

From Boots to Bedside

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Background / Introduction

The United States (US) will face a nursing shortage. Contributing factors such as an aging nursing workforce, and the increase in access to healthcare will significantly impact the nursing profession. The nursing shortage is expected to reach 260,000 registered nurses by 2025. California and Florida will experience the most significant shortages, yielding 109,779 and 128,364 registered nurse jobs, respectively. The supply of nurses will be inadequate to address the corresponding demand, despite a projected national growth in career opportunities. Exploiting the prior education and experience of military medics and hospital corpsmen to fill these jobs may considerably impact the projected nursing shortage. Upon completion of military obligations, Army and Air Force medics and Navy corpsmen have the clinical foundation and skills to deliver quality patient care. Yet, the civilian world is oblivious to the exceptional military training and education medics and corpsmen obtain, resulting in under-utilization of a potential nursing workforce asset. Further, several veteran empowerment organizations suggest that veterans encounter barriers when transitioning to the civilian workforce such as state legislated licensure restriction, correlating military education and experience with civilian qualities, and gender-specific stigma that supports nursing as a female profession.

Method / Process

The Veteran to Bachelors of Science in Nursing (VBSN) program is structured to recruit, retain, and graduate 90 students over a four-year period. Program information is advertised in military publications, social media portals, and by word of mouth. Student applicants are required to meet admission criteria: must be a Veteran of a branch of uniformed service, or a drilling reservist with a classification as a medic, corpsman, or paramedic. In addition, applicants must earn a minimum grade point average of 2.5 in lower college division courses, complete the Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS) with 70%, and earn a grade of "C" or better in nursing pre-requisites courses. The VBSN program provides its veteran students with academic advising and planning targeted to their unique needs through interpretation and translation of military education into college credit for program eligibility. Upon admission to the VBSN program, students participate in a structured and condensed nursing fundamentals curriculum called Boot Camp, designed to build upon prior clinical education and training through didactic lecture and demonstration of competencies in the Simulation, Training, And Research (STAR) Center.

Outcome / Results/Data

The VBSN student body has a robust representation of the branches of uniformed service, representing the Army (42%), Navy (26%), Air Force (26%), Marines (3%), and the Coast Guard (3%). Military experience is diverse, as students are former emergency medicine technicians, healthcare specialists, respiratory therapists, and licensed practical nurses. The racial/ethnic mix is similar to the demographic of the South Florida region and is comprised of Hispanic (40%), African-Americans (35%), White (22%), and Asians (3%). Males represent 61% of the student body. Of the 18 graduates the program has produced since its inception in the spring of 2014, two have obtained registered nurse licensure and are employed, while the other 16 students await the opportunity to take the National Council Licensure Exam – RN.



Discussion / Conclusion

Veteran nursing students possess exceptional clinical skills and are well trained in care delivery. As graduates, they add value to the nursing workforce and positively impact the nursing shortage. FIU's Nicole Wertheim College of Nursing and Health Sciences (NWCNHS) VBSN program is producing BSN-prepared nurses who are uniquely positioned to reintegrate into the civilian workforce and mitigate barriers that plague veterans such as poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. They are best prepared to provide quality care for the US population, and contribute to improving outcomes for the growing Veteran population nationwide and in the South Florida region.

Implication for Nursing

Producing nurses from a pool of highly trained Veterans meets the growing demand for RNs in Florida. FIU's VBSN program generates the supply to meet the demand for nurses statewide while simultaneously augmenting diversity. Approximately 85% of NWCNHS graduates are non-white, which is roughly a similar representation of the South Florida patient population.¹⁶ Moreover, the VBSN program has a 60/40 male-to-female sex mix exceeding the 9.6% national average of men in nursing as reported by the US Census Bureau.²⁷ Furthermore, the program has a very diverse student body with multiple backgrounds, given that a diverse nursing workforce is most befitting to render culturally competent care to the increasingly diverse US patient population, thereby minimizing the profound health care disparity in the USA.

Significance to Veteran Community

The VBSN program has sparked a surge in veteran student enrollment in the NWCNHS and provided the impetus for infusing veteran-centered content into its nursing curriculum. Exposing veteran and civilian nursing students to the health care issues of all veterans will produce baccalaureate prepared nurses equipped to contribute to improving outcomes for this growing population, which stands at 22 million US residents.²⁵ Furthermore, the NWCNHS provides faculty development regarding Veteran culture and Veteran characteristics to enhance teaching strategies that address the unique Veterans student needs such as building upon leadership experience, and addressing the needs of Veterans with physical or emotional disabilities that may impact learning. These Veteran-centric efforts to enhance curriculum and teaching strategies are intended to recruit, retain, and graduate transitioning Veterans as RNs to reintegrate them into the civilian nursing workforce. Additionally, the VBSN program will alleviate challenges, such as unemployment, substandard income, and homelessness that many former service members face after separation from the military.

