

## Facilitating Veteran Student Success: Experiences from an Accelerated BS Program

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Military Veterans (MVs) face unique challenges that are important to recognize when building supportive academic environments. There is a need to broaden our understanding of the diverse student population within academia, requiring us to hear their voices and deduce facilitators and barriers to their academic transition and success.

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to explore the unique needs of MV students and understand obstacles and facilitators for successful transition and completion for MV students entering a civilian baccalaureate program.

**Method:** This study was guided by a phenomenological approach; we conducted three focus group interviews with Veteran students ( $n = 17$ ) and conducted verbatim transcription thematic analysis.

**Results:** Three themes were identified that impacted student success: (1) military experience prepared me for academic challenges, (2) defining my new role, and (3) no one left behind. Specific exemplars for thematic components to support transitioning into a civilian academic program included incorporating a military liaison for academic guidance and mentoring, acknowledging baseline skills using competency-based cohorts, and facilitating opportunities for connecting with other Veterans.

**Conclusion:** Preparation of faculty and staff to better understand MV's specific needs in civilian academic environments is needed.

Submitted 4 June 2023; accepted 8 August 2023

*Keywords:* military veterans, nursing education, academic success, transitioning, veteran student



## INTRODUCTION

Students are an essential component of healthy academic communities, and their success and progression is an important outcome for educational institutions. Across the United States (U.S.) and globally, there are student population subsets, including but not limited to first-generation-in-college, parents, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ+), and international students. Another often forgotten group is Military Veterans (MVs). While many concerns and needs of these sub-groups are universal (e.g., academic success, inclusion, mentoring, timely progression), they also may face unique challenges (e.g., isolation, stigmatization, communication barriers). These subgroups bring skillsets to academia that are important to recognize when building supportive academic environments. It is essential to broaden our understanding of the diverse students who make up academic patrons by hearing their voices and learning what approaches work and what supports are missing to facilitate their transition and academic success.

Those who served in the military and then transitioned to civilian life are an example of a subgroup student population, and their numbers are increasing in the U.S. higher education system. The military provides very diverse training needed to sustain the U.S. military forces across six branches (i.e., Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and the newly established Space Force). Enlisted medical personnel who include medics, corpsmen, and technicians, account for over two-thirds of active duty personnel in the U.S. military. In 2021, there were over 73,000 active duty medical personnel across the various military branches (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). These medical personnel have skills and qualities mirroring those required in the nursing profession. However, the majority of training and education certificates from the military are not transferable to job opportunities in the civilian sector. Understanding the challenges and unique needs faced by veterans who return to civilian academic programs is needed to facilitate successful transition of those students into such programs and ensure a timely schedule for graduation. Gaining an understanding of the strengths veterans bring into academic communities while also recognizing their lack of resources is needed. This knowledge can help provide structure and guidance for veteran students (VS) in academic settings.

Efforts to increase access to nursing programs and provide a pathway that builds on the education and training of the medic or corpsman can provide job opportunities for veterans returning to the civilian workforce as well as address the nationwide nursing shortage (D'Aoust et al., 2016). This is a favorable approach as the profession of nursing faces challenges such as staffing shortages due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, retention of experienced nurses, and upcoming retirement of many in the nursing workforce. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recognized the unique opportunity to capitalize on veterans skills and competencies that could be critical to addressing the nursing workforce shortage and devised a plan to transition them into the nursing profession. In response to this initiative, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grants were awarded to schools of nursing to develop and support Veteran's Bachelors of Science Degree in Nursing (VBSN) programs. Funds were first awarded in 2013 to nine schools of nursing throughout the U.S. Currently, programs are underway in 31 select schools of nursing (D'Aoust et al., 2016). The VBSN programs help to reduce barriers that prevent veterans from transitioning into the nursing workforce (HRSA, 2021). The purpose of this study was to explore the unique needs of MV students

and understand obstacles and facilitators for successful transition and completion for MV students entering a civilian baccalaureate program.

## BACKGROUND

An extensive literature review was performed concerning factors impacting VS success in higher education. MVs bring different life experiences from that of the traditional college student. College students with military backgrounds demonstrate strengths such as self-control (Kern & Bowling III, 2015) as well as traits in integrity, sense of duty and responsibility, and leadership (Gibbs et al., 2019). Typically, VSs are older, may have experienced intense situations such as combat or have long term injuries or health conditions, live off-campus, and have families. In addition, many of the VSs still have obligations to the military (Gibbs et al., 2019).

