperately need those (Rhoades, 2012; Katsinas, 2005).

Historically, however, relationships between higher education expenditures and college outcomes have not been consistent (Pike, et al., 2010). Rhoades (2012) states that there is a shift in the conventional thinking of education from being a “public good” to that of being a “private benefit” and thus more and more legislators are willing to push this sector down their list of priorities to fund.

With the different functional tasks community colleges are expected to achieve, the general public demands a better return for the higher educational dollars that are spent (Crawford, 1999). Crawford (1999) further states that effective student retention is the key to the accomplishment of different elements of success for community colleges. Community college students can benefit from specialized services that are targeted to assist them such as academic and career planning, academic skill development, and other areas that may affect learning and retention (CCSSE, 2012). Even though policymakers and educators want to help all students rather than target specific populations in this current environment of high accountability, limited funding, and scarce resources, it is essential that they pay special attention to the challenges underserved students face (Green, 2006). Green (2006) further states that in order to halt the nation’s decline in educational attainment, we must continue to ask which policies, programs, services can help underserved students such as first-generation students to be more successful in college. Providing first-generation students with the support and skills they need to succeed would lead to greater retention rates and increased success (Olson, 2010).

At the forefront of retention studies is the role of student engagement on and off the college campus. Research supports the positive relationship between student engagement and successful completion of college (Crawford, 1999; Tinto, 1998; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Chickering, 1974; Astin, 1993). Tinto's interactionist theory discusses how a "student's departure from college is tied to the formal and informal dimensions of a college and how these interactions occur between the individual student and the academic and social systems of a college or university" (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) states how the two variables that are important to retention is academic and social integration. Tinto (1998) believed that academic and social involvement appears differently in different educational settings and can influence different students in different ways. High levels of academic and social integration lead to greater persistence and institutional commitment that can result in higher graduation rates (Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000).

Of the many factors that support persistence, none have attracted more attention that the relationship between the student and the college or university. Student engagement is the interaction between the student and the institution. Regarding student engagement, Tinto states that the more students are involved in the college environment, the more positive their experiences (Tinto, 1998). Attrition is typically associated with poor academic preparation, excessive work, family responsibilities, and lack of commitment to educational goal (Scheutz, 2008). However, Tinto (1993) stated that only 25% of students drop out due to academic failure and that more than 75% of students fail due to the lack of fit between the skills and interests of students and the organization. Research has shown that the more actively engaged students are in all the various aspects

of college life, the more likely they are to learn and stay in college (DiMaria, 2006; Crawford, 1999).

Tinto (1993) states that two variables are important to retention: academic and social integration. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) defined integration as the degree to which an individual shares an institution's values and follows the formal and informal rules required for membership at that place. Academic integration is defined as the assimilation of the student into the academic life of the college (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). NCES (1998) determined academic integration by how often a student attended career-based lectures, participated in study groups, good study habits, talked to faculty, utilized academic support services, and met with advisors (NCES, 1998; Terenzini, et al., 1996; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). However, results from a recent CCSSE (2012) survey indicate that only 28% of students nationally at community colleges are engaged academically by preparing for classes such as studying, writing, reading, doing homework, and other activities related to their program. McConnell (2000) indicate that first-generation students showed lower levels of academic integration than second-generation students. These results are alarming because studies have found that first-generation students benefit more from in-class participation, discussions, and collaborative learning than the non-first generation students (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2005; Terenzini, et al., 1996). Prospero & Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that academic integration contributed to higher grade point averages among first-generation students and GPA is considered to be a high predictor of persistence (Mihok, 2005). However, according to Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler (2012), even though students who had higher cumulative GPAs were twice as likely to stay in college, none of the academic integration

variables were predictors of student persistence in community colleges. Even though many factors associated with academic integration can influence student persistence, there are other factors in a student's life that can affect persistence regardless of their level of academic involvement.

Social integration is defined as the assimilation of the student into the social life of the institution (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Social integration is determined by how often students had contact with faculty outside of the classroom; went places with friends from school; or participated in student activities, events, programs, or clubs and organizations (NCES 1998; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). First-generation students, more than other underserved students, were less likely to be involved in campus organizations, participate in extracurricular college activities, and had few friends on campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini, et al., 1994; Terenzini et al., 1996; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; McConnell, 2000; CCSSE, 2012). Research shows that a student's integration into college can have a bearing on his/her academic achievement because their levels of involvement with social networks have strong positive effects on critical thinking, sense of control over their academic success, preference for higher-order cognitive tasks, scientific reasoning, writing skills, and educational degree plans (McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Other researchers had similar conclusions from their studies. Some of the earliest findings on student engagement came from Chickering. Chickering's theory of student engagement and integration of experiences states that learning requires active participation in a variety of academic and social activities as well as the integration of

these diverse experiences into a meaningful whole (Chickering, 1974). The idea behind Chickering's theory is that the activities involved should all come together towards supporting a common goal.

Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement discussed the impact of student involvement on student outcomes in college. Astin (1984) asserted that students must be actively engaged in their surroundings to learn and grow in college. Involvement was defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). Student involvement can be in academically related activities, involvement in activities outside of class, and interactions with faculty, staff, and peers (Astin, 1984; Astin, 1993). Activities related to academics could include attending class prepared for discussion and/or participating in study groups whereas involvement in outside of class could include campus based student organizations, college athletic or intramural sports, or employment on-campus (Astin, 1984).

According to Engle & Tinto (2008), encouraging engagement on the college campus was one of the strategies to address the barriers of college success among first-generation students. Pike & Kuh (2005) discussed how the integration of academic and social engagements would affect learning and intellectual development. However, not all researchers agree about the importance or value of academic and social integration. Bean (1980), best known for the student attrition model for non-traditional students, stated that non-traditional students were more affected by their external environment than social integration variables that affect traditional students. In a study on social integration at 2-year Associate's colleges, Burnett (1996) found that there was no relationship between student retention and lack of participation in co-curricular activities. Borglum & Kubala

(2000) also found that at community colleges there was no correlation between academic and social integration and the withdrawal rates among students mainly in part to the large number of nontraditional students community colleges serve. Jehangir, Williams, & Pete (2011) and Terenzini et al., (1996) found that overall first-generation students tend to be less satisfied with the campus environment and are not connected to campus academically and socially. Lack of connection academically and socially among first-generation students is troubling and poses a challenge for community college faculty and administrators trying to attain higher retention rates among this student population.

According to Pike & Killian (2001), differences among academic disciplines produce differences in students' educational outcomes. Numerous studies have contributed to support Tinto's theories on student departure and engagement among first year students (Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000), but there is little research on whether academic and social engagement theory of Tinto would apply for students in an undergraduate professional program (Coll & Stewart, 2008). Coll & Stewart (2008) further stated how academic and social integration as applied to at-risk students enrolled in an undergraduate professional program of study remains unexplained in the college student departure process. Results of studies on Tinto's theory on academic and social integration for first-generation students in an undergraduate associate degree nursing program can help support retention initiatives for nursing programs as well as other academically challenging career programs.

#### First-Generation Students

Among all the different types of non-traditional students attending community colleges, none is more prevalent than first-generation students. A large number of the student populations attending community colleges are first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Calkins, 2005) where neither parent had more than a high-school education (Pascarella, et. al, 2004). First-generation students reflect the diversity of our society. The definition of a first-generation student differs throughout literature. However, the most common definition of first-generation students have been those students who is the first person to attend college from their family where neither parent had more than a high school education and had been to college (Shirlin, 2002; Duggan, 2001; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001; Choy, 2001). Shirlin (2002), U.S. Department of Education (1996) also classifies a student as first-generation even if the student's parents attended college but did not complete a degree. Other researchers included siblings or other family in their definitions of first-generation students (McConnell, 2000; York-Andersen & Bowman, 1991). For the purpose of this study, first-generation students are defined as those students who are first in their family to go to college where neither the father nor the mother attended college. Choy (2001), using results from the NCES Beginning Postsecondary Students longitudinal Study, found that in 1995-1996, 34% of students entering the nation's four-year institutions and 53% of students starting at two-year colleges were first-generation students. In 2005, first-generation students comprised 61% of all community college students in U.S. higher education and were the largest segment of student populations at community colleges (Calkins, 2005).

Researchers have found that first-generation student research generally have fallen into three general categories (Pascarella et al, 2004; Terenzini, et al, 1996). The

first category typically consists of first-generation student demographics, secondary school preparation, the college choice process, and college expectations (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). The evidence from this research indicates that first-generation students, when compared to their peers, generally tend to be at a disadvantage when it comes to post-secondary education knowledge (Pascarella, et. al, 2004).

The second category of research focuses on understanding the transition of first-generation students from high school to postsecondary education (Lara, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994; Rendon, Hope, & Associates, 1996). First-generation students have more difficulty transitioning from secondary school to college than their peers (Terenzini et al, 1996). Not only do they have the same anxieties and difficulties as any other college student, but their experiences also often involve substantial challenges in cultural as well as social and academic transitions (Pascarella, et. al, 2004).

The third category of research on first-generation students consists of examining their persistence in college, degree attainment, and early career labor market outcomes (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000; Choy, 2000; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). These studies have shown that first-generation students are more likely to leave a higher education institution at the end of first year, less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution, and less likely to be on a persistence track to attain a degree than their peers whose parents are college graduates (Pascarella, et. al, 2004). Ishitani (2003) found that first-generation students are 71% more likely to drop out of college than their peers who are not first-generation. If first-generation students make up a large majority of students at a community college

and they drop out of college at such an alarming rate, then that would significantly affect an institution's retention rate. Besides having financial implications, high attrition rates needs to be addressed from an educational and national standpoint to ensure that students are given the resources to succeed.

### Demographics

The first category of research on first-generation students typically consists of their demographics, college expectations, preparations, and the process in choosing a college. When studying first-generation student experiences and success traits, it is important to know who they are first and to understand their background. First-generation students are more likely than their traditional counterparts to be students of color, immigrants, student-parents, low-income, and over the age of 24 (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Duggan, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 1998). Even though there are white students who are first-generation students (Stuber, 2011), research shows that majority of the students who are in this category are from a historically underrepresented racial or ethnic group (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Horwedel, 2008).

First-generation students tend to live off-campus, work part- or full-time during college, have additional family responsibilities, and feel less socially and academically connected on campus (Chen, 2005; Hsiao, 1992; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). They have dreams of college and great aspirations to succeed, but more often they do not fulfill them (Venezia et al., 2005; Brag, Kim, & Barnett, 2006; Jehangir, 2008). They face many structural, situational, and interpersonal barriers that arise from being in this student population (Mowbray, 2008). Prospero & Vohra-Gupta (2007) indicated that

first-generation students are less likely to complete any degree when controlling for age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (NCES, 1998).

### Transitioning to College

The second category of research on first-generation students typically consists of understanding their transition from a secondary school to a post-secondary institution. For historically underserved student populations such as first-generation students, accessing and transitioning to college can be a great challenge (Green, 2006). They tend to enter college with less academic preparation and have limited access to information about college (Green, 2006; Jehangir, 2008; Thayer, 2000). They are also less likely to receive any assistance from parents or relatives to prepare for the experience (Thayer, 2000). While the families of first-generation students may be jubilant about their admission to college, they generally know very little about college life (Jalomo & Rendon, 2004; Jehangir, 2008, 2009, 2010; Leste Law, 1995; London, 1996; Osei-Kofi, Richards, & Smith, 2004; Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011). Duggan (2001) explains how first-generation students have a hard time understanding college because their parents are not able to provide any advice or parental support (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Calkins, 2005). Inman & Mayes (1999) described how without experienced parents to guide them, first-generation students faced higher challenges accessing useful information, taking advantage of university resources, navigating financial aid, having an academic plan, interfacing with technology, and understanding the overall functions of the college.

Transitioning to college can be a turbulent time for many students; but for first-generation students, it is like being in a strange new land where they have to learn the

language, customs, and more without the codebook that explains everything (Borrego, 2001; Rendon, 1996). Mowbray (2008) talked about how first-generation students, without parents who have been to college, are usually left alone to learn on their own the necessary skills and knowledge needed for successful transition to college. They are not sure what to do and feel confused about college and how to navigate things (Green, 2006). Inman & Mayes (1999) states how the lack of knowledge can contribute to the feelings of culture shock when entering college. Despite the fact that first-generation students go to college with specific intent to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing, their focus is not always on that very purpose (Ayala & Striplen, 2002). Engle & Tinto (2008), Thayer (2000), and (Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011) stated that these conflicting roles of first-generation students often results in low retention rates especially if those first-generation students are low-income or students of color.

### College Persistence and Degree Attainment

The third category of research on first-generation students consists of their persistence and degree attainment at a post-secondary institution. Successfully transitioning to college does not necessarily guarantee persistence or degree attainment for first-generation students. College persistence and degree attainment are factors that are considered to be a challenge for first-generation students in their higher education journey. Jehangir (2008) wrote that many first-generation, low-income students believe that college is a dream that holds the key to their future; but when they finally get there, it turns out to be much more confusing than magical. Jehangir (2009) found that first-generation, low-income college students experienced both isolation and marginalization in college, especially during their first year, which impacts their long-term persistence in

higher education. According to CCSSE (2012), students' behaviors contribute significantly to their learning and the likelihood that they will attain their educational goals. First-generation students work more hours off campus, have additional family responsibilities, are less likely to live on campus, to develop relationships with faculty members, and to perceive that faculty as being concerned about their development (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1996). These students are also less likely to develop strong relationships with other students, become involved in clubs and organizations on campus, or feel satisfied with the campus environment (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994; Terenzini et al., 1996; Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011). Jehangir, Williams, & Pete (2011) further stated that first-generation students feel less socially and academically connected on campus.

The majority of students at community colleges felt that their college emphasized providing support services that they need to help them succeed, yet smaller number of students used these support services. A significant number of students also felt that their colleges do not offer support for non-academic, social, and financial issues such as academic advising/planning, career counseling, tutoring, work, funding, etc. (CCSSE, 2012). First-generation students responded as rarely being part of student organizations or having any support for financial aid advising even though first-generation students marked these things as highly important to them. Such responses are indicative of a lack of academic and social connections among first-generation students. Lack of knowledge regarding these critical support services that are vital for persistence and degree attainment can lead to high attrition rates. First-generation students comprise a majority

of students that are at community colleges and increasing their persistence rate can lead to higher overall graduation rates.

### Nursing

Nursing ranks among the top programs at community colleges for academic rigor and popularity due to its economical, social, and personal benefits. Demands and opportunities of a career in nursing will drive first-generation students to pursue a career in this field. Many first-generation students may find this major appealing because they go to college with specific intent to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing (Ayala & Striplen, 2002; Bissett, 1995). According to Rhoades (2001), 97% of all nursing students get jobs immediately after graduation. Bissett (1995) further states that associate degree in nursing (ADN) programs provide the training needed to satisfy the critical need to educate disadvantaged groups. Nursing programs, however, are highly selective, have very competitive admission standards, and even stricter academic policies. Many nursing programs require candidates to take an entrance exam to demonstrate their competency in different subject matters including numeracy skills for admission to the program (Dray, et al., 2010). Students enrolled in nursing programs are expected to attend school full-time, work part-time, have plenty of family support, and spend a great deal of time studying (Olson, 2010). Many nursing programs, including that offered at the Midwestern community college, expect their students to successfully pass all courses and only allow students to repeat a course once if they fail a class (Midwestern College, 2012). Students are usually dismissed after this one strike policy. Therefore, first-generation students may find it difficult to be successful in a nursing

program because many minority and low socioeconomic status students display low levels of academic preparedness, which can lead to high attrition rates (Perin, 2006).

According to the U.S. BLS (2004, 2010), more new job openings for nurses are expected in the future than any other occupation. In 2008, the median wage was \$62,450 with employers offering flexible work schedules, child care, educational benefits, and bonuses to attract new nurses to their institution (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). As one of the largest industries, healthcare provided more than 14.3 million jobs for wage and salary workers and is expected to generate 3.2 million new jobs between 2008 and 2018. This expected increase is more than any other industry due to the rapid growth in the elderly population (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004, 2008) further states that registered nurses (RNs) make up the largest healthcare occupation with 2.6 million jobs and is expected to grow by 22 percent from 2008 to 2018 which is faster than the average for all occupations. Overall, job opportunities for registered nurses are expected to be excellent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2005), currently there is a serious shortage of nurses in the labor market, which is predicted to worsen over the next decade (Allan & Aldebron, 2008; Worth, 2008; Ukpabi, 2008; Friedel, 2012).

According to U.S. BLS (2010), the three typical educational pathways to becoming a registered nurse are through a diploma program, an associate's degree, and a bachelor's degree. The length of an associate's degree nursing program at a community college is usually two years. Though there is a debate in the nursing field about the advantages of a baccalaureate degree in nursing versus an associate's degree (Karp,

Jacobs, & Hughes, 2002), the role community colleges play in preparing students for nursing careers during national shortage is vital (Perin, 2006). Perin (2006) further states that in 2004, approximately 61% of first-time U.S. educated candidates taking the nursing exam had an associate's degree. Nursing degrees and the quality of nursing education are heavily regulated by external organizations so many nursing programs have tough admission standards to ensure that the students will be successful in the programs. Due to scarce resources that are needed to operate an expensive program, meet minimum standards set by regulatory agencies such as faculty to student ratios in clinical settings, and limited nursing faculty, there is a limit to the number of students enrolled in nursing programs (Bissett, 1995). Bissett (1995) further states that due to these restrictions, nursing programs at community colleges have selective admissions contradicting their mission of open door admissions.

Many programs use measures that can predict successful National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) pass rates to determine their admission standards. Because significant correlation exists between GPA, ACT composite score, SAT verbal rating and NCLEX scores, many admission policies in Associates Degree in Nursing (ADN) programs require a specific GPA and a standardized examination for admission. However, there is little study that has been done between these criteria and performance in the nursing program (Bissett, 1995).

