

HELPING STUDENTS THRIVE: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF PEER MENTORSHIP-BASED APPROACH TO RETENTION FOR INTENDED BACCALAUREATE NURSING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods explanatory study examined the impact of peer mentoring on the retention of first-year intended nursing students enrolled in a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program at East Carolina University (ECU). Grounded in the Nursing Universal Retention and Success (NURS) model and the theory of student thriving, the study aimed to determine if peer mentoring effectively promotes student persistence and thriving among freshmen nursing students identified as needing additional support. The Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT) was utilized as an early warning tool and administered pre- and post-intervention. Quantitative results indicated mentoring positively influenced nursing student retention, particularly enhancing students' sense of belonging and connection to campus resources and activities. However, retention rates between intervention and control groups were similar, suggesting mentoring benefits students broadly rather than exclusively those identified as non-thriving. Four BIT components: life satisfaction, flow, support, and belonging, showed promise as indicators predictive of student stop-out, with students failing to thrive in these categories more likely to discontinue. Qualitative findings from participant interviews affirmed that mentor-mentee relationships significantly influenced student engagement and retention, especially when mentors shared similar academic backgrounds. Nevertheless, mentees perceived variability in mentor quality, noting that less committed mentors limited the intervention's effectiveness. These

findings reinforce that peer mentoring can effectively enhance nursing student retention and provide holistic support for intended nursing students.

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APPROACH TO RETENTION FOR INTENDED BACCALAUREATE NURSING STUDENTS

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DEDICATION

To you

Most people use this page to thank their families, and mine absolutely deserve a medal for surviving this process with me. But this dissertation is for you, the reader. I hope you find something helpful, insightful, or at the very least, the comfort of knowing that this is proof that dissertations do end, eventually.

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“Let us strip off every weight that slows us down... And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.” – Hebrews 12:1

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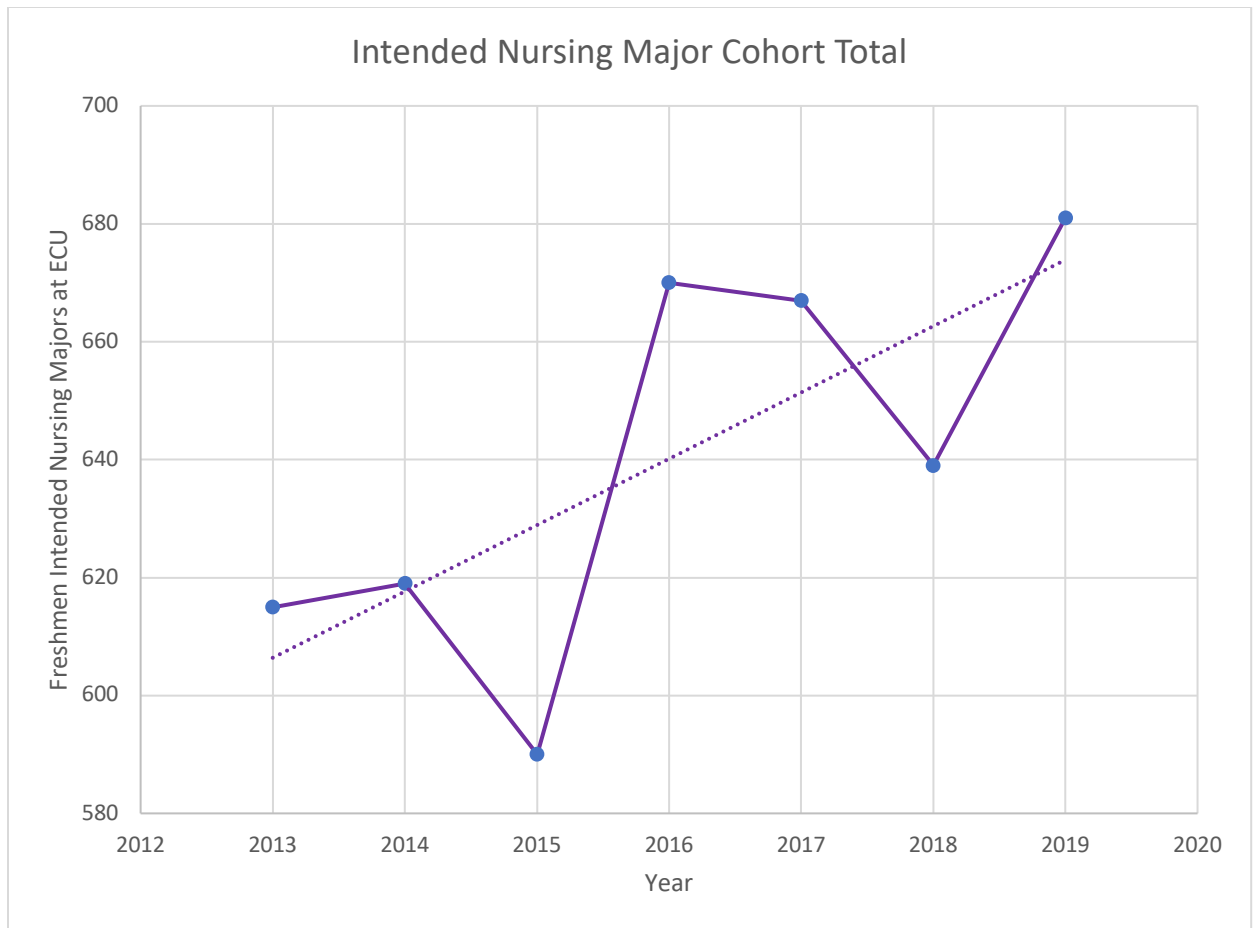
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There is a global nursing shortage (Bumby, 2020; Smiley et al., 2021; Soerensen et al., 2023). The United States is not immune to this dilemma. The state of North Carolina is predicting an 11% nursing shortage by 2033 (The Program on Health Workforce Research and Policy at the Cecil G Sheps Center, 2021). Given the high-touch nature of nursing programs, colleges of nursing are limited in the number of students they can admit each year as they are required to maintain student-faculty ratios (21 NC Admin Code, 2021; NC Board of Nursing, 2023; Smiley et al., 2021; The Program on Health Workforce Research and Policy at the Cecil G. Sheps Center, 2021). While institutions seek to maximize the number of nursing students enrolled, it is difficult to account for students who stop or drop out.

Nursing students abandon their studies for a variety of reasons (Canzan et al., 2022). Difficulties adjusting to clinicals cause some students to leave (Soerensen et al., 2023). Other students leave their studies for academic difficulties and progression policies (Jeffreys, 2012; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1993). The lack of support for the communities and patient populations that students serve is another cause for students abandoning their major (Soerensen et al., 2023). These reasons for leaving, however, have been studied in students who are already in the final two years of their program and are exposed to the professional challenges of nursing. They do not address the reasons why students in their first two years stop out. This study will examine mentoring as an intervention strategy for retaining first-year nursing students, using the positive psychological construct of thriving as a measure for providing support. Between 2018 and 2023, East Carolina University (ECU) has seen an increase in the number of intended nursing majors, averaging 658 freshmen nursing students, up from the previous five-year average of 617, see Figure 1 (Yan, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2023).

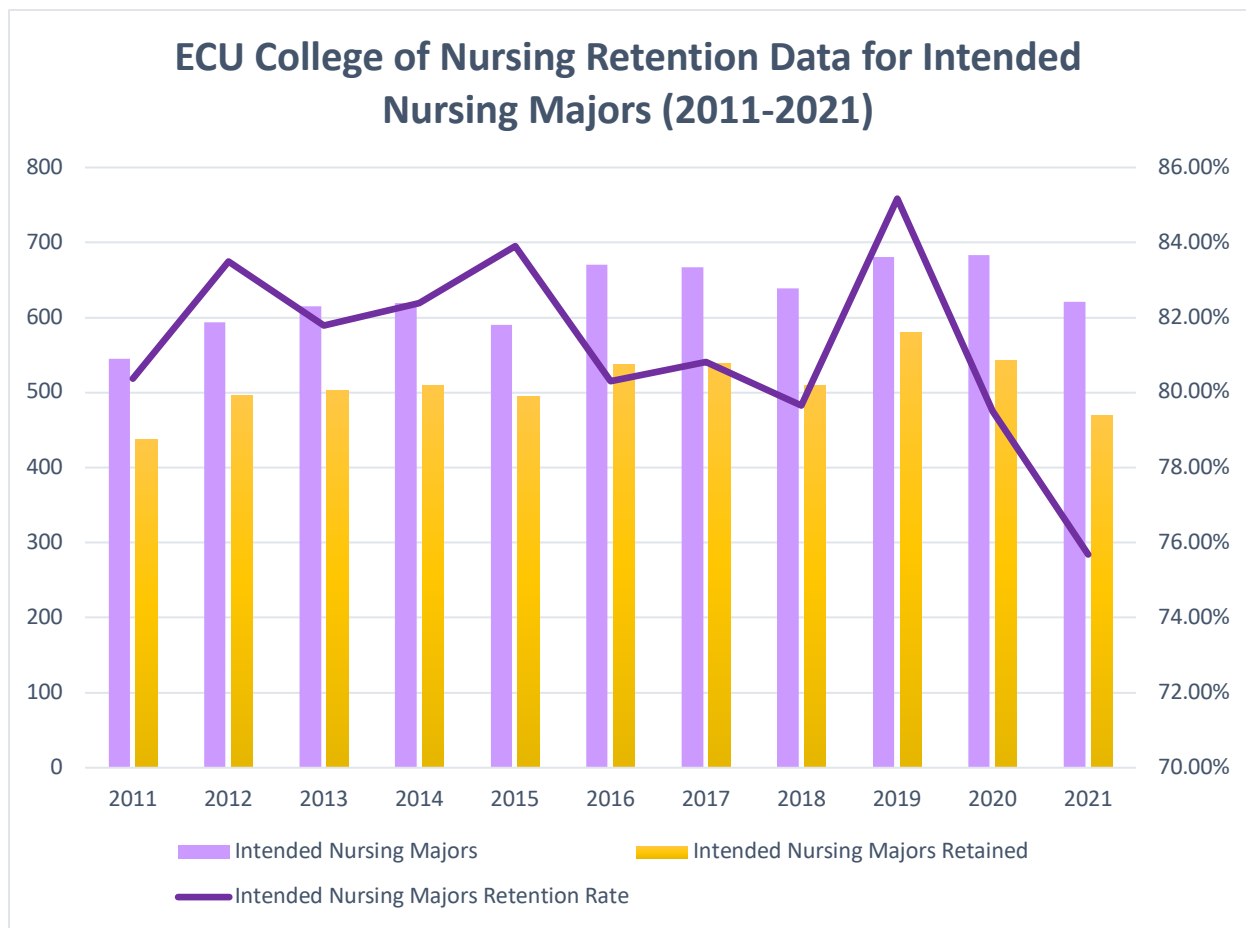


Note: Data compiled from Yan (2016, 2019, 2020, & 2023) indicates the number of nursing intended majors that are entering ECU.

Figure 1 *Freshmen Intended Nursing Majors*

At ECU's College of Nursing, rates of first-year BSN student attrition are increasing (Yan, 2023). Post-COVID, this issue has remained prominent, as students adjust to the academic and social changes of starting post-secondary education (see Figure 2). The nursing school had a peak first-year intended student retention rate in 2019 at 85.2%. That number fell to 75.7% in 2023 (Yan, 2019, 2020, 2023). As a result of the decline in overall intended nursing retention rates, applications to become declared nursing students at ECU reached a ten-year low.

Fall of 2020 marked the beginning of the decline of first-year student retention at ECU College of Nursing. In the following two years, the decline in retention rates of first-year BSN intended students was higher than the rates of first-year students in other programs on the same campus. The average of all other major's decline was not as drastic as what the College of Nursing experienced (Yan, 2023). These majors still saw an 80.75% retention rate of first-year intended students. During the same time frame, the College of Nursing had an average 77.6% retention rate (Yan, 2023). While the average of many other programs on campus have started to increase back to pre-pandemic levels, the College of Nursing has seen first-year retention continue to decline, dropping below retention rates prior to the COVID pandemic's influence. In addition to the decline in first-year intended student retention rate, the years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic have seen the proportion of non-white students drop significantly. Before the pandemic's influence cohorts entering the College of Nursing were constructed of 19.7-25.6% of non-white students. However, since the pandemic's impact cohorts have only consisted of 17.4-20.7% students who identify as Non-White (Yan, 2023).



Note: Data compiled from Yan (2016, 2019, 2020, & 2023) indicates intended nursing majors retained to sophomore year at ECU.

Figure 2 *Intended Nursing Major Retention Data*

The increase of students entering ECU to pursue nursing provides evidence that nursing is still a desirable field of study and a desired degree. The decline in nursing major retention, as demonstrated in Figure 2, suggests a need to emphasize keeping nursing students in the program to reach the opportunity to practice as nurses. Currently ECU's College of Nursing does not have a method for prophylactically identifying intended nursing majors that would benefit from additional support or a mentoring program established for intended nursing students within the college. This inquiry will test if using the positive psychological construct of thriving can be used as a predictor of student retention to connect students with additional support to improve retention in the intended-nursing student population.

First and second year nursing majors have access to the same success and retention strategies of other majors on campus. Nursing-specific interventions for success available to first- and second-year nursing students include access to advising services, a living learning community (LLC), and nursing specific first-year seminar courses. Advising services are available for all nursing students; however due to logistical limitations, first-year seminar courses and the LLC can only support up to 20% of the first-year student population. Students who are non-traditional generally do not qualify for the additional support due to already having too many credits or having to live off campus. A structured mentoring program could provide retention support for students who do not qualify for additional nursing-specific support.

This chapter will include the background of the focus of practice and the context of the study. I will then provide information about the focus of practice and the guides, boundaries, and overview of the study. Then there will be an overview of the theoretical framework and definitions; however, a more detailed explanation will be found in Chapter 2. I will follow with

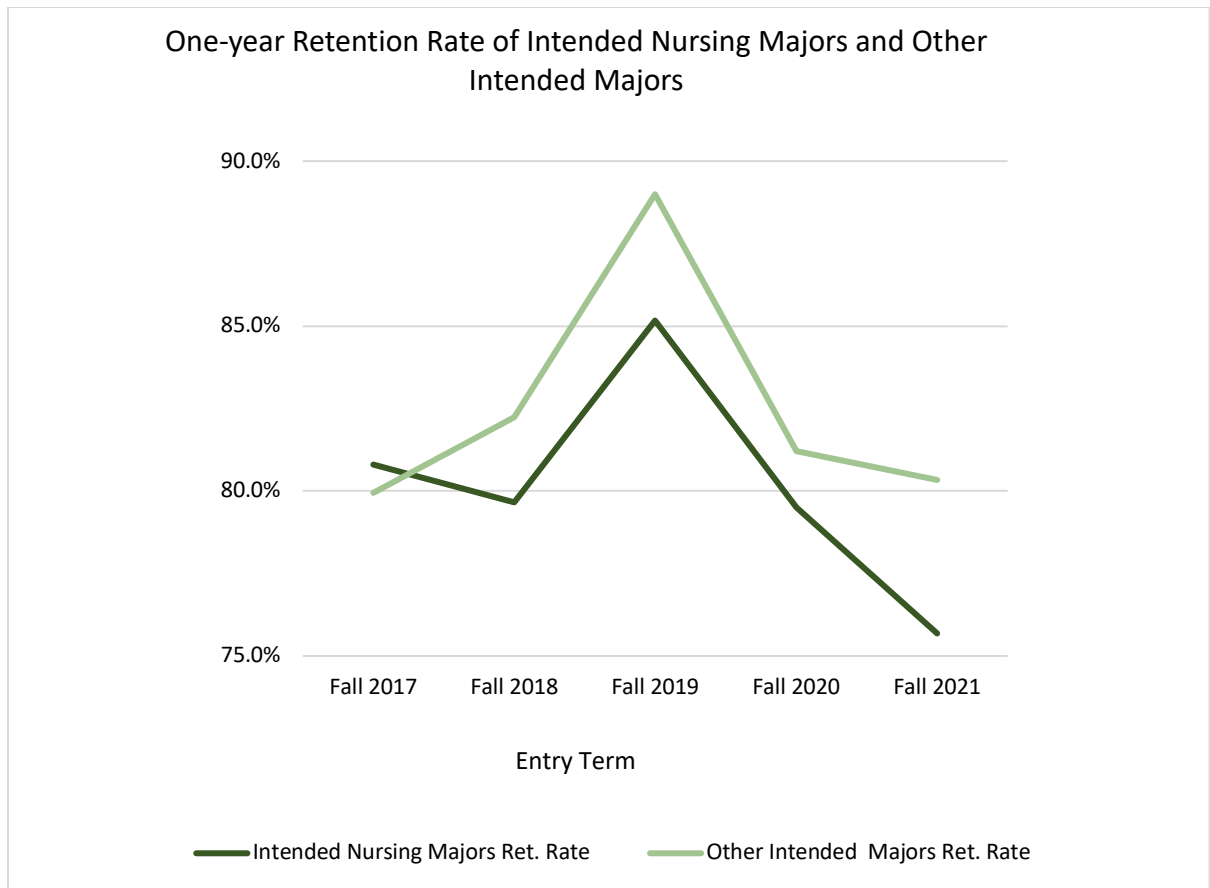
scope and assumptions. I will then explain the future implications of this study and conclude with a preview of the remaining chapters.

Background of Focus of Practice

ECU offers several processes for obtaining a four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree. While the following section will discuss the other degrees offered, this study will be focused on the traditional four-year option. In this pathway, nursing students are admitted to ECU as an intended nursing major and must compete for available seats in the nursing option. There are 130 total seats available for nursing students to earn in each fall and spring semester. Students are ranked using the College of Nursing's ranking formula to determine the top 130 candidates who will be accepted (see Appendix C). ECU's College of Nursing hit a 10-year low in the number of applicants to the traditional BSN. Traditionally the option averaged approximately 500 applicants to the BSN option per year in 2013; that average has dropped to slightly more than 300 applicants in 2023 (Yan, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2023).

Retention is defined by ECU's College of Nursing as "the proportion of ... cohort members (full-time, degree-seeking, first-year undergraduate students) who are enrolled on census day the following fall semester" (Yan, 2023 p.2). ECU's College of Nursing's intended nursing retention rate post the pandemic phase of COVID-19 did not recover proportionately to other university majors on campus (see Figure 3 [Yan, 2023]). This decline in first-year retention has led to fewer students applying for the BSN. This is due to the process that nursing intended students go through in order to apply to the BSN option. A traditional nursing intended student must complete all curriculum pre-requirements in order to apply to the nursing program and be accepted. They must then take an entrance exam at the beginning of what is traditionally a student's second year in the program; and then at the conclusion of the student's third semester,

they apply to the traditional BSN option. Students who choose to stop-out from the nursing major at the end of their first-year do not take the entrance exam and never enter their application for consideration. This lowers the potential applicant pool for the BSN option. There is a direct correlation to the past nine admission cycles between the number of applicants and the academic quality of the applicant as determined by the ranking formula (Appendix C & D). The application process occurs twice a year in both the fall and the spring and 130 students are accepted each time. There is a further relationship between the one-year retention statistics and the number of applicants in the pool for the BSN option. The BSN application pool is a better representation of a two-year retention metric instead of a one-year metric. The data for the nursing school applicants are coded for the year that they begin the BSN option. Therefore, when considering the one-year retention metric, the application data that aligns with that class would be coded 2 years following the retention year data. For instance, the one-year retention metric from 2019 would align with applicant data for 2021. This relationship demonstrates that quantity and quality of the applicants are not necessarily separable. By increasing the quantity and quality of applicants to the BSN option, students that are selected are more likely to succeed as they will have demonstrated academic proficiency prior to being accepted to the BSN option. Students are limited to three attempts at applying to the BSN option; however, applications are time sensitive for students applying for selection. Students traditionally apply in the second semester of their second year of undergraduate education. In the first semester of their sophomore year, students take the HESI a2 examination as a part of their admission. If students are not retained in the nursing major their first-year, they generally do not take the HESI a2 entrance exam to be eligible to apply to the BSN option.



Note: From “Retention and Graduation of BSN Students in the College of Nursing ABSN, Spring 2023” by Yan, L. (2023)

Figure 3 *One-year Retention Rate of intended nursing majors compared to other competitive majors at ECU*

Each year that a student fails to apply to the BSN option means that they are potentially occupying seats from future cohorts if they are later accepted. Chapter 2 will offer a more detailed discussion of the literature; however, the following section will introduce reasons why students stop out of nursing school, and then offer suggestions to improve pre-licensure nursing student retention.

Reasons Students Stop Out

Determining a specific reason for nursing student attrition in a specific nursing program can prove challenging. The institutional system at ECU is designed that students can change their majors, withdraw from courses, or leave the university without providing a reason for their decision. To change majors, students simply have to send an email to an advisor in the new major that they wish to change to. The change is generally made without notice to the previous advisor or advising center. Students are able to register for and drop courses through their own student portal without consulting advisors or faculty. Students are also able to withdraw from the university by either sending an email to the registrar's office stating they will not return, or simply not registering for classes. Attempts have been made in the past to collect exit surveys to inquire why students choose to leave; however, they were unsuccessful as students lacked an incentive to complete the requested surveys. As a result of this institutional design, generalizable information about the reason nursing students are not retained at ECU is not readily available. Because of this lack of institutional data, it is necessary to rely on literature and theory to establish the reasons why nursing students choose to leave the major.

Nursing students stop-out due to programmatic structure, a misconception of the profession, and a lack of support for the communities they serve. Administrative and legislative policies have created a programmatic structure that breeds competition among first- and second-

year nursing students (Al-Alawi et al., 2020, Carolina Nursing, 2023; East Carolina University College of Nursing, 2023; University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2023; North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, 2023; NC Central University, 2023). In four year BSN options, this structure also creates a curriculum that means first- and second-year students are not exposed to the profession until they are in their third and fourth year of study (NC Board of Nursing, 2023; Smiley et al., 202; The Program on Health Workforce Research and Policy at the Cecil G. Sheps Center, 2021). This lack of exposure can lead to misconceptions about the profession's physical and emotional demands. In nursing student's third- and fourth-years students are exposed to clinical rotations and witness the lack of support for the communities they serve and the realities of clinical practice (Hou et al., 2022; Sweetman et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). The physical realities of clinicals and the lack of support can cause students to stop prioritizing their social life and lead to stopping out (Ayoobzahdeh, 2023; Falten & Lambert, 2020; Soerensen et al., 2023; Waldinger & Schulz, 2023).

Professional Misconceptions. Nursing students in their first two years of the curriculum often struggle with academic demand, might have a misconception about the realities of the profession, or they may realize they are not suited for nursing (Canzan et al., 2022). To apply to ECU's BSN option, students have to complete rigorous pre-requisite courses specifically in the science fields. Students are required to earn a grade of a C or higher in college algebra, introduction to chemistry, organic chemistry, anatomy & physiology I, anatomy & physiology II, and microbiology (see Appendix C). This academic requirement causes some students to stop out as they are not able to meet the requirement. In addition, once students are accepted to the BSN option, they are exposed to the clinical setting for the first time, and the realities of the occupation become apparent.

In a student's third year of the program, they are exposed to twelve-hour shifts and other physical demands, an incongruency between the theories presented in the classroom and the profession once human interaction is involved, and not finding the clinical environment to be as collaborative as the students were led to believe (Canzan et al., 2022). Students in clinicals want someone who is able to discuss clinical experiences with that can support them psychologically to persist in their learning (Soerensen et al., 2023). This can be a staff, faculty, or another student and can either be a formal arrangement or an informal one. Felton and Lambert (2023) describe this need as a need for the student to establish a mentoring constellation or a web of relationships. These mentoring networks are effective when the student is intentional in their creation and provide a positive support structure for the student to go to for support when needed (Felton & Lambert, 2023). These larger constellations of support are then supplemented by "mentors of the moment," who provide informal, quick advice or support, but do not become a part of the larger constellation. This concept means that anyone can provide mentoring support and make a meaningful contribution to an individual student's success (Felton & Lambert, 2023).

Lack of Support. Nursing students may leave after they have been accepted into the BSN option because they lack resources to help the community they serve, clinical demands were greater than anticipated, or their social life was not prioritized (Soerensen et al., 2023). Students are drawn to nursing for a variety of reasons, but many nurses have a personal attachment to the field. For some, it may be a past personal experience with themselves or a family illness and an innate desire to want to reciprocate the care they received for someone else with similar diagnoses. Others may feel called to a specific community or setting they feel passionate about serving. In both cases, nursing students reported that there was a lack of psychological support for students who were serving communities that they belonged to

(Soerensen et al., 2023). Globally, nursing students have discussed a possible lack of professional support available from clinical instructors or the clinical setting as a reason they choose to leave the major (Cazan et al., 2022).

Reasons Students Stay

Nursing students in the first two years of the curriculum stay because of social connection, academic success, and engagement (Jefferys, 2022a; Jefferys, 2022b; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021). Nursing students who have been accepted stay in the program because of the sunk cost fallacy, access to academic supports, and the desire to remain with a certain cohort (Jeffreys, 2012; Jhang et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022). To combat programmatic structural issues and improve student retention at ECU, college advisors are assigned and provide support to all nursing students. In addition, advisors provide workshops available to all students, teach first-year seminar courses, and help manage a LLC. The sunk cost fallacy is an economic principle that people are unwilling to part with time and money that has already been spent (Hun-Tong & Frank, 1995). When applied to academics, specifically nurses, students are less likely to part with a program that they are already heavily invested in emotionally and financially. This causes students to stay in programs that they might otherwise depart from. Students who were able to build relationships through their cohorts and received help through support with their studies were able to overcome or succeed in academically difficult courses (Felton & Lambert, 2023).

Improving Pre-licensure Student Retention

Student success, as discussed in the following chapter, has generally been tied to test scores and academic engagement. Thriving as a concept presents an opportunity to move past the traditional views of student success and include psychological and social factors, while still maintaining the emphasis on academic success (Schreiner et al., 2022). Thriving in college is

conceptually a look at students who are flourishing while in college. Flourishing is a psychological construct that refers to individuals who belong to a supportive community that engage with others in their environment and advance past simply surviving (Schreiner et al., 2022). When flourishing is conceptually applied to college students it is referred to as thriving and is a measure of how well a student is engaging with their campus environment and community for support.

Improving nursing retention requires building relationships that will support nurses through their educational journey. To improve nursing student retention, students need to feel suited to be a nurse, accurately understand the profession, and be equipped with psychological coping mechanisms. In this study, I will seek to reveal and describe if and how peer-mentoring is an effective intervention strategy for retaining freshmen nursing students who are not thriving.

Context of Study

ECU was founded in 1908 as East Carolina Teachers Training School (Tucker, 2018). In 1923, the university was renamed East Carolina Teachers College (East Carolina Teachers College, 1923). After becoming the second largest college in the state, the NC General Assembly granted ECTC college status, and the school became East Carolina College (ECC) (East Carolina University, 2019a). Through political pressure from then ECC president, Leo Jenkins, the general assembly agreed to break up the University of North Carolina's monopoly on higher education in the state (Tucker, 2019b). Along with three other teaching colleges in the state, ECC was granted university status and was renamed East Carolina University in 1967, in furtherance of a democratic, multi-tiered, regional university system in North Carolina (Tucker, 2019b).

Fifty-two years (52) after the founding of East Carolina Teachers Training School, the East Carolina College (ECC) School of Nursing was established in 1960, and the first nursing

students were admitted in 1961 (Tucker, 2019a). At the time of the nursing school's founding, it was contested by schools in the western part of the state as an unnecessary institution and that demand was for two-year nursing programs rather than four-year bachelors trained nurses (Tucker, 2019a). Walter B. Jones Sr. championed the establishment of the four-year nursing degree at ECC, citing that the bachelor trained nurses would be able to teach in the two-year programs (Tucker, 2019a). It was also noted at the time of the school of nursing's founding that this would be the only nursing program in the Eastern region of the state of North Carolina (Tucker, 2019a). In 1964, the College of Nursing was accredited by the National League of Nursing (NLN) and graduated its first class of 17 students (Tucker, 2019a).

Characteristics

ECU is rated as a large, basic doctoral university with high research activity (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020). Most of the student body is comprised of undergraduate full-time degree-seeking students, with over 50 % of these students residing on campus. ECU features professional and arts and sciences degree programs with a high graduate coexistence (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020). A high degree of graduate coexistence highlights that students who complete undergraduate degrees at ECU return for graduate programs. Most of these graduate programs are in professional fields, like nursing.

Nationally, nursing students are predominantly white (58.6%) female (86.4%) and are under 25 years of age (54%) (National League of Nursing, 2022). Across all types of nursing degrees, including the two-year, four-year, and graduate level nursing programs, nursing students are predominantly taught by White (76.4%) women (91.2%) who are between 30 and 60 (76.7%) (National League of Nursing, 2022). ECU's demographic statistics show that students in all

programs are predominantly White (74%) women (90%) (ECU, 2021) and are taught by predominantly White (80%) women (94%) (ECU, 2021). Thus, in comparison to the national average of all nationwide nursing programs, ECU nursing faculty are reflective of national demographics, whereas nursing students are significantly less diverse.

