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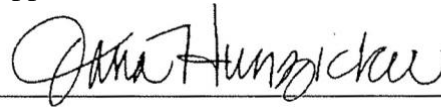
STUDENT SATISFACTION AS A PREDICTOR OF PROGRESSION AND RETENTION IN
UNDERGRADUATE NURSING: A QUALITATIVE ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

A Scholarly Research Project

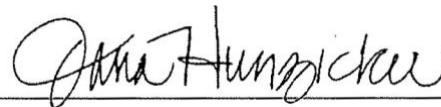
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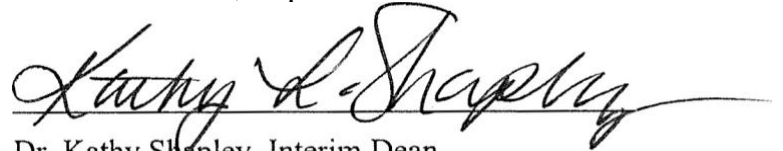
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ABSTRACT

This study sought to understand if a decline in student satisfaction occurs in undergraduate nursing students, and if students recover from such a decline. The purposes of this study were to examine overall undergraduate nursing satisfaction, explore the potential decline in satisfaction as students' progress through nursing school, and to describe the impact of student satisfaction on retention, at a private, not-for-profit health sciences and nursing school. The study used a qualitative approach, with one-on-one semi-structured interviews with nursing students in their final semester of nursing school to explore usage of student services, connection with staff, faculty, and peers, and sought to determine if students were happy as they prepared to graduate. Although some of the students in the study had more tumultuous academic journeys, each of the students in the study ultimately did find connection and reported they were happy with their selection of college and career choice. Limitations of the study include small sample size and niche area of study, investigating only undergraduate, Bachelor of Science in Nursing students.

Keywords: nursing student satisfaction, student services, student happiness

DEDICATION

Many years ago, I hoped to work in higher education. Life had other plans and I spent much of my professional career in corporate America, and working at home to form my three children into amazing human beings to launch into the world on their own journeys. I don't regret the path my life took, but when the opportunity came to work in higher education, I knew immediately the time was finally right. I jumped in with both feet, and shortly after entering the field knew this is where I belong. Dr. Kyle Bright and Bobbi Biringer, thank you for taking a chance on me. You both were mentors all professionals entering higher education deserve. Working with you has been a bright spot in my career.

Friends and family – if I have cancelled or refused plans, been flakey, forgotten to return your text, returned your text a few weeks late, I am finally done! I cannot wait to re-enter the social scene and reengage with all of you, have you over for pasta Sunday, watch your kids' Little League games, accept volunteer opportunities, nights out, road trips, bourbon trail weekends, bring it all on!

To my parents, who always expected me to graduate from college, I suspect you thought this might have ended many decades ago, but here we are. Thank you for your support over many, many years. Your expectation of high academic success manifested itself differently for each one of your children, and we have all found an outlet to share our skills and knowledge. It just took me a little longer. I always want make you proud, and hope this achievement will serve to do so.

Nathanial, Sophie, Tess –the delight of seeing you bloom in your adult lives is such a treasure. Being your mom is truly the greatest joy of my life. You each are amazing in your own unique way; each of you are the reason I strive to do better and more each day. You keep me young and simultaneously age me by decades, make me laugh, are the reason I get up each and every day (sometimes quite literally!), and bring such tremendous value to the world and to my life. I appreciate your unwavering love and support as I set out to accomplish this.

Adam, thank you for the support – financial, mental, around the house, all the ways and places you make each day better and easier for me, especially as you carried more of the load these last few years. You are the ultimate partner, co-parent, friend, chauffer, dog walker, all the things! Without you, I

could not have done this. Additionally, over the course of your career, you have demonstrated what it means to be a compassionate, student first, student friendly educator who creates an overarching vision for a group of students and a plan of execution, always giving of yourself, and always ready to conquer what the day has in store. Now that we have achieved this degree, let's go have some fun (just not on a boat)!

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Entering the EdD program at my alma mater was a decision that just felt right. Learning from Dr. John Howard and Dr. Charles Bukowski as an undergraduate, expectations were high that any other program might be equally as fulfilling, interesting, and challenging. I am immensely thankful to Dr. Jon Neidy for his guidance and support through the early coursework, when I wondered if I really was crazy for embarking on this journey. After Dr. Neidy assisted in navigating the first few chapters, along came Dr. Jana Hunzicker. I do not have enough words to express my profound thanks for her input, attention to detail, expectations for quality of work, and ability to edit a chapter in a way that rivals the best copy editors in the publishing industry! She is truly an inspiration.

I am thankful to my co-workers who have listened, encouraged, and cheered me on each step of the way. Joel Shoemaker, your ability to find any book, journal, or other material I needed was so valued. Thank you for editing this project! Your aptitude to provide distraction to my work at hand was also always appreciated! Thank you for the morning coffee, evening whiskey, great friendship, and your ability to model living in the moment, and living out our own unique lives in our own unique ways, where happiness comes through and from this! Dr. Theresa Schwindenhammer, thank you for the opportunities and mentorship you have provided. Dr. Blanca Miller has offered me many opportunities of educational and professional growth. She leads with intensity, integrity, knowledge, and a passion for nursing education. Her sense of following the data, always seeking to improve herself and our College is inspirational! Dr. Octavian Gabor, you are the most thoughtful faculty member I have had the privilege of knowing. Your commitment to the College, our students, staff, and faculty are unparalleled.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

After multiple college tours with my daughter over the past three years, I began to sense unrest with the upper-classmen tour guides; questions were often answered with a bit of trepidation, and it became increasingly obvious that the tour guides were often holding back. This was confirmed when a guide at one school reached out to my daughter following our visit to provide her with the “real feel” for the college, which was not very positive. As a professional working in admissions and recruitment for undergraduate nursing students at Central Illinois College (a pseudonym), I became curious about the issue of student admission representatives disparaging the very institutions they were supposed to be promoting as an overall phenomenon. This chapter introduces the study’s research problem and provides an overview of the literature related to college student satisfaction in general and specific to undergraduate nursing programs before stating the study’s purpose and describing the significance of the study. The chapter closes with an overview of this five-chapter report.

Research Problem

According to the Ruffalo Noel Levitz 2018 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report, student satisfaction declines between freshman and senior year (National Student Satisfaction, 2018). Understanding student satisfaction is crucial to understanding how colleges and universities can take preventative action upfront, or corrective action prior to graduation. Additional elements to consider include overall customer retention strategies employed by marketing firms outside of higher education and applications that may prove relevant to institutions in higher education. Exploration of relationship commitment from a marketing

perspective, and the drivers of loyalty, as well as consumer trust is crucial to having an informed appreciation of retention rates (Gustafson, A., et al., 2006).

Undergraduate nursing programs are unique in that the demands on student time are often more strenuous than in typical undergraduate programs. Further, the emotional toll and psychological demands of this rigorous curriculum can often be overwhelming for student nurses. Ensuring students are able to progress through their undergraduate program of study has wide ranging implications for both the students themselves and for colleges and universities offering nursing programs.

Literature Review

At its most basic, satisfaction is defined as fulfillment of a want or need (Merriam-Webster, 2021). While most higher education institutions emphasize satisfaction, could higher education be missing the point all together by overlooking happiness (Elwick, A., and Cannizzaro, S., 2017)? Understanding the differences between and similarities of nursing students and traditional undergraduate students formed an important aspect of the study.

Literature on student satisfaction is abundant. It is widely accepted that a decline in student satisfaction exists. Umbach and Porter (2000) have discussed the implication that characteristics, that may differ from program to program, have on student experience and satisfaction; “The literature points to departmental characteristics such as student-faculty relationships, structural diversity, and the research emphasis of the faculty as factors influencing student outcomes” (Umbach & Porter, 2000, p. 7). They further implore readers and researchers to understand the impact of peer influences on student outcomes.

Tinto (1993) discusses student commitment as critical to their progression. If a student is dissatisfied, it may impact their personal commitment to complete their degree, at least at the

institution they might be attending. The author further shares "...the great one's commitments, the greater the likelihood of institutional persistence" (Tinto, 1993, p.43). It is important to balance many of the factors Umbach and Porter, as well as Tinto, discuss in understanding student persistence as it pertains to their overall satisfaction. Carter and Yeo (2015) tie this together, sharing "establishing satisfaction early on should lead to a greater likelihood that loyalty will follow" (p. 636). Leveraging student commitment to impact satisfaction may provide institutions with the ability to recover more easily when students reach periods of dissatisfaction in their education, or with their college or university.

Satisfaction and happiness appear to be closely related. The 2018 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report indicate an overall satisfaction level of 59% but by the senior year of study an overall satisfaction level of 54% for students attending four-year private colleges and universities (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2018). They further report an overall satisfaction rate of students attending their first-choice school at 64% and 47% for those at their second-choice school. Does entry into a first-choice or second-choice school impact satisfaction? Is there a correlation between being satisfied with your choice and that satisfaction provides a level of happiness? Elwick (2017) reports the National Survey of Student Engagement does not address happiness, but does mention satisfaction eleven times. "Hence, a concern with students' satisfaction at the expense of their happiness is present in student experience surveys across the world" (Elwick, 2017, p.3). Elwick further maintains that when the focus is on satisfaction there is a lack of emphasis on learning through difficult courses, topics, or instructors. His research indicates that studies show students find highest levels of satisfaction with instructors or courses that challenge them least, where "...this is in direct contrast to the argument that wellbeing, flourishing and a more meaningful understanding of happiness can only be garnered through

some level of unhappiness or discontent” (p.6). The focus of satisfaction is a measure important for college administrators to understand; however, growth through challenge is minimized in these instances.

Roberts (2013) recognized that happiness should be a goal of education and that education should ultimately contribute to collective happiness. Kale (1988) discussed happiness and balance at the classroom level, as it relates to his own teaching and experiments in the classroom, which provides a unique perspective. He includes specific integration of happiness into his classroom, through lectures and emphasis on a holistic view of students. He further emphasizes the critical nature of personal relationships in his research. He maintains friendships are an integral part of “belonging, emotional stability opportunity for communication about oneself, provision of assistance and physical support, reassurance of one’s worth and value, opportunity to help others, and personality support” (Kale, 1988, p. 98). Understanding the importance of connection is critical to understanding a student’s satisfaction and happiness.

Papanek (1974) found the importance of friendships to be the most satisfying thing about their years in college. Additionally, in her research, the correlation of happiness to the subjects’ friendship, careers and professions are examined during a time of institutional and cultural change (Papanek, 1974). Further, this study pointed to the lack of satisfaction when students were not in courses they felt provided them with proper preparation for future careers. These studies shed light on the historical significance of happiness and satisfaction in higher education.

While literature relating specifically to the satisfaction of nursing students is limited, it is possible to glean information from studies conducted in nursing programs. In reviewing studies by Elkins (2019) and Kubec (2017), retention of nursing students is discussed. Assuming as

Elkins (2019) supports, students want to complete undergraduate nursing programs, but may face barriers, such as childcare, that prevent them from doing so, but are willing to transfer to a program states away to accomplish this, the retention of nursing students, or lack thereof, discussed in these studies may indicate a lack of satisfaction in the field of study or institution a student has chosen. Kubec (2017) shared student frustration and roadblocks leading to dissatisfaction in their program, including a lack of flexibility from faculty to a lack of support or stability at home, all factors which may contribute to a student's satisfaction and happiness. Betts, et al. (2017), had similar findings regarding student attrition. The authors included the intensity of a nursing program, where students are often required to be in clinicals for eight to twelve hours per day, sometimes multiple times per week. The study also discusses the critical nature of student support systems to their success.

Recognizing factors related to declining student satisfaction and happiness have led to research around college branding, marketing, loyalty, and retention efforts of colleges and universities. Loyalty is defined as faithfulness to an institution (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Understanding this faithfulness to a student's college provides a window into why a student may have chosen the institution or why they stay somewhere when they experience periods of dissatisfaction. Gustafsson, et al. (2005) discussed the importance of the conceptual difference of satisfaction as backward looking and commitment as forward looking. While colleges and universities measure success through student satisfaction, student commitment is also important to retention. It seems this is often overlooked, but is an important component to both student satisfaction and retention. Further evaluation of situations that affect commitment, such as major life changes (having a baby, a move, change in employment or relationship status, among others)

will assist in informing the satisfaction and commitment of students (Gustafsson, A., et al., 2005).

Wyatt (2011) investigates the engagement of non-traditional students in their study. “As one of the largest and fastest growing populations of students, adult learners spend much more time on academics and subject matter and are highly focused, serious, and more motivated than the traditional college student” (Wyatt, 2011, p.13). The study further elaborates on the critical importance of understanding nontraditional students in order to successfully engage these students. Statistics in this study mirror the experience I have had with this population of students at CIC. These students are less inclined to participate in extracurricular activities and community service or volunteer work (less than half participated in the studies reviewed in Wyatt’s literature), than their more traditional counterparts (Wyatt, 2011). The findings of this study include ensuring the institution understands the priorities of the student, how best to communicate with them, how they learn, and the importance of flexibility. As Central Illinois College is an institution with primarily non-traditional students, acknowledging this fact and having an appreciation of this will also help in the collection and analysis of data.

Carter and Yeo (2015) provide global implications for student satisfaction and loyalty, as they discussed incorporating emotions and using “soft” and “hard” factors to increase satisfaction and retention. They view student satisfaction (and persistence) through teaching elements and non-teaching elements. These include academic experience and quality of faculty for teaching elements, and campus life, facilities, and placement support (or career services) as non-teaching elements with impact on persistence and satisfaction (Carter and Yeo, 2015). Each category is broken up into elements within; however, what stands out are factors they considered as part of satisfaction, including IT systems and support, availability of cafeteria, and other

elements that are often overlooked in studies I have found, and the impact of these factors of satisfaction.