Although nursing is a popular degree in community colleges, the lack of academic preparedness prevents many students from completing their degrees in this field (Perin, 2006). Between 2001 and 2006, nursing program enrollments increased 63 percent; however, nursing program graduation rates decreased almost eight percent during that

period (Friedel, 2012). Community colleges have a large student population of racial and ethnic minorities who are in developmental education as well as large number of recent immigrants and others with limited English language proficiency that may encounter difficulty in nursing courses (McCabe, 2003; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The healthcare industry is attempting to increase the number of individuals with ethnic minority backgrounds in nursing due to the diversity of the U.S. population (Vaughan, 2005) and from a lack of minority individuals in nursing programs (Robbins & Hoke, 2010). However, the attrition rates remain high among these students (Davidhizar & Shearer, 2005; Fletcher et al., 2003; Williams, Hall, & Papenhausen, 2005; Beard, 2009).

ADN programs appeal to disadvantaged students by providing a real opportunity to realize academic success leading to economic well-being (Bisset, 1995). Bisset (1995) argues that selective admission policies limit educational mobility for disadvantaged student groups and questions the ethics and equality of community colleges denying students at an opportunity for a better life. However, in order to succeed, nursing students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as first-generation students must overcome many barriers (Igbo, et al., 2011). Nursing is a degree that requires the students enrolled in that program to attend school full-time, work part-time, have plenty of family support, and spend a great deal of time studying (Olson, 2010) which directly contrasts with many of the characteristics of first-generation students. Barriers such as poor academic preparation, financial need, ineffective study skills, poor background in the sciences, and poor English language skills can prevent minority students and other underserved student populations from successfully completing nursing programs (Campbell & Davis, 1996; Dowell, 1996; Zuzelo, 2005; Beeber & Biermann, 2007).

Another issue is that students are often surprised and overwhelmed by the amount of information and the level of detail that they are expected to learn in a nursing program (Amaro, Abriam-Yago, & Yoder, 2006; Straker & Kelman, 2007).

### Student Persistence and Retention

Colleges and universities are beginning to address retention issues more due to the focus on completion and graduation rates at both federal and state levels (White House, 2009; Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2012). Adams (2011) defines retention as the percentage of freshmen students who return for a second year of college. Community colleges enroll over half of all students beginning their higher education journey including high number of adults, low income, first-generation, and other underrepresented student population (Schuetz, 2008). Though large numbers of students enroll in college with hopes of attaining a college degree to better position them to attain a middle class life, the harsh reality is that only a little more than 50% of those students will actually finish (Adams, 2011).

In order to ensure that students in programs such as nursing are successful, community colleges must actively promote a culture that supports efforts that will boost their retention rates. Calkins (2005) talks about the increasing presence of first-generation students at community colleges where they comprise about 61% of all students enrolled. To attain higher persistence and degree attainment rates among first-generation students, community colleges must focus on initiatives that can support retention efforts. Attrition is defined as leaving higher education before achieving one's educational objectives (Scheutz, 2008). Almost half of students at community colleges

failed to earn a certificate or degree or remain enrolled 6 years later without transferring to earn a bachelor's degree (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2003; Crawford, 1999; Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). Ishitani (2006) further states that first-generation students are at the highest risk of departure during the second year, followed by the first year. Though there are many reasons why a student may leave college before finishing his/her educational goals, Scheutz (2008) suggests that the decision to leave is correlated with student's poor academic preparation, excessive work, family responsibilities, and a lack of commitment to educational goals. Institutions that enroll a high number of first-generation students must address these issues and provide resources to increase retention.

According to surveys conducted by ACT, Inc., a testing and research company, students who attend four-year public or private colleges were more likely to return for a second year than students in community colleges (Adams, 2011). Adams (2011) further states that even though the overall retention rates is around 67% for decades, four-year colleges had a retention rate of 74% in 2011 in contrast to community colleges whose retention rate was only 56% in 2011. Graduation rates and completion numbers at community colleges are historically low and even lower for minorities and other less-advantaged students (NCES, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003; Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2011). Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2003) reported that six years after enrolling at a community college, only 9.7% students had earned certificates, 15.7% earned associate degrees, 10.3% went on to earn bachelor's degrees, 17.4% remained enrolled in higher education, and an astounding 45% left higher education without credentials.

While overall retention of students is a significant issue at most institutions, the retention of minority and underrepresented populations deserves even more of a concern (Furr & Elling, 2002). Rankin (2008) states that when it comes to non-traditional student populations at community colleges, the need to understand retention methods is necessary to remain competitive in today's society. Ishitani (2003, 2006) found that first-generation students are 71% more likely to drop out of college than non-first-generation students and are less likely to receive any degree (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Failing to graduate can lead to many other challenges in a student's life even after they leave the college environment. Besides losing the potential earning power that comes with a college degree, many students are in student-loan debt that can set them back years (Adams, 2011). Adams (2011) further states that college dropouts also cost society potential tax contributions and unrealized potential for being productive members. Bailey & Morest (2004) states that addressing these risk factors have become a major policy concern for community colleges.

Community colleges have taken diverse approaches when dealing with the problem of student persistence. According to (Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy (2011), one reason for low retention was the belief that the students who do not persist in college were simply underprepared for college work while another theory is that institutions themselves are to blame. Retention efforts can be focused on meeting the needs of students through different areas such as financial aid, student services, counseling, and student engagement (Kulik, Kulik, & Schwalb, 1983; Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Stuart, 2010; CCSSE, 2012). According to literature, there are strong relationships between persistence and factors such as college prep curriculum, grade point average

(GPA), financial aid, low levels of engagement, and parental and family support (Mihok, 2005; Adelman, 1999, Calkins, 2005; CCSSE, 2012).

### College Prep Curriculum

Among the different factors that can increase retention, preparing for college in a secondary institution is vital to provide students with a foundation to be successful in higher education. Many colleges mention that the retention problems they face cannot be solved without support from the K-12 sector. According to Scheutz (2008), there is an assumption that poor attrition is due to poor preparation outside of college. Kotamraju & Blackman (2011) and Pike & Kuh (2005) emphasized that the variation in graduation and completion rates at community colleges is dependent on the many cumulative influences community college students had prior to enrolling such as their previous workforce or high school experiences. Adelman (1999) stated that high school curriculum is a strong predictor of college success. Underserved students do not generally complete college prep curricula and take lower level reading and math courses in college (Twigg, 2005; Harrell & Forney, 2003). DiMaria (2006) stated that according to CCSSE data in 2005, more than half of the respondents reported they have taken or plan to take a developmental math, reading, or writing course. In comparison, recent CCSSE (2012) data indicate that a staggering 90% of student respondents have taken or plan to take a development math course, 65% developmental writing, and 53% reading. Lack of college prep curriculum classes leaves underserved students with a need to take remedial courses, which can result in remaining in college longer and that can possibly discourage them from completing their program of study (Chen, 2005; Twigg, 2005; Venezia, et al., 2005).

First-generation students are unaware of their learning style; even though many are intelligent, they lack the study skills and are unprepared for college because of their backgrounds (Horwedel, 2008; DiMaria, 2006). If these students are not prepared, their grades will suffer as a result. When considering many different variables on factors that influence student persistence in community colleges, GPA was the strongest predicting variable (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012). Without the proper background and foundation, first-generation students will not be prepared for the rigors of a college curriculum and can lead to low academic performance in their classes. Low grades can lead to frustration and can discourage students from continuing to take courses that will only lead to more negative results. Adams (2011) states that, according to ACT retention survey, students' lack of commitment to earn a degree and their lack of academic preparation in high school were among the top reasons for attrition in college.

#### Financial Aid

Financial aid and how to pay for college are considered to be determining factors in whether or not first-generation students persist (Mihok, 2005). Research studies have shown that financial factors play a significant role in student persistence behavior and financial assistance was considered a major factor in whether students were able to attend and persist in a higher education institution (Robb, Moody, & Abdel-Ghany, 2012). The results of studies on persistence models have also shown a relationship between financial aid and persistence where there was a positive correlation between composition of financial aid packages and persistence to the sophomore year of first-generation, low-income students (Mihok, 2005). Sixty-six percent of all undergraduates received some type of financial aid in 2007–08 (NCES, 2012). Without

financial assistance, many students would not be able to afford college. Underserved student populations were highly dependent on financial assistance to help support tuition and other costs associated with attending college. Financial aid is considered by community college students as a factor that influences their decision to drop out or stay in school (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012). Since first-generation students tend to come from families with lower incomes (Terenzini et al., 1996; DiMaria, 2006; Green, 2006; DeLong 2003), receiving financial aid and the kind of financial package students received were high persistence factors (Mihok, 2005; NCES, 1998).

For many Americans, especially among low-income and first-generation students, navigating the financial aid process can be difficult (College Board, 2010). When compared to students from college educated families, first-generation students are less likely to receive the academic, social, and financial support needed to be successful (Coy-Ogan, 2009). Colleges address financial issues from the beginning of a freshman student's college experience by providing extra help to overcome financial aid problems that prevent students from persisting and thus intrusively attempting to improve retention and graduation rates (Stuart, 2010). Stuart (2010) suggests that colleges that have traditionally focused on low-income, first-time college students with academic achievement deficiencies, such as community colleges, need to pay even more attention to addressing these academic and financial concerns than other institutions. Issues affecting persistence may be alleviated through targeted educational programs on financial aid and perceptions of debt (Robb, Moody, & Abdel-Ghany, 2012). Furthermore, other initiatives such as connecting families with financial aid resources can boost college completion (Adams, 2011). From their research, Engle & Tinto (2008)

recommended providing additional financial aid for college was one of the strategies that colleges and universities can pursue to address barriers that first-generation students face and to help improve students' chances of earning degrees.

### Parental Support

Researchers have found a significant relationship between parental support and academic adjustment (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Schneider & Ward, 2003; Lopez, 2001). An indicator of college success for first-generation student enrollment and retention in college was the education levels of their parents (Harnell & Forney, 2003). The level of support parents can provide to their children in college is dependent on the educational level of the parents. Parents are usually one of the reasons why first-generation students have low enrollment and persistence rates at college; they lack the ability to advise and support their children in an environment where they have very little experience. Though parents of first-generation college students understand the benefits of a college degree, they often do not comprehend that the pursuit of a degree may disrupt the family norms (DeLong, 2003). Researchers found that some of the family norms of first-generation students can be conflicting with college and because of that many first-generation students tend to walk a fine line between discovering how to navigate new territories, while at the same time trying to assure their families that they have not lost their true identity (DeLong, 2003; London, 1989; Howard, 2001).

Parents have the potential to instill in their children the expectation of attending college and can provide encouragement and emotional support throughout their college experience (Lopez, 2001). However, college may not be as important or relevant for a first-generation student's family as it is for those whose parents have been to college.

First-generation students do not have the same expectations to succeed in college as their peers who have parents that have been to college. Parents and other family members of first-generation students do not always understand the academic rigors and expectations of a college student and does not provide the student with the necessary support physically or mentally. With very little support from families, first-generation students face a daunting task of staying in college to complete their degree and have a higher risk of dropping out after a certain period of time (Mowbray, 2008).

Lopez (2001) found that parents have the potential to instill in their children the expectation of attending college and can provide the emotional support and encouragement throughout their children's college life. Parents of first-generation students often used strong familial and community norms to support their children which could come in conflict with wanting their children to succeed in college (DeLong, 2003). The importance of family relationships for first-generation students cannot be ignored when studying their persistence because family stability and desire for college success raise conflicting emotional responses from them as they try to understand everything themselves (Stieha, 2010). As first-generation students discover their "self" by acquiring new roles and identities in the college environment, parents play a key role in this process (Mowbray, 2008). Calkins (2005) and Terenzini et al. (1996) indicated that family support is critical to first-generation student's access and persistence in higher education; however, first-generation students consistently report a lack of such support from their parents.

First-generation students are just not groomed to go to college the same way as their second-generation counterparts because their parents are not aware of what is

expected of college students (Horwedel, 2008). Nunez & Cucarro-Alamin (1998) & Mowbray (2008) states that students with parents who have college experience have an advantage over first-generation students because their parents understand college life and can help their children manage and navigate the college environment whereas this is not the case for first-generation college students.

### Learning Communities

One form of student engagement that has emerged in colleges to bring interdisciplinary, multicultural curricula that allows diverse student groups to find a sense of belonging is multicultural learning communities (Jehangir, 2008). Research has shown the benefits of learning communities and peer group involvement in regards to enhancing student engagement and increased retention (Zhao and Kuh, 2004; Tinto, 1997). Learning communities are defined as a “kind of coregistration or block scheduling that enables students to take course together” (Tinto, 2000). According to Tinto (1997), learning is greatly enhanced when students participate in collaborative learning experiences where their learning process is active rather than passive. Learning communities create environments that heighten the quality of the learning experience; foster active and collaborative learning by faculty members who build connections between the academic and social world of their students’ lives (Astin, 1993; Goodsell-Love, 1999; Jehangir, 2001; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Levine, Smith, Tinto, & Gardner, 1999).

Recently, studies at 2-year colleges have revealed that first-generation students in learning communities were more engaged and more likely to persist from first year to second year than those students who were not in a learning community (Engstrom &

Tinto, 2008). The studies done on low-income, first-generation students dictate opportunities to develop curriculum that can build bridges between the academic and social realms of these marginalized students (Jehangir, 2008). According to Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo (1993) in Jehangir, Williams, & Pete (2011), learning communities serve as a bridge between the academic and social systems by proofing study partners, sources for class notes, and so forth. Learning extended beyond the classroom and became part of study groups and informal gatherings (Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011). Tinto (1997) argued that colleges should reorganize curriculum into learning communities that enable student learning to span the disciplines and that higher education institutions should reorganize classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences. Nursing programs have similar model of scheduling classes as learning communities. Collaborative learning can lead to higher student engagement and if nursing faculty designs their curriculum and classroom norms similar to learning communities by increasing academic and social engagement among students, it may increase overall retention and success in the nursing program.

#### Nursing Student Engagement Strategies

Olson (2010) stated that providing non-traditional students with the necessary support and skills would lead to greater retention rates for nursing programs. Nursing programs are generally considered to be difficult due to being science-intensive and externally regulated (Perin, 2006). Educational programs need to be aware of the needs and challenges of the non-traditional student and provide opportunities to ensure their success (Olson, 2010). According to Igbo, et al. (2011), nursing schools address barriers to student success through on-campus enrichment programs that offer academic and

social support. Since the nursing shortage is predicted to worsen over the next decade (Allean & Aldebron, 2008; Worth, 2008), it will be vital to keep struggling students within the nursing program (Poorman, Mastorovich & Webb, 2011; Perin, 2006).

For nursing students, particularly among first-generation students, school is rarely their only concern (Poorman, Mastorovich, & Webb, 2011). Poorman, Mastorovich, & Webb (2011) further stated that students often experience struggles and issues that are both academic and nonacademic in nature. Some areas identified for institutions to develop best practice strategies can be in pre-entry, program orientation, advisement, study skills, test-taking skills, remediation, clinical skill development, National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses preparation, faculty commitment, and learning environment (Waltman & Hoover, 2006). Perin (2006) recommends nursing-specific tutoring, advisement, and counseling intervention to address serious difficulties in retention and academic performance. Evidence has shown counseling services to have a positive influence on retention of college students and that retention of underserved nursing students at community colleges were influenced by their personal characteristics and commitment to college (Khattab, 2011; Bishop & Walker, 1990; Coll & Stewart, 2008). Thus, early counseling intervention can help first-generation students to be committed to the nursing program by creating an awareness of the academic expectations and resources available to be successful.

In order to provide support and mentoring to help nontraditional students achieve success in the nursing program, educators need to be aware of their needs and challenges (Olson, 2010). Evidence supports the practice of active learning due to the positive effects on college students in regards to problem solving, critical thinking, and

persistence (Popkess & McDaniel, 2011). Salamonson, Andrew, & Everett (2009) reported the importance of promoting academic engagement of nursing students and the importance of active learning engagement in influencing academic success. Institutions need to develop learning-related activities because the time students spend on these activities has been identified as a crucial element of academic engagement (Salamonson, Andrew, & Everett, 2009). Nursing students perceive themselves as significantly more academically challenged than their peers; however, they do not perceive themselves to be engaged in student-centered and interactive pedagogies (Popkess & McDaniel, 2011). Learning activities must include time spent both inside and outside the classroom such as homework, lectures, and private study as well as attending on-campus activities including lectures and tutorials (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002; Singh, Granville, & Ditka, 2002; Olson, 2010).

Understanding the concerns and challenges of nontraditional nursing students can help nursing programs to develop multi-disciplinary strategies for at risk students such as study skills components which includes preparing for lectures, taking notes, critical skills and test-taking strategies (Igbo, et al., 2011). Igbo, et al., (2011) further identified a need to address written and oral communications skills, career coaching, socialization activities, and the importance of faculty and student collaborations. Faculty members are expected to play a key role in addressing the needs of their students even though the multiple roles of the nurse educator can be overwhelming where they may lack the time, availability, and expertise necessary to help certain students (Poorman, Mastorovich, & Webb, 2011). Since community colleges are commuter colleges, community college students may find it difficult to connect with faculty outside of class (Schuetz, 2008).

However, Beard (2009) stated that nursing faculty members play a pivotal role in ensuring retention of minority students in the program (Beard, 2009). For many first-generation and other underserved students, the faculty is a figure of respect and influence due to their role as the expert in the field. Because of such perceptions, faculty has the power to make a difference in student retention initiatives.

Olson (2010) found four major themes that emerged among nontraditional nursing students; social support, organization, spirituality, and challenges. Several sub themes emerged such as friends, teachers, personal motivation, and family under social support. Peer group, study groups, student services, and financial support from family or financial aid also were minor themes under the social support major theme (Olson, 2010).

Findings from a peer assessment study among nursing students showed that most students enjoyed the peer assessment process and that peer assessment facilitates and enhances student engagement (Casey, et al., 2011). Olson (2010) further noted that the sub themes under challenges included stress, family and friends, working while in school, second time in college, and financial concerns. However, according to Sandiford & Jackson (2003), nonacademic variables did not support first semester final course outcomes in an ADN program. The number of hours planning to work weekly, financial difficulty attending college, and achievement tendencies were not significant predictors of retention. Their studies on attrition and retention of first semester associate degree nursing students concluded that nursing students with college level language skills and pre-semester GPA of 2.5/4.0 and above had lower attrition rates (Sandiford & Jackson, 2003). Sandiford & Jackson (2003) further found that among nursing students, academic background seems to play a more significant role in determining student retention. The

current study will look for themes related to several of the academic and social activities mentioned by prior research to determine if those results are similar to the experiences of first-generation nursing students at the Midwestern community college.