Shepherd et al. (2021) discusses the concept of “total institution” (p. 591) requiring soldiers and alike to fully embrace the values, norms, and practices of the military while setting aside those of civilian society. The authors explain transitioning to civilian life as difficult because the challenge stems from a structural change involving rigid organization and predictability. Studies found VS in civilian schools of nursing encountered stressful challenges with a less structured environment and beginning a new chapter in life (Patterson et al., 2019a). Shepherd et al. (2021) shared MVs with higher perceptions of structure in their military environment are likely to struggle with efficacy and belonging in a less structured environment. As foreseen, factors correlating with VS success focus on environment, structure, and organization.

Sikes et al. (2019) explored predictors of VS progression and graduation rates in VBSN programs. The authors found that while demographics were not predictors of program completion, a program delivery with a hybrid structure was significant compared to online-only and campus-only programs ( $p < .001$ ). The authors explained, “veterans leaving a highly structured collectivist environment such as the military to attend college online, where learning is more self-directed and individual may be a challenging format for this student population” (p.637). Moreover, the hybrid structure offers some flexibility for VSs still in active duty or reserves.

Norman et al. (2015) explored facilitators and barriers to VS academic success. The authors stressed the importance of communication and coordination within institutions regarding veteran benefits and the G.I. Bill, as well as allowing VS to fulfill their military responsibilities with active duty and reserves. Additional services include accommodation for disabilities and flexibility for registration, tuition, and withdrawals.

Prasad et al. (2020) explored the lived experience of medical veterans transitioning from military service to civilian nursing education. Following individual interviews with ten medic student veterans attending a Bachelor of Science in Nursing program, three themes emerged: (1) staying true to military training, (2) normal life, and (3) fitting in as a university student. The authors found military students valued service, commitment, work ethic, and leadership. Normal life focused on family, education, and contributing to society. Areas of concern for these students revolved around their desire for inclusivity, social integration, and academic support. As compared to the university setting where non-veteran students typically favored working individually, Shepherd et al. (2021) explained that those with military experience were more motivated by collectivistic goals, functioning as a group opposed to individualistic.

MVs typically work in a group, always watching the back of a fellow comrade. Norman et al. (2015) found an active veteran presence and community on campus was a facilitator of academic success.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Multiple frameworks were considered for the theoretical foundation of this study. MVs enrolled in civilian nursing programs transition their role as military medical personnel to the role of student nurse. Transitions theory (Meleis, 2010) defines transition as a social process from one stable state or role to another. Transitioning involves a dynamic internal process and may include a phase of instability attributed to insufficiencies, such as gaps in information, resources, or support. Minimizing such insufficiencies will yield a smoother and more productive transition process.

Compensatory control theory (Shepard et al., 2021) implies a sense of personal control is imperative to adaptation to an environment or stressor. Shepard et al. (2021) applied compensatory control theory to understanding a cultural shift experienced by MV transitioning to civilian environments. The authors explain when personal control is low, it is important for the environment or institution to have a clearly developed structure and predictability for a MV to successfully adapt.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains new knowledge is interpsychological, learned through interaction with others. The same knowledge is intrapsychological, internalized, and the new knowledge or skill can be mastered on an individual level (Clabaugh, 2010). In essence, social interaction plays an important role in learning. As with military training, social learning theories are used because of the extensive interpersonal interaction involved, particularly in the context of human performance (Culatta, 2023).

Transitions theory (Meleis, 2010), compensatory control theory (Shepard et al., 2021), and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Clabaugh, 2010) focus on internal and social processes contributing to academic success. Qualitative research captures such processes by exploring experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, a qualitative research design was considered to explore MV experiences transitioning to a civilian nursing program.

## **METHODS**

Overall, literature remains limited about the experiences of MVs transitioning to civilian nursing programs. A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to gain insight and understanding into the process of transition for these students and to explore their experiences to best capture unforeseen obstacles and strengths that could build on current approaches to facilitate successful transition. Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method was used to guide the study. Data collection took place through focus groups which are known to be effective in generating rich data utilizing group interaction (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001).

