

The Veteran-Student Experience

Lessons for Higher Education

Col. Sherrill J. Smith, RN, PhD, CNL, CNE, U.S. Air Force Reserve, Retired

Sharon L. Farra, RN, PhD, CNE, CHSE

Deborah L. Ulrich, RN, PhD, ANEF

Suzanne Franco, EdD

Kathy J. Keister, RN, PhD, CNE

Adrija Chatterjee, MA

Abstract

Institutions of higher education are seeing more veteran and military-connected students as increasing numbers of students take advantage of the tuition assistance options available for those who served in the armed forces. These adult learners are unique in that they come to higher education with challenges and strengths that differ from traditional college students. Putting into place best-practice approaches to promote veteran-student success is crucial for transitioning those who have served our country into post-military careers. This article outlines the student's perspective of a program option designed to meet the needs of military medics seeking a bachelor's degree in nursing. Their experience provides implications for higher education seeking to promote veteran-student success.

Universities often use military service members' and veterans' benefits such as tuition assistance to entice military service members to enroll in their programs. While these benefits serve as effective recruiting tools, they do not ensure success for veteran-students who may find the world of academia a stark contrast to the orderly life of the military. To promote the success of the increasing number of veterans entering higher education, educators must understand the unique needs of the veteran student. This article explores the veteran-student experience in a program option created to promote the success of military medics seeking a bachelor's degree in nursing. Lessons learned provide higher education with insights into best-practice approaches to promote veteran success and may inform the development of similar programs in other fields of study.

Background

Since the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, military members who patriotically serve, who are prepared to sacrifice their lives for our country if necessary, have been provided post-military service educational opportunities through benefits that include tuition assistance for higher education. These benefits now include the Post-9/11 GI Bill as well as state-based and other tuition assistance opportunities. Never before have veterans' education benefits been as comprehensively or widely utilized as they have been through the current Post-9/11 GI Bill.¹ The numbers of veterans using just these Post-9/11 benefits have increased dramatically since the bill's inception, from approximately 34,000 in 2009 to over 750,000 in 2013.²

Despite the fact that military members are being provided the financial means to seek higher education, many barriers may affect their success. The needs and challenges of veteran-students have been well documented in the United States since the beginning of the War on Terrorism in 2003. Veterans returning to campuses must deal not only with their recent battlefield experiences, but also with the transition to a new and unfamiliar academic environment. Veteran-students may struggle with issues such as posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and depression. In addition to the psychological challenges that can affect learning, com-

Col. Sherrill Smith, U.S. Air Force Reserve, retired, is the project director for a Health Resources Services Administration federally funded grant to support veteran medics to achieve their bachelor of science degree in nursing. She currently holds the rank of professor in the College of Nursing and Health at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, where she has taught full-time since 2008. She holds a BSN from the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire; an MS from Wright State University; and a PhD from the University of Northern Colorado. She is certified as both a nurse educator (CNE) and clinical nurse leader (CNL). Her scholarship and funding is in the area of education, including military training.

Sharon Farra, RN, PhD, CNE, CHSE, is a certified nurse educator with over twenty years of experience in academia and over thirty-five years of nursing experience. She has worked on curriculum committees, curriculum revisions and development and has numerous teaching awards. As a graduate of the doctoral program at the University Cincinnati, Farra researches teaching methods, specifically related to implementation of interventions to improve learning and retention.

Deborah Ulrich, RN, PhD, ANEF, is an experienced nurse educator and administrator. She is nationally known for her expertise in creative innovative teaching strategies. She has developed curricula for nursing programs, published numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, and presented at local, regional, national, and international nursing conferences.



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bat-related physical challenges and disabilities may also affect the student's ability to be successful in an academic environment.³

Additional struggles include difficulty accessing veterans' benefits and adjusting to an environment that contrasts sharply with their more familiar structured military environment. The lack of structure may be further exacerbated for veterans who are first-generation college students and lack familiarity with the university environment and lifestyle. Veterans may be less likely to seek assistance when struggling in the classroom as the military emphasizes self-reliance, which may lead to a belief that they need to "figure it out for themselves" rather than seek academic or student support services. For students whose last significant academic experience was in high school three or more years previously and who have not enrolled in courses that would have helped them maintain or develop good study habits, success in higher education may be especially challenging. Without recent academic opportunities, they also may not have the necessary knowledge base to draw on for success. Those who have taken classes while serving may have lower GPAs because of deployments or long duty hours that prevented them from attending classes or from devoting as much time to studying as they needed.⁴ Students may also feel "disconnected," with little in common with traditional students who do not share their military service and deployment experience.⁵ Even though these students have had extensive military training and education, students find that while the military training transfers to college credit, it does often not provide credit toward an actual program of study or degree.⁶

Suzanne Franco, EdD, is a professor of research and statistics at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. She received her doctorate in urban educational leadership at the University of Cincinnati in 2006. She is the program director for a doctorate program in organization studies and for a certificate in program evaluation. She serves as an external evaluator for numerous educational projects funded by national, regional, and state programs.

