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Stand At Ease, Then Forward, March!

Janice E. Hawkins
Old Dominion University, jhawkins@odu.edu

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Stand at ease, then forward, march!

By Janice E. Hawkins | 01/05/2017

Author finds parallels between military formations and career planning.

I enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1985. After reporting for basic training, I learned to execute military-formation maneuvering commands. Military formations help organize ceremonial parades, gain tactical advantage, and create discipline. It occurs to me that the same elements that contribute to effective functioning of a military unit—ceremony, tactical planning, and discipline—also contribute to achieving one’s goals
after completing graduate school.

Ceremony
Completion of a graduate program is celebrated in a ceremony called graduation. Faithful readers of Reflections on Nursing Leadership (RNL) are aware of my recent journey through graduate school. In an article titled “I'm still standing! 5 strategies to survive going back to school,” I celebrated successful adjustment to the demands of returning to the student side of things to pursue my PhD. I shared tips for surviving—and even enjoying!—life as a graduate student.

Going back to school was definitely a challenge, and in “I’m still standing, but I’m not standing still!,” I reported that, though weary, I was still making progress toward my goal. My intention in writing that article was to encourage other weary graduate students to keep moving forward in their programs.

I am happy to report that I have successfully completed the requirements for my PhD in nursing education! After graduating in August 2016, my first step as Dr. Janice Hawkins was to celebrate and take a much-needed break.

The military has a formal maneuvering position for taking breaks. On the command of “Stand at ease,” soldiers relax in place but remain in formation by keeping their right foot planted firmly on the ground. I relaxed by taking an extended break that included trips to Charleston, South Carolina, and Boston, Massachusetts, USA; El Salvador; and Italy. Taking time to rest and celebrate provided rejuvenation and balance, but in between packing and unpacking—and during airport layovers—I remained in formation by mapping out a schedule for upcoming teaching, service, and scholarship activities, which I am now fulfilling.

Tactical planning
A tactic is purposeful action toward a desired goal. For me, mapping out plans for teaching, service, and scholarship is a purposeful activity that helps me reach my goals.

As part of a curricular change, I recently updated and revised courses I teach. In
response to student feedback, I will continue to update and tweak them each semester. I have found that continually updating my courses and their syllabi minimizes confusion for students and reduces time spent clarifying assignments and expectations. The time I save in course maintenance gives me more time for service and scholarship.

Ironically, one goal of my tactical planning is to spend less time in service-related activities rather than more. By nature, I am a server. Serving others is personally fulfilling and one of my core values. And it benefits those who are served. I always find time to serve, but I often take on too much. I recognize in myself some of the psychological blocks that make it difficult to say no to service requests, and I need to work on this to ensure I am not too exhausted to do what really matters to me.

**Short-term medical missions** were a big part of my service before graduate school. This will continue. I would also like to explore some new opportunities, such as serving on the board of an organization that promotes better health outcomes.

With my teaching and service plans underway, my current goal is to increase my scholarship-related activity. For starters, I want to disseminate my dissertation findings. Tactical planning includes reviewing calls for abstracts and evaluating professional journals as potential venues for presentations and publications that match my study topic. In doing so, I keep a running list of possibilities, including submission deadlines. As of this writing, my application to present my research findings has been accepted by a qualitative research conference, and I’m anticipating others. My tactical planning and discipline in meeting deadlines led to another celebration!

**Discipline**
Discipline is the third element in reaching my post-graduation goals. Scholarly productivity requires discipline. One strategy that worked well for me in completing my dissertation was to schedule time on my calendar for writing. I set aside one day a week for writing and dedicated most of that day to making significant progress toward finishing a chapter. To maintain that momentum after graduation, I continue to schedule one scholarship day per week to work on abstracts and manuscripts.

The night before my writing day, I review my list of projects and their corresponding
due dates, and I set specific goals. Sometimes, they are as simple as “Write five paragraphs.” The main goal is to make forward progress, and keeping a running list of projects, setting aside blocks of time for writing, and establishing progress goals keep me moving in the right direction.

As with military formations, ceremony, tactical planning, and discipline are important, but a basic command I learned in the Army—and the only way to get anywhere—is “Forward, march!” For me, marching forward is working to achieve my next goals.

**Janice E. Hawkins, PhD, RN, is a lecturer at Old Dominion University School of Nursing in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. Master adviser certified, she also serves as the school's chief academic adviser.**