### Conceptual Framework

The purpose of the conceptual framework is to provide a pathway for the researcher to examine and base current research on theories developed from prior studies. The conceptual framework sets the stage for presenting specific research questions that will drive the investigation (Fleming, Bordage & Shea, 2001). Studying and understanding retention in all aspects of the college is vital and not just among the first year students. There are numerous literatures on incoming first-generation students, their demographics, and needs but very little studies have been conducted on first-generation students' experiences in a nursing program and whether their needs are similar to the first-year first-generation students (Popkess & McDaniel, 2011).

The conceptual framework for this study is based on Tinto's theory of academic and social integration. This study will help determine whether theories that have supported student retention for first-year undergraduate students will support first-generation students in an undergraduate professional program such as nursing. Current study will take into account Chickering's theory that both academic and social activities must be integrated into a meaningful whole to support retention. The belief is that both the academic and social activities of nursing students are integrated towards a common goal of passing nursing classes. This study will assume that academic and social integration activities in the nursing program can help first-generation students succeed

regardless of their external environment and background. This study will try to learn how first-generation students in the nursing program succeeded and whether academic and social activities they participated in the program helped them overcome the challenges they faced outside the college environment.

The foundation of the conceptual framework for this study is based on the belief that academic and social activities and student involvement on campus will not only contribute to the successful retention of students in their first-year of college but also in an undergraduate professional program such as nursing. The first-generation nursing student retention model (see Figure 1) illustrates the relationship between social and academic activities for first-generation nursing students and their role in overcoming external challenges and in predicting successful retention and graduation from a nursing program.

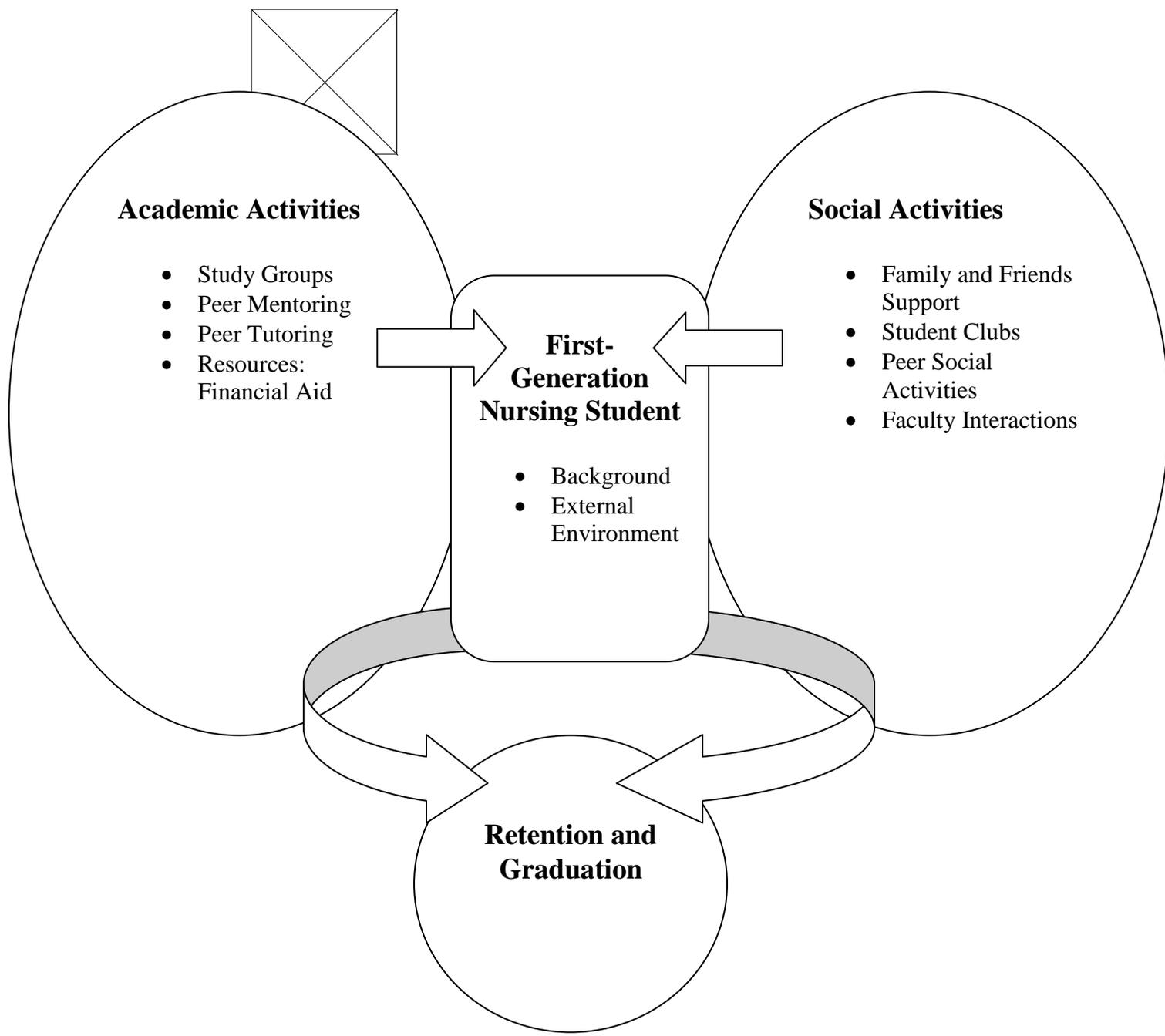


Figure 1: First-Generation Nursing Student Retention Model

Successful retention and graduation of nursing students would require several different academic and social activities that can be integrated into the nursing program to successfully address some of the challenges first-generation students face in an academically rigorous professional program. Academic activities such as lectures, tutoring, peer assessments, study skills, test taking strategies, private study, note taking skills, and written and oral communication skills are all themes that nursing students have found to be supportive in helping them succeed (Olson, 2010; Casey, et al., 2011; Igbo, et al., 2011; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Greenwald, et al., 2002; Singh, Granville, & Ditka, 2002). Social support such as from family and friends, counseling, financial aid, peer study groups, career coaching, socialization activities, and faculty support and collaboration were also found to be vital for first-generation student's in a nursing program (Olson, 2010; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Greenwald, et al., 2002; Singh, Granville, & Ditka, 2002; Igbo, et al., 2011). This study will add to current research by determining which academic and social support activities, if any, helped them to successfully graduate from the program.

## Summary

In this chapter, the purpose of higher education was discussed and the role community colleges play in educating first-generation students. The demographics and characteristics of first-generation students were explained in detail. The importance of student persistence and retention was discussed as well as the factors that can lead to higher retention rates. Nursing as a profession and a degree was discussed along with student engagement strategies for first-generation nursing students. The basis for the conceptual framework of this study was explained and a student retention model for first-generation nursing students was introduced in this chapter.

Findings from research studies have supported the benefits of academic and social integration for first-year students in enhancing their college experience and in retaining students who are considered at-risk such as first-generation. However, there is little research on the benefits of academic and social integration in an undergraduate professional program. Would Tinto's theory of academic and social integration support retention of first-generation students in a professional undergraduate program with high academic standards such as nursing?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The primary purpose of this study focuses on how first-generation students graduate from a nursing program at a community college. Additionally, the aim of this study is to contribute to the literature regarding experiences of first-generation students in a nursing program at a Midwestern community college. The information obtained will provide a better understanding of whether student engagement theories supporting academic and social integration can be applied to first-generation students in an undergraduate professional program such as nursing. This chapter covers research design, data collection process, participant selection, interview process, analysis of data, trustworthiness, ethical issues, researcher biases, limitations, and delimitations. The study is designed to gain more specific information about the factors that contributed to the graduation of the nursing students enrolled at a Midwestern community college. The research questions addressed are: 1) What are the experiences of first-generation nursing students that helped them to successfully graduate, 2) What role did academic integration play in supporting first-generation students to succeed in the nursing program, 3) What role did social integration play in supporting first-generation students to succeed in the nursing program and 4) What can community colleges do to help support first-generation nursing students to be successful?

## Research Design

Creswell (1998) wrote that “the best studies have a strong inquiry procedure” (p. 27). He and others suggest that a good research design should be inquiry-based where the purpose or the goal of a research project should guide the design (Creswell, 2007; Wolcott, 1994; Cobb & Hoffart, 1999). Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). Qualitative studies are tools used in understanding and describing the human experience where one of the greatest strengths is its ability to conduct and describe explorations in great depth (Myers, 2000). A qualitative approach to research is a way to gain knowledge through discovering meanings and comprehension as a whole. Creswell (2008) stated that qualitative research is the best approach to pursue when a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because there has been little research done on it. Because there is little actual research done on first-generation students in a professional undergraduate program such as nursing (Coll & Stewart, 2008), a qualitative research design is central to this study.

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research design was preferable to a quantitative research design. Creswell (2008) pointed out that a qualitative research design allows the researcher to gain a better understanding of the experiences of participants through question probing and other methods. Qualitative research pursues what and how questions to get a deeper understanding of an observed phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). A qualitative approach will allow more flexibility in capturing the

personal views and experiences of first-generation students in a community college nursing program. Additionally, a phenomenological inquiry is one of many types of qualitative research that examines the live experiences of first-generation nursing students and was the most appropriate for this study.

### Methodology: A Phenomenological Study

Prior research suggests that phenomenology is the appropriate study when trying to address meanings and perspectives of research participants. Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy and is described as an understanding of a subject's perceived reality (Leedy, 1997, p.161). A phenomenological approach to a study investigates an individual's or group's perception of reality as they construct it (Creswell, 1998, p.207). Patton (1990) describes a phenomenological study as one "that is focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (p.71). According to Schwandt (2000), the major concern for phenomenological study is to understand how the everyday world is constituted from the participants' perspective. The researcher often plays the role of a biographer or story teller and finds meaning behind an experience by locating key statements that speak to the phenomena in question (Denzin, 1989). The researcher reduces data gathered through lengthy interviews from several informants describing their shared experiences to a central meaning for those experiences (McCaslin & Scott, 2003).

Phenomenology would be the best approach in designing this study since the primary purpose of this research was to learn about the experiences of first-generation nursing students from their perspective. Even though a phenomenologist may study just

one subject, typically six to ten subjects are purposefully selected (Creswell, 1998, p.207). In this inquiry, the phenomenon being investigated was the experiences of seven first-generation graduates of the nursing program at a selected mid-western community college. For the purpose of this study, the experiences of these former first-generation students provided meaningful insights, common themes, and patterns that were then placed within the context of this phenomenon.

### Biases

Bias is a possibility in all research; both qualitative and quantitative researchers must address the issue of bias to avoid influencing the study in any particular way. Merriam (1998) stated that qualitative researchers especially be knowledgeable of how personal biases can influence their study and must be careful when collecting data. Since qualitative research is interpretative research with the inquirer typically involved in an intensive experience with participants, it can lead to a range of strategic, ethical, and personal issues that can introduce bias in to the process (Locke, Spirduso, Silverman, 2000).

The researcher acknowledges that certain biases, actual or perceived, may exist in this study. The first bias centered on the researcher's personal life in being an immigrant, first-generation student in the United States as defined by this study and whose mother and fiancée is a nurse and currently have a sister who is enrolled in a nursing program. It is possible that the researcher's personal views could skew the way findings are interpreted. Another bias may be derived from prior notions the researcher may have regarding factors that makes a successful nursing student from observing and informally

talking to nursing students at the nursing college he was employed with prior to his current position. A third bias was the perceived, generalized view of first-generation students among higher education professionals as an at-risk student population and the preconceived notions of their challenges in going to college may not be an accurate reflection of first-generation students in a professional program such as nursing. Last, the researcher's experiences with working with students from different backgrounds such as immigrants, minorities, and first-generation students may all lead to preconceived notions of their experiences and could influence the way he chooses the candidates for the study, selects research questions, controls the interview to guide answers, and how he interprets their experiences.

Having worked in admissions and enrollment services at a community college, for-profit institution and a private nursing college in different capacities for over 8 years, the researcher had vast depth of first-hand knowledge of first-generation student's experiences, issues, problems, struggles, and successes. Yet, the researcher's current position has not provided any opportunities to talk to first-generation students in the actual nursing program to learn about their experiences, challenges or successful strategies. Therefore, the subject's experiences in a nursing program should not be relatable to the researcher and will be unique regardless of prior notions. However, the professional experiences and understanding of the first-generation students in general should provide the researcher with information necessary to build a good rapport with the participants. Even though research will be conducted at the researcher's institution of employment and can raise concerns from doing "backyard" research (Glesne & Peashkin,

1992), the researcher will report all data and disclose information that are complete and in accordance with standard data reporting.

### Ethical Issues

Most authors discussing qualitative research design address the importance of ethical considerations (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Spradley, 1980; Creswell, 1998). Because participant observation is invasive and sensitive information is frequently revealed (Spradley, 1980), the researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and the desires of the informants (Creswell, 1998).

For this research study, addressing the ethical issues and protecting the interest of the subjects was facilitated through several methods. The researcher submitted an expedited review form to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Benedictine University before conducting any research. All research conducted at Benedictine University which involves human or animal subjects must first be reviewed by the IRB. The IRB at Benedictine University reviewed the current study to ensure that ethical guidelines for research are followed and approved the proposal since it met the National Institute of Health (NIH) and/or American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines for human subjects' research. Fritz (2008) stated that by consulting the IRB for guidance, the researcher will be able to ensure that the participants are protected and the integrity of the research process is not questioned. In addition, the researcher has successfully completed a web-based training course called "Protecting Human Research Participants" by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research (Appendix A).

The researcher has an obligation to inform the subjects that they are part of a research project. The research objectives as well as how the data will be used were articulated verbally and in writing to the participants so they clearly understand the study. An Informed Consent form were created to ensure that participants understand their rights and to ensure them that the researcher will use all data confidentially (Appendix A). A written permission to proceed with the study as mentioned in the Informed Consent form were received from the participants. The written interpretations were made available to the participants for review.

The participant's rights, interests, and wishes were considered a priority when choices are made regarding the data. The researcher established clear procedures to ensure that personal identifiers will not be used in interview notes and transcripts to reduce risk and to maximize confidentiality. The researcher used pseudo names to protect the identity of the participants. The researcher also protected the identity of the institution and will use the pseudo name "Midwestern community college" to ensure confidentiality. The researcher further kept interview notes, tapes, transcribed notes, processed data, results and any other material related to this study locked up and passwords protected within the office of the School of Education at Benedictine University as well as established a clear chain of custody procedures to ensure that data does not get tampered with or lost. Data will be maintained for seven years to maintain proof of the study's results.

#### Participant Selection

In this study, the technique that was used was purposeful sampling that involved samples that attempted to maximize range. Instead of selecting respondents randomly, the researcher attempted to find people who can give different points of view from one another to avoid duplication of the same stories and to find as many different experiences as possible within a given population (Weiss, 1994). This strategy was used so that possible generalizations can be made to a larger population from a sample chosen to maximize range. The researcher attempted to make the argument that if there are uniformities in the sample despite adequately representing a range of instances, then the uniformities must be general and if there are differences, then those differences should hold in a larger population (Weiss, 1994, p. 24).

In order to participate in this study, research participants met the following criteria: 1) be a recent graduate (past 3 years) of the Midwestern community college's nursing program and 2) be a first-generation student where neither their father nor mother attended college. The researcher requested a report from the institution's Research Office of persons who met the stated criteria. For the purpose of this study, students who indicated that their parents had "some college" were excluded. The researcher sent an initial email to the graduates to determine if they would be interested in participating in the study. Based on their responses, the researcher contacted by telephone those graduates who were interested in participating in the interview.

For this study, the researcher selected a minimum of six up to a maximum of ten participants because Creswell (2007) stated that in phenomenological study, the researcher must study a small number of subjects through intensive engagement in order to develop patterns of meaning. The subjects were chosen from different years to ensure

that the findings were not a result of coincidence that is unique to any one particular graduating class.

The researcher first completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) form and submitted to Benedictine University for approval before collecting data. Once approval was obtained, the researcher contacted the Midwestern community college's research office to obtain the names and contact information of nursing graduates for the past three years who met the criteria of being a first-generation student and graduated from college's nursing program. The researcher obtained permission from Midwestern community college to use student data for research (Appendix B). The researcher adhered to the college's procedures in requesting data. An introductory letter (Appendix C) was sent by the researcher to potential participants via email explaining the study and asking for their participation. After receiving responses from participants who wish to participate in the study, the researcher then followed up with a telephone call to make a formal introduction, review the purpose of the study, explain terms and conditions of confidentiality, and to schedule the interviews.

Once the interviews were scheduled, the researcher emailed confirmation notices with all the details and logistics of the interview (Appendix D). The researcher also made a reminder phone call one day before the interview (Appendix E). During the interview, the researcher provided the participants with an informed consent form and requested their signature. A thank you card along with a gift card to Starbucks was given to each participant after the interview acknowledging the researcher's appreciation for their time and assistance with the study.

