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# Recognizing Occupational Stress: A Case Study Of Admission Staff In A For-Profit Nursing College

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RECOGNIZING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: A CASE STUDY OF
ADMISSION STAFF IN A FOR-PROFIT NURSING COLLEGE


By

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A DISSERTATION

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Educational Leadership

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ADMISSION STAFF IN A FOR-PROFIT NURSING COLLEGE

Abstract

While numerous studies have looked at the influence of occupational stress on employees, less is known about the effects on employees in the for-profit higher education industry. Admissions advisors in particular must endure cyclical pressures to fill classes to ensure a college's financial viability. A criterion sample of 12 admissions advisors employed at a for-profit nursing college with campuses located throughout the United States were interviewed. The participant criterion sample specifically sought to include advisors who enroll pre-licensure nursing degree-seeking students.

The purpose of the study was to acquire a richer understanding of nursing admissions advisors' convergence of personal recognition of occupational stress and resulting experience(s) with proactive coping mechanisms. Research questions that guided this study were: (a) How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand occupational stress in the workplace?, (b) How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand proactive coping mechanisms in the workplace?, and (c) What proactive coping strategies do tenured nursing admissions advisors describe to mitigate stress in the workplace?

Five core thematic patterns with connected elements developed out of the data analysis method and interpretation process. The themes identified were (a) perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress, (b) job responsibility contributors, (c) work-life

balance, (d) coping mechanisms applied within and outside of the workplace, and (e) care for the whole person and location of care. Additionally, five subthemes consist of (a) burden of performing well, (b) feeling of overwhelm, (c) time management/prioritizing, (d) differentiating proactive vs. reactive coping mechanisms, and (e) coping classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical.

Coping mechanisms varied according to admissions advisor's personal perceived experience and encompassed a wide range of conclusions. Findings indicate (a) the sample criterion population was aware of their personal definition of occupational stress, (b) the gap from expected job responsibilities versus actual job responsibilities caused perceptions of occupational stress, (c) a lack of implementing time management tools existed, (d) proactivity was not a solid component of relieving occupational stress, and (e) identified capabilities of admissions advisors applying coping mechanisms to increase the richness and support for complete self-care.

Recommendations such as designing a corporate wellness center, effective training for higher education leaders in specific transformative leadership ideology, and the application of corporate-funded stress reduction workshops and related activities to assist in proactively reducing occupational stress in admissions advisors, especially during the cyclical times of enrollment were revealed. Findings and insight gained from this study identified the gap that permits educational organizations, their institutions, communities, and specifically individuals in the admissions department to better recognize the stressors of the position due to specific job responsibilities, culture, and environment.

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University of New England

Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

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October 30, 2015

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DEDICATION

This is first and foremost dedicated to my father, Dr. Raymond T. Powers. He is the quintessential leader, personally and professionally, one I strive to emulate on a daily basis and who is my safety net when life throws a curve ball. Secondly, I would like to dedicate this work to my mother, Judith A. Powers. She has taught me prioritization, responsibility, organization, focus, and style. Additionally, my two little guys, Taven and Cove, receive this dedication as they are the lights in my life. I adore being their mother. Finally, I dedicate this work to my husband, Robert J. Becker. who was instrumental in providing motivation and support during my tenure at the University of New England.

"If you don't make dust, you eat dust." –Jack A. McAllister

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

For-profit higher education admissions advisors experience a stressful work environment. Job responsibilities of admissions advisors at institutions of higher learning include sales and marketing challenges that link directly to the financial viability of their institutions, thus leading to occupational stress disorders. Results of physical and psychological occupational stress include lower productivity, absenteeism, and turnover. Coping with stress and developing coping strategies becomes essential to offset stress levels and promote a higher quality of life.

Historically, coping has been seen mainly as a reactive response, a strategy to be used once stress had been experienced; however, proactive coping mechanisms, which are "something one can do before stress occurs" (Greenglass, 2002, p. 1), introduce a more active and positive approach to dealing with stressors. Leaders in institutions with highly stressed staff may be compelled to transform organizational structures to support and retain admissions advisors; however, those in the role currently need both professional skills and stress management skills along with structural support to prevail. Furthermore, subject-specific admissions advisors, such as nursing specialists, may have additional challenges due to working in a high demand field and competitive admissions requirements.

The use of proactive coping mechanisms for occupational stress relief by nursing admissions advisors is a topic that is poorly understood. Proactive coping is a strategy of forward thinking management and can be combined with elements of positive psychology. This approach integrates life management with self-regulatory goal attainment. Understanding advisors' ability

to recognize stressful experiences associated with their work is the foundation for determining which proactive coping mechanism(s) they employ. The case study will seek to discover if nursing admissions advisors recognize occupational stress and which, if any, proactive coping mechanism(s) are commonly used to combat stress found in a fast-paced, for-profit nursing college admissions department.

**Occupational Stress**

The top cause of stress in the United States has been found to be job pressure (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012; Rahe, 2013; Statistic Brain Research Institute, n.d.). An interdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners associated with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health ([NIOSH], 1999), a part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), stated that those who have workplace stress reported the primary effects as "illness, injury, and job failure" (para. 6). They also reported that "exposure to stressful working conditions (called job stressors) can have a direct influence on worker safety and health" (para. 17). However, individual and other situational factors such as work-life balance, a strong foundation of friends, coworker support, and a relaxed positive outlook "can intervene to strengthen or weaken this influence" (1999, para. 17). St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company (1992) claimed that more health complaints are associated with work than any other life stressor including money or family issues. Examples of physical and psychological deleterious health symptoms from stress are fatigue, headache, upset stomach, irritability, anger, and nervousness (Statistic Brain Research Institute, n.d.).

Occupational stress is a multivariate disorder resulting in varying degrees of anxiety that may directly impact job performance. Occupational stress becomes a psychosocial risk factor when the occupational demands overcome one's ability to address or control the situation (Eleni et al., 2010). Shatkin (2008) compared the stress levels of 747 general occupations identified by the U.S. Department of Labor. He found that education administrators ranked third overall by stress tolerance. The Occupational Information Network (Tippins & Hilton, 2010) stated that post-secondary education administrators' multitude of reported job titles include admissions advisors. They reported that admissions advisors are vulnerable as staff in one of the most stressful occupations throughout institutions of higher education. Due to stress levels being greater in admissions than all other departments, occupational stress is a concern. Cyclical admissions schedules, criteria of accountability, and performance expectations of the position are factors that increase stress levels in admissions. Panelists at a recent 2012 conference of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) generalized:

> The field is requiring skills that are more demanding and varied than ever. And at a time when universities are looking especially hard at the bottom line, people in admissions need to constantly learn new things and make themselves indispensable. (Hu, 2012, para. 2)

NIOSH (2008) research supports two types of interventions to decrease occupational stress: organizational change and worker-focused mediation. To manage the dichotomy between organizational and worker-focused interventions, this study will concentrate exclusively on worker guidelines. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) (2003), stress

can diminish and motivation can improve when employees feel control over their work. It is essential that admissions advisors are knowledgeable about the occupational stress-reducing interventions necessary to overcome pressure associated with on-the-job responsibilities. A proactive intervention platform supports employees while its constructive influences are felt through college departments, internal and external customer service, and ultimately, the financial landscape. Four types of interventions for work-related stress are cognitive-behavioral interventions, multimodal interventions, organization-focused interventions, and relaxation techniques (Van der Klink, Blonk, Schene, & Dijk, 2001).

**Statement of the Problem**

In the current for-profit education sector, research indicates admissions advisors experience high rates of occupational stress (Hu, 2012; Kingsbury, 2009; Larson, 2014; Shatkin, 2008). The concern of both staff and employers is that stressed employees are suffering physical and psychological problems or simply leaving the field at escalating speed due to stress (APA, 2012; Larson, 2014). Employers may understand that stress in the workplace leads to negative physical and psychological health issues impacting turnover and productivity. They may not, however, be aware that longer-term employees may already be using proactive coping strategies to sustain their productivity. Awareness of successful coping mechanisms used by staff in high stress positions may provide the impetus for employers to provide proactive coping support for all employees.

Research indicates that employers who institutionalize proactive positive occupational stress coping mechanisms may help improve the mental and physical health of the worker and

their performance of job responsibilities (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). Currently, however, many organizations (including for-profit colleges) do not provide such support. Interviewing admissions advisors in an effort to examine individual's current use of proactive coping mechanisms will provide documentation that employer may find useful when seeking interventions to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to establish if a criterion sample of admissions advisors in a for-profit nationwide nursing college recognize and understand the phenomenon of stress as it relates to the admissions advisors' beliefs and perceptions of occupational stress, from a work-life balance perspective. This study further identified whether and how proactive coping mechanisms were used as a method for counteracting occupational stress.

**Background of the Study**

The author's passion to fully understand how staff experience stress in the workplace has been driven by working 20 years in the for-profit higher education industry, with a majority of that time in an admissions management role. A career in the admissions environment began prior to the *Title IV New Regulatory World* with changes the U.S. Department of Education implemented on October 29, 2010 to improve the integrity of federal student aid programs authorized by the Higher Education Act of 1965 (NACAC, 2011)**.** Title IV Federal Student Aid Program Integrity Final Regulations were mandated due to previous unethical practices in admissions and financial aid in the for-profit higher education industry. The new regulations

cover 14 areas as listed by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC, 2011).

Prior to the new mandates, unethical practices such as unrealistic benchmarks and outrageous employee incentives generated stress, competition, and dissatisfaction in work-life balance (Hoover, 2011b, 2014; Lucido, 2012). This nationwide implementation of regulations changed how employees responsible for recruiting, enrollment, and awarding financial aid were managed, measured, and awarded. The Incentive Compensation regulation was set in place, fundamentally, to replace the benchmark (daily, weekly, monthly, and annual) quantitative goals often set for individual advisors, as well as subsequent bonuses attached to the achievement of large number of student enrollments (NACAC, 2011). The policy ensures that colleges and universities are maintaining compliance with enrollment practices along with providing a high quality educational experience and a student-centric approach to pedagogy. This mandate removes misrepresentation and allows for ethical compensation practices (DOE, 2010).

**Significance of the Study**

There has only been nominal exploration of the perceptions of tenured admissions advisors' stress in nursing colleges and the use of proactive coping mechanisms to combat occupational stress. Higher education, occupational stress, and proactive coping mechanisms have been studied independently; however, not in association with one another. This qualitative case study thus fulfills a gap in educational research. The author's pre-understanding and extensive experience with the admissions culture contributes to recognition that this research is essential. Findings from obtaining knowledge of various admissions advisors' recognition of

occupational stress and their preferred proactive coping mechanism(s) can be useful in designing corporate education health and wellbeing programs.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions will assist in defining how admissions advisors in a for-profit university setting recognize and manage occupational stress.

1. How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand occupational stress in the workplace?

2. How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand proactive coping mechanisms in the workplace?

3. What proactive coping strategies do tenured nursing admissions advisors describe to mitigate stress in the workplace?

**Conceptual Framework**

There are many relevant theories of occupational stress and research on personal and social coping strategies that help to combat work pressure. When reviewing related frameworks, seminal authors Lazarus (1966, 1991) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984, 1987) set the benchmark for coping strategy (stress management) research. Other influential models used for the primary theoretical perspective of this study include Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1986a, 1986b, 1992, 1994, 1997) and the proactive coping theories of Aspinwall and Taylor (1997; Aspinwall, 2012) and Schwarzer (2000), which synthesize concepts such as causal antecedents, mediating processes, functioning, and outcomes.

   This case study research is based on the constructs and variables of social factors in the workplace. Self-efficacy theory suggests that individuals who are healthy, capable, and resourceful are competent to handle stressful situations. However, competence is often not sufficient as there is potential for an individual to underestimate their potential to take action; they may not develop strategies. Bandura (1997) stated, "Perceptions affect how people think, behave as well as how people emotionally react" (p. 65). Perceived self-efficacy levels (Bandura 1992, 1995) based on experience can enhance or impede an individual's motivation to act within one's capabilities (Schwarzer, 2000). The belief in one's ability to succeed with a task (self-efficacy) converges with proactive coping mechanism implementation. Therefore, primary recognition of the existence of occupational stress is initially critical; then a secondary motivation to manage the stress is required, which ultimately leads to a choice to as to whether to implement a stress coping mechanism within one's capabilities.

   Proactive coping theory addresses important concepts in terms of antecedents, mediating processes, functioning effects, and outcomes. Antecedents can be defined as "person variables such as commitments or beliefs on the one hand and environmental variables, such as demands or situational constraints, on the other" (Schwarzer, 2000, para. 4). Schwarzer (2000) also stated, "Mediating processes refers to cognitive appraisals of situational demands and personal coping options as well as to coping efforts aimed at more or less problem-focused and emotion-focused" (para. 4). This work can be traced back to the late 1960s. Using a model centered on psychological stress, Schwarzer examined coping by dividing it into two functions: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Later, avoidance-oriented coping was introduced

along with further refinements from problem-focused coping and how they both contribute to adaptive functioning. Functioning effects and outcomes synthesize organizational functioning between all three concepts.

The interrelated theoretical approaches of Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) and Schwarzer (2000) regarding proactive coping theories accentuate four strategies: reactive coping, anticipatory coping, preventive coping, and proactive coping. Reactive coping is defined as "An effort to deal with a stressful encounter that has already happened" (Greenglass, 2002, p. 6). Compensating for loss or alleviating harm is the focus of reactive coping efforts. Greenglass (2002) indicated that anticipatory coping deals with an imminent threat that is certain to occur in the near future while preventative coping responds to a critical threat that may or may not occur in the distant future. Alternatively, proactive coping deals with perceived situations seen as risks, demands, and opportunities in the far future without necessarily consciously appraising them as threats, harm, or loss (Greenglass, 2002). Also, when looking at the differences of proactive versus avoidance coping, Schwarzer (1992) concluded, "The likelihood that valued health behavior or change in detrimental habit may depend on three cognitions, namely outcomes expectancies, self-efficacy expectancies and the perception of risks" (p. 96).

The leading researchers' theories have informed the author's study in several ways. First, the 30 plus years of theoretical development support the relevance of emotional response and human adaptation to successful coping. This is important as perceived self-efficacy or optimism is seen as a prerequisite for coping. Secondly, proactive coping incorporates a confirmatory and positive approach to dealing with stressors (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive

beliefs may predict higher levels of physical health by promoting better health practices. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) noted that individuals who have well developed psychosocial resources, including a sense of personal control, high self-esteem, and optimism, are more likely to cope proactively with respect to health; which in turn helps to minimize the effects of stress, including occupational stress. Finally, Schwarzer and Kroll (2009) emphasized that proactive coping is a form of goal management, thus collaborating the practicality of designing corporate education health and wellbeing programs whose ultimate proposition is goal management.

