

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# GW NURSING

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## THE BATTLE AT HOME

HOW NURSES ARE  
TREATING VETERANS





# SERVING THOSE

## Making an impact on nursing and veterans' education

BY LAURA BRADDICK

**Veterans' lives are defined by service. For those who choose to become nurses, it's a natural fit. Nursing continues their service in a new way.**

Since 2014, more than 100 former service members have taken the first steps to become nurses through GW Nursing's veterans BSN option.

With tailored resources and dedicated mentors, the program provides an accessible, accelerated and supportive track for veterans who are transitioning back to civilian life and want to work in a profession where their experience and strengths make an impact.

Those who work with them say veterans bring leadership, teamwork and a hard work ethic to the classroom, benefiting their

non-veteran classmates. With an NCLEX pass rate of 94 percent for this unique population of students, these graduates translate their invaluable experience in the armed forces into the practice of nursing.

As the program grows, so too does its impact in shaping best practices for educating veterans—sharing knowledge with other institutions in increasing and improving educational opportunities across the board.

"Veterans deserve the best," said Associate Professor Billinda Tebbenhoff, who oversaw the launch of the BSN veterans option. "They were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in service of our country. Offering them some time, support and opportunities to build community as they attend nursing school is the least that we could do."



KALISA  
MARTIN  
NAVY RESERVES  
10+ YEARS

KWAKU  
ASANTE  
ARMY  
7 YEARS

BRADLEY  
CROFTS  
AIR FORCE  
26 YEARS

# THE WHO SERVED

## THE RIGHT THING TO DO

Recruiting more veterans was already a priority for GW Nursing when the opportunity to apply for a grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) came along. The mission: Make an easier path for service members to obtain a nursing degree.

“We had an initiative that was focused on recruiting more veterans,” said Mary Jean Schumann, associate professor and principal investigator on the initial grant. “HRSA was seeking to help schools establish the best practices and resources to enable veterans-focused programs to be successful.”

GW Nursing was selected as one of 31 schools to implement such a program. The grant funded resources for recruitment, admissions, enrollment and support services

of new students.

Through this initiative, GW Nursing admits veterans regardless of whether they have had previous military medical training and who likely have not received a bachelor’s degree. These individuals are fully integrated into the school’s accelerated BSN program. Veterans who took relevant courses through military training may receive academic credit toward prerequisites, affording them quicker entry into the program.

“These vets come in with as few as 60 hours of academic credit,” said Dr. Schumann. “They can transfer credit for many of those courses. For example, if they took an anatomy and physiology class during basic training, that class was probably very similar to the prerequisite course we offer.”

Of the 107 veterans admitted since

2014, only 38 possessed at least a bachelor’s degree prior to entry. The remainder met the criteria of 60 credit hours and all the required prerequisite courses. Of the veterans admitted, 48 percent had military training to prepare them for direct patient care.

Prospective students are assigned a dedicated admissions counselor who helps them assemble and review their joint services and academic transcripts. If there are gaps in credits or prerequisites, the counselor helps students create a plan to address them. Once enrolled, students can complete the program in 15 months.

“Most of the students coming into the program were not field medics,” said Dr. Schumann. “We took the approach of ‘We don’t care if what you did in the service was medical-related or not.’ >>

## Here to help.

### Joe Rebideaux

BSN '17

Joseph Rebideaux, BSN '17, served as an Army combat medic for eight years before leaving the service and earning a bachelor's degree in history and political science.

"After a short break, I realized I missed taking care of people," he said.

Of all the nursing education programs Mr. Rebideaux explored, GW's BSN veterans option was the best fit.

"They were very approachable," he said. "They were receptive to my experience in the Army and as a medic."

The advisers were also straightforward about the rigor.

"They told me, 'This is a tough program, but it is doable,'" he said. "You've been through worse. You can handle this, and we're here to help."

Mr. Rebideaux's time in the BSN program was vastly different from his previous college experience. The courses were more challenging—in a good way—and faculty and staff provided an invaluable support system, he said.

"They took a vested interest in making sure I was successful," he said. "It was a personal—almost one-on-one—approach."

