

An Early Integration Enhancement Program for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students

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By

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### **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my children: Grace, Jacob, and Jackson. You are the most amazing gifts from God and I am eternally grateful that I am your mother. You fill my days with joy, amazement, admiration, and pride. Thank you for the constant encouragement, patience, and understanding you have shown me throughout the last six years. I would not have been able to accomplish this dream if it wasn't for the three of you. I know that each of you has the ability and determination to reach every dream and goal you set out to achieve. Thank you for always being by my side and never letting me give up. I love you to the moon and back.

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### **Abstract**

As a result of the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act (PPACA) and the continual rise in age, chronicity, and diversity of the population served (Institute of Medicine, 2010), the nation's health care needs are dramatically transforming. With almost three million nurses, the profession of nursing represents the largest discipline within the health care system (IOM, 2010), therefore, it is necessary for nurse leaders and educators to increase, advance, and diversify the profession of nursing (IOM, 2010). Unfortunately, as a result of attrition rates reaching as high as 50%, nursing programs across the country are finding it challenging to meet this directive (Harris, Rosenberg, & O'Rourke, 2014). For this reason, it is imperative for nursing programs to direct their attention toward institutional practices which promote student integration, retention, and graduation.

Although collegial integration and institutional retention remain at the forefront of academic research, there is a lack of evidence surrounding best practices principles related to the unique needs of first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students. The identified gap in evidence compelled the researcher to explore this student population's perception of early integration and retention strategies. This research study sought to discover the perceptions of first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students' experiences in an Early Integration Enhancement Program (EIEP) at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program.

A qualitative, phenomenological, hermeneutical approach was used to explore an inaugural EIEP experience as portrayed through the collective accounts and authentic descriptions of five first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students. The institution's Clinical and Academic Development Director recruited five out of nine eligible students

involved in the EIEP to participate in the study at hand. Three out of the five participants were male, five were Caucasian, five were 24 years of age or younger, one was a first-generation student, one entered the program directly out of high school, four were transfer students from a four-year college or university, and all five participants intended to complete their nursing degrees at the current academic institution.

The data gathering processes consisted of in-depth interviews and a characteristic-card sorting activity. Data analysis was conducted through a line-by-line review of interview transcripts, open-coding, and analytic coding. The following analysis assurances were used to confirm findings were trustworthy and rigorous: bracketing, adequate engagement, member checking, peer review, audit trail, and thick, rich descriptions.

Four primary themes and four sub-themes were expressed through participants' perceptions of the EIEP experience and are as follows: apprehension and uncertainty to acceptance and appreciation, relational connections to academic staff with the sub-themes of support, availability, belonging, and trust, intellectual connections to academic resources, and the program is committed to me. Participant descriptions illustrated an overall positive and enriching EIEP experience. Although participants' initial perceptions of the EIEP elicited feelings of apprehension and uncertainty, their feelings quickly evolved to acceptance and appreciation. Participants valued relationships between themselves and the academic staff. These connections were described as supportive, available, trusting, and promoting of a sense of belonging within the academic culture. Participants also valued the intellectual insight and academic resources gained through one-on-one sessions with the Clinical and Academic Development Director. Participants further perceived the individualized attention gained from

relational and academic connections as an expression of the program's commitment to their academic achievement and personal welfare.

Unlike the value placed upon the relational and academic connections identified above, participants lacked an appreciation of and connection to peer mentors, student organizations, and reflective journaling. This study's findings reveal a genuine perspective of what first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students' value in an EIEP experience. As a result, leadership, faculty, and staff are empowered to make informed and meaningful decisions regarding the advancement of first-year retention levers for this unique student population.



An Early Integration Enhancement Program for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students

**CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of chapter one is to identify this study's purpose and the potential benefits its findings may contribute toward nursing education and the profession of nursing. Chapter one includes the study's purpose statement and background information needed to support the researcher's rationale for conducting the study. Chapter one will also discuss academic and health care implications associated with high nursing program attrition rates, while paying particular attention to first-to-second-year retention. The chapter will also include research questions, assumptions made by the researcher, delimitation, and operational definitions.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological, hermeneutical study was to discover the perceptions of first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students' experiences in an Early Integration Enhancement Program (EIEP) at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program. Although collegial integration and institutional retention concepts are at the forefront of academic research, there remains a lack of evidence surrounding best practices principles related to the unique needs of first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students. This void compelled the researcher to explore and enhance the understanding of student perceptions related to integration and retention strategies specific to the undergraduate nursing student and academic commuter culture. Identifying student encounters that are valued, complementary to expectations, and reflective of individualized institutional commitment presents an awareness and opportunity for academic stakeholders to strategically enhance first-year student experiences.

### **Background and Rationale**

With the 2010 launch of the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act (PPACA) and the continual rise in age, chronicity, and diversity of the population served, the nation's health care needs are dramatically transforming (Institute of Medicine, Committee on the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, Initiative on the Future of Nursing, 2010). Since the commencement of the 2010 PPACA, the nation's medically insured population has increased 10% within the Hispanic community and 9.5% within the black community (Marken, 2016), which contributed to an additional 16.4 million medically insured Americans (Obamacare Facts, 2015). As the number and diversity of Americans seeking health care continues to increase, so does the complexity of care in the aging population. It has been found that individuals over the age of 65 experience a greater number of chronic illnesses and comorbidities and, therefore, have multifaceted health care needs (Pershing & Fuchs, 2013). These individuals seek twice as many physician services as individuals younger than age 65 (Pershing & Fuchs, 2013).

It is projected that by 2050, over 83.7 million Americans will fall into the 65-and-older age group, which will more than double the number of Americans that were in this age range in the year 2010 (Pershing & Fuchs, 2013; West, Cole, Goodkind, & He, 2014). As the number of individuals with diverse and complex health care needs continues to grow, it is imperative for the nation's higher educational systems to admit, educate, and graduate health care professionals who meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century American population. With almost three million nurses, the profession of nursing represents the largest discipline within the health care system (Institute of Medicine, Committee on the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, Initiative on the Future of Nursing, 2010). For this reason, it is necessary for educators to increase, advance, and diversify the education and profession of nursing.

### **Nursing Shortage**

Throughout the United States, the need for nurses continues to grow at an alarming rate. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projected a 19% nursing employment growth rate from 2012 to 2020 compared to the average occupational growth rate of 11% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014-2015). The anticipated growth rate is in direct response to the increased number of individuals with access to healthcare as a result of the PPACA, as well as the increased number of the aging population (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014-2015). It has been projected that in the year 2030, the national nursing workforce shortage will be over 900,000 with only Massachusetts and South Dakota having a surplus of nurses (Juraschek, Xiaoming, Ranganathan, & Lin, 2012). As the population receiving healthcare continues to grow, so does the need for nurses who are able to meet the complex and diverse needs of the clients served.

### **Profession of Nursing Initiatives**

In direct response to the anticipated increase in diversity and overall healthcare-seeking needs of the American population, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) initiated a partnership with the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to assess and transform the profession of nursing in order to provide safe, competent, person-centered care (IOM, Committee on the RWJF Initiative on the Future of Nursing, 2010; IOM of the National Academies, 2010). As a result of this two year initiative, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* recommended nurses obtain higher levels of training through educationally-improved systems which promote seamless academic progression (IOM, Committee on the RWJF Initiative on the Future of Nursing, 2010; IOM of the National Academies, 2010). The report further recommended nurses be prepared to assume roles of leadership, manage and coordinate care,

negotiate with health care teams, navigate and understand health care policies, programs, and services, research and incorporate evidence-based practice principles, and participate in quality-improvement initiatives (IOM of the National Academies, 2010). The initiative also challenged educational stakeholders to increase baccalaureate-prepared nurses to 80% of the work force, increase the diversity of nurses, and transform the academic teaching and learning culture by 2020 (IOM, Committee on the RWJF Initiative on the Future of Nursing, 2010).

### **Undergraduate Nursing Retention Implications**

Undergraduate nursing programs are a foundational component of the nation's healthcare system. While nursing programs are able to recruit and admit students to program capacity, unwelcome attrition rates as high as 50% limit the number of students graduating and entering the profession of nursing (Harris, Rosenberg, & O'Rourke, 2014; Schmidt & MacWilliams, 2011). Although nontraditional nursing student enrollment is on the rise, these students tend to experience higher attrition and lower graduation rates in comparison to traditional nursing students (Jeffreys, 2012). High attrition rates and a limited number of nontraditional student nurses graduating and entering the work force limit the educational sector and the profession of nursing's ability to meet the American population's complex and diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century healthcare needs.

**Nursing student profile.** The profile of the undergraduate college student is changing. As entry profile characteristics diversify, so does the need for strategies and programs which promote and support early student integration and retention. It is expected that by the year 2020, 46% of students enrolled in colleges throughout the United States will be of color, and there will also be an increase in students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who hold a nontraditional

student status, speak English as a learned language, and are first generation college attenders (Seurkamp, 2007).

Nursing programs are experiencing a similar, yet slower, expansion in the student profile and require alternative approaches and strategies to increase first-year retention. The National League for Nursing (2015) published the following student nurse demographic changes: (a) an approximate 7% increase in minority students enrolled in baccalaureate nursing programs from the fall of 2009 to the fall of 2012, (b) a 2% increase in students enrolled in baccalaureate nursing programs over the age of 30 from the fall of 2009 to the fall of 2012, and (c) a 1% increase in male students enrolled in baccalaureate nursing programs from the fall of 2009 to the fall of 2012. For undergraduate programs to diversify the nation's nursing workforce, they must focus attention toward retaining and graduating nontraditional students. Student retention has the potential to be influenced through early integration and retention principles and practices which benefit the entire student population served (MacWilliams, Schmidt, & Bleich, 2013).

### **Commuter Student Retention**

Residential versus commuter status is an external factor which impacts first-year integration strategies and retention rates (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, McClendon, 2014; Jeffreys, 2004; 2012; Tinto, 1975; 1987). Sole commuter campuses hold the highest percentage rate of undergraduate attrition, whereas full-time, traditional-aged, residential students hold the highest percentage rate of retention (Jeffreys, 2004). Commuter students tend to spend less time on campus and their daily schedules are likely dictated by environmental factors rather than academic obligations, (Braxton, et al., 2014). As a result of external factors, past and current research confirms the challenges associated with integrating commuter students into an academic culture (Ishitani & Reid, 2015).

Commuter students require integration strategies which are uniquely crafted to complement their on-campus time constraints and external obligations.

### **First-Year Student Retention**

The first year of undergraduate education is an important period of time when students formulate perceptions of their future collegial experiences (Woosley & Miller, 2009). The first year of enrollment also marks a critical juncture when students determine whether or not to continue with their education for another academic year (Braxton, et al., 2014). Braxton, et al. (2014) reported 28% of students enrolled in four-year colleges or universities leave at the completion of their first academic year. It is hypothesized that students' ability to successfully integrate into the academic and social constructs of an institution can positively influence their first-year persistence and retention (Tinto, 1975; 1987). Further research indicates that early institutional retention strategies (Schrum, 2015; Tinto, 1975; 1987), student satisfaction, (Schreiner, 2009), a sense of belonging (Woosley & Miller, 2008), and relational connectedness (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012) also impact student persistence and institutional retention during the first academic year. Unfortunately, students may lack opportunities to engage or choose not to participate in early retention activities which promote inclusion and integration into the campus culture. As a result of these identified barriers, commuter campuses must be aware of their student population's unique needs of engagement and strategically craft early retention practices which promote integration.

### **Problem Statement**

Over one-third of the undergraduate student population decides to leave the college or university they are attending during their first year of study (The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2014) reported a

58.2 % retention rate for all students who started college in the fall of 2012 and returned to the same institution in the fall of 2013, which equates to an overall college attrition rate of 41.8%. First-to-second-year attrition rates for all college students who enrolled in four-year public institutions from the fall of 2012 to the fall of 2013 was reported at 31.8%, which is a 1 percentage point decrease in retention rates compared to 2009 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). Four-year, private, non-profit institutions reported a similar 1.1 percentage point decrease in 2012 to 2013 retention rates compared to the 2009 report, with a first-to-second-year attrition rate of 27.1% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). In summary, an overall first-to-second-year college attrition rate of 41.8% and an annual decline in first-to-second-year retention rates prompts further analysis of the influence early integration and retention programs have on student decisions to re-enroll for a second year.

The influential power that early retention practices have on first-to-second-year enrollment in commuter, undergraduate, nursing programs are neither abundant nor easily accessible. As a result, academic scholars have challenged researchers to direct their focus toward early first-year retention practices and strategies that promote second-year enrollment (Sparkman, Maulding, & Jalynn, 2012; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Nursing student retention and graduation are complex and multifaceted phenomena which demand focus toward student enrichment and optimization (Jeffreys, 2014). As a result, it is imperative for academic scholars to explore early integration and first-year retention levers specific to commuter, undergraduate, nursing programs.

### **Research Questions**

The student perspective is an essential data point needed to holistically assess and enhance institutional integration and retention strategies. As a result, the researcher crafted the

study's central research question to explore first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students' perceptions of an early integration and retention program. The central question was further supported by two sub-questions. The first sub-question allowed for further insight into what participants valued in the EIEP. The second sub-question allowed an opportunity for participants to reflect and share their perceptions of how the nursing program demonstrated commitment to their individual welfare. Student integration, student value, and student perceptions of institutional commitment were the theoretical underpinnings which guided the study at hand.

Uncovering student perceptions related to retention and integration strategies provides academic institutions an opportunity to enhance first-year student experiences. One way to pursue this knowledge is to develop an understanding of how first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students experience and value an early retention program set forth by an institution; therefore, the following questions were posed by the researcher.

**Central Question.** What are the perceptions of first-year commuter nursing students regarding their experiences in an Early Integration Enhancement Program (EIEP) at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program?

**Sub-question 1.** How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private Midwestern undergraduate Bachelor of Science nursing program describe the value of an EIEP?

**Sub-question 2.** How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private Midwestern undergraduate Bachelor of Science nursing program perceive nursing program commitment to their first-year college experience?



### **Assumptions**

The *Jeffreys's Nursing Universal Retention and Success (NURS) Model* and the *Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities* serve as the two primary theoretical frameworks for the research under study and, therefore, reflect and support the assumptions identified below. The first assumption was that retention will continue to be a primary concern for all constituents involved in higher education, including programs of nursing. It was also assumed that retention is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon and is, therefore, influenced by various factors, including the entry-student profile, academic achievement, external environment, and varying configurations of integration. The third assumption was that all students, regardless of entry-student profile or commuter/non-commuter status, can benefit from varying forms of early integration and enrichment experiences. The closing assumption is that student involvement in early integration and enrichment programs impacts program satisfaction and perceived level of program commitment to student welfare.

### **Delimitations**

The qualitative, phenomenological, hermeneutic research study used a purposeful convenience sample of commuter, Bachelor of Science in nursing, first-year students. The researcher's intent was to explore first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students' perspectives of a year-long EIEP experience. As a result, the population and the setting were limited to one cohort at one Midwestern, commuter, undergraduate, nursing program. Recruited participants were enrolled in fall 2016 classes and had a program enrollment start date of August, 2015. As a result, the delimitations of the study included the targeted participant population and academic institution. Furthermore, findings were not intended to parallel the lived early integration experience of first-year nursing students enrolled at residential institutions.

### Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions were used within the research study.

***Academic integration.*** Level of student engagement in academic opportunities and activities (Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Tinto, 1975; 1987).

***Academic and intellectual development.*** Occurs when students are more fully engaged in academic learning as a result of the perceived commitment offered by the institution to the welfare of the student (Braxton, et al., 2014).

***Commitment of the institution to student welfare.*** Colleges' or universities' display of continual concern for the growth and development of their students. Institutional actions or levers are as follows: placing high value on students, respecting students as individuals, and equal treatment of students (Braxton, et al., 2014).

***Commuter college.*** A college without on-campus residential housing. All students live off campus in housing that is not institutionally owned or operated (adapted from Jacoby, 1989).

***Early integration enrichment program.*** Formally designed program aimed to enrich the complete nursing student experience through professional integration (Jeffreys, 2014). The program commences one week prior to the start of the fall semester with a three-day preparatory camp followed by one-on-one relationship building, navigation of student success resources, proactive intervention sessions with the Academic and Clinical Development Director and Professional Development Director, an assigned peer-mentor, an assigned nursing faculty advisor, reflection journal entries, and student organization participation (adapted from Jeffreys, 2014).

***Environmental factors.*** The external factors of hours worked, finances, outside encouragement, family responsibility, and opportunity to transfer that impact nontraditional student retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

***First academic year of enrollment.*** First-year enrollment of nursing students who participated in an EIEP at a private, commuter, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program commencing the fall 2015 semester and ending upon the completion of the spring 2016 semester (Pilker, 2015).

***First-year program commitment to student welfare.*** The value and concern a private, commuter, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program places on an individual student and his or her academic growth and development as perceived by an EIEP participant during the first year of enrollment (adapted from Braxton, et al., 2014).

***First-year program satisfaction.*** The level of first-year nursing program satisfaction expressed by an EIEP participant at a private, commuter, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program (adapted from Bean & Metzner, 1985).

***First-year retention.*** The percentage of first-year nursing students who participated in an EIEP at a private, commuter, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program during the 2015-2016 academic year and continued nursing program enrollment during the 2016-2017 academic year (adapted from National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

***Institutional integrity.*** An institution of higher education remaining true to its mission and goals, which are reflected through the actions, decisions, and communication of the culture and members within the organization (Braxton, et al., 2014).

***Levers of action.*** Recommendations for academic institutions to enact in order to reduce attrition in higher education (Braxton, et al., 2014).

***Nontraditional undergraduate nursing student.*** Student enrolled in an entry level nursing program who meets one or more of the following criteria: 25 years of age or older, commuter, enrolled part-time, male, member of an ethnic and/or racial minority group, speaks English as a second language, has dependent children, has a general equivalency diploma, and required remedial classes (Jeffreys, 2012).

***Professional integration.*** New perspective of social integration for the undergraduate nursing student. Professional integration enhances student interactions within the social system of the college environment and includes the following factors: nursing faculty advisement and helpfulness, professional organization membership, professional events, peer encouragement, enrichment programs, peer-mentoring (Jeffreys, 2012).

***Second consecutive academic year.*** Second-year enrollment of nursing students who participated in the 2015-2016 EIEP at a private, commuter, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program commencing the fall 2016 semester and ending upon the completion of the spring 2017 semester (Pilker, 2015).

***Social integration.*** Student level of congruence within a college or university's social system including attitudes, beliefs, and values (Tinto, 1975).

***Traditional undergraduate nursing student.*** Student enrolled in an entry level nursing program who meets one or more of the following criteria: 24 years of age or younger, resides in campus housing or off-campus housing, enrolled full-time, female, White and not a member of an ethnic and/or racial group minority group, speaks English as first language, has no dependent children, has a U.S. high school diploma, and required no remedial classes (Jeffreys, 2012).

### **Summary**

The number, age, and ethnic and/or racial diversity of Americans receiving health care continues to increase along with the complexity of health care requirements. One factor challenging the nation's health care system to keep pace with the needs of the clients served is the high attrition rates experienced by undergraduate nursing programs. Nursing student attrition places an undue strain on the health care system's ability to care for the American population. Therefore, academic institutions are responsible for enhancing learning environments and strategies that support collegial integration and retention for all students served. Early integration and retention of first-year nursing students has the potential to increase and diversify the profession of nursing.

Chapter one identified the purpose and need for the study at hand. The chapter also addressed the background associated with first-year undergraduate, commuter, nursing students, assumptions made by the researcher, delimitations, and operational definitions of relevant terms used throughout the study. Chapter two presents the study's theoretical framework and review of literature.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two is framed by a paucity of research surrounding the perceptions first-year commuter, undergraduate, nursing students hold regarding their involvement in early integration strategies and retention programs. Institutional retention is the cornerstone of the phenomenon under study and, therefore, serves as the theoretical backdrop for early integration and continued enrollment for a second academic year. It is necessary to begin with the definition of retention and to distinguish it from the commonly intertwined concept of persistence. Although both concepts lead to the desired end goal of graduation, they remain distinct from one another and serve as separate instruments of measurement. Hagedorn (2005) defined retention as an institutional measurement and persistence as a student measurement, therefore, institutions retain and students persist (p. 92).

Chapter two begins with a review of theoretical retention constructs in higher education by examining the works of Tinto (1975; 1987) and Braxton and colleagues (2004; 2014). Both theories offer foundational commonalities, yet unique perspectives, on integration and retention philosophies based on student population sub-sets. Due to the researcher's exclusive interest in undergraduate nursing retention, a third retention model was included in the study's theoretical underpinning. It is relevant to note that undergraduate nursing programs are uniquely characterized by rigorous theoretical and clinical curriculums, institutional cultures, and student populations served. As a result of these distinct characteristics, nursing programs are challenged with high attrition rates, therefore, the *Jeffreys's NURS Model* was specifically crafted for nursing education with a focus on retention and success rather than attrition (Jeffreys, 2004; 2012; 2015). The *Jeffreys's NURS Model* serves as a framework for nurse scholars, leaders, and educators, and was therefore incorporated into this study's theoretical underpinning.

### **Introduction**

Retention theories, principles, and practices continue to be a central focus of research in higher education. This study's review of literature transitions from the overarching retention and integration theories presented by Tinto (1975; 1987) and Braxton and colleagues (2004; 2014) to that of professional integration, which was created by Jeffreys (2004; 2012; 2015) and specific to nursing education. Tinto's (1975; 1987) model addresses the influence academic and social integration has on student persistence and institutional retention. Whereas, Braxton and colleagues (2004; 2014) identified a lack of empirical evidence supporting Tinto's retention theory related to the commuter student and, therefore, further explored this population sub-set. Finally, Jeffreys' retention model focused on a holistic approach of professional integration for traditional and nontraditional undergraduate nursing students. Due to the unique student population of interest, the researcher's theoretical lens was built upon the work of Tinto as a foundational guide for integration principles and practices, the work of Braxton and colleagues, which was specific to commuter students, and the work of Jeffreys, which was specific to undergraduate nursing students.

### **Interactionalist Theory of Retention**

Scholars in the 1960s and 1970s primarily viewed student college departure through a psychological lens, placing sole responsibility on a student's ability or willingness to persist with minimal attention directed toward an institution's role in retention (Tinto, 1993). Early scholars identified student intellect, personality traits, motivation, and maturity level as primary factors contributing to a student's decision to depart from higher education (Tinto, 1993). Although Tinto (1993) agreed with the influential nature the psychological makeup of students had on their decisions to withdraw, the theorist acknowledged the construct as only one element of the

conundrum. Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993) suggested that a limited psychological perspective prevented a holistic understanding of factors which influence retention. Due to this limited view, Tinto (1975) added a social element to the psychological perspective by integrating the concepts of academic and social integration. Tinto's theory suggested that students' family backgrounds, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling influenced their initial commitment to the institution and achievement of academic goals. Tinto (1975) further postulated that social and academic integration influenced students' subsequent commitment to the institution and achievement of academic goals (graduation). Therefore, the greater the subsequent commitment to the institution and achievement of academic goals, the more likely students would be to persist during their first academic year. The following section further addresses social and academic integration.

### **Durkheim Theory of Suicide**

Tinto (1975) incorporated the *Durkheim Theory of Suicide* as a theoretical underpinning in the development of the *Interactionalist Theory of Retention*. Durkheim theorized the likelihood of suicide increased when an individual lacked integration and affiliation within a social structure (Tinto, 1975). As a result, Tinto (1975) postulated that if a student's values are incongruent with the college system and if insufficient social interactions occur, students will develop a lower level of commitment to the social system (1975). Tinto further theorized that a decreased level of commitment to the social system increases the likelihood of voluntary student withdrawal (Tinto, 1975).

