

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction and Overview of Project

My name is Ashley Johnson, and I am a senior at Middle Tennessee State University. I am 23 years old and will be graduating from nursing school in December of 2016. I was born and raised in Appleton, Wisconsin, but moved to middle Tennessee in December of 2008 with my family during my first year of high school. For my high school education, I attended The Webb School of Bell Buckle and graduated in May of 2012. I have a passion for helping others and am a people person. It is through this commitment to others that I have had the opportunity to do so much in my college career. As a student at MTSU, I decided to take the time to be involved on campus. I love honors courses and challenging myself, which is why I decided to pursue a degree from the Honors College.

One of the things that I have invested a lot of time in the last year is this honors thesis project. As part of the requirement for graduating from MTSU's Honors College, students are required to complete an honors thesis. Although every thesis is different and can be very individualized, it was hard for me to figure out a topic. I enjoy writing and being creative, but I also wanted to write on a topic involving research and my nursing school experience. Because nursing school, and the decision to pursue nursing, is something that has made a huge impact on me, I decided that writing about my journey through nursing school would be something that I would thoroughly enjoy and could potentially help others.

Throughout my honors thesis, I will discuss my experiences and personal journey through college, and, in particular, nursing school. I will also make various suggestions for other students who are beginning this stage of life, based on my personal experiences, related research, and research findings from interviews with other students. Being a person who loves to learn and mix things up, I knew that I wanted to have research included in my thesis, but also do something creative. With so many personal details of my life involved, I changed all of the names of people mentioned throughout my thesis in order to protect the privacy of all people and families included.

In addition, I decided to complete a creative project but still incorporate research elements throughout. I also wanted to leave MTSU with something I could take with me and look back on for years to come; thus, I decided to write a reflection on my college career. There is a table included at the end of this chapter that lays out themes and where they are included throughout my thesis for clarification. In my thesis, I discuss the thought processes and decision-making involved during different points in time throughout the college career. Although a great deal of the thesis involves specific instances in nursing school, many of the struggles that I faced and obstacles I have overcome are situations that students face, regardless of major or university.

I desire my thesis to be something that people can read to better understand coping and the challenges of college. I want students to realize that many of the struggles they face are common and that they are not alone. Throughout this thesis, I will present research from published articles and other sources to support various topics discussed. In addition, I will discuss results from a qualitative survey I conducted with other nursing

students. This study required me to get IRB approval (see Appendix A) by completing several training modules, quizzes, and a lot of paperwork. Although this process added a great deal of work to my thesis, it also added a substantial amount of support to my reflection and challenged me to think about how my thesis can apply to other students, regardless of their major. By completing research and working through the IRB application process, I was able to use the skills that I learned throughout my nursing research classes that I was never able to apply.

Two different versions of a survey about nursing students' experiences and reflections were distributed to first semester students enrolled in NURS3000 and fifth semester nursing students enrolled in NURS4507 (see Appendixes B and C). Seventeen undergraduate nursing students completed the survey; 7 students were in their first semester of nursing school, and 10 were in their fifth and final semester. I selected the students at random in an attempt to get a more representative sample. Of all of the people surveyed, there were 4 male participants and 13 female participants. Because the nursing program has both non-traditional and traditional-aged students, there were 11 students between the ages of 19 and 24, and 6 students who were older than 25. Participants rated their religiosity on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = *not religious at all*, 10 = *extremely religious*); 13 of the students placed themselves at a 7 and above, 2 were at a 5, and 2 at a 3. The survey also included other different reflective questions about nursing school and students' own experiences.

I asked students about their level of religiosity because of the major role that Christianity has played in my life during my nursing school career. Throughout this thesis

project, I will go into depth about my journey, from the time I was debating about which college to choose, to where I am now, finishing nursing school. I will walk through my successes and my failures. This project goes into detail about different aspects of college that enabled me to achieve what I have, as well as some common mistakes that I made throughout my journey. Although everyone has different experiences during their time in college and approaches situations differently, I believe that reading through this reflection can help people understand what students experience in college today.

<b>Themes</b>							
	<b>Family</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Work</b>	<b>Campus Activities</b>	<b>Living Situation</b>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>Identity Formation</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>							
<b>Chapter 2</b>							
<b>Chapter 3</b>							
<b>Chapter 4</b>							
<b>Chapter 5</b>							
<b>Chapter 6</b>							
<b>Chapter 7</b>							
<b>Chapter 8</b>							
<b>Chapter 9</b>							
<b>Chapter 10</b>							
<b>Chapter 11</b>							
<b>Chapter 12</b>							
<b>Chapter 13</b>							

## CHAPTER II

### Decision Making Before College

In high school, I was always someone who wanted to do everything I could possibly do in order to be the best I could be. Throughout my time in high school, I went to The Webb School in Bell Buckle, TN, a prestigious college preparatory school, and spent the majority of my time volunteering, participating in organizations at school, and meeting with teachers. I always made sure to do everything with 110% of my effort, so I did not disappoint my parents or teachers. Exceeding the expectations of others made me the epitome of an overachiever and people pleaser.

When I was young, I wanted to make sure that I set myself up for the “path to success.” I focused on achieving in all areas of life, from my future education and profession, to my family life. With my time in college counseling classes, I debated between being in dentistry, obstetrics, pediatrics, nursing, and secondary education. I did not know which direction to go or which one would fit me the best, especially since they were all so different. I believed that until I knew where I was going to school, and what I would be studying there, nothing else could move forward. Without knowing exactly what I wanted to do, I could not make a final decision on where to apply for college. Because of the fact that I was attending a prep school specifically set out to ensure collegiate success, my teachers and family did not like that I did not know what I wanted with my future. Even though I understood the importance of these decisions, I did not like the pressure that was on my shoulders. It made me uneasy, and I did not know how to approach everything in front of me. After many long discussions with family and the

Webb School staff, I knew that I needed to make a decision. I felt like everything that I had worked for up until this point was not nearly as important as what I was deciding on at that point. I wanted to make everyone happy, so I spent time completing research on the schools and calling the admissions offices for more information in order to be better prepared. When looking at all of the in-state colleges and universities, there was so much to consider. There were private colleges, like Belmont or Sewanee, and large state universities, like University of Tennessee or Middle Tennessee State University. All of the schools had different things to offer in terms of financial aid, scholarships, length and types of degree programs, design and layout of campuses, safety, on campus housing, and school colors; the list was endless and overwhelming.

In addition, there were programs specifically designed to help students graduate with a master's degree in four years instead of six; however, I would need to know what I wanted to do when I entered school in order for this to be a beneficial option. There was so much to consider, and it seemed as though there was a weight and heaviness on my shoulders until I made a decision. I had a difficult time concentrating in my classes, because of the fact that I wanted to be completing more research and campus tours of schools in Tennessee. I felt like I was going crazy, knowing that other students already had their choice of colleges and career path determined. At the time, deciding on a college and a career choice was the biggest decision of my life. I had no idea just how much more there would be to consider, as I continued maneuvering through the next few years, from high school student to soon-to-be graduate of a university.

During the summer before my senior year of high school, I participated in a program called the Strive Volunteer Program at The Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt. This program was designed to help students work alongside people in different medical professions; I spent time with the Child Life Specialist Department. It was during this time that I talked with people working as x-ray technicians, CPR instructors, nursing professionals, pharmacists, radiologists, trauma surgeons, and many others. At the time, I thought that I wanted to be an OBGYN, but after hearing many of the physicians say that the biggest sacrifice of their career was not getting to spend enough time with their families, I knew that that career was not for me. Family is something that is very important to me, and I knew I wanted to have kids of my own and be able to take part in my family's activities. Finally, after hearing nurses talk about the flexibility and the passion they had for their careers, I decided nursing could be a great profession for me. Although I liked the idea of nursing as a career, I did not realize how much responsibility and work they had to do. I understood nursing to be a career that had a convenient schedule and one that worked with people; however, I did not realize that nursing was more than just helping people. What I did not realize was that there was also a lot of the job that required patience with families, strange smells, and a huge amount of paperwork.

After deciding that nursing was the option that I wanted to pursue, I began to research different nursing programs throughout Tennessee. With so many great nursing programs available in the middle Tennessee region, however, I ended up debating among MTSU, Belmont, and Sewanee (that had a 2-2 program with Vanderbilt where I could get

my masters in nursing in four years instead of six). I loved the campuses at Belmont and Sewanee because of the beautiful location, landscaping, and size; both were smaller, like my high school had been. However, private colleges are significantly more expensive than larger state universities. Ultimately, I chose to attend MTSU instead of Sewanee or Belmont because cost was an issue, and neither could offer enough financial to me. Even though I received multiple scholarships at Sewanee and Belmont, there still would have been over \$30,000 a year that I would have had to take out in student loans, which was not something that I wanted to do at the time. At MTSU, the Hope Scholarship and a scholarship I had from my mom's work covered nearly all of my tuition each semester.

Even though some students do not mind taking out loans in school, my parents always stressed the importance of staying on top of my finances and not taking out loans unless it was something that was necessary (like for a house or for graduate school). Because MTSU offered a spectacular education that was nationally recognized in many magazines featuring nursing schools, I knew it was a great school that was close to home. MTSU enabled me to live at home the first year with my family, and this option made the most sense financially. Even though I debated moving to Hawaii, Alaska, or anywhere else far away from home for college for independence, I decided to be realistic. I knew that staying at a local in-state school would be the best option for me in order to make graduating with no student debt an option.

Once I made the decision to go to MTSU, I officially declined my acceptance to Belmont's nursing program. Belmont accepts people right out of high school into their nursing program, but at MTSU, one cannot apply until one's sophomore year. This was



disappointing to me because of the fact that I had already envisioned myself at Belmont. I had gone to the new student orientation and loved the beautiful campus and dormitories. I wanted to be close to home but also have the independence to be out on my own. In addition, I knew that I was risking my entire future in nursing by making this decision, but I knew, financially, it was the wisest option. Although at first I thought this was something that I could potentially regret, it gave me time to debate between multiple majors until I was positive about what I wanted to do. Although I knew I wanted to go into nursing, the admission policy was a factor because I knew that MTSU did not accept people into its program until later. This meant that until then, I would have to earn outstanding grades in order to be considered a competitive applicant, and even after that, it was not guaranteed that I would be offered a spot.