Like all of the program's students, Mr. Rebideaux was offered the opportunity to complete his clinical training at a Veterans Affairs health care facility, which he accepted.

"It was a really meaningful experience to bond with people who needed help and who shared the same or similar experiences as you," he said.

While his Army service introduced him to health care, GW's program gave him the foundation to be a nurse and deliver expert care. The program's emphasis on humanistic and holistic approaches to nursing prepared him to deliver true patient-centered care. [GW](#)

"If you're interested and can meet the admission criteria, come in. We're going to integrate you and help you be successful."

### NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

The program's flexibility and admissions counseling are just the first steps. GW Nursing takes seriously veterans' transitions from military settings to an academic one.

While all students coming into the program have taken some college courses—whether online, part-time or at community colleges—most have never been fully immersed in the culture of higher education. Once enrolled, they are in a full-time program next to classmates who may have just completed bachelor's degrees, said Gretchen Wiersma, veterans and military faculty liaison.

### BSN Veteran Students BY THE NUMBERS



NCLEX PASSAGE RATE OF VETERAN BSN GRADUATES



ADMITTED VETERANS WHO HAVE MILITARY TRAINING TO PREPARE THEM FOR DIRECT PATIENT CARE

"Part of the full-time academia experience requires a lot of organization and time management around coursework that is determined by the individual," said Dr. Wiersma, a veteran who served in the Army. "You are not told what to do and how to do it. This is a change from the military where there is so much structure. While the student veteran might be organized and have great time management, they might not understand the breadth of what is needed starting out. But with support and a semester or so of exposure, they figure it out."

To assist with this transition and ensure their success, veteran students are provided with dedicated support services such as advising, coaching and mentoring from a support team composed primarily of nursing faculty members who are veterans.

In addition to adjusting to an academic setting as students, some veterans face challenges and needs unique to a military background. They may struggle with the relative lack of structure in an academic institution, for example, or have financial

difficulties. Faculty, coaches, mentors and civilian students all support the transition to a significantly less-structured but otherwise rigorous environment. Mentoring covers everything from managing living arrangements, making social adjustments, stress management techniques, time management and study skills, as well as mental health counseling.

"I offer a listening ear, strategies for studying, self-care and encouragement," said Paul Tschudi, a transition coach and mentor who served as an Army medic and surgical tech during the Vietnam War. "Veterans are used to clearly defined instructions and expectations. Most have not been immersed in a university culture before entering our program."

Veterans as a group tend to be older and have more life experience, which, he said, may add to feelings of isolation. They also miss being a part of a cohesive unit, with buddies whom they trust to have their backs and work effectively with as a team.

"We also create opportunities for cohort cohesion, outside activities and team meetings," said Mr. Tschudi. "We continually search out community resources and support. And as veterans ourselves, we have a better understanding of the unique challenges that they may face."

To combat isolation, peer support activities are encouraged. Coaches provide monthly formal and informal meetings of the veterans in each cohort, as well as periodic gatherings inclusive of veterans in all cohorts, with the goal of creating a community of mutual support. The veterans' lounge at GW Nursing's Virginia Science and Technology Campus in Ashburn provides a space for social gatherings and study sessions.

"We provide monthly meetings where students can talk about some of their challenges and what they are doing to tackle the issues at hand," said Veterans BSN Project Coordinator and Instructor Carolyn Cummings, who served more than 20 years in the Air Force. "We routinely invite veteran students more senior to them to talk about what was helpful in addressing changes."

In addition to the tailored support services, all faculty members teaching veteran students receive orientation and training to better understand and meet their learning needs. New faculty members are required to

have one-on-one sessions regarding teaching and learning methods to address challenges that surface among veteran students.

“One need identified by the faculty and addressed through faculty development has been a better appreciation of military culture that includes branches of service, level of rank and the rank structure,” said Dr. Schumann.

### IMPACT FROM CLASS TO TRIAGE

Full integration into the larger accelerated BSN program from the beginning through completion is key to the veteran students’ transition into the civilian workforce. However, this integration does not solely benefit veterans.

