

Mission Critical: Failure Is Not an Option. The Journey of Three Universities to Promote Military Student Success

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Author Note

This article reports on three university-based bachelor of science in nursing programs that developed recruitment and retention strategies to meet the objectives of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Nurse Education, Practice, Quality and Retention (NEPQR) - Veteran's Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) program. Funding for this project was made possible by HRSA. Grant numbers are as follows: Davenport University UF1HP26488, Wayne State University UF1HP28521, and Florida International University UF1HP26491. Research studies referenced in this article were under title "VBSN Cohort Survey," IRB # 16110135, approved on 11/7/2016 by Davenport University Institutional Review Board.

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Abstract

Three universities – Davenport University, Wayne State University and Florida International University – embarked on a journey in response to a federal initiative calling for the creation of pathways for veterans into the nursing profession. Based on existing research and recommendations from veteran groups, these universities set up systems and supports for recruitment and retention to ease the transition of military service members to a nursing program. The objective of these action steps was to help service members transition to become successful nursing students and eventually successful nursing graduates. Along the way, the nursing faculty at each university recognized the benefits of having military veterans in the classroom as well as in the profession of nursing. The recruitment and retention of veterans in a competitive nursing program required targeted efforts of the nursing program faculty and administration. Having support services in place and encouraging the veterans to use them helped veterans succeed in their nursing program. Each university discusses strategies that helped them address common challenges encountered in implementing their nursing programs for veterans.

Keywords: student veteran, nursing, recruitment, enrollment, retention

Introduction

*Were there none who were discontented with what they have,
the world would never reach anything better.*

—Florence Nightingale

In any journey, moving forward takes one step at a time. Academia's charge is to create pathways in which transformation can take place through learning. For the faculty and staff who guide those on this journey, the work should also be transformative through their interactions with students and their investment in each student's success. For the universities that embarked on a journey to create pathways for veterans and military-connected students to become nurses, failure was not an option as they stepped into unknown territory. The journey of transforming military medical service members into bachelor-prepared nurses not only changed the career of the service members, but it changed the universities and faculty as well. This journey remains mission critical for each university and school of nursing.

The journey started with what we know. Veterans bring with them vast skills in leadership, accountability, trust, teamwork, and especially values central to nursing and healthcare. The skills veterans learned in military life and service provide the potential student with critically needed experience in leadership and teamwork. People look to veterans for guidance. Indeed, military life more than adequately prepares veterans for careers in healthcare. This is centrally true for those who served in the military medic and Hospital Corpsman communities. Compassion is also another key value. Military community life teaches a service member not to judge others, but rather to be compassionate regardless of differences and variation. Taken as a whole, these qualities are also the foundation to becoming a successful nurse (Cox, 2019; Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley 2010).

Based on the Health and Human Services strategic plan for fiscal year 2013, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) created a grant for developing pathways for veterans into nursing bachelor's degree programs. Davenport University, Wayne State University and Florida International University received grants as part of the HRSA Veterans to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) funding. Based on the original number of grants (nine), budgets awarded, and project work plans approved, HRSA estimated that approximately 1,100 veterans would obtain their BSN degrees by the end of the grant project period. Creating innovative ways to award credit to veterans for prior military medical training and experience was the main goal of the program.

Many universities have military-based recruitment, enrollment, and retention strategies. However, the question was how to recruit and retain military students within a rigorous nursing program. In this article, three universities share stories of their success and strategies implemented to address the challenges faced when helping veterans make the transition to bachelor-prepared nurses.

The VBSN students had different backgrounds, service branches, and experiences. Early on, all three schools noticed that it was essential to listen to the voices of the veterans. The schools needed to adjust and accommodate to students who had military service, employment and other obligations. For example, students who were in the reserves had to drill on the

weekends. Others had returned recently to families and needed to maintain employment for financial reasons in addition to attending school. Overall, the experience of working with VBSN students helped faculty listen more closely to the needs of all nursing students. The purpose of this article is to describe the recruitment and retention strategies of three universities that developed VBSN programs.