## Data Collection

In a qualitative study, there are three main methods of data collection: interactive interviewing, written descriptions by participants, and observation (Myers, 2000). For this study, the primary method of collecting data was through interviews. The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind (Patton, 1990). Weiss (1994) describes interviews as an especially important means of data collection that gives a window to the past. Creswell (1994) stated that phenomenologists rely on semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather data and that the researcher must work closely with subjects to collect information. Qualitative interviews should involve open-ended questions whose answers should take on a narrative of the respondent's experiences and give researchers and readers a more complete picture of the subject's perspectives (Weiss, 1994). According to Patton (1990), there are three approaches to collecting data through open-ended interviews: informal conversation, general interview guide, and standardized open-ended. The informal conversational interview is the most open and relies on the natural flow of conversation. The general interview guide approach is open but uses a guide to cover topics. The standardized open-ended interview is where the same set of questions is used for each participant (Patton, 1990). Patton (1990) stated the importance of truly asking open-ended questions as to minimize directing predetermined responses when gathering data.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher collected data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The researcher conducted open-ended interviews using a combination of strategies as outlined by Patton (1990) that included a general interview guide approach and a standardized open-ended interview approach where the same set of

questions were used for all the participants. Such an approach ensured that the researcher had a guide to make sure all the topics are covered and that the information obtained is reliable in the context of the study by asking the same set of questions to everyone. The interview techniques are supported by both Weiss (1994) who believes that the researcher should prepare a simple outline of topics to be used as a research guide to avoid veering off the topic and Creswell (1998) who believes that a brief set of questions must be asked sequentially by the interviewer. Weiss (1994) emphasized the importance of creating an atmosphere where the respondents feel at ease and the interviewer and respondents are having a conversation because of the relationship they built within the interview. Creswell (1998) believes in a more formal aspect to it so the interviewer does not stray from the research plan and all the questions will be answered. The researcher hopes that the current study explained the experiences of the participants in relation to the phenomenon of this study (Creswell, 2008).

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews during the spring of 2013 with students at a location agreed upon by the participants and the researcher. If a participant does not have a preference to where they meet, the researcher's office was used. Before the interview begins, the subjects were provided with an informed consent form for signature (Appendix F). The interviews began with general questions followed by more focused communication (Appendix G). The questions were about the participant's characteristics and experiences that helped them succeed in the nursing program. Interviews were all held under 60 minutes. Once the initial interviews were completed, interview interpretations were emailed to the participants to validate or clarify any data. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim according to data

collection guidelines as outlined by Weiss (1994) and Creswell (1998). Complete transcripts of the interviews were held in a secure location in a locked file cabinet maintained and accessible only by the researcher.

### Data Analysis

According to Marshall & Rossman (1989), data analysis procedures are organizing data, generating categories, themes and patterns, testing emerging hypotheses against data, searching for alternate explanations of data, and writing the report. In qualitative research, the most widely used method of data analysis is coding (Turner, 2001). The coding of data involved organizing the data into categories and critically analyzing them for patterns and themes. In a qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher collects emerging data with the primary intent to develop themes from them (Creswell, 1998). Creswell (1998) further states that “phenomenologists communicate findings through detailed narratives exploring themes and patterns which emerged from data analysis and reduction” (Creswell, 1998; p. 207). Merriam (1998) describes this method of analyzing qualitative data as narrative analysis and involves the study of a participant’s experience through stories. The current study utilized the narrative analysis method along with phenomenological analysis to analyze the data. Phenomenological analysis involves getting to the essence of the phenomenon in question (Turner, 2001) – successful graduation from the nursing program.

Phenomenological studies generally follow data analysis through reduction and specific themes to search for all possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). The goal of data analysis is to identify behaviors, problems, issues, and characteristics that can showcase a

particular case. In addition to theme development and testing, data analysis involves organizing the obtained information to a meaningful whole. Because data collected in qualitative research can be ambiguous, the researcher must apply meaning and insight to the participants' words (Turner, 2001). At this point, it is vital that the researcher sets aside all preconceived notions and judgments that can arise from his or her experiences to avoid misrepresenting meaning of the participant's experience. Moustakas (1994) recommends keeping the balance between subjectivity and objectivity.

The interview responses were organized, coded, and categorized for analysis by the researcher at the conclusion of all the interviews. Using the coding process, responses from the interviews were categorized into various themes for further analysis. Creswell (1998) stated that coding can be used to generate a small number of themes which will be the major findings in a qualitative study. All information that identifies particular participants during the organization, coding, and categorizing of interview responses was removed by the researcher to ensure anonymity and to protect the privacy of the participants. After all data were collected, analyzed, coded, and categorized, the researcher presented the findings in a written format in relation to the outcomes of the research questions. By bringing together all the data, the researcher made interpretations and conclusions about the insights gained from this study.

### Trustworthiness

Seale (1999) stated that "trustworthiness" of a study is at the heart of discussions regarding reliability and validity and is considered to be essential in establishing quality. Any qualitative researcher must be concerned with validity and reliability when

designing a study, analyzing results, and judging the quality of the study (Patton, 2002). In qualitative research, an examination of trustworthiness is crucial in ensuring reliability (Golafshani, 2003). Lincoln & Guba (1985) stated the criteria in ensuring “trustworthiness” in qualitative studies are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Negative cases, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement and observation, audit trails, and member checks are all recommendations of specific strategies to attain trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the researcher will utilize the strategies of peer debriefing, member checking, and audit trails to demonstrate trustworthiness. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), there can be no validity without reliability so a demonstration of validity would be sufficient to establish reliability. Patton (2002) also supports this notion by stating that reliability is a consequence of the validity in a study. The researcher will discuss below the strategies utilized in this study to establish validity and overall trustworthiness.

There are both internal and external threats to validity (Creswell, 1998). External validity threats can occur when experimenters draw incorrect inferences from the sample data to include other persons, other setting and past or future situations by generalizing beyond the groups in the experiment to other racial or groups not under study (Creswell, 1998). Internal validity threats are experimental procedures, treatments, or experiences of the participants in an experiment that can hinder the experimenter’s ability to make accurate conclusions from the data (Creswell, 1998).

The researcher is aware of the external threats that can occur and will not make any conclusive generalizations beyond the groups that are being interviewed. The researcher is aware that the common factor among all the studies is that they are first-

generation nursing students. The other characteristics such as gender, age, race, immigrant status did not lead to any conclusive findings and understands that any differences in findings among the groups would require further studies to support current data.

The researcher employed different strategies to ensure that the internal validity threats are addressed. By addressing these threats to validity, the researcher were able to establish credibility for the study. In order to establish credibility, the researcher demonstrated that the subjects were accurately identified and described. Data triangulation is a tool that the researcher will use to address validity of data by using multiple sources to collect data. The study utilized multiple subjects from different backgrounds for interviews to maximize range and to avoid accusations that the findings are simply a result of a single source or a single investigator's biases (Creswell 1998). The researcher also analyzed documents by examining the admission application of students selected for interview from the Midwestern community college's Records Office to check if they indicated their first-generation status on the application. By confirming the status on the original application, the researcher was able to verify the information from the research office regarding the first-generation status of the participants as credible and that it was not a data entry error. Verification is the process of checking, confirming, making sure, being certain, and can contribute to ensuring the reliability, validity, and rigor of a study (Morse, et. al., 2002).

The researcher also utilized member checking as a tool to establish credibility and to triangulate the researcher's interpretations. Member checking allowed participants to review findings from data analysis to check for accuracy and whether they agree or

challenge its accuracy (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The member checking employed in this study were achieved by sending each participant an interpretation of the data from their interview where they were able to review for clarity and accuracy as well as identify any areas that may have been missed or misinterpreted.

Peer examination was another tool utilized by the researcher to ensure credibility and trustworthiness to the study. Peer examiners used in this study included a current graduate student in a doctoral program, as well as a professional in higher education with experience in qualitative research. The researcher met with them frequently to discuss the different approaches and methods used in the study and also conducted a sample interview with a peer to address any unforeseen concerns prior to conducting individual interviews with the participants.

Transferability of the study's findings is an important factor in determining the study's trustworthiness. The question of neutrality within a study is essential to determine trustworthiness where the findings are determined by the participants and the conditions of the inquiry versus the biases, interests, motivations or perspectives of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability can only be achieved if readers and future researchers have enough information to adequately transfer the findings of this study to similar settings (Martin, 2010). In this study, the researcher gave thick descriptions so that readers are able to make decisions as to whether the results of this inquiry can be transferable. Byrne (2001) stated that thick descriptions can provide a researcher with sufficient information to determine if the findings can be applied to other settings. Since contexts are designed to evoke multiple meanings, the meaning of communication depends on relevant context. For the purpose of this study, the researcher

developed thorough and comprehensive descriptions of the context, so the reader can fully understand the findings.

Finally, dependability and confirmability of the study are to be addressed to determine the “trustworthiness” of the findings. Dependability is determined by the consistency of the findings and whether they can be replicated while confirmability addresses the strength of the findings as supported by data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purpose of this study, the researcher achieved both dependability and confirmability by establishing an audit trail which included digital recordings, field notes, and transcribed interviews. Patton (1990) states that full transcriptions are the most desirable data to obtain because they can be enormously useful in data analysis and later in replications or independent analyses of the data. When data analysis and conclusions are triangulated, subjects’ perceptions are verified and a chain of evidence is established; it increases a study’s trustworthiness (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996).

### Limitations and Delimitations

All research studies have certain inherent limitations and delimitations that need to be identified to establish the boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications (Creswell, 1998). Delimitations narrow the scope of a study and are described as the work that will not be undertaken (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). In this study, research was limited to first-generation nursing graduates at one mid-western community college. Although four-year universities and other community colleges across the United States have first-generation nursing graduates, they were not central to this study. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to first-generation nursing graduates from four-year

universities or other community colleges in different regions of the country. The study was also limited to only first-generation nursing students whose parents have not attended college. Outcomes and results cannot be generalized to non first-generation nursing graduates or to first-generation students in other professional programs.

All statistical procedures and research strategies have limitations (Creswell, 2002). Punch (2000) describes limitations as limiting conditions or restrictive weaknesses that are unavoidably present in a study. Although this study contributed to the body of literature and identified the factors that helped first-generation students in a professional nursing program succeed, it does have limitations. This study is qualitative and by conducting interviews, the sample size was small due to the intense nature of transcribing and analyzing data. Although small sample sizes are acceptable in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2002), they limit the researcher's ability to make generalizations. In addition, the research study only considered the first-generation status of nursing students as a factor. It did not take into consideration other factors such as culture, values, parent's background besides education, family income level, and other influences that may have influenced the research participant's success in the nursing program. The study revealed the factors and influences that helped first-generation nursing students succeed; however, it was limited in its assumption that all of the first-generation nursing students that are being interviewed fit the first-generation student profile that was defined by prior research. The study was further limited in its assumption that the participants are truthful in their self-reporting of data.

### \Summary

In this chapter, the methodological approach to the study was outlined. A qualitative research with a phenomenological inquiry method was selected as the design for this study. This chapter covered research design, data collection process, participant selection, interview process, analysis of data, trustworthiness, ethical issues, researcher biases, limitations and delimitations. The topics in this chapter summarized how the research was conducted and provided information on the specifics of the study.

The current study focused on the experiences of successful first-generation students in a nursing program at a Midwestern community college. The study was designed to gain more specific information about the factors that contributed to their graduation from the nursing program. Analysis of data determined the common themes that existed in student experiences and revealed correlation between graduation and academic and social activities. The findings of this study helped determine if faculty and administrators at community colleges should spend time and resources to integrate academic and social activities into the nursing program to help first-generation nursing students succeed. It is with these elements that the study of success factors among first-generation nursing students at a mid-western community college was better understood.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The primary purpose of this study is centered on how first-generation students graduate from a nursing program at a community college. Additionally, the aim of this study is to contribute to the literature regarding experiences of first-generation students in a nursing program at a Midwestern community college. The information obtained will provide a better understanding of whether student engagement theories supporting academic and social integration can be applied to first-generation students in an undergraduate professional program such as nursing. The study is designed to gain more specific information about the factors that contributed to the graduation of the nursing students enrolled at Midwest College. The research questions addressed are: 1) What are the experiences of first-generation nursing students that helped them to successfully graduate, 2) What role did academic and social integration play in supporting first-generation students to succeed in the nursing program, and 3) What can community colleges do to help support first-generation nursing students to be successful?

This chapter contains the description of the research participants, an analysis of the interviews, and the research findings gathered from interviews with first-generation nursing graduates at Midwest College. Seven first-generation graduates were interviewed to learn more about their experiences and whether academic and social

activities played a role in their success. After the interview responses were organized, coded, and categorized, five emergent themes with sub-themes were found as a result of data analysis and reduction.

The participants included persons who had graduated within three years from the time of study or about to graduate within a month of the time when the interview was conducted. The sampling procedures were purposeful, yielding a fairly diverse pool of participants. The participants described their experiences in the nursing program in the context of their personal characteristics and understanding. They had incredible stories to tell regarding their personal motivation, determination, challenges, and strategies to achieve their goal of attaining their nursing degree.

### Participants

This section provides an overview of the demographics of participants in this study. Seven students responded favorably to participate in the interviews; six were prior graduates of the program within three years of when the study was conducted and one was graduating within a month of the study. Though the participant pool is fairly diverse, the researcher was unable to secure an interview with an African-American graduate even after several follow-up attempts by phone. Of the four Caucasian students, one of them was an immigrant whose family was originally from Poland and had a background that was different from a traditional Caucasian student. Two other Caucasian students had strong ethnic identities as well because their families were from Greece and Italy which added to the diversity of the group. There was only one male participant; however, this is consistent with the limited diversity of male students in the nursing program. There was

a good mix of both traditional and non-traditional students based on Midwest College's definition of a traditional student as 24 years old or younger.

A brief summary of the demographic of the participants in this study is provided. Furthermore, the gender, race, age, and ethnicity are presented in Table 1. Pseudo-names were assigned to protect the identity of participants and to ensure confidentiality. All participants are first-generation students who graduated from the nursing program at Midwestern College within the last three years or about to graduate within a month of the time when the interview was conducted.

Table 1  
Participant Demographics

| NAME  | GENDER | RACE      | AGE | ETHNICITY    |
|-------|--------|-----------|-----|--------------|
| Amber | Female | Caucasian | 22  | Italian      |
| Jan   | Female | Caucasian | 27  | American     |
| Amy   | Female | Latino    | 23  | Mexican      |
| Sonny | Male   | Asian     | 23  | East Indian  |
| Pam   | Female | Caucasian | 25  | Greek        |
| Nancy | Female | Latino    | 31  | Puerto Rican |
| Mary  | Female | Caucasian | 25  | Polish       |

### *Amber*

Amber, a 22-year-old Caucasian female, is currently working in a home health agency as a registered nurse. She is a traditional student who went straight to college

from high school. Amber came from an Italian family and was very passionate about nursing. She still actively supports students currently enrolled in the program. Amber plans on completing her bachelor's completion program and wants to pursue a master's degree in nursing in the future.

*Jan*

Jan, a 27-year-old Caucasian female, was working part-time at the college after her nursing degree. She has recently started employment working as a registered nurse at a nursing home. She is a non-traditional student who is a single mother of two children. She worked 30 hours per week while enrolled in the nursing program. Jan is currently enrolled in a bachelor's completion program for nursing and planning to pursue a master's in nursing after working for a while to find her knack.

*Amy*

Amy, a 23-year-old Latino female, is currently looking for a job as a registered nurse. Amy is a traditional student who went directly to college from high school. Amy's family is originally from Mexico. She did not work while in the nursing program. Amy is planning to complete her bachelor's in nursing in the future and may decide to go to medical school or pursue a master's in nursing.

*Sonny*

Sonny, a 23-year-old Asian male, is currently working as a registered nurse at a hospital. He is an immigrant whose family is originally from India. Sonny graduated high school in India and has only been in the United States for five years. He is a traditional student who went to college right after high school. Sonny is planning to start his bachelor's completion program soon and wants to pursue a master's in nursing in the

future. He is interested in being a nurse anesthetist, nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant.

*Pam*

Pam, a 25-year-old Caucasian female, is currently enrolled in the nursing program but will graduate within one month of the date that the interview was conducted. Pam did not work while in the nursing program. Her family is originally from Greece and she has served in leadership roles for the nursing club while in the program. Pam is planning to complete her bachelor's degree in nursing and later, after working for a year, pursue a master's degree in nursing.

*Nancy*

Nancy, a 31-year-old Latino female, is currently working in a hospital as a registered nurse. She worked in a nursing home first after graduation. She is a non-traditional student who matriculated in the nursing program after obtaining a bachelor's degree at a university. Nancy's family is originally from Puerto Rico. She worked part-time while in the nursing program. Nancy is currently completing her bachelor's in nursing. At one time, she planned to pursue a master's degree in nursing but she is not so sure anymore. She will re-evaluate her decision after she completes her bachelor's degree and works for a few years.

*Mary*

Mary, a 25-year-old Caucasian female, is an immigrant from Poland. She emigrated to the United States as a young child. She worked part-time in the medical field while enrolled in the program. She recently passed her National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) Board exam and currently works in a

hospital. Mary plans to complete her bachelor's degree in nursing and wants to pursue a master's in nursing to become a family nurse practitioner.

### Emergent Themes

Analysis of the data provided insight into the factors that helped first-generation students graduate from a nursing program. The researcher analyzed and grouped the data by major themes found in the responses. A theme of significance was identified based upon the fact that a major count or percentage of the number of the population participating in the research study gave the same or very close responses (Blum, 2006). Creswell (2004) stated that under each theme and sub-theme, the researcher describes and adds counts or percentages in a narrative format. Five strong themes with some sub-themes were identified from the participant's responses: 1) Strong personal drive, 2) Cost, work, and financial aid, 3) Support of family and friends, 4) Academic activities, and 5) Social activities. These themes are presented below.

#### Theme 1: Strong Personal Drive

Virtually all of the participants described themselves as internally motivated to achieve their degree. They had strong personal drives that motivated them to attain their goals regardless of the challenges they faced in the program. All of the participants were highly motivated to graduate from the nursing program and that drive helped them to be resilient to obstacles. Because nursing was their number one priority, they were able to focus and overcome the many challenges in the nursing program. Many of the participants were motivated early in their lives through personal experiences that solidified their decision to become a nurse.

Mary chose to become a nurse for a greater cause. As an immigrant from Poland, she saw how her family struggled when they went to a hospital because they did not speak English. Since it's their health, they would feel anxious, scared, and insecure due to not knowing the language. As a kid, she would translate into Polish what the doctor said to ease her family's fears. She "always wished that there could be someone, like a nurse, that could help them in Polish." She decided to be that nurse.