“Because of their world experience, their military-acquired maturity, diversity, teamwork mentality and opportunities for leadership in the field, veterans unquestionably bring a lot of value to the non-veteran students,” said Dr. Schumann. “They also stick to the philosophy of ‘leave no man behind.’ If a classmate is struggling, they will be the first to offer to help that person.”

Veteran BSN students are also used to working under pressure.

“They have a ‘failure is not an option’ mentality,” said Mr. Tschudi. “They ask questions. They have a respect for authority and hierarchy. They often bring leadership skills. They are used to serving their community, their team and the nation.”

Integration of veterans into the accelerated BSN program has boosted diversity as well, increasing the male student body population from 11 percent to 16 percent, higher than the national average.

The value veterans contribute to others and their environments doesn’t end at graduation either.

“Veterans bring a unique level of commitment and dedication to the profession,” said Dr. Tebbenhoff.

These attributes make them sought after and highly valued by employers.

“I hear from alums who work with vets, and they say that they understand what it is to show up, be responsible and do the job,” said Dr. Schumann.

“They’re not rattled by things others might be,” said Dr. Schumann.

BSN faculty members recall teaching a class when students saw a man injure himself while performing electrical repairs outside.

Two veteran students ran out without hesitation to stay with him and provide basic care until emergency services personnel arrived. This is just one example of the value they bring to the profession before they even get to the bedside.

### LEADING THE WAY

Those involved with the veterans BSN initiative are actively establishing and disseminating best practices to benefit other programs.

GW Nursing is currently pursuing membership in the education training alliance of the Virginia Values Veterans initiative spearheaded by the governor’s office.

“We’ve been awarded federal grants and will be presenting around the state to organizations like the Virginia Nurses Association so other institutions can learn from best practices,” said Dr. Wiersma.

Dr. Wiersma credits the collective efforts of the program’s faculty and staff, who are passionate about helping veterans and dedicated to each and every student.

“We have a faculty and mentor team that works closely together to keep close track of our students, learn what their needs are and set the students up for success early on,” she said.

GW Nursing’s philosophical approach of making veterans a priority drives the program’s success, said Dr. Schumann.

“When you take a step back and look at the big picture, a lot of times, veterans struggle for whatever reasons and there might be barriers,” she said. “We need to commit to making extra efforts to remove those barriers for our veterans so they can be successful. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

Supporting veterans, adding qualified and service-oriented nurses to clinical settings, increasing diversity and fostering best practices ultimately benefit everyone, said Dr. Wiersma.

“We consider it an obligation to provide extra support for our veterans,” she said. “They’ve given so much to serve our country. We need to continue to step up and work to understand their challenges and give them the tools to be successful.” <sup>GW</sup>

## We’ll work with you.

### Brendalyn Tavel

BSN '19

When Capt. Brendalyn Tavel set out for her annual training deployment with the Army Reserves in Washington state this summer, she thought she would help with the logistics of units arriving from across the country for the training exercises and expected to be stationed in a hotel room near Tacoma. Those plans quickly changed.

“When two soldiers had to go back home due to unforeseen circumstances, I found myself in the field, which meant no electricity, internet or showers, and living in tents for 18 days,” she said.

While happy to fulfill her new duties, Capt. Tavel, who is enrolled part-time in the RN to BSN program, realized she would not be able to complete her coursework assignments for her online class while stationed in a tent in the middle of the Washington wilderness. She wrote an email to her instructor and got a supportive reply.

“She said, ‘Don’t worry about it. We’ll work with you,’” Capt. Tavel said. “They’ve been so helpful.”

As an officer overseeing a watercraft unit with full-time soldiers assigned to it in the 359th Transportation Battalion, Capt. Tavel dedicates more duty time than a typical reservist. She also works full-time as a cardiac progressive care nurse at Virginia Commonwealth University Health System in Richmond, Virginia.

“Sometimes it’s overwhelming, but I try my hardest to be organized,” she said. “I have friends [in the service] who are afraid to go back to school because of the time constraints. So it’s a great thing that GW has been so supportive of military members and veterans.” <sup>GW</sup>

 Learn more about the BSN veterans option at [go.gwu.edu/vetsBSN](https://go.gwu.edu/vetsBSN)