### **Social Integration**

Student persistence is a multifaceted phenomenon that is affected by a multitude of factors such as, but not limited to, family background, individual attributes, pre-college



schooling, goal commitment, and academic commitment (Jeffreys, 2004; 2012; Braxton, et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993). In addition to the factors listed above, Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993) postulated that social integration was a fundamental variable that indirectly influenced first-year student persistence.

Social integration occurs on formal and informal levels. Formal interactions include extracurricular activities offered by an academic institution, whereas informal interactions primarily occur with peer groups, faculty, and semi-formal extracurricular activities (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993). Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993) theorized that positive formal and informal interactions lead to greater student integration within a social community, thereby leading to greater subsequent commitment to goals and the academic institution. Likewise, the greater the commitment to the academic goal and institution, the more likely the student will remain enrolled at the college or university for a second year (Tinto, 1975; 1993).

### **Academic Integration**

Academic integration was the second principle of integration included within Tinto's (1973; 1987; 1993) *Interactionalist Theory of Retention*. Academic integration was defined as the degree to which a student engaged in various academic opportunities outside of class which promoted academic growth (Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Tinto, 1973; 1987; 1993). Similar to social integration, academic integration has formal and informal sub-sets. Formal academic integration is based on a student's academic performance and achievement of grades, whereas informal academic integration consists of interactions with faculty or staff outside of the classroom (1973; 1987; 1993). The influence academic integration has on subsequent commitment replicates social integration. Positive formal and informal interactions lead to greater student integration into the intellectual community, which leads to a greater commitment to goals and the academic

institution. Likewise, the greater the commitment to goals and the institution, the more likely a student will remain enrolled at a college or university for a second year (Tinto, 1975; 1993).

The participant sample of Tinto's original work consisted of traditional students at four-year residential institutions, and, therefore, lacked generalizability to the nontraditional student and to institutions that were not primarily residential. Although Tinto (1973) theorized that social and academic integration promoted persistence and retention, the strategies offered by an institution will vary according the student body served and an institution's campus structure. As a result, the theories discussed in the following sections incorporate the constructs of social and academic integration in the context of commuter campuses and student nurses.

### **A Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities**

The scholarly pursuit of knowledge involving past and current retention theories and practices led to the refinement and development of a new theoretical construct specific to the commuter student. Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) raised several concerns regarding the lack of empirical evidence and explanatory power of Tinto's (1975; 1987) *Interactionalist Retention Theory*. Tinto's early work primarily focused on traditional undergraduate students who resided on campus; therefore, the theory could not be applied to the commuter student. Residential and commuter students experience different external challenges and support structures; therefore, meaningful integration and retention strategies do not parallel one another and should be designed according to the student population served. A lack of generalizability among residential and commuter students served as a catalyst for the development of an exclusive retention model for commuter colleges and universities (Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014).

Similar to Tinto (1975; 1987), Braxton and colleagues identified student entry characteristics (psychological and psychosocial) as influential factors contributing to a student's initial commitment to an academic institution. One theoretical component which set Braxton, et al. (2014) apart from Tinto (1975; 1987) was the exclusion of social integration and the inclusion of organizational characteristics. Unlike Tinto (1975; 1987), Braxton, et al. (2014) theorized that organizational characteristics influence a student's subsequent institutional commitment and academic and intellectual development, which leads to persistence rather than social integration. Unlike social integration, academic integration was not eliminated from the construct and remained a concept woven through the *Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities*. The following section addresses the contributing characteristics of commuter students which decreases the importance of social integration, and thereby supports the theorists' decision to remove social integration from the *Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities*.

### **Social Community and the Commuter College**

Unique characteristics of commuter campus communities perpetuated the need for an exclusive retention theory (Braxton, et al., 2014). In comparison to residential institutions, commuter campuses lack well-defined social structures, such as fraternities, sororities, residence halls, and extracurricular activities (Braxton, et al., 2014). Commuter student roles and responsibilities also differ from those of the traditional students who live on campus as commuter students are more likely to encounter obstacles associated with family and work obligations (Braxton, et al., 2014). Finally, students residing off campus typically spend less time on college or university grounds and their schedules are driven by environmental and personal obligations rather than academic responsibilities (Braxton, et al., 2014). As a result,

commuter students require alternative integrative approaches and opportunities which enhance persistence and institutional retention in comparison to residential students (Braxton, et al., 2014). Braxton and colleagues (2014) tailored a theory of retention for commuter students by focusing on perceived institutional commitment of student welfare, perceived institutional integrity, and potential levers of practice that influence persistence and retention.

### **Organizational Characteristics**

Organizational characteristics are the crux of the *Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities* and their incorporation sets the model apart from previous retention theories. Braxton, et al. (2014) theorized that an academic institution's organizational characteristics influence academic and intellectual development and subsequent student commitment to an institution. As a result, students who experience a greater degree of academic and intellectual development and subsequent institutional commitment are more likely to persist at the college or university in which they are enrolled (Braxton, et al., 2014). Braxton, et al. (2014) identified organizational characteristics as institutional commitment to student welfare and institutional integrity. These two concepts are addressed in the following sections.

**Institutional commitment to student welfare.** Institutional commitment to student welfare is described as a continued concern for the growth and development of every student (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). To highlight the phrase "of every student," the theoretical construct does not segregate high-risk students from the student body, but rather embraces all students as high-risk. Each student is valued, respected, and given equitable treatment. Braxton, et al. (2014) theorized that organizational structures (faculty, administration, and staff) perceived by students as valuing and remaining committed to their personal welfare help the students to develop a stronger subsequent level of commitment to the academic

institution and a greater degree of academic and intellectual development (Braxton, et al., 2014).

A greater degree of subsequent institutional commitment leads to a greater level of student persistence and institutional retention (Braxton, et al., 2014). Otherwise stated, the more students perceive an institution as committed to their personal welfare, the more they engage in learning activities and experience a great degree of commitment to the institution. A higher degree of institutional commitment and engagement in learning activities perpetuates a greater level of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities (Braxton, et al., 2014).

Braxton, et al. (2014) speculated a similar phenomenon regarding the organizational characteristic of institutional integrity which will be addressed in the following section.

**Institutional integrity.** A similar outcome was hypothesized for student perceptions of institutional integrity. Braxton, et al. (2014) defined institutional integrity as an institution remaining true to the mission and goals of the organization as demonstrated through fair policies and rules and the fulfillment of student expectations (Braxton, et al., 2014). Braxton, et al. (2014) postulated that commuter students who perceive their academic institution as remaining true to its mission, values, and policies experience a greater level of subsequent commitment to the institution and a greater degree of academic and intellectual development (Braxton et al., 2014). A greater level of subsequent commitment to the institution positively influences a student's persistence (Braxton, et al., 2014).

In summary, the two organizational characteristics theorized by Braxton, et al. (2014) which influence commuter student persistence represent an institution's demonstration of integrity and concern for the welfare of the students served. Both characteristics were believed to directly influence subsequent institutional commitment and the academic and intellectual development of a student. Finally, the greater the degree of subsequent institutional

commitment, the greater likelihood a student will persist at commuter college (Braxton, et al., 2014). The organizational characteristics of institutional commitment to student welfare and institutional integrity are two levers within the control of an institution. Commitment to student welfare, as viewed through an informal academic integration lens (Tinto, 1975), was a continuous theme throughout the study at hand and will, therefore, be further explored.

*Possible influences of perceived commitment to student welfare.* Student perceptions of institutional commitment to student welfare was hypothesized by Braxton, et al. (2014) to directly influence subsequent institutional commitment and academic and intellectual development, which impact student persistence in commuter colleges. For this reason, when academic institutions positively influence factors associated with commitment to student welfare and academic and intellectual development, they can positively impact commuter student persistence. The following section addresses institutional levers or actions recommended by Braxton, et al. (2014) which positively reflect on an institution's commitment to student welfare.

Braxton's et al. (2014) *Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities* emphasized the importance of commuter colleges' ability to demonstrate commitment to the individual well-being of the students served. Levers or mechanisms of actions were identified as, but not limited to, the following: communication by all college personnel that demonstrates the value of students as individuals and demonstrates concern for their growth and development, academic advising, first-year student orientation, and faculty interest in students (Braxton, et al., 2014). The levers identified are controllable factors which leaders can foster within an academic culture. These levers demonstrate institutional concern for the student body served and are hypothesized to increase subsequent student commitment to the

institution, which impacts persistence and retention for the commuter student and academic institution (Braxton, et al., 2014).

A deeper understanding of commuter persistence and retention through empirical evidence is warranted. As a result, it is necessary for academic scholars to continue to explore levers or mechanisms of action that are controllable and which promote persistence and retention. Likewise, it is necessary for academic leaders of commuter campuses to understand the unique needs of the student body served and apply strategic and meaningful integration strategies that promote first-year retention.

### **Jeffreys's Nursing Universal Retention and Success (NURS) Model**

Similar to commuter campuses, undergraduate nursing programs have unique integration challenges associated with their student populations, the academic and social culture, and the preparation for the professional culture of nursing. As a result of these unique challenges, Jeffreys (2004; 2013) created the *Jeffreys's NURS Model* which is specifically designed for traditional and nontraditional undergraduate nursing students.

The *Jeffreys's NURS Model* was crafted with the underlying assumption that retention is a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon that is influenced by interactions which occur between and among multiple variables (Jeffreys, 2004). The above assumption is not exclusive to nursing education, but strongly supported by past retention theories and research (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014). Jeffreys's theory incorporated previously known retention factors consisting of student profile characteristics, psychosocial factors, environmental factors, and academic factors.

The factor which differentiates the *Jeffreys's NURS Model* from past retention theories is professional integration (Jeffreys, 2004). Professional integration was defined by Jeffreys (2004)

as factors that enhance student interactions within a college's social system through professional socialization and career development (p. 13). Professional integration includes nursing faculty advisement and helpfulness, professional events, memberships in professional organizations, encouragement by friends in class, peer mentoring and tutoring, and enrichment programs (Jeffreys, 2004). Just as Braxton's, et al. (2014) identification of institutional commitment to student welfare was instrumental in identifying commuter student retention levers, so was Jeffreys (2004) acknowledgement of professional integration and recognition of nursing student retention levers. Professional integration factors were placed at the center of the *Jeffreys's NURS Model* as a result of the assumption that these factors influenced student decisions to persist or withdraw. Jeffreys (2004) proposed that strong professional integration increased professional commitment, behaviors of persistence, and retention for both traditional and nontraditional students.

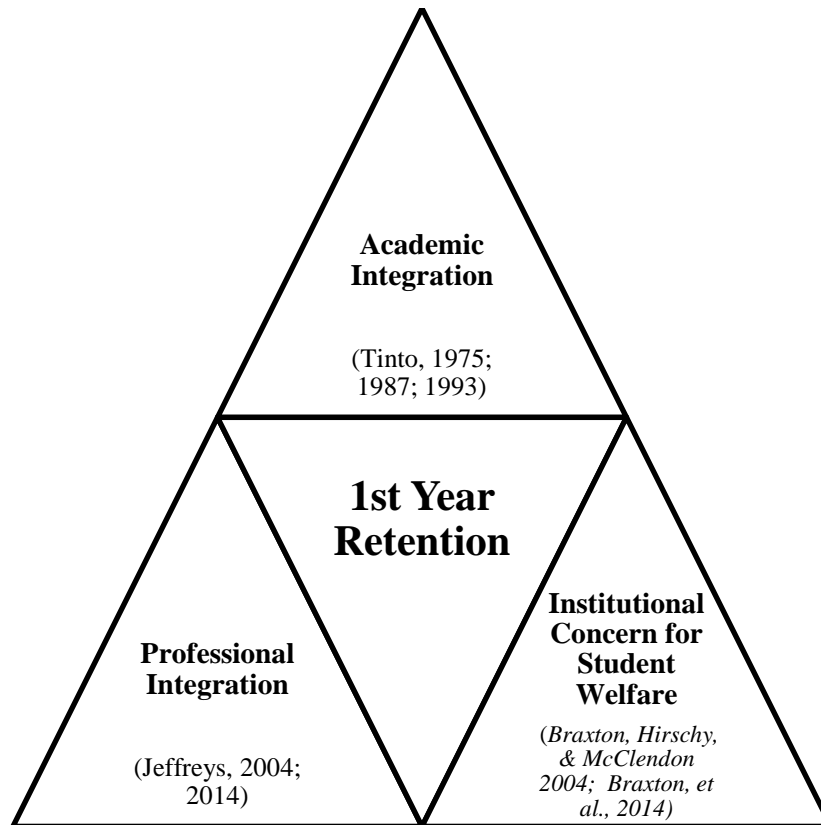
### **Summary**

Retention theories presented by Braxton and colleagues (2004; 2014), Jeffreys (2004) and Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993) have distinct philosophies of integration, which influence student persistence and institutional retention. Tinto (1975) was among the first scholars to incorporate social and academic integration into the retention conundrum for traditional undergraduate students who lived on campus. Braxton, et al. (2014) identified a gap in theories and incongruences within research for commuter students and focused attention on organizational characteristics and levers that influence retention on commuter campuses. Finally, Jeffreys (2004) created the concept of professional integration and identified contributing factors that enhance retention in nursing education. All three theories include an element of student integration and all three theorists postulated that the more students experience a positive form of



integration which also complements their student character and institutional structure, the more likely they will persist. The following section focuses on research related to the distinct population sub-sets of nursing and commuter students along with institutional retention levers.

Figure 2.1 represents the theoretical underpinning which guided the study at hand.



*Figure 2.1. Early Integration for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students*

### **Transformation in the Undergraduate Nursing Student Profile**

Trending data indicates nursing programs are experiencing a decreased enrollment of traditional students and an increased enrollment of nontraditional students (Jeffreys, 2012; Wells, 2003). Jeffreys (2012) defined the undergraduate, nontraditional, nursing student as a student enrolled in an entry level nursing program who meets on or more of the following criteria: 25 years of age or older, commuter, enrolled part-time, male, member of an ethnic and/or racial minority group, speaks English as a second language, has dependent children, has a general

equivalency diploma, and required remedial classes. The following section will elaborate on the retention challenges associated with nursing students who are underrepresented minorities (URM), male, and commuter students.

### **Effects of Racial and Ethnic Diversity on Integration and Retention**

The enrollment percentage of racial and/or ethnically diverse students in entry-level baccalaureate nursing programs has steadily increased from 24.1% in 2005 to 30.1% in 2014 (Fang, Li, Arietti, & Trautman, 2015). Although this demographical transition is welcomed and aids in the attainment of the 2010 *Future of Nursing Initiative* (IOM, Committee on the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Initiative on the Future of Nursing, 2010), it has impacted institutional retention rates (Jeffreys, 2012; Loftin, et al., 2013). It is reported that URM students (Loftin, et al., 2013) and students who speak English as a second language incur higher attrition rates in comparison to non-minority groups (Jeffreys, 2012).

As a result of high attrition rates associated with URM students, scholars have directed their attention toward the identification of barriers which negatively impact retention (Loftin, et al., 2013). A multitude of research studies have identified factors such as financial concerns, academic preparedness, lack of mentoring, and lack of support structures as barriers to retention, but minimal research references the impact integration has on URM nursing student retention. In a phenomenological study, Gardner (2005) explored the perception of 15 URM nursing students' experiences in three four-year, public university campuses that were predominately Caucasian nursing programs. One of the eight themes that emerged was loneliness and isolation (Gardner, 2005). The theme of loneliness and isolation was the most deeply expressed theme, and some participants openly cried (Gardner, 2005). Gardner (2005) advocated for faculty development in cultural diversity and mentoring relationships between educators and minority students. Gardner

(2005) further endorsed positive faculty and URM student connections which are supportive, non-threatening, welcoming, approachable, and available. Furthermore, Jeffreys (2012) identified a lack of peer solidarity and social integration as impeding factors on the retention of URM. As a result, it is essential for academic institutions to intentionally and diligently implement and assess integration and retention levers that ensure an inclusive culture for all students served.

Although a limited amount of research was found on social integration for URM students in nursing programs, several scholars directed their efforts toward assessing academic support (academic integration) interventions which were intended to increase academic achievement, retention, and graduation rates (Nugent, Childs, Jones, & Cook, 2004; Stewart, 2005). Studies reported positive retention and graduation outcomes as a result of academic and integration strategies (Nugent, Childs, Jones, & Cook, 2004; Stewart, 2005). In a 2005 study conducted by Bagnardi and Perkel, preliminary findings identified a 70% first-to-second year retention rate for URM nursing students who voluntarily participated in a Learning Achievement Program (LAP). The first phase of the LAP occurred during a four-week intensive bridge program that occurred one month prior to the start of nursing courses (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). Based on each student's preliminary needs, they attended sessions in mathematics, reading, writing, and computer technology (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). Sessions were also held to address socialization into the college and nursing environment, and students were given the opportunity to hear from a panel of previous nursing students (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). Students met individually and in groups to discuss time management, stress management, test-taking skills, study skills, and financial planning (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). The final component of the LAP was an individual meeting with the LAP advisor to create a plan of success for their first

semester of nursing courses (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). Phase II occurred during the sophomore year and phase III occurred during the junior and senior years (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). Phase II consisted of weekly structured review sessions with a learning coach, weekly group sessions with a counselor (psychologist), and individual sessions with the LAP advisor (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). The purpose of Phase III was to provide study support and counseling as needed and structured National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) review sessions (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). Survey results after Phase I and II indicated that 93% of students strongly agreed or agreed that Phase I was beneficial and should be required of all students (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). Finally, 80% of the students identified sessions with the counselor as the most significant intervention in their success (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005). When the study was published, the program was in phase III; therefore, retention and program assessment results were incomplete (Bagnardi & Perkel, 2005).

In regard to academic integration and retention levers in higher education, Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) conducted a correlational study which included 18 baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities. The purpose of the study was twofold: first, to determine if relationships between student behaviors and institutional integration and retention levers fostered student success, and second, to determine the effects of purposeful academic engagement among different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Findings revealed that as African-American students reached an average amount of integration through meaningful academic engagement experiences, they were more likely to return to college for a second year than when compared to Caucasian students (Kuh, et al., 2008).

As a result of a limited focus in nursing education specific to UMC commuter students, further research is warranted to explore integration strategies which promote nursing student

retention. Simply identifying barriers and recommending retention strategies for URM nursing students lacks the sufficient knowledge needed to improve retention rates; therefore, researchers are encouraged to focus their attention toward assessing student perceptions regarding integration programs in order to enhance persistence and retention of URM nursing students.

### **Effects of Gender on Integration and Retention**

The field of nursing has traditionally been viewed as a female profession, and although the number of males entering the profession is increasing, they remain an underrepresented minority (Fang, Li, Arietti, & Trautman, 2015; Jeffreys, 2012; Landivar, 2013). Similar to URM students, males also encounter greater challenges in nursing education and experience higher attrition rates in comparison to female nursing students (MacWilliams, Schmidt, & Bleich, 2013; Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, & Hunter, 2012). As a result of high attrition rates, it is necessary to draw attention toward the unique challenges male students experience during their nursing education.

Through an integrative literature review, Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, and Hunter (2012) revealed male nursing students tend to perform lower academically and require additional support. MacWilliams, Schmidt, and Bleich (2013) also completed an extensive review of 56 articles and found that male nursing students frequently reported feelings of social isolation and loneliness as a result of a female dominate environment. Feelings of social isolation and lack of integration have been found to adversely impact retention (Jeffreys, 2012). With an understanding of the social barriers which affect the retention of male students, nursing programs must re-align integration and retention practices with well-defined initiatives that complement and support the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student. Nursing programs also need to take initiative

in understanding the male perception of retention programs and experiences with the intent to promote retention through meaningful integrative strategies.

### **Effects of Commuter Status on Integration and Retention**

Commuter campuses encounter the highest student attrition rates in comparison to all other institutions of higher education (Jeffreys, 2012). Commuter campuses have distinct institutional characteristics and student demographics which challenge student integration within the campus community. Braxton, et al. (2014) described the commuter campus and student dynamic as a “buzzing confusion” of students hurrying to attend classes and hurrying to leave campus in an attempt to fulfill both academic and external obligations. As a result of these two interactions, an ability and desire for students to socially engage on a meaningful level is much more difficult, less important, and less effective when compared to residential students (Braxton, et al., 2014; Ishitani, & Reid, 2015; Jeffreys, 2012). Although social integration has been found to be a strong determinant of persistence in residential campuses (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Jacobs & Archie, 2008; Schmitt, Oswald, Friede, Imus, & Merritt, 2008; Tinto, 1975; 1987), it lacks importance and influential power on commuter student persistence and institutional retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 2014).

Although social integration has been found to have less of an impact on commuter students, the commuter population still requires integrative opportunities which correspond to their unique academic needs and external obligations. Jacoby (2015) indicated that commuter students’ lifestyles and obligations do not resemble those of the traditional, full-time residential student; therefore, they cannot readily experience and gain from traditional social integration experiences as do residential students. It is not the responsibility of commuter students to adjust their schedule and lifestyle to fit the traditional student model, but rather, it is the institution’s

responsibility to design an academic culture and learning experience that intentionally and intellectually engages commuter students (Jacoby, 2015).

Academic integration experiences, which generate meaningful learning opportunities outside of the traditional classroom and foster relational connections, were found to enhance commuter student engagement and retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that both residential and commuter students achieved greater success and personal growth when involved in on-campus learning-based activities. Kuhl's, et al. (2008) findings revealed that early academic integration, for both residential and commuter students, positively affected student persistence during the first academic year. Similarly, Ishitani and Reid (2015) conducted a study among multiple four-year public and private institutions, which included 7,571 first-time beginning students who enrolled during the 2003 academic year. 67.3% of students lived on campus, 12.3% of students lived off campus with their parents, and 20.4% of students lived off campus (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Findings revealed that there was not a statistical difference in drop-out behaviors between residential and commuter students, but there was a significant difference with students who lived with their parents (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Students who lived with their parents were 23% more likely to drop out during their first academic year in comparison to students who lived on campus (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Findings further indicated that students who participated in study groups, engaged in social contact with faculty, met with an academic advisor, or talked with faculty about academic matters outside of class (academic integration) were more likely to persist through their first academic year (Ishitani & Reid, 2015).

It is important to recall that commuter student decisions to persist or withdraw are less influenced by social integration in comparison to residential student cohorts (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014). On the contrary, merging

socially-structured, integrated opportunities with meaningful academic and intellectual development has the potential to positively impact commuter student decisions to persist. As a result, institutions need to be challenged with creating intellectual learning experiences that are socially interactive and reach beyond the classrooms.

### **Early Integration and Retention Levers**

A student's first-year experience within an institution of higher education is influenced by his or her ability to transition, integrate, and navigate through the academic, social, and environmental culture. Woosley and Miller (2009) declared the first year of undergraduate education as an important period of time when students are laying the foundation for future collegial experiences within the institution. The following review of academic research will draw attention toward the phenomena of early academic and professional integration principles which align with institutional retention levers for commuter, undergraduate, nursing students.

### **Early Academic Retention Levers**

Early student integration within an institutional culture of academia remains an area of concern for programs in higher education. Although many academic scholars have dedicated their careers to retention philosophies, programs, and practices, Jeffreys (2004; 2012) remains the leader within the discipline of nursing education. In 2001, Jeffreys published a study which took place at an urban, commuter, public university college in the northeastern region of the United States. Participants consisted of nontraditional nursing students who participated in an enhancement program (EP) with a primary focus on peer mentor/tutor-led study groups. Findings revealed that students who participated in study groups achieved higher pass rates, received lower course failures, and withdrew from courses at lower rates than those who did not consistently participate (Jeffreys, 2001). Student responses also indicated satisfaction with



nursing as a career, the college, course offerings, faculty advisors, peer mentors/tutors, and the overall EP experience.

