

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Nursing higher education mergers: Do the benefits outweigh the risks?

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ABSTRACT

Merger as an organizational change has the potential to create turmoil, unrest, and uncertainty among the employees. Despite the shortage of nursing education workforce, global economic hardships have brought on a recent increase in nursing higher education mergers. The focus on integrated operations of the newly merged organization can burden all involved. Financial and business survival factors can create an unintentional oversight of the employee feelings. Nursing education faculty and administrator's quality of work lives are related to their performance, which ultimately determines organizational performance. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate the influence of a nursing higher education merger on the quality of work lives of faculty and administrators. Principal results of this research revealed that faculty and administrators perceived the influence of the nursing higher education merger to be negative in the beginning with a transition to a positive influence over 5 years. Challenges in this merger were related to cultural integration and the magnitude of work required for operationalization. Exact timing of transition of the negative influence to positive was not established and needs further research. These results have implications on the nursing higher education institutions planning future mergers. Nursing education leaders must utilize strategies to address the quality of work life factors during the nursing higher education mergers. Implications of maintaining quality of work lives during an organizational change has the potential to address the nursing and nursing education workforce issues.

Key Words: Nursing higher education, Faculty and administrators, Merger influence, Quality of work lives, Higher education merger influence

1. INTRODUCTION

Nursing higher education pertains to higher education of the nursing professionals. Despite the nursing shortage affecting the nursing education workforce the economic hardships have become increasingly common. Inspired by the business sector, the economic downturns in higher education have warranted the strategic organizational transformations.^[1] Merger poses itself as a strategic and fiscally responsible tool for creating a strong hold of the organization within the respective industry.^[2] The challenges brought on by financial hardships as well as the justification of administrative decision making

are real. Fiscal benefits of mergers have been expressed as lower operating costs, increase in revenues, and consolidation of the resources.^[3] The fear and stress among employees on the other hand, lead to decreased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational performance.^[3] While economic hardships do force mergers, nursing higher education leaders must develop strategies to retain and recruit faculty rather than allowing a negative impact on organizational commitment from fear and stress related to the organizational mergers.

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While nursing higher education mergers may be unavoidable due to the economic issues, the challenges instigated by the merger related stress do not align with job satisfaction, particularly in the context of an already depleted nursing workforce. American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has identified the nursing faculty shortage as a crucial factor for solving the nursing workforce shortage.^[4] Another mitigating factor to consider is the set up of the main university where the dynamics may be quite different than that of the nursing higher education. Shortage of nursing faculty and the need to retain the existing workforce makes the retention during organizational changes such as mergers even more difficult. Efforts aimed at keeping the nursing faculty satisfied with their jobs will need to be understandably much greater due to the low supply compared with the other disciplines in higher education. Keeping all the aforementioned factors in consideration, focus on the efforts to maintain the quality of work lives (QWL) and the efforts for retaining the nursing faculty do become a priority for nursing education practice leaders.

The QWL includes various aspects of an employee's life. Lanctot, Durand, and Cobiere^[5] explained QWL as a product of a persons' interpersonal, intrapersonal, physical, as well as structural factors that influence the work environment and working conditions. QWL factors in the nursing profession will also have an influence from the professional issues. Importance of nursing faculty QWL is pertinent to solving the nursing faculty shortage. Nursing education leaders are challenged with improving the faculty QWL, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, to retain the existing workforce as the demand is substantially higher than the supply. Mobaraki et al.^[6] articulated that the QWL encompasses job satisfaction and the factors related to work-life as they contribute to the employees' overall subjective wellbeing. Bahrami and Habibzadeh^[7] emphasized QWL as a predictor of the employee as well as organizational performance. QWL and its practical implications on employees, render influence on the employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment.^[8] Despite the fiscal benefits of mergers, the personnel related QWL factors can potentially disrupt the QWL.^[9, 10]

Our study population comprised of faculty and administrators at a nursing school who had participated in a merger brought upon by a government mandate to consolidate the assets of two state universities. One of these two universities participating in the merger was primarily a basic arts and sciences university with predominantly liberal arts schools, with the exception of a professional nursing school. Second university was a health sciences university with various professional programs in health sciences, including a profes-

sional nursing school. Integration of the two nursing schools with competing interests became inevitable because they were located within a 1-mile radius of each other. The objective of our study was to evaluate how a nursing higher education merger influenced the self-perceived QWL of the faculty and administrators.

