

PARTNERSHIP TO IMPROVE QUALITY CARE FOR VETERANS: THE VA NURSING ACADEMY

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More than 22 million living veterans reside in the United States. In fact, understanding military culture and the experiences of these veterans is important to their ongoing health care and the unique challenges faced by many. The Veterans Affairs (VA) Nursing Academy began in 2007 to fund pilot partnerships between schools of nursing and local VA health care facilities to better serve our veteran population. Fifteen academic/service partnerships were selected for funding between 2007 and 2009 with the goals of expanding faculty and professional development, increasing nursing student enrollment, providing opportunities for educational and practice innovations, and increasing the recruitment and retention of VA nurses. This article details critical components of the partnership developed between the Birmingham VA Medical Center and the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Nursing, a VA Nursing Academy partnership funded in the 2009 cohort. Site-specific goals of the partnership are described along with a discussion of the framework used to develop the Birmingham VA Nursing Academy, which includes relationship building, engagement, governance, evaluation of outcomes, and sustainability. The logic model developed for the partnership is included, and the interim outputs and outcomes of this practice-academic partnership are detailed, a number of which can be replicated by VAs and schools of nursing across the country. (Index words: Veterans; Partnerships; Nursing education; VA Nursing Academy) J Prof Nurs 31:57–63, 2015.

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“MY EXPERIENCE OF soldiers is that they will go back into the fight to find a prostrate comrade or their wounded officer-& fight their way out again bringing him with them-or as often happened leaving their own lives behind. May I be worthy of them!”

Florence Nightingale's Letter to Dr. Thomas Gillham Hewlett, November 4, 1888.

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Caring for the military has been an integral part of nursing since its earliest history as recounted in many of Nightingale's memoirs and letters (Nightingale, 1853–1893). Today, the U.S. veteran population totals more than 22 million and includes a significant number of aging veterans from World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War as well as those returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn, some with devastating wounds, disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, and severe posttraumatic stress disorder (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). It is imperative that nurses be well educated to care for the unique needs of these veterans and their families.

Goals of the National VA Nursing Academy Partnerships

In response to the ongoing and escalating needs of America's veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs established the Veterans Affairs (VA) Nursing Academy in 2007 to fund pilot partnerships between schools of

nursing and local VA health care facilities (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Nursing Academy Partnerships, 2013). The goals of these partnerships include (a) expand faculty and professional development, (b) increase nursing student enrollment, (c) provide opportunities for educational and practice innovations, and (d) increase recruitment and retention of VA nurses (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009). The VA Nursing Academy initially included 15 competitively selected academic/service partnerships nationally, 5 partnerships that began in academic year 2007, another 5 that began in 2008, and a final cohort of 5 partnerships that started in 2009–2010. Twelve of the original pilot partnerships remain in existence, and no two are alike because great latitude was allowed in their creation (Bowman et al., 2011; www.va.gov/oaa/vana/partners.asp, accessed September 21, 2013).

Conceived in 2005, the VA Nursing Academy was created to address the predicted long-term nursing shortage, projected to be more acute within the VA because of the older average age of nurses and to recruit and retain baccalaureate nurses with the knowledge and skills to improve veteran's health care (Bowman et al., 2011). Although recruitment and retention were the perceived urgent need at that time, the VA Nursing Academy program has evolved well beyond this primary goal. Among the hallmarks of the program is the faculty and professional development that has resulted in educational and practice innovations that improve the quality of health care for veterans and their families. Since 2008, dramatic economic and health reform shifts have refocused the goals of these partnerships toward patient safety and quality and increased access to health care for veterans and their families. Sensitive to public concerns and dedicated to the VA mission, determination has grown to provide not only safe and competent care but also care provided by nurses educated and trained in the unique needs of veterans and their families across hospital and community settings throughout the nation.

The purpose of this article is to describe the framework developed to build the academic/service partnership for the Birmingham VA Nursing Academy, including the evolving partnership outputs and outcomes, and the lessons learned to date that are transforming the care of veterans and their families. As one of the five funded programs in the 2009 cohort, the Birmingham Veterans Affairs Medical Center (BVAMC) and the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Nursing (UABSON) were funded for a 3-year period through 2012. Funding was extended for the latter two cohorts to receive the full 5 years of support in order to meet the full intent of the pilot program.

Partners in the Birmingham VA Nursing Academy

The BVAMC is an acute tertiary care facility, operating 139 beds, located within the University of Alabama at Birmingham's health sciences complex and medical center district. The largest of three VA Medical Centers in the state, this facility provides care in all medical and surgical specialties and subspecialties to the state's

veteran population of 405,600, 75% of whom are wartime veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). The BVAMC served over 60,000 veterans with more than 70,000 outpatient visits during the past year. The facility also has several unique programs including safe harbor palliative care, Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center, mental health intensive care management, and home-based primary care, and it operates nine community-based outpatient clinics in North Alabama. In addition, the BVAMC is one of the 13 blind rehabilitation centers.

The UABSON is part of a research-intensive university and academic health center that prepares nurse leaders to excel as clinicians, researchers, and educators and advances knowledge and high-quality health care in Alabama and worldwide. The school of nursing offers baccalaureate (traditional, second degree, and AD to BSN), master's (traditional, accelerated, and second-degree options), and doctoral (DNP and the state's only doctor of philosophy in nursing) programs, all of which have experienced record growth in recent years. An explicit goal of the school's strategic plan is to expand partnership with the Birmingham VA Medical Center to include shared faculty, joint initiatives, increased funding for various partnership projects, and increased clinical exposure for students. This goal is synergistic with the intent of the VA Nursing Academy.

These two institutions sit across the street from one another and already had a long-standing relationship in terms of regular clinical rotations and preceptor arrangements as well as intermittent joint educational and research efforts. The VA Nursing Academy program, however, has allowed these partner institutions to link institutional missions and governance, create a pipeline for the development of VA Nurse Scholars and faculty, and develop shared clinical, educational, and leadership opportunities for students, staff, and faculty in the BVAMC and UABSON.

Site-Specific Goals of the Birmingham VA Nursing Academy Partnership

Building on prior relationships, the site-specific goals of the VA Nursing Academy between the BVAMC and UABSON are to (a) increase the recruitment and retention of baccalaureate nursing students and graduates into the VA nursing workforce, (b) increase the number of undergraduate nursing students educated about the population-specific needs of veterans through an innovative curriculum emphasizing high-quality, culturally competent care for veterans and their families, (c) develop and expand faculty expertise among VA master's-prepared nurses and UABSON faculty with a focus on the delivery of health care for veterans, and (d) expand partnership opportunities in education, clinical service, and evidence-based practice to improve quality outcomes specific to prevention and management of chronic conditions, cultural competence, nursing informatics, and simulation technology.

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