**Assumptions**

The premise of this research is that a criterion sample of successful admissions advisors uses individual proactive coping mechanisms to counteract occupational stress. The basis includes several assumptions. First, research assumed the criterion sample of admissions advisors, tenured for a minimum of one year, were effectively proficient in their job responsibilities. This was confirmed in the study through the interview procedure. Second, the study assumed that admissions advisors were not long-term higher education professionals, and that therefore their careers poses unique trials accompanied with regular turnover. Third, adapted from Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, this study assumed that admissions advisors recognized the positive value of mediating processes such as cognitive, motivational, affective and selection and had some conception of their own capabilities.

A final assumption was that the choice of proactive coping mechanisms used may differ between age groups and gender. A study conducted by McCrae (1989) demonstrated "the older people in this sample coped in much the same way as younger people and that, where they

employed different mechanisms, it appeared to be largely because of the different types of stress they face" (p. 454). Curry, Nembhard, and Bradley (2009) noted, "Qualitative methods can be used to understand complex social processes, to capture essential aspects of a phenomenon from the prospective of the study participants and to uncover beliefs, values and motivations that underlie individual health behaviors" (p. 1442).

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are identified as having specific importance to the study in order to provide a reference point of understanding of the concepts:

**Admissions advisor:** Also referred to as an educational administrator. Admissions advisors work full time in colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical/ trade schools (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2014).

**Acute stress:** Resulting from specific events or situations involving novelty, unpredictability, or a threat to the ego, leaving us with a poor sense of control (Centre for Studies on Human Stress [CSHS], n.d.).

**Burnout:** Gradual emotional depletion, loss of motivation, and reduced commitment (Freudenberger, 1974).

**Chronic stress:** Repeated exposure to situations leading to the release of stress hormones (CSHS, n.d.).

**Coping:** Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Li & Lambert, 2008).

**Coping mechanism:** An adaptation to environmental stress based on conscious and/or unconscious choices that enhances control over behavior or gives psychological comfort (Coping Mechanism, 2013).

**For-profit college:** Institutions providing flexible scheduling with year-round enrollment, online options, small class sizes, and convenient national locations that are managed and governed by private organizations and corporations (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2013).

**Occupational stress:** Something that can affect one's health when the stressors of the workplace exceed the employee's ability to have some control over their situation or to cope in other ways (Mathi & Thirumakkal, 2015).

**Tenure:** The amount of time a person holds a job, office, or title (Tenure, 2014).

**Vignette:** Stories about people, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes (Hughes, 1998).

## Summary

This research examined the convergence of personal recognition of occupational stress and resulting experience(s) with proactive coping mechanisms. The research questions addressed the perception of stress and the proactive coping mechanisms used to counteract the stress when recognized. The research proposition was supported by the scope of the literature review in Chapter 2. This included an examination of relevant topics, models, and prior research on the topic of stress recognition and stress management in the workplace. The literature suggests that not enough research has been done on the topic of the occupational stress of admissions advisors

and their use of proactive coping mechanisms as a way of dealing with it. The resulting gap of knowledge compelled further study on the subject. Chapter 3 explores the methodology used to guide this qualitative case study research. Chapter 4 presents and analyzes the data collected regarding the proactive coping mechanisms that were used to combat the occupational stress found in a fast-paced, for-profit nursing college admissions department, resulting in an understanding of advisors' respective experiences. Conclusions and recommendations are in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focused upon three central themes of study, which were higher education, the concept of stress, and the role of coping mechanisms in dealing with occupational stress. The three themes examined are the foundation for the critical summary of published research relevant to the topic. The scope of published research for this study consisted of works composed in English published in the last 10 years with the exception of seminal authors or foundational research. While the content of the literature review justified future research into the understudied area, the overall review of sources concluded that there was a specific need to further explore the perceived recognition of occupational stress of admissions advisors in nursing schools and the relationship to effective coping mechanisms as this topic is less well understood. This case study will begin to fill the gap. The research themes are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Central Research Themes*

| Higher Education | Occupational Stress | Coping Mechanisms of Occupational Stress |
|---|---|---|
| Current For-Profit Sector History & Trends<br><br>McDonough and Robertson (1995), McCabe (2000), Deming et al. (2013) | History/Definition/ Reduction<br><br>Lazarus and Folkman (1984) | Benefits of Coping Mechanisms<br><br>Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Taylor and Kagay (1985)<br><br>Sedgeman (2005) |
| Post-Secondary Education<br><br>McCabe (2000), Deming et al. (2013) | Stress and Work Performance<br><br>Seyle (1956)<br><br>Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Schwarzer and Leppin (1991), Scheier and Carver (1992), Hobfoll (1989), Hobfoll et al. (1996) | Reduction of Occupational Stress and Addition of Health Promotion Conversion<br><br>Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) |
| Enrollment Management Standards<br><br>Hauser and Lazarsfeld (1964) Vinson (1976), Hoover (2011), Harkin (2012) | Occupational Stress in Higher Education<br><br>Lazarus and Folkman (1984) | |
| Admissions Advisor Job Responsibilities<br><br>Fitts (2010), Hoover (2011, 2014), McDonough & Robertson (1995) | Economic Impacts of Stress<br><br>Brun (2008) | |
| Admissions Advisor Stress in Workplace<br><br>Schultz and Lucido (2011), Lucido (2012) | | |

Under the umbrella of the three central themes, the review first examined higher education, in particular the history of the for-profit sector, enrollment management standards, admissions advisors' job responsibilities through a sales and marketing lens, and ultimately the relationship between occupational stress and the admissions advisors' environment, the critical situation that is being examined through this research. Secondarily, the researcher explored the concept of stress and how it is defined in order to frame the phenomenon properly. Continuing in the same theme, the subsequent literature explores the role of occupational stress on work performance and the economic impacts of stress in higher education. Within the third theme, mechanisms used to cope with stress, including occupational stress, are surveyed. Included within this theme is the assessment of the benefits of coping mechanisms to alleviate occupational stress and the parallel between the role of the admissions advisor archetype and sales, thus emphasizing the importance of understanding the convergence between the recognition of stress and implementation of effective proactive coping mechanisms.

**Current Trends in For-Profit Admissions in Higher Education**

The educational services industry is the second largest U.S. industry with approximately 12.9 million workers at all educational levels (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2012). The National Occupational Research Agenda ([NORA], 2013) stated that post-secondary institutions employ 4.4 million of those workers, with the remainder in elementary and secondary institutions. Higher education or the terminal stage of schooling is commonly referred to as post-secondary education, tertiary education, or third level education. It is comprised of the associate level through doctoral level degrees, or their equivalents.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the United States and other nations. A foundational piece of literature included in the NCES regarding higher education is a commissioned report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success (Horn & Premo, 1995) that discuss profiles of undergraduates in U.S. postsecondary education institutions. Additionally, McCabe (2000) conducted research for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative and stated that "as many as four-fifths of high school graduates need some form of postsecondary education to prepare them to live an economically self-sufficient life and to deal with the increasingly complex social, political, and cultural issues they will face" (p. 1). Additionally, many high school graduates do not meet employers' standards in a variety of academic areas, as well as in employability skills such as attendance, teamwork and collaboration, and work habits, thus the need for further higher education (National Association of Manufacturers, 2005; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2005). America's system of higher education provides access and opportunity to achieve advanced training and skills for students and workers (Bangser, 2008; National Association of Manufacturers, 2012).

Access to higher education learning as a human right can be found in several instruments including the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, which declares, in Article 13, that "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education" (United Nations Office for High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015, p. 5). The National Office for School Counselor Advocacy ([NOSCA], 2015)

released results that stated that 95% of administrators agreed that the mission of schools should be "to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have equal access to a high-quality education" (p. 1).

Due to the presence of approximately 30.8 million teens in 2006, which equates to 900,000 more than the highest level of baby boomer teens, along with the cost efficiencies gained by online modality education, post-secondary institutions need to be prepared for a dramatic increase in admission. For example, a 346 percent enrollment gain was found from 1961 to 1991 of college students entering post-secondary education (McDonough & Robertson, 1995). After stabilizing in 1992, enrollment then increased another 32 percent, from 15.9 million to 21.0 million, between 2001 and 2011 (NCES, 2013). This research demonstrates the foundation from which structured enrollment management needs blossom (Hauser & Lazarsfeld, 1964; McDonough & Robertson, 1995). Hoover (2011b) suggested that as higher education continues to evolve, enrollment departments must perform new functions and take on new responsibilities, including securing the financial viability of the institution as well as maintaining or elevating prestige, especially in the for-profit education industry.

**Post-Secondary Education at For-Profit Institutions**

As the role of post-secondary education in today's educational landscape continues to grow, the number and size of for-profit institutions of higher learning continue to expand as public institutions alone simply cannot meet the demand. However, Deming, Goldin, and Katz (2013) found evidence that shows for-profit institutions were somewhat limited and could only provide equal or lower quality education when compared to public community colleges. A

survey of participating institutions prepared by the College and University Professional

Association for Human Resources ([CUPA-HR], 2014) demonstrated that private institutions

now comprise 54 percent of the total population of schools, including those colleges with a faith-

based philosophy as their underlying principle. CUPA-HR's survey indicated there were 338

faith-based colleges and 271 non-religious institutions for a total of 609 private schools

altogether. Lee (2012) reported the number of students enrolled in for-profit institutions went

from 766,000 in 2001 to 2.4 million students in 2010 (p. 32).

Considerable and diverse growth has increased awareness of enrollment practices from a

political and industry perspective. For-profit institutions have been targets of critical review due

to aggressive recruiting, high tuition and corresponding high loan default rates, lack of career

assistance, and low retention percentages (Harkin, 2012). One goal of the Association of Private

Sector Colleges and Universities ([APSCU], 2012) is to change negative perceptions stemming

from commercial pressure resulting in misleading recruiting practices and align the sector's

culture with a fresh approach in enrollment management, one more in line with educational than

financial concerns. However, it is difficult to balance the opposing interests of profit and public

service.

**Enrollment Management in Nursing Programs**

The enrollment management environment has been evolving because of the formalization

and professionalization of admissions. Hauser and Lazarsfeld (1964) developed the first-ever

comprehensive study of admissions officers in 4-year institutions, comparing historical and

modern recruitment practices. They described enrollment management as a developing

occupation emerging out of the registrar's domain and into a full-time specialized function.

Vinson (1976) replicated Hauser and Lazarsfeld's study, and provided the first longitudinal

assessment of enrollment management. Again, the study documented that enrollment

management is undergoing changes to meet the needs of the consumer, and noted the dangers of

surrendering to commercialism in enrollment practices. A third study conducted by Robertson

(1989) for Stanford University argued that competition began to emerge as a temporary decline

in college applicants reached its lowest point in 1993. With competition for future students,

recruitment practices began to turn towards a hybrid blend of marketing and educating.

Over the course of 30 years, enrollment management has transformed from a semi-

practiced approach to a key administrative tactic (Hoover, 2011b). Prior to the 1980s enrollment

managers were likely to be found only at small, private, for-profit institutions (Hoover, 2011b).

Renovated strategies at the present time find senior enrollment officers rapidly becoming the

norm at colleges and universities, including data-driven leaders who cultivate data-informed

tactics (Hoover, 2011b).

As the occupation is attracting professionals, diversity has grown along with the

enrollment management occupation; however, women and minority racial/ethnic groups remain

underrepresented. McDonough and Robertson (1995) identified that a decline in single-sex

institutions cut into the number of women chief administrative positions during the 1970s,

further compounding, at least temporarily, the lack in gender diversity. Since then however,

coeducational training has been contributing to an increase in gender diversification. The

American Council on Education ([ACE], 2012) recently reported that although women earn the

majority of postsecondary degrees, they occupy just 26 percent of all college presidencies. The proportions of gender and ethnic groups in higher education leadership still remain largely unaligned with those in the general population. To coordinate efforts to continue bridging that gap, representatives from a variety of institutions and associations that have an active leadership agenda for women gather on a periodic basis.

Another challenge for enrollment management, one that directly influences the future of higher education by emphasizing the need for the talented men and women who will determine the professions' trajectory, is turnover. Turnover is prevalent as the issue of a vague career path in enrollment management remains undefined. Hoover (2014) inferred that turnover was also attributed to unhinged work-life balance as admissions advisors were unsure about how to steady the demands of quotes, travel, and low salaries when weighing against other positions that directly interfaced with students, but carried less numerical and verbal pressure. The turnover rate may increase as institutions further view students as customers and foster recruitment practices masquerading as sales. Research (NACAC, 2014; Schulz & Lucido, 2011) has concluded that the lack of career path definition has also affected work-life balance and the retention of admissions advisors. Education to train for an enrollment management career is non-existent and evidence has shown that fledgling professionals looking to enter the profession crave clear direction (NACAC, 2014; Schulz & Lucido, 2011).

**Responsibilities of Nursing Admissions Advisor Recruitment**

While responsibilities for recruitment have traditionally been primarily a counseling function, today's admissions advisors find themselves increasingly in the role of sales and

marketing professionals concerned with maintaining enrollments for the financial viability of the institution (ACE, 2012; Fitts, 2010; Hoover, 2011b, 2014; Lucido, 2012; McDonough & Robertson, 1995; Riehl, 1982). NACAC (2014) has cited concerns over a growing "sales culture." NACAC's "Career Paths for Admission Officers: A Survey Report" (2014) surveyed nearly 1,500 admission counselors, directors, deans, and vice presidents in admissions and found that "demographic trends are increasingly creating strong pressures to meet enrollment goals in order to ensure their institutions' financial health" (p. 6). The generation of income and resources leads to administrations setting consistently high college enrollment goals coupled with daily expectations, ultimately transforming into stressors for the admissions advisors.

Evolving from the previous role of guidance counselor or ambassador, professional standards and supervisory admissions colleagues now hold admissions advisors accountable for a vast amount of items such as knowledge benchmarks in technology and data as well as behavioral-based benchmarks in rapport and communication. Admissions advisors now have added concerns regarding being monitored for compliance by administrators, trustees, and faculty. These monitoring pressures eventually affect employees' psychological well-being and may cause drastic changes in the organization. Fitts (2010) argued that for-profit pressures have materialized to a radical point of closing institutions or laying off administration personnel.