1.1 Background and literature

Mergers inflict a significant change to the integrity of an organization and the employees/human beings who are an essential part of an organization. These organizational employees run the day-to-day business of the organization and ensure its smooth running and success. Dimensions of QWL by Walton^[11] include adequate and fair compensation, safe and healthy working conditions, an immediate opportunity for human capacity development, opportunities for continued growth and security, social integration in the work organization, constitutionalism in the work organization, work and life total space and the social relevance of work-life. Merger related organizational changes induce stress and anxiety among employees and influence their QWL.

QWL as a critical factor for employee performance, was supported by Bahrani and Habibzadeh^[7] through their quantitative descriptive study of 240 higher education employees. Authors concluded following dimensions of QWL; safe and healthy working conditions, opportunity to use and develop human capacities and talents, social integration in the workplace, constitutionalism in the workplace, work and total living space, and social relevance to work. QWL has also been linked to the job satisfaction of the employees. Efforts to institute strategies to address job satisfaction during merger related organizational change are empirically supported. Linde and Schalk^[12] studied higher education employees (N = 492) to evaluate the relationship between the psychological contract and job satisfaction. Linde and Schalk^[12] concluded that the factors determining job satisfaction include management structures, which include satisfaction within the work structure, self-actualization, which includes the participants' ability to grow and achieve their maximum potential, autonomy, or the ability to do the job without management interference. Job satisfaction factors and QWL factors have common pathways to employee wellbeing in the workplace and the ability and intention to perform the job with their optimum potential.

The factors associated with the business and human perspectives of mergers have been extrapolated as the external and internal factors respectively.^[13] External factors included political, economic, infrastructural, and administrative aspects. Internal factors included cultural, personnel interconnectedness, and demographics. Internal factors capture

the human perspective from QWL factors related to human emotions, feelings, and perceptions.^[14,15] Hasan et al.^[13] expressed that human factors such as the cultural differences and communication issues could impede the merger success.

Discordance between internal and external factors in mergers can be understood through the opposing influence of the internal and external factors per Hasan et al.^[13] Dirva and Radulescu^[15] also emphasized this discordance as the reason for merger failure and stated that gross negligence of the internal factors in the mergers often lead to the failure of mergers. Many of the QWL factors, including communication issues, unfavorable management behaviors, poor working conditions, work culture, were enlisted as the internal factors responsible for merger failures.^[15] Keeping all the QWL factors in consideration, it appears that QWL influence can be understood via the perceptions of those experiencing the merger related change. Self-perceived changes are derived from the perception of the social identity of the individuals in their workplace. The perceptions of influence are also related to the perceptions of change management at the institution.

1.2 Theoretical framework for QWL influence in mergers

QWL Influence Conceptual Model was derived to capture the social identity component, the self-perceived component as well as the perceptions of change management at the institutions experiencing the merger related change. The social identity theory by Tajfel,^[16] Attribution theory by Kelley,^[17] Heider,^[18] and ADKAR Change Model by Hiatt^[19] were utilized to create the QWL Influence Conceptual Model depicted in Figure 1. The model conceptualizes the pre-merger and post-merger QWL of the faculty and administrators as mitigated by the merger related organizational changes and the social identity factors, self-perceived change to the QWL, and the perceptions of the change management.

1.2.1 Social Identity theory

Scientific underpinnings of social identity theory were originated by Henri Tajfel,^[16] who postulated that a person's social identity was related to the process of the person's social status. The social status was explained by Tajfel^[16] as a composite of factors arising from an individuals' occupational, religious, ethnic, cultural, and political affiliations. Social identity theory was further explained as the intergroup and intragroup relations that provide a foundation for an individual's social identity.^[20] The author reiterated that the social identity of the individual relates to the self-concept of an individual in relation to the personal and social concepts. Personal identity as per Rodriguez,^[20] included the individual traits, qualities, and achievements while the social

identity was expressed as the overall perception of the self-image in relation to the group affiliations. Social identity theory provides the theoretical understanding of changed social identity of the employees as a result of a merger.

