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THE NEEDS OF MILITARY VETERANS RETURNING TO COLLEGE AFTER SERVICE

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Each year over 7000,000 U.S. military veterans utilize government benefits to pursue college education. Institutions of higher education play an important role in student veteran adjustment to collegiate learning environments. Using current research, this paper reviews student veteran characteristics, strengths and challenges faced as students, and evidence supported institutional strategies to enhance their academic success.

Keywords: Student veterans, Strengths, Needs, Higher education.

Introduction

College faculty, staff and administrators play a critical role in helping an estimated one million U.S. student veterans pursue advanced training and college degrees. This support is both timely and relevant for several reasons. For one, assistance throughout their programs of study can help them navigate challenges unique to student veterans, such as the utilization of Veterans Administration education benefits. Second, recognition of demographic differences can help educators better understand how student veterans' lives differ from non-veterans, often older with families, frequently the first from their family of origin to attend college, and with broader life experiences than traditional student populations (Kim & Cole, 2013; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013). Third, identification and incorporation of student veterans' strengths—personal drive, determination, aptitude for working in high pressure environments, an ability to work in teams and groups, leadership training, managing responsibilities, as well as their multi-cultural experiences (Ang & Kelley, 2016)—can have positive implications within the classroom. Fourth, educators' ability to identify and understand the end to which "invisible" (e.g., painful combat memories, posttraumatic-stress disorder, traumatic brain injury) and/or "visible" (e.g., physical injuries) injuries are present for student veterans can help educators support them within the classroom, transition from the military into a less unstructured college setting, battle stereotypes from others, and combat isolation from traditional students or routine adjustment back into civilian lives (Church, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Kirchner, 2015). This paper reviews the empirical data detailing today's student veterans in higher education, their strengths and challenges, and educator roles to support them.

Student Veterans in Higher Education

After the end of World War II, 2.2 million or about 1 in 8 of American veterans used the newly implemented *Servicemen's Readjustment Act* (a.k.a. G.I. Bill) education benefit to seek higher education

degrees and another 5.6 million attended high school or vocational school by the time it ended in 1956 (Olson, 1974). This resulted in one of the largest growth periods of higher education in the United States than had ever occurred before, in some cases, 49 percent of enrolled students at some institutions were veterans. Although post-service education benefits in various forms have been available for those serving in the the U.S. military, the new *Post-9/11 G.I. Bill* have made advanced vocational training and higher education even more attractive to military personnel. Specifically, for three years the veteran receives coverage of full-tuition and fees for any public institution in their state of residence and a housing, food and living expenses monthly stipend, referred to as a Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH). Once these tax-free benefits are earned from three-years of cumulative active duty service, the veteran has ten years to use or assign to a dependent for their use. Unlike the Montgomery G.I., the Post-9/11 Bill does not require any financial contributions from the veteran during their time in service, i.e. it is totally free.

Today's student veterans, like their counterparts from previous conflicts, tend to be more similar to those college students labeled as non-traditional: older, married with dependents and with more life experiences than their younger classmates. Comprehensive data collected by the Student Veterans Association (Cate & Davis, 2016), shows that 80% of student veterans are over the age of 25, with most falling between the ages of 25 to 30 and 40 to 50, the later typically retired service members. With regards to martial status, 45% are married or 14% divorced or separated. Nearly half (46%) of Post-9/11 student veterans have children. For race and ethnicity, 70% of veteran students reported being white/Caucasian, 8% Latino, 8% African-American, 6% bi/multi-racial, 2% Asian, 1% Native American or Alaskan Native, and less than 1% reported being Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or Middle Eastern. Unlike past generations of student veterans, though, the recent cohort is 27% women. According to their data, the typical student veteran is between the age of 25-30, a white (non-Hispanic), married male with dependent children.

Student Veteran Strengths

The frequently held veteran stereotype conjures up an image of an emotionally unstable and physically used up heterosexual male, unshaven, heavy drinking, combat traumatized soul, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, homeless with limited civilian job skills. In short, a John Rambo figure that simply can not fit back into "normal" society. Whereas a small portion of veterans may indeed depict elements of this caricature, the facts indicate it is simply an inaccurate portrayal of today's veteran students and, furthermore, fails at accurately portraying their strengths.