Approval for this study was obtained by the Institutional Review Board of both affiliated universities. Participants were recruited from one Florida university where a VBSN program was established in 2013 with its first graduating cohort in 2015. Students were recruited for the study through posted flyers and an announcement in class. To mitigate conflict of interest, a researcher not affiliated with the university or the VBSN program introduced the study in a class and answered questions. Interested students were asked to contact one of the co-investigators by phone for a general

description of the study and screening for inclusion. Inclusion criteria were: (a) 18 years of age or older, (b) English speaking, and (c) currently enrolled in the VBSN program or no more than two years post-completion of a VBSN program. The exclusion criteria were students who were not enrolled or more than two years post-completion of the VBSN program. Students who met criteria for inclusion were invited to participate and assigned to a focus group meeting at a time most convenient for the participant. All persons who expressed interest and met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate. Recruitment ceased after saturation was achieved with 17 participants.

Fully informed written consent was obtained by the Primary Investigator from participants prior to the meeting of the focus groups. Participant's names and identities were not included in recordings nor transcription to ensure confidentiality. Three focus groups were conducted with 17 participants. Two groups were in the Spring 2017 VBSN cohort (group 1,  $n = 4$ ; group 2,  $n = 6$ ) and one group in the Fall 2017 VBSN cohort (group 3,  $n = 7$ ). Demographics assessed for each participant included gender, age [range], race, ethnicity, highest degree obtained before nursing school, nursing school semesters completed, number of months since graduation (if applicable), years in the military, military rank, title, and branch of service.

Focus groups were used to gather data on obstacles and facilitators of program retention and completion and the lived experience of transitioning from the military (most often as medic) to a nursing student. Following common procedures, a semi-structured interview script (Table 1) was used to guide the focus group discussions (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 2005). Interview questions were asked; however, participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses when necessary (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). Initial interview questions were, "What was it like transitioning to the role of a nursing student in a civilian nursing program?" and "How did you transition your role as a military veteran to a civilian nursing student?" Participants were given opportunities to share opinions and experiences beyond the semi-structured questions. To elicit more in-depth responses, the interviewer began with broader questions and utilized more probing follow-up questions (e.g., help me understand that better) as appropriate. These descriptions were further enhanced in depth and breadth by group responses that took place within the groups (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). Focus group responses were audiotaped for data analysis. Data were transcribed verbatim and double-checked against the audiotape to confirm accuracy.

The research team included an experienced moderator who was present with all focus groups for taking field notes, keeping track of time, and signaling, if necessary, tasks that ensure the group's comfort (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). Debriefing with the team took place immediately after each focus group session to share vantage points, visual, and auditory. Morrison-Beedy et al. (2001) explains "the debriefing session may produce different perspectives, and it is important to capture this input in a timely fashion" (p. 50). All data, field notes, and debriefings were password secured in a qualitative data analysis program.

**Table 1**

*Interview Guide*

<b>Interview Guide</b>	
1	What was it like transitioning to the role of a nursing student in a civilian nursing program?
2	How did you transition your role as a MV to a civilian nursing student?

3	What factors at the College of Nursing were most helpful in ensuring your transition was successful?
4	Were there factors that made your transition process difficult? If so, how did you overcome these factors?
5	What advice would you give to other MVs who are interested in transitioning into the role of a nursing student in a civilian nursing program?
6	What is the single most important piece of advice that you would give to program directors/staff at a college of nursing working with military/VSS transitioning to a civilian nursing student to ensure the success of these students?
7	What resource available to you was most important to your successful transition from MV to a civilian nursing student?

To identify and summarize themes relevant to the purpose of this study, transcripts were read multiple times in preparation for within-group and between-group comparisons. This allowed a measure of data triangulation. Methodologically, triangulation strengthens credibility and dependability of investigations (Polit & Beck, 2022). Using conventional thematic analyses focusing on intentions, meaning, and context (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001), an open-coding scheme was employed to identify themes, which were coded manually. Within and between-group analysis continued until no further themes emerged. Data were initially analyzed and shared among the research team to ensure trustworthiness. Once saturation of data was achieved, recruitment of participants ceased, and final analysis took place.