In 2004, Jeffreys formally presented the EP which was embedded within *Jeffreys's NURS Model*. Strategies included within the program were constructed from evidence-based practice retention principles and were identified as, but not limited to, the following: (a) networking, (b) mentoring, (c) orientations, and (d) transitional support (Jeffreys, 2004). The EP's purpose was to "enrich the total nursing student experience by maximizing strengths, remedying weaknesses, promoting positive psychological outcomes, facilitating positive academic outcomes, and nurturing profession growth and development" (Jeffreys, 2004, p. 117). Jeffreys (2004) also indicated that when students viewed an EP as a beneficial experience, persistency behaviors and institutional retention were positively affected.

Aligning with Jeffreys's (2004) EP, Fontaine (2014) conducted a correlational study consisting of 137 nursing students who participated in the Northern Nevada Nursing Retention Program (NNNRP). The NNNRP consisted of the following strategies reflective of Jeffreys's (2004) EP: (a) a comprehensive orientation program, (b) learning communities, (c) individualized academic plan, (d) community nurse mentor, (e) counseling, (f) peer tutoring, and (g) career counseling. Although the study did not focus on first-to-second-year retention, findings revealed a statistically significant difference in the average overall six-semester retention rate of 61% before the NNNRP was implemented and the average overall six-semester retention rate of 71% while the NNNRP functioned (Fontaine, 2014). Fontaine's (2014) findings indicated neither individual interventions nor a mixture of interventions as significantly correlated to retention.

Schrum (2015) reported supplemental instruction and tutoring as two strategies which increased nursing student retention rates. As a result, Schrum (2015) conducted a descriptive correlational study with 168 pre-licensure nursing students enrolled in an associate degree nursing program. One purpose of the study was to determine if there was a difference in attrition and retention rates between students who did and did not seek assistance from a retention specialist (Schrum, 2015). Findings conveyed that 23% of the students who did not use the retention specialist for tutoring did not progress past the first year and 28% of the students who did not attend a one-hour application class offered by the retention specialist did not progress past the first year of the nursing program (Schrum, 2015). A statistically significant difference was noted in first-year attrition rates between students who attended the one-hour application class and those who did not (Schrum, 2015). In a similar fashion, Harding's (2012) results revealed at-risk students who participated in voluntary supplemental nursing instruction on student success during their second year of enrollment in an associate degree nursing program experienced an immediate impact on academic success. Harding (2012) further noted that once the supplemental instruction ceased, a larger attrition rate occurred.

Harris, Rosenberg, and Rourke (2014) embarked upon the assessment of a three-pronged approach to increase academic success and decrease rates of attrition in an Associate Applied Science nursing program. The approach consisted of a Student Success Program (SSP), faculty development, and admission changes (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014). The SSP was made available to at-risk students who had an American College Testing (ACT) score of 20 or below, were enrolled in a remedial English or math class, or previously repeated anatomy and physiology (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014). The SSP was offered to at-risk students upon enrollment in the initial nursing course and 18 out of the 19 at-risk students agreed to voluntarily

participate (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014). The SSP involved group meetings, individual mentoring with the program director, eight modules presented during one-hour group learning sessions, introduction to university resources, testimonial presentations from successful nurse graduates, and online journaling (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014). Despite the high level of participation within the SSP, ten of the 18 participants were either unsuccessful or withdrew from the fundamental course, and, therefore, the overall goal of decreasing the total number of failures was not achieved (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014). Although the SSP did not positively impact progression and academic success, participants rated the SSP a 4.3 on a 5-point scale (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014). The rating reflected student satisfaction of the overall program, teaching methods, and instructor performance (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014). Positive themes from participants' feedback included faculty mentorship, group meetings, and the topics covered during the group learning sessions (Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014).

Providing students access to additional learning opportunities and strategies beyond the classroom can enrich and further support the learning process for at-risk students. The early identification and implementation of integration and academic strategies can potentially impact student satisfaction, achievement, and retention. For this reason, it is recommended that nursing programs provide additional experiences that not only enhance the learning process, but also encourage academic integration through relational connections with faculty, staff, and peers.

### **Institutional Commitment to Student Welfare**

It is necessary to extend the review of literature beyond the border of academic enrichment strategies and into the relational component of academic integration. Reflecting upon Braxton's, et al. (2014) *Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and*

*Universities*, researchers must be mindful of relational characteristics that reflect institutional commitment to student welfare. Braxton, et al. (2014) addressed first-year commuter student retention rates in connection to student perceptions of being valued as an individual, respected, and treated equally within an organizational structure. The following section reviews implications of institutional satisfaction among first-year students and their perceptions of institutional characteristics which reflect commitment to student welfare.

### **Importance and Achievement of Expectation**

Schreiner (2009) conducted a large-scale empirical study involving 65 four-year institutions in higher education. Approximately 28,000 students, who were evenly distributed throughout the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior levels, participated in the Student Satisfaction Inventory survey published by Noel-Levitz. The survey consisted of global satisfaction indicators, campus climate satisfaction indicators, and institutional feature characteristics (Schreiner, 2009). The survey assessed student satisfaction related to two continua: (a) how important it is for an institution to meet certain expectations and (b) the level at which a student is satisfied with an institution meeting that expectation (Schreiner, 2009). Not only did findings indicate that student satisfaction is connected to student persistence, but they also demonstrated that predictors of retention varied across each class level (Schreiner, 2009). Schreiner's results indicated that first-year student retention was best predicted by campus climate. Several items indicative of campus climate and most predictive of students returning for a second year included, but were not limited to: (a) satisfaction with being a student, (b) feeling a sense of belonging, and (c) advisor availability (Schreiner, 2009). In regard to institutional satisfaction and academic advising, Braxton, et al. (2014) conducted an empirical study involving five publicly supported commuter colleges and universities. Study participants

consisted of 714 students who had completed two or fewer semesters and lived off campus (Braxton, et al., 2014). Findings indicated that the more students were satisfied with academic advising and viewed advising as a strong component within the academic environment, the more they perceived the institution as being committed to their welfare as students (Braxton, et al., 2014).

Woosley and Miller (2009) conducted a study involving 2,744 first-time and first-year undergraduate students to determine if very early college experiences impacted academic outcomes, including persistence. Woosley and Miller (2009) measured student perceptions of academic and social integration and institutional commitment within the first three weeks of an academic term. Academic integration referred to a student's degree of satisfaction with his or her academic life on campus, social integration addressed the student's level of "fitting in," and institutional commitment referred to the degree to which a student anticipated transferring to a different institution (Woosley & Miller, 2009). Although all three variables positively impacted second-year retention rates, the strongest predictor was institutional commitment, followed by academic integration (satisfaction) (Woosley & Miller, 2009). Researchers were unable to determine if social integration, or "fitting in," had a direct or indirect impact on retention (lacked significant odds ratio), but speculated that social integration directly impacted institutional commitment and, therefore, indirectly affected student decisions to persist (Woosley & Miller, 2009).

The above findings suggest that student satisfaction is one factor which may contribute to student persistence and institutional retention. As a result, it is necessary for academic institutions to understand what institutional levers are important to the student population served and how they can satisfactorily meet the expectations held by students. Understanding student

needs, and implementing, evaluating, and enhancing institutional levers based on student perceptions is vital to retention.

### **Belonging or Fit**

A sense of belonging, or academic fit, is a concept which can influence a student's decision to continue enrollment within an institution. Schmitt, et al. (2008) conducted a study involving incoming first-year undergraduate students. The study's intent was to discover if a correlation existed between students' perceived organization fit and academic satisfaction, which, in turn, would predict several student outcomes, one being turnover intention. Similar to Schreiner's (2009) findings related to student satisfaction, results supported the researchers' assumption that perceived fit led to student satisfaction and, thereby, predicted student retention. In comparison to the research studies mentioned above, Jacobs and Archie's (2008) aim was to determine if a sense of community influenced first-year college students' intent to return to college for a second consecutive year. The study included 305 students at a predominately undergraduate university in the western United States. An adapted version of the Sense of Community Index (SCI) was used to measure participants' sense of community (Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Findings revealed a sense of community as a positive predictor of student persistence, which signifies the relevance of the concept of community in persistency research (Jacobs & Archie, 2008).

In a similar pursuit to uncover variables related to first-to-second-year retention, Morrow and Ackermann (2012) studied 960 first-year undergraduate students and their intention to persist for a second year. Morrow and Ackermann's (2012) findings were unlike Schmitt, et al. (2008), and Schreiner's (2009), and revealed that an overall sense of belonging did not correlate with student intentions to persist. Morrow and Ackermann's (2012) findings revealed that

faculty support and perceived peer support were both significant and positively correlated to student intentions to persist for a second year. It is relevant to note that the researchers found that when students' motivational attitudes were included, faculty support and peer support were no longer significant predictors, whereas motivational attitude remained a significant predictor for second-year persistence (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

The above findings suggest students' sense of belonging within an institution may or may not impact persistence and institutional retention. Regardless of previous findings, it is the responsibility of academic institutions to provide a culture of inclusion which best supports all student demographics. An inclusive academic culture provides all students an equal opportunity to flourish and complete their academic journey if they so choose.

### **Support and Relational Connectedness**

Specific to the education of student nurses, Williams' (2010) phenomenological study intended to uncover common experiences and practices that enhanced nursing students' ability to persist during the earlier periods of a baccalaureate nursing program curriculum. The study involved ten undergraduate nursing students, and one of the four themes identified within the results involved the use of resources (Williams, 2010). Resources included relational connections with others to create friendships and support from peers and faculty within the program (Williams, 2010). Shelton (2003) also conducted a study specific to the retention of nursing students through a quantitative cross-sectional design approach to determine if a correlation existed between various support structures and student retention in an associate degree nursing program. Shelton's (2003) study did not specifically address first-year retention rates, but rather the entire duration of the program. Support was measured by psychological and functional support constructs. Psychological constructs consisted of peers, family, and

employers promoting a sense of competency and self-worth, whereas functional constructs consisted of faculty, counselors, peers, and learning support systems which provided resources promoting task and goal achievements (Shelton, 2003). Findings revealed that nursing students who persisted from the first clinical nursing course to the final semester had significantly higher levels of perceived psychological and functional support than those students who withdrew voluntarily from the program (Shelton, 2003).

In conjunction with relational connectedness, Leary and DeRoiser (2012) conducted a descriptive correlational study consisting of 120 first-year college students enrolled in four Pennsylvania institutions of higher education. Results revealed the concept of social connectedness as one of the most important predictors of first-year students' ability to positively adjust to college during the transitional period. Social connectedness was also directly linked to the level of self-reported stress during the first six weeks of the academic term (Leary & DeRoiser, 2012). Although the results are not directly linked to retention, Leary and DeRoiser (2012) postulated that first-year experience (FYE) programs which help build social connections can positively increase student persistence.

Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, and Hunter (2012) conducted an integrative literature review of both qualitative and quantitative research studies. One purpose of the review was to identify factors that influenced preregistration nursing student attrition rates. Findings suggest that students who sought out and engaged in academic and social support systems were less likely to withdraw.

Braxton's, et al. (2014) study reviewed the relational component of academic integration offered by institutions and its impact on commuter students. Empirical findings revealed that the more students perceived faculty as valuing their individual growth and development and as being



genuinely interested in them, the more favorably they perceived their college or university's commitment to the welfare of their students (Braxton, et al., 2014).

Academic integration through relational connections was found to be an instrumental lever which influenced student persistence and institutional retention (Braxton's, et al., 2014; Leary & DeRoiser, 2012; Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, & Hunter, 2012; Shelton, 2003; Williams, 2010). As a result, it is within an academic institution's best interest to foster a culture of support and relational connectedness among students and the academic community. Students are more likely to continue their academic journey with institutions who embrace leaders, faculty, and staff who value, support, and relationally connect with the student they serve.

### **Summary**

Retention continues to be a primary issue and concern for all stakeholders involved in higher education. When students are challenged with the decision to continue or withdraw from a college or university, their perceptions of an institution's commitment to their individual wellbeing and their degree of commitment to the institution will impact their chosen path (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014; Jeffreys, 2004; Tinto 1975; 1987). It is theorized that various forms of integration, such as academic, social, and professional, influence student persistence and, therefore, effect institutional retention (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014; Jeffreys, 2004; Tinto 1975; 1987). In light of the theories and findings identified in chapter two, it is the responsibility of academic institutions to craft, implement, and assess early retention strategies unique to their student populations and academic cultures. This strategic planning and analysis promotes integration and can positively influence early retention. Commuter programs of nursing have the opportunity to partner with students and provide an inclusive culture of learning that promotes early academic integration

through genuine and supportive relationships. A culture of academic support and community has the potential to positively impact student decisions to persist, graduate, and enter the profession of nursing.

The interest of this research study centers on a cohort of first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students involved in an EIEP. The EIEP was devised from evidence-based retention principles and practices highlighted in the theoretical framework and review of literature. The researcher's attention was drawn toward the essence of EIEP participation and how commuter, undergraduate, nursing students valued the experience and characterized program commitment.

### CHAPTER III: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Chapter three will discuss the research plan, design, and processes used to explore and describe the essence of the lived experience of undergraduate nursing students who participated in an EIEP at a commuter Bachelor of Science in nursing program.

#### Research Design

Qualitative research is a process of inquiry which unveils rich descriptions and meanings of a phenomenon of interest through the exploration of personal and social experiences (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) metaphorically described the process of qualitative research as an intricate fabric comprised of various materials, threads, colors, and textures. The phenomenon under study is comparable to such fabric in its complexity and the difficulty one experiences in trying to explain it (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research allows scholars the opportunity to explore individuals or groups in their natural settings through conversations, observations, and documentation (Creswell, 2013). Leedy and Ormrod (2013) described the process of qualitative research as *digging deep* into a phenomenon of inquiry to gain a complete understanding by constructing a rich and meaningful picture of complex and multifaceted experiences.

The analytical process of qualitative research is as complex and intricate as the phenomenon addressed. As a result of the complexity and difficulty in measuring the phenomenon of interest, a researcher finds him or herself as the analytical instrument and uses inductive and deductive reasoning to build patterns, categories, and themes (Creswell, 2013). The final responsibility of the scholar conducting qualitative research is to present a holistic account of the phenomenon under study by reporting multiple perspectives and complex interactions of factors within the experience as expressed by the individual (Creswell, 2013).

The process of qualitative research guides researchers in the exploration of a complex phenomenon involving individual experiences, followed by the presentation of findings through rich and descriptive holistic accounts.

The phenomenological approach to qualitative research is popular in the social and health sciences, including nursing and education (Creswell, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The methodology begins with individually lived experience and furthers the process of inquiry by discovering commonalities experienced by several individuals (Creswell, 2013). This approach attempts to uncover the universal *essence* of a phenomenon by describing participants' shared experiences (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology casts light on descriptive group-meaning rather than the individually isolated perspectives surrounding the experience of a phenomenon.

This qualitative phenomenological study used a hermeneutical approach to answer the questions posed by the researcher in order to gain an understanding of the EIEP lived experience. The hermeneutical, or interpretive, approach in phenomenology was described by Creswell (2013, p. 80) as, "not only a description, but an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of a lived experience." The hermeneutical approach used to guide this study complemented the exploration and description of the lived EIEP experience while lending support to the researcher's need to interpret meaning connected to the experience as expressed by commuter, first-year undergraduate, nursing students. Figure 3.1 represents the Data Collection Circle, which was developed by Creswell (2013) and guided the researcher's inquiry process.

### **Sample Selection**

For the study at hand, the population of interest was students who participated in an inaugural EIEP during the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016 at a private, commuter, Midwestern,

undergraduate Bachelor of Science nursing program. Qualitative researchers most often intentionally or purposefully select participants in a nonrandom fashion (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013) to expose a deep understanding and common meaning of a phenomenon of interest. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described purposeful sampling as the most appropriate and logical method of selecting a population sample when conducting qualitative research. It was also noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) that *unique* sampling is one type of purposeful sampling in which a researcher can glean an understanding of an atypical or unique phenomenon of interest. Creswell (2013) further suggested that all participants in a phenomenological study must experience the same phenomenon of inquiry. As a result of the support noted by Leedy and Ormrod (2013), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Creswell (2013), the researcher implemented *unique purposeful criterion sampling* as the study's participant selection method.

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), a recommended sample size for a phenomenological study is 5 to 25 individuals, whereas Merriam and Tisdell (2016) remain ambiguous in identifying a sample number. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest terminating the sampling once no new information is forthcoming, thus redundancy or saturation is the primary criterion for identifying the sample size. A total of five out of nine possible participants partook in the study at hand. The researcher determined redundancy or saturation once the information gleaned from participant interviews became repetitive and lacked new insight into the phenomenon under study.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The researcher identified participant inclusion and exclusion criteria which guided the unique purposeful criterion sample selection method used within the study. Inclusion criteria for study participation was as follows: (a) entering first-year commuter student at a private,

Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program, (b) inaugural EIEP participant during the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016, (c) 19 years of age or older, and (d) maintained enrollment during the fall of 2015, spring of 2016, and fall of 2017. Any student who voluntarily withdrew, was administratively withdrawn, or experienced a leave of absence from the nursing program during the fall of 2015, spring of 2016, or fall of 2017 was excluded from the study.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Students who initiated enrollment and participated in the EIEP in the fall of 2015 through the spring of 2016 were recruited for the study at hand. The researcher requested the Clinical and Academic Development Coordinator, who established and initiated the program, to recruit participants for the study. The Clinical and Academic Development Coordinator contacted prospective participants through their assigned college email accounts. The researcher provided the Clinical and Academic Development Coordinator with an electronic version of the Recruitment Invitation Email Letter to electronically send to prospective participants. The Recruitment Invitation Letter provided the purpose of the study, participant selection criteria, and anticipated time commitment (Creswell, 2016). A copy of the Recruitment Invitation Letter is available for review in Appendix A. The researcher's contact information was included in the letter to allow individuals intending to participate in the study a gateway to communicate with the researcher.

### **Description of Setting**

This study took place at an urban, private, commuter, Midwestern college of health sciences. The college had approximately 700 enrolled students and offered associate, bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. Of the 700 students that made up the student body, approximately

500 were enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in nursing program, which was accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN).

The intent of the research under study was to focus on first-year institutional retention strategies unique to commuter nursing students pursuing their Bachelor of Science degrees. An urban, private, commuter, Midwestern college of health sciences crafted a first-year EIEP for at-risk nursing students identified upon admission to improve academic integration, satisfaction, and first-year retention rates and was, therefore, selected as the solitary site under study. Two rubric admission criteria options were used for the selection process: one pertained to the traditional applicant (directly out of high school), and the second pertained to the applicant with college credits. Criterion was weighted and incorporated into the admission rubric and consisted of academic achievement (70%), applicant/faculty interview (15%), essay (10%), and admission team member interview (5%). Accepted applicants identified as at-risk students met all program admission requirements yet fell below the established cohort benchmark for acceptance. The researcher's decision to selectively conduct the study at one site was validated by the following statement presented by Creswell (2013): "participants may be located at a single site" (p. 150). In addition, the researcher adhered to the designated selection process requiring all participants to meet one criterion (Creswell, 2016), which the researcher established as the EIEP lived experience.

### **Data Gathering Plan**

The process of data collection reaches far beyond identifying and gathering appropriate types of data which support the discovery of a phenomenon of interest. Creswell (2013) depicts the process of data collection as an interrelated circle of activities designed to assemble accurate information in an attempt to answer questions posed by researchers. The following sections

represent Creswell's (2013) data collection circle and ensure the practice of evidence-based principles and methodologies of research were implemented throughout this study (see figure 3.1).

**Interview.** The researcher initiated the inquiry process, as found in Appendix C, by conducting one-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the participants. Individual interviews are advantageous in allowing the researcher control over the questioning process and also encouraged open exchanges to occur between the participant and researcher (Creswell, 2016). The premise of the interview was to gain insight and obtain rich description from participants regarding the lived experiences of the EIEP.

**Documents.** The second source of data collected resided within the category of documents. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) address the concept of researcher-generated documents, which involves one of two formats: (a) the researcher prepares the document for the participants or (b) the participant prepares the document for the researcher after the study has been initiated. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify the purpose of generating documents within a research study as the discovery of more information related to situations, people, or events. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that when documents are used as a secondary source of data to verify primary themes rather than used to illuminate a topic, incongruences may occur. Therefore, the researcher developed an EIEP characteristic-card sorting document with the intention to further explore and illustrate the lived experience of the EIEP phenomenon while also incorporating the findings into category development. When documents are used by a researcher with the intent to enhance and build upon primary data, they become evidence in support of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Collecting data through illustrative formats and building themes through



various sources which are meaningful, complementary, and reflective of the phenomenon under study enhance the interest and quality of the discoveries uncovered by the researcher.

**Participant demographics.** Gathering and sharing participant demographics is a fundamental component of qualitative research. Creswell (2016) specified that a *good* qualitative study includes participant personal profiles which allow readers a detailed understanding of the participants' demographic characteristics. Recommended demographic profile criteria include gender, race, position, geographical location, and others (Creswell, 2016). The researcher gathered several demographic criteria recommended by Creswell (2016) along with additional profile information specific to the population of interest. The gathering of demographic data provided the researcher with further insight into the participants' backgrounds. Refer to Demographic Form in Appendix B for a complete list of the demographics collected.

### **Data Gathering Procedures**

It is imperative for researchers to understand and implement data collection processes and procedures which reside within the best practice principles of research. The following sections describe processes the researcher implemented to effectively and accurately collect data which was relevant to and descriptive of the phenomenon under study.

**Interviews.** Interviewing participants is a common practice of data collection in qualitative studies. For this study, the researcher coordinated and facilitated interview sessions which took place in a private location free from all audio or visual distractions (Creswell, 2016). The researcher conducted one-on-one, face-to face interviews guided by open-ended questions and lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. During the interview process, the researcher also provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect and disclose words associated with the EIEP through a characteristic card sorting activity (see Appendix C for Interview Questions and

Appendix D for the Characteristic Card Sorting Activity Guidelines). Interviews were conducted according to Creswell's (2016) recommendation and are as follows: (a) researcher/participant introductions, (b) review of the study's purpose and structure, (c) review of the interview process, (d) review of consent to participate form, (e) attainment of the participant's signature, (f) delivery of interview questions, (g) review of the characteristic card sorting activity guidelines, (h) delivery of the characteristic card sorting activity, (e) clarifying questions by researcher/participant, (g) thank you extended to participant by the researcher.

The researcher used a Sony ICD-PX333 as the primary audio recorder to capture participants' verbal responses in their entirety along with handwritten notes. Upon the conclusion of the interview, the researcher thanked the participant for his or her time and answered final questions posed by the interviewee (Creswell, 2016). The researcher asked permission to follow up with the participant to validate preliminary themes, address additional questions if necessary, and clarify statements if needed.

