

PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLES

Empowering Resiliency Online: Advancing Integrative Medicine in Graduate Military Nursing Education

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Graduate military nursing professionals operate in complex healthcare environments that require sustained clinical performance alongside emotional and cognitive resilience. Traditional educational models have emphasized operational readiness and technical competence; however, evolving healthcare demands increasingly call for whole-person approaches that support adaptability and recovery. This project-based article describes the development and implementation of an asynchronous online graduate course designed to introduce complementary and integrative health approaches as a means of fostering resilience literacy among military nursing learners. Grounded in Resilience Theory, Adult Learning Theory, and the Community of Inquiry Framework, the course integrates structured exposure to mindfulness practices, virtual wellness tools, and reflective activities. Emphasis is placed on experiential learning, critical reflection, and application to clinical contexts. This article provides a framework for integrating resilience-oriented strategies into graduate nursing education and contributes to ongoing discussions on preparing military nursing professionals for sustained practice in high-demand environments.

Keywords: online graduate education; military nursing education; resilience; integrative wellness; complementary and alternative medicine

Graduate military nursing education has traditionally emphasized clinical competence, trauma response, and operational readiness in complex healthcare environments. While these competencies remain essential, contemporary practice increasingly requires providers to address psychological and emotional dimensions of care alongside physical health needs. Military healthcare settings often involve sustained stress exposure and demanding operational responsibilities that affect both providers and patients. Educational preparation must therefore evolve to support resilience, adaptability, and leadership capacity among graduate nursing professionals (Maiden & Stewart, 2025).

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has gained attention as an adjunctive approach that supports whole-person well-being and recovery. Practices such as meditation, acupuncture, yoga, and expressive therapies have been explored for their potential to enhance coping and emotional regulation among healthcare providers and military populations (Donnelly et al., 2021; Padayachee et al., 2020). Exposure to such modalities within graduate nursing

education offers an opportunity to expand clinical awareness while maintaining an evidence-based perspective. Integrative exposure can therefore serve as professional literacy rather than advocacy.

Online graduate education provides a particularly relevant platform for introducing integrative concepts to military learners, as flexible and asynchronous environments enhance accessibility for adult learners managing professional responsibilities while fostering engagement and reflective learning processes (Winfield et al., 2023). Online platforms also support cognitive presence and reflective engagement, which are essential to meaningful learning in virtual environments (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020). This project-based article describes the development and implementation of an online graduate course designed to introduce CAM concepts as a means of supporting resilience and professional readiness among military nursing students.

Theoretical Framework

The course innovation is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that draws upon resilience theory, adult learning theory, and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model of online learning. These perspectives provide a structured instructional foundation for preparing graduate military nursing students to navigate complex, high-demand healthcare environments that require sustained cognitive, emotional, and leadership performance.

Resilience theory serves as a foundational lens by conceptualizing adaptability not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic capacity that can be intentionally developed through supportive experiences and structured learning environments (Charney & Southwick, 2021). Military nursing professionals routinely operate in contexts characterized by operational stress, clinical uncertainty, and sustained performance expectations. Educational exposure to resilience-supportive strategies may therefore strengthen adaptive capacity and promote long-term professional sustainability. Within this course, integrative wellness concepts are introduced as tools for reflection and awareness rather than clinical interventions. This framing allows learners to critically examine how resilience-supportive practices may contribute to both provider well-being and operational effectiveness.

Adult learning theory further informs course design by recognizing that graduate learners engage most effectively when content is relevant to their professional roles and prior experiences (Knowles et al., 2015). Military nursing students bring substantial operational insight that shapes how new concepts are interpreted and applied. Accordingly, the course incorporates experiential learning activities and reflective assignments that encourage learners to connect integrative concepts to real-world clinical and leadership contexts. This approach promotes knowledge integration rather than passive content acquisition, strengthening motivation and fostering professional meaning-making.

The CoI framework supports understanding of how meaningful learning occurs in online environments through the interaction of cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2010). Cognitive presence is fostered through assignments requiring critical appraisal of complementary and integrative practices. Social presence is developed through peer dialogue that allows learners to explore resilience-supportive concepts collaboratively. Teaching presence is reflected in the intentional structure of modules and guided experiential activities that encourage reflection without promoting therapeutic advocacy. Together, these elements support deeper engagement with course material while maintaining academic rigor (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020).