To ensure that responsibilities of recruitment remain on an even trajectory across all institutions, Title IV Integrity Regulations were instigated by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 to improve the integrity of federal student aid programs authorized by the Higher Education Act of 1965. These regulations were mandated due to previous unethical practices in

admissions and financial aid in the for-profit higher education industry. The new regulations

cover 14 areas as listed by NACAC (2011, p. 1), which include:

1. Definition of high school diploma

2. Ability to benefit

3. Misrepresentation of information students and prospective students

4. Incentive compensation

5. State authorization as a component of institutional eligibility

6. Gainful employment in a recognized occupation

7. Definition of a credit hour

8. Agreements between institutions of higher education

9. Verification of information included on student aid applications

10. Satisfactory academic progress

11. Retaking coursework

12. Return of Title IV funds: Term-based programs with modules or compressed courses

13. Return of Title IV funds: Taking attendance

14. Disbursements of Title IV funds

Prior to these new mandates, unethical practices such as benchmarks and employee

incentives generated stress, competition, and dissatisfaction with work-life balance among

admissions advisors at for-profit institutions. This nationwide implementation of regulations

changed how employees responsible for recruiting, enrollment, and awarding financial aid were

managed, measured, and awarded. The Incentive Compensation regulation was set in place,

fundamentally, to eliminate the benchmark quantitative goals set for individual advisors each day, week, month, and year, as well as the payment of subsequent bonuses attached to the achievement of large number of student enrollments (NACAC, 2011). The new policies ensure colleges and universities are maintaining compliant enrollment practices along with providing a high quality educational experience and a student-centric approach to pedagogy. This mandate removes misrepresentation and allows ethical compensation practices.

**Admission Advisors' Stress in the Workplace**

Admissions advisors play an essential role assisting those interested in continuing their post-secondary education, specifically at a bachelor's level. Admissions advisors at for-profit institutions serve as a liaison to facilitate communication and application efforts and ensure information is provided to prospective students in an accurate and timely fashion. Students turn to numerous sources when advancing to tertiary education. While friends, parents, and other family member support can influence the institution of choice, high school counselors, admissions counselors, college brochures, institutional websites, and other internet-based resources help to bridge the entry to a bachelor's track (Kinzie et al., 2004, p. 34). Therefore, admissions advisors' positions are critical in order to handle the influx and maintain successful college admissions recruitment practices.

Schultz and Lucido (2011) emphasized how being well-versed in the institutions' culture and maintaining relationships with influential leaders can help prepare admissions advisors' understanding of relevant admissions practices. Education, analytical, and strategic thinking, as well as experience also contribute to admissions understanding and allow for adaptation to

organizational change. While these are key preparatory aids to avoiding occupational stress, a common barrier to admissions advisors advancement is the ability or desire to maintain work-life balance or the capacity to handle the stressors commonly found in the admissions environment.

In alignment with the "24/7" demand, model advisors work late to process applications only to arrive the next day to more applications (ACE, 2012; Hoover, 2011a, 2014; McDonough & Robertson, 1995). This never-ending cyclical trend of enrollment processing requires specific marketing strategies to complement the flux of applications; thus most institutions use predictive modeling, which provides accurate forecasting of prospects' enrollment conversion (Noel-Levitz, 2013). Sales strategies are then tuned to complement the marketing strategies to refine recruitment strategies. This cycle places high demands on the admissions advisor. The daily challenge of focusing limited resources can seem overwhelming to admissions advisors, thus resulting in occupational stress (Lucido, 2012).

In a for-profit higher education culture of secret shoppers, tracking conversion and yield rates, and cyclical goals and quotas, occupational stress can result even with protection from Title IV regulations (Noel-Levitz, 2010). An example of a work-related event of resulting in occupational stress in admissions is compliance and the control pressures of recording every call for motioning purposes. A second illustration was included in Senator Harkin's investigation of for-profit colleges:

Documents demonstrate that in order to achieve company enrollment goals, recruiting managers at some companies created a boiler-room atmosphere, in which hitting an enrollment quota was the recruiters' highest priority. Recruiters who failed to bring in

enough students were put through disciplinary processes and sometimes terminated

(Harkin, 2012, p. 3).

The complexity of the fluctuating landscape in higher education directly impacts

admissions advisors and their stress in the workplace. Admissions advisors must learn to employ

coping mechanisms to offset the occupational stress in this numbers-driven environment.

**Occupational Stress**

This portion of the literature review examines research regarding the reduction of levels

of occupational stress on admissions advisors. Seminal author Seyle (1956) was considered the

first to demonstrate the existence of biological stress and the need for assessments to facilitate

and support the connection between personal and work-related stress and its contribution to a

multitude of health issues. Thus, being able to recognize common stress symptoms provides a

step up in managing them and preventing health problems. Further research has brought a wide

variety of studies and advances in stress management (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 1996;

Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991; Scheier & Carver, 1992). Further

research focused on biological indicators regarding long-term stress is currently being conducted.

At the Stress Research Institute ([SRI], 2015), current foci of studies include biological

psychology and treatment research, epidemiology, and psychoneuroimmunology with an

emphasis on work-related stress and health.

**Causes of stress.** Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that stress can be thought of as

resulting from an "imbalance between demands and resources" or as occurring when "pressure

exceeds one's perceived ability to cope" (p. 59). The National Institute of Mental Health

([NIMH], 2014) stated, "Stress can be defined as the brain's response to any demand" (para. 2). The second definition illustrates that it is not reasonable to categorize all stress as detrimental. Stress response hormones in animals and humans can be lifesaving and function as a way to respond to threats and danger. However, chronic stress can be concerning as it generates the same chemicals used for safety, which "can suppress functions that aren't needed for immediate survival. Immunity is lowered and your digestive, excretory, and reproductive systems stop working normally" (NIMH, 2014, para. 3). Constant stress builds up over time and can result in ill health.

The World Health Organization ([WHO], n.d.) has documented that chronic, perpetual stress is commonly found in the workplace due to pressure and demands not matching personnel's knowledge and abilities. Marmot (2005) identified in his book, *The Status Syndrome*, that having little to no control over one's job is the major cause of workplace stress. Job demands such as a high work pressure, emotional demands, and role ambiguity may lead to sleeping problems, exhaustion, and impaired health (Doi, 2005; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Empirical evidence shows the combination of high job demands and low job control is an important predictor of psychological strain and illness (Kain & Jex, 2010; Schnall et al., 1994). Work-related stress is exacerbated when employees feel very little support from colleagues and management.

Karasek's 1979 job demand-control model of occupational stress (Kain & Jex, 2010) describes how the demands of a person's job and the degree of control the person has over their own responsibilities results in workplace stress. Karasek discussed four kinds of jobs: passive,

active, low strain, and high strain (Kain & Jex, 2010). Conversely, Siegrist's (1996) effort-reward imbalance model (ERI) found in epidemiological literature is defined as instead of using the control structure, the reward is emphasized. The lack of reciprocity resulting from high effort /low reward leads to stress.

Numerous organizational scholars have argued that organizational research could benefit from the study of human physiology because physiological reactivity may explain the underlying processes that link exposure to workplace stressors to impaired functioning at work, absenteeism, and health care costs incurred by employers (Ganster, 2005; Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Greenberg, 2010; Halpern, 2005; Zellars, Meurs, Perrewé, Kacmar, & Rossi, 2009). When trying to self-assess the stressors, it is important to acknowledge two things: that there is a difference between acute and chronic stress and that responses to each are quite diverse but may overlap. Thus demographics and definitions make it difficult to reach consensus on definition and measurement of stress. The Center for Studies on Human Stress has found that acute stress can be defined as "resulting from specific events or situations that involve novelty, unpredictability, a threat to the ego, and leave us with a poor sense of control" while chronic stress results from "repeated exposure to situations that lead to the release of stress hormones" (CSHS, 2014, para. 1-3).

Somaz and Tulgan (2003) have noted that among the many stressors, the most common sources listed by employees are the way they are treated by their bosses, supervisors or company, the lack of job security, company policies, and unclear expectations, just to name a few. Holmes and Rahe (1967) developed and refined a scale for linking stress and illness called the social readjustment rating scale (SRRS). The perceived stress scale (PSS) or profile of mood scales are

developed particularly to assess the effects of stress in the workplace. PSS is the most widely used scale for measuring perceptions of stress.

**Economic Impacts of Stress in Higher Education**

Recent research about workplace stress in higher education has documented the economic impacts caused by occupational pressures. Brun (2008) presented foundational figures related to workplace stress in the United States, which demonstrate annual costs in the billions for mental health, absenteeism, turnover, and productivity. An average of 7.1 days were reported lost per employee for an average of 67,923 days total, which adds up to 289 full-time jobs annually and a short-term sick leave deficit of $13,965,691. Mental health reasons have been associated with 35 percent of short-term sick leave.

Kingsbury (2009) addressed traditional standard private college admissions practices held at institutions such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale, stating, "Most admissions counselors enter the field assuming they will stay in it just a few years, and indeed, turnover is extremely high. The demanding lifestyle is usually to blame, but the pay doesn't help" (para. 11). The average salary was about $33,000 during the 2008-2009 school year (CUPA-HR, 2014). In a for-profit higher education setting, Larson (2014) anecdotally noted, "This year seems to be worse than most–counselors are taking off for greener pastures at new schools, desks on the high school side, or jobs out of higher education" (para. 1).

Employers are recognizing the high costs from employee turnover due to a stressful work environment. Employee turnover is defined as "a ratio comparison of the number of employees a company must replace in a given time period to the average number of total employees" (Khan,

2013, p. 13). CompData's 2013 edition of their annual BenchmarkPro Survey collects data submitted by 40,000 organizations, and noted a 15.1% overall total turnover, including voluntary turnover. It is important to note they found total turnover trends have been stabilizing since 2010 with only a .08% maximum variance over that period. Kenexa Research Institute (KRI) conducted a study in 2007 that found that those who support and appreciate their organization's efforts to support work-life balance also indicated a much lower intent to leave the organization, regardless of gender.

**Strategies for Coping With Stress**

The American Psychological Association (APA) (2012) reported that 44% percent of those in the general population report doing a poor to fair job in managing their personal stress and only 31% fully recover after experiencing stress. More than 25% of people who agonize from an excessive amount of stress say they do not consciously take steps to control or reduce it. Emotional denial, physical exercise, and stress avoidance are the most popular methods used by people who do attempt to manage their stress (Taylor & Kagay, 1986). The Utah Counseling and Mental Health Center (2013) has concluded that the key to managing stress is to identify the coping mechanisms that work for each individual.

When examining coping mechanisms and stress, the seminal authors Lazarus and Folkman (1984) reported that the transactional theory of stress (TTS) provides "metatheoretical principles to understand the work stress process in terms of antecedents, mediating processes, and outcomes" (p. 65). This work can be originally traced back to the late 1960s. Using that model, coping is divided into two functions: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused

coping. Later, avoidance-oriented coping was introduced along with further refinements from problem-focused coping and how they both contribute to adaptive functioning. "Cognitive-relational theory defines stress as a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Lazarus (1991) proposed the cognitive-motivational-relational theory (CMRT) of coping, which attempts to link positive and negative emotions with motivation and goal attainment.

A second theory is the health/realization/innate health model (HR/IH). HR/IH establishes "principles that explain why the experience of psychological stress is not an effect of causal factors beyond people's control, but is an artifact of the energetic potential of the mind" (Sedgeman, 2005, para. 1). In this model, a person's perception or state of mind is dominant over the actual content of the stress response. HR/IH "suggests that the primary effort of mental health care could be to initiate life-long prevention of the state of chronic stress" (Sedgeman, 2005, para. 1). Remaining in a positive state of mind could assist in reducing stress-related illness.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141). To measure coping, two instruments are the standard: the ways of coping measure originally developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) and the COPE scale developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). The ways of coping measure is an "empirically-derived inventory of specific ways in which people might cope with a stressful event" (Taylor, 1998, para. 4). The following eight coping mechanisms

result from this measure: confrontative coping, seeking social support, planful problem-solving, self-control, distancing, positive appraisal, accepting responsibility, and escape/avoidance. Alternately, COPE requests respondents to "designate how they typically react to stressful events. The state measure of the COPE is completed by respondents with respect to a specific stressor, designated either by the respondent or by the researcher" (Taylor, 1998, para. 5).

Research shows that the following commonplace coping mechanism strategies are found to be effective when dealing with workplace stress, as categorized by the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, UCLA Dual Diagnosis Program (2014):

1. Humor. Pointing out the amusing aspects of the problem at hand, or "positive reframing," is thought to help deal with small failures.

2. Seeking support. Asking for help, or finding emotional support from family members or friends, can be an effective way of maintaining emotional health during a stressful period.

3. Problem-solving. As described above, problem solving is an instrumental coping mechanism that aims to locate the source of the problem and determine solutions. This coping mechanism is often helpful in work situations.

4. Relaxation. Engaging in relaxing activities, or practicing calming techniques, can help to manage stress and improve overall coping.

5. Physical recreation. Regular exercise, such as running, or team sports, is a good way to handle the stress of a given situation. This may involve yoga, meditating, progressive muscle relaxation, or other techniques of relaxation.

6. Adjusting expectations. Anticipating various outcomes to scenarios in life may assist in preparing for the stress associated with any given change or event.

There are strategies, however, that have been found to not work and which may even increase stress:

1. Denial. Avoidance of the issue altogether may lead to denying that a problem even exists. Denial is usually maintained by distractions, such as excessive alcohol consumption, overworking, or sleeping more than usual.

2. Self-blame. Internalizing the issue and blaming oneself (beyond just taking responsibility for one's actions) leads to low self-esteem and sometimes depression.

3. Venting. An externalizing coping technique, venting is the outward expression of emotions, usually in the company of friends or family. In moderation it can be healthy; however, ruminating on the negative can lead to strained relationships over time.

The following are seven strategies listed in Helpguide.org (2014) that are used to assist in minimizing the need to implement coping mechanisms and manage stress:

1. Get moving

2. Engage socially

3. Avoid unnecessary stress

4. Alter the situation

5. Adapt to the stressor

6. Accept the things you cannot change

7. Make time for fun and relaxation

Avoiding stress will help eliminate the amount of stressors in the workplace while altering a stressful situation can help transform the problem so that the same stressor can be avoided in the future. Adapting to the stressor helps to regulate stress by shifting expectations and attitude. Employees accepting things they are unable to change rather than expending energy struggling with a non-negotiable, such as a death or serious illness, will ultimately lead to successful stress management. Finally, a nurturing approach is vital for ultimate health and energy applied when needed to combat stressors. While there is not one exact method, experimentation with various techniques will prove helpful for contending with stress in the workplace (Helpguide, 2014).

