

“Looking for a unicorn”: The challenges of studying African American men enrolled in pre-licensure nursing programs

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to relay the results of research study about the perceived challenges and successes of African American men in pre-licensure nursing programs, while describing the lessons learned when trying to research an underrepresented population in nursing education. Methodological flaws, poor return rates, and an overall lack of support led to findings which were not usable for the research topic, but might be usable to others interested in nursing education research. The research process highlights the continual struggle that nursing education has with creating and disseminating evidence to help faculty diversify the student body in nursing programs.

Keywords: Men in nursing | Diversity | Pre-licensure education

Article:

Introduction

African American (AA) men are underrepresented in nursing programs, and, thus, underrepresented in the nursing profession. It is believed that having a nursing workforce that more closely resembles the population will improve health disparities and inequities that currently exist in healthcare (AACN, 2019). Therefore, a research study was attempted to learn more about the perceived challenges and successes of African American men in pre-licensure nursing programs. However, methodological flaws, poor return rates, and an overall lack of support led to findings which were not usable for the research topic but might be usable to others interested in nursing education research. The purpose of this article is to relay the results of the research study, while describing the lessons learned when trying to research an underrepresented population in nursing education, as well as to raise questions for faculty to consider about our role in diversifying the nursing profession.

Background

The purpose of the original study was to examine the challenges and successes of AA men enrolled in pre-licensure nursing programs. By understanding their challenges and successes, perhaps programmatic changes could be implemented to aim at their retention in nursing school. There is little research on minority students in pre-licensure nursing, and even less on AA men in nursing (Murray, 2015; Patterson, 2020), yet this was the population chosen for the study for two reasons: one, anecdotal evidence supports the need to investigate where the

Black men in nursing school are; and two, racial and gender diversity in nursing has been an elusive goal for a long time.

Anecdotal evidence

The current climate of discrimination and violence towards AA men in the United States led to conversations with a colleague who works with first year students at a local university. He reported that more AA men come to the university intent on nursing as a major than finish the program, but is unsure why they change their major. He also reported that racial stereotypes, systemic issues with support structures like advising, and fear from campus police alerts, limited AA male student success in the general college population, particularly in the first two years of college (Wyatt, 2015). Is the same true for AA men in nursing school? In today's current climate of racism and discrimination, are AA men enrolled in nursing programs that predominantly serve white females, faced with unique challenges that are hindering their success? Are AA men being accepted into nursing programs, but are unable to finish due to challenges?

Statistics

Increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the nursing workforce has been a goal in the profession of nursing for quite some time. As early as 1994, the lack of racial diversity in nursing was highlighted by the Institute of Medicine in their report entitled *Balancing the Scales of Opportunity: Ensuring Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Health Professions* (Institute of Medicine, 1994). Ten years later in 2004, the Sullivan Commission on Diversity issued their report entitled, *Missing Persons: Minorities in the Health Professions* (Sullivan, 2004), where, once again, evidence was presented regarding the lack of diversity in nursing and other healthcare professions, and strategies for increasing the numbers were shared. Then, in 2011, the Institute of Medicine's report, *The Future of Nursing* (Institute of Medicine, 2011), the issue of increasing diversity in nursing was, again, brought to our attention. With almost 30 years of intentional focus on increasing the racial diversity of the nursing workforce, how close are we to meeting this goal? When considering that in order to get into the nursing workforce, potential nurses must first get through a nursing program, it only makes sense that efforts to improve workforce diversity should begin in schools of nursing.

When examining demographic statistics in nursing education, the trends do show an increase in the racial makeup of nursing students enrolled in pre-licensure programs, however, the upward trends fail to align with the changing demographics in the United States. The US continues to grow in diversity, and, according to Frey (2020), the country is becoming more diverse more quickly than expected. Between the years 2010 and 2019, the US saw the largest increases in Hispanics (20%), Asians (29%) and Blacks (8.5%). Comparatively, nursing education has not diversified at the same rates as the US population, and, therefore, nursing only continues to miss the mark on having a workforce that represents the population it serves. It is also important to note that while some demographics, such as Hispanic and Asian, saw large increased representation over the years, the enrollment of Black students remained constant (Table 1).