Currently the undergraduate nursing education program at ECU offers four pathways to obtaining the Bachelor of Science in nursing (BSN): the traditional four-year route, the RN to BSN option, the RIBN option, and the aBSN option. The traditional four-year route is pursued by students who enter ECU as a nursing major out of high school and following the NC Board of Nursing requirement of a two and two curriculum (North Carolina Board of Nursing, 2023). The first two years focus on general education coursework and the latter two years are when students focus on their nursing-specific coursework. The RN to BSN option allows students to pursue a two-year RN degree as a nurse and then return to East Carolina to complete the remaining two years for their BSN degree. RIBN is a partnership between ECU's College of Nursing and 17 community colleges from the surrounding 29 counties. Students dual enroll in their local community colleges to complete their associate degree and then finish their BSN degree through ECU's College of Nursing. Finally, the aBSN option is an alternative licensure program for students who already have a bachelor's degree in another field and want to start a new career as a nurse. The program is extremely fast paced as the traditional two-year nursing program is completed in a calendar year.

Statement of Focus of Practice

Because the existing data are insufficient to tailor a customized approach to nursing student retention at ECU, it is necessary to rely on the suggestions provided through the literature. Bumby (2020) conducted a literature review of studies that identified retention

intervention programs and their effectiveness. The study found that peer or faculty mentors, success specialists, orientations, enrichment programs, and stipends were all included as potential interventions for improving nursing student retention. Studies showed that recruiting upper-class students to provide peer mentoring to more junior students were of good value because they were successful and cost effective (Bumby, 2020). These findings align with suggestions made in the NURS model to improve student retention (Jeffreys, 2022). The NURS model suggests that mentoring is an effective way to improve multiple factors affecting nursing student retention (Jeffreys, 2022).

The focus of this inquiry is to examine the impact of a mentorship-based approach on retention for intended baccalaureate nursing students pursuing the traditional BSN degree. Studies on nursing student retention are not new. However, the novelty of this study is that it will focus on nursing students who are still within their first two years of study, in addition the study is unique in that it will utilize the psychological lens of student thriving to identify students in need of support (Mentag, 2022). The information discovered from this study can be utilized as a holistic approach to identifying students who need support without the use of an “at-risk” label or being reliant on traditional predictors of student success such as academic achievement or engagement. The dangers of an “at-risk” label will be discussed later in this chapter, and limitations of traditional predictors of success and achievement will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Four-year nursing preparation programs could utilize this information to develop targeted interventions for students before they reach clinicals, simulations, and theory courses in the second half of the nursing curriculum. ECU is a regional university that directly services 29 rural counties in the eastern part of North Carolina. This study will offer a unique perspective by

studying the intended nursing student pipeline for four-year nursing programs. ECU is the state of North Carolina's largest producer of registered nurses (East Carolina College of Nursing, 2023a). As Figure 3 shows, 2021 marked the lowest retention rate for intended nursing majors since 2007 as demonstrated in Table 1 (Yan, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2023). Nursing requires a secondary admission process for students to become a formal nursing major. Fall of 2022 through Spring of 2024 marked a 10 year low for the number of total applicants to the traditional Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program. Despite the low quantity of applicants to the program, the number of new first-year students beginning as nursing intended majors has increased over the same timeframe. This suggests that the issue is related to retention rather than recruitment. The purpose of this study is to reveal if and how peer-mentoring is an effective intervention strategy for retaining freshmen nursing students who are not thriving. The inquiry can be used to justify the need for peer-mentoring for freshmen nursing students as a retention strategy.

Guiding Question

This study is guided by the following overarching research question: How does peer-mentoring provide holistic support to influence first-year nursing student stop-out, as suggested by the NURS retention model. To address that question, I will collect and analyze data to answer the following sub-questions:

SQ1: How can a thriving scale be used to build an early alert system for identifying first-year nursing students in need of support?

SQ2: How effective is mentoring at preventing or delaying first-year nursing student stop-out?

Table 1*Intended nursing student population 2005-2021*

Entry Term	Intended Nursing Majors	Intended Nursing Majors Retained	Intended Nursing Majors Retention Rate
2005	311	240	77.17%
2006	424	328	77.36%
2007	434	314	72.35%
2008	505	423	83.76%
2009	499	413	82.77%
2010	594	496	83.50%
2011	545	438	80.37%
2012	594	496	83.50%
2013	615	503	81.79%
2014	619	510	82.39%
2015	590	495	83.90%
2016	670	538	80.30%
2017	667	539	80.81%
2018	639	509	79.66%
2019	681	580	85.17%
2020	683	543	79.50%
2021	621	470	75.68%

Note: Data compiled from Yan (2016, 2019, 2020, & 2023) indicates intended nursing majors retained to sophomore year at ECU.

Student thriving will be utilized as an early alert system to identify students in need of support. Students that demonstrate thriving through five components grouped into three categories. The academic category includes components of academic determination and engaged learning. The interpersonal category includes social connectedness and diverse citizenship, and the psychological category includes a positive perspective (Schreiner et al., 2020) A more detailed discussion is included in Chapter 2.

Overview of Inquiry

To answer this inquiry, the study will be grounded in improvement science and cycles of inquiry known as the plan, do, study, and act (PDSA), which is characterized by four phases (Bryk et al., 2015; Midler et al., n.d.). (Langly, 2009). Phase 1, the *plan* phase, defines the changes that need to happen within the organization. Phase 2, the *do* phase, is the phase where the implementation of the plan occurs. The *study* phase focuses on the analysis of the outcomes. The final phase, or *act*, is when the study will be evaluated, and future implications and adjustments will be made based on the findings. The following chapter section will address how each phase will contribute to answering the inquiry questions (Bryk et al., 2015; Langly, 2009; Midler et al., n.d).

To analyze the findings of this inquiry, I will use a mixed methods approach using an explanatory sequential design. Utilizing a mixed methods approach will allow me to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions in the previous section. The explanatory sequential design utilizes two phases to collect quantitative data and qualitative data sequentially (Toyton, 2021). The quantitative phase's purpose is to collect data about the research and examine trends and patterns statistically (Toyton, 2021). In this inquiry, the first phase of the study will collect and analyze retention data for students based on the results of the brief thriving

inventory. This will generate quantifiable data that will be maintained in run charts from the intervention group and two control groups. The run charts will attach the retention data to chronological occurrence, which will help to determine trends and patterns as well as determine the influence of the intervention (Anhoj & Olsen, 2014; Williams, 2018). The second phase of the mixed methods explanatory sequential design focuses on the collection of qualitative data that helps to further explain the quantitative phase's results (Toyton, 2021). By conducting interviews with the participants who were a part of the intervention group, I will assess how the intervention influenced student persistence and gain insight into the quantified trends.

Plan. During the first phase of the study, data will be gathered from institutional data from the College of Nursing to establish base line statistics to identify an opportunity for study. The data from Figures 1-3 above demonstrated a need for improving intended nursing student retention. As discussed above, the relationship between nursing student retention and the quality and quantity of student applications influences the ability for the college to select students that will be more likely to be successful in obtaining a nursing degree. The trend noted above, demonstrated in the figures, shows that, despite the increase in recruitment, there is a decrease in applicants. This decrease in applicants who apply may also cause a decrease in the quality of the applicant. Because East Carolina University provides retention support to all students, I isolated the retention interventions that are specifically available to first-year nursing students. There are three main interventions to improve first-year nursing student retention: academic advising, first-year first-year seminar courses, and the LLC. Every nursing major is assigned an academic advisor to support them through their educational experience, which provides a 100% reach rate. The LLC and first-year seminar courses have logistical restrictions that prevent them from reaching all indented nursing students. In addition, students who participate in the LLC are also

required to take the first-year seminar course, so there is overlap. Taking the total potential enrollment in the first-year seminar course and dividing it by the total population of first-year nursing students, I was able to quantify the potential reach of this retention intervention.

As Table 2 demonstrates, over the last five years, first-year seminar was able to reach an average of 20% of the first-year nursing population. First-year seminar is also available to any first-year nursing student on campus, so it is not targeting students who need additional support for success. Currently, there is no major specific early detection program for first-year student retention. A formal mentoring program also does not exist for first-year nursing students.

Implementing a targeted peer-mentoring program may provide additional retention support for students who are not able to access other major specific mentoring intervention programs. The students who are selected to participate in the mentoring program will be enrolled a freshman seminar course and required to meet with their mentor at least once a week for the duration of the fall semester. The focus of these meetings will be predominantly on academic success strategies; however, because of the weekly check ins, the opportunity for students to receive more holistic support will also be available for students. The peer mentor records logs of the meeting topics and those topics are shared with the instructor of the freshman seminar course.

Do. Students will be contacted to register for a success learning community that will be housed by the Student Academic Success Center (SASS). The application is a formality and demonstrates a request for support. The learning community will have students register for a freshman seminar course and a public health course. The students who participate in the success learning community freshman seminar course will also be required to meet with a certified trained mentor ten times over the course of the semester. The study will commence two weeks after classes start with a survey being distributed by the instructors of three nursing-specific

freshman seminar courses to their students. The survey will request that the students complete *The Brief Thriving Inventory* (Su et al., 2014). Once the results have been determined, students will be placed in two groups. The first group will receive peer-mentoring as an additional intervention as a part of the freshman seminar course affiliated with the success learning community. The second group will not receive the peer-mentoring intervention, but they will still receive support through a freshman seminar course. Both groups will be monitored and tracked for stop out. At the conclusion of the semester, students who have had the intervention and were retained will be interviewed to examine the effectiveness of the peer-mentoring program. While an ideal situation would allow for every student who is identified as needing support to have a mentoring dyad assigned to them, due to scarcity of resources, it will not be possible to assign all students a mentor. Because the mentors will be volunteering their time, there will be a limit on the number of mentors available to pair with students. This is in an effort to not overwhelm the mentors, who are also students with multiple competing priorities.

Table 2*First-year seminar potential impact on intended nursing population*

Year	Seats Available	First-year Nursing	Percentage
2017	125	667	19%
2018	125	639	20%
2019	125	681	18%
2020	125	683	18%
2021	125	621	20%
Average Total Impact			20%

Note: Enrollment opportunity for First-year Seminar course 2017- 2021

Study. The data collected will be analyzed in Phase 3. Quantitative data will be analyzed from the thriving surveys collected and the dependent variables and independent variables will be compared from the intervention group and the two control groups. The control groups will provide data for comparative analyses to explore the potential impact of the mentoring intervention on students who demonstrate the needed support. This will be modeled after an experimental framework. Students will be monitored for stop-out and data will be recorded on a run-chart (Williams, 2018). Run charts display data and connect them to a chronological timeline in order to assess the influence of an intervention in shorter time spans. Because they are connected to chronology, they are also helpful to determine if an intervention's influence has been sustained. Run charts are generally associated with quality improvement projects in a healthcare setting, however the data collection process aligns with improvement science's PDSA model which this inquiry is utilizing as a framework (Williams, 2018).

At the conclusion of the semester, students who were retained will be interviewed to explore the influence of the peer-mentoring program. Qualitative data collected from interviews will be coded and examined to assess the influence of peer-mentoring as a retention intervention. To collect this qualitative data, students will complete a reflection in the freshman seminar course that will answer the interview questions. This interview technique utilizes methodology from hermeneutic phenomenological design (Miles et al., 2013). Hermeneutic phenomenology treats each person involved in the study as a unique individual with their own story (Miles et al., 2013). This methodology will allow for open dialog with participants that would then be analyzed to generate themes based on the responses (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). The inquiry would easily be transferred to another institution and become cyclical to verify the findings and expand the scale or duration.

Act. Based on the summary and recommendations from phase three, phase four will make recommendations for future studies that wish to transfer the study to their place of practice. In addition, the study could be utilized to justify or deny the creation or continuation of a nursing specific peer-mentoring program. Recommendations for adjustments to future studies that wish to transfer the findings of this study to their own practice setting will be made during this phase of the inquiry.

Inquiry Partners

Within the College of Nursing, I have solicited the support and assistance from my colleagues. There are four advisors in the College of Nursing that teach freshman seminar courses, including myself. Two of the other advisors have agreed to be the control group in my study. Their courses will not participate in the mentoring intervention. In addition, a colleague from the Student Academic Success Center (SASS) has agreed to provide another section of the freshman seminar course to primarily nursing students and their course will function as a second intervention group. All sections of the freshman seminar course will administer the *Brief Inventory of Thriving* survey in the second week of the semester and will monitor students for potential major changes.

In the past, the College of Nursing has had a mentoring program for declared students which was housed within the counseling department. The previous iteration of this program was not designed for nursing intended student. It was housed within the College of Nursing's counseling center, and it was not successful. Because of this, I worked with the college's psychologist to gather the qualitative data that had been collected in the prior iteration of the mentoring program. The survey data that was provided indicated that the mentors were not very helpful or available in order to support their peers. This iteration of the program will feature

mentors who have completed a certification, will focus on nursing intended students, and are managed by the SASS department. I have gained permission from the director of student services to work with the student population in this capacity and to conduct the study.

I partnered with ECU's Student Success Center to provide quality mentors for the students participating in this study. The student success coaches and mentors must undergo College Reading and Learning Association's International Mentor Training Program (IMTPC) training in order to and become certified mentors. The collaboration led to the creation of a section of ECU's first-year seminar course that is affiliated with a student success learning community. This allows for identified nursing intended students access to trained peer-mentors they will be required to meet with as a part of the course.

Theoretical Framework

Chapter 2 will include a thorough review of the literature and a more detailed discussion of the theoretical framework of this inquiry. The framework of this inquiry will be Maryanne Jeffreys' Nursing Universal Retention and Success (NURS) model (Jeffreys, 2012). This model provides a major specific framework to understanding holistic nursing student retention. As chapter two will highlight, Jeffreys argues that mentoring could be the single most influential intervention to retaining nursing students. This model will be synthesized with Laurie Schreiner's theory of student thriving (Schreiner, 2010). Thriving is a positive psychological construct that is rooted in flourishing and addresses perceptions of support of students in higher education settings. The study will utilize student thriving to identify students in need of support and allow a targeted approach for interventions.

Definition of Key Terms

Attrition in the context of this study means the failure to persist in the nursing program (Jeffreys, 2012). The NURS model offers an additional breakdown and puts attrition into two types of attrition voluntary and involuntary attrition. Voluntary attrition refers to a person who drops out of a nursing program for personal reasons (Jeffreys 2012). Involuntary attrition refers to a person who fails to persist due to academic difficulties (Jeffreys, 2012).

Coaching refers to providing the coachee with professional guidance for their individualized professional goals (Carr et al., 2017; Garvey et al., 2014). Generally coaching is focused on short term outcomes and does not require that the person providing the guidance has been through the process that the coachee is experiencing (Carr et al., 2017; Garvey et al., 2014).

Admitted Nursing Students In this study this refers to intended students who have been admitted to East Carolina University. When necessary if I am discussing admission to the traditional BSN option, I will designate that as a part of the explanation.

Intended Nursing Students For the purposes of this study an intended nursing student is any nursing student that is currently enrolled at East Carolina and is majoring in nursing. However, this student has not yet been accepted into the traditional BSN option.

Declared Nursing Students In contrast to an intended nursing student, a declared nursing student is a student that is enrolled at East Carolina University, is majoring in nursing, and has been accepted into the traditional BSN option.

First-year Nursing Students For the purpose of this study this refers to students who are intended nursing majors that are completing their first or second semester at East Carolina University.

Second-year Nursing Students Similar to first-year nursing students this refers to students who are intended nursing majors that are completing their third or fourth semester at East Carolina University.

Pre-licensure Nursing Students Refers to all nursing students who have yet to complete the entire BSN option or pass the national certification exam.

Retention can be defined as the effort that universities put forth to engage their students in an effort to prevent drop out (Tight, 2020). To align with the study's home institution, the same metric for examining retention will be used. A full-time student's persistence from their first-year to the section year fall semester (IPAR, 2024; Yan, 2023).

Mentoring is a relationship or partnership that can be finite or continuous, centered on learning, that the mentor serves as an experienced guide, and a social contract exists between the two parties that changes over time (Garvey et al., 2014).

Persistence can be defined as the determination by students to continue to progress through a program despite facing challenges (Tinto, 2017).

Thriving draws from positive psychology and well-being research, thriving is optimal functioning to improve student success and persistence that attempts to explain why students flourish in the university setting (Schreiner et al., 2020)

Stop Out in the context of this study in order to align with the NURS retention model means "a break in continuous enrollment for one or more semesters excluding summer sessions" (Jeffreys, 2012, p.10). This can include transferring to another institution or changing majors.

Assumptions

Several assumptions underly this proposed study. One assumption is that students will honestly and accurately provide quantitative and qualitative feedback. However, social norms

and biases may influence responses. The study will be facilitated using a freshman seminar course. This should help to provide a familiar and comfortable space for the students to provide accurate and thoughtful feedback. Another assumption of this study is that the issue at hand is within the college's influence. By studying the nursing intended population that is completing the general education requirements in the curriculum, there are academic influences that impact students from other colleges within the university. Students participating in the study are assumed to need academic support. All incoming nursing students were emailed to offer an opportunity to register for the freshman seminar course that is affiliated with the mentorship program. Students were informed in the email that they would receive the support of a peer-mentor. It is also assumed that students will receive similar support from instructors in the freshman seminar courses. The courses are designed to achieve the same objectives and deliverables while having similar instructional designs. Finally, it is assumed that students will receive similar support from their peer mentors.

Scope

The scope of this study is limited to nursing intended students who register for a non-mandated first-year seminar course at ECU. The results should not be generalized to other institutions. In addition, this study is limited specifically to nursing majors at a specific university. Because this study took place at a four-year BSN institution, results may not be indicative of two-year registered nursing programs. The results are also not designed to be indicative of all nursing programs in the UNC system. Due to legislative considerations, this study's results should be confined to transferable studies within the state of North Carolina in four-year BSN programs. While the study may be transferable, results should not be generalized for non-professional majors and other universities.

The purpose of this study is to reveal if and how peer-mentoring is an effective intervention strategy for retaining first-year nursing students who are not thriving. My inquiry will be limited to first-year nursing students enrolled at ECU. These students have to be accepted into a student success learning community that is housed within the SASS. This learning community will be managed by the SASS office, and they require an application process to register for the course. The application is a formality, and students can register for the course if there is available room. My inquiry will engage first-year nursing students that register for a first-year seminar course at ECU. Students will not be excluded on the basis of any demographic indicator such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc. Students who participate in the interviews in phase three will only be students who registered for the section of first-year seminar that received the intervention. Students that withdraw from the university or from the seminar course that were members of the intervention group will not be able to be interviewed due to logistical constraints. Students who are under the age of 18 will not be included in the study. Nursing intended students that are in their second year will not be eligible for this study because they would not be eligible for a first-year seminar course. Transfer students will also not be eligible for the study because they would not be eligible to register for the freshman seminar course.

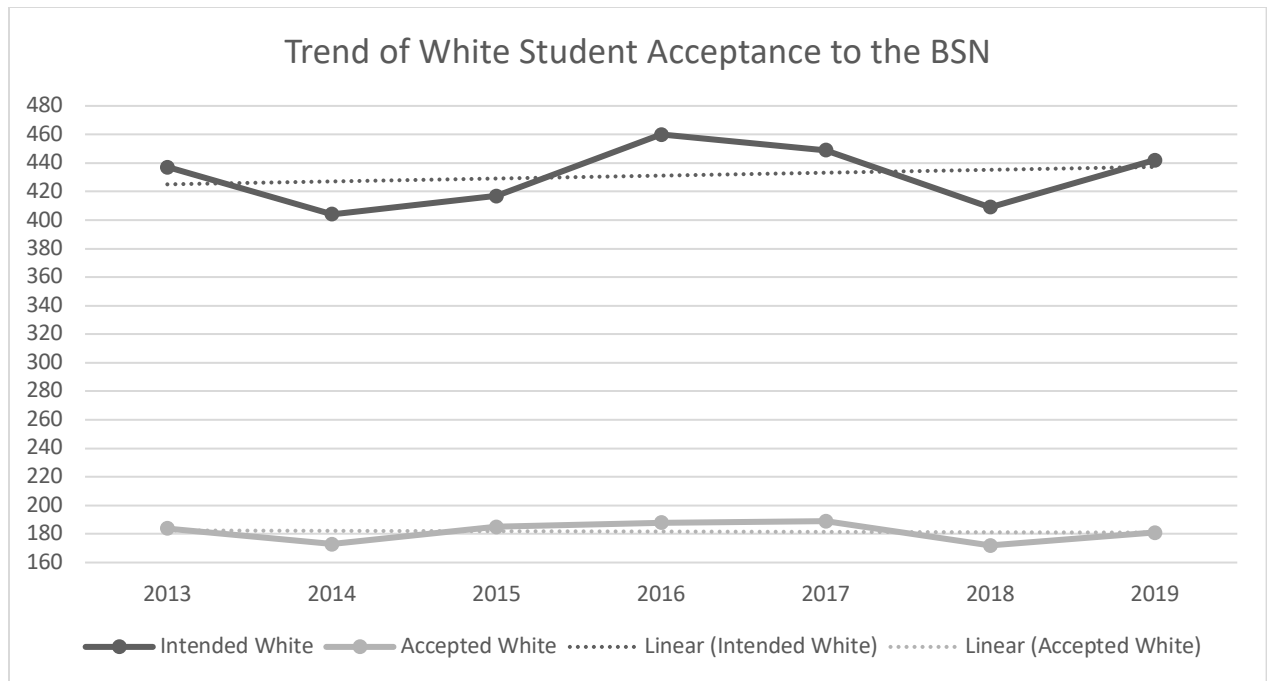
Significance of Inquiry

My study will build on research conducted by Nicole Mentag (2022) who studied the influence of mentoring on nursing students who were deemed to be thriving. At the conclusion of the study, Mentag (2022) suggests that studying the influence of mentoring on students who were designated as non-thriving was an opportunity for future research. There is currently an absence of a standardized metric for proactively implementing targeted early intervention strategies

tailored to students at risk of stop-out at ECU College of Nursing. This study's results would form the statistical basis for implementing and sustaining a peer-mentoring program housed within student services. In addition, there is not currently a metric utilized for proactively implementing targeted early intervention strategies for students at risk of stop out. This study identifies that the thriving metric could be utilized as a tool to identify students at risk of stopping out. The following sections will explain the implications for equity and social justice, as well as advances in practice.

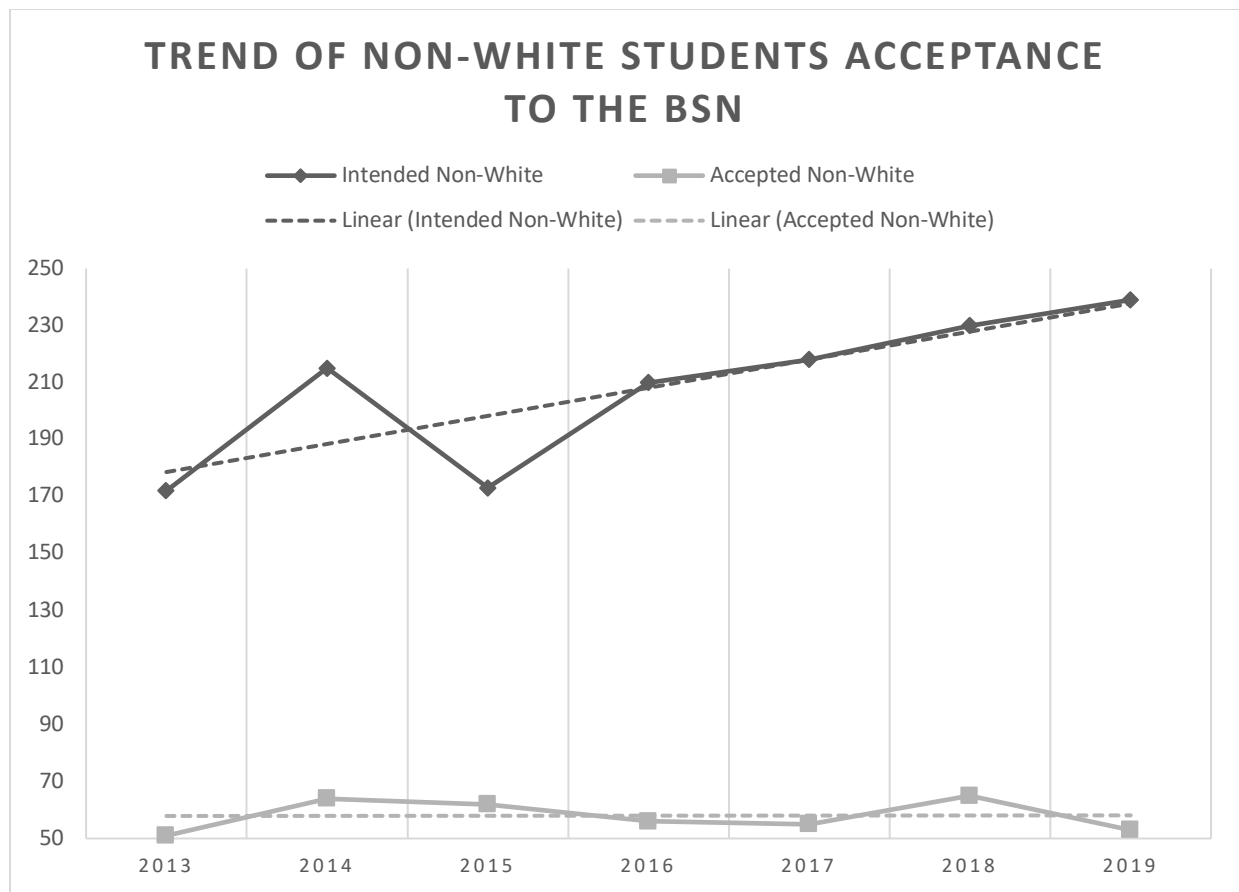
Advancing Equity and Social Justice

Student retention in competitive majors advances social justice. At the time of this writing, there is a discrepancy between the demographic constructs of the student population before and after declaring the major (See Figures 4 – 6) The top line in each of the figures identifies the number of potential nursing students based on a demographic category. The bottom line demonstrates the number of each category of students that have been accepted into the BSN option. The trend lines indicate that the number of intended students who identify as Black have increased. However, the trend lines indicate that the number of Black students who are ultimately accepted into the BSN option has not adjusted reflect the increase of Black students. In addition, the number of intended students who self-identified as male nursing students have increased. However, the number of male students who are ultimately accepted into the BSN option has decreased despite the population shift.



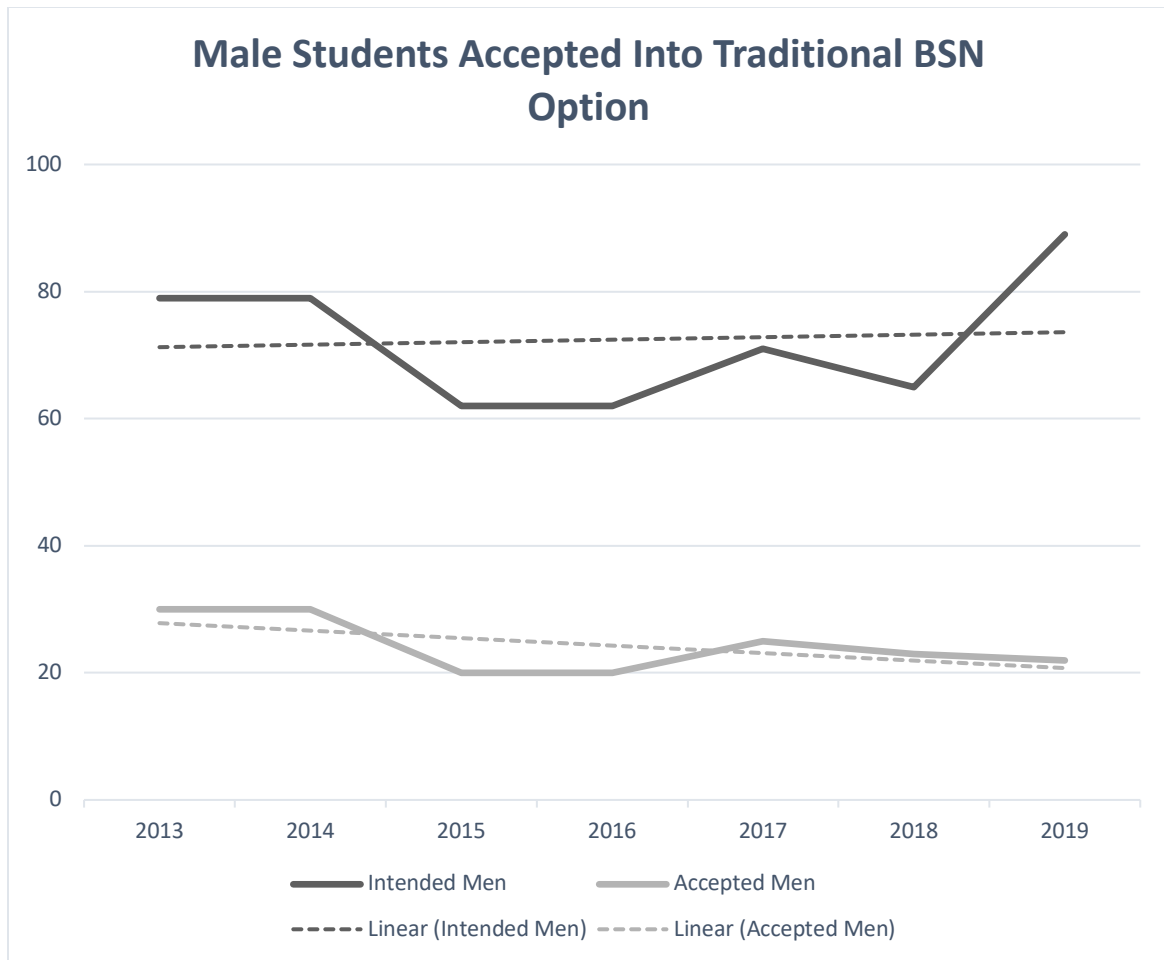
Note: Data compiled from Yan (2016, 2019, 2020, & 2023) indicates intended nursing majors retained to sophomore year at ECU.

