

Thriving not Surviving: A Thriving Nursing Student Concept Analysis



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Abstract

Aims: The primary aim of this review was to complete an analysis of a thriving nursing student with a goal of producing a new definition instead of a successful nursing student. **Design:** A concept analysis design was used. **Data sources:** A literature review was completed using CINHAL, PubMed databases, and grey literature. Search terms included (nursing student success OR thriving) AND (student success or academic achievement or academic performance or academic success or student retention) AND (nursing education AND success OR thriving) AND (college student success OR thriving). **Review Methods:** A combination of Walker & Avant and Chinn & Kramer systematic concept analysis approaches were used. **Results:** 57 articles met inclusion criteria. Of those 57 articles, 29 were included in this review. Three defining attributes were identified: academic success, clinical success, and psychological well-being. The antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents are also highlighted and discussed. **Conclusions:** The current definition of success proves to be inadequate for nursing students. The concept of a thriving nursing student can help educators identify those at-risk early, is adaptable and appropriate as students traverse the transition of a nursing program, and includes a focus on mental health and well-being instead of simply academic achievements.

Keywords

academic success;
clinical success;
concept analysis;
thriving nursing student;
well-being

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Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Abstract..... | 113 |
| 1 Introduction | 114 |
| 2 Materials and Methods | 115 |
| 3 Results and Discussions..... | 116 |
| 3.1 Results..... | 116 |

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| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| 3.2 Discussion..... | 119 |
| 4 Conclusion..... | 120 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 120 |
| References..... | 121 |
| Biography of Authors..... | 123 |

1 Introduction

With the current nursing shortage, many nursing programs are focused on retention and the success of their graduates ([American Association of Colleges of Nursing \[AACN\], 2023](#)). This has shifted focus not just on success as an end-product, but early identification of at-risk students and methods to help them achieve academic achievement ([Williams & Dahan, 2022](#)). Because of this shift, the current definition of a successful student is no longer appropriate. The current definition only provides a narrow view of success – simply academic achievement – and only looks at the end-product (a successful graduate of the program). A new definition of a thriving student is needed. The concept of a thriving student can help educators identify those at-risk early, is adaptable and appropriate as students traverse the many transitions of a nursing program, and includes a focus on mental health and well-being instead of simply gauging academic achievements.

Background

The arena of nursing education is rapidly evolving. This stems from several causes: patient safety concerns brought forth by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the readiness of graduates to practice brought forth by employers, clinical judgment concerns from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), different learning styles of students in generation Z (Gen Z), and COVID-19 has imparted a major impact on both the state of healthcare and education.

The current definition of a successful nursing student follows traditional models of passing classes, a high grade-point average (GPA), psychomotor skill success, and passing the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) on the first attempt ([Al-Alawi et al., 2020; Hershkovitz & Ambrose, 2022; Jeffreys, 2015, 2022; Seago et al., 2012](#)). However, this definition does not address the needs of all the stakeholders involved in nursing education. There are several problems with continuing to use this definition: 1) it only addresses students at the end of a program which makes it more difficult to identify at-risk students throughout the program, 2) it only addresses academically preparing students which can set them up for burnout and anxiety both throughout and after the program, 3) it does not address clinical judgment which can directly impact patient outcomes.

In addition to these missing components, a new definition is needed that addresses the transitions a student experiences throughout a nursing program. Students transition from one stage to another while in programs and then prepare for the biggest transition yet, to a practicing nurse ([Brown et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2016](#)). Part of those transitions includes a focus on mental health. New graduates need the mental health tools not only to be successful in school ([Calo et al., 2022; Cleary et al., 2018; Jeffries, 2015, 2022; Niedermeier et al., 2022](#)) but also upon beginning their first job to be a successful and thriving nurse ([Cox & Copeland, 2024; Kavanagh & Sharpnack, 2021](#)). The current definition of a successful student is stagnant, with a definitive end. A new one is needed that can be viewed on a continuum.

Significance to Nursing Education

Schools across the United States and Canada are undergoing major curricular revision to meet the standards of the Next Generation NCLEX (NGN) and to ensure successful students that are ready to transition to practice ([Kavanagh & Sharpnack, 2021](#)). The NCSBN changed the NCELX because employers and studies showed that new graduates were not practice-ready ([Kavanagh & Sharpnack, 2021; NCSBN, 2023](#)). Practice readiness can be defined as a new graduate that demonstrates several important qualities including cognitive, clinical, and professional capabilities that are demonstrated in their personal assessment as a nurse ([Mirza et al., 2019](#)). Based on these changes and the scope of healthcare in general, educators require a new definition of a

successful student. Curriculum updates need to reflect the needs of the new Essentials established by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) and the NGN, but also based on the needs of the students (Altmiller, 2023). Burnout rates of new graduates is too high, and the retention rates of bedside nurses is too low (Aller, 2021; NCSBN, 2023) for programs to continue to graduate students without the tools to maintain their mental health on the job. Kavanagh & Sharpnack (2021), reported that only 9% of new graduates were deemed "practice-ready". Many schools have begun to address the issue of mental health, but this is not reflected in the current definition of a successful nursing student.