With so much at stake, I knew it was a good idea to weigh all of my options and interests. Once I decided that it may not be a bad idea to look into other career paths, I debated between majoring in psychology with a pre-med concentration, forensic science with a pre-med concentration, political science with pre-law, English, Spanish, and finally, nursing. The other degrees did not require any type of application process to be accepted, which made those options less stressful. With nursing, no matter how well you did, other people could still score higher, interview better, or have previous work experience that would make them stronger applicants. I had never felt so inadequate before, or like I may not be enough. I was scared that even after all of the effort I put into my schoolwork, it would still not be enough to earn a spot in the nursing program. I always felt like I had to earn my place, so I always pushed myself to the limits to achieve

everything I could. With this mentality, I was always able to accomplish whatever I put my mind to while growing up. Although I did work hard to achieve whatever I could, I suppressed the feelings of inadequacy by ensuring that I never disappointed people. So, I began my time at college trying to navigate my way through picking professors and classes, learning how to put together the best schedule on Pipeline, and waiting for the infamous “purge day.”

## CHAPTER III

### Summer of 2012: Beginning College

My first class of college began in June of 2012. I wanted to get ahead, so I took a history and speech class the next month after graduating from high school. Typically, students wait until August to begin classes; however, I wanted to be a step ahead and dive in to my schooling. This was a great idea because it helped me transition from high school student to college student more slowly, find my way around campus before the fall semester, discover the best food/coffee/parking/routes across campus, etc. I learned how to use D2L and how to communicate with professors. Although I had gone to a college preparatory high school and had small class settings in college summer classes that were similar to what I experienced at Webb, it was different being treated as an adult by my professors rather than as a teenager. The teachers in high school were always there to remind you of deadlines, answer questions, and make sure that you were successful. However, in college, my professors did not give us that type of guidance. The professors at the university did not hold our hands during the transition because they wanted us to be independent. We were responsible for ourselves, for studying on our own time, for going to class when we wanted, and we were fully responsible for keeping up with our grades, deadlines, and the content. There was much more responsibility and independence than I had anticipated.

By the end of the first few days of college, I knew that the transition was definitely going to be overwhelming. I had heard from my college counselor in high school that the transition from high school to college could be challenging but did not

know exactly what he was referring to at the time. I finally could see that this time is incredibly important when thinking about developing my sense of identity and future goals. I was learning who I was, what I believed, and who I wanted to be. This transition time was not just about parking, professors, or passwords, but also about deciding what I wanted to get involved in on campus, whom I wanted to be associated with, and what I wanted my presence to be like on campus. College students have the chance to reinvent themselves, make new decisions, and take advantage of having a clean slate.

All of these changes in my life produced a lot of anxiety. Even things as little as figuring out the best routes to drive to campus at different times of day were unbelievably complicated. Then, even after I got to campus, I had to find out where the best place was to park. Luckily, in the summer, parking is less chaotic; however, the parking lots were spaced all across campus. I was almost halfway through my summer classes before I realized that there was a parking lot open for students almost half of the distance from where I was parking initially.

When I first began classes, my parents frequently had questions that they wanted to ask about campus regarding grades and financial aid, but my parents were told by administrators that they had no right to access my school accounts because I was 18 and legally an adult. Because my parents were helping to pay for college, I wanted them to have access to my records in order to do everything needed for payments and financial aid, so I had to contact school and fill out forms to give them permission. In addition to the other confusing aspects, MTSU technical support constantly sent me emails requesting that I change my passwords. I was confused about why it seemed like every

week, I had to add another symbol or number to my password, which made it extremely difficult to remember.

After several months of deliberating among different majors, I reached the conclusion that nursing was the best choice because I loved the idea of the challenge and possibilities. I had heard other students on campus say that it was impossible to get into the program at Middle Tennessee State University and “good luck with that.” I was determined to prove I could to everyone who thought that I could not do it. After my acceptance into Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital competitive high school program the previous year and good grades in my college level classes at Webb, I believed that I was at least a competitive candidate for the program. So, I decided that even though I did not know whether or not I would get into the program, it was worth the risk.

With many students experiencing stressors when beginning their college experience, having a passion behind what they are doing can really help with the transition and decision-making. The article “Goals, Styles, and Decisions: Changes and Interactions during the First Year of College” by Galotti and Clare (2014) discusses just how many changes occur almost immediately after graduating from high school and beginning college. They note that many students have “a new living situation, new friends and classmates, new responsibilities, new courses and subjects, new teachers and supervisors” (p. 383). They also discuss that whenever students are transitioning from high school to college, they begin to think about what they want to do by “envisioning goals” and creating a vision of “who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future” (p. 384). Similar to what I was experiencing,

they discuss how important it is for people to sit down and think about what they want to do in their future, what their goals are, where their values lie, and what their main priorities are for whatever decision they are facing.

With so much pressure to figure out what I wanted to do, I do not think I took the time to figure out what I would be best at and what I would enjoy the most. I mainly thought about my interests, job security, and job flexibility. However, after reading “Choice of a Major and Students’ Appreciation of Their Major” by Kimweli and Richards (1999), I learned about the role of identity development in Erikson’s psychosocial developmental theory. Kimweli and Richards explain that there are many times when students in college have not had enough time for identity development because they may still be developing their sense of identity throughout the first year (or more) of college. This can affect students when they are “deciding on college majors. Students who are still struggling with identity formation may base their decisions on interests carried forward from high school. Consequently, such students may not have had the opportunity to explore their strengths, weaknesses and the career opportunities available to them” (Kimweli & Richards, 1999, paragraph 4).

Looking back now on where I was when I entered college, I can tell that I had not analyzed and explored all of the potential opportunities. I stopped looking into the options and settled for what I thought would be a good fit for me, without digging deep into the possibilities. This response to a situation is called identity foreclosure and occurs whenever someone decides to do something without applying their actual values, beliefs, and needs to the opportunity. Pepitas (1978) wrote in “Identity Foreclosure: A Unique

Challenge” about how students avoid different crises in their lives by trying to gain “a sense of safety and security but have done so at the expense of their personal freedom and opportunities” (p. 558). I believe that taking the time to explore every possible option before deciding on nursing, maybe even doing job shadowing in areas that I had not considered before, would have been a beneficial opportunity for me. I had never thought about how my strengths and weaknesses could be an avenue to explore when deciding on my career. I think that I had always focused on the money and benefits of careers, rather than doing something that I would naturally be good at. Although I know that I will be a great nurse and that I have worked hard in school to learn the materials, I do think that I have a lot of talent for speaking in front of others, as well as education that I never fully explored during this time. I had no idea that these were talents of mine until I explored them a few years later, after nursing was already my declared major.

Another opportunity that I never explored when I was beginning college was the free career counseling services that are on campus for students. In “High Expectations for Higher Education? Perceptions of College and Experiences of Stress Prior to and Through the College Career,” Krieg (2013) discusses how “the number of first year students who report feeling 'overwhelmed' has almost doubled, and some colleges are reporting that use of counseling and psychological services has gone up by one third” (p. 636). Although I am unsure why I never thought about going to visit the people in the career counseling office at MTSU when I first started school, I think that they could have given me some great advice and wisdom about different opportunities available to me. Going to the career counseling office on campus is something that students can gain

insight and support from because in the career counseling office, there are specific people who solely work with students who unsure of their majors and career choices. The career counselors take time to help students complete interest surveys and discuss their strengths, their areas of passion, and their vision for their future. This would have been a great thing to explore during my transition phase. Having someone ask me questions and take the time to help me walk through the thought and decision-making processes would have removed some of the pressure on my shoulders and given me the chance to have someone objective share his or her experience and thoughts with me. Although I had heard nurses speak about their jobs during my time at the Children's Hospital, I had never sat down one-on-one with a nurse to discuss everything that went into the job. I did not know what they did not like about the job or what they considered to be the hardest part of the job. To be honest, I never even thought deeply about their day-to-day life or what it would be like for me to personally provide care to people who were ill.

Although everyone going through college has different experiences, everyone has to go through similar decision-making experiences. On my qualitative survey, I asked my participants why they chose nursing as their future career. Because my main reason for selecting nursing was to help people, and I loved the idea of the challenge, I figured that others would have similar reasons, as well. Of the 17 students surveyed, the top reasons for going to nursing school included (a) interest in the field ( $n=5$ ), (b) having the opportunity to make a difference by helping people ( $n=7$ ), and (c) knowing someone personally in the field (e.g., a family member, friend, or person met through traumatic experience) ( $n=4$ ). Although everyone had different ways of phrasing it, there were



commonalities people identified with, regardless of where they were in nursing school. Students identified specific reasons for why they wanted to be a nurse, but they also were asked if there was some sort of a pivotal moment when they knew nursing was what they wanted to do. Although there was not one moment in particular, it was my time and the families at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital in high school overall that made me want to be a nurse. Of the 17 students, only 1 person said that there was not a specific moment when they knew they wanted to be a nurse. The other 16 students were able to describe in their responses their pivotal moment. Although some people described an experience of a sick family member, others wrote about traumatic experiences (e.g., a school shooting or friend dying in a car accident). Students stated that they had a reason behind why they pushed forward towards their end goal of finishing nursing school and becoming a professional nurse.

When trying to figure out what else I wanted to do with my time in college, I began asking other students about different ways to get involved on campus. In my Communications class during the summer semester, I became friends with a woman who was in a sorority on campus. She took the time to explain to me what Greek life on MTSU campus was like, as well as the benefits of joining an organization on campus. I learned about the different philanthropies, the popular events of each chapter, and the purpose behind each chapter. The main draw for me was the impact sororities made through their international and local philanthropies. The women in the sororities raised money for organizations, such as the Make a Wish Foundation, the Ronald McDonald House, and the Arthritis Foundation. After many long discussions, I decided to take a

chance and go through recruitment in the fall. Even though I had no idea which group I would join, or even get accepted into, I knew that any of the organizations would be a great place for me to continue my involvement and passion for making a difference, as I had in high school.

## CHAPTER IV

### **The First Years of School: Fall 2012 to Fall 2013**

During my first fall semester of 2012, it was very scary going through the process of Panhellenic sorority recruitment. My mom had no clue what sorority recruitment was; she thought that I meant military recruitment. I struggled with self-doubt and wondering whether any of the sororities would want me to join. During this time, my mom was someone who provided me a great deal of comfort. She helped to remind me that my worth was not found in what the women in the Greek organizations thought of me, or which chapter on campus offered me a bid. Having her on my side throughout the entire process made me more confident in myself and what I had to offer.

As a part of the application process, the women going through recruitment had to complete an online application (similar to a resume). In my application, I listed my high school involvement, GPA, and interests. I went through a week-long recruitment where I spent time getting to know the women in different chapters and going through a process of mutual selection. Each night, different chapters would invite certain women back. With so many women going through Panhellenic recruitment, not all of the women were invited back to visit all of the chapters, and it was common knowledge that some women would not get a bid.

