



A Closer Look at the Focus Forward Fellowship: Meeting Women Student Service Members and Veterans Where They Are (Part 1)

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[INTRODUCTION THEME MUSIC]

JENNY REA: Welcome. I'm Jenny Rea, an Independent Consultant, with the Military Families Learning Network Family Transitions team. Our team provides education, resources, and networking opportunities for military family service professionals, as they help military families build resilience and navigate lifecycle transitions. We invite you to engage with us and your colleagues in conversations on military lifecycle issues.

In this let's talk transitions podcast, I have the privilege of chatting with Dr. Kenona Southwell and Keara and Ludiker. Our conversations centers around the current challenges of women student service members and veterans as they transition into civilian life and begin college in hopes to accomplish their academic and career goals.

We then dive a little bit deeper into the Focus Forward Fellowship program that was offered through Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. Focus Forward was designed and continues to help women student service members and veterans build their skills and leadership and a sense of community all with their peers. We conclude the episode with Kenona and Keara sharing several unique and beneficial strategies that military family service providers, you our listeners, may be able to use in your work as you support military service members and their families. So, let's dive in and listen to Kenona and Keara share their thoughts.

Welcome Kenona and Keara! It's a pleasure to have both of you here with me today! Um Kenona, can we begin by having you share with our listeners a little bit about yourself?

KENONA SOUTHWELL: Yeah sure, so thank you so much, Jenny, for having us here today. My name is Kenona Southwell. I was trained as a military family and health and work scientist over at Purdue University. I did all of my assistantship with the Institute... the Military Family Research Institute with Shelley MacDermid as my advisor.

I have since moved on after completing my PhD and I work with Eagle Technologies, which is a technology company, of course, and now they specialize in supporting

research for mental health. My time at the company has gone into supporting cancer with doing research in that same space. So thank you so much again and I look forward to speaking about one of my passions, which is doing research that helps members of the military and their families.

JENNY: Great, thanks so much for sharing, Kenona. Keara, let's go ahead and have you share a little bit about yourself.

KEARA LUDIKER: Sure, uh, hi Jenny. Thanks for having me. I just have a smile on my face when listening to Kenona introduce yourself because it's just such a great reminder of the team that I used to work with... everyone is so just so wonderful.

So, my name is Keara Ludiker. I currently still work for Purdue University. I work in the graduate school now, in the Office of Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs, where I manage the Ecological Sciences and Engineering Interdisciplinary graduate program. So, I am no longer with the Military Family Research Institute [MFRI], but I just started this new role with the graduate school back in April and I was with MFRI for about four years, where I was the practitioner side of Focus Forward. Um, and managed the education and implementing there.

I am a veteran. I served with the United States Army for about eight years. And, gosh, I've been out since about 2016. Um, so I wouldn't necessarily classify myself as recently separated. It has been a while, but that's how I got into that role. I was a student service member at one point during and I have an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree and the only degree that I was not a student service member was for my master's degree. And then, working with Focus Forward is one of my most fondest professional experiences... just being a woman veteran and being able to work with women veterans and see service members in that capacity and so, other than that I miss working with the team at MFRI very much and I am excited to talk more and kind of reminisce about Focus Forward and look to the future.

JENNY: Great, thanks so much for sharing, Keara, and thank you so much for your service! Um I think each of you – you and Kenona will share so much from different backgrounds, the pieces that you each ... you can each contribute – your practitioner side, your personal experiences a veteran. Kenona, your research side. I think all of these aspects combined can really help fold and bring these pieces together to share with professionals who are listening today. So, thank you again, both, for being here.

Um one of the pieces that you two have worked on as a team and then other contributors, as well as a manuscript that I came across and our team came across as well, and each of you contributed to it's called Focus Forward Fellowship: Evaluation of a Program for Women ... for Women Student Service Members and Veterans. The manuscript is currently under... under a peer review with a journal, so for those that are listening today and are interested in reading this article, please check back. We'll be sure to add that link, so that you can hopefully read that when it gets published.

So, as we begin, I wonder, whoever wants to respond to this question... Why study or why, why should we learn about women student service members and veterans especially you know, during this time.

KENONA: So a recent study by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families identified that there are 2.1 million women service members and veterans. 84% of post 9-11 women veterans have some college degree or higher so that percentage is much higher than what you would find for non-veteran women as well as male post 9-11 veterans. So we're seeing that we do have quite a bit of women veterans who are participating in a university environment. However, we've seen that there's quite a bit of evidence, both in the research aspect as well as anecdotal evidence that there's a lot of good reason to pay attention to women student veterans.

So, a set of researchers, Fredman and colleagues found that... women... Service members or veterans had relatively greater risk of academic problems, particularly in light of having posttraumatic stress disorder as well as other relationship strain. Women veterans are also much more likely than men to have experienced military sexual trauma. In a national study, they found that the true prevalence of women veterans with depression was about 47% greater than what the diagnosis would suggest. So we're seeing that there's that interplay of that past military service and trauma and then we have them transitioning from the military into civilian life.

So when it comes to trying to get employment, we're seeing that female veterans had higher rates of unemployment than their male counterparts. About 40% of women, compared to 19% of male veterans reported that it took them over a year or at the time of the of this study, they were still looking for employment. We also find ... they also find that 66% of female veterans reported that their transition out of the military was very difficult and that was compared to only about 51% of males.

Again, when it comes to being prepared for the transition out of the military, you find more female veterans being unprepared and then, once they are within that system of transitioning out, just about 54% of them did not feel prepared to navigate their resources or local community that compared to 35% of veteran males.

So, we're seeing that there are some challenges for women veterans who are trying to transition out of the military as well as those that are maybe still in the service and among those that are transitioning, 59% of them found a loss of connection with a military community... a similar percentage who also loss a sense of purpose and finding employment was a challenge for a significant portion of them. So, we've thought about women veterans and servicemembers in light of those challenges and the Focus Forward program is really designed to try to give women the skills that they would be to try to gain employment... um... to give them that social support and that connection to a

military community that they may have lacked as well to get the skills to advocate for themselves, so that they can develop professionally as well as within the school setting.