These theoretical perspectives position exposure to integrative healing approaches not as endorsement, but as an instructional mechanism for developing resilience literacy and reflective professional judgment. Through structured engagement, learners are encouraged to critically examine how non-pharmacologic strategies may support coping, recovery, and leadership composure in demanding healthcare settings (Dossey et al., 2015). This integrated framework lays the conceptual groundwork for the course by aligning theoretical insight with intentional instructional design. Such grounding situates the innovation within a scholarly understanding of professional development and strengthens its relevance to evolving military healthcare environments.

Taken together, resilience theory, adult learning theory, and the CoI framework operate as an integrated foundation rather than parallel influences (Charney & Southwick, 2021; Garrison et al., 2010; Knowles et al., 2015). Resilience theory defines the developmental outcome of adaptive capacity, adult learning theory situates that development within the lived experiences of military nursing professionals, and the CoI framework operationalizes these processes through structured cognitive, social, and teaching presence. This integration ensures that exposure to complementary and integrative approaches is not only conceptually grounded but also intentionally enacted through course design.

Project Context

The course was developed to provide doctoral nursing students with an opportunity to expand beyond traditional advanced practice clinical skillsets through structured exposure to complementary healing approaches. The design reflects an understanding that resilience is not solely an individual attribute but also a professional competency that can be strengthened through intentional educational experiences (Southwick & Charney, 2021). Graduate military nursing learners frequently operate in high-demand environments that require sustained cognitive and emotional performance under pressure (World Health Organization, 2020). As a result, educational innovations that support adaptability and recovery are increasingly relevant. Structured exposure to resilience-supportive concepts may enhance both personal and professional readiness (National Academies of Sciences,

Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). The integrative medical modalities presented in the course represent a small subset of a broader landscape of healing practices that have been explored within healthcare contexts. These include Basic Battlefield Acupuncture, meditation, animal-assisted therapy, aromatherapy, art therapy, virtual reality applications for wellness, and yoga. While these approaches vary in origin and application, they share a common focus on supporting resilience across physical and psychological domains (Jonas et al., 2018). Exposure to such modalities provides learners with broader awareness of strategies that may support recovery and provider well-being. This expanded awareness aligns with whole-person approaches to care.

Importantly, the course does not advocate for the clinical adoption of CAM practices. Instead, its purpose is to provide thoughtful exposure to alternative techniques while encouraging evaluation of available evidence. Students are guided in developing their ability to critically appraise emerging therapies within an evidence-informed framework (Owens, 2022). This approach promotes analytical thinking rather than endorsement. Integrative exposure is therefore positioned as a means of enhancing clinical awareness rather than replacing conventional practice.

Design and Delivery of the Online Learning Experience

The design of the course reflects the intentional integration of resilience theory, adult learning theory, and the CoI framework. Resilience-supportive concepts are introduced through experiential and reflective activities grounded in adult learning principles, emphasizing relevance, autonomy, and the application of prior professional experience (Knowles et al., 2015). At the same time, the CoI framework structures how learners engage with these concepts through guided interaction, critical appraisal, and collaborative dialogue, fostering cognitive presence and deeper reflection (Garrison et al., 2010). In this way, resilience development is not treated as an abstract outcome but as an active learning process shaped through theory-informed instructional design. The asynchronous online format further supports this integration by allowing learners to engage with content at their own pace, reflect on its relevance to practice, and connect new knowledge to real-world clinical and leadership contexts. This alignment strengthens both learner engagement and the integration of knowledge into professional practice.

Self-paced modules introduce students to integrative modalities such as Basic Battlefield Acupuncture, meditation and wellness. These modalities are presented as resilience-supportive strategies rather than clinical competencies to ensure that exposure remains educational rather than prescriptive. Learners are encouraged to critically examine how diverse approaches may contribute to recovery, coping, and provider well-being (Jonas et al., 2018). This exploration supports adaptive awareness by expanding understanding of how resilience may be supported in healthcare environments. Such exposure aligns with resilience theory by promoting reflective consideration of supportive strategies.

A central component of the course is the annotated bibliography assignment, which requires students to evaluate the scientific and clinical evidence supporting CAM approaches. This activity strengthens cognitive presence by encouraging analytical engagement rather than passive acceptance of integrative concepts (Garrison et al., 2010). Students synthesize findings across modalities to consider potential applicability within professional contexts. Knowledge assessments further reinforce understanding by prompting integration of theory and evidence. These strategies support readiness for evidence-informed decision-making.