Figure 4 *Trend of White Student Acceptance to the BSN*



Note: Data compiled from Yan (2016, 2019, 2020, & 2023) indicates intended nursing majors retained to sophomore year at ECU.

Figure 5 *Trend of Non-White Students Acceptance to the BSN*



Note: Data compiled from Yan (2016, 2019, 2020, & 2023) indicates intended nursing majors retained to sophomore year at ECU.

Figure 6 *Male Students Accepted into Traditional BSN option*

The simple solution to this challenge would be to identify students through traditional demographic categories. Using simple demographics, however, makes unfounded assumptions about the population of students. The psychological construct of student thriving allows this study to focus on the underlying cause of the problem, and target students that lack support. Utilizing thriving as a determinant of students who need support, allows this study to provide an intervention for specific students without using the “at-risk” label. The use of “at-risk” as a label for students is problematic as the term is not clearly defined and can categorize students simply for being non-White, impoverished, enrolled in special education, traumatized, or English language learners (Maryland ACLU, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2010).

When this label is applied as an adjective to students based on race, there is an implication that the student is deficient, and requires specialized remediation strategies (Ladson-Billings 2010). In their presentation to the Maryland Kirwan commission, Dr. Tolson highlighted that assigning the “at-risk” label to students that are traumatized, impoverished, English language learners, or enrolled in special education courses are not actually at risk if they have the correct protective factors surrounding them (Maryland ACLU, 2018). Rather than using an ambiguous universal label for students that are “at-risk,” it is more beneficial to specifically label the issue that the student is facing and provide culturally appropriate interventions specific to the student to improve their education (Toldson, 2019). In addition, as chapter two will discuss, the NURS model was originally developed as a method for supporting non-traditional nursing students and was later adapted to the larger nursing student population after learning that the model was universally effective. Synthesizing thriving with the NURS model allows the intervention to target students that need support as opposed to making assumptions about the need for support

based on sociodemographic characteristics that correlate with support needs in group design studies.

Advances in Practice

Utilizing thriving as a predictor of student retention and as an identification strategy for providing targeted support is novel in this studies' context. This study's results could be used to justify a generalizable study on the use of thriving as an early warning identification strategy for students transitioning to higher education. The results of this study could be used as a foundation for implementing additional stop out intervention strategies at four-year nursing institutions. Peer mentoring for the purpose of retention. This study will be created in a transferable way so that other four-year nursing institutions could utilize elements of the study and be replicated.

Summary

There is a global nursing shortage that the United States is not immune to. The opportunity for improvement is evident in the need to retain nursing students who have chosen to pursue nursing as their chosen careers. The reason that freshmen nursing students stop out from their chosen program varies. However, utilizing a holistic approach to retention and an early warning system provides an opportunity to potentially improve nursing student retention. This inquiry will is to examine the impact of a mentorship-based approach on retention for intended baccalaureate nursing students. The study will utilize action research and the plan, do study, act model to accomplish this goal. The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in the NURS retention model and the student thriving theory. The study will add to the existing research in nursing student retention by utilizing thriving as an early detection protocol. The study will advance social justice by targeting students who lack needed supports to succeed and provide an intervention that directly targets that need. Chapter two will provide an in-depth review of the

literature for student retention, student thriving, and mentoring. This will provide the research and literary context for this study. Chapter three will further discuss the research methodology that will be utilized for this inquiry.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The focus of this inquiry is to examine the impact of a mentorship-based approach on retention for intended baccalaureate nursing students. In NC, there is a projected 11% deficit in the necessary nursing work force by 2033 (The Program on Health Workforce Research and Policy at the Cecil G Sheps Center, 2021). Therefore, focusing upon improving the number of nursing graduates and the efficiency in their completion rates will reduce the projected deficit.

In the state of North Carolina (NC), intended nursing students are students enrolled in a Bachelor of Science in nursing program (BSN) and are in their first two years of study. This student population is also sometimes referred to as pre-licensure nurses. During this period in their studies, nursing students are enrolled in general education coursework and have not yet begun coursework in the theory, simulation, or clinical practice part of the nursing curriculum (Smiley et al., 2021).

Chapter 2 provides an extensive review of the literature on the broader context of student retention, thriving, and mentoring. The chapter will begin with an explanation of the theoretical framework of nursing student retention. Following this section, I will explore the context of student retention and definitions related to retention. Specifically, I will look at the conversations surrounding the definitions of student retention, traditional factors of retention, and definitions of student success. Next, I will discuss nursing student attrition and offer a holistic approach to retention. I will then analyze how thriving can relate to an approach toward a predictor of student retention. The characteristics of thriving students include a positive perspective, engaged learning and academic determination, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship. I will then offer a novel synthesis of a holistic retention model with a thriving measurement, and offer that mentoring is a natural intervention to pair with students who are not thriving. Previous research

indicated that the influence of mentoring could be impactful for the retention of students who were failing to thrive (Mentag, 2022). In studying nursing student retention, the major-specific model of retention is found rooted in nursing education principles (Jefferys, 2012). Thriving is a construct found within the psychological theory of flourishing and is housed in the discipline of psychology (Schreiner, 2010a). There was not a model that was readily available that could be utilized to examine thriving and nursing student retention simultaneously, so the two models were synthesized to analyze the influence of thriving and mentoring on student retention. The chapter ends with an exploration of mentoring. Specifically, I will define the different forms and characteristics of mentoring and offer definitions. I will focus on peer-mentoring and how it is beneficial to both the mentor and the protégé and then discuss how mentoring affects student retention. Read collectively, the work presented in chapter two suggests that a holistic approach to student retention helps identify and retain nursing students in need of support. Attentive to this literature, the proposed inquiry will examine the effectiveness of mentoring as an effective intervention for first-year nursing student retention.

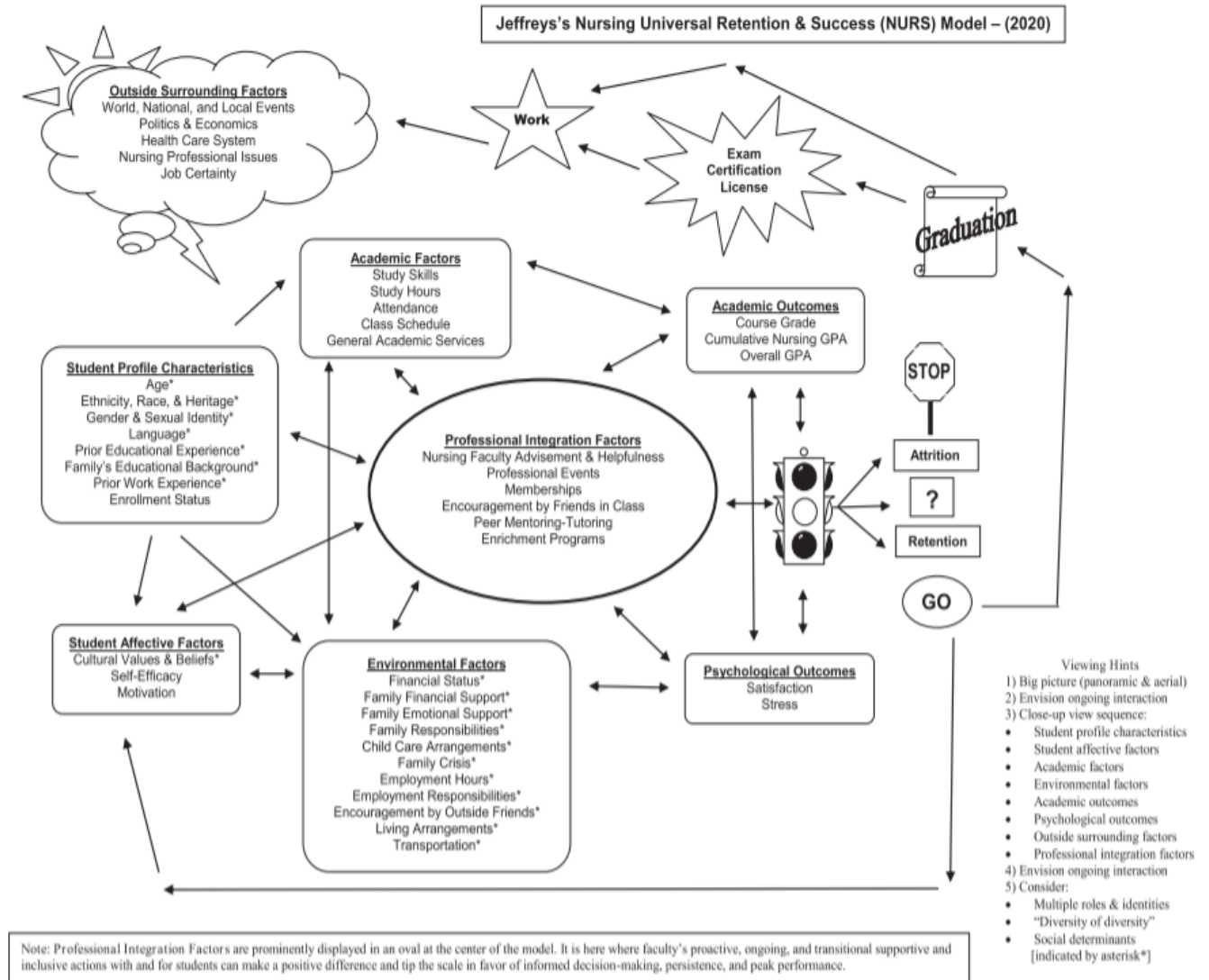
Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is Maryanne Jeffrey's Nursing Universal Retention and Success (NURS) framework. The NURS framework was chosen because it offers a unique discipline specific approach to nursing student retention. The framework looks at nursing student retention through a holistic perspective. The NURS framework consists of seven factors (see Figure 7) that influence student retention, and retention revolves around professional integration (Jeffreys, 2012; Jeffreys, 2022). While it is possible to isolate and study one aspect of the framework, it is important to consider all factors together as a cohesive model (Jeffreys, 2022a). Originally the NURS model was developed to track and understand non-traditional nursing

student retention (Jeffreys, 2012). The original acronym for the model was Nontraditional Undergraduate Retention and Success and was based on Bean & Metzger's work on non-traditional student retention (Jeffreys, 2012). However, as the model was tested the results indicated that NURS framework was applicable to all Nursing students and "Nursing Universal" replaced "Nontraditional Undergraduate" in the acronym (Jeffreys, 2012; Jeffreys, 2022b). Figure 7 shows Jeffreys' NURS framework.

The NURS framework examines why students stay in their chosen program, instead of examining why they leave (Jeffreys, 2022a). Jeffreys (2022a) argues that nursing student retention is holistic and can be analyzed through a series of factors of persistence. The factors are student profile, student affective factors, environmental factors, academic factors, academic outcomes, psychological outcomes, and professional integration (Jeffreys, 2012; Jeffreys, 2022a). Table 3 analyzes the seven factors of the NURS model. While it is possible to isolate and study one aspect of the framework, it is important to consider all factors together as a cohesive model (Jeffreys, 2022a). Jeffreys' (2012) notes that there are three pathways for tracking nursing student retention ideal, continuous, and stop out. In addition there are three attrition pathways first semester failure, voluntary, and involuntary (Jeffreys, 2012).

Jeffreys' NURS retention model was empirically supported through a literature review of experiments that used the model as a part of the study's conceptual framework and was found to be a successful framework for evaluating nursing student persistence (Cox, 2021; Hawkins et al., 2022; Jeffreys, 2022b; McNally, 2019; Williams & Dahan, 2022). The model has been used to determine methods for veterans transitioning to nursing careers after serving (Cox, 2021).



Note: From “Nursing Universal Retention and Success Model” by Jefferys, M. (2022a) Nursing universal retention and success (NURS) model: A holistic, discipline-focused framework. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 24(3), 650-675. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120939254> (p.657).

Figure 7 Jeffrey’s NURS framework

Table 3*Factors Affecting Nursing Student Retention from the NURS Model*

Factors	Characteristics
Student Profile	Considers student background prior to starting nursing courses such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, language, educational and professional background, and family educational background. By ensuring students are professionally integrated, perceptions about their identity can be positively or negatively impacted as obstacles or strengths in the profession. This factor directly impacts nursing student belonging.
Student Affective Factors	Considers a student's cultural beliefs and values which influence self-efficacy and motivation. This factor is influenced by all the other factors. By considering nursing students' cultural beliefs professionals can improve student self-efficacy and improve retention and can lead to persistence.
Environmental Factors	Factors that are external to the academic process which can be summarized in the model as finances, family, work, and friends. By considering students' environmental factors professionals can effectively advise students and can refer or provide accommodation if necessary. These factors tend to be more important for nontraditional student retention.
Academic Factors	Addresses nursing student study skills, hours committed to studies, attendance, schedule, and access to academic support. These factors are less important for nontraditional student retention. Academic factors directly affect environmental factors and academic outcomes.
Academic Outcomes	Accounts for nursing student academic performance. This goes beyond the GPA and accounts for individual course grades. Because this model is discipline specific it is important to separate the nursing discipline GPA from the general university GPA. This is due to the fact the nursing school policies regarding grades can lead to involuntary or voluntary attrition. These policies must be balanced with the regard for patient safety as the student begins to practice.
Psychological Outcomes	Refers to student stress and satisfaction, both of which are indicators of retention. Satisfaction leads to a greater chance at retention. In contrast dissatisfaction is an indicator of student attrition. Stress is experienced by all college students and leads to students to coping mechanisms. Positive coping mechanisms indicate a higher chance of retention while negative coping mechanisms lead to a greater chance of attrition. Psychological outcomes are directly related to academic outcomes and vice versa.
Professional Integration	The centerpiece of the NURS model considers factors that "enhance students' interaction with the social system of the college environment" (p. 126). These are the factors or interventions that are considered the most influential on assisting students in the decision to persist in nursing school.

Note: Information compiled from Jeffreys, M. (2012). *Nursing Student Retention: Understanding the Process and Making a Difference*. Springer Publishing Company.

Comparing military veteran students to traditional nursing students further emphasized that non-traditional students needed support in different factors than traditional students (Hawkins et al., 2022). NURS retention also has been successfully utilized to identify underrepresented minority nursing students in need of additional support for targeted interventions (Williams & Dahan, 2022). The NURS framework has been utilized to support retention for non-traditional students as professional integration factors reduced isolation (McNally, 2019).

Nursing Student Retention

To combat a global nursing shortage, it is important to retain students who are committed to the nursing profession. Student retention is one of the most researched fields in higher education (Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1993). Institutions are financially incentivized to retain their students through graduation (Tinto, 1993). In 2020, student service expenditure per student was \$2,412, institutional support cost \$4,382, and academic support per student cost \$4,259 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Isolating student service, academic support, and institutional support does not account for total expenses per student as it ignores instruction and research costs, however it does highlight institutional investment to student success. Nationally, four-year universities were investing a total of \$11,089 per student in student success (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022).

From a sunk cost theory of economics perspective, each student who leaves the university costs the university \$11,089 per year prior to drop out. Sunk cost is the amount of investment that an individual makes in a product or experience that cannot be recovered (Jhang et al., 2022). Each year that a student remains enrolled prior to exit compounds the university cost. A student who exits the university after their first-year year would cost a university \$11,089; If a student withdraws after their junior year, the university loses \$33,267 in sunk cost; If a student were to

stay enrolled for five years and then exit without completing the university would have lost \$55,445.

In conjunction with total cost, students directly generate revenue through tuition, fees, and government appropriations. Four-year institutions in 2021 reported that on average tuition and fees accounted for \$10,573 per student (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). State, federal, and local appropriations per student accounted for \$9,677 in revenue (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). Combining tuition, fees, and appropriations, on average each student is directly responsible for generating \$20,250 of revenue per year. Assuming that degree plans are completed in four years over the course of a student's undergraduate degree, on average they would directly generate \$81,000 for their institution. Each year following a student stop out that is an average revenue loss of \$20,250 per student, per year for up to three years. According to the national average each student, each year, nets a four-year university a 95.3% return on investment towards student success. This return-on-investment compounds each year and demonstrates that it is financially responsible for universities to prioritize student retention.

Trying to determine effective interventions to mitigate student exodus is desired throughout all higher education, but particularly in nursing. To combat a global nursing shortage, it is important to retain students who are committed to the nursing profession (Bumby, 2020; Soerensen et al. 2023). It is especially important to retain nursing students who will look like the communities in which they will serve (Dahan, 2022). To develop these interventions, it is necessary to study the motivations behind why students leave higher education and fail to persist in nursing (Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1993). This section will look at student retention, analyze nursing attrition through challenges specific to nursing, and finally examine a holistic approach to nursing student retention.

Retention and Definitions

This discussion of student retention will begin with Tinto's (1993) model of student retention. Tinto (1993) argues that students who quickly engage with and become integrated into the university community form a sense of belonging and commitment leading to lower student attrition. The locus of control in Tinto's model of student retention is shared between the individual students and the institution. It is the student's job to set goals and commitments to the university, and it is the institution's responsibility to ensure access to resources and encourage engagement with the campus. Based on Tinto's model, engagement and commitment have become the two criteria for improving student retention and lowering student attrition. Engagement is a term in higher education that lacks a clear definition (Tight, 2020). Student engagement has evolved over time to include time and effort that students devote to activities that are linked to outcomes such as cognitive development, psychosocial development, self-esteem, moral development, ethical development, and how universities induce student participation to achieve the desired outcome (Kuh, 2009). Engagement is linked with integration, involvement, and community and is directly linked to student retention (Tight, 2020). Commitment refers to the factors that shaped the initial goal set by the student who is seeking to pursue a degree in higher education, and based on their engagement with the university can enhance or diminish the student's commitment to complete their degree (Hovdhaugen et al., 2023).

Defining Student Retention. Student retention is difficult to universally define. The term retention can be used to describe students who leave the college system altogether, transfer to another institution, simply change majors, or any number of reasons that delay a traditional graduation timeline (Tight 2020; Tinto, 1993). For four-year institutions retention as a metric is

defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics as the percentage of students who persist in their educational program from their first fall enrollment to their second fall enrollment (2021). East Carolina generally as well as the College of Nursing specifically both utilize a similar metric, however with the delineation that full-time, first-year students are measured for retention statistics (IPAR, 2024; Yan, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2023). Persistence as a metric is similar to retention is measured by the National Student Clearinghouse as the number of students that return to any higher education institution for their second year (2024). Persistence and persisting are defined by Tinto (2017) as “Another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise” (p.2). Persistence is independent of student affiliation with any particular institution. Retention studies and theories focus on the reason students leave, and what universities do to encourage students to stay at a particular institution (Tight, 2020). For this reason, measuring student retention can prove problematic as the metric does not totally encompass the reasons for student departure from a particular institution, much less track students across institutions. This lack of clarity around student retention may be part of the reason that more modern studies of the metric have tried to isolate characteristics of student retention rather than exploring retention comprehensively (Tight, 2020).

Traditional Factors of Retention. Traditional models of retention focus on academic performance, grade point average (GPA), university engagement, and community as predictors for student success and attrition (Jefferys, 2022a; Mentag, 2022; Tight 2020; Tinto, 1993). These factors help predict student dropout, but they do not take other psychological factors into account (Mentag, 2022; Schreiner, 2014). Traditional factors of attrition may provide guidance for students in non-professional majors, but they do not offer a holistic picture for students pursuing

professional degrees (Mentag, 2022, Yatzack et al., 2021). Traditional measures of success do not account for psychological factors such as flourishing or well-being, and do not account for a student commitment to professional goals (Mentag, 2022). Traditional measures do not consider professional requirements or demands of social integration of students to multiple groups (Yatzack et al., 2021).

Tinto (1993) may be applicable to traditional academic majors such as history, psychology, or mathematics; however, nursing and other pre-professional degrees present a unique challenge for retention models (Hovdhaugen et al., 2023; Sweetman et al., 2022). Research has shown that Tinto's model for institutional engagement and commitment is not effective in the current framework for pre-professional students, including nursing students (Hovdhaugen et al., 2023; Sweetman et al., 2022). Hovdhaugen et al. (2023) argues that for Tinto's model to be applied to nursing students the emphasis must be altered from academic community integration and commitment to professional community and commitment. In Tinto's model, students are integrated into a collegiate major in a linear fashion and integrate socially and academically with one social and one academic group. In Tinto's model, the social and academic integration that facilitates goal commitment and ultimately persistence or dropout, is grounded in a student's pursuit of an academic goal.

In nursing, and other professional degree programs, student persistence is rooted in professional commitment (Hovdhaugen et al., 2023). Professional commitment can be defined as the commitment that a student has towards obtaining access to a profession (Hovdhaugen et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). Thomas et al. (2023) found that nursing student's commitment to gaining access to the nursing profession was an important motivator for persistence in the program. Thus, in addition to having to integrate academically nursing students also must

integrate as a practitioner, through clinicals that are not present in traditional academic programs. Sweetman et al (2022) adds to this argument by highlighting that nursing students are constantly facing reintegration amongst multiple peer groups. Nursing students must integrate socially, academically, and as a practitioner. This means that nursing students must engage with a cohort of students, and faculty, in a traditional academic manner. Then the same student must engage with a different social group of students, faculty, and professional nurses as a practitioner in clinical practice. This social group integration forces students to be in constant flux of integration as students shift between social settings. In addition to this social flux, students also experience multiple or extended periods of transitions that work in opposition to integration or engagement. Nursing school clinical rotations mean that students are constantly having to re-integrate with new students and professional nurses meaning that socially they are experiencing a constant state of being a novice. Professional commitment becomes the consistent motivator for persistence through the social and academic fluxes that nursing school presents (Hovdhaugen et al., 2023; Sweetman et al., 2022).

Student success is an ambiguous term that can be used in a variety of ways (Denham et al., 2018; Jeffrey, 2012; Schreiner, 2018; Yatzack et al., 2021). The literature suggests that there is not a universal definition of success and because of the ambiguity traditional institutional measures of retention are also insufficient determinants of student success (Denham, et al., 2018; Jefferys, 2022a; Mentag, 2022; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1993; Yatzack et al., 2021). The most common measures for student success are grades, grade point average (GPA), retention rates, graduation or completion rates, certification, and job attainment (Yatzack et al., 2021). Student success can refer to student academic achievement in their first or second year (Al-Alawi et al., 2020). and so much more. Universities can define student success as grades and grads; however,

this does not account for a student's perception of success (Denham et al., 2018). There can be a disconnect between grades and student perceptions of success. Students who are facing additional barriers, like language acquisition may perceive academic success as professional certification (Denham et al., 2018). GPA does not account for student perceptions of success (Stadler et al., 2021). By accounting for student's perceptions of academic success the measurement moves from objective grades to the student's subjective perceptions (Stadler et al., 2021). In turn, this makes the student a factor of defining their academic success (Stadler et al., 2021). Success can be defined as helping students transition from simply surviving to thriving in college (Schreiner, 2018). In this vein, student success is in the eye of the one defining the metrics.

Nursing Student Attrition

In the examination of student retention, it is also important to consider student attrition. Attrition in the context of this study means the failure to persist in the nursing program (Jeffreys, 2012). Attrition is the antithesis of retention and through its analysis, institutions can discern students' reasons for leaving their studies. It is important to continue to consider the whole student when considering if a student will leave (Hou et al., 2022). Students in nursing leave for a host of reasons including financial need, family responsibilities, academic failures, and job opportunities. Hou et al. (2022) also noted personal environment, self-efficacy, financial situations, and the opportunity for professional advancement were indicators of student drop out. According to Soerensen et al. (2023) students left nursing school for three primary reasons. First, due to a lack of emotional support for dealing with coping with the harsh realities of the profession (e.g., 12-hour shifts, witnessing patient death, vomit, blood, poop, etc.). Second, a lack of belonging and feeling vulnerable emotionally. Students reported feeling emotionally

drained witnessing patients battling serious illness, and the emotional drain caused students to stop out. Finally, the lack of social support from other students caused students to withdraw. Students reported feelings of isolation, and drama as reasons they stopped out. Students need social support to be less likely to withdraw from their studies (Ayoobzahdeh, 2023). Social support and the opportunity for professional integration can be accomplished through peer-mentoring (Ayoobzahdeh, 2023; Jeffreys, 2022). Canzan et al. (2022) supports these reasons by highlighting that clinical placement served as the catalyst point for many students to decide to leave the program, since this generally is the first real exposure to the profession.

It should be highlighted that students who considered dropping out ultimately choose to stay in their selected programs due to the people who students perceived were involved in their education (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021). In “The Good Life and How to Live it” an 80-year longitudinal study on adult development, four things were identified as essential for human well-being: nutrition, exercise, purpose, and positive relationships (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). Relationships are essential for students to persist in their college endeavors (Felten & Lambert, 2020). For example, students reported that family, friends, university staff, or any person who offered the student positive support influenced their decision to persist in their program (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021). The more overlap that exists in the networks of relationships that exist for a student creates a resilient resource that students can draw on when challenges arise (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

Challenges Nursing as a Field Poses to Retention

Nursing poses a unique challenge to the issue of retention (Hovdaugen et al., 2023). Nursing is highly selective and there is a balance between maintaining legislated professional standards, while also meeting the increasing demands of the market (NC Board of Nursing,

2023; Smiley et al., 202; The Program on Health Workforce Research and Policy at the Cecil G Sheps Center, 2021). To manage the scarcity of available resources, the selection process and logistical challenges of nursing school applications is competitive and rigorous (Al-Alawi et al., 2020). Programs in North Carolina are confined to logistical requirements placed on schools of nursing by state and nursing boards. UNC policy dictates that a program that fails to have at least an 85% pass rate on the state licensure examination (NCLEX-RN) for two consecutive years could have leadership terminated, and if a program fails to have a 75% pass rate on the NCLEX-RN would be terminated (Nursing Education, 1990). The North Carolina Board of Nursing (2023) requires that four-year universities institute a two and two curriculum. In addition, in North Carolina, clinical practice that are required for licensure is legislatively limited by student-preceptor ratios (21 N.C. Admin Code 36.0318 – Faculty, 2021). The first two years of experience in college, the intended nursing student takes academic foundations courses such as anatomy and physiology and chemistry. The following two years, nursing students become declared nursing students and engage in their nursing course work and begin clinical rotations (North Carolina Board of Nursing, 2023). These guidelines produce scarcity of available seats for students seeking a four-year nursing degree. In the state of North Carolina between 2019-2021 there were 4,233 qualified applicants for BSN programs and only 2,363 were admitted and enrolled in nursing school (North Carolina Board of Nursing, 2022). Common predictors of student success for pre-nursing students are pre-nursing grade point average (GPA), pre-nursing science course GPA, and standardized exams to ensure that candidates will be successful; completing their schooling in a timely manner, thus avoiding logistical challenges of scarce resources (Al-Alawi et al., 2020). Schools in North Carolina use these predictors to select students to fill their limited seats, and have competitive application processes (Carolina Nursing,

2023; East Carolina University College of Nursing, 2023; University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2023; North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, 2023; NC Central University, 2023). Studies have been conducted that focus on the retention of nursing students after they have been accepted into their chosen Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program (Al-alawi et al., 2020; Bumby, 2020; Cazan et.al., 2022; Cox et al., 2021; Denham et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2022; Mentag, 2022; Sorrenson et al., 2023). However, there is less research available regarding the attrition of pre-nursing students in bachelors' programs.

Holistic Approach to Retention

As previously noted, students abandon their studies for a wide range of reasons. It is important to utilize a holistic approach to identify students at risk of leaving an institution and implement intervention strategies (Hou et al. 2022). This is partially because it is difficult for researchers to define “drop out” and “attrition,” and attribute pre-nursing student attrition to realizing students want to choose a different path or fail to meet academic expectations (Canzan et al., 2022; Tight, 2020). The dictionary definition of drop out is someone who abandons an activity or pathway, in this context a student who abandons pursuit of a nursing degree (Merriam Webster, 2024). Similar to dropout, stop out can be defined using the NURS model as means “a break in continuous enrollment for one or more semesters excluding summer sessions” (Jeffreys, 2012, p.10). Within the NURS model Jeffreys (2012) offers three definitions of attrition. The first simply refers to students dropping out of nursing.

