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# Joining Forces: Enriching RN to BSN Education with Veteran-Centered Learning


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## Joining Forces: Enriching RN to BSN Education with Veteran-Centered Learning

### Abstract

This article highlights the commitment of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing to engage nursing schools to support the Joining Forces initiative by enhancing the education and preparation of the nation's nurses to care for veterans, service members, and their families. The progress toward meeting the Joining Forces pledge and integrating veteran-centered learning in an online RN to BSN program is described.

In early 2012, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) announced its partnership with the Department of Veteran Affairs, the American Nurses Association, the National League for Nursing, the National Organization for associate Degree Nursing, and other stakeholders to urge nursing schools across the United States to support the Joining Forces initiative. Joining Forces is a comprehensive, national initiative led by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden designed to engage all civilian sectors in providing support and opportunities for service members and their families by emphasizing three key priority areas including employment, education, and wellness programs (AACN, 2014). By pledging their support, nursing schools agreed to enhance the education and preparation of the nation's nurses to care for veterans, service members, and their families (AACN, 2014).

The Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing (LGSSON) took the Joining Forces pledge (Table 1) in 2013. Since taking the pledge, LGSSON faculty members have focused on integrating key concepts related to this population into both the pre-licensure BSN and the online RN to BSN curriculum. The Joining Forces initiative is a natural fit for the School of Nursing due to a community-based curriculum that emphasizes health promotion, illness prevention and treatment, and social justice, through a learner-centered approach to nursing education. A learner-centered approach to education is a framework that provides the opportunity for students to engage in discourse about complex issues that emerge in higher education (Dolence, 2003). The purpose of this article is to highlight the progress made toward meeting the Joining Forces Pledge in the LGSSON online RN to BSN program.

### **RN to BSN Program**

The online RN to BSN program is one of the three Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) tracks offered by LGSSON, which also includes an accelerated BSN degree and traditional BSN

degree. Currently, there are approximately 200 Registered Nurses progressing through the RN to BSN curriculum. The majority of nurses that attend the program are employed in nursing and bring a variety of personal and professional experiences to the online learning community. Some of the nurses are veterans themselves or have had previous experiences working with veterans and their families, either through their nursing practice or experiences within their own communities. The integration of veteran-centered learning into the RN to BSN curriculum is an opportunity for the nurses to increase their awareness of veteran health issues and develop valuable skills for working with veterans, service members, and their families. The integration is consistent with the RN to BSN curriculum, which highlights content related to leadership, professional communication, and population health.

### **Veteran Health Issues**

Since 2001, more than 2.4 million U.S. military personnel have served in Afghanistan and Iraq in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (Veteran Health Administration, 2011). Of those who have served, approximately 1.44 million individuals are eligible for Veterans Administration (VA) services and close to 772,000 have used VA health care (Veteran Health Administration, 2011). The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been the longest sustained U.S. military operations since the Vietnam era and have resulted in more than 6,600 deaths and 48,000 injuries (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2013). The outcome of the wars are varied and include complex health conditions and challenging social and economic circumstances related to re-integration and returning to work or school (IOM, 2013).

The most prevalent health conditions sustained by military personnel from serving in combat zones include mental health conditions such traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which have affected 1 in 6 of veterans (White House, 2012).

The female soldiers who have been deployed to combat zones have been particularly vulnerable to certain health conditions. Women have suffered from common urinary infections due to dehydration (Wilson & Nelson, 2011), higher rates of depression than their male counterparts (Jacobson et al., 2009), increased risk of disordered eating and weight loss (Jacobson et al., 2009), and sexual trauma experienced during military service (Haskell et al., 2010). The urgency to address the health, social, and economic challenges of our military personnel supports the integration of veteran-centered experiences in the RN to BSN program.

### **Integration of Veteran-Centered Learning**

Veteran-centered learning has been purposefully integrated into the RN to BSN curriculum. In addition to enhancing the RN to BSN student's knowledge of veteran health issues and their experiences, the goal is to assist the nurse to improve his or her awareness and skills for working with all vulnerable populations. The literature available for teaching course material that is specific to veteran health issues in the online classroom is limited. The faculty members approached the integration in the same way they addressed content for vulnerable populations throughout the curriculum. They conducted research on the most current health and social issues impacting veterans, engaged feedback from faculty members and nurses in the community experienced in working with veterans, and utilized a variety of web based materials authored by reliable veteran organizations such as the Veterans Health Administration.

Distance education has provided new opportunities for learning for adults. Through web-based activities and research, students can search actively, discover rich resources to solve problems, and construct new knowledge (Huang, 2002). As a theoretical approach to teaching the concepts that emphasized veteran health issues, faculty members utilized student-centered, constructivist strategies. Social constructivism focuses on learning that is facilitated through

social interaction as a primary element of effective learning through collaborative experiences, critical thinking activities, and culturally relevant experiences (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Based on their rich life and work experiences, the social, situated nature of constructivist learning is uniquely authentic for adults (Ruey, 2010). The integration of veteran-centered course content and learning experiences in the RN to BSN courses are summarized in the next sections and presented in an overview in Table 2.

