

A conceptual model for academic success of military nursing students of color

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ABSTRACT

Veterans continue to enter the nursing landscape, diversifying the nursing workforce. However, it is unclear as to best practices for supporting these prior military, medical professionals in their academic success. At one, private, not-for-profit institution, Gasman and Arroyo's (2014) HBCU-centered student support framework was applied to the case of a military student of color. The student, key faculty, and mentors that interacted with the student of color were interviewed. Mentoring activity logs were also reviewed to corroborate interview data. The findings indicated that not all of Gasman & Arroyo's original factors seemed relevant to the student of color, with additional ones more applicable to a non-traditional, prior military veteran with medical experience. Recognition of military medical background, program diversity, and opportunity for mentoring from cultural-competent faculty and mentors are crucial to academic success, graduation, and NCLEX-RN passage and transition to practice.

Key Words: Military and veteran nursing students, corpsman and military medic, student of color, academic support framework

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INTRODUCTION

Legislation presented by both the California Board of Registered Nursing and the State of California seeks to acknowledge and embrace the multi-faceted skill sets military veterans bring to the nursing field (California Board of Registered Nursing, 2015; the State of California, 2012). At the same time, a lack of diversity within the nursing field consistently seems to present a challenge (AACN, 2014). And while military veterans entering nursing school contribute to increasing diversity in nursing; racially, ethnically, and through other identifiers, only recently has literature explored the academic need of veterans of color in nursing programs (Van Hofwegan, Eckfield, & Wambuguh, 2019). There is no clear verdict as to how to support these talented military veterans entering nursing programs. Further, it is not well understood how the unique challenges of students of color may also contribute to his or her academic success.

A previous study (McNeal, Tontz, Smith, Reyes, & Parsons, 2019) shared that military corpsman and medics complete a rigorous basic healthcare training as part of their initial military training prior to working as an enlisted health care professional (Wilson et al., 2016). Additionally, the high level of leadership development training these corpsmen undergo makes them a highly valued partner in the interdisciplinary health care team. The objective of this pilot case study was to explore the academic experience of a military veteran student of color in a nursing program through the lens of an existing academic support framework.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Veterans to BSN program

An additional academic track for an accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree program was developed and designed to increase the number of medics and corpsmen who apply to, enroll in, and graduate from the BSN program. The university program included student-veteran access to academic counseling, professional and academic nursing-related workshops, and participation in a nurse mentoring program all intended to increase student retention and graduation and in congruence with the California State Board of Registered Nursing (California Board of Registered Nursing, 2015; the State of California, 2012). The success of the program, as well as the outcomes of nurse mentoring have been previously documented (McNeal, Smith, & Tontz, 2019; McNeal, Tontz, Smith, Reyes, & Parsons, 2019).

Military corpsman & medics

U.S. military personnel who trained as medics and corpsmen have significant training and experiences that begin with an introductory nursing course training lasting approximately 14 weeks, followed by more advanced training to include didactic and clinical hours, ranging from 50 days to 12 months depending on the military branch (Wilson et al., 2016). Due to the high scope of practice within their military occupation specialty these individuals upon completion of at least one year of active duty bedside care in the State of California, U.S., can apply by examination to take the NCLEX-PN, the board exam to become a licensed vocational nurse (Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians, 2020).

Conceptual framework for academic success

In alignment with the person-centered principles espoused by the nursing faculty, the Veterans to BSN program was designed and developed to place the student at the center of focus in addressing learning needs. When faculty at this institution embraced the Planetree Model of person-centeredness (Planetree International, 2019), strategies were then developed and implemented to ensure student success. Embracing a person-centered approach, the Planetree philosophy filters all decisions through three focused lenses: empowerment, dignity, and compassion, with an underlying foundation in well-being for all. Gasman and Arroyo (2014) describe a conceptual framework for supporting students of color at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) that embraces this Planetree philosophy. In short, the model assumes a diverse set of students enter university, supported by the ease of access and affordability to higher education. An interactive process takes place between the supportive educational environment and three processes and outcomes: identity formation, values cultivation, and achievement with a positive, supportive environment positively impacting each process and outcomes and a negative environment negatively impacting, respectively. The ultimate outcome of the model suggests success in the form of graduation, career attainment, and civic engagement.

