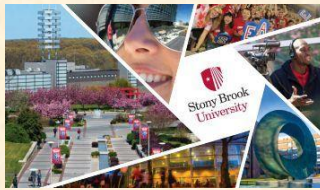




## Battling the Unknown: A Thematic Analysis of the Academic & Employment Experiences of Nursing Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### School of Nursing

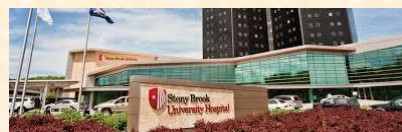
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- Large, public university approx. 60 miles east of NYC
- Affiliated with Stony Brook University Hospital (SBUH), the only tertiary care institution in Suffolk County

#### **March 12, 2020:**

- Notification that as of March 23 (return from Spring Break) all didactic coursework would be conducted online
- Hosting institutions began canceling clinical placements



### Background

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**March 23, 2020:**

- Online didactic learning
- Most undergraduates transitioned to simulated clinical hours
- Undergraduate student volunteers were permitted to provide care on non-COVID-19 units
- Graduate students continued clinical rotations
- Many students continued to work as RNs and CNAs at SBUH and other area hospitals

*All students faced dramatically altered work & learning environments*

**Background (cont.)**

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***The purpose of this study was to examine the academic & employment challenges faced by nursing students during the initial surge of the COVID-19 pandemic.***



**Purpose**

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**Open-ended question via electronic survey:**

*As you reflect on your academic & clinical experiences during COVID-19, what is most striking in your memory?*

- Convenience sample
- 320 Pre- & post-licensure Undergraduate & 120 Adult-Gerontology Primary Care NP students
- Online distribution April - October 2020
- **Qualitative Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

**Method**

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**194 usable survey responses**  
**(44% response rate)**



**Demographics of respondents:**

37% Pre-licensure (Basic & Accelerated Baccalaureate)  
30% RNBS completion (Post-licensure)  
33% Adult-Gerontology Nurse Practitioner

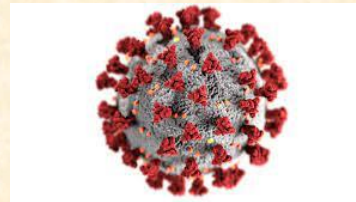
**Results - Demographics**

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## Five Themes:

- *Battling the Unknown*
- *Filling the Void*
- *Education Interrupted*
- *Experiencing Moral Distress*
- *Taking an Emotional Toll*



## Results

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- **Credibility** – *Intense engagement with data over a 6-month period; 5-member research team*
- **Dependability & Confirmability** – *Audit trail; biweekly meetings with comparison of individual code/theme documents*
- **Transferability** – *Representative sample (various education levels & unit specialties)*

## Rigor

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***Filling the Void*** theme portrays:

- Expanded nursing role
- Providing care in isolation
- Filling in for family & healthcare team (or not); inability to meet patient needs
- Value of technology

**Filling the Void**

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*“The first time [I] spent alone with a confirmed COVID positive patient in the room, [I] donned my PPE & just entering through the door, closing it behind me, being alone with him, totally alone & scared.”*

*“I remember phoning the wife every night at 8:30 pm and again at 6:30 am, just so she could let him hear her voice.”*

**Filling the Void – Participant Responses**

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*“I wanted to spend more time with him & let him know he wasn’t alone, but I had to care for other patients.”*

*“Students were not allowed to enter isolation rooms. So, I had to watch a woman cry laying in her own feces and could only stand at the door to comfort her while waiting for a staff member to become available to help her. Meanwhile, I had the skills necessary to do it myself but couldn’t because of the imposed rule.”*

### Filling the Void – Participant Responses

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**The theme *Education Interrupted* represents:**

- Abrupt transition to online learning
- Cancellation of planned clinical experiences
- Statements of being disappointed, “robbed”, or clinically unprepared

### Education Interrupted

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*“Missing the last part of the semester was the hardest. I was hoping to improve my clinical skills during capstone, but that didn’t happen.”*

*“I was not able to get much clinical experience, as I live with high-risk people...I felt guilty that I wasn’t volunteering, and sad because of the isolation.”*

### Education Interrupted – Participant Responses

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*“I was grateful when one of my nursing teachers canceled a big assignment. Somehow, I managed to get through my classes.”*

*“I feel that I missed out on a great clinical opportunity but at the same time I’m overwhelmed at work and glad to have the extra downtime.”*

### Education Interrupted – Participant Responses

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***Taking an Emotional Toll*** theme depicts:

- The severe mental impact of providing nursing care & witnessing enormous suffering
- Replaying shifts in their minds
- Experiencing nightmares

**Taking an Emotional Toll**

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*“Here we were literally fighting so hard to save people’s lives while comforting families, keeping them hopeful and updated all at the same time. The emotions I felt in these last several months are like nothing I have ever felt before.”*

*“Weeks later, I still cope with memories of Face Timing patients’ families.”*

*“A lot of life changes to deal with in such a short time. So much uncertainty.”*

**Taking an Emotional Toll – Participant Responses**

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- Findings from a **qualitative thematic analysis** may not represent the population of interest adequately
- Study was conducted at one public university in NYS using a convenience sample
- Electronic survey; no observation or interviews



## Limitations

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- COVID-19 may have a severe and lasting impact on professional role development, especially in novice & new graduate nurses.
- Faculty & clinical leaders must implement changes to support student & staff preparedness during times of both normalcy & crisis.

(Della Ratta et al., 2022)

## Conclusions

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- Incorporation of self-care programs (mindfulness, meditation, and stress management) into curricula
- Use of guided reflections & debriefing to promote emotional strength & resilience
- Development of hybrid learning models

### Implications for Nursing Educators

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- Recognize that anxiety & emotions may impact transition to practice & professional progression
- Psychological disruptions may occur in the future as new pandemics & disasters arise
- Watch for & identify those in need of support to avoid new graduate turnover & attrition

(Della Ratta et al., 2022)

### Implications for Practice Leaders

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# Questions?

## Questions

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Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

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## References

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Stony Brook University



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