When going through recruitment, I found my place in Alpha Omicron Pi. It was then that I began to learn how getting involved on campus is one of the best decisions I could ever make when starting college. I gained many opportunities to make new friends and began to feel as though things were falling into place. I finally had found something

that I could devote myself to and apply myself in that would help me to establish strong relationships and leadership positions like those that I had had in high school. Even though schoolwork is something that many people think should be their main focus, I could not focus only on school for the next four years. I needed the opportunities to go to meetings and social events and to participate in philanthropy projects. I thrived in the environment where I was able to spend my time working with other women in order to achieve national recognition through the sorority.

My involvement in Greek Life is also where I learned about the Student Government Association (SGA) and decided to run for senator for the College of Behavioral and Health Sciences. After campaigning and running for this position, the executive board extended me an offer, and I gratefully accepted the opportunity. During my time in SGA, I learned about the inner workings of MTSU; it gave me a new appreciation for the university and helped me get to know a variety of faculty members and campus officials. By taking the time to get to know about the policies on campus and to help create legislation to make MTSU a better campus for its students, I learned how much I loved working towards improving campus and helping people in this way. The faculty were always appreciative whenever I was in my SGA uniform campaigning for different pieces of legislation or giving students free scantrons or candy during finals week.

It was also during fall of 2012 that I learned about EXL and honors classes. I jumped into taking 11 hours of honors coursework my first full-time semester of college. The professors were incredible, and it was in these classes where professors pushed me as

I had been pushed in high school. The classes were difficult and small in size. We were challenged to go into the community to complete hands-on, experiential learning activities. The time in those classes was irreplaceable, and I would highly recommend participating in EXL and honors courses to any qualified student wanting the extra challenge because these courses require you to apply and challenge yourself in ways that the non-honors courses do not. The classes also have extra projects to complete and higher expectations of students, and there is the opportunity to get to know professors better. In addition, I believe that the honors and EXL courses that I took prior to applying for nursing school helped me stand out from the other students during the application process.

Additionally, I also completed several different mathematics and science classes that were requirements for admission to nursing school. The anatomy and physiology classes were especially difficult because there was a huge amount of material to cover in a very short amount of time. Most of the information sounded similar and required a large amount of time studying for the information to register. I heard from sorority sisters who had taken these classes before they started nursing school that if you struggle in the anatomy and physiology classes, it was probably a bad idea to apply for nursing school. The women in nursing school before me said that nursing school classes were significantly more challenging because they covered additional information, such as how medications affect different body systems, what aging does to the body, how different developmental stages affect the body, and what nurses can do to ease their patients through different circumstances. Although these prerequisite classes challenged me with

the amount of material I was expected to learn, I was still able to make A's in both classes because I took the time to devote myself to studying adequately. The extra effort I put into the science classes made me a more competitive applicant.

After my first semester of college, I completely understood why many students take longer than four years to graduate. Students get a lot of pressure to choose a major that they can stay with for the next four years, and that is a big decision! With such a wide variety of classes to take and to choose from for the general education requirements (e.g., theater, communication, sciences, mathematics, English, health, etc.), it is easy to see why some students changed their interests or discovered a different area of study they wanted to pursue. A person cannot know what a particular major is going to be like in the advanced level courses until they reach that point after two years, and if they change their mind at that point, it would set them back tremendously. I was afraid of making the wrong decision because I did not want to be set back on my graduation. I had started college early with the intent to graduate on-time and knew that if I was set back, I would be disappointed in myself.

It can be a difficult process transitioning from high school, to college, to declaring a major, and then deciding what to do for the rest of your life. Personally, there was a lot of stress, uncertainty, and self-doubt during this time because I wanted to make the best decision for myself and please my parents at the same time. I lived at home during the first two years of college in order to save money, but my parents had high expectations for me. They wanted me to make all A's and to focus on school. Although this is not a bad or unreasonable thing to wish for your child, I needed to do more than just school. I

wanted to be involved and present on campus in as many ways as I could possibly be. Most of my desire to please people and do well came from wanting to please my parents. My parents believed that if I were not so involved on campus, I could make straight A's. To me, however, it was not worth one letter grade for me to miss time with my friends and doing the things with the organizations that I loved to do. I knew that in the end, I would not remember the one B that I earned on an exam, but I would remember the time spent during the Fight Song competitions and Panhellenic recruitment practices. Being at home gave them the opportunity to constantly monitor how much time and effort I put into my studies, who I was spending my time with, and how I was spending my time.

After working at Sonic Drive-In during my senior year of high school, I had established a core group of friends there and loved my time working with those people. However, my parents wanted me to work less so that I had more time to study. They wanted me to spend less time in meetings for my sorority, SGA, and volunteering in order to spend more time with them. My mom and dad accused me of pushing them to the back burner. In an attempt to find myself and devote myself to my work, school, and studies, I had essentially made spending time with them less of a priority in my life. Although this was unintentional, I felt it was necessary in order to accomplish everything that I wanted for my future. I felt guilty not being able to spend as much quality time with my family, and I missed the time that I was not spending with them. They always sent me pictures of what was happening and the home-cooked meals, and they gave me updates of things going on. My brother was intentional about visiting with my family every single week, but I had commitments almost every night of the week, and it seemed like I could

never find the time. Being involved and busy helped me meet new people, feel like I was making a difference, and have some sense of purpose in my life. As a result, I continued to distance myself from my parents until I eventually moved into the sorority house and out from being under their wings. This move was hard on my family because we had always been so close, but ultimately, it made us have to put more effort into spending time together, which oddly made it so I saw them more often than when I had lived with them. It also made the time more special.

There were 18 women who lived in the Alpha Omicron Pi sorority house on Greek Row. We lived in suites, with two women per bedroom and four per bathroom. One of my suite mates was Megan. She was in my recruitment group when I joined Alpha Omicron Pi in fall of 2012. We were not very close because I was always so busy, and we hung out with different groups of women. When we first began Alpha Omicron Pi together, she was very social and went out with the other members a lot. After our first semester, however, she began to change and started going to church a lot. Her personality shifted from being extremely social, and she began spending her time with a different group of women in the chapter. She talked about God a lot, and I did not understand what the difference was in her life. Because she had changed so much, I did not know what to think about living with her.

During my time living with Megan, she always appeared to be so relaxed and calm. She drank her coffee while reading her Bible and journaled for hours every single morning, whereas it seemed like I was always up studying at 5 a.m. in order to make it to my 8 a.m. classes. Then, I ran all day from different organization meetings to work and



finally back home around 11 p.m. I was exhausted and always on the go. It seemed to me that she, on the other hand, was completely rested. I did not know why, but somewhere deep down, I envied her. She had this contentment that was deep down. No matter what was going on in her life, she remained calm and collected, never frazzled. I had never seen anyone change like she had, so I didn't know what to think. After living with her, she did make me question what it was in my life that always made me anxious; I had a need to be constantly moving. I wanted what she had: the peace, the joy, and the rest. However, I believed that if I wanted to accomplish all of my goals, I could never have that relaxing lifestyle.

Throughout the time that I spent completing my general education requirements for nursing school, I was nervous that my hard work would not be enough. The nursing school entrance requirements were very high, and there were many different portions of the application to complete. There were GPA requirements, an interview in front of a board of nursing faculty, and a standardized Health Education Systems Incorporated (HESI) examination. The HESI score could determine whether a person was viewed as a competitive applicant or was dropped off the list and not even considered. Advisors cautioned me not to be too hopeful or confident that I would get a spot in the program because of the number of applicants applying for the program. Each semester, there were hundreds of applicants, but only 65 were ever offered a spot. I was told that without having a GPA of at least a 3.7, a HESI score of 88, a good interview score, and/or previous healthcare environment work experience, it was unlikely that I would get a spot.

This created anxiety and made me doubt myself, even though I had been doing everything I could possibly do to succeed for the last year and a half.

Because my advisor had discussed with me the high expectations for getting into nursing school, I was very nervous that I would not be admitted. Ever since I was young, I have struggled with feeling inadequate and self-doubt. When reading “Self-Doubt and Self-Esteem: A Threat from Within” by Hermann, Leonardelli, and Arkin (2004), I learned that there are people like me who struggle with self-doubt who “harbor doubts about their abilities, but who also have particularly strong concerns about performing successfully, and adopt a related but opposite strategy of over-achieving” (p. 395). This is something that I struggled with because I knew that even though I could possibly fail and may not be able to accomplish everything I wanted to, it was that fear of failing that made me want to work harder in order to achieve my goals. Thus, although many people have anxiety and doubt that hinders their ability to perform well, I discovered that a little bit of self-doubt is actually something that helped me push forward through the first few semesters of college. Even though people may have doubted my abilities, including me, I worked hard to make sure that I gave it my all and did what I set out to do.

After completing all of the steps for my application, I found out in the fall of 2013 that I had earned a spot in the Spring 2016 Middle Tennessee State University Nursing School cohort that would start the following semester. Even though various nursing students who I knew from Alpha Omicron Pi and SGA had cautioned me, I did not think that the program would be as difficult as they described. I believed that because I had been good enough to get into the program that the worst part was over. I was excited to

see what the program was like and how the coursework would challenge me, as well as to prove everyone else wrong regarding what I could accomplish. I thought that once I was accepted into the program, I would be okay for the rest of the time, as long as I continued to work hard.

In addition, I believed that my last five semesters would run more smoothly than the first few semesters taking general education courses had. Although I do not know exactly what made me think this way, after reflecting on my thought process at the time, I believe that I thought that the people who had warned me about the program were being overdramatic or maybe did not apply themselves to their studies as I did. Additionally, I believed that I could do whatever I needed to do. Admittedly, I was probably overconfident in my abilities and myself. I was overjoyed to be entering into one of the top nursing schools in the southeast and to begin taking classes that pertained to the actual career path I was pursuing.

## CHAPTER V

### Spring 2014: First Semester of Nursing School

After beginning nursing school, I had many classes that were introductory courses: Health and Gerontology, End-of-Life Care, Health Assessment, and Pathophysiology. The focus of the first semester was to introduce the students to what we would be doing as nurses through basic health assessments of patients and professionalism. Although the classes were definitely different and challenging compared to the classes I had taken previously, I was still able to make all A's in my nursing classes and to stay involved in all of my extracurricular activities. Alpha Omicron Pi nominated me for positions serving with the philanthropy committee, and the executive board chose me to be a Panhellenic Recruitment Counselor for prospective new members going through recruitment. Participating in this executive position required multiple meetings a week and several different training seminars in order to be prepared to counsel the women going through recruitment. This was stressful because the women looked to me as an example of what Greek Life was like and as someone they could go to with any concerns or questions at any time of the day. Although it may not have been one of the easiest positions, it was rewarding helping the women going through recruitment find their home chapters and begin their journey in a sorority like I had.