JENNY: Great, thank you so much for sharing. Um there's like so much great research there that is talking about not only like the... the successes that women students service members are going through, but also those key challenges, and I thank you so much for pointing those out, I think that we're going to talk more about this Focus Forward Fellowship program, but um I think that what we could do is maybe share ... um, Keara from your own perspective too and just kind of where your transition and how maybe those key pieces and how they kind of relate to you or do not and what you're kind of seeing in your own work as well.

KEARA: Sure. Um, yeah, I am happy to speak to that a little bit. I'll always tie a little bit back to research. I'm not always as quite precise with the percentages and numbers as Kenona. So, if anyone wants to where I've kind of plucked the little piece of knowledge out .. afterwards, I can definitely do my best time to touch on it.. either through conversations or talking to people about the program. Um what we do know about women is they're more likely to choose military service as a way to pay for education .. for education benefits. That's definitely not a secret. It was a huge part, not the only reason why... it was a huge part of why I initially enlisted and a lot of fellows have disclosed that education factor... the pathway to a better future ... education, employment.. finding meaning... meaning in all of that, you know in getting a degree with the hopes of ending up in an environment of meaningful employment with something that they desired.

We also know that ... it was the Purdue Gala index that when women student veterans and servicemembers felt less supported than their male counterparts during their academic experience and a lot of is carried over on their transition from the military .. um it's just because a lot of military communities have such a high presence of male counterparts ... women service members are less likely to see women ...to see a reflection of themselves in leadership .. they're less likely to find a mentor... they're less likely to have those more positive, meaningful and impactful experiences and then unfortunately, that kind of carries over to their education experiences and so a lot of different components that Focus Forward are providing those experiences for fellows who come to the program, and you know.. so that they can connect with other women...just in general... whether that's women service members, veterans, people in different sectors of employment.

Uh, we hear it so often... I say we hear it... as if I'm still working with them... that something that we've heard in half of the fellows in their Focus Forward experience is that they never been in a room with that many ...with many other women veterans. That really speaks a lot for itself and then for it to be such a positive experience... You know I think it's very intentionally designed as an environment to ... to support women, to meet them whenever they are at and support them in their academic endeavors and their professional endeavors. It really is not a competitive environment, which so often

military spaces tend to be and so... I just.. you know my personal experience...You know I would say that I fall more on the traditional side of military students.. you know most military students are nontraditional you know just based off of their military experience.

But you know, on that scale, you can still have people who fall even further on a nontraditional or closer to you know what a traditional student looks like. For me, personally, during my military service, I was single. I was not married. I don't have any children. And I was a little bit younger, and so I enlisted when I was 17 and so you know, there are a lot of experiences that military service members and veterans' students closer to that nontraditional side who are older, who have spouses, who have children, families... So I will say that my experience, you know, doesn't often align with you know that.. uh... the extreme end of the nontraditional, but a lot of our Focus Forward fellows it does and those women from all different walks of life... that that's something about women, that is, that is so neat ... it's that we really do it all...

we're professional working women... we are partners... We are mothers, we have pets, you know, we're constantly trying to take care of these other areas of our life and so often we're not taking care of ourselves and this Focus Forward is an intentionally designed environment to support these women and, so I think that that's something that is very special... very unique about women and what Focus Forward does for women.

JENNY: Great, thank you so much! I don't know, Kenona, if you wanted to tie back into anything there or... I'll just open that space for you.

KENONA: Yeah, definitely. So, Keara touched on the point of just how diverse women student service members are... you know you do have some that appear to align more with the traditional student, especially if they are more within that age range, or if they don't have children, they don't have partners so they may be able to live on a college campus but they have others who are more like the nontraditional students when without a military connection and they have a lot more constraints when it comes to living on campus and really being in that college environment that is really helpful for the academic success. So I think within that we will come back and talk about the little nuances within those women that indicate so much so as to why Focus Forward is really needed for those different subgroups within those women.

JENNY: Definitely. No, thank you so much for touching base on that. I think that both of you have highlighted obviously the significant pieces of why we want to study woman students service members and veterans ... Um and continue to do so. Because of that growing population, especially for those that are leaving the military and I think I know you've touched a lot of bases about the specific challenges specifically, you mentioned a few of them, Kenona, PTSD... But some of those specific challenges... I'd like to just kind of highlight a few of those for our listeners who, you know, might not be in depth into the literature, or you know in depth to their own personal experiences, or maybe don't work hand in hand with students service

members so if one of you could start maybe just sharing some of those highlighted specific challenges that women students service members and veterans experience.

KEARA: Sure, uh, I can speak to a little...Kenona touched on it a little bit already. I think that one of the most obvious challenges to this day and Kenona touched on it a little bit ... is that women service members and veterans are more likely to experience of military sexual trauma, which is MST. And so, unfortunately, a lot of different symptoms can kind of branch off from that... women that have had experience of military sexual trauma, um you know, are at higher risk for depression... anxiety... and I'm sure Kenona can also speak to... you know, substance abuse... so that is a larger concern that kind of ties into some of the other general concerns that a lot of members in the military veteran community struggle with.

I would also just kind of tie it back to that you know, even though women on college campuses is such a... women student service members and veterans is one of the fastest growing populations on college campuses. We know that they are more likely to struggle in their academic endeavors. I have women who are you know, trying to use their earned education benefits to get a degree in higher education and find meaningful employment ... um, and they're really struggling... you know, not everyone, but you know, a large portion of the population is struggling to find support and be successful in those endeavors.