Overcoming negative standards and developing constructive characteristics of job satisfaction and work engagement in higher education are important themes for corporate-led tools regarding combating workplace stressors. Corporate modality comparisons and use of various programs offered tend to be significant sources of stress management. Various workshops that promote mental well-being within an organization are becoming a trend with the objective being to reduce the percent of worksites that have stress-related outcomes such as turnover or employee illness. The Centers for Disease Control's *Healthy People* (CDC, 2010) report delineated health promotion significance indicators according to sentinel benchmarks.

As stated in Healthy People 2010 (CDC, 2010), there are 9 measures associated with one or more of the 11 sentinel objectives in the Occupational Safety and Health area. Leading health indicator measures are: Physical activity, overweight and obesity, tobacco use, substance abuse, responsible sexual behavior, mental health, injury and violence, environmental quality,

immunization and access to health care. Data on the baselines and most recent values for these indicators and their objectives are shown in the detailed tables for the individual priority areas in the Occupational Safety and Health section of the review. The 11 objectives include: Work-related deaths, work-related injuries, overexertion or repetitive motion injuries, pneumoconiosis deaths, work-related homicides, work-related assaults, elevated blood lead levels, occupational skin diseases or disorders, worksite stress reduction programs, needle stick injuries, and noise-induced hearing loss. Worksite stress reduction programs displays a 1992 baseline of 37% with an increased 2010 target of 50%.

This information is vital to workplace stress management as it mentions two of the target objectives that align with this study: reductions in the number of people reporting stress and an increase in the role of health promotion programs. The importance of these objectives is supported by numerous sources, including the National Survey of Worksite Health Promotion Activities ([NSWHP], 2004), the International Association for Worksite Health Promotion ([IAWHP], 2015), and the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion ([ODPHP], 2015).

**Conclusion**

The literature on stress and coping mechanisms in the higher education admissions workplace provides a general understanding of the concepts related to recognition of and response to workplace stress management. The definitions, framework, and subsequent exploration of themes inform this study by demonstrating how they can work to improve staff health and well-being. This understanding supports the need to study admissions advisors'

coping mechanisms of stress and the impact on relevant stress management. Through an exploration of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) work, the Holmes and Rahe scale (1967), and several models, including the health realization/innate health model (2005), the job demand-control model (1979), and the effort-reward imbalance model (1996), it has been found that, if coping mechanisms are implemented accurately and in a timely way at the initial indication of workplace stress, then successful stress management is possible.

The conclusion that intervention is a viable response to employee stress is vital to the current study. The review of the literature indicated there has been substantial research on the topic of occupational stress and coping mechanisms generally, but very little about workplace stress among the admissions advisor population and techniques for stress management among this population. This study explores workplace stress in that specific setting.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research design and approach for the study including setting, participants and sample size, data collection method, interview questions, data analysis, participant rights, premise, limitations, delimitations, stakeholders, and potential biases. The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine how nursing admissions advisors in a for-profit educational setting recognized and understood the phenomenon of stress in the workplace. The study sought to document the admissions advisors' beliefs and perceptions of occupational stress, and to further identify whether proactive coping mechanisms were useful as a method for counteracting occupational stress. The following three research questions were examined using a formative case study methodology.

1. How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand occupational stress in the workplace?

2. How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand proactive coping mechanisms in the workplace?

3. What proactive coping strategies do tenured nursing admissions advisors describe to mitigate stress in the workplace?

**Focus of the Study and Theoretical Framework**

A case study is "an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). Yin (2013) noted that case study methodology allows the researcher to explore individuals' experiences of

phenomena including relationships, communities, and programs as well as interventions. A variety of lenses thus allows for multiple facets of phenomena to be explored and supports the deconstruction and reconstruction of phenomena. The philosophical framework underpinning this case study has been formulated by seminal authors Stake (1995) and Yin (2013) based on the tenets of constructivism; namely, that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective (p. 545). The method's focus was appropriate due to the following factors based on Yin's (2013) design to answer "how" and "why" questions: not being able to manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study and needing to examine contextual conditions because they are relevant to the phenomenon.

Morrow (2005) considered qualitative research standards to include social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation. Influential models considered for the primary theoretical framework of this study include the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and the proactive coping theory (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Schwarzer (2000a, 2000b). The proactive coping theory synthesizes notions by causal antecedents, mediating processes, functioning effects, and outcomes (Schwarzer, 2000b). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984, 1987; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) work on emotions, adaptation, the sources and management of stress and coping strategies also informed this study.

**Setting**

The setting of the study was a for-profit nationwide nursing college. This setting aligned with the study objectives to examine the experiences of program-specific admissions advisors. The institution as a whole had 17 campuses across the nation, encompassing approximately

10,261 students and an admission staff of 40 admissions advisors. Students at this institution attend classes online, on-ground, or via an integrated format of both modalities. Admissions advisors selected for the study were drawn from all 17 campuses. The setting(s) allowed for unhindered participant contact and ease of information retrieval due to the researcher's employment at one campus and leadership position in the system. Access to data such as admissions advisors' contact information, tenure, and job responsibilities as well as other relevant information ensured an appropriate criterion sample was obtained.

The specific setting was a busy Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program where admissions advisors were subjected to high levels of stress within the enrollment cycle. Workplace stress reflected the conditions described in the literature, including the unprecedented demand for nursing professionals with waitlists at some nursing schools, a competitive admissions process, and required nursing entrance administration. Recruitment stress levels for staff differ between demanding programs versus those of a noncompetitive, ease of entry platform. For example, measured monthly team averages such as inquiry to application, application to accept, and application to start may be larger in a competitive admissions committee dictating acceptance rather than automatic acceptance as in a noncompetitive platform. After acceptance, further stress on admissions staff may be caused by a process requiring a minimum of 14 steps for each student to be facilitated by the admissions advisor, such as a drug screen, background screening, obtaining a fingerprint card, and signing enrollment documents prior to the student starting class.

**Participants and Sample Size**

  This study utilized criterion sampling to recruit participants who were able to provide meaningful data regarding the phenomena. Data was collected from tenured admissions advisors at a for-profit BSN pre-licensure nursing college. The sample consisted of 12 tenured admissions advisors drawn from a population of approximately 50 possible participants identified from 19 different campus' admissions departments. The advisor range provided a criterion sample that represented a large pool of individuals from this workplace population with an identifying factor of tenure. The subsequent advisor pool was then reviewed to ensure diversity of age, race, gender, and admissions experience beyond the 1-year tenure requirement. Team characteristics consisted of all English-speaking men and women aged 18 years or older (See Table 2 for the demographics of potential participants organized by years of service).

  For purposes of this study, only tenured admissions advisors at a for-profit, higher education nursing college were included. Tenure was defined as those employed over one year. Tenure can be described as the amount of time a person holds a job, office, or title (Tenure, 2014). Tenured participants also represented individuals who have demonstrated appropriate product knowledge by successfully completing an annual standardized product knowledge aptitude test to remain certified as an advisor. Participants also met the criteria of full-time, ground modality advisors who spent eight hours a day with an average of 20-40 inquiries and five hours of talk time per week.

Table 2

*Demographics of Potential Participants*

| Advisor | Race | Age | Gender | Hire Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | African American | 36 | Female | 2007 |
| 2 | European American | 28 | Female | 2009 |
| 3 | African American | 46 | Male | 2010 |
| 4 | African American | 30 | Male | 2011 |
| 5 | European American | 26 | Female | 2011 |
| 6 | European American | 27 | Female | 2011 |
| 7 | European American | 57 | Female | 2011 |
| 8 | Hispanic/Latino | 48 | Female | 2011 |
| 9 | European American | 31 | Female | 2012 |
| 10 | Hispanic/Latino | 30 | Male | 2012 |
| 11 | European American | 26 | Female | 2012 |
| 12 | Hispanic/Latino | 34 | Female | 2012 |
| 13 | Asian American | 27 | Female | 2012 |
| 14 | European American | 28 | Male | 2012 |
| 15 | European American | 40 | Male | 2012 |
| 16 | European American | 59 | male | 2012 |
| 17 | European American | 28 | Female | 2012 |
| 18 | European American | 23 | Male | 2012 |
| 19 | African American | 32 | Female | 2012 |
| 20 | European American | 35 | Male | 2012 |
| 21 | European American | 45 | Female | 2013 |

Table 2 (continued)

| Advisor | Ethnicity | Age | Gender | Hire Year |
|---------|-----------|-----|--------|-----------|
| 22 | European American | 27 | Female | 2013 |
| 23 | African American | 29 | Male | 2013 |
| 24 | African American | 26 | Male | 2013 |
| 25 | European American | 25 | Male | 2013 |
| 26 | European American | 32 | Female | 2013 |
| 27 | European American | 26 | Male | 2013 |
| 28 | European American | 27 | Female | 2013 |
| 29 | Hispanic/Latino | 28 | Female | 2013 |
| 30 | European American | 26 | Female | 2013 |
| 31 | Hispanic/Latino | 28 | Female | 2013 |
| 32 | Hispanic/Latino | 25 | Male | 2014 |
| 33 | African American | 40 | Female | 2014 |
| 34 | European American | 26 | Female | 2014 |
| 35 | African American | 32 | Male | 2014 |
| 36 | Hispanic/Latino | 54 | Female | 2014 |
| 37 | African American | 27 | Female | 2014 |
| 38 | European American | 25 | Female | 2014 |
| 39 | European American | 29 | Female | 2014 |
| 40 | European American | 27 | Female | 2014 |

**Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted via phone to collect the data used in this study. The interview questions focused on participant experiences and ways of knowing about and dealing with critical stress events. Participants' own work-life stressful experiences were described through vignettes.

An interview script consisting of five questions was vetted through a local admissions expert (see Appendix A). These interview questions reflected research about workplace stress and were designed to solicit particular types of responses. The interview also included an open-ended question for the purpose of obtaining a vignette describing a stressful experience and the methods used by the participant to cope with it. Vignettes have a multitude of definitions (Ainscow, 2000; Alexander & Becker, 1978; Barter & Renold, 1999; Erickson, 1986; Finch, 1987; Miles, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Poulou, 2001; Pransky & Baily, 2002; Schoenberg & Radval, 2000). However, for this study, Hughes' (1998) definition was used: a 'continuous narrative' or developmental approach and, usually, participants are invited to comment on the various stages of the story's progression.

The vignette included an explanation of the rationale used to choose the proactive coping mechanism instituted to manage the event, if applicable. These descriptions supported collateral which benefited the data analysis by providing additional individual textual descriptions and aided in generating thematic material.

One interview was conducted per participant. Due to the fact that participants were drawn from campuses from across the country, the interviews were conducted over the phone. They did not last longer than 20 minutes.

**Interview Questions**

The interview questions were developed based on the literature and were validated by an admissions expert to endorse and support the problem statement, purpose of study, and the effectiveness of the instrument. Once the instrument was validated, a letter was sent by email to a list of potential study participants (see Appendix B). Letters were sent, drawn from a population of twenty-seven qualified participants, selected from 17 campuses in 9 states; 12 agreed to be interviewed. The researcher audio-recorded participant responses and had them transcribed. Table 3 shows the interview questions and the theories related to them.

Table 3

*Interview Questions and Theoretical Framing*

| Interview Question | Theoretical Framing |
| --- | --- |
| 1. How do you describe occupational stress? | Self-Efficacy Theory Bandura (1997) |
| 2. Tell me about a time when you recognized occupational stress based on a lived experience. | Self-Efficacy Theory Bandura (1997) |
| 3. What is your understanding of proactive coping mechanisms? | Proactive Coping Theory Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) Schwarzer (2000) |
| 4. What proactive coping mechanism(s) do you employ? | Proactive Coping Theory Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) Schwarzer (2000) |

| 5. How have the proactive coping mechanism(s) you have employed helped reduced your occupational stress? | Self-Efficacy Theory<br>Bandura (1997)<br><br>Proactive Coping Theory<br>Aspinwall and Taylor (1997)<br>Schwarzer (2000) |

**Data Analysis**

The primary form of data was the interview transcripts. Interviews were transcribed, proofread, and analyzed for emergent themes. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) described an organizational system able of managing data vital to support a scholarly qualitative case study. Their four-step process includes reviewing and exploring data for "big" ideas. Responses are interpreted on a general level, using independent researcher analysis, organized and structured in order to observe trends from semi-structured interview questions. Identified trends were then coded and placed in categories. Coding was used to identify the specific categories and themes analyzed and summarized for identifying collapsible data and key findings. The analysis process developed by formulating finding statements, which included participants' quotations. The final step was to analyze and synthesize findings by the convergence of comprehension, knowledge, and relevance to the research question and the existing literature. Yin (2013) recommended periodically reviewing the scope of the study to ensure the researcher remains within the constraints of the original research questions.

Additionally, Moustakas' modified van Kaam method for analysis (Moustakas, 1994) provided an effective 7-step method to identify themes within the collected data:

Step 1: Listing and preliminary grouping

Step 2: Reduction and elimination

Step 3: Clustering and thematizing

Step 4: Validation and identification

Step 5: Individual textual descriptions

Step 6: Individual structural description

Step 7: Synthesis

These steps ensure the validity of responses through evaluation to determine invariant or consistent themes of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used this as a foundation to guide the coding of repetitive expressions, determine invariant themes, and finalize the synthesis of data.

**Participants' Rights**

Ethical behavior and the protection of patients' rights in conducting this study was guided by the University of New England IRB consent outline as well as the researcher's commitment to accurately portray individual participant's perspectives. Howe and Moses (1999) stated that research ethics must be based "on mutual respect, on trust, and on close communication between researcher and participant" (p. 74). Therefore, it lies on both the researcher and the research participants to determine if the risks and benefits associated with the research participation were acceptable. Fritz (2008) stated, "Protection of participants through an informed consent process favors formalized interaction between researcher and participant" (p. 6). Participant's rights were indicated in the formal consent for participation form by the researcher (see Appendix C).