For Nancy, the decision to become a nurse was more personal. Her mother was sick with cancer; while staying with her mother at the hospital, Nancy realized what she wanted to do. She noticed that there were too few good nurses, which made her want to help out even more with taking care of her mom. She was turned off by the rudeness of the nurses and how they can "hate" people so much being in this profession. However, Nancy mentioned one particular nurse that really helped her to understand the nursing profession. "There was just one nurse, in particular, she was the best thing that ever happened and was always really nice." She saw how critical nurses were in the care of her mother and how their attitude could really make or break a patient's experience during a difficult time in their lives. She was determined to be that one nurse that was going to make a difference. "But I still, to this day, would never, ever treat people the way that some of the nurses were treating the family. So, from that situation alone, I said I want to do this. I see myself doing this; I could not see myself doing anything else."

Amber was also motivated by an experience during which her brother was injured and in the hospital; she observed the nurses who truly made a difference. She understood that there was more to nursing than just passing medicines and physically helping a

patient. The caring and compassion aspect of nursing really helped to ease the recovery process.

It was amazing how it was not even just the physical aspects of what she did, but the caring end of it and the compassion end of it that helped the process of recovering so much easier. So that really made me realize that was what I want to do and ever since then, it has just been a passion of mine.

For Jan, her children were the major reason she began thinking about a career. Being a single mom, her kids were her primary motivation to attain a degree. In spite of the obstacles, she knew she had to complete her degree for their future. "I knew I had to complete it and show them that this is what needs to be done. So that when they are old they have someone to look up to." Though her initial interest in nursing was financially motivated, it became personal after her daughter became sick. Because she was in the hospital all the time, she was able to observe nurses and learn more about the profession.

It was when she became sick that I really became passionate about nursing.

Being in a hospital all the time, you see how nurses are and for some of them it was just a job to them. For me, it became personal.

For Sonny, alternately, his parents and family were his motivation to complete his degree. An immigrant who attended high school in India, he experienced a huge language barrier along with culture shock. He wanted to have a graduation because he had a cousin graduate from high school. Since there was so much excitement among the extended family, he decided that he wanted to have his parents have that feeling that their son is graduating. He also wanted to get a degree so that he could help support his family.

In my family, we are only four people and my parents both work in companies.

They really do not make a lot of money so I just wanted to do something quick so

I could be stable and help and support my family.

#### Sub-theme 1: Challenging program

Strong personal desire to be a nurse is one thing, but the challenges of attaining that goal is completely a different matter. Every participant emphatically stated that the nursing program was extremely challenging. When asked about the successes they had in the program, surprisingly, many of the participants repeatedly said their biggest success was that they completed or graduated. Nobody mentioned high GPA, top in class, or anything of that nature, but all felt that surviving the program was their greatest success.

Pam stated that sometimes it was necessary to just take it one semester at a time, “Every semester that ends, you can breathe a little bit until the next semester begins.”

Some of the participants felt very proud of their completion considering their circumstances. Jan mentioned that “just being able to complete it was a big success considering all the students that did not pass or dropped. As a single mom, I did not have much help either.”

Sonny felt that being able to graduate in a short time since arriving in America and to have his whole family proud of him were major achievements.

It was amazing. I could not believe it myself that it has only been five years and I am a nurse already; the whole family was so proud of me. Besides my parents, all my relatives in the United States were all proud of me that I made it in five years.

I am the only one who finished school and got a job so far. It was just an amazing feeling when I graduated.

These successes, however, did not come easy. Many of the participants shared some of their challenges and fears during the program and particularly, the first semester. They were able to express the extent of their shock and overwhelming feelings once in the program. Mary stated, “It is very overwhelming. It is like you love it, but you are crying; you do not know if you can do it.” She found it extremely difficult to balance life with such an intense program and doubted her ability to handle everything. She described, “I am not saying I was going to give up but there were doubts. It was so overwhelming and I just kept studying and going to work and pulling all-nighters.”

For Jan, “It was a huge shock. You do not know what to expect really... actually coming into it and seeing the course work, it was shocking and it was very overwhelming.” She mentioned how she “just pushed through it. There were times I would cry all the time just because I was so tired and I cried like a baby.”

The shock and intensity of the program created a fear of failure among the participants. Nancy mentioned that she was a “nervous wreck during the first semester... I was scared to fail at this because I wanted it so bad and I just thought I was going to fail... I always was very negative. I always thought oh my God, I cannot do this. The whole time in the program, I was saying, oh no, I am going to fail.” Her fear of failure was overtaking her so much that she was shaking and crying all the time. Failure was not an option for her. One of the most difficult things for her to comprehend was how she was able to do so well prior to being admitted to the program and still struggle so much in the nursing program.

The program was pretty tough and it was different from any college. Before the nursing program, I did not have to really try hard in college and I would get an A;

it was not something that I had to study all night. In the nursing program it was like I would study, study, study; I barely would get a B, so it was killing me. I thought I was going to fail and it was just so different to me. It was like a foreign language. I always thought it was not going to happen.

Pam felt the same way after her first exam even though she heard from others what to expect. She thought she knew until she actually took a test,

After the first test, not so much because I am like whoa, it was different, it was different than anything else I have ever taken and especially the tests... It was difficult. The first part of the semester, the first quarter was the most difficult because I was trying to get used to everything.

Mary stressed her challenges existed because English was her second language on top of everything. She also felt that her first clinical experience was overwhelming because she had no idea what to do.

The first day is the worst; you are so scared and you do not know what to expect. It was overwhelming to all of us. I am not even kidding, we went to the closet and we cried because we did not know what to do... No one told us what we were supposed to do. I understand that I am supposed to change the sheets on the bed but there was a patient there. A lot of patients are critical, so it was just very overwhelming. I know a lot of people left the first semester because it was just too much. Everything was so new and I felt that the transition from the book to the unit was not that good.

Sonny also mentioned the challenges of being in a very difficult program like nursing where English was his second language. He said he had to spend double the time

reading to comprehend the materials. Even though he did well in the program, he stated that nobody really understood how much of a struggle it was for him to just be on the same level as everyone else due to the time it took him to read.

It was really hard I was not used to studying long hours and I stayed at the library everyday until midnight. I would stay at Midwest College until 8 p.m. or 10 p.m. and then I would go to a different university library to study and sometime during exam times, I would not even sleep; sometimes, I would go to White Castle to study with my friends after midnight. And getting used to reading, because still, as of today, I see speaking or reading English as the biggest concern. When it comes to reading anything, I need more time than most people. As for American people, they can read around 100 pages in an hour. But for me, in my first semester, even if I did 25 pages, I'm satisfied.

Amber summarized it well when she said that sometimes students forget that there is a life outside of the nursing program. She stated,

I worked very, very, hard and went through so much. It was amazing how you have to be pulled out from the scenario of nursing school and snapped into the reality that you still have to eat, you still have to sleep, and you still have to function like a normal human being; you just get so sucked in.

#### Sub-theme 2: Goal-oriented

Even though the program was very challenging and the first semester was overwhelming, all participants successfully completed the program. All of the participants were goal-oriented and extremely focused on attaining their degree at all costs. Many of the participants discussed doing whatever was necessary to ensure their

success. Failure was not an option and the nursing program was their number one priority.

Mary stated that even though it was discouraging and would wonder how they are going to do this, they told themselves from day one that, "I can do this, I can do this, I can do this." She further stated,

I already knew that I wanted to be a nurse and I never had a plan B. It was always that plan and that was it. I knew that there was no other way for me, it was either that or nothing and I think that mentality helped me. I told myself, it is going to be tough, it is going to be sweat and tears but that is what you signed up for.

Amber expressed the same sentiment as for her also there was no second option. She was pretty confident that nursing is what she wanted and had no hesitation when it came to her decision, "I am a very confident person. When I want something, I will do anything to achieve it." She said, "It is not impossible but you have to keep telling yourself that you can do it. If you are hundred percent sure that this is what you want, then it can be done." According to Amber,

So I do feel that a lot of it has to do with if people want it bad enough or not. I still see people who are like, I want to be a nurse but I could do this instead and I am like, if you have that mindset and you are not 100 percent or 120 percent positive, then it is going to be a lot more difficult. I was dropping weight, I was in the library, I was not sleeping, and I had no appetite. I am not going to sit here and tell you it is easy, but it is not impossible. If this is your passion, there is no reason why you cannot pass... There is an aspect of the actual work and then there is the mental aspect.

Amy suggested that, “you study and read everything and that you need to have a vision.” She stated to visualize being a nurse and do not let anything come between achieving that vision.

Have a vision... and stick with the vision, because if you are not able to see yourself as a nurse, then you really will not succeed. The group of students that really wants to graduate is the ones who take it seriously.

For other participants, extrinsic motivation was what kept them from failing. Jan dug deep into her personal motivational factors to keep going when it got really tough. She was dedicated and wanted to do this for her children. She felt that she was older and understood the value of a good education more now than when she first went to school.

I think back then, mentally, I was not ready. When I came back, I was dedicated and knew I was going to succeed. I wanted to do something for my children.

This time around, I felt like I was older and understood the importance of an education better... after the first semester I told myself, this is what I want to do, so I stuck to it; but it was very hard.

Jan said it would have been so easy to give up because it is tough but “anything worth having is not going to be easy and it was very tough, but just do not give up.”

For Pam, nursing was also a priority. She wanted to be successful so badly that she was willing to put everything else aside and make sure that the program was her number one priority.

But for me, this is my life, so I kind of really pushed everything aside. Basically, just telling myself that this is my goal and that nursing is the end for me. So once I put that as number one, everything else just took the back burner. I had to

realize that friends, going out, and things like free time, was not so much free time anymore, it was study time... It was just kind of realizing this is my number one priority... I am going to be a nurse... This is what I wanted and I should not let anything hold me back. If it means that I have to study 40 hours a week, so be it. If this is what you really want, then really go for it and devote your time one hundred percent.

Sonny stated similar sentiments of putting everything else aside and doing whatever it took to study. He took it as a challenge and pushed himself to do it and dedicated everything towards that goal. Sonny barely had any social life due to the time it took him to study and comprehend the materials,

I took it as a challenge that I will definitely do that... I had no connection with my friends and if they call, I would not pick up. I used to turn off my phone while I was studying because with the language barrier, I wanted to fully focus on the study... I wanted to get the concept... I wanted to know what I am studying and if I get distracted, I would read it over.

Nancy also “placed her life on pause” for the time she was in nursing school. Failure was not an excuse and she had to focus and “put everything on the back burner for a short amount of time until the program was over.” Nursing was her number one priority and everything else took second place to that.

### Sub-theme 3: Balance and adjustments

Many of the participants revealed that in order to successfully navigate the program, they had to make adjustments and find that balance between school and everyday life. As challenging as school was, it got easier not because curriculum got

easier, but because they were able to find a routine. The participants were able to adjust their lifestyle after the first semester and find that balance that helped them to succeed.

As a single mother, Jan had a tough time balancing work and life. Jan stated that you really need to have some sort of life and have a balance so you are not mentally exhausted.

Being able to balance life, being able to balance being a mom, being able to balance work, and do it all successfully, that was really the biggest challenge.

There were times when I wanted to give up because it got tough... You have to have a balance between nursing school and the rest of your life. It is important that you want to finish, but also need to give yourself a break every once in a while, and I did that.

Amber indicated that there is an adjustment phase and figuring out all the different things you are not used to in nursing school.

The first semester was difficult. The information was not difficult; it was more adjusting to the lifestyle of nursing school. I was a bad tester, so getting acquainted with the tests and figuring out how to study, meeting people to study with, there were a lot of factors that went into it. During the first semester, it was more of getting acquainted to everything. I remember sitting down for the first test and I just had no idea what to expect. It is like anything in life, you must adjust to the situation at hand and with nursing that is a big thing.

Pam reiterated what the other participants were saying, "I was like nursing first, nursing first... but learned that there must also be some sort of balance... and you learn

to prioritize things better by your second semester.” Sonny voiced similar sentiments, “It was more about getting used to the routine... manage your time and set small goals.”

Mary said it best when she said that “you have to mentally adjust yourself positively from the start... and you should give yourself a break and do not push yourself to such a point, because you will burnout.” Mary explained how when she started to give herself a break mentally, things got a little smoother.

I started seeing my friends more and of course, I was scared and wondered what if I do not do well on the test. However, the more I actually took a few hours to myself, went to the gym, spent time with my family and my friends, I realized that my grades got better and I was not so burnt out. After that break, everything actually started flowing better.

### Theme 2: Cost, Work, and Financial Aid

Participants mentioned that financial factors impacted their ability to matriculate and persist in the nursing program. A few of the participants mentioned that the cost of the program and the close proximity of the school to their home as primary reasons in selecting the nursing program at Midwestern College. Amy stated, “It is the college that is closest to me; since it is a community college, it would be cheaper.” Nancy expressed her thoughts similarly, “I lived in the area, so I just came to Midwestern College. I wanted to go to a community college because I still had loans from another university. I **cannot** afford high tuition rates and I did not want to be in debt the rest of my life.” Jan said cost was a big factor in her decision to attend the program, “The cost was a huge factor. I am a single mom, I am not with their father. So it became about money and what I could or could not afford.”

Financial aid was a key factor for many of the participants to be able to attend classes and to meet other financial obligations such as rent, food, bills, etc. None of the participants in the study worked full-time while in the program so they were not able to support themselves through employment while in school. Two of the participants worked 30 hours maximum, one worked 15 hours, and the others did not work while in the program. This is significant because many of the participants relied on financial aid to support them while in the program. Some of the participants had their parents to support them financially. However, most of the participants did not have that luxury and relied on part-time employment, grants, scholarships, and loans to help pay their bills.

Mary was working 30 hours a week while in the program full-time because she had to support herself and said she was lucky her work was actually cooperative enough to adjust her schedule according to school. For Mary, financial aid helped a lot, “I received financial aid which obviously helped me significantly.”

Jan also worked 30 hours per week while in the program and felt that it was very tough to do while in the program. She stated, “I worked 30 hours per week here so it was tough being single mom and staying on top of my studies while working.” For Jan, financial aid was vital to her being able to go to school and complete the program.

If I did not have financial aid, I would not have been able to come to school; there would have been no way. I did receive full grants, and in order to survive and pay the rent, I did have to take out loans as well. Without financial aid, there was no way I would have been able to complete school.

Nancy wanted to work full-time and go to school full-time because she had a lot of bills. She was working 15 hours part-time and mentioned that it was already

challenging with the 15 hours so “I just did not think I would be able to do full-time school and full-time work.” Nancy did not take financial aid because she had loans from her previous institution, but worked part-time and was lucky enough to move in with her sister while in the program. However, she felt stressed over her finances and working while in the program, stating

Financially, I just thought this is going to be a mess once I graduated. I did work part-time and may have worked 15 hours a week. Even with those limited hours, it was stressful. I felt like I should be doing something nursing-related.

Pam did not work while in school. She stated, “Working would have been a challenge and she knew that students who worked struggled due to the time constraint and especially since studying for nursing was unbelievable. She stated “I was lucky enough to not have to work during the program.” She received financial aid while in the program and expressed “Financial aid helped and the loans helped as well since I did not work.”

Finally, Sonny received financial aid through the form of a scholarship. Without the scholarship, Sonny would have struggled financially and he did not want to burden his parents financially either. He stated,

They gave me a scholarship; otherwise, I would have been really financially challenged going through nursing school. Even though it is a community college, I did not want it to be a burden on my parents to pay my tuition and books so I was really lucky to have that scholarship.

Sonny felt very lucky and thankful that he received the scholarship, “And financially, I had scholarship from Midwest College, so that helped and it covered all my tuition, my

books, and everything and so I was really lucky. I am really thankful to Midwest College for that.”

### Theme 3: Support of Family and Friends

Majority of the participants described support from family and friends as critical to their success during the program. They described how the family support was essential for them both mentally and physically. They explained how many of the first-generation parents had no idea about the rigors and expectations of a nursing program, but were able to observe what they were going through and allowed them to study. Their family did not have too many expectations for them like having to support the family or have any family obligations they had to meet while in the program, which really made a difference in their ability to succeed.

Amy mentioned that her parents did not expect anything from her to support the family. From the beginning, “my parents encouraged me to go to school instead of having to get a job and contribute to the household things.” Her parents did not know the rigors of college, but they knew it involved a lot of studying.

For Amber, her family was everything. She felt that students need support from family when in nursing school. Her mom would even try to support her by attempting to read her books with her and it would turn into a hilarious moment because she would not be able to pronounce the words. Her parents proactively supported her in any way possible. This is hard to find in a first-generation family but something she absolutely needed to overcome the obstacles of the program. Amber explained the need to have those family moments.

Family moments are what you need to snap out of the seriousness of the nursing school because there were times when I was not leaving the library. I was just studying 12 hours on end and my mom would call me and say that she was coming get me. Other times, she would bring me dinner in the library or she would make me come home and have my favorite dinner ready for me. But my mom, my dad, and my brother were absolutely everything... I was extremely blessed to have my family support. For me, it was like my security blanket almost and you need that in nursing school, people think you do not need that, but you really do.

Amber, however, did explain that her parents had a hard time trying to understand the whole process due to not going to college themselves. However, their support really made all the difference for her in surviving the program.

Being first generation, my mom and dad had a hard time understanding the whole admission process too. So I would sit down and we had all these papers in front of us and we would be like, oh, Lord where do you even start... I had my parents; thank God. I would have hit rock bottom if I did not have my family.

On the contrary, Pam stated that her family did not quite understand how big education is and all the hard work that goes into it. They never went to college, but they really helped her out financially. Since her family was originally from Greece, they still tried to push the need to work. She was able to convince them that she could not and really need to finish school first. Even though they said one thing, they really did not understand the rigors, because the work mentality was always there.

They see it and they understand that you have to have some sort of education in order to go somewhere in life, but for them it was work, work, work, so it was still in the back of their minds that I need to work. However, I would insist that I need to finish school... What is the point of working, if I do not finish school? So it was a challenge there, but they supported me financially.

Sonny was another student who experienced the challenges of being a first-generation student, because he had nobody to help him navigate the college process. He was actually dropped off to the college by his uncle, who said here you go, now go to college. Sonny had no clue what to do. Since nobody from his family had gone to college, including his cousins, he did not receive any support from family, and had to successfully navigate the whole college process himself with a language barrier. The friends that he met at college became his biggest supporters. "So my friends, that was my biggest support; they supported me, they were the ones who decided which classes I need to take... I did not have a car and my friends would come pick me up, drop me off, my friends really supported me." Sonny's main family support was his brother. He shielded him from all the family expectations and obligations that would normally have fallen on him. His brother took care of everything at home so he could study. Sonny explained,

I am really thankful to all my family members and friends who supported me during the whole program especially my brother; he was my big support while I was in the program. He never called me to tell me, can you do this, or can you do that? He took care of everything at home. I had no clue what was going on at home. I would just come home, sleep, and leave.