It could be that they have not found a meaningful connection with their advisor and so maybe they are less likely to go to their advisors to seek out support on choosing classes ... so then maybe they chose classes that are not a great fit for them and then they end up in a class, and you know they're really struggling and I will say that you know... again this is a new challenge for ...for women student service members and veterans... um You know I get a lot of time and so I will take it from personal experience you know if I go into you know, an office or an event as military related or veteran related ... I try to park my car in the you know parking spot at Lowe's that's designated for a military service member... I get dirty looks. I get comments. I have had people explicitly asking me you know why, why ... why was I doing that? You know, why was I parking my care there.

Women consistently have to explain and justify their military service, whereas men do not and again that's not being ... you know not being hateful towards our male counterparts.. um there's a lot of really wonderful allies and supporters out there, and I would say you know that after several years that I had been working in the space specifically for women, a lot of military and veterans organizations have been making a great effort to address that issue... um, but you know oftentimes self-identifying as a veteran for women can be a traumatic experience you don't... if you're encountering... that you're having an interaction with someone who doesn't know what to say, or you know says something you know where you're trying to get help and you know, they just kind of look at funny or asks what your husband did or what your partner did.

Um and so I that is something that you know is a specific challenge for women, just because our male counterparts um hardly ever find themselves... I don't say there are male counterparts who have um, but women find themselves in that situation more often and so some of those faculty can be intimidating on the college campus if you, you know have never been to their office before, and you are... you know just trying to get some help, and you know you realize that you have to self-identify and then you kind have to talk yourself through the process of well what is that going to mean and how is that going to make me feel, and so I would say those three things are kind of come to the top of my list and I'm sure Kenona will have more to add, but um military sexual trauma and just not having as much support or in terms of mentors and advisers and friends in their higher education and employment experiences. And then just you know constantly having to justify why it comes to self-identification.. um you know justifying your military service and having that constant pressure of society to prove that you served.

JENNY: Great, thank you so much for sharing those. Kenona, did you want to share?

KENONA: Keara has mentioned several things that have been identified in the literature of studies with women service members or veterans... um women service members are in a very unique space because there's a challenge of the past military service, but then there's also a challenge in the present ...in the current university environment, and that makes the dance really difficult when trying to navigate this school. So, for example, as was mentioned the experience with trauma ... there's also this struggle that we may have had in the military community with trying to belong... getting that sense of belonging in a male pre-dominated environment where it may have been demeaning and supportive and you know they had to try to figure things out and do a lot on their own and then also you know... the literature has spoken about the women having the need to act masculine and trying to outperform the men, and you know, trying to earn their respect in the military span and um... trying to... and it's difficult for them, trying to present themselves in a civilian environment which is totally different.

But then now you bring them into a university environment where the rules are different even more so from the military and yet still different from just being in the regular civilian community. So they found that women, although they're highly committed to completing their degrees...they've had difficulties creating relationships with faculty and other students, especially those traditional students, who may be so many years younger, you know, without a lot of work experience and you know the lifestyle on campus and in a university environment... you know, maybe so different from what the from one this service members experience. So, then you find that with the quality of the relationships with faculty and with peers...If it's not at a good level, or it does have the potential to influence a degree completion.

Actually a study from MFRI found that service members who were not be able to connect with faculty and their peers ...those relationships put them at higher risk of

attrition, so you know it really is something that we focus on with the Focus Forward program because there's so much in terms of having those good connections and that social support at the university. Um the research has also found that women veterans would appreciate some guidance and some support from other women veterans like themselves so people who have had the experiences, but as we've mentioned there are so few of them on the university campuses they may not be able to make those connections and within the university, you know, sometimes they need to adjust and understanding of themselves in relation to other people and how they navigate the challenges of being in university ...having their family lives ... having their full time work... and, of course, all of those competing demands may have some challenges for the academic functioning.

And of course the satisfaction with their university experience. So a lot of research has been highlighted namely the importance of women veterans... not just having relationships with other women who have military experience, but also with their peers... also with faculty and there's a need ... like Keara mentioned... for services that have specialized for those women that could help them navigate the university environment and have that social support that they would that that they need, so that they can preserve and complete their degrees.

JENNY: Definitely. Thank you for addressing those. Um I, too, have seen ... have seen these in my own research for MFLN and have um kind of have highlighted these two blogs and other podcasts and it's exciting to see that there's progress of programs and services and universities and colleges, all of these places coming together to support women students service members and veterans and, as you guys have both highlighted several of those challenges that they're experiencing while they wear many hats and it's hard to... it's hard to um take one hat off and like focus on just one, and so I think that if we you know kind of jump a little bit forward, we can talk about the Focus Forward fellowship program and I think what we'll discuss here further is that this program really focuses on involving all of these aspects that student service... women students service members and veterans go through and it's specifically focused for women.

So let's talk a little bit more about the program... Again it's called Focus Forward Fellowship and um maybe... Keara, would you like to share a little bit about what the programs goals might be?

KEARA: Sure. Um so I'm going to tie it back to research, because the Focus Forward program is a program that is designed based off of evidence-based research.. um just like all of the MFRI programs... MFRI is a research institute and so there's a lot of quite brilliant people and Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth is the director of the institute and one of the most brilliant minds that I have ever have the ability to work with I, and I, you know... being in charge of the director of research and being able to work with people like Kenona and graduate students um who you know there's a variety of people who ...we just saw Focus Forward as a dynamic community, and it really is... it's grown so much. Um the pilot cohort which took place in 2015 and you know it started off with

just one cohort and you know and gosh I can't even think they know a small number of participants and now has grown to this community, of you know, like talking about in the hundreds of fellows who are involved and it's not without all the hard work that you know all of the minds...people who are still there... people who have come and gone... made it all centered on the research that we have been talking about um just looking at data showing that you know women veterans and service members you know have very complex experience as it is and then moving into a higher education factor, they are ...again because of their unique experiences... are experiencing unique challenges and so there's so much research out there and that's how this world of Focus Forward was built... is that this is a research is telling us.

