

From GI Joe to College Joe: Bridging the Gap Between Military and College Life

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Introduction

“We get so much run around during our lives in the military, constantly being sent to multiple people for one issue. At school, I want to be able to meet with one person or in one office to accomplish most of my needs” (M. Beck, personal communication, December 16, 2019). The words of this veteran convey a sentiment shared by many in the veteran community, and they speak to a major challenge facing student veterans: transitioning into and navigating higher education both confusing and frustrating. This frustration leads to retention issues and a lack of degree completion within this particular population of students. With enrollment numbers for student veterans continuing to rise, following a decade-long pattern, easing the transition is a challenge that needs urgent attention. Scholarly research written on the student veteran population agrees that this particular group of students face unique challenges, especially those who have seen combat in both Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom (Campbell & Riggs, 2015; DiRamio et al., 2015; Gonzales & Elliot, 2016). This paper will analyze the demographic makeup of student veterans and the unique challenges they face during their postsecondary education before formulating pragmatic, on-campus solutions to assist this population in achieving their educational goals.

The Student Veteran Population

Veteran Demographics

The student veteran population is comprised of a diverse group of people that are often considered members of other sub-populations within the collegiate student body, including those who are racially minoritized and nontraditional students. The demographic data demonstrates an average of 63% Caucasian, 17% African American, 14% Hispanic, with the remaining 6% being naturalized American citizens (American Council on Education, 2014). They joined the military for wide-ranging reasons including the call to serve one’s country to provide for their families to attaining an affordable education (“Women Warriors: Supporting Female Student Veterans”, 2011). As the ethnic diversity of the armed forces has expanded over the past decades, the population has also witnessed a concurrent drive toward gender equality through the expansion of job opportunities.

Within the last seven years, women serving in the armed forces have seen their roles broaden and shift toward this notion of equality in ways that no previous generation of female veterans have experienced. Having long served in the United States military, female veterans have faced restricted career options with positions as aids, secretaries, and medical personnel being the only ones available. Their career prospects changed in 2013 when the ban on women serving in combat roles was lifted by the Secretary of Defense, opening up thousands of positions on the "front lines" and in elite units (DiRamio et al., 2015). At 21% of all student veterans, female veterans have emerged as a significant portion of the population with their representation projected to increase as more career fields are made available to them (American Council on Education, 2014). In conjunction with the increase in diversity, research is also projecting that this student population will continue to increase in sheer numbers, giving institutions not only more challenges but also opportunities to offer more solutions on campus.

The Global War on Terror and, within it, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, have directly influenced not only the amount of personnel in uniform, but also the number of veterans who have

access to educational benefits. By 2010, over 2 million military members had served in these ongoing conflicts with 1.09 million of them separating and receiving veteran status (Campbell & Riggs, 2015). These numbers continue to increase with a projection of over 5 million service members expected to transition out of active service by 2020 (American Council on Education, 2014). While these statistics paint an optimistic picture for colleges and universities looking to attract this group of students, they do not necessarily translate into successful degree completion.

Veterans as Nontraditional Students

Amongst such a diverse and large student body, there is comradery in their military service as these students struggle together to ascertain their place on college campuses. The one position they occupy that is agreed upon by researchers within higher education is that of the nontraditional student due to the fact that student veterans deviate from the educational track of traditional students in several ways (DiRamio et al., 2015; Ford & Vignare, 2015; Lim et al., 2018). These deviations include deferred enrollment or breaks in their education, being older than their peers, the presence of dependents, financial independence, and a more career-focused outlook (Osborne, 2016; Pelligrino & Hoggan, 2015; Campbell & Riggs; 2015). According to the American Council on Education (2014), the average student veteran does not begin their postsecondary education until the age of 25. While 42% of them are working a full-time job concurrent with their college education, 52% also have dependents with many occupying a place in both of these categories (American Council on Education, 2014). A literature review by Ford and Vignare (2015) demonstrates that student veterans are similar to their peers within the nontraditional student community in not only their choice of institution but also the factors that influenced these choices. For example, student veterans enrolled in either two-year community colleges or private for-profit institutions more often than traditional undergraduate populations due to factors pertaining to affordability, location, flexible scheduling, online options, and available degree programs (Ford & Vignare, 2015). These factors can be causally linked to the dynamic nature of military life, leaving little doubt as to the nontraditional nature of these students.