2 Materials and Methods

Aim

The aim of this analysis is to develop an operational definition of a thriving student that will allow educators to identify thriving and non-thriving students as they transition from one stage of education to another and include a focus on more than academic achievement to ensure a more complete picture of a successful student.

Methods

A combination of the Walker & Avant (2011), concept analysis and Chinn & Kramer (2014), concept analysis methodology was used. Both methods are useful to guide a concept analysis, but a combination allows for this work to be approached in a way that will promote nursing science to expand upon this concept and improve evidence-based education (Rodgers et al., 2018). There are eight steps in the Walker & Avant (2011), concept analysis method:

- 1) Selection of a concept
- 2) Determination of the reason for analysis
- 3) Identification of all uses of the concept
- 4) Determination of the defining attributes
- 5) Identification of a model case
- 6) Identification of borderline, related, contrary, invented, and illegitimate cases
- 7) Identification of antecedents and consequences
- 8) Definition of empirical referents (p. 160)

Chinn & Kramer (2014), identify four basic steps in their concept analysis method:

- 1) Selection of a concept
- 2) Clarification of purposes
- 3) Investigation of evidence
- 4) Development of validation criteria

There is overlap with the two methods which allows for a more comprehensive definition of the concept.

Data sources

- (nursing student success OR thriving) AND (student success or academic achievement or academic performance or academic success or student retention) AND (nursing education AND success OR thriving) AND (college student success OR thriving) EBSCO 675 results. Academic peer-reviewed journals, English language: 241 results. 35 selected after abstract review for relevance.
- (nursing student success OR thriving) AND (student success or academic achievement or academic performance or academic success or student retention) AND (nursing education AND success OR thriving) AND (college student success OR thriving) PubMed 551 results. Academic peer-reviewed journals, English language: 201 results. 22 selected after abstract review for relevance.
- Exclusion criteria: examining practical nurses, graduate nurses, practicing nurses, did not focus on student success, for example increase of clinical judgment after 1 simulation experience, duplicates.

- After a systematic and thorough review, 29 articles were included in the final analysis.
(See figure 1)