Table 1. Examples of Student Veteran Strengths

- Ability to function in high stress environments
- Fast pace learners
- Bottom line, up front (BLUFF) thinkers
- Thrive in teams
- Mission focused
- Flexible, can adapt, improvise and overcome challenges
- Respond well to strengths based, affirming approaches

Student veterans bring a number of personal strengths and positive attributes to the college learning environment. First, they have functioned under high stress environments, either simulated in basic training or during active duty mobilization for guard and reservists or during deployments to sea or a combat zone. Also, military teaching plans emphasize repetitive learning of information and tasks to the point that they are committed to what is referred to as "muscle memory," so the necessary information or

skillset is recalled almost instinctively. The military also relies on intense, focused, fast paced and highly structure teaching pedagogies, delivering a lot of information in a short period of time. Often referred to as "drinking from a firehose," this method is akin to cramming the night before an exam, albeit a bit more systematic. Military communication also filters out unnecessary information, focusing on a "bottom line, up front" (BLUFF) approach that offers conclusions and recommendations in the beginning, rather than the end, to facilitate rapid decision making. It is possible that more fluid, extraneous pedagogical styles may prove difficult for the veteran student that was use to the more rapid pace, parsimonious style military education model.

Military culture has a long tradition of emphasizing teamwork, working as a collective, focusing on unit cohesion and overall group abilities, i.e. you are only as strong as your weakest link. This workforce strategy is a true asset for many career paths, with student veterans adept at working in mission focused small groups and, in many cases, leading such endeavors. It is common for leaders (commissioned officers like a captain, major, commander) to communicate the general intent of a mission's goal then step back and allow non-commissioned officers (Army, Air Force, Marine Corp sergeants or Navy chiefs) to operationalize it, to actually make it happen. In this sense, faculty can create learning tasks that offer guidelines yet flexibility in how these endeavors reach an identified goal, allowing veteran students who to adapt, improvise and overcome the academic task.This brings up another strength, the ability to be flexible, to adjust to the situation, to improvise, to make lemonade from lemons… to be "flexible like Gumby," the clay animation character, or as the Marines say, "Semper Gumby," i.e. always flexible. Again, the ability to think creativity, function autonomously, be flexible and accomplish a mission are true assets, a form of critical and creative thinking. Although, such independent thinking is not always encouraged in the lower ranks (privates, seamen, airman), certain military occupations or in environments that demand obedience to strict "stepwise" thinking and behaving. Moreover, a highly functional "field soldier," i.e. one that is use to taking the initiative, being flexible and getting things done even if it involves bending regulations, may be seen as dysfunctional when on the highly regulated and structure garrison environment during peacetime or when at their stateside duty base.

The military likes organization, from "squared away" footlockers and barracks, precise chains of command, and detailed regulations, forms and procedures to mission op-orders for a field exercise, personal hygiene techniques, and the preferred way to pack a seabag. There is the right way, the wrong way then the Army, Navy, Marine Corp and Air Force ways. Student veterans understand this organized way of thinking and behaving, to "move with a purpose,"although not all value this excessive structure they have had to survive. In some degree, though, it enables them to create organization, to make sense or generate structure from chaos, especially if they served a leadership role in a combat experience. It takes significant discipline to be faced with what may seem to be an impossible task yet to preserver, to continue on. Today's military culture, unlike the movie depictions, uses a strengths based, positive affirmation approach to personal development and growth. It recognizes personal achievement though coining, awards and commendations to earning rank and receiving command/leadership positions, whether it be a small unit of three soldiers to a brigade of 5,000 soldiers. Student veterans are use to learning from their mistakes. In the military milieu, "not meeting standard," e.g. failing a chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive (CBRNE) weapons examination, results in "corrective training" to address deficiencies in knowledge or skills. It's a well articulated, systematic and documented approach to learning, different from the typical lecture, read, independent study atmosphere in college.

The U.S. Military itself is a racially and ethnically diverse group of people deployed in countries around the world. At the moment, soldiers, marines, sailors and airman can be found in over 150 countries, from Ukraine, Poland and Germany to South Korea Japan, Israel, Sudan and Yemen. Members of the U.S. Armed Forces have representatives from all of these nations and more. Military service remains a path to U.S. citizenship for immigrants (Dowd, 2017). A value for multiculturalism is emerging as polices adapt to accept differences in race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and sexuality. For instance, military chaplains are trained to minister to Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, as well as Wiccan faiths. U.S. military chaplains represent specific religious organizations yet work together within the pluralistic context of the military to ensure freedom of religion. Being in an organization that accommodates

differences and diversity is a unique resource for student veterans, especially when contrasted with traditional students typically having far less exposure to diversity and differences outside their home communities.