Attrition can then be categorized into two pathways. The first is voluntary attrition, which is when a student drops out for non-academic reasons. The second pathway is involuntary attrition which is when a student leaves for academic reasons (Jeffreys 2012). Utilizing retention models that consider the whole student picture should offer a more comprehensive guide to

student retention than the linear one size fits all approach suggested by Tinto (1993). This could also be an example of a trans mutated theory as over time the principles suggested in Tinto's theory of retention could have been simplified to be applied to larger bodies of students. Tinto (1993) does suggest that relationships are a vital aspect of student persistence suggesting that it is a web of relationships that connects students to the campus. The intentionality of weaving a web of relationships with others throughout campus can help to mitigate the complex challenges that students face and allow for support to encourage student persistence (Felten & Lambert, 2020). This aspect of Tinto's model of retention does lend itself to a holistic approach to student retention. Students have a wide variety of factors for deciding to leave (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021). Studies that try to pin the reason for student departures on a single problem are missing the whole picture (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021). Because attempting to isolate a single issue for addressing retention is insufficient, it is necessary to consider a holistic approach to retaining pre-admitted nursing students (Jeffreys, 2022a).

Studies have shown significant retention using the NURS model as an early identification system for "at-risk" students significantly improved retention rates for the studies' nursing program (Williams & Dahan, 2022). The NURS model supports students who belong to historically marginalized groups when it is implemented as a part of the conceptual underpinnings of a holistic intervention strategy (Jefferys, 2022b). The model was originally created for retaining students who were considered non-traditional undergraduate nursing students (2012). Identifying students who are deficient in a NURS model factor and implementing retention intervention strategies early in a student's collegiate career has a significant impact on student retention, especially on students who are underrepresented minorities in nursing (Williams & Dahan, 2022).

It is imperative that institutions make efforts to retain nursing majors to help meet the growing demand for nursing in a timely manner. By failing to retain students it creates inefficiencies in the job market. Students who delay entry into the program delay entry into the field which then creates a jam as those students have to take seats from students arriving in the next cohort, which then further delays those student's entry into the field. This then limits students time in practice in the clinical setting. It is important to understand the factors that influence student attrition to understand effective interventions to retain these students. Utilizing the NURS model, institutions can utilize a holistic approach to retention to better address multiple challenges to student retention. Holistic approaches should allow nursing students to thrive in their program and stay in the major.

Thriving

Taking a holistic approach to retention considers traditional academic factors like GPA, academic performance, and community, while also including psychological determinants such as stress, belonging, and external influences (Jefferys, 2022a; Mentag, 2022; Tight 2020; Tinto, 1993). Thriving is rooted in the positive psychological theories related to flourishing and resilience, which have been predominantly studied in younger children and older adults, so there is limited research on college student populations (Mentag, 2022, Schreiner, 2010c; Yatzack et al., 2021). In addition, there is a lack of thriving research as it relates to nursing students specifically (Mentag, 2022). Thriving provides a more inclusive approach to retention by considering non-academic factors (Erck et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2021; Mentag, 2022). This approach shifts the motivation behind studying student success from the negative perspective of why students fail (e.g., centering on “at-risk” or drop out) to a positive perspective of why students succeed (Schreiner, 2010c; Yatzack et al., 2021). For students enrolled in professional

degree programs, current models of anticipated retention do not adequately address persistence or resilience (Mentag, 2022; Yatzack et al., 2021). As discussed previously in this chapter, persistence examines the reasons for why students choose to remain dedicated to completing a goal in a despite facing challenges. Resilience is similar to persistence as it refers to a person's ability to recover after facing a setback (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Students in professional programs are currently measured through methods that are more aligned with surviving and not thriving (Yatzack et al., 2021).

Thriving is demonstrated through a person experiencing both vitality and learning, and the term is often associated with flourishing and resilience (Jaleel et al., 2023; Schreiner, 2010c; Spreitzer et al., 2005; Yatzack et al., 2021). Schreiner (2010c) defined thriving as, “the experiences of college students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally” (p. 4). Thriving college students have an optimistic outlook on life that directly influences their ability to persist through academic, social, and emotional challenges because they have developed coping mechanisms to address their challenges. The objective is to shift from studying college students' motivations for attrition and focus on student successes, which shifts notions of student success from surviving to thriving (Schreiner, 2010c; Yatzack et al., 2021).

Characteristics of Thriving Students

Thriving encapsulates student success above the standard retention metrics because it accounts for psychological components of retention and can predict persistence and success (Mentag, 2022). Schreiner (2010a) explains that student thriving is composed of five characteristics: positive perspective, engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship. The following section will look at the five characteristics of thriving argued by Schreiner (2010a).

Positive Perspective. Positive perspective in thriving examines the likelihood that a student would have a positive outlook and persist through a problem despite the challenges (Schreiner, 2010c). This measurement correlates to the psychological outcomes and part of the student profile factors of the NURS model (Jeffreys, 2022a). Psychological outcomes in the NURS model refer to a student's stress and satisfaction (Jefferys, 2022a). The goal is for a student to have low stress and high satisfaction for students to be retained. A positive perspective helps to serve as a measure of self-efficacy and motivation, which are components of the NURS model's student affective factors.

Engaged Learning and Academic Determination. Engaged learning is investment in one's learning, demonstrated through processing, attention, and interaction without distraction (Jaleel et al., 2023; Paquette et al., 2022; Schreiner, 2010b). Engaged learning is both behavioral and psychological. Three components to student engagement exist including meaningful processing, focused attention, and active participation (Jaleel et al., 2023; Paquette et al., 2022; Schreiner, 2010b). Meaningful processing involves making connections between learning and personal experiences. Focused attention requires a student to be present in the moment while learning is occurring. Active participation is the easiest observable part of learning.

Academic determination helps to predict persistence and the ability to regulate learning behavior (Paquette et al., 2022; Schreiner, 2010b). Academic determination contains four components: investment of effort, self-regulation, environmental mastery, and goal-directed thinking. Investment in effort is demonstrated by a growth mindset and can serve as a significant predictor of GPA and persistence (Schreiner, 2010b).

Engaged learning and academic determination are the closest to traditional predictors of student success in the NURS model (Jefferys, 2022a; Tight 2020). Thriving accounts for

academic determination and engaged learning by assessing academic determination and engaged learning to measure the psychological success of a student in the classroom environment. The NURS model also accounts for these more traditional measures of student retention through academic factors and academic outcomes.

Social Connectedness and Community. Relationships play an important role in positive life outcomes (Schreiner, 2010a; Zhou et al., 2022). Social connectedness directly relates to belonging and a sense of community (Schreiner, 2010a). Students who thrive are connected to others who support, listen, and spend time with them (Schreiner, 2010a). It is important to note that the quality of the relationship is more important than the quantity of friends. The ability to form and maintain healthy relationships allows access and benefits to other aspects of college. The four components of a sense of community for thriving students are membership, relationship, ownership, and partnership (Schreiner, 2010a).

Community is formed as a student learns their place within the campus community and is related to successfully transition to college (Schreiner, 2010a; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1993). Colleges can help achieve this by helping students find their niche within the campus community and helping students connect with organizations and clubs at the university (Schreiner, 2010a; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1993). Relationship refers to students sustaining the positive connections made in their first-year year, as well as the respect students receive while in college (Schreiner, 2010a; Zhou et al., 2022). Relatedly, ownership refers to including students in the decision-making processes at the university and providing leadership opportunities (Schreiner, 2010a). Overall, thriving examines social connectedness helps describe a student's relationships (Schreiner, 2010a). This characteristic of thriving can be used to measure the environmental

factors of the NURS model which addresses family relationships and external factors influencing student retention.

Diverse Citizenship. Thriving students can be identified by their ability to appreciate diversity and serve others (Schreiner, 2010a). Diverse citizenship in thriving students addresses a student's willingness to be inclusive and impact the community (Schreiner, 2010c). Serving others helps students accrue self-esteem, strengthen their immune system, and find greater satisfaction (Schreiner, 2010c). Students who demonstrate diverse citizenship are also more likely to give back and support other students, which could indicate students that would be candidates for peer mentors. This aligns with the NURS model's student profile and student affective factors. By considering student background, culture, ethnicity, race beliefs, gender, language, educational, and professional background into account the NURS model student profile takes a student's identities into account (Jeffreys, 2012). Through understanding these differences and being aware of the biases and prejudices that exist towards specific students, educators can maximize retention strategies (Jefferys, 2012). Cultural values and beliefs are the final component of the student's affective factors would also be measured through the diverse citizenship factor.

Synthesizing the NURS Model and Thriving

Mentag's (2022) study identified that thriving could be used as a predictor of student retention. In that study, Mentag (2022) identified that there is an opportunity for additional research in identifying students who would be characterized as not thriving, and the influence that mentoring would have on retaining those students. By utilizing thriving as an early warning system the research could be utilized to address achievement gaps in historically marginalized groups (Mentag, 2022). Schreiner's (2010a) theory of student thriving provides five attributes of

students who are thriving. Jeffery's (2012) NURS model suggests that retention of nursing students can be addressed through six factors that revolve around professional integration. Upon studying these two models it became clear that the two authors were discussing similar elements, however, they approached their theory through different lenses: Jeffery's through a nursing education lens and Schreiner through a psychological lens. In my search through the literature a study that synthesized these two theories was not readily available, so I synthesized the information based on my interpretation of the literature. This would allow me to utilize thriving as an operational theory for identifying students as an early warning system, and then create a holistic pathway for retention for nursing students. Synthesizing Laurie Schreiner's (2010a) theory of student thriving with Marianne Jeffery's (2022a) nursing universal retention and success (NURS) model provides a theoretical framework for predicting nursing student retention. Jeffery's (2022a) NURS model of retention centers around ensuring that students are integrated with their potential profession during their collegiate experiences. The six factors surrounding this professional integration affect the likelihood of students becoming connected to the profession during their collegiate experience. Schreiner's (2010c) Student Thriving framework can be used to analyze how these six factors would influence student success. Figure 8 demonstrates how the thriving framework and NURS retention model could be utilized to predict student retention and success.

Jeffreys' framework centers around professional integration as the primary reason students in professional programs, specifically nursing, persist in their programs (Jefferys, 2022a). The theory then identifies seven factors (professional integration, academic factors, academic outcomes, environmental factors, psychological outcomes, student affective factors,

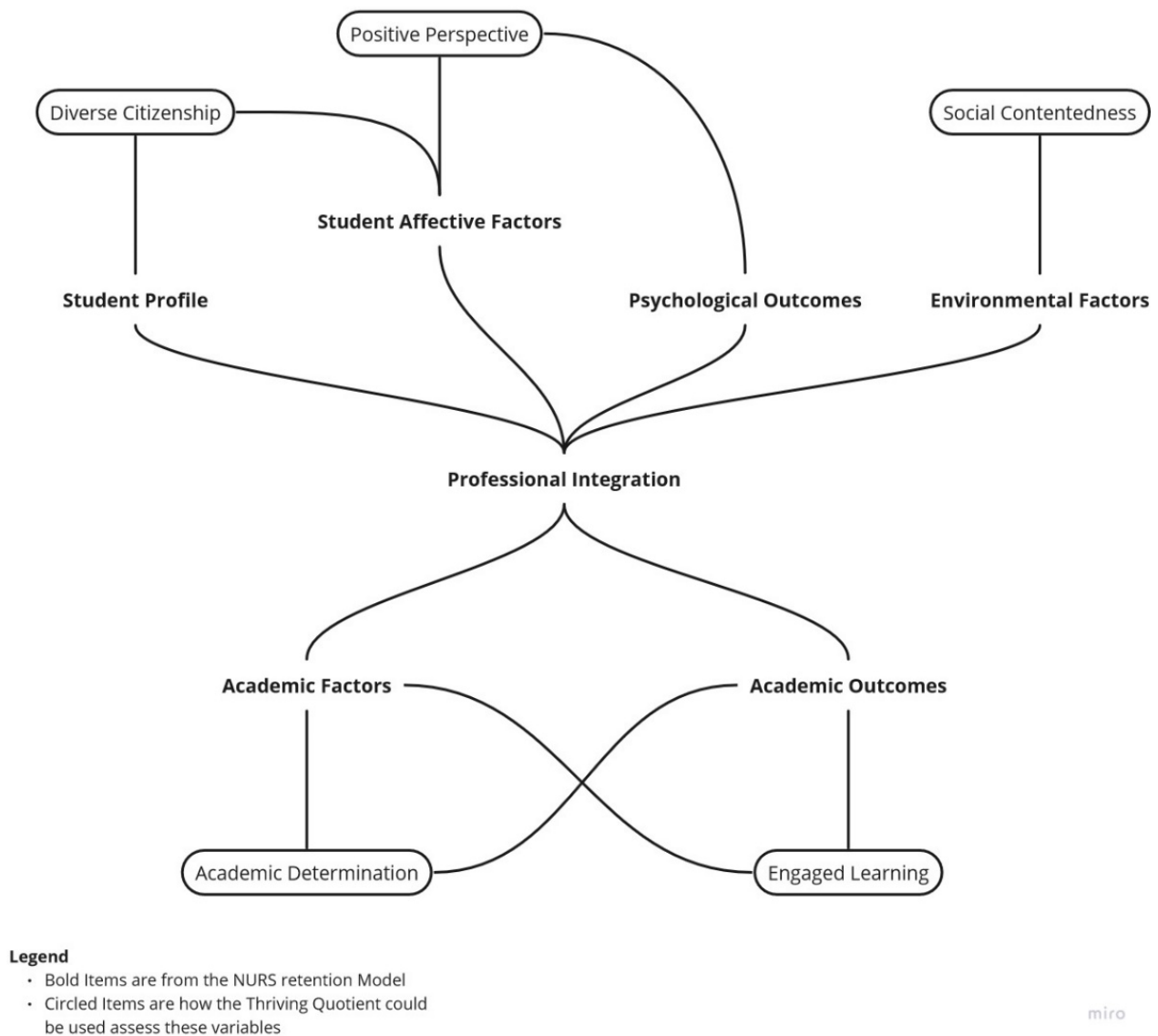


Figure 8 *Synthesizing NURS Retention Model and Thriving*

and student profile) that influence students' ability to integrate professionally. These six external factors align with Schreiner's (2010a) theory of student thriving which can be seen summarized in table 4. Student thriving can then be utilized to potentially predict attrition in nursing students, and other professional programs.

Mentoring and Nursing

Mentoring is a common and cost-effective intervention to empirically positively influence nursing student retention (Ayoobzadeh, 2022; Bumby, 2020; Canzan et al., 2022; Grabsch et al., 2022; Lane, 2020; Venegas-Muggli, 2021). Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs are designed with a two and two curriculum (Smiley et al., 2021). The first two years of the intended nursing student experience are grounded in theory and general education courses. The second two years declared-nursing students are involved in the clinical, classroom, and simulation settings. Partnering students that are in their first two years of college with a more experienced student gives intended nursing students an opportunity to identify professionally while still in the first two years of the BSN program (Smiley et al., 2021). This section will describe characteristics of mentoring overall, focus specifically on peer-mentoring, and discuss peer-mentoring's influence on retention.

There is not a consistent definition of mentoring, because many types of mentoring exist (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Mentoring creates an opportunity to place a more experienced individual in a learning partnership with a novice, or protégé. Vygotsky's theory of zonal proximity (1978) suggests that learning occurs through social exchange between two individuals where one individual is more knowledgeable about the subject and is able to provide support to a protégé.

Table 4*Characteristics of Thriving Students*

Thriving Characteristic	Description
Positive Perspective	Thriving is demonstrated by students who have a positive outlook of challenges and are able to persist through difficulty.
Engaged Learning	Students demonstrate thriving when they demonstrate meaningful engagement and connect personally with the material they are studying.
Academic Determination	Students who demonstrate thriving can prioritize academic activities like studying and class preparation, over distractions.
Social Connectedness	Thriving is demonstrated by those students who are engaged in quality relationships with others.
Diverse Citizenship	Students who can appreciate differences between themselves and others.

Note: Information compiled from (Schreiner, 2010a; Schriener, 2010b; Schriener, 2010c).

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory suggests that social learning occurs through modelling, when a protégé observes a more advanced individual performing an action and then repeats the action. Mentoring serves as a proactive intervention to provide support that counteracts factors that cause nursing student dropout (Joung et al., 2020; Lane, 2020). Through mentoring students are provided formal opportunities to engage in social learning, and benefit from the proximity and example of a more experienced individual. Mentoring is unique in that it is a relationship or partnership that can be finite or continuous, centered on learning, that the mentor serves as an experienced guide, and a social contract exists between the two parties that changes over time (Garvey et al., 2014).

Types of Mentoring

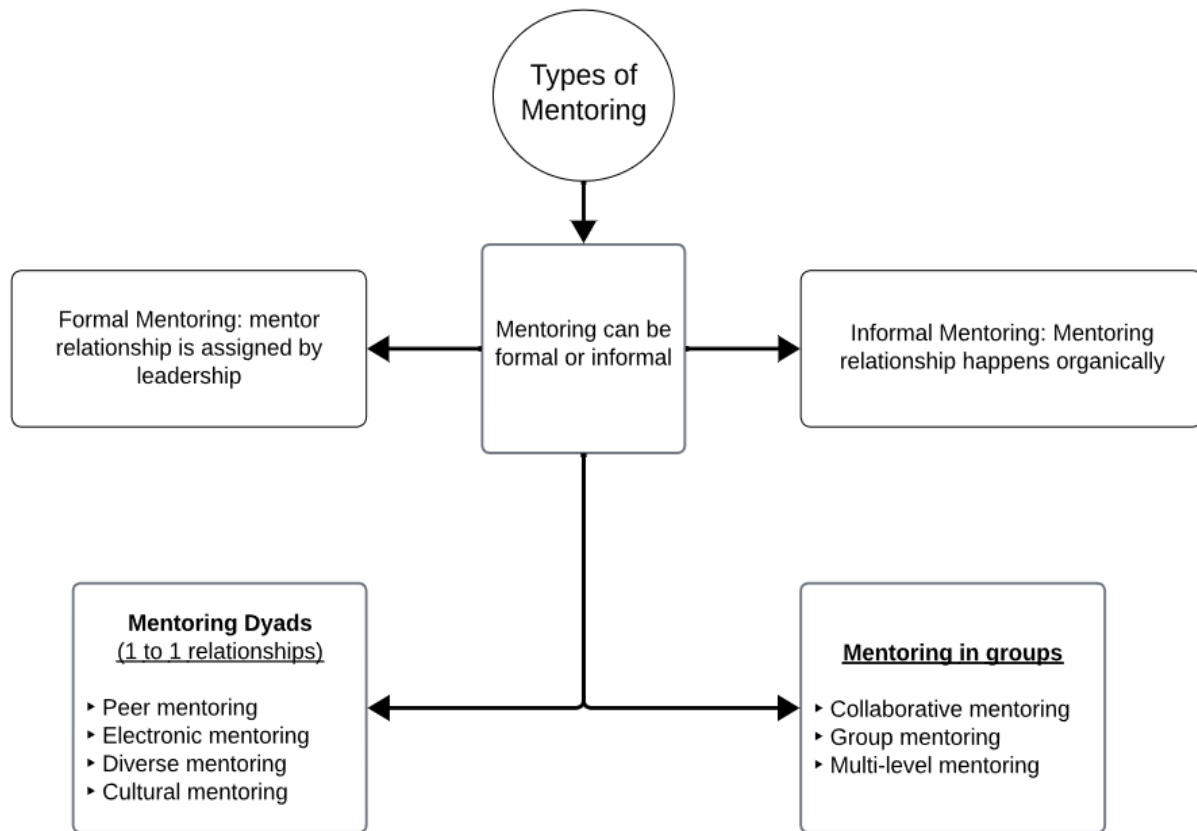
In a traditional mentoring model, there is an experienced mentor and protégé arranged in a professional learning relationship, normally as a dyad (Garvey et al., 2014; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). There are nine types of mentoring relationships identified in the literature: formal mentoring, informal mentoring, diverse mentoring, electronic mentoring, collaborative mentoring, group mentoring, peer mentoring, multilevel mentoring, and cultural mentoring (Garvey et al., 2014; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). These forms of mentoring refer to the structure and intentionality of the mentoring program. Figure 9 demonstrates how these mentoring types can be categorized. Formal mentoring is assigned or arranged by an organization or advisor. In contrast to formal mentoring, Informal mentoring happens organically and does not require leadership assignment. Diverse mentoring blends formal mentoring with the intent of connecting individuals who are not alike. Electronic mentoring refers to the use of technology to allow mentoring partnerships to occur. Collaborative mentoring denotes a dynamic partnership where there is an evolution of the relationship and mentor and protégé can be parallel or exchange

places within the dynamic (Garvey et al., 2014; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Group mentoring provides an alternative to the traditional dyad model and allows for one mentor to guide multiple protégés. Multilevel mentoring brings about systemic changes by connecting leadership with staff. Cultural mentoring connects students or protégés with diverse international mentors. Peer mentoring is a form of mentoring that is specifically designed for protégé persistence, as the peer mentor is an experienced individual who can model and demonstrate for the protégé because they have advanced further professionally or academically (Garvey et al., 2014; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021).

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring offers the greatest potential of influencing a nursing student's professional integration and social integration according to the NURS retention model (Jefferys, 2022). There is not a universal definition for peer mentoring (Joung et al., 2020; Lane, 2020; Lim et al., 2022; Yarbrough, 2022). A concept analysis from 2022 found that a definition for peer mentoring for higher education nursing students is, "a formal learning partnership between two individuals (mentor and mentee) with differing levels of nursing school experience. The peer mentor promotes a positive academic and emotionally supportive environment, decreasing stress and increasing the mentee's confidence and competency" (Yarbrough, 2022, p. 1549).

Yarbrough's definition (2022) of peer-mentoring is important to distinguish because it disqualifies faculty and staff within the institution as peer mentors. Peer mentoring in the first-year of the student transition is a viable method for improving student retention as it allows for a holistic approach to helping the student persist (Lane, 2020). Students engaged in peer mentoring maintained a high amount of motivation to continue their studies, and a low intention to leave (Ayoobzahdeh, 2023).



Note: Information compiled from (Garvey et al., 2014)

Figure 9 *Types of Mentoring*

Academic peer mentoring is beneficial for both the mentor student and the mentee student (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Joung et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021; Majors et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Yarbrough, 2022). The following section will examine the benefits for both the mentor and mentee.

Benefits for the Mentor. Mentor students benefit from the mentorship relationship as well as the protégé. In nursing, the mentor benefits from the relationship because of the opportunity to develop professional skills, reduce stress, and develop competencies (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022). The mentor student is also able to gain and develop important leadership skills as they engage in the mentoring process (Baroudi & David, 2020). This opportunity for leadership is important for students who belong to populations that are traditionally denied opportunities to lead due to social norms, expectations, and in some cases legal restrictions (Baroudi & David, 2020). For example, in some Middle Eastern nations, women are traditionally denied traditional leadership opportunities. However, by utilizing a mentorship program, women in those nations are given opportunities to develop leadership skills (Baroudi & David, 2020).

Mentors grow in their relational intelligence through building rapport with their protégé (Marshall et al., 2021). Mentors grow in leadership and self-awareness by being given the opportunity to confirm concepts and impart learned skills to their protégé (Marshall et al., 2021). Peer-mentors were able to grow professionally as they are exposed to new ideas and perspectives from their protégés (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2021). Nursing mentors when serving as mentors during clinical exercises benefit from professional growth in practice by having the opportunity to mentor a protégé in skills they were still developing

(Jacobsen et al., 2022). By supervising protégé students peer mentors grow in self-confidence as they share experiences (Jacobsen et al., 2022).

Benefits for the Protégé. For the mentee, the relationship provides support, advising, stress relief, and improved study skills (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Lewis, 2021; Lim et al., 2022, Wang et al., 2022). Peer-mentoring reduces stress for both the mentor and protégé (Lim et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Yarbrough, 2022). Peers are able to provide both problem and emotional solutions as well as survival advice because they lived the experience themselves (Lim et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Mentees also reported that they felt more comfortable asking questions of their peers, rather than their instructors further reducing stress (Yarbrough, 2022). Mentors play an important role in advising, supporting peer mentees, and providing opportunities for professional growth (Lim et al., 2022). Organizing formalized mentorship models can allow students to work with others who look like they do and can improve belonging and retention (Majors et al., 2022). Major's (2022) novel study found that students who were intentionally paired with mentees who had similar characteristics improved the perceived support that the mentee received and improved the inclusiveness of their peer-mentor program.

Peer Mentoring and Retention

Psychological outcomes in the NURS model would be directly influenced by mentoring because mentoring helps to reduce mentor and mentee stress (Jefferys, 2022; Lim et al., 2022; Yarbrough, 2022). When faced with stress, nursing students seek coping mechanisms and because of the structure of the peer mentoring relationship, mentor students can provide protégé nursing students with emotional and academic support (Lim et al., 2022). Connecting nursing students early in their education with a mentor had reduced anxiety, stress, and increased confidence (Yarbrough, 2022).

Mentoring is different than tutoring or coaching in that it requires that the mentor previously experienced the career pathway that the protégé is traversing. Peer-mentoring potentially possesses the greatest potential of the mentorship models for improving nursing student retention. The relationship between the mentor and protégé is beneficial to both parties. Mentorship programs help mentors improve their leadership capacity and their competencies, and protégés reduce stress and improve their sense of belonging. Peer mentoring directly influences students' professional integration, the centerpiece of the NURS retention model. This makes mentoring a holistic, cost-effective approach to improving retention in nursing students.

Summary

Missing from the current research on student retention are holistic approaches to the concept of retention and success. Studies need to be conducted to evaluate the impact of intervention strategies on students who are deemed as non-thriving. According to Bemby, sixteen studies on the retention of nursing students recommended evaluating the impact of peer-mentoring on retention. Jeffreys suggests that using peer-mentoring or faculty mentoring has the greatest potential for influencing a student's professional integration characteristics and therefore nursing student retention. Utilizing Jeffrey's NURS model of retention provides a framework with which to study student retention through a holistic approach. Traditional retention studies focused on students who are surviving and are best suited for students who are pursuing traditional academic programs of study. By evaluating students from a holistic perspective, interventions can account for additional factors that can lead to student retention.

This study aims to synthesize the NURS model of retention with the psychological construct of student thriving. Thriving is rooted in the concept of flourishing. Thriving was selected as the terminology aligns with Schrier's application of the concept of flourishing to

students in higher education. The five characteristics of college student thriving align with Jeffrey's NURS model and can provide a predictor of stop out. Students who lack an element of thriving demonstrate a need for support. Because both the NURS model and thriving are holistic approaches, it necessitates an intervention that can support students holistically.

Mentoring provides students with a holistic intervention for support that can impact all characteristics of the NURS model and provide support for students who are not thriving. There are a variety of mentoring methods and approaches, however peer-mentoring is directly related to improving student retention. A peer mentoring relationship is psychologically and academically beneficial for both mentor and protégé. Because a peer mentor is someone who has experienced similar events to the protégé and builds a dyadic relationship with the protégé the mentor is able to provide holistic support to improve retention for intended nursing students that are failing to thrive.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

The focus of this inquiry is to reveal the influence of a mentorship-based approach on retention for intended baccalaureate nursing students pursuing the traditional BSN degree. As discussed in the previous chapters, there is an anticipated nursing shortage, and it is important to ensure students who are interested in pursuing the profession persist in the program. This study will be conducted at East Carolina University's College of Nursing amongst the first-year student population. The following chapter will outline the methods utilized for conducting the study beginning with the inquiry's guiding questions, design, and then procedures. This will be followed by the inquiry's rigor, scope and limitations, and my positional perspective within the context of this study.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

This inquiry will be guided by the overarching research question seeking to reveal how peer mentoring provides holistic support to influence first-year nursing student stop-out, as suggested by the NURS retention model. To help the analysis of the findings, the following sub-questions will further assist in guiding the study:

SQ1: How can a thriving scale be used to build an early alert system for identifying first-year nursing students in need of support?

SQ2: How effective is mentoring at preventing or delaying first-year nursing student stop-out? Jeffrey's NURS model suggests that mentoring is the most effective way to influence nursing student retention (Jeffreys, 2022). The following sub-questions will provide the answers to the quantitative questions surrounding the broader question evaluating the effectiveness of the program. Sub-question one will seek to identify the total number of students in need of mentoring support. Sub-question two will attempt to quantify the effectiveness of an

implemented mentoring program. Finally, sub-question three will examine the qualitative information about the effectiveness of the peer-mentoring program for student retention. This mixed methods approach will allow me to examine the effectiveness of the mentoring program's effectiveness to retain intended nursing students.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to reveal if and how peer-mentoring is an effective intervention strategy for retaining freshmen nursing students, who are not thriving. Uniquely, the study employs a psychological lens of student thriving to identify those requiring support. The findings aim to offer a holistic approach to support identification without relying on conventional predictors like academic achievement. ECU, a major producer of registered nurses in North Carolina, has seen a decline in retention rates, particularly among intended nursing majors. Despite a decrease in total applicants to its traditional BSN option, the number of freshmen nursing majors has risen, indicating a retention challenge rather than a recruitment issue. The study aims to determine the influence of peer-mentoring as an intervention for retaining freshmen nursing students who are not thriving.