STUDY OVERVIEW

This pilot research designed to test the feasibility of the conceptual framework published previously by Gasman & Arroyo (2014) for academic success in its use for nursing students was completed over the time period of April 2017-June 2019, during which a military student of color completed the nursing program with the Veterans to BSN program at a non-profit, private nursing school in California, U.S.. Institutional Review Board review was sought and the effort was approved with exempt status (IRB-FY18-19-791). The student, in this case, was a participant in the Veterans to BSN program. While not central to this study, the student also participated in nurse mentoring intended to match a prior or active duty military corpsman or medic with a practicing nurse to help retain and transition these individuals through the completion of their BSN degree. The framework from Gasman & Arroyo shares factors that contribute to the student of color's success. The framework is not specifically designed to address the unique issues that veteran students of color may face while pursuing their nursing education. Because of the unique background and skills that the corpsmen bring to their nursing education, it is imperative to further explore how these factors are impacting their education. For nursing education to continue to support diversity, persons of color, male nurses, and those with a demonstrated commitment to the healthcare field, a call to identify the factors that contribute to this unique group's success is necessary.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study approach was chosen to explore how the student's environment, including the faculty and mentoring staff that he interacted with, impacted his academic development and retention, thus answering the question how does the student's nursing school environment & experience impact his or her academic success? In conjunction with Creswell (2018) and Miles and Huberman's (2014) protocol for case study design, this study can be

described as both a critical case and a convenience case. Potential value learned and applied to other military corpsmen of color cases is notable, and the case is convenient in that the student presented himself in a state of academic probation and potential suspension. Aspects of the original model have been described in the conceptual framework, but are further explained in the Findings section.

Participants and recruitment

Sampling criteria for participant selection varied. In order to participate, the student had to identify as a student of color and be a corpsman in the Veterans to BSN program. The student in this study was a convenience sample and had been exhibiting some academic difficulty. Faculty and mentors were selected based on having interacted with, counseled, or instructed the student of color chosen for the study. One student, three faculty members, and one nurse mentor volunteered to participate in the study.

Data collection and ethical procedures

Data were drawn from primary sources to include interviews as well as content from activity logs from the mentor and the student. Sample interview protocol (Table 1) was designed to explore the relevance of Gasman and Arroyo's (2014) conceptual framework for supporting the academic success of students of color at an HBCU to a non-for-profit, adult accelerated nursing program. Similar interview protocols were developed for faculty and mentor. All interviews were conducted using video conferencing, and video and audio recordings automatically transcribed the content into text. Length of interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes and were conducted at the participant's choice of location virtually, usually their private home. To control for inter-rater reliability in interviewing technique, researchers reviewed any questionable content from participant interviews. Data from the student was triangulated with content and observations from his faculty and mentor for credibility. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participant's identities in the Findings section and are identified racially to help illuminate racially driven comments.

Data analysis procedures

Our data analysis used an iterative, spiraling process that proceeded from general to more special observations (Creswell, 2018). Transcripts were first uploaded as a Word document in a cloud file storage site and coded line by line into significant statements by the primary researcher using the "add comment" feature within the transcript. As a secondary validation for trustworthiness, another researcher reviewed and coded the transcripts as well, and where there was a discrepancy, discussion occurred. These coded transcripts were then printed, and researchers met to discuss how each statement fit together with the initial model.

Significant statements related to both the conceptual framework as well as new statements were collapsed into themes and categories to support, refute, or add to the existing support model. The descriptive model, statements, themes, and clusters were then reviewed and corroborated by participants in the study to check for accuracy and validity.