Um at the time, there were not a lot of programs that were out there, specifically tailored to the needs of women who fell into that category and the research was showing that there was a need to develop something and that's how Focus Forward came into fruition. Um and it's changed so much throughout the years. I watched it change and then grow and it really is... it's like you said, Jenny, designed to support women in all of those different factors... in their academic endeavors and there you know professional and important goals and then also personally, you know ... let's get women in a room with other women and surround them by women, and again I swear I'm not you know not hating on our male counterparts and allies that are out there. But women veterans experience, you know, they're exposed to communities surrounded by men so frequently and surrounded by women so infrequently. But you know that is something that's just so powerful kind of tearing those walls of competition and judgment down, and it really is I you know it just that we are there to support these women across all of those areas. And so a lot of it is focused on education and employment ...that's kind of the department of MFRI that Focus Forward is housed in, and so what we... the two main goals, I think, Kenona can add a little bit to this, um after I wrap up are um significantly looking to improve and promote persistence to graduation and so catching these women at a point in time, where you know either they might be struggling with some academic endeavors or maybe like right before...they might be getting ready to struggle and so that they have a community of support.. and um a community of resources so that we can kind of help see them through their education, and I think we can currently attest to the fact that we have seen that.

You know fellows who start in the program usually do that as their cohort... um you know maybe they're an undergraduate student and we try to keep in touch with our fellows so that we can help them with what they're doing.. and also so you know provide support and resources that I have seen fellows who were part of a 2015 cohort and saw a student persist on through a master's degree.. go on to a doctorate ... um become parents... moving forward with them. And so it's been really wonderful um to see .. to see that all come through to fruition and even promoting you know academics and getting them through their degree and supporting them as far as they want to go on their education... doing what we can to find meaningful employment with an employer that really resonates with them and then um that community of support that hopefully

is going to provide them a way to reach out with personal concerns that they have and providing them the support that they need... that's kind of how I would describe the components of the program... in a nutshell..

JENNY: Thank you so much for sharing that. The program is so well rounded... I think that it's hard to share just like two aspects of it, so thank you so much for sharing um those pieces. Kenona, would you like to share about the program goals?

KENONA: Sure. Yes. The overarching goal is mainly for the long term. So making sure that women service members or veterans complete their degrees... making sure that they're successful... once they complete that degree they're able to get a career, like Keara mentioned, that they're happy with their career, that is satisfying for them. But in the short term, and if it's something that may be the most important aspect of that program ... it's just giving the women as a sense of belonging, as an understanding of themselves as women as service members.. as veterans.. as students, that at the time, when their current .. their current roles that they can be their best selves.

And, of course, giving them the skills so that they can engage in behaviors that can continue to help them be successful. So things like networking... things like writing a resume ... especially when having military experience that they're not quite sure how translates into a civilian job... We can show that they have those tools, so that we can succeed at the time, if it's a part time job they're looking for while they're at school, or if it's upon graduation. So another aspect I think that what's very important is just for women to be self-advocates... for them to be able to speak up for themselves, for them to be able to get the courage and the drive to achieve the goals that they'd like to achieve.

So as you mentioned, Jenny, very well-rounded program and I, too, am very proud of the work that the Military Family Research Institute has been doing, you know, to help make sure that we're meeting the needs of those women.

JENNY: Yeah and I definitely think the program has and continues to serve those needs for the women. Um I get to in a later podcast with Diane Darling and I'm excited for her to share her own experience from the Focus Forward fellowship ... but really what you highlighted Kenona and Keara is that this program is really focusing on helping those women, you know stay persistent and keep pushing on but also a space to reach out, and I think what I found too in my own research and maybe my own personal life ... I struggle and other women maybe just struggle just reaching out and asking for support and reaching out to other related members and just really saying like this is where I'm at, and this is what I need help with, and so I think that this this program really provides that that space and that that comfort to kind of allow the service members and the women to really be themselves. So thank you both for sharing those aspects of the Program.

And so we did touch a little bit about this, but if we could maybe share a little bit more about what the main program components are. Um we've talked about belonging, understanding and

doing ...is from what I've learned from the manuscript, but maybe one of you can start by sharing a little bit more about what those components mean and how they relate to ...I guess how the Focus Forward program uses them.

KENONA: Sure, Jenny. Um I can go. So developing the program, those pieces, that you mentioned those three components: belonging, understanding, and doing... is basically the foundation of the program. And King, in 2004, he had a model that he put forward on the meaning in life, and this model is one that was used predominantly in the rehabilitation services ... but it fit so well with the Focus Forward program because we're trying ... just like the model suggest ...to enhance the quality of life and the and the ability for women to pursue their goals so the three aspects as we, as we mentioned ...belonging understanding and doing are all a part of King's model that he put together after reviewing 30 theories and framework... very comprehensive accumulation of theories and framework went into this work.

And so Focus Forward.. it really puts us at this position where we have this realistic and process-oriented framework that looks at those domains, and we touch on each on them. So for belonging... we're thinking of building satisfying relationships...having women feel socially connected in their community and having them access social support and oftentimes we might find... especially earlier when this program was being developed there wasn't resources for women, and then you know, given the experiences of military culture and the status as non-traditional students and just how not that many of them are widely oftentimes in the same space, you find that the belonging aspect of it is really important for them. And then with understanding... now we're working on those aspects where there might have been a little bit of incongruence between self as a woman, and self as a service member, but in environment that had a lot more men and now we're looking at how these women can be aware of their position in the world...their position, right now, as student service members... as mothers as... full time workers, also as caregivers. Right?

And trying for them to be in a sense of fulfillment in their potential. So with that self-understanding, we've seen from the literature that it's important for women, especially when they're in academic fields where women were underrepresented, and you do find that we touched a lot on STEM... where you have women underrepresented in that area in terms of all of our production of all of the Focus Forward program, as we said very evidence-based and of course... that research is really insightful for us, and then, so we have to have women trying to develop their knowledge of their personal strengths. And we also touch on the identity integration, and this will be a very important part of the program that evolved from conversations with women and having that pilot program and really trying to understand how, as Keara mentioned, sometimes they don't want to self-identify as veterans, but this is a very important part of their experiences...And we work very hard with those women to try to reach those identities that we see the benefits of all of the different caps that they wear and with those multiple identities, you don't want them conflicting with each other.