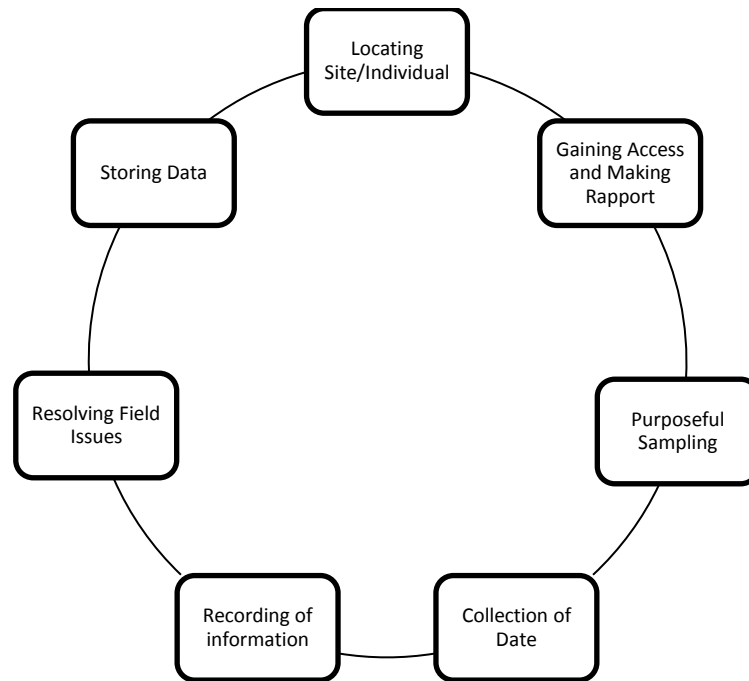
**Documents.** Documents are a creative and alternative way for participants to express personal experiences and for the researcher to illuminate the phenomenon under study while inductively building categories and theoretical constructs (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2016) encourages researchers to collect data in ways which are uncharacteristic to the social science spectrum, therefore, the researcher used a characteristic card sorting activity as an expressive source of data which enhanced previously collected data and furthered the development of themes identified during the interview process. The researcher sought expertise from the Clinical and Academic Development Director and the Professional Development Coordinator when selecting words which exemplified the essence of the EIEP. The recommendations presented by the creators of the EIEP and the theoretical underpinning of

Tinto, Braxton and colleagues, and Jeffreys guided the researcher's selection of words and phrases to be included in the characteristic card sorting activity.

During the interview process, participants were provided with guidelines addressing the purpose and process of the characteristic card sorting activity (see Appendix D). Word cards describing a characteristic of the EIEP were given to the participant (see Appendix E). The participant initiated the activity by determining if a characteristic card was important or not important, and when a participant identified a card as unimportant, it was discarded. The participant was also given the opportunity to self-identify an EIEP characteristic which was not presented by the researcher, and write it on a blank card. None of the participants self-identified an additional characteristic of the EIEP that was not already represented within the activity. Secondly, the participant numerically ranked the remaining characteristic cards' levels of importance (number one was the highest ranking of importance). Next, the participant identified whether or not he or she was satisfied with how the characteristic was delivered in the EIEP, and finally, if the characteristic was a reflection of the EIEP's commitment to his or her individual well-being. The researcher then compiled a photographic record of the characteristic cards selected as important, levels of ranking, and perceived program commitment.

**Participant demographics.** The researcher gathered participant personal profile information by way of a constructed Demographic Personal Profile Form (Appendix B). Participant information obtained included gender, race/ethnicity, age, first generational college status, prior enrollment at a previous institution, and current educational goals. The Demographic Personal Profile Form was completed prior to the start of the interview process. Three out of the five participants were male and two were female, all participants were Caucasian, all participants were 24 years of age or younger, one out of the five participants was a

first-generation student, one out of the five participants entered the program directly after high school and the other four participants were transfer students from a four-year college or university, and five participants intended to complete their nursing degrees at the current institution in which they were enrolled.



*Figure 3.1 The Data Collection Circle. Creswell, J. (2013). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.*

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The process of analyzing data in qualitative research is an art and skill that must be gained in order to accurately uncover and interpret concepts connected to the phenomenon of inquiry. Creswell (2016) addressed the importance, skill, and responsibility bestowed upon the researcher to accurately code the data obtained in open-ended interviews and documents. The researcher of this study closely adhered to the phenomenological process of data analysis which was supported by the works of Creswell (2013, 2016) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

A primary step in qualitative research is the selection of a qualitative software program to store, analyze, report, and visualize themes which evolve from the data (Creswell, 2016).

NVivo11 was the qualitative analysis software used by the researcher to organize, classify, and code data. The next procedural step implemented by the researcher was the preparation of data for analysis. This process included transcribing audio recordings into text and creating digital copies of the handwritten interview notes and characteristic card sorting selections. Audio recordings were transcribed by a transcriptionist to ensure accuracy and participant protection. In addition, the researcher compared handwritten notes obtained during the interview sessions with the transcribed documents, and clarified questions and discrepancies with each participant.

Upon the conversion of data into a text format and the completion of data storage in an electronic database, the researcher engaged in the process of data analysis. Creswell (2016) refers to the general process of data analysis as thoroughly reading through all forms of documents and recording notes within the margins of the text. Once the researcher explored the database and had a general understanding of the data gathered, the process of identifying significant statements which revealed participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon ensued (Creswell, 2013). The researcher then clustered meanings derived from significant statements into themes which were used to write the textual and structural descriptions of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) defines the textual description as what the participant experienced and the structural description as how the experience happened. The researcher also used data obtained from the characteristic card sorting activity as a means to enhance descriptions and build upon themes gleaned from the interview process and analysis described above. The final step in analyzing data for a phenomenological approach was

composing a description that portrayed the “essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The composition presented the lived experiences shared by all participants (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Quality Assurance Plan**

Analyzing and reporting legitimate and well-founded results is imperative for ensuring high-quality qualitative research. As with quantitative research, it is essential for qualitative researchers to report valid and reliable findings, but through very distinct qualitative assurance processes. Creswell (2014) associates the terms “trustworthiness, authentic,” and “credible” with qualitative validity, and employs the use of multiple approaches to assess the accuracy of the researcher’s findings. Creswell (2014) refers to qualitative reliability as exercising consistent and credible approaches throughout the data gathering and analysis processes. In a similar fashion, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) employ the terms “trustworthiness” and “rigor” in reference to the internal validity and reliability of the data collected. The trustworthiness (validity) of a study culminates in how the findings match and are congruent with the *reality* of a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) accentuate the concept and assumption of reality within the context of qualitative research: “reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in quantitative research. Assessing the isomorphism between data collected and the ‘reality’ from which they were derived is thus an inappropriate determinate of validity” (p. 242-243). Therefore, qualitative researchers are unable to identify an absolute truth or reality within a study, but can increase the trustworthiness (validity) of the findings through various strategies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The traditional definition of reliability within a research study refers to the degree to which a study’s findings can be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As stated above,

qualitative research is based on the reality of human behavior and experiences which are ever-changing; therefore, the concept of reliability in qualitative research becomes problematic due to the nature of the phenomenon of inquiries (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than scrutinizing whether or not a study's findings can be replicated, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend determining whether or not the findings are rigorous (reliable) and consistent with the data collected. The following section addresses the strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness (validity) and rigor (reliability) of the findings which uncovered the *essence* of the EIEP phenomenon.

**Bracketing.** The process of bracketing is a strategy used within qualitative research that supports the trustworthiness (validity) and rigor (reliability) of a study's findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bracketing occurs when a researcher explores his or her experience with the phenomenon of interest in order to elicit an awareness of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Upon completion of self-reflection, a researcher sets aside, or brackets, his or her biases and assumptions in pursuit of the data collection process and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher of this study incorporated the process of bracketing by initially reflecting upon personal experiences, biases, and assumptions related to the EIEP phenomenon. In addition to reflections, the researcher disclosed and transcribed past experiences and personal biases which may have influenced the methodology and interpretation of the data collected and analyzed (see Role of the Researcher section). Upon the interview and data analysis processes, the researcher bracketed previous assumptions and biases in order to draw upon the essence of the experiences shared by the participants. As did Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Creswell (2013) also highlighted the importance of the researcher's awareness of biases or assumptions that may impede the structure and results of the study. Creswell (2014) further

stated that a researcher's authentic self-reflection creates an honest and sincere depiction of the phenomenon to the reader. Thorough reflection and disclosure by the researcher is one method used within the study at hand to ensure trustworthiness and rigor and is further addressed in the section titled *Role of the researcher*.

Phenomenological reduction and horizontalization are two bracketing strategies unique to phenomenological research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenological reduction encourages the researcher to continually return to the essence of the experience to elicit the meaning of the phenomenon at hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Horizontalization is the initial process of analyzing and equally valuing all data obtained before the researcher clusters or organizes the information into themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reduction and horizontalization were two additional methods of bracketing implemented by the researcher.

***Role of the researcher.*** As an educator and academic leader in a Bachelor of Science nursing program, the researcher had witnessed and engaged in varying types of processes and practices involving admission, progression, and graduation (APG) of nursing students. As an educator, the researcher served as a member of the Nursing APG Sub-committee for ten years and fulfilled the role of Chair for one year. The purpose of the Nursing APG Sub-committee is to develop criteria for admission, progression, and graduation, and to admit qualified applicants to the program on a bi-annual basis. Throughout the researcher's term, the committee focused on the responsibilities of the applicant selection processes, limiting attention and efforts toward progression and graduation initiatives. During this timeframe, the Nursing APG Sub-committee transformed the admission process from that of rolling acceptance to one of bi-annual pooled acceptance. Following the completion of the pooled admission process, the Nursing APG Sub-committee restructured the applicant interview process and increased academic admission



standards. The researcher was an active member in the creation and implementation of the above standards and processes involving student admission into the nursing program.

As an academic leader, the researcher had thus far served as an Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Nursing for four academic terms. The role of Assistant Dean is to collaborate with the Dean of Undergraduate Nursing and faculty in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the undergraduate nursing curriculum. As a result of the change in roles from educator to leader, the researcher transitioned from a Nursing APG Sub-committee member with voting privileges to that of an ex-officio with nonvoting privileges. During the researcher's first year of ex-officio status, Nursing APG Sub-committee members pursued a final challenge associated with the admission process. A revised admission rubric was developed and presented to the committee by an internal constituent and thereby modified, voted upon, and implemented into the applicant selection process by committee members. Committee members then directed their attention toward progression enhancement strategies specific to applicants who scored in the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of the admission rubric and were accepted as alternate students. Committee members charged the institution's Student Success Center, which is under the direction of the Clinical and Academic Development Director, to develop and implement an early enrichment program grounded in evidence-based practice principles promoting student success, integration, and retention.

In response to the Nursing APG Sub-committee charge, the Clinical and Academic Development Director partnered with the Professional Development Coordinator and created the EIEP. The researcher was not involved in the preliminary design and implementation of the program, but provided suggestions to readily connect students with peer mentors and nursing faculty advisors. The EIEP creators took into account the researcher's suggestion, and within the

first five weeks of the semester, they assigned students to peer mentors and, upon midterm, assigned students to nursing faculty advisors. The researcher and EIEP creators strategically assigned a nursing faculty advisor to each student participating in the program and educated the advisors on their roles and responsibilities. It is common practice for all entering students to be assigned to the Registration and Advising Supervisor for first-year advising. Students are then assigned to a nursing faculty advisor within the nursing program upon the start of the second academic year.

In its entirety, the inaugural year-long EIEP consisted of the following components: (a) three day prep-camp, (b) reflective journaling, (c) individual sessions with the Clinical and Academic Development Director and Professional Development Coordinator throughout the academic term, (d) assigned nursing faculty advisor, (e) assigned peer mentor, (f) and the exploration and involvement in a student organization during the academic year. It is relevant to note that two out of the five participants did not attend the three day prep-camp and, therefore, the researcher excluded this component from the research study. All components, with the exception of the reflective journal, are grounded in evidence-based retention principles and practices of retention.

The researcher was not directly involved in the inception or implementation of the EIEP and did not actively engage in any form of student evaluations related to academic performance or progression. Consequently, students did not gain or risk academic achievement as a result of study participation. The creators of the EIEP were not within the division of nursing and did not directly report to the researcher or Dean of Undergraduate Nursing. As a result of the department division, the creators of the EIEP did not gain or risk employment implications. The

EIEP is not connected to the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Nursing role or professional description and, therefore, the researcher did not gain or risk employment implications.

It is imperative for researchers to be self-aware and disclose personal experiences and biases to the phenomenon of inquiry. The researcher of this study was not a creator or voting member of the revised admission rubric and did not serve as a voting member when applicants were selected for program admission. The researcher did not cast a vote requiring alternate students to participate in an early enhancement program, nor did the researcher create or implement the EIEP. Furthermore, the researcher denied previous development of or involvement in programs of a similar retention nature and, therefore, denies prior experiences or personal biases to draw from when collecting and analyzing data. Finally, the researcher remained objective and enforced strategies that supported the attainment of trustworthy and rigorous findings while safeguarding participant, constituent, and researcher rights. The researcher was compelled to explore evidence-based strategies which promote student satisfaction and demonstrate institutional commitment to the well-being of students enrolled in a private, commuter, Bachelor of Science in nursing program.

**Rich, thick descriptions.** A vivid illustration of a phenomenon adds breadth and depth to the lived experiences of the participants. Rich descriptions reveal findings in a meaningful, contextual, and realistic fashion; thereby, allowing the reader an opportunity to share in the experience which adds to the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also addressed rich, thick descriptions in regard to the external validity, or the transferability (generalizability), of findings to alternative settings. The researcher conveyed the “essence” of the experience through rich, detailed descriptions gleaned from the interviews which were enhanced by the characteristic card sorting activity to foster transferability.

**Adequate engagement in data collection.** Continued exploration of a phenomenon until new information or insight is no longer gleaned from participants is an approach used by qualitative researchers to support the credibility of findings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest qualitative researchers conclude their data gathering endeavors once saturation is obtained and the analysis of data reveals robust themes which sufficiently cover additional data that may emerge at a later date. The researcher deemed saturation of data after interviewing five participants who experienced the inaugural year-long EIEP. The researcher identified repetitive descriptions, expressions, and themes related to the EIEP which represented the group's collective perspective without further expression of additional concepts. The acquisition of saturation demonstrates the trustworthiness (validity) of the findings uncovered by the researcher.

**Member checking.** Member checking is a critical practice in verifying data and confirming findings conveyed by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identified member checking as a key strategy used in qualitative research to validate the trustworthiness (validity) of preliminary findings by soliciting feedback from the participants. The researcher interacted several times with the participants after the conclusion of the first interview. The researcher and participants corresponded via email in order to clarify questions which arose during the data analysis process, to confirm accuracy of the transcribed transcripts, and to obtain approval of the preliminary themes and sub-themes which emerged.

**Peer Review.** Peer review is an additional means to support the trustworthiness (validity) and rigor (reliability) of a study's inquiry process and findings. Creswell (2014) describes a peer review, or debriefing, as a method used to enhance the accuracy and validity of an inquiry. In addition to credibility, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify the peer review process

as a means to ensure rigor or reliability of a study. A peer reviewer is an individual who is familiar with the research or phenomenon of interest and provides support by affirming and challenging the researcher's methodology and findings (Creswell, 2016).

**Audit trail.** An audit trail was implemented by the researcher throughout the inquiry process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) referred to an audit trail as a "captain's log" which describes in detail the data-collection processes, the identification and division of categories, and the researcher's decision-making process throughout the inquiry. The researcher constructed an audit trail by maintaining a journal throughout the research process. As recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the journal contained the researcher's reflections, questions, and decision making processes related to problems, data analysis, and data interpretation. The implementation of an audit trail was an additional method used to ensure the rigor (reliability) of the study at hand.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As a researcher pursues the process of inquiry, it becomes necessary to anticipate and address ethical issues which may be encountered. Participant selection, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis processes were guided by principles grounded in human protection and ethical standards of practice. Qualitative research commonly involves collecting emotionally charged information directly from participants (Creswell, 2016) and, therefore, requires the protection of those involved. It is important to note that the researcher who conducted the study at hand successfully completed The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research Web-based training course *Protecting Human Research Participants* and instituted precautionary processes and procedures to ensure the safety and well-being of those involved. The following section replicates processes suggested by Creswell

(2014) which ensure participant protection, promote integrity, and prevent misconduct during a qualitative research inquiry.

**Researcher disclosure.** Reputable researchers disclose biases and past experiences linked to the phenomenon of inquiry as a means to validate findings and gain the reader's support. Qualitative research is noted to be interpretive research and, therefore, it is imperative for the researcher to communicate connections to a phenomenon which may influence his or her interpretations of data throughout a study (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, this section will outline the connections which existed between the researcher, the EIEP, and the setting in which the study took place.

Bachelors of Science in nursing programs throughout the country share common educational standards set forth by accrediting bodies of nursing education, yet significantly differ in the overall learning and evaluation approaches and experiences within a curriculum. In addition to these variations, programs of nursing serve diverse student populations based on national and regional locations in comparison to one another. Consequently, diverse curriculums and student body subsets have unique factors which influence first-to-second-year retention rates.

Scholars such as Jeffreys (2002) and Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, and Hunter (2012) challenged nurse educators to implement evidence-based retention principles and practices appropriate for specific contexts and student cohorts, followed by an overall evaluation of the strategies employed. In a direct response to the challenge, the researcher of the study at hand sought to uncover the "essence," or lived experience, of a newly crafted first-year retention program within a small, private, commuter, Bachelor of Science nursing program.

The researcher served as the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Nursing where the study was conducted. Creswell (2014) addressed the concern of carrying out a study within a researcher's own organization, or "backyard," due to possible disclosure infringements leading to inaccurate data collection and possible imbalances in power existing between the researcher and participant(s). Despite these concerns, the researcher believed that studying the lived experience of this specific EIEP is essential to understanding and enhancing strategies which positively affect the student experience and positively impact first-to-second-year institutional retention rates within the specific program of nursing being studied. The researcher found support in pursuing the identified institution through the following statement offered by Creswell (2014): "If studying the backyard is essential, then researchers hold the responsibility for showing how the data will not be compromised and how such information will not place the participants (or the researchers) at risk" (p. 118).

**Research site permission.** When conducting a qualitative study, it is essential for the researcher to seek and receive permission from the appropriate individuals involved in overseeing the site of interest, as well as the appropriate governing boards of review. Institutional leaders within the site have the authority to grant permission to the researcher to conduct the study at the desired location. Leaders also serve as instrumental communication components by navigating the researcher to the appropriate individuals within the institutional system to ease the inquiry process. Leaders are aware of the personnel, technological systems, and available resources and, therefore, are able to connect the researcher to individuals who can provide data access and facilitate data collection processes (Creswell, 2013). For the research site under study, access permission was sought and gained from the Dean of Undergraduate Nursing through email correspondence (Appendix G).

**IRB approval.** Along with institutional site approval, IRB approval was gained to ensure ethical standards and practices would be maintained throughout the process of inquiry. Creswell (2016) highlighted an essential step in a qualitative research as attaining study approval through appropriate boards of research. IRB approval was initially requested from the institution in which the researcher was pursuing an educational doctoral degree. Upon the first institutional IRB approval, the researcher sought and gained IRB approval from the institution in which the study was to take place. A copy of the IRB approval letter from the doctoral degree granting institution is available for review in Appendix I. IRB approval was also granted from the institution where the study was conducted but documentation is not included in the appendices to uphold institutional and participant confidentiality.

**Participant permission.** Obtaining consent from individuals agreeing to participate in the phenomenon under study was the final permission sought by the researcher before the process of inquiry was to begin. The following elements of participant consent, as identified by Creswell (2016), were included in the document: the right to voluntarily withdraw at any time, the central purpose of the study, data collection procedures, assurance of confidentiality, known risks associated with participation, expected benefits or reciprocity of participation, and participant signature.

The informed consent was reviewed by the researcher and presented to the participant at the beginning of the interview process. The researcher informed the participant of the study's purpose, the interview, the assurance of anonymity, the right to voluntarily withdraw at any time, and the risks and benefits associated with participation. The participant's signature was then obtained confirming consent to participate. A copy of the Participant to Consent Form is available for review in Appendix H. Creswell (2016) addressed the importance of qualitative



researchers remaining sensitive to participant rights and ensuring the absence of participant harm. The processes of obtaining permission from the site of interest, boards of review, and participants are gateways of assurance to upholding the rights, anonymity, and dignity of all parties involved.

**Data storage.** Written notes, audio recordings, electronic data, and characteristic card documentation was coded to ensure participant anonymity. To ensure anonymity, data was coded as *Participant 1SP*, *Participant 2SP*, etc. All hardcopy data was only accessible to the researcher and was stored in the researcher's office in a locked cabinet at all times. All electronic data was only available to the researcher and was stored in a password-protected file and password-protected computer. The researcher erased audio recordings on the recording devices upon the completion of transcription. The established American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) data retention guidelines were upheld, and the researcher will maintain all raw data and additional information related to the study for five years after the completion or publications of the research.

### Summary

A qualitative phenomenological approach was put into practice with the intention to vividly express and represent a collective group of first-year, undergraduate, commuter, nursing students' lived EIEP experiences. The above chapter discussed the rationale for selecting the design and method of inquiry, along with recommended research practices and processes that were implemented to ensure participant protection and data collection accuracy, validity, and reliability.

## **Chapter IV: Report of the Findings**

A qualitative, phenomenological, hermeneutical design was used to guide data collection and data analysis to uncover the perceptions held by first-year nursing students regarding their EIEP experiences. Chapter five begins with a review of the research methods used to analyze and ensure the study's findings were credible, rigorous, and upheld an accurate reflection of the EIEP experience as expressed by the participants. This chapter also reports the study's findings through participant excerpts and a narrative summary which illustrates the lived experiences of five commuter, first-year, undergraduate, nursing students' journey as they engaged in a year-long EIEP.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Data analysis is the complex process of making meaning out of data through consolidation, reduction, and interpretation of the participant's words and the researcher's observational experiences and examination of documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher incorporated data analysis concepts recommended by Creswell (2013; 2016) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016). To begin the analysis process, the researcher scrutinized the first interview transcript, interview notes, and characteristic card sorting documents. The researcher recorded questions and comments next to all bits of data that were of interest and potentially relevant to the phenomenon. This comprehensive form of coding is referred to as open-coding due to the openness and expansive inquisition of all initial data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, the researcher grouped similar codes into categories or themes through analytical coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analytic coding allows the researcher to construct themes by reflecting upon the phenomenon under study and interpreting the coded data. Themes were written on a separate piece of paper and attached to the interview transcript. After coding and

identification of preliminary themes within the first interview transcript, the researcher determined if codes reflected the reality of the phenomenon and if personal biases were projected upon the data. This process was replicated with the data obtained from the second interview along with themes which emerged from the first interview. Themes which emerged from the first and second interviews were then compared and compiled into one master list (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The master list was the initial classification system for subsequent data points to be sorted into (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once the data points of all transcripts were coded and sorted into the master list, the researcher refined and renamed preliminary primary themes followed by the identification of sub-themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher then completed a final review of all documents and fleshed out additional bits of data which further strengthened the primary themes and sub-themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Four primary themes and four sub-themes emerged from the analysis process and will be discussed in chapter four and chapter five.

### **Data Analysis Assurance**

Accurate analysis and reporting of data gleaned from the data gathering processes are essential elements of qualitative research. As a means to ensure the themes uncovered accurately reflect the data collected, the researcher implemented multiple approaches to support the trustworthiness (validity) and rigor (reliability) of the findings. The following section outlines best practice approaches in qualitative research that were implemented by the researcher to support the data analysis and reporting processes of the study.

**Bracketing.** The researcher initially incorporated the process of bracketing by reflecting upon and disclosing personal experiences, biases, and assumptions related to the EIEP phenomenon. These perceptions had the potential to influence the researcher's methodology and

interpretation of data. An awareness followed by displacing one's perceptions allowed the researcher to focus on the data through an authentic and genuine analytical lens.

Phenomenological reduction and horizontalization were also used within the analysis process to affirm trustworthiness (validity) and rigor (reliability) of the findings. The researcher continually drew attention toward the EIEP experience expressed by the participants (phenomenological reduction) and equally analyzed and valued all data points obtained from the interview and characteristic card sorting activity (horizontalization reduction).

**Adequate engagement in data collection.** Adequately engaging in the data collection process occurs when a qualitative researcher obtains saturation or redundancy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher identified the attainment of saturation and terminated the sampling process once participant responses became redundant and lacked new information. Saturation or redundancy of data is an additional method used within this phenomenological study to support the trustworthiness (validity) of findings uncovered by the researcher.