Analysis followed a descriptive phenomenological approach as guided by Giorgi (2009):

1. Read for the sense of the whole - The researcher reads the entire description to get a general sense of the whole description. Giorgi (2009) explains, “one gets the sense of the whole while sensitively discriminating the intentional objects of the lifeworld description provided by the participant” (pp. 128-129).
2. Determination of meaning units - The researcher re-reads the description while being mindful of the specific phenomenon being investigated. The description is broken down into a series of meaning units (Giorgi, 2009, pp. 129-130).
3. Transformation of participant’s natural attitude expressions into phenomenologically psychologically sensitive expressions - The researcher interrogates each meaning unit to discover how to express in a more satisfactory way the psychological implications of the lifeworld description. The transformation aims to generalize the data into one structure. The researcher revisits the data contained in the meaning unit to assure the invariant sense truly comprehends all critical senses contained therein (Giorgi, 2009, pp. 130-133).

Trustworthiness was established using multiple strategies during the analysis: (a) providing an audit trail of what was done and why, (b) debriefing post focus group, (c) presenting rich descriptions of the study and data, (d) incorporating field notes into the analysis where indicated, and (e) using an independent transcriptionist for word-by-word transcription. Credibility of the study was established by including representation from students in both years of the program and one graduate. In addition, participants represented varied military branches and enlisted medical roles. Dependability was enhanced by using a single, experienced moderator and a detailed interview guide.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

Interviews were conducted with VBSN students ( $N = 17$ ) among three focus groups. Participants were primarily male ( $n = 15$ , 88.2%) with one female in groups two and three, white ( $n = 6$ , 35.3%), and between the ages of 18–35 years. Three branches of service were represented (Navy, Army, Air Force), and years of service ranged from 4–15 years. All participants held medical or health titles while in the military. Prior to enrollment in the VBSN program, 11 (64.7%) participants previously completed an associate degree, one (5.9%) completed a bachelor's degree, and one (5.9%) completed a master's degree.

### Themes

Analysis revealed three major themes related to successful transitioning to a civilian educational program: (1) Military experience prepared me for academic challenges, (2) Defining my new role, and (3) No one left behind. The themes reflect the continuum from the time veterans began preparing to enroll in a civilian nursing program through their time as an active college student.

#### *Military Experience Prepared Me for Academic Challenges*

MVs strive to be prepared. As one VS stated, “We prepare! We prepare! We prepare!” These students were veterans from various states and branches of service who searched for options and opportunities to further their education. Most of the veterans searched specifically for a program providing a military-supportive community. One VS shared, “It’s a military friendly school, so I applied.” They were most attracted to institutions who were familiar with the military and associated benefits and needs specific to veterans. One VS explained, “it was really difficult to try to find a school that would offer any kind of credit for military training. That is why I ended up here.” Their military experiences were deeply entwined with organization and procedure, so they looked for such qualities in an educational program. One VS shared, “[the liaison] is a former Lieutenant Colonel... If it did anything, it just kind of enhanced our ability to be able to get into the program just having that structure.” VSs collectively agreed the program lead (military liaison) and staff were essential to their transition. One VS explained, “They were... meat and potatoes...no fluff...here’s what you got to do...by this day.” Another VS expanded:

Coming across the country and ending up in this program, it seems like it would have been a lot more difficult if we didn’t have that support network and they weren’t continuously trying to proactively address some of the potential problems that we could have during the transition.

These VSs were self-motivated, determined, and confident in their future success. Failure was not an option. These veterans were committed to follow through and put forth 110%. One VS commented, “It was preparation by default...Once you commit to something, you’re gonna see it through...I’m gonna do 110%.” Similarly, another VS noted, “Failure is not an option...It’s school, not Afghanistan.” Students further along in their program advised, “You

got to do your research for what you're going to do and stick to that because it's really hard to do that." One VS noted, "For me, I think the advice I can give is have a solid plan of the courses or the pathway that you want to pursue."

Finances and resources were obstacles for furthering education. Benefits were affected by whether they were active duty, Reserve or National Guard, or completely separated from the military. A VS shared, "finances are a big thing for all of us because we're taking a huge pay cut, especially me coming from active duty." While there is a belief that veterans who attend post-secondary education institution all have access to tuition funding through utilization of the Post 9-11 G.I. Bill, many have utilized their Post 9-11 G.I. Bill while completing prerequisites or through completing other degree programs. This often leaves the veteran with challenges such as how to pay for some or all of their nursing program. A VS explained:

There is a misconception... I thought the G.I. Bill pays for all this stuff... I have my savings...but that was for my living expenses...But all that money started going to different places and before I knew it, I was like...Oh, now I'm really stuck. I'm trying to find out the resources for money to get me through.

