

Stories from the Academic Front: Leveraging Veterans' Voices

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The authors are solely responsible for the contents of this article. The opinions represented herein are those of the authors alone and do not reflect the official positions of the institutions where the authors are employed, including Davenport University and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The authors have no financial conflicts of interest. Funding for the project was made possible by Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) for Davenport University (grant number UF1HP26488), and the University of Alabama (grant number UF1HP26483). Research studies included in this article were under title "VBSN Cohort Survey," IRB # 16110135, approved on 11/7/2016 by Davenport University Institutional Review Board. This information or content and conclusions are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

Special Acknowledgements: The authors wish to acknowledge the expert knowledge, skills, and abilities of Michele R. Davis, Executive Director of Sponsored Programs and Grant Development at Davenport University, without whom, none of this work would have been possible. A special thanks to Keri Dutkiewicz, Director of Faculty Learning; John Niedzielski, Director of Learning Design and Strategy; and the talented Office of Performance Excellence team at Davenport University for their learning design expertise, direction, and support. Finally, grateful thanks to the VBSN teams and student veterans at Davenport University, University of Alabama at Birmingham, and to Marian Smithey, Nurse Consultant and Project Officer at HRSA, for giving this work direction and purpose. Most importantly, thanks to all of the students who allowed us into their academic journeys. We will always believe you taught us more than we taught you.

Abstract

With the number of veterans transitioning to a post-military career, and many of these trained medics, Corpsmen, or other health care specialists, professional nursing is an option that allows these veterans to utilize their training and experience. However, the transition to nursing academia from the military is not easy. Two institutions, Davenport University Department of Nursing, and University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Nursing, both recipients of the Health Resources and Services Administration Veterans-to-BSN grant, describe student and faculty perceptions throughout the veterans' transition from the military, to higher education. Understanding the characteristics of the veteran-student, the difficulty of transitioning from a military culture to an academic culture, and the strengths that veterans bring with them as a nursing student, help nursing faculty and staff create an environment that supports success for the military student. This article demonstrates the complexity of assuring the successful transition from military service member to graduate nurse and provides strategies that can be implemented by other nursing programs to promote academic success of military nursing students.

Keywords: military student and faculty perceptions, transitions, academic culture, military culture

Introduction

Of the veteran population of 19.2 million, a reported 7.2 served in the Gulf Wars. As these veterans transition into careers after concluding their military service, many of these veterans face questions of how to use their skills and training in their post-military career. Additionally, veterans often encounter difficulty in finding employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Many of these veterans are expertly trained medics, Corpsmen, and health care specialists who have served, working in combat and in humanitarian efforts, yet these highly skilled individuals often have difficulty transferring these skills to the civilian workplace.

Paralleling this issue is a national shortage of nurses. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) projects an increasing shortage of nurses. Many factors contribute to this shortage including a shortage of nursing faculty that limits the number of students enrolling in nursing school, an aging nursing workforce that is nearing retirement age, and an overall change in population demographic characteristics, including a much older population, which requires more nurses to meet healthcare needs (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2019).

In 2013, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) awarded funding to nine schools of nursing in the United States for a Veterans-to-BSN (VBSN) program. The overall purpose of the VBSN program was to help transition veterans into careers in professional nursing once their service had concluded; after the inaugural year, the VBSN program expanded to 31 schools of nursing. Efforts such as the VBSN program encourage veterans to return to school, yet as non-traditional students, these veteran-students still face many obstacles in completing their nursing degree. Veterans have many of the same characteristics as other non-traditional students. The average age of veterans enrolling in higher education is 25 years; approximately 15% of veteran-students are the “traditional” college age of 18 to 25 years. The average length of time between graduation from high school to enrolling in college courses is five years (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Fifty-two percent of veteran-students have reported having dependents, compared to 20% of traditional students (Molina & Morse, 2015). Forty-five percent of veteran-students are married, while 46% report working either full or part-time while in school. As with other non-traditional students, the multiple roles related to personal relationships, work, and school lead to increased stress for these students. Additionally, over 50% of veteran-students report having a VA disability rating, with four out of five indicating that their disability contributes to their stress related to school (Student Veterans of America, 2017).

