

A Core Course on Veterans' Health in an Online RN to BSN Program: Preparing Nurses to Work With Veterans

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Abstract

The Joining Forces Initiative challenges nursing programs throughout the country to develop curriculum that addresses the unique healthcare issues facing veterans. It is imperative that Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students acquire the knowledge that will help them to care for veterans in all areas of nursing practice. This article describes a retrospective evaluation of the effectiveness of a dedicated core curricular course in increasing awareness of the unique issues facing today's veteran. It also discusses whether nursing students gain an appreciation for their role in helping veterans gain access to available resources and achieve maximum health and wellness.

Introduction

There are 22.7 million living veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans' Analysis and Statistics, 2014). These veterans have diverse healthcare needs related to their military service, and nurses are in an ideal position to address these needs. It is imperative that Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students acquire the knowledge that will help them to care for veterans in all areas of nursing practice. Supported by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), American Nurses Association (ANA), American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), National League for Nursing (NLN), National Organization for Associate Degree Nursing (NOADA), and other stakeholders, the Joining Forces Initiative (WhiteHouse.gov., n.d.) asks schools of nursing to pledge to incorporate content related to veterans' healthcare needs into their curriculum (AACN, 2014). This article describes how the RN to BSN program at American Public University System (APUS) responded to the Joining Forces Initiative by developing the core curriculum course *Caring for Today's Veterans* and retrospectively evaluates how well the curriculum prepares BSN nurses to work effectively with the veteran population.

Literature Review

In a study of over 18,000 veterans, Nelson, Starkebaum, and Reiber (2007), report that 89% of veterans receive no healthcare through the VA system. This statistic clearly demonstrates the need for nurses in all settings to have knowledge of veterans' healthcare issues. The health concerns of veterans are often unique to their service history. For example, many Vietnam veterans are living with the long-term effects of exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant used to thin the jungle canopy for combat operations. Veterans who fought in the Gulf War may have the vague, medically unexplained symptoms of Gulf War Syndrome (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, War-Related Injury and Illness Study Center, 2014). Today's younger veterans, surviving injuries that 15 years ago were often fatal, are living with multiple limb amputations (Robbins, Vreeman, Sothman, Wilson, & Oldridge, 2009) and the invisible scourge of traumatic brain injury (Lawhorne & Philpot, 2011). Veterans in all conflicts often struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These veteran-specific healthcare issues may go unnoticed within the civilian healthcare system, as few veterans offer information about combat experiences to their healthcare providers. Knowledge of the long-term health problems unique to combat zones can help nurses provide better care for veterans, as well as direct veterans to resources of which they may not be aware.

The asynchronous online environment of this 8-week course allows students from various areas throughout the country to collaborate in learning about the resources available to veterans, and areas where improvement may be needed. The perspective from which students view the discussion questions is broadened because their classmates are reviewing veterans' resources from a wide geographical area. This broadening of the experiential component of the class supports online and adult-learning pedagogy by providing students with opportunities to study and evaluate real-life situations related to the care of veterans (Pappas, 2014).

Nursing Program

American Public University System (APUS) consists of two universities: American Military University (AMU) and American Public University (APU). AMU, opened in 1991, was founded to meet the educational needs of active-duty military personnel. As enrollment grew, APU was added in 2002 to serve the civilian population in the public service sector (American Public University System, 2014). Combined, APUS has a student enrollment of over 100,000 students in 97 degree programs. All nursing courses are offered completely online, are 8 weeks in duration, and begin monthly.

The nursing program, serving both AMU and APU, opened in January 2011. It is a degree-progression program serving nurses who have earned an associate degree in nursing and are pursuing a baccalaureate education. The baccalaureate degree program was accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) in April 2012 for an initial period of 5 years. The current nursing program registration is just under 200 students.

Course Development

In pledging to the Joining Forces Initiative, the APUS nursing program agreed to incorporate veteran-specific content into its curriculum by 2014. This broad pledge offered two clear options. Content could be added to existing classes that address patient assessment, pharmacology and pathophysiology, or a new core course could be developed and added to the curriculum. The program director discussed these options with the nursing faculty and the Dean of the School of Public Service and Health. Since there was room in the core curriculum, the decision was made to create a course dedicated to the care of veterans, to be taken by all nursing students. In this way, students would be able to focus totally on veterans' health content for a full 8 weeks without the distractions of consolidating the content with other important conceptual nursing content.

APUS's course *Caring for Today's Veterans* was developed by the program director, a veteran herself, with input from the nursing faculty, particularly those who are also veterans. Webinars offered by the AACN to participating schools were a valuable resource in course development. Many ideas came from a webinar describing a veterans' care course at Brigham Young University, *Veterans Health Care: Caring for Today's Veterans* (Brigham Young University School of Nursing, 2014). Although this brick-and-mortar course is very different from APUS's online course, several student activities were easily adapted to the online environment. The APUS course was offered for the first time in January 2013, and as of this writing, a total of 45 students have taken the course.