Student veterans are motivated learners, ambitious and with a strong work ethic. According to a Pew Survey (2011), 77% of respondents listed educational benefits as a primary reason for joining the military. The military values higher education, with college credits often required for promotions and advanced degrees required for commissions and movement through the ranks. Student veterans see education benefits as earned not as entitlements, hence motivated to maximize their returns in these education opportunities accrued over several years of military service.

These traits and abilities certainly vary from veteran to veteran, dependent on factors like the branch of service (e.g. Army, Marine Corp, Navy, Air Force), component (active duty versus reserve or guard), length of service, rank, military occupation and whether they deployed to a combat zone. For instance, a master sergeant in the U.S. Army with 20 years active duty time in service as a 11B (infantry soldier) serving in Special Forces with multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan would have a different skillset and experiences from a airman with four years experience in the U.S. Air Force National Guard where she served a communications specialist, although both would be indistinguishably labeled a "student veteran."

Student Veteran Challenges/Needs

As civilian college students, veterans face a different mission than they were use to, especially for those that served in combat environments. Often in academic institutions and with scholarly endeavors there is certainly less urgency. The importance of completing a theme paper on time may pale when compared to responding to a call to provide support for a unit under hostile fire. Value conflicts with other students also may occur, since 34% of veterans identify as Republicans in contrast with 20% of nonveteran college students (Newport, 2009). The military also has its own language and an excessive use of abbreviations or phrases that easily confuse non-veterans. For instance, referring to one's car as a POV (personally owned vehicle), going to the DFAC (dinning facility), "breaking it down Barney-style" (explaining something very simple as if to a child), "no impact, no idea" (used if a shooter is so far off target that you can't see an impact, used loosely to mean the speaker does not understand an idea or that someone is totally clueless). There is also the phrase that's universal across military branches, "standby to standby" or "hurry up and wait" which is self-explanatory for anyone that has served in the military or waited in line at the registrar's office on the last day to drop courses. Thus, even simple communication can leave a veteran feeling like going to school showed "good initiative, bad judgement" or feeling the need to "pop smoke" and re-enlist to evacuate the confusing academic culture. Finally, Moore (2017) asserts that some veterans with only a few years of enlisted duty and very little civilian work experience may lack basic communication skills, commonly referred to as "soft skills."

Table 2. Examples of Student Veteran Challenges

- Reverse culture shock back into civilian institutions
- Starting over after a 10 or 20-year military career
- More solitary, individual academic endeavors
- Mental and physical health problems like PSTD, TBI, chronic pain
- Greater likelihood for self harm

For veterans leaving service with higher rank and a history of responsibilities and successes, starting over as a lowly college student also can be a challenge. Likewise, when compared with the ordered life of the military, colleges and universities can seem chaotic, unruly, and valueless environments lacking a

dedicated mission, an unclear command structure, and undisciplined participants (Romero, Riggs, & Ruggero, 2015). For a veteran, the concept of a lowly private scheduling a face-to-face meeting with a full-bird colonel would be unheard of, whereas on a college campus a freshman walking into a dean's office would not. Much of higher education relies on solitary tasks (e.g. reading, writing) and individual performance evaluations, i.e. it's not a team sport or at least it should not be. This can create a sense of isolation and loneliness for a student veteran who is use to working on teams. Hence, there can be an actual reverse culture shock as student veterans return, full-time, to the civilian world, easily overwhelmed by the degree of personal choices and lack of apparent structure when compared to their military lives. According to a Pew survey (2011), 44% of post-9/11 veterans say their readjustment back to civilian life was challenging, nearly twice as many as those from previous conflicts like Vietnam or World War 2. The reintegration process, adjusting back to civilian life after active duty, wether it is a 16-month deployment or retiring after 20-years of service is difficult. Norms, values, beliefs and behaviors that were functional and appropriate in military service do not always translate into civilian life.