Kathy J. Keister, RN, PhD, CNE, is an associate professor of nursing at Wright State University College of Nursing & Health at Wright State University. Keister received her PhD from the Francis Payne Bolton School of Nursing at Case Western Reserve University. She holds an MS from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a BSN from Bowling Green State University. She is a certified nurse educator.

Adrija Chatterjee, MA, is a doctoral student at the School of Professional Psychology, Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. She has earned her MA in clinical psychology from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, Chicago. Currently, she is completing her doctoral level internship at Washburn Center for Children in Minneapolis and plans to earn her PsyD in clinical psychology in 2018. Chatterjee has been involved in several research and program evaluation projects as part of her graduate school career.



Despite these barriers, veteran-students have the advantage of life experiences and characteristics that come with military training such as perseverance, discipline, and integrity.⁷ At a time when the number of high school graduates entering colleges is decreasing, military veterans provide an ideal adult population for recruitment.⁸ However, once recruited, resources to promote retention that assist with overcoming

barriers while building on the strengths of veteran-students are a must. This article examines the student perspective of a unique project designed to promote student success of veterans with a military medical background to achieve a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) degree and transition to a career as a professional nurse.



(Figure by authors)

Figure. Veterans' Education Project Partners

Methods

Setting and intervention. The project to promote veteran success took place at Wright State University, a midsize public university in the Midwest. Based on federal funding from the Health Resources Service Administration, a new program option was developed to recognize the training and experience of military medics in achieving a bachelor's degree in nursing. The project incorporated an interprofessional collaboration of members from both within and outside the university (see figure).

The program option was designed with three areas of emphasis: (1) faculty development designed to prepare them to meet the needs and promote the success of veteran-students; (2) modifications to the traditional BSN program of study to accommodate and recognize prior health-care training and experience of veterans;



and (3) successful transition to the collegiate environment and a professional nursing career facilitated through veteran-centric resources offered by the university, the college, and the local community. *Faculty development activities* included three two-hour continuing education sessions developed by the university Veteran and Military Center that reviewed military education and training, common physical and psychosocial issues of military-connected students, and teaching strategies for these same students. *Modifications to the curriculum* included a shorter sequence with a bridge transition course, credit for military training and experience, and options to test out of nursing and general education courses. *Success* was facilitated by use of a cohort model, a dedicated part-time nursing tutor providing individual and small-group tutoring sessions, a dedicated full-time advisor, and access to university and community support resources.

Participants. Eight veteran-students enrolled in the grant-supported veteran program option designed to help military medics achieve a BSN were recruited to take part in a focus group to evaluate the project. All students had a health-care background and had either served or were currently serving in the armed forces. These students were enrolled in their first semester of nursing and were part of an accelerated cohort of students that also included other health-care professionals with health-care experience such as emergency medical technicians and licensed practical nurses. The university institutional review board granted an exempt status to the project. All eligible veteran-students were invited to participate; one female and four male students agreed to take part in the focus group interview.

Data collection. Prior to the start of the focus group, one of the two facilitators reviewed the purpose of the focus group, the participants' rights regarding answering questions and participation, and the protection of participants' anonymity, and then assigned numerical identities for use during the audio recorded focus group. One facilitator led the discussion and a second facilitator assisted. The focus group interview was recorded with student permission. Institutional review board approval was granted to conduct the study by the affiliated university.

Instrument. The focus group interview guide developed by the researchers included the following questions, which were based on program goals and literature related to veteran education. Follow-on questions were used by the facilitator to provide clarification as needed during the focus group interview:

1. What were your experiences during the application process for the accelerated BSN program option? What worked? What didn't?
2. How would you describe your experiences in transferring college credits?
3. How would you describe the support services you have received in the program?
4. Literature indicates that when available, veterans benefit from accessing psychological support services. What type of psychological support do you think would be beneficial for individuals like you in the BSN program? What would that look like? What would be the barriers to accessing that support?