1.2.2 Attribution theory

Causal explanations of specific events and phenomena were originally outlined by Heider^[18] and Kelley.^[17] They explained these individual causal explanations as causal attributions that human beings have an inherent need for. This need for being in control of the environment was explained as the foundation for each individual to derive the causal attributions for the events and phenomenon^[18,19] Attribution theory has also been endorsed by Pekrun and Marsh^[21] as a theoretical framework for understanding the perceptions of causal attributions of the influence of the merger on the employees' QWL.

1.2.3 ADKAR change model

Concepts included in the ADKAR change model by Hiatt^[19] as represented by each letter of ADKAR include awareness (A), desire (D), knowledge (K), ability (A), and reinforcement (R). The change model is based on the concept that human beings resist change. The model seeks to capture the transition of an organizational culture during any event or phenomenon that enforces change in the organizations. ADKAR change model was adopted by Grovom^[22] to understand the management of change in the organizations. The author posited that the ADKAR change model was an excellent change management model because of its ability to understand the transition of change through the interrelated components. The latter allows for an understanding of change management and identify gaps that could allow for strategy development for future organizational changes.

1.2.4 QWL influence conceptual model

QWL Influence Conceptual incorporates the self-perceived causal influence via Attribution theory, perceptions of the change to social identity via influence on the QWL, and the perceptions of the change management during the merger related change (see Figure 1) and understand the influence of merger on the QWL of the employees of an organization. QWL Influence model is also linked to our research questions aimed at studying the overall influence of a merger on the faculty and administrators who experienced the merger related organizational change.

Figure 1 shows the QWL Influence Conceptual Model-Conceptual representation of the change in faculty and administrators' QWL influenced by a nursing higher education merger and the theoretical contributions of Social Identity, ADKAR Change Model and Attribution theories.

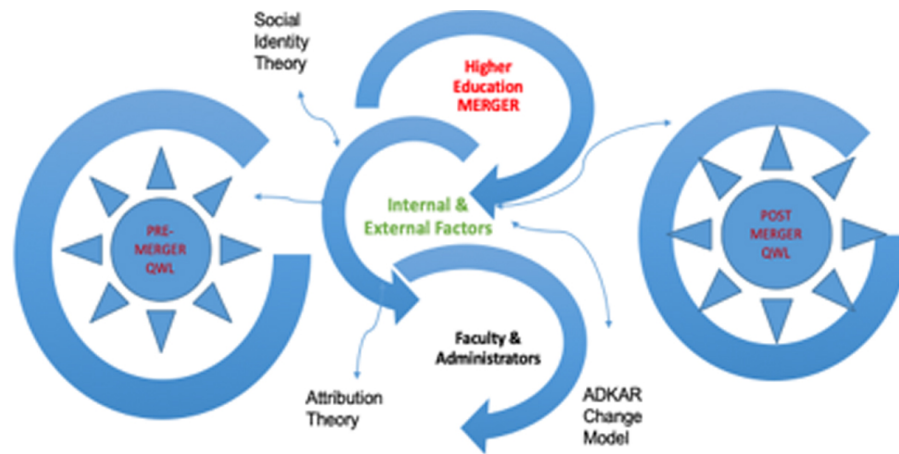


Figure 1. QWL influence conceptual model

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Methodology and design

An exploratory qualitative case study was utilized for this research to understand the influence of a nursing higher education merger on the faculty and administrators QWL. A qualitative methodology was used to gain insight into the perceptions of the participants.^[23,24] A case study was identified as an appropriate research design to evaluate the participants lived experiences with the environmental context.^[24] Because of its ability to explore and understand complex issues, we selected an exploratory case study research design to develop a thorough understanding of the case of the higher education merger through the perceptions of the influence imparted on the participants’ QWL.

2.2 Population and sample

Nursing faculty and administrators participated in this research study. Since this study aimed to understand the post-merger QWL of nursing faculty and administrators, we used the purposive sampling method. The total sample size was 50 (N = 50), including faculty (n = 26) and administrators (n = 24) who met the inclusion criteria of working at a nursing higher education institution that participated in a merger. Table 1 shows the details of the study sample by method of participation, school affiliation and gender. The nursing schools that participated in the merger are named school A and school B to display the representation from both the pre-merger schools.