In addition, I was elected to hold the position of Vice President of Scholarship on the Panhellenic Executive Board that was over all of the sororities on campus. I also continued to hold my senator position on SGA and was re-elected for another year of service. Trying to balance these positions, nursing school, and work (approximately 35

hours a week), while living independently was hard, but staying busy helped me to focus and push myself to do my best.

Had I not been involved in so many organizations on campus where I was constantly surrounded by people, I do not think that my schooling would have gone as well as it had. As I discussed previously, it was through my involvement and relationships with people that I was able to remain sane. Although my grades possibly may have been higher had I studied more, I would not have been as happy or had the support that I needed to make it through each day.

One of the students who was in her final semester who was surveyed wrote about this similar experience by discussing how “this program expects the students to make nursing the single focus within their lives. What I find difficult is being successful while remaining unwilling to make nursing my only priority.” She further discussed how they refused to make nursing the sole focus in their life because of thoughts like,

what if I died tomorrow? Well, yes, I have a test tomorrow. But, my 88-year-old grandfather is coming into town and he wants to cook lunch and then catch up on life while sitting on the front porch. The answer will always be yes, I will not deny the opportunity. This has caused me to be slightly less successful in school when looking at the numbers, but has allowed me to grow as a person and learn how to maintain a well-balanced life.

Many students experience this struggle. Trying to find a balance between family, friends, school, and work can be challenging. Repeatedly, students who I surveyed wrote about

how their support system got them through nursing school (8 of the 17), 6 of the 17 stated that their biggest regret through school was not being able to spend enough time with their family and friends (5 of the 6 were in their fifth semester).

Although I had to sacrifice a lot of time with my friends and family, I finished the first semester of nursing school with a 4.0 GPA. I had tried to maintain as much of a balance as I possibly could, but I knew that it was my support system that helped me through the most. My parents were always there to support me and encourage me to perform my best and asked me about my progress regularly. I thought that by trying to find a balance between school and social life, I would be able to make it through nursing school without much trouble and that I could still see everyone as much as I had before school started. Additionally, in thinking about the upcoming semesters, I believed that the transitional semester was over and that the rest of the semesters would continue to be similar to the one I had just completed, where I could find that balance. I thought that mainly relying on myself to get through the hours of studying, my time with my friends for support, and my knowledge and/or ability to learn things quickly would be enough to get me through. By the end of that spring semester, I was extremely tired and ready to finally rest and recuperate for the upcoming school year.

It was incredible to think back on all that I had been able to accomplish in the last several years. I had gone from being a student in Wisconsin, to being an honors student at The Webb School, to being an honors student at MTSU, to being a nursing student at one of the best schools in this region of the country, and finally to making a 4.0 my first semester of nursing school. Not only was I in awe of what I had accomplished in my life,

I also had been awarded every position on campus that I had run for and could not believe how well things in my life were going. It was achieving all of the things in my life that I ever imagined that made me realize how unbelievable my journey had been.

Reflecting on the time that I had spent in college so far, I knew that everything in my life was far better than I could have imagined. When I first entered college, I never thought that I would be able to be so active on campus, while also being successful at work and making good grades at the same time. I began to wonder how everything had come to be the way that it was. I started to realize that there must be someone or something else out there that had to be planning or guiding me through everything. It was then that I began to examine where my faith had been and where I wanted it to be. Whereas many people experience a pivotal moment, such as a crisis, that causes them to reevaluate their faith, it took me some time to figure out what it was that caused me to begin such a significant turn-around.

When I took the time to intentionally sit down and think about what was leading me to re-evaluate my belief in God, I began to see that there were seeds that had been planted along the way. My family had not raised me in the church, so I knew that they were not the ones who were causing this change. After seeing the change that my suitemate Megan had experienced, however, I knew that there was a change that people experienced when they became a Christian that I never understood before. I was able to see firsthand how she loved people in our sorority with so much intentionality and patience, and how she lived with a peace that I had never seen before. Although I may

have thought that she was a little odd at first, I began to see that my feelings towards her were jealousy and misunderstanding.

After years of always rushing from place to place, working until after midnight, going to class early, studying instead of sleeping, and being exhausted, I thought about what it would be like to live a life that was about more than just pleasing other people. I became fascinated with how Megan lived, and after a year of sitting back and watching her change, I decided to ask her for coffee so that we could talk about what it was in her life that had led her to change in such a significant way. I began to envision what it would be like to rest each morning, rather than immediately jumping up and rushing through the day, trying to complete innumerable little check boxes on my “to do” lists. It was during this time when I realized that I wanted something to change in my life, too.



## CHAPTER VI

### Summer of 2014

During the summer before my junior year of college and my second semester in nursing school, several things began to change in my life. I took the time to intentionally sit down to think about how everything in my life had ended up the way it had (in the most positive and incredible way), and I began to reexamine my belief in God. I came from a family who had never practiced Christianity, or any other form of religion for that matter. My family was unsure what to think when I decided to move out of the sorority house and back in with them, but they were definitely excited to welcome me home. I also decided to break up with my boyfriend, who I had been with for over a year. Although I did not know exactly why I felt I should do these things, I decided that it would be good to work towards changing myself.

Although my family and I did not understand why I was changing all of these things, I knew that I was slowly pruning out everything in my life that had been holding me back from being truly happy. Even though I thought that I had been happy with everything in my life, I think that I knew deep down that something was missing. My entire life, I had been motivated merely by what I wanted to accomplish in order to gain other people's approval, rather than being motivated to actually make a difference. I sought out people like Megan and some of my other sorority sisters who were Christians to ask them about their beliefs, and I began meeting with Megan every week to talk and get to know her better. She listened to me talk about how I envied her and that I thought her change was incredible; we discussed her past, her family, and what had been the

major change in her life. The time that I spent meeting with Megan helped me to solidify my faith and showed me that the change that Megan experienced was what I was going through, as well. She was the person who I looked to as an example of who I wanted to be.

In the summer of 2014, Megan helped me try to figure out how I needed to change my life in order to represent the Christian beliefs that I was beginning to understand. We read the Bible together and thought about how we could be better “imitators of Christ,” like it says in one Corinthians 11:1. I reflected on what it was that I wanted to be. After working at Sonic for almost three years, I decided that it was time for me to make a change. Although I loved my time with the people there, a lot of it was spent complaining about other people we worked with or customers who were mean. In addition, there were customers who degraded me and did not make me feel good about myself simply because I worked in “fast food.” This caused a lot of insecurity and made me question why I still worked there. Although I had friends and my coworkers respected me, because I had worked there for so long, I knew that my heart was not in it anymore. Going into work began to feel more like a chore rather than something to do with friends, like it had been when I first started.

As a result, after a long period of deliberating, I decided that switching to a job working with children at a facility that focused on helping people and encouraging employees was what I needed. I had always loved babysitting and working with children and knew that after volunteering at Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital I would love to work in pediatric nursing. I decided to focus on living a more joyful life and pursuing my

passion for children by working at a local preschool. I applied for a job at Primrose Preschool, and the management offered me the position on the spot. The new job change was very positive, and every night I went home and was thankful for the time I had spent loving on those sweet children all day.

At the end of each day, I went up to my room and read for hours in my Bible and different Christian books. I also began attending a southern Baptist church called City Church and focused on doing things that were purposefully relaxing for me. Because I had always been a person who worked and was in constant motion, taking time to work towards my overall health and well-being was something that I was not used to doing. I had never taken the time to make sure that I was sleeping enough, eating healthy, painting and crafting for enjoyment, or learning about how I could be my absolute best for me. Finally, I was able to take the time for myself and do all of these things. This made a big impact in my life and helped me understand why Megan had spent so much time relaxing and making time for things that she enjoyed doing, and we became extremely close. Her presence in my life during this time had an impact on me.

Some of my favorite memories from this summer are the times I spent relaxing with family and hanging out with my friends. My entire life, I had struggled to feel an inner sense of peace and belonging. I thought that working and staying busy was what people wanted or expected. As I continued reading in my Bible and meeting up with people from my church, I began to see that I did not have to earn people's love or put so much effort into trying to please them. The more I dove into scripture and tried to get to know people in my community, the more I learned that by putting my focus on being

happy and creating a less stressful schedule, I could achieve the sense of peace that I had always wanted, but never knew I needed.

## CHAPTER VII

### Fall 2014: Second Semester of Nursing School

After a summer filled with relaxation and peace, I came back to school to begin my second semester of nursing school. Not knowing what to expect, we dove head first into a very stressful first week back at school learning new skills needed for our very first clinical rotation. On top of new skills that the nursing cohort needed to know, there were deadlines, exams, papers, projects, and various other things that were due that were continuously overlapping. For my very first clinical rotation, I was assigned to work with the elderly at a nursing home/assisted living facility in town. I had never worked with this population or done any type of work that was nursing-related, so everything that we did was very new to me.

Having a rotation where we had to complete extensive paperwork on medical histories, to administer various medications, and to create care plans, as well as various other things discussed daily with our instructors, made it very challenging to balance. My nursing student cohort at MTSU mainly worked alongside the certified nurse techs in order to learn how to communicate with patients, read charts, learn about diseases and medications, and perform basic skills, such as feeding/rotating/bathing/putting ted hose on (which is harder than you'd think). Although these tasks were not what I thought I would be doing for those 8-hour rotations, I did enjoy my time getting to know all of the patients at the facility. I liked the relational aspect of nursing, the appreciation from the patients and their families, and the fact that we were able to see the tangible difference we made in their lives during each shift. After that semester, I definitely felt more like a

nurse and was excited to see what else was out there at the other facilities. However, it did make me nervous realizing how much we were responsible for and how many people were overseeing everything we were doing.

During this time, I had a difficult time with anxiety related to my clinical experiences. It was challenging to find a healthy balance between the number of hours in clinicals, studying, and family. When analyzing the responses from the qualitative survey about what was the most difficult aspect of nursing school for them, the top three categories that all students wrote about were time management, the amount of work/studying, and difficulty maintaining a social life. Many students specifically connected their most difficult aspect of nursing school to their biggest regret. Although only one student from the first semester stated that she didn't have any regrets about nursing school, all of the students in their fifth semester wrote down at least one regret. Struggling to find a balance between social and school life continued to be an issue; four of the students reported that trying to find a balance between school and personal lives was hardest. Comments like "learning to say no to social events and giving my all to studying" and "I've spent a lot of nights in my books, when I could have been playing with my son. Missing time with him has been the most difficult for me" demonstrated how many of the students have to sacrifice when furthering their education. Even though the students stated that they did not regret their decision to go to nursing school, they did wish they had been able to find some sort of a balance in their lives so they did not have to miss out on so many things.