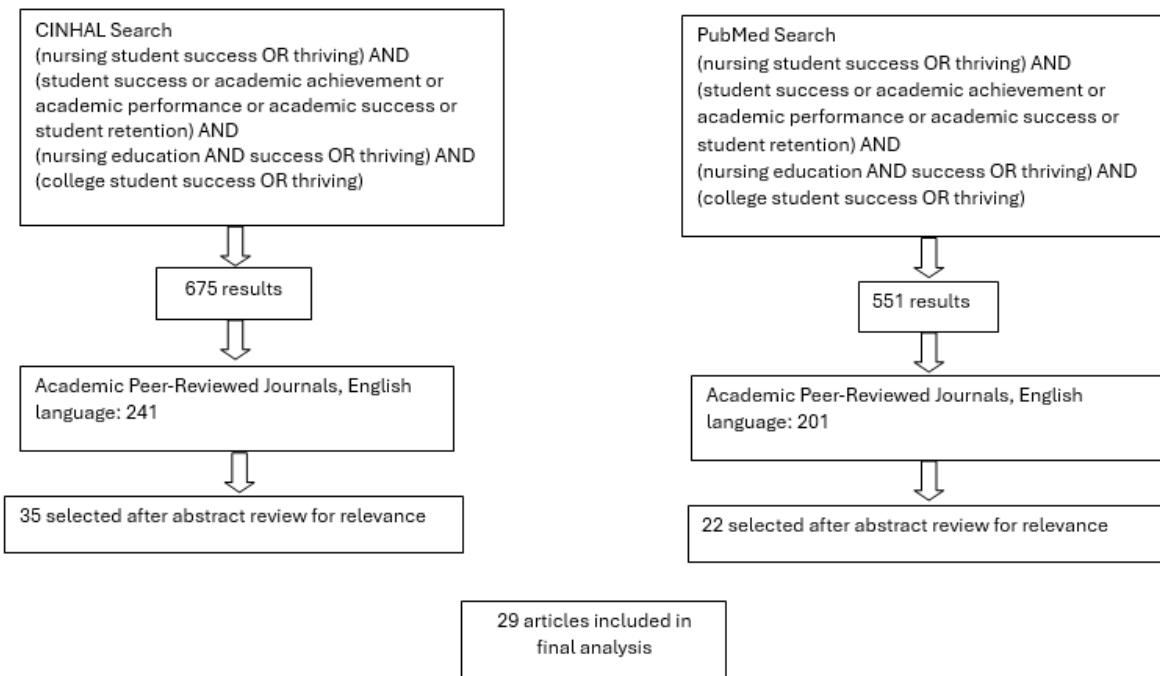


Figure 1.

3 Results and Discussions

3.1 Results

Concept Use

Defining Success

Both [Walker & Avant \(2011\)](#) and [Chinn & Kramer \(2014\)](#), encourage a wide lens of examination for a concept. This includes lay terms such as a dictionary and even the use of slang. Success can be defined by the dictionary as “the favorable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavors; the accomplishment of one's goals ([dictionary.com, 2020](#)). Merriam-Webster defines success as satisfactory completion of something ([Success, 2024](#)). To examine success from a medical viewpoint, the [APA Dictionary of Psychology \(n.d.\)](#) identifies successful aging as “avoidance of disease and disability, maintenance of cognitive capacity, continued active engagement in life, and adaptation to the aging process through such strategies as selective optimization with compensation”.

Looking to nursing education literature, the classic definition of a successful student is one who has completed the coursework in a timely manner while earning passing grades and passing the NCLEX on the first attempt, graduation from the program, or gaining employment post-graduation ([Al-Alawi et al., 2020](#); [Caponnetto et al., 2021](#); [Jeffries, 2015](#)). This has been the metric as it meets the needs of students (passing the NCLEX and having the ability to work as a nurse) and the needs of schools (to meet accreditation standards). Therefore, nursing education has been tailored to meet this standard ([Caponnetto et al., 2021](#); [Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education \[CCNE\], 2018](#)). Other studies have defined nursing student success as retention in the program ([Mitchell, 2024](#)).

In summary, within the discipline of nursing education, success is defined as achieving the goal of earning passing grades in nursing school and passing the NCLEX on the first attempt. This definition of success is one achieved at a definitive endpoint and is quite stagnant.

Defining Thriving

In lay terms, the dictionary defines thriving as “prospering or doing well; growing to developing vigorously” (dictionary.com, 2024) and the Merriam-Webster uses words such as flourishing (Thrive, 2024). We can also examine the slang term of thriving with the Gen Z definition as “slaying” meaning someone who has done very well or impressed others (keyhole.com, 2023). In medicine, a definition of thriving can be identified as “failure to thrive” which is a condition where an infant’s weight gain and/or growth is significantly below what is expected (Wolters Kluwer, n.d.).

The discipline of higher education has been researching the concept of thriving for years. Schreiner et al. (2020), defines thriving students as not only succeeding academically but also engaged in the learning process, investing effort to reach important educational goals, managing their time and commitments effectively, connected in healthy ways to other people, optimistic about their future, positive about their present choices, appreciative of differences in others, and committed to enriching their community (p. 20).

Perez (2020), identified student thriving as having 3 main aspects: academic thriving, interpersonal thriving, and intrapersonal thriving. In honors students, Cuevas et al. (2107), identified 5 aspects of thriving: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness as originally identified by Schreiner (2010). On the other side of the argument, Hershkovitz & Ambrose (2022), provide a definition on non-thriving, meaning a student that is a risk for drop out (of a course or a program) or simply not just surviving a course with a passing grade.

Looking specifically at nursing education, aspects of thriving in nursing education have been identified as “including professors’ investment in students, partnerships with peers, seeing success through hardships, greater purpose, and finding a balance” (Mentag, 2022). Whiles Jeffries (2022), identifies the need to use a holistic approach to guide students to success which includes a focus on mental health. Thriving is defined by Sofia Aragon et al. (2020), as the “means to grow, develop, be personally resilient, and become successful to the point of self-actualization” (p. 256).

Defining Attributes and Criteria

Chinn & Kramer (2014), describe the importance of identifying criteria of the concept early in the analysis process and clarifying those criteria while gathering evidence. This is a similar process of clarifying the defining attributes that Walker & Avant (2011) describe as the “heart of the concept analysis” (p. 162). Three attributes or criteria were identified in the completion of this concept analysis: academic success, clinical success, and psychological well-being.