**Member checking.** The process of member checking was also used by the researcher to support the trustworthiness (validity) of themes which emerged from the data analysis process. All five participants were individually emailed a list of personal significant statements that were extracted from their interview transcripts and characteristic card sorting documents. All five participants confirmed accuracy and the significance of the statements extracted from the data by the researcher. Four out of the five participants were asked to clarify who they were referring to when they mentioned *faculty* during the interview and characteristic card sorting activity. Faculty members who taught in the classroom, lab, or clinical setting were not involved in the EIEP and were, therefore, an irrelevant component of participant perceptions of the EIEP experience. Clarification was intended to ensure participants were referring to interactions that

occurred between the Clinical and Academic Development Director and the Professional Development Coordinator rather than faculty who facilitated curriculum courses. All four participants indicated that their references to *faculty* correlated with the Clinical and Academic Development Director and the Professional Development Coordinator. The researcher then requested that all five participants thoroughly review their transcribed interviews for accuracy and critically analyze preliminary themes and descriptions (Creswell, 2013). All five participants indicated their transcribed interviews were accurate reflections of their intended expressions of ideas, and all five participants confirmed the preliminary themes identified by the researcher echoed their perceptions of the EIEP experience.

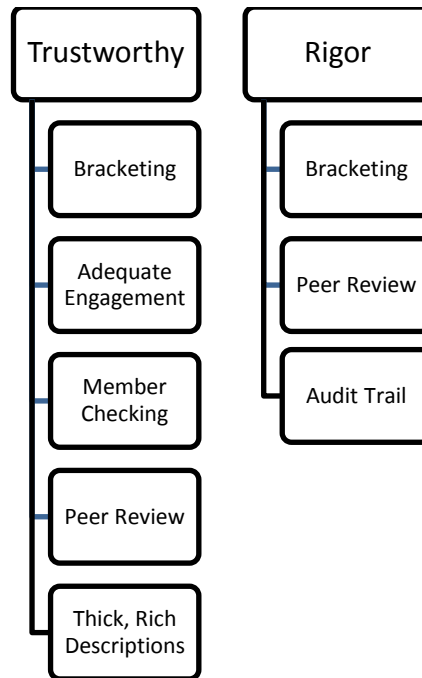
**Peer review.** Peer review systems are used to support the design rigor (reliability) and data trustworthiness (validity) of qualitative research. The researcher solicited a scholar with expertise in qualitative research. The scholar acted as the researcher's peer reviewer and assessed the transcribed interviews and preliminary findings to ensure data trustworthiness and design rigor. The scholar concurred with the researcher's analysis and identification of preliminary themes and sub-themes. In addition, the expertise of three scholars, who represented the researcher's doctoral committee, provided a final peer review summary of the strengths and challenges of the study at hand.

**Audit trail.** The rigor (reliability) of a qualitative study is strengthened through the implementation of an audit trail during the data gathering and data analysis process. The researcher constructed an audit trail by maintaining an electronic journal throughout the research process. As recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the journal contained the researcher's reflections, questions, and decision making processes related to problems, data analysis, and data

interpretation. Verbal and written correspondence which occurred between the researcher, participants, committee chair, and peer reviewer was also recorded in the electronic journal.

**Rich, thick descriptions.** Rich, thick descriptions which illustrated the phenomenon under study was the final method used to support the trustworthiness (validity) of the study's findings. A vivid portrayal of the EIEP experience was expressed through both participant excerpts and the researcher's interpretation of the themes and sub-themes. Chapter four concludes with a summary of findings expressed by the participants and interpreted by the researcher. This illustration provides readers an opportunity to visualize and better understand the phenomenon and further strengthen the study's validity and transferability.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the process used by the researcher to ensure findings were trustworthy (valid) and rigorous (reliable). The data analysis assurance processes used were supported by the works of Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Creswell (2013; 2014).



*Figure 3.2 Illustration of Data Analysis Assurance Strategies Implemented to Ensure Trustworthiness and Reliability as Recommended by Merriam & Tisdell (2016) and Creswell (2013; 2014).*

### **Research Questions**

The central question of the study at hand was created as a pathway to reveal rich descriptions offered by five, first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students regarding their personal experiences in and perceptions of an EIEP. The study's theoretical underpinning, which was a compilation of works presented by Tinto (1975; 1987), Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon (2004), Braxton, et al. (2014), and Jeffreys (2004; 2013), guided the development of two sub-questions, nine main interview questions, and multiple probing questions (Appendix C). A characteristic card sorting activity (Appendix D) was also developed with the intention of illuminating the descriptions and themes gleaned from the interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) support the use of secondary source documents to further illustrate a phenomenon rather than verify primary themes. The following central question and two sub-questions guided the

study and remained focal points to the researcher during the exploration of significant statements and theme development.

**Central question.** What are the perceptions of first-year, commuter, nursing students regarding their experiences in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program?

**Sub-question 1.** How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program describe the value of an EIEP?

**Sub-question 2.** How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program perceive nursing program commitment to their first-year college experience?

### **Themes and Sub-Themes**

Four themes and four sub-themes emerged from the data analysis process and collectively addressed the central research question which sought to reveal the *essence* of the EIEP experience. In addition, the identified themes and sub-themes answered the questions posed in sub-question one and two which addressed value and program commitment. The four themes and four sub-themes are as follows and will be further discussed: feelings of apprehension and uncertainty to acceptance and appreciation; relational connection to academic staff with the sub-themes of support, availability, belonging, and trust; intellectual connection to academic resources; and the program is committed to me (see Table 1). Table 2 outlines the top five EIEP attributes identified by participants during the characteristic card sorting activity and indicates each participant's level of satisfaction and perception of institutions commitment.



Table 4.1

*Participants Perceptions of the EIEP*

| Themes  | Sub-themes<br>Value                           | Lack Value                               | Central<br>Question | Sub-question<br>Addressed |
|---|---|--|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Feelings of<br>Apprehension and<br>Uncertainty to<br>Acceptance and<br>Appreciation |   |  | Perception          |                           |
| Relational<br>Connection to<br>Academic Staff                                       | Support<br>Availability<br>Belonging<br>Trust | Peer mentors<br>Student<br>organizations | Perception          | 1 – EIEP value            |
| Intellectual<br>Connection to<br>Academic<br>Resources                              |   | Reflective<br>journaling                 | Perception          | 1 – EIEP value            |
| The Program is<br>Committed to Me   |   |  | Perception          | 2 – Program<br>commitment |

Table 4.2

*Top Five Characteristic Card Sorting Activity Attributes**Satisfaction with Offered Activity**Demonstration of Institutional Commitment*

| Attribute                         | Participant Selection          | Satisfaction | Institutional Commitment |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Connection to Academic Staff   | All participants               | Yes          | Yes                      |
| 2. Establishment of Trust         | Participant 1SP, 2SP, and 4SP  | Yes          | Yes                      |
| 3. Individualized Attention       | Participants 2SP, 3SP, and 4SP | Yes          | Yes                      |
| 4. Meaningful Learning Strategies | Participants 2SP, 3SP, and 4SP | Yes          | Yes                      |
| 5. Establishment of Support       | Participants 1 and 5           | Yes          | Yes                      |

**Feelings of apprehension and uncertainty to acceptance and appreciation.** To fully capture the essence of the phenomenon of inquiry, the researcher acknowledged and illustrated the participants' initial thoughts and feelings regarding the experience at hand. The initial EIEP interaction with all participants was delivered through written format in the form of a generic program acceptance letter. The letter congratulated the applicant on his or her acceptance into the nursing program followed by a statement indicating their required participation in the EIEP. Each participant met individually with the Clinical and Academic Development Director at the start of the academic year for a briefing on the year-long program. Although all participants

welcomed the opportunity to join the ranks of the student body, the majority of participants expressed an initial feeling of apprehension and uncertainty related to their required year-long EIEP involvement. Participants were unsure as to why they were selected to participate and what they were participating in. Participants not only questioned their academic abilities, but the program's assessment of their academic readiness. Textural words and phrases which described participants' initial reactions to the EIEP are as follows: why me, what did I do wrong, isolation, frustration, and self-doubt.

Participant 1SP described initial reactions to the phenomenon as confusing, frustrating, and self-doubting.

Honestly, at first since I was put into this program, I didn't really understand why. I did really well at [my previous school] and then I came here and they [Clinical and Academic Development Director and Professional Development Coordinator] are talking to me about how to study, how to do all of this stuff, and I was just like, wow, did I do something wrong?

Participant 1SP went on to say,

I felt like I knew how to study and I knew how to do this stuff and then they [Clinical and Academic Development Director and Professional Development Coordinator] are asking if I know how to study or know how to do this or that. I felt like they were kind of, not looking down at me, but just like you need to look at your study habits a little more, even though I did do good at [my previous school]. I was like, do I need something else or what?

Participant 1SP also expressed an initial sense of aloneness as a result of not knowing that other students were required to participate in the EIEP. 1SP went on to state, "As the

semesters went on, I found out that there were a couple more people in it [EIEP] and that helped once I found out there were other people.” Participant 2SP expressed a similar response to the EIEP,

At first I was a little weirded out about it. I was just coming from [my previous institution] and I was just kind of like, what, I have already been in college. So, I was like, I don’t understand, but then my grades weren’t so well so I understood why I had to do it, but then I don’t know, it’s kind of annoying.

Participant 3SP’s initial response to the EIEP was described as “feeling a bit on edge at first, not being completely sure what it [EIEP] is” and “not knowing what I was getting into was a little intimidating at first.” Participant 3SP went on to state,

To begin with, I wondered if maybe I was like on an academic probation or something. I remember talking to [the Clinical and Academic Development Director] about that and I was like, am I am trouble for something or what, but she was very reassuring that it was just kind of something that was more for my success rather than something that was, I don’t know, like a punishment.

An initial response to an experience has the potential to either cast a negative shadow or positively illuminate an individual’s overall perception of a phenomenon. Despite participants’ initial EIEP reactions of apprehension and uncertainty their, feelings evolved into acceptance and appreciation toward the program. Once participants understood the intent of the EIEP and began to experience relational and academic connections within the EIEP, their perceptions positively transformed.

Participants expressed a sense of value and appreciation toward the program and recommended involvement of future incoming students. When questioned if 1SP’s perception of

the EIEP changed throughout the experience, 1SP stated “yes.” Participant 1SP’s statements revealed that once a deeper understanding of the EIEP was gained, 1SP developed an appreciation for the program and a greater desire to try “even harder” academically. Participant 1SP also indicated feelings of isolation subsided once 1SP was aware of other student EIEP participants. Participant 2SP expressed a similar transformation of feelings, saying, “After I was done with it [EIEP], I was like, wow, I am actually glad I did this, it made me feel better.” In concert with Participant 1SP and 2SP’s transformation in perspective, Participant 3SP stated that the EIEP was “definitely good for me in my situation” and recommended the program to other entering nursing students.

A lack of clarity and understanding regarding the selection and intention of the EIEP ignited feelings of apprehension and uncertainty. However, once participants became aware of the program’s purpose and developed relational and academic connections within the EIEP, a sense of acceptance and appreciation prevailed. Participants perceived the EIEP as an enriching experience which contributed to an increase in their self-confidence and self-motivation to excel academically.

Table 4.3

*Participants Initial Perceptions of the EIEP*

| Participant | Feelings of Apprehension and Uncertainty   | Feelings of Acceptance and Appreciation   |
|-------------|--|---|
| 1SP         | Honestly at first since I was put into this program I didn't really understand why. I did really well at [my previous school] and then I came here and they [Clinical and Academic Development Director and Professional Development Coordinator] are talking to me about how to study, how to do all of this stuff, and I was just like, wow, did I do something wrong? | When I had a better understanding of the program then I felt better about being in the program and I think I even pushed myself a little harder to do better. |
| 2SP         | At first I was a little weirded out about it. I was just coming from [my previous institution] and I was just kind of like what, I have already been in college. So, I was like, I don't understand...   | After I was done with it [EIEP], I was like, wow, I am actually glad I did this, it made me feel better.  |
| 3SP         | To begin with I wondered if maybe I was like on an academic probation or something. I remember talking to [the Clinical and Academic Development Director] about that and I was like, am I am trouble for something or what...   | It [EIEP] definitely was good for me in my situation.   |

**Relational connection to academic staff.** Scholars such as, but not limited to, Tinto, Braxton and colleagues, and Jeffreys were instrumental in the research of retention with a focus

on integration principles and practices. The type, significance, and meaning related to integration principles and practices within an academic culture vary according to the student body served. To gain an understanding of what first-year, undergraduate, commuter, nursing students' value about their EIEP involvement, the following research question was crafted:

***Sub-question 1.*** How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program describe the value of an EIEP?

When participants were queried about their EIEP experiences, the unanimous expressed response was the value they placed on the relational connections gained from the EIEP experience. The relational connections most highly valued by the participants were those which flourished between themselves and the academic staff (Clinical and Academic Development Director, Professional Development Coordinator, and nursing faculty advisor) rather than EIEP peer connections. Participants described relationships with the academic staff as welcoming, supportive, and trusting. Participants felt as though they were viewed by the academic staff and the nursing program as individuals rather than numbers. Participants also expressed a sense of belonging within the academic culture and felt comfortable approaching, dialoguing with, and seeking assistance from the academic staff. Participants described occasional interactions with the academic staff as informal and even social.

Participant 4SP identified the relational connection with the Academic Development Director as the most valuable component of the EIEP. Participant 3SP expressed a similar perspective regarding the value of relational connections, saying, "It is very important to know that there are people here who I can talk to about school situations or anything like that." When asked if 5SP would recommend the EIEP to incoming students, 5SP stated, "Yes, it's a challenge

changing from high school to college and it's really bad to do it all by yourself. Here you have other people helping you and not just letting you fall." Expressive sub-themes which emerged as direct responses to relational connections fostered through the EIEP were support, availability, belonging, and trust. These sub-themes, which signify the value placed on relational connections with the academic staff, are covered in the sections to follow.

*Support.* The concept of support was a common theme throughout the descriptions shared by participants and it emerged as a result of the relational connections gained from the EIEP. The support offered by the academic staff was highly valued and appreciated by all participants. Examples of phrases and words that were used to represent supportive attributes which characterized the academic staff are as follows: helpful, knowledgeable, someone you can turn to, and someone who will go to bat for you. Participant 2SP referred to encounters experienced with the Clinical and Academic Development Director as non-threatening, open, and helpful. Participant 2SP stated,

It was nice to know that if I was struggling, I could go to her [Clinical and Academic Development Director] and she [Clinical and Academic Development Director] actually gave me a lot of different study habits. She [Clinical and Academic Development Director] always said that if I had questions to just come, so she [Clinical and Academic Development Director] was always very supportive, very open, and I didn't feel scared to go in and talk to her [Clinical and Academic Development Director].

Participant 2SP further stated, "When I came here, I was a little nervous because at [the previous institution], I was overwhelmed and I wasn't doing very well in school and when I got here it was nice to have that support." Furthermore, the support received positively impacted Participant 2SP's academic confidence which is demonstrated through the following excerpt:



“She [Clinical and Academic Development Director] kind of gave me confidence and she [Clinical and Academic Development Director] was always someone that I could go to.” Finally, the support received from the academic staff positively impacted Participant 2SP’s academic accountability and desire for success. 2SP said, “It [the relationship between Participant 2SP and the Clinical and Academic Development Director] almost made me more accountable, like if I have to go talk to her, I have to make sure that my grades are good.”

Participant 3SP referenced the establishment of relational connections within the EIEP as the most important and rewarding part of the program. Participant 3SP also expressed relational connections with the academic staff as supportive and disclosed the following encounter when comparing a previous first-year experience to the current first-year experience.

They [previous academic institution] didn’t really have an advisor or anyone for me to work with. They just put me in the pre-exploratory program and so every time I had questions, I would go and ask someone and it was a new person each time and, I don’t know, I kind of feel like they really didn’t guide me as well, and then I came to here and, I don’t know, there was a program [EIEP] set in place where I felt like maybe someone was a little bit more invested in my success so it was kind of nice to get that.

Participant 3SP further emphasized the value placed on the connection which existed between 3SP and 3SP’s nursing faculty advisor, saying, “I think the most important thing for me was getting set up with my nursing faculty advisor early on instead of someone that is just passed on to me later down the line, I really appreciated that.” Participant 3SP also stated, “She [nursing faculty advisor] went to bat from me” and “our [participant and nursing faculty advisors] personalities meshed a little bit better than my previous advisors.” Participant 3SP appreciated and valued early EIEP support systems and stated, “From the start it was nice to

have faculty [Clinical and Academic Development Director, Professional Development Coordinator, and faculty advisor] not necessarily watch over you when you start, but help you get going.”

Participant 4SP and Participant 5SP shared similar responses to Participant 3SP regarding the support extended to them by their nursing faculty advisors. Participant 4SP replied, “She [nursing faculty advisor] is someone you can turn to if you have academic questions, and I think that [support] just helps to keep you on the right track.” Participant 5SP appreciated the nursing background of 5SP’s faculty advisor and stated, “It was nice to have her...to have someone who has already gone through it [nursing school] and who knows what it is like and she can give me strategies to help me manage school and other stuff.” Participant 5SP went on to recognize the faculty advisor as “one of the greatest ones I have ever seen.”

Participant 1SP also valued relational connections with the academic staff and appreciated conversations which were social in nature rather than academically driven. Participant 1SP stated,

There was one time that I went and talked to her [Professional Development Coordinator] and it was more about how is your life going, how is this, how is school going, seeing how everything was going, and if I did need help. Most of the time I talked to her [Professional Development Coordinator] about what was going on in my life and relieving stress if I needed to.”

Participant 1SP valued the personal and conversational encounters that occurred with the Professional Development Coordinator.

Participants described a sense of support from the academic staff as being helpful, knowledgeable, individualized, someone you can turn to, and someone who will go to bat for

you. The support displayed by the academic staff regarding participants' academic and personal endeavors was greatly valued by participants and expressed as a significant component of the EIEP.

Table 4.4

*Relational Connections to Academic Staff - Perceptions of EIEP Value as Expressed through Support*

| Participant     | Support   |
|-----------------|---|
| Participant 1SP | She [Academic and Clinical Development Director] always said that if I had questions to just come, so she was always very supportive, very open, and I didn't feel scared to go in and talk to her. |
| Participant 2SP | When I came here I was a little nervous because at [the previous institution], I was overwhelmed and I wasn't doing very well in school and when I got here it was nice to have that support.       |
| Participant 3SP | ...I came to here and I don't know, there was a program [EIEP] set in place where I felt like maybe someone was a little bit more invested in my success so it was kind of nice to get that.        |
| Participant 4SP | She [nursing faculty advisor] is someone you can turn to if you have academic questions, and I think that [support] just helps to keep you on the right track.                                      |
| Participant 5SP | It was nice to have her...to have someone who has already gone through it [nursing school], and who knows what it is like, and she can give me strategies to help me manage school and other stuff. |

*Availability.* The availability of the academic staff members was an additional concept that permeated the theme of relational connections. Participants consistently commented on the availability that was extended to them by the Clinical and Academic Development Director, the Professional Development Coordinator, and their respective nursing faculty advisors. Participants' perception of having an individual available to assist and guide them in their academic journey was valued and greatly appreciated.

Participant 2SP stated that the Clinical and Academic Development Director was accessible and "she always said that if I had questions to just come in." Participant 3SP disclosed a similar "open door policy" that was offered by the Clinical and Academic Development Director and commented on the flexibility the nursing faculty advisor demonstrated toward his personal scheduling needs. Participant 4SP described the availability of the Clinical and Academic Development Director in a similar manner, saying, "She did say that if you ever needed anything, just to come in here and you can talk to me or I can point you in the right direction...." A final statement representing the overall availability of the academic staff was expressed by Participant 5SP as, "I always had help if I needed it."

The availability of individuals offering support to the participants was gleaned as a meaningful EIEP attribute within the context of relational connections. Participants most often commented on the opportunities that were extended to them rather than the actual extent to which they partook of impromptu sessions with the academic staff. The availability of the academic staff further enhanced the value participants placed on relational connections obtained through the EIEP.

Table 4.5

*Relational Connections with Academic Staff - Perceptions of EIEP Value as Expressed through Availability*

| Participant     | Availability   |
|-----------------|--|
| Participant 2SP | She [Academic and Clinical Development Director] always said that if I had questions to just come in.  |
| Participant 3SP | ...open door policy...   |
| Participant 4SP | She [Academic and Clinical Development Director] did say that if you ever needed anything, just to come in here and you can talk to me or I can point you in the right direction.... |
| Participant 5SP | I always had help if I needed it.  |

***Belonging.*** Interview transcripts were teeming with statements illustrating participant perceptions of belonging and the value they placed on relationships which fostered a sense of “fitting into” to the academic culture. The words which represented participants’ sense of belonging within the college community were welcoming, comfortable, and including.

Participant 1SP’s relationship with the Professional Development Coordinator was described as follows: “She made me feel welcomed at the college.” Participant 1SP further went on to describe their relationship as being casual, conversational, and meaningful. Participant 1SP indicated that if there was a pressing issues or she just needed a friendly face to converse with, 1SP could connect with the Professional Development Coordinator.

Participant 2SP’s voice captured a strong sense of belonging to the academic culture through statements such as, “I felt like I was somewhere where I belonged,” and, “I don’t know

how to explain it, it just felt different from when I was at the previous college I attended where I got lost in the shuffle.” Participant 2SP also commented that the connections, support, and sense of belonging gained through the EIEP increased her level of confidence and ability to be successful. 2SP stated,

I felt more comfortable to go up to the teacher and ask questions if I am confused about something. I feel that things would probably have been different if I felt lost. I think that I would have lost confidence and probably not have been successful. You are not alone and if you are struggling there are always people there for you.

When Participant 2SP was questioned about her intent to remain enrolled in the nursing program, 2SP stated, “I will definitely stay here, I feel that I belong here.”

Participant 4SP referred to a sense of belonging through welcoming and inclusive words. 4SP also valued personal encounters experienced with his nursing faculty advisor when she would address him by name and inquire about personal endeavors when they passed each other in the school hallways. Participant 4SP described his sense of belonging to the program and college as,

They [academic staff] are super easy to talk to, really nice, and like I said before, it is not just, hey, how is it going, it’s hey, and then your name, and then something that they remember about you, like how is your dog or whatever. They remember that stuff about you and that makes you feel more included and you are not just paying to go to school somewhere where they don’t care about you really.

Participant 3SP and 5SP shared similar responses to the connections they built with their nursing faculty advisors. Participant 5SP stated, “I feel like she knows me” and described a typical advising session as follows:

We can sit there and talk about different things, every time we fill out my schedule for the next semester it takes like 3-4 minutes and she can tell me everything about my classes. Then we just sit there and talk about school and everything else and I always enjoy going in there.

Participant 3SP indicated that his current nursing faculty advisor's personality "meshed a little bit better" with his than his previous non-nursing faculty advisor.

Overall, participants referenced a sense of belonging as feeling included, being known, being comfortable, and being welcomed. Belonging was consistently described through EIEP encounters involving relational connections with the Clinical and Academic Development Director, the Professional Development Coordinator, and the nursing faculty advisor. In alignment with the concepts of support and availability, belonging was viewed as a thread woven throughout the tapestry of relational connections. Belonging was an additional attribute which contributed to the value participants placed on relational connections fostered within the EIEP.

