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Facilitating Veteran Learning in Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) Education: The Faculty Perspective

Katie A. Chargualaf, PhD, RN, CMSRN

Nursing, University of South Carolina at Aiken, Aiken, SC, USA

Barbara J. Patterson, PhD, RN, ANEF

School of Nursing, Widener University Graduate, Chester, PA, USA

Brenda Elliott, PhD, RN

Division of Nursing and Health Sciences, Wilson College, Chambersburg, PA, USA

Background: Increasing demand for nurses and the availability of educational benefits through the post 9/11 GI Bill had resulted in more Veterans pursuing college degrees; with nursing being a popular choice. Roughly 10,000 of the more than 75,000 total medics and corpsman leave military service each year (D'Aoust, Rossiter, & Clochesy, 2016). Although these Veterans maintain significant healthcare knowledge and experience, a lack of academic credit awarded for prior military training means that they are unable to attain employment commensurate to their skills without a college degree (D'Aoust, Rossiter, & Clochesy, 2016).

The transition out of the military into civilian life is often described as complex and stressful as veterans adjust to new cultures, personal and professional roles, and establish new support networks (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Elliott, Chargualaf, & Patterson, 2016). College enrollment is one approach commonly used by veterans to reintegrate into the civilian culture (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Due to vast differences between military training and higher education, barriers impacting the veteran transition to higher education may create unforeseen learning challenges (Dyar, 2015; Jenner, 2017). Specifically, Dyar (2015) argued that veterans in nursing education may encounter difficulties learning due to a "transition from highly structured and repetitive training to more independent learning" (p. 3). Dual family and student responsibilities, increased age, difficulty relating to peers, and deployment experiences are commonly reported obstacles encountered by student veterans in higher education (Dyar, 2015; Jenner, 2017). Research supports that faculty and staff in higher education lack knowledge related to military culture and experience, impacting an understanding of how to facilitate learning (Bichrest, 2013).

The ability of veterans to transfer learning and knowledge from their prior military service is imperative to successful matriculation and degree completion. López, Springer, and Nelson (2015) suggested academic success for student veterans relies on teaching and learning practices that build on life experiences, classroom environments that promote socialization, accommodation of diverse learning styles, curricular coherence allowing for transfer of prior knowledge, and timely and relevant feedback to students. Research validates that learning transfer is not merely the result of individual characteristics but rather depends on educational design, the learning and clinical environments, and the collaboration between academic and workplace institutions (Botma & McKenzie, 2016).

Approaches to enhance nursing education to better meet veterans' needs have been proposed (Allen, Armstrong, Saladiner, Hamilton, & Conard, 2014; Morrison-Beedy & Rossiter, 2018). Exemplars include a dedicated military liaison support position in the school of nursing, educational events for faculty and staff to increase veteran cultural competency, academic advising by faculty with knowledge of the military, and accelerated programs to propel motivated students into the workforce faster (Allen et al., 2014; Morrison-Beedy & Rossiter, 2018). Prior learning assessments are one approach colleges and universities are able to acknowledge prior learning in the military (Bergman & Herd, 2017). In one nursing program, a competency-based education (CBE) model was developed to award college credit for prior military training and skill development (Sikes, Francis-Johnson, Jones, Opton, Casida, & Allen, 2017). However, no study published to date could be located that specifically addressed faculty perspectives and experiences with veteran students in the nursing classroom. This study seeks to fill that gap in understanding the faculty role in meeting student veterans' needs and success in nursing education.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine faculty perceptions of facilitating veterans' transfer of learning and knowledge from their military experience to their Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) education.

Methods: A descriptive, qualitative design guided the study. Following institutional review board approval, participants were recruited from accredited nursing programs in military centric areas of the United States. The sample included 10 nurse faculty; 5 teaching in Veterans' Bachelor of Science in Nursing programs (VBSN) and five teaching in non-Veteran affiliated BSN programs. Although more than half of participants did not serve in the military (70%); 60% had someone in their immediate family who did. Participants were predominately female, greater than 50 years of age ($M = 50.7$) and worked as nurse faculty for a decade ($M = 10.8$).

