Military Veterans Transitioning to the Student Role in Civilian Nursing Programs

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**Purpose:**

Between 240,000 and 360,000 men and women leave the United States (U.S.) military annually (National EMS Management Association, 2014). Unemployment rates on average are higher for U.S. Veterans than for those never serving in the military. Military medics and corpsmen have critical skills and qualities in focus with the nursing profession. Yet many skills and certificates from the Military are not transferred to job opportunities in the civilian sector. Military Veterans earning a degree in nursing will impact the overall nursing shortage, benefit Military needs and services, and have job opportunities once returning to the civilian workforce.

The Joining Forces campaign launched in 2011 during the Obama Administration focused on employment and education for U.S. military service members. In response, 31 Schools of Nursing received Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funding to develop Veterans Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) programs. A university in the southeastern hemisphere of the U.S. launched a VBSN program in 2014 (D’Aoust, Rossiter, & Clochesy, 2016). This study was conducted for quality assurance and continued assessment and evaluation efforts.

Literature to date primarily highlights academic and operational factors of Military Veterans transitioning to civilian nursing programs (Allen, Armstrong, Saladiner, Hamilton, & Conrad, 2014; Morrison-Beedy, Passmore, & D’Aoust, 2015). Although some personal aspects are acknowledged, the personal experience has not been deeply explored. Study objectives were to 1) gain understanding of Military Veterans transitioning to the role of a nursing student in a civilian nursing program, 2) identify obstacles and barriers 3) promote and enhance successful completion and 4) minimize attrition for Military Veterans pursuing a VBSN degree.

**Methods:**

Research Question. What is the lived experience of Military Veterans transitioning to the role of a nursing student in a civilian nursing program?

A qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach may best capture unforeseen obstacles and barriers. As well, student input generates valuable information to evaluate the effectiveness of academic programs and identify areas of need to support student success (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2013). This study employed a qualitative research design using phenomenological methodology outlined by Georgi (2009). Data collection involved three focus group interviews with VBSN students (n =17). Focus groups are effective to generate enriching data through group interaction (Morrison-Beedy, Côté-Arsenault, & Feinstein, 2001).

Institutional Review Boards (IRB) process was completed through two east coast universities. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to interviews. Participant’s names and identifies were not included with recordings nor transcription to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were conducted by a moderator. A note taker was present to capture additional observations.

**Results:**

Four key themes emerged, preparing by default, making sense, drawing the line, and no one left behind.
**Preparation by Default.** Military Veterans strive to be prepared. Veterans were committed to their decision to attend nursing school. Their military role is deep rooted in organization and following procedure. They look for such qualities in a college program. Finances and resources were conflicts to preparing for furthering education.

**Making Sense.** Veterans were unclear with the definition of nursing and had low expectations about the role. As veterans progressed through the VBSN program, they gained a better understanding of nursing and its role. Some described it as eye-opening.

**Drawing the Line.** Veterans clarified their scope of practice to decipher field military and civilian nursing roles. Veterans relayed the importance to accept and work with the differences to move forward and succeed in the program.

**No One Left Behind.** Veterans supported each other regardless of military branch, rank, or semester in school. Veterans are continuously vigilant to the needs of other veterans. Current students helped establish resources for newer and incoming cohorts to be best prepared for success in the VBSN program.

The overarching theme was *knowing where to draw the line*. This was a pivotal point with transitioning to the role of a civilian nursing student. Veterans first focused on preparing for admission and relocating to new living arrangements while balancing military and personal responsibilities. Lack of understanding of the nursing role was a conflict to clarifying differences between veterans in the field and civilian nursing. Veterans had a personal drive to succeed however; a key to their success was support from fellow veterans regardless of branch or rank.

**Conclusion:**

This study advocates the importance of liaisons, support services, and resources for Military Veterans transitioning to civilian nursing schools. Military presence was highly valued. Establishing Military lounges to foster peer support and mentoring may prove essential to success. Future research is needed to further explore the experiences of Veterans transitioning to civilian nursing programs.

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**Title:**
Military Veterans Transitioning to the Student Role in Civilian Nursing Programs

**Keywords:**
Military Veterans, Nursing Education and Transitioning

**References:**


**Abstract Summary:**
A phenomenological approach was used to explore Military Veterans transitioning to civilian nursing programs. Four themes emerged, Preparation by Default, Making Sense, Drawing the Line, and No One Left Behind. Findings support Military liaisons and peer mentoring within civilian nursing programs.

**Content Outline:**
I. Introduction
   1. Military medics and corpsmen have critical skills and qualities in focus with the nursing profession. Yet many skills and certificates from the Military are not transferred to job opportunities in the civilian sector. Military Veterans earning a degree in nursing will impact the overall nursing shortage, benefit Military needs and services, and have job opportunities once returning to the civilian workforce.
   2. Thirty-one Schools of Nursing received Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funding to develop Veterans Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) programs. A university in the southeastern hemisphere of the U.S. launched a VBSN program in 2014 (D’Aoust, Rossiter, & Clochesy, 2016). This study was conducted for quality assurance and continued assessment and evaluation efforts.

II. Body
   1. Literature to date primarily highlights academic and operational factors of Military Veterans transitioning to civilian nursing programs (Allen, Armstrong, Saladiner, Hamilton, & Conrad, 2014; Morrison-Beedy, Passmore, & D’Aoust, 2015). Although some personal aspects are acknowledged, the personal experience has not been deeply explored.
   2. Study objectives were to a) gain understanding of Military Veterans transitioning to the role of a nursing student in a civilian nursing program, b) identify obstacles and barriers c) promote and enhance successful completion and d) minimize attrition for Military Veterans pursuing a VBSN degree.
   3. A qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach may best capture unforeseen obstacles and barriers.
   4. This study employed a qualitative research design using phenomenological methodology outlined by Georgi (2009).
5. Data collection involved three focus group interviews with VBSN students (n = 17).

6. Four key themes emerged, preparing by default, making sense, drawing the line, and no one left behind.

a. Preparation by Default. Military Veterans strive to be prepared. Veterans were committed to their decision to attend nursing school. Their military role is deep rooted in organization and following procedure. They look for such qualities in a college program. Finances and resources were conflicts to preparing for furthering education.

b. Making Sense. Veterans were unclear with the definition of nursing and had low expectations about the role. As veterans progressed through the VBSN program, they gained a better understanding of nursing and its role. Some described it as eye-opening.

c. Drawing the Line. Veterans clarified their scope of practice to decipher field military and civilian nursing roles. Veterans relayed the importance to accept and work with the differences to move forward and succeed in the program.

d. No One Left Behind. Veterans supported each other regardless of military branch, rank, or semester in school. Veterans are continuously vigilant to the needs of other veterans. Current students helped establish resources for newer and incoming cohorts to be best prepared for success in the VBSN program.

7. The overarching theme was knowing where to draw the line. This was a pivotal point with transitioning to the role of a civilian nursing student.

III. Conclusion

1. This study advocates the importance of liaisons, support services, and resources for Military Veterans transitioning to civilian nursing schools.

2. Military presence was highly valued.

3. Establishing Military lounges to foster peer support and mentoring may prove essential to success.

4. Future research is needed to further explore the experiences of Veterans transitioning to civilian nursing programs.

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Author Summary: Dr. Rolland is an assistant professor at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. She continues to explore the phenomenon of transitioning. Dr. Rolland’s current research involves Military Veterans transitioning to the role of civilian nursing student. The research supports Military Veterans pursuing Bachelors in Nursing.