This article focuses on the experiences of two very diverse institutions who implementing a VBSN program: Davenport University Department of Nursing (DUDON) and the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Nursing (UABSON). DUDON and UABSON are very different institutions and used different strategies for supporting their VBSN students. Davenport University is a private, not for profit, university with sites throughout the state of Michigan. Based in Grand Rapids, the Nursing Department serves approximately 900 undergraduate and graduate nursing students. The VBSN program has served 50 students since inception in 2013 and enrolls new VBSN cohorts twice a year. The University of Alabama at Birmingham is a large, comprehensive urban university that is part of an academic health science center and is the largest research institution in Alabama. The UABSON offers undergraduate and graduate degrees and has an enrollment of about 2,500 students, 831 (34%) of which are undergraduate students. The VBSN program, implemented in fall 2014, has graduated 32 students and currently has 14 students matriculating through the program. The article describes the results of a longitudinal survey of VBSN students conducted by DUDON assessing the challenges faced by veteran-students returning to school and how these results are applicable to a very different academic setting.

Challenges Faced by VBSN Students

At the inception of the grant funding, a paucity of research existed on how to ensure success for military students in nursing programs. The research only discussed challenges of reintegration from the military to civilian life but had little to offer about academic transitions. Based on the research, we put several strategies in place but it soon became apparent that the student themselves wanted to have input and share their feedback about how to customize our

efforts to their unique challenges. In true military style, they gave very little feedback to anyone in authority (Dean or Associate Dean) but would write paragraphs if given an open text box. Many were even brave enough to stop by a faculty or staff office and express opinions at length. Since we have a philosophy of continuous quality improvement, the DUDON decided to survey the students with open-ended questions to harness their voices (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Student Survey Questions

Student Survey Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Returning to higher education can be a potentially stressful transition? How have you coped with stress in the past? 2. Seeking help is often discouraged within the military, but in an educational environment seeking help is encouraged. How can we help you reach out for help and utilize the resources we have available? 3. Describe any challenges you had reintegrating into civilian life that could affect your education. What suggestions or strategies can we implement to help you with this? 4. What is the hardest thing about returning to school? 5. Do you feel like you have to deal with problems by yourself? If yes, what stops you from reaching out for help? 6. What support systems do military students need at Davenport to be successful? 7. What types of events would you like to see to support military students? 8. What communication techniques would you prefer professors to use to talk with military students about requirements of the class? 9. What strategies would you suggest to military students to help balance school life and personal life?

The responses were often raw and very honest. During the five-year grant, DUDON surveyed their VBSN students in years 3, 4 and 5 during the transitions course in their initial fall semester with the University. Responses were coded for commonalities the first year. These codes were tested against the second-year responses to be either confirmed or discarded. In the third year, this process was again followed and the team reviewed the codes to designate discreet themes. In this rich body of qualitative data, the veterans' voices illuminated an overarching theme we named Shifting Perspectives: Transitioning Service Members to BSN Students (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Military Students Shifting Perspectives



The six themes that emerged from the coding of the responses delineated transition points necessary for VBSN students to navigate in order to succeed. The themes identified are balancing, finding my team, time management, respect, mission critical, and fitting in. Hearing these student voices increased our understanding and helped each institution formulate strategies for assisting military students to make the transition to a successful nursing student. Ultimately, we saw that success in the nursing program required a “shift in perspectives” from a military perspective to an academic success perspective. Understanding the student’s challenges through evaluation of the survey responses helped the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff facilitate this transition.

Theme One: Balancing

The survey revealed that balancing schoolwork with home life created major stressors that affected veteran-students ability to succeed in school. DUDON VBSN students discussed having to attend drill, and reintegrate into families and communities. Juggling priorities of a very demanding program often led to struggling or “going under.” The students described trying to function on their own and not wanting to ask for help, not seeing other students as peers or mentors and not utilizing resources such as free tutoring. Sharing these perspectives helped the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff alert the advisor and faculty to working with them to

intervene before they were in crisis mode, encourage communication and reinforce that asking for help is an academic strength, not a deficit. Students stated they felt much more confident once able to achieve a better balance. Overall balancing emerged as a way students coped with the stress of the nursing program. One student reflected on the struggle to balance as follows:

Finding the balance between working 10 hours, 4 days a week, school, and work which takes 5 hours each day, and all family duties including housework. Then there is sleep sometimes.

To make sure the students connected and were able to mentor newer students, the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff created a Battle Buddy system in which they could support each other and give each other advice on how to balance. To assure they were aware of the demands of the program up front we created a nursing contract that all students signed. To ease the transition of having to negotiate the mysteries of veteran financial aid, we worked to make sure there were accessible and knowledgeable financial aid and veteran benefit specialists available. To decrease the complexity of navigating a complex university environment, we created a one-stop shop as a VBSN micro website so that the resources they needed were just a click away. These actions enabled VBSN students to balance multiple demands better and ease their transition.