Table 1. Nursing students enrolled in pre-licensure programs

Race	Enrolled 1990 (NLN)	Enrolled 2010 (AACN)	Enrolled 2014 (NLN)	Enrolled 2019 (AACN)
White	83%	73.2%	72%	64%
Black	10%	10.9%	12.2%	10.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%	8.4%	5.9%	8.8%
American Indian	1.5%	0.6%	1.5%	0.5%
Hispanic	2%	6.8%	8.1%	13.2%
Multiple races			7.5%	3.2%
Total minorities	17%	26.7%	28%	36%

The number of men enrolled in nursing programs has also been stagnant for quite some time. The NLN reports that in 1989, 6% of the nursing school enrollment was men. The number doubled to 12% in 1995, and that trend has continued for 25 years, where it is reported that 13% of the total enrollment in prelicensure nursing programs are men (NLN, 2021). Furthermore, the demographics for men enrolled in nursing programs is not broken down by race, so there is difficulty understanding the magnitude of the diversity issue.

The lack of existing research, combined with anecdotal knowledge and the statistical data, are what led to a desire to focus only on Black men in nursing programs, rather than expand to include women and other minorities. Unfortunately, attempting to research an underrepresented population proved challenging.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of African American (AA) men regarding factors that contribute to their success while enrolled in nursing school. Research questions included the following: 1) What factors do AA men enrolled in nursing school perceive as contributing to their success while in the program? 2) What factors do AA men perceive to be challenges to their success while in nursing school? The work of Ferrell and DeCrane (2016), who studied minority nursing students using Tinto's framework of student retention, guided the study. Specifically for this study, Tinto's beliefs about academic and social support was used to create the survey questions. Tinto's framework posits that student retention in college is dependent on how students engage with the academic and social structures within the institution (Tinto, 1993). Students who are unable to adapt to these systems are at risk for not being retained. While Tinto's framework speaks to the university as a whole, one must also consider nursing education, which operates through the lens of white women, as an additional system that African-American male nursing students must navigate.

Methods, design, & procedure

After IRB approval from Walden University was given, an open-ended, online questionnaire was created and emailed, with permission, to the student members of the Association for Men in Nursing (AAMN). Tinto's framework of student retention (Tinto, 1993), as well as the work of Ferrell and DeCrane (2016) and Wyatt (2015) led to the creation of the questionnaire. The questionnaire (Table 2) consisted of 10 items aimed to gather information on

student engagement in the university, student use of support systems, as well as student perceptions of challenges and successes while in nursing school. Content validity of the questionnaire was established by seeking input from college students and recent graduates who reviewed the questionnaire and gave suggestions for changes. One noted addition came from an AA male nurse who suggested adding a specific question about experiences with discrimination while in nursing school. Participants who chose to provide their email addresses were emailed a \$20 Amazon gift card.

Table 2.

Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions. If you don't feel comfortable answering an item, it is fine to skip it.

Age: _____

Year in school: 1st year _____ 2nd year _____ 3rd year _____ 4th year _____

Type of program: ADN _____ BSN _____ ABSN _____

Are there any academic support services available to you in your nursing program?

Yes _____ No _____ Unsure _____

Have you used any of these academic support services in your nursing program?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, which one(s)? _____

Is there anyone in your program, such as a professor or staff member, who assists you with navigating nursing school? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, what is the person's role (not name) and how has he/she assisted you? _____

Do you participate in any extra-curricular activities in your program, such as student organizations?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please list _____

Have you experienced incidents in your program or while in clinical that you considered to be discriminatory or racist? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please explain: _____

What has helped you be successful in pursuing your nursing degree?

What challenges have you experienced while a nursing student in your current program?

Results/Findings

The Qualtrics questionnaire was sent via email to 503 members of the AAMN. Fourteen emails were returned as undeliverable, nine participants attempted the survey, and eight questionnaires were usable. For those who completed the questionnaire (n=8), the ages ranged from 19-40, with the average being 29. Four students were enrolled in BSN programs, three in

Discussion of findings

With only eight usable questionnaires, the results may seem meaningless, however, some of the reported findings are intriguing and warrant further investigation. For example, while only two cited specific examples of discrimination, both of these incidents occurred while in the clinical setting, supporting the research of Sedgwick et al. (2014) who found that minority nursing students felt uncomfortable and unwelcomed by the nursing staff in the clinical setting. However, more students cited the lack of diversity as a challenge while in nursing school. These findings demonstrate the need for this research, as it seems that there is something that can be learned from these statements.