Table. NVivo Analysis Codes and Student Quotes

Code name and description	Quotes	Number of references
Admission process Frustrations with the admission process experience	"The time frame of everything that we had to get submitted (for admission) is where I think the problems happened"	7
Challenges Frustration, difficulties, and challenges experienced various topics such as technology resources	"Compliance (on-line) system does not work very well" "We were lost in the independent study (on-line modules) in terms of knowledge we were supposed to gain"	23
Civilian and military experience Disconnect between civilian and military skills that are not accounted for in college credit	"There just isn't real world application outside the military that you can just be like, okay, this matches"	6
Cohort 'We thinking' indicating a collective identity	"We all pretty much immediately started building relationships and talking to each other, reaching out to each other, helping"	11
Credits Lack of recognition of military experience for academic credit	"Not all my stuff transferred" "Principles of marine marksmanship—that just doesn't apply to anything and I get that" "There is no good avenue now that is as seamless as this training is for college credit"	16
Future recommendations Changes students would like to see	"Select a group of people that are going to be responsible enough for the challenge" "Technology textbook resource was just a waste of a bunch of time I could have used elsewhere" "Start admission interviews sooner"	13
Military Prior military experience	"Just dealing with the stress in the military has prepared me for anything else I will do as far as stress goes"	13
Accommodating military Accounting for military experience/ obligations	"They understood military obligations and they work around you"	2
Military self or group identity Defining the self-identity of military personnel; drive to succeed	"The military experience that each of us have has helped us" "Stress management discipline translates into nursing"	6

(Table by authors)



Table. NVivo Analysis Codes and Student Quotes (continued)

Code name and description	Quotes	Number of references
Successes Positive comments about the program	"Everything has been really fantastic" "I just want to say my appreciation for the faculty here"	26
Support Types of support that students received or wish to receive		36
Academic support	"Help has been there when you need it"	11
Faculty support	"Every teacher has a very open policy" "They (faculty) were like come on in, let me help you. It has been fantastic"	10
Other support	"Not just the professors, but the staff, the support, and the veterans center"	10
Peer support	"Not only do we have support from the staff, we have support collectively from our cohort"	5

(Table by authors)

5. How has your training in the service helped you in any of the classes this semester?
6. What are your thoughts about working in the small cohort/group?
7. How can the program option be improved to better serve veterans like yourself?
8. Is there any topic I have not mentioned that you would like to talk about?

Data analysis methods. After the focus group was completed, the facilitators transcribed the audio recording verbatim. Nonverbal behaviors and possible interpretations were discussed and related to the responses. The transcript was uploaded into NVivo 11 for analyses.⁹

The unit of analysis for the code-based analyses was each student’s responses. Participants’ nonverbal and verbal behaviors demonstrated respect and familiarity with each other through use of names and acknowledgment of common experiences.

The transcript was analyzed for two purposes: classical content analyses to summarize responses to each question from the interview guide and a theme-based constant comparison analysis investigating student attitudes and beliefs overall.¹⁰ *A priori* themes were established as codes prior to the analysis (support, cohort,



credit transfer, and stress management). Word frequency data analyses based on NVivo output and individual and collaborative project team coding contributed to the removal of the theme “stress management.” Statements related to students’ stress management were coded within other codes. Also, during the project team review and collaboration, an additional nine codes and subcodes emerged (admission process, civilian/military experiences, military, accommodating military, military-self, future recommendations and academic support, faculty support, peer support, and other support). The additional codes added a finer level of detail for each of the remaining *a priori* codes. All project team data analysts agreed on the final coding, yielding a strong inter-rater reliability.

The table (on pages 22–23) represents the final set of codes used in the analyses, the related code definitions, the number of times statements were assigned to the code, and student quotes related to the code.

Discussion

The analysis of the focus group data provided important insights related to implementation of the project for veterans with military medical experience. Final coded findings were found to fall into three major categories: processes, civilian-military dichotomy, and psycho/social impacts. Process concerns were focused on awarding of credit and admission processes. The group was able to offer insights and recommendations for improving processes for future cohorts such as identifying the need to develop crosswalks between military training/work and college credit. Suggestions such as providing information earlier to provide more time for admission processes was one of the strongest recommendations.

The second major category of responses was related to the civilian/military dichotomy. This category included crossover from the processes category such as concerns regarding the lack of translation between military work and training and the civilian work and academic environment. Participants had a strong sense of military identity/self and characterized themselves as being strong and resilient. The group viewed their military experiences as a strength. The participants strong military identity was expressed in the use of the word “we” when referring to the cohort identity as a collective. Although the group was made of different military branches, military service was seen as a unifying identity.

A third category of themes was related to the psycho/social aspects of their experience. The participants described high levels of support from faculty and peers, despite the stressful nature of academia. This category also included crossover from the military/civilian category. Military identity and grouping with others from the military into a cohort was seen as very positive. The strong support from peers was helpful to the cohort and they acknowledged that their military training prepared them to be resilient despite the stressful nature of their classes. The group felt well supported by faculty, staff, and the campus Veteran and Military Center.