Um having them mesh together is where you have that identity integration and research has found that people who are able to integrate their identities ..are able to have better health outcomes... better social outcomes..

JENNY: Hmm that's great.

KENONA: Right? And finally, with the doing... now we're trying to put the things that we've shown into action. So we want to build that confidence so that they could actually go out and engage in those goal directed behaviors. So actually utilizing the skills with problem solving with... um writing their resumes.. with using those personnel strengths and using those networking behaviors so that they've learned during the program so that they can achieve the goals that they've set for themselves. So were are all just having them coming back into a circle... where we have them understanding themselves... understanding their roles and um of course, also having that feeling of belonging to a group of like-experienced women and, finally, doing so that they can make sure that we be at full potential.

JENNY: Thank you, thank you so much for Kenona. I think you really like... how you explained it, I was able to like visualize it. Really, as a circle. As these women meeting and just socializing and really reflecting on who...who they are, who they want to become and how they can do that, so thank you so much for sharing that. Um Keara, what would you like to share about the program components?

KEARA: Um well it's really hard to follow that up.

JENNY: I know.

KEARA: I will say that I mean I'm absolutely gracious that they did really well in finding that model and it's so fitting for Focus Forward... it makes so much sense and in some ways, you know, like Kenona said...different components of the program developed as we went on.. you know, as more research was done... as we heard anecdotally from fellows that about their experience and you know, I think that sometimes as researchers, you go into a project or work, you know, thinking that you have something down and then as you get into it, you realize that the program is trying to tell you something else. So it is really appropriate that Kenona touched on the identity.

You know in a sense a quarter of these women when it comes to lesson on their military experiences um transitioning into the identity as mom, as student... and kind of all of those different hats that they're wearing ...transfer into different parts of your identity and all that, together, because so often I attest to half of it... especially at 17... no one knows who they are when they're 17 um .. you don't know who you are or what you want to do.. um and then you go into an environment where you have to be a certain person.. you

have a job.. you have a routine... you have responsibilities. And you're not coloring your full identity. You're kind of emerged in that culture ... in that experience. And then you transition in the university as a student and you know, no one is there to tell you exactly what to do... maybe you have an adviser who can kind of give you guidance. But a lot of people who have military experience um really do well with explicit direction and a lot of them don't get that in a college environment ...in a work environment and it depends on industry and other factors.

But it can be kind of a harsh experience um if you are not, you know, getting some support and kind of rocking on all of those different experiences and that identity to kind of create yourself... um whole.. you know I get asked a lot, because I served in the military and then I went into a working and learning in higher education, and that's where I have done, for a very long time and now I'm still in higher education. I know, I don't work with women service members and veterans anymore and I definitely have to explain myself to fellows...

You know I get asked a lot, you know, is there any reason why? And it has to do with identity. Um it has to do with you know that's a big part of my identity ... was Focus Forward... was being a woman that you know.. a women veteran.. a service member at one point and then I started to realize that as I, you know.. found my partner.. when we found our home.. and we have our dog.. but my identity ... your identity shifts at different points in your life and so as I am getting older and further away from my military experience... my military identity is kind of speckling down the list of identities that I don't have access to and so a lot of women who have military service kind of struggle with this as well and kind of wrapping up that and know, ultimately, the goal is to kind of get to a place where you have certain experiences, but everything is well balanced... that is also kind what we're talking about when we mention belonging, understanding, and doing.. we are kind of keeping everything together...for a holistic view of yourself and the different components of your identity.

And so, I think that's also something that the program also really shines a light on in simplicity... something that other women kind of go through.. so that is you know just kind of an example of going through that process and how Focus Forward is a space for learning to self-identify and for women to talk about their military experiences, but it's also a place where you know that's not the only thing that they have to be like.. they don't have the consistently wear it like as a badge... they don't have to reflect their service as a badge, and you know to just know that it's okay when you go to Lowe's and that you didn't park in the veteran parking .. you can choose not to. And that is really just kind of a really great example of just kind of all the program's components: belonging, understanding, and doing and um yeah.. identity work that kind of just came out as the program progressed.

JENNY: Wow! Thank you. I'm getting such a good visual and um so Keara, you touch base on.. I'm thinking of it as kind of like a ladder. So you said kind of like your veteran status kind of just

slowly went down in.. in identity and I also kind of want to touch a little bit back... I'm going to reverse little bit... Kenona, you mentioned identities and this like multi-sectionalism of identities and I wonder if you could touch base on how the program kind of like... maybe if you could share an example of how the program helped the students service members and these women kind of .. be able to .. I don't know... I guess, be able to use these identities is all as one.

KENONA: From what I know, there was a lot of it in the program, especially during the weekend, where they were all together, there was a lot of journaling... there was a lot of self-reflection and talking about their experiences, and of course... um activities tailored to trying to get women to understand just how divided their identities may be or you may have several women who have you know, maybe at some point there they may be similar to Keara.. with them being out of the service for a while and they've been able to work on their own, so that they can have their identities more integrated.

But just a lot of self-reflection, a lot of awareness of their past experiences and how that may influence their current experiences and where they would be going in the future.

JENNY: Okay, thank you. Keara, I don't know if you want to add a little bit more to that ..sorry.

KEARA: I can speak a little bit to it. Um I can't give away exactly what happened, um just in line with what Kenona said... there's a lot of very intentional reflection and activities and then it just kind of circles back to that. Focus Forward is a very intentionally designed safe environment for women to join us where they are at and Focus Forward as a community is a very diverse community of women... older and younger women, there are women who have children.. there are women who don't have children. There are women who are caretakers of children in their families ... and may not be their biological children. It is such a richly diverse community of women who are from all walks of life, all of their experiences... there are women who maybe go through a more intense process of finding their identity and there are also women there who are a little bit further along and there's some women who are you know ... at a similar point to what I described, and I think that's something that's really beautiful about Focus Forward.. um that all of these women seemingly come together from all different walks of life... everyone looks different... everyone has a different story, but at the same time they all have the same story.