Nancy had a similar situation with her sister being her biggest supporter. Nancy only worked part-time while in the program, so she moved in with her sister who took care of everything, so she could study. She could not afford rent so her sister paid for everything and paid all the bills that she could not pay at that time. If it was not for her sister, she would have struggled. She did not have any expectations or obligations to do anything and her family was always really supportive.

I lived with my sister and dad and they were always really supportive. If I needed the house to myself or have a study group over, they would go out to dinner or whatever. My sister has kids so she knows that they can be loud. As far as friends, they just knew not to bother me. They knew not to call me. They were very supportive by leaving me alone... As for family, they did not have any expectations and I was not obligated to do certain things; nothing, not even the chores at the house. They were awesome.

Nancy also mentioned that the group she was in also had supportive families and the students who had that support group were the ones who actually were successful in the program.

With the group that we had, those with supportive families were the ones that actually made it through the program. There are some that did not have that support system and unfortunately, did not make it.

Mary felt family was essential for the mental support and you need them to succeed. "Family, friends, without them I do not know how anyone can do it. They are really just for the mental support." As immigrants, her family had a hard time understanding higher education and how stressful it is. They never did it. In her culture,

the thinking was very old fashioned; she was expected to be married, have kids, not work, be a stay at home mom, and have your husband provide for you. It was not until they observed how much stress she was under and never being home, that they began to slowly understand the intensity of the program. She went through small milestones with them throughout the program.

To them, in their mind, it was just school. They did not realize that how intense it was. On the other hand, once they saw how much weight I lost, and how I was constantly never home, they began to change their mind... I was at work, I was at school, I was in the library until midnight, and then I would tell them the stories of my patients that I saw and the teachers. It just opened their eyes and they saw how intense it really is. They saw me crying after failing a semester or jumping in the air when I got an A... The family realized how important and how intense it was and they then became much more supportive and encouraging; they left me alone. Family is huge; family, friends, and any support group just make all the difference.

Contrary to the experiences of other participants, Jan did not state she received much family support. Her parents were divorced and her sister lived out of state; she was alone. Interestingly, her support came from her classmates who became her family and friends. She did not feel like her family really understood the intensity of the program and what it is like.

My classmates became my family and friends when I was in the program; really, there are three or four girls that I was in the program with that I talk to every day now. Family and friends that you have in your life already just do not understand

what it is like. My family tried to be there for me, but they did not understand why I was so stressed. Nobody understands it unless you are in the program. To them it is just school. But it is not, there is a lot riding on it. They were not close to me, so it really was my classmates that became like my family.

#### Theme 4: Academic Activities

The participants were asked about academic activities they were involved in while in the nursing program such as study groups, peer mentoring, peer tutoring, exam reviews, counseling, library, etc. Different participants seemed to have been involved with different activities that played a role in their success. For some, peer mentoring played a role, others peer tutoring was helpful. Two participants mentioned exam reviews but, while helpful, they did not attribute too much of their success to exam reviews. Pam, however, thought “exam reviews were huge.” Study groups, however, were the one academic activity that seemed to be consistent throughout all of the participants’ responses. Though some of the other activities seemed to help in their success, study groups seemed to be the one response that the participants identified as critical and most beneficial in their success.

##### Sub-theme: 1: Study groups

Study groups seemed to be the one common activity that seemed to transcend from all the responses. All but one participant was actively involved in study groups. Amy studied at times with her friends but it did not work out for her because “the group of friends that I had, most of them had kids and jobs, so it was difficult to schedule something.” However, Amy did respond that she wished she could have chosen a different group because study groups would have helped her, “I think I would have

probably chosen to be in a different group.” The participants somehow were involved in many of the academic activities and resources that help students succeed such as counseling, exam reviews, tutoring, mentoring, and friendship within that study group who came together to do more than just study. As Jan stated, “There was a group of people that I was close with that we would study together like we were each other’s support groups.” They were building relationships that will last well beyond their nursing program.

Nancy described how having a study group really helped her to cope with the anxiety of the program by knowing there were others in the same boat as her. She felt better knowing that she was not alone in the way she was feeling. She also stated the study group she was in was small and they built lasting friendships.

Getting study groups together always helped me because I knew that I was not the only one feeling overwhelmed; everybody felt the same way. Everyone looks fine in class but when you get into your study groups, everyone is freaking out and then you realize you are not as crazy as you think you are... I had a small study group, it was four of us and to this day we still talk, we stayed really good friends. It is just that we all went through the same thing and we got really close through it.

Pam emphasized the people in her study group as her “go to people for anything.” She stressed the importance of having this group to motivate one another and to lean on each other for support during struggles. They were her base for pretty much everything.

Definitely, study groups were helpful and they reinforce this in the first semester.

All of the instructors say you should have at least one person that is kind of your

go to person. Friends and everything kind of fade to the background and you need that one person to help motivate you. Since nursing is difficult, you need that other person to bounce back ideas and see it from different perspective. Study groups were big for me. If you are stressing about not working or passing the class, they are the ones that you lean on because they know it, they are right there next to you in class, and experiencing the same struggles ... They are your number one and your biggest supporters.

Amber felt that her study group really helped her and she learned a lot from the group. When asked about the right size of the group, she stated that “oh God, it is huge” and emphasized that you cannot have too big or too small of a group. She too described how they were her support group and saw her through the program.

I came in knowing one person and I was thankful for that. Thank God I had one person. But in the first semester, I met my two best friends whom I will be best friends with forever. We helped each other study, which was nice and we made a study group that I swear got me to where I am now. Study groups are huge... I learned a lot from study groups. I learned they cannot be too big and they cannot be too small. You have to be with someone who wants to study as well; if not, they do not work... We would have study groups of seven people sometimes and we would all be talking. I found up to three people that I studied with amazing, and we just talked everything out and it worked, it just clicked... They helped me so much.

Mary too indicated that people in the study group end up being your family and friends, well after the nursing program.

The study groups and friends from nursing program become a family, and that is how you survive. I am still very good friends with four girls that I was in my study group. We still keep in touch, go out, and catch up and I can definitely call them my friends, and I am going to be friends with them for a very long time.

Mary, however, was also skeptical about study groups in the beginning because she always liked to study by herself, but had an epiphany once she joined a study group. She also explained the importance of having the right size and fit for the study group.

I was always 'anti' study group; I always like to study by myself. And then, I said, why not? I did the study group. I always want to try something once because you never know. It was the most helpful thing I have ever discovered, even though I was so against it at first... you cannot go too big... you also have to figure out who you click and clash with, because there is a lot of debating involved, especially with the way we learned. So I would say three to four people at the most. If you do anything more, it is just going to be hectic and you are just going to get frustrated.

Sonny also indicated that he did not join a study group in the beginning because he felt bad that he could not keep up with the readings. He felt that because he was reading slower than them, he did not understand concepts quickly enough to discuss. He did not study with anyone in the beginning. He studied on his own until the third semester when he felt comfortable enough to study with other students in the nursing program.

First semester, I never studied with any of my friends. I would feel bad because they were reading so fast and I was reading so slowly. They knew what was in

these 100 pages and I was still at page number 20. So I studied on my own. I would stay focused; I would find a corner where I would not see anyone and no one would bother me... third semester was the time when I started hanging out with my nursing friends, like studying with them and doing discussions and stuff. But I actually would only study with one friend, no more than that.

#### Sub-theme 2: Peer mentoring

A few of the participants seemed to have been involved with peer mentoring. The participants involved with mentoring indicated that they were the mentors versus having a mentee officially. Though the mentoring activity seemed informal, they indicated the positive impact of helping other students remain in the program. They also mentioned that either they wished they had an experienced peer mentor or had friends who were already in the program that served as mentors. The mentors would explain to them what to expect in the program and give them insights into certain situations, when they were really feeling overwhelmed.

Amber reported that she mentors students currently in the nursing program, because they are either friends of hers or her cousin. She is able to provide them with insights to overcome certain challenges because she has been there. She wished that she had someone like that to go for reassurance. "I did not have someone who went through the program to look at me and shake me and say, wake up, you are okay." She stated that even though there are instructors to guide you, it is not the same as your peers. "They are my instructors, so it is a different kind of mentor... it is always nice to hear from someone who is kind of your age and kind of at the same level." Amber recommended,

“My best advice would be to get in touch with people who have been through it as first generation nursing students. No one knows it better.”

Pam also stated that she was involved in “helping other semester students in the program, such as the ones that are behind me.” Being in a leadership role for the Future Nurses Association, she was involved in a mentoring role where she was able to give advice to new incoming students. She indicated that she had a couple of friends in the program that really assisted her when she started the program, so she felt it was great to help others. She viewed mentoring as a great way for new students to learn about the insights of the program from a student perspective.

Definitely, going to mentors and asking, hey what should I expect? What should I do? What do you think will help me? It is nice to hear from everyone. Different people have different ways of studying or different ways of coping.

Similarly, Sonny served as a peer mentor through his involvement of the Future Nurses Association. He mentored new students and he also had friends in the program that he really sat down with and talked to for hours regarding the program and strategies to be successful.

I did mentoring and I would answer their questions. I would go to the meetings with them. They used to send me e-mails or call me to see if I can help them figure out what the best thing is for them to do. They would ask questions like how they should study, what the routines are, and how they should get used to it... I had a couple friends who were in the nursing program and before I started nursing school, I would just sit with them and talk to them for an hour or two, to

get an insight on how they felt, what they are going through, and how much time they were putting into studying.

### Sub-theme 3: Peer tutoring

Interestingly, the same participants who were involved with peer mentoring were the ones involved with peer tutoring as well. Pam was involved with tutoring students and also had second year students who tutored her in her first year. It seemed like the peer tutors could serve as peer mentors too by answering nursing related questions on how to be successful. Pam felt that tutoring students also helped her to brush up on her skills.

I tutor them and they always know they can come to us if they need help or have any questions. That just helps me brush up on the past as well so I did not mind helping... I had friends who were in the program before and graduated about a year ago that kind of led the way when I started. They prepared me, so I prepare others; it helps.

Sonny was a recipient of peer tutoring and felt that it really helped him. There were two tutors who were also in the nursing program so he would go to them for help. "Sometimes, in my first year, I used to go to them and ask if they can explain certain things to me."

Amber tutored students from the goodness of her heart and from a passion to help other nursing students. She did it for free after she graduated and willingly helped those students who she knew were struggling in the program. She has been personally responsible for helping a few students pass courses, because she was able to tutor them. She does not want anyone to fail and believes that if someone who has been through it

can explain to students how to study, they will pass. She did not have that and wished there were peer tutors.

Every time I went to tutor, they were very appreciative and would want to pay me and I am like absolutely not. I wish someone would have done this for me. I sat down with them four or five times and they did awesome and passed. Honestly, I wish that I would have had that.

#### Sub-theme 4: Academic resources and services

Many of the participants indicated that they did not use many of the resources and services provided by the college such as counseling or library services. Majority of the participants did not use counseling services at all. Amber, however, took advantage of the counseling service and felt that the nursing counselor was a “great, great help... she helped me the entire way from the start to the finish... I have gotten so close with her from when I was being admitted until all the way until the end.” Mary suggested that the college should “encourage more counseling or support... sell it to the students, propose it to the students.” She felt that it would be helpful if the college provided intrusive counseling and do not give students a choice. Rather make it mandatory, so they will be able to open up to counselors and receive the support they need.

Many of the participants expressed concern about the lack of a location at the college where nursing students can study. They indicated that the hours to the library were decreased and they had to find places to study. They elected to go to a local university to study because that library was open until midnight. They felt that they had so much to study that they really needed a place to study late. Pam stated,

The hours in the library were a big issue for us because especially for nursing, we are studying really late, so a lot of us tend to venture to a local university. They are open until midnight and so it was easier for us to go there versus here, especially on Sundays.

Sonny voiced similar concern.

When I was in the third semester, they cut down library hours from ten o'clock to eight o'clock and all my friends and I were complaining about that because instead of extending, they just cut down two more hours. So that was the reason that we all used to go to a local university library. I would just say extend the library hours for all the nursing students, because we really need time to study and a place to study.

Amber suggested a study area besides the library.

I do wish there was some sort of study area like maybe on the third floor somewhere. Just because, the library has everyone on campus and everyone on campus does not understand what studying for nursing is like.

In regards to resources, Nancy recommended using all available resources to help you succeed.

The program seems impossible, but it is not impossible. Use all your resources if you can: your family, your friends, your teachers, your study groups, anything else that you can find to help you get through it, because it is challenging.

#### Theme 5: Social Activities

The participants were asked about the different social activities in which they were involved to determine if social integration played any role in their success. The

participants were asked about their involvement in student clubs, professional organizations, peer meetings, social gatherings with classmates, etc. while enrolled in the nursing program.

The participants were not involved in too many social activities due to the rigorous nature of their program. However, a majority of the participants indicated they were in the career related student club, Future Nurses Association (FNA). Some of the participants were more active than others, but almost all of those involved with the club participated in some events. Jan stated that “I was not really active; I did participate when they had stuff on campus. I would go support and donate stuff for them and sell if they were doing like baked goods or something, but as far as working very actively, I did not have time.” Others were in leadership roles and were active in organizing events, community activities, and serving as mentors. They felt that membership in the club gave them access to faculty easier and also looked good on their resume. Amber mentioned “People see that you were involved in something, so that was a big help.”

#### Sub-Theme 1: Peer Activities

However, all participants indicated being involved in peer social activities with other classmates. Some of the events were sponsored by FNA while others were informal gatherings among the study groups such as going out to dinner after a test or taking breaks, and just hanging out while studying. Amber stated:

We do community service in fourth semester. We set that up and we did a pizza party before pinning. We even had little get together outside of school. For instance, after we passed fourth semester, we all got together and went to Hooters

and had a drink. We sat down and all of us were like whew, it is over; take a load off.

The program brought several students together because they faced similar challenges, shared successes together, and made life-long friends as a result of their journey together and experiences in the program.

Amber stated that she was close to her classmates because of their shared experiences and the connection on the same level.

I think we just kept each other motivated. We always said that no one understands nursing school unless you have been through it. I can talk to my best friend. I could talk to her until I was blue in the face, but she does not understand it because she has not been through it. So it is more a connection on the same level and it is so crazy. The two best friends I made in this program were so different, totally different ages, totally different lifestyle, and totally different background. We are best friends because we went through this together and we found common ground, which is nice.

Jan also mentioned that “social activities were with classmates... I really did it with my classmates; they were really like the closest people to me.” Pam indicated that the classmates are like your family because of all the experiences they had together in two years.

For social gatherings, you are like family with the people that you are in the semesters with because you are with them for two years. We have gone through a lot of happy periods the last two years, so we tend to hang out and become really close and we are always partying together, when we can.

Sonny explained how even study time can turn into social activities. “We will go and study and then all of us will take a break at the same time; sometimes we will order pizza. We may decide we are going to study at this time, until 10 o'clock and then we are going to go eat.” Nancy described the feeling of sharing successes and fun times with the ones you faced the challenges with and that built stronger relationships.

The study group, after we passed each semester, would go out... Yeah, I had my original friends, who would always talk about going out. But at the end of the semester, I wanted to share that with the study group because we all did it together. Just like simple jokes that we would say were nursing related, that would be funny or whatever the case may be that would always make you feel better about what we just went through.

#### Sub-Theme 2: Faculty Interactions

Many of the participants in the study indicated how interactions with faculty impacted their success. Pam noted, “They all played a role. They are the ones that sat there with you and explained everything to you.” Most of the participants discussed both “good” and “bad” instructors in their programs. Mary stated, “I had the privilege of having some amazing teachers, so of course, there are good ones and bad ones.” They indicated the positive and negative implications of their experiences with their instructors. There is a consensus among the participants that faculty can really “make” or “break” their experience in the program. They talked about how certain faculty members were so amazing that it really made all the difference in their ability to succeed in the program. However, they also discussed interactions with certain faculty whose actions caused them doubt their ability to move forward in the program. Participants were

excited and in awe when they talked about the faculty members who really made a difference in their lives. The instructors with whom they had positive interactions seemed to be caring and willing to go above and beyond for their students. Faculty seemed to be also serving the role of informal advisors because many of the participants reached out to certain faculty members for questions and concerns throughout the program. Nursing students are overwhelmed both academically and personally, so their interactions with nursing faculty can provide that additional support that might be the difference between attrition and retention.

Jan explained how some faculty members are willing to do whatever it takes to help you, while others are not as much interested in helping as much, allowing you to figure it out for yourself.

I think that the staff here in the nursing department, few of the teachers would go above and beyond for the students. But for most of them, I think it is just a job to them. It seemed like some of them were not willing to help students succeed.

They did not want you to fail, but I felt like the teachers could have done more as far as tutoring.

Amber described a similar instance where one instructor helped her to understand everything while another instructor was so challenging that she took it personally and doubted her ability to pass the clinical. She used the negative interaction as a learning experience.

The teachers were always good. Professor A was my teacher first semester and she sat us down and said, 'This is going to be the hardest test you ever take, simply because it is your first nursing test.' I loved the information, I loved my

teacher, and when she taught, I understood the material. It made sense, and fourth semester was when everything came together for me... One clinical instructor was extremely different from all the rest and she gave me an extremely hard time, when all I was doing was practicing what I had been taught. And at first, I took it really personal. I was wondering what I am doing wrong. Afterwards, I just realized this is how she practices and I need to get acquainted to her. At first, it was a struggle, but in the long run I think it was good for me.

Pam felt the instructors who made an impact on them were the ones who were accessible and who they can go to throughout the program for advice, and not just during that one class.

You can always go to them and they always have an open-door policy. All of our instructors always told us that if you need anything, just come on by, and they participated in everything that we did. If we had a meeting, they will be there for us... Sometimes, I will go back to them like my pharmacology instructor from my second semester and would say I miss you, I need your help, what do you think? And they were always there for you. They were willing to answer any questions, which was nice.