Although the struggle to find a balance of everything in my life continued, the semester went smoothly overall and had few bumps in the road. It was extremely difficult because of the time that was required for our clinical experiences and schooling, but I tried my hardest to scrape up any time I could to spend with my family and friends. When trying to find that time, however, I also decided to start my position as an executive officer for Panhellenic and continued being an officer for SGA. On top of everything else, I was still working at Primrose Preschool about 30 hours a week. My time management skills were strong because of trying to balance everything and keep up with deadlines. So, even though there were not any major events that happened in the semester, it was trying to find some rest time that was the most important thing for me.

Even though the students' experiences through school were more stressful than anticipated and required more time management skills, 8 of the 17 students specifically mentioned that having a passion for nursing behind their decision to enter nursing school helped them endure. There were several comments regarding how it was looking towards their future career as a nurse that made their difficult times in nursing school worth it. Personally, this is definitely something that a student trying to enter nursing school needs to keep in mind. College is rigorous and will challenge students in unimaginable ways; however, if a person has a deep passion for what they want to do in their future, remembering that everything they go through in school is a means to an end can definitely help when reminding them that what they are enduring is not meaningless.

Although it was stressful driving from place to place every day and never having time to rest, I was continuously looking towards the future, knowing that one day, there

would not be so much going on. I was exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally from the constant moving around and not spending time with my family and friends. The support that my group of friends at church provided helped me immensely during this time. They showed me where to look for support that was outside of myself and where I could find strength when mine was not enough. I reminded myself about what I had learned when reading Veith's (2002) *God at Work* that "work often appears meaningless. It is a means to an end-survival; but it seems that we survive only to work" (p. 15). I did not want to view my schooling as work or think that everything I was going through in nursing school was meaningless. Instead, I tried to consistently remind myself that what I was struggling with during that time was temporary and that my future career in nursing was not going to be like my time in nursing school. There were times when I would see the healing of my patients, unlike the example pictures in my nursing textbooks. Thinking about what my future life as a nurse would look like helped me to make it through the semester.

As the semester moved forward, I debated whether my heart was truly in nursing. Although I enjoyed the course work and clinical experiences, I never had time to do anything for myself. There was no time to read books that I wanted to read and no time for going to social events through my sorority or SGA, and I never was able to spend time with my newborn nephew and family. I missed having free time, and I debated frequently as to whether it was worth losing so much that I loved. Ultimately, I decided to focus on enjoying the little time that I had free and making the most of that time. The time that I had available was spent mostly with my friends from my church. Although I



never was able to spend as much time with people as I wanted to, I did appreciate the little that I had.

With so many different things happening throughout the semester, many of the students who completed the qualitative survey discussed how they used the time they had available to do things for coping. Although everyone copes in different ways (I do it through church activities and people), the students who filled out the survey all said that there were specific activities that helped them the most. Students emphasized that they had to find ways to cope in order to make it to the end. They discussed that they used activities like exercising, reading, music, and painting to relieve some of the stress experienced from their schooling. Of the 17 students surveyed, 5 of them specifically said that it was through their faith in God that they were able to cope with the challenges of nursing school. From prayer, to reading scripture, to having faith in God's plans, those students wrote about how much their faith helped them when they were struggling. It was interesting to compare the students from the first semester to the fifth/final semester, because first semester students mainly only mentioned that their faith in God was an integral part of their lives. In the final semester, students, however, discussed specifically how they trusted God through their time in nursing school and His plans for their futures. I was able to relate to how these students felt and the ways that they were able to stay sane throughout their time in the program.

When thinking about how my religiosity helped me through my difficult times in school, it is incredible to realize what a difference it made for me. Although many people may not understand how someone's faith or religion can help them get through tough

moments, my faith has made the largest impact for me. Of the 13 students who identified their level of religiosity as a 7 or higher, 8 of them responded with their faith being something that helped them make it through school. Whereas it is difficult to prove that one's faith in a higher power has a physical impact, many people attempt to study the impact it makes. In the article "Spiritual Health, Clinical Practice Stress, Depressive Tendency and Health-Promoting Behaviours among Nursing Students," Hsiao, Wu, Chien, Chiang, and Huang (2010) discuss how nursing students' spirituality has an effect on their physical well-being. Throughout their study, they discussed how much spirituality and religiosity impact levels of stress and depression in students. Specifically, they mentioned that faith can "empower people to discover the meaning and purpose of life when suffering from illness or hardship" (p. 1614). It is through prayer, reading, and spending time in Christian community that the other students who wrote about their religiosity in the surveys and I were able to "successfully face and manage sources of stress and reduce the impact of stress on health" (p. 1614) as discussed in the article. By the end of the semester, my nursing class was tired and ready for Christmas break. We were so happy to be one more semester closer to graduating! However, we were anxious because we had heard that Adult Health I (known as Med-surg by the students) was the most difficult class/semester to get through. It was going to be a stressful Christmas break waiting for the third semester to start, but it was exciting to know that after the upcoming semester, it was going to get easier. Students in the semester cohorts before ours had told us that the third semester was the hardest, but after that, it would not be nearly as bad and was downhill from there.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **Spring 2015: Third Semester of Nursing School**

According to the students who were ahead of us, third semester had the hardest classes of all, and one class was known to challenge students in completely new ways. These classes were challenging because they delved into the difficult material of disease processes and how they affect the body, as well as different ways to treat them rather than simply memorizing basic nursing skills and assessments. We were learning the inner-workings of hospitals and what different areas, like labor and delivery, neonatal intensive care unit, newborn nursery, and postpartum, and medical-surgical floors looked like.

That semester, I spent a great deal of my time at Saint Thomas Rutherford Hospital for my clinical rotations. The hospital was a beautiful facility that had friendly nurses, but the number of patients the nurses cared for was outrageous. I could not believe that nurses were responsible for eight patients each shift and the amount of responsibility they had. Although I understood the issues of having too many staff on the floors and working within a budget, I did not understand why the staff had to be stretched so thin. It was because of the amount of work required during the clinical day and that our clinical instructors were constantly watching what we were doing that made this rotation so stressful. Clearly, being a student and starting out, we had a lot to learn in terms of interacting with patients, but it was hard to show how proficient we were as students when people were watching over our shoulders.

I learned during that time that I prefer the hospital setting more than the long-term care setting. I enjoyed the more acute care disease processes and learning about the different procedures, testing, and surgeries that had been performed. There was constant

commotion on the units, which is something that I always enjoyed. I was able to care for people in some of their hardest times, and that helped me feel like I was making a difference. Although there was a lot of paperwork to fill out, performing the interviews in order to get to know the patients was something I thoroughly enjoyed. It made me feel like I was helping people by taking the time to get to know them, when normally nurses have a lot to do and cannot always sit and visit with patients.

During, this time I learned what it looks like to be a Christian in the nursing profession. During my clinical rotation at St. Thomas Rutherford Hospital, I spoke with the nurses about what they enjoyed most about their jobs. They explained to me that you cannot always bring up faith with patients, but sometimes patients will ask about it, and the nurse can open up with them and talk. I loved learning about facilities that have Christian values at the core of their organizational mission and wanted to be able to take part in that. Although there are many facilities that do not allow people to talk about their faith, it was refreshing to learn that not all places are like that.

In my personal journey with God, I learned more about what it was like to try and balance everything in my life. I learned that sometimes it can be difficult to work time into my schedule for a moment of quiet time each morning, and that every once in a while, it may be better to read before bed or in the afternoon before work. Taking the time to read during each day, even if it was only a few passages, made all of the difference. I felt like I was not on this walk through nursing school alone, and that I could always take a moment to rest in the fact that everything in my life was not solely on my shoulders. I learned to depend on others, rather than relying on my own strength. My

friends from City Church consistently checked up on me, went to the library to bring me coffee, and made time to come over to do homework with me. Through their acts of love for me I was able to see how God had strategically placed them all in my life at this specific time.

By walking through the semester with friends from church, it helped me to remember all of the support that I had with me. I did not have to worry about keeping everything together or wondering if people would be there for me if I ever needed help with anything. In addition to the support that I had from my church friends, I also had my sorority sisters in Alpha Omicron Pi for encouragement. My best friends from the sorority left me encouraging notes on my car door, and would leave me flowers at my house when I had a hard day at clinical or take me for ice cream to celebrate after a test. What kept me moving forward throughout this difficult semester was the support from my friends. I was constantly reminded of how blessed I was to have everyone in my life.

By the end of the semester, I began to prepare for fourth semester. The nursing students ahead of mine had told us that Adult Health 2 (also known as Critical Care) was challenging, but doable. I knew that the clinical rotations in the upcoming semester at the hospitals were the longest I would have throughout all of my time in nursing school and that some students would have to drive almost two hours for clinicals, but they said that the class was something I could handle if I made it through Med-surg. So, I took my time to focus on finishing my exams successfully and decided to continue pushing forward as I had been.

## CHAPTER IX

### Summer 2015: Church Internship

The summer following my junior year, my church offered an internship program for college students. The program gave students a chance to see what the inner-workings of the church looked like and to learn more about God and what a future working in a church environment looked like. I decided to apply for the internship after finishing my fourth semester because I knew that it would be a great way to deepen my faith because there would be theology professors coming from around the country to speak with us. After applying, I had to participate in an interview process with our pastors at the church and complete an essay on why I wanted to participate in the program. Upon completion of the interview process, I was given the opportunity to start the program.

I entered into the full-time, unpaid internship program at the church and began working fewer hours for Primrose. I knew that this time would be incredible working alongside 11 other college students at my church and taking the time to learn more about Christianity, God, and where I stood in my faith. The internship involved theology classes taught by seminary professors, biblical counselors, writers for the Gospel Coalition, international missionaries, and members on staff at our church. We read 15 theological books and wrote reflection papers about what we were reading and discussing weekly. In addition, I was able to complete volunteer work at Greenhouse Ministries and took a trip to Wilmington, NC, for a church plant visit at The Bridge Church. We covered topics on evangelism, discipleship, culture, biblical counseling, church planting, and worship, as well as many other aspects of Christianity.

We also were required to intern under various members on staff at our church. There were people who interned under the children's ministry, college, technical, and music areas. However, I chose to intern as a pastoral research intern alongside our lead pastor. I decided that if my goal of the internship was to learn as much as I possibly could about Christianity, interning with the man in charge of delivering the messages each week would be a great idea. I learned about the importance of continuing to learn throughout life and to dig deeper into why I believe what I believe. I had never thought of the importance of reading different theological texts, researching different things happening in the world, or finding ways to learn new things about Christianity. However, after working with our pastor, he showed me how important it is to continuously push yourself to learn more and how that can affect the relationships we have with others and help others deepen their faith, as well.