Table 4.6

*Relational Connections with Academic Staff - Perceptions of EIEP Value as Expressed through Belonging*

| Participant     | Belonging  |
|-----------------|--|
| Participant 1SP | She [Academic and Clinical Development Director] made me feel welcomed at the college.   |
| Participant 2SP | I felt like I was somewhere where I belonged. I don't know how to explain it, it just felt different from when I was at the previous college I attended where I got lost in the shuffle. |
| Participant 3SP | ...her [nursing faculty advisor] and my personalities meshed a bit better.   |
| Participant 4SP | They [academic staff] remember that stuff about you and that makes you feel more included and you are not just paying to go to school somewhere where they don't care about you really.  |
| Participant 5SP | I feel like she [nursing advisor] knows me   |

**Trust.** Trust was the final concept linked to relational connections which emerged from participants' EIEP experiences. The value of trust was reflected within participant descriptions and further acknowledged through the characteristic card sorting activities. The foundation of trust builds upon the concepts of support, availability, and belonging. The following excerpt is a conversation that occurred between Participant 2SP and the Professional Development Coordinator and exemplifies the trusting relationships which were fostered through the EIEIP.



I had some roommate issues, like, a couple of years ago and it was nice to be able to talk to someone about it, because I don't really talk to people that often. But, um she just kind of helped more on a personal nature that I was doing okay and, like, I had past depression and, like, she made sure I was doing okay with my mental health.

Participant 2SP further described the trust and safety she felt toward the Clinical and Academic Development Director and her nursing faculty advisor, saying, "I didn't feel scared to go in and talk to her [Clinical and Academic Development Director]" and "I feel like I am able to trust her [nursing faculty advisor], knowing that she has put me in the right direction for my classes." In addition to Participant 2SP's acknowledgment of trust, Participant 4SP articulated the value placed on the trusting relationships that were established with the Clinical and Academic Development Director, Professional Development Coordinator, and nursing faculty advisor through the following excerpt:

I just think that trust is important in anything that you do, so having the faculty trust you and you trusting them is important to me. Trust is shown through, if you needed anything you could go to them [Clinical and Academic Development Director, Professional Development Coordinator, and nursing faculty advisor] or not to be afraid to ask some questions, and then, like, again, just being super easy to talk to and stuff, that makes them feel really trusting...they would follow through if we had something.

Participant 4SP correlated trust with the assistance he received from the Clinical and Academic Development Director, saying, "I definitely trusted her and she [Clinical and Academic Development Coordinator] helped me with finding the right resources." When asked about 5SP's connections with the Clinical and Academic Development Director and the Professional Development Coordinator, Participant 5SP provided a similar response regarding

trust, saying, “Yeah, I would say that I could trust them a lot, they always help me.” A final comment made by Participant 4SP, which embraced the concept of trust, was described through the following faculty advisor session:

She [nursing faculty advisor] definitely remembers me. I signed up for classes the other day and she was talking to me about stuff that we had talked about like last semester when I signed up for classes, so she definitely, like, remembers me and things about me that, I don’t know, it makes me trust her and hopefully her trust me.

The above descriptions acknowledge the trust experienced by participants and extends from relational connections which foster support, availability, and belonging. A portrayal of participant perception of trust is expressed through words and phrases such as helps, remembers, unafraid, approachable, and sets me in the right direction. Trust is the final attribute which contributed to the overall value placed on relational connections made through the EIEP.

Table 4.7

*Relational Connections with Academic Staff - Perceptions of EIEP Value as Expressed through Trust*

| Participant     | Trust   |
|-----------------|---|
| Participant 2SP | I feel like I am able to trust her [nursing faculty advisor], knowing that she has put me in the right direction for my classes   |
| Participant 4SP | ...trusting them [academic staff] is important to me...<br>Trust is shown through, if you needed anything you could go to them [Clinical and Academic Development Director, Professional Development Coordinator, and nursing faculty advisor] or not to be afraid to ask some questions, and then, like, again, just being super easy to talk to and stuff, that makes them feel really trusting...they would follow through if we had something |
| Participant 5SP | I would say that I could trust them [Clinical and Academic Development Director and the Professional Development Coordinator] a lot, they always help me  |

**Lacked value.** Relational connections, which were intentionally crafted and implemented to enhance the cultural integration of incoming students, were regarded as valuable components of the EIEP. Within this discovery, it is important to note two outliers which existed within the context of relational connections offered by the EIEP. The two relational connections which lacked participant value were peer mentors and student organizations.

**Peer mentors.** Each participant was paired with a peer mentor within the first five weeks of the academic term. The peer mentors' charge was to be participants' relational connecting

points and navigational resources to the academic and social culture of the program. Although the principle intent of the arrangement was theoretically beneficial, the execution lacked engagement and meaning to the participants. Similar statements such as: we rarely met, there was no follow-up, and lacked a connection described the interactions which occurred between peer mentors and the participants. When asked to complete the characteristic card sorting activity, none of the five participants referenced their peer mentor as an important connection within the EIEP. Participant 1SP stated, “I was actually looking forward to having a peer mentor,” but when they both attended a scheduled outing, “she didn’t even recognize me.” Participant 1SP also expressed frustration with the lack of accountability that was demonstrated by the mentor, saying,

For me as a student, I didn’t want to reach out to her, I felt that was her job of being a mentor. I feel like, if you want to be a mentor, you should be the one to go and text and be like, hey, do you want to meet up for coffee and just to see how school is going, or do you want to go and study somewhere together?

Participant 4SP had a similar experience and stated,

To be honest, I don’t even know who my peer mentor is. I think once I got a text and I haven’t heard from him again. I think he graduated, so I don’t know if we get a new one.

Participant 2SP stated, “I didn’t really have an experience.” 2SP indicated a desire for a connection with the peer mentor as a way to learn about the college experience from the perspective of a student.

Relational connections valuable to participants were expressed through the attributes of support, availability, belonging, and trust. The connections or relationships which existed between participants and their assigned student mentors did not embody one mentioned attribute

reflective of the relational connections that were demonstrated by the academic staff and valued by participants. To further highlight the lack of value participants placed on their connections with their peer mentors, all participants eliminated it from their selection of top five important characteristics of the EIEP in the characteristic card sorting activity.

***Student organizations.*** Professional integration is a concept within *Jeffreys's NURS Model* (2004). The intent of professional integration was to “enhance students’ interactions within the context of professional socialization and career development” (p. 104). In response to *Jeffreys's NURS Model* (2004), EIEP participants were directed to explore student organizations offered by the institution during their first semester, followed by an active membership in at least one organization during their second academic semester. One student organization offered by the institution was specific to student nurses, and although the majority of participants explored this organization, all reported they were not actively engaged in it or any other organization. Participants acknowledged academia and work as priority obligations which challenged their schedules, abilities, and desire to invest and engage in student organizations. Participant 1SP’s experience with the student nurse organization was expressed through the following excerpt:

Last year I started going to some meetings, but then I think school work and work just kind of got in the way and I stopped going. I tried to be involved and everything, but then it just seems like school and work came into play and I am trying to study when the meetings were held.

Although Participant 1SP liked the organization, 1SP stated, “I just got too busy and that is pretty much it.” 1SP went on to say, “I want to try to get involved at the right time.” Similar challenges prevented Participant 2SP from actively engaging in an organization and 2SP stated, “I am really busy, I have three jobs, and between studying and working, I don’t have time.”

Participant 3SP did not address obstacles impeding organizational engagement, but rather addressed a lack of interest in those that were offered.

There's not really as many student organizations that I wanted to get involved with necessarily. Consider myself to be artistic, a creative person, and there is not really anything like that here.

Although Participant 3SP was extended an invitation by a friend to attend a gathering, 3SP graciously declined due to a lack of interest. The nursing-specific organization did not fit into Participant 4SP's schedule, therefore, 4SP did not attend the meetings but continued to receive emails. Finally, although Participant 5SP was member of the nursing-specific student organization, 5SP's priority was to improve academically. Participant 5SP went on to state that when this goal was achieved, 5SP would become more actively involved in the organization.

When Participant 4SP was asked if the opportunities presented by the nursing-specific organization were valuable and led to a greater professional connection to nursing, 4SP stated,

No, not really, I just did it so I could see like what there is in the nursing field, see what the different options are, and meet new people. I think you guys (academic institution) have the types of student organizations I needed, some of them could be improved, but that is everywhere. I think they (student organizations) are all positive, or at least most of them.

When participants were asked to share their student organization experiences, responses reflected a lack of value, importance, and interest in comparison to work, life, and school commitments.

Table 4.8

*Participant Perceptions of EIEP Lacking Value*

| Participant     | Peer Mentor  | Student Organization  |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Participant 1SP | For me as a student, I didn't want to reach out to her (peer mentor), I felt that was her job of being a mentor. I feel like, if you want to be a mentor, you should be the one to go and text and be like hey do you want to meet up for coffee and just to see how school is going, or do you want to go and study somewhere together. | I tried to be involved and everything, but then it just seems like school and work came into play and I am trying to study when the meetings were held.   |
| Participant 2SP | I didn't really have an experience (with my peer mentor).  | I am really busy, I have 3 jobs, and between studying and working I don't have time   |
| Participant 3SP |  | There's not really as many student organizations that I wanted to get involved with necessarily. Consider myself to be artistic, a creative person and there is not really anything like that here. |
| Participant 4SP | To be honest, I don't even know who my peer mentor is. I think once I got a text and I haven't heard from him again. I think he graduated, so I don't know if we get a new one.  |   |
| Participant 5SP |  | No, not really (not a valuable experience), I just did it so I could see, like, what there is in the nursing field...   |

**Intellectual connections to academic resources.** In addition to the value EIEP participants placed on relational connections with the academic staff, they also placed value on intellectual connections with academic resources. The following section further addresses sub-question 1.

*Sub-question 1.* How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program describe the value of an EIEP?

Participants continually acknowledged the relevance and importance of the academic resources and encounters provided to them by the Clinical and Academic Development Director. These resources included the MI<sup>3</sup> Talent Key®, various individual learning sessions, and strategies presented to the participants by the Clinical and Academic Development Director. The following section illustrates the value participants placed on the academic resources presented to them through their involvement with the EIEP and connection to the Clinical and Academic Development Director.

Participant 1SP remarked on the value and early benefits experienced by engaging in the MI<sup>3</sup> Talent Key®.

I don't remember what the test name was called (MI<sup>3</sup> Talent Key®), but I figured out how I study or how I like to study. I did that before the rest of the class so that was nice because I figured out how I study better before the rest of the class did. It showed me that I need to get up and move more and I need to take more notes when I study and I think that did help.

Participant 1SP also recommend the EIEP to incoming students simply because “you definitely get a feel for more (learning) resources.” Participant 2SP also referenced the



importance of the learning strategies gained, through sessions facilitated by the Clinical and Academic Development Director, which complimented 1SP's style of learning,

... I could go to her (Clinical and Academic Development Director) and she actually gave me a lot of different study habits. She was very supportive in how I was studying. I think that was the main thing that we concentrated on and she definitely taught me new ways.

Participant 2SP further emphasized the importance and knowledge gained from the MI<sup>3</sup> Talent Key®, saying, "It helped determine what kind of learner I am and that was very important and it helped me realize what I need to do." Participant 3SP had a similar response to his enlightening experience with the MI<sup>3</sup> Talent Key®.

I really enjoyed meeting with her [Clinical and Academic Development Director] and going over my learning styles. It was positive for me because I didn't know there were different intelligences styles. I'm a musical style learner and I never thought to use that as way to learn before.

Meaningful learning strategies were ranked among 3SP's top five selections for important EIEP components. Similarly, participant 4SP also highly ranked and valued the academic resources and connections offered through the EIEP. Participant 4SP also commented on the genuine concern and individualized attention 4SP received from the Clinical and Academic Development Director, saying,

I was slipping in anatomy a little bit so she pulled me aside and asked if there was anything she could do that would help me study and told me to, like, calm down and it will be fine and I still have time to pass, and it helped calm me down and made me aware of my study strategies and stuff.

Likewise, Participant 5SP also ranked meaningful learning strategies within the top five EIEP components of importance and stated, “The biggest thing was it [EIEP] helped me figure out how I studied and then as soon as I figured that out, everything else just started excelling.” 5SP then credited the MI<sup>3</sup> Talent Key® for helping him understand how he best studied and stated,

...it showed me what my key aspects were that helped me study. It showed me what type of learner I am, for example, whether I am a kinesthetic or a musical learner.

I am not a fan of music and like sitting in silence, so the test helped reinforce what I thought.

An awareness of learning strategies and the personal insight from participant and Clinical and Academic Development Director encounters were consistently expressed as valuable EIEP components. Participants also highly ranked the learning strategies gleaned from individual sessions with the Clinical and Academic Development Director during the characteristic card sorting activity.

Table 4.9

*Intellectual Connections to Academic Resources - Perceptions of EIEP Value*

| Participant     | Intellectual Connections  |
|-----------------|---|
| Participant 1SP | I don't remember what the test name was called [MI <sup>3</sup> Talent Key®] but I figured out how I study or how I like to study. I did that before the rest of the class so that was nice because I figured out how I study better before the rest of the class did. It showed me that I need to get up and move more and I need to take more notes when I study and I think that did help. |
| Participant 2SP | ... I could go to her [Clinical and Academic Development Director] and she actually gave me a lot of different study habits. She was very supportive in how I was studying. I think that was the main thing that we concentrated on and she definitely taught me new ways.  |
| Participant 3SP | I really enjoyed meeting with her [Clinical and Academic Development Director] and going over my learning styles. It was positive for me because I didn't know there were different intelligences styles. I'm a musical style learner and I never thought to use that as way to learn before.   |
| Participant 4SP | I was slipping in anatomy a little bit so she pulled me aside and asked if there was anything she could do that would help me study and told me to like calm down and it will be fine and I still have time to pass, and it helped calm me down and be aware of my study strategies and stuff.  |
| Participant 5SP | The biggest thing was it [EIEP] helped me figure out how I studied and then as soon as I figured that out, everything else just started excelling.  |

**Lacked value.** Unlike the value placed on intellectual connections to academic resources and a personal awareness of meaningful learning styles and strategies, reflective journaling was unanimously discredited in value and omitted from the top five rankings within the characteristic card sorting activity. Participants expressed a lack of value regarding the reflective journal through the words and phrases shared with the researcher. Participant 1SP stated, “Journaling wasn’t beneficial for me. I am not a journal keeper and I didn’t keep one in high school. For me going and talking to someone is better.” Participant 2SP’s response was contextually identical, saying, “I personally didn’t like the journal, it wasn’t beneficial or important to me.” Participant 3SP’s comment portrayed the journaling activity as a strategy that did not complement 3SP’s artistic nature, saying,

I did the first couple of them (journal entries), but then I really didn’t utilize it much past that. I think that for some people it might be a good tool to utilize, for me, though, it wasn’t really. I don’t know, it just kind of felt like more work on top of the school work that I had, so I tried to focus on that first. I don’t know, I am kind of more get up and be artistic type of person as opposed to sitting and writing.

Participant 4SP’s journal experience lacked direction and purposeful intention. 4SP expressed indifference toward the strategy through the following statement:

I don’t know if it was a huge benefit, but it also didn’t really require that much time and effort, so it wasn’t, to me it wasn’t good or bad either way, it was just kind of, I will do it. I wasn’t sure what I was really doing with it.

Participant 5SP had a similar lack of regard concerning the value of journaling and as the academic weeks went by, classes took priority and 5SP’s journaling subsided.

Connections to academic resources that were valued by EIEP participants were based upon academic enhancements and meaningful encounters with the Clinical and Academic Development Director. These encounters brought forth an awareness of learning styles and strategies which complemented participants' pursuit of learning. Reflective journaling was neither valued nor beneficial to the participants at hand.

*Sub-question 2.* How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program perceive nursing program commitment to their first year college experience?

**Program commitment to me.** The attribute of program commitment, which echoed throughout the excerpts of all participants and manifested in the majority of top rankings in the characteristic card sorting activities, was the concept of individualized attention. Individualized attention, which was presented through interactions occurring between participants and the academic staff, was perceived as program commitment. Participant 3SP expressed program commitment through a statement which compared 3SP's current academic enrollment with a previous collegial experience, saying, "When I came to here [from previous academic institution] and there was a program set in place [EIEP] where I felt like maybe someone was a little bit more invested in my success." Similar to Participant 3SP's statement, Participant 2SP commented on being valued and known as an individual within the program, stating, "Coming from [previous academic institution], you are just a number. I think coming here, people know your face and people know your name." Participant 2SP further elaborated on the college's demonstration of commitment and concern for student welfare, saying, "I am very important to the college, and because it is smaller, it really thinks about every single person and wants them to succeed. So I know they want me to be successful." The EIEP not only helped Participant 1SP

transition into the academic culture, but was also viewed as a demonstration of the college's commitment to 1SP's individual success. Participant 1SP expressed feeling a sense of institutional commitment through the private interpersonal sessions 1SP engaged in throughout the first academic year, saying, "You sit one-on-one and actually meet with people that want you to do well and want you to succeed." Participant 4SP's perception of program commitment referred to the intentional connections and relationships which were fostered through the EIEP.

I remember at the beginning of all the classes, they [Clinical and Academic Development Director and Professional Development Coordinator] would talk about their resources and what they do. Now, even if I am at an outside activity and I see one of them, they will tell me to come in and talk to them. She [Clinical and Academic Development Director] will come out of the hall and say, hey, how are you doing?

Final statements which represent perceived program commitment extended to EIEP participants were expressed by Participant 4SP through the following excerpts: "...it [EIEP] wasn't just a one size fits all thing, they just made it to me..." and "they [the program] don't want anyone to fail, so they are going to set you up for success and then it's up to you."

Table 4.10

*Program Commitment to the Student – Program Commitment to Me*

| Participant     | Individualized Attention  |
|-----------------|---|
| Participant 1SP | You sit one-on-one and actually meet with people that want you to do well and want you to succeed.  |
| Participant 2SP | Coming from [previous academic institution] you are just a number. I think coming here, people know your face and people know your name.  |
| Participant 3SP | When I came to here [from previous academic institution] and there was a program set in place [EIEP] where I felt like maybe someone was a little bit more invested in my success.  |
| Participant 4SP | <p>I remember at the beginning of all the classes, they [Clinical and Academic Development Director and Professional Development Coordinator] would talk about their resources and what they do. Now, even if I am at an outside activity and I see one of them, they will tell me to come in and talk to them. She [Clinical and Academic Development Director] will come out of the hall and say, hey, how are you doing?</p> <p>...it [EIEP] wasn't just a one size fits all thing, they just made it to me...</p> |

### Summary

A qualitative, phenomenological, hermeneutical, approach allowed the researcher an opportunity to explore an inaugural EIEP experience as portrayed through the collective accounts and authentic descriptions of five, first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students. This

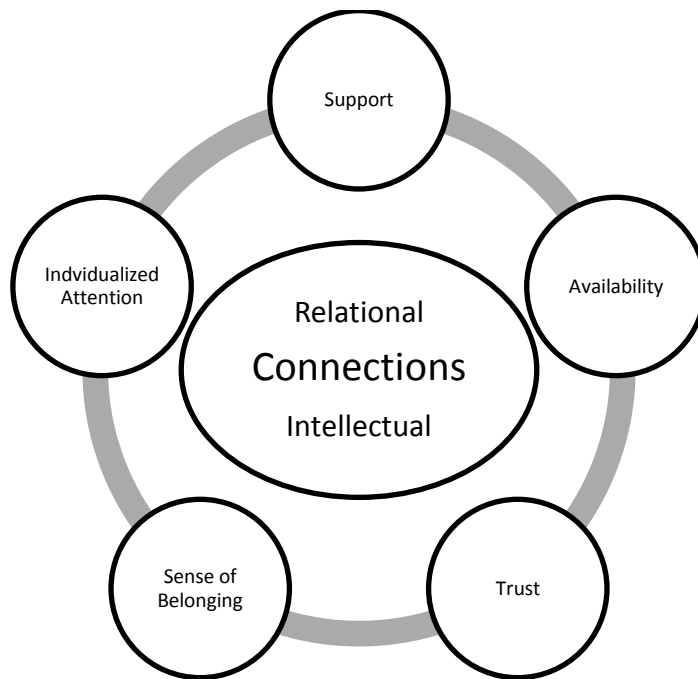
method of exploration provided a pathway for the researcher to identify, describe, and interpret participants' expressions. As a result of line-by-line analysis, open-coding, and analytical coding, four primary themes and four sub-themes were discovered by the researcher. To ensure findings were trustworthy and rigorous, the researcher requested that each participant review their transcribed interviews, approve significant statements gleaned from the transcribed interviews, and validate preliminary themes which emerged. In addition to member checking, the researcher sought counsel from an outside expert who expressed similar support for the preliminary findings.

Four themes and four sub-themes were identified, outlined, and supported by participant excerpts throughout Chapter four. All themes aligned with the central research question and respective sub-questions. Participant excerpts and insight offered by the researcher illustrated an overall positive and enriching EIEP experience. Although participants' initial perceptions of the EIEP were teeming with apprehension and anxiety, they culminated in accolades of acceptance, appreciation, and advocacy for future first-year student participation. Participants valued the relationships which existed between themselves and the academic staff. They described the relational connections as supportive, trusting, available, and promoting of a sense of belonging within the academic culture. Participants also valued the intellectual insight and academic resources gained through one-on-one sessions with the Clinical and Academic Development Director. The relational connections experienced by the participants transpired within the office spaces of the academic staff and hallways of the institution. The intellectual connections primarily occurred within the office spaces of the Clinical and Academic Development Director. Participants further perceived individualized relational connections and individualized academic connections as an expression of the program's commitment to their academic achievement.



Figure 4.1 illustrates the EIEP attributes that were valued by the participants and contributed to their overall appreciation of and satisfaction with the first-year integration and retention program.

Unlike the value placed on the above-mentioned relational and academic connections, participants lacked appreciation and an academic gain from experiences involving peer mentors, student organizations, and reflective journaling. To follow, Chapter five will commence with an interpretative discussion of findings and identified correlations to the theoretical framework and review of literature. Study limitation, implications for education, and recommendations for future studies will conclude Chapter five.



*Figure 4.1. The EIEP Experience as Perceived by Commuter, Undergraduate, First-Year Nursing Students*

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY**

There remains a paucity of research illuminating the commuter, undergraduate, nursing students' perceptions of first-year integration experiences. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological, hermeneutical study was to uncover the perceptions of first-year, commuter, nursing students EIEP experience at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program. This platform provides an opportunity for academic leaders to recognize what students regard as valuable and meaningful during their first academic year of study. Leaders will then be equipped to implement changes to better meet the unique needs of the student body served, thus promoting first-to-second year retention within the commuter, undergraduate, nursing community. Chapter five will present interpretive themes and descriptions which emerged from the collective voices of participants, a correlation of findings to the study's theoretical framework, and review of literature, limitation, implications for nursing education, and suggestions for future research.

### **Research Questions and Interpretation**

The following sections present a holistic interpretation of findings related to participant perceptions of the EIEP experience (central question). The researcher will address the central question by disclosing and interpreting findings associated with the two sub-questions. Furthermore, this section will include an association of findings related to the study's theoretical framework and review of literature.

### **Feelings of Apprehension and Uncertainty to Acceptance and Appreciation**

The narrative shared by the participants began with an assortment of emotions ranging from excitement of program acceptance to apprehension and uncertainty at their required EIEP involvement. Although participants were enthusiastic about starting the academic journey of

becoming a nurse, they were overwhelmed with unanswered questions and uncertainty pertaining to the EIEP. Participants stated they were unaware of the EIEP student selection criteria, required activities, and program goals. Participants also began to question their own collegial preparedness and ability to successfully navigate the nursing program. Participants indicated they did well at their previous academic institutions and did not understand why they were required to participate in this institution's EIEP. A lack of understanding of the process of selection also led to participants questioning the institution's assessment of their college entry qualifications. These unanswered questions led to feelings of self-doubt, frustration, isolation, and skepticism toward the academic institution and program of nursing.