For Nancy, the instructor that made the greatest impression was the one with a teaching style that really made a difference in her overall learning. She also talked about how some of the professors were challenging. For her, that one teacher was awesome and made the program great as well.

Some of the professors were challenging; there were some professors that you loved and then there were some that maybe we were just not a good mix for each

other. I used to love Mrs. C, she was just awesome. If it was not for her, I probably would not have thought the program was as great as it was. She was awesome. Everything that she taught you, it just stuck for some reason. The way her teaching style was, I can remember things, even the little things that she would say.

Amy talked about having two instructors that were the opposites and how they struggled with the one that did not help them.

The teacher that we had, the way she lectures, it did not really help us. The other teacher was a lot more helpful and gave more assistance when it came to the test. Depending on the faculty, it can be a challenge.

Amber described the difference between “an instructor that wants to help and others who are so cold.” She reported being surprised that certain faculty seemed actually angry that too many students passed a test or was upset that the test was not hard enough, because they all passed. Rather than celebrating their success, the instructors seemed disappointed. She wished all instructors were as supportive, encouraging, and helpful as the two that she mentioned by name.

Professor B would really let us work our way through and problem to find an answer, and that was helpful. But some of my teachers just did not explain the reasoning... I had that closeness with Professor Z and Professor T, as well as the counselor. However, there were always those instructors that were just so cold and made you feel like they just did not want you to do well, which is never a good feeling, ever... I just wish all of the teachers were like Professor Z and

Professor T. The closeness helps you, and the coldness makes you feel like it is impossible.

Mary articulated the difference in how a student feels from interactions with a good instructor and a bad instructor. Her explanation of her experiences supports the idea that a great faculty member can make the students confident, extraordinary, and successful, while a bad faculty member can make them feel stupid, scared, and want to quit. The difference in the student's experiences with good and bad faculty members are like night and day, as Mary noted in her interview, "the faculty is everything, because a good teacher is everything."

Faculty can give you confidence or bring you down. I felt great when I had teachers who showed me that they were confident in me, believed in me, and complimented me versus hovering over me where my hands would shake, because I was so scared. With these good instructors, I just felt like I can do it. My confidence went up and I could do things that I thought I could not do before. I was confident and did not doubt myself. I knew that the teacher was there to guide me and not judge me. I cannot tell you what an extraordinary feeling that is for a student. It is a night and day experience from someone hovering over you and scolding you... The bad teachers are the ones that would tell you that you do not know what you are doing; you are stupid, and call you out in front of a patient. There were instances where a teacher would take a patient's bed and rip it apart right in front of them, which makes you feel so low; you are stressed, you are ready to run out of there... Someone scolding you and calling you out in front

of a patient was one of the biggest things for a lot of students to get over. That is why again, the faculty is everything, and a good teacher is everything.

### Summary

For successful nursing students, the importance of strong personal desires to achieve their goals was evident in this study. They were motivated to attain their degree at any cost. They were driven by personal reasons that gave them the strength to face the challenges of the nursing program. The nursing program was extremely challenging and unlike anything they had done before. However, they were goal-oriented, focused, and driven to succeed. By adjusting and finding that balance between school and other responsibilities, the participants were able to tackle the obstacles they faced and eventually succeed in achieving their goals. The participants indicated financial factors such as program cost and close proximity to home as reasons for selecting the program at the community college. Because they were not able to work full-time in the program, financial aid played a key role in their ability to go to school. Almost all participants agreed that family and friends support was vital to their success. They stated equivocally that without their family's support, they would not have made it.

The study investigated the role academic and social integration played in their lives and what activities were essential for their success. Though peer mentoring and peer tutoring were helpful activities, nearly all participants agreed that the study group was the one activity that was the key to their success. Study groups served so many different purposes besides just getting together to study. The study groups served as their support group, social group, and provided them with a venue to come together as peers

and friends to tackle the same common challenges of nursing program. Social activities involved being members of Future Nurses Association, and peer social activities included going out to eat and celebrating successes. The study groups served as a forum for social activities outside of studying and brought together students in the program, where many of them became friends for life. Finally, participants talked about the key role faculty played in their development and how their experiences with faculty left them with either positive or negative impressions. The interactions with faculty played a major role in their growth and eventual success in the nursing program.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of first-generation students who graduated from an associate's degree nursing program. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe their experiences and to gain a better understanding of how these experiences promoted or impeded their persistence to graduation. Additionally, the aim of this study was to contribute to the literature regarding experiences of first-generation students in a nursing program and whether student engagement theories supporting academic and social integration can be applied to first-generation students in an undergraduate professional program such as nursing. Accordingly, seven first-generation nursing graduates shared their perceptions on the factors that helped them successfully complete the program. This chapter provides a brief overview of the study, discussion on the findings as they relate to literature, recommendations for practice, and future research.

#### Overview of the Study

The conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1) incorporated the previous findings of researchers, who have studied academic and social integration factors, and examined the experiences of first-generation students in a nursing program (Tinto, 1993; Chickering, 1974; Olson, 2010; Perin, 2006; Beard, 2009; Igbo et al, 2011). This study

was guided by Tinto's interactionist theory of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993) as well as Chickering's theory of how the academic and social activities should all come together to support a common goal (Chickering, 1974). While there is extensive literature on incoming first-generation students, there is very little research on the experiences of first-generation students in a professional undergraduate program such as nursing (Popkess & McDaniel, 2011). Furthermore, the role academic and social integration plays in an undergraduate professional program of study remains unexplained (Coll & Stewart, 2008). Taking this into consideration, the primary focus of this study was to explore the following questions: 1) What are the experiences of first-generation nursing students that helped them to successfully graduate, 2) What role did academic and social integration play in supporting first-generation students to succeed in the nursing program, and 3) What can community colleges do to help support first-generation nursing students to be successful? This study utilized prior student engagement theories in the context for students in a nursing program. Whether the results of this study are similar or dissimilar to the previous studies done is addressed in the context of the discussion on findings.

### Discussion of Findings

In order to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation nursing students at a community college and to gain an understanding of the factors that helped them succeed, seven graduates of the nursing program at Midwestern College participated in qualitative interviews. Participants included six females and one male who graduated from the program within the last three years of the study. Interviews were conducted to

gain more understanding of their experiences and to determine what roles academic and social activities played in their success. Accordingly, each participant provided a clear picture of her/his experiences in the program and discussed in detail different things such as challenges, motivation, academic activities, social activities, family support, resources, and faculty interactions.

The interviews of first-generation nursing students revealed some inconsistencies when compared to the characteristics of an incoming first-generation college student as found in previous research. The participants indicated many factors in their experiences that have been shown in previous literature to be strategies that support retention such as motivation, financial aid, family support, academic and social activities, and faculty interactions (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Mihok, 2005; Calkins, 2005; Lopez, 2001). Though the demographics of many of the participants were similar to first-generation students from prior research, these successful first-generation nursing students were able to overcome the obstacles that usually lead to attrition among first-generation students. Using data gathered from interviews, the researcher identified five emergent themes with sub-themes: 1) Strong personal drive, 2) Cost, work, and financial aid, 3) Support of family and friends, 4) Academic activities, and 5) Social activities. Though many of the findings in this study supported previous literature, some of the results added, refuted, and provided a more in-depth understanding of prior literature.

#### Theme 1: Strong Personal Drive

The nursing graduates all indicated that the nursing program was very challenging and consistent with what Olson (2010) found as a major theme. In this study, there was a sense of a strong personal drive to succeed from all the participants. They were goal-

oriented. Once they figured out how to adapt to the situation, participants were able to find that balance between school and everyday life after their first semester, which helped them to persevere for the rest of the program. The participants in this study were different from other first-generation students from prior studies that indicated they lacked focus to succeed. Ayala & Striplen (2002) and Sheutz (2003) suggested that despite the fact that first-generation students go to college with specific intent to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing, their focus is not always on that very purpose. However, first-generation nursing graduates in this study indicated that they were extremely focused, driven, goal-oriented, and highly motivated to graduate from the nursing program. Many of them had personal experiences that solidified their decision to become a nurse. It seemed like that internal drive motivated them to overcome the many challenges of the nursing program. Olson (2010) also found among motivation as a sub-theme among non-traditional nursing students.

Prior research indicates that nursing students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as first-generation status must overcome many barriers to succeed (Igbo, et al., 2011). Likewise, several of the participants had to overcome different obstacles to succeed. Jan was a single mom and had no support, Mary had a culture that did not put too much value to girls getting an education, Sonny had to overcome a language barrier, Nancy had to move in with her sister, Pam had to convince her family that she could not work, and so on. For nursing students, particularly among first-generation students, school is rarely their only concern (Poorman, Mastorovich, & Webb, 2011). Even though this was true for many of the participants in this study, what was different for them was that school was their main focus and everything else revolved around the program.

Failure was not an option for them and because nursing was their number one priority, they did whatever was necessary to overcome obstacles that came from being enrolled in a rigorous program such as nursing, as well as from being a first-generation student.

### Theme 2: Cost, Work, and Financial Aid

Results from this study support findings from prior research that first-generation students have financial challenges and how to pay for college were determining factors whether or not first-generation students persist (Mihok, 2005). Many of the participants were financially challenged and needed financial support while in the program to help them with tuition, rent, bills, and other costs associated with attending college. Robb, Moody, & Abdel-Ghany (2012) stated that financial factors play a significant role in student persistence behavior and financial assistance was considered a major factor in whether students were able to attend and persist in a higher education institution. Olson (2010) also found financial aid as a minor theme among nursing students. Many of the participants in this study claimed that they were financially constrained while in the program, because they could not work full-time due to the challenging curriculum. All of the participants did not work at all or worked part-time and were not making enough money to pay for all their financial obligations. They indicated that the cost of the program was one of the key reasons they chose the nursing program at a community college. Most of the participants received some sort of financial aid such as grants, scholarships, and loans to help with their financial needs while in the program, and they indicated financial aid as a key indicator of why they were able to stay in the program.

A key finding in this study in comparison to other research regarding financial woes of first-generation students is that the participants were aware of the financial

challenges and made arrangements to ensure that their financial concerns would not derail their goal to attain their degree. In addition to receiving financial aid, many of the participants made changes in their personal lives so they could attend school and study without having to work full-time. They were proactive in their approaches to finding a solution to their financial challenges.

### Theme 3: Support of Family and Friends

One key finding is that almost every participant in this study received support from their family such as a parent, brother, or sister. Researchers have found a significant relationship between parental support and academic adjustment (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Schneider & Ward, 2003; Lopez, 2001). Parental and family support impacted the success of the participants in this study as well. Even though many of the participants indicated that their family did not understand what they were going through or could not comprehend the rigors and expectations of the program, their families still wanted them to succeed. As DeLong (2003) mentioned, the parents of first-generation students understand the benefits of a college degree; however, they often do not comprehend that the pursuit of a degree may disrupt the family norms. Pam expressed that her parents did not quite understand why she could not work and had to keep convincing them that it was not possible for her to work. Mary indicated how her family wanted her to go to school, but did not understand why she could not go to family events, because she had so much to study. However, results of the current study showed that their family's opinions changed and they began to understand the rigors of the program, once they saw what the participants experienced on a daily basis. When they noticed that the participants would not come home until really late and exhibited physical

manifestations of stress, the family began to understand, and left them alone to study. They did not have too many expectations from the family and was free of any familial obligations, which is different from what the literature shows of other first-generation college students.

The results of this study support prior research on the importance of family support in retention. Mary, Pam, Sonny, Nancy, and Amber all mentioned that they could not have gone through the program without their family. The support they received from their family was invaluable. Even if their family was not able to help them academically, they supported them in so many other ways both financially and emotionally, that really helped them to succeed. Lopez (2001) stated it best when he said that parents can provide encouragement and emotional support throughout their college experience. In this study, that was true. Amber gave credit to her mom for helping her through the program; Amy was thankful for her parents; Sonny's brother was the key to his success; and Nancy's sister was the reason she made it through nursing school. Family support was critical for the participants' success in the nursing program. First-generation students generally face a major challenge in their college experience with parental support but for nursing students, that support is vital for their success. Without a support base, it would have been extremely difficult to persist and graduate from the nursing program.

#### Theme 4: Academic Activities

Tinto (1993) identified academic integration as one of the two variables important to retention. Academic integration is defined as the assimilation of the student into the academic life of the college (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Some of the activities of

academic integration include attending career-based lectures, participating in study groups, developing good study habits, talking with faculty, utilizing academic support services, and meeting with advisors (NCES, 1998; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Terenzini, et al., 1996). Results of this study revealed that academic integration was a factor in the success of first-generation nursing graduates. Majority of the participants indicated they were involved in different academic activities that helped them to graduate. McConnell (2000) indicated that first-generation students demonstrated lower levels of academic integration. However, in this study, the first-generation students who succeeded all indicated certain academic activities supported their learning.

Some of the participants identified different academic activities such as peer mentoring and peer tutoring as helpful, but the one activity that was consistent throughout all the participant's responses was the study group. The study group seemed to be the one activity that many of the participants indicated as critical and attributed heavily to their success. The superior benefits and the heavy reliance of the participants on study groups are new to this study and will add to literature as a critical academic integration activity among nursing students. Other key components of the study group indicated in this research study were that the same set of students was in the same study group for the entire program. The study also revealed that the size of the group mattered and the fit was crucial to the success of the study group. The study group cannot be too big and must have people on there that can work together. Even though other academic activities helped in their success, study groups were the main academic activity identified as critical for nursing students to succeed.

Perin (2006) recommended nursing-specific tutoring, advisement, and counseling intervention to address serious difficulties in retention and academic performance. This study supported the idea of having nursing-specific tutoring because some of the participants indicated that peer tutoring really helped them in the program. Khattab (2011) and Bishop & Walker (1990) stated counseling services positively influence retention of college students. However, in this study, many of the participants never took advantage of the counseling services. Instead, the participants relied on one another, their study groups, and faculty for advice in difficult situations. The study group was once again the main focus of support they mentioned when they faced challenges in the program. Pam mentioned the study group as her “go to people for anything.” They motivated and supported one another during struggles.

Another key finding of this study was the value of peer mentoring. Some of the participants indicated having informal peer mentors as a major support and help in the program. They indicated that guidance from previous nursing students was extremely helpful and felt that would be a greater asset than having a counselor. Many of them never utilized counseling because they did not really know the value or understood the services offered by a counselor. Yet, based on the results of this study, counseling was not necessary to their success. They were able to utilize other resources to help them overcome the challenges.

#### Theme 5: Social Activities

Tinto (1993) stated that social integration is the other variable that is important for retention. Social integration is defined as the assimilation of the student into the social life of the institution (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Social integration is determined

by how often students had contact with faculty outside of the classroom; went places with friends from school, or participated in student activities, events, programs, or clubs and organizations (NCES, 1998; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Based on the results of this study, social activities were a factor in the success of first-generation nursing students. Majority of the participants in the study indicated that they were involved with the professional nursing club on campus and were involved with social events and activities that were related to the club. They felt that the membership in the club gave them access to faculty easier as well. They were able to meet with other students for the events and had opportunities to serve as mentors to incoming students.

Research shows that a student's integration into college can have a bearing on his/her academic achievement, because their levels of involvement with social networks have strong positive effects on their academic success (McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). A finding of this study was a strong social component in the participants' experiences with other classmates while in the program that proved to be beneficial to their academic success. Most participants indicated that, besides the student nursing club, they were too busy with studying to be involved in any formal social activities and events while in the program. However, all participants mentioned social activities they were engaged with that happened informally among the study groups. The participants explained how the members of the study groups would go out for dinner after taking a test, or how they would take breaks after studying, and just have a little fun. The participants shared stories of forming life-long friendships because they shared the challenges and successes together, and provided strong support to each other throughout the program. Jan mentioned that "social activities were with my

classmates... they were the closest people to me.” According to Jehangir, Williams, & Pete (2011), learning extended beyond the classroom and became part of study groups and informal gatherings.

Nursing programs follow a cohort model similar to learning communities where students take classes together. Research has shown the benefits of learning communities and peer group involvement in regards to enhancing student engagement and increased retention (Zhao and Kuh, 2004; Tinto, 1997). In this study, participants indicated the benefits of being in a program with the same students. These were not just the students they had a class with, but also the persons with whom they shared successes and struggles. They knew each other well and were able to build relationships with fellow students that extended beyond the classroom.

Prior research has indicated that first-generation students were less likely to be involved in campus organizations, participate in extracurricular college activities, and have many friends on campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini, et al., 1996; Nuner & Cuccarro-ALamin, 1998; McConnell, 2000). This study indicated that these first-generation nursing students were only involved in one student organization, but did make friends while in the program. All participants indicated they were too busy to be involved with too many extracurricular activities due to the rigor of the nursing program. However, as prior research has shown, social integration is a key indicator for persistence as was the case in this study, where the participants became involved socially with other classmates as a result of academic activities such as study groups. Once again, the study groups for the participants in this study proved to be

critical not only from an academic standpoint, but from a social standpoint that inadvertently helped them to be successful in the program.

Igbo, et al., (2011) stated the importance of faculty and student collaborations in the nursing program. Many of the participants in this study indicated interactions with faculty had positive and negative implications. They indicated that having amazing faculty played a major role in their success, while bad faculty hindered their growth. The participants explained how the most memorable faculty demonstrated their support by going above and beyond for the students, and by being open to provide guidance. Faculty served in the capacity of informal advisors for the participants while in the program. Poorman, Mastorovich, & Webb (2011) indicated how faculty members are expected to play a key role in addressing the needs of their students and play multiple roles besides being a nurse educator. Results of this study support prior research that nursing faculty serves different roles in their student's lives and first-generation nursing students tend to rely on them for motivation, support, guidance, and assistance throughout the program.

Nursing faculty play a pivotal role in ensuring retention of minority students in the program (Beard, 2009). Beard (2009) further stated that, for first-generation students, the faculty member is a figure of respect and influence due to his expertise in the field, and such perceptions give faculty the power to make a difference in student retention. The participants in this study reaffirmed the role of faculty in student retention as Amber mentioned, "One teacher really made her understand everything." Additionally, Nancy stated, "She was awesome... Whatever she said just stuck for some reason." However, this study expands on prior research by stating that poor faculty can impact attrition.