When identifying biases for the study, an initial principle is that the confidentiality and privacy of participants will be protected. Privacy and confidentiality were assured by

anonymizing identifying data provided by the participant and de-identifying the participant. Identities were protected by implementing pseudonyms for the participating admissions advisors. Additionally, all email and phone correspondence was held to telephony and inter/intranet security standards. Data was encrypted when transmitted, and kept secure after it was collected and stored by the researcher. While results may be incorporated into a presentation for stakeholders, a dissertation defense, a journal article, or a report to a third party agency, confidentiality will be maintained. The researcher will destroy data 7 years after project is complete.

**Premise**

Three premises were established while taking into account the reader's as well as participants' rationales and beliefs about the purpose of this qualitative case study. LaBossiere (2015) stated that a premise is similar to a claim given as evidence or a reason for accepting the conclusion of a study. Therefore, the initial assertion for the study is that admissions responsibilities are linked with occupational stress because of cyclical pressures to fill classes to ensure a college's financial viability. Secondly, admissions advisors chosen for the interview are a satisfactory representation of the broader divergent population. Third, participants will accurately reveal their recognition of occupational stress and proactive coping mechanisms during the interview process. When weaving the aforementioned assertions together, the researcher believes the findings will reflect the assumptions outlined here and represent participants' experiences.

**Limitations**

The study was limited to admissions advisors who were at least 18 years of age with a criterion sample requirement of a minimum tenure of 1 year. Therefore, the findings will not be representative of admissions advisors with less than 1 year of admissions experience. The participants represent only one for-profit, higher education institution. Additionally, the qualitative case study is not longitudinal in nature, but a snapshot of individuals' perceptions of their experiences. The nature of the problem to be studied, stress in the workplace, is multifaceted. Interview-derived data alone and the analysis of that data provide only one perspective on the research question, rather than a generalizable set of conclusions. Lastly, a limitation of the study may be influences that come from researcher bias, reflected in the phrasing of interview questions and the analysis of data.

**Delimitations**

Creswell (2009) described the concept where the specific nature of a problem delimits subject matter and focuses attention on a specific aspect of study. Delimitations refer to "what the researcher is not going to do" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Delimitations impact the external validity or generalizability of the results of the study. Occupational stress and proactive coping mechanisms are common, found to some degree in all workplaces, and affect all parts of society. To ensure the study focused on a specific class of employees, the study was intentionally limited to nursing admissions advisors. While this role is too specific for generalization of the results, the intent of the study was to strictly examine the recognition of occupational stress and

proactive resolution strategies in higher education admissions. This delimitation strategy adds to the creditability of the study.

**Stakeholders**

Definite reciprocal relationships exist between an organization and certain groups of individuals (Ginter, Duncan, & Swayne, 2103). Stakeholders are considered to have a stake or claim in the outcome of decision-making. Stakeholders in the current study include admission advisors and administrators in college and university admission departments, individuals responsible for nursing education and staffing, and local and national leadership of both non-profit and for-profit educational institutions.

This study provides stakeholders with data regarding admissions advisors' experiences with occupational stress and possible proactive coping mechanisms that may be used as a foundation for creating alternative workplace stress reduction programs. Findings may also entice other colleges and universities to proactively implement corporate-led stress reduction programs for their employees, with the goal of reducing occupational stress in the workplace, thus decreasing employee turnover. Retention of admissions advisors is a significant goal due to the high turnover rate of this particular position. If the research can identify strategies to help with retention of staff, it would be valuable information for all higher education professionals.

**Potential Biases**

It is important to initiate a regular practice of critical self-reflection, which is done by exploring assumptions, looking at their significance, and questioning why they are vital. Though speaking about students, Cranton (2002) stated,

We need to provide the opportunity for students to question their assumptions: to

examine what they think and how they feel and consider the consequences of holding

certain assumptions. If that piece is absent, broad issues can't be questioned nor depth be

added therefore accuracy may be void. Broad issues can be related to social justice,

curriculum development, learning theories, politics, culture, or use of technology. (p. 67)

Cranton's statement is applicable to any population.

The researcher's own awareness of personal bias is imperative. Awareness is essential

whether analyzing a moment in time or a series of events without a preconceived belief about the

event, which contributes to new conclusions regarding assumptions, solutions and answers.

Creswell (2007) suggested that this awareness enables the researchers to retain a focus on

learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that

the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature. Humans must be able to set

aside the personal standards they are raised with to comprehend the data without bias. Each

person has their own feelings and beliefs about how things happen in the workplace. Perceptions

can influence their beliefs which could potentially interfere with their interpretation about what

is happening. Creswell (2007) also describes how researchers' past experiences influence tactics,

pursuit of information, and the core research questions used.

A conflict of interest may influence the researcher's critical subjectivity. Heron and

Reason (1997) noted that critical subjectivity is attending to "the grounding relations between the

forms of knowing, and also to their consummating relations" (para. 12). In other words, critical

subjectivity is understanding how we recognize personal specific high degree of skill and the

associated knowledge that accompanies it. The researcher's personal understanding will result in

creating a perspective drawn from past experiences. While such knowledge may add critical

reflexivity into the research and has a natural place in some forms of research, mechanisms must

be put in place to ensure they do not distort the outcomes. Herr and Anderson (2005) stated that

examples of preventative mechanisms include the triangulation of methods and data sources, as

well as member checks. Triangulation can be defined as "comparing and cross-checking data

collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data

collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same

people" (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). Member checks can be considered collaborations with the

participants. It is vital to confirm the researcher has made accurate interpretations and

perspectives.

**Summary**

A qualitative method was selected for the research study to conduct 12 one-on-one

interviews to collect and analyze data associated with understanding the participants' perceived

recognition and understanding of the phenomenon of stress in the workplace. The study's intent

was to document the admissions advisors' beliefs and perceptions of occupational stress, and to

further identify whether proactive coping mechanisms were useful as a method for counteracting

occupational stress. This chapter described the research focus, design and approach for the study

including setting, participant sample/rights, data collection, and analysis method. The interview

questions are outlined and were followed by linking each question to its theoretical frame. The

chapter ends with a review of the premise, limitations, delimitations, stakeholders, and the

potential basis of the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data collection process along with the demographic characteristics of the participants, descriptive analysis summarizing the core thematic patterns, and answers the research questions.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As stated in previous chapters, the purpose of this qualitative case study research was to examine how nursing admissions advisors in a for-profit educational setting recognize and understand the phenomenon of occupational stress in the workplace. The study addressed three guiding research questions:

1. How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand occupational stress in the workplace?

2. How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand proactive coping mechanisms in the workplace?

3. What proactive coping strategies do tenured nursing admissions advisors describe to mitigate stress in the workplace?

This chapter begins with a discussion of the demographic characteristics of the participants in the sample. Next, descriptive analysis summarizes the core thematic patterns, results of the study, and answers the research questions; the results are then discussed with implications and recommendations for future research in Chapter 5. The results were derived from transcripts of recorded one-on-one interviews from a single for-profit college over a period of 4 weeks. Twenty-seven qualified participants selected from 17 campuses in 9 states were contacted and invited; 12 agreed to be interviewed. The 12 participants who agreed to participate were assigned an alpha-numeric reference which reconciles with Table 4.

**Profiles of Participants**

Demographic specifics of the 12 participants are shown in Table 4. The research study participants were comprised of 11 females and one male. The length of service varied from 1 to 8 years. A graphical representation of the advisor population approximates a larger pool from which the participants originated (see Table 2). The participants selected for the interview process met the following criteria, consisting of a variety of characteristics: English speaking men and women age 18 years or older; employed as admission advisors for at least one year; demonstrated appropriate product knowledge by having successfully completing an annual standardized aptitude test to remain certified as an advisor; and being full-time, ground modality advisors who spent 8 hours a day with an average of 20-40 inquiries and 5 hours of talk time per week.

Table 4

*Profiles of Participants*

| Participant | Race | Age | Gender | Hire Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant A | Caucasian | 27 | F | 2014 |
| Participant B | Hispanic/Latino | 33 | F | 2013 |
| Participant C | Asian | 29 | F | 2013 |
| Participant D | African American | 37 | F | 2007 |
| Participant E | Caucasian | 50 | F | 2014 |
| Participant F | Hispanic/Latino | 29 | F | 2013 |
| Participant G | Caucasian | 26 | M | 2013 |
| Participant H | Caucasian | 29 | F | 2011 |
| Participant I | African American | 27 | F | 2013 |
| Participant J | Hispanic/Latino | 35 | F | 2012 |
| Participant K | Caucasian | 27 | F | 2011 |
| Participant L | African American | 35 | F | 2012 |

This divergent pool of admissions advisors were asked five semi-structured interview questions in identical sequence and manner:

1. How do you describe occupational stress?

2. Tell me about a time when you recognized occupational stress based on a lived experience.

3. What is your understanding of proactive coping mechanisms?

4. What proactive coping mechanism(s) do you employ?

5. How have the proactive coping mechanism(s) you have employed helped reduced your

occupational stress?

Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each. The interview questions provided a lens through which to examine the context of the research questions to ensure that they were closely related to the focus of the study. The 12 participants made up a case bounded by a common professional experience. Yin (2003) demonstrated that a case study approach is useful when the case study cannot be considered without context, in this instance a college of nursing, and more specifically, tenured nursing admissions advisors.

**Five Core Thematic Patterns and Subsequent Findings**

Overall, five core thematic patterns with connected elements emerged out of the data analysis method and interpretation process. The themes identified were (a) perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress; (b) job responsibility contributors; (c) work-life balance; (d) coping mechanisms applied within and outside of the workplace; and (e) care for the whole person and location of care. Additionally, five subthemes consist of (a) burden of performing well; (b) feeling of overwhelm (c) time management/prioritizing; (d) differentiating proactive vs. reactive coping mechanisms; and (e) coping classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical. The convergence between the five themes, subthemes, and findings is illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

*Five Core Thematic Patterns and Subsequent Findings of the Phenomenon of Occupational Stress in the Workplace*

| Main Theme | Subtheme | Findings |
| --- | --- | --- |
| (a) Perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress | (a) Burden of performing well | Finding 1: Acknowledgement of the degree of burden attributed to wanting to perform well on the job |
| (b) Job responsibility contributors | (b) Feeling of overwhelm | Finding 2: An opportunity to address improved ways to overcome overwhelm affiliated with job responsibility |
| (c) Work-life balance | (c) Time management/ prioritizing | Finding 3: The ability to manage work-life balance as a factor in occupational stress |
| (d) Coping mechanism(s) applied within and outside of the workplace | (d) Differentiating proactive vs. reactive coping mechanisms | Finding 4: Understanding of proactive coping mechanisms in the workplace is not a solid component of proactively relieving the onset of occupational stress |
| (e) Care for the whole person and location of care | (e) Coping classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical | Finding 5: Coping strategies described to assist in care for the whole person were not engaged on a regular basis at the workplace |

**Analysis Method**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) presented various methods for analyzing qualitative research data. An overview of possible analytic approaches were reviewed including instruction on accumulating raw data, organizing data management strategies, coding, and developing conceptual models. Other analytic approaches include grounded theory, case study, ethnographic, and quasi-statistical methodologies to name a few. Prior to analysis of the detailed description of thematic patterns resulting from all participants, the researcher selected Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method for analysis.

The data analysis procedure chosen by the researcher consisted of reviewing the interview transcripts for thematic configurations, phrases, and comparable experiences. Moustakas (1994) provided an effective seven-step method to identify themes within the collected data. A specific research strategy may employ either linear or interactive patterns, or some combination of both. Its qualitative nature makes it feasible to analyze specific amounts of narrative data taken from a moderate sample size. The seven steps include listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing, validation and identification, individual textual descriptions, individual structural description, and synthesis.

Moustakas (1994) viewed experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of a phenomenon with the person experiencing the phenomenon. Thus, there are solid links between phenomenology and constructivism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996), which are concerned with how the world appears to a particular person based on their personal views and experience. The opportunity to examine personal experiences based on lived experiences is

essential to avoid judgment and biases later during the course of research (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). These steps ensure validity of responses through evaluation to determine invariant or consistent themes of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher found this a successful phenomenological analysis method to form a foundation for coding repetitive expressions, determining invariant themes, and finalizing synthesis of data. Also, enhancing the quality and credibility of the qualitative analysis included triangulation of data by multiple analysts to strengthen credibility which also assisted in reducing single observer bias (Patton, 1990).

**Presentation of Results**

The research questions and a summary of the responses appear below. Question 2 was designed to solicit a vignette or anecdotal description of a personal (admissions-related) incident or experience that might exemplify the nature of stress to the participants. It is through the composite textural and structural individual descriptions that the order of the thematic findings emerged. As a result of systematic data analysis using the Moustakas (1994) modified Van Kaam seven-step method, the order was determined after removing duplicate and vague comments, listing what remained and grouping into theme categories by order of the study's research questions and subsequently by occurrence in the interview.

**Research question 1.** How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand occupational stress in the workplace?

**Thematic finding 1: Perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress.** The primary finding reflected the experiences of 11 out of 12 participants

who voiced they were aware of their personal definition of occupational stress and while they had not taken significant time to review the subject, there was a desire to delve deeper by participating in the study. As seen in the majority of the participants, the sub-thematic pattern consistently observed was related to the burden of wanting to perform well on the job. One participant mentioned, "Having a burden of wanting to do as well as you can and not knowing if it's enough . . . it's more of a burden, the stress that comes with doing a job and doing it well" (Participant B). Another participant commented, "Occupational stress is like a burden at your job, so when you come in and feel like you can't catch up, it creates a negative environment in your workplace" (Participant A). A third contributor (Participant I) declared, "To know you are carrying a lot of weight, a lot of burden . . . that can be overwhelming at times." Similarly, Participant L's statement indicated, "I have a personal goal for myself and sometimes that can become added-on stress." Finally, when discussing the definition of occupational stress, one admissions advisor's response was,

> The expectations go higher as you get better in your job, which is fantastic, but because people put more things on your plate and trust you more to delegate additional time . . . you take on more of that responsibility to hold your own, which adds to that stress because you don't want to let your team down, you don't want to let your boss down, and you don't want to let your company down. (Participant B)

**Thematic finding 2: Job responsibility contributors.** To be eligible for participation in the study, each participant needed to have demonstrated appropriate product knowledge, determined by examining whether they had passed the standardized product knowledge aptitude

test to remain certified as an admissions advisor. This exam ensures accuracy, familiarity, and understanding of admissions advisor during daily job functions. Collectively as an eligible group, the participants frequently mentioned being overwhelmed by daily tasks and job responsibilities that caused hemorrhaging into their personal life, thus contributing to their perception of occupational stress.