Experiential wellness activities complement theoretical learning by offering structured opportunities for applied reflection (Schramm et al., 2021). Students engage with mindfulness practices, virtual wellness tools, and expressive modalities within an academic framework. Reflection promotes integration of personal insight with professional understanding of resilience-supportive practices. Experiential learning has been associated with improved confidence and professional engagement among graduate learners (Altmiller & Pepe, 2022). Such engagement enhances both awareness and preparedness.

Instructional Alignment with Theoretical Framework

The course structure intentionally aligns with adult learning theory by promoting relevance, autonomy, and experiential engagement. Graduate military nursing students are encouraged to reflect on how integrative approaches relate to their operational and clinical experiences. This emphasis supports deeper knowledge integration and professional meaning-making within real-world contexts (Knowles et al., 2015). Reflection serves as a mechanism for translating exposure into practical understanding. Such engagement promotes sustained cognitive investment in the learning process.

Cognitive presence is strengthened through assignments that require students to evaluate the scientific evidence supporting CAM practices. Rather than remaining at the level of awareness, learners are prompted to consider applicability, limitations, and professional implications. This process supports critical thinking and professional judgment within an evidence-informed framework (Garrison et al., 2010). Analytical engagement encourages readiness for decision-making in complex environments. The emphasis on evaluation aligns with graduate-level expectations.

Social presence is fostered through structured discussion of experiential insights and shared reflection on resilience-supportive strategies. Peer dialogue allows learners to collaboratively explore how integrative approaches may relate to provider well-being and patient care. This shared exploration contributes to adaptive thinking and leadership awareness within military healthcare contexts. Collaborative engagement enhances the development of professional perspective. These outcomes align with resilience theory.

Teaching presence is reflected in the intentional design of modules and guided experiential activities. Faculty facilitation supports meaningful engagement without promoting therapeutic adoption or advocacy. This balance encourages openness to emerging concepts while maintaining

academic rigor and scientific grounding (Owens, 2022). Structured guidance ensures that exposure remains reflective rather than prescriptive. Such an instructional approach aligns with best practices in online graduate education.

Instructional Insights from Course Implementation

Although the course was not designed as an intervention study, patterns of student engagement suggest substantive interaction with the content. Learners consistently demonstrate increased awareness of resilience-supportive strategies and whole-person care approaches through reflective assignments and discussion activities. Written reflections frequently indicate that exposure to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) broadens conceptualizations of recovery and provider well-being. Students often connect integrative concepts to their lived experiences in military healthcare environments characterized by sustained operational demands. These observations align with resilience theory's emphasis on strengthening adaptive capacity through intentional, supportive learning environments (Southwick et al., 2014).

Engagement with the annotated bibliography assignment has been particularly strong. This assignment requires critical evaluation of the scientific and clinical evidence supporting selected CAM modalities. Students frequently emphasize the importance of balancing openness to emerging approaches with rigorous evidence appraisal, reinforcing the course's goal of promoting analytical engagement rather than advocacy (Owens, 2022). Such evaluation reflects cognitive presence within the CoI framework, as learners move beyond awareness to structured analysis and synthesis (Garrison et al., 2010). This level of engagement strengthens readiness for evidence-informed decision-making in complex clinical settings.

Experiential activities have also prompted meaningful dialogue regarding provider resilience and leadership readiness. Structured exposure to mindfulness practices, virtual wellness tools, and expressive modalities often leads students to reflect on stress management, attentional regulation, and emotional awareness. These reflections suggest increased recognition of the cognitive and emotional demands inherent in military healthcare roles. Discussions frequently extend beyond patient care to include leadership composure and sustained performance under pressure. Such engagement supports the development of emotional intelligence, which is widely recognized as a critical competency in healthcare leadership (Sperling & Hulett, 2026).

Impact on Student Wellness

Beyond professional insight, course participation appears to influence students' personal wellness awareness. Reflective exercises and experiential activities encourage learners to examine their own coping strategies, stress patterns, and recovery practices within the context of demanding academic and clinical responsibilities. Many students report heightened awareness of

the relationship between sustained cognitive load, emotional regulation, and performance sustainability. Exposure to resilience-supportive strategies often prompts self-reflection regarding burnout risk, work-life integration, and the importance of proactive stress management.