Recruitment Strategies: Opening the Door

Each of the universities has a long history of recruiting military service members and veterans. However, recruitment into nursing programs can be challenging due to the competitive nature of admissions for university nursing programs. For example, many veterans have found that their credentials were inadequate for acceptance into a typical nursing program. The recruiting strategies that had been used by each of the universities may have excluded veterans with minimal college credits or American Council on Education (ACE) approved transfer credits. (ACE evaluates post-secondary classes and assigns college credit by identifying equivalent courses.) All universities involved in this grant found that identifying veterans who were interested in enrolling in their BSN program was more difficult than anticipated. Identifying veterans or active military members who may want to transition to academia required a customized recruitment approach. All three universities found having recruiters with military experience helped establish a trusting relationship between the veteran and the university. Also, personalized and timely responsiveness was key to maintaining the trusting relationship and essential to bringing students into each nursing program. Initially, strategies focused on how to help the student navigate the application process. As veterans entered the nursing programs, it became apparent that faculty needed to acquire a basic understanding of military culture.

Davenport University

Applicants to the Bachelor of Science Pre-Nursing (BSN-PL), Mable Engle Nursing Program (MENP) at Davenport University (DU) are often recruited by multiple universities. Although DU has successfully recruited veterans since its founding shortly after the Civil War, this new nursing pathway required a different, more nuanced outreach to veterans. After a year of struggling to identify viable applicants, grant funds were repurposed to include hiring a recruiter with military medical experience, thus enabling potential recruits to speak with another military person throughout their recruitment to the university as the single point of contact. The opportunity to speak with someone who could answer questions about the program and about the transition to life as a student in a civilian institution was invaluable. This personal touch was often cited by VBSN students as the reason for finalizing their decision to attend school at DU. Building rapport with potential applicants was important for a successful application submission. Quick turnaround and responsiveness helped develop a trusting relationship between the veteran and the university. Because the recruiter was headquartered in the Eastern Time zone, applicants were able to communicate with him about the VBSN program from Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea, Guam, etc. at a time that was feasible for them to talk on the phone.

Because DU is not located near any active duty military installation, the marketing plan included billboards throughout Michigan as well as digital and social media advertising on

military bases nation-wide. Many applicants were unaware of DU's multiple locations or its proximity to major metropolitan areas. DU recruiters needed to explain the geographic area in detail and provide information that would assist an applicant in choosing one of the four DU campuses that share one nursing program. Lifestyle for the applicant and their family was important. Information about nightlife, school systems, and housing helped veterans make their decision to apply to a nursing program. While some applicants were originally from Michigan and knew what to expect, others came from as far away as Washington and California. These applicants needed more information and guidance through texts, phone calls, emails, FaceTime, and in-person touring of the surrounding area.

One of the largest barriers to overcome for applicants was academic preparation. Meeting the requirement for admission testing was the initial challenge. Beyond testing, many military applicants lacked a traditional educational background. To balance the shortcoming of a competitive grade point average or high enough national standardized test scores, DU revised the BSN-PL admission requirements. These revised requirements gave credit for the knowledge medics and Corpsmen obtained through military training and experience. Specific admission points were awarded based on how many years' experience the veteran had as a medic or Corpsman. This method of acceptance into the program honored the expertise that a military medical veteran brings to a nursing program and accelerated program progression by shortening a four-year program to three years. One of the DU VBSN graduates explained, "Because of transfer credits and prior college experience, receiving up to 45 credits for military experience is unheard of. The advanced standing and recognition for medic experience was enough to come to Davenport as well as to stay" (Davenport University, 2015-2017).

A key turning point in DU's ability to demonstrate respect for the knowledge and skill that veterans bring to an academic program was the expert help of the DU registrar's office. Essential to this method of credential evaluation during the admission process was a forward thinking registrar who was willing to see military training as equivalent to academic credit. Without this, many of the students would not have been admitted. In the case of the DU VBSN, credits were granted toward the Bachelor of Science in nursing program. Since the close of the grant, the method of granting credit for military experiences has expanded. Instead of assessing for transfer credits, a job classification such as an army medic or navy Corpsman, is transcribed as 45 credits granted toward the nursing degree.