Like other college students, some student veterans live with a mental health condition like anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress. Estimates suggest that between 20%-46% of recent student veterans screen positively or report symptoms of these mental health conditions (Fortney et. a., 2016, Hoge et al., 2004; Reeves, Parker, & Konkle-Parker, 2014; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2015). However, a larger national study involving 43,210 non-veteran undergraduate students from 72 campuses revealed that 34% screened positive for at least one mental health condition (Ketchen et al., 2015). Additional findings indicate that university counseling centers are ill-equipped and lack cultural competence regarding military service to adequately address student veteran behavioral and emotional needs (Niv & Bennette, 2017). Furthermore, a sizable study involving 27,774 college subjects, found that veteran students were statistically more likely to commit acts of self-harm than students without military experience (Blosnich, Kopacz, McCarten,& Bossarte, 2015). Coincidently, student veterans with identified mental health care needs reported greater stigma towards care than those without needs, less likely to seek treatment at college-based counseling centers yet more likely to pursue care at Department of Veterans Affairs clinics or readjustment counseling centers (Currier, McDermott, & McCormick, 2017). According to Elnitsky et al. (2017), "…student veterans experience high rates of chronic pain that interfere with their daily functioning (92.7%), symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD, 77.9%), symptoms of TBI (26.0%), and comorbidities as the polytrauma clinical triad (14.2%). Despite the high prevalence of pain, PTSD, and TBI, few students used disability services (5.2%), counseling services (18.8%), or student health services (36.5%)" (p. S58). In contrast, Ness, Rocke, Harrist and Vronman's research found that student veteran "…participants did not perceive neurobehavioral symptoms as particularly deleterious to their learning thereby highlighting the potentially integral role of coping strategies and motivation in post-secondary success" (2014, p. 155). In summary, although student veterans rates of mental health problems are similar to other students, their likelihood for self harm and stigma for seeking care are greater than other college students. Interestingly, Twardzicki and Jones (2017) found a mental health focused comedy show reduced mental health stigmatisation and improved mental health knowledge among United Kingdom military personnel.

According to the Congressional Research Service (2015), 10% of veterans are physically disabled and more than 52,000 were wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan, so it is probable that some student veterans will be dealing with just such a physical injury. Student veterans also are likely to be coping with less obvious traumatic brain injuries. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is defined as "an alteration in brain function, or other evidence of brain pathology, caused by an external force" and the U.S. Government estimates that 19% of veterans may suffer from this condition and 260,000 have been diagnosed, although 1.7 million Americans have traumatic brain injuries each year. Many student veterans also bring a history of military sexual trauma, an estimated 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men (National Center for PTSD, 2018), requiring faculty and staff to understand "…rape in the military, and the influence of military culture on the survivors' disposition to seek institutional resources" (Rolbiecki, Pelts, & Albright, 2015). Lastly, alcohol and substance abuse as well as addiction remains problematic for student veterans, with estimates suggesting that 7.1% to 25% suffer from these problems, compared with 20-40% of non-veteran

college students (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018). Again, rates of physical disabilities, TBI and substance abuse remain high, albeit similar to other college students.

Table 3. Examples of Higher Education Veteran Student Strategies

- Strengths based narrative about student veterans
- Faculty, staff iservices about veterans
- Cultural humility, ask questions about their experiences & needs
- Veteran campus center
- Peer support
- Faculty mentoring
- Veteran Safe Zones
- Institution, community specific virtual resource centers
- Dedicated, veteran services coordinator
- Vet student organizations
- Campus chapters of veteran service organizations like the VFW or American Legion
- Implement universal curriculum design

Higher Education Strategies to Support Student Veterans

Considering the strengths and challenges of this nontraditional college student population, institutions have several evidence-based approaches to assist veteran student success in their pursuit of higher education. First, in contrast to assuming a outright disdain for all things military, research shows that college faculty generally hold positive attitudes about veterans and military service, some with military experience themselves (Gonzalez, 2012; Gonzalez & Elliot, 2016; Moore, 2017). Often, though, there is a lack of confidence in teaching student veterans stemming from minimal knowledge about current student veterans, military service in general or simply inaccurate assumptions about both topics, as suggested earlier. The continuation of stereotypes regarding veterans as "broken and used up" with an emphasis on deficits as opposed to strengths further biases faculty opinions about this group of students. How they think about student veterans, a collective narrative stemming from myths, hearsay and movies, needs to be strengths based and evidence informed. As the above suggests, veteran students possess many assets and live with deficits at a similar rate as other college age students. Moore (2017), however, cautions about believing veteran students as superior to non-veteran students from their association with the military, a sense of military superiority by assuming only altruistic motivations for serving such as selfless service for the good of the nation, to protect our freedoms, personal sacrifice, labeling them a hero, or assuming they have been tempered and strengthened by the trials of war. One solution, faculty and staff in-services (professional training programs) to learn more about the reality of student veterans as wells university and community resources to assist these veterans (Borsari et al., 2017, Gonzalez, 2012; Osborne, 2014)). It is easy for faculty and staff to feel overwhelmed by military culture, veteran needs and services. So, a sense of cultural humility, a willingness to ask student veterans about experiences should be encouraged rather than overall cultural competence. Although, this gentle questioning should be done in one-on-one conversations, seeking permission before asking questions about their service in an open classroom setting, a means to protect student confidentiality and not "out them" to other students as a veteran. It is far too common for most people to have limited interest in learning about veteran experiences, typically lasting 30 seconds or asking vulgar questions like, "Did you kill anyone?" A genuine and sincere interest in their life experience will communicate respect and support, especially if coming from a faculty member.