Academic Success

Academic success, the focus of the old definition of nursing student success is still an important aspect of the new definition. In this case, we don’t want to “throw the baby out with the bathwater” and forget all the aspects of the current definition. Academic success has been identified in the literature in a variety of ways including the adequate completion of exams and assignments, passing classes, passing the NCLEX on the first attempt, graduation, retention in the program, and gaining employment post-graduation (Al-Alawi et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Caponnetto et al., 2021; Denham et al., 2018; Jeffries, 2015; Mitchell, 2024). These are important criteria to quantify student achievement of minimal competency as defined by the NCSBN (CCNE, 2018). They are also important attributes for the stakeholders of faculty and administrators of nursing programs as they directly relate to accreditation standards.

Clinical Success

Clinical success is another important aspect of nursing education, and an important aspect that sets nursing education apart from other forms of higher education. In the literature, clinical success can be defined as student competency in psychomotor skills, the development of clinical judgment, and GPA as many clinical courses are included in the classroom grade (Jeffries, 2105; Carvalho et al., 2012; Lewis et al., 2022). It can also be identified as the ability to perform in the high-stress arena of the clinical environment and a strong sense of self-efficacy in skills (Mentag, 2022). The competency of psychomotor skills has always been an important aspect of nursing education. Recently, a greater focus has been placed on the development of clinical judgment (Lewis et al., 2022).

Psychological Well-Being

Psychological well-being is the third attribute that has been identified as a crucial aspect of a thriving nursing student (Dames, 2019). Psychological well-being can be described as the ability and knowledge to cope with stress and anxiety, the ability and knowledge to engage in self-care, and the achievement of work/life balance (Cleary et al., 2018; Jeffries, 2015). Psychological well-being is also associated with academic burnout which can negatively affect performance in the classroom and clinical settings (Hwang & Kim, 2022; Niedermeier et al., 2021). This is the new aspect of the definition of a thriving nursing student.

While it is not a defining attribute, it is worth mentioning that all three of these aspects are crucial for a nursing student to transition from one stage of nursing education to another. The word thriving is a continuum, not a stagnant end. Thriving at each stage will set students up to have a healthy transition from student nurse to practicing nurse.

Model Cases

Two model, or exemplar, cases are presented for this conceptual analysis as these cases will provide clarity and include all defining attributes of the concept (Chinn & Kramer, 2014; Walker & Avant, 2011):

- A senior nursing student has a good GPA, passes classes, engages in self-care, utilizes knowledge and skills in clinical to care for patients, engages in the community, demonstrates work/life balance, seeks help when needed, and passes the NCLEX on the first attempt.
- A junior nursing student repeating a course to develop competency in the subject, has a GPA that meets the school's minimum standards, recognizes anxiety in themselves, seeks help, engages in the campus and community, and engages in self-care.

Contrary Case

Including a contrary case can be useful for educators to understand what this new conceptual definition is not (Chinn & Kramer, 2014; Walker & Avant, 2011). A contrary case of a struggling student is presented below:

- A student is not passing multiple assignments or classes, they are unable to master psychomotor skills or develop clinical judgment in clinical. They are unable to recognize anxiety in self and seek out help. They do not demonstrate a social life or work/life balance.

Related Case

Related cases are important to include as well. They are cases that include some of the defining attributes, but not all of them (Chinn & Kramer, 2014; Walker & Avant, 2011; Dante et al., 2013). An example of this would be a successful student using the old definition of success. A related case of a successful student who is struggling with psychological well-being is presented below:

- A new graduate completed nursing school with a high GPA, passed all classes on the first attempt, and developed adequate psychomotor skills. They passed the NCLEX on the first attempt but did not have community engagement or a work/life balance throughout the program. They have unrecognized anxiety and develops burnout quickly in their first nursing job and ends up leaving the profession.

Antecedents and Consequences

Identifying the antecedents and consequences is the next step in the [Walker & Avant \(2011\)](#) method of concept analysis. Antecedents are defined as “events or incidents that must occur or be in place” (p. 167).

Antecedents

The antecedents identified in this case analysis of a thriving nursing student include attending and engaging in classes, recognizing and acting on cues in clinical, engaging in self-care, maintaining health, engaging in self-reflection, seeking help when needed, and having outside interests [\(Al-Alawi et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2024; Caponnetto et al., 2021; Cox & Copeland, 2024; Hwang & Kim, 2022; Jeffries, 2015; Mentag, 2022; Mitchell, 2024; Niedermeier et al., 2021\)](#).