The combined efforts to enhance recruitment were successful. Over a five-year period, 50 students were admitted to the MENP BSN-PL program. To date, 23 of these students have graduated, and the other students are progressing through the program. Moreover, the recruitment methods and practices described have become a permanent part of the DU recruiting process for veterans. The revised admission requirements continue to make it possible for highly experienced veteran applicants to be admitted to MENP BSN-PL program.

Wayne State University

For approximately 75 years, Wayne State University (WSU) College of Nursing (CON), in Detroit, Michigan, has been committed to educating students to provide excellent care to patients living in an urban environment. Recruiting students for the BSN track for veterans was initiated in collaboration with the Office of Military and Veteran Academic Excellence

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(OMVAE), which is the WSU military and veteran advising office that has been providing services to military veterans since 1945. Using available resources, OMVAE contacted veteran organizations in southeastern Michigan, notifying them of the opportunity for military and veteran students to apply to a nursing program that would focus on educating military veterans to become registered nurses. Monthly information meetings were scheduled and posted on the College of Nursing website. The WSU website announced the program to current students and alumni, informing them about the program. Pamphlets about the program were sent to local veteran vocational rehabilitation counselors. Due to the uniqueness of the program, the University Board of Governors included the announcement of the program at their meeting, which provided for a university wide awareness of the program. OMVAE and CON academic advisors worked together to identify potential students. Social media was utilized to notify military veterans in the area about the WSU VBSN program designed to meet their specific needs. Approximately 30 students responded to recruitment efforts for the first cohort.

Applicants were required to apply to WSU prior to applying to the CON Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) track. The university evaluated all student transcripts, including their military courses that were documented on their Joint Service Transcripts (JST), through the American Council on Education (ACE). Students were granted credit toward general education and nursing prerequisites. Each potential applicant met with an academic service officer to determine what courses the student needed to meet university graduation requirements.

Like the other VBSN programs, a holistic admission process was implemented, providing students with previous military healthcare experience preference for admission. Applicants were required to write a personal statement, submit two letters of recommendation, and participate in a face-to-face interview. The WSU VBSN program did not require previous healthcare experience in the military to be eligible for admission, but students were required to have completed 30 credits of general education and nursing prerequisites with a 3.0 grade point average.

Students were admitted as pre-nursing students with the intent that they would complete prerequisites and general education courses prior to starting nursing core courses. Pre-nursing students were assigned a peer mentor and had an opportunity to meet as a group and attend tutoring sessions (Elliot, 2015). After two cohorts, the admission process was revised, requiring completion of prerequisites and all university general education classes prior to applying to the VBSN program. It was recognized that some students needed more than one year to complete the required courses, while other students were ready to start nursing core courses. This provided students with the opportunity to complete courses at a community college and allowed for additional time to transition from the military to an academic environment.

Florida International University

The mission of the Nicole Wertheim College of Nursing and Health Sciences at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, Florida includes teaching, conducting research and serving the community. Preparing nurses skilled in veteran-centric care has been part of this mission for many years. In an effort to recruit more military students, several facets of information dissemination were employed. An audio advertisement of the FIU Medic-to-Nurse program was aired during hold periods whenever calls were placed University wide. Further,

recruitment materials that advertised FIU's Medic to Nurse accelerated track program were disseminated via print media to Army Times, Air Force Times, Navy Times and Military Edge publications. Full page advertisements appeared in these weekly periodicals. In addition, three Google advertisements were launched digitally via the worldwide web.