At the heart of this study, the purpose is to research a method of improving student retention within ECU's College of Nursing. To achieve this objective this inquiry will utilize both improvement science and action research to answer the research questions. To address this inquiry, the study will utilize the improvement science principles, specifically the cycles of inquiry model, employing four phases of the framework: plan, do, study, and act (Bryk et al., 2015; Langly, 2009; Midler et al., n.d.). Improvement science requires a continuous improvement cycle with five steps: Define a problem, develop a change, implement the change, test the change, and spread the improvement. Once step five has been completed the research

begins again at defining a problem (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). This research will also draw on action research principles to determine if the intervention is successful. Because the purpose of this inquiry is to bring about institutional improvements for student retention action research methods will be utilized to design the study. Action research is a unique form of research that allows the utilization of various forms of research methods because the primary purpose of the model is to improve the research setting while allowing the researcher to be a participant in the study (Watkins et al., 2023). Action research is also useful for answering problems-based research questions like the one posed in this study (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Similar to the continuous improvement model from improvement science, action research is also cyclical, and has six cyclical steps (Watkins et al., 2023). The six steps are to develop the foundation, frame the challenge, design for the future, plan for change, intervene, and then evaluate the study (Watkins et al., 2023).

I will use a mixed methods approach to conduct this research by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the influence of a peer-mentoring program. The quantitative data will generate closed-ended data that will be used to analyze trends and initial effectiveness of the mentoring intervention. The second part of the data collection will be comprised of student interviews which will generate open-ended data about the effectiveness of the program and be able to provide insight into the influence of the peer-mentoring program on individual participants. This research design follows the explanatory sequential design which collects quantitative data and analyzes the information first and is followed by qualitative data collection and analysis so that the qualitative data explains the quantitative findings (Creswell & Cresswell, 2023). This approach is displayed in figure 10.

To answer the research question, how does peer-mentoring provide holistic support to influence first-year nursing student stop-out, the study will utilize three sub-questions. Phase one of the study will answer the research sub-question one, how many first-year nursing students are thriving? Phase one of the study or the planning phase data will be collected on intended nursing students. This will be collected through survey distribution. Incoming first-year students enrolled in nursing specific first-year seminar courses will be administered the *Brief Inventory of Thriving* advising survey to determine their score on the thriving scale (Su et al., 2014). These data will be collected and analyzed to determine which students are in need of peer-mentoring intervention. Due to the limited availability of mentoring resources, students will be placed in two groups; one group will have access to the mentoring intervention while the other group will be monitored to observe if they are likely to stop-out. Students will be able to participate based on their choice to register for a nursing specific first-year seminar course that is affiliated and choosing to complete the survey. The students will then be grouped based on their results on the survey and the section of the freshman seminar course that they registered for. Two sections of the course will not receive the mentoring intervention and will serve as the control group. The section of freshman seminar that I teach will receive the mentoring intervention. The use of these control groups draws from principles of quasi-experimental design. Quasi-experimental design allows for the researcher to create groups that are not completely randomly assigned (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Because the surveys will be utilized and the data generated will inform the creation of the control and intervention groups, the groups will not be entirely random. The use of quasi-experimental design and control groups will also provide an ability to track students that fail to persist.

Explanatory Mixed Method Design

Research Question: disclose and describe how peer-mentoring provides holistic support to influence first-year nursing student stop-out, as suggested by the NURS retention model?

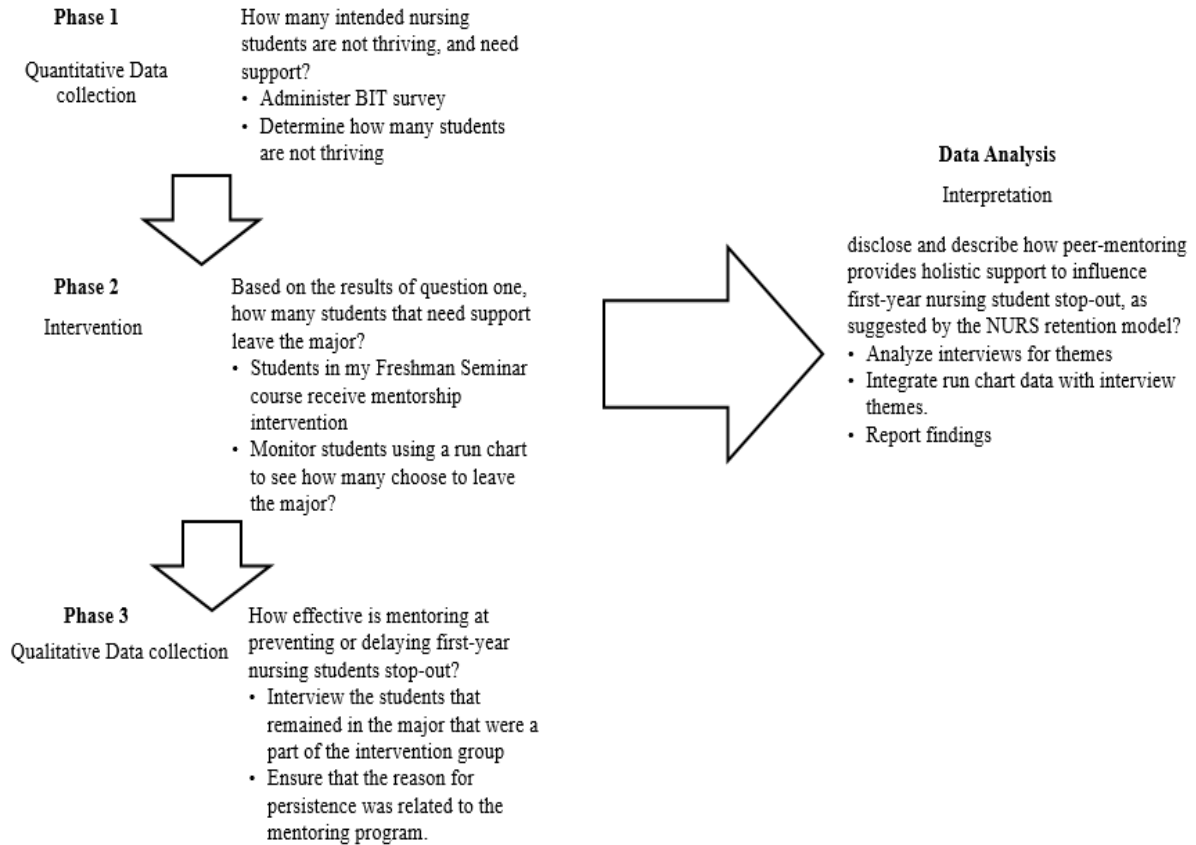


Figure 10 *Research Design*

After using phase one to establish the study groups and answer sub-question one, phase two of the study will focus on implementing the peer-mentoring intervention. This will help to answer the second research sub-question, as well as lay the foundation for the third sub-question. While the peer-mentoring program is being implemented, students will be monitored for stop-out. This will be tracked on a run-chart for both control groups and for the intervention group. The run chart will allow me to analyze trends and assess the effectiveness of the mentoring intervention during the process (Anhoj & Olsen, 2014; Williams, 2018). This will generate quantitative data to be able to measure persistence about retention that will be analyzed and will be substantiated by the qualitative findings from phase three following the explanatory sequential design model (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The final sub-question will evaluate the influence of the peer-mentoring program on student persistence.

Phase three will answer the final research sub-question, which is, how effective is mentoring at preventing or delaying first-year nursing students stop-out? Students from the intervention group that persists will be interviewed to gauge the influence of the mentoring program on their choice to persist in the nursing program. This phase will utilize phenomenological design to understand how the intervention influenced the students' choices. Phenomenological research explores the experiences of the study's participants as explained by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Phenomenology seeks to gain an understanding of our daily experiences prior to reflection (Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology studies persons because it seeks to uncover the irreplaceable (Manen, 1990). This design allows for research to exploration of theory or occurrences from the individual's perspective (Manen, 1990). In the hermeneutic phenomenological approach the qualitative data generated, usually through interviews, are considered along with the data collection process, researcher beliefs, and

interview guides are considered as a part of the whole (Ray & Locsin, 2023). These experiences will be integrated with the quantitative data generated from phases one and two to assess the influence of peer-mentoring on first-year nursing student persistence.

Context of the Inquiry

As previously discussed in chapter one, East Carolina University is rated as a large, basic doctoral university with high research activity (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020). Most of the student body is comprised of undergraduate full-time degree seeking students, with over 50 percent of these students residing on campus. ECU features professional and arts and sciences degree programs with a high graduate coexistence (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020). A high degree of graduate coexistence highlights that students who complete undergraduate degrees at ECU return for graduate programs. Most of these graduate programs are in professional fields such as nursing. As discussed in chapter two, ECU's College of Nursing is the state's leader in graduating nurses into the profession. When faced with an impending nursing shortage it is important that the college of nursing can maintain, or improve, the output of nurses seeking to enter the profession.

Nationally, nursing students are predominantly White (58.6%) female (86.4%) and are under 25 years of age (54%) (National League of Nursing, 2022). Across all types of nursing degrees including the two-year, four-year, and graduate level nursing programs, nursing students are predominantly taught by White (76.4%) women (91.2%) who are between 30 and 60 (76.7%) (National League of Nursing, 2022). ECU's demographic statistics show that students in all programs are predominantly White (74%) women (90%) (ECU, 2021) and are taught by predominantly White (80%) women (94%) (ECU, 2021). Thus, in comparison to the national

average of all nationwide nursing programs, ECU nursing faculty are reflective of national demographics, whereas nursing students are significantly less diverse. At the time of this inquiry there is a discrepancy between the demographic makeup of students that are in the first two years of their nursing curriculum and the demographic makeup of cohorts that are accepted into the BSN option. This inquiry is an attempt to improve retention rates for all students in a competitive major with limited student acceptance. While this study does not directly address any specific demographic challenges to this issue, the study attempts to address the issue of a lack of support for students in need, an underlying cause that affects all students.

As discussed previously, currently the undergraduate nursing education program at ECU offers four pathways to obtaining the Bachelor of Science in nursing (BSN). This study will only focus on the traditional four-year pathway to the BSN degree. The traditional four-year route is pursued by students who enter ECU as a nursing major out of high school and following the NC Board of Nursing requirement of a two and two curriculum (North Carolina Board of Nursing, 2023). The first two years focus on general education course work and the latter two years are when students focus on their nursing specific course work. There is not currently an early warning system for students in this degree pathway to determine if they need additional assistance. In addition, there is currently not a formal process for mentoring within the college. If a student is pursuing a future career as an officer in the United States military, they can complete both the traditional BSN pathway with additional military coursework and earn a BSN and an officer's commission.

Context and Loose Coupling

The emphasis on retention directly overlaps with the work being conducted by the SASS office at ECU. There is currently no office of student success that is specifically or officially

attached to ECU's College of Nursing. Nursing majors rely on student success supports that are designed for students who are taking courses at a geographically disconnected campus. This geographic and organizational disconnect between the College of Nursing and the greater university campus can lead students to miss out on potential available academic support. To combat this, a department of nursing student support services exists to provide support to nursing students while at ECU. This department houses academic advisors, recruiting, compliance, technical support, and counseling offices. These offices exist to support nursing student success. However, the focus of the offices outside of recruiting and advising is focused on declared students who have been accepted into a BSN option. Retention support for intended nursing students generally is the responsibility of academic advisors. Because of the ambiguous job description of advising, advisors are positioned and relied upon to provide support where it is needed, even if it is not a traditional part of the role. To accomplish these additional responsibilities advisors and their offices are uniquely positioned by having relationships with many entities and institutions that influence or exist within higher education. Advisors can refer and provide individualized support for students when needed. The relationships between the institution of advising and the greater university organization can be explained through loose coupling. By analyzing the loosely coupled entities within the larger organizational constructs at East Carolina University, opportunities for utilizing undefined space for student success are revealed. This analysis lead to the development of a collaborative opportunity to partner with SASS at ECU to provide additional nursing specific academic support through peer-mentoring.

Loose coupling as an organizational theory reflects the concept that two entities are not connected, however, their actions and decisions influence and impact each other (Weick, 1976). In an organization that has loosely coupled entities, each entity retains its own individual identity

while being reactive or reflexive to the other entity that it is partnered with. The coupling that holds the entities of the organization together can vary and has a wide range of applicable connections (Weick, 1976). This organizational system offers several advantages: increased system survival likelihood, enhanced sensing capabilities, localized adaptation, capacity for significant innovative development and sustainability, ability to compartmentalize organizational failures, and potentially lower implementation costs. Adversely, there are negatives to this organizational design that can be highlighted by redundancies, ambiguity, and decentralization (Weick, 1976). Loose coupling has specific advantages and disadvantages as an organizational theory. Some advantages include compartmentalization, sensing, localization, and allowing for easy entry and adaptation for programs (Weick, 1976). These loose couplings may occur as a result of intentional planning or as a result of accidental organizational development. The ambiguity and lack of rigidity prove enticing for an organization seeking to remain inexpensively adaptable. These advantages come with a cost associated. To remain loosely coupled an organization must give up centralized rigid structures and accept redundancies that develop (Weick, 1976). The perception of these costs as inefficiencies or advantages is important for an organization to permit the existence of loosely coupled systems within the organizational structure. The ambiguity that this organizational theory allows for can be a pain point for an organizational leader who views redundancies as an inefficiency. Viewing the ambiguity as an advantage allows for potential organizational growth to occur organically as institutions and employees within the greater organization identify and utilize the organizational gray area that is created by a decentralized organization. This lends itself to another previously undiscussed advantage of loose coupling, that the theory supports self-determination and the efficacy of the constituents and consumers of an organization that utilizes a loosely coupled organization

(Weick, 1976). Loosely coupled organizations therefore allow for all within the organization to assume collective responsibility for the organization's sustenance and success.

Advisors are coupled with the university greater through the Office of Academic Affairs. Student Success offices at East Carolina are bureaucratically organized under the advising office, with a dotted line indicating that in some cases both offices hold the same authority and jurisdiction (IPAR, 2024). Student success centers can be equally as ambiguous in their purpose as the term itself has multiple meanings within higher education (Denham et al., 2018; Jeffrey, 2012; Schreiner, 2018; Yatzack et al., 2021). The ECU Pirate Academic Success Center is just as vague in its description stating that the center is “dedicated to fostering a collaborative and inclusive learning environment designed to assist students to achieve their academic goals” (East Carolina University, 2024b). The relationship between academic advising offices and SASS offices within the larger organization is coupled in that policy created by either office directly impacts the other without a centralized department within the organization. The broad definitions of these two offices provide a gray area for student retention. Both institutions can create overlapping policies or procedures, and creating programming for student retention can cause questions about resource allocation and liability. Academic Advisors out of necessity to provide localized support to the student populations they serve, occupy an intentionally ambiguous space. Because of the necessity to provide organizational support to students seeking to navigate the college experience advisors function in a decentralized bureaucratic structure that allows for localized support. Loose coupling can help to explain how advisors can be utilized as an easy organizational access point for interventions and major specific localized supports. This localized support can allow advisors to offer targeted interventions that are major specific to support student retention and success efforts.

Loose coupling in this structure is evident in the redundancy created. Generally, redundancy is viewed as inefficiency and a disadvantage of loosely coupled pairings (Weick, 1976). In this case, it creates an advantage for the students that both organizations are supporting. Having two offices that are concerned with student success generates a system that fewer students should be able to go undetected if they are struggling to succeed. This arrangement emphasizes another benefit of a loosely coupled system, which is that it leads to greater sensing (Weick, 1976). With this arrangement, both offices can provide checks and balances on student success policies and programming. In addition, the two offices can act as advocates for students in the larger organization as policies are legislated and disseminated to students.

Loose coupling provides easy access points for those seeking to engage with an organization (Weick, 1976). The challenge in creating a peer-mentoring program within a complex organizational construct is a point of access and which department would assume control of maintaining the program. Traditionally, since retention is linked to student success, a student success department would be tasked with constructing and housing the program. However, because of the geographic challenges facing first-year nursing students and the challenge of providing major specific localized support the concept of loose coupling provides an opportunity to occupy a bureaucratically ambiguous space. Academic advisors in the College of Nursing occupy a unique space that connects first-year nursing students to the College of Nursing, as well as the contacts to main campus supports. By forming this connection, the intent is that peer-mentoring relationships can be formed to positively influence nursing student retention. The redundancy and common mission of both College of Nursing advising office and SASS to provide support to students who are at risk of stopping out provides a collaborative opportunity. Academic advisors generally are an early point of contact as students begin to

register for classes and seek to learn the basics of navigating their college experience. SASS and resources are equipped with infrastructure to impact student retention efforts for students that need the support. By collaborating with our student success colleagues students can potentially be identified and referred to earlier in their academic careers if they need support.

Inquiry Partners

There are two primary groups of partners that I will collaborate with in conducting this inquiry. The first are my academic advisor colleagues in the College of Nursing's student services department. The second group is the Student Success office and their learning community. My colleagues in advising will provide thriving and retention data for the control groups since they will be teaching the freshman seminar courses that do not require a formal mentoring intervention. The collaboration with the office of Student Academic Success Services (SASS) and the Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC) are essential for the success of this study. Housed within the SASS office, the PASC provides tutoring, mentoring, and academic support services to the general student population at ECU.

Academic Advisors in Student Services

Academic advisors are crucial for the success of this project. Each advisor in the College of Nursing monitors a caseload of students that are monitored and supported. This is also one of the few groups within the college that can contact all undergraduate nursing students regardless of their year in the program. Because of the geographic distances between the health science and main campuses this office often serves as one of the few connections between both campuses for supporting students. For the purpose of this inquiry, I will collaborate with advisors to conduct two essential tasks. The first is to distribute the initial thriving surveys to determine which students are in need of support. As an insider conducting research within the university that I

work, I have personal access to my advisee caseload. However, that only accounts for approximately 20 percent of the total number of nursing majors at the university. I will need the other advisors to contact their advisees. In addition, while the intervention is being implemented, advisors will be asked to monitor the students in the study that are a part of their caseload for stop-out. If a student who is participating in the study that is in a control group changes majors or withdraws from the university, the advisor will be asked to contact and notify me, so that I can update the run charts tracking the data.

Office of Student Academic Success Services

The academic success center is located on the main campus at East Carolina. This makes them ideal collaborators in the study to improve student intended nursing student retention. Their physical location bridges the across town geographic divide that separates advisors and success efforts located on the allied health campus from the intended nursing students located on main campus. In addition, the SASS office has a peer-mentoring program already established with mentors trained through College Reading and Learning Association's International Mentor Training Program (IMTPC). The SASS has created a nursing specific learning community built on two common courses: first-year seminar course and an introduction to health course. The first-year seminar course will serve as the group being studied as the intervention group. Because the freshman seminar course is affiliated with a success learning community, students who want to register for the course students who want to register for the course have to apply and be accepted to the success learning community. This application is created and managed by the SASS office and is used for all the learning communities they run. The application was sent out via email to all incoming freshman nursing intended students, and acceptance to the learning community criteria was first-come first-serve. Most importantly intended nursing students gain

access to the center's trained and certified peer-mentors and will be required to meet with the mentors periodically throughout the semester. The mentoring program is managed by SASS and PASC and student resource usage data will be shared with me from their office.

Ethical Considerations

The study will be conducted with minimal risk to participants. I completed the CITI Ethics training modules prior to beginning this study. UMCIRB will be consulted to confirm that this study will be exempt based on rule 45 CFR 46.104(d)(1) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). The study was found by IRB to be exempt under category 1,2 B. The letter approving the study can be found in Appendix A. Participants will be provided with informed consent prior to completing the Brief Thriving Inventory in phase I (See appendix E).

Ethically this study will face the challenge of not being able to help all who are identified as benefiting from the intervention. More students will be surveyed and identified by the thriving scale than there will be available mentors to support. Because there is capital scarcity with regards to the available mentors the intervention must be limited to only one group, while the control knowingly does not receive the additional benefits.

Inquiry Procedures

The following sections will detail and describe the three phases of the inquiry and the procedures for examining the influence of the peer-mentoring intervention. First, I will detail the Phase I processes utilized for gathering the baseline data and the construction of the control and intervention groups. I will then discuss the details and processes in implementing the mentoring intervention in Phase II. Finally, I will explain the Phase III interview process and the data analysis.

Phase I

Phase one will answer the first research sub-question and begin the process for answering the second sub-question. To answer how many students are not thriving and in need of support, I will ask the incoming first-year students enrolled in a first-year seminar course to complete a brief thriving inventory survey that will be distributed by their academic advisor. This will be conducted two weeks following the start of the semester after students have begun transitioning to college. During the registration period, students will be registering for first-year Seminar. There are four sections of first-year seminar that are offered for intended nursing students specifically. All the sections are taught by advisors for the nursing major. One section will be excluded from the study because it is affiliated with the nursing specific LLC and will receive additional support. Two sections of the nursing specific first-year seminar course will be taught similarly to previous years. Thanks to a collaboration with the Student Academic Success Center, my section of first-year seminar will be affiliated with a student success learning community which will provide access to trained and certified peer-mentors for the students enrolled in my section. Students who wish to enroll in my section must complete an application requesting to be affiliated with the Student Success Learning community that is handled by the student success office. The application simply ensures that students are intended nursing majors and are affiliated with the correct student success learning community. Students are enrolled in the course on a first come-first serve basis. Students enrolled in my section will serve as the intervention group for the study. While students enrolled in the two traditional first-year seminar courses will serve as the control, since they will not be receiving the intervention. The survey will be administered to students in three sections of first-year seminar. Students will be notified that completion of the survey will be accepted as their consent to participate in a research study. The survey will contain

basic demographic questions, a question about their registration status for ECU's first-year seminar course and an optional space to include their email for follow-up. The survey will be the *Brief Inventory of Thriving* (BIT) that was developed, tested, and normed by Su et al. (2014). Validation information is provided below. Students that are deemed as not thriving will be totaled and then assigned into two groups. Students are deemed not to be thriving in a certain category if they score in the 25 percentile or below on the BIT (Su et al., 2014). Group sizes will be determined by the number of students that register for the three-nursing specific first-year seminar course and opt to participate in the study. Since the mentors present a scarce resource, there is a limited number of seats available in my section of the nursing first-year seminar course. Once the two groups have been identified, one group will receive the peer-mentoring intervention while the second group will serve as a control group and all groups will be monitored for nursing stop-out. Once the data from the first phase is collected, I will have the answer to the first research sub-question, and data collection for sub-question two can begin.

Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies

My inquiry will engage first-year nursing students that register for a nursing-specific section of first-year seminar. Students are encouraged to register for first-year seminar courses during the registration window. The nursing-specific sections of freshman seminar courses will be taught by nursing advisors. Students will be surveyed as a part of the course to determine if they are thriving. This survey will also serve as an opportunity to opt out of the research being conducted. The purpose for selecting thriving as a criterion for selection is to allow the study to determine the influence of a mentoring program for students that are both thriving and not thriving. Thriving will serve as the testing framework for the study. Students will not be excluded

on the basis of any demographic indicator such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, first or continuing college student status, and the like.

Participants will be recruited throughout the new student orientation process and through email and during orientation presentations. As summer orientations start, part of the new student induction process is to visit main campus and the college of nursing for two presentations conducted by the advising office. These presentations are conducted in large group lecture hall settings utilizing power point with students and family present. Students are then informed of the opportunity to take a first-year seminar course as a form of support and encouraged to register for the class. My specific section will be aligned with a Student Academic Success Services (SASS) learning community which requires that an application to the SASS office to request acceptance to the learning community. The selection is done on a first come, first serve basis and as students are selected to the learning community, they will be placed in my first-year seminar section. All students who are selected to participate in my section of first-year seminar must be nursing intended students at the beginning of the semester, and in their first-year of college. Two weeks after classes begin a slide will be added to a class presentation with the notice of consent (Appendix B) and a link to *The Brief Inventory of Thriving* survey. The slide will be presented by myself or one of the other advisors. The survey will include an optional place to include an email. Student consent will be collected as they provide their optional email. Students who register for my section of first-year seminar will be asked to participate in follow-up interviews as a part of my section of the course to determine the influence of the mentoring program on their persistence. Students will have the opportunity to not participate in the interviews if they do not wish to participate.

Instrumentation

There are two instruments that will be utilized for data collection. Surveys will be implemented at the beginning of the student onboarding process and interviews will be conducted after the peer-mentoring intervention. The surveys will be the *Brief Inventory of Thriving*, a ten-question survey that utilizes a Likert scale for students to answer each question (Su et al., 2014). The survey is designed as a holistic view of positive functioning and to help predict important health outcomes (Su et al., 2014). Included with the survey will include an optional space for students to include an email for follow-up. Surveys will be conducted following an interview protocol for consistent information (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The interviews will contain three phases, introduction, content questions which will be utilized for generating qualitative data, and closing instructions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Brief Inventory of Thriving

The Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT) and the more in-depth Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) were designed as a tool to measure psychological well-being constructs and to predict health outcomes (Su et al., 2014). The BIT is a ten-item survey and can indicate psychological well-being and serve as a mental health screening tool (Su et al., 2014). The Brief Inventory of Thriving was selected as the preferred tool for this study to better accommodate the time constraints facing potential study participants, while still providing the necessary data. Psychological well-being is composed of seven theoretical dimensions: life satisfaction, supportive relationships, interest and engagement, purpose, mastery, feelings of control, and optimism (Su et al., 2014). These dimensions of well-being overlap with the construct of student thriving. Individuals who take the survey are asked to respond to questions on a scale of one to five, one representing “strongly disagree” and five representing “strongly agree.” The BIT was

tested simultaneously as a part of the CIT. Over four months of testing, the inventory demonstrated reliability and the BIT was correlated to the results of the CIT. The BIT is a reliable screening tool for thriving with a Cronbach alpha between .91 and .93 for each of the ten items administered in the survey (Su et al., 2014). The item-total correlation ranged from .65 to .82. Item loading ranges from .68 to .84. participants who demonstrate a score above the 75 percentiles are deemed to be thriving in that area, while participants who score in the 25 percentile or below are deemed to be in need of intervention. When the Likert score is averaged individuals who score less than a 3.20 is deemed not to be thriving (Su et al., 2014). The 50th and 75th have an average score of a 3.90 and 4.20 respectively. While the survey was designed as a screening tool for the health and medical field, the authors indicated that the use of the survey could also be utilized in many fields including educational settings. Both inventories when assessed in the United States across varying demographics demonstrated validity and were internally consistent (Su et al., 2014).

Pilot Study/Baseline Data Collection

The Brief Inventory of Thriving survey will be utilized to generate baseline data. The surveys will be conducted in the second week of the freshman seminar course. This will allow students an opportunity to experience orientation and get settled onto campus before having to respond about their self-assessment of thriving. Students who score in the 25th percentile or lower on the BIT will be considered not to be thriving in a category. Students who demonstrate that they are not thriving in a category will be added to a run chart to track their persistence in the nursing program. The run-chart that will be used to track student persistence will begin once the initial data has been recorded. This timeline will also provide students the opportunity to change their majors or classes during the first semester after they arrive on campus. The run chart

will run through the duration of the study, and it will be noted if students choose to change majors or withdraw from the university.

Data Analysis

Because this is a mixed methods study quantitative and qualitative data must be managed and integrated. Surveys will be administered and managed through ECU's RedCap software program that provides password protected and secure data collection. Quantitative data will be analyzed using Excel spreadsheets and monitored using pivot tables to generate run-charts. The control groups and intervention groups will be monitored and updated monthly to track student persistence in the groups. Qualitative data will be gathered in phase three. These data will be analyzed to gather themes to describe the influence of the peer-mentoring program. In order to integrate the two data sets together, I will utilize a joint display to combine the quantitative results with the themes that emerged from the interviews that were conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Summary of Phase I.

Phase one will establish baseline data for the inquiry in order to answer the overarching research question: How does peer-mentoring provide holistic support to influence first-year nursing student stop-out, as suggested by the NURS retention model? This phase addresses the first sub-question addressing the number of first-year intended nursing students that are in need of additional support. The BIT survey will be administered to determine which students are in need of support. The results of this survey will be used to create an intervention group and control groups. This process will be used to answer the first research sub-question and begin the process of answering sub-question two which is, how many students who are failing to thrive ultimately stop out?

Phase II

Based on the data gathered in phase one, students will be grouped in one of the participants groups and be monitored to answer sub-question two how many students identified as needing the support ultimately leave the major. During phase two the intervention group will be partnered with peer-mentor students through the Academic Success office and both groups will be monitored for stop out. Student mentors will be trained and certified by the Academic Student Success office and will be required to meet with their mentors weekly as a part of the academic success learning community and first-year seminar course. Meeting data will be tracked by the office of academic success office to ensure that the meetings are happening with fidelity. Advisors will be asked to track students that belong to the intervention and control groups and notify me for data tracking purposes if a student leaves the major. Data will be tracked on a run chart to quantitatively monitor the short-term influence of the program. Connecting the persistence data to the date in the semester could potentially correlate the data to the influence of the program. For example, if a student chooses to change their major within the first couple of weeks in the semester, then the intervention would not have had time to take effect. However, a student who chooses to change their major after working with a mentor for several months would indicate that the mentoring intervention had time to influence the student's retention outcome.