The apprehension and uncertainty projected toward self and the institution were findings not anticipated by the researcher. Best practice approaches regarding how and when selected groups of students are informed of their required participation in an integration program were absent from the theoretical framework and review of literature. The theoretical framework and review of literature also lacked mention of students' diminished self-confidence once informed of the EIEP requirement. The final unforeseen finding and omission from the theoretical framework and review of literature was the skepticism participants expressed toward program and institutional assessment of students' academic preparedness upon college entry. The unanticipated concepts of uncertainty and apprehension will be further addressed in the future research section.

The uncertainty and apprehension that was initially expressed by participants quickly transform into feelings of acceptance and appreciation. The researcher interpreted participant perceptions of appreciation and value as satisfaction toward the overall EIEP experience. Satisfaction regarding the EIEP experience was further communicated by the participants

through the characteristic card sorting activity. In this activity, participants expressed both the importance and satisfaction of relational and academic connections which resulted from EIEP involvement. In addition, satisfaction was also represented through participants recommending the EIEP be offered to future entering nursing students. The following section will present empirical studies which correlate student satisfaction with retention.

Student satisfaction is a concept that is present throughout the research constructs of student persistence and academic retention (Braxton, et al., 2014; Schreiner, 2009; Woosley & Miller, 2009). In support of the impact collegial satisfaction has on student persistence, Schreiner (2009) found that the more first-year students were satisfied with their campus climates, the more likely they would be to return for a second year. Campus climate included, but was not limited to, the following predictors, (a) satisfaction with being a student, (b) feeling a sense of belonging, and (c) advisor availability (Schreiner, 2009). Similarly, Braxton, et al., (2014) found when students were satisfied with their academic advising and viewed it as a strong component of the academic institution's offerings, they perceived the institution as being committed to their welfare as a student. Woosley and Miller's (2009) study examined if first-time and first-year undergraduate students' early collegial experiences (first three weeks) impacted academic and persistency outcomes. It was found that first-to-second year retention rates were positively impacted when students were satisfied (academic integration) with early academic experiences (Woosley & Miller, 2009).

In connection to satisfaction and persistence, Jeffreys (2001) found that a group of nontraditional nursing students who participated in an EP with a primary focus on peer mentor/tutor-led study groups not only expressed satisfaction with their EP experience, but also achieved higher pass rates, received lower course failures, and withdrew from courses at lower

rates than those who did not consistently participate in EP study groups (Jeffreys, 2001).

*Jeffreys NURS Model* postulated that when students view an EP as meaningful, persistency behaviors and institutional retention are positively affected.

Participants involved in the study at hand expressed an overall satisfaction with their EIEP experience. Their satisfaction was conveyed through the appreciation and value placed upon relational and academic connections gained from the EIEP. Participant satisfaction was also expressed when they recommended the continuation of the EIEP to incoming nursing students. Academic leaders, faculty, and staff have to be aware of institutional retention *levers* that are satisfactory to the student population served. The following sections will address sub-question 1 and further emphasize the satisfaction and value participants placed on the EIEP as a result of the meaningful relational and academic connection.

**Sub-question 1.** In an attempt to uncover elements of the EIEP that were perceived by participants as valuable components of the EIEP, the researcher posed the following sub-question: How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program describe the value of an EIEP? The unanimous participant response was based on relational and academic connections that developed as a result of the EIEP.

### **Relational Connections with Academic Staff**

Relational connections with the academic staff was expressed by participants as the most important and valued component of the EIEP. Participants described relationships which existed between themselves and the academic staff as supportive, welcoming, and trusting. Participants felt comfortable seeking guidance and asking for help from the academic staff at any given point during their first academic year. As a result of the connections made through the EIEP

experience, participants also expressed a sense of integration and belonging within the nursing program's culture.

Integration into the social and academic culture of an institution of higher education was the fundamental element of the theoretical framework and review of literature which guided the study at hand. The theories and models presented by Tinto and Jeffrey's support early integration as a positive influence on student persistence and institutional retention (Jeffrey's, 2001; 2002; 2004; 2007; 2014; 2015; Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993; 2002). Tinto's research throughout the last four decades has cascaded around academic and social integration philosophies, models, and strategies which support persistence and retention. *Jeffrey's NURS Model* also draws attention to integration, but in the form of professional integration. Professional integration encounters were described by Jeffrey's as, but not limited to, early enrichment programs, faculty advisement, professional organizations, and peer mentors. In concert with *Jeffrey's NURS Model* (2004), Fontaine's (2014) findings revealed a 10% increase in an overall six semester retention rate when a Nevada nursing program offered the NNNRP. The NNNRP consisted of similar retention strategies presented by Jeffrey's professional integration construct. Similarly, Leary and DeRoiser's (2012) correlational study analyzed first-year students' collegial adaptation and found that social connectedness was a predictor of students' ability to adjust to college (Leary & DeRoiser, 2012). The more social connectedness the students expressed, the easier they transitioned into the college environment (Leary & DeRoiser, 2012). Although results were not directly correlated to retention, Leary and DeRoiser (2012) postulated that first-year social connections can positively increase student persistence.

Unlike findings and hypotheses offered by Tinto and Jeffrey's, Bean and Metzner (1985) and Braxton and colleagues (2004; 2014) concluded that nontraditional and commuter students

are less affected by the concept of social integration. Bean and Metzner's *Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Attrition* correlates student persistence to their background, academic achievement, environment, and intent to leave (1985), whereas Braxton and colleagues' (2004, 2014) *Theory of Student Persistence for Commuter Colleges and Universities* identifies student perceptions of institutional commitment to student welfare as one of several factor affecting commuter students' persistence. It is worthy to note that this concept, institutional commitment of student welfare, included relational connections which exist between students and the academic support system (faculty, administration, and staff). Braxton's, et al. (2014) revealed that the more students perceived faculty as valuing their individual growth and development and displayed a genuine interested in them, the more favorably they perceived their college or university's commitment to the welfare of their students (Braxton, et al., 2014). To further support the construct of integration within the commuter collegial community, Ishitani and Reid (2015) found that both academic and social integration positively affected commuter students' decisions to persist during their first academic year.

Regardless of the scholar, theory, model, or strategy associated with integration, the foundational meaning remains the same. Integration is built upon meaningful and relational connections which occur between a student and a constituent within the academic institution. The discovered theme of relational connections with academic staff was viewed by the researcher as a complementary extension of integration principles and practices outlined by Tinto, Jeffreys and Braxton and colleagues. The following section categorizes and describes attributes of relational connections with academic staff in comparison to previous persistency and retention research.

**Support.** As demonstrated by the participants' words, descriptions, and characteristic card rankings, relational connections with the academic staff were perceived as a highly valuable component of the EIEP. Participants viewed the academic staff as individuals who would provide encouragement, stand up for them, and do what was in their best interest. Participants valued these relationships as a result of the support and guidance gained from the interactions which occurred between themselves and the Clinical and Academic Development Director, the Professional Development Coordinator, and their nursing faculty advisors.

The perception of support, as expressed by participants, was correlated to student persistence and institutional retention strategies throughout the study's review of literature (Shelton, 2003; Williams, 2010; Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, & Hunter, 2012). In a 2010 phenomenological study, Williams revealed that baccalaureate nursing students who experienced support from faculty and peers expressed a greater sense of persistency within the early offerings of the curriculum. Although Shelton's (2003) quantitative cross-sectional study did not specifically address first-to-second year retention rates, it did determine that a correlation existed between various support structures and student retention in an associate degree nursing program. Findings revealed that students who persisted from the first clinical nursing course to the final semester had a significantly higher level of support from faculty, counselors, peers, and learning support systems than those students who withdrew voluntarily from the program (Shelton, 2003). Similarly, Morrow and Ackermann (2012) found faculty support as a significant predictor of student intentions to persist for a second year. To further support the significance of support, Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, and Hunter's (2012) integrative literature review suggested that students who not only seek, but also engage in support systems which involve faculty, tutors, peers, and support services provided by the university were less likely to withdraw.



The perception of student support systems within an academic institution has the potential to impact persistence and retention (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014; Morrow and Ackermann, 2012; Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, & Hunter, 2012; Shelton, 2003; Williams, 2010). In regard to the study at hand, participant responses were filled with descriptors that exemplified the EIEP as a supportive first-year experience. Participant support was gleaned from the relational connections that were intentionally pursued by the academic staff as a result of the EIEP. Relational connections were perceived by the participants as supportive and contributed to the overall value and satisfaction placed upon the EIEP experience.

**Availability.** It is important to reflect upon the illustration Braxton, et al. (2014) painted regarding the academic experience that occurs on commuter campuses when discussing the relevance of availability. The scholars described the environment and student dynamic as a “buzzing confusion” of students hurrying to attend classes and hurrying to leave campus in an attempt to fulfill both academic and external obligations (Braxton, et al., 2014). As a result of this dynamic, a second component of relational connections that was expressed as valued and contributed to participants’ overall satisfaction with the EIEP experience was the availability of the academic staff.

Participants conveyed a strong awareness of the availability of the academic staff through comments such as open door policy, flexible scheduling, and always there when needed. Participants 2SP and 4SP commented on how the Clinical and Academic Development Director always carved out time for them and encouraged them to stop by whenever they were in need of help. Participants also commented on the availability and flexibility of their faculty advisors. They were able to arrange appointments that were conducive to their busy commuter scheduling needs. Participants also felt as though they could drop in for impromptu sessions with all of the

academic staff. Participants not only appreciated the availability and reliability offered to them, but they also felt comfortable approaching the academic staff with questions or concerns.

Although the researcher did not uncover multiple studies endorsing or contradicting the concept of availability, one large-scale empirical study was reported. A study conducted by Schreiner (2009) which included 65 four-year institutions of higher education and 28,000 students revealed that first-to-second year retention was best predicted by students' satisfaction in the academic climate, which included advisor availability. To further support the relevance of staff and faculty availability, Gardner (2005) recommended faculty make themselves readily available to URM students to prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness and to promote a sense of inclusion and integration into the academic culture.

Finally, it is important to reflect upon the concept brought forth by Jacoby (2015) regarding commuter students: it is the responsibility of institutions, not the student, to design academic cultures, support systems, and learning experiences that intentionally and intellectually engage commuter students (Jacoby, 2015). Part of this responsibility is to provide students with the support and guidance needed at convenient times when they are on campus. Parallel to the findings and recommendations identified above, the current study at hand revealed the added value participants placed on EIEP relational connections as a result of the academic staff's availability.

**Belonging.** As a result of the valuable relationships that emerged from the EIEP, participants experienced a sense of belonging within the academic institution. Participants felt as though they fit into the culture, they were somewhere they belonged, and they were somewhere someone cared about them personally and academically. The relationships they forged with the academic staff were characterized by a care and concern that was inclusive and individualized.

Participants expressed that the Clinical and Academic Development Director and nursing faculty advisors established welcoming and inviting relationships that encouraged participants to feel as though they were a valuable part of the academic community. Participant 2SP did not get lost in the shuffle, as she experienced at a previous academic institution, as a result of the academic staff's intentional connections, which fostered a culture of belonging. Participant 4SP and 5SP expressed a sense of being known and cared about by their nursing faculty advisors, which made them feel as though they belonged and fit within the institution's academic culture. This sense of belonging was also conveyed as a contributing factor to an increase in self-confidence and self-assurance regarding participants' ability to be academically successful.

Tinto (1987; 1993) theorized that students' integration into the academic and social environment of an institution of higher education predicts persistence and likelihood of continued enrollment (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). Although the construct of integration includes both behavioral and psychological indicators, early scholars such as Tinto directed their attention toward behavior indicators of integration (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). A student's sense of belonging to an academic institution is a psychological indicator of integration that has drawn the interest of several scholars within the last decade. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods' (2009) examined whether a subjective sense of belonging positively correlated with first-year college students persistence. Findings suggested that a sense of belonging had a direct positive effect on institutional commitment and an indirect effect on both the intention to persist and actual persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). Similarly, Schmitt's, et al. (2008) research findings support the importance of students' perceived sense of belonging to an academic institution. Study findings revealed that the more students experienced an institutional sense of belonging, the great their satisfaction would be,

and the greater their satisfaction, the more likely students would persist (Schmitt, et al., 2008). Likewise, Jacobs and Archie (2008) found that first-year students who experienced a greater sense of community at an institution of higher education expressed greater intentions to return for a second academic year. Unlike the findings identified above, Morrow and Ackermann (2012) found that an overall sense of belonging did not correlate with student intentions to persist. It is relevant to note that findings indicated faculty and peer support as a significant predictor of student intentions to persist for a second academic year (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

Although the body of literature above denotes both contradictory findings and a lack of commuter focus, participants involved in the study at hand expressed belonging as a meaningful attribute within the theme of relational connections with academic staff. Relational connections were a retention strategy used within the EIEP to foster a positive perception of integration and inclusion into the academic culture. As experienced by participants, a sense of belong was a meaningful outcome of relational connections that positively impacted perceptions of the EIEP experience.

**Trust.** Trust is the final attribute which framed the theme of relational connections with the academic staff. Although trust was categorized as a sub-theme, it was perceived by the researcher as a complementary construct of the sub-themes of support, availability, and belonging. When asked by the researcher, participants described their trusting encounters with the academic staff as helpful, supportive, individualized, and knowledgeable. Participants were confident in the staff's judgment and guidance regarding personal and academic endeavors. They were unafraid to ask questions or address concerns and considered the academic staff

approachable. As a result of the academic staff's knowledge and availability, participants described the relational connections as dependable and reliable.

Participant 1SP and 2SP were comfortable disclosing personal issues and concerns to the Professional Development Coordinator as a result of the intentional, genuine, and caring relationships that were established. Participants 4SP and 5SP conveyed a similar trusting relationship which developed between themselves and the Clinical and Academic Development Director as a result of the support, care, and welcoming approach that was displayed by the Director. The trust participants expressed toward the academic staff was built upon the supportive and inclusive nature of the relationships which emerged from the EIEP.

Although the researcher identified trust as a separate sub-theme of relational connections with academic staff, the attribute was derived from the support, availability and belonging that was experienced by the participants. The solitary concept of trust is ambiguous within the literary framework presented by the researcher of the study at hand. The attribute of trust clearly aligns with and is intertwined among the three sub-themes described above, and therefore, was not compared to or contrasted with previous scholarly works.

**Lacked value.** Decades of research support the positive influence integration has on student persistence in an academic institutions of higher education (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Jacobs & Archie, 2008; Jeffreys, 2004; 2014; Leary & DeRoiser, 2012; Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, & Hunter, 2012; Schmitt, et al., 2008; Shelton, 2003; Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993; Williams, 2010). Despite these findings, it is important to recall that interactions and connections which foster collegial integration vary in structural format and level of influence when comparing commuter nursing students to residential and/or nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton,

Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, et al., 2014; Ishitani, & Reid, 2015; Jacoby, 2015; Jeffreys, 2004; 2014). As a result of the identified incongruences, the researcher formulated a foundation of knowledge from the *Jeffreys's NURS Model* (2004), which was holistically crafted for all types (traditional, nontraditional, commuter, residential) of nursing students and all forms of undergraduate nursing programs. The *Jeffreys's NURS Model* incorporated the concept of professional integration which was theorized to positively affect nursing student persistence through retention strategies such as, but not limited to, peer mentors and participation in professional organizations (Jeffreys, 2004). Consequently, it was not expected by the researcher to hear study participants describe their relational experiences with peer mentors and student organizations as lacking value and not meeting their expectations.

Participant descriptions portrayed peer mentor interactions as lacking both the relational and connective constructs that are essential to the development of a meaningful relationship. Arranged encounters that were intended to build relational connections lacked purpose, individuality, and follow-through from the peer mentors. Participants expressed a sense of not being known and not being important to the peer mentors. The limited encounters or communicative exchanges that did occur were viewed as awkward and forced.

Participant 1SP and 2SP looked forward to being paired with a peer mentor and having someone to connect with and help navigate the collegial system. Instead of having this expectation fulfilled, Participant 1SP noted a lack of satisfaction and expressed disappointment in the dyad experience. Furthermore, participant 1SP reported not even being recognized by the peer mentor when both attend an organized group outing. 1SP did not believe it was the responsibility of the mentee, but rather the mentor, to be intentional with communication outreach and further the development of the relationship. Similarly to Participant 1SP and 2SP's

mentee/mentor connection, Participant 4SP was not even aware of the assigned mentor within the dyad and thought perhaps the mentor had graduated.

The participants expressed preconceived expectations of the EIEP peer mentor experience and these expectations were not fulfilled; therefore, the participants were not satisfied and did not value the EIEP experience. The peer mentor program was perceived by participants as lacking purpose, guidance, and intentionality. As a result, it is speculated by the researcher that a mentor/mentee experience that is well-defined and purposeful with clear expectations and intentional connections would be perceived differently by EIEP participants.

Similarly to peer mentoring, participant perceptions of student organizations were that they lacked value and did not meet participant expectations. Organizations did not fit the interests held by Participant 3SP, and Participant 5SP indicated the encounters were not meaningful experiences. Participants 1SP, 2SP, 4SP, and 5SP all commented on their busy schedules and indicated meetings/activities either occurred when they were in class or when they had other school, work, or personal obligations that took priority over meeting attendance.

Although relational connections with the academic staff were perceived by participants as a positive and important component of the EIEP, relational connections made with peer mentors and those experienced through student organizations were not perceived as valuable. The dichotomy between these two forms (staff versus peer) of relational connections may have been a result of how the academic constituents approached and fostered their relationships with the participants. The academic staff promoted integration through intentional and purpose driven interactions. Connections were built upon support, availability, belonging, and trust, whereas the relationships which included peer mentors and student organizational structures lacked intention, individuality, follow-through, and interest. These interactions did not support Braxton and

colleagues' (2004, 2014) commuter construct of institutional commitment to student welfare, whereas the academic staff's interactions exemplified them.

### **Intellectual Connections to Academic Resources**

Supplemental instruction and tutoring are two evidence-based strategies used to increase nursing student retention rates (Schrum, 2015). In connection to the above statement, the implementation of additional academic resources offered to participants was not an unexpected valuable component of the EIEP. Participants strongly valued the establishment of connections to academic resources offered by the College and the intellectual insight gained from interactions that occurred with the Academic and Clinical Development Director. Not only did participants find satisfaction and value within the opportunities to engage in individualized study sessions and meaningful learning strategies, but they also favored the opportunity to identify their multiple intelligence through MI<sup>3</sup> Talent Key®. Similar to the satisfaction expressed by EIEP participants, at-risk students from an Associate Applied nursing programs who participated in an SSP ranked their level of SSP satisfaction as a 4.3 out of a 5.0 scale (Harris, Rosenberg, Rourke, 2014). It is worth noting that although participants expressed an overall satisfaction in academic resources offered by the EIEP, they did not value nor fully engage in reflective journaling.

Despite the positive responses expressed by study participants, previous research both supported and contradicted the impact supplemental academic resources have on nursing students' academic achievement and programs retention rates (Harding, 2014; Harris, Rosenberg, & Rourke, 2014; Schrum, 2015). In 2015, Schrum conducted a study involving 168 pre-licensure nursing students. Results indicated that 23% of the nursing students who did not participate in supplemental tutoring sessions offered by the retention specialist and 28% of nursing students who did not attend application classes offered by the retention specialist did not



progress past their first year in the nursing program (Schrum, 2015). Harding's (2014) findings revealed that at-risk students who participated in a voluntary supplemental instruction experienced a positive impact on their academic success. Unlike the positive results identified above, Harris, Rosenberg, and Rourke's (2014) findings did not lend support to an increase in academic achievement and retention after the implementation of a SSP for at-risk students.

Although previous research does not fully support nor negate the impact additional academic resources have on at-risk nursing students, participants from the study at hand unanimously valued and expressed satisfaction with the supplemental resources offered by the EIEP. Participants credited the early identification and implementation of learning resources to their first-year academic achievements. Participants consistently commented on the high value and high level of satisfaction they experienced in the EIEP as a result of the implementation of additional academic resources.

Sub-question one aimed to uncover what participants valued about the EIEP experience. As heard through the collective voice of all participants, they deeply valued the intentional and relational connections that flourished with the academic staff as a result of the EIEP. These influential relationships were framed around the attributes of support and availability that encouraged participants to experience a sense of belonging to the academic culture and trust toward the academic staff and program of nursing. In addition to the value placed on relational connections, participants also valued intellectual connections with academic resources. Participants perceived that their academic achievement was positively affected by the supplemental resources that were offered to them through the EIEP.

**Sub-question 2.** In direct response to the scholarly work offered by Braxton and colleagues (2004, 2014) regarding commuter retention principles, the researcher intended to

explore commuter nursing students' perceptions of the components within the EIEP which represent program commitment to student welfare. As a result of this inquiry, the researcher posed the second sub-question and it is as follows: How do first-year commuter nursing students participating in an EIEP at a private, Midwestern, undergraduate, Bachelor of Science nursing program perceive nursing program commitment to their first year college experience?

### **Program Commitment to Me**

The concept of how commuter, undergraduate students perceive an academic institution's demonstration of commitment to student welfare was sparsely found throughout the current domain of academic research. One vital component of this study's framework did center on the theoretical and empirically supported notion of perceived institutional commitment to student welfare as individualized attention directed toward the student (Braxton et al., 2014). Although individualized attention is only one of several factors which influence student perceptions of institutional commitment to student welfare (Braxton et al., 2014), it was the most consistently expressed demonstration of commitment as perceived by participants within the study at hand.

Nursing program commitment to student welfare was solely perceived by participants as the individualized attention they experienced through relational and intellectual connections made within the EIEP. As a result of these meaningful and personalized connections, participants felt as though they were known as a person rather than a number and were valued by the nursing program and academic institution. The significance of being known and valued as an individual within the culture of an academic institution of higher education found support through the theory and empirical evidence provided by Braxton et al. (2014). The relational connections which existed between the participant, the Clinical and Academic Development Director, the Professional Development Coordinator, and the nursing faculty advisor fostered the

perception of an academic culture that was committed to the individual success and well-being of each participant. In addition to relational connections, the individualized academic resources offered by the Clinical and Academic Development Director to participants were also perceived by participants as the program's commitment to their academic achievement and welfare.

Similarly to the theoretical component and empirical evidence provided by Braxton et al. (2014) regarding individualization, the more an institution demonstrated an individualized interest regarding a student's academic growth and development, the more the student viewed the institution as being committed to his or her welfare.

EIEP involvement provided participants with an individualized pathway to positive and powerful relational and academic connections within the academic institution. The relationships which existed between the participants, the Clinical and Academic Development Director, the Professional Development Coordinator, and the nursing faculty advisors cultivated an academic environment that offered individualized and holistic support, which was valued, trusted, and readily available to all participants. As relational and academic connections flourished, so did participants' views of their institution's commitment to their welfare as a student.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Nursing Education**

Nursing programs, leaders, faculty, and staff are responsible for understanding and investing time and resources into the enhancement of early first-year collegial experiences. Woosley and Miller (2009) found student satisfaction with academic life (academic integration) during the first three weeks of the semester a positive predictor of retention. Although previous research indicates the influential power of integration on commuter students' persistence as variable factor, participants within the study at hand unquestionably valued the relational and academic connections that were fostered through the EIEP. As a result, it is recommended that

early, first-year, nursing retention programs are framed by strategies that exemplify institutional commitment to the welfare of the students served.