A multi-pronged approach was necessary to supplement traditional recruitment strategies. Recruitment literature was published in a book that the military service members received on separation from the military. A Facebook page was created and updated regularly to reflect the current FIU VBSN student enrollment and cohort activities on campus and in the clinical setting. The enrolled FIU VBSN students were encouraged to "like" the Medic-to-Nurse Facebook page and contribute postings and photographs of their former and present military experiences as a form of advertisement and recruitment of additional students into the program. The FIU VBSN nursing faculty joined the Facebook page to share classroom experiences and promote good rapport between students and faculty. Local military bases were contacted and visited, recruitment activities were planned and conducted, and recruitment literature was distributed. Advisors and faculty met face-to-face with military service members.

The FIU VBSN program academic advisor conducted recruitment sessions with interested and prospective FIU VBSN program applicants. These sessions provided a brief history of the College of Nursing & Health Sciences, its mission and degree offerings, resources available to veteran students, an overview of the FIU VBSN program, the course of study, and admission requirements. Recruitment sessions were available as face-to-face presentations or as recorded sessions delivered virtually via YouTube for potential students who were located outside the South Florida region.

The most successful recruitment strategy for enrolling FIU VBSN students was word-of-mouth. Enrolled FIU VBSN students as well as graduates of the FIU VBSN program directly recruited their friends, coworkers, and relatives. Not only was this an excellent recruitment strategy, it also served as a retention strategy because the new students knew someone who could serve as an informal mentor for them after they entered the program.

The Journey Begins.....

Overall, the recruitment strategies at all three universities were similar in method and spirit. Honoring the expertise and strengths of the veterans attracted them to each of the universities. Adapting to veterans' needs, customizing recruitment approaches for a military service member and veteran audience, and adjusting admission requirements to holistically evaluate applicants helped the veterans successfully proceed through the admissions process. The intense focus on meeting the recruitment needs of the veterans started a transformation of the recruitment processes for all three universities that has had a lasting effect on the recruitment processes used today. The strategies implemented to address the challenges faced with recruiting and retaining veterans during the grant period continue to pave the way at these universities for more veterans to begin the journey of becoming a nurse.

Retention: Pathway to Success

Once successfully enrolled, military service members and veterans arrived on campus. With their unique military experiences, many adapted well and thrived. This background was seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. One student focused on the challenge: “The hardest part about returning to school was my age. I was in my late 30s when I went back, and I felt like I was in a classroom full of kids!” Another student focused more on the opportunity, saying “Many students are considerably younger and are in different profiles of life and this presents a diversified classroom environment (which is not bad) but can be the most challenging part of returning to school” (Davenport University, 2015-2017).

For most nursing students, succeeding in a nursing program is challenging. Successful veterans leveraged their past, present, and future opportunities into completing a nursing degree. Each university committed to assuring the success of the military students. By striving to understand the unique perspectives and needs of military nursing students, each university created, expanded, or resourced existing services to support the retention of the veteran nursing students.

Davenport University

As is true of many universities, the DU MENP has several layers of support in place for veterans. Because the military is very different from a civilian academic environment, expanding these layers of support for veteran nursing students was a priority. It was important to determine what constituted meaningful support from the perspective of the veterans. The DU VBSN students explained that one of their challenges was transitioning from an “external-authority-based environment toward developing self-authorship and establishing a post-military identity” (Davenport University, 2015-2017). Some veterans explained that a self-motivated type of learning was hard to adjust to because of the structured environment they had in the military. On the other hand, the structured military environment helped prepare veterans for a rigorous academic program. Their desire to learn, coupled with a motivated attitude, helped the veterans succeed.

To help ensure that the needs of veteran nursing students were understood, an annual survey about support services was sent to all veteran students (Davenport University, 2015-2017). It was important to hear the full story of DU VBSN students who were polite in person and responded respectfully with one- or two-word answers with faculty and staff, and who oftentimes would not reach out for support services even when needed. The survey results helped faculty understand that essential to becoming more confident and secure as a veteran student were the needs to find balance, find a new team, achieve a new structure for time-management, learn to navigate the new environment, and define respect differently with faculty, staff and younger students. It was also discovered that a peer support system could have many benefits for the students. A DU VBSN student explained the benefit of veteran-to-veteran support:

Having the VBSN cohort automatically established a team here at Davenport. We work together, remind each other of deadlines and have an established connection and understanding from our service to begin with. We are older, married, have families, and jobs. We just have a bigger picture. Not that we don't talk to the other students, but our lives just feel different (Davenport University, 2015-2017).