FINDINGS THAT SUPPORT A MILITARY & VETERAN ACADEMIC SUCCESS FRAMEWORK

This case study was based on in-depth interviews with four participants including the student of color, three faculty members, and one mentor. There were over 176 significant statements extracted from the interview transcripts related to the framework, and these statements were categorized into themes and clusters, comparing them to the initial framework. A descriptive model presented in Figure-1 displays a visual representation of the thematic relationships. These themes include: (1) supportive environment; (1a) program diversity; (1b) cultural privilege; 1(c) recognition of military-learned skill set; (2) institutional entry point: relative institutional accessibility and competitive nature; (3) iterative processes and outcomes: achievement, identity formation and values cultivation; (3a) racial and ethnic identity formation; (3b) veteran identity formation; (3c) intellectual identity formation; (3d) values cultivation; (4) grand outcome: holistic success.

Supportive environment

As with the Gasman and Arroyo (2014) model, the school environment seemed to moderate the other components and the process of the proposed model. That being, as the supportive environment increased or decreased, so did the effectiveness of the model.

Similar to Fleming's (1984) pioneering supportive environment studies, the opportunity for relationships with faculty, academic counselor, mentors, and coaches also were described in this case study as one component of supportive environment.

My mentor was by my side the whole time, and that helps tremendously. She was always available for me to talk to her and was reaching out and advocating for me as much as she could (student).

Additionally, a climate of student development was also consistent with Fleming's work. However, the student in this study did not describe extracurricular activities as being important. This may be because many of the students in this nursing program, including our participant, was non-traditional in age, had a family, and was working two jobs while in school to support himself as a single father. Our study suggests that additional components may be more telling, including program diversity (i.e., faculty, staff, & peers), faculty understanding of personal cultural privilege, and recognition of military-learned skill sets.

Program diversity

Faculty of color describe the existence of few students of color in the program, and the student describes feeling isolated like the only black student in the program with very few faculty instructors of color. "There could have been other students (black) across cohorts, but I felt like the only one (black student) in the program" (student). Ironically, a white faculty, participant # 1, describes diversity in the context of having many different types of students and the presence of nursing leadership of color. "If we're talking about three campuses. Yes, look who we have. I think we have diversity. I think the diverse populations and leadership roles".

Cultural privilege

The student describes feeling tokenized (Haskins, et al., 2013) and stereotyped (McGee, 2016) in regards to his level of intellect or engagement in the program.

There were people that were surprised to find out that I was...how smart I was at times...but that's been happening all my life. So, it's almost expected at this point. I would always get comments (from faculty) like, "Oh, you're, a sleeper or smarter".

Both of these forms of racial microaggressions are known to cause increased heightened anxiety and bouts of anger, feelings of being an impostor, and compulsive work ethic (McGee, 2015). Many of the white faculty in the program describes a form of colorblindness and treating all students the same, aside from ethnicity or race. "I think in general everyone is treated fairly equal at our university. I really do. I don't feel that we single anybody out for any differences. I really do feel that (white faculty # 2).

Another faculty states her frustration in a student of color's inability or desire to ask for help.

Until the military person of color opens up, tells you why...gives you that trust so that you can actually help them in the areas you need, you're like swatting flies, trying to get the point..., trying to say, Hey, you're a talented person. You have knowledge. Tell me why this is occurring? Help me understand what you're thinking. Tell me what you mean so I can help you. I believe in you, and I am not going to change that (white faculty #1).

This level of cultural privilege is very telling. One reason for this lack of help-seeking behavior, according to Guiffrida and Douthit (2010), is that Black students often perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive. Some of the ways of being insensitive can include stereotyping and tokenizing black students. For these reasons, it is not surprising that students of color are hesitant to approach faculty for help and may seek academic advice from family, friends, or academic counselors who are racial/ethnic minorities than from White faculty (Guiffrida, 2005; Sanchez, Marder, Berry, & Ross, 1992).

Recognition of military-learned skill set

Unique to the student studied in this case, a supportive environment must include recognition of the student's past military experience and how it informs the way they learn new nursing skills. It is clear the student believes he has prior medical knowledge that should not be repeated in coursework, and his mentor concurs in helping bridge and make this experience relevant.

There's a lot of stuff that we shouldn't have to go through again like the fundamentals and health assessment...our scope of practice is...like by the time we want to be a nurse, pretty broad. So, I don't know what can be done for that. It may not even be on a school level thing...maybe like state level.