In academic terms, the overflow of responsibilities could indicate the number of prospective students who needed to be contacted within a certain timeframe, the numerous steps necessary to process student files, and/or expectations of team enrollment plan outcomes. Seven participants alluded to their affiliation with job responsibility factors and the perceptions they had of being overwhelmed contributing to their definition of occupational stress.

Integrated examples include, "Here in admissions, it's a lot of work and it can be overwhelming at times just because of the position that I'm in" (Participant J). Another participant reported, "Stress could occur when there is a mismatch with the job expectations and reality" (Participant C). Furthermore, Participant J added, "It's stressful trying to balance it all and just taking a breath in and thinking . . . what do I need to do next." Another contributor (Participant F) stated, "Occupational stress to me is not balancing your daily work the way that you planned for it to be . . . you plan it and then you get sidetracked by different things going on." Other responses included the influence of behavioral traits, personality factors, and perceived job responsibilities, indicated by statements such as, "I can't seem to turn it off" or "There's just so much to do and I can't get to it and I'm very–I'm just the type of person that doesn't like to leave anything unfinished" (Participant E).

Seven of the 12 participants felt the amount of job responsibility contributed to occupational stress. These seven spoke of being overwhelmed and of how that contributed to their stress in the work environment. This theme was repeatedly echoed during the theme coding and data analysis. This finding suggests the importance of admissions advisors recognizing the contributing factors to stress offered by the participants.

**Thematic finding 3: Work-life balance.** A majority, 9 of 12, of the participants indicated that ability to manage work-life balance was a factor in occupational stress. The importance of the maintenance of work-life balance and its convergence of specific physiognomies is that, if not maintained, the imbalance may present as occupational stress. The key conclusion from this thematic finding of maintaining work-life balance stems from time management; and more specifically, prioritizing. Specific to this sub-thematic category, an admissions advisor described a personalized approach to time management by the following expression, "Making a long list and then prioritizing it accordingly" (Participant L). A second participant responded with the statement, "I go over in my mind what do I need to do and how do I need to prioritize my day. That does relieve a lot of my stress" (Participant E). Similarly, a third participant explained, "I try to have time management and organization skills at work, so when I go home I can be a mom and a wife. I don't even think about work anymore. That's how I alleviate my stress at work" (Participant C). Another participant emphasized, "I'm able to not just multi-task, but make an all-inclusive list of what needs to be done, prioritize better" (Participant B).

Out of the nine participants who discussed in detail their perceptions of work-life balance stressors, several statements expressed their views: "If team building is provided and work-life balance is stable, there is a drastic difference in the amount of occupational stress" (Participant A). "Combining housework, childcare, shopping, cooking with having a full-time job and trying to do everything on time is one of the biggest factors of being stressed at work" (Participant C). One described the impact of the time demands on her personal life.

You don't really have time to spend time with your family or girl time with your friends because by the time you get home, being so overwhelmed eight, ten, or twelve hours in a day, you just want a rest–you just want to relax. You don't want to talk anymore. You talk all day long. (Participant I)

A specific vignette of one out of nine participants illustrating the work-life balance concern converging with time management is presented below:

Last summer my boyfriend and I tried to take a road trip to Sedona, Arizona. It was my first vacation away from the amount of students that I have. Oh, the stress level that came with not only just putting in for that vacation but knowing that even while on vacation, I was still going to have to check-in with these students, as there were too many to have the other advisors help me out knowing that I was going to be away for a week. It was definitely a stressful factor that I had my email put on my phone, so I could keep in contact with my students, so they won't call the campus upset or trying and get hold of another advisor who already had their full plate. Then, that stress kind of navigated into my personal life, too because here we are into our vacation and my boyfriend is getting

upset with me because I'm constantly on the computer or my phone trying to take care of things back at work. There wasn't really a sense of being able to just leave it alone because again it comes with wanting to be perfect and wanting to keep on top of your stuff and having that own responsibility rather than putting it onto somebody else. I didn't have much to come back to as far as back-end work to catch up on because I was consistently working on it throughout that week. It also does make you kind of resentful that you can't just walk away and it'll be okay for a while. (Participant B)

From the statements listed above and examining the common phenomena obtained from Research Question 1, the researcher identified concerns and increased understanding of admissions advisors' personal perceptions and recognition of occupational stress. Key concepts focused specifically on the burden/degree of wanting to perform well on the job, taking opportunities to address improved ways to overcome overwhelm affiliated with job responsibility factors, and the importance of the maintenance of work-life balance, time management, and prioritizing.

**Research question 2.** How do tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand proactive coping mechanisms in the workplace?

**Thematic finding 4: Coping mechanism(s) applied within and outside of the workplace.** All participants described their perceived definition of proactive coping mechanisms. It is interesting to note that some used proactive definitions to express their views while others unconsciously articulated reactive coping mechanism definitions. Participant C emphasized, "Coping is like a preventative mechanism that one can do before the stress can even

occur." A second affirmation to proactive coping was illustrated in the following statement, "Understanding the way your mind works before stress; recognizing that everything has to be one step at a time" (Participant K).

Other examples of reactive coping mechanisms formulated themselves as their perceived definition. One example exhibited by Participant E described, "Something that I can do when I'm extremely stressed, like shutting my door so I can just sit and breathe." Secondly, Participant J mentioned, "I think a coping mechanism is something you do to react." A third illustration from participant L consisted of, "I work out and listen to music which is definitely a version of coping; however this is more reactive though." Finally, Participant K declared, "When I feel overwhelmed and stressed out, I like taking some time out (even like 30 minutes) and coming back." The above four examples endorsed a reactive coping mechanism.

Additionally, thematic finding 4 illuminated a lack of coping mechanisms occurring inside of the workplace. As the data revealed proactive and reactive coping mechanisms definitions from the participants, several samples displayed mechanisms that occurred outside the workplace, such as, "I work out and listen to music" (Participant L) or "Being around friends and playing sports helps" (Participant H). A final example that illustrated this observation was from Participant E who stated, "I love to walk, I love to exercise, sometimes I walk back and forth to and from work because I live that close."

To conclude, 12 out of 12 of the participants each articulated in detail their recognized definition of coping mechanism(s). The difference between proactive versus reactive coping mechanisms was pronounced. Thus, the data suggests that tenured nursing admissions advisors'

understanding of proactive mechanisms in the workplace was not a solid component of proactively relieving the onset of occupational stress.

**Research question 3.** What proactive coping strategies do tenured nursing admissions advisors describe to mitigate stress in the workplace?

**Thematic finding 5: Care for the whole person and location of care.** As expressed by the interview participants, a similar value to *Cura Personalis*, which is Latin for "Care for the whole person" (Otto, 2013), factors into the responses to perceived occupational stress in the workplace. Coping strategies described to assist in care for the whole person were based on the participants' reflections of their previous experiences. Corresponding statements originating throughout the participant interviews supported the underlying theme of coping classifications, and the division within this by the researcher into social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical categories.

Similarly, the lack of coping mechanisms occurring inside of the workplace was realized when examining participants' reflections of the location where previous coping mechanism experiences transpired. While thematic finding 5 expressed the value of care for the whole person, it also presents that care for the whole person primarily occurs outside of the workplace environment. Table 6 illustrates admissions advisors' perceived coping mechanism classifications as well as several coping mechanism activities used outside of the workplace. Perceived classifications encompassed multiple categories; for this study, the researcher placed them in the category with the greatest relevancy. This table is grouped by participant letter designations.

Table 6

*Coping Mechanism Classifications*

| Participant | Social/Emotional | Spiritual | Mental | Physical |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | "Walking in the door and being greeted by my husband and daughter" | "My relationship with God, church, and people in that community" | "Mentally organize/prioritize" | |
| D | | "Focus on faith" | "Meditating is part of being in prayer" | |
| H | "Singing in a band" | | | |
| J | "Discuss positive things that happened that day" | | "Read a book" | |
| B | | | "Daily reflection" | |
| L | | "Inspirational message" | "Listen to music" | |
| G | "Coaching" | | | "Work out before and after work to get my mind clear" |
| E | | | "Shutting my door" | "I love to walk" |

Table 6 (continued)

|  | Social/Emotional | Spiritual | Mental | Physical |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| K |  |  | "Mentally organize" | "Healthy diet" |
| I |  |  | "Listen to music" | "A day at the spa" |
| F |  |  | "Being optimistic" | "Deep breathing" |
| C |  |  |  | "Drink a lot of water" |

*Note.* Some of the statements are suitable in multiple categories; for this study, the researcher placed in the category with the greatest relevancy.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the research questions used to query participants in the study and presented the relevant findings of the data analysis. The chapter also included a discussion of the participant profile requirements. The relevant thematic statements that were derived from the 12 qualitative case study interviews were identified using the lived experiences of the participants. The study revealed the following emerging themes and associate trends as described by the participants: (a) perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress, (b) job responsibility contributors, (c) work-life balance, (d) coping mechanisms applied within and outside of the workplace, and (e) care for the whole person and location of care. Subthemes consist of (a) burden of performing well, (b) feeling of overwhelm, (c) time management/prioritizing, (d) differentiating proactive vs. reactive coping mechanisms, and (e) coping classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical.

Findings of importance in this comprehensive study suggest tenured admissions advisors recognize occupational stress in the workplace based on their perceived understanding of the definition of stress. Findings also suggest that tenured nursing admissions advisors recognize and understand coping mechanisms, especially the difference between proactive and reactive coping mechanisms. Furthermore, thematic finding 4 illuminated a lack of coping mechanisms occurring inside of the workplace.

Additionally, the diversity of experiences is vital to recount to enable an understanding of described proactive coping mechanisms listed in categories including social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical. Conclusions suggest that proactive coping mechanisms can be implemented in the workplace but that that is not necessarily done on a regular basis. The mechanisms chosen by some of the participants were reactive or based outside of the work environment. The implications for the conclusions as well as recommendations for further research will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter offers a summary of the research study, discussion of the key research findings, interpretations of findings based upon in-depth analysis, and implications for theory and practice. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research. A review of each chapter in the research study is below.

**Review of Research Study**

Chapter 1 provided the overview and statement of the problem, purpose, background, and significance, along with the three research questions. The conceptual framework and assumptions were addressed including a list of definitions for reference in the study. The purpose of the research study was to discover and establish if a criterion sample of 12 admissions advisors in a for-profit nationwide nursing college recognize and understand the phenomenon of stress as it relates to the admissions advisors' beliefs and perceptions of occupational stress. Additionally, descriptions of the lived experiences of participants were obtained through interviews in order to gain insight into whether and how proactive coping mechanisms are used as a method for counteracting occupational stress.

Chapter 2 reviewed current and historical literature examining higher education recruitment, the concept of stress, and the role of coping mechanisms in managing occupational stress as central themes. These three important concepts link to the research questions. The general findings suggest that there was a need to further explore admissions advisors'

perceptions of occupational stress of and their recognition of effective proactive coping mechanisms. Occupational stress in higher education was less well understood.

Chapter 3 addressed the research methodology and outlined the research design and approach for the study including setting, participants, sample, data collection, interview questions, analysis, participant rights, premise, and potential limitations. The research methodology for this study was qualitative, using a case study approach with semi-structured questions and vignettes. Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1986, 1992, 1994, 1997) was considered the primary theoretical framework of this study. Proactive coping theories (Aspinwall, 2012; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Schwarzer, 2000a, 2000b) were also incorporated as the process of anticipating potential stressors and acting in advance either to prevent them or to mute their impact were queried. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) commented on process-oriented interventions:

> Continued integration of efforts to understand and improve proactive coping with insights into the social-cognitive processes underlying future-oriented thinking more generally will serve to further inform our understanding of the personal and social resources, individual differences, and component processes that underlie successful proactivity, as will increased attention to the affective and transactional qualities of proactive coping. (p. 1)

Aspinwall and Taylor's ideas informed the interpretations of findings in this study, which are expected to increase understanding of the relationship between proactive coping mechanisms and occupational stress.

Chapter 4 presented an analysis of the data collected from the 12 admissions advisors interviewed. The data was organized into five main categories converging with five sub-thematic topics identified as (a) perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress, (b) job responsibility contributors, (c) work-life balance, (d) coping mechanisms applied within and outside of the workplace, and (e) care for the whole person and location of care. The five sub-themes consisted of (a) burden of performing well, (b) feeling of overwhelm, (c) time management/prioritizing, (d) differentiating proactive vs. reactive coping mechanisms, and (e) coping classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings relative to the research questions, along with the researcher's interpretation of findings, discussion of implications, and recommendations for action. Lastly, this chapter recommends topics for future research.

**Interpretation of Findings**

It was through the composite textural descriptions that the essence of the case study emerged. In general, the data in Chapter 4 revealed five major thematic areas pertinent to the three research questions. The researcher ensured integrity with respect to the limitations of the data as well as preserved discrepancies in findings when formulating conclusions to the outcomes. The themes and findings presented in Chapter 4 are summarized below and further aligned to literature, knowledge, and/or practice in the field.

**Thematic finding 1: Perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress.** As stated in Chapter 4, the majority of participants (11 out of 12) were aware of their personal definition of occupational stress. They also acknowledged the sub-

thematic degree of "burden" attributed to wanting to perform well on the job. Data which illustrate the subtheme included Participant A's revelation that, "Occupational stress is like a burden at your job, so when you come in and feel like you can't catch up, it creates a negative environment in your workplace." Other data included "Having a burden of wanting to do as well as you can and not knowing if it's enough . . . it's more of a burden, the stress that comes with doing a job and doing it well" (Participant B).

**Conclusion 1:** The above finding indicates the sample criterion population was aware of their personal definition of occupational stress. All but one of the participants was able to express awareness of their definition of occupational stress due to recognition of experiencing stressful environments in the past. The participants used vignettes during the interview to thoroughly explain past interactions with stressful situations that occurred in the workplace. For awareness to occur, the participants needed to recall or self-reflect on their past work-life experiences. Substantial data collected from vignettes informed the conclusion. One example was a excerpt from a vignette from Participant E, "I had 12 students that became academically eligible, but I couldn't get to all of them to let them know that they were eligible . . . this causes me a stomachache, anxiety, and I've got a headache today because I feel like my job is never finished." This is important as awareness is the primary key to implementing coping mechanisms and overcoming occupational stress. Bandura (1992) implied that perceived competence, otherwise known as perceived self-efficacy, is crucial. Perceived self-efficacy or optimism is seen as a prerequisite for coping. Recognizing the characteristics that accompany one when feeling stress at the workplace allows for awareness and self-reflection for one to believe in their

capabilities to improve those circumstances. Bandura (1986) considered self-reflection the most

exclusive human capability, for through this form of self-referent thought individuals evaluate

and alter their own behavior and thinking. These self-evaluations included perceptions of self-

efficacy, which continues to align with thematic finding 1. Bandura (1986) stated, "The belief in

one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective

situations" (p. 2).