Inquiry Approach/Intervention

As discussed previously, phase two will be when the intervention group is paired with their peer mentor students. Peer-mentors will be asked to check in with their paired students a minimum of once a week to answer questions and provide guidance. This program will be provided by a collaboration between myself and the Academic Student Success office. As

discussed in chapter two, peer mentoring has the potential to provide effective support to students who are not thriving. This intervention should continue through the duration of the Fall semester. While this is taking place, students that are participating in the intervention and the control groups will be monitored for persistence.

This phase will be based on a mixed quasi-experimental design approach where two groups will be monitored for persistence. Two of the three nursing First-year Seminar courses will not be receiving the mentoring intervention and will function as the control. My section of the first-year seminar course will receive the intervention as they will be required to meet with their peer-mentor multiple times throughout the semester. In a mixed quasi-experimental design, the independent variables in the experiment are tested within and between subject variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In quasi-experimental designs researchers use control and experimental groups, and the groups are not randomly assigned (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This phase of the experiment will establish two groups an intervention group and a control group as determined by the survey results found in phase one. Because the groups are determined by survey results and choosing to register for first-year seminar, they are not randomly assigned. This study also features a within variable to be analyzed between the control and intervention groups as well as a between variable to be analyzed. The variable of student retention will be measured for both control and intervention groups. This demonstrates a within-subject design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The influence of the peer-mentoring program will be analyzed for the intervention group. This demonstrates a one-way between-subjects design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Summary of Phase II

Phase two will attempt to answer the research sub-question, how many students that are not thriving ultimately choose to leave the major? In addition, the study's peer-mentoring intervention will be implemented during this phase. Data will be collected on student retention and measured through this phase to generate quantitative data that will create trends that will be analyzed to answer the research question and the second research sub-question. These data will be integrated with qualitative data provided in phase three.

Phase III

The final phase of this study will seek to answer the final research sub-question as well as provide analysis to answer the overarching research section. To evaluate if mentoring is effective at preventing or delaying first-year nursing students stop-out. I will conduct interviews with participants of the mentoring program. This will provide qualitative open-ended data to assess the program's impact on individuals who participated in the mentoring intervention group. To remain consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach students will be asked to write their answers to the questions from the interview in a written reflection response that will resemble a class assignment. Students will complete the interview responses as a part of the first-year seminar section that I am teaching. This is the group that will experience the peer-mentoring intervention. Students who are interviewed may be thriving or not thriving based on the BIT. They will be asked to reflect on their experience transitioning to ECU and the influence that their mentor had on their decision to persist as a nursing major. Asking students to write their interview responses will allow students time to process and provide thoughtful responses to the survey questions. Providing the interview in this format should help relieve some anxiety for students as they will be answering the questions in a format that they are familiar with. Since I

am also an insider conducting research in the class that I will be teaching, there is an element of convenience to this phase in the design. Because of the academic calendar for the semester students will be completing this assignment at the end of the semester a week before final exams.

Interviews

The use of interviews to collect qualitative data is generally utilized as a method for data collection in a hermeneutic-phenomenological research design (Manen, 1990; Ray & Locsin, 2023; Chesnay, 2015). Utilizing this method of phenomenological research suggests that the researcher processes the information gathered through writing (Manen, 1990). This is because writing in phenomenology is research as it transposes our thoughts to paper and process what is our conscious experiences (Chesnay, 2015; Manen, 1990). Many phenomenological studies utilize semi-structured interviews to generate data and the interview process is encouraged to be informal and conversational (Chesnay, 2015; Ray & Locsin, 2023). To accomplish these goals, I will conduct interviews with students who persist in the program that belong to the intervention group to gather an understanding of why those specific students benefit from the mentoring program. Student interviews will be conducted in the form of a reflection assignment distributed through Canvas. The responses will be analyzed for themes and patterns that can be corroborated through the individual students' experiences. The question guide utilized for the student interviews is found in appendix F.

Consistent with the philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology, students will be asked to share their experiences and answers to the interview questions in a written format. The interviews will be given in a class assignment format and students will be asked to reflect on their experiences with their mentor. This will provide a format that the students will be familiar with engaging in and should help improve their comfort level and honesty with their answers.

This format also provides the interviewee with a longer time to process the information and provide more in-depth feedback to be analyzed by the researcher. Students will be graded for participation, but their responses will not be graded for accuracy. Students who choose not to participate will be given an alternative assignment to complete related to the support that they received while transitioning to life at ECU and their responses will not be included in the study.

Analysis of Approach

To assess the influence of the peer-mentoring program the integrated data provided from the study will be analyzed. Phase one will establish a base line number of first-year intended nursing students that are determined to not be thriving. The influence of the peer-mentoring program would demonstrate effectiveness in relation to the persistence of that group of students. Using a quasi-experimental design with an established intervention and control group should indicate a correlation to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the intervention to aid student retention efforts. To ensure that the peer-mentoring intervention is the cause for student retention, interviews will allow me to confirm the influence that the peer-mentor had on the individual students who choose to persist in the major.

The written responses to the interviews will be coded for patterns that will emerge as responses are examined. Coding is cyclical. there may be multiple reviews as the reflections are processed for information (Saldana, 2021). The codes will be then used to analyze the data and generate categories for the student responses. From the categories, themes will be generated and the information synthesized to interpret the data's meaning (Saldana, 2021). This process will be inductive since I don't know what themes or categories will emerge from the responses. There will not be a pre-established code prior to data collection. The first round of the coding process will utilize In Vivo Coding. In Vivo Coding utilizes the language of the respondents to generate

the code from the responses (Saldana, 2021). This form of coding honors the voice of the respondents. The second phase of the coding process will utilize the axial coding method. Axial coding deepens the coding process of the initial phase by generating categories using the codes developed in the first phase (Saldana, 2021). Categories are developed that focus the codes developed in the first phase allowing the focusing of the codes developed in the first phase (Saldana, 2021). Once this process is complete the data from phase III will need to be synthesized with the data collected from phases I and II. In many mixed methods this is accomplished by using a T-chart (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Summary of Phase III

The final phase of the study will answer the last research sub-question as well as explore the data collected in each phase to reveal the influence of peer-mentoring on nursing student retention. After examining the quantifiable data interviews will be conducted with students who were members of the intervention group to explore the influence that peer-mentoring had on their decision to remain in the nursing major. This will be gathered using interviews with the students who received mentoring. The methods will follow a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, and utilize a semi-structured protocol that can be found in appendix F. The interviews will be explored to determine themes that emerge from the interviews. The data will then be integrated with the quantitative data provided to describe and disclose the influence of the peer-mentoring program.

Inquiry Design Rigor

Mixed methods research provides a challenge to validity as both quantitative and qualitative methods are utilized as components of the study (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). The use of a validation framework developed by Dellinger & Leech (2007) can be utilized to design a

mixed methods study using multiple approaches. The framework synthesizes traditional quantitative and qualitative validation components as well as adds an additional foundational element to the framework. The framework follows five elements to provide validity to the study which are: foundational elements, research design, translation fidelity, utilization, and consequential element (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). The following will discuss how this inquiry ensures validity using a validation framework developed by Dellinger & Leech (2007).

Foundational Elements. Foundational elements refer to the researcher's prior knowledge, biases, and perspectives prior to the study being conducted (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). To address my biases and perspectives, my researcher positionality statement is provided following this section. Chapter 2 provides a foundation of prior knowledge for the study. This study is grounded in the NURS framework of nursing retention as well as the student thriving theory. In addition, this study will build on knowledge gleaned from Nicole Mentag's (2022) study on the experiences of thriving nursing students. Mentag's research indicated that there was an opportunity for studying students who were deemed as not thriving and identified that thriving could be studied as a potential method for improving student achievement for all students (2022). This study was combined with a literature review conducted by James Bumby (2020) to identify effective strategies for nursing student retention. The literature review revealed that peer-mentoring was an effective method for retaining nursing students, which aligns with the NURS retention model (Bumby, 2020; Jeffreys, 2012).

Research design. Mixed methods design requires a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative validations (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). The research design validations for mixed methods consist of design quality, legitimization, and interpretive rigor (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). Mentag utilized a similar approach to their research design, by administering a thriving

screening tool and conducting interviews with students who were deemed to be thriving (2022). However, because Mentag was only investigating thriving generally within the nursing student population, their study was conducted using qualitative methods. In contrast, my study is grounded in action research and social sciences and seeks to study two related phenomena. I am proposing using an explanatory mixed methods research design to conduct the investigation of this inquiry. Mixed methods is an effective research design for inquiries that collect related quantitative and qualitative data and is particularly useful for conducting action research (Boswell & Cannon, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The purpose of this study is to reveal if and how peer-mentoring is an effective intervention strategy for retaining first-year nursing students, who are not thriving. To study these phenomena, I am proposing gathering quantitative data related to first-year nursing student thriving. Students who are identified as not thriving will be monitored for stop-out. In addition, an intervention group will be formed, and students will be provided with a peer-mentor. The first phases of the study will generate quantitative data that can be used to study the phenomena. The assumption that is made in this quantitative portion of the research is that based on the combination of thriving and the NURS retention model that thriving should serve as an indicator of nursing student retention. To assess student thriving the *Brief Inventory of Thriving* (BIT) will be offered as a survey to each first-year nursing student prior to their first week of classes.

In mixed methods sequential explanatory methods, the data collected in the quantitative phase is then further explained through qualitative data gathering (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To further study the peer-mentoring program's influence, the intervention group will be interviewed to assess the influence of the peer-mentoring program on a student's choice to persist in the nursing major. The interviews will be conducted in semi-structured format to encourage

the interviewee to be comfortable, while also ensuring that interviewees are treated equally and fairly. The semi-structured protocol can be found in appendix F. The data gathered from the interviews will be analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenology. Since I am currently and have never been a first-year nursing student, I cannot speak to the perspective of persisting through the first-year transition to East Carolina University as a nursing major. Using the reflective techniques of hermeneutic phenomenology will allow me to gather this information from each individual student's perspective and assess how the peer-mentoring program influenced their reasoning to remain in the nursing major. The qualitative data collected here will be integrated with the quantitative data collected from the first phase to determine the influence of the peer-mentoring intervention on first-year nursing student retention at ECU's College of Nursing.

Translation Fidelity. Refers to alignment between the inferences of the research design and the prior research design (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). The study's research questions guided the construction of the phases and methods utilized in order to answer the inquiry. Figure 10 above demonstrates how the research questions align with the design of the inquiry's three phases. To answer how many intended nursing students are not thriving, and need support, a survey is an efficient method for quickly screening students that are not thriving. To completely answer question one, a tracking method for non-thriving students that choose to leave the major is required. Using a run chart can help to measure how many students that are not thriving are retained throughout the academic year. To answer the final research question, students need to be able to provide their personal perspectives on their reasons for remaining in the nursing major at East Carolina University. Hermeneutic phenomenological semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity to effectively gather these data and integrate the findings with the quantitative data gathered in the first two phases.

Utilization. Addresses the ability of the inquiry's usefulness and impact on understanding (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). This study is being conducted by an insider collaborating with insiders at the research host cite (Perry et al., 2020). As such the findings discussed in this study should not be generalized to other nursing programs. The goal of this study is to detail the process, knowledge, and results so that other four-year nursing programs in the state of North Carolina could duplicate or transfer the study's findings to their institution's program.

Consequential Elements. This component addresses the up-to-date relevancy and social acceptability of the inquiry's findings (Delleinger & Leech, 2007). It should be noted that this element is continuous and dynamic and cannot be assessed by the initial researcher. This element has to be evaluated by future researchers that continue to use the uncovered findings by future research (Dellinger & Leech, 2007). This study takes place in a specific place in time with specific social expectations, economic factors, and societal norms. The hope is that the findings discussed in this study will be relevant to future researchers who wish to transfer or build on the study's findings.

The expected intent of this study is to provide a more detailed discussion to the influence of a peer-mentoring program on student retention for students who are not thriving. This will be accomplished using an explanatory mixed-method approach featuring a survey and interview protocol that will be integrated to answer the research questions. The following sections will discuss the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study, and how my position and perspectives influence the study.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

I was drawn to nursing student retention as an opportunity for further study due to my current professional position and perspective within the college. There are many opportunities of potential exploration regarding nursing student retention. Three statistical data points guided me to studying nursing student retention through the lens of thriving and mentoring. The first data point was that at the time this study was conducted the College of Nursing was experiencing a 10 year low in nursing student applications to the traditional BSN option. Nursing intended students traditionally apply at the beginning of the second semester, during their second year. These low application numbers corresponded with a rise in intended nursing student recruitment and enrollment numbers. A deeper dive into the retention data showed that first-year retention data had declined following the university's shift to remote learning following the outbreak of COVID-19. The decline remained despite a rise in retention in other competitive majors on campus. From my perspective this meant that retention efforts needed to be examined. The second data point that guided my decision to examine mentoring and retention was that the demographic makeup of the nursing intended population was not reflected in the cohorts that were being accepted into the BSN option. This guided the selection of the framework that was used to design this study. The NURS framework as discussed in chapter 2 was originally designed as a model of student retention for non-traditional students. The NURS framework suggests that mentoring may be the most important intervention in nursing student retention (Jefferys, 2012). Thriving was then utilized as a potential identification method for students who may most benefit from mentoring programs. The final data point that guided my reason for selecting this area of study was the national and international nursing shortage. The studies'

significance can be found in this shortage. As the nursing shortage grows internationally, nationally, and statewide, it is important that Colleges of Nursing need to operate as efficiently as possible to ensure that the nursing workforce is adequately supplied with quality nurses.

This study is delimited to the research question and sub-questions under investigation. The overarching research question seeking reveals how peer mentoring provides holistic support to influence first-year nursing student stop-out. The context of this question prevents exploring retention models that are specific to other majors or are not holistic in their approach. The first sub question limits the study from examining other early alert systems or the influence of thriving as an identifier for non-nursing majors. This study will not be examining the total number of nursing students who elect to stop-out from the nursing major. The final research sub question limits the study to mentoring as the intervention alone. There may be other factors that influence a student's decision to continue to persist in the nursing major, but this study will not examine these factors.

Limitations

The study design has natural limitations on the data collected. The *Brief Inventory of Thriving* utilizes a Likert scale rather than open ended questions to collect information. There is also a larger inventory of thriving that could be utilized called the *Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving* (Su et al., 2014). The *Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving* is a 60-question questionnaire that screens for the same themes that are screened for in the BIT. The BIT was selected because it provides a quantifiable assessment that aligns with the holistic approach to retention in the framework of this study, and because condensed screening can be easily accommodated in a 50-minute class session. The survey that is being conducted does not perfectly align with the factors that are being explored. It does screen for thriving and provides a

cost-effective and readily available method for a screening tool. The survey's authors suggest that the survey has practical uses in educational environments (Su et al., 2014). The *Thriving Quotient* developed by Laurie Schreiner (2010c) is a stronger survey that may better align with this study. That survey is rather expensive and is controlled by the survey's author. The data collected from the Schreiner (2010c) survey would also not provide trackable information to be able to link the results to students to provide the ability to monitor for stop-out.

Monitoring stop-out and attrition provide logistical challenges to this study. Students are able to freely move between majors at the university level or withdraw from school without notifying individuals. Once the student has left the major they are not incentivized to follow up with exit surveys or questionnaires. In the case of students who withdraw from the university the institution loses its point of contact with the student. All attempts to make sure that any student who leaves the major will be made to ensure that data collected is accurate. In addition, the freshman seminar course provides a unique opportunity for studying nursing major attrition because students will still have a contact point with a nursing advisor to be able to follow up since they will still have to come to class. It is however possible for someone to change their major without notifying a nursing advisor.

To examine the phenomenon of mentoring's influence on student retention students will be provided open ended interview questions to provide their perspective on the mentoring they received. These questions will be administered during a class session to provide a comfortable and familiar environment to provide thoughtful feedback. This approach may influence some students to consider the interview a traditional assignment and seek a correct answer. Hermeneutic phenomenological interview data does not usually create generalizable information because the data generated is specific to the subjects being studied. This methodology was

selected to be able to give students an opportunity to provide open ended data that could provide perspectives that had not previously been considered in the research design. Because the study utilizes a class setting students who choose to withdraw from either ECU, or the freshman-seminar course will not be able to provide qualitative data as a part of the study design. This is a challenge when studying student retention in general. Once a student withdraws from either the university setting or the course setting, they are no longer accessible to be able provide their perspective on the phenomena being studied.

Researcher Positionality Statement

It is recommended for researchers in social science fields to share research positionality statements and identify potential biases in the interpretation of their findings (Holmes, 2020). I am an insider collaborating with other insiders (Perry et al., 2020). I am conducting the study at my place of employment and will be collaborating with others from my department. I am an U.S. born, white, cisgendered, protestant, male from rural areas of the eastern seaboard, and am trained as an educator. Because of these identities the author cannot offer perspective from the nursing student role. This perspective must be provided by students who choose to participate in the study. These identities influence my perspective and analysis of the data gathered from the study.

The research being conducted in this study is on the influence of mentorship on nursing student retention. The author's graduate degree is in educational leadership and is a licensed curriculum instructional specialist. This creates a research bias as part of the training for that certification requires proficiency in action research. My research and training in developing mentors in the K-12 setting has guided me to certain researchers, and their techniques that may cause me to be ignorant toward certain perspectives mentoring programs. In addition, the

author's previous research conducted was focused on coaching, mentoring, and self-mentoring. This previous research may influence definitions and sources utilized in the literature review. To combat this bias, literature was not limited to authors from the United States. However, all sources used had to be available in English as I lack proficiency in languages other than my native tongue.

Prior to serving as an advisor in the institution housing the study, I served as a public-school social study teacher and mentor teacher for over a decade. During that time, I trained mentors, mentees, and facilitated mentoring programs for beginning teachers in k-12 institutions before moving to higher education. This influenced my desire to utilize mentoring as an intervention for the focus of practice opportunity that was identified. I am familiar with the influence of mentoring as a method for retention of young professionals in the education field. However, I am interested to discover the influence that mentoring programs have on students in higher education.

I am planning to conduct a mixed methods approach. This will allow me to measure the quantitative influence of a mentoring program while also evaluating qualitative data. I intend to identify a group of students that will be administered the intervention and then monitor if they return for the following semester. In addition, I intend to identify a control group who will not have an intervention and monitor if they return for the following semester. Finally, to evaluate the effectiveness of the mentoring program qualitative data will be collected and analyzed to complete the study.

Summary

The purpose of this inquiry is to reveal the influence of a mentorship-based approach on retention for intended baccalaureate nursing students pursuing the traditional BSN degree. To answer this inquiry, one research question with three sub-questions will serve as a guide for the study. The study will utilize a mixed methods explanatory approach. I will collect quantitative data through surveys and qualitative data through interviews. After collection, the data will be integrated to provide insight to the research questions. The study will be conducted in three phases. Phase one will provide baseline data for the study and seek to determine how many incoming first-year nursing students are thriving. Phase two will be the intervention and data monitoring, as students are paired with their peer-mentors. Phase three will be when interviews are conducted, and the data is analyzed.

The inquiry's rigor is justified using the validation framework developed and disseminated by Dellinger and Leech (2007). The studies assumptions, delimitations, and limitations are discussed. The conclusion of this chapter is a statement on my researcher positionality and the influence these perspectives may have on the study.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to reveal if and how peer-mentoring is an effective intervention strategy for retaining first-year nursing students who are not thriving. To explore this, I have collaborated with the Student Academic Success Services (SASS) and specifically the Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC) to connect first year intended nursing students with peer-mentors. Student participants were surveyed using the *Brief Inventory of Thriving* (BIT). They were then monitored for stop-out throughout the semester while the intervention was taking place. Students were then interviewed through a reflection assignment in a freshman seminar course. The BIT was administered a second time as a post-test. Finally, student mentors provided feedback on their meetings with their mentees to outline topics that were discussed. This chapter will explore the participants' characteristics, the process for data collection, an analysis of the data, and finally a discussion of the results. Because this is a mixed methods explanatory approach model the quantitative data will be discussed and analyzed first, followed by the qualitative data. The data will then be synthesized to answer the two research sub questions and the overarching research question.

Participants

During the summer, newly enrolled students paid university enrollment deposits and were assigned academic advisors. As nursing students were assigned advisors, they were invited via email from the student's academic advisor to apply for the SASS' Success Learning Community (LC). The email included two links to the application and encouraged students to join by offering a chance to be paired with a peer mentor and have two common classes including freshman seminar and an introduction to health course. The application asked students about their experiences in high school and to rate themselves on their capabilities in test-taking, note-taking,

textbook reading, studying for tests, time management, writing papers, a willingness to ask for resources, organization, building relationships, and paying attention during class (Appendix G). The application also asked for students to self-identify if they received academic assistance when in high school and what major they were pursuing at ECU. Students were then asked to reflect on why obtaining a college education was important to them, why they applied to ECU, what subject they found most challenging in school, which subject was most enjoyable, extracurricular activities, a life changing event and discuss how it impacted them, what challenges the student had faced, and finally if the student had a previously had a mentor and the impact that relationship had on them (Appendix G). All applicants that enrolled in ECU and completed an application were found a spot in a Success LC through SASS. The information provided on the application helped to ensure that the student was routed to the correct section of a success LC. There are other Success LC's that the SASS department facilitates and they are better suited for students that are neurodivergent or have learning disabilities. If a student identified that they had received academic support previously, the student was offered an opportunity to choose a neurodivergent specific learning community rather than the Nursing Success LC.

In total there were 48 applicants that indicated they were pursuing the nursing major for the Success LC. To accommodate the demand a second section of freshman seminar was established for the Success LC and was taught by an employee of the PASC. The applicants were selected on a first come, first serve basis and applicants were not considered once SASS and PASC had reached maximum capacity for the mentors they could match with the students. In addition, as a part of the orientation process, incoming students were encouraged to register for the nursing specific freshman seminar courses that the student support services office offers.

These courses quickly filled, and capacity had to increase to accommodate demand. Each course ultimately filled the 30-seat capacity that was allowed and were taught by nursing advisors.

In total there were 102 students enrolled in the nursing freshman seminar courses at the beginning of the semester. To register for a nursing intended freshman seminar and the success LC a student must be in their first semester at the university and be an intended nursing major. 90 students consented to participate in the study by completing the *Brief Inventory of Thriving* surveys. 20 students identified on the consent that they had not yet turned 18 and their results are excluded from the study. In all the study had 70 participants. Across all courses the population was predominantly female (94.1%). Racial and ethnic data was not collected in part due to ongoing legal concerns surrounding demographic data collection during the time of this study. The students were grouped based on the freshman seminar course that they were enrolled in. This created an intervention group and a control group.

Intervention Group

Students enrolled in one of the two freshman seminar courses that were affiliated with PASC belonged to the intervention group. In total 29 eligible participants belonged to this group. The group is 97% female. Students met in the mornings with one class meeting on Mondays and Wednesdays and the other class meeting on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The courses were entirely conducted in person both days each week and met in the PASC on main campus. On Fridays the instructors of these courses met to plan the instruction for the following week and ensured that students would receive similar instruction for the duration of the course. As a part of this course students had to meet with their peer-mentor weekly and discuss academic progress in their courses and any other topics they want to discuss. Students were paired with peer-mentors that had a background in a health sciences major.

Control Group

Students enrolled in one of the two nursing freshman seminar courses belonged to the control group. In total 41 eligible participants belonged to this group. The group is 91% female. These courses met in the afternoon on main campus. These courses used a hybrid model with their instructors with the classes meeting in person once per week while the other session was conducted asynchronously online. One section of these groups met in person on Tuesday while another section met in person on Wednesday.

Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative Data Collection began in the second week of class and continued through the final exam window of the fall semester. The second week of class was chosen to administer the BIT to allow time for students to adjust to campus and have completed the registration process for their classes. The remainder of the data collection took place via observation as an advisor and maintained on a run chart. The following sections will explain the collection process and analysis for the BIT. Followed by the collection process of the run chart and the analysis of the results.

Brief Inventory of Thriving Survey.

The BIT was administered using RedCap© software. The software provides additional layers of protection for study participants and stores their results in a secure location online. Using the link generated from RedCap© the students in class were directed to access the survey in Canvas which is the universities' learning management software. Students were given time in class to complete the BIT and were given the option to complete the survey at home if they

missed class. The data was recorded in all four sections of freshman seminar over the course of a week. Once the survey closed, data was exported to an excel spreadsheet for analysis.

The thriving survey was administered again a week before exams across the control and intervention groups. There were less respondents in the post-survey from the control group than in the original assessment. The survey was downloaded to an excel spreadsheet and analyzed using the same methodology as the initial survey. The results were then compared to search for changes in student thriving.

The BIT was administered in the second week of class for both control and intervention groups. Students who scored in the 25th percentile or below for a given category as based on the normed results of the survey were deemed to not be thriving in that category. The survey results were categorized and then results were reviewed for each category. Categories that a student was failing to thrive in were highlighted and the totals were organized by intervention and control groups.

Table 5 represents the total number of participants who were failing to thrive in a given category. This table combines the results of both the control and the intervention groups. Students demonstrated that at the time of the survey that 31% of the participants were not thriving in the area of flow. 28% of the participants said they lacked support. 21% of the participants felt that they lacked belonging. 18% of the participants demonstrated a lack of positive effect.

The posttest was administered at the end of the semester to students who were in both the control and the intervention groups. There were less respondents in the post-test than in the pre-test. 28 respondents were from the intervention group, which represented a one-person decline. and 26 respondents from the control group represented a 15-person decline. Table 12 shows the

results of the BIT posttest. Figure 11 shows the changes on the student's BIT responses following the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester. There was improvement shown in the areas of Meaning and purpose, self-worth, flow, support, and belonging. Areas of optimism, life satisfaction, positive affect, self-efficacy, and accomplishment showed a decline between the two tests.

The BIT results were then broken down by control and intervention groups. Table 7 shows the results for the pre and posttests between the two groups of students. The only category that improved for the students in the intervention group over the course of the semester was a sense of belonging. Self-worth, self-efficacy, and support remained the same across the intervention group. The remainder of the categories had at least one student express that that aspect of their life had worsened over the course of the semester. In contrast to that even with the reduced response rate the control group indicated that they had improved in the areas of belonging, support, flow, positive affect, and meaning and purpose. This group stayed the same with regards to optimism and accomplishment. The control reported worse outcomes in life satisfaction and self-efficacy.

Table 5 *Number of Students Failing to Thrive by Category Pre-Test*

	Category	Total
1	Meaning and Purpose	8
2	Optimism	4
3	Life Satisfaction	8
4	Positive Affect	13
5	Self-Worth	8
6	Self-Efficacy	0
7	Accomplishment	9
8	Flow	22
9	Support	20
10	Belonging	15

Table 6 *Number of Students Failing to Thrive by Category Posttest*

	Category	Total
1	Meaning and Purpose	7
2	Optimism	6
3	Life Satisfaction	12
4	Positive Affect	14
5	Self-Worth	6
6	Self-Efficacy	1
7	Accomplishment	10
8	Flow	17
9	Support	14
10	Belonging	6

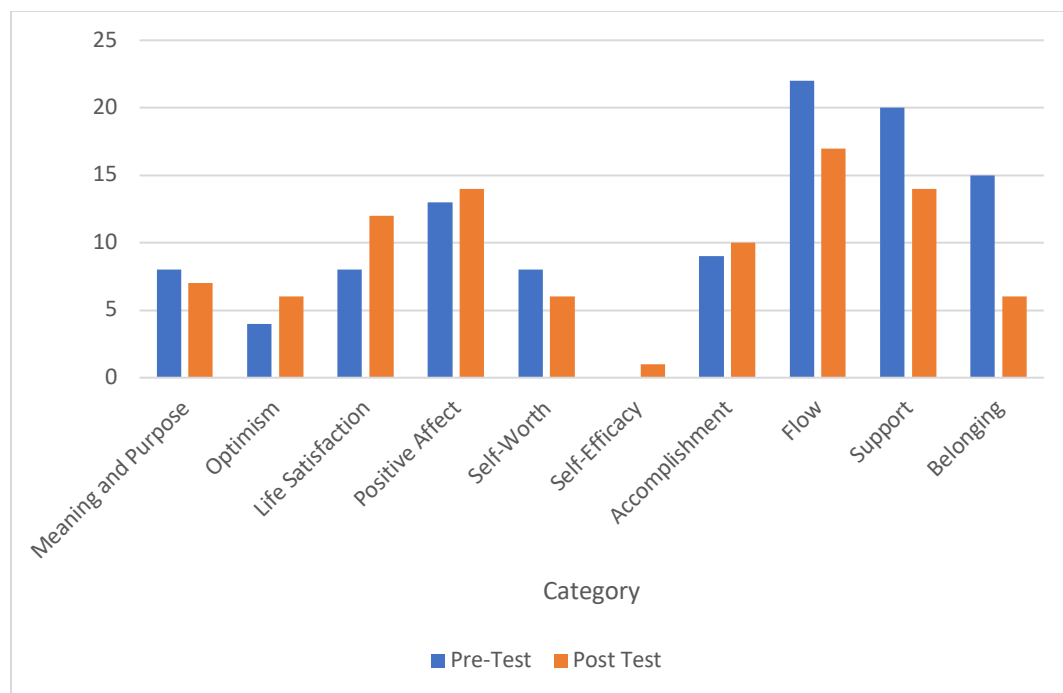


Figure 11 *BIT Pre-Test and Posttest by Category*

Table 7 *BIT Results for Intervention and Control Groups*

	Control	Control Post-	Intervention Pre-	Intervention
Category	Pre-test	Test	Test	Post-Test
Meaning and Purpose	6	3	2	4
Optimism	1	1	3	5
Life Satisfaction	3	6	5	6
Positive Affect	10	8	3	6
Self-Worth	4	2	4	4
Self-Efficacy	0	1	0	0
Accomplishment	7	7	2	3
Flow	16	8	8	9
Support	13	7	7	7
Belonging	9	2	6	4
Respondents	41	26	29	28

Major Enrollment Run Chart.