A unique characteristic of *Caring for Today's Veterans* is that it is open to students in other health-related programs. Students from Public Health or Emergency and Disaster Management have taken this course, and have the opportunity to gain a nurse's caring perspective, which will help them in their own practice. Conversely, nursing students are exposed to the viewpoints of those in other healthcare disciplines, thus expanding their perspective as well.

Course Content

Students begin the course by reviewing statistical data related to the veteran population. They learn about the culture of the veteran and military community and study combat injuries, including Agent Orange exposure, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Students also evaluate unique issues facing female veterans, such as military sexual trauma (MST).

There are several learning activities that expose students to veterans and the resources that are available to them within their communities. Students begin by interviewing several veterans. They visit veterans' service centers, such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled Veterans, or United Service Organizations. They research or visit their local Veterans' Administration hospital as well as a veterans' memorial in their community. They view a movie related to veterans and consider the portrayal of veterans in the media. In the culminating assignment, students select a veterans' healthcare topic of particular interest and write a research paper.

Students have three opportunities to reflect on their learning during the course. In Week 3, they are asked to summarize their learning up to that point. In Week 8, they reflect on the key learning during the entire course. The end-of-course survey, present in every core nursing course, has four qualitative questions based on the Appreciate Inquiry Model (Preskill & Catsambis, 2006). Reflective practice in nursing contributes to the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and allows opportunity for evaluation of learning outcomes (Ross et al., 2014).

Impact

By creating a course dedicated to veterans' health issues, the APUS nursing program director and faculty hoped to create an environment in which students gained a true appreciation of the unique healthcare issues facing veterans. They also wanted the students to finish the course with the knowledge that veterans are a part of their patient population in all healthcare environments, even though they are not always identified as such. And finally, it was critical to the course development team that students emerge from the course with a new understanding of the critical role that nurses play in positively influencing the healthcare of America's veterans.

A retrospective review of student comments in Weeks 3 and 8 of the course and the end-of-course survey indicate that these goals are being achieved. *Caring for Today's Veterans* has had a significant impact on APUS's students. Because the learning activities are relatively open-ended, students are able to visit destinations of their choice and share these experiences with their classmates, enriching the knowledge of all. The comments below, from students in Weeks 3 and 8 of the course, reflect achievement of student learning goals.

Week 3 Forum Comments

- “The more I learned about PTSD and traumatic brain injury, [the more] I learned that it is not easy. Most of the veterans are still re-living what they endured.”
- “If I am able to share or help one person with any of the sites that I have learned in this course, this excites me.”
- “My hope is that, armed with the information I have gathered, I will no longer contribute to the stereotyping this [homeless vets] segment of the population and instead do what I can to be involved and part of the solution.”

Week 8 “Lessons Learned” Forum Comments

- “The Vet Center is one mile from my home and I did not even know it was there until I started this class. I would use the center myself. It was clean, seemed well organized, had great staff, and felt like a non-judgmental environment. If I go there again I would like to see if any volunteer opportunities are available.”
- “Although learning about these types of programs during my visit at the American Legion was educational, the most important aspect I was able to take away was how ordinary citizens, such as myself, can help. Simple tasks such as grocery shopping, child care, fixing the family car or cooking a meal are just small ways in which any of us can help out a family in exchange for the sacrifice they have made for the rest of us.”
- “I am so thankful for these centers that help people like my grandfather and really give them their life back. I now have a better understanding of what true sacrifice is and what it means to give back. I was really overwhelmed what these centers are doing for these men and women, and I am so happy to have had the experience to learn what they do for all of our veterans.”
- “Knowing if a patient is a vet and if they have served in war will help me understand...the health issues they may have, especially emotionally.”
- “This class has been instrumental in how I view the healthcare system for veterans.”
- “This class has reminded me...to thoroughly assess my veteran patients so that my plan of care can address all the healthcare needs that they may be facing.”
- “This class has opened my eyes to a population of patients that have a unique set of needs. I can be a better nurse for them.”
- “This class has been an eye-opener of [the] unique needs of our veterans’ population.”
- “Even having been in the military I still did not know even half of what I have learned in this class.”

Throughout the country, the Joining Forces Initiative is having a broad impact on nursing practice. Recognition that war wounds can often go undetected prompted the American Academy of Nursing’s (AAN) Military and Veterans Expert Panel to launch the *Have you ever served in the military?* campaign. This campaign encourages all nurses to ask this question of their patients. A pocket card to help nurses assess patients for military-related health conditions is available at www.haveyoueverserved.com (Cipriano, 2014).

Conclusion

Baccalaureate nursing programs prepare students to assume both formal and informal leadership roles in their profession. An online learning environment such as the one at APUS provides an excellent opportunity for faculty to prepare tomorrow's nurse leaders to provide care to veterans and to use this knowledge to help their colleagues do the same. The Joining Forces Initiative continues to provide opportunities not only for veterans and their families, but for those who care for them.

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