Institutional entry point: Relative institutional accessibility and competitive nature

Gasman and Arroyo's (2014) study claims that diverse students enter the HBCU model due to accessible tuition and admissions policies. While the institution in this study is described as "open access," the nursing school admissions process is very competitive, with a secondary admissions process in place only admitting students with very high TEAS and math, science, and

writing scores. The program was in place to recruit and support military corpsman and medics to the nursing program, and an additional admissions point was given to this population to help provide access based on their military medical background. However, we believe the student population at the institution is relatively diverse to begin with, reflecting the diverse set of military and veteran personnel entering the military workforce and into higher education.

Iterative processes and outcomes: Achievement, identity formation, and values cultivation

Gasman & Arroyo's (2014) study states that identity formation, values cultivation, and achievement iteratively influence each other and are moderated by the environment. This study found identity formation was impacted by racial and veteran feeling isolation. The student described feeling like the only student of color and also that his or her veteran identity was important, but not always recognized by faculty.

Racial/ethnic identity formation

The student in the study also describes feeling isolated as the only black student in the program. "I mean to see others (black males) in the nursing program is encouraging. But, to see so few, isn't". However, the student shared that he only felt isolated because of the lack of diversity in numbers of other students of color. Faculty frequently assumed or perceived him to be isolated just because he was the only one and could easily be noticed if he missed a class period. A salient finding in this area is that the white faculty describes similar color-blindness in her work with students. Conversely, the faculty of color has a deeper relatability in how a student of color navigates a predominantly white faculty. That being, there is a "testing period" where students of color question whether the faculty will stand by him or her or with the system. "The 'testing period' is across the spectrum wherever I've taught. The 'testing period' where black students try to test to see if I am legit. Will I stand with them or will I side with the system?" (black faculty).

Veteran identity formation

It seems clear that the student perceives certain parts of the program as supporting his identity as a veteran in the way specific staff interacts with him and provides visible ways to identify the student as a veteran (student-veteran uniform patch). However, faculty still seem to operate from a deficit model, the student "not having all the pieces", which they believe can lead to dissociation and isolation in the program.

I think the challenge when working with military veterans and whether or not we are speaking of color on it, is they feel isolated. They don't have the same backgrounds. They don't have quite the puzzle pieces to put together. Perhaps people of color even more...even more than our other veteran students feel that isolation and dissociation (white faculty # 1).

Intellectual identity formation

While there is no direct data to support positive intellectual identity formation from this study, this area, like the original framework, seems relevant based on the changing demographics

of faculty of color that “look like” the students in the project. Intellectual development for students of color seems positively linked to access to faculty of color (Rucker and Gendrin, 2003; Jett, 2013).

Values cultivation

It was evident that certain values of the military/veteran student were recognized: teamwork and leadership abilities in the way the students collaborated, took charge of the situation and followed through. The student's mentor also shared that nurse identity reinforced these values, and she worked to support a transition to nurse identity by developing these values.

I don't look at race or cultural identity as much as I am more focused in helping to shape the identity as a nurse or even as a student nurse and then developing that into a nurse (mentor).

The student did describe conservatism or social justice in the study, but only in the context that many of his community health nursing courses included concepts around sensitivity to race and culture. Thus, as proposed in the original framework, conservatism and black tradition did not seem relevant in this case study to the student. However, strong statements about military nursing students being influential leaders and team-oriented were evident.

I had two veterans last quarter at my free clinic. When they came in I told them “I want you to use the skills that you have learned”, and I will forever sing praises of the two guys because they took a project that I didn't even know where to begin, used their military skills and background they had from the military to organize that project and path, and wrote down the entire thing and passed it onto the next group. All I simply did was hand them the textbook (black faculty).

This is not surprising considering the military background of the individual and was consistent with corpsman nursing students scoring high on the ATI leadership exams (McNeal, G. J., Smith, T., & Tontz, P. (2019).