The run chart was created in excel at the end of the second week. Each month an advisor reviewed the students in the study to verify the student's major. Students who change majors were asked to inform their freshman seminar instructors if they opted to change their majors during the semester. Advisors would then send me an email notifying me of the major change. This would then be documented in the corresponding month on the run chart. In addition, because students can change their majors on their own without consulting their current advisor or instructor, at the end of each month I reviewed each student's profile in Banner to verify that the student's correct major. Banner is the software utilized at ECU as its student information software. As an advisor I have access to this information as a part of my regular job function. The chart includes the following information: month, total students in the study, number of nursing intended majors in the control group, number of intended nursing majors in the intervention group, number of control group not thriving, and intervention group not thriving.

The run chart indicated that between both groups 71% of the study's participants remained a nursing major for the duration of their first semester. The intervention group outperformed the control group retention by one student. Overall results from the BIT did not seem to indicate that a student's likelihood to change majors. In the intervention group 50% of the major change students indicated that they were not thriving in multiple categories and 50% indicating that they were thriving. However, 67% of the control group that changed majors had been identified as "not-thriving" in at least 2 categories. Table 8 provides the run chart overview of all the participants and table 9 examines the breakdown of major changes between the control and intervention groups.

Table 8 *Run Chart Overview*

	Total Students in	Total Number of Nursing Majors in	Major
Month	Study	Study	Changes
August	70	70	0
September	70	67	3
October	70	65	2
November	70	63	2

Table 9 *Run Chart Control and Intervention Groups*

Month	Number of	Number of Intended	Control	Intervention
	Nursing	Nursing Majors in	Group Not	Group Not
	Intended Majors	Intervention	Thriving	Thriving
	in Control			
August	41	29	23	14
September	39	28	22	13
October	38	27	21	13
November	37	26	21	13

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data collection began the final week of August 2024 and continued through the duration of the fall semester. Students began meeting with their mentors during the second and third weeks of the semester and continued to meet until Thanksgiving break in November 2024. These meetings generated the success coach feedback forms that will be discussed in the next section. Additional data was collected through a reflection interview assignment that students reflected on the influence of the supports they received and specifically about the mentor's influence on their decision to remain, or change from, an intended nursing major. The following sections will discuss the collection process for the reflection interviews and an analysis of the results. This will be followed by the collection process of the mentor logs and the analysis.

To ensure the quality of the empirical investigation, Tracy's (2010) "Big Tent" criteria were followed. The criteria suggest that high-quality qualitative research is demonstrated through eight markers. These markers are a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). The qualitative portion of this study meets these eight criteria. The worthy topic is addressed by investigating the reasons students choose to stay with the nursing major. The study seeks to understand the influence mentoring has on student retention through mixed methodology, so quantitative data was collected along with the qualitative component and assumes a student-centric approach gathering the data from the population being studied which meets the rich rigor criteria. Sincerity of the data collected is evident in the transparency in data collection and methods in throughout the manuscript. Credibility can be found in the mentor and mentee reflections in the following sections. From the onset the goal of this study is to be transferable to other institutions that are interested in similar studies; meeting the resonance criteria. This study's significant contribution

will be evident in the data analysis in offering practical suggestions for practice. Ethically the qualitative information was collected following the same standards and delivery for all participants and procedures were followed as stated in the previous chapters. The qualitative portion of the study provides insight into the reasoning behind student's choice to remain in the nursing major, the study's objective meeting, meeting the meaningful coherence criteria.

Reflection Interviews.

Students were given an assignment in Canvas that asked them to respond to the interview questions about how the mentoring program influenced their decision to stay a nursing major at ECU (appendix F). The questions asked students to reflect on information they received about student support services, their reasons for staying a nursing major at ECU or their reason for changing their major, and finally the ways that their success coach influenced their decision to remain a nursing major at ECU. Time in class to respond to the questions and provided additional time at home if they wanted to add more than the class time allotted. The questions were placed in Canvas and the students were to copy them into a word document to type their responses and submit their answers into Canvas.

Student responses to the reflection interviews for the intervention sections were collected via Canvas. The review of the responses were coded using the in vivo coding process (Saldana, 2021). I used research sub-question 3: How effective is mentoring at preventing or delaying first-year nursing student stop-out?" as a guide for identifying responses to utilize as codes. The codes that were selected were used were copied verbatim from student responses into an excel spreadsheet. The code was then given a numerical value. This readthrough led to 32 generated codes that were then analyzed for similarities and redundancies within the codes. The codes were then trimmed to 10 codes by eliminating or consolidating redundant or similar codes. After this

process the codes were grouped into two overarching themes from the codes the positive influence of the mentor and the negative influence of the mentor (Table 10). The codes were then used to analyze the student responses to the interview questions. Analysis was then combined into a mind map that examined the frequency of the codes appearance and relevant student quotes that reinforced the concept expressed in the code (Figure 12 and Figure 13).

Most students perceived a positive influence of their experiences with their mentors. Students mentioned that their mentor inspired them to keep going seven times. Students positively perceived that the mentoring program provided them with additional resources, which was mentioned five times. Students mentioned four times each that their mentor gave them the courage to be comfortable with failure. Students who had a positive mentor experience mentioned four times that they benefited from having a mentor with the same or a similar major. Students mentioned three times that their mentor helped them by focusing on support beyond academics. Finally, it was mentioned twice that students' mentors had encouraged them to get involved and engage with the campus.

Some students perceived a negative influence of their experiences with their mentors. Students reported three times that their mentors were simply checking off boxes during their meetings. Students mentioned three times that their mentor lacked understanding of the nursing major because they had a different major. Twice it was mentioned that the students viewed the mentor meetings as a chore because they did not perceive an additional growth from their current practices as a student. Finally, one student mentioned that their mentor was too busy.

Success Coach (Mentors) Feedback Forms.

Each week students were required to meet with their peer-mentors at least one time. The students were assigned a participation grade to attend the weekly meetings. At the conclusion of

each meeting the mentors filled out a report that is submitted to the mentors' supervisor and the instructor for the freshman seminar courses (Appendix H). The meetings follow a general progression with the mentors asking the students about their classes and their grades and reviewing any upcoming assignments. As they progress through each class, the mentor asks the student to set goals to improve each week. After they talk through the classes the mentors review a pre-planned topic each week to help reinforce and personalize topics that were covered in the freshman seminar course that week. Mentors were asked to encourage their mentees to utilize tutoring sessions and study for courses. Finally, the mentors and students have organic conversations and can provide advice and support for non-academic related issues.

Each week mentors were expected to reinforce topics that were covered as a part of the freshman seminar course (Table 11). In session one, mentors were expected to discuss high school versus college experiences. In session two the meeting was centered on available campus resources and academic technology. Session Three the meeting focused on learning styles and strategies to use. In session four the meeting was about their career paper that students explored their future career plans. In session five the pair met about time management and organization. Session six mentors reviewed time management and organizational skills. In session six the meeting was about setting goals and action plans.

Table 10 *Reflection Codes*

Positive	
1	Resources
2	Inspired me
3	Get involved
4	Courage
5	Similar major
6	Me as a person
Negative	
1	Too busy
2	Chore
3	Checking off Boxes
4	Different Major

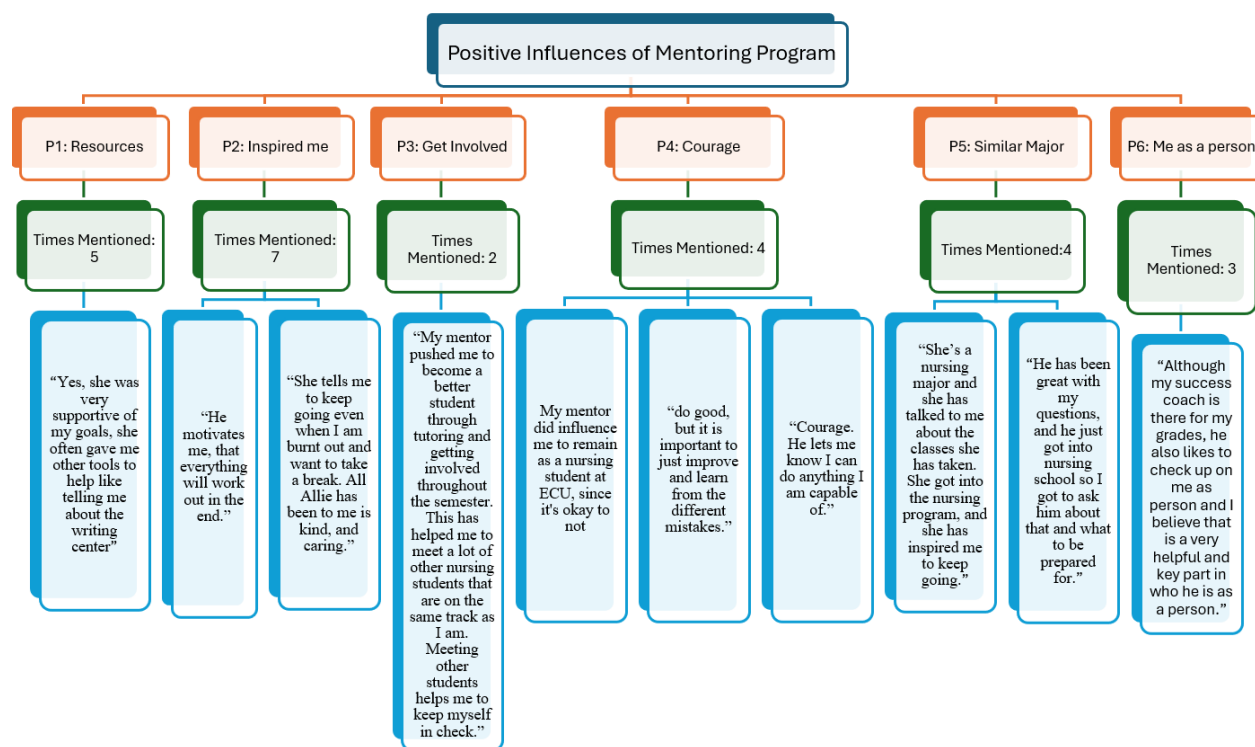


Figure 12 *Positive Influence of the Mentoring Program*

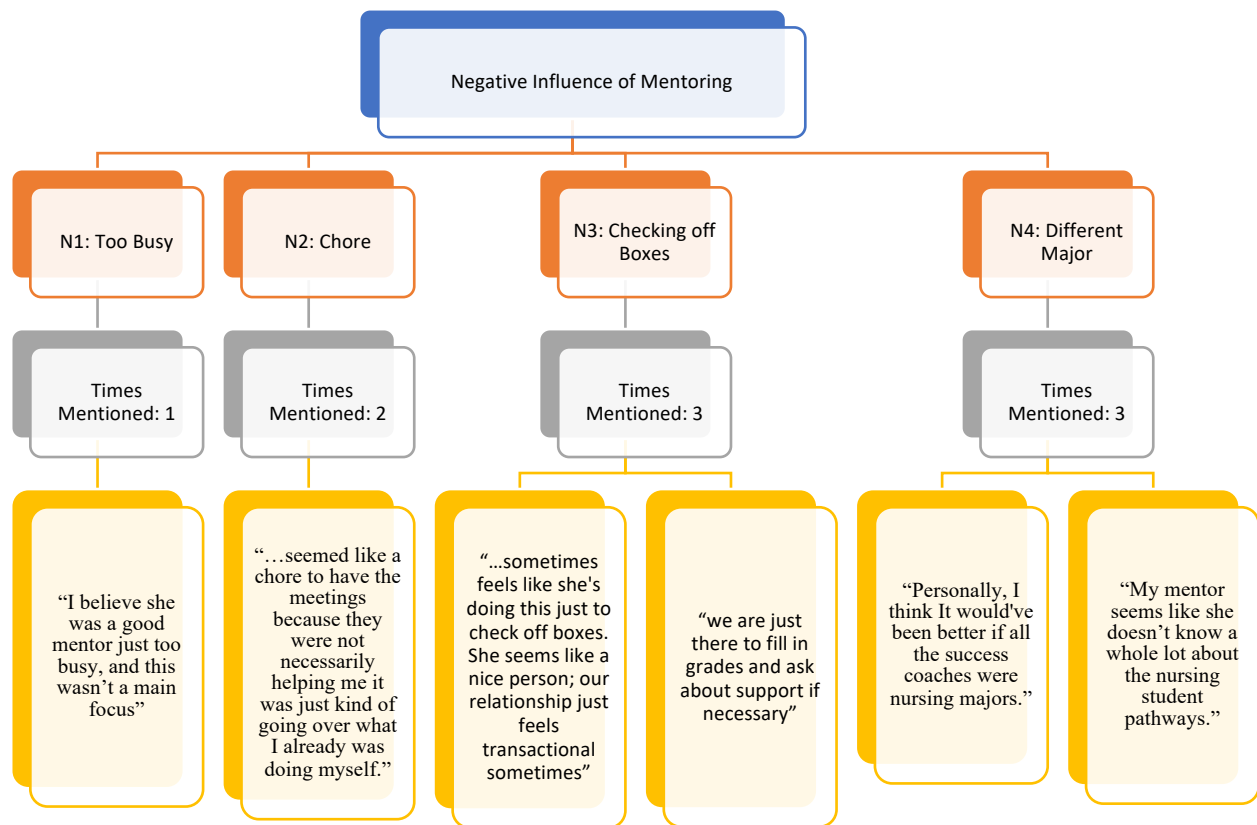


Figure 13 *Negative influence of mentoring program*

Table 11 *Mentor Meeting Topics*

Session	Meeting Topic
1	High school compared to college
2	Campus resources and technology
3	Learning Styles
4	Career planning
5	Time management and organization
6	Goal setting
7	Graphic organizers
8	Test Preparation
9	Registration
10	Exam preparation
11	Final Exam preparation

Sessions seven and eight reviewed graphic organizers and test preparation respectively. Session eight had the mentor help the mentee with registration for classes. Sessions ten and eleven were about preparing for final exams. The Success Coach (Mentor) Feedback forms from the eleven sessions were analyzed for mentor responses specifically examining conversations that deviated from the prescribed meeting topics.

Results

SQ1 Analysis

In this study the positive psychological metric of thriving was utilized as a potential indicator for identifying incoming nursing students in need of support. The results indicate that thriving as measured by the BIT survey did not serve as a strong predictor of first semester student retention or attrition. The main tools utilized to answer this query were the BIT results and the run chart. 70 students responded to the BIT survey as a part of their freshman seminar course. The responses indicated that 37 students perceived that they were not thriving in at least one category. 34 students perceived that they were thriving as they began their college career. The run chart indicated seven students were no longer nursing majors by the conclusion of their first semester as an intended nursing student. Between the control and support groups seven students were no longer nursing majors at the conclusion of the semester. Four of the students who left the nursing major were not thriving in at least two categories. Three of the students who left the major were thriving in all categories. The run chart indicates that there was not a specific time in the semester that students were more or less prone to leave the major or the university. Table 12 demonstrates thriving results based on the total number of categories based on the pre-test. Four students who chose to change their major demonstrated that they perceived themselves to not be thriving in at least two categories. Only one of the students who changed their major

indicated that they were thriving in all categories. Two students who were withdrawing from the university at the conclusion of the semester were doing so for financial hardship, which is not measured on the BIT. These final two students could potentially register and re-enroll prior to the beginning of the next semester if they are able to find a source of financial funding. If the two that withdrew for financial hardship are removed from the analysis, a few trends emerge. Of the students who changed their major 3/5 were not thriving in belonging. 2/5 did not thrive in support, flow and life satisfaction (Figure 14). The student who withdrew from the university was not thriving in 5 categories. This existing data could suggest a connection between student thriving and their likelihood to fail to persist, specifically for students that demonstrate a perceived lack of belonging, support, flow, and life satisfaction.

SQ 2 Analysis

This inquiry examined the effectiveness of mentoring at preventing or delaying first-year nursing student stop-out. Though not drastically different the results indicate that the mentoring program outperformed students who are enrolled in a freshman seminar control group, that did not include a peer-mentoring component. Among students who were mentored, a total of three changed their major or withdrew (Table 13). Students that did not receive the mentoring had four students change their major or withdraw. Students that were mentored mentioned 25 references to their mentor positively influencing their persistence in the nursing degree (Table 13). This is converse to the nine mentions that the mentoring program had a negative influence on their decision to alter their major or withdraw.

Table 12 *Major Changes and Withdraws and BIT results*

Students failing to thrive	BIT results	Major changes or withdrawals
1 Category	10	
2 Categories	8	2 – September Major Change
3 Categories	8	
4 Categories	4	1 – October Major Change
5 Categories	3	1 – September Withdraw from University
6 Categories	1	
7 Categories	2	
8 Categories	1	
9 Categories		
10 Categories		
		1 – October Major Change
0 Categories	33	2 – November withdraws for financial reason

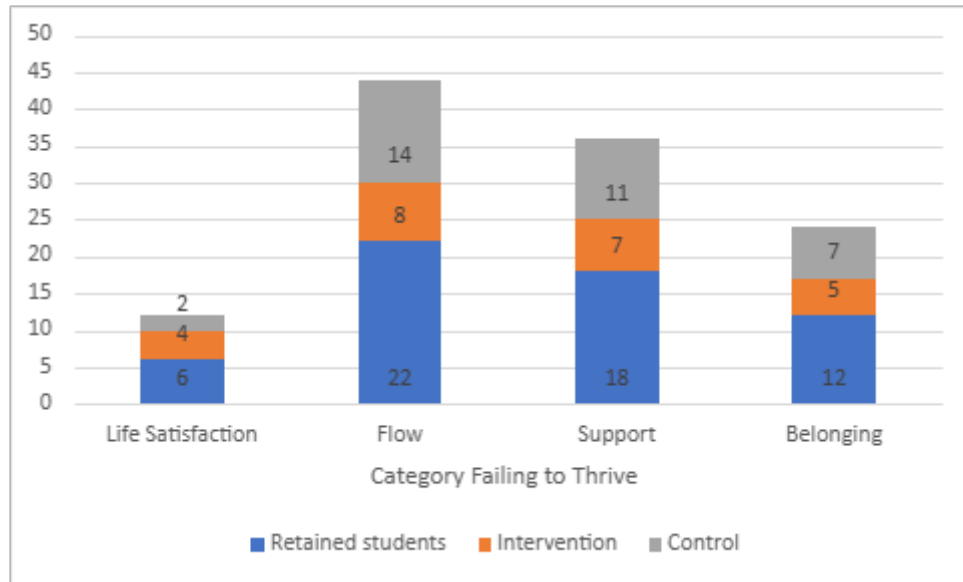


Figure 14 *Retained Students by Thriving Category*

Table 13 *Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Study Results of the Intervention Group*

Retained Students	Reasons Given by Students for Mentor's Influence	Times Mentioned
26 out of 29 students	P1: Resources	5
	P2: Inspired Me	7
	P3: Get Involved	2
	P4: Courage	4
	P5: Similar Major	4
	P6: Me as a Person	3
	N1: Too Busy	1
	N2: Chore	2
	N3: Checking Off Boxes	3
	N4: Different Major	3

The data provided from the pre, and posttest indicate that the mentoring program improved the participants' thriving metrics of meaning, support, flow, and belonging (Figure 11). Life satisfaction, flow, support, and belonging were the four characteristics of thriving that the students who failed to persist were not thriving in (Figure 14). The posttest for the BIT survey indicated that mentoring only improved students' sense of belonging over the course of the semester (Figure 11 and Table 6). While mentors had conversations that were outside of the prescribed weekly conversations, the majority of the conversations that were had between students was academically centric (Table 11). Many of the students reported positively that their relationship with their mentor was beneficial and helped them with the transition to higher education, there were instances that students referenced that the requirement to meet with the mentor was a chore and they did not find the relationship helpful (Figures 2 and 3).

Students were asked as a part of the interview if their mentor had any influence on the decision to remain a nursing major. Very few mentioned that the mentor had directly influenced their decision to remain a nursing student, though they reported having a positive relationship and the mentor was helpful. The majority of student reflections identified that their reason to remain a nursing major was due to a personal commitment they made to themselves and that they could not see themselves as anything other than a nurse.

Analysis of R1

Peer-mentoring provides holistic support to first-year nursing student stop out as suggested by the NURS retention model. Jeffreys (2012) suggests that nursing students benefit from a holistic approach to retention and identifies seven factors that influence nursing student retention. Jefferys also suggests that mentoring and professional integration could be the most effective method at influencing nursing student retention as it can affect all seven of the factors

that the theory identifies as potential reasons for student retention or stop out (Jeffreys, 2012). The following will analyze the data as it pertains to meeting the factors as outlined by Jeffrey's NURS model.

Factor one in Jeffrey's (2012) NURS model is student profile, this factor is directly related to a student's sense of belonging. This factor was measured as a part of the BIT and the pre and post-test data demonstrate that mentoring does have a positive impact on student's perception of belonging. This is also evident in the student interviews with references to mentors encouraging students to engage in campus activities and events.

Student Affective Factors addresses a student's cultural beliefs and is directly related to a student's self-efficacy (Jeffreys, 2012). This factor was measured as a part of the BIT and the pre and post-test data indicates that students did not improve in this area showed a decline as a result of the peer-mentoring program. Students indicated at the beginning of the program that they did not have an issue with this aspect of their college experience and the posttest indicated that students had issues in this area. This was reflected in the student reflection and the mentor feedback forms. There were no references from students or mentors that demonstrated that the mentor considered the student's cultural background or beliefs.

Environmental factors are the external factors that influence a student's likelihood of persistence and include things like work, family, and friends (Jeffreys, 2012). This factor was not explicitly measured by the BIT survey. The mentors addressed this factor for students who had issues related to external influences. Three students referenced that they benefitted from their mentor considered them as a whole person.

Academic factors related to a nursing student's commitment to studying, attendance, and academic support (Jeffreys, 2012). This mentoring program emphasized the commitment to

improving students academically as their prescribed conversation topics highlight. Students reflect this emphasis in their interviews citing the academic resources that their mentors provided them. This is also reflected in the negative influence of the mentor relationship with a reference that their only purpose was to check grades and offer support if necessary.

Psychological outcomes look at student stress and satisfaction and are directly related to academic outcomes (Jeffreys, 2012). Life satisfaction is measured by BIT. The pre and posttests demonstrated a decrease in student thriving in this area. However, when compared with the control group this thriving characteristic the group that was mentored did not see as drastic a decrease in student thriving. The student reflections with 4 references to a mentor encouraging students and 7 references to mentors inspiring students.

Professional integration is the centerpiece of the NURS model and is the student's commitment to the nursing profession and engagement with the university (Jeffreys, 2012). The BIT does not directly measure this factor. Students addressed this through their reflections. Four students mentioned that the mentors who had a similar major was effective in providing guidance. It is possible that this factor was what students were referring to by discussing their personal commitment to the profession in their response to the mentor's direct influence on their decision to stay a nursing major. This was the only category that had a direct opposite reported in the negative influences with three students reporting that the fact that their mentor had a different major negatively influenced their experience. Mentees also twice mentioned that their mentor encouraged them to get involved with campus activities.

Summary

This mixed-methods study sought to determine the impact of peer mentoring on retention among first-year intended nursing students, using the lens of thriving and Jeffreys' NURS

retention model. The quantitative findings revealed that mentoring was associated with improved student outcomes in areas of belonging and support, which are components linked directly to the holistic framework of student thriving. Although retention rates did not differ dramatically between the intervention and control groups, qualitative data provided additional insights to the narrative. Students identified mentor relationships, especially those with mentors sharing similar academic backgrounds, as instrumental in strengthening their sense of belonging and motivation to persist.

However, differences in mentor commitment levels emerged as a challenge, suggesting that program effectiveness is closely tied to mentor selection, training, and accountability. Furthermore, declines in specific thriving domains, specifically positive perspective and engaged learning, indicate that mentoring alone is insufficient to address all challenges faced by first-year nursing intended students.

In summary, the data indicated mentoring positively impacts key retention factors defined by the NURS model, particularly through enhancing professional integration and fostering environmental support. These findings provide compelling evidence for the inclusion of structured, major-specific peer mentoring programs as an essential element in a comprehensive retention strategy for intended nursing students. Chapter 5 will provide a summary of the findings as well as the implications of the results. It will also provide recommendations and limitations of the study. Finally, it will include a summary and reflection of the inquiry implementation.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, I sought to reveal and describe if and how peer-mentoring is an effective intervention strategy for retaining freshmen nursing students who are not thriving. Mentoring was proposed as a promising practice that could influence nursing student retention in the NURS model (Jeffreys, 2012). To accomplish this objective, the study utilized an explanatory mixed methods approach. The data revealed that mentoring positively affected student retention. In this conclusion, I will present a summary and interpretation of the findings, discuss limitations, and make recommendations for the future.

Summary of the Findings

The findings indicated that generally mentoring had a positive influence on intended nursing student retention. Students who received the mentoring intervention indicated that the mentors helped them with getting engaged with campus resources and campus activities. Mentees indicated that a mentor with a similar major was an important factor in influencing student retention. Students were able to receive holistic support from their mentors. Mentoring helped retain students regardless of thriving status. Not all mentors were equal, and students mentioned that they perceived that some mentors were not committed or knowledgeable about their success and that they were “just checking boxes”.

The BIT indicated that almost half of the nursing students that were beginning their first year at ECU were thriving in all ten categories. At the conclusion of the mentoring program, the BIT indicated that mentoring potentially improved student’s perception of belonging. The BIT survey alone did not seem to indicate a student would be more or less likely to stop-out. There were four categories from the BIT that seemed to relate to students who ultimately chose to stop-out. They are life satisfaction, flow, support, and belonging. The one student who chose to

withdraw from the entire university indicated that they were failing to thrive in five of the categories. This finding potentially indicates that thriving could relate to a student's likelihood of staying at the university and be used as an early warning system for students in need of support.

Interpretation of the Findings

Peer mentoring proved to be a promising practice to improve intended nursing student retention, and influence students to stay with the profession. Though not explicitly measured, qualitative data revealed that the mentors influenced student resilience. As one participant stated, "My mentor did influence me to remain as a nursing student at ECU." Several mentees mentioned that their mentor inspired them, "to keep going even when I am burnt out and want to take a break." Another noted, "He motivates me, that everything will work out in the end." Finally, a student with a mentor in a similar major noted, "She got into the nursing program, and she has inspired me to keep going."

The quantitative results from the data revealed that peer mentoring had a positive influence on students' sense of belonging which is a component of thriving that influences student retention and persistence. This was reinforced as one participant responded, "My mentor pushed me to become a better student through tutoring and getting involved throughout the semester...Meeting other students helps me to keep myself in check." Connecting students with campus resources also proved to be an important theme as this mentee put it, "Yes, she was very supportive of my goals, she often gave me other tools to help like telling me about the writing center." The sense of belonging was demonstrated in the mentor caring about students as an individual as one student stated, "Although my success coach is there for my grades, he likes to check up on me as a person and I believe that is a very helpful and key part in who he is as a person." This sense of belonging was further demonstrated in the data provided in the run chart,

and the results of the BIT pre and post surveys. However, inconsistent outcomes on the BIT indicate that peer mentoring may not be sufficient as a standalone strategy. This is evident in the universal decline in engaged learning for both the control and intervention groups. This suggests that first-semester challenges may require additional support beyond mentoring and the freshman seminar course. It may reflect normal adjustment challenges or academic stress that mentoring alone could not alleviate.

In addition, not all mentors are the same. Several students noted that the mentoring relationship was a detractor from their first-year experience, with two students noting the meetings seemed like a chore for the mentor, “I believe she was a good mentor just too busy, and this wasn’t a main focus.” As several students mentioned it seemed like the mentor “sometimes feels like she’s doing this just to check off boxes.” Another student noted, “She seems like a nice person; our relationship just feels transactional sometimes.” It also seemed to be redundant for a couple of mentees, “...seemed like a chore to have the meetings because they were not necessarily helping me it was just kind of going over what I already was doing myself.” Finally, students noted that mentors who had a different major were not as helpful, “My mentor seems like she doesn’t know a whole lot about the nursing student pathways.” Or as this participant put it, “Personally, I think it would’ve been better if all the success coaches [mentors] were nursing majors.”