Student veterans, while sharing many traits with other nontraditional peers, come with their own set of unique challenges that student service professionals need to understand. Some of these challenges stem from combat and other trauma directly related to their military service. If these challenges are going to be taken on with the intention of improving the educational experience of student veterans, then an analysis of them is necessary to enhance the services for this group.

Modern Warfare Creates Educational Challenges

Warfare has drastically changed in the 30 years since the last major war the U.S. was involved in which was Desert Storm. These changes are responsible for the challenges that many current student veterans face. The concept of "front lines" has all but disappeared from modern warfare which has necessitated a change in decades-old military tactics (DiRamio et al., 2015). The change in tactics boils down to one essential fact: "that military personnel are experiencing high levels of combat exposure..." (Campbell & Riggs, 2015, p. 473). Those serving in the military are being sent into combat zones more often and for long periods of time in those zones (Campbell & Riggs, 2015). This heightened exposure can leave students with mental and physical injuries that might challenge their success as students. Due to their combat deployments, veterans serving in our current wars are twice as likely as their non-veteran peers to experience mental or emotional disabilities (Kinney & Eakman, 2017). These disabilities are varied and can include physical injuries, traumatic brain injuries, and mental health issues. These can manifest themselves in an assortment of ways including concentration and memory problems, depression and anxiety, apprehension about how their peers will react to an altered physical appearance, and uneasiness about sitting in a crowded lecture hall (Gonzales & Elliot, 2016). These challenges need to be examined on an individual level as each veteran's experience is unique, and

therefore, so is the disability they may experience.

M. Kakuk, a former student veteran who served in the Army, experienced many of these challenges on a daily basis. While serving for eight years, this student spent much of his time on a Special Forces team that led to an increased amount of combat exposure. During his two official and four unofficial tours, he experienced multiple injuries including a traumatic brain injury and almost lost a limb to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). The effects of combat exposure directly affected his experience as a student through challenges with information retention and the anxiety that comes from sitting in a crowded classroom. The student added that he found it difficult to discuss his military service with non-veterans because they will not understand the struggles that veterans are going through (M. Kakuk, personal communication, July 11, 2018). K. Harris, a former student veteran, served multiple tours in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division during his time in the Army. Although he did not struggle with crowded classrooms or discussing his service, this student experienced difficulty during video activities that included combat footage and often asked to be excused (K. Harris, personal communication, July, 2019). These two examples demonstrate only a fraction of the numerous effects that deployments and combat tours can have on a veteran's ability to succeed in an academic environment.

In light of this, it is not surprising that many student veterans struggle with finding their place amongst their peers in the classroom as well as with the faculty members that are teaching their courses. This struggle can impede their willingness to enter a classroom (Gonzalez & Elliot, 2016). They perceive themselves as unwelcome in this environment with the belief that faculty and staff do not understand military culture and view them as traumatized or dangerous. This leads to low faculty-student interactions and can influence completion (Osborne, 2016; Pelligrino & Hogan, 2015). In addition to affecting classroom and faculty interactions, military service often has a negative effect on veteran enrollment patterns due to the unsettled nature of the lifestyle.

Enrollment Challenges

With veterans experiencing "stop-outs" or breaks in their enrollment due to deployments, relocations, or other events with the intention of returning to complete, many struggle with reintegration with their peers upon returning (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018, p. 52). One veteran's story published in the ASHE Higher Education Report demonstrated this common problem. While attending college, this veteran was issued deployment orders, thus creating a gap in her education and forcing her to re-enroll. She found herself back in a classroom with peers whose lives had not drastically changed while she was in a war zone. In the classroom, when she attempted to comment on her personal experience with war, she felt silenced and her expertise invalidated while her professor remained silent ("Women Warriors: Supporting Female Student Veterans", 2011). M. Beck, a former student and retired Air Force veteran, experienced breaks in his education and the process of re-starting firsthand. After starting his postsecondary education in 2011, the student experienced two interruptions in his education due to a deployment to Afghanistan and a year-long tour to South Korea. He cited his deployment to Afghanistan as the reason he now primarily chooses online or hybrid courses because he feels uncomfortable sitting in a crowded classroom (M. Beck, personal communication, July 11, 2018). While the examples given are not an exhaustive list of the obstacles student veterans face, they do paint an accurate picture of what these students experience as they attempt to make this transition. Luckily, there are advocacy groups, both on campus and within the community, that are ready to assist both institutions and students in bridging the gap.