VSs discussed how preparing for school was different before having a family. One VS explained:

School is easy if you don't have other distractors...So, if you don't have to give into your outside distractions, actually money and family...Anything that you feel like is going to distract you coming in, you need to get that buttoned up before.

### *Defining My New Role*

Prior to entering nursing school, VSs varied on how they pictured the nursing role. One VS shared, "I am more focused on the pathophysiology of something and how we're going to do that, but then I got here and it's ...What does the research say or what's the plan of care, what's the nursing diagnosis?" Some VSs viewed the nursing role as limited from their military role. One VS explained, "Our role of corpsmen is a little bit different, whereas we are not limited to one aspect of care. We can do what doctors do or what nurses do." Some chose nursing thinking it would be an easier path to entering the healthcare field. "It's the first step to put your foot in the door." Other veterans felt nursing most reflected their role in the military and surprised how many concepts and skills differ, "I thought ...that it was going to be like kind of paramilitary and that's *not* what it is." An initial perception of nursing was consistent among all focus groups as shared by one VS, "So in nursing, I just thought oh, you know you kind of go to school and you just do what the doctor tells you to do...[but]It's a lot more."

As veterans progressed through the VBSN program, they gained a better understanding of the role and responsibilities of a nurse. One VS shared, "understanding the nurse's role...is a humbling experience." Another VS shared:

I didn't realize until now that nurses have a huge job. It's more than just doing what the doctor says...I didn't expect that nurses made so many calls, so many decisions ...so it kind of makes sense now... my view has changed.

VSs had to integrate field military experience with civilian nursing roles while identifying parameters and boundaries. A VS student explained, you had to "know where to draw the line...as time progressed I kind of knew



where I stood and what I could do.” Another VS shared, “The biggest thing (is) trying to figure out what I can and couldn’t do. My first semester I was not able to start IVs, (but then I) go do my weekend drill and I was doing sutures.”

Veterans expressed the importance of attitude and the need to accept differences to move forward in their education and succeed in the program. One of the more seasoned veterans explained, “I ran my own clinic for like six years..., so I consciously had to say, ‘you’re not in charge anymore.’” Veterans made efforts to adapt to the role of a nursing student, again reiterating, “failure is not an option.” Another VS shared,

As far as adjusting, it’s just understanding what’s going to basically get you put out of the program. So, if you’ve intubated somebody before and somebody needs an intubation in the hospital, you know that you can’t do that...just knowing what you can and can’t do, as long as you stay in your lane.

The boundaries were notably challenging for VSs in active duty. One VS explained how transitioning roles to that of a civilian nursing student was necessary, yet temporary for those in active duty:

I’m active duty. I’m going back. This is just a brief intermission for me. I don’t want to get too comfortable because I know I’m going back to see them [the military] every day. So yeah, like you said, we left that stuff at the door. We didn’t make it complicated.

In line with a positive attitude, veterans accepted boundaries to better identify the role and strength of nursing. One student remarked “That’s all you have to do - put your pride aside and go on with fresh eyes.” Another noted the need to continually readjust his perspective saying “My scope of practice is by the semester I’m in.”

### *No One Left Behind*

Veterans watched over fellow veterans regardless of rank, military branch, or semester in school. “For the most part, we all get along...cohesion, nobody left behind.... if they’re struggling with something, you’ll have six or seven people [veterans] offer to help them out, walk them through stuff.” One older VSs shared how connecting with other veterans impacted his academic success:

Being surrounded by other veterans that have the little bit extra maturity, they’ve been around...their experiences are different...Even with some of their character flaws, I would much rather be around those guys than just that guy who shows up for college...I wouldn’t make it through the program if I wasn’t in a class like this.

VSs faced obstacles with communication and resources. Communication was key to staying connected and circulating resources. One veteran from the Spring focus group who completed multiple semesters envisioned, “I think that for the next cohort they need to work together as a team...we would have the Facebook thing—the communication thing.” The investigators continued to explore gaps in communication the following semester with the Fall focus group and found a Facebook resource was in place. A first semester veteran explained, “I think the previous students have done a great job of voicing their opinions and getting things changed for us.” The social platform connected veterans to incoming cohorts and resources to best prepare for academic success. One VS shared:

When I found out I was going to try to get into this class, I had two friends that were in this cohort and they had talked to me about the cost of everything and if I had not gauged their perspectives on that, I would have been woefully unprepared.