Similar to the findings of DUDON, UABSON VBSN students often struggle with school-life balance and see it as a barrier to their success. Generally, non-traditional students such as veterans have been in the workforce for a number of years, therefore, they have been removed from the academic setting for a prolonged period. Because of this work experience, non-traditional students often perceive themselves as having more “real life” experience than traditional students. Returning to school creates a new “role” for the non-traditional student beyond that of spouse, parent, breadwinner, parent, or employee. These multiple demands on their time and the need to balance these multiple roles, creates additional stress for the non-traditional student (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). The following describes a situation experienced by one of the UABSON VBSN students:

A 26-year-old female veteran recently discharged from the Air Force. She has two children, ages five and seven. Her husband is currently deployed. Sara is in her first semester of nursing school when her mother, who lives three hours away, has a stroke. Sara needs to visit her mother and arrange for home care. She has been working on a class group project that is due when she will be out of town. Sara has completed her part of the assignment, but her classmates, who are younger, live on campus, and have no family obligations, have not completed their part of the assignment. Sara is frustrated with her peers and worried that the project will not be completed on time.

Theme Two: Finding My Team

Finding My Team is the second theme identified from the DUDON surveys. As the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff watched the VBSN students isolate themselves from traditional students and react negatively working with them, we wondered how we could help. The VBSN students seemed to be searching for a comfort zone that they were not finding. In contrast, they thrived when with other military students. Faculty and staff on the VBSN grant who were familiar with the military reviewed the narrative responses from the survey and identified this phenomenon for us. They explained that since the military is a team-based

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profession, success is found only when the team functions at a level of high efficiency. Students instinctively came on campus looking for that team that would make them feel connected and at home. We had hoped the grant team would be that team for them but it became apparent they needed each other more. One student stated:

For me the hardest part about returning to school is sitting in a classroom of twenty something year old students who for the most part have no clue about life or work ethic. The other hard part is having to listen to the professors talk to the class in the way that these special snowflakes need so that their tiny little egos are not crushed.

With guidance from our military faculty and staff and after analyzing survey narrative responses, the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff created two military lounges, scheduled separate orientations yearly for the VBSNs, and created video links for students to meet, study and, connect with each other. The students showed a real desire to not “leave any man behind,” thus making sure they could work together and form a new highly functioning team as VBSN students. The insight that the VBSN students needed team-based interactions assisted us to leverage this perspective into success strategies.

The literature told us that military students do not reach out and the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff saw this in our cohorts. When passing in the hallway, and asked if they needed anything the most frequent response was, “We take care of our own Ma’am.” Over time, this improved by encouraging them to assess early when they might be getting overwhelmed, might have difficulty due to the anniversary of a negative event, or have increasing levels of paralyzing anxiety. Sometimes they helped each other; sometimes they ratted each other out when one did not want to ask for help. Once we knew them, we were better at sensing there was an issue when there were no responses to emails, texts, or phone calls. Ultimately, when asked what more we could do, we found that surrounding them with military mentors, faculty, and staff created a sense of a new team in which they could thrive and eventually the university staff and faculty became their team as well.

Other authors have reported similar findings that veteran-students often miss the camaraderie of their fellow soldiers and feel out of place in the academic environment (Shellenbarger & Decker, 2019). UABSON faculty also found that support of other veterans was important to academic success. Monthly luncheons for VBSN students provide an opportunity for the veteran-students to gather and share their experiences, offer advice, and generally provide support to one another. We observed students sharing information about veterans’ benefits, work opportunities, and scholarships. Retired military faculty and staff also attend the lunches and provided support to students. Additionally, the VBSN students sought academic assistance from their veteran peers such as tutoring and keeping each other “on-track” regarding assignments, exams, and other school-related expectations. The following excerpt illustrates the importance of “team” to one UABSON VBSN student.

I was able to apply the sterile procedure that I had learned for validations to the patient who was in need. It helped the nurses who were seeing other patients to delegate that skill to me under instruction of my clinical advisor. It gave me a sense of accomplishment because I already knew how to perform the skill. So I was an effective asset to the team and veterans thrive during team work.