### **Professional Communication and Diverse Clients**

Students are initially introduced to veteran issues in a second semester communication course through a learning module about stress, crisis, and trauma. Within this module, students are introduced to the concept of trauma-informed care. The purpose for including this information in the Professional Communication course is to educate nurses on understanding behavior in the context of their life circumstances so that they can respond appropriately without judgment or false assumptions. They are required to complete a 70-minute training webinar in this course, titled *Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans*, which includes several principles for understanding trauma and its impact, promoting safety, ensuring cultural competence, supporting woman veteran control, choice, and autonomy, sharing power and governance, integrating care, recognizing that healing happens in relationship, and acknowledging that recovery is possible (U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2011). Additionally the students are introduced to trauma-informed care in homeless shelter services. This introduces them to the concept of vulnerable populations, using homeless veterans as a primary exemplar. The concept of vulnerable populations is further developed in the final RN to BSN integrated experiential learning course when the focus on veterans is addressed from an advocacy perspective.

## **Population-Focused Nursing**

In the population-focused nursing course, students are exposed to veteran-centered material in a learning module that addresses population and global mental health issues. In the same module, additional content exposes students to concepts of substance abuse, domestic violence, and abuse with the context of the mental health. Students are assigned reading material and web-based resources specific to veterans, including a video on feelings of hopelessness and other videos that include narratives from veterans describing their experiences with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In a group discussion, students are asked to apply a population perspective to mental health issues impacting veterans by addressing the following question:

Analyze the factors impacting the mental health of veterans. Are there specific issues by war (era-specific) or type of trauma? Discuss population-specific strategies and resources available that support veterans and mental health.

During this particular learning module, students have reported a sense of urgency related to the mental health needs of veterans and their families. Connecting them to resources in the community that are available to support the nursing care of veterans has been reported as a valuable outcome of this activity.

## **Palliative Care Nursing Elective**

Students have the opportunity to take a Palliative Care Nursing elective during the RN to BSN program. During a learning module that focuses on loss, grief, and bereavement issues, students are introduced to cultural considerations that address caring for veterans and their families using a palliative care approach. The content of the module includes the care and support needs of veterans and their families who are experiencing life-limiting illness, grief and



loss, risks for suffering, and end-of-life care. Through exploring several web-based resources, watching specific videos, and collaborating in group discussions with their peers and faculty members, students gain exposure to current health and social challenges impacting veterans, and build their knowledge of the resources available that serve the veteran community.

Students are also introduced to the *Wounded Warrior Project* which serves veterans and service members who incurred a physical or mental injury, illness, or wound, as a result of their military service, and to the *We Honor Veterans* (WHV) program which is a collaborative effort on behalf of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) and the Veteran's Administration (VA). The WHV program is designed to empower hospice professionals to meet the unique needs of dying veterans and promotes respectful inquiry, compassionate listening and grateful acknowledgement in order to comfort patients with a history of military service and possibly physical or psychological trauma (NHPCO, 2014).

**Community partnership activity.** As a result of the School of Nursing's involvement in the Joining Forces initiative and collaboration within the hospice and palliative care community, there was an opportunity for a joint project with a local Hospice program and *We Honor Veterans* partner. Through partnering on a shared commitment to veteran issues, a showing of *Honor Flight* was delivered at a local gathering that involved students and the college community as well as staff and volunteers of the hospice program. Several local veterans and community members also attended the event after being invited through outreach in the community.

The *Honor Flight* program was designed to transport America's veterans to Washington D. C. to visit the memorials dedicated to honor the service and sacrifices of World War II veterans. The program focuses on World War II veterans who are estimated to be dying at the

rate of over 600 veterans per day (U.S. Veterans Administration, 2014). The community event included a showing of the movie followed by a panel discussion that was led by an experienced hospice nurse and an experienced VA chaplain, who were both veterans themselves. Topics that emerged in the discussion centered on communication and treatment challenges, as well as current health and social concerns impacting veterans and their families. One of the RN to BSN students that participated in the *Honor Flight* event shared her thoughts on the experience in the online classroom:

I attended Honor Flight tonight. The experience of recognizing some veterans in the audience and watching the film was an emotional one I will not forget. Nine hundred WWII vets dies every day. The Honor Flight program honors these vets by sponsoring as many vets as possible a trip to the World War II memorials in Washington DC. This experience allows veterans to tell their stories which are seldom told. And provides an opportunity for the rest of us to listen and honor them and reflect on the price of our freedoms here in the United States. A veteran on the discussion panel after the movie expressed to the audience that if you ask a veteran to tell you some war experience stories to please listen. The discussion was furthered about how men and women serving still away from their families need our thoughts/ attention and support. As a nurse I learned that if I ask a question about the veterans war experience, I need to make sure I listen well. Another matter I learned is that often the veteran will not want to or be able to talk about many and maybe most of their experiences of the war. I want to be a part of Honor Flight before all of the WWII veterans have passed away—we only have about 5 to 10 years left. I was enriched by the community gathering this evening and am glad I had the opportunity to learn from the film and post discussion panel.