Advocacy for Student Veterans

Several organizations and agencies are leading the way as advocates for student veterans within campuses and communities nationwide. On the front lines of student veteran support is the Student

Veterans of America organization. They are a coalition of student-led chapters located directly on college campuses (Student Veterans of America, 2016). The SVA supports a network of over 1,300 schools where they empower student veterans to be informed participants in higher education to optimize their transition (Student Veterans of America, 2016). They offer scholarships, networking opportunities, and leadership workshops to student veterans to assist in their success in the civilian world (Student Veterans of America, 2016). Aside from on-campus advocates, there are several groups within the off-campus community that support student veterans.

The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) are two organizations that are well-known for their support of veterans in education as well as other aspects of their daily life. The American Legion implemented a Veterans Career Center on their website to aid veterans in their goal of finding meaningful employment. They promote job fairs, tips and advice for completing an interview, and an online military skills translator for a better understanding of how veteran's military skills can translate into civilian jobs (The American Legion, 2018). The VFW, like the American Legions, gives support to veterans who have fought in foreign wars during their transition. While their priority in recent years has not been solely on education, the organization is focusing on assisting veterans in accessing their benefits as a whole including those pertaining to education. Considering that working with the Department of Veterans Affairs can be complicated and time-consuming, the VFW offers free assistance to veterans to expedite this process. In 2017, the VFW of the United States was awarded a financial grant from the Wounded Warrior Project applied to assist veterans with their disability claims (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2017). This level of support is critical to the success of student veterans and can be translated into on-campus solutions with proven success.

Practical On-Campus Solutions

There are many solutions that, if implemented, could assist student veterans in completing their educational goals. The central theme of these solutions should be the focus on creating a veteran-friendly environment that aids them as they take on the role of college student. Improving services dedicated to student veterans by taking their unique challenges into account can be a daunting task. The question that many colleges and universities ask themselves is whether or not this will be a valuable endeavor at their institution. Appealing to this block of the student population will be a worthwhile endeavor and pay off in the long-run considering the number of veterans pursuing a college education is only projected to grow and bring with assets that can benefit postsecondary institutions.

Fifty-six percent of student veterans receive federal funding by using their GI Bill's education benefits (American Council on Education, 2014). They possess a self-starting and disciplined mentality from their time in the military that can be carried over into their academic work. At institutions that have developed on-campus support services for veterans, they have excelled, and, at times, outpaced their peers in similar age groups and life situations. Research has shown that student veterans hold themselves to a more rigorous standards earning an average GPA of 3.35 which is considerably higher than the national average of 2.94 (Student Veterans of America, 2017). Student veterans are more career-focused than their peers who have pursued a more traditional route to their education due to their career-related experience in the military, with 20% of student veterans expressing interest in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics) fields (American Council on Education, 2014; Osborne, 2016). When considering the benefits outlined within current research that student veterans can bring to postsecondary education, creating pragmatic solutions for this population is something that colleges and universities can implement with success to the benefit of the students and the institutions they attend.

On-Campus Veteran's Center

One solution that can benefit student veterans is the implementation of a Veteran's Center on

campus that concentrates on the needs of these students from a holistic approach and provides a variety of services in one location. Colleges have used this type of plan on non-veteran student populations with success, such as the program implemented at the Community College of Baltimore County. In 2014, they piloted a program called Career Communities, which applied a "wraparound" approach for new students in career areas including STEM, liberal arts, and business. They are assigned advisors that coordinate services based on student need. These services include academic advising, help with financial issues, career advocacy, and counseling for personal problems (Pierce, 2015). A Veteran's Center built on this model will provide services including academic advising, assistance with receiving GI Bill benefits, career advocacy, and informed counseling for veteran-specific disabilities. This concept has been proven successful at such institutions as San Diego State University by improving student veteran graduation rates.

San Diego State University is a four-year public institution that is attracting student veterans in high numbers in contrast to the enrollment statistics gathered for student veterans as a whole. According to the American Council on Education (2014), student veterans gravitate toward two-year institutions at the rate of 38% while only 19% enroll in public, four-year colleges. San Diego State University has challenged this trend not only by attracting over 800+ student veterans but also by achieving a 75% graduation rate for these students, which is almost double the national average. In contrast, San Diego Mesa College, a nearby two-year institution, only managed a 1% student veteran graduation rate (Marcus, 2017). The success seen at San Diego State University ties directly to the services provided to the veterans recruited for enrollment. They have created a one-stop-shop within their Veteran's Center, providing solutions for the challenges that student veterans face as well as a place where they can socialize, organize study groups, and develop mentorship opportunities (Marcus, 2017).