The control group’s improvements in the BIT in areas like support, flow, and positive affect imply the potential influence of other institutional supports or factors not explicitly measured in this study. Qualitative data revealed that mentorship effectiveness depends on mentor engagement, quality, and perceived mentor relevance. Qualitative data demonstrated the need for mentors to be knowledgeable about the nursing major, underscoring the need to

emphasize mentor-mentee pairings, specifically focusing on discipline specific pairings. Peer mentoring's ability to influence student belonging can make it a valuable component of a holistic approach for intended-nursing retention. The following sections will look at the findings through the lens of the theoretical frameworks and how the findings relate to previous related research that were discussed in chapter two.

Interpretation of the findings and theoretical frameworks.

Jeffreys (2012) suggests mentoring does influence all of the factors of student thriving. However, not all of the factors were influenced positively by the mentoring intervention. Central to the NURS model is the concept of professional integration. The qualitative data speaks to the importance of professional integration in that students identified that mentors that they found to be particularly effective aligned with their major and their success in the major inspired them. Conversely, students identified that mentors that did not have a background in the nursing major were less effective. In addition, the BIT demonstrated an influence on factors related to student thriving. As established in chapter 2 the thriving metric can be linked to the NURS model and demonstrate the influence of the mentoring program on nursing student retention. The following analyzes the findings of this study via the theoretical frameworks discussed in chapter 2.

Social Connectedness. Social connectedness relates to belonging and a sense of community (Schreiner, 2010a). The BIT measured this metric in questions 9 and 10. This area of thriving demonstrated improvement over the duration of the study. Students improved their sense of belonging and did not experience a decline in the perceived amount of support. Student interviews aligned with the BIT findings, as students indicated that their peer mentors encouraged them to get involved with campus activities, and it helped when students had a mentor that was in the same major. It was also noted by students that the mentors were not as effective if

they had a different major. This thriving lens aligns with the NURS model's environmental factors (Schreiner, 2010a; Jeffreys, 2012). The BIT findings and the interviews indicated that the peer mentoring intervention positively influenced environmental factors.

Positive Perspective. Thriving students have a positive outlook and demonstrate persistence through problems (Schreiner, 2010c). The BIT measured this metric in questions 1 through 5. Over the course of the study, students demonstrated that they did not maintain as positive a perspective over the course of the mentoring program. Despite the BIT results, student interviews indicated that the peer mentors influenced their persistence and perspective, with several noting that their mentor inspired them and helped them develop courage. This thriving lens aligns with the NURS factors psychological outcomes and student affective factors (Schreiner, 2010c; Jeffreys, 2012). The student interviews indicated that peer mentoring positively influenced a student's affective factors and psychological outcomes.

Academic Determination and Engaged Learning. Academic determination helps to predict persistence and learning behavior (Paquette et al., 2022; Schreiner, 2010b). Engaged learning is demonstrated through processing, attention, and interaction with learning material without distraction (Jaleel et al., 2023; Paquette et al., 2022; Schreiner, 2010b). The BIT measured this metric in questions 6, 7, and 8. The BIT revealed that there was a decline in this area of student thriving over the duration of the study. Because the BIT survey was not specifically designed for educational purposes, it lacks specificity and could be improved in this area. The student responses, however, do indicate that the peer mentors influenced this factor. Students noted that mentors provided them with academic resources and were checking on grades and progress. These thriving lenses align with the NURS model's academic factors and

academic outcomes (Schreiner, 2010b; Jeffreys 2012). The mentoring program influenced these factors as indicated in the student interviews.

Diverse Citizenship. Diverse citizenship addresses student's inclusivity and community impact (Schreiner, 2010c). The BIT does not adequately measure this metric of student thriving. This is another potential area for improvement for the BIT. Diverse citizenship was not reflected in the student interview responses. Thriving lens aligned with the student profile and student affective factors in the NURS model (Schreiner, 2010c; Jeffreys, 2012). These factors are reflective of a student's background and living situation.

Additional findings

This study adds to the knowledge of student retention and thriving. Nicole Mentag (2022) studied the effect of mentoring on students that were deemed to be thriving. Their study found that mentoring had a positive influence on student retention for students who were thriving (Mentag 2022). This study had similar findings in that students who were thriving suggested positive effects from the peer-mentoring intervention. The focus of this study however was to expand Mentag's (2022) findings to see if students who were not thriving benefited from the mentoring intervention, as Mentag mentioned in their future implications. This study found that students who were not thriving also benefitted from the mentoring intervention. This suggests that peer-mentoring programs could be seen as beneficial for all students regardless of their thriving status.

Peer-mentoring's most influential effect was positively influencing student belonging. This aligns with Tinto's (1975) student retention model that suggests that students who quickly engage with the university and form a sense of belonging are less likely to stop-out. The study indicated that students attributed the mentor's encouragement to engage with campus resources

and activities as one of the primary ways that the mentors encouraged their decision to stay. Having the mentor as a reference and point of contact for help also improved the chances that a student would choose to stay. This in turn reinforces student commitment to complete their degree and remain at the university (Hovdhaugen et al., 2023).

Tentative ancillary findings

The following section presents findings that were not explicitly tested or sought in the study design. However, the mixed-methods data revealed additional insights worth noting. While these findings are not empirically proven, they may be relevant. The results potentially suggest that holistic approaches to student retention may be more valuable than strategies focused solely on academics and engagement. In particular, the quality of mentor training and preparation appears to be an important factor. The timing of interventions emerges as a critical consideration.

A holistic approach to student retention is valuable. Mentors were able to provide individualized support, addressing the specific needs of students. Only one category identified from student responses related directly to academic support. Five students reported that mentors connected them to campus resources, which they found helpful. The remaining responses focused on personal issues and highlighted the role of mentors as role models.

The quality of mentor preparation is another important factor. Not all mentors were equally effective. Students reflected that some mentors were disengaged and appeared to be “checking boxes.” This was also evident in the mentor feedback forms. Some provided minimal information, while others offered detailed accounts of their mentees’ progress and challenges. Although all mentors completed the same training, the application of that training varied depending on the mentor’s perspective and personality. Less structured mentor meetings may also be more beneficial. Each meeting was organized around a prescribed topic and checklist,

leaving limited space for organic conversation. This structure may have contributed to student comments that meetings felt like a chore or that mentors seemed to be simply fulfilling a requirement.

Finally, the timing of interventions is critical. Early engagement is particularly important, underscoring the value of early warning systems for students transitioning into higher education. Most students who changed their major did so in September or October. The two November withdrawals were financially motivated rather than academically driven. This suggests that interventions should be implemented as early as possible to support students in their transition. Additionally, given the limited number of peer mentors, it is essential to ensure that students with the greatest need for support are prioritized

Limitations of the Study

The Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT) proved to be a fairly weak tool to assess student thriving. The tool requires students to be self-aware and only asks a singular question for each factor of thriving as it relates to student retention. The authors of the study have developed a more comprehensive thriving assessment that asks participants to similarly self-assess if they are thriving in certain categories. However, the question structure is the same; a scale ranging 1-5. The larger version of the survey also includes topics that are not related to student thriving as explained by Schriener (2010), and does not align with the factors that Jeffreys (2012) identified in the NURS model. Jeffrey's model does include a risk factor assessment; however, it does not assess student thriving. Schriener (2010) is the author of the *Thriving Quotient* which assesses student thriving and is much more comprehensive and effective than the BIT. The *Thriving Quotient* is controlled by the author, and there is a substantial cost associated with administering the assessment and the results are recorded and distributed by the Schriener and their team. Since

this inquiry was conducted without an operational budget, cost and control of the results were considered when selecting the measurement tool.

Response numbers on the BIT were different on the pretest and posttest. There were significantly more responses to the pretest at the beginning of the semester than the posttest at the end of the study. This means that establishing the true quantitative influence on mentoring's influence on student retention proved to be challenging. All of the missing survey responses were from the control group. Therefore, it is possible that the numbers may be more distinctly different when comparing the intervention to the control group at the conclusion of the study. However, the influence of the mentoring program on the intervention group was still possible with their responses.

A challenge arose in the middle of the study as the director of the Pirate Academic Success Center agreed to take another job in the middle of the semester. She was the instructor in charge of the second intervention group. Thankfully, the new job was at the same university, and they were allowed to continue to complete instructing the course through the end of the semester. However, navigating a new role transition and the politics and emotions of returning to their previous work environment could have influenced their course instruction.

Not all mentors are created equally. Reflecting on their experiences, students noted that some of their mentors were there to check the boxes and did not seem to be vested in their success. Others noted that their mentors were very helpful and seemed very engaged and interested in their success. The mentor's experience with the nursing major seemed to carry some influence on their ability to mentor the intended nursing students. While every attempt was made at connecting nursing intended majors with other nursing intended majors, the reality was that there were not enough nursing majors available to mentor the incoming mentees, so any mentor

that had a major that was related to an allied health field was pulled and connected with the intended nursing freshman to mentor them.

This study was conducted in the Fall of 2024. In the Spring of 2023, the United States Supreme Court struck down affirmative action in two landmark cases during the time that this study was conducted (*Students for fair admissions, inc. v. president and fellows of Harvard college*, 2023). The implications of this ruling were initially unclear. As guidance and direction was received over the following months from the university, as a department questions on the nursing application that contained demographic information were removed from the application, even though it did not apply to the admission of Nursing students to the BSN option. Other departments at the university were asked to remove demographic questions from applications for programs as well. To remain consistent with the guidance that we seemed to be receiving, the conversation and discussion in this inquiry did not measure or engage in measurements that involved student demographic information.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

The study found that students who participated in both the freshman seminar course and participated in the mentoring program experienced lower attrition rates and benefits from the program. However, it is worth noting that mentor-mentee pairing proved to be an important part of the effectiveness of the intervention. Students noted that some mentors were not as invested and that the meetings seemed just to “check boxes.” Mentees also noted that mentors who were also nursing majors and were familiar with the nursing expectations were more beneficial. Mentees also noted that the inverse was also true, that a mentor who lacked knowledge of the nursing major was not as beneficial. Considering this feedback it’s important to carefully craft mentor and mentee pairings in future mentor programs, and try to ensure that students are paired

with mentors that share their major. If logistical concerns prevent students from being able to be matched with a mentor with the same major, then the mentors should be provided with appropriate training and follow-up to familiarize themselves with their mentee's major.

Students without assigned mentors also demonstrated improvement in certain thriving dimensions. This is likely due to the freshman seminar course but could also be related to other first-year programming on campus. This finding indicates that mentoring adds value on top of baseline support and should not be viewed as a standalone solution.

Implications of the Findings for Equity. The program's design allows for the inclusion of additional support for non-traditional students. By removing the on-campus requirement to participate in the mentoring program, students that have obligations and must live off campus have access to mentors. Currently the mentoring programs that are offered on campus are attached to programs that require students to be connected to a program that has an on campus living requirement. Because this mentoring program was connected to a class and a major, the on-campus requirement was eliminated and the opportunity was extended to students that would otherwise not have had access.

There is specific language and methodology that is used throughout the study that avoids connotations and could provide a method for working in a space that is currently in a legal grey area in higher education. The study does not emphasize or use student demographic characteristics, nor does it provide an intervention for students that is specific to a student's race, gender, class, sexual identity, etc. This study's framework was originally constructed using a framework that was created to improve non-traditional student retention. The NURS model was originally created as a retention model for retaining non-traditional nursing students (Jeffreys

2012). In addition, the study did not put specific labels on students that could then become self-fulfilling prophecies.

The findings are also indicative that mentoring is potentially an effective practice for student retention regardless of status. This study demonstrates that there are beneficial influences to student peer-mentoring programs for students who are not thriving, and those who are. Nicole Mentag's (2022) study also demonstrates that students who are thriving benefit from mentoring programs. This study, when coupled with Mentag's (2022) work, can be used to show that mentoring could potentially benefit students who are thriving and those who are not thriving.

Recommendations for Practice

Data from the interviews indicated that the major of the peer mentor was important. A reoccurring theme in the student reflections indicated that a similar mentor provided a more positive influence or experience, while a mentor with a different major led to a less beneficial experience. Pairing mentors of similar majors can be a challenge as the supply of intended nursing major mentors will most likely not meet the demand of intended nursing majors who are seeking their assistance. Because of this, establishing a development pipeline or potentially incentivizing a mentor development program might be beneficial to ensuring the long-term viability of the program.

Mentees indicated that not all mentors provided the same experience and directly suggested that mentors be familiar with the student's major. It would be prudent to provide training for peer mentors on effective mentoring practices and major specific training. In addition the mentor manager could improve the mentor feedback form and ensure the quality of the meetings that are taking place and not simply that regular meetings are taking place. The mentor

mentee relationship needs to be emphasized rather than simply using the meetings for grade checks.

The study created a replicable and sustainable intervention for student retention and success. I have been invited back to facilitate the freshman seminar course during the next fall transition. The program will undergo some alterations for the next cycle. The PASC center has found a way to incentivize the mentoring program for those who are successful in their first year. The center is going to recruit students who were academically proficient this cycle to be mentors for the next cohort. Students who agree to be mentors will then be fast tracked to become academic tutors. Academic tutors are a paid position within the PASC, so by participating in the program, it creates a track for on campus jobs. The jobs will help students who face financial burdens, helping to further influence student retention.

Mentoring should be considered as a promising add on to baseline student success supports. In addition to one-on-one mentoring sessions, additional resources could be developed and implemented to address the areas mentoring did not influence. Creating or refining additional workshops or resources on study strategies, time management, and stress reduction may target areas like engaged learning and positive perspective that demonstrated declines in the BIT.

Thriving could potentially be used to identify students in need of additional supports. As discussed in the limitations section, the BIT was less than ideal as a screening tool in the academic environment. However, students that chose to withdraw from the university, or change their major from nursing did indicate on the BIT that they were not thriving in multiple categories and specifically all students that left the major indicated that they were not thriving in the categories of life satisfaction, flow, support, and belonging. Administering the BIT or a

similar tool that assesses these areas early in the semester could be used to identify students in need of additional assistance.

Future use of the BIT as a method for identifying students who are not thriving should include modifications. The authors of the BIT suggest that the survey can be used in an educational setting; however, the survey does not include education-specific questions. Academic factors are included as a part of determining student thriving, so including questions that can address these factors would be beneficial. In addition potentially explaining the criteria being measured as a part of the survey may prove to be beneficial. For example explaining what “flow” is asking the respondent to consider when rating themselves in the various that characteristic could provide consistency with the answers received.

Recommendations for Future Study

Due to the study’s limited participants, the findings cannot be generalized beyond ECU’s nursing intended first year students in 2024. The inquiry was designed to be transferable, and could be replicated in various contexts with differing groups of people. The study was designed to fit within a three-year graduate degree program which limited the possible timeline that was examined. Future studies could look to expand the duration of the study to examine the mentoring program’s influence on one year retention or potentially two-year retention. By extending the length of the study the researcher could determine if these short-term results ultimately lead to additional nursing school applications.

The study participants were students who perceived a need for additional support during their transition to higher education. Students who enrolled in freshman seminar courses and those that applied for the mentoring program chose to do so without a requirement to do so. It would

be interesting to see the results of this study with a control group of students who were not receiving any form of additional support.

Researchers should also consider variations on mentor-mentee models in connection with academic support. The use of group mentoring instead of one-to-one mentoring sessions is a possible area of exploration. The mentoring training is also a topic of opportunity. Given the findings of this study, peer mentors that are untrained but have similar interests and majors may provide sufficient support for retention.

Future research should use multiple metrics and quantitative measures given the limitation of the BIT. Exploring academic performance in addition to thriving and retention data may provide more insight into the influence of thriving on retention. In addition, researchers could look to interview students who choose to withdraw from their nursing program to assess what challenges remain unaddressed.

Conclusion

Student retention is more than keeping students registered for classes and grades on tests. Student retention and success efforts need to encompass supporting the whole student in areas beyond academic and campus engagement. By shifting the mindset from survival and success to thriving as the acceptable goal of the student experience the entire institutional organism benefits. The organization benefits financially through maintaining the individual revenue stream, and the marketing benefit of students sharing their experiences with peers and the next generation of students. The students benefit from a positive investment in their lives and reaching their professional goals. Peer mentoring provides the mechanism for students to be able to find support in their subject in a way that may be more comfortable and less academically stringent.

This study contributes to our understanding of retention strategies for intended nursing students by validating the integration of Jeffreys' NURS retention model with Schreiner's thriving framework. Mentoring enhanced students' feelings of belonging and campus connection, both components of thriving and predictors of retention according to the NURS framework. However, mentoring was less effective in addressing certain academic and psychological thriving factors, suggesting the necessity of additional or complementary supports.

Practically, this research underscores the importance of targeted mentor recruitment and training, recommending discipline-specific mentor pairing and ongoing mentor development to maximize program effectiveness. Furthermore, the findings suggest employing a thriving-based early alert system to proactively identify and support students at risk of attrition.

Future research should extend beyond the first semester to assess long-term impacts of mentoring on retention, explore diverse student populations, and refine thriving measures for greater predictive accuracy. Ultimately, enhancing intended nursing student retention through mentoring addresses a critical workforce need, helping institutions not only retain more students but also contribute significantly to resolving the ongoing nursing shortage.

In conclusion, peer mentoring emerges from this study as a viable, impactful intervention to bolster nursing student retention. By addressing critical gaps identified in this research, universities can implement strategic, evidence-based mentoring programs to ensure more intended nursing students successfully progress into and through their professional preparation.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 · red@ecu.edu /
umcirm/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Matthew Passwater](#)
CC: [Jerry Johnson](#)
Date: 6/3/2024
Re: [UMCIRB 24-000816](#)
Helping Students Thrive: Examining the impact of peer mentorship-based approach to retention for intended baccalaureate nursing students

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 6/1/2024. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1,2 B.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Dissertation in Practice proposal - in progress(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Dissertation in Practice proposal - in progress 1.4(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Informed Consent(0.01)	Consent Forms
Instrumentation Scripts and Survey(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Instrumentation Scripts and Survey(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Study recruitment Script(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

Appendix B: INFORMED CONSENT

You are being invited to participate in a **research** study titled “Helping students thrive: Examining the influence of a peer-mentorship based approach to retention for intended baccalaureate nursing students.” being conducted by Matthew Passwater, a student and staff member at East Carolina University in the Educational Leadership and Nursing departments. The goal is to survey 65 or more individuals in East Carolina University who are first-year intended nursing majors. The survey will take approximately eight minutes to complete. It is hoped that this information will assist us to better understand the influence that peer-mentors have on encouraging freshmen to continue their degree program. Your responses will be kept confidential, and no data will be released or used with your identification attached. Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. There is **no penalty for not taking part** in this research study. Please call Matthew Passwater or the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

APPENDIX C: COLLEGE OF NURSING RANKING FORMULA

East Carolina University - College of Nursing BSN Admission Criteria

Minimum Eligibility to Apply

- Have a minimum 2.75 cumulative GPA *(includes all college grades from all colleges attended - pass/fail grades excluded)*
- Earn a final grade of "C" or higher in the following prerequisite courses:
MATH 1065, CHEM 1120, CHEM 1130, BIOL 2110/11, BIOL 2140/41, and BIOL 2150/51

Selection Process

Admission to ECU's BSN program is competitive. The competitiveness of each admission cycle is determined by the unique applicant pool. **Admission is based upon cumulative GPA and the Ranking Formula outlined below.**

Ranking Formula

Grade Point Average:

(cumulative, includes all college grades from all colleges attended - pass/fail grades excluded)

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| ☐ 3.8 - 4.0 = 9 pts | ☐ 3.4 - 3.59 = 7 pts | ☐ 3.0 - 3.19 = 5 pts | ☐ 2.75 - 2.79 = 3 pts |
| ☐ 3.6 - 3.79 = 8 pts | ☐ 3.2 - 3.39 = 6 pts | ☐ 2.8 - 2.99 = 4 pts | |

HESI A2 Exam Average:

(maximum 2 exam attempts, highest score from each of the five required sections is used to calculate exam average)

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☐ 97 - 100% = 6 pts | ☐ 89 - 92.9% = 4 pts | ☐ 81 - 84.9% = 2 pts |
| ☐ 93 - 96.9% = 5 pts | ☐ 85 - 88.9% = 3 pts | ☐ 75 - 80.9% = 1 pt |

ECU Enrollment Status:

- ☒ Enrolled as a freshman with continuous enrollment at ECU (excluding summer) = 2 pts
- ☐ Enrolled as a transfer student with earned 12+ credit hrs at ECU prior to applying = 1 pt

Successful Completion of Prerequisite Courses on the First Attempt:

(Pass/Fail grades taken in any of these courses will not be eligible for bonus points in this category)

MATH 1065, CHEM 1120, CHEM 1130, BIOL 2140,
BIOL 2150, and BIOL 2110 with a "C" or higher *(BIOL labs excluded)*

- ☒ 0 Repeats = 2 pts
- ☐ 1 Repeat = 1 pt
- ☐ 2+ Repeats = 0 pts

BIOL lecture and labs
with a "B" or higher

- ☐ BIOL 2140 & 2141 = 1 pt
- ☐ BIOL 2150 & 2151 = 1 pt
- ☐ BIOL 2110 & 2111 = 1 pt

Additional Student Attributes

- ☐ Current LPN license = 1 pt
- ☐ Veteran student = 1 pt

STUDENT SNAPSHOT:

	Current Admission GPA:	Current Point Rank:
	Recommended Strategies:	
	Date: / /	Advisor:

Updated 10.13.2023 / Subject to change at any time with faculty approval

APPENDIX D: BSN OPTION APPLICATION STATISTICS 2020 - SPRING 2024

BSN option Applicants by semester	Lowest admitted Rank	
Spring 2020	161	11
Fall 2020	136	9
Spring 2021	230	12
Fall 2021	272	12
Spring 2022	201	12
Fall 2022	183	12
Spring 2023	152	9
Fall 2023	158	10
Spring 2024	156	8

Appendix E: BRIEF INVENTORY OF THRIVING SURVEY

Displayed at the top of the Survey: Your responses will be kept confidential, and no data will be released or used with your identification attached. Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. There is **no penalty for not taking part** in this research study. Your completion of the survey will serve as your agreement to participate in the study.

Please provide your ECU student Email (this serves as your consent to participate in the study):

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements using the scale below.

1 Strongly Disagree

2 Disagree

3 Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

1. My life has a clear sense of purpose.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I am optimistic about my future

1 2 3 4 5

3. My life is going well

1 2 3 4 5

4. I feel good most of the time

1 2 3 4 5

5. What I do in life is valuable and worthwhile

1 2 3 4 5

6. I can succeed if I put my mind to it

1 2 3 4 5

7. I am achieving most of my goals

1 2 3 4 5

8. In most activities I do, I feel energized

1 2 3 4 5

9. There are people who appreciate me as a person

1 2 3 4 5

10. I feel a sense of belonging in my community

1 2 3 4 5

The brief thriving inventory was developed by Su et al.
Su, R., Tay, L., & Diener, E. (2014). The development and validation of Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) and Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT). *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*. [https://doi: 10.1111/aphw.12027](https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12027)

Appendix F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interview protocol is designed to be administered as a student reflection in a freshman seminar course. This allows students ample opportunity to ponder and provide detailed responses to the interview questions in a familiar setting.

Say to the students: The purpose of this interview is to gauge the influence of your student mentor on your decision to remain a nursing student at East Carolina University. I also want to explore if the mentoring relationship helped you transition as a new student to ECU.

1. During your orientation to ECU were you provided sufficient information regarding student support services?
2. Describe the role of student support services? (i.e. Pirate Academic Success Center, Disability Support Services, your advisor...etc.)
3. If you are planning to stay at East Carolina University next semester, what are the top 5 reasons you chose to stay at East Carolina for another semester?
4. If you are continuing as a nursing major at ECU, what made you want to stay with nursing?
5. If you are deciding to change your major, what made you want to change?
6. Describe your relationship with your assigned student success coach/mentor.
7. Have you generally found that your mentor was supportive of your goals? Yes or no – Follow up pathway.

Yes to question 6.

1. Name the most helpful or supportive advice or action provided by your mentor?
2. Did your mentor influence your decision to remain a nursing student at ECU? – Why?

No to question 6.

1. Do you have any suggestions for improving your relationship with your mentor?
2. Did your mentor influence your decision to remain a nursing student at ECU? – Why?

Closing question: Are there any other things you think would be beneficial for us to know about the influence of this mentoring program on your decision to stay a nursing major at ECU?

Appendix G: APPLICATION

**ECU**

STUDENT ACADEMIC
SUCCESS SERVICES

AAA



SASS Learning Communities Application

Please complete the following information to express your interest in joining a SASS learning community.

If you have questions about the learning communities, please feel free to contact Dr. Elizabeth Coghill via email at coghille@ecu.edu.

Contact Information:

Name (First and Last) * must provide value	
Cell Phone Number * must provide value	
Banner ID (B0XXXXXXX)	
ECU Email Address * must provide value	
Alternate Email Address	
Permanent Address * must provide value	
City * must provide value	
State * must provide value	

Zipcode * must provide value	
What high school did you attend? (Please include full name, city, and state)	
Parent(s) / Legal Guardian Information	
Name of Parent(s) / Legal Guardian * must provide value	
Mailing Address for Parent(s) / Legal Guardian (Street, City, State, and Zip Code) * must provide value	
Email Address of Parent(s) / Legal Guardian	
Phone Number of Parent(s) / Legal Guardian * must provide value	
Additional Information:	
Intended Major/Career * must provide value	
T-Shirt Size (Adult sizes) * must provide value	v
Will you be living on campus? * must provide value	v
How did you hear about the Success Learning Community? * must provide value	
How would you rate your skills in the following areas:	

	This is new to me	I'm getting there, but need improvement	I've got this covered	I could teach others this skill
Test-Taking * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Note-Taking * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Textbook Reading * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Studying for a Test * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Time Management * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Writing papers * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Willingness to ask for help or seek resources * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Organization * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Building relationships / Making friends * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐
Paying attention during class * must provide value	☐	☐	☐	☐

Reflect:

In high school, did you take classes at a community college?

* must provide value

In high school, did you take AP or IB courses?

* must provide value

In high school, did *any* of these things apply to you?

- I had extra academic assistance
- I attended a high school that offered structured support services
- I had an IEP
- I had a 504 plan

* must provide value

Why is obtaining a college education important to you? * must provide value	
Why did you apply to ECU? * must provide value	
What subject (s) did you find the most challenging in high school? * must provide value	
What subject (s) did you enjoy in high school? * must provide value	
List any activities that you were/are involved in (clubs, organizations, work, volunteering, etc.). Also include if you held a leadership position. * must provide value	
Share a life changing event and discuss how it has impacted you. * must provide value	
What academic challenges have you faced? * must provide value	
Do you have a mentor? If so, how has this relationship impacted you? * must provide value	

Success Learning Community participants will receive high impact services including academic and college life transition coaching, peer academic success coaching, social and cultural activities, priority tutoring, ECU Connect monitoring, enrollment in common classes, and learning center employment opportunities.

By typing my full name, I am stating my interest in joining the Success Learning Community. I understand that my participation in this program will last for one academic year, and I will be placed into common coursework.

* must provide value

Submit

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Appendix H: SUCCESS COACHING REPORT

Session 1 Information

Session Date*

! Required field

MMMM DD, YYYY

Peer Academic Success Coach Name*

First Name

Last Name

Student Name*

First Name

Last Name

Who is the student's COAD instructor?*

Did the student show up for this appointment?*

☒ Yes

☐ No

Did you update and upload Grade Tracker?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

Was the student on time and prepared?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the student's planner include an action plan to complete assignments?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

Class Update

How many classes does the student have? (Count labs as separate classes)*

Session Specific Information

Does the student understand all of their course syllabi including professor information, expectations, grading, and all assignments and due dates?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you discuss the "High School Debrief" handout?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you decide on a consistent day and time to meet with your mentee this semester?*

☐ Yes
☐ No

Select the campus resources the student has utilized so far this semester.

- ☐ Tutoring (Appointment or Walk-In)
- ☐ Study Groups
- ☒ Study Skills Appointments
- ☐ Canvas Videos
- ☐ University Writing Center
- ☐ Math Cave
- ☐ Professor/TA Office Hours
- ☐ None of the Above
- ☐ Other

Follow-Up

What are 3 things that the student will do to be successful by the next session?*

A large, empty rectangular text box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their goals for the next session.

Does a professional staff member from the PASC need to follow up with the student?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

Areas of Concern (ie: did the student mention they violated a residential policy, concerning family issues, mentioned a learning difference, commented about harming one self, participating in any destructive or high-risk behavior). Comments: (ie: did the student join an organization, show interest in finding a job, mention changing their major, has shown major growth in academics).*

A large, empty rectangular text box with a thin black border, intended for the professional staff member to record areas of concern and comments on the student's progress.