Strategies which illustrate institutional commitment can occur through one-on-one, purposeful, and guided sessions with institutional retention specialists, counselors, and nursing faculty advisors. It is recommended that the initial session occur during the first three weeks of the semester (Woosley & Miller, 2009) with monthly and as-needed follow-up sessions throughout the rest of the academic year. Individual sessions allow an opportunity for the academic staff and student to identify strengths, challenges, opportunities, and goal development. These encounters also promote an awareness of institutional resources and how the student can positively and purposefully navigate the academic system. Furthermore, the one-on-one sessions allow an opportunity for the academic staff member and student to develop a supportive, trusting, and individualized connection which promotes a sense of belonging to the institution (Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Relational connections that are intentional, individualized, trusting, and academically enhancing demonstrate an institution's commitment to the welfare of the students served, and thereby influence first-to-second year retention (Braxton, et al., 2014).

The appropriate timing and availability of staff, resources, and academic integrational experiences are important strategies which have the potential to enhance commuter student integration during the first academic year. Commuter students' external obligations and time on campus do not resemble that of residential students, therefore, they cannot readily adapt and adjust their schedules to fit the residential campus environment and student model (Jacoby, 2015). Rather, it becomes the institution's responsibility to design an academic culture that meets the needs and expectations of the commuter student (Jacoby, 2015). It is recommended that nursing commuter campuses offer brief and frequent opportunities for academic integration

and relational connections to occur throughout the day. It is important to capture the commuter audience when they are on campus for required academic experiences, and, therefore, the academic staff should be transparent and make adjustments to their schedules based on student needs. Academic staff are also recommended to post open office hours, and opportunities for engagement should occur right before classes, in between classes, or after classes.

It is also advised that all persons involved in the development and delivery of retention programs and strategies demonstrate a clear understanding of the purpose, expectations, and, goals. Peer mentor programs and extracurricular organizations need to develop mission, vision, and goal statements which guide integration experiences. Organizational leaders and peer mentors should be carefully selected by the academic staff and should demonstrate attributes which reflect the college's and program's mission and values. Finally, in support of a culture of assessment and systematic improvement, retention programs, strategies, and personnel should be thoroughly assessed and improved on a routine basis.

Similar to the assessment and improvement of peer mentors and extracurricular organizations, it is recommended that retention and integration programs be annually assessed and strategically improved through the incorporation of current and scholarly evidence, student outcomes, and student perspectives. Through program assessment and acquisition of knowledge, commuter nursing programs will be more apt to enhance the academic integration and first-year experiences of the students served.

### **Limitations**

The population and setting where the research study took place may be viewed by some scholars and academic readers as a limitation to the study at hand. The researcher does not concur with this notion based on the study's initial intent, which was to gain insight and

knowledge regarding a unique population's retention program experience. A limitation that did involve the participant population was that not all participants attended the two-day EIEP prep-camp. As a result, the researcher did not include participant perceptions of the EIEP prep-camp. Participant perception of the overall EIEP may have been impacted by whether or not they attended the camp.

Another limitation identified by the researcher involved the data gathering process which was limited to one interview. Although the researcher conducted in-depth interviews, further illustrated findings through the characteristic card sorting activity, and obtained saturation, the isolated encounter is perceived as a limitation of the study. In further regard to study limitations, the data analysis processes was vulnerable to the influence and subjectivity of the researcher. Consequently, there was potential for the researcher's past experiences and biases to influence the analysis and reporting of findings despite awareness of personal beliefs and engagement in the bracketing process. Furthermore, the researcher was the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Nursing at the college where the study took place and participant responses may have been influenced by the nature of the researcher's professional role. On occasion, it was noted by the expert reviewer that the researcher responded to participant responses with the word *great* instead of responding with a word that expressed the researcher's neutrality to the question posed. This reply may have influenced participant responses and elicited answers the participants viewed favorable to the researcher.

### **Future Research**

This study revealed several areas of interest for researchers to expand upon. To begin, the results expressed the collective opinion of Caucasian nursing students and, therefore, did not capture the perspective of ethnically diverse nursing students. As the percentage of racially

ethnic baccalaureate nursing students continues to increase (Fang, Li, Arietti, & Trautman, 2015), researchers need to further explore integration and retention strategies that are uniquely valued and viewed as the institution's commitment to their individualized academic success and student welfare.

Diversity is not only expressed through ethnicity, but also through gender. Male nursing students' make up roughly 14% of the nursing student population (National League for Nursing, 2015) and previous studies revealed that male nursing students tend to have poorer academic performance, lower retention rates, and require additional support when compared to female nursing students (Pitt, Powis, Levette-Jones, & Hunter, 2012). Although this study's demographic profile consisted of three out of five males, additional research should focus on integration and retention strategies that are specific to the male student population.

As noted in the results section, the theme of moving from apprehension and uncertainty to acceptance and appreciation was an unexpected theme uncovered by the researcher. The initial reaction experienced by a nursing student has the influential power to affect their overall perception and experience of a retention program. Therefore, it is in the best interest of researchers to explore and disseminate best practice approaches which initially inform students of required retention program participation.

Finally, it would be in the best interest of nurse leaders, nurse educators, and directors of nursing to explore the value, satisfaction, and outcomes of professional socialization. Professional socialization is expressed by Jeffreys (2014) as a strategy which fosters professional growth and development as well as retention. Professional mentoring is a retention strategy within the professional integration construct of *Jeffreys's NURS Model* (2004). This strategy provides nursing students an opportunity to build meaningful relational connections and socially

interact with practicing nurses. Jeffreys (2014) further emphasized the power professional socialization has on encouraging underrepresented students in programs of nursing, such as males and ethnically diverse students.

### **Summary**

Nursing programs throughout the country are challenged by high attrition rates (Harris, Rosenberg, & O'Rourke, 2014; Jeffreys, 2012; Schmidt & MacWilliams, 2011), yet despite this challenge and the urgency to improve retention, there remains a gap in research regarding first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing student perceptions of meaningful integrative strategies. In response to the paucity of research and further need to understand the student perspective of valuable integration and retention strategies, the study at hand was designed to explore the perceptions held by first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students, regarding an EIEP experience. The first-year retention and integration strategies which were instituted within the EIEP were built upon evidence-based principles and practices and also complemented the unique needs of commuter, undergraduate, nursing students.

A qualitative, hermeneutical, approach was used to explore an inaugural EIEP experience as portrayed through the collective accounts and authentic descriptions of five, first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students. Four primary themes and four sub-themes were found to express participant perceptions regarding their EIEP experience. Participant accounts of the EIEP illustrated an overall positive and enriching experience. Although participants' initial perceptions of the EIEP were inferred to be apprehensive and anxiety-provoking, they quickly transformed into feelings of acceptance, appreciation, and advocacy for future first-year student participation. Participants valued the relationships which existed between themselves and the academic staff. They described the relational connections as supportive, available,



trusting, and promoting of a sense of belonging within the academic culture. Participants also valued the intellectual insight and academic resources gained through one-on-one sessions with the Clinical and Academic Development Director. Participants further perceived the individualized attention gained from relational and academic connections as an expression of the program's commitment to their academic achievement and personal welfare. Unlike the value placed on the relational and academic connections which emerged from the EIEP, participants lacked an appreciation and sense of academic gain from the interactions they experienced with peer mentors, student organizations, and reflective journaling.

When institutions implement retention and integration strategies, yet remain unaware of student perceptions, they lack a holistic understanding of the experiences encountered, and thereby limit their ability to strategically enhance the phenomenon at hand. It is therefore imperative for researchers to explore experiences that are valued and that reflect institutional commitment as perceived by first-year undergraduate nursing students. The findings uncovered within the study at hand reflect the unique and genuine EIEP perspectives of first-year, commuter, undergraduate, nursing students.

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### **Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter**

Dear Undergraduate Nursing Student:

I am pursuing my Educational Doctoral Degree at the College of St. Mary in Omaha, NE. I am interested in discovering the essence of commuter undergraduate nursing students' lived experience in an early integration enhancement program. The title of my research inquiry is "An Early Integration Enhancement Program for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students." The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study is to gain an understanding of first-year nursing students' lived experience within an early integration enhancement program at a Midwest, private, commuter, undergraduate Bachelor of Science nursing program. I believe a better understanding of commuter nursing students' experience in an early integration enhancement program may assist in the further development and refinement of early retention strategies that best meet the needs of the future student body and thereby influence first-to-second-year program retention.

Participating in this study may not directly benefit you, but the information obtained may assist in the further development and refinement of early integration strategies that best meet the needs of future students and positively influence their nursing program experience and academic achievement. You have been identified as an undergraduate nursing student who participated in the Early Integration Enhancement Program (EIEP) during the 2015-2016 academic year and, therefore, potentially meet the criteria for this study. If you are willing to participate, I will schedule an interview with you which will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview questions will focus on your personal experience as an EIEP participant. Prior to the interview, you will also be asked to complete a demographic form which will take five to ten minutes. You will also complete a characteristic card sorting activity upon completion of the interview. This activity will take approximately 10-15 minutes. After the data is analyzed, you may be contacted via email or telephone and asked to confirm, clarify, or further expand upon the information obtained. The follow-up session may be conducted via email, telephone, or face to face and will take approximately 30 minutes. The information from this study may be published in journals and presented at professional meetings. An abstract of the study will be provided to you upon request.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, an informed consent document will be provided and your identity will be kept confidential. There is no cost associated with your participation except for the time it will take to complete the interview session. You may withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide not to respond or participate, your decision will not impact your academic endeavors at Bryan College of Health Sciences. If you are willing to assist in this study, please contact me via the email address or telephone numbers provided below. If you wish to further discuss this study or have questions, please contact me. Thank you for considering participating in this research study.

Sincerely,

Sue A. Pilker, MSN, RN

SPilker89@csm.edu

(w) (402) 481-8712      (c) (402) 890-2711

**Appendix B: Demographic Personal Profile Form**

Thank you for participating in this study. Prior to starting our interview, I am requesting that you please complete the demographic information identified below by checking the box which best characterizes you. This survey will take approximately five to ten minutes to complete.

The gender assigned to me at birth was:

- Male
- Female

I would describe my current gender identity as:

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Do not identify as female, male, or transgender

I would describe my race/ethnicity as:

- African-American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic
- Other
- Prefer not to respond

My current age is identified within the following range:

- 24 and under
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 and over

English was the primary language spoken in my home as a child:

- Yes
- No

I am the first individual in my family to attend college:

- Yes
- No

The statement that describes my current college enrollment status is:

- I enrolled here with no previous college credits
- I enrolled here with dual-enrollment credits earned while in high school
- I transferred here from a community college
- I transferred here from a four-year college or university
- Other

My current educational goal is to:

- Complete my nursing degree at this college
- Transfer to another college or university to complete my nursing degree
- Transfer to another program within this college to complete a degree other than nursing
- Transfer to another college or university to complete a degree other than nursing
- I do not plan to continue with college
- I am undecided about my plans

### Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Tell me the story of your personal experience in the Early Intervention Enhancement Program (EIEP):

Probes: Describe your feelings of socialization/isolation during the first day of prep-camp.

Describe your feelings of socialization/isolation during the last day of prep-camp.

Describe your sense of belonging/lack of belonging to the nursing program during the first three week of the fall semester.

Describe your sense of belonging/lack of belonging to the nursing program at the end of the fall semester.

Describe your sense of belonging/lack of belonging to the nursing program at the end of the spring semester.

Tell me about your involvement/lack of involvement in student organizations.

Describe the benefits/challenges of student organizations.

Tell me about the benefits/challenges of the reflection journal.

2. Describe the relational connections you made through the EIEP.

Probes: Tell me about your relationship/lack of relationship with the Academic and Clinical Development Coordinator.

Describe an experience when the Academic and Clinical Development Coordinator made you feel included/excluded in the nursing program.

Tell me about a positive/negative experience you had with the Academic and Clinical Development Coordinator.

Tell me about your relationship/lack of relationship with the Professional Development Coordinator.

Describe an experience when the Professional Development Coordinator made you feel included/excluded in the nursing program.

Tell me about a positive/negative experience you had with the Professional Development Coordinator.

Tell me about your relationship/lack of relationship with your peer mentor.

Describe an experience when your peer mentor made you feel included/excluded in the nursing program.

Tell me about a positive/negative experience you had with your peer mentor.

Tell me about your relationship/lack of relationship with your nursing faculty advisor.

Describe an experience when your faculty advisor made you feel included/excluded in the nursing program.

Tell me about a positive/negative experience you had with your faculty advisor.

3. Describe an EIEP experience that was important/unimportant to you.  
Probes: Tell me more about why the experience was important/unimportant to you.
4. Describe an EIEP experience that you were satisfied/dissatisfied with.  
Probes: Tell me more about why you were satisfied/dissatisfied with the experience.
5. Describe the nursing program's commitment/lack of commitment to your college experience.  
Probes: What experience demonstrated commitment/lack of commitment to your college experience?
6. Tell me the story of what your first academic year would have been like if you did not participate in the EIEP?  
Probes: Describe your first three weeks of classes.  
Describe your first semester of classes.  
Describe relational connections/lack of connections with individuals who work at the college.  
Describe relational/lack of connections with students in the nursing program.  
Describe your level of awareness/lack of awareness of student success resources available.  
Describe your level of involvement/lack of involvement in student organizations.  
Describe your satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the nursing program.  
Describe your perception of the nursing program's commitment/lack of commitment to your college experience.
7. Describe your personal commitment to the nursing program.  
Probes: Describe your intention/lack of intention to continue your program of study at the same institution for a second academic year.  
Describe your intention/lack of intention to graduate from the nursing program you are currently enrolled in.  
Describe your intention/lack of intention to transfer to a different nursing program.  
Describe your intention/lack of intention to transfer to a program of study other than nursing.
8. Suppose a first semester freshman nursing student is interested in participating in the EIEP. What would you tell them?  
Probes: What would you describe to them as the benefits of the EIEP?  
What would you describe to them as the challenges of the EIEP?
9. How do you feel about participating in the EIEP?
10. Characteristic Card Sorting Activity (see guidelines).

11. Is there anything else you would like to express about your EIEP experience?



### **Appendix D: Characteristic Card Sorting Activity Guidelines**

Each card given to you contains a word describing a characteristic of the Early Integration Enhancement Program (EIEP) that may be of importance to you. You will identify how important the characteristic is to you, whether or not you are satisfied with how the characteristic was delivered to you in the EIEP, and finally if the characteristic is a reflection of the EIEP's commitment to you as a student.

1. You will sort the characteristic cards into two different categories of importance, those that are important to you and those that are not important to you.
2. If you determine a characteristic card as not of importance, it will be discarded.
3. If you identify a characteristic of importance that was not identified on a card, you will write it on a blank card provided by the researcher and place it in the importance pile.
4. You will then numerically rank each characteristic card in order of importance by marking a number on the characteristic card (1 equals the most important characteristic).
5. You will then indicate whether you are satisfied or are not satisfied with how the characteristic was delivered to you in the EIEP. You will mark an "S" on the characteristic card if you are satisfied and a "U" on the characteristic card if you are not satisfied.
6. Finally you will indicate whether the characteristic card reflects the EIEP's commitment to you as a student at the college. You will mark a "C" on the characteristic card if you believe it reflects commitment and you will mark an "N" on the characteristic card if you believe it does not reflect commitment.

**Appendix E: Early Integration Enhancement Program Characteristic Card**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Early Academic Interventions</b>             | <b>Resource Navigation Tool</b>             |
| <b>Awareness of My Strengths</b>                | <b>Connection to Peer Mentors</b>           |
| <b>Connection to Faculty</b>                    | <b>Connection to Student Success Center</b> |
| <b>Individualized and Attentive to My Needs</b> | <b>Establishment of Trust</b>               |

|   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Connection to Faculty Advisor</b>    | <b>Integration into Student Life</b> |
| <b>Awareness of My Challenges</b>       | <b>Relationship Builder</b>          |
| <b>Inclusion</b>                        | <b>Establishment of Support</b>      |
| <b>Assisted in Adjusting to College</b> | <b>Meaningful Strategies</b>         |
|   |                                      |

**Appendix F: Recruitment Email to the Academic and Clinical Development Coordinator**

Dear Academic and Clinical Development Coordinator,

I am pursuing my Educational Doctoral Degree at the College of St. Mary in Omaha, NE. I am interested in discovering the essence of commuter undergraduate nursing students' lived experience in an early integration enhancement program. The title of my research inquiry is "An Early Integration Enhancement Program for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students." The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study is to gain an understanding of first-year nursing students' lived experience within an early integration enhancement program at a Midwest, private, commuter, undergraduate Bachelor of Science nursing program. I believe a better understanding of commuter nursing students' experience in an early integration enhancement program may assist in the further development and refinement of early retention strategies that best meet the needs of the future student body and positively impact first-to-second-year program retention.

I have received approval from Dr. Theresa Delahoyde to conduct my research study at the Bryan College of Health Sciences Bachelor of Science Nursing Program. Dr. Theresa Delahoyde has granted me permission to recruit commuter undergraduate nursing students who participated in the Early Integration Enrichment Program during the 2015-2016 academic year. For participant recruitment purposes, I am requesting that you email to each student who has engaged in all required activities associated with the Early Integration Enrichment Program the attached Participant Recruitment Email. Bryan College of Health Sciences, participants, and you will be given complete anonymity.

Sincerely,

Sue A. Pilker, Ed.D(c), RN  
Primary Investigator  
SPilker89@csm.edu  
(w) (402) 481-8712  
(c) (402) 890-2711

**Appendix G: Recruitment Email to the Dean of Undergraduate Nursing**

Dear Dean of Undergraduate Nursing,

I am pursuing my Educational Doctoral Degree at the College of Saint Mary in Omaha, NE. I am interested in discovering the essence of commuter undergraduate nursing students' lived experience in an early integration enhancement program. The title of my research inquiry is "An Early Integration Enhancement Program for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students." The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study is to gain an understanding of first year nursing students' lived experience within an early integration enhancement program at a Midwest, private, commuter, undergraduate Bachelor of Science nursing program. I believe a better understanding of commuter nursing students' experience in an early integration enhancement program may assist in the further development and refinement of early retention strategies that best meet the needs of the future student body and positively impact first-to-second-year program retention.

I am interested in recruiting Bryan College of Health Sciences undergraduate nursing students who participated in the Early Integration Enrichment Program during the 2015-2016 academic year. I would like to interview five to eleven students. Bryan College of Health Sciences and participants involved in the research inquiry will be given complete anonymity.

Please confirm your acceptance or denial of institutional participation via email to SPilker89@csm.edu. If in agreement to participate, I will provide you with the Institutional Review Board approval documentation from the College of Saint Mary, and I will also seek Institutional Review Board approval from Bryan College of Health Sciences. If you have additional questions or are seeking further clarification, please contact me via phone at 402-481-8712.

Sincerely,

Sue A. Pilker, Ed.D(c), RN  
Primary Investigator  
SPilker89@csm.edu  
(w) (402) 481-8712  
(c) (402) 890-2711

### **Appendix H: Participant Consent Form**

I am inviting you to participate in a research study. You have been selected as a possible participant because of your involvement in the inaugural Early Integration Enrichment Program led by the Clinical and Academic Development Director. The Early Integration Enrichment Program was developed to assist your transition, integration, and academic achievement at Bryan College of Health Sciences Undergraduate Nursing Program. This study is an opportunity for you to share your personal experience as a participant and potentially enhance the Early Integration Enrichment Program for future students. The information in this form is written to assist you in deciding whether or not to participate in this research opportunity.

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of first-year nursing students' lived experience within an early integration enhancement program at a Midwest, private, commuter, undergraduate Bachelor of Science nursing program.

In this study, you will participate in a 45 to 60 minute face-to-face interview with the researcher. Upon arrival at the interview, you will complete a demographic form which will take you approximately 5 to 10 minutes. The researcher will then brief you on the interview process and the questions asked during the interview will pertain to your personal experience with the Early Integration and Enhancement Program. During the interview session, you will also complete a characteristic card sorting activity that will take approximately 10-15 minutes. After the completion of the interview process, the researcher will review the information obtained from your interview discussion. Once the information is thoroughly reviewed, the researcher may contact you by telephone or email to confirm, clarify, or expand upon concepts identified from the interview and characteristic card sorting activity. If needed, the research may also request a follow-up interview. At this time, you will also have an opportunity to clarify questions and provide corrections to the researcher's interpretation of your experience.

As with any research study, there is always at least a minimal risk for participating. The risks to participate in this research study may include loss of personal time and mild fatigue and psychological stress during the interview session. If you experience psychological stress during the study, you will have the opportunity to seek professional assistance from the Professional Development Coordinator. You will promptly be informed of new findings which may affect your willingness to continue participation. Please note that approximately 5 to 11 other individuals will be participating in this research study.

The information gained from this study may be used to enhance future Early Integration Enrichment Programs offered at Bryan College of Health Sciences and the program may be extended to other programs of study within the College. The information obtained from this study may guide future academic research and provide the academic community a better understanding of early integration strategies that promote second-year enrollment for undergraduate commuter nursing students. However, you may not experience a personal benefit from participating in this research study.

The alternative to being in this research study is to not participate while continuing involvement in the Early Integration Enhancement Program and remaining enrolled in the Nursing Program at

Bryan College of Health Sciences. There is no cost to you for participating in this study and you will not be provided payment for lost wages.

Your welfare is the major concern of the researcher and if you experience a problem as a direct result of participating in this study, immediately contact the individuals listed at the end of this consent form.

The researcher will take reasonable steps to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The only persons who will have access to your research records are the researcher and the Institutional Review Board. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

You have rights as a research participant and you do not give up any legal rights by agreeing to participate in this study. Participant rights have been explained within this consent form. If you have any questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, contact the investigator. You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can withdraw from the study at any time before, during or after the research begins. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Bryan College of Health Sciences. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled and your nursing program experience, progression, and academic grades will not be affected.

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**Documentation of Informed Consent**

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You are freely deciding to participate in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered, and (4) you have decided to be in this research study.

If you have any questions during the study, you should talk to one of the investigators listed below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

**Participant's signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

My signature certifies that all the elements of informed consent described in this consent form have been explained fully to the participant. In my judgment, the participant possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study and is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent to participate.

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Authorized Study Personnel**

Sue A. Pilker, Ed.D(c), RN  
Primary Investigator  
SPilker89@csm.edu  
(w) (402) 481-8712  
(c) (402) 890-2711



**Appendix I: IRB Approval Letter**

June 21, 2016

Dear Ms. Pilker,

Congratulations! The Institutional Review Board at College of Saint Mary has granted approval of your study titled *An Early Integration Enhancement Program for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students*.

Your CSM research approval number is **CSM 1606**. It is important that you include this research number on all correspondence regarding your study. Approval for your study is effective through July 1, 2017. If your research extends beyond that date, please submit a "Change of Protocol/Extension" form which can be found in Appendix B at the end of the College of Saint Mary Application Guidelines posted on the IRB Community site.

Please submit a closing the study form (Appendix C of the IRB Guidebook) when you have completed your study.

Good luck with your research! If you have any questions or I can assist in any way, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

*Vicky Morgan*

Dr. Vicky Morgan  
Director of Teaching and Learning Center  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
[irb@csm.edu](mailto:irb@csm.edu)

**Appendix J: Audit Trail Completion Letter**

February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Sue Pilker requested an Audit Trail be conducted for her qualitative dissertation, “An Early Integration Enhancement Program for Undergraduate Commuter Nursing Students”. The Audit Trail was conducted on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

In my opinion, the study followed the established processes for qualitative studies, remaining consistent with the intended purpose statement, research questions and planned procedures approved by the Institutional Review Board. The themes identified flowed directly from the documents that were in text format. The procedures utilized were clear, transparent, and well documented.

In summary, I attest that the criteria for trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of the findings met the standards for data quality management. I served as an external expert and auditor.

Sincerely,

Lina Bostwick, EdD, RN, CNE

Associate Professor

Bryan College of Health Sciences

5035 Everett Street

Lincoln, NE 68506