And so getting everyone together in a room and reflecting on their different experience... it really was amazing just to get to watch throughout the weekend, when you know the residential component was in the past, but unfortunately in the last two years has been virtual. And it's been really incredible to watch in person how you know day one, everyone shows up... everyone is a little apprehensive... they don't know anyone and then throughout the weekend... to see them show up for themselves and showing up for each other, when each other needs help... um supporting each other

...they're already forming this community because the walls are down... it's not a competitive environment.

There are activities that support them in a safe way of exploring experiences that maybe they need to explore or maybe they weren't quite ready to explore. And so, all of that is kind of happening and, at the end ... at the end of the weekend ... they already have a community to support them... that they can trust... that they can go to for advice, without judgment. And you know, Jenny as mentioned earlier, you know it's having the courage to ask for help and there are a lot of other communities out there that we kind of looked to you know, in regard to.. you know, there's a lot of Facebook communities ... there's a lot Facebook communities for women who are new mothers.

Um I have a friend who recently just had triplets and there's a Facebook group for that. And so you take notice those things and realize what's going to work ... and maybe a lot of it is trial and error.. but just having that supportive environment with a safe space for women to know that they can share their experiences and that they can do that where there they are at.

JENNY: Thanks Keara. I can I get goosebumps through both of you talking about this program because I think...I don't know... I'm not sure why but it's just exciting to see that um that the program is touching base on many aspects that the literature is reflecting on.. personal experiences are reflecting on.. and so it's kind of tying all these things together, but it's very powerful to know that these women are able to you know share their experiences... reflect on that ...they're coming from different avenues, and they may not know that they, you know, that they may have needed to reflect on those things, and so I think that the Focus Forward allows those...you know, has the space for that. So that's really exciting!

So, as we kind of previously mentioned at the beginning of this podcast, we talked about this article that both of you contributed to and will be published at a later date. But, and what I'd like to kind of touch base on.. is kind of a little bit what was reflected on that article, but really we can just kind of bring that to life and so really what the article describes is an overview of the Focus Forward fellowship and it provides a first round results from the 2017 Focus Forward fellows cohort ...a program evaluation, I guess is, if you will.., and one of the pieces I did want to kind of address is what did these women kind of look like per se and which kind of universities where they in, and like you said Keara.. I think a lot of them were either single or some were in relationships ...some had children.. some were caregivers.

So we kind of touched base a little bit about that what they look like, but maybe if there's any bit more that we wanted to... either of you wanted to share.

KEARA: Sure, uh, so this manuscript was specifically written with the data, as you said, from the 2017 Focus Forward cohort. In the year 2017, it was a little bit of an anomaly. And so, two cohorts actually took place in 2017. And so, every year, what happened is ...is that what we call the Focus Forward national cohort, and that means.. so every year since 2016 there was a national cohort that .. it just means that women were selected

from all over... nationally...from all over the country, from all different types of universities, and community colleges... four-year universities and two-year colleges. All different.. all over the place.

Um but also in 2017, there was what we called it, a 2017 Colorado cohort. It was specifically done with women in the CSU college system, and so we went... Focus Forward went out to Colorado as the facilitator and so that began the data for the CSU cohort, the national cohort and then what we called RI cohort. The Colorado cohort was obviously women in the Colorado State University system and then the national cohort was women from all over the country.. all university systems. And just a fun fact that Diane Darling was part of the national cohort.. as a fellow... and then she has been highly involved in the program as a volunteer as well.

Um what I can say is that, on average, each cohort is around 20 women ...so that's what we have learned that this group, this size is enough to get to know each other personally, and it all makes for good break down into small groups ...we're really trying to create a personable, smaller, more intimate environment, and so we have learned that 20 is just a really good size. There are cohorts that have been less than 20 and then there have been some just as 20.

So, I know I mentioned all of these women kind of looked different you know, physically.. you know, every cohort photo is great. I just think that that is something that is important to our Focus Forward team and MFRI as a whole is that when you are looking to apply to Focus Forward.. you want them to look at a cohort photo on MFRI's website and see themselves represented ...that you know it's a safe place and that is in regard to everything, and so I would say that all of our... all our cohorts have a great representation. And you know, women from everywhere will come to look at the photo and will hopefully see themselves represented and that is, that it is safe for them to come as they are.

You know for one veteran in particular.. she felt that she needed to show herself by wearing her hair purple. She knew that it was a safe environment and that she didn't have to change anything about herself. In regard to the university, and specifically, I'm a little bit rusty on that ...just been out of the role for a little bit, but there is a large number of universities across the country who have participated in Focus Forward. Um there are several universities that are just really great partners...we have retained fellows you know.. fellows coming from Clemson.. is just one that I can think of off the top of my head ...they've been a great partner. They have... we have had fellows from Clemson I think every year.. I'm not certain that all this past year, but there has been a fellow from Clemson every year since 2017 or 2018, and so uh it's just really great opportunities and those partnerships with universities and who are looking to really make sure that women feel supported and that has just grown. Clemson is not the only one, there's a number of universities. Um yeah that's just kind of what I can share. Um I'm not sure Kenona will have more to add?

KENONA: Um yeah. I have a little bit of information about the ladies. So generally the eligibility for the Focus Forward is that the students service members would have had to be ...would have had to either currently be in the military service or had an Honorable discharge from any branch of service. So we have women from representation from all branches of the U.S. military. Um they would have had to be enrolled in a bachelor's or a post-graduate program and average GPA at least 2.75. And so in 2017, we had a total of 20 fellows that are part of the manuscript .. the analytic sample, but that year, the combined cohort was 27 .. as Keara mentioned, we had two separate programs.