Over the five years of grant funding, several new strategies were implemented to address challenges related to student retention. For example, the DU MENP faculty instituted the “Battle Buddy” system. New DU VBSN students were assigned a Battle Buddy and asked to sign a contract detailing the academic demands of the program. Clear expectations and solid support through the program proved effective in retaining students. Also, based on student feedback, a veteran-focused orientation was instituted. New DU VBSN students talked with current students. These interactions helped remove some of the mystery about the program and gave the new DU VBSN students success strategies.

Additionally, the DU MENP faculty found that surrounding the DU VBSN students with a support team was essential, including a focused advisor and teaching faculty who had military experience. The DU MENP faculty assigned the DU VBSN students to distinct cohorts across all campuses. Meeting for class and study sessions in person helped the students develop a sense of connectedness though virtual meetings across all four of the DU nursing campuses. To assure faculty support and increased understanding of the experiences of the DU VBSN students, the DU MENP faculty and staff developed several new faculty and staff professional development opportunities. These training sessions utilized information gleaned from the veterans themselves to create a simulation of students’ transition experiences called the Military Simulation and DU Green Zone training. The military simulation is an immersive simulated experience in which the participants take on the role of a student. The Green Zone training educates faculty and staff about military culture, and possible transition challenges of military students. Both trainings also emphasize the positive attributes military students bring with them to the campus community. These key trainings, initially created for the nursing department, were embraced university-wide, facilitating a much broader impact and cultural change.

Retention of military nursing students in the DU MENP VBSN increased from 75% in 2013 to 90% in 2019. The primary reason for this increased retention rate was thought to be the support team that was made possible by the funding of the VBSN HRSA grant. This dedicated team was composed of a Nursing Faculty Coordinator, a team advisor, a research associate and a military recruiter. Putting all the support services in place took substantial effort and resources. The team’s focus was to fully understand the needs of the medically trained service members and create research-based interventions to support the cultural change necessary to ensure the success of these students.

Despite the retention successes, there were some common reasons for attrition of the DU VBSN students. The inability to adjust to a more independent and less team-based approach to academic work resulted in some cases in time management challenges. DU VBSN students sometimes were reluctant to ask for help in a proactive manner (Davenport University 2017). In addition, there were students who needed to leave due to personal issues preventing them from continuing in a nursing program. Although some students addressed these issues and returned, others did not. Overwhelmingly, the biggest challenges were transition issues related to work burden, veteran benefit issues, family concerns and lack of preparedness for the extensive commitment a nursing program required (Davenport University, 2015-2017). Although similar to concerns verbalized by all non-traditional nursing students, a more individualized approach was needed that incorporated military culture in the creation of a successful pathway for military nursing students.



Davenport University VBSN Nursing Students

Wayne State University

Once students were admitted to the WSU VBSN, multiple strategies were put into place to retain the students (Elliot, 2015). It was recognized that for the WSU VBSN students to be successful, the needs of veterans had to be anticipated. This was done in several ways. First, military and veteran students' clinical experiences were Monday through Thursday to allow for weekend reserve commitments. Second, the WSU VBSN students were assigned to the same clinical group throughout the program. This was to build upon the military value of camaraderie and reduce the impact of weekend reserve responsibilities on other clinical groups. In addition, students were provided with an environment where they could share similar experiences and support each other through the nursing program. Based on feedback from the WSU VBSN students, this was found to contribute to their overall success in the program.

Students were assigned a clinical instructor who was a military veteran and who understood the challenges students would possibly encounter. A majority of their clinical experiences took place in the John D. Dingell VA Medical Center, an environment that was familiar with military culture and that could provide treatment for traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. The WSU VBSN students attended the didactic portion of their classes with the second-degree track students, allowing them to be with students who were older and more mature. The intent was to help the veterans' transition from the military to a school environment and to help them develop professional relationships beyond the WSU VBSN group.