My favorite aspect of the internship program, though, was living with a family who attended City Church. Although many people in my family and group of friends did not understand why I wanted to move in with a family I did not know, I was excited to get to know the family to whom I was assigned. Throughout the 10-week internship, I lived with the Smiths. I was able to experience, for the first time ever, what it was like to see a family be actively involved in church, leading small groups, and living a Christian marriage. This was something that I was not used to seeing because my family had never been involved in a church before. I loved how we would pray together before meals, discuss how the sermon from the weekend applied to our lives, and be open and honest about the things that we were struggling with. I lived life alongside them, watching them

parent and enjoying the time I had each evening eating dinner as a family. They welcomed me into their home and constantly asked what I was learning. My own family was hurt that I would not move home with them, that I continued to pay rent for my apartment, and that I instead moved in with a family of strangers. However, each time I called my parents, I talked to them about everything I was learning through living with the family. They liked to know that I was still thinking about them and that I continued to reach out to them. I was accountable for how often I visited with my parents and how I talked to my mom. They challenged me to be a light in my family, when no one else was. By living with them during my internship, I was able to gain a second family that supported and challenged me.

Although I knew that I could definitely be a nurse and live my life in a way that glorified God, I learned so much about other areas of the world that needed help. Through the messages shared from the international missionaries, I learned about ways that I could go to places in need of help around the world and work in any way I could. I had the opportunity to one day use my nursing skills to volunteer with medical missions and provide care for people who may never receive help otherwise. I wanted to leave immediately to serve, whether that was in Haiti, Africa, India, or the Dominican Republic; however, I knew that staying in nursing school and receiving a degree would be a wiser decision for me at the time and that I could use my nursing skills one day. So, I set that idea aside for a while in order to focus on finishing nursing school.

During this time that I was debating how to incorporate ministry into my nursing career, I thought about getting a masters in Health after graduating from nursing school.



By doing this, I could then apply for seminary school and eventually work for a mission's board with the groups of medical mission teams sent out to different locations around the world. I knew that no matter what, however, I needed to finish nursing school and get at least a year or two of experience in nursing if I wanted to accomplish that dream.

Thinking this way helped me to see how there are options for where to work outside of hospitals and long-term care facilities.

During my time working with my church, I knew that there was a way to incorporate everything I was learning that summer into my current studies in nursing and my future career. We discussed what a vocation was and that I did not have to work in a church to be living my life for God. In *God at Work*, Veith (2002) discusses how the word vocation comes from the Latin word "calling," and how, even as a nurse, I can do God's work through my job. As Veith says, God "grants healing through the vocations of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians, and the like. It is still God who heals us, but He works through the means of skilled, talented, divinely equipped human beings" (p. 14). I loved the idea of being someone who God had uniquely equipped for his purposes in the world. I had never thought of the ways that God made me how I was, or that I was given gifts in order to help other people. By thinking about nursing as my vocation, I was able to better understand how valuable my skills will be one day, and how much I could help people heal by being His hands in the world around me.

The internship gave me a sense of purpose beyond what I was studying and taught me that it did not matter where I was placed or what I was doing, as long as I was able to show how much I cared about other people and helping them through my career. I did

research throughout the summer on how to bring God into my work and what some of the conflicts were around doing that in today's culture, but also received a lot of insight into different possibilities pursuing medical missions through Christian organizations or working for Christian hospitals. Although international medical missions may not ever be something I do long term, I can remind myself that my vocation as a nurse matters, regardless of the location.

When reading *Life on Mission* (Coe & Willis, 2014) for my church internship, I learned how important it is to sacrifice for people around us. Much of nursing involves sacrificing one's time, energy, and physical strength into patients; however, Coe and Willis reminded me that "sacrificially investing in others is anchored in the ability to have a care for them that drowns out our own ability to focus on self. And when believers join as a community and together invest their lives in those around them; they reflect Jesus in a more powerful way that they could ever imagine" (p. 121). Reading this book helped me to bring my major choice into the light and better appreciate the difference I can make in my patients and their families lives. During some of the darkest moments, I can play a role in bringing healing and peace; that is such a gift.

## CHAPTER X

### Fall 2015: Fourth Semester of Nursing School

I began my fourth semester with the course Critical Care. Because MTSU has a small nursing school, the students in the program had all talked with other students from other semesters about what to expect in upcoming semesters. After hearing that Critical Care was not supposed to be as difficult as Med-surg, we were shocked to learn that MTSU had decided to restructure the program and change the exam and grading policies. Even though we knew that the changes in the program were to help the program become stronger, we felt like we had gotten the short end of the stick because we were the first cohort to have to deal with the drastic changes in the program.

The classes no longer counted assignments or projects towards the grades. The only thing that factored into the final grades in each course was the exam grades. The faculty changed their exams to test with questions similar to those on the National Council Licensing Examination (also referred to as the NCLEX), and the questions contained multiple answers that were correct, but we had to determine which option was “most correct.” The students in my nursing cohort studied and took the exams, only to find out that all of the possible answers could be possible options. I would study for hours and hours for the exams (far more than I ever had), but my grades continued to be in the low 70’s, which was considered a failing grade. I was not alone; of the 17 students who I surveyed, 5 of them wrote that the grading scale and program changes were the most difficult aspects of nursing school.

The testing procedures also changed; we had to put all of our belongings along the walls, and we could only use a pencil. We could no longer bring tissues, water, coffee, or anything else with us to the exams. Also, there were usually at least three professors who would walk around the room to ensure that no one cheated on the exam or was breaking any of the policies. We could no longer write our names on the tests, ask questions during the exam, or go to the bathroom during a test. There were no longer make-up exams or leniency for coming into an exam late because of a car accident. If you did not take an exam, the final counted twice, and that was it.

Many of the students who I surveyed wrote about how the changes that occurred throughout the time in nursing school made it extremely hard to go through. Because of the changes in the structure and material of exams, studying was even harder. The program was trying to make the students think in ways that would help us with the licensing exam, but it was something that people were not accustomed to. One student in particular wrote that “the most difficult aspect of nursing school for me is studying. I’ve spent a ton of hours preparing materials for exams by reading, doing online quizzes, etc., but sometimes that doesn’t always reflect back on my test scores which leaves me frustrated and almost in tears.” This was a common complaint among students because many of the nursing students study harder than they have ever had to; however, it does not show when grades are posted.

I also was still trying to conquer the world by holding an executive position as Vice President of Philanthropy in my sorority. Although this experience was great for my resume and was a way for me to work on my leadership, delegation, and planning skills, I

had difficulty allocating enough time to studying for the exams. My leadership positions and position at Primrose Preschool were areas of my life that I was not willing to give up. Being a leader and working with children were what I was passionate about and made the semester easier to cope with. By staying active in these activities, I was able to stay sane amidst the chaos of everything happening around me. I loved being a leader and working with children, so my time spent doing those things actually made it easier to cope.

I also asked students from my research about their coping strategies, and 8 of the 17 people said that the time they spent with family and friends was their primary coping strategy. In addition, 9 of 17 students described different activities, such as taking day trips, painting, reading, or praying, as activities they used to cope during hard times. Even though people had different responses to the questions, the major themes were spending time doing enjoyable activities and looking towards the “end goal”; 7 of the 17 students surveyed specifically mentioned that remembering this time was temporary and that it would end is what helped them the most. Although there are sacrifices with time spent with family, friends, and doing things that we enjoyed, remembering that there would be a day when we could resume all of those activities helped us push through.

During this semester, however, because school was my main priority, and I had so many other activities that I was committed to, as well, I had to work out my schedule to set aside enough time to study and do school work; otherwise, there were obligations to my sorority because I was responsible for planning their philanthropy events. That semester, I had to plan the annual “Smoke Out Arthritis” Barbecue in order to raise money for our international philanthropy, The Arthritis Foundation. This required a lot of

time planning, contacting local sponsors, organizing assignments of each chapter member in the sorority, and ordering the equipment needed for the day of the event. The entire event was on my shoulders, and I had to stay up late at night to finish everything that needed to be done each day. Although I did have a committee to help me with the silent auction baskets and finding local donations, a lot of the delegation and responsibilities of finalizing the event was my responsibility. This position took a lot of time away from studying and caused stress because the success of the event was on me. Occasionally, I debated whether it was a good idea to continue working in this position because I never had time to rest. I did not want to disappoint anyone or make backing out of commitments a habit, so I tried to hang in there. I knew that my time in the position was temporary and that it would end soon, and then maybe life would be calmer.

In addition to my job, sorority positions, and schoolwork, I also began to write my honors thesis. I was working towards writing a thesis that involved nursing as a vocation; however, struggling through the semester made it challenging to even find time to shower. During this time, I read until late hours of the night trying to complete the research needed to supplement this thesis. My thesis advisor challenged me to think deeply about what I wanted from my nursing career and encouraged me in my studies. She also consistently reminded me that the program was challenging, but that if I put my mind to it, I could finish what I started. I appreciated my advisor's constant encouragement and guidance throughout the semester.

As the semester continued to progress in ways that I did not understand, I grew very frustrated with myself and anxious. I began to have severe test anxiety and disliked

the class. I had never struggled with anything school-related before, and it made me feel defeated. No matter how many hours I set aside to study, it did not seem to make a difference with my exam grades. The passing grade for nursing school was a 75%, and I was barely making 70's. It seemed like the harder I worked in school and in my executive positions, the worse I did in Critical Care. Resentment grew as I struggled, and I became very confused and bitter.

The more I continued to fail, the closer and tighter I hung onto my daily Bible reading and community of believers. It seemed like the more I tried to align my life with Jesus, the more I disliked nursing school. I repeatedly read my Bible to find encouragement. Verses like Ephesians 6:7: “work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” and Colossians 3:17: “let the loveliness of our Lord, our God, rest on us, confirming the work that we do. Oh, yes. Affirm the work that we do” were verses that helped me to remember that I was working for more than just a passing grade. Trying to realign my thinking to make it so my schoolwork was honoring the Lord helped me to remember what was truly important and where my worth was. I continuously tried to remind myself that, no matter the outcome, I had worked hard, and God's view of me would never change.

Thinking back on my life, I had never struggled or had this much difficulty in school before. Critical Care was an extremely hard class, and although I felt like I knew the material, this was never reflected on my exams. At the end of what I considered to be my hardest and darkest semester, I ended up failing the class by 1% (a 74%) and was devastated. With all of the hard work and dedication I put into things, I had never, ever

failed or even come close to failing at anything. I always seemed to have everything figured out, and for the first time ever, things went differently from what I had envisioned for myself. This caused me to question whether I had done something wrong and if I could continue to set aside time to read every day when I needed the extra time to study.