The themes clearly depict challenges and strategies to overcome such challenges while transitioning from a military role to a civilian academic role. VSNs revealed the close-knit culture of the military. As a collective entity, VSNs were proactive to succeed.

## DISCUSSION

Through focus groups with MV enrolled in a VBSN program, we identified three prominent themes that spoke to their transition to a new role as civilian, student, and future nurse: (1) Military experience prepared me for academic challenges, (2) Defining my new role, and (3) No one left behind. Veterans shared facilitators of academic success and revealed personal concerns and gaps in resources impacting a smooth transition to the role of nursing student.

Veterans first focused on preparing for admission and relocating to new living arrangements while balancing military and personal responsibilities. As found with Norman et al. (2015) MVs applied the discipline and skills developed during military service to their pursuit of higher education. Most veterans in our study were reserve status while in school serving in either the Reserve or National Guard; however, there was little time from active duty to reserve status. For this reason, organization and resources within the school were critical to establish MVs in the nursing program. VSNs found the school's VBSN Program Director (a Military Officer and nurse) to be a valuable resource with military issues. The VBSN Program Director understood the organization of the military and its rigid schedule with orders and appointments. A VBSN program must allow for scheduling conflicts within the program and alternatives to assignments and platforms for course information when possible (D'Aoust et al., 2016). Allen et al. (2014) suggested incorporating learning management systems (LMS) structured for distance learning for VS to access course content and participate in activities when called off-campus.

Shepard et al. (2021) introduced the concept of a total institution where soldiers and alike fully embrace the military culture including expectations of organization and predictability of their environments. Applying compensatory control theory (Shepard et al., 2021) with an emphasis on structure and organization should in turn, enhance predictability. Academic institutions and programs that are clearly organized, structured, and detailed would better assist MVs in transitioning to civilian college programs.

Educating faculty on the needs of military students in higher education and how to best support this population is important to facilitating VS success (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2015; Sikes et al., 2021). One example is Green Zone Training which is designed to increase faculty and staff awareness of military students' needs and resources to support their transition to civilian college environments (Chargualaf et al., 2023; Gibbs et al., 2019; Prasad et al., 2020).

Most colleges offer relocating resources focused on dorm and campus living. However, most veterans preferred to live off campus and many needed to settle a family and enroll their children in local schools. Prioritizing the settlement of family was fundamental to academic engagement. Off campus living has its challenges with transportation and isolation (Cox, 2019; Gibbs et al., 2019). Although a social media resource was created by VSNs in the program, VBSN recruitment should also broaden resources for off-campus living.

VSNs had preconceived expectations of nursing. They were in the field as medics and medical technicians with limited exposure to the role and responsibilities of the registered nurse. Therefore, MVs sought other sources for information on career roles. Donelan et al. (2014) conducted a survey including military personnel ( $n = 1,302$ ), nursing

students ( $n = 914$ ), and online public respondents ( $n = 1,200$ ) about trusted sources for career information. More than 90% of those who completed the survey reported their family and friends were highly trusted sources of career information, followed by school counselors/teachers, employers, career fairs, and information websites. The least trusted sources were television advertisements. In addition to web-based materials and videos about nursing, personal presentations by college military liaisons, shadowing opportunities, and interdisciplinary collaboration exposes veterans to nursing in a manner not otherwise captured and can help them to understand about the nursing profession.

Veterans were conflicted about where to “draw the line” on how to respond to clinical situations since they were exposed to both roles of a nursing student and of medical military personnel in the field or on maneuvers. It is important to acknowledge the valuable skills and experience each veteran brings with them; yet these skills differ depending on their roles and experiences. Patterson et al. (2019b) encourage pedagogical strategies to enable transfer of learning from military medical personnel to nursing. As with the constructivist approach, learning applies past experiences to construct new knowledge (Tanner, 2006). Encouraging the integration of knowledge into new situations enhances the learner’s ability to transfer knowledge and increase skill development that may be applied in this case to nursing. Voelpel et al. (2018) recommended a cohort dedicated for VS in their first year of a generic nursing program that is focused on competencies. This allows veterans to progress through competent skills and develop those with which they had less experience.