Self-efficacy theory also implies that mastery experiences, social modeling, social

persuasion, and psychological responses play important roles in awareness and perceived

definition of oneself. Bandura (1994) determined that "it is not the sheer intensity of emotional

and physical reactions that is important but rather how they are perceived and interpreted" (p. 3).

This description suggests that without being able to contemplate Bandura's four defined

processes (mastery experiences, social modeling, social persuasion, and psychological

responses), and being able to use it as a framework for evaluating their experiences, the

participants may not have been able to effectively define their occupational stressors or describe

their personal experiences. Or rather, at least not as effectively as they might otherwise have

been able to do.

**Thematic Finding 2: Job responsibility contributors.** All research study participants

demonstrated appropriate product knowledge by effectively completing a standardized product

knowledge aptitude test to remain certified as an admissions advisor. This assessment ensures

accuracy, familiarity, and understanding of admissions advisor daily job functions. Seven of 12

participants indicated that work-life balance was a factor in occupational stress due to their

perceived affiliation with their job responsibilities. When asked about the recognition and understanding of occupational stress in the workplace, Participant C amplified the job responsibility contributor aspect with the statement, "Stress could occur when there is a mismatch with the job expectations and reality." Observations continued to include feedback such as suggesting ways admissions advisors might overcome "overwhelm" associated with job responsibilities.

**Conclusion 2:** This conclusion converges with the job responsibility-themed data collected during this study. According to seven of the participants, they experienced responsibilities that stretched beyond their managing capabilities in a typical work day at the office. This gap from expected job responsibilities versus actual job responsibilities caused perceptions of occupational stress. Participant I expressed how job responsibilities caused perceived stress in the vignette below:

> I'm in a metropolitan area so we get hundreds of calls a day, thousands of calls a week; that's the incoming calls transferred in from a live line. So, those are the ones that are supposed to be pre-qualified. Then, you also have prospective students that just find the number and give you a call as they want more information. Also, we're meeting with students and once we start to build, let's say a case load, you know we've got a hundred . . . thousand calls here then we always follow-up, follow-up, follow-up with the prospective and current students and that can become stressful.

In the above vignette, the result translated into a overflow of stress into the participant's personal life. This was a repetitive pattern associated with data collected. Thus, the felt

experience by the admissions advisors unquestionably led to work-life balance concerns.

Additionally, this conclusion can be associated with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, as indicated

by his comments in the *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, "People's beliefs about their capabilities

to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their

lives" (1998, para. 1). Bandura (1994) specifically noted,

> People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to
>
> be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters
>
> intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. They set themselves challenging
>
> goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in
>
> the face of failure. (p. 2)

Bandura's conclusions correlated with the responses of seven participants. Pronounced assurance

led to confidence in their abilities and performance. This supported a strong commitment to their

goals as well as job duties. This approach may lead to issues with "overwhelm" as participants

strive to master tasks associated with job responsibilities. This also may lead to work-life balance

concerns, which will be discussed in thematic finding 3.

**Thematic finding 3: Work-life balance.** Nine of 12 of the participants indicated that the

ability to achieve work-life balance was a factor in managing occupational stress. Maintaining

work-life balance is essential to prevent an imbalance that may result in occupational stress

physiognomies as evident from participants' descriptions. One example of striving for work-life

balance retrieved from the collected data follows:

Here is my stress level . . . here is what I can take . . . here is the point where I'm no

longer going to be efficient or effective if I don't take a step back and figure out

something to do. So, for me, it's making sure that there are things in place that I can have

my time or I can have time to do things that I need to in order to enroll because when

you're giving a 100% to family and to work and to all of that, you get burned out

(Participant B).

**Conclusion 3:** The key conclusion from the finding of preserving work-life balance

reflects the lack of implementing time management tools; more specifically, an absence of

prioritizing. This finding suggests that admissions advisors may need to implement time

management strategies, set boundaries, and have a prioritizing philosophy to assist with the

tensions created when striving to achieve work-life balance. This tension is demonstrated by a

majority of admissions advisors who were willing to "heighten and sustain their efforts in the

face of failure" (p. 2) and correlates with Bandura's (1994) theory. They describe the degree to

which work impinges upon their personal life. This is perhaps best illustrated by the example

vignette shared in Chapter 4, which demonstrated Participant B going above and beyond to

ensure a strong commitment was maintained to the external customers, the students; having to do

so during a personal vacation, however, created tension in the participant's personal life. It was

discovered that implementing time management activities resulted in favorably reducing

occupational stress. An example of this complementary result was best illustrated by Participant

C, "I try to have time management and organization skills at work. That way I get everything

done at work and during my work hours and when I go home, I feel satisfied."

Chapman and White (2011) suggested that one way to overcome "busyness" is to prioritize. They recognized Steven Covey's book series on the subject of prioritizing themes, which aid leaders and team members to identify priorities that are most important to the individual on a daily basis. Covey's concept of the quadrant of priorities as "Important/not important, urgent/not urgent" has been helpful in professional as well as personal settings in enhancing work-life balance. Covey (1989) continued to point out that if the most vital things neither take priority nor are reflected in scheduling, then time and energy invested in other matters will fail to produce the desired result(s).

**Thematic finding 4: Coping mechanism(s) applied within and outside of the workplace.** All participants described their perceived definition of proactive coping mechanisms. The data indicated that some participants identified proactive definitions and others unconsciously articulated reactive definitions. Proactive as well as reactive descriptions were disclosed in examples provided in Chapter 4. One proactive example from Participant C emphasized, "Coping is like a preventative mechanism that one can do before the stress can even occur." Reactive examples are illustrated by the following two quotes. Participant J said, "I think a coping mechanism is something you do to react." Participant K declared, "When I feel overwhelmed and stressed out, I like taking some time out (even like 30 minutes) and coming back." Further proactive as well as reactive descriptions were disclosed in the examples provided in Chapter 4.

**Conclusion 4:** While all participants identified an understanding of coping mechanisms in the workplace, findings unveiled that proactivity was not a solid component of relieving

occupational stress. This finding reflects evidence from participants that gave examples of reactive coping mechanisms used to relive their perceived occupational stress which occurred outside the workplace. A clear expression of this phenomena emerged from Participant A:

> Family is definitely one, so at the of the day, even if I have had a stressful day/load, like at my previous job, right here; just going home, walking in the door, and being greeted by my husband and my daughter and things like that, spending intentional time with them helps.

In proactive coping theory (Schwarzer, 2000), coping becomes goal management instead of risk management. Individuals initiate a constructive path of action and create opportunities for growth. In light of the complexity between perceived goal management versus risk management of the participants, the study revealed reactive coping mechanisms alone were implemented by some participants instead of or in tandem with proactive coping mechanisms. Schwarzer and Knoll (2009) found reactive coping may be problem-focused, emotion-focused, or social-relation-focused effort to deal with a stressful encounter that is ongoing or has already happened. It rightly depends on the situational demands, continuous or changing, and the perceived definition of proactive coping mechanisms of an individual.

**Thematic finding 5: Care for the whole person and location of care.** *Cura Personalis* is Latin for, "care for the whole person" (Otto, 2013). Coping strategies described to assist in care for the whole person were based on the participants' lived reflections of their previous experiences. Coping classifications that embrace care for the whole person that originated from the participant interviews have been divided by the researcher into the following coping

classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical. Specific examples are recorded

in Chapter 4, and listed in Table 6, Coping Mechanism Classifications. The examples provided

from the participant interviews in Chapter 4 represent a care for the whole person viewpoint and

consisted of an assortment of proactive and reactive coping mechanisms. For example, a specific

illustration of a coping mechanism's classification can be found under the physical heading,

"Getting a good night's sleep" stated by Participant K. This represents a physical action one can

take to either proactively or reactively offset stress in the workplace. Additionally, the interviews

lead to another finding that coping strategies were not engaged on a regular basis at the

workplace but rather during personal time.

        **Conclusion 5:** The results from the final thematic finding confirmed the capabilities of

admissions advisors applying coping mechanisms to increase the richness and support for

complete self-care. Positive benefits are a natural byproduct of implementing self-care which

resulted in marked and sustained relief from stress. These participants used proactive and

reactive coping mechanisms mostly outside of the workplace to implement care for the whole

person. One such citation from Participant I stated,

> Self-care could be a day at the spa or maybe a day just to myself, I think that is a good
>
> day of self-care, you know, keep the kids at the grandparents' house and, no–I don't want
>
> any company–just a day to myself sometimes. Anything that's really going to make me
>
> feel good. It could be a work-out. I love to work out but I am not consistent with it. I
>
> would say my self-care really can come in handy when my stress levels are up to the roof

and I can put in a 30 minute intensive workout video. And then, you know, the way that you feel after you workout, you just feel relieved or less stressed.

Both Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory as well the proactive coping theories of Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) and Schwarzer (1997, 2000) were verified by the results of the final thematic finding. Bandura (1994) touched on the lived reflections of individuals' previous experiences with the following statement, "Succeeding periods of life present new types of competency demands requiring further development of personal efficacy for successful functioning" (para. 75). Aspinwall and Taylor indicated that individuals who have well-developed psychosocial resources, including a sense of personal control, high self-esteem, and optimism, are more likely to cope proactively with occupational stress, which may minimize the effects of stress. Schwarzer and Kroll (2009) suggested extending the concept of coping to resolute goal pursuit and personal growth, offering a more comprehensive and precise depiction of human beings in their struggles and strivings. Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) summarized their conclusions,

> People strive for more resources, desire to maximize gains, and build up resistance factors either to ward off future crises or to grow and cultivate their capabilities for their own sake. This forward time perspective opens new research questions and helps to overcome traditional coping models that overemphasize the reactive nature of coping. (p. 6)

The convergence of these three principles link back to the finding that coping strategies are typically based on past perceived reflections.

Additionally, perceived self-efficacy serves to promote health, physically and psychologically. Both Bandura's as well as Aspinwall and Taylor's inferences to health connect to the "care for the whole person" thematic finding. Bandura (1994) specified, "Other efficacy-activated processes in the affective domain concern the impact of perceived coping self-efficacy on biological systems that affect health functioning. Stress has been implicated as an important contributing factor to many physical dysfunctions" (p. 6). Aspinwall (2012) explained how interest in coping to mitigate the harmful stressful life circumstances that take their toll on mental and physical functioning gained momentum in the late 1970s, which launched seminal studies about the dynamic process shaped by situational demands and an individual's resources for coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Bandura (1994) believed that individuals who are more successful at reducing health-impairing habits and integrating health-promoting habits into their regular lifestyle show a direct correlation to their strength of perceived self-efficacy.

In summary, findings that were derived using interview data gathered during the 12 participant interviews exposed the following emerging themes and associate trends: (a) perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress, (b) job responsibility, (c) work-life balance, (d) coping mechanisms applied within and outside of the workplace, and (e) care for the whole person and location of care. The research highlighted subthemes consisting of (a) burden of performing well, (b) feeling of overwhelm, (c) time management/prioritizing, (d) differentiating proactive vs. reactive coping mechanisms, and (e) coping classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical.

Using the structural context of Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), as well as Moustakas' (1994) modified Van Kaam method for analysis as a foundation, helped to ensure the validity of responses through evaluation and solidify consistent themes and findings. Findings suggested that tenured admissions advisors recognize occupational stress in the workplace based on their perceived understanding of the definition of stress. Data also suggested that tenured nursing admissions advisors recognized and understood coping mechanisms, and that individuals unconsciously expressed reactive coping mechanisms when asked to define proactive mechanisms. Data indicated a preference towards described coping mechanisms grouped in coping classifications including social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical. This strongly supports the idea that proactive coping mechanisms can be implemented in the workplace; however, it was also found that this was not necessarily done on a regular basis.

Findings and insight gained from this study identified the gap that allows educational organizations, their institutions, communities, and specifically individuals in the admissions department to better understand the stressors of the position due to specific job responsibilities, culture, and environment. While the characteristics and challenges of occupational stress cited in this study do not differ from those indicated in the literature, the study noted that the nature of occupational stress and proactive coping mechanisms requires richer communication and understanding for admissions advisors. The results of the study addressed the research questions by showing direct implications for transformative learning and leadership at the organizational level. Transformative educational leadership varies from other concepts of similarly used terms by creating a larger vision relating education to positive social, equality, and inspiring outcomes.

Transformational leadership focuses on connecting one's sense of identity and wellbeing to professional goals as this leadership approach is more focused on personal ownership rather than society focused. This transformative style flourishes in circumstances where it is most optimized in steady state, merger, and emergency leadership situations. One example of steady state awareness by leaders is to recognize admissions advisors' current state of occupational stress and implement desirable improvements in staff support. Additional research may provide direction and subsequent tools that may assist in developing leadership approach to awareness and understanding of occupational stress and its impact on the enterprise. Along with transformative leadership implementation, additional recommendations will be discussed below.

**Recommendations**

The findings and conclusions offered in this study inform three specific recommendations. The order of the recommendations was derived by presenting the largest to smallest propositions to scale in terms of necessary resources required to implement each recommendation. Analysis of the participants suggests that admissions advisors recognize occupational stress, recognize coping mechanisms, and can articulate their preferred coping mechanism(s). Data collected from participants also informed the recommendations by identifying the perceived and real challenges related to emerged themes and associate trends: (a) perceptions and descriptions of personal recognition of occupational stress, (b) job responsibility, (c) work-life balance, (d) coping mechanisms applied within and outside of the workplace, and (e) care for the whole person and location of care. The research highlighted subthemes consisting of (a) burden of performing well, (b) feeling of overwhelm, (c) time management/prioritizing,

(d) differentiating proactive vs. reactive coping mechanisms, and (e) coping classifications: social/emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical.