Barbarino and Johnson (1999) suggested that strong faculty/student mentoring relationships resulted in stronger commitment to an institution, and therefore increased student retention. Tinto shares the importance of students believing they can succeed. He further expands: “Experience matters. This is particularly true during the critical first year as students seek to adjust to the heightened demands of college education” (Tinto, 2015, p.4). The impact of faculty relationships with their students is crucial to retention of students.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purposes of this study were to examine overall undergraduate nursing satisfaction, explore the potential decline in satisfaction as students progress through nursing school, and describe the impact of student satisfaction on retention at Central Illinois College, a private, not for-profit, four-year college. Critical to these purposes were investigating topics surrounding overall student satisfaction and the impact of student happiness on satisfaction.

The study explored three research questions: 1) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program? 2) What do Central Illinois College student find least satisfying about their educational program? 3) How should the educational satisfaction of Central Illinois College nursing students inform future admission and retention efforts?

Researcher Assumptions

Assumptions include that a decline in satisfaction does occur at Central Illinois College between first semester of entry and graduation. As an academic advisor at CIC, it has been my experience students face challenging semesters and do become quite frustrated and their

satisfaction levels generally do decline. When students have to withdraw from courses, or fail a course, they are often discouraged by the increased cost and the additional time to degree completion they face. However, it is apparent with most students, once the challenges and obstacles have been overcome, they return to academic advising with a renewed sense of purpose and satisfaction.

Significance of the Study

In the United States, nursing school attrition rates are currently between 20% and 50%. (Kubec, 2017). Understanding the critical nature of losing a student, whose seat can almost never be absorbed by another student is important for nursing education, and also for the profession of nursing. Because of the national nursing shortage, it is imperative students and institutions have a mutual commitment to successful completion of a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. Additionally, the reverberating impacts on both the school and examining first-hand accounts of student satisfaction and dissatisfaction will assist faculty and staff in understanding student satisfaction and its relevance to student progression through nursing school, as well as the retention of our students. This study will help inform best practices at Central Illinois College, using the information to ensure recruitment and admissions are working closely with nursing administration and faculty to employ best practices for admissions criteria.

Beyond Central Illinois College, the findings of this study will be useful to admissions and recruitment staff at other colleges and universities. Most especially, it is my hope this provides guidance to admissions and recruitment staff who recruit undergraduate nursing students. Understanding the impacts on satisfaction, such as student choice in the institution they are attending, student connection to faculty and staff members, student ability to maintain supportive friendships with peers who understand their experience, and their feelings towards

their school as they prepare to graduate will recruitment to better understand if a student is the right fit for a school and guide efforts accordingly.

Organization of the Research Report

This chapter introduced the study's research problem, provided an overview of the literature related to college student satisfaction in general and specific to undergraduate nursing programs, stated the study's purpose, and described the significance of the study. Chapter Two reviews current literature related to the study's research problem and purpose. Chapter Three describes the study's research methodology and methods, Chapter Four presents and discusses the study's findings, and Chapter Five concludes the study's report by drawing conclusions, offering implications for practice, and making recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The purposes of this study were to examine overall undergraduate nursing satisfaction, explore the potential decline in satisfaction as students progress through nursing school, and describe the impact of student satisfaction on retention at Central Illinois College (CIC), a private, not-for-profit, four-year college. Critical to these purposes were investigating topics surrounding overall student satisfaction and the impact of student happiness on satisfaction. The study explored three research questions: 1) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program? 2) What do Central Illinois College students find least satisfying about their educational program? 3) How should the educational satisfaction of Central Illinois College nursing students inform future admission and retention efforts? After providing an overview of the study's research problem, this chapter reviews the literature on student attrition, progression, and retention; student satisfaction in higher education; student satisfaction and student happiness; strategies for supporting student attrition, progression, and retention; factors leading to completing college; and undergraduate nursing student progression, with particular emphasis on the study's research site.

Overview of the Research Problem

Understanding satisfaction and decline of satisfaction as students persist through nursing school may help nursing faculty and leadership to better understand gaps in student support services, life events facing students in nursing programs, and other factors that contribute to student retention. While student retention is a much researched and discussed topic in the field of higher education, the application of factors impacting retention may be different for colleges of

nursing. As Tinto (2012) stressed, low retention and progression rates do not offer any part of that value proposition, but instead should create pause for potential students to carefully consider their ability to be successful in their education through graduation. Considering this in the context of nursing student retention, Elkins (2019) shares “attrition of nursing students is a concern for nursing educators because it is a significant problem affecting nursing programs throughout the United States and is associated with the critical nursing shortage” (p.101). Important aspects related to nursing education include the impact of attrition of nursing students with a national nursing shortage. If students are not able to complete their studies, the seat the student took in a nursing program is gone, most likely not replaceable by another student, and as such, a future nurse is lost, contributing to the ongoing nursing shortage.

It has also been identified in the literature that there are many factors besides academic risk that may contribute to a student’s attrition in the program, such as financial constraints, medical or mental health issues, lack of family support, realization that nursing is truly not the career choice for them, and social integration issues (Elkins, 2019). These factors are discussed throughout this study.

At the time of this study, the college used as a research site, Central Illinois College (CIC), had an average student age of 28. Many of the students were married or in relationships, had children, or served as primary caregivers for children or parents, and most held some type of job. At CIC, more students transfer into the college than students who attend all four years of the nursing program, making the two plus two pathway, where students spend two years at a community college and two years completing their Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) one of the most popular ways to graduate with a BSN from the college.

As the Director of Academic Advising at CIC, my interest in this study focused on determining if students experienced a decline in student satisfaction during CIC's baccalaureate nursing program, and, if they did, did they recover from their dissatisfaction and graduated from CIC as satisfied students? Additionally, I was interested in understanding what impacted students' satisfaction during their nursing school experience. While most research on college student satisfaction involved a more traditional undergraduate student population of 18 to 24 years of age with a broad range of fields of study represented, the literature focused specifically on nursing students was limited.

Even so, recognition of student differences was an important first step in the study's research process. One of the most prevalent theories in student retention is an institution's ability to retain students by integrating students into the social and academic spaces of institutional life (Tinto, 2012). Tinto's book *Completing College Rethinking Institutional Action* strongly influenced my thinking on the topic and, as a result, is heavily referenced throughout my review of the literature. I wondered, if institutions are able to successfully integrate students into college life, are students more satisfied and more likely to progress to matriculation? If so, the ability of institutions to provide robust and relevant programming, as well as ensuring students are able to meet the academic rigor in their field of study, will allow students to experience satisfaction and may have reverberating impacts, including improved recruitment and admissions practices, improved student affairs programming, and engaged alumni. Further understanding Tinto's theory, as well as other scholarly works, allowed me to seek out prevailing thought already associated with the research questions posed in this paper.

Student Attrition, Progression, and Retention

To begin, it is important to define student attrition, progression and retention. Student attrition is defined as a student leaving an institution of higher education prior to the completion of a degree or another credential (Tinto, 2012). Persistence is defined as “the rate at which student who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree, regardless of where they do so” (Tinto, 2012, p. 127). Seidman (2012) explained, “A student who enrolls in college and remains enrolled until degree completion is a persister” (p. 81). A non-persister, then, is a student who does not earn a degree, but leaves college and does not return. While Tinto’s definition is more holistic and is more apt to provide a higher level of completion, CIC used a definition that aligned with Seidman’s for measuring institutional persistence at the time of the study. The College prefers to measure retention rates which measures the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage.

For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduate students from the previous fall who are still enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. The full-time retention rate is calculated using the percentage of full-time, first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students, while the part-time rate is calculated using the percentage of part-time, first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students.

Throughout the literature, there is a lack of consensus on how to define retention as it applies to higher education. Seidman (2012) wrote, “Despite the recent attention, measuring college student retention remains complicated, confusing, and context dependent” (p. 81). As a

result, the working definition that most closely matched the definition used by CIC at the time of the study was “staying in school until completion of a degree” (Seidman, 2012, p. 82). Tinto (2012) offered caveats in measuring student retention, including a reminder that “not all students who begin higher education do so with the intent of gaining a degree or certificate” (p.128). While this statement may hold to be broadly correct, it seems that the intent of students entering CIC’s undergraduate baccalaureate nursing program do so with the intention of graduating with their Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree.

Limitations of the Usefulness of Existing Literature for this Study

Tinto (2012) devoted much research and writing to issues surrounding student attrition, progression, and retention, most recently focusing on progression as an institutional goal. Additionally, he has devoted research to understanding institutions that have high populations of non-traditional students and the potential for attrition if weak social systems exist in these institutions (Tinto, 2012). Understanding issues that impact non-traditional students, defined in this study as students older than the traditional college age of 18 to 24, is critical in understanding the student population under study for this action research project. Nearly all students at CIC at the time of the study were commuter students ranging in age from 18 to 51+. Further, in 2022, according to the Institutional Research Manager at CIC, first-generation students comprised approximately 40% of the student body.

Tinto’s work is compelling, as he outlines statistics demonstrating over a thirty-one-year period access to higher education increased by 11 million students, but college completion rates have barely increased in the same time period (Tinto, 2012). National statistics are important and inform Tinto’s work but understanding the attrition, retention and factors contributing to them at the research site is vital to the success of this study. While Tinto’s work is broadly based on

undergraduate students with no field-of-study specific data present, it provides a basis from which to build a program specific information in undergraduate nursing for this study.

Student Satisfaction in Higher Education

The importance of student satisfaction in higher education is multi-faceted. The primary interest in student satisfaction relates back to retention. The goal of any credible institution should be to seek out and admit students who will graduate and become alumni. These alumni will, if satisfied with their experience, be an asset to the institution in sharing their experience with others and as such working to further the recruitment and admissions of future students to the school. Studies offer situations where students preparing to graduate offer the opportunity for admissions' staff to leverage the first-hand experience to share with potential incoming students. In one study, follow-up surveys to prospective students visiting campus included a 96% satisfaction rate with the admission experience when these soon to be graduating students were part of their visit (Kwiatkowski, et al., 2019). Student satisfaction can have a ripple effect on campus climate. When students experience satisfaction, they are more likely to come to school with a positive outlook, engaging in their coursework and seeking out those activities and people on campus with whom they can relate.

Higher Education as a Brand

For decades, higher education institutions have understood the power of brand recognition, management, and recognition on attracting prospective students. Branding provides an avenue for communication with targeted audiences and opens a new opportunity for interaction (Smith, 2020). Student satisfaction plays a large part in brand perception and as such becomes critical for institutions to consider. Because when students pay tuition, there may be some assumption of consumer mindset. It then is important to consider the drivers of brand

loyalty. Smith (2020) provided a brand equity and consumer response model highlighting the importance of perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty as they relate to a consumer's willingness to pay a premium price, exercise their preference for a brand, and form their intention to purchase. Further relating this to satisfaction in the Higher Education Brand Equity model, Smith (2020) maintains alumni who are satisfied are then more likely to donate, promote, volunteer and attend events when they are satisfied and communicated with through branded material and images in a way they perceive to equate to quality and value.

When discussing higher education as a brand and thus as a consumable product, a careful line needs to be maintained. In general, services offered to the public operate under some form of philosophy where the customer is always right. Elwick and Cannizzaro (2017) warn that this philosophy leads to the conclusion that "the short-term demands of students should be pandered to" (p. 6). Ensuring that students understand that they cannot always be right and that they are not consumers in the traditional sense can be tricky to balance for colleges and universities. At the time of this study, CIC had taken a more hardline approach with student complaints, where they were rarely considering students' issues or concerns, but immediately dismissing them as invalid. This is one area where students have expressed, in the course of my position at the College, frustration and a feeling of not being heard.

Student Satisfaction and Student Happiness

Satisfaction

Student satisfaction, measured annually in the Ruffalo Noel Levitz National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report, provides colleges and universities the opportunity to feel the pulse of student satisfaction and priorities on a national level. For the 2018 period, the report shared that overall, 56% of four-year private and public college students were satisfied in the

educational experience they were receiving (Ruffalo, Noel, Levitz., 2018). Conversely, 44% of college students reported that they were not satisfied.

Many factors impact student satisfaction, including whether students are attending their first-choice school, their year in school, gender and ethnicity, age, employment status and whether they commute to school or live on campus (Ruffalo, Noel, Levitz, 2018). According to the report, further information that may impact satisfaction in direct and indirect ways include whether the student receives financial aid and their marital and family obligations, student services available and or which the student is using, including tutoring, mental health counseling, career counseling and other such services. Tinto (2012) provides additional support of the importance of financial aid. “Though the research evidence is somewhat mixed, greater amounts of financial aid appear to be associated with higher rates of student retention, especially for those from low-income backgrounds” (p. 29).

With many of these satisfaction factors in mind, this action research project was designed to seek out information regarding CIC students’ satisfaction with Central Illinois College, while I simultaneously explored whether students recruited to CIC were a proper fit to the institution. For example, does the institution have low academic barriers to entry but rigorous curriculum with potentially limited support to students? Are admissions teams overselling or underselling the nursing program? Do they ensure students understand the time commitment of a nursing curriculum? Questions such as these are an important determinant for student satisfaction and retention. As Tinto (2012) explained, “Expectations can have a powerful effect on student performance” (p.10).

Determining what satisfaction means to students is an important part of creating an environment where students are satisfied. Miriam-Webster Dictionary (2021) defines satisfaction

as “fulfillment of a need or want” and offers synonyms including “contentment” and “gratification”. In terms of undergraduate nursing students, satisfaction might show itself as a student willing to take on additional responsibility within the college, such as a club leader. Contentment could be demonstrated as a student expressing how excited they are to attend clinicals. Gratification might be expressed as a student seeking out a staff or faculty member to express their appreciation for the experience they are having.

Happiness

Elwick & Cannizzaro (2017) maintained that not just satisfaction should be considered, but student happiness is perhaps the more important measure to study. Their research maintains that “happiness in life is connected with the achievement of major goals” (p. 3). They further suggest that happiness and satisfaction should not be used as interchangeable terms to determine whether a student will progress and/or graduate to become alumni willing to provide support to the college or university they were attending. Rather, we should consider how we can educate and ensure students, faculty, and staff alike understand satisfaction may be short-lived, in the moment, or a time of instant gratification, where happiness may derive from the trials and tribulations of an educational or even life journey.