Table 1. Study Sample Description

Gender and School Affiliation	Interviews (n = 15)	Focus Groups (n = 10)	Survey (n = 25)
Female Faculty	7/8	5/5	12/13
Male Faculty	1/8	0/5	1/13
Female Administrators	4/7	4/5	9/12
Male Administrators	3/7	1/5	3/12
School-A Faculty	6/8	3/5	8/13
School-B Faculty	2/8	2/5	5/13
School-A Administrators	2/7	0/5	7/12
School-B Administrators	5/7	5/5	5/12

Table 1 shows the details of study sample with the number of participants for interviews, focus groups, and surveys as well as the participant gender and pre-merger school affiliation.

2.3 Data collection methods

In accordance with the human subject protection guidelines, and upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, the data for this study were triangulated using three methods: anonymous online surveys (n = 25), individual semi-

structured interviews (n = 15), and focus group interviews (n = 10). Recruitment of participants was accomplished via an email to participants requesting participation. The purpose of data collection using three methods was to improve the trustworthiness of the data through triangulation which requires 3 sources for crosschecking. Yin^[24] articulated that qualitative study that uses triangulation produces trustworthy results because the researchers have an opportunity to validate the

results from various sources. In other words, triangulation reduces the chances for the findings to be by chance since the crosschecking via three methods has taken place.

2.4 Research materials and data sources

Three categories of data were collected through the individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and anonymous web-based surveys: (1) QWL influence data to capture the influence of the merger on the participants' QWL; (2) Performance influence data aimed at gathering information regarding the influence of the merger on the participants' performance; and (3) Demographic data to gather the employment status to separate the data for faculty and administrators, pre-merger affiliation to balance the sample to include participants from both pre-merger institutions, and gender to identify gender differences.

The first category of data pertaining to QWL influence were collected by asking the participants about their perceptions of the influence of the merger on their QWL. The participants shared their perceptions regarding the influence on their work environment, working conditions, and work culture. The second category of data pertaining to the performance influence were collected by asking the participants regarding the influence of the merger on their work performance as well as the performance of the school, the university and the students. The third category of data were collected exclusively for the purpose of understanding the demographics of the study group. Demographic data included employment status, pre-merger affiliation and gender.

2.5 Data analysis

Initial data organization was handled using the five stages of preliminary coding by Yin.^[24] The final coding processes using Saldana's^[25] method of coding cycles were used for the 1st and 2nd level coding. Open, in-vivo, and process coding were used after the preliminary coding. First level coding started with the coding of audio transcripts of semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews, and online surveys. Transcribed data from individual interviews and focus group interviews were coded thoroughly, line by line, using highlights in the MAXQDA system.^[26]

3. RESULTS

Five themes emerged across the two study populations and three data sources (individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys) regardless of the pre-merger affiliation of the participants. The concluding themes included (1) Merger news created a negative influence on QWL, (2) Merger came with advantages and disadvantages, (3) Merger related work was tremendous, (4) Cultural integration was a challenge, and (5)

Net influence of the merger on QWL was positive. Individual concluding themes along with the supporting evidence are described below.

3.1 Initial negative influence on QWL

The data saturation confirmed the initial negative influence of the merger on the faculty and administrators QWL. Uncertainty, increase in stress, fear of job losses, program closures, changes in physical locations of work areas, mistrust, preexisting competition among the pre-merger institutions, lack of cooperation, and inability to adapt to new administrative structures negatively influenced faculty and administrators. It was also evident that the participants initial negative emotions were related to their perceptions of the comfort with the pre-merger institution. Common descriptive codes such as lack of community in the new institution and the previous institution was more collegial, were common. Table 2 shows the data supporting initial negative influence of the merger on QWL.

Initial perceptions of negative emotions and reaction to the merger related changes are evident in Table 2. Even though the initial negative influence of the merger seemed to have been strong, it was clear that the participants realized the positive influence of the merger as well. The next theme of perceptions of the advantages despite the initial negative influence or disadvantages is presented in the next section.