Consequences

[Walker & Avant \(2011\)](#), define consequences as “the outcomes of the concept”. Consequences are what would be identified in the nursing student that is thriving. Those consequences in this concept analysis are identified as not simply passing courses, developing competence in nursing, developing clinical judgment, and developing resiliency [\(Al-Alawi et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Cleary et al., 2018; Cox & Copeland, 2024; Denham et al., 2018; Jeffries, 2015; Mentag, 2022; Mitchell, 2024; Niedermeier et al., 2021\)](#).

Empirical Referents

The last step in the concept analysis according to [Walker & Avant \(2011\)](#), is to identify the empirical referents, or the tangible ways we can measure the defining attributes of the concept. The empirical referents of a thriving nursing student have been addressed throughout this paper in the model cases and in the definitions of the defining attributes themselves: academic success, clinical success, and psychological well-being. The empirical referents of academic success include the adequate completion of exams and assignments, passing classes, passing the NCLEX on the first attempt, timely graduation, retention in the program, and gaining employment post-graduation [\(Al-Alawi et al., 2020; Caponnetto et al., 2021; Jeffries, 2015; Mitchell, 2024\)](#). The empirical referents of clinical success include competency in psychomotor skills, the development of clinical judgment, and the ability to perform in the high-stress arena of the clinical environment and a strong sense of self-efficacy in skills [\(Jeffries, 2015; Mentag, 2022\)](#). The empirical referents of psychological well-being include the ability and knowledge to cope with stress and anxiety, the ability and knowledge to engage in self-care, and the achievement of work/life balance, and the avoidance of academic burnout [\(Jeffries, 2015; Hwang & Kim, 2022; Niedermeier et al., 2021\)](#).

3.2 Discussion

The combined method of [Walker & Avant \(2011\)](#), and [Chinn & Kramer \(2014\)](#), provide a more holistic approach to a concept analysis. Both methods emphasize that a concept analysis is not a final examination of a concept. In nursing and in education, concepts can change over time and need to be re-examined to ensure they are still current and relevant [\(Chinn & Kramer, 2015\)](#). Healthcare and nursing educate are currently undergoing major and fundamental changes [\(Kavanagh & Sharpnack, 2021\)](#). For this reason, a new definition of a successful nursing student is necessary. Success is defined as an endpoint, and the successful nursing student now needs to be defined as the thriving nursing student. Merely surviving nursing school is no longer enough to produce nurses that will stay in the workforce.

A thriving nursing student should be defined as a student achieving the prescribed performance standards including an adequate GPA, success competency in assignments and psychomotor skills, developing clinical judgment, and demonstrating psychological well-being with the knowledge and ability to seek help and work-life balance to avoid burnout. The identified critical aspects and empirical referents of a thriving nursing student could help guide the efforts of faculty members revamping or creating new curriculums.

As graduates transition from students to nurses, they are continuing their journey of engaging in life-long learning. A success student should no longer be the outcome for nursing programs. Rather, thriving students should be the standard. The word thriving is a continuum. It is not a stagnant end. This will set student up to have a healthy transition from student to nurse.

Limitations

This analysis presented the findings of a thorough search and the implementation of two frameworks for completeness to present a new definition of a thriving nursing student. However, as with any endeavor, there are limitations. The search criteria was limited to sources written in the English language, only included peer-reviewed articles, and did not include any dissertations. The concept of a thriving nursing student was also primarily examined from the discipline of nursing. These limitation criteria could have impeded the findings and limited the richness of the proposed definition.

4 Conclusion

Upon examining the definition of a successful nursing student considering the NGN, employer expectations, the transitions a student undergoes, and a post-COVID-19 healthcare system, the current definition proves to be inadequate for current nursing students. The definition that educators now need to use is one of a thriving nursing student. A thriving nursing student is one that is meeting more than just the bare minimum academic requirements to complete a nursing program, pass the NCLEX on the first attempt, and obtain a job in the field of nursing. This is a student that is not simply surviving nursing school, but developing clinical judgment and learning how to adapt mentally to the load that is nursing and healthcare. Ensuring students achieve these new standards can help them prepare for what lies ahead and possibly prevent burnout as a new graduate. This new concept of a thriving nursing student is also invaluable to educators. Implementing this standard throughout a nursing curriculum can help educators identify those students who are at-risk early. This can increase retention in nursing schools and is helpful to students academically and mentally. This can be done because a thriving definition is adaptable and can be used as students traverse the transition of a nursing program. Another vital aspect of this definition is that it includes a focus on mental health and well-being. Mental health and well-being are important aspects of nursing that have been previously underrepresented in schools. Shifting a focus to not just academic achievements can help educators better prepare nursing students for what lies ahead, both in school and beyond.

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