The consideration of both satisfaction and happiness is most important in creating students who successfully progress through their education in a timely manner. Forward thinking institutions will work to create a nurturing environment that supports students on their path to graduation and recognize graduates with a high level of satisfaction in their choice of institution and course of study equate to happy alumni. Further emphasizing the importance of happiness in education, Kale (1988) suggests that people are only able to experience the longevity happiness

offers when they are able to integrate it into their authentic selves, or see it as part of their daily lives.

Understanding that happiness is not just a temporary state and working to ensure that students are adjusted and progressing in a manner which suggests happiness may allow institutions to see higher levels of student satisfaction. Ensuring that faculty and staff are educated to that happiness in this sense means a general well-being will provide a basis for all to work from.

Additionally, the recognition that people have needs and desires that are fulfilled by resources and health reinforces the critical importance of happiness in student life (Kale, 1988). Noddings (2003) contended, “Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness” (p.1). While educators work to ensure a proper education, with deeper level critical thinking and mastery of subject matter; frustration or defeat should not be the goal to impart on students. Neither should happiness be seen as avoiding all displeasure and as a palliative cure to all problems (Roberts, 2013). As students progress through nursing school at CIC and other institutions, the rigor becomes increasingly challenging and student stress levels are often high. Frustrated students, it would seem, are less likely to be successful students who are able to find satisfaction in their education or career.

While not all students will be happy, working with students to create school/life balance and an understanding that the pursuit of higher education can be stressful and demanding. Students seeking satisfaction or happiness during this time need guidance to understand it is not impossible but will need to learn to prioritize and balance as they move throughout their lives.

Strategies for Supporting Student Retention, Attrition, and Progression

Tinto (2012) explained, “Involvement or, better yet, the quality of involvement also depends on the degree to which individuals see their involvement as relevant” (p. 69). If, as Tinto contends, colleges and universities are able to ensure retention through meaningful involvement in social and intellectual development of their students, reflecting on which actions were the most meaningful to the students and impactful in their retention, is critical to continued success.

While connection is, according to Tinto (2012), the most impactful factor in student retention, students may not, and often will not connect, to everyone and every group or service offered. What is important is not that students conform to the overall culture of the college or institution they are attending but are able to find connection in at least one community (Tinto, 2012). An upfront understanding of the type of culture the institution students are attending may be a powerful connection for recruitment and admissions teams to facilitate early in the process. Further investigation of this was conducted in the semi structured one-on-one interviews conducted as part of this action research project.

Kubec (2017) discusses the critical importance of maintaining student enrollment in nursing programs. Kubec shares “regardless of why students leave a nursing program, whether due to academic failure or another reason, they leave vacant slots that are difficult to fill, since nursing programs are typically rigidly structured and sequenced” (p.61). Ensuring students have a full understanding of their field of study, climate of the institution they are attending, and expectations inside and outside of their academic endeavors is critical to persistence and retention in nursing programs.

Many students are not considering academic supports available and their potential impact on their success once they begin nursing schools (McDonald, et al., 2018). Each school varies in

the types of support offered to students, which in turn can create different outcomes, as McDonald et al. discuss in the literature. The research site offers students opportunities for success inside the classroom, with many additional opportunities outside the classroom as well, including professional nurse tutoring, peer tutoring, and other opportunities to seek additional assistance.

Factors Leading to Completing College

Tinto (2012) shared that once colleges or universities have decided to admit a student they have “an obligation to do what it can to help students stay and graduate” (p.6). By turning the focus from the student to the institution, the actions and results become actionable, with potential funding and resources behind them. Ensuring student access to institutional resources to increase their chances of success will in turn result in higher satisfaction levels and better retention rates. Students have certain expectations of themselves and their own academic performance; when colleges and universities recognize this and provide clear academic expectations, students will understand what achievement means to their school. In this way, expectations clearly impact satisfaction and retention (Tinto, 2012).

Student Services

Tinto asserted that support is an important aspect in student retention. His grouping of support services, including financial, academic, emotional and social support, are all complex and vital to the success of students. Institutions actively recruiting and admitting first generation students have an obligation to understand these students’ unique needs to ensure that appropriate services are in place to meet these needs. Support provided during the first semester of college can ensure students succeed and establish a baseline for expectation of student (Tinto, 2012).

Tinto (2012) added, “Student retention is also influenced by the expectation the institution establishes for the quality or level of effort required for successful performance” (p. 12). Colleges and universities who address quality student support efforts up front encourage, for example, students’ use of academic success centers for tutoring, test taking skills, study skills, and time management assistance; provide access to mental health counseling services; and ensure that students have food security. Some colleges have created courses or other formal measures to ensure that students know what services are available to them and how to access them (Black, et al., 2016). Taking academic success one step further, it is not uncommon for institutions to offer summer and college bridge programs to provide students the opportunity to begin the semester with the best academic advantage (Tinto, 2012). It is unfortunate that institutions, like CIC, are constrained by financial aid limitations to what can be offered and ensuring the affordability of it for vulnerable students. It is likely programming such as this would be beneficial to many students at Central Illinois College.

Financial Aid

Another factor impacting student satisfaction is financial support. It is difficult to read an article without a mention of how financial aid and financial support are more critical than ever. As most people working in and around higher education are aware, college costs have grown 169% over the last four decades (Hess, 2021). Further, wages for workers aged 22 to 27 have only grown by 19% during the same time period. Given the fact that college will likely seem out of reach for many students considering their future and the possibility of pursuing a higher education, support in the form of financial programs, such as work study, financial need-based scholarships, and an understanding of the costs over the course of a student’s education, such as tuition and fees, textbooks, and room and board, are critical for retention.

Assessment and Feedback

Assessment and feedback from students, regarding factors leading to their retention, is important to measure and act upon expeditiously in an effort to provide flexible support and offers institutions a unique opportunity to pivot in a way institutions have not previously done. Tinto (2012) purports this is more critical during their first year of higher education. Regularly evaluating academic and student support programs, both inside and outside the classroom, in light of student feedback demonstrates a sense of commitment to student success.

Undergraduate student retention impacts the trajectory of students' lives. Understanding why attrition happens and what can be done guides institutions towards improved retention rates. Tinto provides many jumping off points for understanding this broad topic. The application of retention to nursing students in particular is a niche topic with less literature available to researchers. The connection between retention, attrition and progression as it applies to undergraduate nursing students is discussed in the next section.

Undergraduate Nursing Student Progression

A bounty of literature and research exists on retention, progression, and attrition at the undergraduate level; however, literature is scarce on the application of retention, progression, and attrition to nursing undergraduate programs. Students can follow several paths to becoming a nurse. For example, a student may pursue a nursing diploma, a licensed practical or vocational nurse certificate, an associate's degree in nursing, a bachelor of science degree in nursing, a second-degree Bachelor of Science in Nursing, or a master of science degree in nursing pre-licensure. At Central Illinois College, first-degree students are considered students who have not previously finished a Bachelor of Science or a Bachelor of Arts degree and are seeking to

complete their first undergraduate degree in nursing at the institution at the center of this research.

Nursing, as an undergraduate major, is in and of itself a demanding field of study. In most instances, students in four-year, undergraduate nursing programs are challenged with mastering material in liberal arts and sciences and then in the nursing curriculum itself (Black Thomas, 2022). Entry into undergraduate nursing programs is extremely intense and competitive. Students who gain entry are coming off of four-years of high school with varying levels of academic rigor to prepare them for entry into competitive nursing programs. Understanding the unique needs of the nursing major and most effective methods to support these students to ensure higher levels of retention is critical (Hall, 2004).

Nursing School Attrition

Attrition is problematic throughout higher education. “One-third of students who enter postsecondary education expecting to earn a degree leave without one” (Johnson, 2012, p. 1). This constitutes an overall survey of students, not specific to any one field of study. The cost, in many instances, may be burdensome, but in nursing it may have even further reaching implications. Unlike attrition in almost every other undergraduate field of study, attrition in nursing programs has a reverberating effect on the nurses entering the field. Elkins (2019) summarizes this, stating, “The problem of nursing student attrition for BSN nursing programs is that it affects the nursing students and faculty, the reputation of the nursing program, and the approval of the nursing program by state boards of nursing, as well as the national accrediting organizations” (p. 102). With this in mind and understanding that attrition in nursing schools is typically between 20% and 50%, finding solutions to meet the challenge of ensuring retention of nursing students is even more critical (Elkins, 2019). Further, nursing schools do not often allow

transfer students in from other majors due to the very strict order of the nursing curriculum. Once a student leaves a nursing program, for whatever reason, the seat is not able to be filled by a student wishing to transfer in. For students applying to direct admission nursing schools and programs, if they are not successful, there are limited options (Kubec, 2017).

A unique aspect of nursing schools, differentiating it from other undergraduate degree programs, includes the clinical experiences required of students. In addition to classes, nursing students are required to attend clinical sessions, usually at offsite hospital locations, for up 12 hours at a time (Betts et al., 2017). The practicum, or clinical hours, on top of didactic coursework, along with general education requirements, add a level of time commitment and stress for nursing majors that other undergraduate majors do not experience. Students report struggling with time management, varying degrees of family support, their inability to ask for help, and lack of faculty support all leading towards their attrition in nursing programs (Elkins, 2019, p.104-105). Understanding the rigors and challenges of nursing school is an important step to improvement of retention rates for students in nursing programs.

Undergraduate Nursing Admissions

Research has been conducted that correlates the success of students with their grades and achievements in nursing prerequisite coursework. This is particularly true for student scores in science classes (Kubec, 2017). Stankus and colleagues wrote:

To maximize the benefits of nursing education, we must ensure that the students who are accepted into nursing programs represent the populations they will serve and can successfully address the rigors of the required academic work needed for successful graduation (p.147).

The biggest takeaway from these studies seems to be that the better the student is prepared academically coming in to nursing school, the better they are likely to perform.

Understanding the special and specific circumstances around undergraduate nursing programs and how circumstances specific to nursing impact retention, progression and attrition is critical to further meaningful research, discussion and change in undergraduate nursing programs. Using this knowledge to inform recruitment and admissions process and procedures can provide nursing schools such as CIC the opportunity to challenge their students through the duration of their education with confidence they have admitted students who are committed to and will continue to be committed to completing their degree program at higher levels than are currently being achieved.

Researcher Synthesis of Ideas

The importance of student retention cannot be overstated in higher education. With students and families pouring more of their money and going deeper into debt to afford a college education, institutions have an obligation to provide them with every opportunity to progress through school and obtain their degree. With student recruitment more challenging than ever, Central Illinois College should leverage their unique advantages, including the highest NCLEX pass rates in their region. However, it is incumbent on the College to then follow through with the promises made to students and their families, as they enroll. At CIC, this includes maintaining small class and clinical sizes, providing access to mental health counseling, tutoring services, and the library. When colleges and universities recruit and admit students, the services those students need should be offered, as promised, by the institution. Based on the information provided in this literature review, I believe they will be able to improve best practices at the research site and improve outcomes for undergraduate nursing students.

Chapter Summary

After providing an overview of the study's research problem, this chapter reviewed the literature on student attrition, progression, and retention; student satisfaction in higher education; student satisfaction and student happiness; strategies for supporting student attrition, progression, and retention; factors leading to completing college; and undergraduate nursing student progression, with particular emphasis on the study's research site. Chapter Three will describe the study's research methodology and methods.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology and Methods

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to describe the overall educational satisfaction of Central Illinois College nursing students. The study was guided by three research questions: 1) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program? 2) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find least satisfying about their educational program? 3) How should the educational satisfaction of Central Illinois College nursing students inform future admission and retention efforts? This chapter describes the study's research methodology, research context, and research methods.

Research Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological, action research design to explore the phenomenon of educational satisfaction among nursing students. Qualitative research “involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Qualitative research, therefore, provided a tool for the researcher to explore students’ lives and educational satisfaction, with the opportunity to add nuance and detail to the study not available in other choices of methodology. Phenomenology further explores the meaning individuals make of their lives by studying the life experiences, in specific context, of several individuals for the ultimate purpose of deeply describing overarching experiences they share of the phenomena under study (Van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 2007). In this study, the interrelationships between progression through nursing school and overall satisfaction with college were explored using semi-structured, individual interviews. The study was classified as action research because the

study is conducted at the researcher's institution for purposes of analysis, and ultimately improvement in the educational experience offered to students at this institution (Mertler, 2020). Utilizing these tools in qualitative action research, this work sought to provide a road map to better understand the undergraduate nursing experience in order to improve future student experience.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2020) asserts “researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 13). With the emphasis of qualitative research on understanding individualized problems or problematic material, qualitative research is uniquely designed to allow researchers the flexibility to understand a particular problem on an intimate level. Mertler (2020) discusses the importance of understanding “that qualitative research approaches are directed only by research questions, whereas quantitative research approaches may be guided by either research questions or hypotheses” (p. 89). Using Mertler (2020) as a guide to outline the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, the research question is broad, holistic, and interpretive, the body of literature is limited, the research topic involves in-depth study, and the timeline for the study is relatively long, and demonstrates the appropriateness of choice for this study. It is my goal to achieve Mertler’s assertions for qualitative research in this study.

Creswell and Creswell (2020) further expound on characteristics of qualitative research including the setting where research takes place, sharing that “qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study” (p. 181). Also shared by Creswell and Creswell, are the importance of multiple forms of

data. This study included one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, as well as the review of college data on admissions practice, and the use of student services including tutoring and mental health services.

Action Research

To understand action research and its reflective process, the exploration of working definitions is necessary. Action research has been defined by many in the field for more than twenty years. Mertler (2020) states:

Action research is defined as any systemic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn (p. 5).

Herr and Anderson (2015) write:

Action research is inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken, and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions (p. 4-5).

Schmuck's (1997) definition of action research is simply "an attempt to study a real school situation with a view to improve the quality of actions and results within" (p. 28). Of the three definitions, Schmuck's definition of action research is one that resonates deeply with me because of the ability to quickly identify areas of improvement students might be able to experience within my office to create higher satisfaction and retention within our own student population.