Consistent with the literature, this study highlighted the unique bond among veterans (D’Aoust et al., 2016; Patterson et al., 2019b; Prasad et al., 2020). MVs sought the comradery and support of a fellow veteran regardless of their military branch or rank, or semester in school. Veterans migrated towards “someone who looked like me.” Hurlbut and Revuelto (2018) shared the importance of a designated veteran’s lounge where VBSN students could meet and study. It included a white board, bulletin area, a map of the world for veterans to mark where they served, and an American Flag. The Florida institution established the Veteran’s Lounge with similar qualities. In line with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Clabaugh, 2010), the lounge was more than a workspace. It housed the culture and unique camaraderie among all MVs and reaffirmed the concept of “no one left behind.”

Although veteran specific resources and support are critical to the initial transitioning to civilian nursing programs, fundamental technical skills equal out among veteran and non-veteran cohorts in the third and fourth semesters where nursing students develop higher applications of critical thinking and decision making. Veteran and non-veteran groups would combine for the remainder of the program. Shepherd et al. (2021) discussed the joining of the two culturally distinct groups as a “cultural mismatch” (p. 600). Considering the groups would be working together in clinical settings and academic activities, Shepherd et al. (2021) suggested employing strategies to bring students together and share their stories, perspectives, and strengths, in addition to sharing concerns about belonging and identity threats. The goal is to establish psychological safety and belonging and in turn, establish connectivity among all students, therefore facilitating academic success.

## Limitations

Limitations should be acknowledged with this study. First, participants were only from one academic institution. Also, although participants were diverse in race, the gender was predominantly male. The transcription did not differentiate

the participants by their responses. While many issues were discussed and prompted during the groups, only a few comments captured responses related to participants' progress in the program. Strategies may be considered in future research to better capture such details with the data and still maintain confidentiality.

## Conclusions

This study revealed critical factors with MVs transitioning to civilian nursing programs. The findings inspire strategies to mitigate insufficiencies and enhance resources leading to a more positive transition and in turn, promoting academic success. In preparing MVs for advanced education, institutions with VBSN programs should offer informational materials including a website and a video, to define nursing and explain how the skills of enlisted medical personnel are embodied in nursing. Academic institutions could also benefit by establishing a military liaison role, someone who would be familiar with the organization and structure of both the military and college programs. In addition, liaisons could facilitate understanding of, and access to, resources for establishing residence, financial aid, and incorporating military schedules into their college routines.

Faculty orientation and development should include education about the needs of military students and the experience, leadership, and maturity they bring to higher education. Importantly, curriculum should acknowledge prior knowledge, skills, and experience to build upon academic concepts and theory. Establishing MV cohorts in the entry year and allowing these students to challenge select skill competencies and integrate with advancing cohorts focused on critical thinking and theory should be considered. This also offers an opportunity to clearly establish boundaries regarding scope of practice in professional programs such as nursing.

Most important, establishing a line of communication, access to resources, and means for peer support are all strategies identified that have been useful for successful transitioning for these students. Institutions should consider establishing a lounge specific for military personnel enrolled in any program. In this way, veterans can find a "safe space" where they can connect with other veterans for support, trust, and the shared goal of success. Capitalizing on the "shared experience" of being a veteran was critical for all these students. As one veteran explained, "We are like-minded people." Students can build strategies for "team success" within the confines of a safe space student area for veterans.

College wide activities introducing and integrating various cultures would heighten acceptance and socialization, and lower threats of isolation, stigmatization, and discrimination. This would also benefit in later semesters where veteran and non-veteran students in the nursing program are combined for classroom lectures, lab activities, and clinical experiences.

The results of this study add to previous knowledge supporting VS success and can help build on approaches to facilitate student success that can be integrated or adapted by academic communities. A replication study involving other VBSN programs will further validate this study's findings and enhance the understanding of MVs transitioning to civilian nursing programs from a broader perspective of students. Continued research in this area could heighten understanding of the bond of support among VVs as revealed in this study, and how similar bonds may be built across other student populations to facilitate success. Future research is needed to explore other challenges specific to MVs

in academic settings, including the impact of those dealing with PTSD, and additional strategies that may be needed to facilitate their academic success.

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**Author's Note**

We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.