Davenport University VBSN Nursing Students

Faculty training was conducted prior to the WSU VBSN students' arrival in the classroom (D'Aoust, Rossiter, Itle & Clochesy, 2016). OMVAE staff developed a training session for CON faculty and staff. This training was helpful in many ways. For example, it helped faculty become more aware of veterans' intolerance of classmates who did not display professional behavior and their sensitivity to topics that might trigger symptoms of PTSD. Additionally, faculty had ongoing training sessions, and several military veteran faculty were available to assist other faculty with day-to-day issues and concerns as needed.

WSU has several departments, such as Counseling and Psychological Services, Student Disability Services, Financial Aid and the Academic Success Center, to address the needs of underserved populations. Although these services are available to all CON students, it was anticipated that they would be particularly beneficial for veterans. For example, the Academic Success Center has workshops that focus on time and stress management, procrastination, and the development of good study skills. The Academic Success Center modified the existing programs to accommodate the needs of older students and military veterans. As a requirement of the grant, the VBSN students attended the workshops during their second day of orientation. In addition, they were encouraged to take advantage of testing options available such as increased time or testing in an environment without distractions. The Project

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Director communicated with students regularly to assure them that they were maintaining a pass rate. If students were not successful on exams, they were provided with additional study time with a tutor. The WSU VBSN students worked together to help each other be successful in the classroom and in the clinical settings. Providing academic and social support was found to contribute to the overall success of retaining 100% of the WSU VBSN students who were admitted over three years.

Florida International University

All FIU VBSN students who took FIU nursing program prerequisite courses and nursing courses participated in a survey each semester about University resource utilization to identify barriers that prevented and/or benefits that facilitated academic success.

A military veteran faculty member was hired to work hand in hand with the Veteran Student Academic Advisor and Veteran Academic Coach. These team members were committed to establishing personalized academic plans for each FIU VBSN student and establishing FIU VBSN student access to mentorship and social support services (e.g., childcare, psychological support, community support, housing, employment, work-life-family balance, veteran outreach services, etc.). In addition to having served in the U.S. Navy Reserve Nurse Corps for 10 years, this veteran faculty member was a seasoned educator who had taught undergraduate nursing courses and had almost 20 years of experience as an Acute Care Nurse Practitioner and Clinical Educator in a Level I Trauma Center.

Another retention strategy was early detection and intervention with academic and personal difficulties. The FIU VBSN project director and the faculty advisors met with identified students and referred them to appropriate support services and/or to the FIU VBSN academic coach. A database of resources was developed and made available for FIU VBSN students. The database included resources for childcare, psychological support, writing center, learning center, community support, housing, employment, work-life-family balance, veteran outreach services, the on-campus Military and Veterans Center. The database also included contact information and office hours of the FIU VBSN advisor, FIU VBSN academic coach, and faculty members (Keita, Diaz, Miller, Olenick & Simon, 2015).

The Chair of Undergraduate Nursing, and other grant-funded faculty members, served as mentors to incoming VBSN faculty. In this role, they facilitated and encouraged faculty professional development. For example, an eight-hour clinical faculty professional development seminar facilitated manuscript preparation and publishing as well as grant writing skills. In addition, the project director, who was experienced in grant management, provided one-on-one mentoring regarding managing grant reports and fiscal budgets.

Faculty members and staff attended several educational events to increase their knowledge regarding how to recruit, retain, support, and graduate transitioning veteran students. For example, a two-day seminar provided an overview of the latest and current teaching/learning strategies required to meet the learning needs of a diverse student/staff nursing population. Attending this seminar offered faculty an opportunity to meet nurse educator colleagues from around the nation to discuss academic challenges faced by veteran students and share lessons learned.