Theme Three: Time

The third theme emerging from the survey was that of time. The lack of structure in academia forced the military students to search to create structure. From the survey results, the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff were able to see that the academic structure was markedly different from military structure, and the military student needed to understand how to effectively manage their time. Solutions used by traditional students were unfamiliar such as using a Google appointment calendar to schedule assignments and group work. Often, these students would wait until the last minute, and become overwhelmed with the volume of work or forget completely that an assignment was due. One student stated:

Time is the absolute hardest, at least for me. When you have a family and you have to dedicate time to your husband or wife, and children plus your job it seems that there aren't enough hours in the day. Plus, you have to make time for studying as well. It gets pretty difficult at times because no matter how you look at it you are always stealing time from somewhere. Even a person who has their time down pat and is very organized is still stealing time. You are limiting yourself from everything and everyone.

As students progressed in the program and refined time-management techniques, these responses were more common:

Quit making excuses and just do it! Definitely develop a plan and a couple of back up plans to help maintain peace between school life and personal life. They will have to realize that some things you may have to give up. But once you get in the groove and in the flow of things, everything else usually becomes easier.

The DU VBSN faculty learned to alert students that they were not managing their time well and make suggestions such as completing assignments early in case of drill or other obligations. Most effective were the peer-to-peer recommendations. When VBSN students stressed time management techniques to each other, students were much more likely to act on this advice. Each successive group has done better each year with time management and information regarding this topic and is now covered in the VBSN orientation.

While the lack of structure in the academic setting can be a source of stress and lead to time management issues for some veteran-students, non-traditional students such as veterans have also been found to use more active coping strategies such as organizing and prioritizing tasks to manage their stress. Comparatively, traditional students tend to use more passive strategies (e.g. not doing homework, missing class) (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). VBSN students at UABSON exhibited both approaches. While some veteran-students struggled with time management, others were extremely organized and developed very structured systems to manage the multiple demands on their time. The “organized” veteran-students often helped their veteran-peer who was less organized. As one student stated:

I have everything on my calendar; all our assignments, tests, clinical, everything! It is the only way I can keep up. But I also have to send reminders to a [friend] all the time or he would be late for everything.

Theme Four: Respect

Our VBSN students did not want to be singled out as veterans but felt that they were due a certain amount of respect for their service. Many were not happy when thanked for their service or did not want any recognition at all. However, in survey responses, VBSN students were unhappy that this service was not acknowledged and appreciated. Many voiced concern that faculty did not understand their level of training or rank and felt disrespected. The concept of earning respect as a student and showing respect for teachers was also difficult for some military students. Building trust was a long process of listening, meeting their needs, and standing by them in their struggles while celebrating successes. Despite holding many training sessions on military culture, the DU VBSN team could not move the needle much during the early years of the grant. The creation of a military simulation in which faculty and staff were enrolled in the military, attended a boot camp session and went through reintegration, attended a classroom and experienced micro aggressions followed by graduation, was a major turning point in facilitating a respectful understanding of military culture for the university. In addition, the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff added a military coining ceremony at pinning to blend a military recognition ceremony with an academic one and this served to communicate the high regard we had for them as military students.

One VBSN student described feeling a lack of respect in this quote:

We do not like to be talked to like children; we are adults and like to be treated as such. Instead of being treated like a professional we are talked to and handled like we are back in high school. The best way to help us transition is to be treated with respect and get things done when promised. We were given a great deal of responsibility in the military and to be talked down to is very frustrating.

Beyond the military simulation, the most effective way to communicate respect for the experiences and accomplishments of the military students was the work the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff did to grant credit for military experience. Acknowledging the expertise gained within their military occupation and translating this into credit so that they could accelerate into the nursing program demonstrated our understanding of military culture and occupation-based achievements. Working closely with the Medical Education Training Center and our Registrar, we identified 39 credits to grant toward a nursing degree. By far, this work communicates respect for their service in a way no other interaction can.

For students in the VBSN program at UABSON, “respect” was not an identified issue or expectation; however, respect was evident in multiple ways. The UABSON VBSN students voiced their appreciation of the program “respecting” their military skills and training. Faculty voiced appreciation of how “respectful” the VBSN students were in their communications with them. Similar to DUDON VBSN students, UABSON students did not want to be acknowledged publicly as veterans.

Building of trust for UABSON VBSN students began before they even entered the BSN program. A faculty member was identified as the VBSN academic advisor and served as the “one-stop” resource for veteran- students wanting to enter the BSN program. The VBSN advisor/ faculty answered questions and facilitated communication with appropriate individuals for other questions, and served as a general resource through the application process to the

BSN program. Having one person to whom they could contact for any question helped build a trusting relationship. When the VBSN students entered the BSN program, they were not only familiar, but also comfortable, with a faculty member.