As Mertler (2020) establishes the importance of action research, he shares:

[First,] action research deals with your problems, not someone else's. Second, action research is very timely; it can start now – or whenever you are ready – and provides immediate results. Third, action research provides educators with opportunities to better understand, and therefore improve, their educational practices. Fourth, as a process, action research can also promote the building of stronger relationships among colleagues with whom we work (p. 20).

Using action research for this project also provided for the study to be reflective.

Reflective research “allows the researcher to reflect on the research process as well as the findings, which seldom can be easily formulated as propositional knowledge” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 2). Taking this approach and action through a cycle which includes planning, acting to implement a plan, observing, and reflecting allow for immediate impact on an institution (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Qualitative action research allowed me to analyze interviews and make use of jottings – or “analytic sticky notes” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 86) – and margin notes as part of the reflection process. Jottings were used to create themes in the research. The first cycle of coding included broad themes of choices, length of time at institution, happiness, and services used. A number of themes were condensed into the main themes for this study. The main themes, as discussed in Chapter Four, include connection through student services, connection with faculty, peer relationships, change, and belonging.

Action research allows for the growth of the researcher throughout the research process, and through this growth, the researcher has the opportunity to improve their professional judgment and insight, which in turn can help to improve professional or work-related outcomes (Mertler, 2020). Reflection, or the ability to critically explore what you are doing, why you are doing it, and its effects, allows researchers to put their research into practice (Mertler, 2020;

Parsons & Brown, 2002). Understanding the importance of reflection differentiates action research from the more simplified act of problem identification. Reflection is what allows the researcher to act upon the problem, by systematically identifying it, studying it, and working to offer solutions to the problem. Using the outcomes of this research allowed me to analyze my job and my approach to it, taking into account the outcomes from semi-structured interviews conducted and consider alternative and new approaches to working with students.

Retention issues facing higher education institutions nationwide are critical and timely solutions are necessary to keep colleges and universities in business. Understanding problems at the institution at which I am employed created an imperative to improving my own job performance, as well as allowed me the opportunity to offer immediate, actionable solutions, and created a situation in which action research is uniquely opportunistic to provide benefits in the short term. Reflection provided an important tool to evaluate processes and procedures that could be improved and immediately make adjustments to offer improved student satisfaction.

Phenomenology

In addition to qualitative action research, the study utilized a phenomenological approach. In the words of Van Mannen (1990), “Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-thing what it is – and without which it could not be what it is” (p. 10). Phenomenological research allows participants to share their lived experiences around a phenomenon through their own lens or perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Understanding clearly the perceptions of others allows researchers to understand and articulate nuanced details of participants’ lived experiences that might otherwise be overlooked. Phenomenological information is often obtained through interviews with several individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Assimilating this participant

information into composite descriptions of participants' lived experiences around student satisfaction allows me a window in to what may contribute to their satisfaction and how it may be applied to Central Illinois College.

While phenomenology is most often a qualitative approach to research, researchers using this approach are interested in the value of the natural sciences as well as the human sciences as they seek to explain and understand the phenomenon they are studying. Englander (2012) explains:

In order for phenomenological research to achieve the same rigorous quality as natural scientific research, it is important that the research process be methodologically articulated in such a manner that data collection and data analysis are both seen part of a single, unified process with the same underlying theory of science (p. 16).

Understanding that this is not a quantitative study, but is still bound by scientific criteria is important to ensure the accuracy of the findings.

The phenomenological approach was developed as:

a frame of reference for studying human experiential and behavioral phenomena that would be both rigorous and non-reductionistic. The spirit of science would be respected but it would be implemented with methods and concepts different from the natural sciences because of the subject matter, human persons and relationships (Giorgi, 2012, p. 4).

Phenomenological studies focus on the phenomenon as the "object of the investigation, not the person, although obviously, a person is required to describe the phenomenon" (Englander, 2012, p. 23). Using the interviewees to understand the phenomenon allows the researcher the opportunity to become familiar with the focus of the study through the lens of these first-hand

experiences, and as such, the participants and their selection become critical to the study. This is discussed later in this chapter in more detail.

The success of phenomenological research is predicated on the researcher's ability to establish clear goals and objectives at the beginning of the study (Cypress, 2018). Further, it is necessary to employ bracketing, a tool in phenomenological inquiry requiring the researcher to deliberately put aside one's own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what the researcher suspects or does actually know about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Chan et al., 2013). Bracketing helps to ensure the trustworthiness of the study's findings. Cypress (2018) explains, "If your data collection and analysis are based on personal desires without careful assessment of the implications of the latter for your methods and conclusions, you are in danger of creating a flawed or biased study" (p. 302). Bracketing also deepens the researcher's understanding of participants' lived experiences. According to Patton, instead of focusing on the subject matter, it is important for the researcher to "experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves" (2002, p. 106) in undertaking this type of action research.

According to phenomenological tradition, the essence of the phenomenon, which is based on the lived experiences of all research participants, is distilled into an overall, composite description that is used to report the study's findings and answer a study's research questions (Moustakas, 1994). Patton (2002) explains that a phenomenon "... may be an emotion – loneliness, jealousy, anger. The phenomenon may be a relationship, a marriage, or a job. The phenomenon may be a program, an organization, or a culture" (p. 104-105). Using Patton's framework of emotion, relationship, and program on the phenomena explored in the current study included the emotion of satisfaction, their relationships with others, including faculty, staff,

and students, at CIC, and the phenomenon of their program of study, nursing, at Central Illinois College.

Research Context

Research Setting

A small, midwestern, private, not-for-profit nursing college formed the research setting for this study. The pseudonym Central Illinois College was used to maintain the confidentiality of both the research setting and the research participants. The college, which had an enrollment of approximately 550 students at the time of the study, offers bachelor's degrees in Social Work, Health Sciences, and Nursing. Master's degrees are offered in Nursing, Nursing Education, and Nursing Leadership. Certificate programs are offered for Nursing Assistant and Medical Assistant programs. Nursing students comprise approximately 85% of the institution.

Because of my relationship with Central Illinois College, and the health sciences focus of the institution, the site offered a unique opportunity to explore nursing students during their educational lived experience in a way a traditional, four-year university might not. For example, Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain, "The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions" (p. 185). Conducting the study at Central Illinois College allowed for both the ability to understand nursing students, as outlined above, and for the researcher to recruit the most appropriate research participants for the study.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

During the fall 2023 semester, all Central Illinois College nursing students in their final semester were sent an email by the primary researcher of this project during their first weeks of their final clinical course. All nursing students in their final semester are required to enroll in an

internship course as their final clinical experience. In total during the fall 2023 semester, there were 41 students enrolled in this course. The professor of the course, a full-time nursing professor, encouraged all 41 students to consider participating in this study. She described participation as an opportunity for students to have their voices heard and provide feedback that will be valuable as the college continually works to improve student education and experiences. It was not required for students to participate, nor did the professor know which students elected to participate in the research project. Students received no course credit, nor were there any detrimental impacts for participating or not participating.

Initially five students responded to the invitation to participate in this study. Due to their schedules, two of the students were unable to participate. In the spring 2023 semester, three students approached me, as they heard the study was seeking additional participants. One student was placed on the waitlist and deemed not eligible to participate in the study because they were a student in the second-degree Bachelor of Science in nursing program. The CUSHR proposal submitted to Bradley University, and the Institutional Review Board proposal submitted to Central Illinois College, specified that students would be sought from the undergraduate prelicensure program. This student did not technically fit the criteria of the proposals and potentially would bring different lived experiences to the interview that were beyond the scope of this study.

Background Information

During the participating students' time at Central Illinois College, nursing curriculum has changed, as a new curriculum was developed and launched in the spring semester of 2022 to better align with the changes the NCLEX announced. The goal of the new curriculum was to ensure strong academic NCLEX preparation for nursing students. These students also

experienced the change in leadership of at least two Chancellors and two Deans of Nursing. Frequent turnover in leadership at Central Illinois College has been a cause for concern for some students; many have strong feelings about changes at the college and this provided an opportunity to share their experiences with someone from within the institution who wanted to learn from their experiences. Because “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9), allowing these students to share their experiences allowed for a deeper understanding of what the college is doing well from those who have experienced this first hand.

It was my goal, as the primary researcher, to recruit at least five students who would agree to participate in a one-on-one interviews to further understand what drew them to Central Illinois College, if they experienced any regret in their decision to attend the College or to pursue a nursing degree, and how they felt as they neared completion of their degree. Five students agreed to participate in the study. While five participants was not a large number, it did represent over 10% of the Central Illinois College graduating class of undergraduate prelicensure nursing students, and provided me – the study’s sole researcher - with a manageable amount of qualitative data to process and analyze.

Participants

Understanding the differences and similarities of nursing students and traditional undergraduate students forms an important aspect of the study. Demographic data was explored to determine differences in satisfaction levels of traditional versus non-traditional nursing students. Traditional students are typically defined as students between the ages of 18 and 24 years old; non-traditional students are those students who are 25 and older (Jesnek, 2012). Jesnek (2012) further elaborates that non-traditional students may include first generation college

students, displaced employees, those seeking a career change, or returning students. As part of the research, traditional and non-traditional students were interviewed to form an overall sense of the student body at Central Illinois College. It was my hope that students of a variety of backgrounds, races, and ethnicities participate in the study, as well as traditional and nontraditional students. The students who participated in this study included four students who first attended at least one other institution and transferred into the nursing program. One student chose to attend the college specifically because they were able to complete all four years at one institution. Table 1 illustrates the student demographics of those nursing students who participated in this study.

Table 1

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Traditional Student	Transfer Student
Amelia	Yes	Yes
Bridget	No	Yes
Christie	No	Yes
Eleanor	Yes	Yes
Fiona	No	No

The five nursing students selected for participation in the study were admitted to Central Illinois College under inclusive admissions' policies, where the minimum grade point average to gain admission was 2.0 and ACT/SAT scores were not necessary if they had completed at least 30 hours of college credit. While four of the five students transferred into the College, they all had spent no less than six semesters studying at Central Illinois College, providing ample time to have the full experience to provide relevant information for this research.

Englander (2012) suggests that researchers need to consider “what representativeness means for the qualitative, phenomenological perspective, similar to other, traditional evaluative

criteria such as, for instance, validity and reliability (p. 18). Therefore, finding participants who would provide information based on their lived experiences as final semester nursing students in a forthcoming and truthful manner was most important. Englander supports this strategy by sharing “hence, when it comes to selecting the subjects for the phenomenological research, the question that the researcher has to ask themselves is: *Do you have the experience I am looking for?*” (p. 19). The participants who volunteered for this study were deemed qualified by the aforementioned criteria. The number of semesters they have studied at the research institution, the courses they have taken, and the services utilized that were available to them, create an experience the researcher is interested in understanding through phenomenological, semi-structured interviews.

Researcher Positionality

“Appreciation of the students’ experiences, first-hand and without predisposition to their points of view, allow for the research to be conducted without preconception or a point of view that prevents the participants from sharing their own stories in their own words” (Denzin, 1978, p. 10). Listening to research subjects and understanding what they are saying, not what the researcher hopes they will say, or believes they mean, is vital to the trustworthiness of the data collection, data analysis, and the results of the study. In order to avoid preconceived ideas of participants’ feedback, clear research design is critical to the success of the study. Patton emphasizes “the first step in a research process is getting clear about the purpose” (2002, p. 213).

In the fall of 2023, I transitioned from serving as Recruitment Coordinator to Director of Academic Advising. As research evolved in this action research project, I worked to maintain a twofold obligation; to remain objective to the needs of the College, while listening to student feedback without assumption of what they may mean. Holmes (2020) explains, “The term

positionality both describes an individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context" (p. 1). Positionality influences all aspects of research, from how it is undertaken to the outcomes and presentation of results (Holmes, 2020, p. 2). Objectivity in these circumstances may be difficult, but in the case of dissecting the information presented to the researcher by students, the importance of eliminating bias based on age, race, nationality, political views and other such aspects is critical to avoid. Understanding it is possible to avoid is cause for self-reflection for the primary researcher, as positionality "may predispose someone towards a particular point or point of view, however, that does not mean that these necessarily automatically lead to particular views or perspectives" (p. 2).

The recognition of research positionality is important in understanding the impact this may have on all aspects and stages of research. "Open and honest disclosure and exposition of positionality should show where and how the researcher believes that they have, or may have, influenced their research" (Holmes, 2020, p. 3). In the instance of this study, I have reflected on the admission process, retention of students and how I view college admissions and support experiences, including the experiences of first-generation students, students who need extra support, and non-traditional students. I believe I hold assumptions and preconceived ideas that include CIC should offer more support to students overall, and specifically targeted support to students who may need extra assistance. I further believe the admissions process could be more robust and ensure students have more awareness of the program of which they are enrolling. Understanding my own bias and judgement will help inform this study, and ultimately create a stronger study with more robust results.

Research Methods

Data Collection

Data collection began at the start of the fall semester in September 2022 with an email sent to students in their final clinical course. Following the email, the researcher visited the class and gave a short overview on the study and why student participation was important. Instructions for those interested in participating were shared with students. These instructions included emailing the researcher to express interest in participating in the study.

For the purpose of this action research project, the interviews were conducted by this researcher. The interviews were conducted during the fall semester of 2022 and spring semester of 2023. Three of the interviews were conducted in the fall semester of 2022; two students were interviewed in May, 2023, which concluded this portion of the study.