My family was furious that I had failed the class and would be held back a semester. They did not understand why things had been so difficult for me, especially since I was the child who always had worked so hard for everything to go right. I tried to tell them that the class was a hard class and that it was not because I did not apply myself, but they did not understand. I finally explained to them that I was just as upset as they were because I had worked diligently all semester, and it still was not enough. I told them that I had never failed at anything, so it would be great if they could at least understand that and give me a minute to process what was in front of me. After that conversation, they decided that because we could not fix it, I needed to simply move forward and do better the next time. Trying to collect myself, however, was the hardest thing I had ever had to do.

That semester, I developed many coping strategies. Although some of them did not work for me as effectively as I needed them to, others of them did help. With the test anxiety, I found that when I practiced deep breathing and focused on relaxing or working backwards on the exam, my mind was clearer, and I would not panic as much when the exams were distributed. I also spent a lot of time relying on my friends and family. I talked to them about what was going on and what help I needed. I knew that having a great support system was important for me. Another thing that I did while studying was



to take baths with a lot of essential oils, candles, and hot chocolate. Although I personally do not know of any research on the benefits of drinking hot cocoa while studying, it is something that definitely helped me relax.

In the end, making it to the end of the semester seemed like a miracle. After focusing on my relationship with God the entire summer, going into a semester that was as difficult as this one was a challenge. I wanted to believe that I had failed the class for a reason, and that God was using my failure for His glory. Trying to think this way, however, was very hard. I had friends who encouraged me from quotes in Christian books like Coe and Willis' (2014) *Life on Mission* because they knew how defeated I felt. They reminded me that "when things seem bleak and hopeless, God shows up and breathes life into our situation" (p. 37). They also reminded me that even though the world around us has its imperfections and that I face struggles every single day, it is "God's mission to take what is broken and redeem it-not simply to make it better but to make it new. And the exciting part is that God Himself invites us to follow Him into a broken world" (p. 30). It was talking with my friends, reading different books, and taking time to sit and process what had occurred that helped me begin to feel a little bit of peace.

## CHAPTER XI

### **Spring 2016: Repeating Fourth Semester of Nursing School**

Because I had to repeat my Critical Care course, I was set back an entire semester for graduation. Trying to gather myself to move forward through that time was very difficult and involved a lot of reevaluation of what I wanted to do and why I was in nursing school. The majority of my time was spent trying to find the passion again and taking time to figure out how to study differently and think about the material in new ways. I developed anxiety because I knew if I failed the class again, I would be kicked out of nursing school. There was so much pressure to be successful that it was challenging to focus on anything else. I started asking around about finding someone to study with and began a strict study schedule for the entire semester. Although this was different from what I had always done, I knew that if I did not pass this class again, I would fail nursing school.

When it was test time, I had to sit for a minute after I was handed the exam to gather my thoughts, deep breathe, and remind myself that I knew the material. From never having anxiety related to exams to having full blown panic attacks leading up to the exams, I had to train myself to think positively, instead of negatively, in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed. The other nursing students who had also failed the class were struggling with the same thing; going through the class again together made it much better and helped us all bear the weight together, knowing we were not in it alone.

After taking the time to solely focus on Critical Care, I learned that the more I talked through different clinical situations with my peers, watched videos, re-listened to

lectures, and learned every single disease process, medication, diagnostic test, and potential outcome, the better my grades would be on the exams. This time, I was able to pass the class with an 86%. The professor helped us every step of the way by identifying ways we were thinking incorrectly and encouraging us to take a deep breath and trust our initial judgment. In the end, the meetings we had with our professor and working together in study groups that made the biggest difference for all of us. I never thought that studying with a group would be helpful or something that I needed. I had always thought that group studying was a waste of time because I could not focus on the material I needed to study or would have to move at a different pace.

In terms of trying to find my passion for nursing again, I worked hard to continue to pursue a relationship with God. I tried to pray throughout the day, apply scripture to different situations, and meet up with my friends from church whenever it was possible. When re-reading different quotes from Veith (2002) in *God at Work*, I was able to apply a lot of truth to where I was at the time. I was reminded that “trials and tribulations, even failure, keep Christians aware of their weakness, aware of their utter dependence on God. And it gives them empathy for their neighbors in need and a desire to serve them out of love” (p. 149). Out of this desire to serve people and help them as my friends had been helping me, I decided to sign up for a mission trip to visit La Represa in the Dominican Republic over Spring Break with my friend Megan.

Going to the Dominican Republic was one of the best things that I could have ever decided to do. I was able to care for people in all aspects of their health: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. My time in the Dominican reminded me how there

are so many people in the world who desperately need our care, attention, and love. Remembering how many people are in hospitals and facilities in the United States who I could care for every day in my future profession gave me a chance to understand the impact that my future career could have. Megan continuously pushed me to discuss how my thoughts were changing about nursing and to think about how my time out of the country could change my outlook on life in general.

It was through my time working with the children and elderly in La Represa that I was reminded of how excited I had once been to enter into a profession where I could make a tangible difference in people's lives every day. How many people can say that? I was reminded of all of the time that I had spent learning about vocations and callings. It was in the Dominican Republic that God reminded me that He was bringing me through every struggle and that He was with me every step of the way. It was thinking this way that renewed my passion and excitement for nursing. Even though I was having a hard time with Critical Care, I tried to stay focused on remembering that God had me where I was for a reason and that I could make it through.

Once I returned to the United States to finish out the semester, I found it difficult to continue working on my thesis. I was so engrossed with my time in the Dominican Republic and on finishing out the semester strong that my thesis was pushed to the back burner. Although I knew I could apply all of the vocational research and my experiences to my thesis project, it was difficult for me to write about the actual nursing tasks that I would be completing. My advisor was a nursing faculty member, and she knew that my passion was more rooted in my love for God, rather than in nursing. After meeting with

her, she encouraged me to focus on making it through my Critical Care class and finishing nursing school, rather than trying to finish my thesis. My thesis advisor knew that my main passion was in Christianity and that I would have loved the possibility of pursuing ministry work. She advised me that it was not too late to quit nursing school and pursue something else, like seminary school. She knew that I was questioning whether finishing nursing school was worth the struggle, and she wanted me to be able to invest all of my time and energy into passing if that was what I needed to do. We discussed how much of the Christian aspects were in my thesis proposal and how little I had included about nursing. She said that she could tell when I talked about nursing that I did not have the same light-up reaction and passion that I had when I talked about God and my faith. She encouraged me to be realistic about finishing my thesis and my opinion of nursing as the main topic of my thesis. As a professor in nursing, she thought it would be better to choose a different topic for my thesis. She recommended that for the time being, I focus on nursing school and finish out the semester strong, rather than finishing a thesis on a nursing topic that was no longer a great fit for me. Although this was very tough to hear, she wanted to help me figure out what it was that I wanted out of nursing school first. It added in self-doubt regarding whether or not I should continue my thesis about nursing or switch to a completely different topic that interested me more. After meeting with the honors college though, I decided to continue pushing forward with my thesis and to change my topic instead.

## CHAPTER XII

### Fall 2016: Fifth Semester of Nursing School

At the start of my fifth semester of nursing school, I realized that there was still so much to think about and do before graduating in December. My nursing class had to fill out packets of paperwork to register for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX), take pictures for the nursing school composites, complete over 200 hours of clinical work, and continue studying and completing the course load from previous semesters. I also had to begin working on resumes, job applications, and studying for the NCLEX. A sense of excitement was in the air, but I was nervous because I had made it so far and could not afford to make any mistakes in the final months. I also had to make sure that we took our senior pictures and turned in paperwork for graduating.

There were many things to consider as I was debating on what I wanted to do after graduation. I was getting excited about what was up ahead, but still worried that something could go wrong and prevent me from graduating. I had decided on my dream job of working as a pediatric or NICU nurse when I was volunteering with Vanderbilt Children's Hospital, but their nurse residency program for new nurse graduates was extremely competitive. Even though there was a small chance of being accepted, I decided to pursue it anyway and began sending in all of my applications to the NICU and pediatric units/hospitals in the area. I applied at Vanderbilt, Centennial, StoneCrest, and St. Thomas Rutherford. These were all of the hospitals with nurse residency programs that would allow me to specialize in an area I was passionate about right after graduating. I sent in my applications in early September and received notice by the end of the month

that I had gotten interviews at all four hospitals. All of the interviews went well, but it took over a month to hear back on which facilities would be offering positions. When first working on this chapter, I was waiting on the job offers to arrive; however, now I am at the end of the semester and have received notice that I have been offered jobs at every facility that I applied for.

After setting up and completing interviews, it was still crucial not to forget everything else that still needed to be completed. On top of all of the deadlines and 12-hour clinical shifts that began the first day of classes, there were also several tasks that still needed to be finalized with my Honors thesis and Spanish degree. After my nursing thesis advisor and I decided not to proceed with my previous topic that had been approved, I decided to work with a different advisor and pursue a different avenue for my thesis. My new topic combined nursing, psychology, and Christianity, a topic I was passionate about. I decided that I wanted to write about something that other students could read who were going through school, facing the same indecision and doubt that I had faced.

In addition to completing my schoolwork and planning, I also had to work multiple weekends with three 12-hour shifts for clinicals, where I was driving with traffic, to and from Nashville in the dark. Leaving at 5:15 a.m. and not getting home until 8:30 p.m. was exhausting and allowed very little time to do anything else, making schoolwork virtually impossible on days other than Monday through Wednesday. In capstone clinical, we were finally on our own in facilities working one-on-one with nurses on different floors. I was assigned to Vanderbilt Neurology and Epilepsy unit,

which was an incredible experience for learning and figuring out how to prioritize and outline my days. Accomplishing the deadlines was very difficult, even though I did learn a lot during my time there. As soon as I thought I had everything managed for the week, it seemed like another thing was thrown my way, whether that was schoolwork, exams, graduation requirements, job applications, interviews, or my job that I needed for paying my bills.

Navigating through fifth semester, I discovered that it is important to focus on my end goal and recognize how much closer I am to finishing in order to manage my way through the muck and get to the end. With everything coming at me, it was no wonder that by the end of the day, my new bedtime had become 8 p.m. I was trying to make sure all deadlines were met with my schoolwork and my job, while trying to apply for jobs. Every single area that I was facing was vitally important, and it was nearly impossible to prioritize their importance. Thankfully, after capstone clinicals were over at the beginning of October, I had more time to focus on my exams and thesis work.

After the most difficult part of my fifth semester was over, I began completing my Community and Mental Health clinical rotations. These rotations were significantly shorter and ranged from working with Hospice, to mental health, to public school system schools. We had the opportunity to experience a variety of different settings that we may never have had the chance to see before and open our minds up to different possibilities for our futures. Even though this semester has been busy and stressful, as the day of graduation draws nearer, we finally have the sense that we have almost reached the end.