Achievement

This factor was not explored significantly in the study. Still, coincidentally the student's persistence is relevant as he involuntarily stopped out several times during the program due to low achieving course grades until the failed course was offered again, and he could rejoin a new cohort.

Grand outcome: Holistic success

The student in the study completed his bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) degree and attended his white coat graduation ceremony. The student is currently completing his Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) and is now precepting other student-nurses who are veterans (student, March 23, 2020, personal communication).

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This pilot study included a limited number of students, staff, and faculty participants; generalization must be used with caution. Further, access to corpsman of the color in the nursing school is low. The sample was also taken from one university setting in California, U.S., and

may reveal differing results when combined with other institution's data or from regional institutions. The pilot is the first study known to describe an academic support model for military veteran nursing students of color. A more thorough case study analysis with multiple students of color may reveal a more comprehensive description of best practices for supporting these students and advisable that this descriptive model be further tested.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Program diversity, racial identity development, and intellectual identity are closely intertwined. When students of color are provided with positive same-race role models, they are shielded from negative stereotypes (Fries-Britt & Turner 2002; Perna et al. 2009). The nursing program where this student attends seems to be lacking racial and ethnic diversity according to the student, and this seems consistent with AACN's (2019) most recent report that states that of the 212,727 generic BSN students nationally, only 9.7% or 20,567 are of Black/African-American background. A further effort needs to be taken to continue to diversify nursing campuses by hiring faculty and staff of color, especially as students continue to diversify across racial and ethnic lines.

A competency-based education approach consistent with current higher education trends needs to recognize the prior learning experiences of these military learners in order to capture their previous medical experience. Allowing the student to demonstrate competency for prior military learning will allow the student to feel more engaged in the learning process, moving quicker to graduation.

Lastly, an integrative approach for faculty training around cultural competency must be addressed. These trainings should incorporate key concepts of military and veteran culture, but also include self-reflexive training to understand one's own cultural privileges and racial identity development and how it impacts the learning environment for these students.

CONCLUSION

The descriptive framework presented in this case study used an existing conceptual model based on a thorough literature review of best practices for supporting students of color at historically black colleges & universities. The framework proposed also embeds person-centered principles core to Planetree International in placing the student at the center of the learning process. This exploratory study produced a descriptive model regarding the academic success of military nursing students of color for further testing. While many of the initial components of the Gasman and Arroyo's (2014) model hold true, additional components critical to the success of military corpsman of color became evident and are shared. These included recognition of military-learned skill sets, cultural privilege, and competency of the faculty that interact with the student, and student-veteran identity development. It is hoped this study will provide insight to nurse educators and programs into ways to support the academic success for military nursing students of color. The study also provides the opportunity for the faculty who work with these students to self-reflect and continue to learn of one's own cultural privilege and in developing a person-centered, culturally competent teaching philosophy.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Table 1

Sample Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Student-Veteran of Color

Supportive Environment

1. How do you find the environment of the university and the nursing program as a student of color and former military member?
2. How has the Veterans to BSN contributed to that?
3. Have you made any significant relationships/friendships beyond the classroom while here?
4. How does extracurricular activities contribute to your success?
5. Have you found that you feel you are treated with respect and dignity while in the nursing program and progressing? By students? Faculty? Staff? School leadership?

Identity Formation

1. How if any, has the nursing department supported or empowered your racial, ethnic or veteran identity?
2. Tell me about the level of diversity of instructors, staff, mentors and faculty you work with.
3. Would you consider yourself a change-oriented leader? If so, where does that identity stem from?

Values Cultivation

1. Do you find that the university and nursing program show compassion for racial and social injustices?
2. Tell me about your experience with the program as it relates to conservatism? More conservative? Liberal or open?

Achievement

1. Do you feel that your prior military corpsman background impacted in any way your achievement in the program?
2. What if any impact did the nursing mentoring program have on you?
3. How might the diversity or lack thereof, of the program impact your achievement?
4. Did you feel like the only student of color in the program?
5. Tell me about how information was taught to you? Do you feel like it was culturally sensitive to both your military background and your identity as an African American?

Appendix B

Figure 1. Descriptive model for the academic success of a black military nursing student