Nurse faculty participated in a single, semi-structured interview of varying duration. Using principles of content and thematic analysis, members of the research team individually and collectively analyzed verbatim transcripts to derive initial themes. Data collection concluded when saturation was achieved.

Results: The data suggests that the unique perspective and life experience that veterans bring to the BSN classroom challenge nurse faculty to move beyond traditional pedagogies to enhance learning. Opportunities to optimize contextual knowledge and traits can help veterans draw connections, understand the "why," and recognize how these may be applied to nursing practice. Finally, awareness and sensitivity of student needs and outlying struggles may help faculty decipher student's issues from veteran-related issues capable of interfering with degree attainment. Recommendations provided by faculty to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills align with published literature and include participation in veteran related professional development, get to know students to understand needs and potential barriers to success, and be amenable to nontraditional teaching modalities that generate opportunities to use prior knowledge in a new context.

Conclusion: Veterans bring a wealth of expertise and life experience to the BSN classroom. Assisting veterans to repurpose knowledge and skills from the military for use in new contexts is essential for successful matriculation and integration into the profession. Recommendations for faculty teaching veterans focus on bridging gaps in understanding of military and veteran culture through professional development and exploring innovative pedagogies to facilitate the transfer of prior learning and skills.

Title:

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Keywords:

Nursing education, Prior learning and Veterans

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Abstract Summary:

Many veterans are using GI Bill benefits to pursue nursing degrees. Significant differences between prior military training and higher education may impact retention and successful degree completion. Strategies nurse faculty employed to assist veterans transfer of learning and knowledge from their military service to nursing education are explored.

Content Outline:

Learning Objectives:

- Describe methods nurse faculty employ to facilitate learning and knowledge transfer from military service to nursing education and the RN role.
- Identify strategies to support student veterans enrolled in pre-licensure baccalaureate nursing programs.
- Discuss the implications of nurse faculty efforts to retain veterans through enhanced progression to degree completion efforts.

Background

- Veterans transitioning to higher education

Review of the Literature

- Veterans in higher education
- Transfer of learning

Methods

- Purpose
- Design
- Data Collection
- Data Analysis

Findings

Discussion and Implications for Nursing Education

Conclusions

First Primary Presenting Author

Primary Presenting Author

Katie A. Chargualaf, PhD, RN, CMSRN
University of South Carolina at Aiken
Nursing
Assistant Professor
Aiken SC
USA

Author Summary: Dr. Katie Chargualaf is a military spouse and certified medical-surgical nurse with more than 19 years of clinical experience. As a nurse educator and researcher, she teaches undergraduate leadership and management and medical-surgical clinicals in a pre-licensure nursing program. As a member of an academic-practice partnership, Dr. Chargualaf is also investigating early readmissions of kidney and liver transplant recipients.

Second Secondary Presenting Author

Corresponding Secondary Presenting Author

Barbara J. Patterson, PhD, RN, ANEF
Widener University Graduate
School of Nursing
Professor of Nursing, Director of PhD program in nursing
Chester PA
USA

Author Summary: Dr. Patterson serves as Distinguished Professor in the School of Nursing at Widener University in Chester, PA. Her research has focused on leadership and evidence-based teaching. She has presented and published extensively in nursing education; and has conducted research in the areas of male nursing students, evidence-based teaching, student veterans, and leadership in nursing education. Dr. Patterson also served as faculty for the Nurse Faculty Leadership Academy of Sigma Theta Tau.

Third Secondary Presenting Author

Corresponding Secondary Presenting Author

Brenda Elliott, PhD, RN

Wilson College

Division of Nursing and Health Sciences

Assistant Professor

Chambersburg PA

USA

Author Summary: Dr Brenda Elliott served in the United State Army from 1994 – 1998. Her doctoral research focused on the military nurses' experiences returning home from war. She has co-developed curricula for a post bachelors Veteran Healthcare Certificate program for healthcare providers which focuses on Military and Veteran culture, Healthcare needs of Veterans, Veteran Advocacy, and Veteran Healthcare Policy. She is currently working on a study involving Veterans and their transition from military to the classroom.