One of the best aspects of this semester has been taking the time to reflect on how my spirituality has impacted me throughout my time in nursing school. I have found that the more I focus on learning about Christianity and developing into the best person I can possibly be, the better my mentality is about school. I have struggled with knowing whether nursing school was the right decision, but I know that at the end of the day, if I am doing what I am in order to shine God to the world around me, it will make a difference. The time in school has been extremely challenging and still is to this day; however, it is also very rewarding. Hsiao, Wu, Chien, Chiang, and Huang (2010) wrote about how a person's faith can help by putting meaning behind what they are doing; I definitely have found this to be true in my life. By remembering that I can glorify God in my future nursing career, I know that I am not wasting my time and that this challenging fight is worth it. Hsiao et al. discussed how people can be transformed by reflecting on the difficult things in their lives, and that "these kinds of thoughts helped them to discover the meaning of clinical practice training, therefore reducing stress [. . .] giving hope and motivation to cope with difficulties. It not only reduces the impact of stress, but also enhances growth and well-being" (p. 1618). The data from my qualitative analysis supports this, as many of the students who claimed to be religious said that it was something that helped them make it through to the end of school and find meaning behind what they were doing. Personally, my Christianity is what made me want to make a bigger impact and helped me to find purpose behind my future nursing career.

Thinking back on this semester, my time has been eye opening and life changing. During fifth semester, I was able to get the most hands-on experience with my patients. I

also was able to finally choose where to apply for jobs after graduation, interview, and even accept my dream job as a Pediatric Cardiology Nurse in Vanderbilt Children's Hospital's Residency Program starting in March of 2017. At the end of every week, I have been able to stop and look around and realize that I am one week closer to graduating and never having to come back to school for an exam again! It is so bittersweet because after three years of struggling side-by-side with my friends from nursing school, it is nice to know that we will all be out working in the next few months as Registered Nurses, making a difference in people's lives every single day. It helps to know that at the end of the day, no matter what difficulties or down right hard times I have gone through, I made the right decision for my futures by enduring nursing school.

## CHAPTER XIII

### Application and Reflection

It is one of the best feelings to look back and see how much I have accomplished and achieved throughout the past 4.5 years. People say they understand nursing school and what the students go through, but what the students experience together creates a bond that not many people can fully understand. The students in my nursing cohort have walked through our patients dying together, babies and elderly alike. Nursing students have to take part in codes, postmortem care, and discuss poor prognoses with our patients and their families. In nursing school, I have been asked questions that I cannot always answer. At the same time, nursing students help people survive, too. The students going through all of the difficulties of nursing school have witnessed miracles and tragedies that most people will never see in their lifetime, and it gives me a great appreciation for what I will be doing for the rest of my life.

This journey has been challenging, from the beginning to the end. I have learned many things along the way that I wish I had known earlier in my college career. Although campus involvement is not always something that people want to invest their time in, by getting involved early in my college career, I was able to grow more into who I am today. Being involved and invested in school is something that can make one's time at MTSU even better, both in terms of meeting new people and helping to stay focused with school. In addition, making sure to take advantage of all of the resources available to students is another huge thing that I had no idea about when I first began my time at MTSU. The career counseling center is an incredible place for students to go if they are struggling

with major selection, finding a job, or just needing to talk through different career opportunities. They offer free services to students and are available when students need their help.

Because school occupied so much of my time and energy the last few years, it has been challenging to maintain my relationships with my friends and family. However, spending time with them is something that has helped me cope with all of the struggles I have faced throughout my time in school. The students in the final semester were asked in the survey about what advice they would give themselves if they could go back to their first semester. 6 of the 10 students surveyed mentioned something about spending more time with family and/or friends, and 3 mentioned that they wanted to tell themselves to enjoy life where they are at. It was interesting to compare their responses to this question compared to what the students in first semester wrote. Of the students in first semester, only two of the seven said that they had any regrets regarding nursing school (one male stated he missed his social life; the other was a female who wished she had volunteered more at a healthcare facility). Comparing these results to how the final semester students responded, all 10 included at least one regret about their time in nursing school and included what they would tell themselves. The students included phrases like “breathe,” “focus,” “you are smart and it is worth it,” and “keep your head up” for what they would give advice to themselves back in first semester. Interestingly, although each student had regrets and advice they would give, they all responded saying they do not regret their decision to go to nursing school.

After analyzing these responses and thinking about how they also relate to my personal journey, I saw many commonalities between what they wish they had known when starting out and what they would have done differently; however, I also do not regret my decision to go through nursing school. Yes, it has been the hardest thing that I have ever done in my entire life. I have had to work harder than ever before to earn grades that are still lower than I have ever gotten in school; however, there is so much that I have learned throughout the entire process about the world around me, the people I am surrounded by, and about myself that is invaluable. College may not be something that comes easy, but it is worth the struggle, the tears, and the frustration to make it through. This semester, I have seen how much growth I have gone through in terms of my knowledge and my resilience with life in general.

If students are debating between nursing and another profession, I would recommend job shadowing or meeting with a nurse to ask questions about his or her career and experience in nursing school. The decision to enter this profession should not be taken lightly and should be given a lot of thought. Had I known the amount of time that would need to be devoted to my nursing education, I would have thought more deeply about this decision. Although I do not regret my decision to pursue nursing, I definitely was not prepared for the amount of time I would have to sacrifice with my friends and families during the three years of nursing school. With any career path being debated, I would urge students to take their time making a decision because their education can ultimately determine what they will be doing for the rest of their life and is a serious decision.

Although college is something that is challenging to begin with, there is comfort found in knowing that we are not alone in the struggle. Many changes occur during the first four years of college, and the level of expectations can be higher than anything students are used to. Trying to maneuver through the undergraduate career is complicated and stressful, but by the end, it is something that people can look back on and be proud of. The students in our classes have learned about what relying on family, friends, and professors look like. I have walked through successes and failures with my nursing school friends and sorority sisters, and have come out a stronger and better future nurse because of it. Although every student nurse's and college student's experience is different, there are similarities that are intertwined throughout that tie us together as one big community of future RN/BSN's.

At the end of the day, I am thankful for my experiences in MTSU's program and know that my future is bright because of the time spent there. The program made me reevaluate what it was in my life that was helping me make it through, and I give nursing school experience the credit for helping me to discover my Christianity. It made me think in ways I had never been taught before and helped me to reevaluate my priorities. I now have a greater appreciation for my time with my family and have learned to not take time with my support system for granted. I learned how many people are with me every step of the way, whenever I need them. I have learned what it looks like to serve people and help them heal physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. There are many dimensions to health, but in nursing, I am able to help heal people from the inside out. I consider myself lucky to have been given the opportunity to go through MTSU's nursing

program, and although it has been a difficult journey, I know that after graduating, I will be in a career where I can truly make a difference.

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## APPENDIX A

## IRB APPROVAL

**IRB****INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Office of Research Compliance,  
010A Sam Ingram Building,  
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd  
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



## IRBN007 – EXEMPTION DETERMINATION NOTICE

Friday, September 16, 2016

Investigator(s): Ashley Johnson (PI), and Dr. Michelle Boyer-Pennington (FA)  
Investigator(s)' Email(s): [aaj3a@mtmail.mtsu.edu](mailto:aaj3a@mtmail.mtsu.edu)  
Department: Psychology

Study Title: *Nursing Students' Experiences and Reflection*  
Protocol ID: 17-1012

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXEMPT** review mechanism under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) within the research category (2) *Educational Tests*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

IRB Action	EXEMPT from further IRB review***	
Date of expiration	<b>NOT APPLICABLE</b>	
Participant Size	20	
Participant Pool	<b>MTSU students</b>	
Mandatory Restrictions	Participants should consent.	
Additional Restrictions	<b>Students who enrolled in NURS 4507 or NURS 3000</b>	
Comments	N/A	
Amendments	<b>Date</b> N/A	<b>Post-Approval Amendments</b> None

\*\*\*This exemption determination only allows above defined protocol from further IRB review such as continuing review. However, the following post-approval requirements still apply:

- Addition/removal of subject population should not be implemented without IRB approval
- Change in investigators must be notified and approved
- Modifications to procedures must be clearly articulated in an addendum request and the proposed changes must not be incorporated without an approval
- Be advised that the proposed change must comply within the requirements for exemption
- Changes to the research location must be approved – appropriate permission letter(s) from external institutions must accompany the addendum request form
- Changes to funding source must be notified via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))
- The exemption does not expire as long as the protocol is in good standing
- Project completion must be reported via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))

**APPENDIX B****First Semester Student Survey****NURSING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS IN THE FIRST YEAR:**

Please answer the following questions. If you need more space, please use the back of the pages:

1) **SEX:**

Male: \_\_\_\_\_

Female: \_\_\_\_\_

2) **AGE:**

Traditional age student (19-24) \_\_\_\_\_

Nontraditional age student: (25 and older) \_\_\_\_\_

3) **RELIGIOSITY:** How religious would you say you are (1 = not at all religious & 10 = extremely religious) \_\_\_\_\_

4) Why did you decide to join the nursing program?

5) Tell me about any specific event(s)/moment(s)/pivotal point(s) that made you want to be a nurse.

6) How satisfied are you with your decision to enter the nursing program? Describe any regrets you have had? Why or why don't think you have had regrets?

7) What has been the most difficult aspect of nursing school for you? Why?

8) If you were to do it over, would you choose nursing again? Why or why not?

**APPENDIX C****Final Semester Student Survey****NURSING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS IN THE FINAL YEAR:**

Please answer the following questions. If you need more space, please use the back of the pages:

1) SEX:

Male: \_\_\_\_\_

Female: \_\_\_\_\_

2) AGE:

Traditional age student (19-24) \_\_\_\_\_

Nontraditional age student: (25 and older) \_\_\_\_\_

3) RELIGIOSITY: How religious would you say you are (1 = not at all religious & 10 = extremely religious) \_\_\_\_\_

4) Why did you decide to join the nursing program?

5) Tell me about any specific event(s)/moment(s)/pivotal point(s) that made you want to be a nurse.

6) How satisfied are you with your decision to enter the nursing program? Describe any regrets you have had? Why or why don't think you have had regrets?

7) What has been the most difficult aspect of nursing school for you? Why?

8) Looking back on your time in school, what has kept you moving forward towards your end goal? Describe any coping mechanisms you used or continue to use. If religiosity plays a role in your life, describe that role here during this time.

9) If you could go back to your first semester in nursing school and give yourself advice about the years ahead, what would you tell yourself?

10) What is your proudest moment from the last 4 or 5 semesters of nursing school?

11) If you were to do it over, would you choose nursing again? Why or why not?