Implications for Higher Education

Research related to veterans in higher education is growing, but at this point in time still lacks in studies of the student voice or description of the student experience in a way that would help educators know the veteran-student.¹¹ This study attempted to address that gap by soliciting the student's perspective of a veteran program option for nursing students based on recommendations in the literature for recruitment and retention of military students. Although the sample was small, the findings indicate that there were many positive and supporting aspects of the program option, but there were also concerns relayed by students related to the challenges the students experienced. These findings provide insights for those in higher education.

Identifying how to translate military training into academic credit has been identified as a barrier for veterans, including those seeking health-care careers.¹² Despite a developed program of study to recognize military training and experience, students still expressed frustration with the amount of credit awarded and the process for awarding credit. A more effective and student-friendly process must be developed for granting credit based on military experience and training, especially for students who have training that may have less applicability to a college program of study such as infantry training. This may need to be done at a state, if not federal, level with collaborations between educators in higher education and the military. The Student Veterans of America recently identified business; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-related; liberal arts; and health professions as the top majors of military students. Therefore, universities and veteran-centered organizations should begin examining their local populations to determine educational pathways related to these degree areas.¹³ An example of work being done to address this issue is the Multi-State Collaborative for Military Credit in the Midwest to facilitate transfer and awarding of military credit.¹⁴

Another finding was that students identified a clear sense of identity as military members and commented positively on the cohort-based model developed for the program option. While it has been noted that some universities are moving away from cohort-based models for military-connected students, it appears that this type of model was a strength for the students in this project.¹⁵ There were numerous positive comments about the small cohort group. The team-based approach to health care may facilitate this feeling among this particular group of students in a nursing program, but the students also expressed how teamwork was an important component of success in the military—not just as military health-care team members. Despite the positive comments, concerns were raised about integration into larger classrooms with a hundred or more students as the students' transition through the rest of their program. Although the veterans will be in small cohorts for clinical courses, cost constraints prohibit continuing the small cohort of military students for classroom courses after the first semester—these students will be incorporated into larger classes with a mix of veteran and nonveteran students as they progress over the next three semesters.



As public institutions of higher education experience significant budget cuts, finding creative opportunities to provide veteran-students opportunities for working together may be challenging but necessary to promote student success.¹⁶ In addition, this project implemented an approach with clear support structures in place that included faculty training, a dedicated advisor and tutor, a director with military experience, and partnerships with the local military hospital, the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and the university Veteran and Military Center. While the support services were effective, they were possible because of grant funding that may not be available across all educational settings in today's environment of limited budgets. Despite these expenses, providing affordable support services will be a key factor in promoting veteran success in higher education. While this group of students did not particularly highlight any disability-related support service needs, those supports are available and should also be considered in any academic setting servicing veterans.¹⁷

Though students did indicate that they were resilient and had persevered as military members, they did find aspects of the program frustrating, including processes like admission, online compliance processes, and technology resources used in the classroom. There is a steep learning curve related to the university system and the various technology programs that can be very different from those in the military arena. Giving students ample resources and time to complete the required processes in academia will be helpful to ensure students feel ready for the first day of class. In addition, students require time and support services to be able to use the latest in educational technology.

Limitations. Limitations of the project included the small sample size (N=5) and the fact that the entire cohort was part of group that comprised both veteran and nonveteran students, yet only the veterans were interviewed. Therefore, differences between veterans and nonveterans cannot be determined. Participants were interviewed in a group and not individually, which may have limited the comments and stifled variability of responses among students.

Recommendations for future research. Continued work is needed to understand the experience of the student veteran in higher education. These veteran-students are living as students, veterans, and a combination of the two that makes them unique from other student populations. Further work examining the use of cohort-based models of education or other interventions used to promote student success from the student's perspective are needed to help inform best practices in higher education. Given students must learn the role of "student," are student outcomes better if cohorts are veteran only or mixed?



Conclusion

Veteran-students have unique backgrounds and skills that make them a welcome addition to college campuses. As more veterans take advantage of tuition assistance

opportunities and pursue higher education, faculty and administrators must be aware of best-practice approaches to promote student success and provide our veterans opportunities they are seeking through higher education. The voices of these students provide thoughts for educators to better know this student population and their needs. Despite veteran-specific challenges, veteran-students have many strengths that, if capitalized upon, can lead to high levels of student achievement and create win-win opportunities for our veteran-student population as well as the colleges and universities that serve them. ☞

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