Accurate data collection is imperative to the success of any qualitative research study. Defining data collection informs the method or methods used and the understanding of the activities to happen throughout this portion of the research. “Data collection is a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering information to answer emerging research questions” (Cypress, 2018, p. 303). Creswell and Creswell (2018) further encourage researchers to include “data collection types that go beyond typical observations and interviews. These unusual forms create reader interest in a proposal and can capture useful information that observations and interviews may miss” (p. 187). Use of interviews as a method of data collection was primary in this study, but my unique interactions, as a member of the staff at this college, serving as Director of Academic Advising, with students allowed for additional impressions based on my observations that were documented as I reviewed notes and made jottings as part of the data analysis. As part of the data collection design, as discussed in the subsequent section, using language that conveys the exploratory nature of the study and its emerging design were important to me in the context of qualitative action research, using a phenomenological design

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As Creswell and Creswell illustrate, the use of language that is exploratory assists in the design and development of the study, including words such as “affect, influence, impact, determine, cause, and relate” (p. 135). Using such words in my interview questions, jottings, and margin notes allowed for more constructive, open-ended conversation, and provided the opportunity for me to explore the first-hand experiences of the subjects and their shared experiences.

When does data collection end and where does data analysis begin? As Patton (2002) reminds us, “the fluid and emergent nature of naturalistic inquiry makes the distinction between data gathering and analysis far less absolute” (p. 436). Patton further expands that the gathering of field notes during the data collection indicates the beginning of a qualitative data analysis. Therefore, in the findings presented in this action research project, data analysis began in May 2023, in the last few weeks of data collection.

As data collection concluded, more formal data analysis began, including detailed fieldnotes, case study creation, and coding of data (Mertler, 2020; Patton, 2002). The unraveling of data and the use of both descriptive and interpretative validity, defined by Mertler (2020) as factual accuracy of accounts and interpretations of participants’ behavior, words, and actions began.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Critical to the success of conducting interviews, are the participants in the process, and the perception of the information they provide. Cypress wrote:

Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumptions that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. A major advantage of interviews is that it permits the respondent to move back and forth in time to reconstruct the past,

interpret the present, and predict the future. Interviews are likely to provide a more complete and in-depth picture than other forms of inquiry (p. 304).

The semi-structured nature of the interview lends itself to thoughtful and insightful answers to questions and flows to additional prompts allowing a full picture of the situation through the interviewees' perspective.

Using a phenomenological approach to action research, this researcher determined that one-on-one interviews with each participant would best facilitate the information needed for data analysis and to further the research in the area of nursing student satisfaction.

“Phenomenological interviewing involves an informal interactive process that aims elicit a personal comprehensive description of a lived experience of a phenomenon” (Cypress, 2018, p. 304). Utilizing a more informal approach to understand student experience allows for a flexibility that quantitative research, or other forms, such as surveys, wouldn't permit. Cypress explains that using semi-structured interviews allows researchers to gather others experiences as a way of feeling the experience themselves.

Semi-structured interviews, in the context of this study, allowed me to explore the experiences of the participants through the lens of their perception of nursing school. Exploring their satisfaction at different points of their experience provided insight into their perception of the services Central Illinois College offers (because they believe they are important to student success and retention), while simultaneously allowing for the exploration of the academic rigor of the program and the preparedness of the student for the rigor, as perceived by the participants.

The interviews conducted involved face-to-face interviews with each participant. The researcher took detailed notes, but did not audio- or video- record the interviews out of respect for the privacy of the students. Students expressed the importance of confidentiality, and this

measure allowed them further reassurance that their identities would be kept private and confidential.

During the interviews, students seemed relieved to talk to me about their experience and what constituted the good and the bad during their time at Central Illinois College. While the eight questions found in Appendix C were asked of each student, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to expand upon the students' responses to try to complete the full lived experience of each student. Asking the students open-ended questions allowed for them to tell a more complete story and infuse their answers with details they thought were pertinent to the question or topic at hand.

Finally, the primary reason for the choice of semi-structured interviews with the students previously mentioned, was the ability to gather information in an open-ended fashion, allowing the researcher the ability to fully understand students' points of view without "predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories" (Patton, 2002, p. 21). By utilizing open-ended questions with opportunities for the interviewees to reflect and fully answer, it is the hope that this research fully explore the experiences of students during their semi-structured interviews.

The development of strategic questions supporting the study's research questions was the primary strategy used in the development of the interview questions for this study. The interview questions used in this study, as illustrated in Appendix C, include why the participants selected Central Illinois College, whether the College was their first choice, how many semesters they have studied at the College, asked them to identify any time, reflectively, they felt unhappy in their choice of school or career, if they were happy with their choice now, what services (such as counseling or tutoring) they utilized, how their non-nursing peers related to their college

experience, and any other items they might want to share. Limiting the primary questions to seven allowed for focusing the study while simultaneously leaving the interview questioning open for conversation and exploration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the study took place from May, 2023 to January, 2024. Understanding what the data gathered translated into was a critical job of proper data analysis. Patton explains, “Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Directions can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when – and if arrived at” (p. 432). Accepting the directions, making sound choices in research methodology, and design and execution allowed for data analysis transformation into useful and reliable findings.

Ensuring the trustworthiness of data analysis was of critical importance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertler, 2020; Patton, 2002). As Mertler (2020) reminds us: “Research is often used to develop theories that eventually help determine best practices in education” (p. 21). Data analysis for this study included reviewing participants’ answers several times to ensure a complete understanding of what each student shared. The data was then reviewed and margin notes were made to reflect points of interest and initial coding. First round codes included choices, length of time at institution, happiness, and services used. From this, additional notes were taken and themes were narrowed down or eliminated based on research and participant feedback and trends. Once this was completed and reviewed, the themes for this study were determined.

Strategies/Procedures

During data analysis, the role of the researcher is to dig into the data to detect trends and issues, to tell the story of the data in a meaningful manner, but not to embellish the story or make the story theirs or about them, ultimately completing a composite description, of, in the instance of this research, educational satisfaction. The first step in ensuring these tasks were met with rigor is identifying the researcher's own implicit bias and its potential impact on the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), known in phenomenological research as bracketing (Chan et al., 2013). Because of the length of the data collection process and the personal nature of it, as the primary researcher, I kept my role as Director of Academic Advising and as a doctoral student in higher education and leadership front of mind throughout the process. I made use of bracketing to suspend my judgement and preconceived ideas about what I assumed made students successful in the nursing program and led to student satisfaction, and through the nature of semi-structured interviews sought to listen to students tell their unique story to learn what they shared about their educational satisfaction, if in fact they were satisfied.

As I began the data analysis process, the data was first analyzed in terms of the research questions. The initial attempt of this involved setting aside all data that did not directly relate to one of the study's research questions. Many of the questions asked were able to be broken down to simple yes or no responses. Creswell and Creswell (2018) refer to this as a winnowing of the data: "Because text and image data are so dense and rich, all of the information cannot be used in a qualitative study. Thus, in the analysis of the data, researchers need to winnow the data, a process of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it" p. 192). The winnowing process was conducted carefully, with the intent of telling participants' complete story regarding their satisfaction with Central Illinois College and their satisfaction of studying nursing, and bracketing of my own bias forefront at the front of mind, as the data is narrowed in

scope to meet the needs of the study. Patton urges qualitative researchers to do their best to “fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (2002, p. 433). Using processes to identify characteristics, habits, trends, and patterns assisted me in culling out unnecessary information to the study and assisted in the matter at hand.

In order to achieve meaningful information from the interviews, data coding was utilized in this study. Data coding, according to Mertler (2020), provides the researcher the ability to reduce narrative data in a categorical manner. Coding “is used to group data that provide similar types of information” (p. 174). Creswell and Creswell (2018) further elaborate on data coding as “the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks (or text or image segments) and writing a word representing a category in the margins” (p.193). Using coding, the researcher reads, re-reads, reflects, and discovers trends in the data that were broken down into themes that were coded to assist in further data analysis.

In the instance of data collection in this study, data was initially analyzed and coded with broad codes that included choices, length of time at institution, happiness, and services used. From this point, the codes were narrowed in focus and themes were eliminated. The remaining themes are presented in Chapter Four, and include an overarching theme of connection which presented itself in three areas. The first area connection was present was connection through student services utilized. The second area connection was present was through student connect with faculty. The final area connection was present was through peer relationships formed inside and outside the College. The final themes represent my perception of the participants’ lived experiences. These provided invaluable assistance in creating a composite description of the overall student experience and aided in the identification of the findings of this research.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the study's research methodology, research context, and research methods. Understanding and properly deploying the methodology, context, and methods allowed the study to move forward with proper data analysis and confidence in the results to accurately illustrate the appropriate action to move forward with actionable solutions to improve the processes at the research institution. Chapter Four will report and discuss the study's findings.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to determine how students at Central Illinois College (CIC) became students at the college, the services they used as students, and their satisfaction with the educational institution as they prepared to graduate. Three research questions guided the study: 1) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program? 2) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find least satisfying about their educational program? 3) How can student satisfaction of Central Illinois College nursing students inform future recruitment, admissions, and retention efforts? This chapter reports and discusses the study's findings, establishes connections between the findings and the current literature on the subject of student satisfaction, and answers the study's three research questions.

Findings

The crux of the study's research questions was to determine the satisfaction of Central Illinois College students to inform how feedback participants in this research project provided can lead to continued or new institutional best practices at CIC and similar institutions. Tinto (1993) writes extensively on students' abilities to "locate at least one community in which to find membership and the support membership provides" as a means to capture the students' retention (p. 105). In order to understand these findings, an overview of the student participants is found in Table 2.

Table 2*Student Participant Overview*

Pseudonym	Traditional Student	Attending 1st Choice College	Ever unhappy with college choice/Happy now	Ever unhappy with career choice/Happy now
Amelia	Yes	Yes	No/Yes	No/Yes
Bridget	No	Yes	No/Yes	No/Yes
Christie	No	No	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes
Eleanor	Yes	No	No/Yes	No/Yes
Fiona	No	Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes

Amelia*College and Career Choice*

A traditional college student, Amelia came to Central Illinois College with some transfer credits from another field. She did not mention having children or a spouse in her interview. The location being close to her residence, CIC's academic rigor, and other nursing programs not recommended led Amelia to CIC. Her choice was influenced by alumni of similar programs actively encouraging her not to choose their alma mater. In addition, she was impressed by the high National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) pass rates achieved by Central Illinois College. She transferred to CIC as her first choice in nursing programs and shared she has never regretted her decision. "The staff are friendly and professors are accommodating and responsive." She elaborates "clinical professors are a great support, educational and emotional support. Career support when I worked on the floors was great." The impact of small clinical

sizes also positively impacted Amelia's educational experience and satisfaction with her college and career choice.

College Services Utilized

Amelia used the services within the tutoring center throughout her education. These include student tutoring, professional tutoring, and tutoring by the nurse education coordinator. She chose not to elaborate much on these services, but focused more on other aspects of her educational experience as discussed in belonging, below.

Peer Relatability

Amelia did report she does not feel that her peers in non-nursing fields of study were able to relate to her experience in nursing school. As with many nursing programs, the grading scale at CIC require students to receive a 77% testing average in nursing courses, as well as an overall passing course grade of 77% as a minimum threshold for receiving a passing grade. This creates a unique academic challenge for many nursing students.

Belonging

A sense of belonging seems to have been achieved by Amelia more through connections with faculty and staff, than through a direct emphasis on the services she utilized. She specifically mentioned a relationship with the director of the simulation center, Julie. She mentioned she felt comfortable seeking her guidance and feeling no judgement from Julie. Further, she discusses the support she received from her clinical professors. Their ability to provide educational, emotional, and career support helped her better understand how to be an effective nurse. "Because clinicals are so small, I am able to receive more attention. Professors offer guidance on where to pursue a career post-graduation." This experience has provided the

opportunity for the health system hosting clinicals to gain a new employee, an important focus the health system shares with CIC on a regular basis.

Bridget

College and Career Choice

Bridget transferred from a community college where she obtained both an Associate Degree in Science and an Associate Degree in General Education. As a non-traditional student, Bridget had spent seven years working as a Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) when she arrived at CIC. Bridget did not mention children or a spouse during her interview. She did consider attending a local community college to pursue an Associate's Degree in Nursing (ADN) and then transferring to complete her Bachelor of Science in Nursing. She indicated this option was strongly considered because of her concern of the burden of student loan debt; however, she further elaborated she did not gain admission to the ADN program she planned to attend. She researched nursing schools and noticed a trend of hearing good things about CIC from nurses working at a competing healthcare system. Further, a friend of her mom's encouraged her to explore CIC.

College Services Utilized

During the seven semesters Bridget spent at CIC, she did not take advantage of student services until her final semester. She shared she met with the nurse education coordinator, Marta, after her academic performance early in the semester did not meet her expectations. She elaborated they "reviewed and dissected questions and test taking strategies, which has helped and I would return for help." Bridget also used the writing center for review of her papers and found this service to be helpful to her success in her coursework.

Peer Relatability

Bridget shared her friends in other fields of study do not relate to her experience in nursing school. She mentioned a friend in dietetics, and felt her friend had a much easier field of study. She did consider she might have been biased in this regard. She further elaborated friends from other colleges appeared to have a lack of support from their schools, with some needing anti-depressants and suffering from the lack of support they felt. She contrasted this to her own experience of feeling supported, as discussed below.

Belonging

Bridget shared she “never felt unhappy. Everyone is very ethical. I feel supported here.” She continued that she “never feels wrong. Everyone tries to help you succeed.” This may be most magnified for Bridget through her experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that CIC offered arts and sciences courses, as well as nursing courses, provided an outlet for students during a difficult time. She shared “this was one of the only things I looked forward to.” Taking courses in humanities, literature, and fine arts allowed her to further expand her world view. These courses were designed around being a caregiver. Coming from a small, rural community, Bridget said “this allowed me to be aware of other people and how they might be feeling.”

It was surprising to hear a student gain a sense of belonging from failing a class, but Bridget mentions this not as a negative aspect of her education, but one that reshaped her and, ultimately, had a positive impact on education and experience at CIC. During her third semester of clinical coursework, Bridget was enrolled in a half-semester pediatric course and was not successful in completing the class. “I previously saw going to a teacher as weak. Lara changed this view. She changed how I viewed being a student.” For her second time in the class, she

specifically requested Lara. She learned to seek out assistance from her professors and as a result felt a strong sense of support from the faculty at CIC.