So women to be included in the manuscript and the results that we will speak about a little later...we had about 45% of them being white and we had even representation between black and Hispanic or Spanish women, so roughly about 22% in both groups. Um most of the fellows were employed and worked less than full time, on average. Just about a third of them were married and a similar percentage were divorced, and that is... It shows us just another challenge that we've seen with women in the service, where we have those high rates of divorce among those women and also on another side, not less of them being married than their male counterparts and most of the fellows did not have children, which was interesting. Um roughly about a little over half of them did not have children and those who had children had on average two children ...we had some with as many as four children.

Not surprising, the fellows were utilizing their education benefit at the time, so just about 93% of them were using that benefit and, interestingly, we had a large representation from post-graduate students...we had a little over 60% of our students be part of doctoral programs or master's degree program. So we had a lot of individuals who had completed their bachelor's and had success, and yet they still saw that they will be so much value for them to be part of the Focus Forward program in their doctoral or master's degree programs.

The fellows, the majority of them had the current or prior military affiliation of active duty. And then we had some from the National Guard, and a smaller percentage from the reserve and junior enlisted ..

And I'm sorry from the reserve, and the majority of them were junior enlisted and, as I mentioned, we had representation from all branches of the service. On average, the women had military service of just about three years. The maximum was five years of service for those ladies. So that just gives an overall look at a few aspects of their lives, but I think Keara was able to bring them alive in describing them as she saw them in person.

JENNY: Definitely. Um, thank you for sharing that Kenona. Um I like to paint this picture of all these women and it's amazing that you said there was 19 fellows.. Is that correct? So, basically.. it's sorry... go ahead Kenona.

KENONA: Uh yeah. So the 19 fellows is the number of them who completed all our waves of data.

JENNY: Okay, Okay.

KENONA: Yes, but we started out with 27 of them who were accepted.

JENNY: Right, okay. So in 19 that's amazing to see so much diversity um that you were talking about.. in um a lot of the research that I look at ...is like most of them white ...most of the male... most of them... and not from all these different avenues or diversities or walks of life so that's really cool! I appreciate you both sharing that. And I'll just skip a little bit forward and I really just want to focus in on what ...what you guys found from that first evaluation and what those findings kind of mean for providers and educators out in the field and how they might be able to kind of use those findings in their work? So I'm combining two questions here, but I think if that's okay...Whoever would like to kind of share what was found and kind of what we can make meaning of those things?

KENONA: Sure. So I think I can go. So just a highlight.. so we did do special analyses to make sure that because we have two programs um that those changes that we saw within the two cohorts were similar. We also did analyses to make sure that there was significant differences between the cohorts. So once you take care of that will look at the findings. So the findings .. first talking about belonging.. um so we expected that we would have this great sense of community ...that the women would have come into the program and by the time they left, they would... we would have seen an increase in their scores, about you know feeling happy and as a sense of community in the Focus Forward group of women and mentors and what not, but we did not find what we were expecting.

Instead, we found that the scores we're relatively low, and it did not change significantly over the course of time. So, even after that in-person retreat, several these together and then you know, being in contact online with that online component of the program... we still did not find that women had this sense of community and what we were thinking, maybe driving that is that once the women leave the retreat, then they're back into their multiple roles... those competing roles of work, school, family and because of those demands they may not be able to really continue those relationships that they may have built during that retreat.

So definitely, you know, one of the things that we want to work on in the future is to look to see how those relationships shape because we don't have evidence from qualitative research that we collected and that ...that research is not part of the paper, but from the evidence that we have, we find that fellows did connect with each other ... but it appears that those connections and more with maybe smaller groups that it may be a one and one connection and our measurement of a sense of community doesn't capture this ...because we're thinking of it overall as a community... that Focus Forward

community and in fact, it might just be that they're building personal relationships with each other ... within smaller groups.

For understanding, so looking at personal strengths...We found that was a significant increase from the from the first assessment so that's at the beginning of that retreat ...of that weekend. So from that period right for six months after the retreat, we find that there is an increase in the women's assessment or the awareness of their personal strengths and that has sustained right through to the end, so a year later while we're controlling for where they stand at the beginning... we're finding that these women as still developing an awareness on the personnel strengths and that is encouraging.

Um another thing that was encouraging was the identity integration. So this one is ...is very interesting. We don't see significant gains in identity integration between the first assessment, which is when they first get to Focus Forward and six months after. And then we don't see that either between six months after the retreat and at the end of the year... what we do find is that there is a significant increase between the first time ..and the first assessment...sorry and 12 months later. So it appears that there's a good bit of time that goes before these women are able to see you know the fruits of all those program activities designed to create and force their identity integration among that group. So this is a very interesting finding that we have to keep working on so we can understand the mechanisms through which the program is able to help those women with identity integration.

So with that doing .. um area ... we're looking at fellows perception of gains in the resume and work and the networking skills and this is an area that we saw gains. So very early on we're finding that fellows reporting significant increase in their skills when it comes to writing their resumes as well as understanding the skills and the need for networking. However, the challenge we find is actually doing. So, especially with the networking skills...when it comes to them participating in activities where we can use those skills among either the military base or professional networks...we're not seeing those gains, so it appears that, although that they have developed those skills....it's possible that they haven't found avenues for them to use their skills throughout the 12 months or they just haven't been able to translate it. So this definitely is an area that we want to focus in the future, because it looks like they're developing those skills, but we need them to be able to use those skills, because that is how they will really benefit from um knowing, you know how to network and what not.

So again, it is possible that just having all those challenges, or having to work... having school...having family to take care of ...that it's possible they haven't been able to engage in those activities. So you know we are very mindful of some of the challenges that the group has but we're also very excited about the results that we've found and the possibilities for it, and of course we'll continue to use those results to build a program and to develop the program to make sure that we're getting improvements in all of the areas that we've described.