Additionally, several faculty participated in the South Florida Homeless Veteran Stand Down on May 1-3, 2015. Currently enrolled FIU VBSN students and prospective students were also encouraged to participate in this event. During the Stand Down, homeless veterans were offered a myriad of services, including sleeping accommodations, hot meals, permanent housing assessments, healthcare screenings and prescriptions. Through their participation in this event, students and faculty gained a better perspective regarding the health and societal concerns of the veteran patient population.

Another retention strategy was the development of an individualized student plan of study reflecting the student's level of competency based on military and academic experiences. This included awarding University core curriculum credits for veteran students who had a baccalaureate degree so students would have fewer prerequisites to complete for entry into the program (Diaz, 2018). For example, one of the FIU VBSN students who had a bachelor's degree in leadership management was given three credits for NUR 3821, Nursing Leadership.

To ensure seamless integration of the VBSN program with the online environment, the online educational support programs, Blackboard and Canvas, provided student orientations embedded into the web-based environment. This meant that orientation sessions remained available to students during their enrollment at FIU. Topic-specific tutorials that demonstrated the multitude of capabilities of this learning management system were also available to students. In addition, online support services were available seven days a week from 8 a.m. to midnight via email, telephone, and live chat. FIU online support services were available to faculty to assist with delivering course content in the virtual medium. Each faculty member was assigned an IT designer to provide one-on-one technological guidance throughout the semester. Most of the online nursing courses in the FIU VBSN curriculum had undergone a Quality Matters (QM) faculty-centered peer review process to certify the quality of the course content. The FIU libraries had two librarians specifically designated to assist online students. During student orientation, students received information regarding the multitude of resources available to them, including research and catalogue search strategies, citation help, and plagiarism prevention assistance. The veteran nursing students utilized these library resources significantly more than other resources (Keita, et al., 2015).

The FIU VBSN students' curriculum utilized simulation for 50% of the assigned clinical hours, except for the 180 hours of clinical practicum. Veteran students entering the FIU VBSN program had been exposed to simulation training during military training. The Simulation Teaching and Research Center (STAR Center) offered the students access to innovative resources, technologies, and teaching environments that provided abundant opportunities for interdisciplinary instruction and collaboration. Additionally, simulation training was incorporated into the Nursing Boot Camp course where students were required to develop and run a simulation activity. This exercise was designed specifically to foster role transition into nursing.

The students received focused support from the university for the first two years in areas such as math and writing. However, once students reached their last two years of nursing courses, they did not get a lot of individual support. Fortunately, grant funding was available to pay for tutors for small groups and one-on-one tutoring. This was very useful, but unfortunately underutilized by the students, mainly due to time restraints. Even though the FIU VBSN students' writing skills should be adequate based on succeeding in lower level classes, several

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students' writing ability needed improvement. The FIU Writing Center was an excellent resource for providing the needed assistance. Even though the Center staff were not experts in the writing standards required by the nursing faculty, they were able to foster better writing for the VBSN students who took advantage of the service. Once again, time restraints were an issue, but the Writing Center staff adapted their services to allow virtual submissions.

Some of the VBSN students would not admit they were struggling. Some students stated they were doing well and experiencing "no issues," but later it was found that the students' grades were below passing. When in the military, unmet expectations are clearly delineated. The military expect notification by the leader when goals are not being met. As a student, this led to the expectation that the faculty member would address the student through face-to-face meetings or with an individual message. It was not enough just to enter the low grade into the grade book. In adapting to the veteran nursing student's needs, faculty started using a direct approach for feedback. This was found to be very beneficial for the students.

All students should be treated with respect. Veterans have earned respect through their selfless sacrifices and service (Hassan, et al., 2010). Veteran students are usually older than the traditional undergraduate nursing student and have been exposed to many experiences, including combat. It was found that due to these experiences, veteran students performed better when the relationship between faculty and student was not authoritarian.

The FIU VBSN students were often non-traditional students. For the most part, this meant juggling many responsibilities outside of academia such as a family, military orders, a job,



Florida International University VBSN Nursing Students

and aging parents. To give these students an opportunity to succeed, flexibility in lab practice hours, office hours, distance learning, and testing schedules needed to be maintained while still maintaining standards. The FIU VBSN program succeeded in achieving a high retention rate of 97%. During the grant period, only three students left the program. One left after failing a course, and another student left due to financial issues. The third student left to return to the military.