Christie

College and Career Choice

As a non-traditional student, Christie balanced the rigors of nursing school with a spouse and several children to care for and manage as well. Her first choice was a community college, after which she planned to attend another, local, institution with an emphasis on nursing education. When she visited this school, she felt the staff “wasn’t very personable, where CIC wanted to help, {the competing school} seemed very irritated with me.” She maintains that when she attended clinicals at the healthcare system associated with the competing institution, her initial impressions held up. She further explained how off-putting this was, as the “atmosphere you are in sets up your entire day.” This led her to reconsider her choice and enroll at CIC.

While reflecting her satisfaction with a school that was not initially her first-choice college, she shared “everybody has those moments” {of contemplation or regret}. She continued, sharing the changes in her personal situation during her time in nursing school, marrying and having children. She concluded with an answer to the question regarding her happiness with her school choice now by answering “yes, ultimately yes. Every college has things to improve upon, but teachers here want to help you.”

College Services Utilized

Christie utilized nurse education coordinator tutoring sessions, where she discussed how Lara was able to “talk it through” and help her understand the application and how it related. “She changed it all and I can connect the dots.” She was able to transform her notes into useful study guides after these sessions and felt she became a stronger student as a result. Further

conversation led Christie to share her dissatisfaction with several aspects of her experience.

While the prior students seemed reluctant to share any points of dissatisfaction; Christie did not hold back! She critiqued the fees assessed to students, mentioning the graduation fee and testing fees (from software packages such as Coursepoint) as sources of frustration. As a member of the first graduating class that were required to pass a predictor test for the NCLEX (referred to as the green light) in order to receive permission to sit for the NCLEX, she experienced frustration with the new policy. She also mentioned her perception of a reliance on PowerPoint presentations in lecture, sharing she would prefer more hands-on learning. She indicated she felt a further need to have more emphasis on EPIC (a patient charting system) as part of her education.

Peer Relatability

Initially, Christie shared she did not have any non-nursing peers to determine how they might relate to her experience as a nursing student. Upon further reflection, she shared a friend studying psychology who was able to complete her homework faster. Other friends studying social work “are able to help. Psychology is interesting. When {a patient} broke my glasses and threw me down, they {friends} help. Honestly, this is the hardest thing I will probably do in my life.”

Belonging

For Christie, a sense of belonging was provided by her instructors. “Teachers are stupendous. They have good character and values.” Additional connection was developed with the nurse education coordinator, as well as her fellow students. “Some students are so smart.” She also referred to her classmates and herself as “the underdogs.” Again, Christie emphasized

the impact COVID-19 had on her educational experience, sharing “we are the class that failed and got back up, especially because of COVID-19.”

Eleanor

College and Career Choice

A traditional undergraduate student, Eleanor came to CIC as her second choice of college. She previously hoped to attend a nursing school nearer her hometown in Central Illinois, but was not accepted as they required all lower-level general education pre-requisites to be completed prior to admission. As she was missing an introductory philosophy course, she was not accepted to the college. She shared that she initially thought she would pursue an Associate Degree in Nursing, not her Bachelor of Science in Nursing. She chose CIC from an existing student referral and also mentioned the lower entrance requirements at the time of her admission for choice. She has no regrets in her choice of school or career and shares faculty desire and eagerness to help students and their interest in their students as primary factors in this.

College Services Utilized

Eleanor took advantage of the services offered in the tutoring center during her time at CIC. She also mentioned the helpfulness of supplemental instruction (SI), specifically during her first experience in a medical-surgical clinical. She did not elaborate on the services used. This will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

Peer Relatability

While many of her peers did not relate to her experiences in nursing school, she shares her friends in physical therapy programs were able to relate. Otherwise, she shared “there isn’t free time to do stuff” and her friends, particularly those that were “education majors don’t get it.”

While her peers did not relate, Eleanor built a broad base of support through her peers at the college.

Belonging

During her final year at CIC, Eleanor served as an officer of the Student Government Team, where she built strong ties with the Student Nursing Association and their leadership team. Eleanor was able to build consensus and drive fundraising to host the first formal dinner and dance in recent history for the student body. She also felt strong support in her education from her faculty. “Instructors have made an impact. They support and have an interest in student success.”

While Eleanor enjoyed a strong network of support, she did voice dissatisfaction with aspects of the college and her education. She shared it has been beneficial to have “more activities and more student interaction. The result of this was less negativity.” Her experience of negativity comes from a curriculum change that occurred during her time at the college, her perception of instructors’ lack of consistency across the board; and “overall programmatic changes.”

Fiona

College and Career Choice

Fiona, a non-traditional student, chose CIC as her first-choice school to study nursing. She further shared she wanted to attend for all four years of her college education. Each of the other participants transferred in coursework from other institutions. The primary reasons she chose CIC were the ability to complete all of her college credits at the college, and she had been told “everyone who applies gets in.” Of mention, admission criteria were strengthened during her time at the college.

Fiona indicated she has questioned both her career and school choice. She concluded our interview sharing she was happy with her choices now. Her frustrations are shared below.

College Services Utilized

In her first few semesters, Fiona relied on supplemental instruction (SI) to improve her academic performance. She also shared she took advantage of tutoring services and the writing center. Her discussion of services utilized was brief. She did have considerable information to share on her overall experiences, detailed below.

Peer Relatability

Fiona shared her sister went to a large university and had different experiences. Her overall perception of this question seemed to lean away from the actual academics but towards a more holistic view of the collegiate experience. She voiced difficulty in relating to her peers, as well as her faculty due to the small nature of the college. Her experience led her to conclude the small environment created a sense of favoritism between certain faculty and students, leaving other students (herself included) feeling left out.

Fiona received a code of conduct referral from a professor during one of her semesters as a student at CIC. The professor was not actually her professor, but included her in the code of conduct; she felt she was included, or targeted, because of the group of students she was associated with. Her general sense of this code of conduct violation was not that she or her friends did anything wrong, but that the entire incident would have been avoided if she were at a larger institution.

Belonging

Overall, the sense of belonging felt by Fiona was overshadowed by her preoccupation with the aforementioned code of conduct violation. She shared “it felt like the college sucked the

life out of me and I didn't want to talk to anyone." Fiona continued that "everyone knew all my business" which created a sense of turmoil for her.

Fiona also discussed all of the changes that have occurred at the college during her time there. Changes included leadership turnover more than once, a new curriculum instituted in the nursing program, and new ownership of the college. She did reflect the changes to the nursing program would likely help future classes of nurses and were "overall good. The positives outweigh the negatives." Other positives she was able to reflect on included the amount of clinical time built into the curriculum. She further appreciated the faculty following her through each semester. "They care about student success." This brought her back to her happiness with her choice of career and college, where she concluded at the end of our interview that she was ultimately happy with both choices.

Discussion

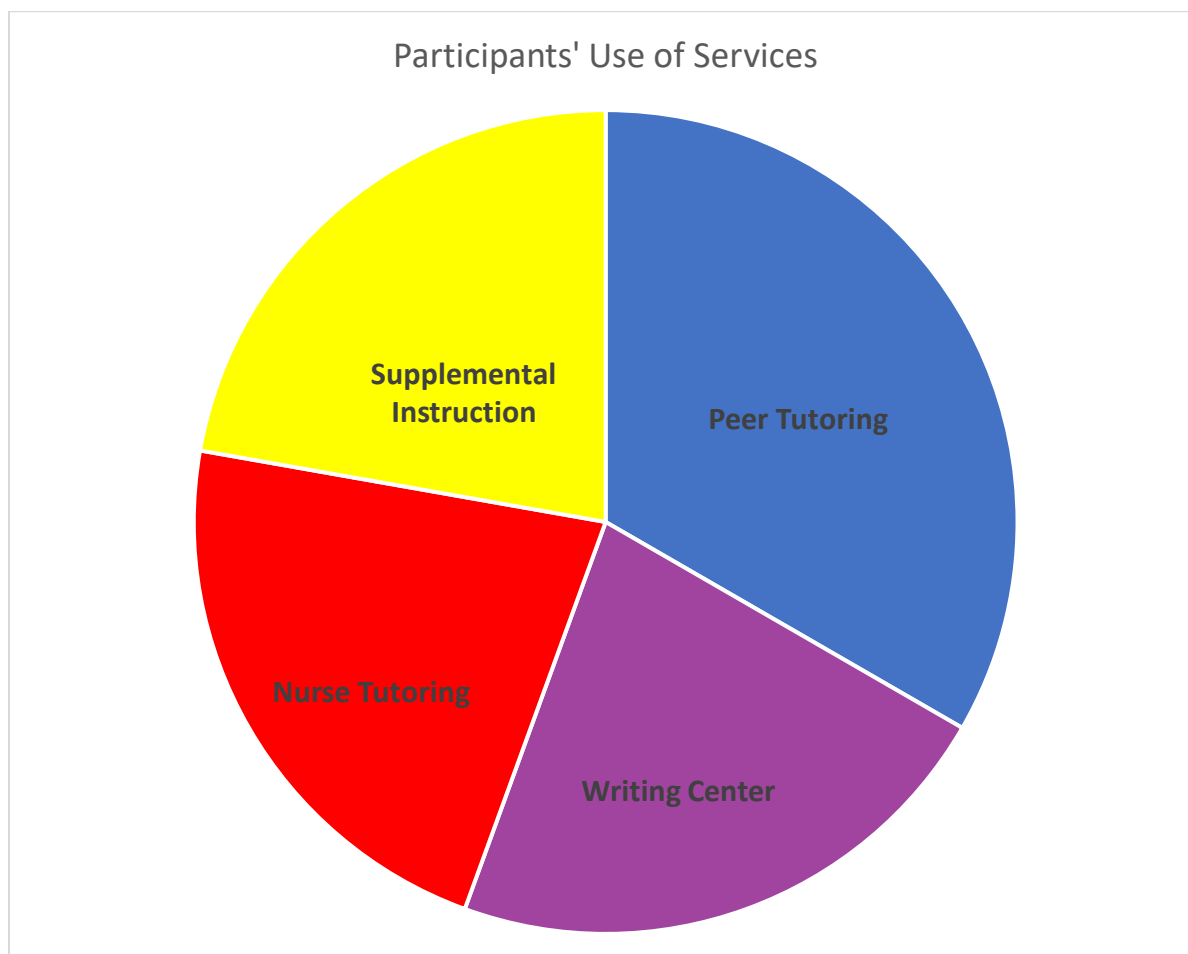
As I analyzed the data from each of the interviews and reflected on the attitudes of each participant throughout our conversations, several themes began to emerge. The overarching theme that emerged was the connection or connections students were able to form while they studied at CIC. This theme presented itself in three areas. The first was the connection they forged through their use of different services available at the college. The connection the students made with their instructors and faculty at the college was the second theme to emerge. Student ability to find relationships with their peers who understood what they were going through was a third theme that emerged. Finally, the amount of change students felt, and how they perceived it to impact their education, emerged as an important theme in this research. The themes that impacted each of the student participants is illustrated in Table 3 by my perception of its impact on each students' experience rated low, medium, or high.

Table 3*Emerging Theme Impact on Experience by Participant*

Name	Connection through Student Services/Lack of Connection	Connection/Lack of Connection with faculty	Peer Relationships/Lack of Relationships	Change	Belonging
Amelia	Medium	High/Connection	Low/Lack of Relationships	Medium	Medium
Bridget	Medium	High/Connection	Medium/Relationships	High	High
Christie	High/Connection	Low/Lack of Connection	Medium/Relationships	High	Low
Eleanor	Low/Lack of Connection	Medium/Connection	High/Relationships	Low	High
Fiona	Low/Lack of Connection	High/Lack of Connection	Low/Lack of Relationships	High	Low

Connection through Student Services

Figure 1 illustrates the services used by the students in this study.

Figure 1*Services Used by Students*

Peer tutoring was utilized by three of the five participants in this study. This includes appointments, and dropping in to the tutoring center for assistance with any range of subjects taught at the college by peers who have had training in tutoring and work under the direction of the nurse education coordinator.

Two students reported using the writing center. The writing center is staffed primarily by students for the purposes of reviewing and providing feedback on papers for their peers. Again, these students are supervised by the nurse education coordinator.

Supplemental instruction was used by two of the students. This service is also provided by peer tutors, offering specific breakout sessions for certain courses. The students hired to offer supplemental instruction have successfully completed the course in which they are the SI leader, and attend lectures again, as well as offer breakout sessions, in the semester they are employed.

Finally, two of the five students utilized tutoring provided by our professional nurse education coordinator. This tutoring is provided by the nursing education coordinator who holds a BSN, or higher, level of education credentialing and has worked as a nurse. This service was disrupted during these students' time at the college, as one tutor left and there was a gap in hiring another coordinator which could be associated with a lower number of students reporting use of this service than I anticipated. The students that did report use of this service shared enthusiastic praise for their experiences. Bridget and Christie both had experiences with nurse tutoring and both had connection with student services; Christie had the highest impact in this area of connection.

While none of the students in this study utilized all areas of services offered, they all used some form of service or services. The nurse education coordinator seemed to have the most direct impact on students, but many students also turn to tutoring services for guidance and tutoring had an impact on their educational experience.

Connection with Faculty

Amelia and Bridget had high levels of connection with faculty. Each specifically mentioned faculty that had a positive impact on their education. Amelia connected with Julie, the director of the simulation center, and Bridget connected with her professor in a pediatric nursing course. While Amelia didn't mention anything negative leading to this, she specifically discussed how she felt "no judgement" when asking questions or needing assistance from Julie. Bridget

failed her pediatric course on her initial attempt. While certainly disappointed with her lack of success the first time through, through the guidance of Lara, she was able to reframe this and change her perception of the student/instructor relationship. Where she previously viewed asking for assistance as a weakness, she was able to understand asking for help from a professor was not a sign of weakness.

Christie and Fiona seemed to both suffer from a low level of connection with faculty, which impacted their experience at Central Illinois College. During her interview, Christie seemed to focus on negative aspects of classroom experiences. She appeared often frustrated with teaching styles or methods. She was also very vocal in aspects she felt were missing from her educational experience, including training in software used for documenting patient care in hospital systems, grading practices, and software packages used to support classroom learning.

