

Abstract: Success Strategies for Undergraduate Nursing Students Transitioning from Military Healthcare Careers: A Qualitative Study

Authors: Taylor Thurston, DHSc, MHA, Sallie Beth Johnson, PhD, MPH, MCHES, and F. Jeannine Everhart, PhD, MPH, MBA, CHES

Background: Nationally, approximately 60 percent of undergraduate college students graduate while only 54 percent of college students who are military veterans graduate. There is minimal research into why veterans are less successful than their peers, and the research that does exist focuses on challenges, rather than success. The purpose of this research is to better understand the strategies veterans nursing students are using to succeed as they transition from the military into higher education.

Methods: A qualitative exploration was conducted with veteran nursing students within Radford University (RU) and Radford University Carilion (RUC) using semi-structured interviews (N=8). An interview guide based on the constructivist theory and Schlossberg's transition model (4S- Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) was used to capture insight into how students define success, the challenges they experience, and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. Dedoose 8.2.32 was used to independently identify and code meaning units (mu), which were grouped into overall themes and categories. The research team conducted consensus meetings and an inter-rater reliability with Cohen Kappa was set at >80%.

Results: Study participants representing RU (n=2) and RUC (n=6) were 62% male and 38% female. Fifty percent of participants served in a medical occupation in the military, 25% received extensive medical training in the military, and 25% had no advanced medical training. Overall study themes included: Military Role (N=142 mu), Success Defined (N=104 mu), Challenges (N=218 mu), Success Strategies (N=429 mu), and Military Integration (N=22 mu). Major challenges reported were a lack of support from the institution (n=62 mu), lifestyle changes (n=48 mu), and initial difficulties communicating (n=30 mu). Primary success strategies were good communication skills (n=89 mu), grit (n=82 mu), and being goal-driven (n=48 mu). Categories aligned with the constructivist theory constructs of 1) communication, 2) leadership, and 3) grit, and two of Schlossberg's Transition Model's constructs of support and strategy. Veteran nursing students identified a comprehensive Military Resource Center (MRC) as a supportive mechanism for their success and recommended expanding the MRC, veteran coordinator role, and veteran academic advising services at RUC.

Conclusion: Study findings closely reflect the challenges of undergraduate veteran nursing students reported in the existing literature. Strategies veterans are using to succeed in the transition from the military into higher education are aligned with the constructs of constructivist theory and Schlossberg's Transition model. Success strategies employed do not appear to be related to a medical role in the military.