Participants in an online survey conducted by Heitzman and Sommers underscored the value of veteran peer guidance and suggested it would help new students acclimate to campus, connect with the veteran community, and gain an understanding of the services available from someone with the same background (2015). J. Alston, a student veteran interviewed for a similar study, corroborated the need for peer mentoring programs for veterans on campus. He suggested creating a work-study program where veteran upperclassman – those more familiar with the services available – serve as mentors for the new student veterans on campus (J. Alston, personal communication, June 13, 2018). Experienced student veterans possess firsthand knowledge about the transition these new students are experiencing and can put them at ease during this process because of their shared experiences as veterans.

The results of the survey align with and corroborate the research presented in this paper; however, the research does have limitations when it comes to the types of institutions presented as successful examples. These institutions are often found in urban areas, Baltimore or San Diego, for example, and therefore have vastly different resources than those in more rural parts of the United States. The availability of resources and funding is a weakness between institutions that cannot be ignored as all institutions are not created equal. In light of these differences, a feasible alternative is to designate one or two staff members within a larger department to focus solely on veteran assistance when a full-scale Veteran's Center is not feasible. Dyersburg State Community College has succeeded as a smaller institution in this respect by incorporating veteran's lounges within larger student success centers and providing veteran academic success coaches at these locations (Dyersburg State Community College, n.d.) By incorporating services and workshops into one location, whether it is a single staff member or a center, colleges will demonstrate that not only are they taking the needs of the student veteran population seriously but also that they are a welcome and essential part of the campus community. Positive steps in this endeavor by college administrations are essential and space made available in the budget to accomplish it.

Creating a Collaborative Learning Community

If institutions are serious about creating a campus community that welcomes student veterans, they must look beyond student services and emphasize a change in a more practical aspect of attending college: classroom interaction. Implementing curriculum and materials using different modalities demonstrate that faculty members are willing to adapt courses to the various challenges student veterans face within the classroom, thus creating solutions for the challenges that student veterans face in the classroom (Gonzales & Elliot, 2016; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). One solution to improve veteran-faculty relationships could be the creation of a professional development training module focused on interacting with and instructing student veterans. This solution has the potential to encourage dialogue between faculty and veterans, therefore creating a safe and healthy atmosphere within the classroom. Research on faculty-veteran interaction and increasing positive exposure in the classroom is present, but much of it is more than four years old. A push for up-to-date scholarship will greatly advance this idea and consider more modern solutions, including the use of technology and universal design to accommodate these students.

Providing Non-Academic Support

In addition to college-oriented services that can assist student veterans, the creation of non-academic solutions is equally as important to student success. Veterans might have family and work responsibilities to contend with that run congruent with, and sometimes take precedence over, their academic studies. Pelligrino and Hoggan's (2015) study of two female veterans who transitioned into the role of college student support this concept. Their positions within their families as wives and mothers were just as significant, if not more, than their roles on campus. Research conducted by DiRamio et al. (2015) proposed a possible solution to take on the problem of childcare by providing childcare services through the Early Childhood Development Departments on campus. Instituting a form of drop-off childcare service will benefit both student populations by providing students within the Early Childhood Development programs practice hours and enabling student veterans to fulfill both their role as parents and as students easily. These two articles, while presenting timely research and a viable solution, limit their focus to female veterans with children rather than addressing the needs of the broader community in terms of non-academic support. Broader research is needed that focuses not only on non-academic support outside of childcare but services applied to the community at large.

Implementing accessible student services, improving classroom interaction, and offering childcare are only three of numerous possible solutions that could drastically improve the performance of student veterans at colleges and universities nationwide. These solutions are supported by contemporary student veteran-focused research and make sense if colleges are serious about improving the successful completion rates of this population, but more could be done. Postsecondary institutions need to be proactive in their creation of veteran-centric solutions if they intend to grow the population within their campuses.

Conclusion

With the student veteran population continuing to grow, it is essential to recognize their increasing contributions and impact to the postsecondary environment. While this paper presents practical first steps that can be utilized by colleges and universities to assist student veterans, these solutions merely scratch the surface of what is needed to encourage this population of students to not only enroll in secondary education but also complete it. More research is needed in areas involving faculty development, student veteran orientation, military work experience transference, and classroom design that aids veterans who are suffering from combat-related disabilities. By addressing the weaknesses in the academic record of this topic, the solutions presented in this paper could start the process of aiding student veterans feel welcome and encouraged to complete their educational goals.

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