Fiona, as previously discussed, had a negative interaction that led to a code of conduct violation which seemed to skew her perception of the faculty at CIC. In addition to this experience, she felt instructors often “played favorites” and bonded with students over shared nursing specialty interest or other factors. This bonding created, in Fiona’s mind, a perception that faculty had favorites in their classroom and led her to feel excluded.

Eleanor did not indicate a high level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with faculty or engagement with faculty. Through my relationship with Eleanor, as her academic advisor, and advisor to the Student Government Association of which she served as President, I understood her to be held in high esteem by college leadership and regarded as a hard-working, diligent student. She did not discuss faculty relationships, but she never indicated a level of dissatisfaction with the faculty at Central Illinois College. Overall, relationships with faculty seemed to have a strong impact on students’ educational experience.

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are important at any age, and in college they are often a central part of the collegiate experience. Non-nursing peers often do not relate to the undergraduate experience of nursing students. Understanding the importance of relationship building within the college was important for me to explore, given the evidence in the literature to the correlation between retention and belonging.

Two students did not seem to have a strong peer relationships, Amelia and Fiona. Amelia did not mention peer relationships throughout her interview. This does not indicate a lack of relationships, but rather a lack of emphasis on these relationships. Fiona, who was a non-traditional student, had a negative impact on her educational experience due to peer relationships. As a non-traditional student, emphasis on peer relationships may not have been a high priority for her. I did not pursue this line of questioning in these interviews; therefore, this study can only examine the relationships as reported by Fiona. She indicated in her interview that relationships with certain students in her nursing courses led to her code of conduct violation, which was a major source of frustration and embarrassment for her. Ultimately, I believe this created a situation in which she felt left-out, targeted, frustrated, confused, and unhappy during several semesters at Central Illinois College. An effort to deliberately connect students with one another may be an initiative worth pursuing. It is not uncommon for students to reach out to academic advising or our professional nurse tutor for advice on how to be more successful in their coursework. One suggestion to students is often to form a study group and I have been asked on more than one occasion how to do this. Working with students to understand how to network with their peers may offer social and academic benefit.

Bridget and Christie both discussed peer relationships, but they did not serve as major source of emphasis in either of their interviews. They both reported peers who were supportive, but in different fields of study, so perhaps unable to fully relate to their experiences. Christie emphasized the group feelings during COVID-19, sharing they (her nursing school fellow students) felt a sense of persevering when conditions for success were less than optimal.

Eleanor had a high relationship score, with positive relationships. While serving as President of her student body, Eleanor forged many new relationships with students, and served as a role model on campus. She discussed the impact of activities, including a formal dinner and dance, sponsored by Student Government Association, in creating a more positive environment on campus for students. She was largely responsible for initiating this event, and working to change the climate on campus for students, engaging and re-energizing students towards taking a more involved role in creating a campus climate in which they wanted to take part. Peer relationships create a sense of comradery, which students need during their college years. Students surrounded by friends and classmates who understand what they are going through provide an outlet for students. The lack of a supportive group around students can lead to a sense of isolation and unhappiness, as illustrated by Fiona's experience.

Change

Bridget, Christie, and Fiona were all impacted by change during their college years. Bridget discussed COVID-19 as one source of change that had an effect on her education. Because Central Illinois College offered arts and sciences courses during the pandemic, as they did before and do after, students were able to engage in their education in a manner they couldn't in their online nursing courses. The arts and sciences courses offered them the opportunity to move into less prescriptive coursework at a time when everything felt stressful and different. An

art course offered Bridget the opportunity to dissect the human body in a whole new way. A humanities class allowed to view the world through the lens of people who are different and analyze how they were treated through a different perspective. She offered her opinion of how these courses broadened her awareness of other people and created a deeper sense of empathy.

Christie viewed change through the lens of COVID-19, sharing “we were the class that failed and got back up.” She was primarily concerned with changes in policies and fees. She was visibly frustrated with testing used to prepare students for the NCLEX. There were policies she may not have fully understood that she thought added no value to her education. Whenever a change in nursing curriculum is made, it is based on research and best practices, aimed at enhancing student improvement, and within the boundaries of what is necessary for accreditation or re-accreditation. A point that can be taken from this is, while students may not agree with the changes made, positive and proactive communication may help students better understand and feel more in control, leading to less negative impact from changes that do occur.

Fiona was largely positive about the change that took place during her time at Central Illinois College. She mentioned competency exams that were initiated during one of her last semesters. These exams were required before students were allowed to attend their clinical rotations. If students were unable to pass these exams, they failed the course. Her opinion of this as a positive change at the college provided feedback for our faculty that students do care about mastering skills and being part of a high-level cohort of nursing students.

Eleanor indicated a low level of impact from change. She did share increased activities for students on campus was changing the culture of students to interact more and created less drama and negativity on campus. Otherwise, she was largely unphased by change that occurred, considering it part of moving forward.

Amelia echoed a few of the same themes as Fiona. She mentioned new testing and testing policies utilized to prepare students for the NCLEX as a source of frustration. Amelia further discussed the new curriculum adopted by the nursing department as change creating a sense of aggravation that students starting school now will be better prepared than she is.

Student challenges adapting to change took different direction, but primary themes were change in curriculum, communication about general campus change, and change that created an additional financial obligation for the student. Change often begets fear and frustration. When students understand why their school is making changes, some of these feelings may be mitigated. Proactive communication will alleviate much of the stress surrounding general adjustments, particularly staff or faculty change. Curriculum change was well communicated to students, but remained a challenging for staff and faculty, as students widely discussed, and often blamed, the “old” or the “new” curriculum for a variety of things, including their own academic challenges. When change creates a new or additional financial expenditure for students, it may be worth exploring including small expenditures, if a software package is needed or other instances of unexpected out of pocket expenditures for students, consideration for rolling these costs into student fees may be beneficial. This provides students with the ability to use financial aid if necessary, and avoids students who may not have disposable income from either embarrassment or from academic challenges if they are not able to cover additional costs.

Belonging

While students who participated in the study were not asked to define what student satisfaction meant to them specifically, the interview questions led to commentary where their answers provided me the opportunity to understand their perceptions of student satisfaction. I inferred from our interviews that their student satisfaction was made up of factors including staff

and faculty support, academic success, and progressing through the curriculum in a timely manner with few to no setbacks, and finally their ability to secure employment in the field of nursing. This analysis is similar to what widely published research shares on best practices for student retention.

An institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life. It hinges on the establishment of a health, caring educational environment which enables all individuals, not just some, to find a niche in one or more of the many social and intellectual communities of the institution. (Tinto, 1993, p. 204-205).

A sense of connection or belonging was created with each participant which led to student satisfaction. While some of the following examples were mentioned in other areas of this report, it is worth mentioning these specific examples of how the students in this study found belonging at CIC. Amelia shared how internship provided the opportunity for her to refine her nursing skills in a way that ensured she was prepared for the real world. Her excitement about moving into her nursing career was conveyed and included in her satisfaction with her education. She further expounded that the support from her professors and their ability to share real world experience provided her a high level of satisfaction with her educational choice. The support Amelia received for staff in the clinical simulation center allowed her an opportunity to practice bedside nursing skills with "no judgement." She mentioned her clinical instructors and nurse preceptors overseeing her clinical rotations. She said they would share "when I worked on the floor I did it this way," and she continued, it always worked so much better!

Bridget echoed the theme of support Amelia discussed. She shared, “Everyone tries to help you succeed. I was never unhappy. This is a great school, professors are very supportive, and I learned a lot about life in general from the staff.”

Christie shared the faculty wanted to help and had “good character and values.” She appreciated the atmosphere the clinical faculty created and mentioned how the “atmosphere you are in sets up your entire day.” She contrasted this to the atmosphere she has felt in other hospitals and how this ultimately impacted her choice in schools.

Eleanor reflected on the impact her instructors have made through their support, but particularly their “interest in student success.”

Fiona noted a similar theme, sharing “instructors follow you through each semester and they care about student success.”

Reexamination of the Study’s Research Questions

This study was guided by three research questions. The research questions included: What do Central Illinois College nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program? What do Central Illinois College nursing students find least satisfying about their educational program? What do Central Illinois nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program?

What do Central Illinois College Nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program?

When students feel they are supported by faculty and staff and have the services they need (such as tutoring services) their perception of an institution can change. As they forge friendships with fellow students, this can strengthen their new found satisfaction with a college or university. Mestan’s (2016) findings share that students tend to identify and acknowledge the

importance of peer bonding in relation to retention, even when open-ended questions are asked. Tinto (1993) shares “interactive experiences which further one’s social and intellectual integration are seen to enhance the likelihood that the individual will persist within the institution until degree completion, because of the impact integrative experiences have upon the continued reformulation of individual goals and commitments” (p. 116). When institutions are intentional in creating an environment that supports students, students are allowed to engage in new relationships, and they are more likely to reach their educational and career goals, students feel a sense of satisfaction with the college they have chosen.

CIC faculty and staff, based on student interviews, connect with students, are able to re-frame negative experiences, allow for student growth and empower students to succeed in achieving their long-term goals. However, there is work to be done. When considering that only three of five students created meaningful connection through student services, this serves as opportunity to pause and consider how student services may offer more meaningful interaction to improve connection with students. Similarly, three students had positive connection with faculty. While faculty have complex schedules, with clinicals, lectures, skills, and testing, time spent building relationships with students is valuable to their success.

What do Central Illinois College students find least satisfying about their educational program?

The interviews conducted for this study lead to the suggestion that educational satisfaction is not static, but can change over time, based on circumstances and interactions with other students, faculty, and staff. Ultimately, the fulfillment students have in their experience creates the sense of satisfaction they feel, and impacts their overall feeling of the institution. As professionals in higher education interact with students, creating a feeling of inclusion and a

sense of place where students want to be should be a guiding principle in their work. While the familiar mantra of the customer is always right cannot be the mantra in higher education, understanding students are, in fact, consumers does need to be a factor considered when making decisions and in interacting with students.

The ebb and flow of student satisfaction appears to have led students in this study to consider various aspects of their education to determine if they ultimately made a choice they were happy with. Students were impacted by COVID-19 and mentioned positive aspects of their educational experience at CIC. The positive reflections were their initial views, and ultimately led one student to feel they persevered regardless of what challenges faced them. As Christie stated, “we were the class that failed and got back up.”

All five students in this study mentioned changes in leadership, curriculum, and staff during their time at Central Illinois College. Many of these changes were not communicated or poorly communicated to the students. If better communication had been employed by college leadership, students might not have felt such upheaval. This is particularly important when considering staff, faculty, and administrative changes. Under prior leadership, the college stopped announcing any staffing changes so students were often left feeling confused or as if things were being kept from them. The lack of communication stemmed from a leader’s perspective that reporting staff changes, and other changes on campus, seemed negative and might reflect poorly on their leadership. Managing change, providing forward vision to students, and operating under honest and inclusive communication will provide an opportunity for increased satisfaction in the future. Recently, the college experienced a situation where leadership had the opportunity to proactively share news with students that could have been perceived as negative. Leadership was able to craft a message to students to frame the issue in

manner they wished to convey and were able to move forward with little negative student reaction. If the situation had an impact on them, they knew the next steps to take and where and how to seek the information they might need.

How should the student satisfaction of Central Illinois College nursing students inform future recruitment, admissions, and retention efforts?

During the 2022 – 2023 academic year 97% of the undergraduate students at Central Illinois College entered as transfer students, with a mean number of 43.7 credit hours transferred in to the college (N. McCoy, personal communication, March, 2024). Studies indicate when colleges adopt a test optional admissions' strategy, they experience more diversity in the applicant pool (Cortes, 2013). As the admissions team continue to examine best practices, understanding the diversity the students in this study brought to the college, and other students like them can bring in the future, should inform the consideration of future admissions' decisions.

Tinto, a pioneer in student retention and attrition and on whose work this study was inspired, writes extensively on student success. He shares “if there is a secret to successful retention, it lies in the willingness of institutions to involve themselves in the social and intellectual development of their students.” (Tinto, 1993, p.3). Further suggesting these findings hold true at Central Illinois College, is the information elicited from the interviews conducted for this action research dissertation. Understanding from students the importance of faculty involvement and support in their academic journey allows for college leadership and faculty to leverage this crucial asset of the college. “Early intervention and good support from faculty are important for nursing students successfully completing their BSN program. It is important for faculty to demonstrate a supportive and caring role in advising students and referring them for

tutoring help” (Elkins, 2019, p. 102). Using faculty to assist in identifying at-risk students who might benefit from services offered by the college will help with retention, as well as student satisfaction, based on the findings from this, and other, studies. Faculty and staff also have an opportunity to assist students into the fabric of the campus by working with students to help them form friendships. By encouraging study groups and campus clubs and activities, students will find like-minded students and foster friendships with peers who will understand the unique challenges of nursing school.

Tinto (2004) considers institutional actions to enhance student retention and graduation where he encourages providing support, connecting academic support to everyday learning, effective assessment, and engaging students in learning. Nursing curriculum lends itself, naturally, to engaged, hands-on learning, effective assessment, and learning connected to practical application. In order to support retention efforts at Central Illinois College, faculty and staff may consider the findings of this study to ensure that faculty encourage students to continue to take advantage of services available to them. Alternative outreach may be necessary, in the form of classroom visits, specific invitation to students to utilize certain services and other measures to reach further than we currently are. They may also consider additional methods to engage students to provide the sense of connectedness literature, and the interviews in this study, demonstrate add to a sense of belonging students seek. Tinto (2015) provides evidence for the critical nature of this, sharing “the actions of faculty in the classroom, the skills and knowledge they possess to engage students there, are critical to student success” (p.115). Institutionally, Central Illinois College must encourage faculty to engage students. Their understanding of this role beyond classroom or clinical instructor should be emphasized to all faculty.