Theme Five: Mission Critical

Once the DUDON VBSN faculty and staff understood military culture in more depth, we found that using military terms as a cue was very helpful. In the military, every service member understands that there are actions essential to the success of any mission, referring to this as “mission critical.” Communicating the importance of completing certain milestones in a nursing program was difficult. Military students often thought papers, assignments, and clinical paperwork was unnecessary busy work. To them, the work they did in the military was important and impactful. Seeing the end goal, trusting the faculty and curriculum to get there was challenging. Lack of recognition of priorities caused some students not to succeed on the first try and have to repeat a semester. A frequent complaint was that the students did not think nursing would be hard because they already knew so much medicine. Our realization of how to communicate the urgency of meeting deadlines, show up at clinic, and complete assignments on time came from one of the students who stated, “None of this is mission critical.” From that point on, understanding how to communicate the work necessary to succeed, we found that using this term of “mission critical” clearly communicated the need to prioritize.

At times, when prioritizing well, VBSN students were frustrated with the priorities of the other students as illustrated below:

Two Army veterans, both in the second semester of their nursing program, are meeting with their academic advisor. Both express frustration with the other students in their clinical group. They are so focused on getting a good grade but then want to do minimal work to earn that grade. Any little criticism from the instructor they think is the end of the world!

VBSN students at UABSON are also focused on their “mission”--to complete their degree. As the above story illustrates, the relationship between veteran-students and their peers can lead to frustration, conflict, and misunderstanding. Relationships with their civilian peers has been identified as a source of frustration for veteran-students. Veteran-students see themselves as more mature, confident, and driven compared to their civilian student peers (Patterson, Elliott, & Chargualaf, 2019; Shellenbarger & Decker, 2019). Veteran-students report a disconnect with their non-military classmates whom they see as not as committed to their studies, having a poor work ethic, and uninformed about the world (Jones, 2013). Veteran-students express generational and professional gaps between themselves and their classmates (DiRamio & Jarvice, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Shellenbarger & Decker, 2019).

Theme Six: Fitting In

VBSN students spoke clearly about how they felt different from their nursing student peers, stating that fitting in was a challenge that sometime impacted their success as a student. Many talked about being older, not wanting to be around high school students, and having much more life experiences than their classmates. One student told a story about getting angry in a computer lab because the young women sitting next to him was surfing the internet looking for a bathing suit for spring break. Apparently, he told her how he felt about this and

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stormed off. Navigating intergenerational differences in values, experiences, and respect created conflict if not recognized early and planned for. Military student nurses responded at times with a lack of patience while traditional students reacted with fear or avoidance due to lack of understanding.

On the positive side, military nursing students were recognized for their leadership qualities, and resilience, and their experiences were leveraged as an asset. Several excelled at leading in student groups. One became President of the Student Nurses Association. At the end of the year award ceremony, both she and the organization won university-wide recognition for their work in the community. Another military nursing student set up a foundation helping veterans learn about using yoga to combat PTSD and ran classes for faculty, students, and staff on his local campus. Several veterans participated in identifying common micro-aggressions veterans had heard in their interactions with classmates in class, and worked with our team to bring these to the community for further discussion. In addition, the VBSN student along with other military service members assisted the VBSN team in identifying common myths about the military and created a myth-busters series.

Fitting in with their non-military peers was also often a struggle for UABSON VBSN students. The VBSN students' commitment was many times in conflict with the traditional students' focus on "getting by." At our VBSN lunches, students would speak of the "drama" from their peers when having to repeat a skills validation. One student commented, "Why is it so difficult for them (traditional classmates) to follow a dress code?" Situations such as these often led to a lack of patience and frustration on the part of the VBSN students.

Yet, the UABSON VBSN students tried to fit in with their peers by assuming both formal and informal leadership roles, similar to those described by DUDON. When describing the benefit of validating a skill early because of their military experience, one student stated:

Then when the skill is taught, we help the students who may have questions displaying our leadership skills in the open lab area. Overall, validating early has been a great opportunity to positively affect ourselves, patients, fellow non-veteran cohort members, hospital, and school staff.