Some of the participants in this study described interactions with faculty that made them doubt their skills and ability to pass the course. Amber explained how a faculty member was giving her “an extremely hard time” that she took it personal, and was not sure what she was doing wrong. The results of this study showed that interactions with faculty in the nursing program can either support student success or lead to attrition. Mary indicated how a great faculty member can make the students feel “confident, extraordinary, and successful”, while a bad faculty member can make them feel “stupid, scared, and want to quit.”

#### Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study have numerous implications related to retention of first-generation students in a nursing program. The results may be beneficial for other first-generation students aspiring to be successful in a nursing program. Administrators and faculty in the nursing department may find the results of this study useful to support and strengthen retention initiatives. Supported by the findings of this study, the researcher is presenting five recommendations to support retention initiatives for first-generation students succeed in a nursing program: mandatory pre-nursing counseling, mandatory family orientation, formalized introduction to study groups, peer mentoring and peer tutoring programs, and mandatory faculty advising.

Mandatory pre-nursing counseling is recommended based on the results that emerged from the findings in regards to strong personal drives and financial factors. Every participant mentioned that the program was extremely challenging. They also talked about being goal-oriented and making completion of the nursing program their

number one priority. There was a transition period where they adjusted in the first semester and found a balance between school and life. None of the participants worked full-time and a few of them were able to work only part-time. They had to change their routine and lifestyle in order to be successful in the nursing program. Many of them mentioned that financial aid helped them meet their financial obligations while enrolled in the program. A mandatory pre-nursing counseling session with a counselor will be of great benefit to new nursing students; it would help them to understand these different components that are critical to their success in the program. Having a counseling session will help students gauge their commitment to the program and avoid any surprises when they are in the program. However, it is important to make sure the counseling session is positive and does not discourage them. The information should help them understand the nature of the program, challenges, expectations, obstacles, and provide them with the tools and resources that will help them succeed.

Results of this study also revealed that family support is vital to participant's ability to succeed in the nursing program. A mandatory family orientation is recommended because it will provide incoming nursing student's family information about the program, explain to them the rigors of the curriculum, describe the expectations of the program, and provide guidance on ways to support the students in the program. This orientation should include a panel of current nursing students and their family members who can explain the rigors of the program, the challenges, and adjustment strategies. Hearing from current students and their family about their experiences will help them to understand the importance of having family support while in the program.

Family is important to their success so having a mandatory family orientation may expedite the adjustment phase.

A third recommendation is to create a formalized plan to incorporate study groups into nursing programs based on the perception among the participants regarding study groups as an important component of both academic and social integration that helped them to succeed. Because study groups seemed to have served a crucial function in creating an atmosphere that fosters academic and social activities, it will be beneficial to create a process where students will actively become part of a group. Since the right size and fit is important, faculty should create a process in the first class where the students will actively select a limited number of other like-minded students to form their group. A formalized process would also create an atmosphere of collaborative learning similar to learning communities where faculty members would actively build connections between the academic and social world of their students' lives. Study groups are a crucial academic tool in nursing programs where learning can be extended beyond the classroom and become part of informal social gatherings.

The fourth recommendation would be peer mentoring and tutoring because of the value these two academic activities provided for the participants in this study. The researcher recommends incorporating a process to pair an upper-class student from the program with an incoming student to serve as peer mentor. Some of the participants described the benefits of having someone who has experienced the challenges and can explain to them ways to overcome them. Peer mentoring can serve as a great retention tool to support those students who are struggling with issues more than academia. The study revealed that first-generation nursing students face many challenges both in and

outside the classroom. Most participants did not seek out counseling; having a peer mentor in the program that can help and provide advice on how to overcome certain obstacles will be invaluable. The researcher also recommends actively creating a nursing specific tutoring program where second-year students in the program would tutor those in the first-year. The participants mentioned that there were not any nursing tutors at the college and informal peer tutoring was extremely helpful. Since some of the participants explained the value of tutoring and how it prevented themselves and other students from failing classes, a peer tutoring program is being recommended to support retention initiatives.

Lastly, mandatory faculty advising is recommended due to the role faculty seemed to play in the lives of their students and the positive implications they have on retention. Each faculty will be assigned a certain number of students they will advise throughout the program. These students will be required to meet with the faculty midway through the first semester to assess their transition into the program. Faculty will explain everything to them and make sure the student is set up to succeed. Afterwards, the students can meet their faculty advisor anytime by appointment to go over any issues they may have in the program. Because participants described the impact faculty had on their success, mandatory faculty advising will be a crucial resource for the students in the program.

#### Future Research

This research focused on how first-generation students succeeded in a nursing program at a community college. Considering the limitations and findings in the study, there are implications for future research.

This study focused on first-generation students in an associate's degree nursing program at a community college. It would be interesting to do a study on first-generation students in a bachelor's degree program at a university to compare the results and discern for similarities or differences.

The main variable for this study was the participant's first-generation status. A study on second-generation students who graduated from an associate's degree nursing program would be great to compare results and to determine whether the results of this study is specific for first-generation students or universal for all nursing students regardless of their first-generation status. A study comparing the two results will be significant to verify the results of this study that may be common to only first-generation nursing students.

Research regarding other characteristics or areas of personality might be explored to determine if other factors played a role in their success. Even though this study tried to maximize range in its selection of participants, a more focused study on a particular group might provide more in-depth knowledge of their challenges, obstacles, and strategies for success. Studies involving students from a particular ethnicity or race may provide more insight into that group and how cultural difference may influence their behavior in nursing school. Gender specific research such as a study on male nurses would be interesting to see if there are any correlations to the results of this study. A comparison study of first-generation nursing students from different socio-economic

status would also yield some great insight into the different obstacles and challenges these students face and have to overcome, depending on their social and economic background.

Family support played a key role in this study. Many of the participants had support from their family except for one. It would be interesting to do a study on first-generation nursing students in the program who received significant family support versus those who received minimal family support, and learn the significance of family support from those students who are still in the program.

Finally, a study should be done on first-generation students who did not successfully complete the program to hear their story and determine the reasons they did not graduate. It will be interesting to compare the results with this study to determine whether those students utilized some of the successful strategies learned from this study. It will be especially interesting to learn about their motivation, challenges, family support, and whether those students were involved in certain academic and social activities such as study groups, peer mentoring, peer tutoring, clubs, and informal social gathering with classmates. A comparison of these results with the results of the current study can help determine whether there are any correlations between the results of the two studies.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-generation nursing graduates from an associate's degree program. This study provided depth and insight into the factors that helped first-generation nursing students graduate from the program and how academic and social activities helped them succeed.

Several of the themes represented in this study reflect support for results found in previous research. Other themes are new to this study and not found in literature and clearly added to the body of knowledge of first-generation nursing students. Some of the themes added or expanded the knowledge currently found in literature while others refuted it. The results of this study led to several recommendations that should be considered for retention initiatives.

There have been numerous studies done on incoming first-generation students and the role academic and social activities played in their success. However, studies on first-generation students in a professional program such as nursing were limited. This study adds information to literature regarding first-generation students in a nursing program and how academic and social activities helped in their ability to successfully complete an undergraduate professional program. The findings of this study do support the conceptual framework of this research that was based on Tinto's and Chickering's theory. Academic and social activities integrated towards a common goal do indeed support retention of first-generation students in a professional program such as nursing and was crucial for their success.

Results from current study provided support for previous findings that motivation, financial aid, family support, academic activities, social clubs, and faculty interactions were all critical for retention among nursing students as well. The differences from prior research indicate that unlike many of the incoming first-generation students, nursing students who were first-generation students were involved in academic activities, social activities, focused on their goals, and received family support. The themes that are unique to this study included the strong personal desire to achieve their goals, the importance of

group studies, the dynamics of informal social gatherings that were formed in building relationships, and the negative implications of faculty interactions.

Overall, this study showed that academic and social activities can support the successful graduation of first-generation students from a nursing program. This study emphasized that, though first-generation nursing students faced challenges that were similar to incoming first-generation nursing students, the successful nursing students overcame the challenges, and found a way to succeed. The findings of this study should be considered for future persistence models for first-generation students in a nursing program and possibly for other academically challenging undergraduate professional programs. Results will hopefully inform other first-generation students on how to successfully graduate from a nursing program, as well as assist faculty and college administrators in developing retention strategies for first-generation students in a nursing program.

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APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

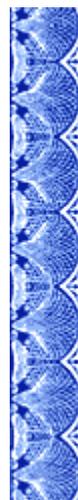
## NIH CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION

**Certificate of Completion**

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Sujith Zachariah** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 11/12/2009

Certification Number: 337790



## APPENDIX B

## APPROVAL OF USE OF DATA FROM TRITON COLLEGE

**From:** Dr. Douglas Olson [<mailto:dolson@triton.edu>]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 26, 2012 4:54 PM  
**To:** Sujith Zachariah  
**Cc:** Mary-Rita Moore  
**Subject:** RE: Permission to Use Student Information for Dissertation Study

Sujith this should be fine as long as we extract the data, then there are no identifiers. In addition, we ask that you share the final outcomes with us. Lastly, there should be some agreement that you would need to sign for us, similar to an IRB process. Touch base with Mary-Rita on this request. If we do not have a form in place, her and I can craft one.

**From:** Sujith Zachariah [<mailto:szachari@triton.edu>]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 26, 2012 3:49 PM  
**To:** Dr. Douglas Olson  
**Subject:** Permission to Use Student Information for Dissertation Study

Hi Dr. Olson,

I would like to request your permission to be able to use student data from Triton College's database for my dissertation research study. The purpose of the data would be to initiate an inquiry e-mail to request student's assistance and consideration in participating in my study. My dissertation research study, *An Examination of Experiences of First-Generation Nursing Students at a Midwestern Community College*, involves studying the experiences of first-generation nursing graduates from Triton College to learn more about their successful traits and the type of resources they utilized at Triton to be successful. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times and there will not be any known risks to students if they decided to participate in this research study. The interview is voluntary, anonymous and the student's name will not be used anywhere in the discussion of the study. There will not be any costs involved to the student or the institution.

The primary purpose of this study is centered on how the first-generation student graduates from a nursing program at a community college. The primary research question that will be explored is as such: How do first-generation nursing students successfully graduate from a professional undergraduate program? Second, this inquiry will investigate common characteristics or traits of first-generation nursing students that helped them successfully complete the program. Last, this study will analyze if academic and social integration activities played a role in retaining first-generation nursing students. The information obtained will add to literature and provide future first-

generation students insight into how to be successful in a rigorous program such as nursing. The information will also provide community college administrators and nursing faculty in-depth knowledge about vital resources that will help students succeed.

I know we have discussed my dissertation topic in the past and I truly appreciate all of your support throughout my educational journey. I look forward to hearing from you soon regarding this matter. Please let me know if you have questions. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sujith Zachariah

APPENDIX C  
INQUIRY LETTER

Hello,

My name is Sujith Zachariah. I am a doctoral candidate at Benedictine University. I would like to request your assistance and consideration in participating in my study titled *An Examination of Experiences of First-Generation Nursing Students at a Midwestern Community College*. My dissertation focuses on the experiences of first-generation students who graduated from the nursing program at Triton College. The aim of the study is to contribute to the literature regarding the experiences of first-generation students in a professional undergraduate program such as nursing.

Your participation could provide insight for other first-generation students who aspire to become a nurse and provide invaluable information to help them succeed in a nursing program. Furthermore, your experiences could provide information to community college administrators and nursing faculty about activities and resources that are essential for first-generation nursing students to be successful.

Please take a brief moment to reply to this email to inform me of your interest. Please note that your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. Lastly, the only time elements requested will be an initial interview approximately 60 minutes in length which may be followed by a short follow-up conversation via telephone to provide further clarification. Confidentiality will be maintained in the reporting of the data.

Due to the small size of this specific study, your response is exceptionally critical to this study. I will call you within the next two weeks to request your participation in this study and schedule an appointment for the interview. During this time, I will answer any questions you have regarding the study.

Should you have any questions or need further clarification prior to me contacting you, please feel free to reach me via telephone at 708-456-0300 ext. 3593 or e-mail at [szachari@triton.edu](mailto:szachari@triton.edu). You may also contact my dissertation director, Dr. Amanda Turner, via telephone at 708-456-0300 ext. 3679 or e-mail at [aturner1@triton.edu](mailto:aturner1@triton.edu) if you have any questions. Lastly, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Benedictine University, Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke at 630-829-6295 or e-mail [AClarke@ben.edu](mailto:AClarke@ben.edu) for information about participant's rights.

Thank you and I look forward to your participation.

Sincerely,

Sujith Zachariah

APPENDIX D  
CONFIRMATION EMAIL

Dear Name of Student,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the study I am conducting as a doctoral student at Benedictine University to complete my dissertation on *An Examination of Experiences of First-Generation Nursing Students at a Midwestern Community College*. The purpose of this study is to gain insight on the experiences of first-generation nursing students. Specifically, this inquiry will explore the needs and support services a first-generation nursing student will need to graduate from nursing program at a community college.

As a prior graduate of the nursing program at Triton College, you can provide valuable insight on how first-generation students can be successful in obtaining a nursing degree. Additionally, your participation in this study will be central to contributing to the literature regarding the experiences of first-generation students in a nursing program and whether academic and social activities play a role in their success.

Your face-to-face interview will be conducted on Date at Time in Room. The interview should last no longer than 60 minutes.

You can be assured that your identity and responses will be treated confidentially and the information obtained will be used for the purpose of this study only. Should you desire, once the study is completed, you will be given an opportunity to review it.

This study is strictly voluntary. You may terminate your participation and withdraw your consent at any time without consequences. If you choose to participate, all questions should be answered honestly, accurately, and in a timely manner.

As a reminder, I will contact you via phone call prior to the interview as a reminder. I look forward to learning about your experiences as a nursing student at Triton College. Should you have any immediate questions, please feel free to contact me at 773-895-3708 or [szachari@triton.edu](mailto:szachari@triton.edu) or my advisor, Dr. Amanda Turner, at 708-456-0300 Ext. 3679 or [aturner1@triton.edu](mailto:aturner1@triton.edu).

Thank you in advance for your support.

Sincerely,

Sujith Zachariah

## APPENDIX E

## INTERVIEW CONFIRMATION TELEPHONE REMINDER

Mr. / Ms. Name of Student,

Hi, my name is Sujith Zachariah. I am a doctoral candidate at Benedictine University. I am calling to confirm my face-to-face interview with you tomorrow regarding my study titled *An Examination of Experiences of First-Generation Nursing Students at a Midwestern Community College*. We are scheduled to meet tomorrow at Time in Location in Room. The interview should last no longer than 60 minutes.

Do you have any questions? I look forward to meeting with you tomorrow.

## APPENDIX F

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are being invited to participate in a research study I am conducting to complete my dissertation on *An Examination of Experiences of First-Generation Nursing Students at a Midwestern Community College*. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of a first-generation nursing student who successfully graduated from a community college nursing program. Sujith Zachariah, under the supervision of a faculty member from the education department at Benedictine University, is conducting this study. This study is being conducted as part of a doctorate student project.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you graduated from Triton College's nursing program and indicated in your admission application that you were the first in your family to attend college. Your opinion and experiences will prove to be a valuable insight into learning about the traits of a successful nursing student.

There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this research study. There are no costs to you for participating in the study. The information you provide will be used to understand the activities and resources that are essential to be successful in a nursing program. The interview will last about sixty minutes. The information collected may not benefit you directly, but the information learned in this study should provide more general benefits.

This interview is anonymous. Your name will not be used anywhere in the discussion of the study. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study. Individuals from the Institutional Review Board at Benedictine University may inspect these records. Should the data be published, no individual information will be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. By doing the interview, you are voluntarily agreeing to participate. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Sujith Zachariah at 708-456-0300 ext. 3593 or e-mail at [szachari@triton.edu](mailto:szachari@triton.edu).

The Benedictine University Institutional Review Board has reviewed my request to conduct this project. If you have any concerns about your rights in this study, please contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Benedictine University, Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke at 630-829-6295 or e-mail [AClarke@ben.edu](mailto:AClarke@ben.edu).

I have read and understood the information on the informed consent form. I understand my participation is voluntary and received a copy of the form.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

---

Date

## APPENDIX G

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FIRST-GENERATION NURSING GRADUATES

Project: *An Examination of Experiences of First-Generation Nursing Students at a  
Midwestern Community College*

---

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

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Thank you for your participation in this study. As accuracy is essential to the study, I would like to digitally record this interview. The interview should not last any longer than 60 minutes. At any point during the course of the interview, you may request that recording be stopped.

Please answer the following questions as fully and accurately as possible:

1. When did you decide to pursue a career in nursing?
2. What are your thoughts in regards to the selection criteria for admission into the program?
3. Were you confident in being successful in the nursing program when you first started?
4. How would you describe your overall experience in the nursing program during your first semester?
5. Can you describe any successes, if any, that you experienced in the program?

6. Can you describe any challenges, if any, that you faced in the nursing program?
7. How did you overcome the challenges?
8. Did your family or friends play a role in your life while you were in the nursing program?
9. Were you involved in any academic activities such as tutoring, study groups, library, counseling, exam reviews, etc. while in the nursing program? If so, please explain.
10. Were you involved in any social activities outside of the classroom such as peer meetings, student clubs, professional organizations, social gatherings with classmates, etc. while in the nursing program? If so, please explain.
11. Did any of the academic or social activities involve faculty from the nursing program? If so, please explain.
12. Did you receive any support from the college that prepared you or helped you to be successful in the nursing program? If so, please explain,.
13. Were there any additional services that the college could have provided to help you succeed? If so, please explain.
14. If you could go back and change one thing, if any, from your overall experience in the nursing program, what would it be?
15. What, if any, are your future educational plans?
16. What advice would you give to future first-generation students who are aspiring to be nursing students to be successful in the nursing program?

Thank you for your participation in this interview. As a reminder, I will email you a summary of the interview for you to review and/or to provide any clarification on your answers.