Of note in the semi-structured interviews was the fact that Central Illinois College was not the first-choice institution of three of the five students interviewed. When the admissions and recruitment team create a plan, understanding the college does not need to be the first choice, but rather a school students have knowledge and familiarity with is important. Further, interviewees shared they chose the school because, unlike a few of the competitor institutions in the area, the college offers a full four-year program for Bachelor of Science in Nursing students. They also indicated choosing the college because of the high NCLEX pass rates. NCLEX pass rates have continued to improve and should be highlighted by our admissions and recruitment team to prospective students. These findings suggest admissions may be able to consider activities early in the admissions process to connect students with faculty and staff to begin to understand the support available to them. Our admissions and recruitment team also have a few opportunities to differentiate CIC from other nursing programs. The flexibility to attend on a part-time or full-time, the opportunity to engage with students in other health profession programs, the low student to faculty ratio, and the relationship with a health system are all differentiators and should be highlighted to prospective students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reported on and discussed the study's findings, established connections between the findings and the current literature, and answered the study's three research questions. Chapter Five will conclude the research study with implications for students, student recruitment and retention, and their relationship with current literature, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This chapter serves to summarize the study's overall research findings, and synthesize the answers to the three research questions with reflection from my experience as an employee working with students of Central Illinois College on a daily basis. Chapter Five offers recommendations for practice and future research, discussing the study's limitations and provides a final report.

Summary of Findings

This qualitative study, based on semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, as part of participatory action research, described factors that led to student satisfaction or dissatisfaction of students in their final semester of a four-year Bachelor of Science nursing program. The study was guided by three research questions: 1) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find most satisfying about their educational program? 2) What do Central Illinois College nursing students find least satisfying about their educational program? 3) How can student satisfaction of Central Illinois College nursing students inform future recruitment, admissions, and retention efforts? Findings of the study revealed four common themes: 1) Students were happy with their college and career choice as they prepared to complete their undergraduate studies; however, during their journey some students did experience moments where they reflected they were not always happy with their college choice. 2) Students utilized college services, but none of the participants used all of the services. Connection with staff occurred with services utilized. 3) Participants in the study did not feel their non-nursing peers always had a sense of relatability to their experience as nursing students. 4) Finally, a sense of belonging was created with each of these students in different ways.

Most Satisfying Experiences at Central Illinois College

Each student was satisfied with their choice of school as they prepared to complete their undergraduate academic journey. This is not to say there were not moments of reflection where two of the students indicated they wondered if they had made the correct choice in colleges. One of the students who pondered this question indicated she was not at her first-choice institution. However, the second student who was not at their first-choice institution experienced satisfaction throughout the process and did not question their choice of school. Whether a college is a student's first choice or not is something that is recoverable from an institutional standpoint.

Students mention having Central Illinois College recommended to them or having been encouraged not to attend another nursing program. Much of the perception of this relates back to the discussion of brand management in Chapter Two. When admissions and enrollment consider the niche branding available to them through the values of the college, as stated in their mission statement, they are afforded an opportunity to create a unique chance to differentiate themselves from other programs in the area.

Three of the students in this study had good connection with faculty. At a small institution, like CIC, it is important to leverage the strength in small class and clinical size, the relationships students and faculty are able to form, and the benefit of being associated with a healthcare system and offering more personalized access to human resources. All incredible advantages that many other schools may not have available to them.

Peer relationships are important at every age and type of institutions. At CIC, a large population of our students are non-traditional students. An effort to deliberately connect students with one another may be an initiative worth pursuing. It is not uncommon for students to reach out to academic advising or our professional nurse tutor, Lara, for advice on how to be more

successful in their coursework. One suggestion we often provide is to form a study group. I have been asked on more than one occasion how to do this. Working with students to understand how to network with their peers may offer social and academic benefit.

In my position at the college, I often have students share their personal struggles of balancing a challenging nursing curriculum, work, children, and other life experiences. It is important that we work to ensure as many students as possible are able to connect with a group of their peers to build a network of friends and a community that understands what they are experiencing.

Change is inevitable in life. How we teach our students to handle change and how we frame changes being made at CIC are within our purview. Ensuring we provide students information affecting them in a timely manner is essential. Offering them the appropriate resources to direct questions to, a timeline if appropriate, and other resources to better navigate change will allow students to feel less panicked or frustrated when change occurs, and will provide facts rather than rumors for them to understand. Students may not agree with the changes made, but positive and proactive communication may help students better understand and feel more in control, leading to less negative impact from change that does occur.

Belonging is where the research synthesizes and provides a view of how we can better serve our students at CIC. Forming relationships with staff and faculty, creating meaningful peer relationships and traversing their educational journey with an understanding of the policies, procedures, curriculum, expectations, and all other large and small things that constitute an academic experience in a stable and trusted manner will provide students with a climate and culture where they feel they belong, can trust the professional staff and faculty around them, and feel confident they will be able to succeed. When students feel they belong, they are more likely to continue their education. How faculty and staff can develop more meaningful interactions with

students, assist in connecting students with their peers, and ensure the appropriate opportunities for connection are available become even more critical in a small school setting, such as Central Illinois College.

Least Satisfying Experiences at Central Illinois College

Students taking issue with something, a policy, an instructor, a faculty member, a course, financial aid, is not unique to Central Illinois College. Mitigating the stress of college or change that creates stress is one method successful institutions employ to ensure satisfied graduates. Central Illinois College student participants in this study all had experiences they found less than satisfying. How our staff and faculty helped these students' journey through the process of this is one factor that sets us apart from other schools. Our faculty were able to reframe situations where a student failed and had to retake a class in a manner that led the student to mention this as a formative and positive experience in their education. Other faculty and staff provided non-judgmental guidance. In the case of our simulation director, Julie, one student in this study, and many in my day-to-day interactions with students at the college, mention the expertise and assistance she is able to provide in a manner that leads them to feel comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance and advice.

Avoiding experiences which lead students to withdraw from their peers, the college campus, and feel animosity towards staff and faculty are something, I believe, we as professional staff and faculty at Central Illinois College already work to avoid through creation of a warm and welcoming atmosphere. As with almost every situation, there is the student understanding of the incident that happened, the faculty or staff perception, and then somewhere in between we may have the actual reality of the situation. Working with students to understand disciplinary action at

the collegiate level is particularly important as it should be a learning moment and will hopefully lead to improved behavior and minimal negative feelings towards those involved.

Proactive communication to inform students of change, leave them with a sense of understanding, and often a sense of control over the situation will ease the anxiety of change. Change is a large part of nursing and preparing students for this now, in a healthy, professional manner should be an emphasis on how we model and work with students during their time at the College. Creating a sense of normalcy around change allows students the ability to navigate change and other stressful situations in their education and future profession.

The interviews conducted for this study lead to the suggestion that educational satisfaction is not static, but can change over time, based on circumstances and interactions with other students, faculty, and staff. Ultimately, the fulfillment students have in their experience creates the sense of satisfaction they feel, and impacts their overall feeling of the institution. As professionals in higher education interact with students, creating a feeling of inclusion and sense of place where students want to be should be a guiding principle in our work. While the familiar mantra of “the customer is always right” cannot be the mantra in higher education, understanding students are, in fact, consumer of our product does need to be a factor considered when making decision and in interactions with students.

How Student Experiences Can Inform our Future at Central Illinois College

Since undertaking this study, CIC has installed a new executive leadership team, hired a new marketing coordinator and put best practice policies in place to ensure students have the best possible educational experience. One of the most profound implications of this study for me were how late in their academic career many of our students are learning about the resources available to them and how some resources are going unused by students. Central Illinois College

offers free mental health counseling by a certified counselor to our students. No students participating in this study used this service. Conversationally, with the students I meet with on a daily basis, I am finding an under-utilization of mental health counseling. In consultation with my colleague providing mental health counseling, this was confirmed. Further confusion with students exists about whom to reach out to for specific services offered by the College. Efforts to ensure students understand the services available and how to access them is important. Future plans are already underway to improve in this area, including creating a video series introducing several service areas, where we break down what we do, how we may help students, and how to reach out to the particular staff or department.

Recommendations for Practice

As we move forward during a time when institutions of higher education are fighting for students, costs of higher education are soaring, and families questioning the relevancy of higher education, it is my recommendation, based on the research in this study, that Central Illinois College may differentiate itself in three ways: 1) Create more seamless methods to serve our students. Knowing that change has a negative impact on student experience, we may move forward with more proactive tasks to ensure students have the information they need, when they need it, with follow up on any action(s) they need to take clearly detailed with a timeline for their completion. 2) Encourage a sense of belonging through intentional mentoring; both faculty/staff and peer to peer opportunities. Creating opportunities for students to engage with one another in classroom and non-classroom settings will allow students to find their “people,” so to speak, and achieve a sense of belonging with a peer group and potentially with other mentors – clinical instructors, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members. 3) Through recruitment and admissions efforts, create an understanding of the value of a nursing career while working and

having an employer (our affiliated health system) off-set the cost of education. Further, the small class and clinical sizes Central Illinois College offers is an important asset to students. Emphasis on this and the more hands-on time students receive during clinicals, the more personalized approach to scheduling courses and availability of plans of study to meet the unique needs of each student is an important differentiator.

Recommendations for Future Research

Belonging became the essence of this study. When students find belonging, as each student in this study did, except for Fionna, they find a sense of satisfaction. Each of the students made a connection at some point in their studies at Central Illinois College, resulting in a sense of belonging. Christie had lower belonging, as her connections were not as strong, and Fionna had a low sense of belonging due to the circumstances outlined in Chapter Four. Taking the lessons of their lower connection and therefore their lessened their feelings of belonging, the staff and faculty can move forward in a meaningful manner working to create connection and belonging for all students. Creating situations where people feel valued is important, and during stressful times allows students the opportunity to turn to people whom they believe will have compassion and empathy for their situation. Students and faculty in the program are likely to have common shared experiences and can create belonging by sharing with one another.

In order to further the goal of creating connections and building belonging, I offer the following suggestions: 1) Create programming to further support nursing students targeted at each specific semester of their nursing education. Programming may be a guided study session before mid-terms in their first semester of clinical courses or a career speaker as they begin their final semester of coursework. Each of these activities could be proposed by the Student Government team, faculty, or a group of students from each semester's cohort. 2) Market

services currently offered to prospective and current students so they may make better use of them earlier in their education, can begin to form relationships, and have better academic success. 3) Engage students in peer-to-peer mentoring. During a student's first semester on campus, create a system of assigning a student to turn to for advice, questions, and connection. Allowing students to guide this process provides an ability to connect with their peers as soon as they become a student on campus.

Further research in this area may be of interest (in or with) regards to special interest groups. In the instance of this study, I did not pursue a line of questioning to determine if a student is a first-generation college student. Because Central Illinois College has a population of first-generation college students that is well above national averages, I suspect most of the participants may have fallen into this category. Understanding belonging in this sense may provide further knowledge to assist students in successful completion of their program. The same may hold true of students who have Veteran status.

Limitations of the Research

This research provides the opportunity for Central Illinois College to engage with students more purposefully from the beginning of their education. This study is limited by three factors. 1) The size of the study is limited to traditional Bachelor of Science in Nursing students. CIC offers five program pathways to achieve a nursing degree: traditional Bachelor of Science in nursing (explored in this study), License Practical Nurse (LPN) to Bachelor of Science in nursing, Registered Nurse (RN or Associate Degree in nursing) to Bachelor of Science in nursing, Second Degree Bachelor of Science in nursing, and Master of Science in Nursing prelicensure program. Understanding the needs from each of these programs would further direct the college to undertake specific measures to assist students in each program. 2) Due to the

inexperience of the researcher, better and additional questions could have been asked to further understand the undergraduate experience at CIC. Asking participants to define what satisfaction, explicitly, meant to them would have further informed this study and provided a basis to understand what each participant meant when they qualified whether or not they were satisfied with their experience at Central Illinois College. Further understanding of peer relationships, particularly with non-traditional student participants in this study would have been helpful. 3) Expanding the study to understand the faculty perspective of student engagement and how it might impact satisfaction would further inform this study by providing a rich background of the student experience. Additional information about how faculty decide when to issue code of conduct violation (beyond the obvious) would provide context to student reports of events.

Conclusions

Students participating in this study demonstrated that both connection and belonging matter with regard to student satisfaction. While research indicates that the correlation, understanding the specifics with students in the nursing profession compel me to continue to work with students to help them find a place on the Central Illinois Campus to find the community they need, a community to uplift and support them, to encourage them, and to have better support when a day, an exam, or a clinical does not unfold in the way they expect. This research allows me to point to specific instances where my colleagues have made a difference, and how in both large and small ways we can support our students throughout their journey of nursing school. Using our strengths to our advantage, as an institution, will allow our recruitment and admissions teams to further reach students who are looking for the fit we offer students. Not every school is for every student, but when a student chooses to study at CIC, we should honor that decision by working as hard as we expect them to, to support and uplift them, provide them

with relevant services, and guide them through their educational journey with us. Ultimately, when students leave satisfied, we have the best recruiters we could ever ask for: proud alumni who want to encourage others to attend their alma mater.

This research set out to inform my initial job, as an enrollment coordinator, when this action research project was developed, but transformed into something more for me as my career change led into the position of Director of Academic Advising. Understanding the implication of this research on how better to reach students to improve their satisfaction and retention became much more meaningful. Developing relationships with students and understanding why they are pursuing a nursing degree, allows me to have a buy-in to their success. Utilizing information from this action research has allowed me to create opportunities for first-generation students at the college, initiate short-term study abroad opportunities, and engage with student services professionals in an effort to better serve our students. Watching our students reach their goal is the ultimate reward for this work.

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APPENDIX A

SEMI STRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW AGENDA AND QUESTIONS

Review of Informed Consent, Signatures, Collection of Informed Consent documents

Introduction and overview of the study

Questions

Questions for participants:

How and why did you choose Central Illinois College?

Was Central Illinois College your first choice for nursing school?

How many semesters have you studied at Central Illinois College?

Looking back at your time here, was there a time you felt unhappy or disappointed in your choice of school or career?

Are you happy with your choice now?

Did anything specific occur to make you feel this way?

Did you take advantage of any services Central Illinois College offers, such as counseling or tutoring?

How do your non-nursing peers relate to your college experience?

Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your education at Central Illinois College or your experience here?