### **Integrated Experiential Learning**

The final RN to BSN course integrates all previous course work through service learning experiences in the community and online activities including simulation in a virtual community. In addition to the didactic online experiences that focus on veteran-centered nursing care throughout the curriculum, students may choose to focus on veteran health issues in their community as part of the service learning activity. The service learning experience is designed to help students develop their leadership skills by identifying a vulnerable population (i.e. veterans) in the community and spending time developing an activity or service that responds to

a need identified by the community members related to health promotion (Gillis & MacLellan, 2010). Students are encouraged to choose a population in the community that they have a passion or interest in serving. The service learning activity provides students with the ability to interact with veterans in the community and gain experiences with some of the challenges they may be experiencing related to promoting their health and well-being.

In the virtual community experience, students discuss how they can influence community change through the use of coalitions defined as “an alliance of people or groups with similar goals who join to achieve their objectives” (Sullivan, 2004, p. 90). They initially discussed an issue that is important to them and how they would start a coalition to address the issue using their influence as registered nurses. The students are provided with information about evidence-based practices for coalition building and examples of successful coalitions. They build on this learning by developing a coalition for homeless veterans in a virtual community, “*The Neighborhood*” developed by Jean Giddens (2010). The *Neighborhood* features unfolding stories of several characters representing community and nurse members. The stories are enhanced with pictures, video clips, medical records, and newspaper clippings (Giddens, 2010). Students are required to become familiar with several members of the community in the weeks preceding the final learning activity, which is done in groups of approximately five students. In addition, an addendum is added to the virtual community in the learning module to create a more specific experience featuring homeless veterans. Information about homeless veterans is provided along with a review about coalition building and planning steps for the development of a coalition.

Students are required to develop a planning document for a community coalition to develop services for the homeless veterans in the virtual community. The students create this

planning document collaboratively in small groups. Student have expressed that this assignment had been exceptionally meaningful to them as discussed in the next section.

### **Student Reflections**

Students have been asked to reflect on their experiences with the veteran-centered activities at the completion of the final experiential learning course. A few of their anonymous reflections have been collected to reflect the value of integrating veteran-centered content and activities in the RN to BSN curriculum.

Veteran care is something that I think we all need to contribute to. These men and women volunteered to put their lives on the line to defend our country and to preserve our freedom. It just isn't right that they return after serving their country and then not have a home, a job, and then be forced to deal with issues like depression, substance abuse, and PTSD. It just seems like an injustice to these brave men and women... to have to suffer such atrocities in another country and then be forced to live on the street because they can't return to their lives. I don't think anyone should be homeless, there is just no reason for it, but it is especially unfathomable that our veteran population are not only among the homeless, but make up the majority of the homeless ... I would like to volunteer to help these men and women, so I will look into what I can do to make a positive impact. If we all spent a small amount of our time, we could help to eliminate homelessness. Veteran care is something that I think we all need to contribute to.

The biggest lesson I learned from the project was that vets often mistrust the system and even the public. I have seen "homeless vet" on cardboard signs carried by panhandlers and thought to myself "That's what your VA benefits are for". Now I know that they sometimes cannot navigate the red tape to access their benefits, and sometimes they don't trust the VA at all, so why try. I am still sure there are a few using the term 'vet' who have never served a moment. But now I also know there are many who did serve who are lost here at 'home'.

I am in the process of doing the online competency training from the VA website for health care providers. I do not look at vets the same. I have more empathy and strongly feel as a nation we have not done enough to support our vets. I am looking for ways to be more involved. However my first step is to educate myself and then to make sure I advocate for every vets that I have the opportunity to be involved in their care to have access, information and follow up care to ensure care is provided and offered. I am suggesting the VA training to other nurses and sharing my learning from this assignment.

### **Next Steps**

Based on the reflections of students, feedback received from students, and faculty members' observations, the experience of integrating veteran-centered content and activities into the RN to BSN curriculum has been very positive. Moving forward, it will be important to integrate a more comprehensive evaluation of these experiences, beyond course reflections and the current course evaluations, in order to measure the impact on student learning and the nursing care of veterans. Current efforts on campus are also aimed at the development of an inclusive learning environment, led by the Director of Inclusion and Access, which includes dedicated support for students who are military veterans. We have the opportunity to further engage students, staff, faculty members, and our community partners in the Joining Forces initiative that extends beyond our curriculum and into our college and healthcare community through raising awareness of the issues impacting veterans, service members, and their families.

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