Recommendations and Best Practices

Veteran students encounter many of the same obstacles as other non-traditional students, but their military experiences provide them with other characteristics and skills that, if applied to the academic setting, enhance their success. Veteran-students exhibit a strong sense of duty, a strong work ethic, respect authority, and tend to be more focused on the task at hand (Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Patterson, Elliott, & Chargualaf, 2019). International experiences of veteran-students can enhance their knowledge of customs and beliefs of patients they may encounter from other cultures (Bentley & Ellison, 2007). Additionally, veteran-students have enhanced problem solving and leadership skills, characteristics that are integral to any nursing curricula (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014).

While understanding the strengths of our veteran-students is important to their academic success, understanding the barriers they may encounter as a student is also important. The transition from a military environment to an academic environment can be challenging for

the veteran-students. Results of the survey done by DUDON can provide a guide for the development and implementation of strategies to support veteran-students success in a BSN program. While the survey was conducted at one institution, the findings were applicable to a much different university.

Helping students find balance with the many demands on their time should begin before students are enrolled in classes. An academic advisor that understands the time commitment of nursing school can be helpful in this process. Nursing classes are different from other, non-professional, non-health science courses. Nursing students juggle didactic, labs, and clinical courses in addition to skills practice and reading time. Increasing the veteran-students awareness of these differences before students begin their nursing coursework can help students plan their school-life balance.

Both DUDON and UABSON identified the importance of helping the VBSN students find a “team.” The structure of a program such as VBSN helps in this process, but more deliberate strategies can also be useful. Having designated times where all VBSN students meet, such as lunches that UABSON have, provides an opportunity for the veteran-students to build that team. Other strategies that can be helpful include assigning veteran-students to the same clinical or lab group where they can work together. Faculty with military experience assigned as advisors/ mentors can also facilitate the team experience.

Professional and peer mentoring is another strategy that can promote balance, build team, and address the other themes identified in the survey results. Collaborations with area hospitals to seek registered nurses with a military background can be a source of professional mentors for the VBSN students. Utilizing VA work study students can increase the number of veteran mentors on available on campuses. These work-studies, strategically placed and well-trained, can provide vet-to-vet support and guidance to veterans new to academe. A peer-mentoring program can be established whereby matriculating VBSN students serve as peer mentors for new VBSN students.

Leveraging the leadership and resilience of the military students can create a positive impact on your program, campus, and build their confidence in being a successful student. Encouraging the veteran-students to take leadership roles in the Student Nurses Association or the University’s Veterans’ Student Organization can help them identify a similar team, provide opportunities for them to use their leadership skills, and help the veteran-students “fit in.”

Creating a learning community of veterans and traditional students has been an effective way to have students interact casually to learn from each other. In a subsequent grant, the DUDON has brought together VBSN students with students whose primary clinical placement is with the veteran community. During Lunch and Learns, the students can ask questions informally, get to know each other and work together. Non-VBSNs can ask about experiences and get advice on how to interact effectively with veteran clients. It is important to help veterans develop soft skills appropriate in an academic setting. Much of the difficulty veterans have integrating may be due to trying to interact through a military culture lens, not as a civilian student. As hard as we tried to make the campus welcoming for the students, just as much effort should be put into assisting military students to understand the culture of academe.

Proud of our work, and anxious to share our findings and recommendations, Stahley and Daley began presenting these results about shifting perspectives widely. Overall, this was very well received until at one conference a hand went up and a participant stated: “Isn’t this the same process that all students go through adjusting to college?” A bit stunned, we realized that this statement was true. On the one hand, we had identified that our VBSN students had similar struggles to all college students. On the other hand, we had delineated unique differences and nuances specific to the transition for military nursing students and were able to customize our academic support in order to meet these needs. In serving those who served, even the most accomplished academics know that humility is paramount.

Conclusion

Now more than any other time, the healthcare industry is facing a severe shortage of nurses that left unabated could threaten the quality of healthcare for generations to come. At the same time, the nation has been experiencing a large number of military service members returning over the last 20 years from overseas deployments. With the passage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Forever GI Bill, vast numbers of veterans return home seeking higher education degrees. Many returning military service members and veterans have extensive medical training coupled with combat medical experiences that translate well into a nursing career. However, transition from combat and military medicine to the classroom and student clinical experiences is well documented as one of the biggest challenges in transitioning out of the military to civilian life. The discussion in this article demonstrates the complexity of assuring the successful transition from military service member to graduate nurse. The veteran voices became key in assuring their own success by prompting the faculty and staff to strive for a deeper understanding of military culture and creating a profound appreciation of their ability to lead even in an academic setting.

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