3.2 Advantages and disadvantages

Despite experiencing the initial negative influence of the merger on their QWL, the participants realized the advantages of the merger. The perceived disadvantages included but were not limited to interpersonal and personality conflicts, emotional turmoil created by stress, anxiety, fear of job losses and assignment changes, higher expectations for productivity in the newly merged institution, and physical space and parking challenges. On the other hand, perceived advantages included the merger's influence on the research, scholarship, and teaching resources, which was expressed as the advantages of the merger by faculty participants. Table 3 shows the data indicating the advantages of the merger despite the initial negative influence of the merger on QWL.

The faculty and administrators balanced their perceptions by looking at the negative and positive influence of the merger. It is noteworthy that even though the advantages and disadvantages were clear from the three sources of data from faculty and administrators, the participants also emphasized that the workload associated with the merger related activities was tremendous. Results that led to the theme to emphasize the magnitude of work related to the merger are presented in the next section.

Table 2. Initial negative influence of the nursing higher education merger

Data Source	Initial Codes	Categorical Codes	Participant Quotes
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More complicated work life • Pre-merger institution was more collegial • Concerns about losing jobs • Stressed about relocation to another site Stressful period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative influence on work functions/workload • Lack of Community • New silos • Feeling of being threatened 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was very difficult initially and there was a lot of conflict • The bureaucratic levels were a lot deeper and resulted in more stress • The loss of role caused a sense of loss • The merger itself created a lot of positional stress
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty, fear of losing jobs and relocation • Chaotic environment, weird rumors going around • Feelings of being taken over 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling of takeover rather than a merger • Shocked at the news • Dumbfounded, feeling dissociated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For a short while my QWL was completely taken from the uncertainty and the chaotic environment • There was a lot of misinformation and uncertainty • Nobody knew what was going to happen • It also felt like death to me
Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of job losses • Anxiety • Uncertainty • Increase in administrative tasks of merging systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less control • Forced to move locations • Covering for colleagues who left • Physical space is more spread out • Many have left because they could not keep up with required adjustments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The work environment became more complicated and a source of frustration • The integration process was not smooth as it had to go through lengthy evaluations and consolidations for necessary function alignment • It has significantly increased the amount of administrative functions and personnel within my areas of responsibility leading to more time on the job and more thoughts of the job when away

Table 3. Advantages despite the disadvantages of the nursing higher education merger

Data Source	Initial Codes	Categorical Codes	Quotes
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal issues in the beginning that resolved • High expectations of the merger • Personality conflicts that were cleaned up over time • QWL improvement over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in scholarship productivity, due to higher expectations • Improved performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel more fulfilled with my role now • Despite everything, I could not be more thankful for where I am now • I'm grateful that I stuck it out
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parking issues at different locations • Two unions that are divisive but advantages such as ability to work from home because of no set requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bigger school with higher rankings • Made the very best of it at the end of the day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is such potential there that both schools individually did not have anywhere near the national ranking that the combined entity had • After getting to know the faculty after a while, I was surprised how supportive they were of us
Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top three factors with positive influence; opportunities for collaboration, scholarship, and opportunity to work in an institution that was ranked higher than the previous one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative comments from survey included that despite all the initial negative influence, merger was a positive thing for the school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are some very good things that came out of the merger • On the positive side, there have been more opportunities to meet faculty members engaged in interesting work

3.3 Merger related workload

Faculty and administrator participants explained the work related to the merger as ‘tremendous’. This government-mandated merger warranted the merger related work to be conducted within 1-year after the announcement. Both the

pre-merger schools participated in harmonization teams with representation from the faculty and administrators. The programs that existed at both the pre-merger schools needed to be integrated to prevent duplication. In addition to their regular teaching assignments, the faculty had to integrate

the educational programs, curricula, and advisement for the combined student populations. Table 4 shows data indicating the increased workload resulting from the merger.

The study participants offered clarity in sharing the activities and processes required in merging two pre-merger in-

stitutions that required extra work to integrate two different institutions in to one post-merger institution. The tasks required to operationalize the merger were evident from the data sources. Additional challenges related to integrating the two different institutional cultures were expressed and resulted in the next theme for this study.