Importantly, these reflections suggest that integrative exposure may serve as a catalyst for personal resilience literacy. Rather than positioning wellness as an abstract concept, the course framework encourages learners to consider how evidence-informed, non-pharmacologic strategies may support their own adaptability and long-term professional sustainability. This dual focus on provider and learner well-being reinforces resilience theory's emphasis on strengthening adaptive capacity at both individual and systemic levels (Southwick et al., 2014). While formal outcome measurement remains an area for future research, observed patterns of reflection indicate that the course may contribute meaningfully to both professional development and personal wellness awareness among graduate military nursing students.

Overall, student responses suggest that integrative exposure enhances awareness of resilience-supportive practices within an academic context while simultaneously encouraging self-reflection related to personal well-being. Learners frequently express appreciation for structured opportunities to engage with emerging concepts in a reflective, evidence-informed manner. These observations underscore the relevance of resilience-focused curricular innovation in graduate military nursing education and highlight the value of continued evaluation to better understand long-term impact.

Implications for Online Graduate Education

This project demonstrates how online graduate education can function as a meaningful platform for developing resilience-oriented professional competencies among graduate military nursing learners. The structured exposure to complementary and alternative medicine encourages reflective learning and adaptive thinking, both of which are essential in complex healthcare environments (Garrison et al., 2010). Through guided engagement, students are able to critically examine how integrative approaches may support recovery and provider well-being. Online learning environments facilitate this process by supporting sustained cognitive engagement and reflection. As a result, learners are better positioned to consider resilience-supportive strategies within professional contexts.

Adult learning theory suggests that relevance enhances motivation and promotes deeper knowledge integration (Knowles et al., 2015). The course design intentionally connects integrative concepts to real-world practice scenarios that are familiar to military nursing professionals. This alignment strengthens engagement and supports professional meaning-making among learners. When students perceive content as applicable to their roles, they are more likely to internalize new knowledge. Relevance therefore contributes to both retention and application.

Experiential learning within online environments further enhances readiness by promoting synthesis rather than memorization (Altmiller & Pepe, 2022). Reflective activities encourage learners to integrate theoretical knowledge with personal and professional experiences. This process aligns with resilience theory by supporting adaptability and self-awareness (Southwick et al., 2014). Experiential engagement also fosters critical thinking about non-pharmacologic approaches to care. Such learning supports the development of adaptive capacity.

The integration of CAM exposure also highlights opportunities for innovation in online graduate education. Courses can introduce emerging perspectives without requiring clinical certification or endorsement. This approach allows learners to explore new concepts within an evidence-informed framework (Jonas et al., 2018). Such models may inform broader program design across graduate disciplines. Innovation of this kind supports evolving professional needs in complex healthcare environments.

Conclusion

The course was developed to provide doctoral nursing students with an opportunity to expand beyond traditional advanced practice clinical skillsets through structured exposure to complementary healing approaches. Rather than functioning as an intervention, the course design emphasizes fostering resilience literacy through intentional, theory-informed learning experiences. Learners engage with integrative concepts in ways that encourage reflection, critical appraisal, and application to professional practice. This approach positions resilience not as an inherent trait, but as a competency that can be strengthened through structured educational engagement.

Within the course, patterns of learner engagement suggest meaningful interaction with resilience-supportive concepts. Reflective assignments and discussion activities indicate that students can connect integrative approaches to their lived experiences in high-demand military healthcare environments. Engagement with course materials frequently centers on understanding how non-pharmacologic strategies may support coping, recovery, and sustained performance under pressure. These insights align with theoretical perspectives that emphasize the role of supportive learning environments in strengthening adaptive capacity.

Assignments requiring critical evaluation of complementary and integrative modalities further reinforce analytical engagement. Students demonstrate the ability to balance openness with emerging practices with evidence-informed decision-making, highlighting the importance of maintaining academic rigor. Experiential activities, including exposure to mindfulness and reflective practices, prompt consideration of stress regulation, emotional awareness, and leadership composure. These reflections extend beyond patient care and contribute to broader discussions of professional sustainability and readiness in complex healthcare settings.

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Disclosure

The opinions and assertions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences or the Department of War.

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