Taking an appraisal-focused behavioral approach from Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997) while incorporating the research questions, it was determined that personal recognition of occupational stress was easily identifiable by the participants, earnest recognition of the need for coping mechanisms was realized, and the ability to select coping mechanisms to offset the occupational stress was understood. Furthermore, reconciling of data led to recognition that proactive coping mechanisms were not necessarily selected as often as reactive coping mechanisms and that the majority of coping mechanisms presented were conducted outside of the workplace.

Personal recognition of occupational stress was determined by statements similar to Participant L who indicated, "I have a personal goal for myself and sometimes that can become added-on stress." The majority of participants had experienced occupational stress which affected their work-life balance. This can be attributed to purpose, strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities associated with job responsibilities. An example of this influence is represented of data collected by the following quote, "Stress could occur when there is a mismatch with the job expectations and reality" (Participant C). Other statements collected directly influence the work-life balance, coping mechanisms applied within and outside of the workplace, and care for the whole person and location of care. Thus, data displayed a presence of occupational stress which necessitates that leaders and decision makers recognize its existence and assist in implementing successful coping mechanisms as a proactive measure in the admissions environment as well as

contribute to transforming the culture of the work so individuals are less dependent on coping mechanisms.

The study's initial recommendation from the substantive data collected and analyzed indicates that it would be beneficial for for-profit educational companies to create wellness centers designed to further improve the higher education environment. This recommendation is drawn from participants' common threads of reoccurring stress linked to job responsibility and work-life balance and improvements. Responses from Participant A summarize this point well by stating, "If team building is provided and work-life balance is stable, there is a drastic difference in the amount of occupational stress." Kelly (2014) concluded, "Organizations could benefit from employee health and wellness programs through reductions in employee absenteeism, healthcare and worker compensation costs, as well as enhanced productivity" (p. 193). The Education Advisory Board (2014) released a research brief that indicated benefits of campus wellness centers, which interweave services for the mind and body and create a one-stop shop for proactive occupational stress relief. Other strategies that might be provided by a wellness center can include a healthy café with chef and nutritionist, counseling specializing in mental and psychological services, conflict mediation, therapeutic massage services, recreational space for team-building, physical assessments, personal fitness trainer, dog therapy, travel agent, and a selection of comprehensive health-focused presentations/workshops.

The second recommendation is to invest in effective training for higher education leaders in specific transformative leadership ideology that allows for the opportunity to gain awareness, recognition, and implement actions to assist staff with proactively offsetting occupational stress.

Training would apply for junior, middle, and senior level management. Yukl (2006) suggested that three forms of leadership development should be considered: formal training, developmental activities, and self-help activities (p. 4). Additionally, data collected from several participants regarding the opportunity to gain awareness and recognize occupational stress spoke of the importance of the organization providing support. An example of the effect of a lack of support from leadership can be seen in the following statement, "When I was at my previous employer, there was not a lot of leadership development; you do your job, you deal with it, and you go home" (Participant A). Participant A expressed an absence of inspiration and challenge due to the deficit of leadership training and involvement. Bass and Riggio (2006) concluded that transformative leadership brings intrinsic motivation and focuses on the positive development of followers where they then seek inspirational leadership to guide them through an uncertain environment, to be challenged and to feel empowered, if they are to be loyal, high performers.

The third recommendation links to the original premise of the study, and is that corporate-funded stress reduction workshops and related activities would assist in proactively reducing occupational stress in admissions advisors, especially during the cyclical times of enrollment. Various workshop activity topics were suggested from Participant K who said, "I definitely think time management and organization is really huge with this job. It's easy to lose track of where your students are, so I think that time management and organization workshops are a really good thing for admissions advisers." Participant A mentioned an alternative idea stating, "Meditation workshops offered at different times throughout the stressful enrollment period would be helpful." Stress reduction workshops target the enhancement of both social

support and mastery resources with a variety of topics that can contribute to reducing occupational stress in admissions. Through such workshops, cooperative efforts of leaders and staff together may help amplify the evolution of stress management and ability to reach positive benefits in proactively reducing occupational stress in admissions advisors, primarily during cyclical enrollment terms.

**Practical Application of Results**

When considering successful practical applications of the results of the study, ensuring that wellness activities add to the health of a company without taking away focus and energy is crucial. Chapman and White (2012) mentioned that in a demanding environment, harsh realities appear in the form of reduced budgets, increased taxes, and an untrained workforce; the consensus is not to waste time on projects that do not contribute to the success of an organization. The review of the literature and analysis of the data discovered and confirmed benefits that admissions advisors and educational organizations gain from engaging in an application that proactively assists with occupational stress. Chapman and White (2012) suggested helping employees feel wanted and appreciated in order to ease the fears associated with working in a non-stable environment, thus reducing turnover. The case for instituting comprehensive wellness activities is strong due to empirical evidence collected from the participants recognizing occupational stress in their workplace. Wellness activities contribute to the reduction of occupational stress, which correlates to improved staff health and well-being.

Pronk (2014) called attention to the 2011 Automatic Data Processing Survey, noting that the most often-cited reasons for offering wellness programs include improved employee health,

health care cost control, increased productivity, and absenteeism reduction. He continued, "Each of these reasons is quantifiable, and their value can be monetized, allowing for a calculation of savings and an estimation of a return on investment (ROI)" (p. 1). This proactive approach could also be perceived by staff as a gratitude factor, thus moving the suggestion of implementation of wellness activities from a potential afterthought to a recommended integral part of staff benefits.

Benefits to stakeholders include reduction of occupational stress in the workplace, thus decreasing the high costs attributed to employee turnover. The literature review clearly identified staff struggles with occupational stress and suggests that knowing how improve retention of staff would be valuable information for all higher education professionals. The results of improved wellbeing and a reduction of occupational stress in the workplace can be disseminated through meetings and various other modalities, and observed through enhanced culture in higher education departments.

**Future Research**

The findings and conclusions offered in this study imply that additional empirical research is needed as it relates to understanding proactive coping mechanisms used to manage occupational stress by admission advisors. This research study aids in filling in that gap. However, this study has limitations in scope with regard to the demographic population, data collection instrument, research method, and analysis. An assessment of proactive coping mechanisms used to manage occupational stress by admission advisors in a for-profit college admissions department and their respective experiences coping with stress suggests further exploratory research is needed. As the education terrain continues to evolve, additional research

could occur in other settings, such as other for-profit institutions, not-for-profit colleges, as well as ground and online disciplines outside of the nursing field.

False assumptions may currently exist about proactive coping mechanisms applied to prevent occupational stress in the workplace. An example of an incorrect premise may be that there are certain types of career groups and occupations that are less responsive to proactive interventions to stress management. Exploratory evidence observed by the researcher in various career arenas suggests that the critical component for effective management is recognizing stress for proactive stress management interventions, regardless of the occupation or career, and that cognitive-behavioral interventions are more effective than all other intervention types (Van der Klink et al., 2001). With the appropriate application, future analysis, and evaluation, a variety of occupations and industries may be positively affected.

**Conclusion**

The significance of this research study was gaining an understanding that admissions advisors recognize occupational stress and that some use proactive coping mechanisms to manage occupational stress in for-profit higher education. Through the interviews, the participants described their perceptions about the importance of these subjects; proactive coping mechanisms and occupational stress in detail.

As a result of the research, the key outcome indicates the workplace needs to be less stressful. However, given it is stressful, not all participants reported the ability to recognize and implement proactive coping mechanisms to prevent occupational stress in the workplace. The creation of a wellness center or attendance in well-being workshops may address individuals'

inability to recognize and implement proactive coping mechanisms to reduce stress. This study illustrates, through participant responses, that admissions advisors experience occupational stress and how proactive coping mechanisms converge with occupational stress. The opportunity to improve institutional response to the "overwhelm" and "burden" that accompanies higher levels of performance lies with leaders in higher education. Interventions such as maintenance of consistent work-life balance and implementation of proactive coping mechanisms at the workplace induce application for resource allocation to these areas. It is commendable that educational companies not only support, but are proactive in transformative leadership initiatives that will keep institutions on the leading edge of higher education.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview questions which reflect the qualitative case study methodology of advisor's recognition of occupational stress and employed proactive coping mechanisms are:

1.     How do you describe occupational stress?

2.     Tell me about a time when you recognized occupational stress based on a lived experience.

3.     What is your understanding of proactive coping mechanisms?

4.     What proactive coping mechanism(s) do you employ?

5.     How have the proactive coping mechanism(s) you have employed helped reduced your occupational stress?

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

(Current Date)

Carie L. Powers
Lead Researcher
Doctoral Candidate University of New England
Phoenix, Arizona

(Participant Work Address)

Dear (Participant),

My name is Carie L. Powers and I am a graduate student at the University of New England in the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership (Ed.D.) program. Upon review and approval of the University of New England Institutional Review Board, I will begin a study associated with tenured Nursing Admissions Advisor's ability to recognize occupational stress and institute proactive coping mechanisms as a preventive measure. I am requesting your participation to gather data relative to your personal insights of proactive coping mechanisms to occupational stress and comfort levels with leader-led alternatives in the workplace.

The study is designed to explore tenured admissions advisors' proactive coping mechanisms instituted to combat stress found in a fast-paced, for-profit nursing college along with understanding respective experiences for improved transformational leadership application.

Admissions advisors are being requested to complete an interview. This interview can be delivered and conducted in person or over phone/Skype, if applicable. There will be up to 10 semi-structured questions pertaining to proactive coping mechanisms of occupational stress. In addition, you will be asked to give a vignette to describe proactive coping mechanism implementation and an associated stressful admissions experience. I have included the consent form and interview questions for review. You may choose not to participate in this study. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

Also, please don't hesitate to contact me at cpowers5@une.edu or my direct line at (602) 690-9343 for further details. I look forward to working with you. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Carie L. Powers


Carie L. Powers
Lead Researcher
Doctoral Candidate, University of New England
Phoenix, Arizona

APPENDIX C


PARTICIPANT CONSENT



UNIVERSTIY OF NEW ENGLAND

CONSENT FOR PARTCIPATION IN RESEARCH



**Project Title:** Recognizing Occupational Stress: A Case Study of Admissions Staff in a For-Profit Nursing College

**Principal Investigator(s):**
Carie L. Powers
Lead Researcher
Doctoral Candidate-University of New England
Phoenix, Arizona

Advisor: Dr. Michelle Collay
Faculty-University of New England

**<u>Introduction:</u>**
Please read this form in its entirety. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete. Your participation is voluntary.

**<u>Why is this study being done?</u>**
The objective of this study is to establish if, a criterion sample of up to 20 admissions advisors in a for-profit nationwide nursing college, recognize the phenomenon of stress as it relates to the admissions advisors beliefs and perceptions of occupational stress, from a work-life balance perspective. This study further identifies if proactive coping mechanisms are used as a method for counteracting occupational stress.

**<u>Who will be in this study?</u>**
A total population of up to 20 participants is needed or until saturation is met. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate and hold the title of Admissions Advisor or Admissions Representative with a minimum tenure of one year.

**What will I be asked to do?**
Each participant will provide a vignette of a proactive coping mechanism implementation and associated stressful admissions experience. The study will also incorporate an in-person, phone, or Skype interview to obtain data from admissions staff. The duration of your participation in the project will extend the length of the interview and explanation of stressful admissions experience and include Lead Researcher's ability to follow-up as needed for clarification. Measurements regarding progress and completion will be communicated randomly and the Lead Researcher, Carie L. Powers will be the administrator.

You will receive a $20 Starbucks gift card for participation in this project for your time upon conclusion of the interview.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**
There are no reasonably foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. If problems or discomfort occurs, it will be addressed on a case-by-case basis and a Chamberlain College of Nursing support service, ASPIRE is available.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**
There may be a benefit to you, others, and the organization by identifying themes such as what causes stress, coping mechanisms implemented, and openness to leader-led alternatives. Direct benefits include a review of other anonymous colleague's experiences as well as indirect benefits such as implementation of future transformational occupational stress reduction activities incorporated in the workplace.

**What will it cost me?**
Participants do not incur any costs.

**How will my privacy be protected?**
Participant privacy will be respected at all times by ensuring confidentiality. The setting where the interview takes place is a private office. All phone and email correspondence are equivalent to telephony and inter/intranet standards.

Results may be incorporated into a presentation for stakeholders, a dissertation defense, a journal article, and a report to a third party agency.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**
All participants in the study are to be kept confidential. This study is designed to be confidential which means that no one can link the data you provide to you or identify you as a participant with exception of Lead Researcher, Carie L. Powers and possibly a transcriber and/or editor.

Data will be kept secure after it is collected with the Lead Researcher and possibly a transcriber and/or editor. If identifying information will be collected; the Lead Research, Carie L. Powers will have access to the data and will destroy seven years after the project is complete.

All data will be encrypted in storage and transmission. Research records will be kept in a locked file in the locked office of the Lead Researcher. Data will be stored on a password protected computer on an encrypted drive/secure server. All computers that will be used to access research data will have its hard drive encrypted.

Individually identifiable data will be destroyed after the study is complete. Please note that regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records. A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the Lead Researcher for at least seven years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

If audio tape recordings are made, Carie L. Powers, Lead Researcher will have access to them along with transcriber and/or editor. They will be used for review of experience and responses to interview questions. They will be erased/destroyed seven years after the project is complete. The study will include the use of interview questions that will result in collected data transferred over the phone or potentially the internet. The occupational stress experience can be described online or over phone rather than face-to-face, if necessary. Appropriate standard workplace measures will be used to keep all the transferred data secure. You will be notified, in the event the data may be used for future research purposes. Research findings can be requested by all participants by contacting Carie L. Powers, Lead Researcher for publication location.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**
Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England or Chamberlain College of Nursing. Your decision to participate will not impact your relationship with your employer. You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason. If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. If any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research, you will be informed immediately. Anticipated circumstances under which the individual's participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard for the subjects consent would be non-participation after a set number of attempts, unexpected health concerns immobilizing participation, or loss of job designation during the research period.

**What is my timeline to reply?**
Let the researcher know within 2 weeks if you would like to participate or if researcher doesn't hear within 2 weeks, a follow-up call and email will be made.

**What other options do I have?**
You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**
The researcher conducting this study is Carie L. Powers. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at (602) 690-9343.

If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research-related injury, please contact Dr. Michelle Collay at 207-602-2010 or mcollay@une.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**
You will be given a copy of this consent form.

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**Participant's Statement**

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.**

_____                    _____
Participant's signature or                                              Date
Legally authorized representative

_____
Printed name

**Researcher's Statement**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

_____                    _____
Researcher's signature                                              Date

_____
Printed name