Table 4. Increased workload associated with the nursing higher education merger

Data Source	Initial Codes	Categorical Codes	Quotes
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No compensation for DNP students • Increased requirements for publishing • Curricula had to be merge • Decrease in amount of sleep at night because of more hours of work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional workload for core faculty who merged curricula • Work had to be out in to keep the quality of the courses up • Poor work life balance due to the increase in work hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have taken in a lot more DNP students which increased the work but no credit • It is not unusual to put a full day in here and go home and still work. Even on the weekends, I can work 3-4 hours a day • I think having two buildings influences our work. Being in this building while many of the leaders in the other building, makes communication more difficult
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too many programs to handle without proper planning and infrastructure • Programs and rules changed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New courses to teach and increased numbers of students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As we brought the two schools together, we were running three parallel curricula; we had students that were coming into the brand new improved harmonized curriculum with students teaching out from both the schools • It was like a huge monster with so many parts to it • It has cost me extra work because I lost control over what my students were taught, so I had to mitigate that down the line
Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in demand to produce scholarship • Changes in roles due to the merger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in responsibilities and workload of a combined school • More work after the merger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic demands for bringing in large grants • It has added to the work I am expected to do • Integrating financial functions was a huge task as there were multiple unions, two separate payrolls, finance and student systems, different methods of budget process, financial reporting, and grant management

3.4 Cultural integration challenges

Challenges related to the post-merger cultural integration were evident from triangulated data sources. The reasons for the cultural integration challenges were cited as the difference in the philosophies of the pre-merger schools. One of the two pre-merger schools had more emphasis on research and was among the other liberal arts schools, while the second school was more focused on teaching at an academic health center. There were also leadership differences between the two schools. One of the schools' leadership was laissez-faire, where the structure was suggestive of shared governance, and the faculty participated in administrative and operational processes. On the other hand, second school

leadership had an autocratic style where the administration determined and dictated the operational processes. It was also apparent that the differences in the policies and processes governing the faculty from the two pre-merger schools still existed after the merger as well. Table 5 shows the data showing the cultural integration challenges.

The study participants shared the cultural integration challenges that were partially grounded in the first theme pertaining to the initial negative influence of the merger as well. Despite the challenges in integrating the two pre-merger cultures, the faculty and administrator participants indicated that the net influence of the merger on their QWL was positive. Results related to the last theme indicating the net influence

of the merger is presented in the next section.

3.5 Net positive influence on QWL

Even though there was an initial negative influence, increased workload, and increased stress due to cultural challenges, the faculty and administrator participants weighed in on the merger's advantages and disadvantages. The net influence of the merger on the QWL was positive. Overall work performance was acknowledged as improved due to improved overall access to the combined resources. Faculty and administrator participants opined that the new school created as a result of the merger between the two schools was a "better", "higher ranked" schools with a much better standing in the educational community. Table 6 shows the data indicating net positive influence of the merger.

It is noteworthy that the improvement in QWL and performance was expressed as gradual that improved over time after the merger. The process of the merger and the post-merger period of 5 years brought on the expressions of initial negative feelings along with the realization of the advantages and disadvantages. While the process was complicated due to initial human reactions to the merger related organizational change and increase in the amount of work and the challenges of adjustment with a new group of coworkers. The benefits were weighed-in and the net influence of the merger was perceived to be positive. To conclude, merger is an arduous process, but this net positive effect is in line with the benefits outweighing the risks associated with the initial hardships.

4. DISCUSSION

The initial negative influence on the participants' QWL experienced after the announcement of the merger is in line with the Dirva and Radulescu^[15] study, which outlined the employee resistance to the merger related changes. Our theme of initial negative influence is also in-line with the preliminary findings of Evans^[9] study that concluded the negative influence of the merger even though our findings of net positive influence are not. Gleibs et al.^[27] and Hasan et al.^[13] also align with the merger's initial negative influence due to human emotions and internal factors related to the reaction to anticipated merger related changes.

Realization of the advantages in addition to the disadvantages was the second theme of this research, which was also corroborated by the research from Hasan et al.^[13] and Li et al.,^[28] where the authors identified the human factors as the negative influencers and the scholarship productivity and financial gains as the positive influencers in mergers. Slade et al.^[11] were predominantly focused on evaluating the post-merger research productivity of the faculty and found a statistically

significant improvement in the faculty research productivity after the merger. Notably, our study corroborates the negative and positive influencers in mergers. While the human factors created the perception of the merger's negative influence, there was also an acknowledgment of the merger's positive influence or advantages in terms of increase in research and scholarship productivity, improvement in available resources, and opportunities for collaboration with the larger academic community.