JENNY: Definitely. Thank you so much for sharing those Kenona. I can definitely see kind of where the program is shifted... you know it's growing, and you know you're...you're improving from these findings, and it's exciting ...it's really great work! Um some really promising outcomes of the program so it just.. it just sounds like it just takes a little bit more time within that year for these women to kind of recognize where those changes were and how they can use them in their own lives. Keara would you like to add anything further from that?

KEARA: Uh, sure, I can just say a short note that um I think that starting out the Focus Forward was special and also makes the work of the researchers and practitioners like kind of frustrating at times .. is that but based on the women that come into the program, they're starting point ends up you know, obviously, impacting um data differently, so you know it's really interesting...you know we're talking about data from 2017, but you know just you know, and last year we've been thinking about then talking about data from you know 2018 and 2019 and then 2020 and 2021 and how that'll look different, you know because you know, the environment was different, you know there were significant changes made to the program in 2018 that were you know kind of result in intensely result in you know on a variety of outcomes and then with COVID-19 pandemic...it went virtual in 2020 and 2021.. you know it just so happens that everything coupled up nicely and you know like groups of that you know..

But I remember, we weren't even anywhere close to being done with this year's group and Shelley was thinking about "Oh, you know I wonder what the 2018/2019 data will look like?" And so um I just think that that's you know just something ...it's the nature of the work that you're always thinking about that you know looking ...looking ahead. But you know, even though we're specifically talking about 2017 data, it's so interesting how different groups of data can look different based off of where the women are coming into the program...like what their starting point is, and although it's just really interesting you know, to top it all, to have actual hard data versus anecdotal data .. uh so you know qualitative versus quantitative.

You know me being in the kind of practitioner-like program manager role.. um I often got to see a different side of the program, whereas a lot of people you know who worked on the research team, or in other areas of MFRI kind of working with the data, you know, always see.. always see the data side. And so it's just so interesting...uh a wide variety of elements that all kind of come together to hopefully influence the way ... that like you said, providers and professionals can support this unique population of women, and so I think that's amazing, and I think that if there's you know...

I personally wanted to kind of come into this conversation just to talk about women, women veterans and service members in general and those unique challenges and all aspects of that population and how it ties into student... you know, being a student service member and a veteran and then Focus Forward... you know all of this with the purpose of just trying to shed a little bit of light on to this population and the challenges

that they face ...Just in hopes that maybe we shared a little nugget that will resonate with the listener and maybe they will reach out ... maybe they'll follow up... or you know, maybe you know, a small, a small nugget will end up making a big impact in our community and so that was.. that was my.. that was kind of my ... my last .. take away message if you will.

JENNY: Thank you so much Keara. Um I think it is ...it's hard to wrap up things in ..in like with so much depth um because with all of the things that we've talked about today there is so many great things moving forward... things that are still shifting... um I hate to wrap this up so quickly, because I think we're getting to a place that's really awesome and we had... there's much more conversation to touch base on but um what I think what we can do now is um like you said Keara those nuggets ...What are those things that those professionals, service providers, educators...all those people that are working with service members, veterans, families,.. military families, in general, what can they take home today? Um what can they use from the findings of the program... the findings that's in the research and then these anecdotal things that we've learned today as well... Kenona, I'll let you.. I'll let you share.

KENONA: Um, yes. I think that there is definitely a lot for us to learn and the goal of all of this is, is that we can impact more than just the women in the Focus Forward program, but student service members and veterans on the whole, so I think one of the biggest takeaways is that the women are dynamic. And you know the environment that has been created for universities, for traditional students may not work, similarly to how it would work for the traditional students and overall, when we're doing mentorship for women veterans or women student service members, it's very important to know their past experiences and how those experiences can help shape their today... their right now, and individuals, you know... providers who are working with these women need to always keep that in mind, that they have sort of multiple identities that were found and, depending on the phase in their life they may need to have a different approach.

So this program has shown that having mentorship is important...having other women service members similar to themselves ...that's an important in lifestyle... that's an important feature for women student service members to have that camaraderie and once communities can be built ...if it's online communities or in-person communities... that allow women to be themselves and allow women to share their experiences as much as they would like or as little as they would like.... that would be helpful, and I think there's a lot to learn also for the classroom experience, you know that it may be important for education.... education providers to maybe share the groups of traditional students, as well as alternative students to understand that we have diverse, very diverse groups of people in the classroom and that you know we have to always try to be open to their experiences and to be inclusive, so that others who may not have similar experiences can also feel welcome.

JENNY: Mmhmm. Thank you, Kenona. Those are great take home messages. Keara, would you like to share anything?

KEARA: I think that Kenona really wrapped it up beautifully and um I can tell you that I am just being in this space is that the more information you're willing to share ...the more widespread the support is going to be and you know there's only 20 spots available per cohort you know for Focus Forward and you know, there's probably an unlimited amount of women who could benefit from the program and so you know, I think that what I had experienced just within the community of providers and professionals who are working with the military and veterans is that everyone is always willing to reach out and either you know, ask for help or provide support, and so I think having an open mindedness when working with this unique population and just you know be willing to take an active listening approach, so that you are open minded... that you're listening and that you're meeting women where they are at ... they're going to be more likely to open up to you and it's going to allow for a more productive relationship. And the result of that is that you know that one veteran is going to get the support that she might need and so that's just something that I um would note as well.

JENNY: Okay, that's super helpful. I appreciate that and I hope that our listeners today will be able to kind of incorporate those suggestions and those takeaways and be able to use them with the ...with anybody that they're working with.

[CLOSING THEME MUSIC]

From all of us at the Military Families Learning Network Family Transitions team, we thank you, Kenona and Keara so much for your time chatting with me today. For those listening, thank you for joining us. I encourage you to refer to the resources mentioned in this podcast on our webpage, under the list entitled additional materials. We encourage our listeners to check out other podcasts, blogs and free webinars from our Military Families Learning Network Family Transitions website at MilitaryFamiliesLearningNetwork.org

[CLOSING AWARD STATEMENT]

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