Social, Information, & Service Networks

As with many students, positive relationships with peers and faculty have tremendous influence on veteran student retention, graduation rates and overall academic success. Institutions can foster a supportive network in several ways. First, creating a veteran campus center, a physical place/lounge area for student veterans to gather, relax, and study, an informal source of peer support (Williston & Roemer, 2017). They also benefit from more formal, organized peer support and mentoring programs (to include student veteran organization development, formal student mentoring programs, and faculty/student mentorships). For combat veterans, support programs that emphasized post traumatic growth have proven especially beneficial (Borowa, Robitschek, Harmon,& Shigemoto, 2016).

Many institutions have a virtual veteran, military and family resource center, a dedicated website offering a plethora of institution and community specific resources on education, financial, health and mental health issues (e.g. see https://www.usi.edu/outreach/veterans or http://www.dartmouth.edu/~ide/employee_resource_networks/veterans/). A dedicated veterans services coordinator specializing in veteran education benefits as well as community resources also is helpful. Similarly, some institutions encourage a dedicated veteran student organization or sponsor a chapter of the *Veterans Student Organization* (https://studentveterans.org), *SALUTE Veterans National Honor Society* (http://www.salute.colostate.edu) or student chapters of organizations like *Veterans of Foreign Wars* (https://www.vfw.org/community/student-veterans-of-america) or *American Legion* (https://www.legion.org/education/studentveterans).

Vet Friendly Institutions

Creating a network of faculty and staff with experience or training in veteran issues or merely those practicing cultural humility with good active listening skills may provide a organized and helpful network of veteran safe zones, people to talk to and receive support and guidance, an approach similar to those used for LGBTQ students.

The American Council on Education, supported by the Walmart Foundation, funded millions of dollars worth of veteran student initiates on campuses across the United States. Their outcome based efforts found that involving local non-student veterans in the campus community was important, establishing, for instance, a veterans advisory committee or soliciting student veteran feedback on program initiatives and in-kind support. They also uncovered that, academically, veteran students benefited from distance learning preparation modules, bridge courses to aid in military transfer credit process, as well as face-to-face and online student veteran orientation programs. Selective hiring veterans as student workers serving in departments or majors that veterans frequent also were helpful, providing an informal peer support that is invaluable and positively influenced the milieu for veteran students.

Ellison et al. (2018) found that supported education services (e.g. manualized veteran-centric programs using principles of supported employment for individuals living with mental illness and components of civilian models of supported education) had a positive effect on veteran student time spent attaining educational goals. Krugh et al. (2015) tested a student veteran mindfulness skills group with participants reporting improved emotional and physical coping, positive changes in personal functioning, improved organizational capabilities, and improved stress management skills. Some scholars assert that applying the concept of universal design to college environments and curriculum broadens the scope of accessibility to all students with unique learning needs similar to veterans (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011).

Several scholars authored additional treatises on strategies to assist student veterans.

Pryce (2016) offers additional information describing this population and several best-practices for addressing their needs. Coll and Weiss (2015) provide a comprehensive resource of information for academics and higher-education administrators to justify veteran services, focusing on a strengths and resiliency perspectives. Hamrick and Rumann (2014) highlight their book strategies to organize and staff veteran student initiatives, addressing policy issues, and infrastructures related to recruitment, retention

and degree completion. Allen et al. (2014) details opportunities, challenges, and solutions related to veteran nursing students.

In summary, student veterans possess a number of academically useful strengths and live with similar challenges as their nonveteran student counterparts. Higher education has multiple evidence supported strategies to assist student veteran in achieving their academic goals and transition into productive civilian lives.

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