While the study participants verbalized the advantages and disadvantages, the amount of work required to conduct the merger related activities was expressed as tremendous. The increase in the workload to accommodate the merger related work is in line with the Toledo and Lopes^[29] findings that the increase in the workload originating from the mergers involves a transformation in the personnel's identities and the consolidation of resources. The sources of increase in the workload for the faculty and administrators involved in our study included rapid turnaround times, consolidation of the educational programs and curricula, consolidation of the students, staff, faculty, and learning management systems as well as higher expectations for research and scholarship in the newly merged school.

Cultural integration as a challenge was also evident from our research. The study participants attributed the challenging cultural integration to the differences in the two organizations pre-merger organizational cultures and philosophies. The human resistance to change was also commonly cited as an important factor for cultural integration issues. These findings of complexities and challenges associated with the cultural integration in a merger also converge with the findings from another study by Min^[10] that concluded that the employees have difficulty associating with their post-merger identities because they cannot dissociate with their pre-merger identities. It appears that cultural integration is a gradual process, and adjustment takes time.

Final concluding theme included the net positive influence of the nursing higher education merger on the QWL and the performance of the faculty and administrators. Improvement in research productivity and research and scholarship performance aligns with the Slade et al. study.^[11] This finding of a net positive influence of this merger is contrary to the Evans study^[9] finding where the author concluded that the mergers were detrimental to the QWL of the employees. Evans et al.^[9] had concluded that a merger negatively influences the QWL. Evans et al.^[9] was a preliminary study and included recommendations for an ongoing evaluation of the merger influence on the QWL could explain the transition of the negative influence into a positive one in our study.

4.1 Summary and recommendations

This study stipulates that a merger is a complex organizational change that threatens the QWL of the nursing faculty and administrators imparting a negative influence initially but can balance out the negative influence over time and create an overall positive influence. However, the exact transition needs further understanding through sequential research. Further implications of this study illustrate the magnitude and rapidity of the work required to conduct the transitional work related to the merger.

Future research should focus on the periodic evaluation of the post-merger QWL of the faculty and administrators in mergers to capture the transition of negative influence into a positive influence. Research should also evaluate the relationship of merger related changes on the retention of nursing faculty. In nursing higher education mergers, the QWL of students and other staff members should also be assessed. A more balanced sample from a gender perspective and other disciplines will add to the literature on this topic.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The benefits of the nursing higher education merger under study outweighed the risks despite the initial negative influence and the magnitude of work involved. While fiscal benefits are the primary goal of mergers, its influence on the employees' QWL is a crucial factor determining the success or failure of mergers. Evaluation of the post-merger QWL can play a critical role in employee performance, which predicts organizational performance. The outcomes of mergers can be better understood through the evaluation of the post-merger QWL. The benefits and risks of mergers should be

carefully assessed. Attention to QWL factors appears promising for improving employee and organizational performance.

Careful planning to support the nursing higher education faculty can ensure that the initial negative influence on the QWL related factors does not lead to the merger failure. Mergers could be potentially beneficial to both parties involved if the negatively influencing employee QWL factors are addressed proactively. Merger under study was perceived by faculty and administrators as having a net positive influence. Hence, the benefits of the merger did outweigh the risks in the case of the merger under study at the 5-year mark. There is hope for the organizations who skeptically refrain from participating in mergers. If carefully planned and with allocation of adequate resources, mergers have a great potential for success. The implications for nursing education practice include careful planning and resource allocation for future mergers. Efforts in strategic planning and additional personnel support are imperative to conduct merger related work effectively and efficiently. Challenges related to cultural integration should not be overlooked as they can complicate the merger's influence on the QWL further. Time and resource investment in early identification of the cultural differences and efforts to address those cultural differences might be an important strategic step to ease the challenges related to the complexities of cultural integration, maintain QWL, and retain existing workforce. With careful planning, nursing higher education mergers could be a beneficial organizational change.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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