But the research process provided unexpected lessons to the researcher that could benefit a wider audience. First, what went wrong and what could have been done differently to gather a more robust sample? Initially, the researcher reached out to program directors in 12 nursing schools in the US and asked if they would be willing to post the electronic link to the questionnaire in their learning management system. The schools represented a variety of institutions: public, private, historically Black, and community colleges. Of the 12 queried, two agreed; three replied they don't allow their students to participate in research; three asked for more information, but then never replied when the information was given; two stated the researcher would have to go through their IRB, in addition to the researcher's IRB; two never responded; and one stated there were no AA men in their program. Of those that did respond, most acted surprised about the topic, with one director stating, "It's like you're looking for a unicorn!" After little support from nursing programs, the researcher chose to reach out to a student organization. Therefore, student members received an inquiry about a personal topic from a random researcher. When researching difficult topics, such as discrimination, Sankare et al. (2015) found that participation increased when subjects were recruited within their own communities. Therefore, perhaps if students had one of their faculty members post the link and they were able to access the survey through their own institution, more would have chosen to participate. Furthermore, participants were asked to provide an email address in order to receive the incentive, which could have also been a source of mistrust. In addition, the nature of the study may have been too controversial for some to support. The researcher received two emails from students angry about the intent of the study, which supports the difficulty in researching race. One might wonder if nursing program faculty also felt the topic was too controversial, and, therefore, led to their unwillingness to post an electronic link for their students.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study which can guide further research. The method in which participants were recruited was perhaps the limitation that impeded the study the most. Because of the unwillingness of nursing faculty to distribute the link to the questionnaire, social media may have been an option to try. The use of social media has been found to be successful when recruiting college age students, especially when the research involves underrepresented students or sensitive topics. Arnold and Casellas (2021) found Instagram to be a useful recruiting tool when researching underrepresented college students, particularly low income. And Das et al. (2017) successfully utilized Facebook to recruit men ages 18–35 as subjects for their research study on a sensitive health topic, Human Papillomavirus. Fazzino et al. (2015) demonstrated not only the benefit of social media as a recruitment strategy, but also the importance of having some connection to the researcher when they found that students from the researcher's university were

more likely to participate when recruited via social media than those students who had no affiliation with the researcher.

Another limitation with this study was the lack of responsiveness from nursing faculty. Raymond et al. (2018) reported their difficulties trying to recruit and retain nurse educator participants for their study, and recommended that “nurse leaders encourage, facilitate, and role model participation in nursing education research...” which includes “...welcoming studies to be done with their nursing faculty, participating in studies as applicable, and promoting the use of research in education decisions” (p. 95). These recommendations can be extended to nursing faculty who are often the gatekeeper as to whether their students are participating as research subjects.

Recommendations

Even though the return rate was low, the responses that were received support the idea that studying African American men in nursing school is important. Understanding the unique challenges they may have can help nurse educators make adjustments to enhance their success. More research could also guide recruitment strategies, in addition to retention strategies, which would ultimately admit and graduate more AA men in nursing. Studying the reasons AA men drop out of nursing, or change their majors before entering nursing school, could ultimately increase diversity in nursing schools.

Whether they disagreed with the study, shied away from the topic, or just didn't have time to deal with an additional task, nursing faculty were a barricade to this study. If nursing faculty are to support the use of evidence-based research in nursing education, then willingness to allow students to be research participants should become a priority. The invitation to participate in research studies is an opportunity for students to see firsthand the research process, begin to understand the importance of research in nursing, and perhaps one day become nurse researchers themselves. More importantly, participating in research is a way for the AA male in nursing, in particular, to tell his story. In an academic setting where there is already a power difference, the underrepresented are not as likely to approach faculty and ask that their needs be met.

Finally, dialogue is needed at the local and national level on the best ways to conduct nursing education research with students, especially those underrepresented in nursing. Boileau et al. (2018) in recognizing the ethical issues that arise when students are researched in medical school, outlined 12 steps that researchers can take to safeguard students, whom they refer to as a “vulnerable group” (p. 23). Adapting such a document to nursing education would provide beneficial guidance to nurses interested in nursing education research. What better way to “...foster a spirit of inquiry in all nursing students to create a scholarly identity” (NLN, 2020) than to show them first-hand the research process and allow them to see their role in the generation of knowledge by participating in nursing education research. In conclusion, the profession of nursing cannot truly diversify until faculty have evidence to implement meaningful strategies aimed at inclusion in nursing education.

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