Discussion

Hassan, et al., (2010) asked, “Do you see me?” referring to veteran students on campuses. At that time, as veterans were returning from one or possibly several deployments and transitioning into academe, the authors encouraged universities to see the strengths and expertise of military students. Leveraging the discipline, loyalty, sense of duty, and commitment to mission can be assets for students on college campuses. Hassan, et al., explained, “Many veterans have survived, endured and excelled in artificial and real-world situations, leaving them resilient and self-confident” (2010, p. 31). Faculty in all three universities sought to build on these strengths while implementing strategies to overcome the challenges that students faced in an unfamiliar academic environment. Faculty and staff understood that this work was, and remains, mission critical to enabling veterans to transition successfully to a civilian nursing career.

The three universities found that VBSN faculty and students faced similar challenges related to developing and sustaining effective communication, establishing and maintaining trust, and fitting in as non-traditional students. Moreover, the universities implemented similar strategies to address these challenges and help veterans succeed as nursing students. Table 1 summarizes strategies that were used to address the varied challenges in these three areas. For example, with respect to communication, targeted marketing strategies needed to be developed to recruit military veteran students, and faculty needed to customize their communication style to take into account the students’ military background. Establishing and maintaining trust was facilitated by building a network of support services for the students. It should be noted that faculty training and mentoring was essential to the success of the various strategies designed to enhance communication and build trust. In fact, students frequently commented that efforts to increase the faculty and staff’s understanding of their military experiences and background helped them succeed. Finally, all of the universities recognized similarities between the VBSN students and other non-traditional college students. They put into place a holistic admissions process that maximized college credit for military education and experience. They also enhanced student support services and learned to accommodate to non-traditional college student needs.

Table 1. Strategies Implemented to Address Challenges Encountered when Implementing the VBSN Program

Challenges	Strategies Implemented
Developing and Sustaining Effective Communication	
Establish methods of effective communication between students and faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted marketing to recruit military veteran students • Engage students in surveys to assess their support needs • Provide direct, clear and respectful military style feedback to students • Develop faculty conferences related to military culture • Establish recruitment strategies to increase military veteran student applications • Nursing program orientation focused on the needs of the military veteran • Connecting students with military veterans throughout the university
Establishing and Maintaining Trust	
Increase faculty and non-military student understanding of military culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for faculty in military culture • Having dedicated advisors, coaches, faculty, and tutors with military experience • Military veteran peer mentoring • Assigning older nursing students as “Battle Buddies” • Using clinical settings conducive to military culture • Making available a network of support services
Fitting in as Non-Traditional Students	
Create an environment that focuses on excellence and inclusiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing a holistic admissions process • Maximizing credit for military experience • Establishing environment of mutual respect • Develop flexible scheduling for clinical, lab and testing schedules as well as faculty office hours

Conclusion

Recruitment and retention of military veterans in a competitive nursing program required targeted efforts on the part of nursing program faculty and administration. Having support services in place at the university, school and individual faculty levels and having an environment that encouraged veterans to utilize the available services were key elements in enabling the veteran students to succeed. The commitment to supporting students who had heroically served their country and focusing on the transition from critically important military roles to a civilian nursing career captured the spirit of the VBSN grant. Faculty learned how to anticipate the needs of military veteran students, recognize when the VBSN students may have competing responsibilities that could interfere with being successful, and make reasonable accommodations. Although nursing has a deep history of carrying out critical military service roles, most faculty today do not have any military experience. Hence, increasing faculty awareness of military culture improved student success. As a result, in this year of the nurse, VBSN programs have facilitated adding military veterans into the nursing workforce. Honoring Florence Nightingale's mission, the presence of these military turned nurses enhance the nursing profession's history of delivering high quality care for all.

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